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## An Evolving Communication Perspective on Family Violence

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For the past 20 years, researchers in the communication discipline have recognized that family or domestic violence in all its forms is an all too common problem in the United States. In this chapter's review of the communication research on family violence, 1986 was the year that articles on family violence first appeared in communication journals (Harris, Gergen, & Lannamann, 1986; Hecht et al., 1986; Rancer, Baukus, & Amato, 1986).<sup>1</sup> For almost a decade, Infante and his colleagues published a number of quantitative articles on married partners' trait verbal aggression and lack of argumentation skills. Then, around 1995, a major turning point occurred as scholars began to publish *qualitative* studies of family abuse in communication journals (Sabourin & Stamp, 1995; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). That year also ended a focus primarily on martial violence in the discipline and a broadening of interest in violence between other family members.

Scholars in other disciplines studied the subject of family or domestic violence before researchers in the communication discipline, and they recognized, too, that family violence is a serious social problem. Ten years ago, Sally Lloyd and I pulled together scholars from psychology, sociology, family studies, and communication to provide a multidisciplinary view of communication approaches to the subject (Cahn & Lloyd, 1996). Back then, we also wanted to further the study of family violence from a communication perspective regardless of discipline of origin. We also wanted to help broaden the communication discipline's repertoire that existed at that time of communication approaches to the study of family violence.

Now over a decade later, many more researchers in communication departments have produced studies on family/domestic violence revealing a diversity of methods and useful findings. While family violence is a multidisciplinary subject, in this chapter I would like to focus solely on the communication discipline's research, to compare the communication research since 1995 with the previous 10-year period, and to provide a comprehensive review of published work on family/domestic violence done by communication researchers over the past 20 years.

To find these studies I relied primarily on Communication and Mass Media Complete, COMINDEX, and PsychInfo for articles and chapters in edited books published by communication scholars on the subject of family violence. I used key terms derived from the search engines ERIC and PsycInfo.<sup>2</sup> As of January 31, 2007, my review of the published communication research studies and essays resulted in a total of 48 published quantitative and qualitative (QL) research reports and 17 general essays (i.e., position papers), which are listed in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.<sup>3</sup> Because many more research reports and essays appeared after 1995 than before, I believe it is time to revisit the subject and compare the past decade of communication research with the previous one.

My objective for this review was to examine trends in the communication scholarship over the past 20 years on family/domestic violence to see what changes have taken place with respect to the following research questions:

1. How do communication scholars define and measure family violence?
2. Which violent family member relationships have received the most attention by communication researchers?
3. What methodologies are used by communication scholars to obtain communication data on family violence?
4. What constitutes a "communication approach" to the study of family violence?
5. Which communication outlets publish the most research on family violence?

## Review of the Communication Literature

### *How Do Communication Scholars Define and Measure Family Violence?*

When communication researchers study family violence, they must identify and define the concept of 'family violence' to employ it as a cause or an effect in their research. With the exception of research on

TABLE 1.1  
Published Research Reports by Year

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Harris, L., Gergen, K. J., & Lannamann, J. W. (1986).—(married couple scenario)—*CM*

Hecht, M. et al. (1986).—Parent-Child Violence—*CE*

Rancer, A. S., Baukus, R. A., & Amato, P. (1986).—Marital Violence—*CRR*

Infante, D. A., Chandler, T., & Rudd, J. (1989).—Married Partner Violence—*CM*

Infante, D. A., Sabourin, T. C., Rudd, J. E., & Shannon, E. A. (1990).—Married Partner—*CQ*

Bayer, C. L., & Cegala, D. J. (1992).—Parent-Child Violence—*WJC*

Cloven, D. H., & Roloff, M. E. (1993).—Romantic Partner (i.e., dating) Violence—*CM*

Sabourin, T. C., Infante, D. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1993).—Marital Violence—*HCR*

Beatty, M. J., Zelle, J. R., Dobos, J. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1994).—Parent-Child (i.e., father-son)—*CQ*

Infante, D. A., Myers, S. A., & Buerkel, R. A. (1994).—(aggressive family member scenario)—*WJC*

Rudd, J. E., Burant, P. A., & Beatty, M. J. (1994).—Marital Violence—*CRR*

Rudd, J. E., & Burant, P. A. (1995).—Marital Violence—*CRR*

Sabourin, T. C. (1995).—Married/Cohab Violence—*JACR*

Sabourin, T. C., & Stamp, G. H. (1995). QL: Marital Violence—*CM*

Stamp, G. H., & Sabourin, T. C. (1995). QL: Married/Cohab Violence—*JACR*

Beatty, M. J., Burant, P. A., Dobos, J. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1996).—Parent-Child (i.e., father-son)—*CQ*

Carey, C., & Mongeau, P. A. (1996).—Romantic Partner (i.e., dating) Violence—Chapter

Hegde, R. S., (1996).—QL: Marital Violence—*CS*

Petronio, S., et al. (1996).—QL: Parent-Child Violence (incest)—*JACR*

Rogers, L. E., Casleton, A., & Lloyd, S. A. (1996).—Marital Violence—Chapter

Martin, M., & Anderson, C. (1997).—Parent-Child—*WJC*

Martin, M. M., Anderson, C. M., Burant, P. A., & Weber, K. (1997).—Sibling Violence—*CQ*

