“Family Rituals and Communication: The Construction of Family Identity and Social Capital” by Carol (Sessler) Bruess ’90 and Anna Kudak.

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Introduction to Family Ritual: Creating Family Culture and Identity

The idea of ritual often conjures images of religious or anthropological practices; in early studies, ritual did frequently imply magic, myth, or taboo. However, family ritual as central in constructing family social capital refers to all acts of communication – from the routine family dinner to the celebratory family holiday traditions – which pay homage to something that is sacred, such as a person, relationship, object, or event. As “symbolically significant” interactions, rituals become important places where family “business” is indeed accomplished, including the work of keeping in touch, updating each other on daily events, sharing fleeting (or ongoing) emotions, creating and perpetuating family identity, expressing positive or negative regard, touching base, planning, organizing, coordinating schedules, and transmitting family values between generations, among multiple other functions. Family rituals, from the mundane to the celebratory, reflect the dynamic lives of 21st century families. Rituals are particularly important for family members who also share a business. In many ways, family identity is expressed in family communicative and ritual activity. Family identity – those beliefs, values, norms, rules and expectations shared among members – is also sustained by family rituals.

Most relationship scholars in the field of communication agree that maintaining a relationship, the work it takes to keep a relationship going, is the most important work of all. The communicative strategies people use for sustaining long-term relationships – especially those most intimate and complex relationships of family – hinge on daily communication and the joint development of a family relational culture. Families are mini-cultures in which we develop our own language, rules, worldviews, identities, customs, and rituals. Created in and through communication, a family’s relationship culture – similar to Sorenson, Goodpaster, Hedberg, and Yu’s notion of a “family point of view” – is a co-constructed and shared perspective. Based on a family’s common moral convictions as well as from a jointly constructed identity and repetitive, symbolically significant experiences (commonly known as family rituals), a shared and strong family culture is a basis for shared dialogue that has meaningful applications in family business.

From the communication discipline comes a perspective on family and symbolic interaction that places meaning construction at the center of study; communication is viewed not merely as a tool used by family members to build business, create dialogue, and/or negotiate conflict. Rather, family is formed in and through the daily, routine, and
mundane communication of members. Through a communicative lens, families are symbolic systems in which interactions – large and small, celebratory and routine – compose our understanding of self, other, and the world. For members who also share a family business, such compositions have an even greater stake. As one of the single most illustrative and important types of symbolic family interaction, family rituals allow members to examine and reflect on family communication dynamics. Family rituals, for instance, serve as powerful sites of the routine conversation and communication that creates our individual and collective relationship identities. In total, family rituals have a host of positive functions and provide many opportunities for building and sustaining family social capital. Let’s take a closer look first at some of the meaning-making activities in which rituals are developed, then explore the way rituals might be used to consciously shape family and family member identity.

**Manifestations of Family Ritual: Family Rules, Patterns, Images and Stories**

The study of family communication has grown rapidly in the past decade; from multiple disciplinary perspectives, our understanding of both macro and micro communicative variables is stronger than ever. From a meaning-making perspective, the building of family capital is similar to the construction of a strong family culture. The complexity of a family system increases the range of possible interpretations within that system. In such a system, family rules, communication patterns, images, stories, and rituals serve as ongoing central communicative acts through which family identity is created and sustained. As communicative enactments, rituals build identity development; they are created in and through – manifestations of – a family's rules, image of self and members, and stories. In so many ways, “ritual is a genre of communication events.” Rituals specifically, and communication more generally, are “performances” of family identity. Let’s take a look at how this process works.

**Family Rules as Ritual**

One of the primary ways that families develop their sense of identity is through shared rules. As shared understandings of what communication means and what is expected behavior in certain situations, rules are central to family functioning and even more so for families sharing a business. All families develop rules for interaction in the family, although family rules are often unstated. Think of some of the rules guiding what you are not allowed to talk about in your family. Common taboo topics in families include discussion of family finances or sexual activity. Where and when did you learn such rules? Most of us learn these rules over time through observation of other family members or because we actually broke the rule. Not all rules are implicit and learned only through experience or observation; some rules in the family are explicit rules: “Do not talk back to your mother!”

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**Communication Patterns and Behaviors as Ritual**
What can his findings tell us about improving family social capital? We believe quite a bit. ... Happy couples were those that maintained a five to one ratio of positive to negative moments in their relationship. It didn’t matter if couples fought a lot or very little, or had great passion or very little; what did matter was the overall balance (5 to 1) of positive to negative interactions. This seems like a meaningful concept as we consider social capital.

The second striking conclusion of Gottman’s research, and which also has easy application to family communication choices, is that all forms of negativity are not equal. Gottman and his team found that certain negative communication behaviors are more toxic than others and should, as he says, be “outlawed” from our relationships. These five particularly corrosive behaviors work like a cancer in our interactions, destroying the relationships and the goodwill between its members. They are: 1) Criticism: evaluating and judging the other person in an interaction, 2) Defensiveness: responding in an oppositional manner that does not acknowledge the other person’s ideas or opinions, 3) Contempt: the act of despising or communicating a lack of respect for another person. Gottman suggests that a simple nonverbal behavior such as the “roll of the eyes” can communicate contempt in a relationship. 4) Stonewalling: removing oneself physically or emotionally from an interaction, like putting up a stone wall. Eighty-five percent of stonewallers in Gottman’s research were male. And 5) Belligerence: acting in a hostile or combative manner, as if looking for a fight.

Family Image as Ritual

Families also develop a shared identity, and greater social capital, by creating a shared image. Metaphorically, a family image is an understood or created likeness; it reflects what the family is like, what is expected in the family, how important family is, patterns of communication among members, and between members and the outside world. Family images and metaphors construct the reality of family members.

