

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIVE AND STRUCTURAL OPENNESS  
ON ADOPTIVE FAMILIES' COMMUNICATION PATTERNS,  
RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE BEHAVIORS,  
AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING

by

Sarah E. Shipman

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of Communication Studies  
Texas Christian University  
Fort Worth, Texas

May 2, 2014

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIVE AND STRUCTURAL OPENNESS  
ON ADOPTIVE FAMILIES' COMMUNICATION PATTERNS,  
RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE BEHAVIORS,  
AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING

Project Approved:

Kristen Carr, Ph.D.  
Department of Communication Studies  
(Supervising Professor)

Paul Schrodt, Ph.D.  
Department of Communication Studies

Chantel Langlinais, Ph.D.  
Department of English

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	5
Adoption .....	5
Family Communication Patterns.....	6
Relational Maintenance .....	7
Structural and Communicative Openness.....	9
METHOD .....	12
Participants.....	12
Procedure .....	13
Measurement.....	13
RESULTS .....	15
DISCUSSION.....	18
Limitations and Future Research .....	23
REFERENCES .....	26
TABLE 1.....	31
ABSTRACT.....	32

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my supervising professor, Dr. Kristen Carr, for her continuous assistance, advice, motivation, and knowledge. Her guidance throughout my research and writing of this thesis was invaluable. I could not have imagined a better mentor and friend.

Additionally, I would like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Paul Schrodtt and Dr. Chantel Langlinais. I am so grateful for their time, as well as their support and insightful comments.

My appreciation is also extended to everyone who participated in my study. Without their willingness and contribution, this thesis would not have been possible.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family who took the time to read over all my drafts. I would not be here without all their support and encouragement.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its formal recognition as a field of study in the mid-1970s, family communication scholars have examined the impact and effectiveness of a wide variety of communication behaviors on family life (Galvin, 2001). Generally, we know that families who demonstrate effective communication skills have greater family cohesiveness and flexibility (Schrodt, 2005). However, as the family form has become more diverse—single parents, blended families, co-parents, adoptive families—scholars are increasingly interested in understanding how, if at all, these structural variations in families impact their communication and family functioning. For example, approximately 135,000 children are adopted each year in the United States, and researchers suggest that more families are choosing to adopt, as parents wait longer to have children and turn to alternative means of building a family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Often, adoptive families face unique challenges in creating and maintaining family bonds because family members are frequently not biologically related to each other (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). Although existing research has focused on the effect of adoptive communication on adoptees' identity (i.e., Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011), less is known about the impact of adoption on adoptive family functioning.

As a means to illuminate the influence of communication on family functioning in a general sense, Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002b) family communication patterns emerged from the idea that family functioning is based on members having a shared social reality. This shared social reality makes it easier for family members to understand each other and often has the effect of increasing the quality of family relations. Family members create this shared reality through variations in conversation and conformity

orientation. *Conversation orientation* is characterized by family members' ability to disclose ideas frequently and openly; *conformity orientation* is characterized by similar beliefs and attitudes held by all members of the family (Rueter & Koerner, 2008; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b).

All traditionally formed (i.e., biologically related) families exhibit varying levels of conversation and conformity orientation, affecting how members sustain familial relationships. However, in the absence of biological connection, adoptive families face additional challenges as they continually rely upon discourse for the maintenance of family ties (Galvin, 2006b). In adoptive families, discourse-bound maintenance may be shaped by variations in the individual adoption processes. Some adoptions occur during infancy, whereas other children may have been adopted later in life. Although each adoption has its own unique situation, and families choose to address the topic of adoption differently, communication remains central to managing and maintaining these relationships. In this regard, Stafford and Canary (1991) originally developed a tool to measure relational maintenance behaviors, which looked specifically at positivity, openness, assurances, network, and shared tasks, and was used primarily for dating and married couples. It has since been used to look at relationships of all types, including familial relationships. No matter the relationship type, all relational maintenance research focuses on the particular interactions that help preserve ongoing relationships. Relational maintenance uses openness as one important maintenance behavior, and it has been found that openness affects not only adoptees (Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006) but also the adoptive families and birth families (Ge et al., 2008). Consequently, it seems likely

that family structural openness and communicative openness may affect how adoptive families maintain their relationships.

Even within the category of adoptive families, there is a wide variety of structural and communicative differences. Some adoptive families have a significant amount of information about their child's birth family, whereas others may have little to none. Some adoptive parents may choose to share information about the birth family with their adopted child, or they may choose to keep this information private. The adoptive parents' willingness to share information and discuss the circumstances surrounding their child's adoption is described as *communicative openness* (Neil, 2009; Brodzinsky, 2006). It is important to note that communicative openness in adoptive families is focused on the parents' *willingness* to discuss and share whatever adoption information they may have, regardless of the amount of information they actually have. Thus, even adoptive families with very little information may demonstrate high levels of communicative openness if the adoptive parents are accessible in terms of answering questions surrounding the adoption.

