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Outing Heteronormativity in Interpersonal and Family Communication: Feminist Applications of Queer Theory ''Beyond the Sexy Streets''

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Within interpersonal and family communication, researchers have tended to construct and describe LGBTQ relationships in regard to a heterosexual norm. A review of recent research reveals the conceptual limitations of this framework, ''outing'' heteronormativity's influence on our understandings of nonheterosexual relationships. I outline the challenges of ''queering'' interpersonal and family communication research and argue that feminist theory can contribute to this process by (a) revealing the heteronormative assumptions perpetuated by dyadic models of communication, (b) challenging the public/private bifurcation, (c) complicating notions of identity, and (d) emphasizing intersectionality. The article concludes by discussing the implications a feminist queer perspective holds for interpersonal and family communication pedagogies and research.

> We want to urge queering to extend itself beyond the ''sexy streets'' to the home and hearth. (Malone & Cleary, 2002, p. 275)

In recent years, theorizing about same-sex romantic and family relationships has become an area of interest for interpersonal and family communication scholars. Topics studied have included LGBTQ parenting (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Breshears, 2011), relational maintenance (Haas & Stafford, 1998, 2005), self-disclosure strategies (Breshears, 2010), and family members' perceptions of communication with LGBTQ kin (Soliz, Ribarsky, Harrigan, & Tye-Williams, 2010). This inquiry into ''alternative'' relationships and family structures is important and productive; however, researchers attempting to broaden the scope of relational and family research continue to encounter theoretical and methodological limitations. Contemporary

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scholars face a dearth of critical theorizing about sexuality in interpersonal and family communication. This lack, I argue, creates an aporia in which heteronormative frameworks bracket our understandings of nonheterosexual relationships.

Silences surrounding sexuality have been noted in many disciplines; the field of communication is no exception. As Yep (2003) observes, substantive conversations around issues of sexuality were absent for the first 61 years of the discipline's existence, but by the mid-1990s queer theory had directed attention to issues of sexuality and heterosexual privilege both in and out of academia. As queer theory and communication studies have grown alongside one another, they have become more integrated. However, despite its influence in rhetoric, media, and performance studies, queer theory has largely failed to infiltrate interpersonal and family communication. In this article, I argue that by constructing and describing queer relationships and identities in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts, interpersonal and family communication research tends to (re)produce binary understandings of sexuality that constrain communication research and theory. I urge interpersonal and family communication scholars to consider how queer theory can inform their research, and suggest that bringing heteronormative assumptions "out of the closet" in interpersonal and family communication is a matter of concern for all scholars, not just for the LGBTQ community.

Interpersonal and family communication research would benefit from a more nuanced engagement with gender and sexuality for at least four reasons. First, communication studies can affect understandings of identity, both others' and our own. In the undergraduate classroom, for example, students often express the desire to better understand their relational partners through the course material. Second, research findings regarding sexuality can and do filter into popular media, a process highlighted in Chesebro's (1980) critique of the social scientific use of the term "homosexual." While some researchers have shifted away from this term, research findings—and the ways they are presented—can still pathologize LGBTQ relationships and identities. A third problem is that existing discourses set the tone for future discourse on the subject. In this manner, the replication of normative ideas about gender and sexuality in interpersonal and family communication research can limit our ability to form alternative understandings. Finally, a more in-depth engagement with critical theorizing can increase the validity of the claims communication scholars make about nonnormative relationships.

The primary goal of this critical interrogation is to explore theoretical and methodological difficulties encountered by researchers attempting to create inclusive theories of relationships and family life, and to offer recommendations utilizing the intersections of feminist and queer theory. Rather than attempting a comprehensive review of existing scholarship,[1] I hope to instead illustrate specific points where heteronormative assumptions appear. I begin with a brief overview of queer theory and its intersection with feminist approaches. Next, I explore the heteronormative construction of family and relationships in the United States. Following this, I elaborate queer critiques of interpersonal and family communication scholarship.

I argue that feminist theory can contribute to ongoing discussions of "queering" communication research by (a) revealing heteronormative assumptions underlying dyadic models of communication, (b) challenging the public/private bifurcation, (c) complicating notions of identity, and (d) emphasizing intersectionality. Exploring how scholars have navigated these demands, I offer practical directions for "queering" communication inquiry into relationships. The article concludes by discussing the implications a feminist queer perspective holds for interpersonal and family communication pedagogies.

Queer and feminist approaches to sexuality

Queer theory in the U.S. academy rose in tandem with LGBT activist movements in the 1990s, which brought attention to dominant discourses of sexuality through democratic counterpolitics (e.g., Berlant & Freeman, 1997). Directing attention to issues of sexuality and heterosexual privilege long neglected in the academy, queer theory emphasized the socially constructed, performative aspects of sexuality (e.g., Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Warner, 1993). As an ostensibly inclusive signifier, "queer" disrupted the homosexual/heterosexual binary, countered categorical models of sexual identity, and examined the cultural, historical, and political discourses around which sexuality is constructed. While there have been heated contestations over queer theory's "proper objects" of study,[2] the challenging of heteronormativity, or "the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence" (Jackson, 2006, p. 108), remains a central focus of queer analysis.

