Real and Ideal: Family Communication

Frank Carlo Mills 1*

B.A. Candidate, Communication Studies, California State University Stanislaus, 1 University Circle, Turlock, CA 95382

Received 16 April 2019; accepted May 2019

Abstract

How does the difference between our idealized visions of our experiences and the actual experiences affect familial relationships, the most influential relationships to a child’s development? What role does interpersonal communication play in creating these differences, remedying them, and structuring families in general? Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) can help determine the effects the differences between idealized and actual experiences have on family communication, and possibly how to control those effects. CMM claims we co-create meaning through communication guided by rules. RDT sees relational life as a constant process and motion—people in relationships constantly feel the push and pull of conflicting desires. For my study of this issue, I used my family (myself and my brother, father, and mother) as test subjects, using our Thanksgiving family gathering in 2018 as context. I started with the hypothesis that I would find a difference between idealized and actual experiences in the family setting, involving failed expectations. My process was simple: I gave my family four two-part questions, the first parts asked before Thanksgiving started and the second parts asked after Thanksgiving ended. Asking the first parts and learning everyone had high hopes for the holiday but feared some upset, I observed our Thanksgiving celebration, made my own notes, and asked them the second parts, finding many common themes between everyone’s answers and my own notes. Everyone desired positive family interaction and stable relationships rather than unstable ones, they all had their own worries, and as I thought, expectations were violated, but instead of our worst nightmares coming to pass, we simply didn’t achieve our wildest dreams.

Keywords: family communication, real and ideal, Coordinated Management of Meaning, Relational Dialectics Theory

Introduction

Family communication is by far the most important communication setting for a person’s development. The earliest and longest-lasting connections that a person forms are almost invariably those of the family, as people form connections with their family almost as soon as they’re born and continue to develop those connections throughout their entire life. However, the process of family communication isn’t as perfect as we’d like to believe. There’s a significant difference between our idealized perception of events and the actual experiences, which has the potential to upset peace and harmony in a family and bring about conflict, and I believe that interpersonal communication plays an important role in creating these differences, remedying them, and structuring families in general.

Two communication theories can help us determine what kind of effects the differences between idealized and actual experiences have on family communication: Coordinated Management of Meaning and Relational Dialectics Theory. Coordinated Management of Meaning, states that we co-create meaning through communication guided by rules. Focusing on the relationship a person has with his or her society, this theory analyzes shared meaning and the way we socially construct society. Relational Dialectics Theory paints relational life as a constant process and motion—people in relationships continue to feel the push and pull of conflicting desires throughout the relationship, and they want to have “both/and” relationships rather than “either/or” when speaking of opposing goals. I will also look into two aspects of familial communication: the parent-child relationship, which revolves around the way parents raise their children and how children respond to their parents, and sibling relationships, which deal in the wide range of positive and negative relationships a child has with their sibling, with the primary focus being on the parent-child relationship since I believe that is what shapes how sibling

1* Corresponding author. Email: fmills@csustan.edu
relationships play out (for example, whether they like or hate each other).

I have already started on my research with a study of my family’s feelings about our 2018 Thanksgiving celebration—that is to say, I gave them a questionnaire of four two-part questions, the first parts asked before Thanksgiving started and the second parts asked after Thanksgiving ended. Working off of the hypothesis that I would find a difference between idealized and actual experiences for this particular family setting involving failed expectations of some kind, I learned that my father, brother, mother, and myself all had high hopes for the holiday but feared some upset with the first half of the questionnaire, made my own internal notes about my Thanksgiving experience, and asked everyone the second half of the questionnaire after the celebration was over. I found several common themes between everyone’s answers and my own notes: While everyone desired positive family interactions and stable relationships rather than unstable ones, as well as several worries and fears about how this Thanksgiving could be derailed, both our desired and dreaded expectations were violated. However, this initial study only proved that a difference between my family’s idealized visions of what a Thanksgiving should be and the actual events that transpired on that Thanksgiving existed. To move forward with my project, I have to prove that these differences can actually be dealt with by interpersonal communication.

