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# A Study of Communication in Baby Boomers' Romantic Relationships and the Effects of their Children's Communication about the Relationships

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A STUDY OF COMMUNICATION IN BABY BOOMERS' ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS  
AND THE EFFECTS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE  
RELATIONSHIPS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study contributes to our knowledge of life-span communication by examining the communication of the Baby Boomer generation (born 1946-1964) as they re-enter the dating scene. Although Baby Boomers' early years of dating (the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's) occurred in a time of new-found freedom, especially in sexual relationships, the experience of dating several decades later brings many complications due to aging and children. The intent of this study was not to generalize that all Baby Boomers would express the views stated in this study, but to show the complexity of this generation, and to present a theoretical framework for better understanding communication in their romantic relationships, and with their adult children.

Information gathered in this research fills an important gap in the information about this generation. Although previous studies have examined romantic communication of much younger or older subjects, the current study employs a life-span perspective with extended interviews of twenty-four men and women age 46-64, to examine changes in communication from the respondents' early years of dating to mid-life. Results indicated that numerous changes in romantic communication and behavior have occurred, especially in the areas of communication channels, use of technology, and physical romance.

Bowen Family Systems Theory (1966) and Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management Theory were used as a framework to explore how management of communication within the family affects the romantic relationships of single Baby Boomer parents. Results indicate that a poorly differentiated family member can create or amplify privacy boundaries, thus hampering communication within the family unit. Triangulation, the addition of any third person (in this case, the romantic partner of the Baby Boomer parent) to a two-person



relationship (parent and child), can potentially affect the original relationship. Most interviewees indicated that they had open communication with their adult children, but they failed to notice that they were not discussing the parent's romantic relationship. Most of them also stated that their children's opinions about their partners would be noted, but not acted upon. These findings suggest that communication in the family should be carefully monitored when triangulating new persons into relationships.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Baby Boomer Generation**

The Baby Boomer generation has never been known for its calm acceptance of lifestyle advice handed down from earlier generations. It is already evident that the men and women of this generation are negotiating mid-life in different ways than did their parents and grandparents. Mid-life men fight the image of sedentary pre-retirees with thinning hair and a paunch by boldly announcing that “Bald is beautiful.” Cultural stereotypes of middle-aged women as gray-haired, frail, and asexual have been replaced by societal images of strong, active, and sexual women. Because Baby Boomers comprise a large portion of the population and have arrived at middle age, their aging is popularly termed “the graying of America.”

However, even within generations, there are wide variations of groups; for example, both Viet Nam soldiers and the anti-war protesters were Baby Boomers (Rindfleisch, 1994). Stewart and Torges (2006) point out that early Boomers endured endless air raid drills in which children were taught to “duck and cover” in the event of a nuclear attack. Anxiety about the possibility of attack might have shaped some of their ideas about the future and the way they experienced the events of the September 11 attack on America. According to Blieszner and Roberto (2006), leading edge Boomers endured a confusing adolescence in the 1960’s, when America was reeling with enthusiasm about such events as successful launches of space satellites, the discovery of DNA, and the election of John F. Kennedy, but also experiencing civil rights protests and marches, Kennedy’s assassination, and Vietnam War demonstrations. They also experienced young adulthood in the 1970’s, when numerous books about human sexuality were published. In contrast, the younger Baby Boomers were adolescents in the 1980’s when Ronald

Reagan was President, personal computer ownership was on the rise, and international relations, although sometimes strained, did not present any imminent threat. Sex was already more acceptable than it had been for their Baby Boomer predecessors, and life was not quite as turbulent.

Although as individuals they may vary greatly, the Boomer generation has many characteristics which identify it as a unified group. Stewart and Torges (2006) state that as a whole, the Baby Boomers identify more strongly with their own generation than with that of their parents. According to Light (1988) the greatest shared aspect of the Boomers is a lack of commitment. This generation had been told that they could be anything, and a rejection of traditional social roles and labels was part of their liberation. Changes in sex and marriage are major examples of the Boomers' rejection of tradition. Throughout the entire Baby Boomer era of 1946-1964, sexual openness increased. During the 1960's, when leading-edge Baby Boomers were young adults, birth control was becoming successful and easier-to-use. Sex outside of marriage was gaining increasing acceptance, and rates of cohabitation increased dramatically during the 1970's and 80's (Fingerman & Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Leading-edge Boomers (born 1946-1955) entered young adult romantic relationships in a more traditional era for early marriage and parenting, but as societal mores continued to change, more young adults began to delay marriage and create non-married cohabiting unions. The number of persons cohabiting in America has quadrupled since the 1960's. Divorce rates are higher, and a bigger proportion of Americans have never married (Blieszner & Roberto, 2006). In fact, younger Baby Boomers have a slightly lower divorce rate than older Boomers, but that is only because fewer of them are actually getting married (Light, 1988).

A major identifying factor that all Boomers seem to have in common is an aversion to growing older. Over and over, they were told that the youth were the hope of the future and that

they would lead the way, so they began to value their youthfulness as their most powerful characteristic (Smith & Clurman, 2007). Gilleard and Higgs (2007) pointed out that an often-repeated phrase in the 1960's was to "Trust no one over 30," and one popular song of the 1970's stated "I hope I die before I get old" (p. 17). Baby Boomers are now presented with a serious dilemma; they are faced with becoming what they had earlier resisted—getting old.

### **Importance of Studying Baby Boomers' Romantic Communication**

The topic of communication in Baby Boomers' romantic relationships is very timely, because the image of singlehood is ripe for change. Gone are the days when a person of "a certain age" was assumed to be in the domain of widows/widowers and those who were never married. Increases in life expectancy and divorce in recent years promise larger numbers of midlife singles who are ready for fun and romance (Montenegro, 2003). Yet, even with the biggest generation of all time settling in to middle-age, it is recognized that their romantic relationships have been largely neglected by researchers. Malta (2007) states that finding out what is going on in terms of older adults' intimate/romantic relationships has now become a matter of importance, and in the news article "More Demi's than June Cleavers?" (2003, September 29) on the AARP website the author states, "Yet, even as the population ages, we have been remiss in recognizing this growing cohort of older singles, in looking at their lifestyles and needs, and at their behavior as consumers in comparison to singles in their twenties and thirties" (p. 1). The article goes on to state that even with unmarried persons comprising 34 percent of the age group 40-69 in the United States, the literature on them is "... sparse, especially research on their dating and sexual attitudes and behavior" (p. 1).

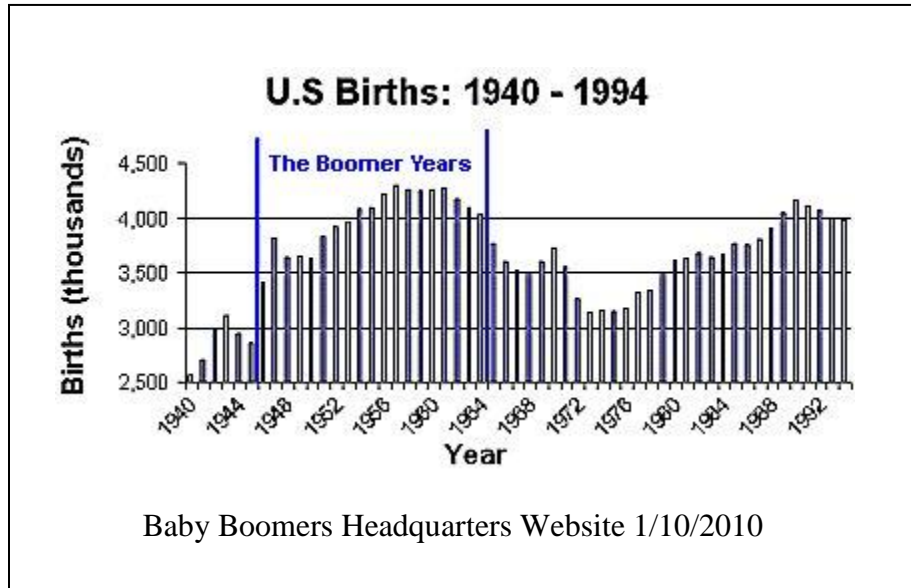
Another reason for the scarcity of research on mid-life daters is that studies on singles and their dating and sexual behavior usually focus on persons younger than thirty, and in looking at romantic communication from a life-span perspective, we must realize that important changes

occur at all stages of development as we continue to gain more life experience. According to Sigelman and Rider (2009), adoption of a life-span perspective causes one to assume that development of the self occurs throughout the life-span and is affected by its historical and cultural context.

The current study is unique in its approach in that it reflects the true spirit of qualitative research. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated, "Fundamentally, qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations" (p. 18). The few studies of Baby Boomers who are dating at midlife, (including Montenegro, 2003 and Fisher, 2010 cited in this dissertation), have used a survey approach or telephone interviews of thousands of persons from midlife to elderly in order to obtain statistical data. The current research involved 24 in-depth interviews with men and women from the "Boomer years" of 1946 to 1964 (see Figure 1.1) in order to determine how dating has changed from their teens and twenties to midlife, and how their communication with their adult children has influenced their romantic relationships. To reach this objective, this study will incorporate the life-span perspective along with Bowen Family Systems Theory (1966) and Communication Privacy Management (2002) to serve as the theoretical framework for this endeavor.

### **Overview of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management**

Bowen Family Systems Theory will provide a lens through which to examine the relationship between Baby Boomers and their adult children when single Boomers become involved with a romantic interest. Bowen Theory consists of eight interlocking concepts used to view the family as an emotional unit or system (Papero, 1990). Two of the concepts—triangulation and differentiation—will be used in this study. Bowen used the term "differentiation" to indicate the degree of separation from the family unit that an individual is



**Figure 1.1. The Boomer Years**

able to achieve in order to develop as an independent being. The parent-child dyad can also experience “triangulation” when another individual (the romantic interest) becomes involved with one of the members of a dyad (parent-child).

Sandra Petronio’s Theory of Communication Privacy Management is an excellent tool for studying the patterns of communication in families. CPM focuses on the person who is making the decision to reveal or conceal information, and on how that decision affects other persons. Persons and groups create boundaries around private information and choose to create co-owners of that information. As Baby Boomers bring another person into a family system through a romantic relationship, decisions must be made about if and how much the relationship will be discussed. The next chapter will describe Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management in more detail, and the Methods chapter will discuss the theories’ uses in the current study.

## **The Upcoming Chapters**

This chapter has been an introduction to the Baby Boomer generation as an important but understudied part of lifespan communication and to the subject of romantic communication during mid-life with the complicating factor of adult children. Chapter 2 will review the important literature relevant to romantic communication among older and mid-life persons and to the theories used as a framework for this study: the Life-span Perspective, Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in the study, including a description of the participants, the research questions, and the procedure used to obtain and evaluate the results. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4, and the final chapter provides a discussion of the results, limitations of the study, and suggestions for areas of future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter will review the relevant literature about relationships and communication of Baby Boomers in mid-life. While numerous studies exist which target the romantic relationships of other populations, such as dating among college students, communication in married relationships, and even romance among the elderly, few studies have specifically used the Baby Boomer generation as a focal point. The current study is unique in that the participants all fall into the understudied category of middle-age (specifically 46-64 years of age). The chapter will also introduce the Family Systems Theory of Murray Bowen (1966) and the Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory of Sandra Petronio (2002) which are used as a framework for analyzing the information collected in this qualitative study.

First, we will look at studies and relevant information about romantic relationships among older persons in general, including their use of personal ads and online dating. Secondly, the chapter will cover the romantic lives and communication of Baby Boomers. The third part of this literature review will discuss family communication concerning relationships and will serve as a lead-in to the final two sections, which discuss Family Systems Theory and CPM.

#### **Romantic Relationships of Older Adults**

Numerous studies examine romantic communication, but most of them involve much older or much younger subjects than Baby Boomers, or they specifically study sexuality among older persons. What all of the studies seem to have in common, however, is that intimacy is important at all stages of life. The following sections present research that involves older persons who do not necessarily fit the category of Baby Boomers and could have some bearing



on the present study, including the topics of women and dating, sexuality, friendships, remarriage, and the use of technology in romantic relationships.

### Women

Many Baby Boomer women had once been angry daughters who blamed their stay-at-home mothers for not being role models as career women. Their mothers' generation also remained in unsatisfying marriages because a monogamous lifetime marriage was the ideal of the time (Bergquist, 1993). Now many of these same daughters are mid-life women who, either by choice or circumstance, are living alone and dating in a new era. They now face challenges and opportunities for which the previous generation of women did not leave any clues. Most of the extant research about older women and dating involves their lives after widowhood, single women's perceptions about dating, and their preferences concerning dating partners and the possibility of marriage. Although these studies involve women who are older than Baby Boomers, the research presents relevant information about women dating later in life.

The goal of Moorman, Booth, and Fingerman's 2006 study was to examine decisions women make about their romantic lives after widowhood. They used data from the Americans' Changing Lives Study of 3,617 widowed and remarried Americans, most of whom were born between 1891 and 1926. The researchers found that these women base their decisions on individual needs and desires as well as attributes and availability of partners. Women who were more unhappy or anxious desired more male companionship, whereas those with higher incomes and who were less anxious did not worry about remarriage. Also, this study indicated that happy women are less likely to be interested in remarriage because they do not feel as much societal pressure to marry, and that there is a difference between "should" and "want" to get married. Another study of older persons who had suffered the death of a spouse was conducted by Davidson (2002). The researcher studied friendship and partner networks of widows and

widowers over age 65 in the United Kingdom. The study focused on the problems encountered with forging new friendships, and how men and women differ in their approaches. The friendship networks developed by older persons tend to be age- and gender- specific. Many of the widows were living by themselves for the first time, and found being alone to be liberating. The older men, on the other hand, felt more of a sense of deprivation after a life of being cared for by a woman.

Perceptions of dating by women in later-life were studied by Dickson, Hughes, and Walker (2005). This study revealed some particularly negative perceptions about dating, such as “The Nurse with the Purse” trend, used to describe men who just wanted someone to take care of them and provide money. Women also complained about the limited number of men available, and the feeling that they would have to accept a less than ideal partner. A study conducted for AARP (Montenegro, 2003) also indicated that women complained about men carrying a lot of “baggage” and that it was difficult for women to discover how or where to meet new men.

Another study of older women’s insights into relationship preferences was done by Levesque and Caron (2004). The researchers determined that the criteria for relational partners need to be revised, since women’s responses indicate that they are not necessarily looking for marriage or a long-term relationship. More specifically, older women reported that they wish to maintain their independence, and are not necessarily interested in someone who could provide financial stability. They are looking, instead, for someone to enhance their lives. Levesque and Caron also indicated that research tends to center on older women rather than older men. Lack of research on what older men want in a relationship leaves the possibility that men’s criteria may have changed from their stereotypical desire for younger, less-educated women.

Hurd (2006) studied 24 women age 52-90 who were remarried after age 50. She found that there was a shift from emphasis on sexual intercourse and passion to companionship and

non-sexual intimacy. Hurd also found that there was a significant tendency to have more positive sexual experiences in their later years than in their first marriages. This concurs with an earlier study by Bograd and Spilka (1996), who studied self-disclosure and marital satisfaction in mid-life and late-life marriages. They discovered that marital satisfaction was greater in late-life marriages than in middle-age marriages, and was higher for men than for women.

### Sexuality

Although the focus of the current study is on communication in romantic relationships, the importance of sexual intimacy cannot be ignored. Gott and Hinchliff (2003) collected accounts from men and women 50-92 in which the respondents rated the importance of sex. They found that the only participants who did not consider sex to be important were those who either did not have a current sexual partner, or felt that they would not have another sexual partner in their lifetime. They also discovered that most participants who had a current sexual partner considered sex to be 'very' or 'extremely' important. However, because getting older means that there are more barriers to being sexually active, some respondents placed less importance on sex when health problems were experienced. These same researchers (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008) interviewed 19 women over age 50 in the United Kingdom, and discovered that the women are re-positioning themselves against the stereotype of women losing interest in sex after menopause. These women wish to be known as sexually complex creatures who are more self-confident and desirous of sex.

