Spring 4-1-2007

Family Stories as Indicators of the Family Dynamic

Allison Clarkson
Lynchburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/utcp

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons, International and Intercultural Communication Commons, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, Other Communication Commons, and the Social Influence and Political Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalshowcase.lynchburg.edu/utcp/37

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Showcase @ Lynchburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Showcase @ Lynchburg College. For more information, please contact digitalshowcase@lynchburg.edu.
Family Stories as Indicators of the Family Dynamic

Allison Clarkson

Communication Studies Honors Thesis

Lynchburg College

Spring 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of highest honors attached to the Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies at Lynchburg College.

Faculty Committee Advisor: Candace Todd, Ph.D.

Faculty Committee Member: Janice Rice, Ph.D.

Faculty Committee Member: Sharon Robinson, Ph.D.
Abstract

An important element of the family unit involves the stories that are often told and retold. Although the collection of stories varies among families, the themes within these stories are sometimes common across different families. Within this research, certain patterns were shown to recur regarding these story themes. Furthermore, a positive relationship was found between families’ stories and the characteristics that are used to describe the families.
Thanksgiving is an occasion when members of the immediate and extended family gather to celebrate, catch-up, and reminisce. It is during this time of reminiscing that the family stories often get recounted. In this particular instance, the stories might be reflections on previous Thanksgiving gatherings. The stories might include humorous instances such as the time Aunt Linda dropped the pumpkin pie on the floor, or sentimental memories such as the many years past that it was the tradition for Grandpa to carve the turkey. Perhaps also they are reflections on family growth such as the year Cousin Steve brought his girlfriend to Thanksgiving Dinner to meet the family for the first time, though no one would have guessed that she would become his wife just a few years later. Of course, these are just examples. It is not merely at Thanksgiving, or even holidays in general, that families tell their stories. Rather, storytelling is a frequent occurrence in families.

The Role of Stories in Family Life

The significance of storytelling is expressed by Walter Fisher when he states that "humans are essentially storytellers" (1984, p. 7). In her text, Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How our Family Stories Shape Us, Elizabeth Stone argues that "family is our first culture" (p. 7) and that "family stories are one of the cornerstones of family culture" (1988, p. 17). Segrin and Flora claim that families are unique minicultures that develop their own symbols, and they attach meanings to these symbols that are only understood within the family, such as "nicknames, family jokes, or references that only members of the family understand" (2005, p. 15).

According to Stone, a family story is "almost any bit of lore about a family member, living or dead . . . as long as it’s significant, as long as it has worked its way
into the family canon to be told and retold” (1988, p. 5). In fact, “when we remember events that happened to us in our families, usually we recall and tell about the events in the form of stories— who did what to whom, where, when, and why. We describe our experiences in the language of stories” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 524). So why are family stories so important?

**Family Story Importance**

Family stories are important because they bond the family over common experiences. They are also important because they are the means by which the family history is maintained throughout the generations. The family “has a major stake in perpetuating itself”, which is assured through the telling of family stories (Stone, 1988, p. 51). Family stories help family members construct identity within the family context because they “define the family, saying not only what members should do, but who they are or should be” (Stone, 1988, p. 31). Furthermore, “our identities hinge largely on the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories we hear and internalize that others tell about us” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 515).

An example of the importance of family stories is expressed by Kellas who found that a family’s collection of stories, and the themes that emerge in them, “are potentially important indicators of its approach to family, society, and self” (2005, p. 368). This is echoed by Vangelisti, Crumley, and Baker who claim that “When people tell stories about their family, they provide listeners with clues as to how they feel about family members and what they think makes for ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ family interaction” (1999, p. 336). Furthermore, Kellas also found that the content of stories and the process of storytelling intersect to define family identity (2005, p. 385). This research also found
that “telling family stories may influence overall family satisfaction, engender family
closeness, and increase adaptability by offering lessons for dealing with each other and
the outside world” (Kellas, 2005, p. 386). This research proves the importance of
storytelling in shaping the family. So what are other functions of these important stories?

Family Story Functions

The specific functions of family stories are as varied as the stories themselves.

Peterson suggests that stories “function as a strategy for maintaining the family as a
small-group culture” (1987, p. 39). According to Jorgenson and Bochner, families
develop a corpus of stories that define their history, depict what makes them
unique ‘as a family’, establish the principles and values to which they are
devoted, and characterize the identities of each family member. Many of these
stories are told and retold, again and again, until they sink in (2004, p. 524).

