5. *Queering Family Communication*

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Queer families, simply put, are families where one more of the family members are queer *or* where something about the structure/nature/being/doing of the family is inherently queer. As bloggers K&W explain,

> A queer family could certainly be a family with or without kids. Queer families can have two moms or two dads. They can have one mom and one dad. They have one parent. They can have more than two parents. They can also include one or more people who identify as trans* or genderqueer. They can include bisexual, omnisexual, pansexual, polysexual, asexual, or queer people. Queer families have kids by marriage, kids from previous relationships and/or pregnancies. They can add kids through foster care, adoption, surrogacy, sperm donors (both on and off the books), and good old-fashioned P-I-V intercourse. They can include beloved furbabies (our pet children). They can include supportive queer family relationships that came about out of kinship or necessity in place of or in addition to our legal/bio families. (2013, 6)

It is difficult to ascertain how many queer families exist, especially because in many parts of the world there are severe social and legal penalties for expressing queer identity and/or engaging in acts that are deemed queer. Although queer marriage is now legal in over 30 countries (Masci, Sciupac, & Lipka, 2019), homosexuality is illegal in many nation-states around the world, with 13 United Nations member states still enforcing the death penalty for queer sexual acts (Simmons, 2017). As these facts suggest, rights and acceptance for queer families vary world-wide.

Because queer families are often stigmatized, many queer family communication studies have examined topics related to difficulties, struggles, and hardships. Still, it is important to consider that for many families "queer" is but one marker that might be placed upon them; that not all queer people are victims; and that, in many ways, queer families have some advantages others

do not. Differences between queer and non-queer families, while important, should not be overemphasized, as they usually only involve family structure and/or awareness of queer identities and issues (Tasker, 2005). Queer and heterosexual families share more similarities than differences.

With that backdrop set, this essay offers a review of queer family communication scholarship. Although the catch-all term *queer* is used to characterize this work, it is important to note that most studies do not study queer families broadly; but, instead, examine particular types of queer families (e.g., lesbian mothers, queer children, etc.). This review primarily focuses on interpersonal and relational communication literatures. Other studies have examined public discourses about family, such as social movements or media representations, but due to space limitations that work cannot be covered here. Following the literature review, future research considerations are offered, with a particular focus on the value of queer-theoretical approaches. Throughout the essay, practical applications of queer family communication studies are also considered.

Reviewing Queer Family Communication Research

As Suter (2015) observed, studies of queer family communication mostly germinated in the late 2000s and came into full focus in the 2010s. That observation is reflected in this review, where the research can be broken into four primary areas: queer partnerships, queer parenting, coming out, and trans families.

Queer Partnerships

The modern roots of queer family communication can be traced back to two primary research lines: Pamela J. Lannutti's work regarding same-sex partnerships and Elizabeth A. Suter and colleagues' work about symbolic rituals for queer partners. Lannutti's earlier work, much of which was completed in the United States before same-sex/same-gender marriage was legalized, does not explicitly label queer partnerships as family. It does, however, raise many important questions that are salient to understanding queer families. As one example, her examinations of same-sex marriage indicate that couples believed marriage would allow them to feel as if their relationships were "more real" (Lannutti, 2007, p. 135) and that, even if they decided not to get married, same-sex relationships in general would be considered more legitimate (Lannutti, 2014).

Around the same time, Suter's work explored more of the symbolic and meaning-making aspects of queer partnerships, often establishing them as families with rituals and relational meaning systems. For example, in one study she and her colleagues learned that 85% of queer couples indicated that rings served as a nonverbal way to communicate their commitment, with 90% reporting the same about their home (Suter & Daas, 2007). The work also established that many unmarried queer couples still celebrated anniversaries, with less of a reliance on wedding dates and more of a focus on important events or moments that are considered the symbolic beginning of their partnered relationship (Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008).

