

Qualitative Family Research

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qualitative family research, family culture, communication research, everyday communication, family development, family psychology, family communication style, content analysis, family communication worlds, family verbal interaction, everyday family conversation, video analysis

Abstract: Qualitative psychological family and communication research is focused on the investigation of everyday communication of families as social unities. Discussions of "normal families" during everyday routines are videotaped and analyzed differently to answer the question of the development of family system.

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1. Initial Questions and Main Intentions

How can communication research in the field of psychology meet standards that satisfy a developmental, psychologically-oriented family and group research? How can a psychologically-oriented qualitative research strategy be followed in the different phases of a research project? How can a theoretically- and methodologically-based communication and conversation research be conceptualized as "everyday life research"? And finally, what does this research look like? [1]

My primary research concern is the realization of a qualitative psychological family research, in other words, putting qualitative psychological family research into practice. The main point is to study relationships in the family by analyzing family communication, with the emphasis on everyday conversation. I concentrate on everyday situations that regularly occur in daily family life. The research material I use are videotaped authentic family conversations. I work mainly with transcripts of these videos. [2]

2. Traditions in the Field of Family Research

An important line of tradition in family research traces back to the 1920's. BURGESS (1926) defined the family as a unit of personalities in interaction with one another, thereby pointing to the key importance of the structure of the family relationships, put into a concrete form by the conversational exchanges between members of the family. Another important source for my work is HESS and HANDEL (1959), who introduced the term "family culture" into family research. They maintained that the social unit "family" is a world of its own in the sense of being a micro-culture with its own values, norms, rituals, manners and habits. The third tradition in family research is seen in the findings of DUVALL (1971) and ALDOUS (1978) that the family must be conceptualized as a dynamic unit that is constantly undergoing a process of change. Families therefore face the demands of providing the necessary stability and security for each member yet at the same time allowing the necessary space and freedom for change. Only in this way can the normative developmental tasks that face the family be mastered in a way that is satisfactory for each family member. [3]

In family communication research, the connection to these research traditions means not limiting the study of families to the study of the individuals or of subsystems such as dyads like mother-child, father-mother, or sibling pairs. Rather, the main point of interest is the family as an entirety or an integral whole. Both the changes in the unit "family" as well as the unique features of each family based on its own distinctive communication history should be kept in mind. [4]

3. My Own Research Activities

3.1 The research subject: "Normal families"

In my research on family communication, I concentrate on the family as a whole. My goal is to study the family as a social unit, that is, as a group. This "unit of observation" is necessary to capture the complex interactions of all the members of the particular family and to analyze these processes. This point of view presents a new challenge. In relevant family research until now, hardly any attention has been paid to the family as a whole, rather, studies using data from single individuals or single dyads in the family have been much more common (HOFER, YOUNIS & NOACK, 1998). Lacking the necessary self-criticism to realize that the "family as a whole" was not really the object being considered, family researchers make statements about the "family". Generalizations are made that can not be supported. This kind of research provides data about individuals or dyads as the object of investigation, not data about the family as a group, so that conclusions about the latter contain a categorical error (SCHUMACHER, 1995). [5]

Due to the diversity of forms of family life today, it is important to investigate the family unit as it actually exists. This means nothing more than that the object of investigation "family" is very variable and can not be reduced, for example, to only the nuclear family. Depending on the family form (single-parent, traditional nuclear family, stepfamily, etc...) and the actual family reality experienced (living together with other persons and generations), the social unit "family" can contain very different persons. In my research I am presently studying families that can be described as biological families. This means parents and their natural children, in other words families that have not experienced separation, divorce or remarriage. This type of family is particularly suited to investigate the communication world of the family because they have a long-standing communication history in common. [6]

3.2 The research field: Everyday life in the family

Following ethnographical traditions, communication research takes place in the social context of the research object itself; in other words, I visited families in their own life sphere to study and experience them under "normal" conditions. It was important for me to use material from authentic, spontaneous conversations for the analysis of family communication, in other words to analyze conversations that actually took place in the family, as opposed to asking family members about specifics of communication in their families. This research strategy is important to meet scientific standards of authenticity ; in other words, the ecological validity of the conversation has priority for me (DEPPERMAN, 1999). This means visiting the families repeatedly in their customary surroundings with a certain regularity and choosing study situations that are adequate and relevant for the subjects, depending on the developmental stage of the family. It is important to me to capture everyday scenes in families that are spontaneously produced by the families themselves. Concrete everyday routines such as mealtimes are

practically ideal as research situations to study the family reality as it is. The family meal as a communicative event is the main place for the family's own daily continuing and expanding interaction history and is necessary for the maintenance of the family's self-image and their definition of a comprehensive conception of the world. The meaning of everyday family rituals such as mealtimes increases, the more the daily routines of the individual family members are intertwined into different societal areas such as work, education, clubs, etc. Briefly, the research objects are investigated in the framework of their own everyday activities, for example, during certain everyday rituals (ROTHENBUHLER, 1998). Thus the complexity of the family's everyday communication is being appropriately respected as early as in the collection of the data. As empirical material everyday family conversations can then be used rather than conversations with given tasks and themes constructed by the researchers for experimental purposes. In this sense the table talk can be considered authentic conversation of the families. [7]