Some functions of the family story, according to Stone, are to portray the family in an
esteemed manner, to provide messages or instructions, and to issue warnings and
prohibitions (1988, p. 5). She further suggests that family stories can function to make
known the “unspoken and unadmitted family policy” (p. 7) and to set the family rules (p.
31). Furthermore, Segrin and Flora argue that “family stories often have symbolic
meaning. They can function to socialize members, affirm belonging and connect
generations, and present implicit or explicit judgments about behavior” (2005, p. 52).

In a study conducted by Bylund, three families were interviewed and asked to
report what they considered to be the functions of their own family stories. The common
responses included entertaining, inspiring, relating, teaching, passing down family
history, reminiscing, and illustrating individual traits (2003, p. 230). According to
Family Stories 6

Langellier, family storytelling functions “to represent family history, to teach family values, to entertain at family gatherings, to bond family members” (2002, p. 57).

Stone describes a few of these individual functions of stories. She explains “teaching stories” as “family stories about the world…telling members still at home the ways of the world according to the experiences its elders have had” (1988, p. 7) which often relay bad news of how the family does not measure up financially or socially but also offer helpful coping strategies. Stone also describes the function of stories that ‘illustrate individual traits’ as persuading family “members they’re special…the persuasion consists of stories showing family members demonstrating admirable traits, which it claims are family traits” (1988, p. 7). As varied as the functions of family stories may be, it holds true that a family’s experiences determine the themes and functions of their stories (Bylund, 2003, p. 234). So family stories are important and have many functions, but who constructs these stories and when?

Family Storytellers

Family storytelling is a process through which family members act as “performers who assume the interactive roles of speaker and interpreter, taking part in co-productions” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, 518). Although men and women exist equally in family stories, Stone suggests that it is women who primarily act as the storytellers (Stone, 1988, p. 19). In her research, she found that men “often do not tell their own stories,” but the stories are instead relayed through their sisters, mothers, wives, or daughters (Stone, 1988, p. 19). Stone further found that it is “not unusual for the woman to know more of her husband’s family stories” than he does because she was told them by his mother (1988, p. 19). Furthermore, because women are generally the primary family
storytellers, they tend to receive a more substantial and untarnished role in the stories than do men (Stone, 1988, p. 20).

Grandparents also play an important role in family storytelling as well as the construction of family identity. Trujillo claims that “one of the most important acts that our grandparents perform is to tell us stories about our family histories” (2002, p. 111). Furthermore, “grandchildren and other family members who retell the stories they hear from their grandparents also play an important role in sharing and shaping family history” (Trujillo, 2002, p. 112). This argues that every family member has a part in constructing and expressing family stories, but when do families tell their stories?

**Family Storytelling**

According to Stone, family stories are told to children beginning at a very young age, “as early as a child understands language,” when they are “as blank and unresisting” as ever (1988, p. 9-10). Family stories are also carried along when someone moves away, “and they continue to matter, but sometimes in new ways” (Stone, 1988, p. 8).

Family stories are created as families go through various situations and are compelled to account for them through narratives (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 515). When family stories are told it is either done ritually, such as at holiday gatherings, or incidentally, when a memory is suddenly sparked (Stone, 1988, p. 20). Milestone occasions such as

- Birthdays, wedding receptions, and other family-centered holiday celebrations become the means for staging continuity and implicitly sanctioning tradition;
- memories of these ritual occasions themselves become the subject matter for particular storied episodes of family history, for example, the honeymoon trip to
the hospital emergency room or the Christmas dinner that bombed” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 518).

Family stories are commonly told at the dinner table as well, which Jorgenson and Bochner claim can create an “atmosphere of warmth and mutuality, for example, when parents’ anecdotes center on a child’s clever remarks or precocious behavior; at other times, however, stories embarrass, antagonize, and rupture consensus” (2004, p. 518). Jorgenson and Bochner further suggest that family stories span our entire lifetimes because they are

remembrances of the past situated in connection to the present moment in which they are recollected and projected toward an anticipated but uncertain future […] As life progresses, we tell and retell, to ourselves and to others, the story of who we are, what we have become and how we got there, making and remaking a story of ourselves that links birth to life to death as a continuous stream of experience flowing across the temporal coordinates of our lives (2004, p. 516).