The interrogation of heterosexuality as a cultural system aligns with much feminist theorizing. Queer theory is intellectually indebted to feminist examinations of "obligatory heterosexuality" (Rubin, 1975, p. 179), "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980/1993, p. 227), and "sexual essentialism" (Rubin, 1984/1993). Despite these convergences, queer theory has often been fashioned as a more contemporary theoretical project against which previous theorizations of gender are cast as limited and outdated. Queer critiques have challenged feminist theory's reification of sexual difference, arguing against feminism's attachment to the stable categories of men and women.[3] For many scholars, particularly those alienated by "feminists' injunctions to identify with and as women . . . the celebration of an antinormative queerness has been a welcome relief" (Martin, 1994, p. 105).

And yet, feminist theory is not alone in producing epistemological erasures. While some queer theorists have held gender firmly in their analytical grasp, others have focused exclusively on sex and sexuality, leaving gender in the domain of feminist inquiry. However, scholars have noted how in the absence of an analysis of gender, queer theory can reinscribe white gay male identities, erasing gendered and racialized differences (e.g., Johnson, 2001; Lee, 2003). Furthermore, queer theory's emphasis on fluid, destabilized identities has at times led to analyses that privilege parodic play and public gender crossing to the extent that its project seems outside of, or irrelevant to,

those factions of society that remain predicated on heterosexual norms. But gender crossings and identity deconstruction alone do not unsettle the heteronormative assumptions deeply embedded in the private sphere. Feminist theory can inform a queer intervention into communication study, bringing queer theory off the "sexy streets" into the gendered domains of family and intimate relationships.

The heteronormative family and its (dis)contents

Heteronormativity has been defined as "an ideology that assumes heterosexual experience is the normal human experience" (Suter & Daas, 2007, p. 178). This refers to heterosexuality as a system that structures social life and appears as the taken-for-granted, "natural" state of affairs. While queer theorists have often explored the effects of this system on those who deviate from it, heteronormativity does not only affect individuals with nonnormative sexual preferences. Studies reveal that negative effects of the institution of heterosexuality on heterosexually identified women range from physical violence to emotional exhaustion and diminished mental health. In addition, and perhaps not surprisingly, many heterosexually married women are in worse psychological health than are heterosexually married men. More surprisingly, many heterosexually identified women also report worse psychological adjustment (i.e., more anxiety, tension, and depression) than do lesbians (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993).

Compulsory heterosexuality also affects heterosexually identified men. Heterosexuality calls for "real" men (Wittig, 1992), entailing "an exhausting and unending performance" (Yep, 2003, p. 20). Homophobia therefore becomes an organizing principle of masculinity. The fear of humiliation and emasculation "impels heterosexual men into a lifelong labor of 'proving' their manhood and concealing, if not banishing, a range of sexual possibilities [and] gender performances" (p. 21). The homophobia created by the institution of heterosexuality also causes real and devastating violence faced by LGBTQ individuals, and reifies heteropatriarchal ideologies that influence U.S. politics, institutions, and academic pursuits.

The family is a primary vehicle through which heteronormative ideologies are mobilized. Families are sites of reproduction—both biological and cultural—and despite recent reconfigurations of families, and growing (but limited) acceptance of same-sex partnerships and trends such as marrying later, divorcing, or choosing not to marry becoming more common, a particular form of relationship continues to be "valorized as 'normative'" (Jackson, 2006). Marriage remains a sought-after social contract, and monogamous coupledom continues to be enshrined as the ideal; this in turn is perpetuated through institutional policies and practices that "legitimate specific forms of relationship" (Jackson, 2006, p. 110). Societal views of intimate relationships are therefore constructed in relation to the privileged role of the heterosexual nuclear family in the U.S. imaginary. This affects research and theorizing about relationships, often producing unrecognized and unaccounted for biases that affect study designs, research questions, and subsequent analyses. In the following review of interpersonal and family communication scholarship, I demonstrate the

ways heteronormativity is upheld through both erasures and inclusions of LGBTQ subjects. Examining how heteronormative assumptions appear even in the work of scholars seeking to broaden the terms of the discourse reveals the theoretical ground that remains to be covered. At the same time, I also wish to recognize contributions made by interpersonal and family scholars who have continually challenged the exclusion of LGBTQ subjects and dominant discourses of sexuality.

Queer interventions in interpersonal and family communication

Queer theory poses questions regarding sexuality, identity, and romantic relationships that are highly relevant to the field of interpersonal communication. For this reason, queer theory's failure to be more fully incorporated in this area is notable. As Wood and Duck (1995) have stated, ''a field labeled *social and personal relationships* would seem to comprise the range of close relationships that people form. Yet this assumption is not borne out by the history of relationship scholarship. Instead, the research community has reduced relationships and aspects of relational life to a narrow and unrepresentative sample'' (as cited in Elia, 2003, p. 62). That heterosexuality remains a dominant and often taken-for-granted frame is evidenced in Elia's (2003) survey of interpersonal communication textbooks, which revealed that textbook examples and pictures featured heterosexual couples almost exclusively. Lovaas (2003) found a similar phenomenon in nonverbal communication textbooks, in which few references were made to individuals or experiences other than heterosexual; instead, ''heterosexuality is the unmarked, presumed to be universal category of sexuality'' (p. 94).