**Research Question & Rationale**

How does the difference between idealized and actual (lived) experiences affect familial relationships, and what role does interpersonal communication play in creating these differences, remedying them, and structuring families in general? Coordinated Management of Meaning and Relational Dialectics Theory can explain conflict arising from the differences between idealized and actual experiences in family structures, looking at two aspects of a family: parent-child relationships, which will be the primary focus of the paper, and sibling relationships, which will be the secondary focus. The third and final focus will be how interpersonal communication is both the cause and the cure for this conflict.

To begin with, let us first look at the two aspects of familial communication we shall be studying. First and foremost, there is the “parent-child” relationship, which revolves around the way that parents raise their children and how children in turn respond to their parents, and sibling relationships, which deal in the relationships that a child has with their sibling—a wide range of positive and negative relationships. The primary focus will be on the parent-child relationship, as I believe the way that parents treat their children is what shapes how sibling relationships play out—whether they like or hate each other—so the sibling relationship cannot be understood without first addressing the one between parents and children in its entirety, or at least the dimensions related to the present study.

Coordinated Management of Meaning is the main theory that I will be using to study these questions. Like many communication theories, such as Symbolic Interaction Theory which believes that people are motivated to act based on the meanings they assign to people, things and events, CMM places communication as the most important aspect of humans’ lives, claiming that people “live” in communication due to its stance of social construction—the theory that people co-create social reality through communication—and lends itself to many subcategories, such as the hierarchy of organized meaning, a means of categorizing meanings that has six different levels of meaning: content, speech acts, episodes, relationship, life scripts, and cultural patterns (Holmgren, 2004), each of which is above the other in terms of prevalence. CMM also helps us recognize problems, such as unwanted repetitive patterns.

Relational dialectics theory makes four assumptions about relational life: “relationships are not linear, relational life is characterized by change, contradiction is the fundamental fact of relational life, [and] communication is central to organizing and negotiating relational contradictions” (West & Turner, 2014). The first assumption is the most important, as it characterizes relationships as constantly moving back and forth between contradictory desires. Relational dialectics’ core elements are totality (acknowledging the interdependence of people in a relationship), contradiction (opposition, the central feature of the theory), motion (relationships’ processual nature), and praxis (humans’ choice-making capacity). There are several dialectics that this one covers, such as autonomy and connection, openness and protection, novelty and predictability, public and private, and the one that this very essay addresses, the *real and ideal dialectic*. This deals in the differences between idealized and lived relationships, such as the way that a sitcom like *Leave it to Beaver* might show an idyllic version of an event that in reality is far more nuanced.
Background/Literature Review

Much has been said and written on the subject of parenting over the years, and all of these claims are important to figuring out what needs to be said and done on the topic of family structures. There are a few things that we should keep in mind when discussing families. One of these is no doubt the fact that parents treat children differently from one another. Parents will change their parenting style as they gain experience raising children, and each child has their own needs. In addition to this, there are several other factors, such as the size of one’s family, that change the way we deal with children. Birth order is one of the more important ones, as it affects the way that parents relate to their children, the way that children in turn understand and respond to their parents, and the experiences that both parents and children have. Firstborns may feel “neglected or unloved after the arrival of a new sibling” (Healthy Children, 2015), and different developmental stages amongst children determines a lot of different factors, such as the levels of attention and affection that they need. Finally, temperaments of the children play a big role in their needs, as a high-strung child will probably want more specific things than an easy-going child.

Aside from the issue of parenting, there is also the sibling relationships. Siblings often “compete for the affection and attention of their parents…compare themselves with one another, become aware of one another’s strengths and weaknesses, and try to find the most comfortable and rewarding role for themselves within the family unit” (Healthy Children, 2015). In short, siblings most often have a love-hate relationship in which each sibling’s feelings about the other constantly change from positive to negative depending on various factors, the most notable of which is the way that their parent treats them. If the parents treat one child favorably over the other, this can lead to resentment between the two siblings, but if the parents watch and prepare for such behavior, they can negate it and encourage positive relations between the two. Additionally, the sibling relationship is most often viewed from the position of the parent, which makes the very act of analyzing it a form of parent-child relationship.

Relational Dialectics closely relates to these issues, as well as to a related theory called “family systems theory” that is in many ways an equal and opposite theory to relational dialectics. According to this theory, family systems orient towards equilibrium by engaging “in ‘error correction’ designed to sustain themselves in a state of dynamic balance” (Baxter, 2004), while relational dialectics does not share this notion due to its issues and reframing (looking at the opposition in a different light) (West & Turner, 2014). In the context of presupposition of a center, and instead posits that there is an “ongoing centripetal-centrifugal flux” (Baxter, 2004). These two theories are a sort of “meta-dialectic” of opposing ideals of a family: equilibrium vs. flux, a dialectic which we can understand as being the two opposing states of a family.