As same-sex/same-gender marriage rights gained traction in the U.S., such research evolved to include a deeper focus on family aspects of such relationships. Suter's work began to take on issues related to queer parenting; whereas Lannutti's work focused on queer partner issues, often examining how queer partners in the U.S. navigated relationships in a post-queer marriage world. For example, in one study she examined how married queer people dealt with privacy, examining issues such as wanting to maintain privacy during an adoption process or how ready families were to hear about the queer aspects of couple relationships (Lannutti, 2013).

More recently, studies of queer marriage have expanded beyond the U.S. For example, Bie and Tang (2016) explain the challenges gay men face when it comes to marriage and family. As they indicate, Chinese men are under more scrutiny and pressure to marry and create a family than men in other cultures. Such pressure leads to their negotiating with lesbian women to create *xinghun*, a marriage where "a gay man marries a lesbian so that they will appear to be a normal married couple" (Bie & Tang, 2016, p. 353). In this marriage arrangement, each member of the couple clearly understands that their obligation is to attend family events and keep up the appearance of marriage for the sake of the family. Because China is becoming more friendly toward same-sex relationships, this pressure continues to lessen, albeit slowly, with more queer individuals avoiding marriage altogether (Bie & Tang, 2016).

Queer Parenting

Early queer family communication studies also focused on queer parents, especially studies of lesbian motherhood. The results of these studies established a deep sense how family was constituted via communication. For example, one study found that sharing a last name, similar to how it works in heteronormative families, increases a sense of family belonging (Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008). That same study also established how everyday family

activities, from taking a walk to attending church together, formed family rituals that created a sense of familial wholeness (Suter et al., 2008). In another study, with especially practical implications, participants indicated that a child who has the same last name as a parent's can help to prevent confusion about the parent-child relationship in emergencies (Bergen, Suter, & Dass, 2006). Additionally, documents indicating power of attorney, explicit wills, formalized parental agreements, and other paper trails have the potential to both create a sense of family and protect parental rights (Bergen et al., 2006).

Other research about meaning-making in queer-parent families has examined how parents explain aspects of their family queerness to their children. In one such study, Suter and colleagues interviewed co-mothers about their family-of-origin stories. That study revealed that many family-of-origin stories involved "normalizing" aspects of establishing family in two-mother households (Suter, Koenig Kellas, Webb, & Allen, 2016, p. 310). Specifically, participants talked about the use of normalizing conversations to explain topics such as sperm donors and invitro fertilization; as well as taking normalizing actions such as exposing their children to other two-mom families so they could see such a family structure as normal (Suter et al., 2016).

Research often indicates that the need to explain queer family is also the result of messages family members, especially children, receive from outsiders. For example, Breshears (2010) found that lesbian mothers reported their children received negative messages from schoolmates regarding having two moms. In another study, lesbian mothers reported that the parents of other children would not allow their kids to play together; and that others also questioned how a family could function or exist without a male role model (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012). In response, the mothers talked with their children, reaffirming family status and emphasizing love's role in creating family.

Sometimes parents also have to talk to children about messages received from *within* the larger family unit that challenge legitimacy. Research shows other family members, particularly grandparents, sometimes expressed their disapproval of same-sex relationships (Breshears, 2010). In response, mothers defended their family status and stressed that although their families were different from most, they were not lesser or wrong. Interestingly, in a study of gay fathers Baker (2019) discovered that competing discourses about traditional and non-traditional families could actually strengthen notions that families can be queer, similar to a finding about lesbian motherhood from Suter and colleagues (2015).

Finally, it is important to consider that the children of queer parents have to come out as queer family members. Children often do so in an affirming

environment, when the disclosure is somewhat relevant, and when the risk-reward ratio is favorable (Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015). In talking about these experiences, children tended to marginalize negative discourses and favor the positive. Specifically, children emphasized that opposing views were ignorant, many religious-oriented arguments were flawed, and others had no right to judge their family and their family's love. Children also noted that in such discussions they were open to hearing and considering the views of others and that they respected peoples' rights to have different opinions (Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014).

