

Family Communication Patterns and the Development of Reticence

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The primary goal of this investigation was to explore the relationship between family communication patterns and reticence. Students of the Penn State University Reticence Program were asked to complete the Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Results revealed that reticent individuals reported a significantly lower level of conversation orientation within their families than members of a comparison group.

Keywords: reticence, family communication patterns, etiology of reticence

Introduction

As Huang (1999) points out, research has shown that family communication patterns and styles influence children's attitudes and behaviors in a number of areas. Some recent research, in fact, has begun to demonstrate a connection between family communication patterns and communication problems such as communication apprehension (Elwood & Schrader, 1998; Hsu, 1998), shyness (Huang, 1999) and unwillingness to communicate (Avtgis, 1999). Research in this area is quite limited, however, and no such research has been done for the problem of reticence (Keaten & Kelly, 2000; Phillips, 1997).

The present study was done to examine the relationship between reticence and family communication patterns. Research in this area is warranted for two reasons. First, since some research has found an association between family communication and communication anxiety problems (e.g., Avtgis, 1999; Hsu, 1998; Huang, 1999), it appears that this is a fruitful avenue to pursue for the related problem known as reticence. If similar results are obtained, it would be appropriate at that point to design studies able to test for causal relationships to begin to understand the etiology of reticence. Thus far, discussion of etiology of communication anxiety problems in general, and reticence in particular, has been principally speculative (e.g., McCroskey, 1997; Phillips, 1997; Phillips & Metzger, 1973) as others have noted (McCroskey, 1997).

Second, as Dwyer (2000) argues, treatment of communication problems is assumed to be most effective when it addresses the underlying cause or source of the communication anxiety. Thus, to best serve those who seek help for their communication problems, researchers need to try to better understand the causal factors associated with such problems. Although the present study is not designed to establish causality, it may open the door to further etiological research.

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Brief Review of Relevant Literature on Reticence

Reticence, as a behavior, occurs when, “people avoid communication because they believe it is better to remain silent than to risk appearing foolish” (Keaten & Kelly, 2000, p. 168). People referred to as reticent, “engage in chronic silence out of fear of foolishness” (Keaten & Kelly, 2000, p. 168).

Although there is evidence that reticent individuals tend to be anxious, to have deficient communication skills, and to adopt faulty beliefs about communication (see Keaten & Kelly, 2000 for a review of this research), there are no published empirical studies of parental influences or the effect of family communication patterns on reticence. Thus, this review includes research on the relationship of family communication to cognate constructs such as communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970, 1997) or shyness (Buss, 1997; Zimbardo, 1977). Much of the shyness research has tended to adopt a causal position favoring an inherited predisposition (e.g., Coll, Kagan, Reznick, 1984; Daniels & Plomin, 1985), whereas the predominant view of the cause of communication apprehension has reflected, until recently with the introduction of the communibiological paradigm (Beatty, McCroskey, & Heisel, 1998), a social learning paradigm.

Some research on the development of communication apprehension has looked at the role of parental reinforcement of children’s communication behaviors and has found support for a reinforcement model (Beatty, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Daly & Friedrich, 1981). In this view, children develop CA because communication is unrewarding or painful due to a lack of parental supportiveness toward their communication efforts. Modeling theory, offered as an alternative to reinforcement theory, has also been proposed as an explanation for the development of communication apprehension, in which children model or imitate the behavior of their apprehensive parents (Beatty et al., 1985; Hutchinson & Neuliep, 1993) or peers (Hutchinson & Neuliep, 1993). Research results have been contradictory, however, with one study (Beatty et al., 1985) producing no support for modeling theory and another (Hutchinson & Neuliep, 1993) finding evidence of parental, but not peer, modeling. Both the reinforcement and modeling explanations of CA, however, suggest the importance of family communication as a causal variable.

The concept of family communication patterns was articulated by McLeod and Chaffee (1972), who were interested in the role of family as an influence in children’s use of media. According to Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990), “The family communication environment is a set of norms governing the tradeoff between informational and relational objectives of communication. Family environments can be classified according to whether the child is encouraged to develop and express autonomous opinions and ideas (concept orientation) [renamed conversation orientation] or to pursue relational objectives by conforming to parental authority (socio-orientation) [renamed conformity orientation]” (p. 524).

