

Missing Links between Family and Group Communication:

Children and Communication Development

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## Abstract

Calls for the examination of conceptual and theoretical connections between group communication scholarship and family communication scholarship have been recurring for well over a decade (e.g., Socha, 1997). Yet, we find ourselves once again re-asking similar questions (albeit with a focus here on consequential decision-making). What is preventing group communication scholars and family communication scholars from collaborating and sharing ideas? And, if meaningful dialogue between these two units were to occur, of what value might this interaction be for understanding communication and decision making in families? This paper argues that mutual, relative inattention to two missing but significant links between families and groups—children and communication development—are part of an explanation as to why family communication scholars and group communication scholars have not responded to past calls for collaboration as well as for the lack of progress on understanding decision making at home. The paper concludes by highlighting some of the merits of adopting a lifespan developmental approach to the study of communication and decision making in families and groups outside the home.

## Missing Links between Family and Group Communication:

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Calls for the examination of conceptual and theoretical connections between group communication scholarship and family communication scholarship have been reoccurring for over a decade (e.g., Socha, 1997, 1999). Yet, we once again find ourselves seemingly at square one as we re-ask familiar questions concerning connections between communication in families and communication in groups outside of home (here with a focus on consequential decision-making). What has prevented group communication scholars and family communication scholars from collaborating and sharing their ideas concerning mutual topics such as decision-making? And, if they were to interact meaningfully, of what value might this interaction be for understanding communication and decision making in families?

This paper argues that mutual and relative inattention to two missing links—children’s group communication and group communication development—are part of an explanation as to why family communication scholars and group communication scholars have not responded to past calls for collaboration, and for the lack of progress on understanding communication and consequential decision making at home. The paper further argues that adoption of a lifespan developmental approach to the study of group communication and decision making is a useful way to address this problem as it provides a shared context within which the study of communication in families and the study of communication in groups outside the home can mutually benefit.

### Children are Group Communicators Too

The field of communication is currently at a crisis point with respect to how it treats young children. Currently other than a textbook focusing on children’s television (Van Evra, 2004), the field of communication does not have a textbook in print pertaining to children’s

communication in early childhood (one is on the horizon in 2010, Socha & Yingling, in press). The last major book summarizing children's communication (ages birth to 5) was published twelve years ago (Haslett & Samter, 1997) and the last book to report research of children's communication (in a daycare setting) appeared six years ago (Meyer, 2003). At an NCA meeting eight years ago, Yingling and Socha (2001) argued, through an analysis of the field's published works, that when the field of communication was not altogether neglecting young children (exceptions can be found in family communication, e.g., Socha & Stamp, 2009; Vangelisti, 2004), it was mostly studying children's TV-viewing habits. While other social sciences such as psychology and sociology have devoted significant research to understanding the development and welfare of young children, recent interest in communication and aging notwithstanding, the field of communication continues to focus almost exclusively on the communication of individuals in early adulthood.

Socha and Yingling (in press) speculate that communication's relative neglect of young children may be due, in part, to: a lack of courses that focus on children's communication in graduate programs (especially graduate programs that offer a focus on family communication); a lack of a widely recognized home for the study of children's communication (family communication would seem to be the front runner); IRB obstacles preventing easy access to children for research purposes; as well as what Socha and Yingling perceive to be a widely held perception among those who study relational and group communication that what is known about communication in the worlds of children is disconnected from, and of little value to, understanding communication in the worlds of adults.

Currently, other than insights into children's television and new media use, and children's interaction with their parents (mostly from parents' perspectives), the field of communication is short on insights concerning young children's communication in general, and how they learn about communication and consequential decision making in particular. Among those who study groups, Sunwolf (2008) is among the very few who systematically include childhood and adolescence peer groups in her group communication text (also see Frey & Barge, 1997; Keyton, 1994), and even fewer have examined decision making in children's groups (e.g., Socha & Socha, 1994). And, among those who study families, while studies of children communicating with parents exist (e.g., Socha & Stamp, 1995), only recently has descriptive work in family communication begun to focus on communication in family-societal groups that include children (e.g., Socha & Stamp, 2009). Unfortunately, an early finding of this new line of research is that, with some exceptions, children seem to be left out of group discussions between and among parents and societal family agents (e.g., caregivers, teachers, physicians, ministers, etc.), even when the focus of the discussion is about the children themselves.