*Family Story Meanings*

With so many family members retelling the same stories over time, the meaning is constructed and reconstructed along the way to suit the individual occasion. Stone suggests that “the facts of a family’s past can be selectively fashioned into a story that can mean almost anything, whatever they most need it to mean” (1988, p. 17). This same idea is reiterated by Trujillo who argues that “when relatives retell stories, they also emphasize certain meanings over others and reconstruct family history in particular ways” (2002, p. 112).
So the accuracy of family stories now comes into question. Walter Fisher suggests judging "what makes one story better than another" on the basis of formal features, "attributes of narrative probability: the consistency of characters and actions, the accommodation of auditors, and so on", and substantive features, which "relate to narrative fidelity" and "how people come to adhere to particular stories" (1984, p. 16).

Retelling stories not only affects the meaning of the stories, but the act of storytelling can even cause variances in the stories themselves. For instance, Jorgenson and Bochner claim that "when an individual narrates her experience, she selects certain details of the events to include and emphasize, and ignores or omits details of the events that she may have forgotten or considered less important" (2004, p. 524). Family stories can also be inaccurate because they "carry the potential to defeat their own purposes insofar as they embody fantasies, projections, and ideological constructions that make actual family life appear to be flawed in comparison to ideals" (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 519). However, Stone found that although versions of the same story can vary among family members, the family members generally have a shared sense of what their stories mean (1988, p. 10) and maintain a roughly consistent idea of family identity among the members (1988, p. 34).

The accuracy of family stories can also be affected through the process of researching them, by both the participant/storyteller and by the researcher/listener. Jorgenson and Bochner explain that "we should not necessarily trust what people tell us about their families, not so much because they want to mislead us but because we can never assume that the people in the situation know what the situation is" (2004, p. 514). Furthermore, people are not reliable historians, and the family "scrapbook" of stories
“gets adapted over time by inconsistent memories, exaggerations, and denials” (Segrin & Flora, 2005, p. 66).

The ability for researchers to listen to family stories objectively can also be impeded because

Usually, we give our interpretations of their interpretations, expressing their meanings in a different form or medium, remaking or reframing what has been said or meant. Moreover, try as we may (and should) to report or represent accurately, our own family experiences, emotions, and subjectivity may intrude as we engage in the process of giving our interpretations of their interpretations in words” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 514).

In fact, any listener to another person’s family story faces the tendency of “projecting ourselves imaginatively into their lives, and in the process coming into contact with memories and emotions related to experiences in and memories of our own families” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 518). So family stories are often retold and restructured, but what comprises the content and recurring themes of these stories?

**Family Story Themes**

Family stories tend to cluster around a central theme, seemingly “to sponsor and mirror” the aspirations of the collective family (Stone, 1988, p. 6). Walter Fisher explains two forms of narration: recounting, in the “forms of history, biography, or autobiography”, and accounting for, in the “forms of theoretical explanation or argument” (1984, p. 6). He goes on to claim that regardless of the form they may assume, recounting and accounting for are stories we tell ourselves and each other to establish a meaningful life-world. The
character of narrator(s), the conflicts, the resolutions, and the style will vary, but each mode of recounting and accounting for is but a way of relating “truth” about the human condition. (1984, p. 6)

Bylund explains Fisher’s argument with the example that certain family stories may function as recounting stories only—providing a history of how the parents met or the birth of a child. Other family stories may function as accounts for a family member’s personality traits or behavior. Indeed, a story may function in both ways. For example, a mother telling a child the story of his birth may tell the child: “You were born early in the morning— at about 6 a.m.! You must have liked that because ever since then, you’ve been my early bird, always getting up with the sun.” In doing so, she is not just recounting the child’s birth, but also accounting for his behavior. (2003, p. 217)

Fisher also argues that “though the most engaging stories are mythic, the most helpful and uplifting stories are moral” (1984, p. 16). This suggests that although we often enjoy telling humorous, entertaining stories about each other in our families, the stories that have the most meaning to us are those that function to teach and inspire. Jorgenson and Bochner echo this by claiming that “The content of stories is not nearly as important as the convictions that these narratives promote. Usually stories have a moral point. They encourage commitment to ways of acting, thinking, feeling, and living” (2004, p. 524).