The importance of sexuality among older adults is shown by the recurrence of AARP national surveys on mid-life and older persons in 1999, 2004, and 2009. Since the Baby Boomer generation has officially aged its way into AARP in the latest survey, the 2009 report "Sex, Romance, and Relationships: AARP Survey of Midlife and Older Adults" (Geraci, 2010) is discussed in this chapter's section on Baby Boomers' Romantic Relationships.

Along with active sex lives among older persons comes an increase in the incidence of HIV/AIDS. Levy-Dweck (2005) warns gerontologists and social workers that they should work to intervene due to the large numbers of Baby Boomers who will soon be entering the ranks of the elderly and to the increased availability of erectile dysfunction medication.

### Dating and Friendships

Some researchers have examined dating satisfaction across the lifespan. Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986) studied persons age sixty-plus who were currently dating (because of the date of this article, these persons were not Baby Boomers) to determine the importance of dating to the quality of life of older people. Findings reveal that many older persons consider dating to be a means of companionship, rather than of passion, but a dating partner could provide an emotional and sexual outlet that regular friendships could not. The researchers also discovered that for many people, dating in later life does not have marriage as an intention. Data also indicated that older men felt that dating was a means for self-disclosure and a hedge against loneliness.

In another study, Antonucci, Lansford, and Akiyama (2001) looked at the importance of marital relationships and friendships on the well-being of older adults age 60-91. They found that the degree of importance was directly related to the depth of the relationships, and that the absence of family is less detrimental when one has a network of friends.

### Remarriage

Cooney and Dunne (2001) confirmed that marital satisfaction was higher among older adults. The researchers also found that older remarried adults feel more secure about their marriages because most *middle-age* remarriages are the result of divorce, but most *older* (older than middle-age) persons remarry because they have suffered the death of a spouse in a long-term marriage. Cooney and Dunne stated that gender creates a significant difference in the way

older adults approach singlehood, because it is easier for single men to go out alone, and men have a larger number of eligible partners than do women. They predicted that in the future older men and women (the Baby Boomers) may date more because more of them will not have experienced a single, long-term marriage. These same adults will have experienced more pre-marital sex and cohabitation, so more sexual intimacy between older adults is expected.

Similar findings were discovered by Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007). They stated that remarriage is more common after divorce than after the death of a spouse. In addition, late-life marriage is often complicated by health problems and potential complications with one's estate. Of those older persons who do wish to remarry, more are widowers than widows. The researchers agreed that older women are less likely to date than older men, mostly because there are not as many choices available for partners, but also because they do not wish to lose their personal or financial independence. An attractive alternative for some women is called "living apart together" (LAT), an arrangement that is common in Northern and Western Europe. Karlsson and Borell (2002) define LAT as a long-term committed relationship that does not involve cohabitation and state that the women in the LAT relationships that they studied value their own residences as a protection against the expected duties of their gender in a marriage. "Having a home of one's own acts as a demarcation for the distribution of domestic labor" (p. 18).

Researchers in another study (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991) examined dating in subjects over age 60 using data from over 13,000 households in the United States in 1987 and 1988 in the National Survey of Families and Households. Since the study was in 1991, the participants were not Baby Boomers. Bulcroft and Bulcroft argued that older persons are a distinctly different population from studies done on college students and that dating over age 60 does not necessarily culminate in remarriage. In fact, several women in the study mentioned that they did

not want to be in a traditional marriage role again. As mentioned in a previous study (Bulcroft & O'Connor, 1986), dating among older persons is primarily for companionship, rather than mate selection, but about 90% of the participants in the study were sexually active.

### Technology

Older adults have made use of technology to search for and communicate with romantic interests. Several scholarly articles examine these trends in communication, including personal ads in newspapers, Internet personal ads, and online dating sites and services.

Coupland (2000) found that in newspaper personal ads, older adults put less emphasis on sexuality and physical attributes than did younger adults. The researcher examined 100 written dating advertisements in the UK by individuals over 50 in 1999. The ads were found to be more friendship-related than geared toward intimacy.

In another study of personal ads, Jagger (2005) attempted to analyze newspaper ads in terms of differences in age and gender. He used a sample of 1094 advertisers with a mean age of 36.4 years. The researcher found that many older women continued to seek approval from males in terms of body image and performance, while others “disembodied” themselves by concentrating the words in their ads on their minds and outlooks. In general, the data suggested that individuals are negotiating their identities according to societal standards.

Alterovitz and Mendelsohn (2009) analyzed 600 Internet personal ads from four age groups: 20-34, 40-54, 60-74, and 75+ years. (At the time of this study, Baby Boomers would fall into the 40-54 and 60-74 age groups.) Using evolutionary psychology as a theoretical framework, the researchers studied whether males still seek physical attractiveness and offer status-related information, and whether women continue to be more selective and seek status in a romantic partner, even after they are past their reproductive years. The researchers found that across the life-span, individuals continue to seek partners according to evolutionary theory, and

that with age, men looked for women increasingly younger than themselves, while women desire older men until age 75, when they seek younger men.

With advances in technology, romantic partner searches have progressed from newspaper advertising in the personal ads to advertising for partners in Internet ads, to full-fledged online dating sites. In a study of the relative representation and satisfaction of different age groups (175 adults from age 18-64) participating in online dating sites, Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, and Deveau (2009) predicted that older adults who had experienced more divorce and separation than younger dating adults would be more likely to want to screen and select potential dating partners through personal ads and Internet dating sites. The researchers also predicted that since older adults are more fixed in their tastes, they would take advantage of the ability of online sites to restrict and filter out particular undesirable qualities. The researchers discovered that 70 percent of their participants did, in fact, use online dating for the purposes they had predicted, and that use of Internet dating increases rather than decreases with age.

In order to study older adults' use of the Internet and their sexuality in relationships, Malta (2007) conducted interviews with a sample of adults aged 61-85 who had used the Internet to meet potential romantic partners. The researcher discovered that the relationships described by the participants were meaningful and intimate, and that older adults were also involved in flirting and sexual activity.

### **Baby Boomer Romantic Relationships**

Although academic evidence is still not abundant, many popular press articles provide an indication that adults in mid-life and beyond *are* actively looking for romantic relationships, both on- and offline. In a 2003 study conducted for *AARP: The Magazine*: "Lifestyles, Dating and Romance- A Study of Midlife Singles" researcher Xenia Montenegro stated that the image of single men and women in midlife has changed drastically as members of the Baby Boomer

generation liberalize sexual attitudes. The study included 3501 single men and women aged 40-69, of which the most common reason for being single was divorce, followed by the never married, with widows and separated persons as a small minority of singles. Questions relevant to this study included their attitudes about being single, their dating attitudes and behaviors, the people they would like to date or not date, and their sexual attitudes and behaviors. Responses to these items have been included in the results section of the current study as a means of comparison to the current sample.

An updated AARP study by Fisher, Anderson, Chapagain, Montenegro, Smoot, and Takalkar in 2009 was summarized by Ron Geraci (2010). Using a random sample of 1670 Americans ages 45 and older, the researchers found that between 2004 and 2009, the percentage of people in their 50's who engage in frequent sexual activity, hugging, kissing, and caressing took a 10-point drop for both sexes. According to Geraci, probable causes for decreased affection may be increased stress and financial woes. Survey participants indicated that single persons of that age group have more sex and better love lives than their married counterparts. Professor of Sociology, Dr. Pepper Schwartz commented about this statistic: "When people are dating, they are 'auditioning.' [Married couples] get functional about sex instead of seductive" (p. 3).

### **Communicating about Relationships within the Family**

Communication within the families of Baby Boomers will become a major area of concern as Boomers grow older and increasing numbers of their children become adults. As related to the current study, family communication will be further complicated as divorced Boomers become involved in dating and attempt to discuss their romantic relationships with their children. Most existing studies about this type of family communication either involve younger children still living at home or examine the children's communication about their parents'



relationships with each other. The studies presented in this section concern family communication about relationships among and about parents and children.

Shapiro (2003) states that there is good reason to examine the consequences of divorce for older persons and their children. Increasing numbers of divorced and unmarried persons living together, along with lower rates of remarriage imply that adult children may be called upon to support their parents. For the minority of divorcees who do remarry, the question of the children's inheritance becomes a major factor in acceptance or rejection of their parents' relationships. Shapiro suggests that when divorce occurs later in the children's lives, there is a more stable relationship between parents and children than if the divorce had occurred earlier. The researcher collected data from men and women who had at least one adult child who lived outside the parental home and who were either divorced or remarried. Since divorce often frees one or both parents geographically, children must now divide their time between parents in sometimes distant locations. Findings showed that divorce is not associated with substantial changes in the physical distance between adult children and their parents, but a divorce makes it less likely that an older father will co-reside with his adult children.

Giordano (1988) studied relationships between Baby-Boomers and their parents. He found that Boomers' parents have more stable marriages, but the complexity of their children's divorces and remarriages would create stress in the parent-child relationship. He also noted that parents of Boomers have a great sense of responsibility for their adult children, and that an increased sharing of households as parents aged would increase relationship stress. Further complications in family relationships were addressed by Pillemer and Sutor (1998). They discussed the many new forms of families, such as single-parent, cohabitation, and gay-lesbian, and how older persons and adult children are searching for new ways to relate to one another. New types of families create new challenges in family communication.

A four-month, longitudinal study of college students (Leslie, Hurston, & Johnson, 1986) showed that young adults monitor the information they share with their parents about dating. Results also indicated that young adults who were more committed in their relationships were more likely to share their information and attempt to influence their parents' opinions about their partners, and that parents were more likely to support their children in relationships that were highly involved.

Only a few articles mentioned communication between parents and children about relationships when the *parent* was the person whose relationship was being discussed. A study of adolescent girls by Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, and Raymond (2002) revealed that there was more psychological stress placed on the daughter when her divorced mother shared personal information about the mother's relationship with her ex-husband. However, disclosure by the mother did not result in increased mother-daughter closeness.

Children's perspectives on their single parents' dating activities were examined by Ferguson and Dickson (1995). The researchers interviewed children between the ages of eight and eighteen, and found that openness and emotional security were some of the children's most important expectations. The study indicated that these young and adolescent children wish to be included in the dating process and to express their feelings about how their parents' romantic relationships affect their lives.

In Bulcroft and Bulcroft's 1991 study, many older daters reported that while they believed their adult children accepted their dating behavior, the children were not overly enthusiastic and often treated the dating partner as an outsider. In addition, older daters were not open with their family members concerning the sexual nature of their dating relationship, anticipating heavy resistance from their adult children. Cooney and Dunne (2001) mentioned that when some widows considered remarrying, they experienced feelings of disloyalty and other

unpleasant reactions, especially if their children and others objected. Adult children's concerns were often about losing their inheritance because of remarriage or excessive money being spent on a parent's new romantic partner.

Due to the complexity of communication at all stages of life, this study employs a life-span perspective in its approach. The following section will provide a brief overview of the life-span perspective in general, and as it applies to studies in the communication field.

### **The Life-Span Perspective**

As stated previously, adoption of a life-span perspective causes one to assume that development of the self occurs throughout the life-span and is affected by its historical and cultural context. Blieszner and Roberto (2006) suggest that it is important to study all parts of the life-span, since developmental antecedents occur at different stages of life, in addition to the current relationship being studied. The current study, especially the section comparing dating in teen and young adult years with mid-life dating, uses life-span perspective as framework for examining romantic communication among Baby Boomers.

The life-span perspective, as defined by Sigelman and Rider (2009) assumes that human development is lifelong, takes many directions, and is affected by its historical and cultural contexts. Researchers who consider themselves to be "developmentalists" believe that growth in any period of life is best seen in the context of the whole life span. Interviewees in this study compare romantic communication at two different parts of their own life-spans, rather than using current young adult experiences as a means of comparison. In addition, the social conditions of the participants during young adulthood versus today are important factors to consider when studying any phenomenon of human nature along the life-span. Wars, the economy, natural disasters, and catastrophic events are all capable of shaping human lives in ways that may not be apparent unless they are viewed in retrospect.

Since the life-span perspective is so broad and overarching, it has been used to guide research in numerous disciplines, including communication. Williams and Nussbaum (2001) state that communication scholars who study changes in relationships and relational networks across the life-span should keep in mind that developments progress through a number of dimensions (intellectual, social, and physical) at different speeds. The potential for human development—including development in relationship and communication skills—extends throughout the life-span. Life-span developmentalists believe that living organisms are continuously active in organizing their environments, and that the environments, in turn, have reciprocal influences on organisms.

In order to navigate the complexities of family communication, it is necessary to consider theoretical approaches to the family system and its boundaries. The following section discusses Bowen Family Systems Theory and how the concept of differentiation helps us to understand the manifestation of particular family members' communication and adaptation to change. Following the section on differentiation, we will examine the effects of triangulation on the family unit and its communication.

## **Bowen Family Systems Theory**

### The Basics of Bowen

A major theoretical framework used in studying the human family is General System Theory, introduced by the biologist and mathematician Ludwig von Bertalanffy. This theory attempts to define principles found universally in all systems of nature (Papero, 1990). An important quality of all systems is that of homeostasis. *Homeostasis* is the tendency of a system to strive for equilibrium and stability.

According to Hall (1981), American psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry Murray Bowen viewed the family as an emotionally interdependent unit and suggested that change in

one part of the system would ultimately bring about changes in the whole, not necessarily to return to homeostasis, but perhaps to a new level of functioning. Bowen also used the word “system” to describe what he saw, viewing individuals as parts of an emotional field of relationships (Faber, 2004). He then examined how this emotional field affected the functioning of an individual. Years of observation by Bowen resulted in the formulation of eight concepts which later became known as Bowen Family Systems Theory, or Bowen Theory. According to Papero (1990) Bowen observed that the way family systems operated was similar to that of known natural systems, so he strove to recognize the orderly processes that govern human emotional behavior. Bowen and Kerr (1988) stated that when Bowen “took a step back” from the family, he was able to notice the order and predictability of relationships and to determine how an individual’s functioning was dependent upon those relationships.

In attempting to treat individuals within a family, Bowen concluded that the family itself was actually the unit of disorder. He therefore began treating families together, and in 1955 he was one of the first to use family therapy. “Bowenian family therapy...extends the focus deeper—into the hearts and minds of family members—and broader—into the wider family context that shaped, and continues to shape, the life of the family” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995, p. 367).

In categorizing a family as a system, we can understand why families are resistant to change (Brown & Christensen, 1999). This provides a partial explanation about why adult children do not want to discuss a single parent’s relationship that threatens to upset the balance of the current family. Children may feel protective of the parent and complain about the new relationship, or feel that any acceptance of the new relationship is an act of disloyalty to the ex-spouse. Since the original system has been disrupted, new boundaries create questions about who belongs in the family and who is in charge. Fear of change is the link that ties family

systems theory to the present study. When a Baby-Boomer with children begins to date someone, the outsider is upsetting the balance of the existing family. In trying to reach equilibrium (the status-quo), the children may attempt to influence the parent through active or passive means. Sometimes it has nothing to do with the person him/herself—it's all about maintaining the existing family.

Broderick (1993) states "...the family is an example of an open, ongoing, goal-seeking, self-regulating social system" (p. 36). However, human systems, although somewhat predictable, are different from other types of systems because their component parts are self-aware and independent. The system's need for balance is further affected by its environment. In attempting to find a state of equilibrium, a family may use its resources to maintain its own rules (Klein & White, 1996). Some of these rules involve the management of privacy, as discussed later in this chapter.

There are six initial concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory: differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, and sibling position. In the current study, the concepts of differentiation and triangulation are useful in addressing communication between Baby Boomers and their adult children when the Boomer is involved in a romantic relationship with someone other than the child's other parent.

### Differentiation

Bowen (1978) discovered that children grow up to achieve varying levels of "differentiation of self" and that some grow up to become mature individuals with clear ego identities, while others do not. He considered differentiation of self to be equivalent to identity or individuality. If a child is not able to recognize himself as an individual and separate himself from the ego mass of the family, he cannot function independently. According to Knudson-

Martin (1996), too great a need for togetherness can result in low levels of differentiation, in which thinking is overwhelmed by intense feelings and emotions, causing the individual to become overly sensitive to what other people think, say or do, or even what the individual *imagines* the other thinks. Therefore, increasing differentiation reduces anxiety because it enables the person to be more objective, rather than reacting emotionally.

