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Does Family Communication Impact Cultural Identity?

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CST 431

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Abstract

Cultural identity has become increasingly important as peoples' lives intersect with others more globally through technology's growing reach. Understanding cultural identity and the identity of others is difficult. Another increasing aspect of importance is family communication patterns and how that affects people. Current literature demonstrates the nature and importance of both of these variables. This study measured how 30 individuals' socio-oriented and concept-oriented family communication styles interrelated with their own cultural identities and willingness to understand others cultures. The study revealed no significant connection between cultural identity formation and socio-oriented family communication style, but it did produce a nearly significant, unexpected inverse correlation between concept-oriented family communication style and one's cultural identity. This was interesting because it produced the opposite of what was expected. People who grew up in the more liberal of the two family structures actually had a harder time with cultural identity.

### Does Family Communication Impact Cultural Identity?

Scholars have discovered many differences among family communication patterns (Schrodt, Witt & Messersmith, 2008). Other studies talk about the importance between culture and identity negotiation (Jackson, 2002) and also cultural identity as a whole (Jameson, 2007). Yet less is known about how family communication patterns affect cultural identity (Hendry, Mayer & Kloep, 2007). This study explores the relationship between family communication patterns and cultural identity. It looks specifically at socio-orientation and concept-orientation as adapted from Ritchie, 1991. Ultimately, the study examines the relationship between family communication patterns and how that affects ones own cultural identity and their understanding of others' cultural influences in the future.

The importance of culture can no longer be refuted and it is supported that human beings carry an identity into every cultural and conversational encounter (Jackson, 2002). It begins at a very young age and from the time of birth; there is a dependency on the self and others to define the self (Jackson, 2002). The cultural practices that are tied to people are very strong and come with values, norms, morals and more (Tamminen, 2006). This information leads to recognizing how much culture is a part of every person. The U.S. is steadily increasing its diversity in race and ethnicity and by 2050 is expected to be evenly divided among White, non-Hispanics and other groups (Sha, 2006). With this growth comes an ever growing need to an in depth understanding of cultural identity (Sha, 2006).

Using this knowledge, this study sought to understand the impact of family communication patterns and how they affect cultural identity at a greater level. Most scholars agree that the family context has a major impact on children and adolescents

(Sheffield Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers & Robinson, 2007). What happens within this family context is also important to the development of the child (Lamborn et al., 1991). The different forms of family communication shape how family members perceive their social environments and also how they communicate within and outside of the family (Schrodt et al., 2008). With this prior knowledge there was a need to link the two pieces to find a common connection.

With a better understanding of the culture that a person comes from, they will be able to navigate conversations better and be more culturally competent with others (Jackson, 2002). Some people have a hard time communicating across cultures, and depending on how they grew up, may be able to explain a lot about the implications that family communication has. This study examined the possible connection between family communication patterns and cultural identity. This is significant because it will open an understanding of one's cultural identity and how that is affected from the earliest years, and also how it will continue to affect them throughout their lives. It is also completely relevant to recognize how the socio-orientation and the concept-orientation family styles impact an individual.

This study examines two variables, the first being family communication patterns and what it means to grow up in an socio-orientation home as opposed to a concept-orientation home. The second variable that will be looked at is cultural identity; to what degree a person relates to their cultural identity and communicates that through their daily interactions. How they understand and deal with other cultures is also a key indicator in the cultural identity aspect. The importance of looking at these two variables

together is a process to understanding the link between family systems and future cultural identity.

### *Family Communication Patterns*

The first variable allows for a further look into what the impact of family life has on an individual. Families represent one of the most interesting and influential human systems (Schrodt, 2008). Families have uniquely shared worldviews that in turn provide individuals with value and belief systems (Schrodt, 2008). Due to this information on families, it is necessary to look into how this impacts individuals. The first style that will be focused on is socio-orientation; this represents the degree that social roles and relationships will have on the greater influence on children's decision-making (Schrodt et al., 2008). This style places a lot of emphasis on obedience and uniformed behavior (Colaner, 2009). The theory behind this is to lessen the amount of conflict and focus on harmony (Colaner, 2009). Families that are low on this side encourage individuality and allows for each family member to create a unique opinion (Colaner, 2009). This orientation is more driven by rules and obedience as opposed to individuality.

Much of this goes back to parental authority. Families high in this style are typically hierarchical and prioritize the family interests over the individual (Schrodt et al., 2008). This climate focuses on the same attitudes, beliefs and values among the family members (Schrodt et. al., 2008). The idea is to have one central group who believe and behave in the same manner. It is shown that this orientation leads to communication apprehension, conflict avoidance, and young adult children's perceived stress (Schrodt et. al., 2008). Families high in this context hold ideas as more important than the actual relationships (Schrodt et. al., 2008).