In addition to the degree to which families discuss the circumstances surrounding the adoption, adoptive families also vary in the degree of contact they have with their child's birth family. Some families desire and maintain contact with the birth families, whereas others may not choose or be able to have much at all. Other families may have a lot of contact with one birth family member but not any other biological relatives. This aspect is known as *structural openness*, as it measures the degree to which an adoptive family has contact with the biological family (Neil, 2009; Brodzinsky, 2006). As is the case with communicative openness, the concept of structural openness recognizes that

adoptive families have choices regarding the extent of contact they have with their child's birth family, in addition to the amount of information available.

It has been noted that both family structural openness and communicative openness have a significant effect on the adjustment of adoptees (Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). Adopted children with more communicative openness reported higher self-esteem and fewer adjustment difficulties (Brodzinsky, 2006). Additionally, adoptees develop their adoptive identity – their understanding of what it means to be adopted – through communication, and the adoptive parents are the greatest influence on the adoptive identity (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). Samek and Rueter (2011) suggest that genetic relatedness affects how siblings reciprocate behaviors and the activities they partake in together. Ultimately, there are studies of adoptees' adjustment that allude to both structural openness and communicative openness, but there is a lack of information surrounding whether or not the degrees of openness affect larger patterns of communication and functioning in adoptive families.

Thus, the purpose of this study is fourfold: first, to examine variations in family communication patterns in adoptive and non-adoptive families; second, to examine variations in relational maintenance behaviors in adoptive and non-adoptive families; third, to consider the impact of the degree of structural openness and communicative openness surrounding the adoption on adoptive family communication patterns; and fourth, to determine how these variations impact family relational maintenance behaviors.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Adoption**

The practice of adoption is not new. Massachusetts passed the first modern adoption law in 1851, which emphasized children's needs. The first small wave of international adoption began at the end of World War II. After the war, there was societal pressure to have children, so adoption became more popular. At that time, however, children were matched to look physically similar to the adoptive parents, and secrecy about the adoption was valued (Galvin, 2006b; Herman, 2001). Adoption agencies sought to seal all records regarding the adoption process, often in order to protect the child from the stigma of illegitimacy and to protect the birthmothers from the stigma of out-of-wedlock children. If the parents chose to tell the adoptee of their adoption, little background information was shared. The 1970s in the United States brought about the women's rights movement, civil rights movement, and many other social changes. This also sparked concern about adoption privacy and the impact that had on families and adoptees. Thus began the change toward more openness in adoptions (Brodzinsky, 2005; Sykes, 2001).

Today, adoption is more complex, flexible, and visible. The 2000 census revealed that 2.5% of children under 18 are adopted. Additionally, current adoption trends focus on creating a family that is connected to the other members involved. This is known as the adoption triad: adoptee, birthparents, and adoptive parents (Brown, Ryan, & Pushkal, 2007). Currently, adoption is used in a variety of situations, not just limited to couples troubled by infertility. Often, stepparents adopt their stepchildren, and homosexual couples use adoption to become parents. Although adoption is frequently a legal process,

Galvin (2006b) contends that the adoptive family is formed through communication and discourse. Arguably, all families are discourse-dependent in that they create and negotiate expectations and identities through interaction. Adoptive families are even more dependent on discourse in order to define themselves as a family and to validate their family form to others (Galvin, 2006a).

### **Family Communication Patterns**

With discourse being vital in adoptive families, it is especially important to see how family communication patterns can offer insight into how family members relate to each other. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002b) developed family communication patterns (FCP) as a way to look at family functioning using two dimensions: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. They argue that creating a shared social reality is central to family functioning. *Conversation orientation* measures “the degree to which families create a climate in which all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 85). Therefore, low conversation orientation families hinder open discussion and expression of emotion, and high conversation orientation families encourage shared thoughts and opinions. *Conformity orientation* measures “the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 85). Families low in conformity orientation typically lack rules and strict family structure, whereas high conformity orientation families accentuate parental control and agreement.

When the two orientations are combined, it results in four family communication patterns. *Consensual* families have high levels of conversation and conformity. In such

families, members openly discuss their opinions, but in the end, they are supposed to conform to the final decision. *Protective* families feature high conformity and low conversation orientations. These families often have one member who makes most of the decisions. *Pluralistic* families encourage high conversation and low conformity. These families discuss their ideas together but do not conform to a single family-wide opinion. *Laissez-faire* families have both low conformity and conversation orientations. These families believe everyone should make their own choices and have few discussions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006; Samek & Rueter, 2011).

Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, and McRoy (2001) found that a shared social reality is harder to achieve in adoptive families when compared to genetically related families. Research demonstrating the effects of genetics on attitudes suggests that genetics influences one's sensitivity to particular features, even when environmental factors are controlled. This would explain the added challenge for non-genetically related families (Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005). Therefore, communication is especially important in creating a shared social reality in families where adoption has occurred. To better understand the similarities and differences in adoptive and non-adoptive families, this study first seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1: How, if at all, do family communication patterns vary across adoptive and non-adoptive families?

### **Relational Maintenance**

In addition to family communication patterns, relational maintenance behaviors show what communicative acts take place to aid in maintaining relationships. A number of communication scholars study how people maintain relationships. In 1991, Stafford

and Canary sought to create a comprehensive list of relational maintenance strategies. Based on others' research and their own, five strategies were highlighted: *positivity*, *openness*, *assurances*, *networks*, and *sharing tasks*. Positivity includes communicating in a cheerful, optimistic, and cooperative manner. Openness refers to discussing the relationship as well as one's feelings and desires about the relationship. Assurances are communication that expresses one's want to continue the relationship. Networks include interactions with, and belonging to, common affiliations. Sharing tasks involves participating in activities and sharing responsibility (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Canary & Stafford, 1992).