Petronio, S., et al. (1997).—QL: Parent-Child Violence (incest)—*WJC*

Rudd, J. E., Dobos, J. A., Vogl-Bauer, S., & Beatty, M. (1997). QL: Marital Violence—*WSC*

Teven, J. J., Martin, M. M., & Neupauer, N. C. (1998). Sibling Violence—*CR*

Varallo, S., Ray, E., & Ellis, B. (1998).—QL: Parent-Child Violence (incest)—*JACR*

Ford, L., Ray, E., & Ellis, B. (1999).—QL: Parent-Child Violence (incest)—*JACR*

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TABLE 1.1 (*continued*)

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| Kassing, Infante, Pearce, & Pyles (1999)—Parent Child Violence— <i>CRR</i>  |
| Wood, J. T. (2000). QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>QRRC</i>   |
| Olson, L. N. (2001).—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>SCA</i>   |
| Wilson, S. R., & Whipple, E. E. (2001).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., mother-child)—Chapter                                      |
| Wood, J. T. (2001)—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>JSPR</i>  |
| Ford, L., & Crabtree, R. (2002).—QL: Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>WSC</i>   |
| Noller, P., & Roberts, N. D. (2002).—Married/Cohab Violence—Chapter   |
| Olson, L. N. (2002a).—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>WJC</i>  |
| Olson, L. N. (2002b).—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>CS</i>   |
| Olson, L. N. (2002c).—Common Couple Violence— <i>QRRC</i>   |
| Olson, L. N., & Golish, T. D. (2002). QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>SCJ</i>  |
| Sillars, A. L., K. E., & Roberts, L. J. (2002).—Marital Violence—Chapter  |
| Montalbano-Phelps, L. L. (2003).—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>JFC</i>   |
| Eckstein, N. J. (2004).—QL: Parent-Child (actually adolescent to parent violence)— <i>WJC</i>                                   |
| Olson, L. N. (2004b). QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>WSC</i>  |
| Olson, L. N., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2004). QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>CS</i>  |
| Wilson, S. R., Morgan, W. M., Hayes, J., Bylund, C., & Herman, A. (2004).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., mother-child)— <i>CM</i> |
| Wood, J. T. (2004)—QL: Common Couple Violence— <i>JSPR</i>  |
| Myers, S., & Goodboy, A. (2006)—Sibling Violence— <i>CRR</i>  |
| Roberto, A., Carlyle, K., & McClure, L. (2006)—Parent-Child Violence— <i>CRR</i>  |
| Wilson, S. R., Hayes, J., Bylund, C., Rack, J. J., & Herman, A. P. (2006)—Parent-Child Violence— <i>JFC</i>                     |

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family violence using a trait measure, many communication scholars defined and measured family violence the same as other researchers in sociology, family studies, and psychology. However, initially in the communication discipline, family violence was viewed more uniquely as trait verbal aggression.

According to Infante and Wigley (1986), individuals' trait verbal aggressiveness warranted study because of the harm it does to others' self-concepts; sometimes it is more harmful and longer lasting than physical aggression. It can also escalate into physical violence. Infante and Wigley (1986) were the first to develop a measure of trait verbal aggressiveness. This measure was a unidimensional scale consisting of 20 items, 10 worded positively and 10 worded negatively (in general, across situations), and contained such items as: "When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness. When individu-

TABLE 1.2  
Published Essays by Year

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| Whitchurch & Pace (1993)—Married/Cohab Violence— <i>Journal of Applied Communication Research</i> |
| West, J. (1995)—Married/Cohab Violence—Chapter  |
| Wilson, S., & Whipple, E. (1995)—Parent-Child—Chapter   |
| Aid-Ridder, L., & Jones, A. (1996)—Parent-Child—Chapter   |
| Cahn, D. (1996)—Family in General—Chapter   |
| Ray, E. (1996)—Incest—Chapter   |
| Roloff, M. (1996)—Family in General—Chapter   |
| Sabourin, T. (1996)—Married/Cohab Violence—Chapter  |
| West, J. (1996)—Married/Cohab Violence—Chapter  |
| Wilson, S. (1999)—Parent-Child— <i>Research on Language and Social Interaction</i>                |
| Ashcroft, C. (2000)—Married/Cohab Violence— <i>Women &amp; Language</i>                           |
| Wilson, S. (2000)—Parent-Child— <i>Communication Theory</i>                                       |
| Olson, L. (2004a)—Married/Cohab Violence— <i>Journal of Family Communication</i>                  |
| Anderson, K., Umberson, D., & Elliott, S. (2004).—Family in General—Chapter                       |
| Morgan, W., & Wilson, S. (2005)—Parent Child Violence—Chapter                                     |
| Cupach, W., & Olson, L. (2006)—Family in General—Chapter  |
| Wilson, S. (2006).—Parent-Child Violence— <i>Communication Monographs</i>                         |

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als insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off. When nothing seems to work . . . , I yell and scream.”

