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Communicating Across Eternal Divides: Conceptualizing Communicated Acceptance During Parent-Child Religious Difference

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Abstract

Significant religious difference in the family has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. While religious difference may be challenging for families to negotiate, the manner in which family members communicate about it seems to be helpful in promoting positive interactions between parents and children. The purpose of this study was to conceptualize a parental communicated (non) acceptance continuum in the context of significant parent-child religious difference. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 44 adults who identified a significant religious difference with their parent. The results suggested that communicated (non)acceptance occurred along a continuum with four ranges of behaviors: communicated nonacceptance, ambivalence, communicated acceptance, and idealized communicated acceptance. We discuss the characteristics of each part of the continuum and conclude by identifying key theoretical and translational implications.

Humans have a deep, abiding need to be accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Buber, 1965), and parents are often the first, ongoing, and most ardent providers of acceptance (Bowlby, 1969; Rohner, 2016). When parents convey rejection rather than acceptance, children may experience long-lasting negative psychological outcomes (Ali et al., 2019; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner et al., 2005). One cause of feeling rejected in families is significant difference in religious belief, practice, and values (Dorrance Hall, 2018). Religion is often at the core of individual's identities (Ysseldyk et al., 2010), and its impact on identity often continues even after people leave a religious tradition (Scharp & Beck, 2017). Communicating acceptance may be particularly difficult during family religious difference, when perceived eternal consequences are at stake and religious family members prioritize evangelizing nonbelieving family members above anything else (Foley, 2018; McClure, 2019; Piper, 2017).

Understanding how some religiously-dissimilar families, and parents in particular, create a climate of communicated acceptance is important for two reasons. First, religious disagreements are increasingly prevalent and impactful in families. The number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any religious identity has been steadily on the rise, increasing to three out of every 10 U.S. adults in 2021 (Smith, 2021). The number of interfaith households also has increased in recent years (Mitchell, 2016; Murphy, 2015), and intra-religious differences in specific beliefs are also common, affecting about half of U.S. teens surveyed in a 2019 study (Pew Research Center, 2020). The sociopolitical climate surrounding COVID-19 (Dastagir, 2021) and the 2020 election have only intensified the focus on religious difference in families. From political differences to vaccination beliefs, many American families have become staunchly divided, and religion has emerged at the heart of many of these debates.

Second, understanding how parents create a culture of communicated (non)acceptance is important because people learn how to communicate with others through their family relationships (Vangelisti, 1993). The family is a microcosm of the same arguments that exist in the public sphere. For example, some religiously-dissimilar families may prioritize pressuring family members to engage in religious change and may not care to communicate acceptance. However, other religiously dissimilar families may prioritize establishing a climate of

communicated acceptance, but little to no research clearly identifies if or how this is possible. Without an understanding of how to communicate acceptance in the family, people may be unable to engage in communicated acceptance with strangers, political adversaries, or religious "others" outside of the family.

Religious difference in the family

Communicating across religious difference can be particularly difficult because (non)religious identity, such as church affiliation or identifying as an atheist, often are considered important social identities (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Family members – particularly parents – socialize children toward the (un)importance of religion (Gutierrez et al., 2014), and because of this socialization, family members' beliefs about religion are, often correctly, assumed to be homogenous (Milevsky et al., 2008). However, as children mature, parents and children may grow apart in religious belief and practice. In recent years, the number of people experiencing religious difference in the family for various reasons has increased (Mitchell, 2016; Murphy, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2020; Smith, 2021). Because (non) religious identities often are central to self-concept, disagreements over these identities can be fundamentally threatening to individuals' positive self-image and can be tense to discuss (McBride, 2018). As a result, communication about religious disagreement is a topic people often are socialized to avoid talking about (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

When children diverge from their parent's (non)religious identity, they often conceal this change for several reasons, including the desire to protect their parents from getting upset, the desire to protect themselves from the influence of their parent, or the desire to protect their relationship from conflict (Lewis, 2012). Fears of damaging the parent-child relationship are not unfounded, as research indicates religious differences between parents and children are associated with lower levels of relational solidarity (Colaner et al., 2014), closeness (Worwood et al., 2020), and relational quality (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). Tensions may occur because some religious family members feel compelled to proselytize their nonreligious family members (McClure, 2019) and try to "save" a nonreligious family member from immorality, an unfulfilling life, or even eternal damnation.

Family relationships strained by religious differences may lead to family distancing (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019) or estrangement (Carr et al., 2015), which may be preferable and functional for some individuals (Allen & Moore, 2017). However, other adult children may still desire to maintain family relationships. Finding ways to cultivate shared family identity, possibly through constructing a climate of communicated acceptance, may be important to individual and family well-being (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Soliz, 2007). For these situations, it is important to study how people create a family climate of acceptance.