The second style is concept-orientation, this represents the amount that parental discussions of ideas and concepts influence children and their information and decision making process's (Schrodt et. al., 2008). In this environment, family members are encouraged to participate freely on many topics (Colaner, 2009). There are also high levels of conversation, which, are an important aspect of an enjoyable family life (Colaner, 2009). These families are also involved in everyone sharing ideas, helping with decision making, and expressing concerns (Schrodt et. al., 2008). This orientation values individual beliefs, growth, opinions and equality of all family members (Schrodt et. al., 2008). Overall this context is about creating a place where families can all participate on a wide variety of topics (Colaner, 2009). In return families in this context show high levels of expressiveness and constant interaction (Colaner, 2009). They are okay with disagreement and arguing and value each person's individual input. Families that are low on this have little interaction with each other, lack connection and also have high levels of separation (Colaner, 2009).

There are many different factors that can influence whether families demonstrate socio-orientation or concept-orientation. These range from personality characteristics and conflict styles to communication competence and discretion (Colaner, 2009). This creates a lens under which we can study why families lean toward a certain context style. There are many factors that play into the development of children and those factors play an important role. The socialization that happens within a family at the child's young age is important to further development (Sheffield Morris et al., 2007). While focusing on the variable under family communication, there is evidence that shows that regulating emotional responses and related behaviors in socially adaptive ways is an essential part to

a child's successful development (Sheffield Morris et al., 2007). With this fundamental information about family life present, there is still a need for information concerning the measure of how much impact the family has. These studies show that there is a lasting affect on a child depending on what style of home they were brought up in. Depending on if they were brought up in a socio-orientation or a concept-orientation structure could have a direct impact on many different elements in their life. It is apparent that taking a further look into family communication patterns can open doors about the lasting affects on individuals and how that determines different areas of their life.

### *Cultural Identity*

The second variable that will be focused on is cultural identity; specifically, how one's family communication pattern affects a person's ability to identify with their own culture, as well as adapt to others cultures. There are a number of different ways that cultural identity has been defined. One way is that it is the individual's sense of their beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and ways of life that are taken from a group membership (Jameson, 2007). Another is that it is the process when two identities of the individual and of the group are merged into one (Kim, 2007). A quote by anthropologist Edward Hall describes culture in a very straightforward way "Culture is not an exotic notion studied by a select group of anthropologists in the South Seas. It is a mold in which we are all cast, and it controls our lives in many unsuspected ways" (p. 1).

All of these definitions contribute to the knowledge and understanding of cultural identity. When it is looked at this way, understanding the importance of ones cultural identity can begin. Research shows that identities are highly complex and naturally occurring (Jackson, 2002). A cultural identity takes on a very strong form and is able to

follow people for the majority of their life (Hendry et al., 2007). Cultural identity also promotes strong feelings in a young person, as it is being directly passed on to them (Hendry et al., 2007). This information leads us to believe that much of a person's identity is a learned feeling and that they take away much of it from their family and their surrounding environment. Most people do not truly understand how the impact of their culture has affected their values, attitudes, and behaviors (Jameson, 2007). Cultural identity is a very strong force in a person's life and is often times not given the adequate amount of acknowledgement.

A person's cultural identity does not stay the same over the entire course of their life. It is affected by different attributes that include close relationships, changes over time, power and privilege, emotions and communication (Jameson, 2007). A person's significant other, family members and close friends can all impact cultural identity. When people start to gain a sense of self through those relationships, they acquire different values and beliefs (Jameson, 2007). It can change over time because it has both stable and variable components that can be altered over the everyday situations and because people change over the course of a lifetime (Jameson, 2007). It is also closely intertwined with power and privilege. Depending on how these two elements play out in a person's life, they can directly determine the fate of the individual's cultural identity (Jameson, 2007). All of these different elements in a person's life have the ability to alter their own cultural identity throughout time.

Another attribute is that cultural identity can evoke emotions; this means that a person can feel a number of different things about their own cultural identity (Jameson, 2007). With the power to do this, many different changes can be achieved when emotions

are involved. The last attribute is that cultural identity can be negotiated through communication. Some people feel comfortable discussing their feelings with others, but some do not. Depending on how people discuss their cultural differences can change a person's cultural identity (Jameson, 2007). These attributes can lead a person's cultural identity to change during their life and this shows that people are constantly having their cultural identity altered. When there are a number of different elements with the ability to sway decisions, many changes can occur.

There is evidence that cultural identity begins to develop in people when they are infants. According to Tamminen, (2006), there are complex cultural influences that are being mediated during a child's infancy. This is done through family practices and relationships, parental values, beliefs, socialization goals and through parent-infant interactions (Tamminen, 2006). Cultural identity starts to leave its impression on people during infancy and only continues to develop and adjust throughout the course of their lives.