Thus, an important first missing link between the study of decision-making in families and decision-making in groups outside of home concerns an absence of research that focuses on our earliest group communication and group decision making experiences as children. To date, an almost exclusive focus on young adults' group communication has blinded family and group researchers from thinking about important questions such as: How do we begin to learn about group communication and decision-making processes? Or, how does group communication learning evolve over time? And, further, this blind spot hides insights into

how group communication learning and development among family, prior to adulthood, is connected to communicating in groups outside the home.

Thus, I argue that important insights into the foundations of group communication and decision-making (both inside the family and in groups outside the family) can be gained by examining children's earliest experiences of group communicating in families and then tracing the developmental arc of group communication and decision making processes across childhood, adolescence, and the stages of adulthood. Later I will outline some of the kinds of insights that might be gained from the inclusion of children into the study of group communication at home and beyond, but next I turn attention to a second and related missing link between families and groups: the concept of development.

#### Group Communication Processes Develop

There is little debate that during the period from birth through age-5 a significant amount of communication learning (some say most) takes place. And, also that communication learning from birth to age-5 goes far beyond language acquisition (Haslett & Samter, 1997). To help us understand early communication learning in the context of personal relationships, Dixon (1995) offered a conceptual framework where children acquire their initial (primitive) models of relational interaction as they communicate with adult caregivers. Later, as they expand their communication worlds to include other relationships, children continue to use (or revise) these initial communication models as necessary to ensure their messages will fit the communication demands of these new situations. This new learning also feeds back and may change children's communication models with their parents.

Drawing on Dixon's model (1995) and past research (e.g., Haslett & Samter, 1997; Socha, 1999; Socha & Yingling, in press) it is clear that children's communication models

are not limited to communicating in relationships, but include all forms of communication such as persuasive communication (Delia, Kline, & Burleson, 1979), person-centered communication (Delia & Clark, 1977), comforting (Burleson, 1994), emotional support (Burleson & Kunkel, 1996), using media (Van Evra, 2004), as well as group communication (e. g., Socha, 1999).

Although at present the content and details of children's initial group communication models is not fully known or understood, nor how long children's initial group communication models are used unrevised, it is conceivable that unless an initial group communication model is somehow challenged (prompting the potential for revision) that it may endure unchanged throughout childhood into adolescence, and possibly into adulthood—indeed it is conceivable that what we regard as “adult” group communication patterns may have been learned in kindergarten and continued unchanged into adulthood. For example, Socha and Socha (1994) used Bales IPA to compare the group discussions of two first-grade reading groups making a policy decision (the fifth in a series of discussions) with the group decision-making discussion of a group of college students taking a group communication course. With the exception of children dramatizing/playing more, the frequencies of types of messages were similar. Socha and Socha concluded that after some instruction in group communication over the course of five discussion events, that although the content of children's group interaction reflected their age (e.g., toys, play, etc.), that the children's group communication patterns were rather similar to that of adults including struggles for leadership, differences in status and power, managing clashes between individual values and group values, and more. In the same study, Socha and Socha also examined the kinds of groups in which children participated outside the home and concluded

that most children's group experiences outside the home may not be structured to foster group interaction or learning about group interaction, but rather it is structured for individual participation and individual communication-skills development within collectivities (learning separately, together).

Thus, a second missing link, group communication development, opens a new vista for group communication and group decision making both inside and outside the family as well as offers a new way to think about the betterment of group communication insofar we might improve group communication processes by creating interventions aimed at refining individuals' models of group communication and group decision-making as acquired in families and in early groups outside of home and as they develop in interactions in groups across the lifespan.

#### Learning about Communication and Decision Making across the Lifespan

##### *Individual Decision Making*

Socha and Yingling (in press) argue that early decision-making learning begins in episodes of everyday dyadic caregiver-child communication where caregivers instruct young children about how to make "good" individual choices: what foods to eat, who to play with, how to play, what to wear, what to say, and more. Using Subjective Expected Utility Theory (Savage, 1954) and Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), Socha and Yingling suggest that an important function of early caregiver-child communication about making individual decisions is teaching children about psychological decision processes such as: identifying decision goals, understanding and weighing alternatives, as well as managing risks associated with decisional choices (e.g., what is at-risk when making a choice to eat a Snicker's bar rather than a carrot?).

