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A Classification of Family Communication and Right-Wing Authoritarian Beliefs Using Cluster Analysis

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 256 undergraduate students from a university in the USA participated in this exploratory design, which attempted to cluster persons based on whether they perceived themselves as pluralistic, protective, consensual, or laissez-faire in their family communication as well as their subscription to right-wing authoritarian (RWA) beliefs. McLeod and Chaffee's family communication scales and Altemeyer's RWA instrument were used. Principal components analysis and K-means cluster analyses were used to group the participants. Women were more pluralistic and generally scored higher on shared decision-making and open communication. Men fell into the consensual group and scored higher on communication in general. Compared to the other groups, the consensual participants possessed more RWA beliefs.

KEY WORDS: Family Communication Patterns, Right-Wing Authoritarian, Aggression

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I. Introduction

The family unit is an important influence on individual development and behavior especially on the process of how children learn to communicate and behave with others. The family experience can affect individual development through familial interaction resulting in the formulation of beliefs that become the basis of a person's values.

Little research could be found on family communication that incorporates Altemeyer's widely cited right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) typology (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007). A person's past experience and perspective about how and what he/she communicates and how it relates to the development of RWA beliefs and the reinforcement of these beliefs can affect personal attitudes and behaviors. For example, might exposure to early childhood corporal punishment used to reinforce parental rules lead some individuals to believe that some forms of violence are justified? These processes and their relationships warrant study because family communication can play an important role in a person's values and beliefs about authority, and whether an individual may accept justified interpersonal violence.

II. Review of Literature

McLeod and Chaffee (1972) conceptualized two types of family communication patterns (FCPs). Conversation-oriented communication is associated with family openness and shared decision-making. Conformity-oriented communication is viewed as the degree to which a person perceives his or her parents as having primary power and control in the family. Communication focuses on family conformity and parents make the decisions. Thus, parental rule-setting and abidance are prevalent.

Family type can be equated with low and high levels of conversation-oriented and conformity-oriented familial communication (Fitzpatrick & Koerner, 1997; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972). Thus, four family types arise. A family high in conversation-oriented communication and low in conformity-oriented communication is pluralistic. There are opportunities for the child to express thoughts, feelings, independence, and decision-making are paramount. Openness to experience is important.

In the protective family, communication is largely top down and restricted to compliance to family rules, values, beliefs, and traditional societal norms and customs. Parents make decisions and children do not question them so that the focus is conformity. This FCP appears compatible with the RWA perspective, which will be discussed later.

Families high in both FCPs are consensual. Consensual families have rules and established values and beliefs; however, parents explain their rationale to their children, who are allowed to provide feedback. Disagreement with parental views is strongly discouraged and decision-making rests with parents. Children are expected to comply with family rules.

Last, those families low in both types of communication are laissez-faire. These families are similar to permissive families where there is very little perceived communication and minimal at

best interest in children's views and decision-making. Decision-making is not nurtured and children are free to explore the world on their own. With this conceptualization in mind,

H1: Conversation-oriented communication and conformity-oriented communication will cluster around consensual, laissez-faire, protective, and pluralistic groups.

RWA is a perspective that is cognitively rigid, intolerant, and aggressive (McHoskey, 1996). According to Altemeyer (1988, 1996, 2006), the RWA perspective consists of three aspects: conventional beliefs, submission to authority, and acceptance of authoritarian aggression, all which support and maintain *existing* social structures and traditional values and belief systems.

Research by Altemeyer (2006) and Duriez, et al. (2007, 2008) found that compliant focused parents used conforming family communication. When their children became young adults, they tended to subscribe to RWA beliefs. Conversely, this suggests that parents who foster open and bidirectional family communication, where all family members have an opportunity to express their views and participate in family decision-making, raise children who are less RWA and who are more receptive to diverse perspectives.

