

## CHAPTER 1

# Diversity's Impact on Defining the Family

### *Discourse-Dependence and Identity*

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Contemporary families represent a world of “normative instability and definitional crisis” (Stacey, 1999a, p. 489), making it more difficult for members to keep order in their personal lives and maintain family stability (McCracken, 2004). Although all societies and cultures have webs of kinship relationships, the structures of which change across time and cultures (Garey & Hansen, 1998), U.S. families represent the forefront of familial redefinition due to the multiplicity of changing kinship patterns. As families become increasingly diverse, *their definitional processes expand exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent*. Family identity depends, in part, on members' communication with outsiders, as well as with each other, regarding their familial connections.

Even though all families engage in some level of discourse-driven family identity building, less traditionally formed families are more discourse dependent, engaging in recurring discursive processes to manage and maintain identity. A growing number of U.S. families are formed through differences, visible or invisible, rendering their ties more ambiguous to outsiders as well as to themselves. Many other cultures such as those in the Middle East or Asia still identify families by similarities. Circumstances such as ongoing connections to a birthmother and adoptive parents, visual differences among members, siblings' lack of shared early childhood experiences, same-sex parents, or ties to ex-step relatives create ambiguity,

necessitating active management of family identity. These definitional concerns surface as members face outsiders' challenges regarding the veracity of their claims of relatedness or as members experience a need to revisit their familial identity at different times. The greater the ambiguity of family form, the more elaborate the communicative processes needed to establish and maintain identity.

Highly discourse-dependent families engage regularly in external and internal boundary management practices. Times of stress and/or boundary ambiguity challenge families because expectations of inclusion and support are less clear in self-ascribed or ambiguous relations than in families formed and maintained through traditionally recognized biological and adult legal ties. Clarification, explanation, and negotiation of identity become commonplace.

My own experience, unique but not extraordinary, may make this clearer. I was born into a traditional, biological family as an only child; both my parents reflected an Irish Catholic heritage. This rather uncomplicated family experience lasted until I was 17, when my father died and my mother became ill and died a few years later. At that time, another family (Norwegian-German, Methodist with three younger biological children) to whom I was emotionally attached informally adopted me, incorporating me into a familial relationship that continues to this day. Eventually I married, bore a son and daughter, and adopted another daughter from Korea, making us a family formed through "visible adoption" with extended biological relatives of Irish and Korean descent and adoptive relatives of Norwegian and German descent.

When my first child was born, my informally adopted mother and I discussed what she and her husband should be called; we agreed on Grandma Mae and Grandpa Arnold. Today, I have three young adult children; a daughter-in-law; a set of informally adopted siblings; current and, due to divorce, former in-laws; nieces, nephews, step-nieces, and step-nephews, to whom I am "Aunt Kathy"; a whole extended set of in-laws; plus a set of "fictive kin" or extremely close friends who also serve as my extended family. Consequently, my family cannot be explained easily through traditional familial titles; my family requires naming, explaining, legitimizing, and, occasionally, defending. It is held together internally through discussions, narratives, and rituals, as well as some legal and biological ties. Today, family life is like that.

What serves as the basis of family? Minow (1998) identifies the key question as, "Does this group function as a family?" arguing that the issue is not whether a group of people fits the formal, legal definition of a family but "whether the group of people function as a family; do they share affection and resources, think of one another as family members, and present themselves as such to neighbors and others?" (p. 8). Communicative practices contribute to family functioning, especially in families formed, fully or partly, outside of traditional means. Before addressing these communicative processes, it is necessary to describe briefly the current diversity of U.S. families.

## Family Diversity

Families in the first half of the 21st century will alter irrevocably any sense of predictability as to what "being family" means. These families will

1. Reflect an increasing diversity of self-conceptions, evidenced through structural as well as cultural variations, which will challenge society to abandon historical, nucleocentric biases, unitary cultural assumptions, traditional gender assumptions, and implied economic and religious assumptions.
2. Live increasingly within four and five generations of relational connections. Escalating longevity, changing birth rates, and multiple marriages or cohabitations will reveal long-term developmental patterns, ongoing multiple intergenerational contacts, generational reversals, and smaller biological-sibling cohorts.
3. Continuously reconfigure themselves across members' life spans as members' choices create new family configurations through legal, biological, technological, and discursive means, affecting family identity (Coontz, 1999; Galvin, 2004a).