Elwood and Schrader (1998), using a sample of seventh-graders, ninth-graders, and college students, found that conformity orientation was not a significant, positive predictor of communication apprehension, but conversation orientation was a significant and negative predictor of CA in group and interpersonal contexts. Thus, those who perceived their home environment to be characterized by the open exchange of ideas and encouragement of conversation had lower CA scores for two communication contexts.

Huang (1999) found a significant relationship between family conformity orienta-

tion and shyness, as well as a negative correlation between shyness and conversation orientation, although both correlations were fairly low (.27 and $-.28$, respectively). In a similar study, Avtgis (1999) examined the two dimensions of unwillingness to communicate and family communication patterns. The communication reward dimension, which assesses the degree to which participants trust communication and find it rewarding, was found to be significantly related to conversation orientation and negatively related to conformity orientation. Although a significant relationship was found between the approach-avoidance dimension and conversation orientation, contrary to Avtgis's (1999) hypothesis, it was not related to conformity orientation.

In addition to family communication patterns, Hsu (1998) examined the influence of parental acceptance-rejection and other family variables such as cohesion, expressiveness, independence and conflict on communication apprehension. Family expressiveness had the strongest relationship to CA, but conformity orientation was also significantly related to CA for both men and women; conversation orientation was significantly and negatively related to CA for female but not male respondents (Hsu, 1998).

The studies summarized above suggest that family communication patterns, particularly a pattern that reflects a high degree of conversation and open exchange of ideas among family members, may be associated with lower communication apprehension (Elwood & Schrader, 1998; Hsu, 1998), less unwillingness to communicate (Avtgis, 1999) and less shyness (Huang, 1999). In addition, limited support has been found for both reinforcement theory (Beatty et al., 1985; Daly & Friedrich, 1981) and modeling theory (Hutchinson & Neuliep, 1993) explanations for these findings.

Hypothesis and Research Question

Reticent individuals have been found to be significantly more fearful of negative evaluation than their non-reticent peers (Keaten et al., 1999). They are also more apt to agree that "It is better to remain silent than risk appearing foolish" (Keaten, Kelly, & Finch, 2000; Keaten et al., 1999) and that they must avoid making any mistakes when giving a speech (Keaten et al., 1999). These and other findings about reticent individuals raise the question of why reticents are so fearful of negative evaluation, and why they adopt unrealistic beliefs about communication. One answer may be the family communication environment in which they were raised.

The research reviewed above leads to the prediction that reticent individuals are more likely to have come from families that are low on conversation orientation. Perhaps their parents model this orientation or perhaps they are discouraged by their parents from sharing their ideas, and from participating in family discussions. The lack of positive reinforcement and/or the display of negative reinforcement from their parents may lead to the development of fear of negative evaluation, withdrawal from communication, and a belief that it is best to remain silent. Thus, we posited:

H_1 : Reticent college students, in contrast to a non-reticent comparison group, report lower conversation orientation scores on the RFCP instrument.

Previous research has not produced consistent results for the conformity orientation dimension. Although we might expect a high degree of conformity orientation

in the family background of reticents because conformity pressure is likely to generate fear of negative consequences in situations of noncompliance, the lack of strong results in previous studies suggests a research question rather than a hypothesis. Thus, we posed the following question:

RQ₁: Compared to a non-reticent group, do reticent college students report higher conformity orientation scores on the RFCP instrument?

Method

Participants

Participants were 155 students enrolled in six sections of the Penn State Reticence Program during both fall semester of 1999 and spring semester of 2000. Although reticence was not measured with a standardized instrument, studies have consistently shown Reticence Program participants to achieve scores on a variety of measures that classify them as reticent (Keaten, Kelly, & Begnal, 1995; Keaten et al., 1993; Keaten et al., 2000; Kelly & Keaten, 1992; Kelly et al., 1994). Furthermore, each student enrolled in the reticence program undergoes a screening interview to assess both the scope and severity of their communication problems (Kelly, 1989; Kelly, Phillips, & Keaten, 1995).