Knauth (2003) states that from a Bowen perspective, emotional health is determined by how the members are differentiated, and to what extent they can take an “I position.” Differentiation of self can be defined as the degree to which a person can separate the emotional from the intellectual systems, or the ability to keep emotions and thinking separate. From this perspective, the individual can use his/her intellect, rather than pure emotion. Family members who are poorly differentiated may keep more secrets as an attempt to manage their anxiety. Hall (1981) states that lack of differentiation results in emotional cut-off, where family members may distance themselves and become emotionally divorced.

In determining an individual’s level of differentiation, Bowen used a “differentiation of self” scale (Bowen, 1978). He stated that the scale itself is actually a continuum, not an instrument. Hundreds of people requested the instrument, but it never existed. He explained that the “scale” is valuable in estimating the over-all pattern of lives, but is not to be used by persons who are not familiar with the theory. Rather than providing a diagnosis, the scale is designed to define an individual’s adaptiveness to stress. A basic description of the Differentiation of Self Scale is presented in Table 2.1.

Differentiating one’s self from the family is completed when separate family relationships are maintained without fusion or triangulation. In Bowenian theory, two counterbalancing forces fight to stay in balance: those that bind families together and those that fight for individuality (Papero, 1990). This balance of pressures for togetherness and

individualism within each person in the family shapes the family system. This also relates to the dialectic in Petronio’s Communication Privacy Management Theory in which individuals must balance the need to share information with the need for privacy.

**Table 2.1: Differentiation of Self Scale**

Differentiation of Self Scale	
Level of Differentiation	Bowen’s Description
0-25	“No self”. Inability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. May be institutionalized or existing marginally in society.
25-50	Poorly defined, authoritative, rebel. Some capacity to work up to higher level of differentiation. Will not say “I believe.” Under stress, can be psychotic.
50-75	Well-defined, but pressure for conformity is great and under pressure make decisions based on pleasure of others
75-100	Principle-oriented and goal-directed. Respectful of self. Highest part of range is considered hypothetical.

A child with a low level of differentiation may need to distance himself/herself physically from the family, or may avoid personal subjects of conversations. Family members who are undifferentiated operate from their feelings and cannot be objective. In contrast, differentiated people are able to take definite stands on issues. “Differentiated people can talk about the full range of personal issues between them without getting anxious and detouring the conversation to a third person or impersonal subject” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995, p. 47). However, in a poorly differentiated person, his/her intellect and emotions become fused, and the individual will function based on what “feels right” instead of what is rational. This will result in the person having difficulty maintaining an “I position” within relationships (Faber, 2004).



## Triangulation

The concept of triangulation is vital to Bowen Family Systems Theory. Bowen (1978) states, “The theory considers the triangle—a three-person system—as the molecule of any emotional system, whether it exists in a family or in a social system” (p. 198). An emotional system is composed of a series of interlocking triangles. According to Ackerman (1984), one may assume that “The state of any individual in a family at any time is a function of the sum of the states of all other individuals at that time. A change in any one relationship affects all other relationships in the family” (p. 12). The basic configuration consists of two parents and a child—a primary triangle. Behaviors change frequently as each party develops and becomes responsible for self. The set of relationships established in the primary family triangle become a template for future relationships (Papero, 1990).

When one family member triangulates with another person (for example, in a Baby Boomer parent’s romantic relationship), the calm relationship consists of a twosome (parent and child) and an outsider (Baby Boomer’s romantic interest). Papero (1990) states that when the triangle is free of anxiety, the participants may appear relatively autonomous and free from intense involvement with one another. When circumstances are calm, the comfortable and desirable position for an individual is to be a part of a twosome. In these circumstances the outsider is seeking to enter the warmth and positive intensity of the dyad. When the triangle is in a state of tension, as would occur with the child not accepting the relationship, the outside position is the most preferred (Hall, 1981). In order for the system to maintain balance, each move by a member of a triangle requires a compensatory move by another member. Triangles occur because it is too difficult for a dyad to maintain equal distribution of power. A shifting triangle (pair to pair in a threesome) as in the case of a family member adding a romantic relationship can ease some of the tension of the original pair.

A triangle can be a tricky situation for the persons involved. According to Nichols and Schwartz (1995) many triangles are so innocent that we do not notice they are potentially destructive. When two families join in a relationship, it is not only a joining of people, but of two entire systems which overlap to form a third. The more well-differentiated the person, the more resilient he or she is and the more flexible and sustaining his or her relationships. If the third person in a triangle remains neutral, anxiety will be reduced, but if the third person becomes emotionally involved, symptoms will increase. In triangles it is common for one pair to be close and two to be distant. Papero (1990) states that an important variable in the relationships is the intensity of the new relationship between the outsider and the less comfortable half of the original twosome. As two people talk to another about a third person, it affects the sensitivity, perception/interpretation, and behavior of each. The potential for rejection is one reason that single parents are hesitant to reveal their new romantic relationships to their children. The more intense that relationship, the more likely the original partner (the child) will react to the parent's involvement. Rejection of some type usually occurs when one member of the triangle makes a decision that is not approved by the others because it upsets the relationship balance. Adult children of Baby Boomers are by nature distrusting of their parents' new romantic relationships, and are even more distrusting if they are not well-differentiated.

Bowen's elements of differentiation and triangulation were studied by Faber (2004) when the researcher used Bowen Family Systems Theory to examine remarried couples' relationships. Faber found that couples with low levels of differentiation experienced more anxiety within the marriage, and often added someone (often children or ex-spouses) to the dyad in order to triangulate and relieve tension. However, the addition which was intended to reduce stress often placed further strain on the relationship.

The effects of differentiation and triangulation within the family unit may be witnessed through changes in the boundaries of communication. A family is a dynamic system, and the ebb and flow of communication is representative of the functionality of the unit. The following section reviews the literature relating to the research of Sandra Petronio's Theory of Communication Privacy Management (2002).

## **Communication Privacy Management**

### Basics of Communication Privacy Management

In the current study on communication in Baby Boomers' romantic relationships, many of the participants who had children expressed that there was either a lack of communication or a lack of desire to act upon communication with their adult children about the parent's romantic relationships. Individuals in all relationships create personal boundaries within which they keep private information that belongs to them. In her book *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure*, Sandra Petronio (2002) states that her theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), unlike previous theories, focuses on both the individual who is concealing or revealing information and how the decision to reveal or conceal information affects other people. She explains that each person uses a type of "mental calculus" to decide what to reveal to others and what to keep private. There are five basic suppositions for CPM: 1. The theory concentrates on private information. 2. A boundary metaphor is used to indicate the line between private and public information. 3. People want control over the boundaries, because they believe private information is owned or co-owned, and revealing or concealing that information may result in vulnerability. 4. CPM uses a rule-based management system to regulate decisions about boundaries. 5. Privacy and disclosure are dialectical in nature (Petronio, 2002).

## Privacy and Boundaries

The boundaries created for privacy management vary from completely permeable to rigid to impermeable, where secrets are held tightly (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004), and most people slide up and down along this continuum, only occasionally being completely open or closed. We adjust the levels of access to privacy as we need to do so (Petronio, 2000). *Boundary management* as defined by Burgoon and Hoobler (2002) includes the degree of ownership of private information by an individual, the amount of control he or she has over the information, the permeability of boundaries, and the levels of privacy. In order to exercise control over private information, individuals or co-owners of the information create rules. Petronio and Durham (2008) state that when you share private information with someone, you make that person a co-owner and create one mutual boundary around the information. CPM looks at the revealing of information as something that affects both the discloser and the recipient. They both become responsible for the information. The effect of disclosure on the involved parties may be positive or negative, and occasionally might be harmful even if it makes the discloser feel better. In situations where the discloser reveals too much information, or information that makes the receiver of the information uncomfortable, the receiver may act in an angry or unhappy fashion. Sometimes, however, the disclosure may be good and appropriate for all parties. When someone receives private disclosures from another, he or she is linked into the discloser's privacy boundary and becomes subject to their rules and expectations (Petronio, 2004).

## Control and Rules

Petronio, Ellemeers, Giles, and Gallois (1998) contend that the beginning of boundary rule creation for an individual occurs even before the disclosure is made. They state that people anticipate the ramifications of a private disclosure before creating rules about how the information will be accessed and protected. Boundaries that are set by the owner(s) must be

coordinated with confidants and other owners of the information. Petronio (2007) states that once individuals reveal private information, they make others shareholders of the information and presume these co-owners will follow existing privacy rules or negotiate new ones. In this way, shared information becomes the basis for the development and adoption of new, mutually agreed-upon collective privacy rules.

Sometimes new rules must be put in place because of an event that disrupts the original ownership system. According to Petronio (2000) an event such as a divorce may cause rules which have been ritualized into common practice to have to be changed. New rules must then be mutually agreed-upon. When relationships change, it is likely that they do not use the same privacy rules, but when privacy rules work well for us, they can become routine (Petronio & Durham, 2008).

However, when the rules are not working properly, a disruption in the coordination of the rules or a violation of privacy occurs, which Petronio (2007) describes as *boundary turbulence*. When boundary turbulence occurs, the owner of the information often feels anger or uncertainty about sharing private information.

Wilson, Roloff, and Carey (1998) examined the permeability of boundaries and when it is appropriate to attempt to breach those boundaries. Boundary rules may restrict the receipt of information, and an individual may be reluctant to express opinions about another's relationships. The researchers conducted a study of 100 college students with an average age of 19 about when it is appropriate to intervene in a relationship. The participants indicated that if certain conditions are present, it is acceptable for them to ignore boundary rules, and that the most common barrier is that it is "none of your business."

## Dialectics

Communication Privacy Management has as its core the dialectical tension between the needs of concealing and revealing (Petronio, 2000). Unlike previous theories of self-disclosure, CPM includes both personal and private issues, and therefore includes the content of the disclosure as well as the self. Petronio contends that whenever someone reveals information, he/she is also choosing what *not* to reveal, so there is always some dialectical tension. In order to hold back, the person sets boundaries (Petronio & Durham, 2008). Privacy is dialectical in nature because there is a simultaneous push-and-pull between the desire to reveal something and to conceal it. There can be no disclosure without privacy—if all information is available, the concept of privacy does not exist (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006).

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005) management of the tension between openness and privacy is of paramount concern in CPM. Although the maintenance of a closed boundary can cause one to feel safer and more in-control, opening the boundary creates more intimacy and sharing but also greater personal vulnerability. The decision about whether or not to reveal private information is based on more than individual costs and rewards, since it includes the management of the dialectical tension between the two options when it is not a clear-cut decision.

Another way of viewing the dialectics in CPM was discussed by West and Turner (2007) as the notion of being “intertwined.” The authors state that both the self and the other, and disclosure and privacy are intertwined, causing potential boundary turbulence. In order to manage these competing forces, boundary structures are put in place to assist the individual to balance the risks and desires for both privacy and sharing. These structures usually manifest themselves as general cues of conversation management (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

## CPM, Topic Avoidance, and Secrets

The following studies specifically examined secrets and topic avoidance, using Communication Privacy Management as a theoretical framework. Although the studies use college students as participants, these areas of research are relevant to the current study, since discussion of the romantic relationship of the Baby Boomer may be avoided or kept secret in conversations between the Boomer and his or her children.

Afifi and Caughlin (2006) examined 342 college students who were keeping a secret. The researchers focused on predictors and outcomes of revelation. Results indicated that the revelation of secrets seems to decrease rumination while increasing self-esteem. However, this was highly dependent upon the target's reaction to the revelation.

In a study of topic avoidance in relationships, Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) conducted a study of 216 students. The researchers used a questionnaire asking about relationships, topics avoided, and the outcomes expected from an avoided topic. Findings show an extensive overlap between relational uncertainty and topic avoidance. If there are doubts about the relationship itself, there is a definite association with the number of topics avoided and the outcomes anticipated from communication about the avoided topics. In matters perceived as delicate or threatening, individuals in an uncertain relationship are even more likely to avoid certain topics.

Decisions that affect privacy boundaries can have important consequences on relationships. According to Caughlin and Afifi (2004), some persons might ignore their own culturally-shared value of openness in a relationship in order to protect their privacy, so topic avoidance is generally thought of as negative in Western culture. CPM predicts that if individuals are avoiding a topic to enhance a relationship, the persons involved would find the avoidance relatively satisfying; however, avoiding because the relationship would deteriorate if

the topic were discussed could result in dissatisfaction. The researchers studied college students' relationships with their parents and relationships between dating couples to examine whether topic avoidance can be used successfully in relationships or if topic avoidance usually results in dissatisfaction. Results indicated that relationship protection and lack of closeness are important reasons for avoiding a topic and will determine, to a great extent, whether topic avoidance is perceived as satisfying or dissatisfying.

### CPM in Romantic Relationships

Individuals involved in romantic relationships are frequently involved in decisions about revealing or concealing information. The following studies involve choices about revelation to the individuals' social networks and to their online dating partners.

Baxter and Widenmann (1993) studied 101 university students aged 18-30 who were involved in an opposite-sex relationship to determine what they did to make their developing romantic relationship known to social network members and what they did to keep their relationships private. The most frequent reasons the participants gave for revealing information about their relationships were obligation to reveal because of the relationship with the target of the communication, desire for emotional expression, and desire for psychological support from the target. The most frequent reason to withhold relationship information was anticipation of a negative reaction from the target. The researchers also discovered that parents are the most frequent target of concealment. However, unwanted interference by a person in a couple's social network can cause problems. In a similar study, Johnson and Milardo (1984) found that there is a decline in the quality of a relationship when there is unwanted outside attention. Seven hundred fifty students were asked about perceived interference in relationships, and results showed that most interference occurs in the middle stages of a relationship.



Another study (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) examined how social network reactions affect the quality and stability of romantic relationships. It was predicted that social network approval or support for the relationship would have a positive effect on relational quality. The findings confirmed that support from an individual's family and friends had a larger impact on the relationship than did support from the partner's social network. A surprising result was that parents still have a role in influencing romantic relationships of their children.

Gibbs, Lai, and Ellison's (2009) research used Petronio's Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory to investigate the communication strategies used by online dating participants to seek and verify information about others and to manage privacy boundaries. The researchers used a web-based survey of 562 respondents to inquire about their online dating experiences and privacy concerns. Findings supported CPM theory, particularly the dialectic tension faced by online dating participants to reveal personal information while encountering the risk of sharing such information with strangers. Participants in online dating also face pressures to conform to societal norms and to form potential romantic relationships with persons who might be dishonest in their disclosures.

### CPM in Families

As discussed earlier in Bowen Family Systems Theory, the family is an emotional system which serves as a model for our communication and relationships throughout our lives. The information and studies discussed in this section demonstrate the ways that families control private information and participate in topic avoidance. According to Petronio and Caughlin (2006) families often present a unified system and manage privacy with outsiders, but frequently it is up to individual family members to decide how much to reveal to each other within the system. As new couples form relationships after a divorce, they develop privacy rules which could involve teaching existing rules to new family members in order to integrate them into the

newly formed family. For new family members, there is a “training period” where they are either overtly trained or shown through modeled behaviors what is acceptable in terms of information exchange. Concealing information from new family members could serve as a signal of who is accepted and who is still an outsider.

Afifi (2003) used a Communication Privacy Management perspective to examine communication patterns in stepfamilies. However, this study also ties in with Bowen Family Systems theory because it looks at how triangulation is used as an attempt to create new boundary rules in order to alleviate tension. This qualitative analysis of 30 stepfamilies revealed that children were feeling “caught” between their custodial and noncustodial parents and parents and/or stepparents mainly because of the communication boundaries that had become an integral part of their lives. Children are faced with dialectical tension between loyalty and disloyalty, and revealing or concealing information, and the new stepfamilies respond to these tensions with new privacy boundary rules. Parents and stepparents have their own dialectical tensions as they are torn between loyalty to each other and responsibility and a sense of possible betrayal to their own children. As new family systems are formed, original family members may use disclosure with one another or withhold information from a new family member in order to show allegiance to the original family. The new parent-stepparent team is placed in a delicate situation as they develop a new privacy boundary around their own relationship in order to present a unified front to the children. The transitions that occur in marriage and remarriage create boundary turbulence as members of the new family system struggle with a new rule management system of information regulation. Although the children in this study were not adult children, many of the communication boundary difficulties apply to the current study as Baby Boomers attempt to talk to their own children about their new romantic relationships in mid-life.