What contributions have those researchers, who followed a “communicator personality trait approach,” made to the study of family violence? Much of their research has focused on establishing the validity of the trait verbal aggressiveness (VA) measure and correlating it with other constructs of interest to communication researchers. While other operational definitions had their roots in the first 10 years of communication research on the subject, it was not until after 1996 that they received more serious attention. Three different ways to operationally define family violence have since emerged, definitions consisting of (a) self-reports of aggression that are both verbal and physical, (b) designations by caregivers and authorities, and (c) self-reports of potential for violence.

First, in recent years, some communication researchers viewed family violence as self-reported aggression that is both verbal/psychological and physical and used the relevant dimensions of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus 1990) (e.g., Olson & Golish, 2002) or simply asked people if they were in a violent relationship (e.g., Eckstein, 2004) or were victims of child sexual abuse (Ford, Ray, & Ellis, 1999).

Second, some communication researchers accepted those designated as violent or as a victim of abuse by social workers at a shelter,

judges connected with a court referral program, or therapists. Definitions such as this reflect a robust classification of “aggression, abuse, or violence” used by certain authorities such as police, judges, therapists, and social workers.

Finally, other communication researchers viewed family violence as a self-reported potential for verbal and/or physical aggression. According to these researchers, family violence referred to psychological predispositions such as attributions, beliefs, attitudes, and other cognitions that lead to aggressive behavior. A few researchers have determined the propensity toward violent behavior (high risk for physical abuse, abuse potential) using relevant sections of the CTS (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), Dysfunctional Beliefs Assessment (Wilson & Whipple, 2001), or Child Abuse Inventory (CAP) (Wilson, Morgan, Hayes, Bylund, & Herman, 2004). Scores on these measures operationally defined potential verbal abusive or physically violent family members.

Thus, the operational definitions communication researchers use for family violence have broadened in recent years from trait VA to self-reports of aggression that are both verbal/psychological and physical, external criteria as used by authorities and self-reports of potential for violence.

#### *Which Violent Family Member Relationships Received the Most Attention by Communication Researchers?*

If one does not give the matter much thought, family violence might seem like a unified subject. However, a closer look reveals that the literature, researchers, key concepts, and approaches vary according to which violent family members are involved. Studies are classified according to the type of violent family member relationship in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

While 3 studies appeared in the communication literature as early as 1986, it was not until Infante, Chandler-Sabourin, and Rudd published in 1989 their famous study of interspousal verbal aggression that research activity took off. Prior to 1996, 11 studies were undertaken on marital/cohabitation aggression, and only 3 studies on parent-child aggression and 1 on family members in general.

After 1996, there was an increase in interest in marital/cohabitation/common couple violence with 17 studies reported, but nearly as many (15) were published on other family member relationships: 7 studies focused on parent-child violence along with 5 on incest and three on sibling verbal aggression. As reflected in Table 1.5, of the 15 essays, 6 discussed marital/cohabitation/common couple violence; however, 5 focused on parent-child violence, along with 1 on incest, and 3 on fam-

ily members in general. Thus, during the past 10 years, communication scholars have moved on from solely studying violence between spouses and intimate partners to violence between other family members including incest.

The broadening of family violence from marital/cohabitation partner abuse to other types of family members has added a greater variety of relational concepts to the study of family violence. For example, in the communication literature on cohabiting partner violence, researchers emphasize power, control, and dominance; submission and empowerment issues; gender inequality and oppression; communication and argumentation skills; anger; marital roles, and socialization; hegemonic social forces and victimization; verbal aggression, physical aggression, and battering; relationship (dis)satisfaction, love, and commitment; and relationship conflict. In contrast, the literature on parent-child violence emphasizes discipline and corporal punishment; authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian parenting styles; verbal aggression; physical aggression; parent-child communication; power, control, and parental authority; neglect; antisocial behavior and problem child; infant caregiver role; and in the case of child sexual abuse by other family members, communication researchers focus more on factors involving the disclosure process by incest survivors. Finally, in the communication literature on sibling violence, researchers study sibling rivalry and teasing.

#### *What Methodologies Are Used by Communication Scholars to Obtain Communication Data on Family Violence?*

In the broadest sense, the major methodologies used by communication scholars who are also social scientists are quantitative or qualitative. Of course, the two methodologies may be combined in a single study, but with few exceptions, they were clearly one or the other as shown in Tables 1.3 and 1.4.