Further examination of these claims provides a picture of contemporary family life. Fewer families can be depicted validly by discrete categories or unitary terms, such as stepfamily, biological family, single-parent families, or adoptive families, due to overlapping complexities of connections. An overview of contemporary patterns of family formation reveals the following:

People continue to marry across their life spans. The 2000 census reveals that more than half of people age 15 and older were married, although the majority of those younger than 24 were single. Many of these are second or third marriages. In 2000, 9.7% of males and 10.8% of females reported that they were currently divorced, with the 45- to 54-year-old age group reporting the highest percentage of divorces (Kreider & Simmons, 2003).

Stepfamilies, formed through remarriage or cohabitation, generally reflect divorce and recommitment, although an increasing number are formed by single mothers marrying for the first time. In 2000, married or cohabiting adults reported parenting 4.4 million stepchildren (Kreider, 2003). These blended families exhibit a wide range of trajectories leading toward family identity (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Far more is understood about mutual obligations among biologically related family members than among step-kin (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Even less is known about ex-stepfamily relationships, although increasing numbers of individuals live in second or third stepfamilies.

Single-parent families continue to increase. In 2000, 22% of children lived with only their mothers, and 4% lived with only their fathers (Simmons & O'Neill, 2001). Today, women younger than 30 who become pregnant for the first time are more likely to be single than married. Increasingly, single women and men become parents through adoption and new reproductive technologies.

Gay and lesbian committed couples and families are becoming more visible due, in part, to a greater willingness of same-sex partners to identify their lifestyle. Census data do not include gay and lesbian partners, although the 2000 data on unmarried partner households indicated that over half a million households were headed by same-sex partners, representing 1% of all coupled households (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003). According to the 2000 census, 33% of women in same-sex partnerships lived with children, as did 22% of men in same-sex partnerships (Simmons

& O'Connell, 2003). Lesbian and gay families are not easily categorized because they "come in different sizes, shapes, ethnicities, races, religions, resources, creeds, and quirks, and even engage in diverse sexual practices" (Stacey, 1999b, p. 373).

More families are being formed, in part, through adoption. In 2000, 2.5% of children younger than 18 were adopted; a total of 2.1 million children were recorded as adopted, approximately 200,000 of whom were foreign born (Kreider, 2003). Many of these families become transracial through the adoption process. Open adoption is emerging as the common domestic form, creating an ongoing adoption triangle—the adoptee, the birth parent(s), and the adoptive parent(s)—with variable contact among members. The triangle may involve multiple individuals because the biological parent(s) may have partners and other children and the adoptive parent(s) may have other children (Elmhorst, 2003).

Intentional families, families formed without biological and legal ties, are maintained by members' self-definition. These "fictive" or self-ascribed kin become family by choice, performing family functions for one another. The next-door neighbors who serve as extended kin, the best friend who is considered a sister, other immigrants from the same homeland, or occasionally an "urban tribe" or intricate community of young people who live and work together in various combinations (Watters, 2003) function as family. Major tragedies create a need for such families; families of the International Service Workers 32BJ who lost relatives in 9/11 meet together regularly, expanding each others' definition of family (Imber-Black, 2004). The processes by which intentional families are formed reflect a transactional definition of family, that is, "a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity and who experience a shared history and a shared future" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 71).

Currently, fewer people report membership in families fully formed through lifelong marriages and biological offspring; many experience multiplicities of connections. The complexities are captured in a discussion of the label *gay and lesbian families*: "Should we count only families in which every single member is gay? . . . Or does the presence of just one gay member color a family gay?" (Stacey, 1999b, p. 373). The same question must be asked about labeling families as adoptive, blended or step, single parent, and so on.

Other factors, such as ethnicity and religion, affect family structure. According to 2000 census data, Asians report the lowest proportion of separation or divorce, Black men and women report the lowest percentage of marriage (42% of Black men were married and 31% of Black women were married), and Alaska Indians and Alaska natives report the highest percentage of divorce (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). Ethnicity interacts with parenthood; in 2000, 77% of white non-Hispanic children, 65% of Hispanic children, and 38% of African American children lived with two parents, not necessarily biological. Mixed-race families are growing. In 2000, 7% of married couples and 12% of unmarried male/female partners reflected different races (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003). More than 4% of children are of mixed race; overall, 2.4 million persons report a heritage of two or more races (Jones & Smith, 2001).