Within the boundaries of the family system, members participate in the coordination of rules to manage the private information of those members. Caughlin and Petronio (2004) state that there are internal linkages and co-ownership of information when one family member reveals private information to another. These internal linkages each have their own boundary rules, so the family system now has a rule set for individuals within a rule set for the family. Some family members fear negative evaluation or rejection of others in the family if they reveal a secret, so the decision to reveal information and form internal linkages has to be weighed against possible negative consequences. These internal linkages can form any number of boundaries. As stated by Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) individuals can have personally private boundaries, dyadically private boundaries, family group private boundaries, other group private boundaries, and organizationally private boundaries. Whenever a person links one or more people into his/her private information, rules are set concerning boundaries, permeability, and the people involved. In a family setting, agreement about these boundaries is necessary to the successful function of the family. For instance, decisions about who is allowed within a privacy boundary must be clear because particular dyads (perhaps the parents) within a family may exchange certain information, while others do not. One particular linkage is destined to change over time—the connection between parent and child. Caughlin and Afifi (2004) state that during adolescence and young adulthood, renegotiations of privacy boundaries with parents occur because the restriction of private information becomes more equal. The child demands more access to information, but often desires a stricter personal privacy and avoids more topics than does the parent.

Topic avoidance between children and their parents or stepparents has been the subject of several studies, most of which have used Communication Privacy Management as a framework. Golish and Caughlin (2002) conducted 115 telephone interviews with adolescents and young

adults age 13-22, and discovered that the most avoidance was with stepparents and the least was with mothers. The most frequently avoided topic was sex, followed by the other parent or family in stepfamily situations. Sharing with stepparents is considered particularly risky, since the children are less familiar with the new family member and may not consider him/her to be an acceptable parental authority.

In order to confirm differences in topic avoidance between peers and parent-child dyads, Caughlin and Golish (2002) investigated 100 young adult dating couples and 114 parent-child relationships. Because relational power may influence topic avoidance, it was important to examine relationships that tend to be different in terms of power discrepancy. The researchers wished to examine whether individuals in close relationships have inaccurate perceptions of their counterpart's topic avoidance. Because topics can be avoided by not introducing them at all, it is likely that a counterpart may not notice that certain topics are being avoided. In some cases, topics are avoided as a strategy for preventing unnecessary conflicts, and the person's dissatisfaction with concealing information could be outweighed by greater relationship cohesion. The results showed that topic avoidance is reciprocated by the counterpart, and perceptions of a counterpart's topic avoidance are somewhat accurate.

One topic area that is consistently avoided by adolescents in conversations with their parents is the parents' relationship with each other. As discussed earlier, Caughlin and Golish (2002) found that dissatisfaction with relationships resulted from the *perception* of topic avoidance, regardless of whether actual avoidance took place. Afifi and Afifi (2009) studied 112 parent-adolescent dyads in order to determine reasons why the adolescents avoid talking about their parents' relationship. Findings showed that the young people feared negative consequences for themselves, their other family members, and their relationship with the parent. It is also

probable that the adolescent may avoid the topic because he/she feels unable to cope with the information.

### **Summary of Literature**

This review of the literature has summarized the relevant research on romantic relationships of older adults and Baby Boomers, communication about relationships within the family, Bowen Family Systems Theory as it relates to differentiation and triangulation, and Communication Privacy Management Theory. Most of the extant literature on romantic relationships has included studies of young adults, particularly college students, to examine phenomena of interest in the communication of dating couples. While the elderly have been included in some recent studies, the Baby Boomer generation has been conspicuously absent from research, except in popular culture studies. Because of the increasing numbers of middle-aged Americans who are now dating again due to divorce, communication among Baby Boomers in their romantic relationships and with their adult children about their relationships are areas worthy of further exploration. The theories of Bowen and Petronio provide a useful lens through which to explore relationships within the families of the Boomers as they evolve and adapt in their romantic lives.

The preceding literature review serves to reveal the common themes within the literature. In light of the research presented about romantic relationships of older persons, the functioning of family systems dealing with lack of differentiation and triangulation, and communication privacy management within the family, it now seems reasonable to ask the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How have Baby Boomers' romantic relationships and the resulting communication changed from their teens and twenties to mid-life?

-How have their dating experiences changed over time?

- How have their expectations changed over time?
- How has their communication changed over time?
- How have complications in their relationships changed over time?

Research Question 2: What is the effect of Baby Boomers' communication with their adult children about their romantic relationships during mid-life?

- What is the effect of differentiation on communication and relationships?
- How does triangulation affect families involved in Baby Boomer relationships?
- How do families negotiate privacy boundaries when a parent is involved in a romantic relationship?

The following chapter will outline the methodology used to address these questions in the current study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This chapter will describe the methodology used to study differences in the romantic communication of Baby Boomers from their early days of dating to their most recent mid-life experiences and to expand upon the extant knowledge about the complexities of communication with adult children when their parents begin a new dating relationship. An explanation of the participants, interview questions, and procedure is provided, along with information about the application of Bowen Family Systems Theory (1966) and Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management Theory.

#### **Qualitative Research and Interviewing**

This study employed qualitative research methods in order to provide a depth of information on a particular sample. Although a list of interview questions was employed to ensure that all areas of interest were covered, the interviews were more like a conversation than a survey. In contrast to a structured survey interview, the in-depth interview style is not intended to apply to a general population. According to Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000), in survey research, interviews are done with a representative sample so that generalizations can be made to an entire population. However, a naturalistic in-depth interview is used to “. . . understand *particular* social phenomena by developing ‘intimate familiarity’ ” (p. 273). The intent of this study is not to generalize that all Baby Boomers would express the views stated in this study, but to show the complexity of this generation, and to present a theoretical framework for better understanding communication in their romantic relationships, and with their adult children.

## **The Pilot Study**

The current study began with a pilot study to gather general information about Baby Boomers in dating relationships. The pilot study provided a means to test the interview questionnaire and determine areas of concentration. Institutional Review Board approval for the pilot study was first obtained, and a consent form was drafted and copied (See Appendix A). Twelve initial interviewees were selected through snowball sampling from friends, acquaintances, and interested volunteers recommended by colleagues and the researcher's students. Criteria for the interviewees were that they must have been born between 1946 and 1964, and must have been dating someone currently or recently. There were no attempts to screen for culture or sexual preferences. At the time of the initial interviews, there were to have been two homosexual couples included, but due to scheduling conflicts, they were unable to participate, and all interviewees were heterosexual. The interview questions had an intentionally broad focus, so as to determine which areas of dating communication would be used for the dissertation, and which might serve as areas of further study at a later time.

From the initial schedule of questions, some questions about differences in dating from then to now were dropped due to duplication of responses. One particular item, however, elicited such interesting answers that it became a major focus of the study. The question asked: "What or who would you have considered to be a complicating factor in your romantic relationship in your teens or twenties? What about now?" Many of the pilot study interviewees indicated that their children were a major complication in their most recent dating experiences. It was not only the wording of their responses that indicated the importance of this information, but the tone of voice and facial expressions of the interviewees that confirmed it as worthy of further study. Therefore, modifications were made to the original interview schedule to include more in-depth questions on this area.



## The Current Study

### Participants

Participants for the study were chosen from colleagues, acquaintances, and references from friends and students of the researcher according to “snowball sampling.” Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain that this method of finding interviewees is used when people refer others who fit the criteria the researcher is seeking. “These chains of referral create an expanding pool of respondents—a ‘snowball’ growing larger over time” (p. 124). In a naturalistic, in-depth interview, the researcher will often use a “purposeful sample” in which he or she chooses people who are most likely to possess information on the research topic (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). In the present study, most initial face-to-face communication with potential interviewees consisted of a short conversation, followed by “So... you’re a Boomer, aren’t you?” After an affirmative response, the researcher would say, “Would you like to participate in a study of Baby Boomers and dating communication?” The Boomer would usually indicate pleasant surprise about the subject matter, followed by approval, and scheduling of the interview. Referrals from friends and students came after a short explanation about the goals of the study and the types of questions that would be posed.

There was originally some concern about possible cultural bias among interviewees due to the location of the interviews (southwestern Louisiana), but after ascertaining the relative diversity of the sample, it was determined that it would have little, if any, impact on the results of the study. Although most of the interviews took place in southwest Louisiana, many of the interviewees had recently moved there from other areas of the United States, including Delaware (1), Arizona (1), Utah (1), and Wisconsin (1), and one of them was originally from England. Five of the interviews were done by telephone with subjects currently living in Tennessee (1), Texas (1), Colorado (1), Mississippi (1), and Arkansas (1). One interviewee had to work

offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, so the interview was conducted by email. Upon comparison of responses between southwest Louisiana natives and the other interviewees, no differences that would indicate cultural bias were apparent.

No compensation was offered to any of the subjects, but students who referred an interviewee were awarded extra credit for their efforts.

The first criterion for the sample was that the interviewee must be a Baby Boomer. Although the years that encompass this generation may vary by a year or two in either direction, the most common span of birth years is 1946-1964 (Light, 1988). Coincidentally, at the time of this study, the research subjects ranged in age from 46-64. A breakdown of interviewees by their years of birth is detailed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Birth Years of Participants**

"Boomer Years" of Participants	
1946-1949	<b>6</b>
1950-1954	<b>6</b>
1955-1959	<b>6</b>
1960-1964	<b>6</b>

Ten of the participants were male, and fourteen were female. All participants were currently employed, including five educators, two engineers, two secretaries, a college registrar, property manager, purchaser, bank teller, casino cashier, public relations director, salesman, offshore oil rig worker, retailer, two customer service representatives, business owner, legal assistant, plant operator, and pharmacy technician. Eighteen interviewees were living in

southwest Louisiana at the time of the interview, but five of them had moved recently from out-of-state. One person lived in a different part of Louisiana, and five were living in other states. The educational level of the participants varied greatly, with two doctorates, five master's degrees, twelve bachelor's degrees, and five high school graduates. Of the 24 interviewees in this study, 4 are never-married males with no children, 2 are divorced females with no children, 16 have adult children, and 2 have children under 18 who live at home. Demographic information about the 24 participants in the study is listed in Table 3.2.

The second criterion was that the Baby Boomer must be currently dating someone or have dated someone recently. (The term "recently" was used so as to exclude dating that might have occurred when the Boomer was still in his/her 20's or 30's, and would not have been useful in this study for comparisons in the then/now dating questions.) All the interviewees had dated in their 40's and beyond. Eighteen were single or remarried due to a divorce, four had never been married (all male), and two had suffered the death of a spouse. All participants were white and heterosexual.

When conducting the interviews, a target number for the sample size was not initially set, but it became obvious after interviewing about twenty Boomers, that there was consistency of responses that did not change with more interviews. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002) we continue to conduct research until "...we cease to be surprised by what we observe or we notice that our concepts and propositions are not disconfirmed as we continue to add new data" (p. 129).

As part of the grounded theory method of analysis, when the researcher reaches this point, known as "saturation," the researcher reviews the data in order to determine a conceptual structure (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). After reaching this level in the present study, scheduled interviews and referrals continued until the 24<sup>th</sup> interview had been completed.

**Table 3.2: Demographic Information of Interview Subjects**

Demographics of Interview Subjects							
Name	M/F	Born	Occupation	Children	Marital Status	Educ.	Location
Winston	M	1946	Professor	1	Divorced/Remarried	Ph.D.	SW LA, orig. England
Bob	M	1951	Engineer	0	Single/Never Married	Bach.	SW LA
Rob Roy	M	1947	University Registrar	3	Single/Divorced	Mast.	SW LA
Jen	F	1962	Secretary	2	Single/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA
Queen	F	1964	Secretary	1	Single/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA
Jody	M	1946	Property Manager	0	Single/Never Married	H.S.	SW LA
Arnold	M	1947	Engineer	0	Single/Never Married	Bach.	SW LA, orig. Baton Rouge
Moby Dick	M	1949	Purchaser	2	Single/Divorced	Mast.	SW LA, orig. Delaware
Lola	F	1955	Professor	2	Single/Divorced	Mast.	SW LA
Nubbsy	F	1961	Professor	4	Single/Divorced	Mast.	New Orleans, orig. Arizona
Lady Blaze	F	1955	Public Relations	3	Remarried/Divorced	Mast.	SW LA, orig. New Orleans
Lsuman	M	1954	Sales Manager	0	Single/Never Married	Bach.	Colorado, orig. SW LA
Serephina	F	1957	Professor	0	Single/Divorced	Ph.D.	SW LA, orig. Utah
Bill	M	1960	Offshore Worker	4	Single Widower	H.S.	SW LA
Bob2	M	1954	Retailer	2	Divorced/Remarried	H.S.	Arkansas
Gwen	F	1955	Customer Service	0	Single/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA
Mustang Sally	F	1954	Customer Service	3	Single/Divorced	H.S.	Mississippi
Red	F	1957	Business Owner	2	Single/Divorced	Bach.	Texas
Bonnie	F	1956	Legal Assistant	3	Single/Divorced	Bach.	Tennessee
Susan	F	1954	Cashier	1	Single/Divorced	Bach.	SW LA
Thomas	M	1960	Plant Operator	2	Single/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA
Mary	F	1946	Teacher	3	Widow/Remarried	Bach.	SW LA
GD	F	1953	Pharmacy Tech.	3	Single/Widowed/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA
Jamie	F	1964	Bank Teller	1	Single/Divorced	H.S.	SW LA

## Interview Questions

Interview questions fell into three headings (more details provided below): one question about being a “Boomer,” several questions comparing dating in the 1960’s, 70’s, or 80’s with more recent dating, and questions about communication with children about recent relationships. Although a schedule of interview questions (See Appendix B) was loosely followed, the relaxed atmosphere of the interviews permitted the interviewees to speak freely, with the researcher filling in any areas that were not covered. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) indicate that most naturalistic researchers use a semi-structured format by “. . . outlining questions in advance and improvising probing questions on the spot” (p. 277). The following provides more details on each section of the interview.

### Boomers

Research subjects were asked, “What is a Baby Boomer?” and “How do you fit in as a Boomer?” in order to determine how the subjects related to cohorts within the Baby Boomer generation. Previous research by Rindfleisch (1994) had shown that cohorts are better than generations as judges of differences among persons of a particular era, and the researcher wished to determine whether any significant differences in communication were evident in a portion of the generation. A discussion of how the Boomers in this study identified themselves within their generation will follow in the results chapter.

### Dating Then and Now

Several questions focused on differences in dating and communication from the interviewees’ teens or early twenties to their most recent dating experiences in middle age. Interviewees were asked whether they were dating now or recently and how they met, in order to ascertain how long ago they had participated in romantic dating communication, and whether they had used conventional means of finding a partner, or whether they had employed recent

technology. They were then asked about differences in locating dates from their teens and twenties to today. This discussion served as a natural bridge into a discussion of online matchmaking services. Other questions designed to elicit responses about how much dating has changed for Baby Boomers included the criteria for accepting or refusing a date, what the Boomer would have done then and now if a first date was not satisfactory, and the choice of channels of communication used in romantic relationships. An interview question which became an important area of focus in the study was, “In your early 20’s, what or who would you have considered to be complicating factors for your dating relationship? What do you consider to be complicating factors now?” Responses about the complications of communication with their adult children in mid-life dating became the third major area of the interview.

#### Communication with Children about Relationships

In the true spirit of grounded theory, interview questions were added and deleted as interviewees began to discuss their communication with their adult children about the parent’s romantic relationships. When analyzing data according to grounded theory, some unproductive questions may be discarded and other questions included as themes develop which were unexpected at the onset of the study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Some of the questions that were added to the interview included, “How much do you and your children communicate? Do you discuss your romantic relationships with your children? Do your children express opinions about your romantic partners? How important are their opinions to you? Do these opinions influence your decisions about the relationship?”

#### Procedure

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher or a trained assistant explained the goals of the study and the procedure that would be followed. According to Institutional Review Board procedures, participants were told that they were free to decline to answer any questions,

and that all responses would be confidential. They were also told that the interview would be recorded (with their permission), and that all audio files and transcriptions from those files would be kept by the researcher in a secure location until no longer needed for research purposes, then the material would be deleted or destroyed. They were then presented with an IRB consent form to sign. Participants were also asked to choose a pseudonym to be used throughout the interview, so that they could not be identified in the study.