Initially, the primary method for obtaining data was *quantitative*. The quantitative method used measures such as rating scales to produce numerical data for statistical analysis. When communication researchers studied the role of communication in family violence, many identified and measured communication to employ it as an independent or dependent variable in their research. As an independent variable, communication was viewed as the stimulus or cause of family violence, such as the role of verbal aggression as a contributor to physical violence. As a dependent variable, communication was seen as the result or outcome of family violence, such as a “chilling effect” where an abused partner suffers in silence or a passive-aggressive response where she (or he) appears to acquiesce to the demands of the aggressor but later seeks help from

TABLE 1.3  
Quantitative Research Reports (27)

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- Bayer, C. L., & Cegala, D. J. (1992).—Parent-Child Violence—*WJC*  
 Beatty, M. J., Burant, P. A., Dobos, J. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1996).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., father-son)—*CQ*  
 Beatty, M. J., Zelle, J. R., Dobos, J. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1994).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., father-son)—*CQ*  
 Carey, Colleen, & Mongeau, Paul A. (1996).—Romantic Partner (i.e., dating) Violence—Chapter  
 Cloven, D. H., & Roloff, M. E. (1993).—Romantic Partner (i.e., dating) Violence—*CM*  
 Harris, L., Gergen, K. J., & Lannamann, J. W. (1986).—(married couple scenario)—*CM*  
 Hecht, M. et al. (1986).—Parent-Child Violence—*CE*  
 Infante, D. A., Chandler, T., & Rudd, J. (1989).—Married Partner Violence—*CM*  
 Infante, D. A., Myers, S. A., & Buerkel, R. A. (1994).—(aggressive family member scenario)—*WJC*  
 Infante, D. A., Sabourin, T. C., Rudd, J. E., & Shannon, E. A. (1990).—Married Partner Violence—*CQ*  
 Kassing, J., Infante, D., Pearce, K., & Pyles, S. (1999)—Parent Child Violence—*CRR*  
 Martin, M. & Anderson, C. (1997),—Parent-Child Violence—*WJC*  
 Martin, M. M., Anderson, C. M., Burant, P. A., & Weber, K. (1997).—Sibling Violence—*CQ*  
 Myers, S., & Goodboy, A. (2006)—Sibling Violence—*CRR*  
 \*Noller, P., & Roberts, N. D. (2002).—Married/Cohab Violence—Chapter  
 Rancer, A. S., Baukus, R. A., & Amato, P. (1986).—Marital Violence—*CRR*  
 Roberto, A., Carlyle, K., & McClure, L. (2006)—Parent-Child Violence—*CRR*  
 Rogers, L. E., Casleton, A., & Lloyd, S. A. (1996).—Marital Violence—Chapter  
 Rudd, J. E., & Burant, P. A. (1995).—Marital Violence—*CRR*  
 Rudd, J. E., Burant, P. A., & Beatty, M. J. (1994).—Marital Violence—*CRR*  
 Sabourin, T. C. (1995).—Married/Cohab Violence—*JACR*  
 Sabourin, T. C., Infante, D. A., & Rudd, J. E. (1993).—Marital Violence—*HCR*  
 \*Sillars, A., Leonard, K. E., & Roberts, L. J. (2002).—Marital Violence—Chapter  
 Teven, J. J., Martin, M. M., & Neupauer, N. C. (1998). Sibling Violence—*CR*  
 Wilson, S. R., & Whipple, E. E. (2001).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., mother-child)—Chapter  
 Wilson, S. R., Morgan, W. M., Hayes, J., Bylund, C., & Herman, A. (2004).—Parent-Child Violence (i.e., mother-child)—*CM*  
 Wilson, S. R., Hayes, J., Bylund, C., Rack, J. J., & Herman, A. P. (2006)—Parent-Child Violence—*JFC*
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\*Although I classified them as primarily quantitative, these two studies were mixed in that they included both objective observers and subject interpretation of data.

TABLE 1.4  
Qualitative Research Reports (21)

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| Eckstein, N. J. (2004).—Parent-Child Violence (actually adolescent to parent violence)— <i>WJC</i> |
| Ford, L., & Crabtree, R. (2002).—Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>WSC</i>                        |
| Ford, L., Ray, E., & Ellis, B. (1999).—Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>JACR</i>                 |
| Hegde, R. S. (1996).—Marital Violence— <i>CS</i>   |
| Montalbano-Phelps, L. L. (2003).—Common Couple Violence— <i>JFC</i>                                |
| Olson, L. N. (2001).—Common Couple Violence— <i>SCA</i>  |
| *Olson, L. N. (2002a).—Common Couple Violence— <i>WJC</i>  |
| Olson, L. N. (2002b).—Common Couple Violence— <i>CS</i>  |
| Olson, L. N. (2002c).—Common Couple Violence— <i>QRRC</i>  |
| Olson, L. N. (2004b). Common Couple Violence— <i>WSC</i>   |
| Olson, L. N., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2004). Common Couple Violence— <i>CS</i>                       |
| Olson, L. N., & Golish, T. D. (2002). Common Couple Violence— <i>SCJ</i>                           |
| Petronio, S., et al. (1996).—Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>JACR</i>                           |
| Petronio, S., et al (1997)—Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>WJC</i>                              |
| Rudd, J. E., Dobos, J. A., Vogl-Bauer, S., & Beatty, M. (1997). Marital Violence— <i>WSC</i>       |
| Sabourin, T. C., & Stamp, G. H. (1995). Marital Violence— <i>CM</i>                                |
| Stamp, G. H., & Sabourin, T. C. (1995). Married/Cohab Violence— <i>JACR</i>                        |
| Varallo, S., Ray, E. & Ellis, B. (1998)—Parent-Child Violence (incest)— <i>JACR</i>                |
| Wood, J. T. (2000). Romantic Partner Violence (i.e., Dating Violence)— <i>QRRC</i>                 |
| Wood, J. T. (2001). Common Couple Violence— <i>JSPR</i>  |
| Wood, J. T. (2004). Common Couple Violence— <i>JSPR</i>  |

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\*Although I classified it as primarily qualitative, this study included quantitative data.

the police and courts. Of the 48 published research reports, 27 were primarily quantitative. There were 13 quantitative articles and chapters published up to 1996, and 14 since then.