Originally, relational maintenance behaviors were primarily studied in the context of marital relationships. Over time, relational maintenance research was expanded to romantic relationships, followed by friendships and other types of family relationships. Taken collectively, relational maintenance behaviors frequently vary across the type of relationship. For example, Stafford and Canary (1991) found an increase in openness in engaged and seriously dating couples over married and casually dating couples, whereas Madlock and Booth-Butterfield (2012) found that employees use positivity and sharing tasks more than the other strategies. In sibling relationships, sharing tasks and positivity were used more frequently, followed (in order) by assurances, networks, and openness (Myers, 2001). Seeing as there is variation in relational maintenance behaviors in differing relationship types, adoptive and non-adoptive families have a possibility of variation in those behaviors as well.

Scholars often classify relational maintenance behaviors in terms of voluntary and non-voluntary relationships. Voluntary relationships are those in which individuals

interact without any obligations, such as friendships and romantic relationships. Non-voluntary relationships are those in which individuals have no choice but to enter, and feel some obligation to maintain, the relationship. Most commonly, these are familial relationships (Hess, 2000). However, adoptive families represent an interesting subset of non-voluntary relationships. For the most part, adoptees do not choose their adoptive families, although birth parents may choose adoptive parents for their children, and adoptive parents may even select children to adopt in some circumstances. Thus, it seems likely that relational maintenance may be even more important in these types of non-voluntary but discourse-dependent adoptive families. Thus far, however, information about relational maintenance behaviors in adoptive families does not exist. Mikkelson, Myers, and Hannawa (2011) produced the most similarly related data, which shows that genetically related siblings generally reported higher frequency of relational maintenance behaviors than less genetically related siblings. The exception to this is that adopted siblings reported higher usage of networks and sharing tasks than half-siblings (Mikkelson, Myers, & Hannawa, 2011). Therefore, it seems salient to consider variations in relational maintenance behaviors present in adoptive families. To see how relational maintenance behaviors are addressed in adoptive families, the following research question was presented:

RQ2: How, if at all, do relational maintenance behaviors vary across adoptive and non-adoptive families?

### **Structural and Communicative Openness**

When most people hear the term *open adoption*, it brings to mind the idea of sharing information, and even direct contact, between the adoptee and the birth family.

When this occurs, Grotevant and McRoy (1998) call this type of arrangement a *fully disclosed placement*. Brodzinsky (2005) contrasts this arrangement with *openness in adoption*. This refers to the willingness of the family to share information, beliefs, and emotions regarding the adoption process. It does not necessarily mean it is a fully disclosed placement. The emphasis is on the communication process between the adoptive family and the adoptee (Brodzinsky, 2005). Since the differentiation has been made, the terms *structural openness* and *communicative openness* have been used for clarification (Neil, 2009; Brodzinsky, 2006). For example, an adoptive family could have high communicative openness, but if there is limited information available about the adoption, the family will most likely have low structural openness. On the other hand, an adoptee may have contact with the birth family, but the adoptive family may choose to keep their emotions and beliefs hidden, thus resulting in low communicative openness.

Until Brodzinsky's (2006) study, structural openness and communicative openness had never crossed paths. Structural openness was measured through a new instrument of true-false questions regarding information about and contact with the birth family, the Family Structural Openness Inventory. Communicative openness was measured using another newly modified instrument of Likert-type questions called the Adoption Communication Openness Scale. These questions measured the extent to which adoptive parents were open and supportive when talking with their adoptive child about the adoption. Brodzinsky (2006) found that the two types of openness were positively correlated, but only by a small degree. He also found that communicative openness is a better predictor of an adoptee's adjustment than was structural openness. Despite its limitation, this first study analyzing structural and communicative openness set the

groundwork for future studies (Brodzinsky, 2006). In England, Neil (2009) used variations of Brodzinsky's measures and reported that adoptive families with higher structural openness also reported higher communicative openness. Interestingly, she did not find a relationship between communicative openness and better adoptee adjustment (Neil, 2009).

With limited data and some conflicting results, more research is necessary to clarify the role of communication surrounding adoption structure and circumstances. Most studies look at communicative and structural openness as a way to explore adoption outcome and adoptee adjustment (Brodzinsky, 2006; Neil, 2009; Haugaard, Moed, & West, 2001; Hollenstein, Leve, Scaramella, Milfort, & Neiderhiser, 2003; Steinberg, 2001). However, extant research has been largely unable to identify the mechanism through which communicative and structural openness predict adoptee adjustment. One possible explanation lies in the exploration of other communication-based variables frequently linked to adjustment and functioning, such as family communication patterns and relational maintenance behaviors. Specifically, it may be that families with a high level of communicative openness surrounding the adoption contribute to an overall sense of conversation orientation within the family, thus benefiting individual family members as evidenced by adoptee adjustment. Alternately, adoptees with increased contact with their birth family (i.e., structural openness) may find it more important or perhaps more challenging to maintain their adoptive family relationships. Thus, the following research questions are presented:

RQ3: How, if at all, does (a) adoption structure (i.e., open vs. closed) and (b) communicative openness about the adoption predict adoptive family communication patterns (i.e., conversation & conformity orientation)?