Communicating acceptance during religious difference

Communicating acceptance of religiously dissimilar children may present a seemingly paradoxical dilemma for parents in which they feel that their (non)religious beliefs are incompatible with fully embracing their child. On one hand, parents likely want to convey they fully accept their child, but their religious beliefs may infer their child is contradicting deeply-held moral values or, even worse, destined for eternal damnation in hell. Our goal in this study was to understand how, if at all, parents are able to negotiate this paradox, and communicate acceptance of their child. Extant research offers insight into how parents might navigate this paradox. Communicating acceptance of religiously dissimilar children, for example, may involve confirming communication, a concept greatly influenced by Buber (1965), who argued humans have a deeply rooted desire to be validated by others. It is through this validation, and being authentically seen by others, that humans come to understand their identity. Given the role that confirming communication plays in predicting higher self-worth (Ellis, 2002), it makes sense that parents who communicate acceptance of their child would engage in confirming communication. Dailey's (2006, 2009, 2010) work on confirmation demonstrates its importance in family relationships. Parental confirmation, for instance, predicts adolescents' self-concept and sense of autonomy (Dailey, 2009).

Another strategy for communicating acceptance of religiously-dissimilar children involves communicated perspective-taking (CPT; Koenig Kellas, 2022; Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). Koenig Kellas et al. (2013) explained that CPT is the communicative manifestation of thinking about the world from another person's perspective. They identified

a number of behaviors that facilitate CPT, including agreement, attentiveness, relevant contributions, coordination, positive tone, and freedom in communicating. CPT positively predicts individual and relational well-being in research conducted on family and spousal communication (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2022; Kranstuber Horstman & Holman, 2018; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). CPT can cultivate a climate of communicated acceptance during family religious difference because to feel accepted, children likely need to know their perspective has been acknowledged and understood, even if differences remain. While CPT will not erase religious difference itself, it may help parents communicate acceptance of their child by demonstrating that they are making attempts to understand their child's experience.

Because familial religious difference involves communicating across social identities, it likely involves accommodation (Colaner et al., 2014; Dragojevic et al., 2015; Giles, 1973), which occurs when speakers make communicative adjustments to be more similar to their conversational partner. Colaner et al. (2014) developed two dimensions of accommodative communication unique to parent-child religious difference: religious-specific supportive communication (RSSC) and respecting divergent values (RDV). Morgan et al. (2020) found that RSSC and RDV predicted decreased *identity gaps*, or tensions between one's self-concept and enacted, behavioral identity and ascribed relational identity. As far as communicating acceptance goes, RSSC, RDV, or other communicative adjustments may be important in helping adult children feel fully accepted.

Whereas the previously-cited research may provide insight into how children perceive parental communicated acceptance more generally, to date research has not clearly identified how parents communicate acceptance during this unique and paradoxical circumstance. It is not clear if and how parents are able to communicate acceptance of their child when they hold fundamentally different beliefs about a higher power, morality, and eternity, nor if parental acceptance of the child conveys implicit endorsement of beliefs and decisions individuals view as antithetical to their (non)religious identity. To better understand how families negotiate this tension, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: How do parents communicate acceptance when parent-child religious difference exists?

Communicating nonacceptance during religious difference

Given the complexity of communicating acceptance of a religiously dissimilar child, it is also likely parents communicate nonacceptance in many different ways, spanning from the obvious to the subtle to an outside observer. While the specifics of communicating nonacceptance may be unclear, substantial literature has established the negative individual and relational well-being outcomes associated with feeling rejected by parents, including general psychological maladjustment (Ali et al., 2019; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002), depression and substance abuse (Rohner & Britner, 2002) and a fear of intimacy in later romantic relationships (Ashdown et al., 2020). Although rejection is harmful, it is less clear how it manifests in everyday parent-child interactions during religious difference.

Communicated nonacceptance likely involves disconfirmation, which conveys a rejection of an individual's self-concept (Sieburg, 1973). Disconfirming messages include *indifference*, or the denial of another's presence, involvement, or communication; *imperviousness*, or the denial of another's feelings; and *disqualification*, or avoiding blame by suggesting the other is wrong (Sieburg, 1985). Each of these disconfirming messages "denies another's existence . . . or it denies the other's significance" (Sieburg, 1985, pp. 189–190). Similarly, Rohner (2022) defines parental rejection as including coldness, hostility and aggression, or indifference. Disconfirmation and rejection may be particularly damaging during parent-child religious difference because (non)religious identity is frequently central to people's identity; rejection of part or all of one's identity is likely extremely hurtful and nonaccepting.