Fifty-five percent of the participants were female and 45 percent were male. Ages ranged from 18 to 37, although 81 percent ranged from 19 to 22. Forty percent of the participants were seniors, 25 percent juniors, 32 percent sophomores, and 3 percent were freshmen. For a detailed description of the screening procedures used to select students for the program see Kelly (1989).

A comparison group of 80 students from a mid-sized Western university also participated in the study. Previous research (Keaten et al., 1995; Keaten et al., 1993; Keaten et al., 2000; Kelly & Keaten, 1992; Kelly et al., 1994) has found that convenience samples of comparison group respondents obtain significant differences on a variety of communication measures when compared to students in the Penn State Reticence Program, thereby producing a non-reticent sample. Seventy-eight percent of the participants were female and 22 percent were male. Ages ranged from 19 to 35, with the vast majority (89%) ranging from 19 to 22. Twenty-two percent were seniors, 38 percent juniors, 38 percent sophomores, and 3 percent freshmen.

Instrument

The Revised Family Communication Patterns scale (RFCP, Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) measured participants' perceptions of family communication norms. The scale is composed of 26 statements across two dimensions. Conversation orientation refers to the perception "parental encouragement of conversation and the open exchange of ideas and feelings" (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 525). Conformity orientation, the second dimension, corresponds to the perception of "parental power to enforce the child's conformity to the parent" (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 525). Research supports the internal consistency and test-retest reliability of the scale (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Cronbach's alpha indicated high internal consistency for both scales (Conversation Orientation = .92; Conformity Orientation = .82).

Procedures

Participants were recruited during either the first or second weeks of the semester. Students were given copies of the Revised Family Communication Patterns scale

and a questionnaire asking for general demographic information (i.e., gender, year in school, age, etc.). They also were informed of the general purpose of the study and were guaranteed confidentiality.

Results

Difference Analysis

To test the differences between the reticent group and the comparison group, a series of three-factor ANOVAs were conducted, using treatment group, gender and year in school as factors ($2 \times 2 \times 4$). Gender was included as an independent variable because of the high percentage of female participants in the comparison group. Two dependent variables (conversation orientation and conformity orientation) were analyzed separately into the three-factor ANOVA.

Conversation orientation. Participants in the reticent group reported significantly lower levels of conversation orientation than members of the comparison group (see Table 1; $F[1,177] = 17.15, p < .001$). Women also reported higher levels of conversational involvement with their families as compared to men (see Table 1; $F[1,177] = 4.27, p < .05$). All interactions were not statistically significant ($p > .05$) and, therefore, dropped from the model. The three-factor model explained 18.3 percent of the variation in conversation orientation scores ($F[13, 177] = 3.06, p < .001$). H_1 , therefore, received support.

Conformity orientation. The reticent group did not differ significantly from the comparison group (see Table 1; $F[1,177] = 0.52, p > .4$). Women reported lower levels of conformity orientation than men (see Table 1; $F[1,177] = 4.32, p < .05$). The two-way and three-way interactions were not significant ($p > .05$). The three-factor model explained 8.3 percent of the variation in conformity orientation scores ($F[13, 176] = 1.22, p = .27$).

Discussion

This study was conducted to begin to explore the development of reticence. Previous research has shown that reticent individuals, compared to their non-reticent peers, are more anxious about communicating (Keaten et al., 1993; Kelly & Keaten, 1992; Kelly et al., 1994), adopt more unrealistic beliefs about communication (Keaten et al., 1999), and tend to be less skilled communicators (Keaten et al., 1995). The question remains: to what can these differences be attributed? The

TABLE 1
TREATMENT GROUP AND GENDER BY DEPENDENT MEASURES

Group	N	Family Communication	
		Conversation Orientation ^{a,b}	Conformity Orientation
Treatment Group			
Reticence Program	155	47.62 (10.80) ^c	31.33 (7.23)
Comparison Group	80	54.89 (10.16)	31.61 (6.80)
Gender			
Female	147	52.32 (10.91)	30.87 (7.21)
Male	88	47.43 (10.85)	32.54 (6.62)

^a The difference between reticent and comparison groups was significant ($p < .001$)

^b The difference between females and males was significant ($p < .05$)

^c Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviation.

present study examined the role of the family communication environment in the development of reticence.