A similar universalization of heterosexual experience and erasure of queer subjects occurs in family communication. The diverse forms of kinship that exist today and historically (e.g., Coontz, 1992; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997) have not been captured in family communication research. Instead, family communication has largely assumed the ideology of the heterosexual, nuclear, white, middle-class family.[4] Until recently, sexual orientation was rarely mentioned in top-tier family studies journals (see Allen & Demo, 1995), and despite growing interest in LGBTQ families propelled by shifting social configurations, such exclusions have continued. For example, a search of the first 5 years of the *Journal of Family Communication* revealed only one study including same-sex couples (see Bergen et al., 2006). Queer subjects are further erased through the language utilized in discussions of relationships, marriage, and parenting.

A queer intervention into interpersonal and family communication highlights these erasures. To this end, many scholars have challenged the invisibility of LGBTQ individuals in interpersonal and family communication, and have called for greater awareness of heteronormativity in the field's research and pedagogy. Notable examples include Spitzack's (1998) discussion of the production of masculinity in interpersonal communication; Heinz's (2002) commentary on the invisibility of sexual minorities in communication research; and Foster's (2008) call for reflexive pedagogies regarding heteronormativity in interpersonal communication. In addition, the body of interpersonal research on LGBTQ relationships and families is

growing. While the inclusion of LGBTQ subjects remains an important and necessary step for incorporating queer voices in interpersonal communication, an examination of research including LGBTQ relationships and families reveals ongoing theoretical and methodological challenges to "queering" these areas of study. In the following sections, I examine obstacles faced by scholars attempting to broaden the terms of relationship discourse, the first of which is the similarity/difference framework. After outlining this framework and its limitations, I turn to feminist theory to examine the ways it can complement and extend a queer critique.

Similarity/difference

In the similarity/difference framework, LGBTQ relationships are contrasted against heterosexual relationships. Elia's (2003) survey of interpersonal communication textbooks revealed evidence of this frame; LGBTQ relationships, when included, were presented in comparison with heterosexual couples. A survey of published research offers further evidence of this trend. Of the 48 research studies encountered in the course of this analysis, nearly half utilized the similarity/difference framework, with 12 of these directly referencing this comparison in the title of the article.[5] There are problematic implications to this stance; by comparing a historically marginalized group with a privileged group, heterosexual relationships become the "'exemplar' by which homosexual relationships [are] judged" (Elia, 2003, p. 73). Kurdek (1991) states that "homosexual couples are more *like* heterosexual couples than they are *different* from them" (p. 190, emphasis mine), a statement made by numerous researchers in order to debunk cultural myths of LGBTQ relationships as deviant. However, by measuring LGBTQ relationships as either "like" or "unlike" heterosexual relationships, heterosexuality is framed as the natural, normal way of being. This demonstrates that while the inclusion of research on LGBTQ subjects importantly creates recognition and validation for nonheterosexual individuals, it does not necessarily disrupt the heterosexual system.

The dominance of the similarity/difference framework also contributes to an overemphasis on similarity that is not always true to research findings. Researching a marginalized population such as the LGBTQ community carries political and social consequences; findings filter into popular media and policy, impacting legislation, activism, and everyday interaction. For this reason, "because anti-gay scholars seek evidence of harm, sympathetic researchers defensively stress its absence" (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 160). This can lead to incongruities between findings and claims. In a meta-analysis of 21 studies comparing same-sex with mixed-sex parenting, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) found that most authors claimed to find no difference in outcomes for either parents or children even when their findings revealed measurable differences regarding the performance of gender stereotypic behaviors, and in children's sexual orientation and attitudes about sexual orientation. This suggests that scholars invested in social justice for the LGBTQ population may deliberately avoid discussions of difference because of dominant homophobic and heterosexist ideologies that present

heterosexual relationships and families as the ''gold standard'' (Malone & Cleary, 2002, p. 272).

While an emphasis on similarity is therefore well-intentioned and perhaps even warranted, unfortunately, it can result not only in skewed research findings but also in the premising of heteropatriarchy as the normative family structure even in social scientific studies of ''alternative'' families. This is demonstrated by researchers' concerns with children's sex-role development, LGBTQ parents' provision of an ''opposite-sex'' role model for their children, and children's psychological adjustment and sexual orientation (e.g., Allen & Demo, 1995; Flaks, Ficher, Mazterpazqua, & Joseph, 1995; Harris & Turner, 1985). An emphasis on whether children of LGBTQ parents acquire normative gender and sexual identities pathologizes LGBTQ identity even as it attempts to make space for ''alternative'' family structures. Moreover, the stress placed on similarities/differences between LGBTQ and heterosexual families reifies heterosexuality as the ideal. Such a frame constructs LGBTQ relationships and families as ''acceptable'' because they do not deviate from heterosexual norms. Queer theory's potential resolutions to this conundrum lie in its ability to destabilize the normative family unit as opposed to framing ''alternative'' families in terms of the heterosexual model. In the following section, I discuss how feminist theory can extend a queer intervention into interpersonal and family communication.