It is during early episodes of caregiver-child communication that parents give children information about decision alternatives, sometimes share their critical thinking about these choices, and informally begin to teach children about psychological decision-making processes including decision heuristics and biases (from Prospect Theory, Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Early on, caregivers' messages heavily influence (determine) children's valuation of alternatives and their respective probabilities of occurrence as well as form a foundation for the development of children's personal reference points. It is through caregiver-child communication that decision-making procedures are created (who gets to decide what, etc.) as well as procedures to monitor the quality of decision making processes, decision outcomes, and more. In addition to learning to make individual choices in these interactions, children are also crafting their identities, discovering their likes/dislikes as well as their signature strengths.

Making individual decisions (from banal to consequential) and communicating with others about making individual decisions are lifespan developmental processes. Yet, at present little is known about the developmental arcs of psychological and communicative processes of making individual decisions and communicating about individual decisions initially with caregivers and family and later with advisors, counselors, friends, guides, mentors, sounding-board-buddies, and more outside of home. Further, since, developmentally, learning to make individual decisions seems to come before learning to make shared choices, the role of learning to make and communicate about individual decisions on making shared or conjoint decisions also requires further study.

*Conjoint Decision Making*

At about age-5, due in part to increased exposure to interactions with other children and in part to individual cognitive development, children begin to develop their capacity to understand concepts of “shared” choices and “shared” decision-making processes as some children begin to move beyond what are mostly unilateral authority relations with caregivers (Younis, 1980). In their interactions in preschools and in the primary grades of early elementary school, as well as watching children’s television, undoubtedly children will encounter situations that will challenge their models of communicating in relationships and groups, and these encounters may necessitate revision of their communication models, including their early models of communication and decision-making. As any parent of preschoolers, or preschool teachers will attest, children’s egocentrism, reinforced by 2-3 years of learning to make individual choices in unilateral authority relations with caregivers, among others factors, make acquiring the concepts that some choices are “shared” or “conjoint,” and must be arrived at in reciprocal, mutually negotiated authority relationships, difficult. Of course the concept of “sharing” lies at the foundation all group processes including group decision making and understanding how children learn to communicate in situations of shared or conjoint decisions would seem to be among our most important developmental communication tasks.

Yet, at the moment, it is unclear how often U.S. families actually engage in group communication, let alone group decision-making, and, as mentioned previously, it is not known how much children’s group communication outside the home is actually structured to teach children about interdependence and actual group processes (as opposed to individual skills in collectivities). We know little about the developmental arc of group communication

skills development from preschool to college, although the communication field recognizes the important role of communication in making decisions among its standards of communication competency (K-12) (NCA, 1998).

### Conclusion

A lifespan developmental approach to the study of group communication and group decision-making holds much promise for future research. First, it provides those who study communication in groups outside of families as well as those who study communication in families a shared research context, that is, in order to understand the developmental arc of group communication and group decision making whether in families or groups outside families, across the lifespan, the work and insights of both groups are essential. Second, a lifespan developmental perspective opens new vistas for research by raising new and interesting questions pertaining to the content of individuals' models of group communication and their development across the lifespan. For example, are their differences in the content of young children's models of group communication among children whose parents adopt an authoritative, collaborative parenting style, that encourages debate, versus parents who adopt an authoritarian, unilateral parenting style that discourages debate? Third, adopting a lifespan developmental perspective requires asking those who study instructional communication to also join the discussion, as it is clear that children's group communication skills are developing at school, as well as at home, and groups outside of family. This raises important questions concerning inter-groups communication and boundary management between families and societal groups (e. g., Socha & Stamp, 2009). Fourth, a lifespan developmental approach highlights interdependencies between home, school, and peer groups and raises questions about how children learn to handle clashes of approaches to

group communication between home, school, and peer groups, as these groups may hold varying values and preferences. And finally, mapping the developmental arc of group communication and decision making across the lifespan raises questions pertaining to the effectiveness of our current approaches to group communication education both inside and outside of home. For example, how much unlearning/relearning is accomplished in a 15-week course in group communication or family communication after 18-20 years of informal group communication education in families and groups outside of families? Are family communication texts including enough about family communication as a group and are group communication texts including enough about families (e.g., see Frey & Barge, 1997)?

There is a lifetime of groups for communication scholars to study and I hope that this work will begin in earnest so that when we return in 10 years, there will be much more to share.

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