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Conceptualizing the "Dark Side" of Family Communication

with Wanjiru Mbure

Author Alex Haley once said, "In every conceivable manner, the family is our link to our past, our bridge to our future" ("Great Inspirational Quotes," 2010). These words reveal what so many individuals know –our families provide the glue that connects all the parts of our lives –for better and for worse. For some of us, the bonds are strong, enduring, and constant. For others, the connections are fractured and non-existent. For still others, the linkages are both inconsistent and resilient.

Regardless of the strength of our familial bond, most would concur that our families play a significant role in the construction of our identities. Families are primary socializing agents (Burleson & Kunkel, 2002; Kunkel, Hummert, & Dennis, 2006; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, & Morris, 2006), teaching children, for instance, the difference between right and wrong, the (im)proper ways to communicate, and the best ways to show love and respect. Families also teach us how to communicate hate and prejudice (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), to communicate anger and hostility (Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, & Clark, 2007), and to behave deleteriously (Prescott & Le Poire, 2002). Importantly, the family is a living organism, constantly changing and growing. The

socialization that takes place is equally dynamic and enduring. Thus, one is constantly impacted by the family as an organic system –adults and youth alike. As such, the social unit known as the family becomes an important site to focus scholarly attention because of its tenacious, yet shifting ability to impact individuals across their lifespans.

One cannot ignore that an element of families' enduring nature is their darker moments. Writers, poets, comics, and therapists alike have spoken of the challenges and struggles of family life. The textbox below contains a sampling of such philosophizing.

> In each family a story is playing itself out, and each family's story embodies its hope and despair. Auguste Napier ("Wisdom Quotes," 2010a)
>
> If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance. George Bernard Shaw (as cited in Peters, 1996)
>
> Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Leo Tolstoy (1873/2004)
>
> Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go by any rules. They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal because there's not enough material. F. Scott Fitzgerald ("Wisdom Quotes," 2010b)

> The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together. Erma Bombeck ("Conquering Stressful Family Hurdles," 2010)
>
> Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city. George Burns ("Quote DB," 2010)

Family aches, wounds, struggles, and strife are the focus of this book –not because we are voyeuristic and enjoy looking at others' pain and suffering –but because, in varying degrees, all families experience darker moments. For some, the darkness is more a light shade of gray, while, for others, it is as dark as a moonless sky –and countless others are somewhere in between. We contend that all families, in fact, experience some darkness, and that darkness, as also acknowledged by Duck (1994), is an integral part of family life. Thereby, darkness within the family unit becomes a matter of gradation rather than an issue of presence or absence. This non-discriminatory nature of dark communicative dynamics begs further exploration because of its expansive impact on family functioning. Moreover, as Duck noted,

when it is recognized that real lives are richly entwined with begrudging, vengeful, hostile, conflictive tensions and struggles, it will perhaps begin to be realized that one must also start to look at the ways in which people cope with them in life and then to theorize about them. (p. 6)

The fundamental goal of this book is to examine these struggles and to shed light on how such darkness is embedded in an interdependent system of individuals, dyads, family processes, and social institutions. Thus, this book focuses primarily on dark family interactions and is intended to supplement more general readings on family communication by advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and other professionals interested in this specific aspect of family life. It is important to note that, at times, we will explore theories or processes that may not necessarily be dark in and of themselves, but we find them illustrative of dark family life as well and, therefore, include them in our review. Moreover, our discussion of family communication processes will capture shades of darkness, ranging from tones of gray to hues that are clearly dark. We do so in order to capture the range of darkness that exists in family life. There are clearly some processes that are very dark, such as family incest or intimate partner violence, but there are also interaction patterns that are less dark, yet unhealthy nonetheless. Examples of these latter, grayer interaction patterns include parent–child conflict or the impact of narcissism on a family member's communicative abilities. Categorizing such a range of behaviors as dark may be controversial to some readers. However, as stated earlier, we believe it is important to recognize that

family life is filled with happiness and strife, with struggles
and joy. As such, we argue that to understand its fullness, family communication scholarship needs to capture such diversity in its theorizing. Again, we recognize that some may disagree with our categorization of particular behaviors as dark or with our co-mingling of black with gray interaction patterns. Some readers may be offended that we have classified particular behaviors as dark, while others may not. For readers at both of these extremes, we hope that you will read on with an open mind, knowing that our intention is not to offend but instead to provide a way of seeing family communication scholarship through a dark-colored lens.

