

Gender Differences in Parent Child Communication Patterns

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore differences in the ways that males and females communicate and possible reasons for these differences. One possible reason that was explored in depth is differences in the ways parents communicate with sons versus daughters. These communication patterns were measured using the Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument developed by David Ritchie. Results found some significant differences between males and females on some scale items.

Many people confuse the terms gender and sex. Sex is a biological phenomenon that is determined by chromosomes and hormones. Gender is a much more complicated issue that develops with influence from culture and society. Many perceived differences between the genders exist. Some of these differences lie in stereotypical characteristics and others result from typical roles filled by males and females. The differences of greatest interest to this research involve variations in communication patterns and emotional expression between the genders. In addition, the communication patterns of parents will be examined in an attempt to use the Social Learning Theory and Symbolic Interactionism as explanations for these gender differences. The examination will focus on the differences between mothers and fathers as well as patterns with sons versus patterns with daughters.

In a literature review, Block (1983) discussed many findings of connections exhibited in childhood between gender and styles of expression and relating to others. One finding was that for males, control over external events and competition are the most salient issues. In group interactions, boys view the group as a collective entity, emphasizing solidarity, loyalty and shared activities while at the same time struggling to display dominance and expertise. In general, boys tend to form extensive, yet nonintimate relationships (Block, 1983). These communication tendencies follow boys into adulthood. In her book, *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen (1990) states that men tend to perceive social relations as a hierarchy. They employ conversation styles that are competitive and fact-oriented and serve to preserve independence and avoid failure.

Females, on the other hand, display very different tendencies. In Block's (1983) literature review, she found that females emphasize interpersonal relations, communion, conservation of societal values, human relationship, and expressiveness. In group interactions, girls perceive the group as an intimate network, emphasizing the sharing of confidences and support. Block also found that females are the more empathic gender and can more accurately discern emotions from nonverbal cues than males. A study by Adams, Kuebli, Boyle and Fivush

(1995) found that by age 70 months, girls use more unique emotion terms than boys do. In general, females develop more intensive, more intimate social relationships (Block, 1983). Similar to the case with males, these communication styles follow females into adulthood. Tannen (1990) noted that women use conversation to deepen intimacy and share feelings. The central purpose for communication is to build connections through which to acquire and pass along confirmation and support (Tannen, 1990).

A recent study (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kilmartin, Forssmann-Falck and Kliever, 1998) found qualitative evidence for this connection between gender and the use of communication for emotional expression. The study found that boys restrict emotional expression from early adolescence through late adolescence, while girls increase emotional expression during the same age period. According to the researchers, the level of emotional expression may be a function of culturally prescribed gender roles. The ability to report feelings was qualitatively analyzed in this study by having students answer the question, "Is it easy or hard to tell others about your feelings?" The most frequent responses by 12th grade males were that their personalities prevent them from expressing their emotions, they are fearful or anxious of others' reactions or they can't say it right. The relative difficulty and ease males and females felt in conveying emotion suggests that boys and girls follow socially prescribed "display rules" that are gender specific. The display rules state that "masculinity is reduced when boys talk about feelings" and encourage girls to do "girl talk" (Polce-Lynch et al., 1998, p.1038). A similar study done earlier by Papini, Farmer, Clark and Micka (1990) also found that females exhibited greater emotional self-disclosure to parents and peers than did males.

Emotional expression, "the way an individual outwardly displays feelings," (Polce-Lynch et al., 1998, p.1026) is conducted under different motives for males and females. Studies consistently find that women are generally more expressive than men, verbally and nonverbally (Cossette, Pomerleau, Malcuit and Kaczorowski, 1996). Women disclose feelings to a greater extent and report expressing negative emotions to a greater extent (Timmers and Fischer, 1998). Timmers and Fischer suggest that this occurs because women's communication patterns focus on relationships and men's focus on power. Since women are more concerned with relationships, they can freely express happiness and sadness, both of which contribute to the relationship. Happiness leads to increased liking, and sadness increases one's dependency on another. Also, sharing one's love or happiness generally adds to the positive quality of one's relationship with another person. Women are socialized to strive for warm, smooth, supportive interaction. Men, on the other hand, are socialized into hierarchic, status-oriented, and competitive relationships. Under these circumstances, emotional expression is not favored because it suggests dependency and powerlessness (Timmers and Fischer, 1998).