Religious identification adds to familial complexity. Recent research reports a growing increase in interfaith marriage among several denominations as the majority of young adults indicate that shared religion is not significant in a partnership.

Yet interfaith marriages are less stable and more likely to end in divorce than same-faith marriages (Hughes, 2004).

As the population ages, families face increased involvement in managing and renegotiating their identities over decades and across generations. Multigenerational bonds are becoming more important than nuclear family ties for well-being and support over the life span (Bengston, 2001). The average life expectancy for an individual born in the United States in 2000 is 76.9 years: 74.1 years for males and 79.5 years for females (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004), but these figures are further complicated by race. For example, White male life expectancy is 74.8 years, while Black male life expectancy is 68.2 years; White female life expectancy is 80 years versus 74.9 years for Black females.

Families are characterized increasingly by elongated generational structures. Due to increases in longevity and decreases in fertility, the population age structure in most industrialized nations changed from a pyramid to a rectangle, creating "a family structure in which the shape is long and thin, with more family generations alive but with fewer members in the generation" (Bengston, 2001, p. 5). This portends shifts in interaction patterns as family members share more years together.

Grandparenting, as well as its great or great-great variations, is becoming a more predictable familial role; more grandparents assume child care functions, although involvement varies by race and ethnicity. More than half of the African American, American Indian, and Alaska Native grandparents were "coresident grandparents" responsible for their grandchildren (Simmons & Dye, 2003). Elder generations will compete with each other for the attention of their few grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Longevity implies increased generational reversals as middle-aged business owners hire their parents (Leland, 2004), senior citizens are coaxed online by younger family members, parents learn how to use the Internet from their children (Allen & Rainie, 2002), and middle-aged adults confront elderly divorcing parents. Dissonant acculturation of certain immigrant families places children in positions of significant responsibility, thereby undercutting parental authority and putting young people at risk (Pipher, 2002). Young children assume the burden of translating medical, social services, and educational information for their parents or siblings. Their elders may not recognize the children's involvement in unsafe or unhealthy activities.

Family change is inevitable. Technological advances transform family life as fertility treatments result in increasing multiple births, infertile individuals become first-time parents, highly premature infants survive, terminal diseases leave aging relatives existing indefinitely on life support systems, and gender identity and presentation are changed surgically. Such circumstances necessitate serious discussions about the meaning of family as well as negotiations among members.

A tangible lag time exists between institutional definitions of "family" and the rapidly changing composition of household living arrangements and socially constructed relations. Lived practices outpace familial identity building, which outpaces the discourse, which outpaces societal acknowledgment or acceptance. Increasingly, diverse families are dependent on discourse for their identity development.

## Discourse and Family Identity

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As a nation built extensively through immigration, the United States is a key site for exploring constructed family identity. Waves of immigrants have created nonbiological familial structures for psychological and practical survival because most of their biological relatives remained in “the old country.” In a metaphorical sense, many persons with strong nonbiological family ties have immigrant familial identities, an identity that “ever occupies a border position, temporarily divided between the self that was formed in the old world and the forming self of the new. Displacement, not security, is the immigrant’s lot; construction of reality is ongoing” (Goodnight, 2004, n.p.). The lack of biological or adult legal ties creates a sense of displacement for some family members who regularly engage in constructing their familial identity.

We need richer concepts and tools both to make sense of increasingly complex family forms as well as to address questions such as the following: “How are we to characterize the most important relationship processes in such families? When do we need to expand our lexicon to address the new relationships and issues challenging such families?” (Grotevant, 2004, p. 12). From a social construction standpoint, “our languages of description and explanation are produced, sustained, and/or abandoned within processes of human interaction” (Gergen, Hoffman, & Anderson, 1996, p. 102). Discourse processes are relevant to families because, through interaction and language, individuals, within their family context, collectively construct familial identity (Stamp, 2004). Although all families rely on discourse to some extent to construct their identities, the increasing diversity of family forms is accompanied with increasing involvement of discursive processes. Thus, these families may be considered discourse dependent.