Before beginning our discussion of the dark side of family communication, it is important to clarify several key terms that are the focus of this book –namely, what is family? What is family communication? And, finally, what is dark family communication? To answer these questions, we first will review various definitions of *family*, identifying the one definition that we will use to ground our discussion of family throughout the book. From there, we will articulate a definition of *family communication*, explaining various perspectives about communication embedded within the definition. The chapter concludes with discussion questions intended to generate further conversation about the material as well as an introduction to our fictional family, the Moores, whose experiences will help readers apply and process material presented in each of the subsequent chapters.

Key Definitions and Fundamental Assumptions

Family. As others have similarly observed (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b; Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006; Vangelisti, 2004), defining the term family is almost as elusive as finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Just when you think you have it in sight, it slips out of your reach. Or, just as we think we have identified the best working definition of family, we encounter a family unit that is not captured by the definition. The reason for this, as described by Coontz (2000) and others (e.g., Floyd et al., 2006; Galvin, 2006) is that the American family is constantly evolving, and so too are our definitions. Table 1.1 presents a sampling of definitions of family, revealing the diversity of how scholars have conceptualized this institution across time. The definitions range from a more traditional emphasis on heterosexual unions with "owned" or adopted children (Murdock, 1949) or on biological/legal kin (e.g., Popenoe, 1993) to a more post-modern stance based primarily upon intimacy (e.g., Turner & West, 2006/2002). More specifically, as noted by Fitzpatrick and Caughlin (2002), family definitions can be classified in three primary ways: (a) family structure definitions (how the family is comprised; e.g., Bedford & Blieszner, 1997); (b) psychosocial task definitions (functions of the family; e.g., functional view from Sabourin, 2003); and finally, (c) transactional process definitions (implies family's intimacy, loyalty, shared history, and group identity; e.g., Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2004).

Table 1.1. Examples of Definitions of Family Across Time

Murdock (1949)	"The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults" (p. 1).
Jorgenson (1989)	"A system of relations that comes about as individuals define those relations in their everyday communications with another" (p. 28).
Stacey (1990)	"A unit that may have residence but rather one that is based on "meaning and relationship" (p. 6).
Popenoe (1993)	"A relatively small domestic group of kin (or people in a kin-like relationship) consisting of at least one adult and one dependent person" (p. 529).
Bedford & Blieszner (1997)	"A family is a set of relationships determined by biology, adoption, marriage, and in some societies, social designation, and existing even in the absence of contact or affective involvement, and, in some cases, even after the death of certain members" (p. 526).
Allen, Fine, & Demo (2000)	"Characterized by two or more persons related by birth, adoption, marriage, or choice. Families are … defined by socioemotional ties, and enduring responsibilities, particularly in terms of one

	or more members' dependence on others for support and nurturance" (p. 1).
Koerner & Fitzpatrick (2002)	"A group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity and who experience a shared history and a shared future" (p. 71).
Sabourin (2003)	"The family is an agent of socialization, performing the tasks necessary to develop children and citizens" (p. 33).
Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel (2004)	"Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning in a family relationship" (p. 6).
Braithwaite & Baxter (2006)	"A social group of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection" (p. 3).

With so many different definitions of family, it may seem impossible to choose which one is "best." In our opinion, one definition is not necessarily better than the others per se (see Floyd et al., 2006, for a discussion of the pros and cons of different types of definitions). Instead, we agree with Sabourin (2003), who argues that it is not necessary to privilege one definition or one set of criteria over others when defining families, but, instead, "to be explicit about whatever criteria we use, both to subjects engaged in research and consumers of the written research product" (p. 41). Following this suggestion, we want to explicate our own stance toward

family. In response to the current discourse, we assume a more post-modern, transactional approach toward family in this book, recognizing that in so doing we have constructed a particularly wide and more inclusive boundary around our conceptualization of family (see Floyd et al., 2006). More specifically, for our purposes we define family as "*a social group of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection*" (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 3; see textbox below).