All interviews except those done by telephone or email were recorded using a digital device which provided a computer file for later transcription by the researcher. Recording of interviews is important in allowing the interviewer to observe facial expressions and to establish connection with the interviewee. Recording also allows for more accurate quotations when transcribing.

Interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere in participants' offices or homes, restaurants, or coffee shops. Phone interviews were scheduled to occur at a time that would be most relaxed and convenient for the participant. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 75 minutes, with an average length of 45 minutes.

Recordings were then transcribed and responses to particular items were grouped together. Information gathered from the questions about dating in the past and present for Baby Boomers serves to add to our knowledge of communication across the lifespan by filling an important gap in the information about this generation. The life-span perspective assumes that the person and his environment are intertwined, and that they influence each other (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Therefore, a study of persons at a particular segment of their lives cannot be adequately studied without a phenomenological approach including time, place, and situation.

For those responses about communication with adult children concerning romantic relationships of Baby Boomers, grounded theory was used to discover a theoretical framework.

Poole, McPhee, Canary, and Morr (2002) state that when employing grounded theory, the researcher develops theoretical propositions by studying the data, whereas, in the hypothetico-deductive mode, the researcher uses theory to generate a hypothesis and then executes a study. Careful analysis of the data in the section on communication between Baby Boomers and their adult children concerning the Boomers' romantic relationships resulted in the use of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management as a theoretical as well as pragmatic framework for this study.

### **Bowen Family Systems Theory**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Bowen's Family Systems Theory was developed within the realms of psychological research for use in psychiatric counseling. The current study does not suggest that the families discussed in this study are in need of therapy, but Bowen's theory provides a lens by which we may examine communication within the family structure. Two of Bowen's concepts are of particular interest in this study. The first of these, triangulation, occurs when another individual becomes involved in a two-person relationship, sometimes to relieve tension in the original relationship (Papero, 1990). The concept of triangulation comes into play as a third person (the romantic interest of the Baby Boomer parent) becomes involved in the dyadic relationship of the Baby Boomer parent and child. The second concept, and one of the goals of therapy using Bowen's theory, is that of differentiation of the self. Kerr and Bowen (1988) state that the higher the degree of an individual's differentiation, the more capable he or she is of responding to or conforming with changing situations (such as the romantic relationship of a single parent with someone other than the child's parent). Knauth (2003) defines differentiation of self as the degree to which one can keep emotions and thinking separate. Knauth also states that if family members are tightly fused and undifferentiated, communication tends to be more closed, and more secrets exist. Differentiation is important in studying



communication between Boomer parents and their children because a child with a higher level of differentiation in a family will be more likely to communicate calmly and openly than one who is less differentiated. In order to properly determine the level of differentiation of an individual, professional scales are available to licensed professionals, but it was not the goal of the current study to assess the mental health of the adult children of the participants. Since only Baby Boomer parents were interviewed, their self-reports about their interactions with their adult children leave non-professionals with unanswered questions about the actual level of differentiation of their children. However, since Bowen tells us that a lower level of differentiation results in less open communication, it stands to reason that the children who either refuse to accept a new parental relationship or refuse to discuss it in depth may be less differentiated. This is an area that merits further study with interviews of the adult children. It is at this point in the theoretical analysis that the idea of differentiation and the negotiation of privacy issues tie together, since many of the Baby Boomers' adult children had issues with communication about their parents' relationships. This leads to the use of Petronio's Theory of Communication Privacy Management as a part of the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Communication Privacy Management**

Although all families have some secrets, Bowen would consider a family with a lack of communication to have a low level of differentiation. Analysis of early data in the current study indicated that most of these Boomers felt that they had a great deal of communication in their families, but in reality they didn't talk about the parent's romantic relationships. Petronio's Communication Privacy Management theory discusses the dialectical nature of privacy in relationships. When we say that privacy is dialectical, we mean that there is a conflict between wanting to express something and wanting to keep it to ourselves (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). CPM provides a means to study the rules established by families to categorize topics as being

open for discussion or not. Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) state that people control the flow of information through privacy boundaries, which are sometimes changeable. The rules and boundaries discussed in Communication Privacy Management are clearly evident in the parent-child relationships and the topic avoidance disclosed in the current study. In order to extract the boundary rules evident in this relationship about this topic, it is necessary to note the quality of the relationships involved, along with the level of differentiation and the presence of triangulation.

Since triangulation occurs in family relationships when an additional person affects a dyad, and since the romantic relationship of a Baby Boomer parent can be the cause of a privacy boundary issue with an undifferentiated family member (the child), Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Petronio's Communication Privacy Management work well together as a theoretical framework for the parent-child communication section of this study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

The current study contributes to our knowledge of life-span communication by examining the communication of the Baby Boomer generation (born 1946-1964) as they re-enter the dating scene. The first part of the study documents changes in communication from the respondents' early years of dating to mid-life. Although Baby Boomers' early years of dating (the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's) occurred in a time of new-found freedom, especially in sexual relationships, the experience of dating several decades later brings many complications due to aging and children.

The questions in the "Then and Now" section of this study will paint a picture of the Boomers' romantic relationships and communication from their teenage years to middle-age using a life-span perspective. The second part of this chapter will employ Bowen Family Systems Theory (1966) and Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management Theory in order to explore how management of communication within the family affects romantic relationships. Bowen Family Systems Theory illustrates the impact of individual family members on the family unit. In particular, a poorly differentiated family member can be quite unaccepting of change in family relationships. Triangulation, the addition of any third person to a two-person relationship (parent and child), can potentially affect the original relationship. The impact of triangulation on the relationships of parent/child and Baby Boomer/romantic partner can best be illustrated by the resulting management of communication that occurs within the family.

The research questions summarized in Table 4.1 are a result of the researcher's attempt to find behaviors that reflect lifespan changes in romantic communication of Baby Boomers, and

which support the life-span perspective, Bowen Family Systems Theory and Petronio’s Communication Privacy Management Theory.

**Table 4.1: Research Questions**

<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>
<p><b>Research Question 1: How have Baby Boomers’ romantic relationships and the resulting communication changed from their teens and twenties to mid-life?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-How have their dating experiences changed over time?</li> <li>-How have their expectations changed over time?</li> <li>-How has their communication changed over time?</li> <li>-How have complications in their relationships changed over time?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research Question 2: What is the effect of Baby Boomers’ communication with their adult children about their romantic relationships during mid-life?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What is the effect of differentiation on communication and relationships?</li> <li>-How does triangulation affect families involved in Baby Boomer relationships?</li> <li>-How do families negotiate privacy boundaries when a parent is involved in a romantic relationship?</li> </ul>

Takahashi (2005) stated “Nowadays, most researchers will agree that, from the cradle to the grave, humans need others not only for their survival but also for a flourishing life” (p. 48). Studying the Baby Boomer generation as a very large and important segment of communication across the lifespan can increase our knowledge about how individuals and their relationships change over time. In the first section of this chapter, we will compare romantic relationships “then and now” to illustrate how these Boomers’ dating lives and expectations have changed, and how decades of changes, including technology, have had an impact on dating behaviors and communication.

The dating scene for individuals is changing rapidly as Baby Boomers navigate the waters in a different age. Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007) state that although previous studies have

documented that dating among older persons tends to decline with age, dating options for older adults might increase in the new millennium with changing sexual attitudes, Internet dating services, and more societal acceptance of pharmaceutical sexual enhancement. Some statistics on midlife dating were revealed in a survey conducted by Montenegro for AARP in 2003. The survey stated that about one-third of singles ages 40-69 are in exclusive dating relationships, and another one-third are dating non-exclusively. However, those who are dating are primarily seeking companionship and intimacy, rather than looking for a mate.

The participants in the current study present a snapshot of differences in dating from the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's to the 2000's and 2010's. Their responses to the interview questions will be detailed in this chapter, with further discussion about their relevance within the theoretical framework in the discussion chapter.

- **Research Question 1: How have Baby Boomers' romantic relationships and the resulting communication changed from their teens and twenties to mid-life? In particular: How have their dating experiences changed over time? How have their expectations changed over time? How has their communication changed over time? How have complications in their relationships changed over time?**

All interviewees in the study agreed that dating in the 1960's, 70's, and 80's was tremendously different 20, 30, or 40 years later. The questions in this part of the study were intended to highlight those differences and concentrate on the communication used by the Boomers then and now. In order to assess whether there was any basis for examining the Baby Boomers as a unique generational cohort, or whether they should be studied as mid-life daters in lifespan communication, the first question asked how the interviewees fit in as Baby Boomers. Participants were then asked how they met potential partners and whether they had used online dating services, how they asked someone out or accepted a date and what the criteria were/are.

They were also asked to reminisce about how they would have handled a bad first-date experience then and now, what topics were included in typical dating conversations, and which were their preferred channels of communication. Participants also discussed changes in physical romance, expectations about relationships, and what things or people make romantic relationships more complicated.

### Who Are the Baby Boomers?

Some background about the Baby Boomer generation was provided in the Introduction chapter of this dissertation, along with a breakdown of participants' ages within the Boomer years of 1946-1964 in the Methods chapter. When interviewees in this study were asked for their definitions of a Baby Boomer and how they felt that they fit into this generation, responses were quite varied, as expected. Although many of the respondents mentioned social changes, questioning authority, nonconformity, and a sense of activism, others were most impressed with the advances in technology provided by their generation. Surprisingly, half of the interviewees, although proud of the freedoms gained by their generation, did not consider themselves to be the "Boomer" type at all, stating instead that they felt like they were on the outside, looking in, as quiet and conservative types. Bob2 stated, "I wore my hair long and had the crazy clothes, but was always a conservative inside." Moby Dick, who served in Viet Nam, said "I don't fit that description at all. I sort of resent the term 'Baby Boomer'." Other Boomers, like Lola and Nubbsy, seem to have embraced part of the stereotype while becoming the opposite. Lola stated, "I am rather conservative, but I remember thinking that hippies were really cool when I was a kid." Nubbsy, who is now a staunch conservative, said, "We saturated the country, but we have also been the backlash of the 'nicey-nicey' of the 50's, so we are the renegades." Interestingly, the interviewees' views of themselves as Boomers did not adhere to their year of birth within the cohort (whether they were part of the "early" or "late" sub-groupings of Baby Boomers), but

instead was more of a personal feeling about the cohort. Baby Boomers who do identify with the generational label may do so because of what Gilleard and Higgs (2007) refer to as a “conscience collective” that reflects the power of the media in shaping social identities.

Finding a Date

Interviewees were asked, “In your early days of dating, how did you meet potential romantic partners, and how did you meet them later in life?”

Over 75% of the Boomers interviewed remember meeting early dating partners at school through classes or organizations such as the band or the speech team, or through mutual friends. A few of the participants mention meeting people at bars, but only as flings rather than serious relationships.

**Table 4.2: Finding a Date**

<b>How did you find potential dating partners in early dating and at mid-life?</b>		
<b>Means</b>	<b>Then</b>	<b>Now</b>
School	15	1
Through friends	4	9
Internet	0	8
Work	1	4
Bars/Clubs	4	2
Church	2	0
Common interest	2	4

All responses to this question may be seen in Table 4.2. Note that the number of responses may be higher than 24 (the total number of respondents) because the participants were

not limited to one answer. Early relationships that lasted or developed into marriage tended to be formed from some mutual interest, rather than a chance meeting. Several Boomers stated that in early dating it was “understood” that dating was intended to end up in marriage. GD stated, “Back in the 70’s you met in school, then you just got married. That’s how it was.” Nubbsy, whose upbringing was deeply influenced by her faith, said, “In my 20’s I was heavy into my church. I wanted to meet someone of my same faith, so we went to church dances because it was the only way to meet someone. I wish I could have just enjoyed the ride, but there was a lot of pressure religious-wise.”

Later in life, however, the main ways to meet potential romantic partners were either totally *deliberate* (as with online matchmaking services) or totally by *chance* at work or through mutual friends with no intention of finding someone to date seriously. Bob remarked, “Even without the official online dating services, there are Twitter, Facebook, Internet-related sites, and cell phones. All those things make it easy to interact instantaneously.” Boomers in this study compare favorably to AARP’s national survey (Montenegro, 2003) in which the results showed that friends, relatives, and work are still the most common means to find a partner, but online matchmaking services are becoming quite prevalent.

Another interview question explored the use of online matchmaking services for Baby Boomers. In this particular study, 16 of the 24 interviewees have never tried the services, and 8 have tried one or more of them (Match.com, eHarmony.com, Chemistry.com). Three of the participants used social networking of some type (Facebook or Yahoo!) but not an official online dating site. Some older Boomers said online services were not widely available and acceptable when they dated most recently. Winston stated, “Advanced technology for me was colored chalk.” Of those who used online dating or networking, some developed short-term relationships, but none in this particular sample developed a romance of any duration. Red



summed up her online matchmaking experience, in one sentence: “Met someone, got engaged, and dumped him.” Interviewees were also asked which filters they used to screen potential matches. They replied that the service did most of the filtering through their initial questionnaires, but the most important items they looked for were “no smoking” and “intelligence.” Rob Roy stated about smoking, “Even if she is Pamela Anderson, she is not coming home with me if she smokes.” Gwen said it is easy to check out people you meet in online dating by Googling them to see if they are lying about information in their profiles.

#### Procedure and Criteria for Asking Someone Out or Accepting a Date

Interviewees were asked to describe a typical ‘asking out’ or ‘accepting a date’ situation in the 1960’s, 70’s or 80’s. Half of the interviewees indicated that most situations in early dating began with a tentative phone call from the boy, or face-to-face in a school or social situation, and that the date was probably to a movie, a football game, or dancing. Rob Roy, Queen, and Jody said that dates were always with someone you had known for awhile. When asked about their most recent dating, the Boomers described much more variation of situations and events. They mentioned that they are not as nervous now when asking or accepting. Rob Roy, Serephina, and Lady Blaze find that invitations often occur as a result of conversations at work or meetings, and involve the exchange of business cards. Initial dates now tend to be for coffee or meals, rather than movies. Bob remarked, “You can watch movies at home, and there are not as many places for people our age to go dancing now.” Several female interviewees stated that they prefer to go to a first date in their own vehicles, and to meet in a very public place. Gwen said, “Then it was easy—he asked and you went. Now you have to be careful, so I go out with a group to have a good time.” Thomas found a great deal of difference between asking someone out back in his 20’s and today. “It started with casual conversation, and if she showed any interest, I would ask

if she'd like to go see a movie and have dinner. Now- it's a lot different. Women are a lot more aggressive; you can kinda sit back and wait for them to ask you.”

Baby Boomers' criteria for accepting or refusing a date seem to have changed quite a bit through the years. Early dating choices appear to have been quite simple, and in most cases, admittedly shallow. Both males and females mentioned that “good looks” was an important criterion, and that the person should be “fun.” Lola stated, “He had to be cute or a really sweet friend.” Males were supposed to pay for dates, and both males and females expected good conversation, but other than that, there were no high expectations. Arnold stated, “Then I was just grateful,” and Bob quipped, “They had to be good-looking and had to have a pulse.” Jody stated simply, “I would have expected her to be a girl.”

A first date at mid-life, however, has much more serious criteria. All interviewees said that they are much more selective now, and that looks are not as important as before. “Common interests” is the most frequent criterion, along with intelligence, values, respect, and being a good provider. Mid-life dating criteria and some respondent commentary are listed in Table 4.3.

Responses to this question show some support for the results of Montenegro (2003) who found that in mid-life dating, personality and sense of humor count most, and of Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007) who stated that in seeking prospective dates, both men and women said that they value a pleasing personality, sense of humor, common interests, and moral values. One finding in the current study that was different from previous research was that the males surveyed did not mention the importance of a partner's physical attributes, while Montenegro's results indicated that middle-aged men also emphasize physical attractiveness and sexual satisfaction for their romantic partners. Montenegro also found that many midlife and older men want to date younger women, while many older women, by choice or need, also want to date younger men.

The combination of these factors makes men’s and women’s age preferences in dates incompatible. Men are also more open to dating and trying more things to meet these wants.