RQ4: How, if at all, does (a) adoption structure (i.e., open vs. closed) and (b) communicative openness about the adoption predict adoptive family relational maintenance behaviors?

## METHODS

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included 151 people (29 male and 117 female) between the ages of 15 and 78 years ( $M = 33.19$  years;  $SD = 13.63$ ). Of the participants, 59.6 percent were not students, and an additional 35.8 percent were university students in undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral programs. Individuals identified themselves as White ( $n = 130$ ; 86.1%), Asian American ( $n = 9$ ; 6.0%), Hispanic American ( $n = 5$ ; 3.3%), African American ( $n = 3$ ; 2.0%), Native American ( $n = 2$ ; 1.3%), or “Other” ( $n = 4$ ; 2.6%). Both adoptees ( $n = 47$ ; 31.1%) and non-adoptees ( $n = 101$ ; 66.9%) participated in the study. Most adoptees were placed in their adoptive families prior to 18 months of age, with a mean age of placement of 15.42 months ( $SD = 39.00$ ). Of the adoptees, 84.4 percent of the participants were adopted within the United States and 15.6 percent from a variety of other countries. Of all adoptees, 31 (20.5% of all participants) indicated they had communicated with other members of their birth families. Only 3 participants had communicated with grandmother/grandfather (2.0%), 2 with aunt/uncle (1.3%), 11 with siblings (7.3%), and 15 with “other” (9.9%). Those who indicated “other” most commonly had contact with cousins as well (4.9%).

## **Procedure**

Data were collected through an anonymous, confidential, online survey. Participants were recruited from a university student sample, as well as through social and professional networking. Specifically, the link to the informed consent and online survey was posted on social networking websites, including Facebook and Twitter. After providing informed consent, participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire consisting of demographic questions and the measures detailed in the subsequent sections. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete, and participants were thanked for participating. The questionnaire was open to both adoptees and non-adoptees. All participants were asked to indicate whether or not they were adopted. The ones who indicated that they were adopted were directed to respond to the Family Structural Openness Inventory and the Adoption Communication Openness Scale. Regardless of their adoption status, all participants were given the Relational Maintenance Scale and the Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument.

## **Measurement**

*Family Structural Openness Inventory.* Family structural openness was assessed through a version of Brodzinsky's (2006) instrument. If participants indicated that they were adopted, they were directed to this inventory. Non-adopted participants did not complete this instrument. This consisted of 12 true-false, adoptee-reported items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) measuring the extent to which adoptees had information about, and contact with, their birth mother and/or birth father. Higher scores showed a greater degree of structural openness. A sample of items included: "I know the name of my birth mother; I have met my birth mother; I have visited my birth mother on one or more occasions within the last

year.” The same items about the birth father were included. The participants were also able to indicate if they had any communication with other members of their birth families.

*Adoption Communication Openness Scale.* Adoption communication openness was measured using a 28-item ( $\alpha = .97$ ), adoptee-reported instrument. Again, this measure was only completed if the participants indicated that they were adopted. This instrument was adapted from Barnes and Olsen (1985), Brodzinsky (2006), and Grotevant (personal communication). It used a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure the adoptees’ experience with their adoptive parents being open and sensitive in communication about adoption, as well as the adoptees’ comfort level in discussing adoption with their adoptive parents. Higher ratings reflected a higher degree of communicative openness in the family. Sample items included: “My adoptive mother is a good listener when it comes to my thoughts and feelings about being adopted; when I ask questions about my adoption or about my birth parents, I get honest answers from my adoptive mother.” Again, the same questions were asked regarding the openness of the adoptive father.

All participants of the survey were asked to answer the following questions:

*Relational Maintenance Scale.* The relational maintenance scale is a 19-item ( $\alpha = .96$ ), 6-point Likert-type scale that asks participants to indicate the degree to which they use four of the relational maintenance behaviors (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, and sharing tasks) with their family. Adoptees were asked to respond to the questions with regards to their adoptive families. The instrument was modified from the Friendship Maintenance Scale developed and tested by Oswald, Clark, and Kelly (2004). All of the

items on the Likert scale were anchored with *never* and *very frequently*. Sample items included, “How often do you and your family members...”; “Try to make each other laugh?” (positivity); “Share your private thoughts with each other?” (openness); “Try to make other family members feel good about who they are?” (assurances); “Work together on jobs or tasks?” (sharing tasks).

*Revised Family Communication Patterns Scale.* The participants’ family communication patterns were measured using the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) Scale developed by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002b). The RFCP Scale is a 26-item, 7-point Likert-type scale used to assess conversation orientation and conformity orientation. The scale ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Again, adoptees were asked to respond to the questions with regards to their adoptive families. Conversation orientation items (15 items) include: “My parents and I often have long, relaxed conversations about nothing in particular”, and “We often talk as a family about things we have done during the day.” Conformity orientation items (11 items) include: “My parents like to hear my opinion, even when I don’t agree with them”, and “When anything really important is involved, my parents expect me to obey without question.” In this study, the RFCP produced alpha coefficients of .95 for conversation orientation and .87 for conformity orientation.