Thus, the definition of family we use in this text possesses fewer limitations than other current definitions of family. For instance, many scholars would argue that family members ought to be
genetically tied. While our definition certainly allows for blood relation, we assert that families may also be bonded through legal obligations (e.g., family by marriage or through adoption) or by an intimate connection to another. Moreover, this definition causes one to examine complex relationships that, at first, might appear familial. Take the example of an adopted child who has never seen or spoken to her biological parents. Even though the child shares genes with her biological parents, she may or may not consider those individuals to be her family members. The approach to family that we assume in this book allows for both of those possibilities.

Furthermore, our definition of family is grounded in three assumptions: (1) families are systems, (2) families are coherent, and (3) families are constituted via social

interaction (Vangelisti, 2004). These assumptions emphasize the idea that each member of the family affects and is affected by the others; therefore, each member's communication affects and is affected by the others'. As such, each of these assumptions foregrounds the role of communication in family formation and functioning.

Family: a social group of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection. (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 3)

Family Communication: messages that are intentionally or unintentionally exchanged both within a system of individuals who generate a sense of belonging and collective identity and who experience a shared history and future between these individuals and outsiders. (See Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002)

Dark Family Communication: synchronic or diachronic production of harmful, morally suspect, and/or socially unacceptable messages, observed and/or experienced at one or multiple interlocking structures of interaction, that are the products or causes of negative effects (temporary or long term) within the family system. (Baiocchi, Mbure, Wilson-Kratzer, Olson, & Symonds, 2009, p. 11)

Family Communication

With a definition of family in place, we now turn to defining family communication –a rather slippery construct to conceptualize because of its omnipresence in our lives. When something is so commonplace, it can be difficult to define. To complicate matters, scholarship tends to empirically examine the topic without offering a formal definition. Thus, definitions for family communication are not as bountiful as those for its fundamental component, family. However, several definitions can be found in key sources. For example, Le Poire (2006) proposed that family communication consists of messages sent intentionally, that are typically perceived as intentional, and that foster "shared meaning among individuals who are related biologically, legally, or through marriage-like commitments and who nurture and control each other" (p. 27). Additionally, Galvin et al. (2004) provided a "framework" for examining family communication that includes, in part, "the flow of patterned, meaningful messages within a network of evolving interdependent relationships located within a defined cultural context" (p. 49). While there are nuanced differences between these various definitions, they share one fundamental assumption: families are constructed and maintained via their communicative practices (Vangelisti, 2004). We share this basic premise and for our purposes, *family communication* is defined as *messages that are intentionally or unintentionally exchanged both within a system of individuals who generate a sense of belonging and collective identity and who experience a shared history and future, and between*

these individuals and outsiders (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; see the textbox above).

The two major elements of this definition deserve highlighting. First, it is important to remember that our communication with family can be planned and direct, or unplanned and without intention. Second, family communication occurs *within* the family system, but also occurs *between* the family system and others outside that system, such as family friends, neighbors, and colleagues. These two elements are especially salient as we discuss dark family communication.

Dark Family Communication

With clear definitions of family and family communication in place, we now turn to one more essential term to define, *dark family communication*. By its very nature, the dark side is "frequently hidden, secret, and therefore elusive" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1994, p. 316), thereby making it difficult to define exactly what is the dark side of family. Spitzberg and Cupach (1994, 1998), the originators of the dark side metaphor in communication, identified "dark side" topics as those areas of study that often go unnoticed and/or unmentioned. However, they are also those things that are destructive, distortive, exploitive, objectifying, etc. (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1994, 1998). Nearly a decade later, the authors altered their definition, asserting that dark side communication could be viewed along two dimensions: morally/culturally acceptable (vs. unacceptable) and functionally productive (vs. destructive). Hence, one quadrant represented the "bright

side" in which no "dark" existed (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Concomitantly, Duck (1994) offered his own taxonomy of the dark side. He explained his perspective in a quadrant-like fashion as well, with a message sender's good or bad intentions running along one axis, and dark communication's inherent (trait-like) or emergent (state-like) nature running along the other. Notably, he addressed the idea of a positivity–negativity dialectic, claiming that relationships necessarily included both positive and negative aspects.