Although the roots of the *qualitative* method are traceable to 1995, the method did not gain in popularity until after 1996. Of the total 21 qualitative studies published, only 2 were published prior to 1996 (both in 1995 by Sabourin & Stamp), and 19 have appeared in the communication literature since then. Thus, a change occurred around 1995–1996, which resulted in a shift away from solely quantitative research methods to a greater number of qualitative ones.

The shift toward the qualitative method was important because it introduced data for interpretative analysis. Following this approach, researchers relied heavily on subjective data obtained by participant observation, unstructured interviewing, and narrative (stories, accounts)

analysis. Aggression was perceived differently by victims, offenders, and outside/objective observers. By better understanding the phenomenology of aggression from each person's own perspective, Stamp and Sabourin (1995) claimed that "those who work with abusive couples may be better equipped to create lasting change" (p. 285).

*What Constitutes a "Communication Approach" to the Study of Family Violence?*

Like other disciplines that study family violence, communication has more than one disciplinary approach that appeals to communication researchers. In addition to a split between qualitative and quantitative, there is also a tendency for communication researchers to prefer one disciplinary approach over the others. While the discipline emphasized a "communicator personality trait" approach during the first 10 years, the later 10-year period focused more on a "communication cognition approach" and a "communication interaction approach."

*A "Communicator Personality Trait Approach."* What is a communicator personality trait approach to the study of family violence? According to this approach, members of the family are viewed as individual communicators, each endowed with a personality. A personality trait is tied to a particular set of beliefs (i.e., dogmatists are defined as closed-minded persons who are unwilling to consider other sets of beliefs). Infante and Wigley (1986) explain that trait measures exist for studying many traits in communicators, such as assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness. Some of the earliest studies on family violence used a trait VA measure, which prevailed mostly from 1986 through 1996. The verbally aggressive personality desires or intends to dominate others by attacking the other's self-concept and inflicting psychological pain. Trait VA is a subset of hostility, and like hostile people in general, the verbally aggressive person has learned to behave aggressively, but the trait lies latent until aroused.

What contributions have those researchers who follow a communicator personality trait approach made to the study of family violence? Much of their research has focused on establishing the validity of the trait VA measure and correlating it with other constructs of interest to communication researchers.

For example, when comparing the communication behavior of abusive couples to nonabusive, researchers found that physically violent spouses were in fact more verbally aggressive (as measured by the trait VA measure) than other spouses (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990). More recently, Beatty and

colleagues (1994) found that fathers who rated themselves high in trait VA also appeared verbally aggressive to their sons.

In sum, many communication researchers who were interested in family violence published articles on trait VA, but the approach was popular for only about 10 years. Furthermore, none of the researchers developed a training program or manual for trait VA family members who want to improve their conflict and communication skills. However, researchers indicated that argumentation skills include recognizing controversial issues, advocating positions, and refuting positions of others. Thus, such individuals benefited from academic courses in argumentation and debate.

A "*Communication Cognition Approach.*" In more recent years, researchers have adopted a "communication cognition approach" that focuses on the beliefs, perceptions, attributions, and other predispositions that serve as potential for violence. This cognitive approach has identified factors such as beliefs and attitudes, identified abusers' violence prone predispositions, and described the mental beliefs and attributions needed to enable one to enact or avoid verbal and physical aggressiveness in communication situations.

Initially, the verbal aggression research argued for a "communicator personality trait" conceptualization, in which the problematic behavior was traceable to the individual. Later there was a shift toward a "predisposition" conceptualization. According to the later view, there appears to be something in the family context that facilitates the expression of latent hostility. The family context and the latent hostility are contributing factors only when both are present at the same time.

Other researchers have attempted to identify other predispositions. A few researchers determined the propensity toward violent behavior (high risk for physical abuse, abuse potential) using relevant sections of the CTS (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), dysfunctional beliefs assessment (Wilson & Whipple, 2001), or CAP (Wilson et al., 2004). Scores on these measures operationally define potential for verbal, psychological, or physical abuse, aggression, or violence.

Using the qualitative approach, Stamp and Sabourin (1995) interviewed 15 abusive male spouses to better understand how they perceive themselves and their spouses and account for their abusive behavior. The men provided accounts for their behavior in the forms of justifications, excuses, denials, or efforts to minimize significance of their acts and blamed their wives for their abusive behavior. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach revealed that abused women also provide accounts for their mates' behavior, but they dissociate the "real him" from his violent acts—that is, he was not being himself (Wood, 2000). In both cases,

accounts provided by the partners reveal that abusers and their victims perceive the abusive acts differently but in ways that “justify” the abuse.

