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23

Family Communication as Taboo

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In our households, we love to play games – and win! Thus, it is no surprise that a heated game of Taboo™ in the Thorson or Holman household emits sounds of simultaneous boos and cheers following the utterance of a "taboo" word. Yet, we argue that what is actually taboo cannot simply be listed on a card. Taboo communication is constitutive, changes over time, and is reflective of the culture in which family members are positioned. Accordingly, conceptualizing what is or is not taboo using a predetermined set of constructs is misguided, as taboo varies among individuals, places, and spaces. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight research that has been conducted on taboo interactions/secrets/avoidance and concludes with suggestions for how family members can navigate difficult conversations – highlighting the risks and rewards connected with breaching a magnitude of potentially challenging family interactions – and a critique of whether labeling communication or topics as taboo is beneficial or counterproductive.

Taboo Family Communication, Secrets, and Topic Avoidance

Researchers have long tried to understand how and why certain communication is stigmatized/condemned by family members (see Vangelisti 1994, for a review). Specifically, Baxter and Wilmot (1984) argue that most individuals in close relationships avoid at least one of the following topics: prior relationships, current/future status of their relationship, infidelity, relationship norms, conflict-inducing topics, and negative information. Guerrero and Afifi (1995) add to this list, citing relationship issues and negative life, dating, and sexual experiences as frequently avoided relationship topics. Vangelisti (1994) suggests that family secrets differ in terms of their form (i.e. whole/intra-/individual), function (i.e. to create intimacy/cohesiveness or to protect family structure/family from social disapproval), and type (i.e. taboo, rule violations, or conventional – listing marital problems/divorce, substance abuse, finances, sexual preferences, illegalities, mental health, extramarital affairs, and physical/psychological abuse as taboo. Combined, this body of literature, spanning 36 years, argues that family taboo topics are widespread and extensive.

With regard to family secrecy (i.e. a conceptual cousin of taboo family communication), several researchers have examined criteria used by family members to reveal and/or conceal secrets and the effects of secret keeping and disclosure on individuals and relationships (e.g. Afifi et al. 2005; Caughlin et al. 2000; Vangelisti et al. 2001). Specifically, in their review of literature on the dark side of topic avoidance, Afifi et al. (2007) stress that family communication about taboo topics can be influenced by the extent to which information is secret (e.g. information to which family members have a legitimate claim) or private (e.g. information to which other family members have no right to know). In turn, secrecy and privacy inform family members' topic avoidance. Moreover, Afifi and Olson (2005) add that family dynamics, such as coercive power, directly influence the extent to which family members reveal or suppress sensitive information – especially when family members anticipate experiencing negative consequences as a result of sharing information. Thus, we argue that the taboo nature of a secret often impacts subsequent communication among family members. Yet, considering that taboo topics are constituted within family and culture, a glimpse into some of the salient and often enduring taboo topics are needed to further understand the complexity of this family communication.

Sex and Sexuality as Taboo

Family communication about sex and sexuality has long been viewed as private, uncomfortable, and challenging in Western culture. Although many parents want to help their children understand physical development, healthy relationships, and sexuality, in our research we have found that these parent–child conversations are often avoided at the risk of having to engage in in-depth discussions surrounding taboo topics, such as body parts (e.g. penis, vagina), masturbation, or sex (Holman and Koenig Kellas 2018). Even in married or long-term committed relationships, individuals often evade discussion about sexual issues or desires out of fear of vulnerability or rejection (Rehman et al. 2018).

With regard to sexuality, because many societies largely assume and encourage heterosexual identity, the disclosure of non-heterosexual identities within families is often deemed taboo. Whereas some researchers have examined the consequences of disclosing sexual orientation with family members (e.g. Baptist and Allen 2008), Manning's (2015) typology on the disclosure of lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual identity (e.g. pre-planned, coaxed, confrontational, etc.) suggests that the way in which sexual identity is shared may be reflective of the extent to which individuals or their family view nonheterosexual sexuality as taboo.

Transgression as Taboo

Family communication related to transgressions (i.e. violations to an agreed upon norm) are often met with secrecy, shame, and fall-out. In our research (Thorson 2009), we have found that discussions about past marital affairs are often kept secret from extended family members and children because of their taboo nature. Further, when parents' affairs are addressed, the way they are discussed influences whether or not

children feel caught or triangulated between their parents (Thorson 2014, 2021). When examining family violence, Lin et al. (2016) argue that "elder abuse is a sensitive family, as well as societal, issue and could be particularly a taboo topic in the family" (p. 168). They argue that this abuse is often not reported because most perpetrators are family members, because elder victims might choose not to report it to protect their family's reputation, or they fear how family members might respond. Research on child abuse and incest yields similar findings, suggesting that one of the factors affecting a child's decision to disclose an experience of abuse is influenced by their fear of what will happen if this information is uncovered (Donalek 2001; Morrison et al. 2018).