Feminist contributions to a queer intervention

Despite a number of common interests and shared assumptions, in practice queer and feminist theory have often been taken as different theoretical projects. I argue that recombining these projects is beneficial; feminist theory can help ''queer'' interpersonal and family communication research and theorizing by (a) revealing the heteronormative assumptions perpetuated by dyadic models of communication, (b) challenging the public/private bifurcation and its consequences, (c) complicating notions of identity, and (d) emphasizing intersectionality. These theoretical interventions have methodological implications as well, which will be discussed. I conclude this section by offering examples of how researchers have responded to these theoretical and methodological challenges, and, in doing so, provide directions for interpersonal and family communication scholars working under a variety of paradigms.

The dyadic model and its heteronormative assumptions

As a theoretical project, queer theory argues against normalization, questioning how rote assumptions can shape both our research and our social lives. In interpersonal and family communication, heteronormativity can be perpetuated through common deployments of dyadic models of communication that fail to interrogate their assumptions. First, many influential relational theories explore dyadic relationships with little attention to outside influences on these relationships. Furthermore, dyadic models continue to be emphasized in the attempted ''queering'' of interpersonal and

family communication without a corresponding focus on the latent assumptions of heterosexual gender difference that underlie dominant theorizations of intimate partnerships. Clearly, interpersonal and family communication cannot relinquish the study of dyads, nor would this be a productive move for our field. I am therefore not suggesting that we abandon this area of research, but rather that by complicating dyadic models through queer and feminist theory, we can contribute to more complex understandings of interpersonal and family relationships.

To begin with, conceptualizing romantic relationships solely in terms of dyadic interaction can detract from an awareness of the political and social contexts in which intimate relationships occur. A number of studies explore dyadic interaction between same-sex partners with little attention to the broader social world in which these relationships take place. Kurdek's (1998, 2004) influential research on gay and lesbian cohabitating couples, and Bevan and Lannutti's (2002) study on romantic jealousy provide examples of this type of research. Detaching relationships from the social systems in which they occur is a problem when attempting to "queer" communication research, as a queer approach suggests that the study of sexuality cannot be limited to individual identities, but must also incorporate an examination of the knowledges and practices that "organize 'society' as a whole by sexualizing—heterosexualizing or homosexualizing—bodies, desires, acts, identities, [and] social relations" (Seidman, 1994, p. 174). Queer inquiry in interpersonal and family communication is well-situated to make this turn, as demonstrated by communication scholars' inclusions of social support systems as a factor influencing relationship quality in same- and mixed-sex relationships (Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

A further limitation of the dyadic model is that it perpetuates notions of sexual difference and gender complementarity as prerequisites for romantic relationships. Heterosexuality, by its very definition, not only excludes homosexuality but also requires binary gender division. "Hetero" from the Greek form "heteros" means "different"; "heterosexuality" means sexual involvement with one who is different. The difference of the "other" sex is thereby reinforced (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994, as cited in Yep, 2003, p. 32). The assumption of gender polarity is clearly seen in communication research, in which women's ways of communicating are often compared in terms of their similarity/difference to men's communication. Assumptions regarding gender difference also undergird most research and public discourse surrounding two-parent families. Fathers are depicted as crucial to the "normal" gender development of both boys and girls (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996; Pruett, 2000). The reinforcement of the heteropatriarchal family model through gender stereotypes reveals that an analysis of gender difference must accompany a queer intervention.

The assumption of gender difference further undergirds the dominant conceptualization of romantic relationships as a fusion of opposites. In this process, the "self" (and an individual's psychological separation and/or isolation) is intentionally "lost" in the Other. The uninterrogated assumptions of gender complementarity that underlie this construction can preclude recognition of queer subjects by masking

"the rigors at work to keep the 'dyadic' relation reassuringly just between ['man' and 'woman']" (Butler, 2004, p. 139). Butler suggests that the self is "already positioned outside itself" not only in the Other but in "a historical legacy and futural horizon"; for this reason, "who we 'are' fundamentally is a subject in a temporal chain of desire that only occasionally and provisionally assumes the form of the dyad" (p. 151). I interpret this to mean that the "self" is never fully achieved but is an ongoing process, a perspective widely taken by communication scholars. Desire is necessarily fluid, formulated in relation to past relationships and future possibilities; the fusion of desire in the romantic dyad is a fiction that we strive to sustain precisely because it is not—and cannot be—so.[6] Conceptualizing long-term partnerships around notions of complementarity or "oneness" can therefore reinforce heteronormative ideas of gender difference even in the study of LGBTQ relationships and families (e.g., Malone & Cleary, 2002). Combining queer and feminist theory can help to challenge these assumptions; it can also assist researchers in complicating notions regarding the private and public domains of social life.