Many theories try to explain the differences between the genders in communication patterns and expressiveness, and the origins for the motives that control emotional expression. One popular theory that can be applied to these findings is the Social Learning Theory, demonstrated in studies by Albert Bandura. This theory is based on the idea that gender differences begin in a child's socialization and early learning. Children learn and are socialized into appropriate roles by observing and communicating with adults as well as modeling after the adult communication patterns. The communication with adults often provides some sort of reinforcement for certain behaviors. According to the social learning theory, it is through reinforcement and imitation of observed behaviors that children learn to adopt certain patterns of behavior. The adults that have the most influence on children's socialization are

usually their parents. "The intimate, intensive, relatively enduring nature of family interactions implies that the socialization that takes place in this setting is usually the most pervasive and consequential for the individual" (Demo, Small and Savins-Williams, 1987, p. 705). Since the communication that takes place between a parent and a child has such an important role in their acquisition of behaviors, communication patterns that may influence gender tendencies should be examined.

A second theory that can be applied to gender differences in communication is the Symbolic Interactionism theory. This theory centers on the use of symbols and their shared meaning that is created through interaction with others. In the case of this study, the symbols are the concepts of male and female. Meanings are attached to the symbols of male and female that are learned through interaction. These meanings determine how individuals act in order to fulfill the meaning of the symbol they attach to themselves. The interaction to create meaning for these symbols once again can be found most prominently in parent child interactions.

Many studies have found that there are differences between the way mothers and fathers communicate with children. In these instances, sons often relate to fathers and model after them. One example of father communication patterns, cited by Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti (1995), is a study by Dino, Barnett and Howard (1995) that found that fathers tend to deal with sons with instrumental responses and suggest ways of resolving problems without really listening or trying to understand perspective. In their reactions to their children, fathers use directives that elicit little response but focus on solution. In addition, fathers appear more authoritarian than mothers do in the rearing of sons (Block, 1983). These types of responses can be interpreted as modeling a need for power by emphasizing control over situations.

Mothers tend to use a different style when communicating with their children. For instance, mothers tend to speak to sons in an active manner, focusing on the son's activities rather than on problems and solutions (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995). Mothers initiate more interactions by asking questions and tend to focus on the recognition of and acceptance of the child's opinions (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995, Stewart, Cooper, Stewart and Friedly, 1996). These communication styles by mothers give daughters a model of empathic conversation to follow.

There are also findings of differences in parent-son communication versus parent-daughter communication. Conflicts and other interactions with females in families involve more mutual discussion, expression and negotiation and less avoidance and withdrawal while interactions with males involve more coercion (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995). Females talk more to parents and disclose more in conversation regarding issues such as interests, family sex roles and relationships (1995, Noller and Callan, 1991). They also receive more parental affection and are more verbally interactive in general with parents than males are (Fitzpatrick and Marshall, 1996). Parent daughter relationships are characterized by greater warmth and confidence in trustworthiness and truthfulness, greater reluctance to punish and greater encouragement of the daughter to reflect on life (1983). According to a study by Leaper, Hauser, Kremen and Powers (1989) parents generally use "communications that emphasize closeness with daughters and separation with sons." Communications that emphasize closeness could include statements of love and praise while communications that emphasize separation could include criticism.

Parent child interaction patterns also involve gender specific tendencies toward emotional expression and the encouragement of emotional expression. Mothers speak in softer tones

and place more emphasis on thoughts and feelings with their daughters than with their sons (Stewart et al., 1996). Mothers also tend to model emotional expression for their daughters. Mothers reported in a study by Garner, Robertson and Smith (1997) that they express more positive emotion in the presence of their daughters than of their sons. Both parents encourage their sons, more than their daughters, to control the expression of affect, to be independent, and to assume personal responsibility (Block, 1983). One specific study by Adams, Kuebli, Boyle, and Fivush (1995) found that parents' references to emotion were more frequent and varied with daughters than with sons. Garner, Robertson and Smith (1997) state that both mothers and fathers talk more about emotions, especially positive emotion and sadness with girls than with boys.

As discussed earlier, men and women have different focused orientations when it comes to interaction. Men focus on power and hierarchy while women focus on relationship (Tannen, 1990, Timmers and Fischer, 1998). A connection can be made between the parent-child communication and these orientations. The greater use of coercion with sons (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995) could influence them into a reliance on power to accomplish goals. The emphasis on closeness that is used with daughters (Leapers, et. al., 1989) encourages them to establish and maintain relationships. The impact of the modeling effect can also be taken into consideration. Fathers, role models for sons, were found to be more authoritarian and solution oriented (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995, Block, 1983) while mothers, role models for daughters, were found to be more intimate and concerned with their child's thoughts and feelings (1995, Stewart et. al., 1996).