Research Methods & Scope Framing:

In order to use these two theories to the fullest, I shall be using what I consider to be the most important aspects from each. Firstly, the aspects of Coordinated Management of Meaning that I find appropriate for use are the hierarchy of meaning and the LUUUTT model. The highest level of the hierarchy of meaning is the “cultural pattern,” which is described as “images of the world and a person’s relationship to it” (West & Turner, 2014) and involves not only culture, but several other factors. After cultural patterns, there are “life scripts,” which I believe tie in mostly with the parent-child interactions. Not only does a parent’s experience with raising a child shape the way that they raise any other child, but a child’s temperament means that each child will have different needs. After those are relationships, episodes, speech acts, and content, each of which enters into the equation of family life at some point. There is also the LUUUTT Model, which maps out the different stories that are Lived, Unknown, Untold, Unheard, Untellable, Told, and Telling (Griffen, 2014). Out of these categories, I would classify the “Lived” and “Told” as the most important to our investigation, and Unknown, Unheard, and Untellable as the second most important (for the sake of expediency, I shall streamline these three, all of which indicate some event or information that is left out of a story for different reasons, into a blanket category which I shall refer to as “Unnoticed” for the purposes of this paper). Lived are the actual experiences we share, Told are how we remember and idealize those experiences, and Unnoticed are the aspects of the Lived that we have selectively ignored in creating the Told. This “LUT” model already explains the differences between real and ideal – the details which go unnoticed by us in crafting an idealized vision of what actually happened.

Relational Dialectics also lists several ways to deal with dialectics. These include cyclic alteration (choosing different poles at different times) segmentation (choosing different poles depending on context), selection (prioritizing one pole over the other), and integration (synthesizing oppositions through three methods—neutralizing [compromising], disqualifying [exempting] the difference between real and ideal experiences applied to the family model, it’s possible to characterize the different
aspects of family communication using these methods. For example, cyclic alteration and segmentation both play a role in determining the differences in the ways parents bring up different children. They may also be applied to the “equilibrium vs. flux” meta-dialectic that I posited earlier, and thus we may theorize that a family may desire a stable and full equilibrium but actually frequently and periodically shift from equilibrium to flux and back again, even in an erratic fashion. Another useful concept related to relational dialectics is the chronotrope, which implies that contradictions are “best understood in situ” (Baxter, 2004)—in other words, in the context of the event in which they happened.

Participants:

For this exercise, I am going to start small and use an autocritography—using myself and my own family as research material. An autocritography, according to Michael Awkward, “utilizes autobiographical recall, textual criticism, and institutional analysis in a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that bridges the personal, social, and institutional conditions that helped to produce the scholar,” which means that it is researching oneself and one’s own experience to determine what makes you who you are today. Of course, this method isn’t perfect, because you have to acknowledge subjectivity no matter what, but subjectivity is an important aspect of what I’m looking into, so it’s not a real problem for this study. I am going to use autocritography on myself by calling forth past experiences that shape how I view my family (first my parents, then my brother Henry) and put my expectations about how they function into words. Once that has been completed, I’m going to compare these expectations to how they act really in a test setting—namely, Thanksgiving.

Materials:

For this study, I started with the upcoming Thanksgiving as a basis of experience. I’ve interviewed my mother about her plans for that day, learning that she was planning to hold it at my late grandmother’s house and invite distant relatives over to have a potluck sort of Thanksgiving), and her expectations about what it’s going to be like. After doing the same for my father and my brother, I compared these expectations to my own, and then finally compared all three of these expectations to the reality.