**Table 4.3: Mid-Life Dating Criteria**

<b>What are your criteria for accepting or refusing a date in mid-life dating?</b>	
<b>Intelligence</b>	<p><b>Bob:</b> “Now they have to have something between their ears.”</p> <p><b>Moby:</b> “I like conversation and someone who is my intellectual equal.”</p> <p><b>Nubbsy:</b> “It’s hard to find an educated guy who’s not snapped up—someone with a good mind in case the physical wanes.”</p>
<b>Values</b>	<p><b>Lady Blaze:</b> “He would have to understand that I am a feminist with a liberal viewpoint.”</p> <p><b>Thomas:</b> “Good family morals.”</p>
<b>Respect</b>	<p><b>Lola:</b> “Someone who treats me well.”</p> <p><b>Red:</b> “Someone who wants to take time to know me.”</p>
<b>Good provider</b>	<p><b>Queen:</b> “I am a provider, so I would expect him to be as well.”</p> <p><b>Susan:</b> “They have to have a job, financially stable, living in their own place.”</p>
<b>Common interests</b>	<p><b>Jody:</b> “Someone you would like to be with.”</p> <p><b>Gwen:</b> “At our age we want someone to complement our lives, not complicate them.”</p>

Women in the study seem to feel that females have a tougher time finding someone than do males. Several female interviewees referred to the old adage, “All the good ones are gone.” Calasanti and Kiecolt (2007) stated that older women are far less likely to date than older men, not only because of a lack of available partners, but because many of them have finally achieved personal or financial independence, and they would see a potential marriage as a step backwards. In the current study, Gwen said of potential partners, “You want to make sure there is not a lot of baggage.” She said that when you meet someone, either online or face-to-face, you should find

someone who knows him already and get information about him before going out. Gwen's attitude echoes Calasanti and Kiecolt's findings: Women still prefer that men initiate dates, but the women are more likely to insist upon meeting their dating partners in public places and to pay their own way (2007).

### How to Handle a Bad First-Date

An interview question was posed specifically to measure whether Boomers are quicker to end a potentially bad relationship than they would have been in their teens or 20's. The question was, "Imagine that you are back in your teens or 20's. Your date is over, and you had a rotten time. Your date says, 'I had a wonderful time.' What would you say? What would you say in the same situation now?" Nearly all Boomers in the study stated that they would not hurt the person's feelings, either then or now. Most females said that when they were younger, they would lie and say they had a good time also, but then "hide" and not return phone calls until they had worked up the courage to refuse a second date. In mid-life dating, however, Boomers are more likely to hint about the lack of a connection with some vague language such as, "Well, I'm glad you did," or as Jamie stated, "It was interesting, but I am not sure we could do this again." All of the interviewees stated that they would not let the other person believe that there would be another date, because the experience of the years has made them much more definite about what they want in a relationship.

### Dating Conversations

How have dating conversations changed for Baby Boomers from their teens and 20's to now? Most Boomers stated that conversations in their early dating centered on superficial topics like movies, music, football, and people they knew. The only serious topic that was brought up frequently was Viet Nam, or "the war." In the interviews, the only participants who mentioned the war as a topic of conversation were males 56 and older who would have thought

about it often as young adults because of the draft. Winston said, “We talked about tangents, movies, what was going on in class, the football team, and, of course, the war. There are no conversational differences now; there is always a war of some kind.”

On the other hand, dating conversations in mid-life begin with very safe subjects like careers and events, but go to more personal ones when trust is established. Life experience has provided Baby Boomers with a wider range of topics to discuss, with more friends and family to add to the mix of potential talk. Rob Roy mentioned that he enjoys more intellectual conversations, but that his current partner who is younger does not provide that type of stimulation. Serephina laughed as she stated, “Back then we talked about him. Now we talk about him. Men like to talk about themselves.” Ninety percent of the persons interviewed enjoy sharing information about family and common interests. With Baby Boomers aging, a new topic has emerged. Arnold mused, “Now we talk about our *ailments*.” There were some differences in opinion that were expressed by interviewees about when to bring up children and exes when dating. Some Boomers feel that children should be discussed at the first meeting and that it is important to know whether it will be a problem or not, while others feel that it is a topic best discussed on the second or third date. Serephina stated that if the man she is dating has children and the ex-wife will be hanging around because of it, she would like to know if that will be a problem for the relationship. Jamie stated that exes and kids should be discussed immediately, but sex is a topic for “after you know him.” Widows and widowers are also faced with the decision about when and how much to reveal about their deceased spouses when they begin dating. Mary said that she and her new husband discussed the death of their former spouses at their very first meeting because he was a widower, and sharing their stories about coping with the loss of their loved ones gave them a common starting point for conversation.

## Channels of Communication

In order to study the impact of technological changes on channels of communication used by Baby Boomers to keep in touch with a romantic interest through the years, interviewees were asked which channels they used and preferred then and now. The early-dating main channels for all Baby Boomers in the study were face-to-face communication and the telephone, with some of them mentioning writing letters (especially those who were in Viet Nam or had boyfriends who were there). Both males and females preferred face-to-face over telephone, but males were more insistent that the conversations had to be short because they didn't talk as much "back then." All interviewees mentioned that the phones were all corded and rotary-dialed, and that you had to be at home to receive a call because there were no answering machines. Lola remembered waiting for calls in her college dormitory where the girls would light pink candles over their phones when waiting for a call from a special guy. She says it was quite a trick to be available, but not to appear too needy. Lady Blaze told about the privacy issues she faced in her one-telephone home, where pulling the phone into the bathroom was the only way to have a private conversation. In spite of the feminist strides of the era, girls were still supposed to wait for calls from boys. Nubbsy recalled, "Mother always said 'Don't call that boy,' but I did. That wasn't a good idea; mom was usually right." Bonnie also remembers that "Girls were supposed to wait, but whoever made the first move depended on how bold or drunk I was."

Communication between Baby Boomers and their romantic partners at mid-life is a combination of many channels. Most Boomers in the study have embraced technology, and they have incorporated text and email into their communication. However, new technology worries Queen a bit, because she feels that her current romantic partner misses nuances in email, and that he requires face-to-face communication to "get it." All except one of the interviewees currently love the freedom of their cell phones, but males in the study still prefer face-to-face over long

telephone conversations. Winston said, “Cell phone—wife has a leash on me now.” Baby Boomers’ choices of channels for romantic communication are detailed in Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4: Channels of Communication for Romance**

<b>Channels of Communication Used by Baby Boomers Then and Now</b>		
<b>Channel</b>	<b>Then</b>	<b>Now</b>
Face to Face	17	9
Phone (wired)	22	1
Cell Phone	N/A	17
Email	N/A	10
Instant Messaging	N/A	3
Texting	N/A	8

Physical Romance

According to the AARP 2009 Sex, Romance, and Relationships Survey (Fisher, 2010), 10% of Americans over age 45 are single and actively involved in sex. Baby Boomers in the current study were asked what had changed from their teens and 20’s to now in terms of physical romance. The term “physical romance” was left open to the interpretation of the interviewee. The gender of the interviewees was the biggest factor in the interpretation of the question. Most males responded about changes in their own bodies such as a drop in testosterone, heart trouble and back trouble, and weight gain making sex more difficult. Arnold said that now there is “more opportunity but less ability.” Women, on the other hand, interpreted the question as one of freedom and liberation. Queen of Everything stated that, “If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn’t have been so timid and would have been sexually active a lot younger.” Lola

remembers being such a “goody-goody” back then and now says, “I am currently making up for lost time.” Lady Blaze, whose early years were spent with strict upbringing and Catholic school education remarked, “It’s different as an adult with no fear of intimacy. It’s more of an adventure with no parents or nuns watching you.” Mustang Sally is enjoying “... being more open now about my own needs. What I couldn’t say before, I can say now.” The openness and newfound sexual freedom of these Baby Boomer women contradict Montenegro’s (2003) study of older singles in which there were large differences between men and women in their dating attitudes and sexual desire, with only two percent of women saying that sex is acceptable during the first date, while ten times as many men, 20 percent, stating that it is acceptable. The AARP 2009 Sex, Romance, and Relationships Survey also did not concur with the current study, stating that one in five women say they would be happy never to have sex again, but only one in fifty men agree with that sentiment (Fisher, 2010). Some women in the current study, however, mention the need for caution. Serephina stated, “People are more cautious when older. I don’t know if it’s more meaningful, more STD’s, or more consciousness of mortality.” Nubbsy remarked, “I still think it’s a good idea to stay clothed for awhile.”

Overall, the Baby Boomers in this study reflect the sexual openness of their generation with their acceptance of sexual behavior as an acceptable part of their relationships, thus uniting them as a cohort that is different from their parents’ generation.

### Romantic expectations

Expectations for a dating relationship have changed quite a lot for Baby Boomers. When asked what their expectations were in their teens/20’s, responses by gender were quite different, with most male interviewees expecting nothing but a good time and females expecting a boyfriend, going steady, or marriage. As stated by Blieszner and Roberto (2006), most early Boomers entered young adult dating relationships with societal expectations of marriage in their



early twenties, with parenthood to follow shortly thereafter. In the current study, Lady Blaze stated, “Expectations back in my late teens were that if I did not hold on to this person, no one else would want me for the rest of my life. I was not savvy enough to think that I did not have to have a man.” After her first marriage ended, however, she learned her true worth. “I realized that I would not settle and it was not important to get married.” In fact, overwhelmingly, the Boomers in this study were not actively looking for a serious relationship when someone came along in mid-life. When asked about their expectations, most said that they wanted companionship, fun, to dance, or to fill an empty space, but not necessarily a lasting relationship. As a generational cohort, Baby Boomers were influenced in their youth or young adulthood by the civil rights and women’s movements and the War on Poverty, and they are more likely to pursue friendships and romantic relationships based on equity, with less concern about homogenous social characteristics than did previous generations (Blieszner & Roberto, 2006). Most say that they are guarding their hearts, and some are caught by surprise. Mary Honey said she did not date after the death of her husband, and had no expectations, but then she “re-met” someone at a class reunion and fell hard. “I tell you I was like a 15-year-old. My heart fluttered; I doodled his name, and it was so crazy.” They have now been married for a year and a half. At the other end of the spectrum, Rob Roy sadly stated, “I have been thinking lately that I will probably never fall in love again—that head over heels love—because I am so careful now.” Gwen said that a friend once told her, “If you take a man home, he will want to stay for breakfast,” so dating in the early stages of a relationship should go slowly. Serephina suggests meeting at a safe place with a short time frame, like lunch. Serephina, like Moby Dick, Gwen, and most other Boomers in this interview, said that they do not start dating someone with any expectations of a long-term relationship.

## Complications

The final question in the section of this study which explored differences in Baby Boomers' dating relationships from their teens and 20's to mid-life asked what or who would have been a complicating factor in their relationships. Responses about complications in early dating were as varied as the personalities of the respondents. Many of the males said that lack of money or a car was a problem. Both genders mentioned that their own or their romantic partner's families or parents could create uncomfortable situations for the young couple. Rob Roy stated that, "Her father didn't like my family because he thought we had more money than anyone else." Even grandparents offered advice, as Queen reported. "I was so trusting. My grandmother kept telling me not to trust that boy (whoever he was)." Viet Nam, in addition to being a topic of conversation, was also a potential complication for relationships. Moby Dick stated that males always had the war and the draft in the back of their minds, and Rob Roy said that he was in the army during that time, and no one would date the soldiers because they had short haircuts and the girls hated them.

Many of the interviewees' complications in mid-life dating, however, tended to cluster around children. Both Boomers who are parents and Boomers who are dating someone with children consider those children to be an important factor in the relationship. Despite the adult status of most of the children mentioned in these interviews—of the 24 persons interviewed in this study, only two had children under the age of 21 still living at home—they still have enough of an impact on the Boomers' relationships to be mentioned as a complication. Some of the interviewees' comments about the complexities of children in their parents' dating relationships are listed in Table 4.5. The significance of the impact of children in Baby Boomers' romantic relationships led to the second research question in this study. The following section will examine how we can apply Privacy Management Theory Bowen's Family Systems Theory and

Petronio’s Communication as useful tools to illustrate how families who are experiencing triangulation of relationships within their family systems negotiate communication boundaries.

**Table 4.5: Complications of Children in Baby Boomers’ Romantic Relationships**

<b>Participants’ Comments about Complications of Children</b>
<b>Bob: “Sometimes her children are an issue.”</b>
<b>Jen: “Now I have to worry that a potential partner will be good with my daughter, too.”</b>
<b>Moby: “It is complicated when they are dependent on their mother for transportation, and time with me is time away from their needs.”</b>
<b>Lady Blaze: “My children’s approval is important. Luckily, they approved.”</b>
<b>Serephina: “Children of the men I date usually like me, but if they didn’t, it would be complicated.”</b>
<b>Mary Honey: “Children and their feelings can bring a relationship up or down.”</b>

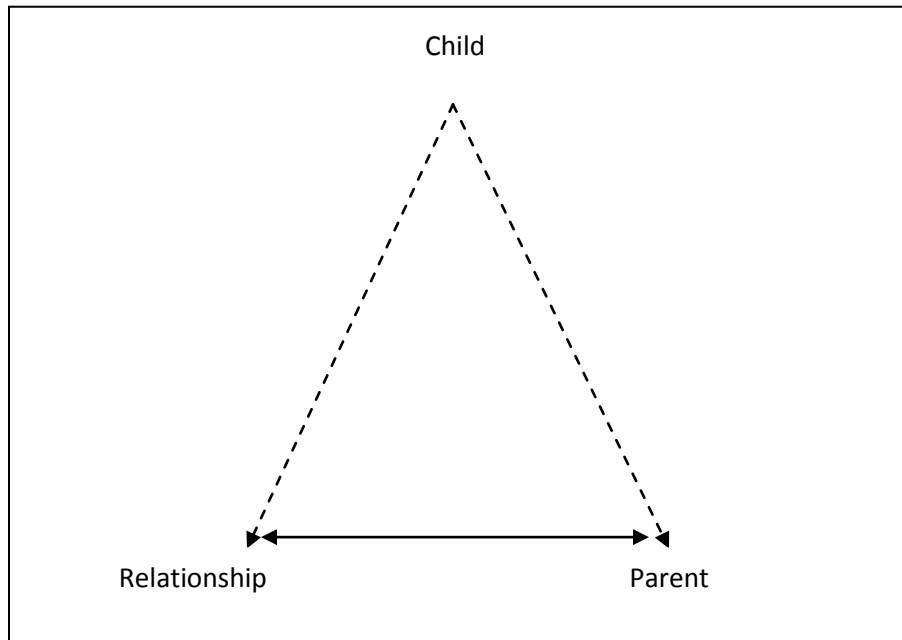
- **Research Question 2: What is the effect of Baby Boomers’ communication with their adult children on their romantic relationships during mid-life? In particular: What is the effect of differentiation on communication and relationships? How does triangulation affect families involved in Baby Boomer relationships? How do families negotiate privacy boundaries when a parent is involved in a romantic relationship?**

As discussed in the review of literature, the theories of Bowen and Petronio provide a theoretical framework for studying the effect of communication between Baby Boomers and their adult children about the Boomer parents’ dating relationships. Bowen Family Systems Theory explains how, in the family dynamic system, the interplay between family members is affected by the levels of differentiation exhibited by the members and by instances of triangulation within the family unit. One possibility about why some Baby Boomers’ children

are unwilling to discuss their parents' romantic relationships after divorce or the death of a spouse is that they are more poorly differentiated than other family members. For example, Queen and her current romantic interest both have 21-year-old daughters. She remembers that her daughter did not trust him at first and tried to manipulate her to end the romance. Since she values the openness of their mother-daughter relationship and feels like her daughter is a rather good judge of character, she listens to her, but sometimes has to tell her it is none of her business.

When a new relationship is formed between a single parent and an outsider, a triangle is created which causes changes in the original relationship between the child and parent, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. The new bond between the parent and the romantic partner causes new privacy rules to be enacted (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006), and the bond between parent and child may no longer be as direct (as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 4.1). As individuals either join or are accepted by families, they undergo a type of training period during which they learn privacy rules, acceptable topics, etc. If the new relationship is not accepted by the original family members, communication continues to be plagued by secrecy and lack of openness. As illustrated by the model in Figure 4.1, the parent-child, and relationship partner-child are out of balance until acceptable privacy boundaries have been established and all relationships are accepted. If the child and relationship partner establish a trusting bond, the anxiety may be reduced and all relationships within the triangle may be harmonious.

