

December 2018

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Recommended Citation

Mishra, Anubhav and Satish, S M. (2018) "Family Communication Patterns and Self-Construal among Indian Adolescents: A Cultural Perspective," *Management Dynamics*: Vol. 18: No. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57198/2583-4932.1289>

Available at: <https://managementdynamics.researchcommons.org/journal/vol18/iss2/5>

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FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND SELF-CONSTRUAL AMONG INDIAN ADOLESCENTS: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Parents are the most important influencers in building the behavior of children. The adolescence period is a critical period of creating a unique identity in the society among peers. This research explores the prevailing communication styles of Indian parents, along with the self-construal traits among Indian adolescents. Using data from 793 students (age 12 – 18 years), we find that Indian parents engage in higher socio-oriented communication as compared to concept-oriented communication. Also, adolescents report higher scores on interdependent self-construal dimension in contrast to independent self-construal. The findings are similar to research from other countries that have similar cultural and societal norms (e.g., collectivistic and power distance) as in India.

Keywords: Family communication patterns, Adolescents, Self-construal.

Introduction

The extant literature suggests that how parents communicate with children affects the social, cognitive and psychosocial development of their children (Huang, 1998). The family communication patterns (FCP) have been used in a variety of studies in communication research area to predict information processing, behavioral and psychological outcomes (refer Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008 for a meta-analytical review). The family FCP have been explored on two dimensions. The first dimension, socio-oriented communication (SOC) is described as “the frequency of communication that is designed to produce deference, and to foster harmony and pleasant social relationships in the family” (McLeod & Chaffee 1972, p. 83). It favors monitoring and controlling children’s consumption activities. The second dimension, concept-orientated communication (COC) is described as “positive constraints to stimulate the child to develop his own views about the world, and to consider more than one side of an issue” (McLeod & Chaffee 1972, p. 83). This orientation promotes the independent development of consumer skills and experiences in children (Ritchie, 1991). These two dimensions have been further divided on low and high values, which gives us four different types of family categorization (see Figure 2). *Laissez-faire* parents are low in both socio-oriented and concept-oriented communication with children, which means there is no or very little communication happening between parents and child. *Protective* parents are high in socio-oriented but low in concept-oriented communication. These parents focus on discipline and obedience, vertical relationships and interactions with child; and control the external information flow to the children. *Pluralistic* parents are high on concept-oriented and low in socio-oriented communication. They accentuate more on open discussion and less on obedience and promote horizontal parent-child interaction. *Consensual* parents score high on both concept and socio-oriented communication. They

emphasize issue-oriented communication as long as hierarchy and harmony are maintained within the family (Kim, Lee, & Tomiuk, 2009; Moschis, 1985).

Therefore, the current study attempts to explore and identify the FCP in India. We have used the survey method to contact adolescents and get their response on how their parents communicate or interact with them. Then, after data analysis, we present our results on the categorization of FCP among Indian parents and compare the results with the existing research. We also follow the same approach to study the self-construal.

Family Communication Patterns

First, we discuss the Hofstede's cultural dimensions topology and its relation to family communication patterns. Hofstede (2001) has provided most widely used typology of cultural dimension: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/ femininity and orientation. The power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. India scores high (77) on this dimension which means that it accepts the hierarchy and a top-down structure in society for functioning (Hofstede, 2001). We expect that the parents act as hierarchy and with authority toward their children in family. This should lead to higher socio-oriented (SO) communication toward their children.

Individualism refers to the degree of independence that is maintained in the society. It talks about how people behave, either as an individual or as in groups. India scores an intermediate score (48) on this dimension, which means it has both collectivistic and individualistic traits (Hofstede, 2001). We also notice that Indian culture focuses on collectivism while celebrating festivals and harmony in relations with elder parents / grand-parents. We believe that parents will engage their children more in the collective side of decision making and autonomy. They may provide a certain degree of independence to their children based on specific context, but mostly they will prefer harmony and togetherness in the family. Therefore, Indian parents will display low levels of concept-oriented (CO) communication to control the degree of autonomy in their children.