In this treatment of the social construction, the focus is on the constitutive formation of families in which there is a desire for an authentic, committed, and substantive feel of family. This discussion does not include the more loosely socially enacted families that serve a time- or place-bound function, performing roles, acknowledging the special nature of the connection, but understanding that it is a situation made up as one goes along without commitment or focus on authenticity. For example, some neighbors serve as fictive kin, finding pleasure in their connections, but do not anticipate a substantive and deep sense of family; when circumstances change, the definition of family changes also. Some informal adoptions, urban tribes, cohabiting pairs, cohabiting stepfamilies, and open adoption triangles represent deeper levels of commitment and perceived future investment. The following pages address the experiences of the consciously committed constitutive family experience.

Family communication scholars claim families are based on, formed, and maintained through communication, or “our families, and our images of families, are constituted through social interaction” (Vangelisti, 2004, p. xiii), necessitating studies that “employ definitions of the family that depend on how families define themselves rather than definitions based on genetic and sociological criteria” (Fitzpatrick, 1998, p. 45). Over time, as diversity increases, communicative definitions of family

will be privileged over structural definitions, requiring new models for talking about and studying families (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Discourse dependency is not new; what is new is that discourse-dependent families are becoming the norm.

The following analogy may highlight this point. The joining of unlike entities occurs through the process of *adhesion*, whereas like entities are joined through the process of *cohesion*. Adhesion refers to how particles of different substances are held together; cohesion refers to how particles of the same substance are attached. Increasingly, families are formed and maintained through processes of *adhesion* rather than *cohesion* as individuals create a family life outside of the traditional biological and/or legal processes (Galvin, 2004b). In biologically formed families, members tend to *cohere* to one another, reflecting the tendency of units of the same substance to hold together with minimal discourse about identity and belonging. In families not fully formed through biological and legal connections, members *cohere* and *adhere* to each other. Finally, in families formed outside biological or legal connections, members *adhere* to each other, reflecting the tendency of entities of different substances to bind together. In the second and third cases, elaborated discourse serves as the primary adhesive or substance supporting family members' efforts to establish and maintain their identity. Thus, families formed wholly or partly without biological and/or legal ties depend heavily on discourse processes to create their "stickiness," or bonding, to provide members with an internal sense of identity as well as an identity presented to outsiders.

The question emerges: What discourse practices do family members use to build an internal as well as an external identity? A review of the academic and popular material on complex families reveals a range of communicative practices used to construct and maintain family identity. Usually, the necessity for such practices depends on the degree of difference reflected within the family form. For example, in discussing adoptive families, Kaye and Warren (1988) suggest that the extent of communicative management depends on the degree to which the adoptive circumstances present intrinsic reminders that the child's biological roots are different.

## External Boundary Management Practices

When families appear different to outsiders, questions and challenges arise. Family members manage the tensions between revealing and concealing family information on the assumption that they control access to their private information (Petronio, 2002). Yet, little is specifically known about how families with differences manage their boundaries. For example, researchers have not yet examined the strategies that gay and lesbian parents use "to shelter their children from negative experiences, to help children cope with instances of prejudice, to build resilience in their children" (Peplau & Beals, 2004, p. 244). And the practices of families built through new reproductive technologies remain unexplored. The following set of communication strategies for boundary management includes labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending.

### *Labeling*

Labeling frequently involves identifying the familial tie, titles, or positions when introducing or referring to another person, for example, “This is my sister.” The constitutive approach invites questions such as the following: What is the intent of a familial title? What questions are believed to be answered by that familial title? What do we want a familial label to communicate? To whom? How will others view labeling?

Labeling orients familial relationships such as “brother” or “mother.” When transitions occur, the specific meaning of certain names must be linked to the person-in-relationship. For example, among the many communicative tasks a man faces in becoming a stepfather is negotiating a definition of the stepfather-stepchild relationship (Jorgenson, 1994). Frequently, this involves overt or covert negotiations about whether to refer to him as “my mother’s husband,” “Brad,” “my stepfather,” or “my other Dad”; each choice reveals a different sense of connection (Galvin, 1989). Because language serves as a constituent feature of cultural patterns embedded within a relationship, changing the language alters the relationship (Gergen et al., 1996).

Labeling establishes expectations. When a stepmother looks the same age as her stepson, two siblings represent different races, or “Grandma Carl” is male, creating a relational definition becomes challenging. Today’s families are confronted with labeling circumstances unimaginable to earlier generations: How does one name his sperm donor or the surrogate mother who carried her?