Challenging the private/public divide

In interpersonal communication, sexuality has largely been envisioned as personal rather than political, and as private rather than public. Interpersonal textbooks generally focus on how heterosexual couples initiate, develop, and maintain relationships, and not on society's influences on these relationships (e.g., Elia, 2003). In doing so, such research can perpetuate notions of relationships as belonging to the private sphere, a sphere often viewed as apolitical. However, when dyadic relationships, and even the emphasis on the romantic dyad itself, are situated within a broader context of knowledges and social practices concerning sexuality, the private sphere appears as not separate from, but rather as intrinsic to the ideologies mobilized in the public sphere.

   While queer theory reveals the complexity of gender relations and sexual identities by complicating binaries such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual, its focus on the public sphere can negate an interrogation of sexual normativity within intimate and family relationships. Furthermore, a focus on public performances and an emphasis on deconstructing identities like "men" and "women" can lead to an inadvertent reification of male dominance. As Rudy (2000) notes, "the desire to break open the dichotomy between men and women has often lead to the valorization of those things previously associated with the male sphere . . . . To be queer often means to be public, hard, aggressive, 'in-your-face'" (p. 207). In this process, sustained attention to home life and "private" activities, particularly the relational and caretaking activities historically associated with heterosexual women, can be left out of queer inquiry.

   Queer theory does not only attempt to elucidate nonnormative identities but rather celebrates *anti*normative display; in this manner, queer identity is often defined in opposition to "conventional" gender and sex roles. In this process, "something called femininity becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other positions become figural and mobile" (Martin, 1994, p. 107). This can effectively solidify,

rather than deconstruct gender norms. For this reason, it is important that the private sphere is retained as a category of analysis within queer inquiry. Construing liberation as "synonymous with participation in a narrowly defined 'public' life" (Rudy, 2000, p. 209) can erase the reproduction of heteronormativity in daily interactions between relational partners and family members in the home sphere. Such a move "can impoverish the language we have available for thinking about selves and relationships" (Martin, 1994, p. 106), relegating both heterosexual and queer identities into narrowly defined categories.

Complicating identity

I have outlined how interpersonal and family communication scholars' emphasis on dyadic models and private life and a queer emphasis on public life can together negate queer subjectivity in the private sphere. I have also outlined the effects of the comparative framework's privileging of heterosexual relationships as the standard by which other relationships are judged. A further effect of the comparative framework is that it shortchanges the variability of queer relationships by reducing them to a type (Elia, 2003). Despite its theoretical claims of deconstructing sexual identities, queer theory has also been responsible for stabilizing sexual identities into "types." As Giffney (2004) notes, rather than dismantling sexual systems and categorical identities made "real" within these systems, "many queer theorists have sought to limit the discourse to examinations of gay male and lesbian genders and sexualities alone" (p. 73). In doing so, some queer theorists have reduced "queer" to an identity category, thereby negating queer theory's proclamations of deconstructing sexual identities.

Even in reflexive, LGBTQ-allied work in interpersonal and family communication, sexual identities can be reified and presented as stable. Foster (2008) intervenes in interpersonal communication theory by questioning the operationalization of "commitment" and its explicit or implicit connection with heterosexual marriage, and calls for further reflexivity regarding the field's heteronormative assumptions. In her essay, Foster positions herself as "a heterosexual researcher critiquing heteronormativity" (p. 87), which calls attention to her own and others' heterosexual privilege—an important task in line with queer theory's interventionist aims. At the same time, however, this language potentially reproduces heteronormative assumptions by suggesting that a stable "heterosexual" position exists. By constructing LGBTQ relationships against their heterosexual Other, the similarity/difference framework and its reification of categorical identities are reinforced. While I am in agreement with Foster that researchers must question how heteronormative assumptions are manifested in the language used to describe relationships, I would add to this that the stabilization of heterosexual and queer identities into types must also be interrogated.

Feminist theory can help counter the reduction of queer theory to a sexual identity project alone by highlighting how gender and sexuality interact within heteronormative constructions of relationships and family. Feminists have long been "concerned with the ways in which heterosexuality depends upon and guarantees gender division," and for this reason, "have a vested interest in what goes on

within heterosexual relations'' (Jackson, 2006, p. 105). Feminist theory broadens our conceptualization of who is affected by heteronormativity, assisting a queer intervention into interpersonal and family communication research by demonstrating that the effects of heteronormativity are not only a ''special interest'' concern. A final way that feminist theory can extend a queer intervention is by calling attention to the intersections of various social locations as the sites where sexuality/ies are constructed.

Emphasizing intersectionality

I have suggested that queer theory's promise lies less in identity-based scholarship than in the interrogation of social processes and systems that produce and sustain dominant and marginalized identities. Too narrow a focus on sexuality can mask other social divisions that intersect with—and constitute—sexual identities. While sexuality remains an important component of a queer intervention, Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005) argue that ''the political promise'' of [''queer''] reside[s] specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, ''gender, class, nationality, and religion'' (p. 1). Feminist scholars have voiced concern regarding the privileging of sexuality as ''the means of crossing,'' an act which can ''make gender and race into grounds so indicatively fixed that masculine positions become the emblem again of mobility'' (Martin, 1994, p. 110). Feminist theory therefore adds depth to a queer interrogation by countering the tendency to stabilize gender and race while destabilizing sexuality, and by facilitating links across diverse scholarship.