Coming Out in Families

In addition to studies about coming out as a queer family, other work has examined coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual *within* a family (Manning, 2014). Until the early 2010s, most empirical research avoided examining communicative aspects of coming out (Manning, 2015a). That is, researchers were mostly focusing on psychological aspects of coming out, such as self-acceptance or discovery of same-sex/same-gender attraction (Manning, 2015c). Manning (2016) argued that such an approach was insufficient, as often the communicative aspects of coming out were assumed in psychological and sociological work, especially in terms of the context and structures of such interactions. His constitutive model of coming out (Manning, 2016; see Figure 5.1) foregrounds communicative practices in an interplay
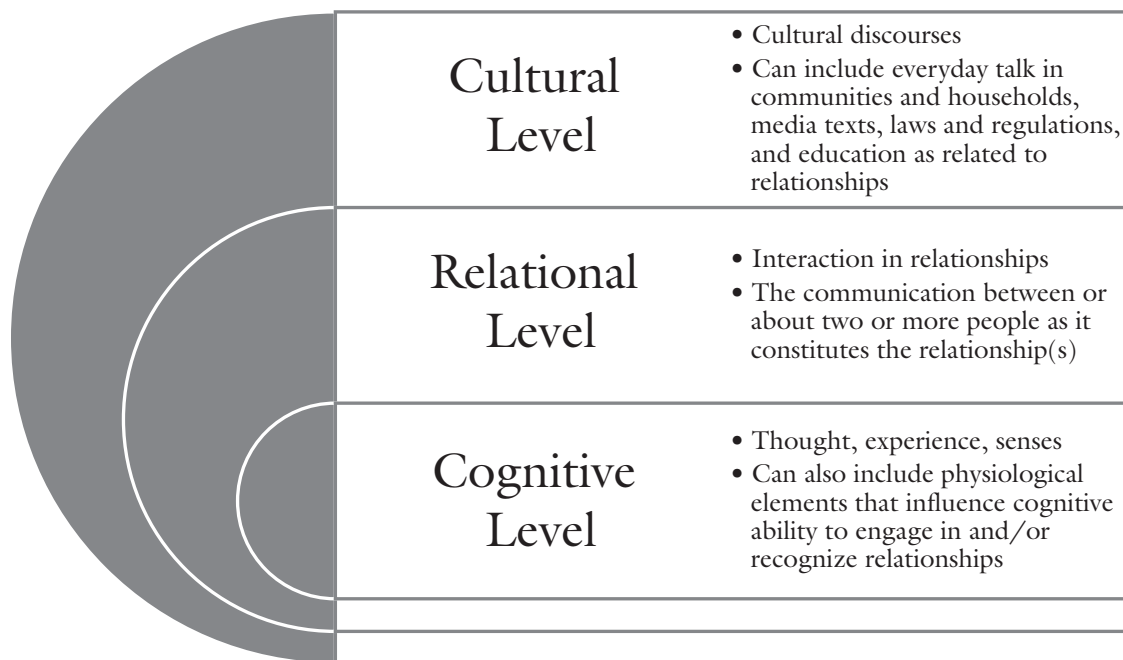

Cultural Level	• Cultural discourses • Can include everyday talk in communities and households, media texts, laws and regulations, and education as related to relationships
Relational Level	• Interaction in relationships • The communication between or about two or more people as it constitutes the relationship(s)
Cognitive Level	• Thought, experience, senses • Can also include physiological elements that influence cognitive ability to engage in and/or recognize relationships

Figure 5.1: Constitutive Model of Coming Out (Adapted from Manning, 2016)

of cognitive/intrapersonal, relational/interpersonal, and cultural levels of meaning-making.