### *Explaining*

Explaining involves making a labeled family relationship understandable, giving reasons for it, or elaborating on how it works. When someone’s nonhostile curiosity seems to question the stated familial tie, explanation is a predictable response. Remarks such as, “How come your mother is White and you’re Asian?” or “How can you have two fathers?” seem to require explanation. An explanation for an international adoptee’s lack of facility in her native language may include “My parents are Irish, so I didn’t learn any Korean” (Galvin & Wilkinson, 2000, p. 11). When a playmate challenged her young son because he did not have a “Daddy,” Blumenthal (1990–1991) explained the concept of a Seed Daddy to the boys—“a man who is not really a parent, but one who helps a woman get a baby started” (p. 185). Negotiating parenthood within a heterocentric context creates issues for same-sex partners faced with educating others about their family but who are often frustrated by the task (Chabot & Ames, 2004). In her study of lesbian and gay stepfamilies, Lynch (2000) found that many of the biological parents had not come out prior to being involved in this relationship, creating a need to explain their new family identity as a lesbian/gay stepfamily to unsuspecting friends and extended family.

### *Legitimizing*

Legitimizing invokes the sanction of law or custom: It positions relationships as genuine and conforming to recognized standards. Legitimizing occurs when one’s

relational ties are challenged, creating a need to provide information that helps another recognize the tie as a genuine, familial link. Adoption agencies regularly prepare parents of families formed through transracial and/or international adoption for questions such as, "Is she your real daughter?" Adoption Learning Partners (2004), an online adoption education community, provides new parents with alternative responses to such an intrusive question. These include "No, she's my fake daughter," "Yes, she's really mine," or "Yes, we're an adoptive family." The response is chosen on the basis of the parent's interaction goals and/or the child's age and ability to understand the interaction. Gay or lesbian parents make reference to outside sources that legitimate their family, such as books that depict their family as genuine (*Heather Has Two Mommies* or *Daddy's Roommate*) or well-known figures who represent gay male or lesbian parents. Those in families created by benefit of a gestational carrier may refer questioners to books, such as *Conceiving Luc* (Freilicher, Scheu, & Wetanson, 1999).

### *Defending*

Finally, defending involves shielding oneself or a familial relationship from attack, justifying it, or maintaining its validity against opposition. Defending is a response to hostility or a direct challenge to the familial form. For example, Garner (2004), the daughter of a gay father, depicts the difficulty of listening to constant messages from media, politicians, religious leaders, teachers, and neighbors claiming gay people are bad or sinful. She describes the specific complications for her nephew when a teacher or friend asserts, "That's impossible. You can't have two grampas in the same house. Which one is REALLY your grampa?" (n.p.). Parents who adopt transracially must be prepared for questions such as, "Couldn't you get a White child?" or "Is she one of those crack babies?" (Adoption Learning Partners, 2004). Defending responses may arise from sheer frustration. Annoyed by hearing the question, "How can you two be sisters?" a pair of Asian and Caucasian teenage sisters decided, "When we got the question . . . we would respond 'The Mailman' and walk away" (Galvin & Fonner, 2003, p. 1).

Children in cohabiting stepfamilies face challenges such as, "He's not your real stepfather if your Mom didn't marry him." Members of families formed through assisted reproductive technology encounter comments such as "Where is the Daddy?" or "She can't be your real mother if that other woman was pregnant with you." Advice columnists regularly respond to questions about how to deal with similar invasive comments or questions. Defending responses tend to reflect strong feelings. They may be straightforward ("That's not something that concerns you"), or they may be indignant ("That's a totally inappropriate question to ask").

## **Internal Boundary Management Practices**

Members of families formed through differences engage in ongoing communication practices designed to maintain their internal sense of family-ness. These practices include naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing.

### *Naming*

“Names entitle situations” (Kauffman, 1989, p. 273). Naming plays a significant role in the development of internal family identity as members struggle to indicate their familial status. Sometimes, names are decided and never revisited; in other cases, names become a source of ongoing negotiation. Naming a child, especially an older child, or a child adopted internationally and/or transracially, presents a challenge. Children arrive with names reflecting their birth family and/or birth culture. An international adoptee captures the loss involved when her Korean name was replaced by an American one, saying, “That was really all I had when I came to this country: that name. And my parents overlooked it and chose another one” (Kroll, 2000, p. 18). A married Korean adoptee reviewed her multiple name options, settling on “Jane, Jeong, Trenka: one name from each family” (Trenka, 2003, p. 208).