3.3 The research material: Daily conversations

I will now present a scene from a videotaped family conversation to give an example of the empirical material. It is only a brief excerpt of everyday family communication chosen from a current study with a pool of 36 conversations. The 36 conversations come from 18 families in Berlin, that took part in the longitudinal study "From Childhood to Adolescence in the Family" on the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education in Berlin, Germany. The eighteen families I studied are a partial sample from the total sample of 68 families. The occupations of the parents are diverse: bus driver, nurse, salesman, book-seller, doctor, housewife, career counselor, teacher, employee, and student. The 18 families are so-called biological families with two children. The 36 conversations shown in my study are from the 18 families at the beginning of the longitudinal study and then four years later. All the conversations took place during daily mealtimes; this excerpt is from the table talk of a four-person family: mother and father, and their 12- and 7-year old children. I will use this example to give an idea of the aspects of everyday family communication with which my research is concerned. [8]

First, a short description of the scene for a better understanding of the conversation: At dinnertime, the family members are busy with planning the coming Christmas activities. They develop concrete suggestions for the arrangements for the holiday and take into consideration those aspects that are important to them, such as who goes shopping, where and when the obligatory Christmas tree will be bought, when the tree will be decorated, which appointments have already been made, etc. The excerpt is from Family Zoepritz' conversation. The numbers on the left-hand margin, which are explained in more detail in section 3.4.3, stand for the participating family members, mother, father, older and younger child, as well as the changes in speaker and addressee.

- 01 Talked to Annette today on the telephone, made two appointments.
- 03 On the 23rd we're going there, all of us.
- 13 And the twenty-fifth.
- 05 I'm in the garage with Herbert then.
- 01 Yeah, Herbert said first thing in the morning.
- 05 Hmm.
- 09 And on the thirty-first.
- 01 That you're back by noon.
- 05 Hmm.
- 01 Then I have to go shopping alone after all.
- 05 I'll do it beforehand.
- 01 Must be possible then Friday.
- 05 Hmm.
- 01
- 02 And we're all going there at five, 17:00, it's a day before Christmas Eve, and then we'll celebrate with them already.
- 09 Oh.
- 08 Great, good.
- 03 Five o'clock, but then we have to have the tree decorated by five o'clock.
- 05 How come only one day before Christmas Eve?
- 01 When should we decorate it?
- 04 On Christmas Eve.
- 16 Hmm.
- 01 Don't we always do it a day before?
- 13 Yes, we do.
- 05 We still have time, Sundays ya can't go shopping
- 01 That's true, then let's decorate it on Sunday morning.
- 05 Yeah.
- 09 And Sunday afternoon we'll exchange presents.
- 02 All of us or?
- 09 You, I think.
- 02 Yeah.
- 09 We also can do it.
- 13 Edith, Sunday morning, when I can help you, then you always tell me when we're going to do it.
- 08 When are we going to buy our Christmas tree?
- 01 At any case, in the daytime, never again in the dark!
- 13 Otherwise we'll end up with such a reject.
- 10 I saw a really pretty one, we could go there.

- 02 Where was it?
06 Where then?
10 Town Hall Schoeneberg, no, Tempelhof Town Hall.
05 Why didn't you buy it?
01 Because we drove past it in the car.
05 You saw a pretty fir tree there?
01 Yeah, as we drove past.
05 Aha.
01 A really pretty one.
05 I want to see it.
10 So big and full.
06 That's too small.
02 It was bigger.
16 So.
02 It was as big as you.
09 As me?
05 That's really too small, I thought we wanted a big one.
01 Oh, man, how' re you going to, in this...
10 Up to the ceiling?
01 Put it up in this small house?
13 No way.
11 No.
13 Sure, one up to the bedroom.
11 Look, Timo, like that.
04 At any case, let's get it during the day.
05 You have two appointments with Annette, so when, another appointment?
01 On the twenty-seventh in the evening- but without children.
05 That is then...
09 How nice.
02 Yes, only that way.
06 But Grandma is there, with her you can...