Building upon these authors' work, we consider dark family communication to be the "*synchronic or diachronic production of harmful, morally suspect, and/or socially unacceptable messages, observed and/or experienced at one or multiple interlocking structures of interaction, that are the products or causes of negative effects (temporary or long term) within the family system*" (Baiocchi et al., 2009, p. 11). To follow is a detailed description of four characteristics that are fundamental to our definition of dark family communication (see Table 1.2 for a summary).

Table 1.2. Characteristics of the Dark Side of Family Communication

Characteristics	Corresponding Assertions

The Nature of Dark Communication (The "What")	• Involves verbal and/or nonverbal messages that are deemed harmful, morally suspect, and/or socially unacceptable • Contains various shades of darkness in dark family communication • Contains a positivity and negativity dialectic
Meaning-Making Processes (The "How")	• Communication that is (in actuality or perceived as) intentional or unintentional • Experienced by interactants and/or observed by uninvolved individuals
Interlocking Interaction Structures (The "Where")	• Exists within and is influenced by four interlocking structures of interaction: individual, dyadic, familial, and social
Time (The "When")	• Involves effects that evolve over time (synchronic and diachronic) • Needs to be understood as both process and product

Characteristic 1: The Nature of Dark Communication

This first characteristic constitutes the "what" of our definition, or, more specifically, what comprises dark communication. In general, dark communication within the family is composed of communication processes and outcomes that involve the exchange of dark verbal and nonverbal messages. Verbal messages may include more

indirect damaging messages (e.g., parental use of negative labels or double binds to discipline children, Stafford & Dainton, 1994) as well as *direct* messages such as verbal aggression or temper outbursts (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). Nonverbal messages include but are not limited to the use of physical
force such as spanking, physical abuse, and child maltreatment (Paolucci & Violato, 2004). Further, we define dark messages to be those that are "harmful, morally suspect, and socially unacceptable" (Baiocchi et al., 2009, p. 11). In sum, we assert that *dark family communication involves verbal and/or nonverbal messages that are deemed harmful, morally suspect, and/or socially unacceptable.*

Our definition of dark family communication also accounts for what we have entitled *shades of darkness.* Much existing scholarship on the dark side of communication often fails to account for the multidimensionality of darkness, instead casting it as a unidimensional construct. For example, relational conflict is often considered a dark topic alongside relational violence (for example, see Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). Most would agree that conflict is typically less dark than relational violence. Yet, to date, no theoretical definition attempts to capture the nuances of these differences. These different forms of dark relational patterns are bound to vary in the types of messages produced and the impact those messages may have on the family system. It is imperative that these differences in the shades of darkness be accounted for when theorizing dark communication. Thus, we assert

that *there are various shades of darkness in dark family communication*.

Next, it is important to acknowledge that not all dark communication within a family produces dark outcomes and neither does all bright family communication result in bright outcomes. The dynamics of family life and communication are much more complex than that, and our perspective on family darkness seeks to capture this complexity by acknowledging a positivity–negativity dialectic similar to one proposed by Duck (1994). So, for instance, a single mom and her daughter who have an established pattern of calling each other derogatory names during conflicts (dark communication behavior) may become so desensitized to this practice that they live a relatively satisfied family life overall (bright outcome). Or, a stepdad who excessively tells his daughter that she is the "best" (bright communication behavior) could unintentionally play a role in the girl's overly inflated sense of self and inability to handle adversity (dark outcome). These
examples demonstrate how labeling processes and/or outcomes as dark can also involve confronting a dialectical tension between positivity and negativity. Furthermore, dysfunctional families can have moments of positive functionality, and vice versa –functional families can have dysfunctional moments. Our definition of dark family communication is intended to account for both of these centripetal and centrifugal forces and such a lens will be used to view the dark family communication literature. Therefore, we argue that *dark family communication contains a positivity and negativity dialectic.*

Characteristic 2: Meaning-Making Processes Involved with Dark Family Communication