Procedure:

The questionnaire that I have put to myself, my parents, and my brother consisted of four two-part questions (the first parts were answered before Thanksgiving starts and the second parts were be answered afterwards). These four questions are about “Looking Forward to Things” (the first part of this question, asked before Thanksgiving starts, is “What are you looking forward to the most?”), the second part, asked after Thanksgiving is over, will be “Did you look forward to happen the way you thought it would? If so, did you enjoy it as much as you thought you would?”), “Not Looking Forward to Things” (the first part, “What are you looking forward to the least?”), the second, “Did you successfully avoid what you were looking forward to the least? If not, was it as bad as you expected?”), “Plans and Preparations (before)” (the first, “Is there any particular action you intend to make before Thanksgiving starts?”), the second, “How were the results of your action?”), and “Plans and Preparations (during)” (“Is there any particular action you intend to take during the Thanksgiving celebration?” and “How were the results of your action?”), respectively.

During the Thanksgiving celebration, I thought that the best option for analyzing the events there was to do just that—analyze the events only, rather than any specific person’s behavior. The reason for this idea was three-fold: Firstly, I thought it would be wrong to judge the behavior of my family because not only would them knowing I would be doing so affect their behavior and so affect my ability to collect data on them, but also because I thought that doing so would have been a betrayal of their trust. Secondly, I thought that an event-oriented approach to the study of the Thanksgiving celebration would prevent me from getting too judgmental of any member of my family, a gambit which payed off in spades when it came to the “turkey incident”, as I didn’t have any hard feelings for my cousin afterwards.

In addition to the initial questionnaire, once I have finished analyzing the results I will review the LUT model and the hierarchy of meaning, in which my family (or possibly myself, would answer which parts of their cultures, life scripts, relations, episodes, speech acts and content are Lived, Unnoticed, or Told. Then I would continue with a questionnaire about the “equilibrium vs. flux” meta-dialectic that I proposed, asking which of the four main responses to dialectics (cyclic alteration, segmentation, selection, and integration) is an appropriate response to the dialectic in question. Though my scope is
very limited, I believe that I can find good results on both the Unnoticed difference between the Lived and the Told and the way that people conceptualize their family.

Data:
The initial questionnaire and the answers that my parents, younger brother, and myself gave were as follows:

1. Looking Forward to things:
   a. Before: What are you looking forward to the most?
      i. Mom:
         “I’m looking forward to sitting around after the meal and chatting with some of my relatives that I don’t see as often, like my brother and my sister-in-law Leigh.”
      ii. Dad:
         “Having good interactions with all members of our family, some of whom I haven’t seen recently.”
      iii. Henry:
         “I feel that the purpose of Thanksgiving would be positive interactions with the various family members, dah da dah da dah.”
      iv. Me:
         “I look forward to talking to all of my family members that I don’t get a chance to interact with for most of the year and all the good food that’s going to be served at Thanksgiving.”
   b. After: Did what you looked forward to happen the way you thought it would? If so, did you enjoy it as much as you thought you would?
      i. Mom:
         “It didn’t happen the way I expected—I spoke to different relatives before and after the preparation of the meal, and didn’t talk that much to my brother and sister-in-law, but I enjoyed talking to more distant relatives that I see even less. I also had a more meaningful conversation with my brother’s mother-in-law who had lost her daughter three years ago.”
      ii. Dad:
         “Because it was a collaborative effort, and everybody tried their best, even though a certain nephew screwed up the turkey, everyone pulled together and was supportive of him, so that there was a truer spirit of cooperative enjoyment, and brought us closer to the truer meanings of Thanksgiving. I had actually dreaded the party more than I implied to you earlier, because in times past, one person—a niece—had demanded everything go her way, creating a level of stress and some resentment, and I was not looking forward to a repeat of that Thanksgiving. I was surprised that one of the best parts was a slow turkey.”
   iii. Henry:
      “Uh, yeah.”
   iv. Me:
      “Though we had a fun time playing a trivia game and I listened in on a lot of conversations, I didn’t have the time to talk to everyone there, and I didn’t eat a lot other than stuffing, pasta, and homemade pear jello (and only two slices of turkey), and the desserts were kind of lacking, so I didn’t achieve all that I wanted out of it. I was, however, satisfied with my interactions with my aunt and my uncle, who I haven’t seen much of lately, my presence in group conversations, even though that mostly amounted to listening, and the food that I did eat was really good.”
   2. Not Looking Forward to things:
      a. Before: What are you looking forward to the least?
         i. Mom:
            “Possibly somebody complaining that they didn’t get the food they wanted exactly the way they wanted it, and since I’m not doing all the cooking, I can’t control that. I’m also worried because it’s my sister-in-law’s anniversary of her death, and I’m worried that her children or parents might be sad.”
         ii. Dad:
            “I’m apprehensive that it will be more stressful just because the way the dynamic is set up that there will be discomfort, and I’m kind of worried that we’ve lost sight of the true meaning of Thanksgiving: Giving thanks to a greater power for our blessings and getting to see our blessings.”
         iii. Henry:
            “The mechanical incompetence of certain family members and the food blockade.”
         iv. Me:
            “I’m hoping that a fight won’t break out between Henry and Catherine or that there won’t be a second ‘stuffing incident,’ among other things.”
      b. After: Did you successfully avoid what you were looking forward to the least? If not, was it as bad as you expected?
         i. Mom:
            “The lead-up to Thanksgiving was a hundred times more stressful than the actual Thanksgiving. What I thought would happen was worse than reality. Everyone was very polite, didn’t complain about the food, and I believe, because I had conversations with people beforehand, things went smoother.”
ii. Dad:
“Refer back to my answer to the first question.”