Studies found positive links among authoritarianism and attitudes towards violence for violating non-adherence to familial and societal established rules. In one study, Benjamin (2006) found that persons with RWA beliefs tend to be more willing to go to war and are more supportive of penal code violence and corporal punishment. Feather (1996) found that individual who subscribe to RWA beliefs assigned harsher punishment to offenders compared to those with less RWA beliefs. These findings imply that RWA individuals might accept some forms of aggression that force compliance to rules and regulations. This process might extend to physically punishing those persons who do not follow laws and societal norms.

Therefore, the sharing and maintenance enforcement of beliefs and values pass from one generation to the next. It follows that,

H2: Retrospective perceptions of family conformity-oriented and conversation-oriented FCP will relate to similar corresponding adult normative FCP responses.

H3: The protective and consensual groups will report higher levels of corporal punishment compared to the pluralistic and laissez-faire groups.

This leads us to authoritarian aggression or collective violence that is justified. The authoritarian aggression perspective can be conceptualized as a characteristic that supports existing societal beliefs, and facilitates submission to this belief system and those authorities that support it. Protective and consensual family members will thus have an increased likelihood to support RWA beliefs and values. Therefore,

H4: The protective and consensual groups will tend to subscribe to RWA beliefs.

H5: The pluralistic and laissez-faire groups will be less likely to accept RWA beliefs and/or violence as a solution to a problem.

The influence of gender is unclear. Some studies found gender differences in family communication, RWA, and related constructs (Barbato, Graham, & Perse, 2003; Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leaper et al., 1989; Leutwiler, & Krcmar, 1996); whereas, other research found no such differences (Campbell, 1998; Sochting, Skoe, & Marcia, 1994). For example, studies found family communication differences by gender based on various contexts such as discussions of school and religion, disciplinary issues, and the gender of the parent involved in the communication. Some research discovered that male participants were prone to conformity-oriented communication, whereas, female participants engaged in more conversation-oriented communication (Barbato, et al., 2003; Fitzpatrick, et al., 1996). Some findings suggest that perceived gender roles and media habits are closely associated with gender differences (Vieira & Krcmar, 2011; Xiao, Li, & Stanton, 2011). Against these mixed findings, the following question will be explored.

RQ1: Do women and men differ in their tendency to be more pluralistic, consensual, protective, or laissez-faire?

III. Methods

The sample consisted of 256 undergraduate students from a university in the USA of which 141 (55%) were women and 115 (45%) were men. The mean age was 20 years and 9 months (*SD* = 3 years, 9 months).

FCP. This instrument was derived and edited from Ritchie's FCP instrument (Ritchie, 1991), which is framed in the present tense. We revised them to represent retrospective and normative perspectives. Each version contains five items per communication type. For example, one retrospective conformity question was: "In my family, I did not argue with parents"; whereas, the normative version was: "Children should not argue with parents." Past reliabilities for these revised scales were assessed at ≥ .70 (Krcmar, 1996; Krcmar & Vieira, 2005; Vieira, 2011). Items were anchored in a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much).

RWA. Altemeyer's RWA Scale (1988, 1996) consists of 30 items that operationalize authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and/or conventionalism. Many of the questions contain 2 or 3 out of the 3 RWA dimensions. In order to reduce the total number of self-report items and mitigate possible fatigue effects, the scale was pilot tested and reduced to 18 items by two coders based on primary RWA dimension. We discovered 5 primarily authoritarian aggression items, 6 primarily authoritarian submission items, and 7 primarily conventionalism items (representing traditional role, religious beliefs, and sexual behaviors). Cohen Kappa intercoder agreement was .90-.95. For the study, the items were anchored in a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).

Moral reasoning about justified and unjustified violence. The Moral Interpretation of Interpersonal Violence scale (MIIV) (Krcmar & Valkenburg, 1999) was used to measure moral reasoning about violence. Respondents read and responded to four stories. In each story, a scenario described how the main character used violence to resolve a problem. Of the stories, two represented unjustified violence and the other two stories described justified violence—

violence used to protect another person or as restitution for harm done. With the two types, one situation involved relatively minor physical aggression, and the other situation involved hospitalization of the victim. Responses were anchored in a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Extremely wrong) to 7 (Extremely right) (Krcmar & Curtis, 2003; Krcmar & Vieira, 2005; Vieira & Krcmar, 2011).

