

Negotiating Power and Communication in Contemporary Family and Marriage Systems: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

Marriage and family institutions are undergoing profound transformation under the pressures of sociocultural change, gender reconfiguration, legal intervention, and intensifying communicative demands. These shifts have amplified tensions surrounding authority, autonomy, emotional responsibility, and intergenerational obligation. This integrative conceptual review synthesizes findings from five recent empirical studies conducted across diverse sociocultural contexts; Australia, Africa, Indonesia, the United States, and Korea to examine how communication operates simultaneously as a site of power negotiation, relational conflict, and adaptive resilience within contemporary families. Drawing on scholarship on forced marriage, cultural transformation, religious discourse, work–family conflict, and intergenerational relationships, the article identifies recurring communicative dynamics, including moral coercion, emotional labor, gendered expectations, and institutional strain. The analysis demonstrates that while contemporary marriage is increasingly characterized by instability and negotiation, family relationships often persist through adaptive communicative practices. The article advances a theoretically integrated framework that positions communication as the central infrastructure of contemporary marriage and family life, contributing to scholarship in family communication and relationship studies.

Keywords: Family Communication; Marriage; Power Negotiation; Emotional Labor; Intergenerational Relationships; Work–Family Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Marriage and family are not merely social institutions but fundamentally communicative systems through which meanings, identities, power relations, and moral obligations are continuously constituted and contested (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Gottman, 1994). In contemporary societies, these institutions are undergoing profound transformation due to modernization, globalization, legal reform, and shifting gender ideologies

(Cherlin, 2004). As a result, marriage is increasingly less governed by stable normative frameworks and more by ongoing interpersonal negotiation.

These transformations have intensified tensions surrounding authority, autonomy, emotional responsibility, and intergenerational obligation. Power within families is no longer exercised primarily through formal hierarchy but increasingly through discourse, emotional positioning, moral claims, and relational expectations (Connell, 2005; Hochschild, 1989). Consequently, communication has become the central arena in which contemporary marital and familial life is organized, contested, and repaired.

Importantly, marital challenges are rarely confined to the dyad. Instead, they are embedded within broader family systems involving parents, adult children, extended kin, religious institutions, workplaces, and the state. This article advances an integrative conceptual review of five recent empirical studies conducted across diverse sociocultural contexts to examine how communication operates simultaneously as a mechanism of power negotiation, relational conflict, and adaptive resilience in contemporary family and marriage systems.

This article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it advances a theoretically integrated framework linking family communication, gendered power, and institutional change. Second, it demonstrates how diverse empirical phenomena, ranging from forced marriage to work–family conflict—can be understood as manifestations of a shared communicative logic of negotiation. Third, it positions communication not merely as a relational skill but as the central infrastructure of contemporary marriage and family life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Family Communication, Power, and Institutional Change

From a family communication perspective, families are best understood not as static structures but as dynamic, meaning-making systems constituted through everyday interaction (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Relational roles, moral obligations, and authority claims are continuously produced and reproduced through communicative practices rather than merely inherited from institutional norms.

This interactional view aligns with Connell's (2005) theory of gendered power relations and Hochschild's (1989) concept of emotional labor, both of which illuminate how inequality and obligation are sustained through discourse, affect, and relational work. In contemporary marriage, power increasingly operates through subtle mechanisms such as moral

persuasion, emotional pressure, and normative expectations rather than through explicit coercion.

Conflict Communication Patterns: Insights from the CPQ

An important extension of this framework is provided by the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), which systematically assesses how couples employ interaction strategies during conflict. The CPQ distinguishes between symmetrical patterns (e.g., mutual withdrawal) and complementary patterns (e.g., demand-withdraw), thereby operationalizing the relational dynamics through which authority, emotional labor, and resilience are negotiated.