The content and recurring themes of stories are widely varied. Family stories “center around common topics (e.g., how a couple got together, how a family originated whether by birth or adoption, how the family handles adversity, what it means to be a member of the family, or how parents struggle with issues of growing up or making
decisions)” (Segrin & Flora, 2005, p. 66). Furthermore, throughout her text Stone describes the categories that she has created for classifying the subject matter of the family stories that she has encountered in her research, such as courtship, survival, getting even, lost fortunes, traveling and lineage. Likewise, Vangelisti has developed a similar system for classifying family stories. However, she has categorized the stories according to themes rather than subject matter.

These many and varied stories survive for generations “not because they’re entertaining, though they may be; they last because in ways large and small they matter” (Stone, 1988, p. 5). For example, Great Depression stories “survive not because they’re dramatic (they’re usually not) but because they’re exemplary -- the family’s celebration of itself for coming through” (Stone, 1988, p. 20).

Family stories are valuable to the family members who tell them and to the survival of the family history. So how do people characterize their own families? And do the stories they choose to tell reflect these characteristics? Previous research in the area of family stories has primarily focused on family storytelling using interviews as method. However, my research will focus on the themes of the family stories and if they relate to the self-reported family characteristics through the use of surveys as method. I will explore the relationship between the respondents’ self-reported family characteristics and the family stories they choose to tell.

Methodology

To find a correlation between family story themes and self-reported family characteristics, a survey was distributed electronically, using WebSurveyor software, at a small, private, Liberal Arts college in Virginia. The survey asked respondents to give
their age, to list three qualities that describe their family, and, after a page break in the survey, to write a family story that describes their family, or more specifically what is best about their family (See Appendix A). The survey for this research was sent electronically to the entire college campus, including faculty, staff, and students, and participation was completely voluntary. This differs from Vangelisti’s research because she only surveyed college students, and she provided extra credit to those who participated.

The surveys were analyzed using Vangelisti’s table entitled “Descriptions of and excerpts of preliminary family story themes” (1999, p. 342). In this table, Vangelisti has created twenty-one different categories, both positive and negative, for sorting the themes of family stories and has included descriptions and examples for each category from her own research findings (See Appendix B). The categories are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Openness</th>
<th>Value Differences</th>
<th>Chaos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Support</td>
<td>Accomplishments Together</td>
<td>Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>Lack of Instrumental Support</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual/Celebration</td>
<td>Lack of Openness</td>
<td>Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Negativity</td>
<td>Lack of Emotional Support</td>
<td>Personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity/Conflict</td>
<td>Lack of Boundaries</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the categories was assigned a letter A through U and then used to code the qualities and stories provided by the survey respondents. The words listed as family qualities were only coded under one category, but because of the diversity of themes
within each family story, many stories were coded under multiple categories. The coded responses for each of the open-ended survey questions were then totaled and charted in order to look for patterns (See Appendix C).

Findings

The survey results were collected over a period of seven days, after which there were a total of 128 survey responses. Of the total respondents, 57% were between the ages of 18 and 24, 14.1% were between the ages of 25 and 34, 10.2% were between the ages of 35 and 44, 12.5% were between the ages of 45 and 54, and 6.3% were between the ages of 55 and 64 (See Appendix C). Only 107 of the total respondents provided a family story as requested at the end of the survey. Of these story responses, 93 were usable and fourteen were eliminated because the respondent wrote that they did not have time to write out a story or did not have a family story, or because the respondent wrote about their family instead of writing a family story.

The survey asked respondents to separately list three qualities that characterize their family. Even though some of the stories were eliminated, all of the family qualities listed were retained. Survey question number two asked the respondents to list the first family quality. Because some respondents listed three qualities for this question instead of just one, there were a total of 132 words provided for this question. The category that received the most responses was Emotional Support, which is when “the family gives members affective support; family members provide comfort and acceptance when circumstances are difficult” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 342). Upon coding, 47 of the 132 words (or 35.6%) were categorized under this theme. The most common of these responses were the qualities “loving”, “caring”, and “supportive.” The second most
common theme category for this question was Contact, which was used to categorize qualities that reflected closeness and togetherness. Of the 132 words for this question, 23 of them (or 17.4%) were coded as Contact. The next highest number of responses was categorized under the Personality theme, which were qualities that were most often solely personality traits rather than relationship descriptors and did not fit more clearly into another category. This category contained 21 of the 132 words (or 15.9%) and included qualities such as “conservative,” “outgoing,” “eccentric,” and “hard-working.”