iii. Henry:
“The mechanical incompetence of certain family members did show itself, resulting in an undercooked turkey.”

iv. Me:
“There was no serious argument of any kind, though my cousin did mess up on the turkey so bad that by the time it was done, I only had the stomach to eat two pieces of it, and I was kind of mad about that, but nobody seemed to be particularly mad at him for his honest mistake, so there wasn’t much conflict.”

3. Plans and Preparations (Before):
   a. Before: Is there any particular action you intend to make before Thanksgiving starts?
      i. Mom:
      “I plan to make sure that the lights are fixed in the house, because it’s dark in the kitchen. First, you gotta remember a little of the backstory: My mother always had Thanksgiving. After she was too old, my sister-in-law Julia always had Thanksgiving with her side of the family included. They both died within a year, and the first Thanksgiving after that, Julia’s family had their Thanksgiving and we had Thanksgiving at home. However, my brother and Julia’s now-adult children wanted to have a group Thanksgiving again. Last year we tried that at my mother’s house since it was the largest place, and it was a bit chaotic because no one knew their roles. This year, we’re trying it again and some of the same problems exist, mainly there is not one host and there is little communication about the exact plans and expectations. Therefore, this week, before Thanksgiving, I hope to talk to everyone and get particulars such as what time, who’s bringing what, etc.”

      ii. Dad:
      “Go hunting and avoid some of the possible upsets and doing something I enjoy instead.”

      iii. Henry:
      “I intend to do a great many things, such as go to sleep four times and also wake up four times. Perhaps I’ll take multiple showers, and perhaps do certain activities, make an English hunting sandwich.”

      iv. Me:
      “I intend to make sure that most of my work on my own project is completed before the celebration starts.”

   b. After: How were the results of your action?
      i. Mom:
      “I was able to fix the lights, and I think it made a difference because we were there after dark, and because I got over the fact that there was no host, I participated more in setting the table and enjoying a different type of Thanksgiving, where it was more of a potluck, and I think it was more successful because everyone didn’t expect someone to host the event, so it was kind of a new tradition.”

      ii. Dad:
      “That went quite well, and to be honest, the day came and I didn’t really feel the energy to go hunting, but your brother Henry insisted and made a special sandwich for the hunting experience, and was able to get Eric, who we have not been in contact with much this year, and we reconnected with him and avoided much of the pre-Thanksgiving stressors, which made the holiday much enjoyable.”

      iii. Henry:
      “Very good.”

      iv. Me:
      “I didn’t have much time to do anything other than the initial questionnaire, so I had to make up for the work after by replacing some of the segments I had planned to be part of the questionnaire with retrospective analyses after the Thanksgiving celebration was over.”

4. Plans and Preparations (During):
   a. Before: Is there any particular action you intend to take during the Thanksgiving celebration?
      i. Mom:
      “Talk to each person there.”

      ii. Dad:
      “I look forward to having nice interactions with the family, catching up to them, and reconnecting with them in some ways.”

      iii. Henry:
      “Yes.”

      iv. Me:
      “I plan to make observations about the holiday focused on the events that transpire, rather than focusing on how people act, so that my subjects don’t feel judged by my analysis of the holiday.”

   b. After: How were the results of your action?
      i. Mom:
There were a couple of people I could have talked to a little bit more, but other people were talking to those people, so I didn’t feel like anyone was left out.