## RESULTS

The first research question asked how family communication patterns vary across adoptive and non-adoptive families. To respond to this research question, mean participants’ responses on the conversation and conformity subscales were calculated. Using these two orientations, the participants’ family types could be found. In this study,

only three of the four family types were present; interestingly, there were no laissez-faire family types among study participants. Results of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) suggested that there was a significant difference in conversation and conformity orientation based on adoption status. Specifically, non-adopted participants reported higher conversation orientations than adopted participants ( $F(1, 86) = 23.17, p < .001$ ). Adopted participants reported a higher conformity orientation than non-adopted participants ( $F(1, 85) = 14.21, p < .001$ ).

To investigate whether a linear combination of family conversation and conformity orientation would vary across adopted and non-adopted individuals, responses to the RFCP were classified into one of four possible family types based on the population means detailed by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002b): *pluralistic* families ( $n = 23$ ), *protective* families ( $n = 16$ ), *consensual* families ( $n = 43$ ), and *laissez-faire* families ( $n = 0$ ). A cross-tabs chi-square contingency analysis was conducted to determine if the frequency of family types varied across adoptive and non-adoptive families. A significant chi square  $X^2(2, n = 86) = 22.94, p < .001$  indicated that adopted individuals were significantly more likely to report a protective family type, and non-adopted individuals were significantly more likely to report either a pluralistic or consensual family type.

Research question two examined the variation in relational maintenance behaviors across adoptive and non-adoptive families. Results of a one-way ANOVA suggested that there was a significant difference in relational maintenance behaviors across these two types of families, ( $F(1, 103) = 29.59, p < .001$ ), such that individuals from adoptive families reported significantly less overall relational maintenance within their families ( $M = 4.12$ ) than those from non-adoptive families ( $M = 5.06$ ). Interestingly, results of least

significant difference (LSD) post hoc tests of differences in relational maintenance based on family type (i.e., protective, consensual, pluralistic) revealed significant mean differences between protective and consensual families as well as protective and pluralistic families, but relational maintenance did not vary between members of consensual and pluralistic families. Overall, individuals from consensual and pluralistic families tended to report the most relational maintenance behaviors, with those from protective families reporting significantly less RM.

Research question three sought to find how, if at all, structural openness and communicative openness about the adoption predicted adoptive family communication patterns (i.e., conversation & conformity orientation). Results of a regression analysis suggested that parents' structural openness and communicative openness affected adoptees' conversation orientation  $R = .85$ , ( $F(4, 19) = 12.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for 72% of the variance in conversation orientation. Specifically, communicative openness from the adoptive mom significantly predicted the conversation orientation of adoptees ( $\beta = .88$ ,  $t(3.15)$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, neither structural nor communicative openness from the biological mom, biological dad, or adoptive dad emerged as significant predictors for conversation orientation in adopted participants.

To address whether structural and communicative openness functioned similarly in predicting conformity orientation, a second regression analysis was conducted. Although the overall model was significant, ( $F(4, 18) = 7.06$ ,  $p = .001$ ), biological mom, biological dad, adoptive mom, nor adoptive dad emerged as significant predictors for conformity orientation in adopted participants.

To determine how these variations in conversation and conformity orientation translate into specific family types, a one-way ANOVA suggested that there was a significant difference in structural openness and communicative openness by FCP family type for adoptive mom ( $F(2, 22) = 15.57, p < .001$ ). Specifically, LSD post hoc tests based on family type revealed significant mean differences in communicative openness for adoptive moms in protective versus consensual families ( $M = -1.74$ ), as well as adoptive moms ( $M = -1.97$ ) and dads ( $M = -1.98$ ) in protective versus pluralistic families.

The fourth research question asked how structural openness and communicative openness about the adoption predicted adoptive family relational maintenance behaviors. To address the final research question, a regression analysis was conducted to determine how structural and communicative openness predicted adoptive families' relational maintenance behavior. The overall regression model was significant, ( $F(4, 22) = 10.10, p < .001$ ), accounting for 64% of the variance in relational maintenance behavior in adoptive families. Specifically, adoptive moms' communicative openness significantly predicted relational maintenance behaviors in adoptees,  $\beta = .63, t(4.24), p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

Adoptive families function as a unique family form in that they are not often connected by genetic ties, but instead create their identities and maintain their relationships through communication. Thus, the overarching goal of this study was to examine how adoption status (i.e., adoptive vs. non-adoptive) and variations in communicative and structural openness surrounding adoption affect family communication patterns and relational maintenance behavior. Overall, results suggest that adoptive families function as a unique family form, as evidenced by the significant

differences between adoptive and non-adoptive families in terms of their communication patterns and relational maintenance. Specifically, children in adoptive families reported significantly lower conversation orientation, higher conformity orientation, and less overall relational maintenance than those from non-adoptive families. Given the status of adoptive families as discourse-dependent (Galvin, 2006b), the reduced presence of communication-based family functioning markers is noteworthy and perhaps a cause for concern. Thus, in the sections that follow, the results of each research question is discussed and interpreted within the context of existing adoption research.