Second, the darkness definition advanced here also seeks to draw our attention to the meaning-making processes that are both fundamental to communication interactions and integral to how darkness is defined, processed, and negotiated with family units. We see this component as the "how" of our definition –how the communicated messages are en/decoded with meaning. Two meaning-making processes are most central to our definition. As others have discussed, perspectives toward communication often assume a sender or receiver stance. This debate then leads to a discussion about the notion of intentionality –does a sender need to intentionally send a message in order for communication to have occurred and does a receiver need to intentionally receive a message? In the dark family context, the following scenario reflects this line of questioning. Let's say that Angela, a cousin to Jeffrey, sent an email message to multiple family members about the status of Aunt Betsy's health. Angela, however, did not include Jeffrey in the email distribution. Jeffrey subsequently learns of this through another cousin. Did communication occur between Angela and Jeffrey in this example? Some might say, "No, not if Angela did not intend to send the message to Jeffrey." Others would say, "Yes," because, regardless of intent, if Jeffrey received a message and assigned meaning to it (in this case, perhaps, a snubbing from cousin Angela), communication occurred. Even if a message was sent unintentionally, the fact that a message was "received" communicates meaning and, therefore, is an act of communication. Our approach to

dark family communication accounts for both of these seemingly contradictory stances. We believe that dark family communication can be intentionally or unintentionally sent by an individual and can be assigned meaning by the interactants contrary to the meaning the sender intended. In other words, dark communication can occur both at the level of message construction (i.e., dark intent) and/or message deconstruction (i.e., dark meaning making). Thus, more formally noted, *dark family communication may be (in actuality or perceived as) intentional or unintentional.*

The discussion thus far focuses on the meaning making that occurs between the actual communicators. In other words, those who have "experienced" the communication. This is a common assumption embedded within the meaning-making deliberation –we typically assume that meaning making is capturing the processes involved with the direct interactants. However, as discussed by Spitzberg and Cupach (2007), there is a social (dis) approval dimension to the dark side. When we enter the dark side of communication, we walk through a door where not only the interactants themselves assign meaning to the actual communication events but additional uninvolved others assign meanings as well. This perspective is not isolated to dark interactions per se, but the fundamental essence of darkness involves making judgments about what may be harmful, morally suspect, or socially unacceptable –and those making such evaluations may not be the individuals directly involved. For example, a couple's heated discussion in a store may be normal to them but socially unacceptable to others standing close by. In this

example, we have individual interactants assessing their communication one way, while observers evaluate it another way.

Whose interpretation is correct? The observer or the interactant? Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) also address this issue with regard to who is best qualified to report on acts of dominance –the participants or the observers? As these researchers note, there are arguments to be made for both sides. For instance, participants
are best positioned to report the behavior because they are more "present" in the interaction than objective observers and more familiar with the nuanced behaviors of their partner. Conversely, a positivity bias has been found among participants relative to observers, suggesting participants are more likely to assign socially desirable meanings to the behaviors –especially to their own. Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986), and related concepts such as fundamental attribution error and the actor–observer bias help us understand this human tendency. According to Attribution theory, individuals have a need to make sense of their environment, and, in order to do so, attribute certain causes for particular behaviors. Individuals tend to attribute internal causes to their own positive outcomes, while attributing external causes to their negative outcomes (fundamental attribution error). On the other hand, individuals attribute another's negative outcomes to the other's behavior (actor–observer bias) as opposed to external forces. These tendencies are especially pronounced when the outcomes are negative, which is certainly the case during dark interactions.

Both sides of the actor–observer argument have merit. In fact, Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) assert that some level of concordance exists between the actor–observer ratings. Although a positivity bias may exist in the participants' self-ratings, it appears that there is a high correlation between the two parties' ratings. Yet, these researchers did find differences between the ratings of observers and participants, especially in regard to individual behaviors. It seems that the participants may have been more likely to use broader and more holistic judgments than attending to individual behaviors, when scrutinizing the actions involved. So, although there are commonalities between the parties' perceptions, there are also nuances to these interpretations that should not be ignored carte blanche. Thus, we believe it important to account for the perspectives of both the person(s) observing and the person(s) experiencing. There may be times when both parties' evaluations concur, but, when examining darker, dysfunctional interactions, an outsider's perspective is especially important to capture in order to move outside of the subjective box of the interactants

themselves. As one might imagine, labeling one's behavior as harmful, socially unacceptable, or morally suspect may be too difficult to admit or too close to see, thereby increasing the need for a more arm's-length assessment. We feel that these are important issues to consider when theorizing dark communication and posit that *dark family communication may be experienced by interactants and/or observed by uninvolved individuals.*

Characteristic 3: Interlocking Interaction Structures

The dark family communication definition advanced in this chapter also accounts for different sites within the family "where" meaning making occurs –within the individual, within a dyad, within the family as a whole, and within society at large. It is instructive to think of these layers as interlocking interaction structures because they metaphorically capture different "locations" where communication takes place within families and where meaning making occurs. Admittedly, similar structures exist within all communication, and certainly, all families. However, such diversity of context is important to acknowledge when discussing the dark side due to its social and moral nature and, unfortunately, is often ignored in empirical examination of the topic.