Open adoption provides a unique set of linguistic challenges, given the lack of terminology for any extended family members in the adoption triangle. For example, a birthmother reports preparing her younger birth children to meet her oldest child who would have been their older sister by telling them, “It’s hard to explain how I feel when I see her as to why it doesn’t bother me that she calls me [first name] rather than, you know, her mom. Because I’m not” (Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000, p. 429).

Stepfamily members confront the question, “What do I call you?” Answers are confounded by the “wicked stepmother” myth, conflicting loyalties between biological parents and stepparents, and the lack of conventional names for a stepparent’s extended family. Stepchildren may choose a name honoring a stepparent’s parental role, such as a hyphenated last name or using biological terms such as “Pop” or “Moms,” dissimilar from their name for the biological parent. A study of stepfathers reinforces the importance of naming, indicating that the child’s use of the “*daddy* or *dad* label can intensify the child’s feelings for an attachment to a stepfather” (Marsiglio, 2004, p. 31) and encourage a stepfather to claim the child. Conversely, some stepfathers reported feeling like a dad but were reluctant to be called by such a title. Gay and lesbian parents confront the issue of how they wish to be referred to by their children because linguistic labels do not include the non-biological parent easily. For lesbian couples, name choice for a nonchildbearing partner may reflect that partner’s cultural heritage (Chabot & Ames, 2004). For example, one Jewish couple decided on *Mommy* and *Ima*, the Hebrew word for *Mommy* (Balka & Rose, 1989). Some lesbian pairs consider taking a hyphenated last name, giving the child the coparent’s name or creating a new name. Those who changed names report that it was to establish a public family identity or to strengthen their presence as a couple or family (Suter & Oswald, 2003). Some who did not change names believed keeping separate names would promote equality in their relationships.

### *Discussing*

The degree of difference among family members affects the amount of discussion about their family situation. If individuals see few role models for their family

form, they have to identify the issues and then attempt to resolve them. Gay or lesbian partners may find themselves discussing how to represent their relationship to each other's extended family because parents and siblings function as gatekeepers to a sense of family belonging. For such partners, a supportive climate is key to a feeling of inclusion (Oswald, 2002). Lesbian parenting partners encounter decisions regarding how to become parents, who will be the biological mother, and how to decide on a donor (Chabot & Ames, 2004). In many cases, donors are chosen because of their physical appearance since "looking related suggests family, which helps communicate a shared family identity" (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Parker, 2004, p. 15). It also reduces the number of challenges to relatedness faced by the family members. Gay male parents experience variations on these issues.

A blended family must develop its identity and "create a shared conception of how their family is to manage its daily business" (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994, p. 370). A study of blended family development found that some of the families "used direct communication, such as regular family meetings, to air issues surrounding the adjustments to becoming a family" (Braithwaite et al., 2001, p. 243). Schrodt (2004) identified five types of stepfamilies that varied in discussions of stepfamily issues. Concerns regarding belonging result in conversations ranging from grandparent gift giving, designated space for noncustodial children, signing official school papers, or rights to discipline. As a stepfamily undergoes divorce, members hold conversations about their future identities and ties.

A child's entrance into a family through adoption or new reproductive technologies necessitates an ongoing series of talks across years as the child's ability to comprehend information results in greater depths of discussion. Currently, sequential, age-appropriate discussions of adoption have replaced the earlier "one big talk" because children's informational needs change as they reach new developmental milestones (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). Transracially adopted children begin to question the physical differences between themselves and other family members at an early age. Parents in families formed through assisted reproductive technology raise questions about how to discuss their children's origins.

Sometimes, the practices used to manage external boundaries are a source of internal family conversation. In certain cases, parents need to prepare all their children for racial derogation although they never experienced it. After interviewing 20 young adult Korean adoptees, Fujimoto (2001) reported that a persistent message from adoptees is "the need for parents to understand that their children are likely to face racist and racialized experiences that the parents will not face" (pp. 15–16) and to discuss how to respond to the challenge. In a list of strategies for transracial families, Bamberger (2004) suggests, "Get ready for the ugly words. . . . Better to hear them first from you, in the context of preparing responses" (p. 45). Such discussions, although painful, are necessary.