The CPQ identifies three subscales; Demand-Withdraw Communication, Demand-Withdraw Role, and Mutual Constructive Communication. Each of which illuminates critical aspects of marital negotiation. Demand-withdraw dynamics, often marked by one partner pressing for change while the other retreats, exemplify how power asymmetries and avoidance can destabilize relational dialogue. This resonates with Connell's (2005) analysis of gendered power relations, as demand-withdraw patterns frequently reflect entrenched gender expectations. Conversely, the mutual constructive communication subscale, strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction, underscores Baxter and Braithwaite's (2010) view of families as meaning-making systems sustained through reciprocity and dialogue.

The CPQ's three-phase structure (initiation, escalation, resolution) further emphasizes the temporal dimension of conflict negotiation. Communication patterns evolve across phases, reflecting both adaptive resilience and institutional strain. For example, mutual withdrawal during escalation may preserve short-term harmony but erode long-term intimacy, while constructive engagement during resolution fosters ethical dialogue and relational repair. These findings reinforce Hochschild's (1989) argument that emotional labor is central to sustaining family life, as couples must continually balance avoidance, confrontation, and constructive negotiation.

By integrating CPQ insights into the broader theoretical framework, communication patterns emerge as both diagnostic of relational strain and predictive of marital satisfaction. More importantly, they provide empirical grounding for the claim advanced in this review: that communication constitutes the central infrastructure of contemporary marriage and family systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an integrative conceptual review design, synthesizing findings from five recent empirical studies conducted across diverse sociocultural contexts; Australia, Africa, Indonesia, the United States, and Korea. The selection of studies was guided by their relevance to contemporary family and marriage systems, with particular emphasis on themes of power negotiation, communicative conflict, and adaptive resilience. Sources were identified through targeted searches in peer-reviewed journals and databases, focusing on research published between 2024 and 2025 to ensure contemporaneity. Each study was examined for its theoretical orientation, methodological approach, and key findings, allowing for cross-contextual comparison and thematic integration. The review was anchored in established frameworks of family communication, gendered power relations, emotional labor, and institutional change, ensuring that the synthesis was theoretically robust and conceptually coherent.

The analytic process followed a thematic synthesis approach, wherein recurring communicative dynamics; such as moral coercion, emotional labor, gendered expectations, and institutional strain; were identified and compared across cases. Particular attention was given to how communication functioned as both a site of conflict and a mechanism of resilience, enabling families to navigate tensions between tradition and individualization, authority and mutuality, and obligation and choice.

The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) was incorporated as a conceptual tool to operationalize conflict interaction strategies, linking empirical findings to measurable constructs such as demand-withdraw and mutual constructive communication. By integrating empirical evidence with theoretical models, this methodology advances a unified framework that positions communication as the central infrastructure of contemporary marriage and family life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Family Communication, Authority, and Coercion in Marriage

The most explicit manifestation of communicative power asymmetry appears in contexts of forced marriage. Nelson and Burn (2025) demonstrate that in the Australian context, coercion into marriage rarely operates through overt violence alone. Instead, it is embedded in dense relational networks characterized by emotional closeness, moral obligation, and cultural expectation.

Their findings indicate that family communication frequently functions as a vehicle for moral persuasion, emotional pressure, and

normative framing. Importantly, even in cases of severe constraint, parent-child relationships often persist, albeit in transformed and emotionally demanding forms. This underscores a central paradox of family communication: the same relational bonds that enable care and solidarity can also be mobilized as instruments of control.

Cultural Transformation and Gendered Negotiation in Marriage

Madondo et al. (2025) document how traditional African marriage systems are being reconfigured under pressures of economic precarity, women's increased financial autonomy, legal reform, and cultural globalization. These shifts destabilize long-standing communicative norms concerning gender roles, bridewealth, and familial authority.

As women's agency expands, communication within families increasingly reflects negotiation rather than compliance. However, this transition also generates intergenerational tension, particularly where traditional expectations remain symbolically powerful but materially difficult to sustain. Communication breakdowns, in this context, reflect not merely interpersonal disagreement but deeper contradictions between institutional legacies and social change.

Religious Discourse, Mutuality, and Ethical Communication

In religious contexts, marital communication is often structured by normative discourses emphasizing duty, hierarchy, and moral authority. Hadiyansyah et al. (2025) critique the dominance of legalistic fiqh discourse in Indonesian discussions of marital harmony, arguing that it constrains dialogical engagement and marginalizes relational ethics.