At the cultural level, notions of how a particular culture accepts and/or understands queerness is considered. As one example, in Adams's (2011) study of the closet, he argues that culturally-constructed rules place an unfair onus on queer people in terms of when to come out. If someone comes out too soon, then they are at risk of making the recipient feel uncomfortable; yet, if they wait too long to come out then they might be blamed for hiding their identity (Adams, 2011). Johnson (2008) offers additional cultural-level insights about coming out and families, with his primary focus being on black queerness in the Southern U.S. As he notes, when cultures and cultural groups are especially homophobic, sometimes families serve as a mechanism for coming out. Specifically, it is not uncommon for a queer family member to tell a family member who they know will likely tell others and lessen the often-awkward and consistently ongoing labor of coming out.

Offering a perspective that is not centered in Western-individualistic values, Bie and Tang (2016) note that whereas U.S. and European coming out narratives are often centered on the individual, gay men in China and Singapore often related their sexual identities to cultural expectations regarding family. They do note, however, that this strong cultural expectation of continuing the family via heterosexual marriage is what paradoxically leads to many Chinese men coming out. When they enter their 20s or 30s, they often break, as they feel they cannot take the ongoing pressure to maintain a heterosexual appearance. Their work also echoed an earlier study, this one involving participants from numerous national/cultural backgrounds that indicated people felt dishonest and deceitful by not coming out (Manning, 2015a).

In a separate study, Manning (2015b) notes several positive characteristics of coming-out conversations that can be beneficial when a family member comes out: making affirming direct relational statements; nonverbal immediacy; appropriate joking and laughter; and keeping communication channels open after the conversation (Manning, 2015b). That same study also found several negative behaviors to avoid, both for the person coming out (indirectly approaching the topic, lack of preparation, and nervous nonverbal behaviors) and for the person who was receiving the disclosure (denying the person's sexuality, talking about religion, inappropriate questions or comments, shaming statements, and aggression). In a different study examining the characteristics of coming-out conversations, DiVerniero and Breshears (2017) noted that children reported offering support and asking questions/seeking information when parents came out to them.

More recently, Li and Samp (2019) have started a new line of theoretical research that establishes communicative aspects of coming out at the cognitive level. Their theory is labeled coming-out message production (COMP) and indicates that disclosure-related goals drive coming-out disclosures. Five goal types influence an individual's coming out: concerns for the self (self-oriented), concerns about the receiver (disclosure target-oriented), relationship management (non-romantic relational and romantic relational), and resource goals (task). Their research suggests that as these disclosure goals are more salient, individuals will disclose more in pursuit of these goals. The development of this theory offers the potential for enhanced understandings of how personal needs relate to coming out in relationships.

Trans Families

A particularly understudied area of queer family communication is research about trans families. Although sexual identity and gender identity are often categorized together, research indicates that there are often notable differences between sexuality (e.g., gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity) and gender (e.g., trans identity) when it comes to social understandings (Institute, 2011). These differences certainly extend to family communication research. Historically, research about trans identities has focused on individuals and their psychological experiences, but recently research exploring the relationships trans people have with their family, friends, and significant others has expanded (Norwood, 2015). For trans people, family support can be especially crucial as they navigate deep cultural prejudice and misunderstanding about trans identity and seek to navigate specialized health care needs (Manning & Thompson, 2016). Initial research about trans families has focused less on trans people and more on how families work to understand, support, and come to terms with having a trans family member.

This work has been led by Kristen Norwood, who notes that the stress families face related to trans identity disclosures and transitions can be significant (Norwood, 2015). Part of the ability to provide support to a trans family member means accepting trans identity, and as Norwood's (2012) research indicates, a part of that is grieving the loss of identity. Specifically, family members feel a sense of ambiguous loss as they recognize that their relative—oftentimes a child—is not fully the person they understood them to be. This sense of loss is exacerbated by rigid, gendered understandings of identities. As Norwood (2013) explains,

> Transition as replacement means that family members talked of their trans-identified relative/partner as a different person because of transition. In communicating

this, participants' talk was largely anchored by biological essentialism, in which sex/gender is natural, binary, and a fundamental component of personhood. When male and female are conceived of as opposite categories of personhood, transition from one to the other functions as a replacement of one *person* with another. In other words, someone who changes from male to female cannot be the same person, because men and women are fundamentally different. (p. 32, emphasis in original)