Dad:

“It was not a complete success, but it was still very positive. Because there were so many people, and they tend to break off into groups, I wasn’t able to spend as much time as I would have liked with everybody, I still had many high-quality interactions with other people.”

Henry:

“Perhaps.” (Note: For him, I asked him if his planned actions worked out or not, since he gave me a vague answer to the first half of the question and I was trying to get something more specific out of him)

Me:

“I was able to get a lot of good data on events even after removing the factor of whether or not people knew they were being watched by not judging them at all, but I feel that my event-oriented approach to research—or even researching at all—hindered my ability to interact with others and enjoy the Thanksgiving festivities. So, it achieved the desired results.”

My attempt to study the events of the Thanksgiving celebration also revealed a lot of family habits that I consider to be worth considering: Firstly, nearly everyone broke off into groups to talk to rather than all talking to each other together, secondly, everyone was slightly upset about my cousin failing to cook the turkey quick enough, but no one was mad at him specifically for it, and thirdly (though this probably isn’t as significant), when we played a trivia game after eating, we went about it in an odd mix of formal and informal—all we did was answer the questions on the cards without splitting into groups or taking turns or anything like that, and people got up and left abruptly at a few stages, but we still called foul on anyone who looked at their phones unless no one was getting it right.

Analysis/Results

Each of my family members’ answers to my questions all spoke of the differences in personality between them. For example, my father was focused mainly on the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Thanksgiving, while Henry gave overtly simplistic answers like “Yes” and “Perhaps,” which signified either his viewing of Thanksgiving from a purely logical standpoint or his reluctance to take my questions seriously (either way, I expected this kind of single-word answer from the beginning, but I hadn’t considered that Henry would have given them in a way to be as unhelpful as possible). I also learned something about myself that I didn’t know before—I was more focused on this very project than I was on enjoying Thanksgiving myself, as at least half of my answers to the questions related to the project itself. I also learned, from my answers to the post-Thanksgiving parts of my questions, that I was very regretful of the way I acted through Thanksgiving, even though I didn’t think the Thanksgiving celebration itself didn’t turn out badly in any way—it was just a little boring compared to others. However, I do admit that it was a very nice holiday in spite of that.

In fact, one opinion that both of my parents expressed was that they were both dreading the Thanksgiving celebration beforehand, which gave me an interesting bit of data: a “shared tension” of Thanksgiving that passed as soon as the party started. I also noted that Henry’s answer to the first question was very similar to my father’s answer to the same question, which indicated a feeling of reverence or admiration to him, which made sense given that Henry does a lot of things with my father, like going out hunting. This, to me, exposed a key factor of the parent-child relationship: admiration. In fact, looking at the results of my questionnaire, several common elements between all of my family’s answers became very apparent. I identified several themes that occurred: First, there was the theme of positive family interaction, seen with all of my immediate family’s answers to the first question—Mom mentioned “chatting with some of my relatives”, Dad mentioned “good interactions with all members of our family,” Henry mentioned “positive interactions with the various family members”, and even I mentioned “talking to all of my family members”. Using the meta-dialectic of “equilibrium vs. flux” that we proposed, it’s apparent that my family skews toward, or at least prefers, the side of equilibrium. However, it’s important to note that while my family clearly desires equilibrium, whether or not it has that equilibrium is another question altogether. Secondly, there was a theme of “violated expectations” in the answers to the second half of the first question—my mother said that things didn’t happen the way that she expected, my father made mention of a cousin who, last year, had demanded everything go her way that he was worried about, and I myself noted that I didn’t have the time to talk to everyone there and didn’t eat all that I wanted to. Putting these first two themes together, a dialectic formed between “real” and “ideal”, just like how I anticipated, and also suggested that while my family desired equilibrium, it had a hard time achieving it and holding onto it. The third theme, “Simple affirmatives”, was unique because it was only evident in
my brother Henry’s responses, but regardless, it’s very much worth noticing since, as noted above, it shows a lot of Henry’s character. It’s also worth noticing that this was a perfect illustration of the “LUT” model that I proposed, as he “Told” very little, but obviously “Lived” a lot that he wanted to keep “Unnoticed” from me. The fourth and final theme I noticed was “worry”, the simplest and broadest of themes that I could think of—after all, it’s something that we have to deal with almost every day of our lives. My parents were the ones who stressed out about this most, as Dad admitted that he “dreaded the party more than [he] implied” to me before the Thanksgiving celebration, and was also worried that we had “lost sight of the true meaning of Thanksgiving.” My mom also expressed worry because it was the anniversary of her sister-in-law’s death and that might have caused discomfort that her children, sister, or parents would be upset during the Thanksgiving celebration, and later admitted that the lead-up was “a hundred times more stressful” than Thanksgiving itself.