Their proposed Integrative-Mubadalah Fiqh Framework reorients marriage toward reciprocity, mutuality, and shared moral agency. From a family communication perspective, this represents a shift from hierarchical instruction to ethical dialogue, positioning communication as a moral practice rather than merely a regulatory mechanism.

Work-Family Conflict and Institutional Strain

Structural pressures also profoundly shape family communication. Schumm et al. (2025) show that among U.S. military officers, work-family conflict is strongly associated with diminished marital satisfaction. Communication strain emerges not primarily from interpersonal dysfunction but from institutional demands that constrain emotional availability and role participation.

This finding aligns with Cherlin's (2004) argument that contemporary marriage increasingly depends on intensive emotional and communicative labor. As external supports weaken, couples are required to perform ever greater relational work simply to maintain functional stability.

Intergenerational Communication and Emotional Support

Lim-Soh et al. (2025) demonstrate that intergenerational communication in Korea is undergoing a gradual shift from son-preferential to more gender-balanced patterns of contact. This transformation reflects broader cultural redefinitions of care, obligation, and emotional closeness.

Notably, mediated communication plays a crucial role in sustaining intergenerational bonds, particularly in contexts of aging and declining health. Communication technologies thus emerge not merely as tools of contact but as infrastructures of emotional continuity.

Taken together, the reviewed studies reveal that contemporary marriage is increasingly characterized by communicative negotiation rather than normative stability. Across contexts of coercion, cultural change, religious authority, occupational strain, and intergenerational transition, families are required to manage persistent tensions between tradition and individualization, authority and mutuality, and obligation and choice. These patterns strongly corroborate Cherlin's (2004) thesis of deinstitutionalization and Baxter and Braithwaite's (2010) view of family as a communicative system. At the same time, these negotiations remain deeply structured by gendered power relations (Connell, 2005) and unequal distributions of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1989). Even in the absence of overt coercion, authority frequently operates through moral discourse and affective pressure.

An additional layer of insight emerges when considering patterns of communication during conflict, as operationalized by the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). The demand-withdraw pattern, in which one partner presses for change while the other retreats, exemplifies how relational asymmetries can perpetuate cycles of avoidance and dissatisfaction. This dynamic resonates with findings on forced marriage and cultural transformation, where moral persuasion and withdrawal often substitute for explicit negotiation. Conversely, the mutual constructive communication pattern, strongly correlated with relationship satisfaction, reflects the adaptive capacity of families to sustain resilience through dialogue, reciprocity, and ethical reframing. These communication patterns provide a measurable framework that links micro-level interaction strategies to macro-level institutional pressures, demonstrating that relational satisfaction is not merely contingent on cultural or structural change but on the everyday communicative practices couples employ to navigate conflict.

By integrating CPQ-derived constructs into the broader analysis, the discussion underscores that communication patterns are both diagnostic of

relational strain and predictive of marital resilience. Families that rely on constructive engagement are better positioned to adapt to institutional demands and cultural transitions, while those entrenched in demand-withdraw cycles risk perpetuating instability and emotional exhaustion. Thus, communication patterns serve as the connective tissue between theoretical models of power, emotional labor, and institutional change, reinforcing the central claim of this review: that communication is the infrastructure through which contemporary marriage and family life is negotiated, contested, and sustained.

CONCLUSION

This integrative conceptual review demonstrates that contemporary challenges in marriage and family life are fundamentally communicative in nature. As institutional regulation weakens and relational expectations intensify, families increasingly rely on communication to negotiate authority, obligation, intimacy, and continuity.

By synthesizing empirical evidence across diverse cultural contexts and anchoring it in established theories of family communication, gender, and institutional change, this article advances a unified conceptual framework for understanding marriage as a dynamic communicative system. Future research, particularly in Southeast Asian and Malaysian contexts, should further examine how local moral worlds intersect with global structural transformations to reshape marital and familial negotiation.

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