Survey question number three asked respondents to list a second family quality, for which there were 120 words listed. Again, the two most common categories of responses were Emotional Support, which was used to categorize 36 words (or 30% of the total qualities) and Personality, which was used to categorize 34 words (or 28.3% of the total qualities). However, the third most common category for this question was Humor, which was coded for 11 words (or 9.1% of the total qualities). The qualities that were designated under this category suggested that “the family engages in funny, amusing behaviors together; family members laugh with each other” (p.344) and included words such as “fun” and “funny” (Vangelisti et al., 1999). The next most common category of qualities for this question was Contact, with 10 words and 8.3% of the responses.

Survey question number four asked respondents to list a third and final family quality. Here, the three most common theme categories were Personality, with 38 out of 119 words (31.9%), Emotional Support, with 32 out of 119 words (26.9%), and Humor, with 15 out of 119 words (12.6%).
The cumulative total number of qualities listed across all three survey questions was 371 words. It is no surprise that the four most common categories of responses overall were Emotional Support (115 words; 31%), Personality (93 words; 25.1%), Contact (39 words; 10.5%), and Humor (36 words; 9.7%), respectively.

These are definitively the most common categories when classifying what respondents consider to be the qualities that most characterize their families. Although these questions were neutral and respondents were not prompted to list positive family qualities, the overall most common words listed were “loving,” “close,” “caring,” “fun,” “supportive,” and “funny,” respectively. This indicates that respondents generally have positive feelings about their family relationships because the words that they chose to describe their families were positive.
However, it is important to note that following Humor, the next two most common categories of qualities overall were Lack of Emotional Support (18 words; 5.4%) and Separation (15 words; 4%). This shows that although positive qualities were the first to come to mind for most respondents, this was not the case for everyone.

Survey question number five asked for respondents to report a family story that characterizes their family, and if possible to choose one that characterizes what is best about their family. Over 75% of the 93 usable stories were coded and categorized under multiple theme categories. The most common category for the family stories was Contact, which applied to 42 (45.2%) of the stories. These were stories about the family spending time together or interacting through joint activities. The Contact theme almost always appeared in the family stories simultaneously with another category, showing that families are often engaging in activities together while also, for example, providing emotional support or participating in a tradition.

The second most common theme categories were Ritual/Celebration and Emotional Support. The Ritual/Celebration category applied to 26 (28%) of the stories, which were about the family gathering “together for a traditional celebration or ceremony” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 344). An example of a story categorized as Contact and Ritual/Celebration is:

Every summer my family would go on a week to two week vacation. We traveled all over the US learning a lot in the process by also having a good time. These trips were always an adventure as we always went by car and sometimes traveled long distances. My brother and I would play games in the back seat and as a
family we would sing and talk about the landmarks we were passing. It was a special time for us to bond and enjoy each other’s company.

Another example of this type of story is:

One of our favorite family traditions (of which there are many) is making Christmas cookies. I began this tradition with my own children when they were quite small and have continued it with my five grandchildren. This is a very messy process which involves “intensely serious” decision-making about which of the numerous antique (some over 100 years old) cookie cutters to use, numerous reprimands from grandma about how eating too much cookie dough will give you a tummy ache, a lot of creativity in decorating (ever seen a blue Santa?), and countless rounds of off-key singing of carols, most especially “Rudolph” and “Jingle Bells.” Grandaddy, who gets into the act as well, creates some rather outlandish designs which evoke either gales of laughter or admonishments to “do it right.” Nothing can quite match the joy of watching those children’s faces when their beautiful and delicious cookies come out of the oven. There is always a photo session of the proud bakers standing in front of the Christmas tree, holding plates piled high with their creations. Each year, I add the most recent photo to the album, in the hope that when my grandchildren look at the photos they will recall the wonderful times that we had together in the kitchen and will want to continue the tradition with their children and grandchildren.

Recently, I attended Grandparents Day at my oldest grandchild’s school. First graders had been asked to write about something special that they do with their
grandparents. My granddaughter wrote, “Making cookies with Grandma.” That brought tears to my eyes.