More recently, Wilson and Whipple (2001) found patterns of attributions about a child’s behavior that result in dysfunctional child-rearing beliefs, which in turn automatically produce abusive responses to a child’s (mis)behavior. Later, Wilson and colleagues (2004) related mothers’ child abuse potential with the mother and child’s play behavior and found that children of high-risk mothers displayed higher levels of involvement combined with lower levels of cooperation compared to children of lower-risk mothers.

This cognitive approach has identified factors such as beliefs and attributions, identified abusers’ violence prone predispositions, and described the mental beliefs and attributions needed to enable one to avoid verbal and physical aggressiveness in communication situations as a preventive method.

*A “Communication Interaction Approach.”* A communication interaction perspective is useful for examining family relationships because “interaction is the sine qua non of relationships; it is through communicative action that persons initiate, define, maintain, and terminate their social bonds” (Baxter, 1985, p. 245). This explains why many communication scholars view the interaction between communicators as joint ventures and meaning as jointly created. Presumably, humans construct their reality and coordinate their actions by intentionally (or perceived as intentionally) using verbal and nonverbal symbols whose meanings are shared by one another.

What constitutes a “communication interaction approach” to the study of family violence? Perhaps the study of “aggression rituals” by Harris, Gergen, and Lannamann (1986) best represents an application of this view of communication to the subject of family violence. The researchers describe violent domestic encounters as a process of “escalating antagonism” consisting of the following sequence involving family members A and B: “A violates a norm or rule; B orders A to cease his or her action; A reproaches B and fails to comply; B insults A; A threatens B; and B then attacks A physically” (p. 254). The interesting point about this sequence of antagonistic acts is that, according to the authors, they increase in intensity until “physical aggression is the proper or appropriate action” (p. 254). In other words, “aggression is not a voluntary act, but the necessary and lawful outcome of certain preconditions” or expectations that are normative in that they are seen as “socially required or obligatory” (pp. 254–55). They found that physical violence served as “a social marker or a punctuating device for a ritual ending” and under certain conditions was viewed as normal and appropriate (p. 263).

However, while there may exist an understanding among many Americans that violence ends the escalating antagonistic episode for both parties, this is not the same as saying that physically violent behavior is the best way to resolve an escalating conflict. Communication competence is the ability to appropriately and effectively use verbal and nonverbal symbols within a given speech community (e.g., culture, family, or relationship). Symbols arouse meanings according to commonly shared conventions (e.g., rules, norms, and customs). Verbal and nonverbal communication is regulated by these social conventions that vary from one culture to another and that govern what is appropriate, expected, permissible, or prohibited in specific social contexts (Cahn, 1996). Appropriate communication avoids the violation of valued social conventions, whereas effective communication obtains valued goals or effects (Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994). Because verbal abuse and physical violence in the family are considered inappropriate responses to conflict situations, communication researchers view abusive and violent acts as the dark side of communication and the abusers and violators as communicatively incompetent (Cahn, 1996). One implication of the communication interaction view of family violence is the emphasis it places on “sequencing” behaviors within communication patterns that differentiate violent from nonviolent family relationships.

The qualitative approach has played an important role along with quantitative methods in describing violent behavior in abusive families. In 1995, Sabourin and Stamp compared the communication behavior of 10 couples with a history of abuse and that of 10 nonabusive couples. All the couples were asked to discuss their daily routines, and these conversations were recorded and content analyzed. The two groups of couples were found to vary along several dimensions, which revealed how the abusive couples differed from the nonabusive partners in the ways they managed dialectical tensions in their relationships.

Olson (2002a) analyzed transcripts of interviews with 31 individuals who reported experiencing aggression with a spouse, cohabiting partner, or romantic partner during conflicts on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). She found that common couple violence (CCV) was not a simple process, but rather three different types of patterns were identified: aggressive, violent, and abusive, each with its own unique pattern of violent behavior. Olson concluded that CCV is not a unitary construct as originally thought.

For another recent example, while her research dealt with physical abuse of parents by adolescents, Eckstein (2004) found that the first episode of adolescent-to-parent abuse experience by parents was verbal abuse. Later, these adolescents progressed to more severe types of emotional or physical abuse. In sum, studies that take a communication interaction view of family violence have identified the phases, stages, or

steps in the “sequencing” of behaviors within communication patterns that differentiate violent from nonviolent family relationships.

When looking over the three approaches that constitute a communication approach to the study of family violence, it appears that the discipline emphasized a “communicator personality trait” approach during the first 10 years but during the following 10-year period focused more on predispositions toward family violence and communication interaction patterns that distinguish violent from nonviolent families.

