



# Communication That Matters: How Salient is Adoption Communicative Openness to Adjustment?



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## Introduction

Research clearly shows that family communication is related to child adjustment (Rueter & Koerner, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). Some researchers hypothesize that adoption-specific communication, or adoption communicative openness (ACO), is particularly important to adopted child adjustment. Yet tests of this hypothesis have yielded mixed results. Thus, the effect of ACO on adjustment is still uncertain.

### The Present Study

The present *theoretical* paper examines the following question:

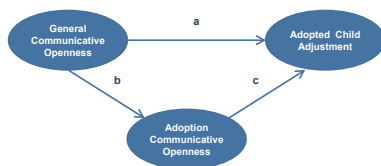
- How important is ACO to child adjustment?

We propose the following:

- Relationship between ACO and adjustment may be spurious.
- General communicative openness (GCO) may be what really determines adjustment.
- General communication theories, such as Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, 2004, 2006), provide an important theoretical framework in which to examine our research question (see Figure 1).

## Theoretical Model

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



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## Literature Review

### Adopted Status & Child Adjustment

- Empirical evidence suggests adopted adolescents may be at increased risk for externalizing behaviors (Keyes, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2008).
- Meta-analyses (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Wierzbicki, 1993) examining decades of descriptive research have confirmed this increased risk, although note that most adopted adolescents are well adjusted.
- We have little understanding of the contributing factors that help explain this increased risk.

### Adoption Communicative Openness (ACO) & Child Adjustment

- Adoption Communicative Openness (ACO) defined as adoption-specific communication processes – both in terms of adoption related content and emotions (Brodzinsky, 2005).
- Research examining the relationship between ACO and adjustment has been inconclusive. Some studies have found that ACO and externalizing behaviors (Brodzinsky, 2006; Levy-Schiff, 2001) are negatively correlated; others have found no relation (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzales, in press; Neil, 2009).

### General Communicative Openness (GCO) & Child Adjustment

- To our knowledge, few studies have examined the association between GCO and adopted child adjustment. However, there is overwhelming evidence for GCO and child well-being in the general population.
- Preliminary support for the importance of GCO in predicting adjustment outcomes:
  - Rueter & Koerner (2008), which used Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT; Koerner & Fitzpatrick 2002, 2004, 2006) as its theoretical framework, found that adolescents in adoptive families that deemphasized openness were at a significantly greater risk (3-5 times more likely) for externalizing problems than adolescents in adoptive families that emphasized open communication. (Note: This study did not measure ACO.)

- In light of these findings, it is possible that the association between GCO and adjustment creates a spurious one between ACO and adjustment.
- No theoretical or empirical reason to assume that the association between ACO and adjustment would be different from that of GCO and adjustment.
- We propose that general communication patterns are more likely to predict content-specific patterns (than vice versa). We suggest that adoptive families who generally communicate openly are more likely to do the same concerning adoption-related issues.

## Theoretical Framework

### Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT)

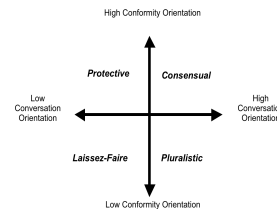
- An appropriate family communication theory to examine the association between GCO and adjustment is *Family Communications Patterns Theory* (FCPT; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, 2004, 2006).
  - FCPT evolved out of McLeod & Chaffee's (1972, 1973) original family communication model.
  - FCPT posits that the creation of a shared social reality is central to healthy child and family functioning.
  - A shared social reality is defined as family members' shared perceptions and evaluations of the social world that involve cognitive processes (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).
- Building on existing family communication theories, FCPT is based on two primary processes that are conceptualized along a continuum from high to low:
- Conversation orientation* is characterized by frequent and spontaneous interactions among family members.
  - Conformity orientation* is characterized by shared beliefs and values.
  - Both orientations interact to define a family communication pattern (FCP).

Based on whether a FCP is high or low on one, the other, or both orientations, four types of communication patterns emerge (see Figure 2):

- (a) *protective* (high conformity, low conversation)
- (b) *consensual* (high conformity, high conversation)
- (c) *laissez faire* (low conversation, low conformity)
- (d) *pluralistic* (high conversation, low conformity)

Together, these FCPs determine the extent in which a Family Shared Social Reality (FSSR), which is central to family functioning and child adjustment, is created.

Figure 2. Family Communication Patterns (FCPs)



## Discussion

Using FCPT to measure FCPs incorporates an important family-level measure of family interactions that may explain its empirically supported association with adopted externalizing behaviors (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). FCPT accounts for all family members.

### Suggestions for Future Research

To understand how important ACO is to child adjustment, future research should test the following research questions that examine the relationships among GCO, ACO, and adopted child adjustment based on the conceptual model in Figure 1:

- How are GCO and ACO related to adjustment?
  - A significant "b" path would indicate GCO predicts ACO.
  - A significant "c" path (after accounting for "a") would indicate that ACO has an independent, additive effect (above and beyond GCO).
  - Alternatively, if the "c" path were not statistically significant (after accounting for "a"), these results would demonstrate that GCO explains all of the variance in child adjustment.
- Does ACO mediate the relationship between GCO and adjustment?
- A significant indirect effect between GCO and adjustment would support a mediated relationship.

## Conclusion

FCPT is an appropriate family communication theoretical framework in which to examine GCO. Future research should determine the nature of the relationships among GCO, ACO, and adjustment. Namely, does each (GCO, ACO) make a contribution to adjustment? Or does ACO mediate the relationship between GCO and adjustment? Such research is needed to pave the way for adoption researchers to focus on communication that matters.

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