As new relationships and new triangles develop, communication in the system is affected, and individuals create personal boundaries within which they keep private information that belongs to them. In Petronio's (2002) Theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM), the focus is on both the individual who is concealing or revealing information, and on how the



**Figure 4.1 Relationships After Triangulation**

decision to reveal or conceal information affects other people. Petronio explains that each person uses a type of “mental calculus” to decide what to reveal to others and what to keep private. Research Question 2 examines how the participants in the current study cope with differentiation, triangulation, and communication boundaries.

In relating the communication experiences of the interviewees, it is helpful to note their status concerning previous marriages and children. As mentioned in the Methods chapter of this dissertation, 4 of the 24 interviewees in this study are never-married males with no children, 2 are divorced females with no children, 16 have adult children, and 2 have children under 18 who live at home. All but one of the interviewees have had communication (or lack of communication) with their own or their relationship partner’s children. Only one participant (a single male with no children) refrained from answering this question because he has not dated anyone with children and has none of his own.

### Single with No Children

The following two paragraphs discuss the participants who have no children of their own. Both the males and females in this section do not talk to the children of their romantic partner about the relationship with their mom or dad. Since neither the Boomers nor the children in these situations are communicating about the relationships, it is difficult to determine whether there is a lack of differentiation in the adult children causing topic avoidance, or whether everyone is really comfortable with the situations and therefore does not feel a need to discuss them.

“Let’s not talk about the relationship”

The three single (never married) males in this study are very friendly, talkative persons for the most part, but are not very communicative about relationships at all; and, according to them, they definitely do not discuss romantic relationships with the children of their romantic partners. They feel uncomfortable bringing up the subject, and so far the children have not expressed a desire to talk about it. Bob states that he communicates openly with his girlfriend’s daughters but avoids personal information about his relationship with their mother. The children have not expressed any opinions to him about the relationship. He says that if they did, the opinions would be important to him, but would not affect the relationship itself. Jody, like Bob, communicates with his girlfriend’s daughter, but not about his relationship with her mother. He says that the daughter has not expressed any opinions about her mother’s relationship, and that if she did it would not affect the relationship. Arnold, although communicative about most subjects, rarely speaks to his girlfriend’s child, and when he does, the relationship with her mother is not a topic of conversation. He says that her daughter is “extremely opinionated, just like her mother,” so he has a feeling that if she had anything to say about the relationship, it would have come up by now. He says that the possibility of negative communication might have

some chilling effect on the relationship for a bit, but would not affect it overall, since her mother is very independent.

“I have concerns about my role”

Both childless divorced females in the study do not communicate with the children of their recent romantic interests, although Serephina has dated three or four men with children in the past. She says the children of the men she has dated usually like her and wanted her to be part of the family, but she has concerns about what her role might be in a future family, such as whether she would have a right to discipline if the kids were still at home. Serephina, who has a background in psychology, also notices that children have a tendency to play one person off against another. The other divorced and childless female in the study, Gwen, makes it a rule to have “no kids or ex-wife too close” when contemplating a new relationship. She feels that children complicate matters, and she worries that the children of her romantic interest will not want a new person taking their inheritance. She is also influenced by a male friend whose daughter will not let go of him, and Gwen feels that he lets his daughter run his life. According to Bowen Family Systems Theory, the ex-wives and children who will not “let go” have not achieved enough differentiation to accept new relationships and allow permeation in the family emotional system. Papero (1990) states that the more intense the new relationship is, the more likely that the original partner will react to the other’s involvement.

#### Divorced or Widowed with Children

“It’s my life—so that’s that”

Only one of the interviewees with children said that his family did not share much communication at all. Winston said that there were no particular topics that were avoided; they just didn’t talk much. The way he feels about communication is that “You don’t want to harm anyone with information. If they want to know, they’ll ask.” He stated that neither he nor his

child brought up or discussed his romantic relationships—“I got married again, and that’s that.” He also said that if his child would express an opinion, it would not affect the relationship “in the least.”

“I love you, but . . .”

The majority of the interview subjects were very enthusiastic when replying that there was a great deal of communication between them and their children with few, if any, taboo topics. According to Bowen, this would indicate a high degree of differentiation in these parent-child relationships. The participants indicated that they are open with their children about their romantic interests, but the interviewer noticed that several of them experienced a very noticeable moment of hesitation when they realized that they and their children seemed to talk openly about everything *but* the parent’s new romantic relationship. This hesitation and realization suggests the presence of privacy boundaries. According to CPM, when a privacy rule is established within a relationship, it often becomes part of a routine and it may not even be noticed as a rule—parents and kids don’t notice that they are *not* talking about relationships. Caughlin and Golish (2002) mentioned that people who are deeply in love with a romantic partner may have illusions that prevent them from noticing that the partner avoids topics. This may be true of a parent-child relationship, especially if the involvement is so deep that there is a lack of differentiation. It is also possible that the topic avoidance was not noticed because the topics were never actually introduced.

However, all of the participants in this group state that their children’s opinions would *not* have a great impact on their romantic relationships. For those children who did state a negative opinion, or for those who might, the interviewees said that they would tell them something like, “I love you, but it’s my life, and I deserve to be happy.” Bob2, who is divorced and has two adult “very opinionated” daughters says, “They would have preferred for me to stay



single, but I stood up for myself because I have a right to be happy. My new wife has kids also, and they are not cooperative, but we are doing what we want.” Despite the current friction with his daughters, he is confident that it will eventually blow over because they have always had excellent open communication. Jamie says that she has lots of communication with her own 15-year-old son and her boyfriend’s adult children. Like other Boomers in the study, she indicates that, “We are open—we don’t keep secrets. Any topic is okay.” However, she also states that she is private about her romantic life. Her son expresses opinions about her relationship, but because of her private nature, his opinions do not have any influence.

Several of the female participants claim that they have a more open level of communication with their children than they ever had with their own parents. Lola is proud that she and her daughters can talk about so many subjects she “. . . would never, ever have talked to her mother about.” Despite that, she was a bit hesitant about broaching the subject of a new relationship after her divorce. She says that she was worried about her children’s reactions, but she would not have allowed their negativity to affect the relationship permanently. Instead, she would have worked slowly and steadily to win her children over. Luckily, the girls were accepting of the new relationship. Lady Blaze, who has three children, is another Boomer who is very proud of the communication in her family, but she also does not let it affect her decisions. “We have lots of communication in the family because I did not have it when I was young. There are no taboo topics. We are open about my relationships, and I have to make it clear that it is *my* life, and that dating is not forever.”

Other participants in this category have very open communication with their children, but after careful consideration, they admit that a few topics are off-limits. Mustang Sally enthusiastically states that she and her children talk about everything *except* finances. Her children offer lots of opinions about her romantic partners, but she states that they have no

influence on her relationships. Red says that she and her children talk quite often, but *not* about politics and religion. She and her daughters are open about her romantic relationships, and “Yes, my girls are opinionated. Their opinions are important, but I will make my own decisions. They don’t like my current relationship, but I am happy, so I don’t care!” Mary Honey, a widow of eight years, and her new husband both have grown children. She has a great deal of communication with her children, *except* about finances, which is an off-limits topic. Her children expressed positive opinions about her marriage, but if they had not, she still would have continued the relationship. Although she loves her children dearly, she relates that a friend of hers stopped dating a man because of her children, and “I learned from her not to do that because of how miserable she was.” Susan and her adult daughter work hard to have open communication, although there are some subjects they avoid until they become necessary. She says that her daughter has not expressed any opinions about her mother dating anyone, so she is not sure how strong any opinions would be or if they would matter. Moby Dick states that he and his sons talk about almost everything except their mother. They do talk about the women he has dated, and his sons feel free to express opinions about his partners. Moby says he is always open to his sons’ opinions if they are valid and not said out of jealousy, but that the final opinion on anything concerning the relationship would be his alone. Moby and his sons, like many of the Boomers interviewed, have managed to “agree to disagree” amicably, while maintaining a good relationship between parent and child. In a positive environment, the flow of communication, even with conflicting opinions, can continue without resorting to secrets or topic avoidance. However, many families choose not to bring up topics that may cause conflict, so it is difficult to determine whether the topic was avoided or just not considered.

Some of the participants’ children are, according to their parents, “quite” opinionated, but none of the Boomers in this section would allow those opinions to affect their romantic

relationships. Jen says that her daughters were raised to know that they could tell her anything, but they would have to agree to listen to *her* opinions, also. She tells them about her relationships, but not until she has had at least two dates with someone. Jen also mentioned that since she and her daughters have such different views about dating, she would listen to her own heart, and her daughters' opinions would not affect her romantic relationships at all. Bill, who is a widower with two children, feels that communication in his family is stronger than in many families. He doesn't feel that they have any taboo topics, and he feels free to share information about his romances with his children. He says, "Yes, my children express opinions about my life, but that doesn't mean I act the way they want me to."

Only one participant in the study did not even flinch when asked whether any topics were avoided or if she communicated with her children about her romantic relationships. GD, who is quite outspoken, has three adult children with whom she has an excellent communicative relationship. She says *no* topic is taboo. "I tell them about my dates—they think it's hilarious!" She, like most other Boomers in this study, feels that her children's opinions about her relationships are important because "They want me to have a good life," but the ultimate decision is hers.

"Maybe it would make a difference"

Two of the Boomers in the study indicated that their children's opinion *might* have a large impact on the relationship. Nubbsy feels that she has excellent, open communication with her four children, but "There are some subjects we dance around more than others. I am not blatant about talking about sex with my kids, but we can do it. I couldn't even say the word around my own parents." The communication situations with her children are quite different. The oldest is an adult who is married and lives out-of-state, so their telephone conversations are usually about subjects other than her love-life. The youngest son lives with her ex-husband out-

of-state, but when he visits, he reacts positively to her current romantic interest. However, he doesn't discuss her relationship or offer opinions. She communicates openly about her romantic partner to her two younger daughters who live at home. Her daughters, who are 15 and 18, do offer opinions about him, and it does matter to her a great deal. "My children are mine forever, so it matters to me that they accept this person. I really don't know what I would do [if they did not accept him] because it's my life and hard to find a relationship, because women are in competition with women who are 20 years younger." Another Boomer, Thomas, has adult children and he says they communicate "... a lot. No topics are avoided." However, he remarks in the next breath, "But we keep our romantic lives private." His children do not express opinions about his romantic partner, but if they did offer opinions, it would make him think seriously and perhaps influence him.

"The children are more important than romance"

Only two of the Boomers who were interviewed felt that their children's opinions about their romantic relationships *would* matter enough to change everything. Bonnie says that her communication with her children has always been very open, but feels that her children might communicate a little *too* much. "They want to talk about sex, but I don't. They probably share too much with my ex-husband. My oldest son posted a picture on Facebook when I got engaged before I had even had a chance to tell anyone." She also indicated that she would be willing to forego a relationship for the sake of her children. "My kids are important to me. If they didn't like him, I probably wouldn't be around him." Rob Roy is another Boomer in this study who openly stated that his children's opinions *would* change his romantic relationship. He values his relationship with his daughters and would take their opinions very seriously if they voiced any. His current girlfriend is quite jealous of his daughter, and she has a daughter who is a

“...smartass about the relationship.” He says that his girlfriend’s daughter is a major reason why he probably will not marry this woman.

### **Summary of Results**

In summary, the results indicate that romantic relationships have changed a great deal for Baby Boomers from their early years of dating to mid-life, and that they are coping with changes in themselves, their partners, and their children in order to enhance their lives with intimacy.

The research questions which guided this dissertation were:

Research Question 1: How have Baby Boomers’ romantic relationships and the resulting communication changed from their teens and twenties to mid-life? Specifically we have studied the following: How have their dating experiences changed over time? How have their expectations changed over time? How has their communication changed over time? How have complications in their relationships changed over time?

Research Question 2: What is the effect of Baby Boomers’ communication with their adult children on their romantic relationships during mid-life? Specifically we have examined the following: What is the effect of differentiation on communication and relationships? How does triangulation affect families involved in Baby Boomer relationships? How do families negotiate privacy boundaries when a parent is involved in a romantic relationship?

In regards to Research Question 1, using life-span perspective as a means to frame the research, Baby Boomers’ romantic relationships and the resulting communication have changed dramatically from their teens and twenties to mid-life.

-The participants in this study, while expressing some pride in the accomplishments of the Baby Boomer generation, did not completely identify with the stereotypes associated with them.

-Their dating experiences have changed drastically in terms of technology providing new means of finding dating partners and communicating with them. The interpretation of changes in “physical romance” was quite different for males and females, with males expressing concern about changes in their bodies, and females relishing their newfound sexual freedom at mid-life.

-Their expectations have changed in that they are now more selective. In their early years of dating, males were looking for a good time, while females wanted a steady relationship. Now most Baby Boomers know what they want, and are looking for common interests, intelligence, values, and respect, rather than physical appearance.

-Communication has changed for this generation from superficial topics in the 1960’s and 1970’s (except for Viet Nam) to more serious topics about friends, family, relationships, and current events. Current technology has made it easier to stay in touch with romantic interests, with the cell phone and email ranking highest in usage, while they were not even available “back then.”

-Complications in Boomers’ teens and twenties involved money, parents, and the war. Now, however, adult children and their potential impact on the participants’ romantic relationships were the main areas of concern.

In regards to Research Question 2, using Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management Theory as framework, single Baby Boomers’ communication with their adult children about the Boomers’ romantic relationships was studied. In situations where the parent and children had a good relationship and communication (18 of the 24 persons interviewed had children), the addition of a third person to the original relationship (parent-child) created an effect of triangulation that potentially could have a negative effect on communication. In situations where the child was not adequately differentiated, the child might

not accept the new relationship and might choose not to communicate or to avoid serious topics. Seventeen of the interviewees had encountered privacy boundaries about relationship communication within their own families without even realizing it. Communication boundaries are indicative of the strength of a relationship and of the stability of the entire family system. For example, Winston said that his family did not share much communication at all, showing that there are individual privacy boundaries within the family system. The lack of sharing inside his family unit is reflected in his statement, “You don’t want to *harm* anyone with information.” On the other hand, GD stated that among her children and herself, no topic is taboo, including her love life. The nonverbal elements of her voice and facial expression indicated satisfaction with the degree of permeability of any privacy boundaries that might exist within her family. The Baby Boomers and their families continue to negotiate the boundaries of communication within their changing family structures and to strengthen their ties with their children and their romantic partners.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Baby Boomers Defy Generalization**

Since the Baby Boomer generation is such a large and important segment of society, comparing and contrasting their communication from young adulthood to mid-life is important in the total study of how individuals and relationships change over time. The members of this generation have experienced several decades of incredible change in lifestyles and technology, which have had an impact on their behaviors and communication.

When this study began, the purpose was to paint a picture of the changes in romantic communication of members of the Baby Boomer generation as they experienced dating several decades after their initial encounters. The intent was never to generalize or to draw conclusions about an entire generation, but instead to gather in-depth information about this particular sample and to observe how their information compared with any available information about Baby Boomers' and previous generations' romantic communication. Using a life-span perspective, we study Baby Boomers as a generational cohort, noting that their diversity makes it difficult to generalize from the entire span of 1946-1964 birth years. In fact, Stewart and Torges (2006) state that for late Boomers the dramatic social events of the 60's and 70's served as an indication of expectations for the future, while early Boomers used these events to shape their identities and political commitments. The researchers explain that within any generation, some people seem to identify with the societal events around them and see themselves as connected or woven into history, while others view themselves as unique and distinct from what is going on around them. The current study found that some of the participants seemed to be embracing the idea of being



wild, freedom-loving Baby Boomers while at the same time realizing that they did not fit the stereotype.

As a population that has experienced more divorce and cohabitation than any other previous generation, their dating at mid-life is different from that of their parents and grandparents. As stated earlier, many of the current studies on romantic relationships are performed using college students, but most dating in mid-life, unlike teenage and young adult dating, has the goal of companionship rather than marriage (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1991). Participants in the current study did not mention remarriage as a goal of their relationships, although five of the twenty-four interviewees have already married their most recent dating partner. Nine of them are in long-term non-married relationships, two are cohabiting, and eight are dating several people. Results of the current research confirm a study by Cooney and Dunne (2001), who predicted that in the future older men and women would date more because they would not have experienced a single, long-term marriage, and that they would be more involved with cohabitation and sexual intimacy at mid-life and older romantic relationships.