First, with regard to the individual structure, we recognize that there are personality traits and characteristics that impact dark message construction and deconstruction (see Chapter 2 for more discussion). Communication is impacted by biological, cognitive, physical and psychological makeup, as well as characteristics related to gender, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic class. Psychologists, for example, have long attributed particular personality traits to behavioral consistencies, including extraverts' susceptibility to positive emoting (e.g., happiness), and neurotics' predisposition toward negative affect and anxiety-related behaviors (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Plomin & Caspi, 1999; Zelinski & Larsen, 1999). These findings help explain why some

individuals are more inclined to verbally or physically abuse. Hostile individuals (a destructive aggressive communication trait, according to Rancer and Avtgis, 2006), for
instance, are likely to wish injurious and/or destructive consequences on another they dislike (Berkowitz, 1998). Chapter 2 will explore in more detail the scholarship on the role that individual personality and behavior play in dark family communication.

We also want to be sure to account for the dyadic nature of human relationships (Messman & Canary, 1998) and how such patterns influence dark side messages and outcomes. The *dyadic interaction structure* (reviewed in Chapter 3), specifically, allows us to examine dark communication processes and effects occurring at the structural level of typical pairs, such as the committed couple, parent–child, and sibling–sibling. For instance, communication patterns between parent and child have been shown to moderate the outcomes of corporal punishment (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005). Research such as this confirms the need to incorporate the relational dynamics between dyads within the family into our understanding of dark family communication.

Similarly, the *family interaction structure* examines how family level processes can be dark or have dark outcomes (subject of Chapter 4). The influence of the family system in its entirety is evidenced clearly by the content, quality, and frequency of family interactions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). For example, Schrodt (2009) found positive relationships between open family communication environments and family strengths and

satisfaction. More specifically, the findings revealed that when families (particularly the parents) communicated in ways that encouraged open discussions, those environments could strengthen the family "by equipping family members with the information-processing and behavioral skills needed to cope with internal and external stress" (Schrodt, 2009, p. 181). In contrast, more closed, conformity- oriented environments were found to be inversely associated with family strengths and family satisfaction. It appears that family conformity negatively impacts a family's adaptability and flexibility during adversity as well as individual family members' levels of satisfaction.

Finally, our approach to dark family communication also considers how the *social interaction structure* (e.g., cultural context, the influence of religion and politics, the impact of the media, the historical time period, etc.) influences the messages produced, the
effects of those messages, and the meaning assigned to the messages (Chapter 5 reviews these issues in more depth). For instance, in the United States during the early to mid nineteenth century, individuals may have been less likely to interpret certain racial epithets as hate messages and familial environments that prompted such speech as dark. However, in today's world, one would hope that more families (albeit not all, unfortunately) would judge this type of rhetoric as hateful –and thereby harmful, morally suspect, and socially unacceptable –or, in other words, dark.

Examining the overarching societal context also allows us to examine the issue of normalization (Barnett et al.,

2005), or what may in other cultures be considered unacceptable and perhaps even illegal. Spanking, for instance, is more tolerated among African-American communities than European-American communities (Wilson & Morgan, 2004). Furthermore, examining the larger societal context allows us to examine the forces that may infiltrate and determine family interactions such as patriarchal gender relations and religion and spirituality (Barnett et al., 2005; Galvin, 2004). We approach culture as part of the larger societal context that influences the production, acceptance, and interpretation of dark messages. Although dark behaviors such as violence appear to characterize all human societies (Collins, 1981; Foucault 1976), there are cultural subtleties regarding, for instance, the level of acceptance and appropriate consequences for the victim and perpetrator. These subtleties may be influenced by other subcultures such as popular media culture of violence in the United States (Denzin, 1982; Weaver & Carter, 2006). For instance, Anderson and Dill (2000) found that exposure to violent video games has been associated with increased aggressive thoughts and behaviors in both the short term and long term. Exposure to certain types of media have also been found to produce changes in men's attitudes about aggression to women (Malamuth & Check, 1981, 1985). The dark messages and effects that can be observed in the interlocking structures are therefore influenced by culture and subcultures in society. Because these interaction structures provide a mechanism for understanding dark family communication, we assert that *dark family communication exists within and*