In her discussion of racism and the production of difference in interpersonal communication research, Houston (2002) finds that not only are African Americans marginalized in interpersonal communication research, but when they have been included they have been depicted in terms of their similarity to or difference from an unmarked white standard. This is analogous to the marginalization of LGBTQ individuals yet, in spite of this similarity, queer theory is also culpable for its exclusion of nonwhite subjects. This has led some scholars to question whether ''the political act of 'queering' [is] itself rooted in . . . a racial whiteness oblivious to its own conditions of privilege'' (Walton, 1997, as cited in Weed & Schor, 1997, p. x). Johnson's (2001) *quare* theory and Lee's (2003) *kuaer* theory respond to queer theory's whiteness by proposing a race-conscious, transnationally informed study of sexuality's constitutive role in constructing social hierarchies. Feminist intersectionality theory, which allows for a more comprehensive analysis of various intersecting forms of marginalization (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Dill & Zambrana, 2009), is also useful in resolving this dilemma. Intersectionality theory calls for a conceptualization of identity as always comprised of multiple facets and denies that one form of oppression, such as sexuality or gender, should be privileged over another such as race or class. To account for the complex processes that influence sexual identity and marginalization, queer theory must move toward an intersectional understanding of sexuality.

I have discussed how the queer deconstruction of gender can inadvertently mask sexism by focusing on the public (male) sphere while dismissing the private. Rudy (2000) further argues that the valorization of public, political aspects of life and

corresponding dismissal of the home sphere leads to sexism, racism, and classism. She argues that the daily chores that comprise ''home life'' must be done by someone, ''and if they're not done by queers, they will be done by women, and if some 'women' manage to get out of these tasks by identifying themselves as queer, then the work will be done by women of color and other disenfranchised people who cannot afford . . . an identity like queer'' (p. 209). The complex linking of race, class, gender, and sexual oppression through heteronormative ideologies necessitates that queer theory engage with these challenges. Feminist scholars have always envisioned the private sphere as laden with power; it is this turn that I urge interpersonal and family communication scholars to consider.

In summary, while much attention has been given to ''queering'' diverse areas of communication scholarship, I have suggested that bringing renewed feminist attention to queer scholarship—or *feminizing* queer theory—extends the argument for queering interpersonal and family communication in several ways. Feminist theory can assist a queer intervention into the private sphere of the family and intimate relationships by revealing the gendered assumptions that undergird dyadic models of communication, destabilizing reified identities that can reproduce heteronormativity, and emphasizing the multiple social locations through which sexuality is constituted. To achieve these ends, however, it is necessary to address the means through which scholarship is produced.

Queer(ing) methodologies

In part, the failure of a queer feminist perspective to further infiltrate interpersonal and family communication stems from metatheoretical tensions that portray critical and postpositivistic methodologies as incompatible. Rather than reiterate this well-hashed argument, it is perhaps more useful to briefly explore the methodological challenges queer theory, and its focus on discursive processes and destabilizing identity, provides for postpositivistic interpersonal and family communication scholars. While most communication scholars willingly acknowledge social influences on identity formations, it is difficult to capture the complexities of identities through the quantitative methods often utilized in social scientific inquiry. This is a challenge with which feminist practitioners have also struggled, leading to attempts to operationalize an intersectional framework for quantitative social-scientific research (Hancock, 2007; Shields, 2008). Such work is informative for communication researchers attempting to account for multiple influences on identity.

While intersectionality's ''operationalization'' provides important new directions for scholarship, the meeting between an intersectional framework and quantitative survey methods remains an awkward one. Selecting a priori categories for respondents to locate themselves in can have the side effect of reinforcing rigid categorizations of identity. In the area of sexuality this can lead to the ''assert[ion of] the homosexual as a natural fact'' (Seidman, 1994, p. 171), rather than as a complex identity influenced and constituted by social and discursive processes.[7] For this reason, many queer theorists and researchers have rejected quantitative methods in favor of

qualitative and rhetorical approaches. While I would not argue for the abandonment of quantitative approaches, I would caution against using surveys alone to try to gather information about sexual identities, which are perhaps too complex and fluid to be captured in this way.

In addition to specific methodological challenges and erasures, queer subjects can be further negated through the location of interpersonal and family communication as sciences. Allen (2000) argues that a link exists between the conservative ideologies often replicated in family studies and the notion of scientific objectivity, which is "often used as a shield behind which people in positions of power to shape discourse and practice . . . hide ideologically driven commitments" (p. 5). The conflation of a conservative theoretical stance and conservative values is problematic, for "while patriarchal power and authority have been denounced as oppressive and failing to answer contemporary configurations of the family, many have been less cautious when evoking the authority of science" (Malone & Cleary, 2002, p. 277). Recognizing the way ideologies are mobilized through science requires scholars to be accountable for the impacts of their research. Rather than abandoning practices associated with science (i.e., theory building, rigor, substantiated truth claims, and controls for bias), I would echo Allen's (2000) call for social scientific researchers to be more honest about the relationship between power and knowledge and to account for the influence of dominant ideologies on their ideas and analyses.