What image do you have of your family? Do you see your family as a football team, a concert band, characters in a comedy skit, waves in an ocean, or the components of a salad? Is your image reflected in the mission statement or daily practices of your
Family Stories as Ritual

A cornerstone of family communication research is found in the literature on family stories and storytelling. As a means for creating family identity and sharing meaning, stories reveal and build family capital. As ritual activities in families, they shape our families in ways often unnoticed until a primary storyteller is gone or until decades after the event inspiring the story has passed.

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Changing Your Family Rituals Toward (Re)Constructing Your Family Identity

Without ritual interaction, our families would lack many intricate, delicate, multi-vocal, multi-layered, sometimes painful but always powerful interactions, negotiations, and creations of identity. Rituals are pivotal yet often mundane acts of family identity, unveiling themselves through cues both big and small, each a kind of “moral commentary about what is valued, or an expressive hope for what could be.”xxi Knowingly or not, families use rituals to create and recreate family identity, consciously and unconsciously relying on them through both the spectacular and the banal events of every family’s life. But can we intentionally change our rituals to enhance, alter, and/or recreate our family’s identity? Yes, yes, and yes. However, such work – because it is relational work – is often emotional and not immediately or clearly successful; it can also cause upheaval as the family system tries to adjust and respond to change.

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Here, let’s review those findings most useful toward our goal of creating, sustaining, and transforming family identity in the context of family business.

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Replacing Negative Rituals with Positive Rituals

Clearly, rituals play an essential role in the positive development of individuals and families.xxii xxiii ... Although ritual is recognized in research as an overwhelmingly positive act, rituals can also come to feel like obligations, reflect outdated tradition, feel empty or uncomfortable, and/or represent negative patterns of interaction not welcome by all members.

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Because rituals – especially those reflecting our patterns of interaction – are often tightly woven into the fabric of our daily lives, we often don’t recognize when and how they are perceived by others. A negative ritual can often open the door – once recognized – for a more positive and productive communicative act.

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Changing Rituals that Prioritize Business Over Family

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As in the lesson above – replacing a negative ritual with a positive one – when rituals no longer “celebrate common family identity” in a way that all family members wish, they should be examined, changed, or abandoned. Here’s an instructive example:

Joanne, the family matriarch, began to notice that holiday gatherings were filled with discussions about the business. She became increasingly concerned that the business was taking precedent and being viewed as “more important” than the family. More and more, she worried that establishing congenial family relationships was no longer a priority. Finally, she decided to take a stand and create a new rule: No discussion about business at family holiday gatherings! The focus of holiday gatherings would be on fun and enjoying the relationships among members, not discussing business successes, challenges, and opportunities. Period.

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Restructuring Family Communication Toward Changing Family Identity and Roles

Classic ritual researchers Bossard and Boll made the poignant suggestion that ritual is "the core of family culture." As we've been seeing time and again in this chapter, most researchers believe rituals are not only communicative enactments themselves, but create and sustain the identities, communication patterns, and roles in families. When such patterns and/or roles become troublesome and/or no longer serve positive functions for some or many members, change is not only desirable, but necessary if the family business is to succeed.

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Challenging and Changing Family Images, Rules and Norms

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Rituals are “expressive of social relations,” depicting not only the norms of family life and thus the images families create of themselves, but cultural norms for members as well. Although we each – as family business members and individuals in
families – are situated within a larger cultural system, we can work to change those roles and images in our own family systems by challenging the assumptions by which they are created and sustained.

_Using Ritual and Communication to Protect Family from Alcoholism_

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For families who have had or are currently experiencing alcoholism, it is probably not a surprise that any illness, especially alcoholism, “can become a powerful organizer of family life, altering the details of daily routines as well as special occasions.”xxvii Bennett and colleagues found that in families where rituals were sustained and kept intact (e.g., the family dinnertime ritual and other similar patterned daily interactions), children were less likely to continue the alcoholic tendencies in their own adult lives. Rituals act as buffers, giving members a sense of predictability and stability. They organize family life. They also provide opportunities for support from other family members to confront – instead of enabling – the alcoholic’s ability to control or dominate interactions and behaviors.

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_Conclusion_

What do we learn here? First, families are constructions of our own making, requiring a mindful, knowledge-driven approach to their maintenance and success. Second, family rituals are commonly underestimated and overlooked; as decades of research supports, family rituals are some of the most powerful sites of rich and meaningful family interaction, and are primary contributors to family identity. Third, building a strong family culture is essential, and we are wise to be deliberate about the process, giving attention to language development, rule structures, our daily patterns of negativity and positivity, and to the stories that sustain our legacies and satisfy our needs to create identity as part of a family group. For all family members – especially those working together in business – conscious attention to making and maintaining a strong family is difficult and ceaseless, yet fruitful and highly satisfying work. From a communicative perspective, making smart choices toward effective and constructive – not mindless and destructive – communication is essential to success and satisfaction. We hope you learned a bit more about the former and will apply these lessons in your own family and business. Working toward an improved communication climate in our families will, no doubt, provide a high return on our investment. As Bossard and Boll (1950) long ago suggested: _Just as those religions with the most elaborate and pervasive rituals best retain the allegiance of their members, so families that do things together prove to be the most stable ones_ xxviii (foreword)._


xiii L. A. Baxter & D. O. Braithwaite, “Family Rituals,” in The Family Communication


xxi L. A. Baxter & D. O. Braithwaite, 259-280.

xxii L. A. Baxter & D. O. Braithwaite, 259-280.

xxiii Fiese, et al., 381-390.


xxv J. H. S. Bossard & E. S. Boll, 463-469.

xxvi L. A. Baxter & D. O. Braithwaite, 259-280.

References


Family Perspectives, 23, 75-83.