Additional items. Corporal punishment was a single item measure, which was: "Did you receive physical punishment (such as spanking) as a child (circle your answer)?" anchored in a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Additionally, participants were asked to report their gender and age. The complete survey consisted of 45 items.

IV. Results

Hypotheses were tested using Principal Components Analysis (PCA)-cluster, two-stage approach (Dash, Mishra, Rath, & Acharya, 2010). PCA with Varimax rotation was run and saved on the family communication items both retrospective childhood and adult normative followed by K-means clustering. Next, the FCP items were factor analyzed to reduce the number of items to a manageable level. In order to define and describe cluster differences, a one-way ANOVA and post hoc analysis were conducted on the FCP latent variables, RWA items, thoughts about violence, respondent age, and retrospective corporal punishment by clusters. We reported significant post hoc test results (alpha = .05).

Four components emerged from the PCA based on Eigenvalues well above 1.00 explaining 60.80% of variance. The first component, childhood retrospective conversation-oriented communication, consisted of 5 items. Its loadings were .66 - .80. A second component, childhood retrospective conformity-oriented communication, with loadings between .59 and .82, consisted of 4 items. The third component, adult normative conversation-oriented communication, comprised 5 items with loadings of .66 - .83. Last, adult normative conformity-oriented communication, consisted of 4 items with loading of .72 - .79. Two corresponding items loaded below .50 and were thus dropped from further analysis. The childhood retrospective version was: "While growing up my mom and dad often said: 'You'll know better when you grow up.' "

Next, since the PCA revealed four components, a K-Means four-cluster analysis was conducted based on the saved components. Cluster 1 consisted of 74 cases, 55 cases were assigned to Cluster 2, 67 cases comprised Cluster 3, and 60 cases were assigned to Cluster 4. Before an ANOVA by cluster was conducted on the study items, the four latent FCP variables were constructed based on the PCA. The Cronbach alpha reliability assessments for Childhood Retrospective Conversation-Oriented Family Communication, Conformity-Oriented Family Communication, Adult Normative Conversation-Oriented Family Communication, and Adult Normative Conformity-Oriented Family Communication were .81, .74, .81, and .81, respectively.

H1: Responses will cluster into corresponding Pluralistic, Laissez-Faire, Consensual, and Protective communication and RWA perspectives. This hypothesis was supported. A four-cluster solution representing the four family types emerged.

We reported only the significant post hoc tests ($p \leq .05$) in the cluster descriptions as per Table 1. Significant differences were found in the retrospective and adult normative FCPs by family type. Differences were also discovered for both cases of unjustified violence, for those who experienced corporal punishment, and for 15 right wing authoritarian items especially between the consensual group compared to the other three types.