In the Emotional Support stories “the family gives members affective support; family members provide comfort and acceptance when circumstances are difficult” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 342). There were also 26 stories (28%) coded under this category. Several of these stories were about the family supporting each other through difficult times and tragedies such as the loss of a loved one or losing everything in a house fire. An example story from the Emotional Support category is:

My sister’s housemate received an award on the [college] campus and the [college] staff asked her to have her parents come down and walk her to receive her award. She never asked her own parents to help her receive the award. She immediately asked my parents due to the support and love that they had given to her. My parents gladly accepted and my dad walked her to receive her honor.

Another example is:

One of my twins had surgery on her legs at age 10 which required her to be wheelchair-bound for several months including through the Christmas holidays. The time came to sign up for soccer, which the other two love and could have played, but they decided not to play because their sister was in a wheelchair and could not play.

These stories exemplify the importance of emotional support within the family.

The next most common type of story was categorized as Humor, with 24 stories (25.8%). These are stories in which “the family engages in funny, amusing behaviors
Family Stories 20

together; family members laugh with each other” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 344). An example of this type of story is:

When my brother was 7 (he is now 46), my father asked him on his birthday if he felt any older. “No”, my brother responded, “just more professional.” Every year since then, my brother and I ask each other on our birthdays the same question, and the birthday boy or girl must respond with that exact answer. This year, having heard this tale more than once, my 6-year-old asked me on my birthday. It’s come full circle now.

Another example of a Humor story is:

We were traveling around London and wanted to get to a particular place by train. As we were on the station platform debating about whether this was the particular train we were supposed to be on, my younger brother impatiently hopped on just before my parents decided this was the wrong train. When the train with my brother on it started to move, my mother grabbed the doorway and tried single-handedly to keep the train from moving. The rest of us started yelling and the train stopped and my brother jumped out. We’ve laughed many times about how she was so strong she stopped an entire train.

These stories exemplify the theme of Humor because they either explain a funny moment involving the family or they explain a time when the family laughed together about something, or they do both.

The fourth most common category of stories was Instrumental Support, which applied to 20 stories (21.5%). This category is for stories in which “family members
provide each other with physical and/or material assistance” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 342). A story that was categorized under this theme is:

My brother was sick in the hospital for a few months. My parents set their differences aside and alternated weeks at the hospital. When my brother was better again, my parents obviously stayed divorced and acted like bitter enemies, but it was comforting to know that my siblings and I are always first in their hearts and when it really matters they have the ability to come together.

This story illustrates the family providing physical, affective support for each other, but it also demonstrates the Reconstruction category, which is when “the family is reunited after a separation or reconciled after a divorce; all family members are together” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 343). Another story which exemplifies Instrumental Support is:

My sister was in a really unhealthy relationship. One day, she called my mom and me while we were out shopping. My sister and her then-boyfriend had gotten in a really awful fight and she needed us to help her move out. Within fifteen minutes, my mom and I had left the store, driven across town to the apartment and began helping her pack. Within another ten, my dad had left everything at work and come to help us and make sure she was not hurt.

This story illustrates the importance of physical support within families, but it also shows the family accomplishing something together, which is the next most common story category.

The category of Accomplishments Together contained 15 of the family stories (16.1%). This category is for stories in which family “members work together to achieve
a common goal or to endure a difficult situation” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 343). An example of this type of story is:

Both of my parents were very young when they were married. They lived in an apartment for three years after their marriage and decided they wanted to start a family and start paying for a home that they would own. To raise the money they scrimped and saved. They (my mom and dad) built our home from the foundation upwards. Our whole family, my aunts and uncles, all helped my parents build this house from the framework to the painting and siding. My mom’s parents even let them live at their house for a year while my mom and dad build their home. A couple months later I was born and we all moved into our house. I guess that’s why I love our house- the whole family built it.

This story illustrates the family working together to accomplish something, while also providing instrumental support.

The next most common story category is Reconstruction, which contained 8 of the stories (8.6%). These stories explain a time when “the family is reunited after a separation or reconciled after a divorce; all family members are together” (Vangelisti et al., 1999, p. 343). A story that was categorized under the themes of Accomplishments Together and Reconstruction, as well as Separation (“family members are isolated from each other physically, emotionally, and/or have experienced divorce”) is:

My family emigrated from El Salvador to the United States illegally. On our trip, my sister, brother, and I were separated on our way to the U.S. We did not reunite until we got to Tijuana, Mexico. I was only 8, my sister was 4 and my brother was 2. It was our first time being separated, and when we got back together it was the
most amazing experience. All of us made it to the U.S. safely and began a new
life in a new country.