An initial goal of this study was to test if one's adoption status predicted variations in family communication patterns. Overall, the results provided evidence that there is a statistically significant difference in conversation and conformity orientation between adopted and non-adopted individuals. Non-adopted participants reported higher conversation orientation, meaning non-adoptive families encouraged more open discussion, expression of emotions, and shared thoughts than did adoptive families. Adopted participants reported higher conformity orientation, suggesting that in families where adoption has occurred, there was an environment of strict rules, parental control, and the pressure to agree. When viewed through the lens of corresponding family types, adopted individuals were significantly more likely to report a protective family type, and non-adopted individuals were significantly more likely to report pluralistic or consensual family types.

Because of their unique reliance on communication as a means of constructing a cohesive family identity, it may be that adoptive families see divergent opinions as more threatening or potentially harmful to the unity of the family than those in non-adoptive

families. Indeed, Grotevant and colleagues (2001) suggested that creating a shared social reality is more difficult in adoptive families because of their lack of genetic relatedness. However, consensual and pluralistic family types tended to mitigate the risks involved in adoptees' adolescent adjustment over laissez-faire and protective families (Rueter & Koerner, 2008), suggesting that it is beneficial for adoptive families to increase the amount of conversation orientation in a general sense.

As communication and discourse are vital in all families, another goal of the current study was to examine if adoption status predicted relational maintenance behaviors. Consistent with the findings regarding family communication patterns, the results provided evidence that there were statistically significant differences in maintenance behaviors in adopted versus non-adopted individuals. Specifically, adoptees reported significantly less overall relational maintenance within their families than those from non-adoptive families. Mikkelsen, Myers, and Hannawa (2011) conducted a similar study analyzing relational maintenance behaviors in genetically and less-genetically related siblings, though their study looked more at half- and step-siblings in blended families. Consistent with the results from the present study, they found that genetically related family members reported more relational maintenance behaviors than those less genetically related (Mikkelsen, Myers, & Hannawa, 2011).

Taken collectively, these results have interesting implications for understanding how adoptive family members maintain their relationships. Although one might assume that adoptive families work harder to maintain their relationship, it appears that this is not the case. One way of explaining these seemingly counterintuitive results is by considering the unique circumstances surrounding adoptive families. Although adoptive

families are considered non-voluntary, there is an element of choice or selection not present in genetically related families. In other words, adoptive family members often initiate their relationship by choosing to be a family, and thus ongoing relational maintenance behaviors may be less salient because of this element of voluntariness. An alternate, albeit darker, explanation for reduced levels of relational maintenance in adoptive families may stem from a lack of the types of communicative acts that, ideally, bind adoptive family members together. Interestingly, when participants of the current study were divided into their respective family types (i.e., protective, consensual, pluralistic) individuals from consensual and pluralistic family types tended to report the highest frequency of relational maintenance behaviors overall. Thus, conversation orientation may serve as the mechanism through which relational maintenance is enacted.

In addition to general adoption status, the structural and communicative openness of adoptive families played a significant role in determining family communication patterns and relational maintenance behaviors, as suggested by Brodzinsky (2006) and Neil (2009). Results of this study suggest that adoptive families' overall conversation orientation was significantly predicted by the degree to which the adoptive mom was willing to discuss the circumstances surrounding the adoption, regardless of the amount of information she actually had. In other words, when the adoptive mom created a sense of open communication surrounding the adoption process, that sense of openness was mirrored by the adoptive family's overall orientation toward conversation. Thus, it seems that openness about adoptive circumstances may create a template for producing and fostering an environment of open expression throughout the family unit. Additionally, when looking at differences in openness by FCP family type, communicative openness

from the adoptive mother differed significantly in protective and consensual families; communicative openness from adoptive mothers and fathers differed greatly in protective and pluralistic families. Thus, regardless of the degree of structural openness, it seems that adoptive parents in general, and mothers in particular, play an important role in establishing the family's communicative environment.

In terms of predicting an adoptee's conformity orientation, no single family member emerged as more influential, although the overall model was significant. This suggests that there may be some other factor (or combination of factors) involved that more accurately predicts one's conformity orientation, such as one's culture (biological or adoptive). It should be noted, though, that the adoptive father's degree of communicative openness approached significant when examined as a predictor of conformity orientation. Thus, examining the factors that influence conformity orientation in adoptive families would be a beneficial avenue for future research.

In terms of relational maintenance behaviors—which included positivity, openness, assurances, and sharing tasks—and both types of openness in adoption, there were statistically significant findings. Adoptees' perception of their adoptive mothers' communicative openness predicted the frequency of relational maintenance behaviors, such that adoptive moms who were more open contributed to a family environment that was significantly higher in relational maintenance. Similar to family communication patterns, the adoptive mother was the only family member with a significant influence on relational maintenance. The adoptive father, biological mother, and biological father did not have any significance in an adoptive family's relational maintenance behaviors.

Consequently, the adoptive mother plays a large role in adoptive families, and she is especially important in determining an adoptee's communication patterns.