It is not argued here that cultural identity is important to an individual and that the roots of the identity start from a young age. It is noted that not only is identity relational but that it is constructed during a negotiation process (Jackson, 2002). This means that there is a lot that goes into developing a cultural identity, as pointed out earlier. With all the knowledge of what is known about these variables, it is possible to begin to narrow it down to a more focused study. The differences are known between the socio-orientation style and the concept-orientation style and how that relates to family communication patterns. The impact of those family lives on adolescents is profound. The impact of cultural identity and the period of time it takes to develop a cultural identity are also well

described. This study examined the following two hypotheses regarding how different family communication patterns relate to cultural identity formation:

H1: People raised in a concept-orientation family system will report higher understandings of their own cultural identity and higher tolerances for the cultural identities of others.

H2: People raised in a socio-orientation family system will report lower understandings of their own culture and lower tolerances for the cultural identities of others.

## Methods

### *Procedure*

Surveys were administered over a four-week period to University of Portland students through an online source. The participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. There was no type of compensation offered or given to any of the participants. The participants had the option to fill out the survey immediately or waiting until later. If they chose to participate they went through a two-part survey. They filled out the first section on cultural identity and then continued on to the second part designated for family communication patterns. The survey took no longer than ten minutes to complete.

### *Sample*

The surveys were administered online to a sample of 18-23 year olds from the campus of the University of Portland. There were 30 students that filled out the survey from the online source and they were a mix of both male and female. No racial or ethnic information was asked of the participants.

### *Instruments*

This survey used two instruments to test the hypothesis: the Family Communication Pattern Instrument (FCP) and the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). These scales both directly tested the variables that were being focused on.

*Intercultural Sensitivity* The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was used to assess participants understanding and acceptance of other cultures. This includes exploring five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness (Chen & Sarasota, 2000). This scale is a 24-item Likert instrument that consists of a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. This scale shows correlations with five measures of intercultural sensitivity: interaction attentiveness, impression rewarding, self-esteem, self-monitoring and perspective taking (Chen & Sarasota, 2000). The alpha coefficient for this scale is usually about .86. During this study I used a Cronbach's Alpha of .78.

*Family Communication Pattern* The Family Communication Pattern Instrument (FCP) is used to assess the "free flow of information within the family" (Ritchie, 1991). This instrument is used to observe which communicative behaviors are motivated by objectives in the family (Ritchie, 1991). It is based off of the Socio-Orientation and also the Concept-Orientation scales. This instrument uses a 14 item, 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The socio-orientation part normally has an alpha of .61 (Ritchie, 1991) and in this study had a Cronbach's Alpha of .62 with one question removed. The concept-orientation usually has an alpha of .66 but in this study had a Cronbach's Alpha of .59.

## Results

A Bivariate correlation test was used to measure whether or not there was a relationship between cultural identity and family communication styles. A separate test was done comparing the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) with concept-orientation and then again for socio-orientation from the Family Communication Patterns instrument (FCP). Results of the first test comparing cultural identity from the ISS and socio-orientation from the FCP showed no significant relationship with one another,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p = .97$ . This indicates that people who grow up in or are accustomed to a socio-orientation family style do not therefore also report lower means of their own cultural identity and also a tolerance for others cultural identities. This hypothesis was not supported.

The second test that was done took cultural identity using the ISS and measured it against concept-orientation from the FCP. Results from this test produced an unexpected inverse correlation that approached significance,  $r = .01$ ,  $p = .09$ . This indicates that people who were accustomed to, or raised in a concept-orientation family were less comfortable with cultural identity and reacted negatively to the idea of it. This was not an expected outcome, and therefore produced new information relative to this hypothesis.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to find the correlation between different family communication patterns and cultural identity. To investigate this, an online survey was distributed to 30 participants and asked a series of questions using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and the Family Communication Patterns Scale. Based on the information above, family communication patterns do not have the implications on cultural identity that were expected. The prediction was that people who were brought up

in the socio-orientation style would be less understanding of cultural identity. In fact, the people who were brought up in the more hierarchical family system of socio-orientation did not report having difficulty with their own culture or the cultures of others. Both the level of significance and the level of correlation were not where they should have been, had this been an accurate prediction. On the other hand, people who were brought up in the more relaxed, sharing environment of the concept-orientation style showed the opposite of what was expected. The hypothesis was that people from this family style would be more in tune with cultural identity and have a higher understanding for other people's culture. The opposite of this nearly was significant statistically in that they showed a higher intolerance for these scenarios. The test suggested that people who grew up in a concept-orientation felt more uncomfortable about their own cultural identity and with people from different cultures.