In examining the research on parent-child communication, differences in the way that males and females communicate and express emotion were found to exist. It is also understandable to connect these differences to family communication patterns that result in modeling and reinforcement for certain behaviors. The research question that this study will investigate is: do parent-son and parent-daughter interactions differ in specific communication patterns. This question is based on the findings and studies presented.

The scale used in this study is the Family Communication Patterns scale developed by David Ritchie (1990). This scale measures two orientations, which are "concept" and "socio." Concept orientation means "parental encouragement of conversation and the open exchange of ideas and feelings" (Ritchie and Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 524). Children in this environment are encouraged to develop and express autonomous opinions and ideas, are less susceptible to influence and focus on informational cues in messages. Socio-orientation implies "the use of parental power to enforce the child's overt conformity to the parent" (p. 524). This type of environment is empirically related to aggression outside of the family. High scores in this orientation are associated with less communication in general.

The two orientations of this scale can be combined in different ways to form different patterns. A pattern that measures high in agreement for concept orientation and low in agreement for socio orientation would be labeled pluralistic. This pattern of communication stresses the relationship between the child and issues (Ritchie and Fitzpatrick, 1990). A pattern that measures low in agreement for concept orientation and high in agreement for socio orientation would be labeled protective. These families stress a relationship of obedience and conformity to the parents (1990). High agreement to both orientations is labeled consensual. Consensual families strive for a combination of conformity and openness (1990). Low agreement on both orientations is labeled as *laissez-faire*. These families have no consistent communication norms and may have very little communication at all between parent and child (1990).

The Family Communication Patterns scale is being applied to gender because the types of

patterns highlighted in previous research, such as both more open communication in general with daughters and, more specifically, more communication emphasizing emotional expression with daughters, fits into the mold of these orientations. It is hypothesized that females will have more agreement to the concept orientation than males and less agreement with the socio-orientation than males. In other words, females tend to perceive their family’s communication patterns to be encouraging and open while males tend to perceive their family’s communication patterns to stress obedience and conformity. This hypothesis is suggested because the concept orientation is centered around open communication, conversation, and encouragement. These aspects would most likely lead to the characteristics found in the relationship orientation that is associated with females. The socio orientation is centered around the use of power and conformity that could reasonably influence an individual into a power focused communication pattern.

RESEARCH METHODS

One hundred and one subjects, 48 males and 53 females, were obtained from an entry-level communication course (CST 110). College students were chosen as subjects because most are living away from their families, and can reflect upon overall patterns without being as distracted by recent family occurrences and problems. CST 110 students were chosen because all university students are required to take this general education course and therefore the sample is not biased towards any major, interest or talent. The subjects were given the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (see appendix A). This 5 point likert scale measures the subject’s perceptions of communication patterns with their parents while they were growing up. The orientations of the scale are associated with open conversation (concept orientation) and power and control (socio orientation). A response of “agree” received a (1) while a response of disagree received a (5).

RESULTS

The mean response to each scale (socio and concept) was calculated for each subject. The mean response by each subject was used to find the mean response to each scale for each gender (see Table 1).

Table 1
Mean Scale Responses

	Females	Males
Concept Scale	2.6	2.54
Socio Scales	1.96	1.95

The mean response to each item was also calculated for each gender (see Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2
Mean Concept Scale Item Responses for Males and Females

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Females	2.23	3.30	2.30	2.51	2.38	2.42	2.62	2.19	2.45	2.00	2.70	1.89	2.09

Males 2.23 3.08 2.60 2.81 3.19 2.56 2.50 2.27 2.10 2.00 2.64 2.08 1.88

Table 3
Mean Socio Scale Item Responses for Males and Females

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Females	3.42	3.77	3.21	4.30	2.23	2.45	2.62	3.17	3.81	1.34
Males	3.17	3.48	3.00	3.79	2.69	2.38	3.00	3.42	3.73	1.98

DISCUSSION

No significant difference was found between the mean responses of females and males on either scale. This data does not support the hypothesis that females will have more agreement to the concept orientation than males and less agreement with the socio-orientation than males. Significant differences were found, however, in the responses of males and females to some of the items.