Loss and Grief as Taboo

Many family interactions surrounding loss and grief are uncomfortable and silenced – even deemed taboo in US culture. This is especially true when family members do not have experience communicating about estrangement (Scharp 2020), terminal illness, death, or dying (Keeley 2017). Regarding death by suicide, Powell and Matthys (2013) found that siblings feel uncertain and apprehensive when they want to talk about their feelings surrounding this loss. Likewise, communication surrounding miscarriage and the grief that follows is often deemed taboo within families and society – especially when medical communities, society, or family members do not recognize it as a "true" loss (Bute and Brann 2014). Specifically, in our research, we have found that men and women often tell different types of miscarriage stories due to familial and societal pressures suggesting how they "should" act after a miscarriage (Holman and Horstman 2019) and that men use metaphors as a way to describe miscarriage in order to make sense of the loss in a less taboo way (Horstman et al. 2020).

Family/Family Members' Health as Taboo

Families' communication about overall health and well-being – be it mental, physical, behavior, or financial – is often taboo. For instance, Flood-Grady and Koenig Kellas (2019) suggest that family stories about mental illness – particularly those about caution and struggle – reinforced some of the stigma and challenges young people experience in talking about mental health with family members. In Burghardt's (2015) research on communication surrounding family members' intellectual disabilities, they found that this information is often kept secret to protect a family's identity. In addition, family conversations surrounding health diagnoses are often taboo, especially when a family member is diagnosed with a form of cancer (Caughlin et al. 2011), HIV (Smith and Niedermyer 2009), or disordered eating (Dunleavy and Malova 2019).

In addition to family discussion – or lack of discussion – about mental illness, disability, and health, conversations about finances are often earmarked as taboo. For instance, in Atwood's (2012) research on familial financial health, they argue that couples would prefer to talk about sex or infidelities rather than how they handle family finances or how much money they earn. This same pattern of avoidance is evidenced when examining parent–child communication about finances (Romo and Vangelisti

2014). Together these findings highlight that health topics – whether physical, mental, or financial – leave many families uncertain how to properly navigate their communication.

Navigating Taboo Family Conversations

Considering the many studies conducted to better understand taboo family communication, there are many factors that individuals might want to consider when determining what, if any, strategies to employ when navigating their own taboo family interactions. For instance, in line with Afifi and Steuber's (2009) research, individuals should critique their own communicative efficacy, family closeness, and topic stigma before discussing secretive information with family members to mitigate risk. When addressing taboos, individuals should actively engage in creating a constructive communication climate (e.g. mindful listening, dual perspective, "I" language, etc.) and using strategies that allow them to gauge family member's potential responses (e.g. carefully rehearse what they will say, share information incrementally, etc.; Afifi and Steuber 2009) before overtly engaging in potentially challenging interactions. For example, a person might want to consider whether it is beneficial to discuss a topic that is often avoided or silenced in their family as it might be personally straining, cause more trauma, or not be in the best interest of their overall well-being.

Regarding the risks and rewards connected with taboo family communication, findings are mixed. Whereas numerous studies suggest that families benefit from sharing secrets and engaging in taboo communication (e.g. increased interpersonal functioning, interpersonal competence, relationship quality, and individual and familial well-being; Afifi et al. 2007; Frijns et al. 2013), others highlight the negatives associated with these interactions – ranging from embarrassment and discomfort to detrimental relational consequences (e.g. Afifi et al. 2007). In fact, researchers have applied various theories (e.g. communication privacy management, family systems, relational dialectics, motivated information management, uncertainty reduction, uncertainty management, etc.) and developed a number of models (e.g. disclosure decision, Omarzu 2000; risk revelation, Afifi and Steuber 2009) to better understand the decision-making processes surrounding, and the risks associated with, sharing secret/taboo information. These have resulted in a number of studies investigating everything from the uncertainty facing married couples during their transition to becoming empty-nesters (Nagy and Theiss 2013) and the experience and management of relational uncertainty for military families (Knobloch et al. 2018) to studies on adolescent–parent conflict (Sillars et al. 2014), families' political discussions (Johnson et al. 2019), and the discursive struggles of new mothers who are disappointed in their transition to motherhood (Cronin-Fisher and Sahlstein Parcell 2019). These findings suggest that there is no "one size fits all" approach to navigating taboo family communication, as individuals' decisions to engaging in complete openness or closeness surrounding family taboos are complex and steeped in routinized family rules, roles, and norms.

Combined, research on taboo family communication is noteworthy, multifaceted, and ever-changing. Although there might always be family taboos, as family scholars we must continue to investigate communication that is viewed as unmentionable, difficult, and prohibited. We understand firsthand that taboo conversations are

challenging to have with anyone, let alone someone in the family. Yet sometimes it is necessary to have conversations that make us nervous, hesitant, and vulnerable in order to build a positive and productive family communication culture. In addition, we must be critical of what has been deemed taboo, question the utility of tools for families to navigate these conversations, and consider whether labeling a set of topics as taboo is useful – as thinking about family through this specific lens can be both valuable and limiting.

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