Overall, adoptive families do vary from non-adoptive families in both their family communication patterns and relational maintenance behaviors. One consistent and significant predictor of these variations lies with the degree of communicative openness evidenced by the adoptive mom. Interestingly, the extent of contact with one's birth family (i.e., structural openness) was not as significant as the degree to which adoptive family members were willing to talk about the adoption, regardless of the amount of information they had. In other words, adoptive parents' willingness to serve as a resource for their adopted children was the single most important predictor of the family's functioning.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Though this research found statistically significant results, it is important to account for the limitations of the study. One methodological limitation was the sample size. With 47 adopted participants, significant associations were found, and it is unlikely (although possible) that a larger sample size would alter the findings. However, a larger sample size would allow for additional analyses to be conducted, such as which specific relational maintenance behaviors were more common in adoptive versus non-adoptive families. Furthermore, the sample group is largely homogenized, with 86.1 percent identified as White and 77.5 percent identified as female. A large dispersion of ages, however, does help diversify the sample. In this study, relational maintenance behaviors and family communication patterns are analyzed, yet there are many other aspects that could be related to communicative openness and structural openness, such as

communication privacy management. Lastly, another possible limitation to the study could be that the questionnaire solely consisted of quantitative questions, such as true/false and Likert-type questions. Open-ended questions could elicit more specific information about the adoptive process and could have added greater insight into the participants' experiences.

Consequently, it is advised that future research consider a larger sample size with greater racial and gender diversity. As this is the first study of its kind, future research in general is highly suggested. Repeating a similar study could help confirm these findings and could lead to greater understanding of the adoptive families' communicative experience. These findings could also be tested by conducting a survey that would take into account the experience of other members of the adoptive families, such as the adoptive parents or adoptive siblings. It should be noted that this study looked at the adoptees' perspectives and non-adoptees' perspectives, not other people involved in the adoption. Therefore, other perspectives could strengthen the validity of this research and perhaps provide additional insight into the outcomes for adoptees from various family types. Though quantitative data is necessary for the chosen instruments of research, future researchers may consider including additional qualitative questions. Overall, future research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how adoption affects communication for those involved.

Nevertheless, the results provide preliminary evidence suggesting that one's adoption status does play a role in overall family communication. Furthermore, when adoption is broken down into degrees of openness (structural and communicative), one can more accurately predict different variables of communication, including relational

maintenance behaviors and family communication patterns. Future researchers might extend this research to other relevant variables, such as gender differences or parenting styles, which could be helpful in gaining a fuller picture of the adoptees' communication experiences. Through these types of studies, researchers can further explore the connection of family and communication, especially in unique family types, so that we can better understand familial relationships.

REFERENCES

- Alford, J. R., Funk, C. L., & Hibbing, J. R. (2005). Are political orientations genetically transmitted? *American Political Science Review*, *99*, 153-167.
- Barnes, H. L., & Olsen, D. H. (1985). Parent-adolescent communication and the circumplex model. *Child Development*, *56*, 438-447.
- Brodzinsky, D. M. (2005). Reconceptualizing openness in adoption: Implications for theory, research, and practice. In D. M. Brodzinsky & J. Palacios (Eds.), *Psychological issues in adoption: Research and practice* (pp. 145-166). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Brodzinsky, D. (2006). Family structural openness and communication openness as predictors in the adjustment of adopted children. *Adoption Quarterly*, *9*(4), 1-18.
- Brown, D., Ryan, S., & Pushkal, J. (2007). Initial validation of the Open Adoption Scale: Measuring the influence of adoption myths on attitudes toward open adoption. *Adoption Quarterly*, *10*(3/4), 179-196.
- Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1992). Relational maintenance strategies and equity in marriage. *Communication Monographs*, *59*(3), 243.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2011). *How many children were adopted in 2007 and 2008?* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.
- Colaner, C. W., & Kranstuber, H. (2010). "Forever king of wondering": Communicatively managing uncertainty in adoptive families. *Journal of Family Communication*, *10*, 236-255.

- Galvin, K. M. (2001). Family communication instruction: A brief history and call. *Journal of Family Communication, 1*(1), 15-20.
- Galvin, K. (2006a). Diversity's impact on defining the family: Discourse-dependence and identity. In L. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook*. (pp. 3-21). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Galvin, K. M. (2006b). Joined by hearts and words: Adoptive family relationships. In K. Floyd & M. T. Morman (Eds.), *Widening the family circle: New research on family communication* (pp. 137-152). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ge, X., Natsuaki, M. N., Martin, D. M., Leve, L. D., Neiderhiser, J. M., Shaw, D. S., Villareal, G., Scaramella, L., Reid, J. B., & Reiss, D. (2008). Bridging the divide: Openness in adoption and postadoption psychosocial adjustment among birth and adoptive parents. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(4), 529-540.
- Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (1998). *Openness in adoption: Exploring family connections*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Grotevant, H. D., Wrobel, G. M., van Dulmen, M. H., & McRoy, R. G. (2001). The emergence of psychosocial engagement in adopted adolescents: The family as context over time. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 16*, 469-490.
- Haugaard, J. J., Moed, A. M., & West, N. M. (2001). Outcomes of open adoptions. *Adoption Quarterly, 4*(3), 63-73.
- Herman, E. (2001). Families made by science: Arnold Gesell and the technologies of modern child adoption. *Isis, 92*(4), 684-715.