There was a significant difference between the female mean response of 4.3 and the male mean response of 3.79 ($t = 2.467$, $p < .02$) on item four of the socio scale which states, "My parents often said things like 'there are some things that are just not to be talked about.'" Females disagreed more strongly with this statement. This finding corresponds with the research stating that parents communicate more openly with daughters than with sons (Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti, 1995, Noller and Callan, 1991, Fitzpatrick and Marshall, 1996).

A second significant difference was found on item ten of the socio scale ("When I was at home, I was expected to obey my parents' rules.") Females agreed more strongly with this statement with a mean response of 1.34 while males displayed a mean response of 1.84 ($t = -3.124$, $p < .01$). This difference could indicate that parents are more protective of females than males.

The final significant difference was found on item five of the concept scale ("I talked to my parents about feelings and emotions.") Females agreed more strongly with this statement with a mean response of 2.38 while males had a mean response of 3.19 ($t = -3.362$, $p < .001$). This difference supports the research that found that females are more expressive than males (Cossette, Pomerleau, Malcuit and Kaczorowski, 1996) and that males restrict emotional expression throughout adolescence (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kilmartin, Forsmann-Falck and Kliewer, 1998). This difference, however, does not suggest that gender differences occur as a result of parent-child communication patterns. The fact that there was no significant difference in the responses to the statement "My parents encouraged me to express my feelings" suggests that these gender differences are a result of other societal factors.

A factor that could have influenced the findings of this research is the fact that all of the subjects were students of higher education. Parent-child communication patterns could be different in families where education is not highly valued. Some research suggests that higher educational attainment correlates with greater communication overall (Noller and Callan, 1991). A suggestion for future research would be to compare gender differences in parent child communication patterns for families with children pursuing higher education to families with no pursuit of higher education.

A second suggestion for future research would be to include information on family make up. The number of children and the ratio of sons to daughters could have an interesting

impact on parent child communication patterns. For example, a male who is raised with four sisters may experience different communication patterns with his parents than a male with four brothers. Other factors to consider in family make up would be the presence of single mothers, single father, two mother, or two fathers.

A final suggestion for future research would be to analyze the mother's communication patterns and the father's communication patterns separately. This could, perhaps, provide for some more significant differences.

In summary, literature review highlights various differences in gender communication patterns. Many of these gender differences can be connected to parent-child communication patterns where differences between parent-son and parent-daughter interactions can also be found. Some of the gendered communication patterns, such as male restriction of emotion and more open communication with daughters when compared to sons, were supported in this study. In general, however, the overall scale found little to no difference in the way parents communicated with daughters versus sons. This result could possibly be attributed to the level of education of the subjects.

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APPENDIX A

The Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument

Subjects were asked to “Please respond to the following statements as they apply to your communication with your parents while you were growing up (especially during adolescence).” They were given five numbered spaces below each statement and told to “place an ‘X’ in the space that best reflects how you feel about the statement. 1=agree, 5=disagree

(Socio-Orientation)

1. My parents often said things like “You’ll know better when you grow up.”
2. My parents often said things like “My ideas are right and you should not question them.”
3. My parents often said things like “A child should not argue with adults.”
4. My parents often said things like “There are some things that are just not to be talked about.”
5. When anything really important was involved, my parents expected me to obey without question.
6. In our home, my parents usually had the last word.
7. My parents felt that it was important to be the boss.
8. My parents sometimes became irritated with my views if they were different from theirs.
9. If my parents didn’t approve of it, they didn’t want to know about it.
10. When I was at home, I was expected to obey my parents’ rules.

(Concept Orientation)

1. My parents often asked my opinion when the family was talking about something.
2. My parents encouraged me to challenge their ideas and beliefs.
3. I usually told my parents what I was thinking about things.
4. I could tell my parents almost anything.
5. I talked to my parents about feelings and emotions.
6. My parents and I often had long, relaxed conversations about nothing in particular.
7. I really enjoyed talking with my parents, even when we disagreed.
8. My parents often said that you should always look at both sides of an issue.
9. My parents liked to hear my opinions, even when they didn’t agree with me.
10. My parents encouraged me to express my feelings.
11. My parents tended to be very open about their emotions.
12. My parents and I often talked about things we had done during the day.
13. My parents and I often talked about our plans and hopes for the future.