Aside from this, I also have to consider the observations I made during my analysis of the Thanksgiving celebration. The first claim of “coordinated management of meaning”, that communication creates our social worlds, is linked to the first and third observations that I made: That everyone split off into groups, and that the level of structure used in the trivia game we played was extremely loose while still having some rules. I believe that, in the case of the first observation, that everyone at that Thanksgiving party, under the pressure of having to process too large of a “social world” that would have resulted into trying to speak to everyone, decided to split it up into smaller “social worlds,” and in the case of the third, the “social world” revolved around the game of trivia that we were playing, thus explaining why there was a very loose system of rules that we were following: we had just started the game with very little precedent from other Thanksgiving celebrations to follow up on, since this was only the second time that we had brought the family together to this degree, so we tried to give it structure but had little idea how to go about doing it. Another concept, that of “logical force”, ties into the second of the three observations, that everyone disliked the wait for the turkey but no one held it against my cousin. Logical force is a sub-concept of CMM, and refers to the “moral pressure or sense of obligation a person feels to respond in a given way to what someone else has just said or done” (West & Turner, 2014)—in other words, it’s whatever we think is the correct and appropriate response. I believe that, since most of us thought it was wrong to blame my cousin Phillip and give him a hard time for the turkey, we all subconsciously decided not to and instead sympathize with him, which we all viewed as a more noble thing to do.

Significance

The results of my study have, so far, shown quite a lot about how my family functions. Out of the four themes that I have identified in my family’s answers, those of “positive family interaction,” “violated expectations,” “simple affirmatives,” and “worries,” I’ve found that three of them apply to my family as a whole, while the “simple affirmatives” applies simply to my brother’s character, and that the first two showed that my family desired to be on the “equilibrium” side of the “equilibrium vs. flux” meta-dialectic that I had proposed but had a hard time achieving it.

Both Coordinated Management of Meaning and Relational Dialectics Theory have helped to explain quite a lot about familial communication. The hierarchy of meaning, the LUUUTT model condensed into the “LUT” model, and the various means to deal with a dialectic have all shown quite a lot about the ways in which the difference between real and ideal experiences impact the family life. Indeed, all of these theories have shown that there is a lot of conflict within the family structure and that anything that goes unnoticed in the process of constructing an idealized experience can demonstrate that experiences’ difference from what really happened. Indeed, Coordinated Management of Meaning and Relational Dialectics reveal a difference between real and ideal experiences and several details of family conflict, and they have already laid the groundwork necessary to piece together a connection between those two elements.

Of course, this isn’t all there is to the issue. There are many ways to deal with conflict and the differences between real and ideal. Coordinated Management of Meaning, for instance, advocates mindfulness as a means of realizing the difference between the idealized and actual experiences. Also, there are other responses to familial conflict outside of these two theories, such as parental intervention and relational maintenance. Finally, CMM and Relational Dialectics have their own flaws—CMM mostly relies on communication and does nothing for family issues that may be caused by something outside of the realm of communication, and Relational Dialectics’ “both/and” perspective may be too narrow to be of much use when dealing with family conflict or the difference between real and ideal, especially if a genuine dichotomy is involved. However, I am confident that, if these two theories can find the cause for conflict arising from the
difference between real and ideal, it can certainly find the cure.

Acknowledgements

I thank the California State University, Stanislaus Honors Program for support throughout this research. The classes that I took with James Tuedio, Ellen Bell, and Andrew Dorsey in particular were a great help in putting this together. I would also like to thank the California State University, Stanislaus Communications Department for additional support, particularly Keith Nainby and Michael Tumolo, who helped me figure out the direction I wanted to take this paper and what information I would need to complete.

References