Table 1

ANOVA of All Significant Items in Original Metrics by Communication/RWA Cluster

Items	Pluralistic[a] (*n*=74)		Laissez-Faire[b] (*n*=55)		Consensual[c] (*n*=67)		Protective[d] (*n*=60)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Childhood conversation comm. *(F(3, 252) = 40.86, p < .001)*	4.93[bcd]	.92	3.50[ac]	1.13	4.03[abd]	.92	3.05[ac]	1.18
Childhood conformity comm. *(F(3, 252) = 88.18, p < .001)*	3.49[bcd]	.78	2.97[acd]	.81	3.87[abd]	.81	5.28[abc]	.85
Normative conversation comm. *(F(3, 252) = 44.35, p < .001)*	6.01[c]	.67	6.27[cd]	.56	4.94[abd]	.79	5.90[bc]	.74
Normative conformity comm. *(F(3, 252) = 44.45, p < .001)*	2.37[bcd]	.80	3.01[ac]	.99	4.15[abd]	.81	3.36[ac]	1.12
Recalled frequency of corporal punishment *(F(3, 252) = 3.63, p = .014)*	2.07[d]	.73	2.45	1.05	2.28	.95	2.57[a]	1.01
Acceptance of less severe unjustified violence[1] *(F(3, 252) = 7.03, p < .001)*	1.36[c]	.54	1.45[c]	.72	1.78[abd]	.73	1.33[c]	.48
Acceptance of severe unjustified violence[1] *(F(3, 252) = 3.51, p = .016)*	1.22	.48	1.36	.91	1.54[d]	1.09	1.13[c]	.34
Physical punishment makes people behave *(F(3, 252) = 6.07, p = .002)*	2.57[c]	1.44	2.67c	1.60	3.51[ab]	1.68	3.22	1.76
Most free young people mess up their lives *(F(3, 252) = 2.98, p = .032)*	3.34[c]	1.46	3.69	1.67	4.05[a]	1.45	3.97	1.65
People should follow personal standards first *(F(3, 252) = 3.36, p = .019)*	4.19[c]	1.73	3.93	1.68	3.44[a]	1.34	3.43	1.90
Nothing is wrong with alternative lifestyles *(F(3, 252) = 2.72, p = .045)*	5.39[c]	1.65	5.27	1.65	4.66[a]	1.59	5.12	1.50
The worse people do not respect normal ways *(F(3, 252) = 3.96, p = .009)*	3.77[c]	1.52	3.91	1.54	4.58[a]	1.27	3.92	1.68
Sometimes rights must be suspended to protect... *(F(3, 252) = 4.10, p = .007)*	3.76[c]	1.54	3.69[c]	1.49	4.51[ab]	1.53	3.97	1.57
Those who rebel against religion are good too *(F(3, 252) = 5.07, p = .002)*	5.50[bc]	1.40	4.73[a]	1.82	4.49[a]	1.57	4.83	1.71
Younger people settle down to the norm in time *(F(3, 252) = 6.07, p = .002)*	3.99[c]	1.61	4.16	1.63	4.82[a]	1.24	4.47	1.63
It's the parents' duty to keep kids on right track *(F(3, 252) = 3.15, p = .025)*	5.30[d]	1.42	5.71	1.01	5.61	1.14	5.91[a]	1.08
Our institutions are mostly right *(F(3, 252) = 11.48, p < .001)*	3.05[c]	1.41	2.75[c]	1.06	3.91[abd]	1.04	2.98[c]	1.20
Many of our sexuality rules necessarily holy *(F(3, 252) = 5.54, p = .001)*	4.57	1.29	4.98[c]	1.22	4.10[b]	1.00	4.58	1.23
Nothing is wrong with gay/lesbian activities *(F(3, 252) = 3.22, p = .023)*	5.54[c]	1.99	5.46	1.95	4.69[a]	1.73	5.48	1.67
The key to the good life is the traditional *(F(3, 252) = 8.14, p < .001)*	2.58[c]	1.43	2.78[c]	1.51	3.76[abd]	1.39	3.02[c]	1.63

Notes: Items were edited to fit table. [abcd] = indicates post hoc significance test at $p < .05$. [1]higher values indicate more "right." *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation. Corporal punishment was anchored in a 5-point Likert scale and all other items used a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). N = 256.

The pluralistic cluster was the largest contained 29% of the total sample (n = 74) of which 74.3% (n = 55) were women and 25.7% (n = 19) were men. As expected, pluralistic respondents scored higher on childhood conversational communication (M = 4.93, SD = .92) and low on childhood conformity communication (M = 3.49, SD = .78). This group scored lowest on adult normative conformity communication (M = 2.37, SD = .80) and high on adult normative conversation communication (M = 6.01, SD = .67). The pluralistic group scored lower than the protective group on recalled frequency of corporal punishment (M = 2.07, SD = .73, M = 2.57, SD = 1.01, respectively). Lastly, pluralistic respondents scored significantly lower compared to other clusters on all items that supported the RWA perspective.

The laissez-faire group comprised 21.48% (n = 55) of the respondents. Nearly 66% were women (n = 36) and 34% (n = 19) were men. This group scored low on childhood conversation communication (M = 3.50, SD = 1.13) and childhood conformity communication (M = 2.97, SD = .81). They scored low on adult normative conformity communication (M = 3.01, SD = .99) and highest on adult normative conversation communication (M = 6.27, SD = .56). They tended to be less supportive of the RWA perspective.