According to Blieszner and Roberto (2006), leading edge boomers (late 1940's-early 1950's) followed more traditional roles in their early relationships and expected these to culminate in marriage. These views were expressed by many of the interviewees in the current study, who stated that this is a drastic change from their expectations at mid-life, where marriage is not considered early in the relationship. Blieszner and Roberto also discovered that younger Baby Boomers who became young adults in the 1980's (born in early 1960's) were more likely to delay marriage and cohabitate. As this type of arrangement becomes more of a societal norm, older Boomers who are no longer considering marriage as necessary to a committed relationship may also embrace cohabitation or LAT (living alone together) arrangements.

Some of the differences in romantic communication from then to now may have to do with aging but some are a direct consequence of the similar historical experiences and lifestyle changes of their generational cohort. The snowball sample of twenty-four Baby Boomers in this study came from different states, occupations, and age groups within the cohort, so the researcher was left with the question, “Do their responses to the questions reflect normal mid-life aging, or does their generation itself affect the way these Boomers have adapted to dating in their 40’s, 50’s, or 60’s?” In current interview questions about intimacy, Baby Boomer responses were quite different than those expressed in earlier research. In their early days of dating, Baby Boomers did not worry about HIV/AIDS (which had not yet been “announced” to the world), so they used birth control devices mainly for prevention of pregnancy with perhaps a slight bit of concern for venereal diseases or “VD.”

Previous generations (older than Baby Boomers) have not expressed the same openness about sex that Boomers have been known for. As stated in the results chapter, the females who were interviewed were quite happy about their sexual freedom after divorce. Males in this generation are more open about the changes in their sexual performance, probably due to societal inundation about erectile dysfunction and ads about its treatment. Perhaps part of the Baby Boomer generation’s interest in and continuation of physical intimacy has to do with their obsession with youth. According to Smith and Clurman (2007), Boomers do not view themselves as getting old. In the researchers’ 1996 study they were asked to state at what age old age begins. The median response to that question was 79.5 years. Since, in 1996, the average life span in the US was 76.1 years, it would seem that Baby Boomers really believe, as stated in a popular song of the 1970’s, that they *will* die before they get old. In the current study, none of the participants mentioned death, dying, or retirement as a part of their futures either alone or with their relational partners.

So, would other responses in the then/now section of this study have been different if the participants had *not* been Boomers? The answer to that question is a definite “yes.” Changes in communication channels were unique to the current middle-age individuals, since they have experienced drastic changes in technology across their life-spans. Current results showed that Baby Boomers have upgraded their technology from face-to-face and wired telephones in the 1960’s and 1970’s to texting and cell phones in their current romantic communication. Eight of the participants also expressed that they had tried online dating services, showing agreement with the findings of Malta (2007), who predicted that Baby Boomers would readily embrace new technology at mid-life and actively look for romance online, and of Stephure, Boon, MacKinnon, and Deveau (2009), who predicted that older adults who were experienced in relationships would take advantage of online dating in screening and selecting potential dating partners.

This study also revealed that a Baby Boomer’s adult children could present complications in the romantic relationships of their parents. In order to study the impact of their children on the family and on the romantic relationship of the Baby Boomer parent, Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management Theory were used as the framework for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework of Bowen and Petronio**

Bowen Family Systems Theory (1966) and Petronio’s Communication Privacy Management Theory (2002), described separately in previous chapters, must now be discussed together in order to make sense of the results of this study. Bowen Family Systems Theory examines the family as a functioning emotional system which, like all systems, strives for homeostasis. Any change in the system causes the members to seek balance. In a family that has experienced divorce or the death of a spouse, the remaining family members have created a sense of balance through their own dyadic relationships within the family unit. The addition of a

new person (the Baby Boomer parent's romantic relationship) causes a shift in balance with compensation by the family members to keep the unit steady. Bowen's concepts of differentiation and triangulation help us to understand the dynamics of the family at this point in time. A less-differentiated adult child of a Baby Boomer, one who is not able to make decisions based on logic rather than emotion, may see the new relationship of his/her parent as a threat to the family system. Triangulation then occurs when the dyad consisting of Baby Boomer parent and child is upset in its balance by the addition of a third person, the romantic relationship, to the twosome. The triangle itself is an attempt at balance with three individuals, but the lack of differentiation of the child creates discomfort. In triangles it is common for one pair to be close and two to be distant, and this distance may be expressed in several ways, including physical distance, expressed hostility, or lack of communication. The creation of communication boundaries links to Petronio's Theory of Communication Privacy Management.

Struggles of all types within the family system are evident in the dialectical nature of the relationships. There is tension between inclusion and exclusion in the formation of triangles and another resulting tension between choosing to reveal or not to reveal information to particular family members. In the case of the Baby Boomer parent, there is also tension between wanting to please one's child and wanting to have a satisfying romantic relationship. In the interviews, when the Boomers were asked whether the opinions of their adult children would make a difference in the parent's romantic relationship, the most frequent response was, "If they expressed an opinion, I would tell them, 'I love you, but it's my life, and I have a right to be happy.'" The "I love you, but..." is the expression of a privacy boundary, since it clearly sets up what can and cannot be discussed, or what will not be acted upon if it is discussed. In some cases the parents and children agree to disagree, and life goes on without incident, but sometimes

the silence about this topic can extend into other areas, damaging previously healthy sections of the relationship.

Avoidance of topics and the ensuing silence or discomfort may be compared to what sometimes goes on in a tug-of-war. Sometimes when both teams are equally matched, one could watch the match and assume that no movement is going on at all because the center line of the rope is not moving. What is actually happening, however, is that there is an incredible amount of opposing force at each side of the rope, causing almost imperceptible movements which are counterbalanced by the opposing team. When topics are *not* being discussed in a family, there is often a massive turmoil beneath the surface being expressed by the involved members as silence.

It is also interesting that interviewees who said that they discussed “everything” with their children did not notice that they avoided the topic of their romantic relationship until they were asked about it directly. Some of them had been avoiding it for so long that it had become a taken-for-granted taboo topic.

### **Limitations**

This type of research, although very interesting, poses certain limitations. Qualitative studies are not intended so much to prove as to reveal. Countless debates have been mounted for decades about the merits of qualitative versus quantitative studies, with proponents of quantitative methods sometimes viewing qualitative methods as soft or indistinct. It is necessary, therefore, to carefully frame a qualitative study in solid theory. The current study, because of its phenomenological nature, lends itself to in-depth interviews designed to—at least for a short period of time—form a trusting relationship between interviewer and interviewee. As stated previously, huge national studies (Montenegro, 2003 & Fisher, 2010) have been performed to gather data from thousands of Baby Boomers, but the subtleties of language and nonverbal communication are not present in studies that are purely quantitative in nature. In the

current study, it was a subtlety of nonverbal communication (an extended pause that recurred in several interviewees after a question about whether Baby Boomer parents and their children actually discussed the parent's dating relationship) that led to a very large part of the research. Nevertheless, a lack of quantifiable data may be viewed as a limitation; therefore, a combined approach could perhaps provide a more complete picture of Baby Boomers' romantic communication at mid-life.

Because this study was limited to only twenty-four individuals, there might be a wider range of responses with more interviewees. The researcher felt that she had reached a saturation level in responses with these participants, but perhaps more persons from a wider geographical area would render some different information. The snowball sampling technique used to find the twenty-four Boomers in this study yielded individuals who were all Caucasians. A different sample including other ethnicities could yield different results, or could provide an opportunity to compare dating experiences and family communication among other demographic groups. All interviewees were also employed or recently retired. Perhaps their access to and comfort with media is influenced by their financial situations, and a sample including persons of differing economic levels would show different results in the questions relating to technology.

Another limitation is that the researcher was not qualified to determine the amount of differentiation in the Baby Boomers' adult children, except with the criteria stated by Bowen—the tendency to react emotionally rather than logically, to keep more secrets to manage anxiety, and to react with a lack of objectivity. The Baby Boomers' adult children who are avoiding topics and are not accepting their parents' new relationships are certainly acting in a manner that could indicate a lack of differentiation, but only a qualified psychologist could make that determination with absolute certainty.

This study also failed to take into account the points of view of the adult children of the Baby Boomer parents. Interviews with the children would have provided a more well-rounded view of triangulation and might have provided the researcher with an opportunity to more effectively attempt to identify their levels of differentiation.

The final limiting factor in this study is that all data was collected through self-report of the participants. Because of the personal nature of the responses, there is no way to validate the participants' answers. Although the researcher is not attempting to generalize the results to all members of the Baby Boomer generation, we may still assume that some information may not be completely accurate or honest due to memory lapses, intentional omissions, or misunderstanding of the question.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There is certainly a need for more studies of the Baby Boomer generation at mid-life. With the incredible changes that this group of individuals has experienced in their lifetime, they present opportunities for researchers to fill a gap in our information about communication across the life-span. In particular, in-depth data about romantic relationships and their effects on the family can be further explored.

As mentioned in the Limitations section above, a study including the adult children of Baby Boomers would greatly enhance a study of family communication in the wake of a new relational partner entering a family system. In addition, there seems to be an entire area to be explored concerning Boomers' identification or lack of identification with their generational cohort. A study designed to show which of them identify and which do not, and why, would be of great interest.

In addition to the researcher's own thoughts about areas for future study in this area of life-span research, interviewees in this study were asked, "What factors about Baby Boomers and

romantic relationships do you feel are relevant and/or worthy of further study?” Their responses were reflective of their feelings about dating in mid-life, and of the experiences they have had and the observations they have made.

One of the leading edge (1946-1950) Boomers mentioned the need for studies about their generation soon being in nursing homes, and the impact that a large population of nursing home residents will have on romantic relationships that go on among the residents. Another leading edge Boomer would like to know why so many people of his generation who were wild when they were younger are coming back to church. Another male interviewee among the older Baby Boomers would like to see more information about “the cougar thing” because women are now experiencing freedoms that only men used to have. Along these same lines, several other interviewees of different ages within the cohort were interested in viewing future studies concerning gender roles among Boomers. One participant would like to know more about sex lives from male and female mid-lifers’ points of view, and “what the other gender really feels,” while another stated that we should look into how men still want younger women, but women’s expectations have changed, and they don’t seem to feel that they “need” men any more.

Participants in this study also wanted to know more about what members of their generation expect in a relationship, including more of a need for intellectual interactions and companionship being as important, if not more important than physical romance. Even after up to fifty years of dating, singles would like to know if research has determined what really works in a relationship, whether opposites really attract, and whether maturity is a factor in relationships. One Boomer was concerned with whether any research had been done on options that mid-life singles have for meeting potential partners, developing relationships, and how to make mid-life relationships last longer.



One interviewee who is also a communication scholar would like to see a study about what makes the Baby Boomer generation different and how the influence of post WWII made a difference in the attitudes of that group. She found that communication was more stilted during her youth with many taboo subjects, and she found that the Baby Boomers wanted to bring communication to the next level, making them a very different generation.

Other interviewees were fascinated with the image of Boomers in the popular press and would enjoy reading a study about whether Baby Boomers are really “all about money and body image.” Another participant is curious about the differences in morality and family values between Baby Boomers and members of other generational cohorts.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to reveal changes in the romantic communication of Baby Boomers from their early days of dating to mid-life, and to examine the impact of Boomers’ adult children’s communication (or lack of communication) about their single parents’ romantic relationships. Although this study provides in-depth information about a small group of Baby Boomers, it is important to remember that the intent of this study is not to generalize to the general population of the generation. Instead, the information is presented phenomenologically, so that the reader may get a picture of the participants, their relationship partners, and their children. Most scholarly studies of romantic communication up to this point have been conducted using university students or the elderly, but it is vital that communication occurring at different places along the life-span be studied in the proper context.

The application of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Communication Privacy Management provide a lens through which to study Baby Boomers, their partners, and their families. In addition, a sound theoretical framework provides a foundation upon which to justify this qualitative research.

The interviews presented in this study highlight the peaks and valleys of love and loss, and of family distance and togetherness. As research continues in life-span communication, it is hoped that the Baby Boomer generation will not be slighted, and that Boomers will continue to provide insight into love at all junctures of life.

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM FOR BABY BOOMER STUDY

1. Study Title: A Study of Communication in Baby Boomers' Romantic Relationships

2. Performance Site: Louisiana State University

3. Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions about this study

Lois Nemetz 337-658-3406

Lnemet1@lsu.edu

4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research project is to study differences between dating communication of baby boomers during their teens and twenties, and in their more recent dating experiences.

5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals born between 1946 and 1964 who are currently dating someone, or who have recently dated someone.

6. Number of subjects: 50

7. Study Procedures: Individual interviews lasting about 30 minutes each will be conducted in a relaxed, non-clinical environment.

8. Benefits: The study will yield valuable information about communication in romantic relationships in mid-life.

9. Risks: The only study risk is the inadvertent release of sensitive information in the interview. However, every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your information. A pseudonym of your choice will be used in the interview, and recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed, so that your voice is not recognizable.

10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Give yourself a pseudonym. (Note if male or female.)
2. What is a Baby-Boomer? What have Boomers contributed to society? How do you fit in as a Boomer?
3. Are you currently dating anyone, or have you dated anyone recently? If so, how did you meet?
4. How did you locate dating partners in your teens or 20's? How do you find them now? Have you ever considered or taken part in online matchmaking services or other social media? If so, what filters do you use to determine a match (picture, compatibility, etc.)? (Follow-up)
5. Describe a typical "asking out" or "accepting a date" situation in your teens or 20's? What is it like now?
6. When you were in your teens or 20's, if someone asked you out (or if you were asking someone out), what were your criteria for accepting or refusing? What are your criteria now? What makes a first date turn into a 2<sup>nd</sup> date?
7. Imagine that you are back at age 21, the date is over and you had a rotten time. Your date says, "I had a great time." What do you say? What would you say in the same situation now?
8. What would a typical dating conversation have included in your early teens or 20's? What do you talk about now? What do you talk about on a first date? (sex, kids, exes) at what point can you talk about...
9. What ways (channels) did you use to keep in touch with a romantic interest in your teens or 20's? Who made the first move to communicate? What was your favorite means of communication?
10. How do you currently communicate with a romantic interest? Who initiates the communication? What is your favorite way to communicate these days? Why? What privacy issues do you face with your communication?
11. What do you feel has changed from your teens or 20's to now in terms of physical romance? (Leave question open to their interpretation of "physical")
12. What were your expectations for a dating relationship when you were in your teens or 20's? How have your expectations changed?
13. In your early 20's, what or who would you have considered to be complicating factors for your dating relationship? What about now?

14. Do you or your romantic partner have children? (If yes, follow up below)
- a) How old are the children?
  - b) Are they male or female?
  - c) Do you share a great deal of communication in the family?
  - d) Are there certain topics that are avoided?
  - e) How and when do you bring up issues about your current romantic issues?
  - e) Are there “rules” about what is okay to share with other family members?
  - f) If there is an “ex” involved, do the children share with the “ex”?
  - g) Do they express opinions about your romantic partners? How important are their opinions to you? Do these opinions influence your decisions?
15. Are your parents or your romantic partner’s parents still involved in your lives at this point? Do they express opinions about your romantic partners? How important are their opinions to you? Do these opinions influence your decisions?
16. Are there any friends, coworkers, relatives, or anyone else in your life whose opinions can potentially influence you or your romantic partner’s decisions in choosing or maintaining romantic relationships? Explain.
17. What are the important issues for baby boomers and dating? Are there any questions you have about the study or areas you would like to see covered?

## VITA

Lois Broussard Nemetz is a native of Kaplan, Louisiana. After graduating from Kaplan High School, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in speech education with a minor in English education from Louisiana State University in 1977. Lois continued her education at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) where she earned her Master of Science in communication in 1989. In 2003, she enrolled in the doctoral program at Louisiana State University in communication studies with an emphasis in communication theory and a minor in mass communication with an emphasis in public relations. Her research examines life-span communication, particularly in the area of mid-life romantic relationships. Lois is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies and Mass Communication at Louisiana State University at Eunice.