Another story that was categorized under the themes of Reconstruction,
Accomplishments Together, and Instrumental Support is:

I think a year after my parents divorced, during Christmas time, my mom was out
going to a store. She stopped at an intersection and a car slammed into her and she
ended up having to go to the hospital. When my dad found out, he rushed to the
hospital in about two minutes to make sure that she was alright. All other relatives
also came to make sure she was alright. This event made me realize that as a
family we will always be united as one.

The most common family qualities listed by respondents overall were categorized
under the themes of Emotional Support, Personality, Contact, and Humor. The most
common story themes were Contact, Ritual/Celebration, Emotional Support, Humor,
Instrumental Support, Accomplishments Together, and Reconstruction. Three of the four
most common quality themes also appeared within the four most common story themes.
This shows that people generally associate positive qualities with their families. This is
further evident in that the most common words used by respondents to describe their
families were “loving,” “close,” “caring,” “fun,” “supportive,” and “funny.” These
qualities were exemplified in the family stories provided by the respondents. The positive
family qualities and family stories outnumbered the negative family qualities and family
stories.

The themes of Contact and Ritual/Celebration were the top two categories within
the family stories, but were not as common within the qualities. This is because when
telling family stories, many of the elements of the story are situational, setting up the
texts and the scene. Therefore, it makes sense that many of the stories would reflect
Contact (family members spending time together) and Ritual/Celebration (families
participating in traditions or special events), whereas the family qualities reflect family
dynamics and relationship characteristics rather than actual events. But when these two
categories are disregarded, the next two most common categories of stories are Emotional
Support and Humor, which were also very common within the family qualities.
Therefore, on a family dynamic level, rather than a situational level, the themes of the
qualities and stories are similar in frequency.

This can be further explained using Kenneth Burke’s Pentad. Burke proposed the
concept of Dramatism, which compares human interaction to the theater using the Pentad
(Simmons, 2001). According to Burke, the Pentad consists of five elements that are
present in every communication situation, and it is to be used in evaluating descriptions
of action rather than actual action (Simmons, 2001). A family’s stories exist as
descriptions of their actions. Therefore, Burke’s Pentad can be used to evaluate family
stories.

The elements of the Pentad are Act (what is being done), Scene (where it is being
done), Agent (who is doing it), Agency (how they are doing it), and Purpose (why they
are doing it) (Simmons, 2001). This translates to the Who, What, When, Where, How,
and Why of the family story. The respondents’ family stories utilize all areas of the
Pentad as they explain what is being done, where it is being done, who is doing it, how
they are doing it, and why they are doing it. However, this is not the case for the
respondents’ family qualities, which only fit under the element of Purpose, or why they
are doing it. The family qualities do not explain what is being done, where it is being
done, who is doing it, or how they are doing it. The qualities only explain the family
dynamics that cause the situations in the stories to occur, rather than the actual situations.
This explains the difference in theme categories between qualities and stories. When
situational elements such as the Act, Scene, Agent, and Agency of the family stories are
disregarded, the Purpose of the stories, or the family dynamic, is reflected in both the
family stories and the family qualities. Thus, Emotional Support, which was the most
common family quality reported by subjects in this research, reflected dynamics or
purposes and was also the most common purpose within Burke's Pentad when applied to
family stories.

Conclusion

The most common elements of the reported family qualities are Emotional
Support, Personality, Contact, and Humor. These are the characteristics that most of the
respondents feel best describe their families. The most common elements of the reported
family stories are Contact, Ritual/Celebration, Emotional Support, and Humor. These are
the characteristics most represented in the positive stories that respondents choose to tell
about their families. The thematic repetitions among the qualities and the stories confirm
that the qualities individuals report as describing their families match the purposes or
motives reflected in their stories.

All families have stories, and they are often positive. This research confirms that
the qualities that people perceive in their own families will be reflected in the stories they
tell. When asked to list three family qualities, most respondents listed positive qualities,
even though they were not cued to do so by the question. Most participants were then
able to report a positive family story when prompted. Even though some negative qualities and stories were reported, the results were overwhelmingly positive. This is important because it indicates that most people foreground positive feelings about their families and readily produce positive narratives regarding their families.