*Which Communication Outlets Publish  
the Most Research on Family Violence?*

Tables 1.5 and 1.6 show the distribution of research studies and essays by communication publication and identify the publications by their full

TABLE 1.5  
Research Reports Publication Outlets

|   | <i>Quantitative</i>  |                      | <i>Qualitative</i>   |                      |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|   | <i>Pre-<br/>1996</i> | <i>Post<br/>1995</i> | <i>Pre-<br/>1996</i> | <i>Post<br/>1995</i> |
| Chapter in Edited Book (Chapter)                                |                      | 5                    |                      |                      |
| <i>Communication Education (CE)</i>                             | 1                    |                      |                      |                      |
| <i>Communication Monographs (CM)</i>                            | 3                    | 1                    | 1                    |                      |
| <i>Communication Quarterly (CQ)</i>                             | 2                    | 2                    |                      |                      |
| <i>Communication Reports (CR)</i>                               |                      | 1                    |                      |                      |
| <i>Communication Research Reports (CRR)</i>                     | 3                    | 3                    |                      |                      |
| <i>Communication Studies (CS)</i>                               |                      |                      |                      | 3                    |
| <i>Human Communication Research (HCR)</i>                       | 1                    |                      |                      |                      |
| <i>Journal of Applied Communication<br/>Research (JACR)</i>     | 1                    |                      | 1                    | 3                    |
| <i>Journal of Family Communication (JFC)</i>                    |                      | 1                    |                      | 1                    |
| <i>Journal of Social and Personal<br/>Relationships (JSPR)</i>  |                      |                      |                      | 2                    |
| <i>Qualitative Research Reports in<br/>Communication (QRRC)</i> |                      |                      |                      | 2                    |
| <i>Southern Communication Journal (SCJ)</i>                     |                      |                      |                      | 1                    |
| <i>Speech Communication Annual (SCA)</i>                        |                      |                      |                      | 1                    |
| <i>Western Journal of Communication (WJC)</i>                   | 2                    | 1                    |                      | 3                    |
| <i>Women's Studies in Communication (WSC)</i>                   |                      |                      |                      | 3                    |
| Totals  | 13                   | 14                   | 2                    | 19                   |

names. *CM* and *CRR* published the most research reports before 1996. A couple of articles also appeared in *CQ*, *WJC*, and *JACR*, with only one published in *HCR* and *CE*. However, after 1996, *JACR*, *CRR*, *CS*, *WJC*, and *WSC* published the most research studies, with a couple appearing in *CQ*, *QRRC*, and *JSPR* and only one in *CR*, *JFC*, *SCJ*, and *CM*.

Altogether, 17 communication journals and at least 8 different edited books provided outlets for research reports and essays on family violence. Prior to 1996, there were 15 research reports, none in edited books, but since 1995 there were 33 research reports (a double increase) with 5 in edited books. As for essays, 3 appeared before 1996, with 2 in edited books and 1 in a journal (*JACR*). After 1995, 13 were published (a substantial increase), with 9 in edited books and 4 in journals. Thus, 1996 marked a significant year in the communication research literature resulting in a greater increase of published research reports and essays on family violence.

## Conclusion

The results of search engines and the examination of the references used in these articles and chapters identified a total of 48 research reports and 17 essays (i.e., position papers.) Over two-thirds of the research reports and essays appeared in the last 10 years. An examination of these studies revealed a number of changes that have taken place over the years in the study of family violence.

My current review shows that research by communication scholars has gone in new directions since 1996. Back then, I defined family or domestic violence conceptually “as the ability to impose one’s will (i.e., wants, needs, or desires) on another person through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts, or both, done in a way that violates socially acceptable

TABLE 1.6  
Essays Publication Outlets

|   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Chapter in Edited Book (Chapter)                        | 11 (1995, 96, 01, 02, 04, 05, 06) |
| <i>Communication Monographs (CM)</i>                    | 1 (2006)                          |
| <i>Communication Theory (CT)</i>                        | 1 (2000)                          |
| <i>Journal of Applied Communication Research (JACR)</i> | 1 (1993)                          |
| <i>Journal of Family Communication (JFC)</i>            | 1 (2004)                          |
| <i>Research on Language and Social Interaction</i>      | 1 (1999)                          |
| <i>Women and Language</i>                               | 1 (2000)                          |

standards and carried out with the intention or the perceived intention of inflicting physical and/or psychological pain, injury, or suffering, or both” (Cahn, 1996, p. 6). This definition in fact appeared in a number of studies since that time. However, with the introduction of research into the discipline on the topic of incest, there is a need to broaden the definition and view of family violence to include the sexual exploitation of a relative of one’s own or of one’s significant other under 18 years of age. Therefore, I revise my earlier definition as follows: Family violence may be defined as imposing one’s will (i.e., wants, needs, or desires) on another family member through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts, or both, done in a way that violates socially acceptable standards that are either (1) carried out with the intention or the perceived intention of inflicting physical or psychological pain, injury, and/or suffering, or (2) in the case of incest, of sexually exploiting a relative of one’s own or of one’s significant other under 18 years of age. While this definition is conceptual, researchers have developed their own specific operational definitions of family verbal and physical violence, abuse, and incest.

How do communication scholars operationally define and measure family violence? Initially, in the communication discipline, family violence was viewed as trait VA. The primary measuring instrument was a version of the trait VA measure created by Infante and Wigley in 1986. More recently, three additional ways to define family violence have emerged: definitions consisting of self-reports of aggression that are both verbal and physical such as the CTS, definitions consisting of external criteria as used by authorities and therapists, and definitions consisting of self-reports of potential for violence.