So much for the "Christmas scene" during Family Zoeppritz' table talk. [9]

3.4 The empirical approach: Different levels of analysis in everyday family communication

In the following I describe several steps in the empirical evaluation I developed in the framework of a study. To help understand the steps described below, note that they only deal with an excerpt from the empirical analysis. These points should therefore be seen as a rough sketch of the actual study. [10]

3.4.1 *The transcription*

The entire conversation is first transcribed word for word. In the transcripts the flow of communication for the statements of the family members are reconstructed in their chronological order and the course of the entire content of the conversation on a verbal level is depicted. If there are more than four persons the situation changes. The members of the family then separate occasionally into sub-groups having separate dialogs at the same time; a complete reconstruction of the individual contributions would therefore be difficult or impossible. The transcription of table talk with four family members is just barely practicable. [11]

3.4.2 *The summaries*

A summary containing the main contents, the persons participating, the atmosphere during the meal, and an overall impression of the "communication with another" was formulated for each family conversation. These summaries serve both as an orientation for the ensuing systematic analyses of family communication and also as a quick reference during the research process to recall the complete conversation of a particular family. [12]

3.4.3 *The change in speaker*

The changes in speaker are seen as the constitutional element of every conversation, as the defining part and, independent of diverse research directions, as the heart of the category "conversation" (see HENNE & REHBOCK, 1982). In discourse analysis research, the change in speaker is regarded as *one* aspect of spokespersonship (FELDSTEIN & WELKOWITZ, 1982). In my study a *further* aspect plays a major role. The addressee of each contribution to the conversation is included further specify the speaker change. In the analysis of the videotaped family conversations it became clear empirically that the four family members practiced a dialog principle in terms of the direction of a statement. This means that the contribution of one family member is definitely addressed to another person, even though the content is audible for all family members present. In addition to addressing their statements to a concrete person, the family members practice another variant: some statements are addressed to no specific member of the family or to all members together. Based on the number of conversational partners interacting, there are always four members of the family involved here, each contribution to the conversation is analyzed according to *who* is speaking to *whom*. In this way the direction of the statements can be reconstructed from the detailed analysis of the videos. [13]

The reconstruction of who is speaking, including the direction of the person's contribution, is not an end in itself; it enables the comprehension of the content of the conversation during its course. Only through this reconstruction can the individual conversational scenes be adequately interpreted in later steps of the analysis. In addition, the amount of communication between the family members can be described. The numerical codes with the numbers 01 to 16 represent

each of the 16 possible changes in the speaker made by the family. The digits have the following meaning:

- 01: Mother speaks to father,
- 02: Mother speaks to Child1, (older child)
- 03: Mother speaks to Child2, (younger child)
- 04: Mother speaks to everyone or no one,
- 05: Father speaks to mother,
- 06: Father speaks to Child1,
- 07: Father speaks to Child2,
- 08: Father speaks to everyone or no one,
- 09: Child1 speaks to mother,
- 10: Child1 speaks to father,
- 11: Child1 speaks to Child2,
- 12: Child1 speaks to everyone or no one,
- 13: Child2 speaks to mother,
- 14: Child2 speaks to father,
- 15: Child2 speaks to Child1,
- 16: Child2 speaks to everyone or no one. [14]

My suggestion is that you now read the above example using the coding and try to follow the conversation in your imagination. You can get an impression of how complex the conversation of a four-person family is, even at the level of conversation organization. [15]

3.4.4 The participation

Using the above system to capture chronologically the detailed changes in speaker for the entire conversation, I make concrete statements about the relative participation in the conversation on an inner- and inter-family level. One interesting finding is that within the family, the degree to which the individual members are included in the communication varies greatly. For example, it was shown that each of the two children are involved in the communication with their parents differently. The older children are clearly included more than their younger siblings in conversations. Findings such as these are relevant for developmental concepts such as the Non-shared Environment Approach from ROWE & PLOMIN (1981), which describe the differences in the conditions in which siblings are socialized within the same family. Differences in parental behavior towards their children can be empirically supported by discourse analysis in the family. [16]

3.4.5 The choice of theme

Everyday communication can be described as polythematic in terms of the themes discussed. In other words, the family members discuss many different themes during a meal. A theme analysis prepared for all conversations shows a profile of the themes for each individual family as well as the whole spectrum of themes mentioned by all the families in the sample. The excerpt above shows a concrete example of the category "holidays", namely, Christmas. Other topics of conversation from the whole palette of themes include school, private personal themes, daily happenings, work, friends, food, travel, mood and physical state, incidents, and conduct. An interesting finding is that the repertoire of themes for the families are principally the same and can practically be counted on two hands, which is really ideal for examining and clarifying the question of how families discuss and deal with principally the same everyday subjects. [17]

3.4.6 The conversation partners and their themes

The two different levels of discourse, participation and themes, can be analyzed together to see which family members speak by which subjects. Are there subjects that are discussed exclusively by certain family members or are the contents of the family conversations treated as subjects for the family? Are there preferred parent topics? Are there new topics in the same family four years later or does the family stay by the same topics? [18]