In my research, I encountered confusion on the part of some respondents about whether the qualities and stories they were being asked about should refer to their family of origin or to their “new” family as a married parent. My response to this question was for them to write about either family, that whatever they chose to write about would be acceptable. Vangelisti did not encounter this problem because she only used students as participants in her research. However, in future research it might be interesting to use this as a variable and compare family qualities and stories from both the family of origin and from the “new” family. The results might show that family qualities and stories vary depending on the various definitions of family.

Also in my research, I categorized the family qualities under one theme, but categorized the stories under multiple themes. In the future, to account for consistency of results, it might be more significant to make a forced decision and categorize both the qualities and the stories under just one theme.

Furthermore, my research requested respondents to report neutral family qualities and positive family stories. It would be interesting to see if asking for any story that characterizes the family, rather than a positive one, would produce different results. Another possible direction to take this research in the future would be to explore the question of why respondents choose to report one story over others and what makes certain stories more memorable or more valuable to them.
It is important to understand the relationship between family qualities and family stories because the stories can often predict the family dynamic. This confirms the argument mentioned above, that a family’s collection of stories, and the themes that emerge in them, “are potentially important indicators of its approach to family, society, and self” (Kellas, 2005, p. 368). Understanding a family’s stories is a necessary element of understanding the family and the way it interacts. We must explore the stories of the past to make sense of the interactions of the present.
References


Survey

The Stories our Families Tell

Thank you very much, for being willing to help me with my research project. Your time and effort will be greatly appreciated! Allison

1) What age are you?
   - Under 18
   - 18 - 24
   - 25 - 34
   - 35 - 44
   - 45 - 54
   - 55 - 64
   - 65 or older

2) Please list below three qualities that most describe your family starting with the first quality here.

3) A second quality that describes your family would be . . .

4) What would be a third quality that describes your family?

5) Please write a family story you have often heard that you think really describes your family. If possible, try to use a story that illustrates what you think is best about your family.

Again, thank you for your time.
Appendix B

Complete List of Categories and Descriptions (Quoted from Vangelisti, 1999, p.342)

_Openness_: Family members are disclosive; they are able to talk about issues that are awkward or difficult to discuss.

_Contact_: The family spends time together and/or engages in joint activities (e.g. attending ball games, vacationing, talking, or watching TV).

_Instrumental Support_: Family members provide each other with physical and/or material assistance.

_Emotional Support_: The family gives members affective support; family members provide comfort and acceptance when circumstances are difficult.

_Esteem_: Members respect one another, treat each other as individuals, accept differences, and/or hold on another’s viewpoints in high regard.

_Avoid Negativity_: Family members do not engage in negative verbal behaviors (e.g. arguing, yelling, stony silence) or negative physical behaviors (e.g. hitting).

_Negativity/Conflict_: Family members engage in negative verbal behaviors (e.g. arguing, yelling, stony silence) or negative physical behaviors (e.g. hitting).

_Separation_: Family members are isolated from each other physically, emotionally, and/or have experienced divorce.

_Reconstruction_: The family is reunited after a separation or reconciled after a divorce; all family members are together.

_Accomplishments Together_: Members work together to achieve a common goal or to endure a difficult situation.

_Value Differences_: Family members have different values or interests.

_Lack of Openness_: The family is unable to talk about certain issues; members tend to be non-disclosive and/or secretive.

_Chaos_: When family members are together, a sense of confusion or disorganization prevails.

_Planning_: Members organize their time together; they anticipate outcomes and/or prepare to avoid negative outcomes.
Lack of Emotional Support: The family does not give members psychological support; family members do not provide comfort or acceptance when circumstances are difficult.

Personality: The personal characteristics of one or more family members affect the family in some way.

Lack of Instrumental Support: Family members do not provide each other with physical and/or material assistance.

Lack of Boundaries: Members do not respect each other’s privacy or autonomy; they try to control each other in inappropriate or undesirable ways.

Humor: The family engages in funny, amusing behaviors together; family members laugh with each other.

Flexibility: Family members accept change in circumstances and/or in each other; members are relaxed and able to cope with change.

Ritual/Celebration: The family gathers together for a traditional celebration or ceremony.
Appendix C

What age are you?
Mean = 2.97
Median = 2.00
Mode = 2

Quality One

Number of Responses