The limitations in this study may help to understand the end results. To begin with the Family Communication Patterns instrument does not seem to be a reliable measure to test with. With a normal alpha of .62 and .66 respectively, this does not allow for conclusive decisions to be drawn. The FCP is not a reliable enough instrument to help show a correlation among a number of different items. Another limitation to this study was that a question had to be dropped in the socio-orientation section. Its negative correlation to the rest of the questions forced the decision to remove it from the study. This happened to be the statement "You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad." If all of the questions cannot be used, then it is difficult to use the instrument to its full potential. The final limitation was the participant group that was used for the study. Choosing to focus on a group of individuals who are in a transitional

phase of their life could have implicated the study. During this period many unknowns are present in their lives and they are mixing in with a number of different cultures and still trying to find their place.

Future research on this study could help to narrow in on the unanswered questions. The issue of the negative correlation in the concept-orientation family style could be looked into further. An analysis of why the negative correlation occurred would be beneficial information. It would be interesting to develop an understanding of what factors made the results what they turned out to be. A study done on a different group in society would help to understand these hypotheses further. Choosing to focus both on younger children and middle-aged adults would allow for more questions to be answered. This would look at an age group who is still strongly influenced by their families, and also an age group who has been out on their own for a period of time. Future research would do better to have a larger sample size and allow for more input to be made on the subject matter. Also broadening the survey to focus in on gender and race would be beneficial to breaking down the cultural implications.

Although the results of this study are interesting, they leave many unanswered questions about the affect that family communication patterns has on cultural identity. Understanding different cultures has never been as important as it is now (Kim, 2007). Both family communication patterns and cultural identity are very important aspects in an individual's life. The changes that are occurring everyday make it ever more important to understand what makes cultural identity tick. Doing what it takes to focus on important aspects to everyone's lives is the key to understanding if family communication impacts cultural identity.

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## Appendix 1: Survey

### Section 1:

This study examines some of your attitudes and feelings when interacting with bearers of other cultures. Please don't tell us your name or the names of any other people. Only aggregate responses will be reported; all individual responses will be kept in absolute confidence. Please try to be as honest and as accurate as possible. If any question is unclear, feel free to ask for clarification. Thank you for participating in this research.

Below is a series of statements concerning intercultural communication. There are no right or wrong answers. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

---

Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank provided below:

1 = strongly disagree    2 = disagree    3 = uncertain    4 = agree    5 = strongly agree

---

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.

## Section 2:

This study examines some of the family communication patterns that take place. Below are a series of statements. Please read the statement and answer with the appropriate number. Answer these questions from the standpoint of your own family and how you would respond in that given context.

---

Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank before the statement:

5= Strongly Agree

4= Agree

3= Uncertain

2= Disagree

1= Strongly Disagree

---

### “I feel...”

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. You’ll know better when you grow up.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. My ideas are right and you should not question them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A child should not argue with adults.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. There are some things in life that are either right or wrong.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The best way to stay out of trouble is to keep away from it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. In our family we often talk about topics like politics and religion where some persons disagree with others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Every member of the family should have some say in family decisions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. My parents often ask my opinion when the family is talking about something.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Kids know more about some things than adults do.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. My parents encourage me to challenge their ideas and beliefs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Getting your ideas across is important, even if others don’t like it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. You should always look at both sides of an issue.

## **Appendix 2: Consent Form**

### UNIVERSITY OF PORTLAND, DEPT. OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title: "Family Systems and the Impact on Cultural Identity."

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#### DESCRIPTION

We're asking you to participate in a study about cultural identity and family systems. Approximately 80 UP students will participate in this study. We expect the study to help us better understand the role of family systems in an individual's cultural identity. If you decide to participate, you'll be asked to fill out the attached questionnaire and survey instrument, which does not ask you for personally sensitive information. Completing these items should take you no longer than 10 minutes.

#### RISKS AND BENEFITS

No known risks, stress, or discomfort are involved with this study. You will be reporting only your perceptions on identity. Results of the study may not benefit you directly, though you may gain some understanding about your own cultural identity.

#### COSTS AND PAYMENTS

You will not receive any inducements (money, service, course credit) for your participation in the study, nor will you bear any costs for your participation.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

All information obtained from you will be kept strictly confidential. It will include no means of identifying you as a participant in the study. You will never be identified in any description of the study. The survey itself will be shredded upon completing this project.

**RIGHT TO REFUSE OR END PARTICIPATION**

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, choose not to answer any question on the survey, or withdraw from the study at any time. All participants have the right to review and delete any of their responses on research records if requested.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions. I understand that any future questions I may have about the research or about my rights, as a participant will be addressed by one of the investigators identified above.

Filling out the attached survey signifies your voluntarily consent to participate in this project.