To be clear, Norwood is not arguing for gender essentialism, but rather points to how a family member's identity is so bound up in gender that a change in gender identity feels as if it is a change in the social self. Alternately, some family members reported that they were able to frame transition in a way that avoided such gendered confusion, both minimizing the grief they felt and allowing them to offer better support. These family members focused less on transition being a *change of the person*, and more on a change in the *outward identity of the person* (Norwood, 2013). Much more research, especially outside of the context of U.S. families, is needed in this area.

Beyond the Family: Family Communication and Society

As individual families become queerer, so, too, do all families. Queer families have undoubtedly changed ideas about what families look like, the forms and functions of family, how gender roles are enacted in families, and notions of practical aspects of family such as divisions of domestic labor. In cultures where queer families are becoming more visible, resistance to such familial changes are evident as critics decry the loss of 'traditional' family values (Foster, 2014). Yes, in examining the research about queer families, it is evident that they are more often than not re-centering heteronormative aspects of family—especially in families with children, where messages about queer families being the same as others are shared to create a sense of normalcy. Even in childfree families, heteronormative patterns persist such as the use of similar terms to note family relations (e.g., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, etc.; Heisterkamp, 2016) and a feeling from queer partners that they have to prove their sense of commitment in a way that positions them just as dedicated as a heterosexual couple (Foster, 2008).

Given the heteronormative assimilation of queer families, it is possible that the emergence of visibly queer families in such cultures speaks more to the fragile nature of heteronormativity and notions of "traditional family" than it does to any problem with queer families. Yet, at the same time, conservative resistance to queer families taking on heteronormative structures, roles, functions, or labels demonstrates exactly how non-assimilationist

and also subversive it can be for queer families to take on these institutions that have been reserved for the heteronorm. Of course, such delineations between traditional/heteronormative and queer families cannot be simply made. Queerness informs heteronormativity just as heteronormativity informs queerness. The relationship is not linear, but rather involves twisting, murmurs, thrusts, and explosions of a wide array sexuality and gender characteristics as they morph in and out of a particular family and/or family context.

As Johnson (2001) noted when considering the lines between queer and straight,

> Still, one might wonder, what, if anything, could a poor, black, eighty-something, southern, homophobic woman teach her educated, middle-class, thirty-something, gay grandson about queer studies? Everything. Or almost everything. On the one hand, my grandmother uses "quare" to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of "queer." On the other hand, she also deploys "quare" to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience. (p. 2)

Here, Johnson is pointing to the queerness/quareness that dominates not only bodies and identities, but the constitutive forces of everyday life. In that sense, families *all* certainly experience some queerness, even if it is not to the threshold of being called queer family.

To that end, those who worry about what queer families take away from society might consider instead what they offer. Research indicates that considering queer family communication offers connections to family interaction and patterns that are decidedly not queer. For example, research indicates that queer parents, similar to heterosexual single parents or a parent whose partner is disabled, might find it difficult to manage or secure work leave to care for a child. Dixon and Dougherty (2014) found that queer parents were paradoxically highlighted in the workplace as they sought to navigate policies that were written to support heteronormative families while simultaneously minimizing or ignoring the notion that queer people could have children (Dixon & Dougherty, 2014). As these findings indicate, workplace managers must develop policies that recognize family as fluid instead of fixed and that are adaptable to families, queer or otherwise, who might not fit the heteronorm.