- Hess, J. A. (2000). Maintaining nonvoluntary relationships with disliked partners: An investigation into the use of distancing behaviors. *Human Communication Research, 26*, 458–488.
- Hollenstein, T., Leve, L. D., Scaramella, L. V., Milfort, R., & Neiderhiser, J. M. (2003). Openness in adoption, knowledge of birthparent information, and adoptive family adjustment. *Adoption Quarterly, 7*(1), 43-52.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002a). Toward a theory of family communication. *Communication Theory, 12*, 70-91.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002b). Understanding family communication patterns and family functioning: The roles of conversation orientation and conformity orientation. *Communication Yearbook, 26*, 37–69.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2006). Family communication patterns theory: A social cognitive approach. In D. O. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 50-65). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kranstuber, H., & Koenig Kellas, J. (2011). Instead of growing under her heart, I grew in it: The relationship between adoption entrance narratives and adoptees' self-concept. *Communication Quarterly, 59*, 179-199.
- Madlock, P. E., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2012). The influence of relational maintenance strategies among coworkers. *Journal of Business Communication, 49*(1), 21-47.
- Mikkelsen, A. C., Myers, S. A., & Hannawa, A. F. (2011). The differential use of relational maintenance behaviors in adult sibling relationships. *Communication Studies, 62*(3), 258-271.

- Myers, S. A. (2001). Relational maintenance behaviors in the sibling relationship. *Communication Quarterly, 49*(1), 19-34.
- Neil, E. (2009). Post-adoption contact and openness in adoptive parents' minds: Consequences for children's development. *British Journal of Social Work, 39*, 5-23.
- Oswald, D. L., Clark, E. M., & Kelly, C. M. (2004). Friendship maintenance: An analysis of individual and dyad behaviors. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*, 413-441.
- Ponzetti, J. J., & James, C. M. (1997). Loneliness and sibling relationships. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 12*, 103-112.
- Rueter, M. A., & Koerner, A. F. (2008). The effect of family communication patterns on adopted adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*(3), 715-727.
- Samek, D. R., & Rueter, M. A. (2011). Associations between family communication patterns, sibling closeness, and adoptive status. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 73*(5), 1015-1031.
- Schrodt, P. (2005). Family communication schemata and the circumplex model of family functioning. *Western Journal of Communication, 69*, 359-376.
- Stafford, L., & Canary, D. J. (1991). Maintenance strategies and romantic relationship type, gender and relational characteristics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 8*, 217-242.
- Steinberg, L. (2001). We know these things: Parent-adolescent relationships in retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 11*, 1-19.

Sykes, M. R. (2001). Adoption with contact: A study of adoptive parents and the impact of continuing contact with families of origin. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 23, 296-316.

Von Korff, L., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2006). Openness arrangements and psychological adjustment in adolescent adoptees. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 531-534.

Wrobel, G. M., Kohler, J. K., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2003). The family adoption communication (FAC) model: Identifying pathways of adoption-related communication. *Adoption Quarterly*, 7, 53-84.

TABLE 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for all Continuous Variables*

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Structural Openness: Bio Mom	1.45 (.37)	-								
2. Structural Openness: Bio Dad	1.69 (.35)	.59**	-							
3. Structural Openness: Bio Parents	1.57 (.32)	.90**	.89**	-						
4. Comm Openness: Adoptive Mom	2.76 (1.25)	.05	.08	.07	-					
5. Comm Openness: Adoptive Dad	2.97 (1.24)	.17	.17	.19	.59**	-				
6. Comm Openness: Adoptive Parents	2.86 (1.11)	.13	.17	.16	.89**	.89**	-			
7. Conversation FCP	3.65 (1.68)	-.07	-.07	-.08	.85**	.58**	.77**	-		
8. Conformity FCP	4.40 (1.38)	.07	.13	.11	-.76**	-.54**	-.70**	-.81**	-	
9. Relational Maintenance	4.13 (1.17)	-.21	-.09	-.16	.79**	.39*	.66**	.90**	-.56**	-

*Note.* Higher numbers reflect higher levels of all variables. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## ABSTRACT

This study looked at the impact of communicative openness and structural openness on adoptive families' communication patterns (Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002b) and relational maintenance behaviors (Oswald, Clark, and Kelly, 2004). Both adopted and non-adopted participants (N = 151) were asked to complete an anonymous, confidential, online questionnaire consisting of demographic questions and measures. Specifically, this research examined the variation of family communication patterns (FCP) and relational maintenance behaviors across adoptive and non-adoptive families. Additionally, the other research questions analyzed the effect of communicative and structural openness on both FCP (i.e., conversation and conformity orientation) and relational maintenance behaviors. Results indicated that there is a difference in FCP and relational maintenance behaviors between adoptees and non-adoptees. Furthermore, in adoptive families, the adoptive mother predicts the FCP conversation orientation and the frequency of relational maintenance behaviors. Limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* adoption, communicative openness, structural openness, family communication patterns, relational maintenance behaviors