The consensual perspective cluster demonstrated a number of intriguing results. This was the second largest cluster consisting of 26% (n = 67) of which 70% (n = 47) were men. The consensual respondents scored high on childhood conversational communication (M = 4.03, SD = .92) and childhood conformity communication (M = 3.87, SD = .81). On the other hand, they scored high on adult normative conformity communication (M = 4.15, SD = .81) and low on adult normative conversation communication (M = 4.94, SD = .79). Among the four groups, consensual respondents scored highest on the acceptance of less severe and severe interpersonal types of violence which were unjustified (M = 1.78, SD = .73, M = 1.54, SD = 1.09, respectively). As a whole, the consensual group scored high on measures that support RWA.

The protective perspective cluster comprised 60 respondents (23.4%). Women consisted 50% of participants. The protective respondents scored the lowest on childhood conversational communication (M = 3.05, SD = 1.18) and the highest childhood conformity communication (M = 5.28, SD = .85). The same pattern emerged for adult normative communication (M = 5.90, SD = .74 and M = 3.36, SD = 1.12, respectively. The memories of being submitted to corporal punishment score was high (M = 3.22, SD = 1.76). Most of the RWA items did not demonstrate any significant differences.

H2: Retrospective perceptions of family conformity-oriented and conversation-oriented FCP will relate to similar corresponding adult normative FCP responses. This hypothesis was confirmed. There was a significant correlation between child retrospective conversation-oriented communication and adult normative conversation-oriented communication (r = .35, p < .001) and between retrospective childhood conformity-oriented communication and adult normative conformity-oriented communication (r = .34, p < .001).

H3: The protective and consensual groups will report higher levels of corporal punishment. This was partially supported. The protective respondents scored higher than the pluralistic participants on corporal punishment (M = 2.57, SD = 1.01, M = 2.07, SD = .73, p < .05).

H4: The protective and consensual groups will tend to subscribe to RWA beliefs. This hypothesis was partially confirmed. As depicted in Table 1, the consensual group scored significantly high on all but one RWA measure ("It's parents' duty to keep kids on the right track."). Most of the differences were with the pluralistic group. The protective group scored significantly highest on only one measure: "It's parents' duty to keep kids on the right track."

H5: The pluralistic and laissez-faire groups will be less likely to accept RWA beliefs or violence as a solution to a problem. This hypothesis was partially supported. As rendered in Table 1, most of the significant RWA item differences rest between the pluralistic and consensual groups. Consensual members tend to agree with RWA beliefs. Pluralistic responses demonstrated an openness to diverse ideas and suggested a willingness to accept diverse perspectives.

Although all of the scores were low, there were differences among the consensual participants (M =1.78, SD = .73) and the less severe unjustified violent scenarios for the other three groups: pluralistic (M = 1.36, SD = .54), laissez-faire (M = 1.45, SD = .72), and protective (M = 1.33, SD = .48). Consensual responses were higher than the protective group for the unjustified violence severe case (M = 1.54, SD = .109, M = 1.13, SD = .34, respectively).

RQ1: The number of women and men in clusters significantly varied ($\chi^2(3) = 31.33$, $p < .001$). Compared to the total gender breakdown, the pluralistic group contained more women than expected (74.3%, Std. Residual = 2.20, CV = 1.96 at alpha = .05) and consensual perspectives comprised more men than expected (70%, Std. Residual = 3.10, CV = 1.96 at alpha = .05).

V. Discussion

As hypothesized four clusters emerged. The pluralistic group reported the highest scores in childhood conversation communication and shared decision-making and low in parental control and top down decision-making. The laissez-faire respondents indicated little communication. The protective group reported low conversation communication and the high conformity communication emphasizing compliance to family rules established by parents. Last, the consensual group reported high communication of both types.