Queering families also have many other positive attributes to offer to family structures as a whole. Queer families, especially lesbian women, are likely to maintain friendly relationships after breakup or divorce, often using the term *family* after a split even when children were not part of the relationship (Bacon, 2012). Numerous research studies show that even when one member

of a married couple comes out as gay or lesbian, they might even stay together as a married family because the sense of commitment is so strong (Manning, 2008). Queer partnerships also often exhibit a strong sense of playfulness in everyday life, embracing ludic—and thus more pleasurable—qualities of relating (Heisterkamp, 2014). Studies of heterosexual families often show there is a questionable distribution of domestic labor (e.g., Riforgiate & Boren, 2015), but studies of queer families indicate a more-fair distribution (e.g., Barrett, 2015). Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of queer families that could be adopted by heteronormative families relates to partner jealousy, where research indicates queer families have less issues related to partners finding others as sexually desirable (Gabb, 2001).

Implications for Scholars and Practitioners

The research done to date about queer family communication has led to many practical considerations, many that have been highlighted throughout the chapter. Still, additional research about queer families is much needed. In the final section of this essay, suggestions for expanding queer family communication are offered. Both the theoretical and more practical aspects of such research are also explored.

Embracing Queer Theory in Family Communication Studies

First, given that gender and sexuality are inherent parts of all family communication, it is essential that family communication scholars—especially those who study queer families—embrace queer theory. Using a queer-theoretical approach does not simply mean involving queer participants (Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006). Rather, it involves direct challenges to notions of heteronormativity that are often embedded in family communication research (Chevrette, 2013). In just about any culture, heterosexuality is both assumed until otherwise proven and compulsory in the sense that those who do not live up to heteronormative standards are subject to social resistance including discrimination and violence (Rich, 1980). Queer theory serves as a body of theories to critique, diminish, and de-stabilize heterosexuality—not via removing acts or performances that would be considered heterosexual, but instead seeking to remove the notion that particular sexualities and genders are read as being normal, abnormal, preferred, or pathological (Yep, 2003).

As this essay has demonstrated, so many aspects of queerness are related to family; and, indeed, many of the expectations for families are themselves constituted by heteronormative rules and assumptions. Yet it is evident that

social scientific studies of families—or social scientific studies in general—have rarely involved the use of queer theory. Moore and Manning (2019) have noted this erasure, pointing to how reviews of family communication, including overviews of critical family communication or sexuality in families, have ignored both queer theory and the studies of families that use it. As Chevrette (2013) argues, incorporating queer theory will unpack heteronormative assumptions, especially as they relate to dyadic models of communication; challenge public/private bifurcations of families; complicate ideas of identity; and, potentially, emphasize intersectionality.

Importantly, queer theory is not limited to application to studies of queer families or individuals (Manning, 2015b). As one notable example, Manning (2015b) used queer theory in a qualitative study of purity pledge families. Specifically, he pointed out both how pledge families articulated what they saw as the abnormal and perverted nature of modern heterosexuality, thus creating pure (their) and impure (others') heterosexualities. Further, he pointed to how, paradoxically, the wearing of purity rings queered both the daughters and the families themselves, as their sexuality was marked as different from mainstream heterosexuality. This study not only pointed out the illusion of a unified heterosexuality, but examined how the pursuit of a pure heterosexuality in and of itself could be considered queer even if the families who were being interviewed would reject the notion that they had a queer identity.

In addition to considering queerness across all sexualities, family communication studies must also consider the complexities of how queerness intersects with other aspects of identity including race, ability, and/or nationality. To that end, intersectionality—a theoretical framework that calls for researchers to consider how multiple social identities and social locations overlap and/or conflict in and across specific contexts—is needed in family communication studies (Few-Demo, Moore, & Abdi, 2017), especially to understand how queerness intersects with other marginalized identities. Although embracing intersectionality offers the rich opportunity to consider how systems of privilege and oppression operate (Crenshaw, 1990), it also allows for rich, complex, and fully-realized theory building that evades the Whiteness that often dominates interpersonal and family communication studies (Moore & Manning, 2019). Those seeking to learn more about intersectionality in family communication studies should read Few-Demo et al.'s (2017) overview; and those seeking a review of queer methods and methodologies can consult Manning's (2017) review.