3.4.7 The communication style

Single scenes as well as entire family conversations can be interpreted in further steps to describe the family's communication style more exactly. An attempt is made to designate or qualify the "being with one another" of the family in communicative exchange, with terms such as: supporting one another, questioning one another, disciplining, teasing one another, paying attention to one another, embarrassing the other. Questions about the family communication style are particularly interesting in terms of the functionality of family systems. In particular for the adolescents in the family, family communication is the "initial investment" that they receive from childhood onwards for the formation of further relationships. [19]

3.4.8 The functions

MACKELDEY (1987) named four different basic functions of everyday communication: (1) steering a common concrete activity; (2) steering conscious ideas and planning activities; (3) creating and maintaining personal contact, and finally (4) the opportunity to vent emotions. These for the present theoretically-derived basic functions, which all relate to the essential meaning of speech, namely the use of speech itself, can be empirically demonstrated in the family discourse. The above Christmas scene from the Zoeppritz family demonstrates the second basic function, the steering of planning activities. Planning activities, such as those shown in the excerpt, are typical for the Zoeppritz family. An

empirical analysis of the functions of table talk allows conclusions on the within-family level and refers to the meaning of social episodes such as mealtimes and interaction routines in the everyday life of families. [20]

4. The Research Intention

The description of the different levels of analysis sketched above provide information about the concrete research activities. I wish to briefly describe my overriding intentions in pursuing qualitative psychological family and communication research. [21]

4.1 The family as a single case

The concentration on the single case in communication research in the sense of an idiographic research strategy has priority in my research, in order to comprehend and appreciate the dynamics within a particular family with its individual features and originality. The comprehension of the course of the conversation is based on the individual family's own particular speech and communication world. The high degree of coded and hidden meanings of the individual contributions to the conversation has developed in the long years of continuous interaction and the communication history of the family. These aspects are the convincing reasons to make the analysis of single cases the core of the empirical work. [22]

4.2 The characteristics of everyday communication

In generating the different categories for the discourse analysis my orientation is towards the specifics of the empirical material, in other words, I consider the specific characteristics of everyday communication in the family as described above. This includes, for example, the fine analysis on the level of communication organization with its manifold speaker changes, the inner structure on the dyadic level, the polythematic reconstruction of the course of conversation, the varying intertwining of individual family members in diverse speech passages, etc. I consciously do without existing category systems from communication research because these were predominantly developed, on the one hand, for conversational situations with two persons, and on the one hand, for the purposes of clinical studies. The motivation behind the previously sketched procedure is, from a research strategy point of view, the discovery of a grounded theory with an optimal match between theory and empiricism relevant for the field of everyday family communication. [23]

4.3 The families as types

In the study of communication style, the methodological procedure, with its single-case orientation, allows the comparison of different families and the construction of family types. Thus, on a higher level of abstraction I generate communication styles in the sense of types. [24]

4.4 The developmental process in families

By studying everyday family communication, I pursue the question of if and how developmental processes happen in the family. For this purpose, I compare the same everyday situation at two points in time, four years apart, with the same sample of families. Through use of the empirical analysis of family communication, the question of change in the family system can be studied true-to-life. [25]

4.5 The purpose of the research

Empirical knowledge about normal families has been scarce to date in psychological family research. In the sense of a qualitatively-oriented pure research it is important to attain knowledge and insight into the communication of clinically non-conspicuous families. With the focus on developmental psychology, a broader understanding of the concrete formation of relationships in the family needs to be developed. In a further step, that knowledge can then be used for questions from the clinical and therapy-oriented family research. [25]

5. Summary

The main concern of my research activities is to orient psychological family research toward the everyday life of the research subject, in the sense of an as-sensitive-as-possible examination of the family reality actually experienced by completely normal families. I use natural interaction scenes in the home environment and investigate family units as a whole (HANDEL, 1992). The main interest of my research is family communication the way it occurs between family members in the course of everyday interaction routines, predominantly "en passant". The investigation of family communication is conducted so that the influence of the researcher in the field is limited to her presence. In the current empirical study with 18 families, 36 conversations are analyzed. The data was collected predominantly by myself in the course of the research project "From childhood to adolescence in the family", led by Dr. K. KREPPNER (1989), at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education. In analyzing and evaluating the data, it is important to me that I remain open to new research questions that may appear in the process. With this research approach in mind, I developed a procedure that takes into consideration different levels of analysis of communication, such as participation, themes, communication style, and the course of the conversation. For the content analysis of everyday family communication, a computer-assisted procedure is helpful in that it makes it possible to present subjective interpretations transparently and makes research steps in the analysis process explicit (HUBER, 1992). In the research practice I succeeded by means of an intensive concentration on single cases in reconstructing family communication styles, which emphasize the uniqueness of the family's communication world (SILLARS, 1995). As a result, types of communication styles were generated empirically. The study of everyday family communication serves in a broader sense to examine the developmental processes of the family system. [26]

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