A second limitation of the value placed on objectivity is that it can lead to knee-jerk exclusions of critical theories, even when such theories are clearly relevant to the topic at hand. It is telling that despite widespread academic consensus regarding the social construction of gender, the terms "gender" and "sex" are often used interchangeably in interpersonal and family communication and tied unproblematically to biology. More nuanced mixed-method approaches and cross-paradigmatic discussions can help to repair these oversights. Rather than abandoning the goals of science in order to conduct critical research, or likewise abandoning critical theory to conduct scientific research, the productive tension between queer theory and dominant social scientific understandings of gender and sexual identities can benefit communication research. Allen (2000) offers four guidelines that can assist in navigating the tensions of "queering" interpersonal and family research. The first is to recognize the way privilege and oppression operate in family life. Second, scholars must insist on complex perspectives that examine intersections of gender, race, and class without reducing them to a variable. Third, researchers need to be modest in their claims of truth, recognizing the discursive influence of such claims. Finally, Allen calls for researchers to consider who is included and who is excluded from their construction of research subjects (p. 13). Further direction can be extrapolated from Mohanty (2003), who, unlike many critical theorists, does not shy from generalizability as a desirable goal, instead arguing that localized data *can* specify and illuminate universals. However, she argues that this can only occur if we anchor our research and pedagogies on the needs of marginalized rather than privileged populations, thereby "read[ing] up the ladder of privilege" (p. 79).

Some communication researchers have responded to these challenges by shifting away from a framework of similarity/difference to instead focus on queer relationships and families without comparing them to a heterosexual norm (e.g., Bergen et al., 2006; Breshears, 2010, 2011; Hajek & Giles, 2002). Such efforts engage some of the possibilities delineated here, including situating dyadic relationships within broader social contexts, or moving beyond dyadic relationships (and their implicit assumptions of heteronormative gender complementarity) to explore intergroup relations (Hajek & Giles, 2002), and family systems (Oswald, 2000). In doing so, these researchers have navigated between the public and private domains in which relationships are constructed. Moving away from the comparative framework has further allowed for nuanced analyses that account for complex variations and intersectional factors influencing queer identities. Such inquiry has required—and allowed for—methodological and epistemological shifts. I conclude this section by offering two examples of how researchers have differently addressed the challenges a feminist queer intervention poses. From these studies, practical implications can be drawn for empirical researchers attempting to create inclusive research and theories.

In a qualitative study of 18 LGBTQ youth with lesbian and bisexual mothers, Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) describe the experiences of "second generation" queer youth. Through interviews with participants, the authors explored individuals' experiences of their sexual and gender identity formation and the coming-out process. This study models the "queering" of interpersonal and family communication in several respects. First, rather than collapsing participants' various identifications into a homogenous type such as "homosexual," the authors allowed participants to specify their own gender and sexual identities. In doing so, "queer" identity is portrayed as open and complex. By addressing both gender identity and sexual identity, complexity is further restored. Moreover, while the participants included only LGBTQ youth and parents, the findings provide useful information for other parents as well, allowing us to "read up the ladder of privilege" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 79). One limitation of their study is its small, mostly white sample. The quantitative study described below provides an example of how researchers might further explore the complex intersections of sexuality with other marginalized social locations.

In their study of 2,431 LGBTQ women, Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum (2002) attend to some of the challenges of "queering" relational and family research. First, by including lesbian and bisexual women in their study they avoid homogenizing different queer identities under a single label. Second, their research does not compare and contrast LGBTQ experiences and identities with dominant experiences and identities, but rather explores experiences unique to LGBTQ individuals.[8] Furthermore, Morris et al. create space for fluidity in sexual identity by allowing participants to place themselves on a sexual orientation continuum. This approach, while still potentially portraying lesbian/gay and heterosexual identities as opposites by positioning them at separate ends of a continuum, offers one solution for moving sexual identities beyond the boxes they are often forced into by survey methods. Finally, the study uses an intersectional approach to explore how LGBTQ

motherhood and the coming-out process are influenced by a wide range of variables, including income and education, race/ethnicity, geographic location, religion, and age. While the use of quantitative survey methods precludes the richness of participant experiences captured through qualitative research, it does allow for a larger-scale exploration of the factors that influence LGBTQ parenting and coming-out.

Both Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) and Morris et al. (2002) offer directions for interpersonal and family communication scholars desiring to construct inclusive and expansive theories of relationships, families, and sexual identities. The different approaches provide guidelines for researchers working under a variety of paradigms, and reveal how each approach might be informed by the other's strengths and limitations. Incorporating more nuanced explorations of sexual identity in our research and dismantling heteronormative assumptions can extend communication theories of families and relationships. Furthermore, shifting our focus to populations frequently omitted from dominant conceptions of relationships and families can extend theoretical understandings from the ground up. In this manner, queer subjects can be seen not as either fitting into or as constituting exceptions to heteronormative theories of behavior but as calling these very theories into question, an act which has pedagogical consequences.