Self-Construal

Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that people from different cultures have different construals of the self, of others and of the interdependence of the two. In their study, they find that people from Western culture (Americans) perceived themselves as more dissimilar to others than they perceived others to themselves. The reverse but non-significant pattern emerged for the people from Eastern culture (Indians). Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that individuals with a Western background have higher independent self-construal (IndepSC), whereas individuals from Eastern backgrounds have higher interdependent self-construal (InterSC). Matsumoto (1999), however, points out to flaws about various assumptions made by Markus and Kitayama (1991) and other similar studies that link self-construal to cultural factors. For example, there is an implicit assumption about the individualistic-collectivism (IC) cultural dimensions and the self-construal. Later, the results about lining IC and self-construal have been examined with better methodology and the results advocate that people from individualistic culture are likely to have higher IndepSC, and people from collectivist culture are likely to have higher InterSC (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2010; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002).

Methodology

The data was collected from 793 students from age group of 12 -18 years (42.2% females). We followed the similar approach of Chan and McNeal (2003). The FCP have been measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Hence the average values were compared with the mid-point value of 4. The SOC was significantly

higher ($M = 4.35$) than the mid-value of 4 ($t = 8.5034, p < 0.001$), while the COC was lower ($M = 3.94$) than 4, but the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.535, p = 0.125$). Therefore, we conclude that the Indian parents engage in a high level of SOC, and low but not significant level of COC. The results are aligned with the culture based findings as argued earlier. The similar findings from the prior studies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Family communication pattern across countries

Research	Country	Power distance	Collectivistic	COC Mean	SOC Mean
Rose, Bush and Kahle (1998)	Japan	Medium	High	2.82	3.82
	USA	Low	Low	3.22	3.07
Rose, Boush and Shoham (2002)	Japan	Medium	High	2.78	3.22
	USA	Low	Low	3.25	3.07
Chan and McNeal (2003)	China	High	High	3.03	3.59
Mukherji (2005)	India	High	Medium	2.79	3.67
Shearman and Dumlao (2008)	Japan	Medium	High	2.91	2.34
	USA	Low	Low	3.23	2.85
Yang, Kim, Laroche and Lee (2014)	Canada	Low	Low	2.93 (F) 3.30 (M)	2.84 (F) 2.96 (M)
	China	High	High	2.85 (F) 3.08 (M)	2.98 (F) 3.25 (M)
This study*	India	High	Medium	2.96	3.23

Note: Study with the * mark used 7-point Likert scale, the values are converted to an equivalent 5-point scale. COC = concept-oriented communication, SOC = socio-oriented communication, F = father, M = mother

We observe that generally parents engage in low COC and high SOC, from countries where power distance is high and collectivistic is medium to high. The findings are in line with the cultural dimensions explanation. In high power distance societies, hierarchy is considered important; hence parents naturally emphasize on maintaining the same within the family using discipline, monitoring and controlling of children. In countries, such as USA and Canada, the power distance and collectivistic scores are low. The society accepts equality among everyone and focuses on the individual freedom. Therefore, parents from such cultures display high COC and low SOC, because they treat their children relatively more equal with rights (as compared to high power distance cultures), and allow their children to have more open discussion and opinions.

In this study, we find that individuals reported higher InterSC than IndepSC, which is expected as India is regarded a collectivistic culture. We conducted a paired sample t-test and found that there was a significant difference in the scores for InterSC ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.71$) and IndepSC ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.78$) dimensions of the self-construal ($t(340) = -2.836, p = 0.005$). Therefore, the results are similar to the earlier findings in past research.

Conclusions

The study makes important contributions to the literature on family communication patterns, self-construal and the role of culture. In India, we find that parents engage in more control and discipline of

their children (similar to other cultures where power distance is high i.e. hierarchy is accepted well in society). Also, India is collectivistic culture, where more importance is given to societal harmony and community work rather than individual efforts and achievement. This is reflected in the self-construal results, where participants report a significant higher interdependence view as compared to independent perspective.

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