Which violent family member relationships have received the most attention by communication researchers? Prior to 1996, most studies focused on marital/cohabitation aggression with a few dealing with aggression among parents and children, romantic (dating) partners, and family members in general. During the past 10 years, communication scholars have moved on from primarily studying spouses and intimate partners to focusing more on other types of family member relationships including child sexual abuse. The review shows that there is a need to study additional abusive relationships such as stepchild-parent and aging relatives.

What methodologies are used by communication scholars to obtain communication data on family violence? Initially, the primary method for obtaining data was quantitative. However, a change occurred in 1995, which resulted in greater use of qualitative than quantitative research methods. I would advocate combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a study to take advantage of the strengths of both approaches.

What constitutes a “communication approach” to the study of family violence? Like other disciplines that study family violence, communication has more than one approach that appeals to communication researchers. In addition to a split between qualitative and quantitative, there is also a tendency for communication researchers to prefer a particular approach to communication behavior. Initially, they adhered primarily to a “communicator personality trait” conceptualization, in which the problematic behavior was traceable to the individual’s latent hostility. Later there was a shift toward a “communication cognition approach,” which has identified abusers’ violence prone predispositions and described the mental beliefs and attributions needed to enable one to enact or avoid verbal and physical aggressiveness in communication situations. Also, in recent years, communication researchers have adopted a “communication interaction approach” to the study of family violence. This latter approach has identified the phases, stages, or steps in the “sequencing” of behaviors within communication patterns that differentiate violent from nonviolent family relationships. In the future, I would hope that researchers can create measures that incorporate communication patterns such that abusive families can be identified and perhaps subdivided according to the type of abuse.

Which communication outlets publish the most research on family violence? Altogether, 17 communication journals and at least 8 different edited books provided outlets for research reports and essays on family violence. Prior to 1996, there were 15 research reports, none in edited books, but since 1995 there are 33 research reports (a double increase) with 5 in edited books. As for essays, 3 appeared before 1996, with 2 in edited books and 1 in a journal (JACR). After 1995, 13 were published (a substantial increase), with 9 in edited books and 4 in journals. Thus, 1996 marked a significant year in the communication research literature resulting in a greater increase of published research reports and essays on family violence. Given that many studies were published by communication researchers after 1996, I decided that it is time to revisit the subject.

## Notes

1. It appears from my review of the literature that the origin of interest by the communication discipline in the subject of family violence started when Teresa Chandler Sabourin and her colleagues presented a paper on marital violence at the International Communication Association’s conference in 1983. She went on to complete her dissertation on that topic and presented a paper at the Speech Communication Association Conference in 1986.

2. To find relevant key words for family violence, I used the search engines ERIC and PsycInfo. Through them, I found that *family* was associated with *domestic, spouse, martial, elder, and child*. I added *sibling* after finding studies on that topic. I also added *dating/courtship violence* to the list of key terms because, according to Olson (2004b), patterns of spousal violence frequently start prior to marriage. I also found that *violence* was associated with such terms as *abuse, battered, incest, and aggression*.

3. I limited this review to research reports and essays published in communication journals or chapters in books edited by scholars associated with communication departments. This review excluded convention papers and published studies that were not written by communication faculty. I assumed that the editors of communication journals and edited communication books and their reviewers paid attention to the relevance of their accepted submissions to the study of communication as a discipline. Conversely, with the exception of the interdisciplinary *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, I did not include articles published in journals outside the communication discipline even when written by faculty associated with communication departments because I could not assume that the editors and their reviewers required a communication perspective from their contributors. JSPR is an exception in that communication faculty edit and review submissions from communication faculty. I did not include unpublished papers such as convention papers by communication faculty because many papers do not go through the same blind review process that guides publication in scholarly journals and edited books.

The creators of communication research search engines have identified those scholarly journals that make up the communication discipline. Using the family and violence-relevant key words, I searched COMINDEX and Communication and Mass Media Complete for journal articles on the subject. I excluded from my search articles of interest primarily to our media colleagues on the effects of television, movies, or video games and articles of interest primarily to our journalism colleagues on the reporting of family violence in the media. My review did not include more general publications on “women” or on “abuse” unless either was identified in a family, marital, or parent-child context. Because relationships are culture bound, I did not include in my review articles on family violence in other cultures, with the exception of Hegde’s (1996) study that was one of the first in a series of similar qualitative studies on American women. I also excluded published book reviews.

To find chapters in edited books contributed by scholars associated with communication departments, I used PsycInfo. I selected those chapters where the senior author of the contribution and the editor of the book were associated with a communication department or were members of a national communication association—namely, NCA or ICA.

A search of PsycInfo for chapters in edited books produced 10 chapters contributed by scholars associated with communication departments. The senior author of the contribution and the editor of the book were associated with a communication department or were members of a national communication association (NCA, ICA). These chapters appeared in the following edited books:

Socha and Stamp (1995), Cahn and Lloyd (1996), Ray (1996), Manusov and Harvey (2001), Noller and Feeney (2002), Vangelisti (2004), Kalbfleisch (2005), and Braithwaite and Baxter (2006)

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