Conclusion: Refining our pedagogies

While I have attempted to demonstrate the constraints heteronormativity places on all its subjects, and on our research and theorizing, the specific forms of violence it enacts on LGBTQ subjects are particularly important. Discursive violence, or the "words, gestures, tones, images, presentations, and omissions used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay subjectivity and experience" (Yep, 2003), can be unintentionally replicated in interpersonal and family communication research through both the use of the comparative framework and the ongoing erasure of queer subjects. This discursive violence can perpetuate material violence in the form of LGBTQ individuals' self-hatred or self-destructive behavior, or in the form of homophobia and hate crimes. It is therefore crucial that interpersonal communication scholars engage in disciplinary reflexivity to avoid reproducing discursive or material violence.

Gearhart Willits (2003) states: "At this moment, we must ask just how willing to be 'queered' our discipline is going to be. In the exciting tumult of a fast-moving world, the question itself will be worthy of scholarly investigation" (p. xxxiv). While significant progress has been made in exposing heteronormativity and increasing queer visibility in the fields of interpersonal and family communication, much ground remains to be covered. I have not tried to portray the field as stagnant and unchanging, but rather to demonstrate successes and limitations while suggesting directions for future research. My aim has been to show how interpersonal and family communication scholars can work to uncover heteronormative assumptions undergirding their research and pedagogies by incorporating queer and feminist

theory. This cannot be done through merely including queer subjects—although this goal remains worth striving for. For this reason, I have not tried to deny the value of the important work scholars have done in these areas. But, I have argued that a feminist queer theorization that does not measure LGBTQ relationships and identities in comparison to a heteronormative standard is also required. Weaving together the threads of queer and feminist theory can produce epistemological transformations in our understandings of relationships and families.

Queering communication, and "feminizing" queer theory, requires scholars to be theoretically diverse, to utilize mixed methods, and to frame research questions with power, language, sexuality, and difference in mind. In some ways, communication theory has already succeeded in these goals. However, by working together across paradigms, communication researchers and critical theorists can continue to ask better questions and provide more insightful answers. This kind of collaboration should be encouraged among tenured professors as well as among doctoral students, countering the prevalent model in which we are encouraged to rigidly adhere to a certain paradigmatic stance. In addition, we need to critically analyze the institutional practices in which funding is awarded for survey research relying on convenience samples of predominantly white, middle-class undergraduates. We need to continue to broaden our studies to other populations, and to utilize paradigmatic approaches that enable us to see the complex relationships between intersecting identities.

Further implications for pedagogy include those discussed by Heinz (2002). As teachers, we should not assume that our students have a particular sexual orientation. We should not perpetuate stereotypes or myths regarding heterosexual men and women, or LGBTQ individuals. Discussions of relationships should include queer relationships, whereas discussions of family communication should include families with LGBTQ members, whether parents, siblings, or children. Finally, we cannot assume that LGBTQ experiences are "different," but neither can we assume that they are the "same." Strategies to accomplish these goals include the use of inclusive language, the dismantling of the similarity/difference framework, and the treatment of LGBTQ issues as majority rather than minority concerns. Similar commitments and caution should be exercised in the treatment of race, class, and gender. By engaging in these practices, and in disciplinary reflexivity, we can better avoid reproducing the forms of epistemic and material violence that have been discussed. Interpersonal and family communication researchers are uniquely positioned to ensure that queer theory does not remain relegated to the "public" sphere. Incorporating critical perspectives into the study of intimate interactions between lovers and families can therefore help to bring queer theory "home."

Notes

1   For a review of queer theory's contributions to the communication field, see Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2003). Dow and Condit (2005) offer a review of feminist theory's contributions.
2   See Butler (1997) for a summary of this debate.
3   See Weed and Schor's (1997) edited volume for further discussion of alliances and disputes between feminist and queer theorizing.

4   See Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009), and Oswald, Blume, and Marks (2005) for further discussion.

5   For examples, see Kurdek (1998, 2004), and Blair and Holmberg (2008). In addition to foregrounding a comparative framework through explicit references to comparison and difference, the language utilized in article titles at times creates an unmatched pair, such as ''same-sex'' versus ''marital'' relationships (Haas & Stafford, 2005), or utilizes terms that rely on and reproduce assumptions of gender difference, such as ''opposite-sex'' (Bevan & Lannutti, 2002). This reveals the way heteronormative language seeps into discourses of sexuality even in the works of scholars seeking alternatives.

6   See Butler (2004, pp. 131–151) for further discussion of the psychoanalytic dyadic model's limitations for queer subjectivity.

7   This is not only a problem for research on sexuality. In his provocative discussion of interpersonal communication as an ideological practice, Lannamann (1991) argues that the discipline risks ''reifying what are essentially cultural forms of thought and treating them as if they represent natural facts'' (p. 187).

8   It should be noted that Morris et al. (2002) do not entirely avoid the comparative framework. In their literature review, they note that ''lesbian mothers and their children appear to be as psychologically healthy as heterosexual mothers and their children'' (p. 145), language that reinforces heteronormativity by depicting heterosexual families as the ideal type and defining LGBTQ families in terms of their similarity to this type.

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