is influenced by four interlocking structures of interaction: individual, dyadic, familial, and social. As noted, the structures form the basis for each of the subsequent chapters in this book and, therefore, will be discussed in more detail within each of those chapters.

Characteristic 4: Time

A final core characteristic of dark family communication, *time*, seeks to organize dark family communication, its interpretation, and its outcomes, both synchronically (one moment in time) and diachronically (occurring over time). Time allows us to capture the "when" of our conceptualization of family darkness. In their discussion of relational dialectics theory, Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) articulated this important time distinction as it relates to meaning making:

> Meanings do emerge in interactional moments, and in this sense, they are, at least momentarily, fixed and stable. But meaning is also fluid, which means that it is ultimately unfinalizable and "up for grabs" in the next interactional moment . . . meaning-making is envisioned as ongoing communicative work that results from the interanimation of different, often competing, discourses. (p. 353)

In other words, truly to understand darkness within families, we must acknowledge its dynamism, its fluidity. As a phenomenon, darkness is not static. Instead, its construction, enactment, meaning, and associated effects can vary within a moment and over many moments.

Within the scope of our definition then, synchronic and diachronic time distinctions aid us in understanding how the meaning individuals assign to dark family communication is not only produced, but also reproduced. For example, a mother and fifteen-year-old daughter may have a very serious conflict over the daughter's desire to go to an out-of-town concert with her friends. Very hostile words are exchanged (dark communication), eventually leading to the daughter running off to her bedroom and slamming the door on the way (short-term dark effect). After a few days of silence (longer-term dark communication and effect), the two of them slowly begin to talk again –but only about superficial daily musings, not about what happened a couple of days ago (continued dark and more diachronic communication). Both of them admit several years later, however, that this argument was a turning point in their relationship. With this outcome, we see both diachronic and synchronic effects of time on family communicative interactions.

A second function of time in our definition captures how dark messages, meanings, and effects evolve along with historical, social changes. Consider how a son's coming out to his parents might be met with a very different response if the conversation occurred in 1952 rather than 2012. Although same-sex romantic relationships are still not fully accepted in today's society, the social climate of the 1950s was much more unaccepting and thus would most likely have an impact on the parents' response to their son. This is just one example of how our definition of dark family communication seeks to capture such time-oriented realities of family life. More

formally, we argue that *dark message production, meaning-making processes, and effects of these evolve over time (synchronic and diachronic)*. Furthermore, *dark family communication cannot be fully understood as either process or product; it must entail both* (see Table 1.1).

Chapter Summary

One thing all humans have in common is we come from some form of family. As we learned in this chapter, family can mean many different things to different people. No longer is the term only meant to reflect those relationships formed via blood or law. Instead, concepts such as closeness, interdependence, and intimacy capture more of the essence of the modern-day version of family. For us, family represents both those relationships formed by blood or law AND by affection and closeness. Unfortunately, that affection and closeness can include moments of disdain and distance and those ties that bind can sometimes feel more like a tightening noose. That complexity of dark and bright, happiness and sadness, functionality and dysfunction are the focus of this book. All families contain dark moments –some more severe, more impactful, and longer lasting than others. This book is intended to shed light on some of the more "hidden" areas of familial communication. More specifically, Chapter 2 reviews the impact of the individual on dark message construction and deconstruction. The topic shifts to an in-depth examination of dyadic types of dark family communication and processes in Chapter 3. The family, as a unit, is the focus of Chapter 4 as we explore dark

sides of family level functioning. In Chapter 5, we broaden the discussion of dark family life to the role of culture, religion/politics, media, and historical time period. Finally, in Chapter 6, we close the book with an analysis of what the future holds for dark side of family communication scholarship, including a description of our Darkness Model of Family Communication and an explanation for how it could be one heuristic device for theorizing about this topic in the future. Along the way, you will be given a chance to apply each chapter's information to our fictional family, the Moores, whom you can meet in our introduction to the family (see the textbox below).