There were correlations among childhood recollections of communication and adult normative perspectives about family communication. For the pluralistic, protective, and consensual groups similar patterns were discovered for their current views of family communication. For consensual group, results suggest that the childhood family interaction experience strongly guided views on family communication as adults. In fact, the consensual group scored the lowest on open, shared decision-making as adults and the highest on controlling top down communication, whereas, childhood recollections were not as extreme but in the same direction. A different pattern emerged for the laissez-fair group. They valued open, shared decision-making in family communication and scored low on conformity communication. This suggests that they would not repeat the pattern that they experienced as children suggesting that childhood memories of family interaction were not satisfying.

The only significant difference in recollections of corporal punishment was between the pluralistic and protective groups suggesting that in protective families compared to pluralistic families conformity to family rules was supported by physical punishment.

The protective group scored the highest on severe and less severe unjustified violence, intimating that such violence was less acceptable to them compared to the other groups because of its unwarranted nature. This suggests that, in their families, at least unjustified violence was viewed as clearly wrong. For the justified violence scenarios, no differences were found.

Findings suggest that FCPs may relate differently to aspects of RWA. For example, compared to the pluralistic group, the protective type scored higher on the item "It's the parents' duty to keep children on the right track." This same pattern was found in the "recall frequency of corporal punishment" item. For this group it might be that keeping on track involves physical punishment whether as a threat or actual physical punishment. The laissez-fair group scored highest on "Many of our sexual rules are not necessarily holier than personal choices." This finding may be explained by the fact that laissez-faire respondents reported little interaction with their family, where parents were not at all that interested in their views. Having little guidance, they were left to explore and experiment for themselves and thus they do not have the reverence for established institutions that the other groups possess however defined.

Overall, the consensual group scored highest on most RWA items. The consensual group is defined as high in both conversation and conformity communication with an emphasis on capitulation to parental rules. Therefore, although parent may listen to their children and explain why rules exist, the parents make the decisions. One would think that the protective group would have scored higher on the RWA measures. However, they did not perhaps because the process of family "involvement" is more effective at persuading children to adopt and profess values and beliefs similar to their parents. It reinforces conformity through family engagement (Cameron, 2004); thus, children buy into the belief system. The top down communication approach of the protective parent, where there is little explanation for decisions, may not be effective in the long run to encourage RWA perspectives because there is no buy-in. It stands to reason, however, that over the long term, children raised as consensual would develop the protective perspective and a RWA philosophy.

In sum, these results suggest that there may be a relationship between FCPs and young adult RWA beliefs. These findings are consistent with Altemeyer (2006) and Duriez, et al. (2007, 2008) who discovered that compliant children who experience predominantly conformity communication tend to grow-up RWA and raise RWA children. Social learning and childhood modeling of parental behaviors (Barbato, et al., 2003; Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; White, 2000) may play a role in some cases where children feel that they are part of the family and participate in important aspects of family life. How one naturally communicates with family members and what one communicates can reveal one's perspective not only about communication but also about the roles of family members.

This research has a number of limitations. First, this was a cross-sectional study. A longitudinal or repeated measures design would examine the stability of responses over time and control for factors that may have influenced respondents at the time of the study. Second, larger cluster sizes would have provided more robust results. Next, the accuracy of the retrospective childhood corporal punishment and communication items is a consideration since memories can be faulty and developmental factors can challenge the veracity of responses, which are largely perceptions. Last, Altemeyer's (2006) RWA scale addresses submission to authority and traditional values and beliefs. A more complete RWA typology might incorporate social dominance in comparison to submission to authority (Akrami & Ekehammar, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), where acceptance of violence might be greater for dominant individuals.

VI. Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the family types based on low and high levels of conversation and conformity types of communication can be expanded to include other factors such as RWA beliefs and moral assessments about different kinds of interpersonal violence. The nature and content of family communication can influence how children communicate and their expectations about communication in the future. This process suggests that whether primary caregivers subscribe to the protective or pluralistic perspective, they influence their children not only in the family setting but in their children's interpersonal interactions as well as in larger settings.

In sum, communication enriches human experience. How one learns to communicate as a child affects how one communicates as an adult. How we communicate and what we communicate reveals something about ourselves, our attitudes, our values, and our belief systems.

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