### *Narrating*

Every family tells stories; however, families formed through differences experience more complex storytelling processes (see Chapters 6 and 7, this volume). McAdams (1993) suggests that a person's story "brings together the different parts

of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole” (p. 12). By extension, as family stories emerge, they represent the family’s definition of itself. Personal and family stories are recursive in that they influence how lives move into the future (Yerby, 1993). Over time, “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” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 516). Because family stories are “laced with opinions, emotions, and past experiences, they can provide particularly telling data about the way people conceive of their relationships with family members” (Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999, p. 337). Everyday narratives create a powerful scaffold for a family’s identity.

Creation or entrance stories answer the question, “How did this family come to be?” They include accounts of how the adult partners met or how an individual chose to become a parent, as well as birth and adoption narratives. In cases of adoption, the entrance story sets the tone for a family’s adoption-related communication; it is the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between parents and their children (Wrobel et al., 2003). In addition, “How the (adoption) story is told and retold in the family can have lasting consequences for the child’s adjustment and well-being” (Friedlander, 1999, p. 43). In their study of adoptive parents’ entrance narratives, Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) identified the themes of fortune versus misfortune and desire versus rejection. Their stories also included references to issues of destiny, compelling connection, rescue, and legitimacy. Cooper (2004) depicts the development of her stepfamily through three types of stories—stepfamily, blended family, and bonus stories—each reflecting a stage in the family’s move toward deeper joining. In all cases, sensitivity to narrative language is critical. Consider the impact of, “Then, when my sister ran off with that jerk, we took you in” versus “Then, you joined our family when your Mom was unable to care for you.” Or, “When you were abandoned . . .” versus “When your birthmother made an adoption plan. . .”

Many families formed through differences suppress or lose their narratives. Just as many divorced families and stepfamilies lose the original parental love stories, certain adoptive parents struggle with the extent to which an adopted child’s painful birth family background should be told to family members. Uncertain parents may fabricate some pieces of the story to avoid discussing infertility or donor insemination. To provide his 2-year-old foster daughter with a missing piece from her childhood after she left his home, her foster father wrote Sierra a story of their time together, hoping she would read it when she grew older (Grady, 2004).

### *Ritualizing*

Families accomplish their “emotional business” as they enact rituals (Bossard & Boll, 1950; see also Chapters 14 and 15, this volume). A typology of family rituals includes major celebrations; traditions such as reunions, vacations, and birthdays; and mundane routines (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Although most families develop rituals, families formed through differences struggle with what to ritualize and which rituals from previous family experiences should be continued.

Family rituals provide opportunities for stepfamilies to define family membership on multiple levels of connection, although they require sensitivity and negotiations. Yet traditions for special occasions “generate a feeling of closeness providing fuel for weathering the more difficult times” (Whiteside, 1989, p. 35). In their study of blended families, Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) found that members engaged in rituals or “important communicative practices that enable blended family members to embrace their new family while still valuing what was important in the old family environment” (p. 101). Family members described enacting new rituals, not imported from a previous family; rituals that were imported unchanged; and rituals that were imported and adapted. Respondents also reported that some new rituals lasted and some failed, demonstrating that becoming a family is an ongoing process.

Adoptive families may celebrate arrival or “gotcha” days as well as birthdays; in families formed through international adoption, members may adopt some celebrations from a child’s birth culture. Birth family members may be invited to share a holiday or a tradition. Some children report rituals of pulling out adoption papers and looking at them or attending a summer culture camp (Fujimoto, 2001).

## Conclusion

Families and their individual members experience multiple identities. As noted earlier, most families cannot be described in unitary terms; they are formed through multiple differences. For example, White lesbian mothers of two African American boys reported the following common (nonhostile) questions from the boy’s preschool peers: “Why are you Black and she White?” or “Why is he Black and you White?” As the boys aged, they encountered variations on the question, “Why do you have two moms?” (Fine & Johnson, 2004). These authors detail the multiple objectified identities ascribed to them as parents in a family created across race and gender borders. Black lesbians experience “triple jeopardy” by virtue of race, gender, and sexual orientation, with racism as the most stressful challenge (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder, 2003).

The concept of family is changing visibly, invisibly, and irrevocably. When family identity is involved, language follows lived experience. This language, managed within and across boundaries, reflects and shapes family experience. Contemporary families, living in a world of normative instability and definitional crisis, depend increasingly on discourse to construct their identities.

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