Meet the Moores

As you walk your dog down the street, you can't help but notice the outside of the Moores' home. The house and yard are almost picturesque: a perfect bay window in the living room that faces the street, the pristine white picket fence, and the freshly manicured lawn. But behind the picture-perfect example of the house and yard resides a family that is troubled and has its own secrets.

Meet Frederick (Fred) Moore: father/husband. A hard-nosed businessman in mergers and acquisitions. Fred is the son of an Air Force officer and stay-at-home mom, who was taught strict discipline from a very young age. As Fred

progressed through school, his father traveled periodically and ran his house like
an Air Force platoon, insisting his children be taught strict discipline and be successful. Failure was not an option. Today Fred is a strict disciplinarian.

Janice Moore: wife/mother. Janice grew up in an affluent suburb of Washington, DC. The third of four children, Janice spent most of her childhood and young adulthood trying to escape her older brother and sister's shadows. Later, the death of her sister splintered her family even more, casting Janice deeper into the shadows. Wanting to feel loved and cherished, Janice met Fred and married him six weeks later. Today, Janice is a stay-at-home mom, who hides the pain of not feeling love and acceptance.

Frederick (Freddie) Moore, Jr: oldest son. Freddie bears the brunt of his father's strict discipline and harsh ways. The oldest of three siblings, Fred is a junior in high school who enjoys spending time away from home, participating in activities such as marching band, baseball, and Honor Society. In his spare time, he draws comics and caricatures, hoping one day to escape his father's dream of Freddie joining the military.

Lucy Moore: daughter. Lucy is thirteen and in middle school. Lucy spends her free time designing

clothes, lusting after the latest pop singer, and debating American Idol contestants with her friends. She also is active in her church youth group.

Robert "Bobby" Moore: youngest child. A seven-year-old with a daring imagination, Bobby is seen as the son Fred Moore never wanted but Janice dotes on. While interested in trains, Star Wars, and NASCAR, Bobby wants to be a crab fisherman on the Bering Strait when he grows up.

Gertrude Westley –aka "Grandma Trudy." After ending her dancing career, Trudy met her husband (of 37 years), Thomas, who was an Advertising Executive for a large Midwest advertising firm. She spent her life as a stay-at-home mom, doting on her two older children. After the death of her husband, she moved in with Janice's family because she could no longer financially support herself.

Steve Berry: friend of family. A junior in high school, who attends school with Freddie Jr. and participates in many of the same activities. He is the only child of a single working father, who works the graveyard shift four nights a week. Because of this, Steve spends many hours and nights at the Moore home and is considered a "member" of the family.

Discussion Questions

What characteristics and assertions from the definition of dark family communication are evidenced in the Moores' family scenario? What potential dark family communication issues are foreshadowed?

For Further Thought and Discussion

Theoretical Considerations

1. Review the definitions of family offered in Table 1.1 and consider the individuals you would deem as your "family members." How does your own conceptualization of your family change when each definition is applied?
2. What theoretical limitations exist, if any, to a transactional approach to family?
3. Your roommate turns to you and asks "What are you reading?" Your reply is "I am learning about dark communication," to which your puzzled room-mate says "What?" How do you explain dark communication?
4. Critique the characteristics of dark family communication advanced in this chapter. Are there any characteristics that you would change or delete? Can you think of other characteristics that may be important to acknowledge in theorizing about the concept?

Practical Considerations

1. Imagine you are a family therapist. How might you use the characteristics of dark family communication to help a distressed family you are counseling?
2. Recall the last major conflict you had with a family member (or members). Apply each of the characteristics of dark family communication to the conflict and evaluate how each influenced the situation's outcomes.

Methodological Considerations

1. How might the characteristics of dark family communication be tested empirically?
2. How might a quantitative approach be used? What insights would be gleaned from testing the ideas using qualitative techniques? How might rhetorical or critical approaches be used?
3. What possible ethical challenges are involved in studying dark family communication?
4. What potential problems might arise when submitting a research proposal to a university's Human Subject Review Board to study dark family communication?