Results of the study suggest two conclusions. First, reticent participants reported lower scores on the conversation-orientation dimension of the RFCP instrument. Analysis of RFCP items reveals that families who are low on conversation orientation have less communication between parent and child about thoughts, daily happenings, and plans and hopes for the future. Parents in such families are less open about their emotions and less likely to encourage their children to express their own feelings. This finding supports the research of Elwood and Schrader (1998), who found that high apprehensive adolescents and college students reported that their families were low on conversation orientation as well as both Huang's (1999) and Avtgis's (1999) studies which found similar results regarding shyness and unwillingness to communicate, respectively.

A second conclusion is that reticent individuals do not differ from their non-reticent peers on family conformity orientation, a finding that also supports the research of Elwood and Schrader (1998). In essence, they do not perceive their parents as more controlling and autocratic than non-reticent individuals, suggesting that reticence does not emerge from a family climate characterized by negative reinforcement.

Results from this study suggest that modeling theory presents a viable explanation for the development of reticence. Data indicate that parents of reticent individuals do not model effective communication skills, as Hutchinson and Neuliep (1993) found in their study of the development of communication apprehension. Because conformity orientation did not differ between reticent and non-reticent populations, reinforcement theory, especially the use of punishment to gain compliance, appears to be a less likely explanation.

If parents communicate little to their children and do not discuss their own feelings and emotions openly, then children do not have effective models for daily interaction or for discussion of feelings. Goleman (1995) explained the centrality of family interaction in developing emotional intelligence, "we learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings; how to think about these feelings and what choices we have in reacting; how to read and express hopes and fears" (Goleman, 1995, p.189).

Gottman (1997) found that parents who engage in "emotion coaching," which focuses on discussing emotion and developing appropriate problem-solving skills, raise children who "get along better with friends, have fewer behavior problems, and are less prone to acts of violence—they are better able to soothe themselves, bounce back from distress, and carry on with productive activities" (Gottman, 1997, p. 25). Given the lack of verbal attention given to emotion within their families, individuals who suffer from reticence may not have learned productive ways of coping with negative emotions, such as the fear of being perceived as foolish. When the fear of being perceived as foolish overshadows the need to communicate, reticence occurs.

We often expect our schools to do more than teach academic skills and content; in fact, many look to our schools to teach communication and social skills, life skills and even values. For the sake of those who are reticent, shy or communication apprehensive, elementary and secondary schools may need to help students develop skills for discussing their emotions as well as their opinions. Currently, curricula based on the emotional intelligence concept are in use in public schools (see Salovey & Sluyter,

1997). Perhaps more widespread use of these curricula might help all students, but especially those from families that are low on conversation orientation, to develop stronger communication skills.

The limitations of the current study warrant additional research on the factors that contribute to reticence, and specifically, the influence of family communication patterns. The comparison group was predominantly female, and although gender did not interact with reticence to affect the dependent variables, gender differences were obtained for family communication patterns. Future studies should include a more gender-balanced sample. Moreover, the present study relied on respondents' perceptions of their family communication environments; thus, reticent and non-reticent individuals may simply differ in how they perceive communication within the family, which also might explain the reported differences in communication patterns. Future research could obtain the perceptions of parents and/or siblings to assess family communication more fully. Finally, a broader population might be studied, such as children in grade schools, middle schools and high schools, allowing for a developmental perspective on reticence and family communication patterns.

Overall, this study represents an initial attempt to study the family communication environment as a contributing factor in the development of reticence. The results are encouraging in that it appears that reticent individuals come from families in which conversation is inhibited or generally absent. Parents do not openly communicate their feelings and children are not encouraged to speak about their emotions. Such a lack of opportunity to discuss and explore various emotional states within the presumably safe environment of the home may contribute to the reticent person's communication difficulties by preventing the development of coping skills for dealing with negative emotions such as fear.

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