It is through communication that family members manage their everyday lives and construct their collective identity.

A relational culture is a “private world of rules, understandings, meanings, and patterns of acting and interpreting that partners create for their relationships”

To form a two-partner system, individuals must negotiate a set of common meanings. This negotiation process is both subtle and complex; some couples never effectively accomplish this task.

Partners strive to create mutually meaningful language. The more similar the partners’ backgrounds, the less negotiation is needed.

Communication patterns emerge from the reciprocally shared verbal and nonverbal messages, recurring and predictable within family relationships; (1) family communication rules, (2) family secrets, (3) family communication networks, and (4) family narratives.

Communication rules are “shared understandings of what communication means and what kinds of communication are appropriate in various situations”

Rules serve as generative mechanisms capable of creating regularity where none exists. In most cases, rules reflect patterns that have become “oughts” or “shoulds”. Relational rules develop when people in relationships, implicitly or explicitly, develop rules unique to their connection; eventually these rules become patterned.

Constitutive rules define “what counts as what” as communicators construct meanings. One’s family-of origin is a primary source of such learning. “During the early years, families teach us what counts as affection (in some families, members kiss and hug but in other families, affection is not displayed overtly), and what counts as conflict (families differ in how openly and civilly they manage differences).

Regulative rules prescribe acceptable communication behavior- how, when, where and with whom to talk.

Rule formation varies on an awareness continuum, ranging from very direct, explicit, conscious relationship agreements that may have been clearly negotiated, to the implicit, unspoken, unconscious rules emerging from repeated interactions.

Individuals tend to carry their family rules into the families they form, implicitly combining those with their partners’ family-of-origin rules.

Old patterns shift as the family system recalibrates itself to accept a wider variety of behaviors and people.

Most rules exist within a hierarchy. Two families may each establish the rule “Do not swear”.

A major source of conflict centers on breaking rules that one member may not even know exist. Family life cycle influences parent-child communication.

Through rule-bound interaction, families enact their primary and secondary family functions. Rules set the limits of cohesion and adaptability while helping to form a family’s images, themes, boundaries, and positions on biosocial issues such as power and gender.

The interaction of rules and functions supports the development of a family’s self-definition. Contribute to a family’s sense of satisfaction.

What can be talked about? How can it be talked about? And with whom can it be talked about? Each family’s rules differ on issues of what can be discussed. Can death, sex, salaries, drugs, and serious health problems be talked about in the Martinez family?

When children are small, they may excluded from financial discussions, but as they grow older or serious financial problems arise, they are included. Rules about their rules.

Information purposefully hidden or concealed by one or more family members. Family secrets are critical communication concerns because family ties are shaped “by what is shared and what is held secret by family members”. People believe private information is owned or co-owned with others and revealing private information may make one vulnerable.

Family secrets may be known to all immediate family members but kept from the outside world (whole family secrets), known to subgroups of the family (intrafamily secrets), or known only to an individual family member (individual secrets).

Sweet secrets serve the purpose of protecting fun surprises and are usually time limited. These include airline tickets to Disney World placed in a child’s Christmas stocking or a cousin’s surprise baby shower.

Essential secrets, which support necessary boundaries defining a relationship, may include talk about fears or insecurities, which enhances closeness and fosters the development of self and relationships.

Toxic secrets poison family relationships; key family issues and stories remain untold and unexplained. Maintaining such secrets may have chronic negative effects on problem solving. Toxic secrets nonetheless sap energy, promote anxiety, burden those who know, and mystify those who don’t know.

Dangerous secrets put their “owners” in immediate physical jeopardy or cause such severe emotional turmoil that their capacity to function is threatened. These may involve physical or sexual abuse or threats of suicide or harm to others.

1 taboos, or skeletons in the closet, including marital abuse, substance abuse, and illegalities; 2 rule violations, such as premarital pregnancy, cohabitation, and serious disobedience; and 3 conventional secrets, or information that is private but not “wrong”, such as death, religion, and personality conflicts.

Function of Secrets:

Bonding. Individuals believe their family secrets increase cohesiveness among family members. Sharing family secrets with new members, such as in-laws, acknowledges their place in the family.

Evaluation. Family secrets help members avoid negative judgment. Parents may hide a child’s sexual preference or multiple divorces to avoid negative evaluations of the family.

Maintenance. These secrets help keep family members close while protecting them from stressors. These represent attempts to prevent tension.

Privacy. Secrets are concealed because they are seen as personal and/or irrelevant to others. None of anyone else’s business..

Communication. Secrets reflect a lack of open communication among family members.

Many secrets are created or revealed at periods of intense relationship change, such as marriage, divorce, birth of a child, leaving home, or death. “Relationships that would ordinarily change and grow become frozen in time, as the presence of a secret locks people on place”.

As noted earlier, multigenerational communication patterns frequently involve protecting secrets. A hidden suicide, abortion, or prison term can affect the communication patterns of future generations.

This communication network creates and reflects the interactive flow of messages among family members.

An operating chain network occurs when family members talk along a series of links; chains may be vertical.

 In the Y network, a key person channels messages from one person on a chain to one or more other family members.

The wheel network relies on one family member to serve as the clearinghouse for relaying messages to other family members.

The all-channel network supports exchanges between or among all family members, supporting direct interaction and maximum feedback.

Through “intentional connections,” such as an e-mail directed to a brother; “assumed connections,” such as the belief that your in-laws will read about your China trip in the round-robin family e-mail; and “random connections” when your former sister-in-law or grandmother responds to your recent Facebook post about a workplace party.

Depicted American families as “networked families” because of the wide range of communication media members use to stay connected. Most households contain multiple communication technologies: 95 percent of households formed by married/partnered adults with children had one cell phone; 80 percent of these households had multiple cell phones; and 57 percent of children (ages 7 to 17) in this group had an individual cell phone.