Expanding Methodological Approaches

This review of queer family communication studies also makes it evident that queer family communication studies is dominated by interpretive qualitative interview studies that primarily rely on one participant to serve as an informant of family life. Although such studies are valuable, embracing a richer methodological palette will expand understandings of queer family communication. Given past critiques regarding relying on one or two family members to try and understand an entire family, the increased use of dyadic and/or multiadic interviewing (Manning & Kunkel, 2015) could be beneficial. Such approaches will allow the different viewpoints of family members to be shared as well as offer a sense of how perspectives differ across a singular family unit. Additionally, it appears queer family communication studies is one of the rare areas of interpersonal or family communication studies where it can be argued that more quantitative research is needed. For an excellent example of how quantitative work can benefit queer family communication understandings, see Soliz, Ribarsky, Harrigan, and Tye-Williams's (2010) study where structural equation modeling is used to create a complex examination of how a queer family member is both an ingroup member (as a family member) and an outgroup member (as queer) and how that relates to family communication.

Finally, those designing studies should also consider heteronormative assumptions as they relate to theory. What would happen if classic interpersonal or family communication theories were reworked to include queer bodies and identities? In a study that did just that (Manning, 2019), social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) was used in an empirical examination of how sexuality functions as information (e.g., Is it surface-level, peripheral-level, or intermediate-level?). In addition to contradicting the notion that sexuality was always private (e.g., some queer people reported that their bodies and actions would make sexuality always already surface-level information), the study also established that when a person came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, it belied the onion metaphor of social penetration theory in that family members responded that they felt as if they were re-learning who their relative was after the disclosure of queer identity (Manning, 2019). Simply put, social penetration theory functions differently for queer people and those relating with them. Future studies should examine other interpersonal and/or family communication theories in a similar fashion.

Practical Implications for Queer Families

Finally, despite many of the positive aspects of queer families articulated in the research reviewed in this essay, it is also apparent that more research that

will lead to practical findings that can help queer families—especially those in communities, cultures, and nations where queer intolerance, discrimination, and/or violence persist—navigate their social worlds in safe, comfortable, and beneficial ways. As the review in this essay illustrates, queerness—whether it be expression of identity, acts marked as queer, or even queer marriage— might be rejected by individuals, families, communities, or governments, and recognizing the context of such interaction is important. To that end, research should especially consider those families who have the potential to be most injured by a lack of understanding about queerness.

Conclusion

In 1988, in one of the first scholarly works examining queer families, social work scholars Poverny and Finch (1988) made an impassioned call to their colleagues, noting,

> Social workers can help reformulate a more inclusive definition of the family. Toward this end, the National Association of Social Workers adopted, as part of its 1981 social policy statement on the family, the following definition: "a group-ing that consists of two or more individuals who define themselves as a family and who, over time, assume those obligations to one an-other that are generally considered an essential component of family systems." This definition represents a step forward in the establishment of a new and more inclusive standard of fam-ily life. New mechanisms for population-and demographic-data collection that will accurately reflect the breadth and scope of family diversity are needed. In this way, social scientists and policy makers can better understand gay and lesbian relationships as well as other family forms and incorporate this understanding in their analyses and social policy development. (p. 120)

The optimism of their statement is crushing today, especially when con-sidered globally. Over 30 years later, few advances have been made, in the grand scheme of things, when it comes to understanding queer families—par-ticularly outside of nation-states where marriage equality and/or queer accep-tance have been established. This essay should be able to cover many other topics related to queer families: raced and classed nuances; information seek-ing for queer people who want to become parents; work exploring trans worl-dviews; studies of bisexuality in families; or even a stronger sense of everyday roles and rituals in queer families, among many other topics. Unfortunately, such research largely does not yet exist. Although scholars have made consid-erable advances in exploring queer family communication—and that should be celebrated—there is much more to be done. Expanded and inclusive research that holds to the quality standards that have been established to this

point will surely lead to theoretical growth and much-needed practical findings for queer families.

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