Parents may also communicate nonacceptance of religiously dissimilar children by ignoring their perspective, which could suggest their child's beliefs, values, and experiences are not worth the time necessary to listen. Koenig Kellas et al. (2013) conceptualized the lack of CPT as including disagreeing, conveying inattentiveness, making irrelevant contributions to the conversation, being out of sync with one's conversational partner, using a negative tone, and constraining the other person's ability to share their perspective. Religious difference is a context characterized by significant differences in perspective, making CPT likely challenging.

Communicating nonacceptance during parent-child religious difference may also involve rigidity and unwillingness to make adjustments to the needs of another. Nonaccommodation, or communication that does not make adequate adjustments to a conversational partner's needs, may be a powerful way parents communicate nonacceptance. Nonaccommodation, or more specifically engaging in inappropriate self-disclosure (ISD) about religious experiences, emphasizing divergent religious values (EDV), and giving unwanted advice (GUA) based on unshared religious beliefs, is linked to lower relational solidarity between religiously-dissimilar parents and children (Colaner et al., 2014). Morgan et al. (2020) found ISD, EDV, and GUA predicted stronger feelings of personal-enacted and personal-relational identity gaps, suggesting parental nonaccommodation negatively impacts children's sense of self and their relationship with their parent.

Whereas the aforementioned dimensions of nonacceptance may be overt and obvious forms of communicated nonacceptance, it is possible parents may also communicate nonacceptance in more insidious, subtle, or unintentional ways. It is unclear how, if at all, this occurs in the paradoxical experience of familial religious difference. Therefore, we posed the following research question:

> RQ2: How do parents communicate nonacceptance when parent-child religious difference exists?

Method

Participants

Forty-four participants (N = 44; 26 women and 18 men) completed the study. They ranged in age from 19 to 51 years (*M* = 27.58, *SD* = 6.45). Forty-three participants identified as white or Caucasian and one participant identified as Indian. In response to an open-ended survey question, 29 participants identified as heterosexual, straight, or mostly heterosexual, seven participants identified as bisexual, five participants identified as gay, one participant identified as lesbian, and two participants did not specify their sexual orientation.

Participants had a wide variety of (non)religious identities. Eleven participants were agnostic, 10 participants were atheist, seven participants were Protestant/Christian, four participants were Catholic, three participants were Jewish, two participants were spiritual not religious, two participants did not label their religious identity, one participant was both Jewish and Protestant, one participant was Pagan, one participant was Hindu, one participant was Mormon, and one participant associated with Catholicism but did not believe in God.

They reported on the demographics of at least one parent. Rather than reporting on a mother and a father, participants reported on Parent 1 and then were provided the option with reporting on Parent 2 if they had another parent involved in their life. All but two participants reported on two parents. Parent 1 (n = 44) ranged in age from 46 to 74 years (M = 57.37, SD = 6.39) and included 39 women and five men who were all heterosexual. Twenty-four participants identified Parent 1 as Protestant/ Christian/ Baptist, 16 as Catholic, two as Mormon, one as agnostic, and one as Hindu. Parent 2 (n = 42) ranged in age from 50 to 75 years (M = 56.98, SD = 6.17), not including two parents who were deceased, and included five women and 37 men who were all heterosexual. Twenty-two participants identified Parent 2 as Protestant/Baptist/Lutheran, 10 as Catholic, four as Jewish, two as Mormon, one as Hindu, one as atheist, one as agnostic. One parent was not identified as practicing any religion.

When matching the participants with their parents, the majority of the participants (n = 33) were less religious than their parent or non-religious. Five participants were more religious than their nominally religious parent, whereas four participants had the same levels of religiosity as their parent but they reported significantly different beliefs or denominations than their parent (i.e., Protestant/ Catholic). One participant was from an interfaith household (Christian/Jewish). One participant identified as a Jewish atheist, and was therefore considered both interfaith (her mother was a Christian) and less religious or non-religious compared to her parent.

Procedures

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, recruitment took place through undergraduate courses, social media, word of mouth,

and local flyers. Participants in approved Communication Studies courses at a large Midwestern public university in the United States were provided with extra credit and all other participants were given a $10 Amazon.com gift card as compensation for their time.

To participate, individuals had to be (a) 19 years of age or older and (b) have a parent who had significantly different religious beliefs than the participant. Recruitment materials included the following information to help participants understand what was meant by "significantly different religious beliefs":

> . . . a significant religious difference is any difference that
> you perceive to be important in your religious beliefs and
> at least one of your parents. For example, you may identify
> as much more religious than your parent, you may identify
> as practicing a different religion than your parent, or you
> may identify as much less religious than your parent.

If participants qualified and wished to participate in the study, interviews were scheduled via e-mail and participants completed a pre-interview survey to provide consent and complete a demographic data survey.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary means of data collection. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted online using video-conferencing software and the remaining 31 interviews were conducted in person. Interviews were completed by the first author and ranged from 28 to 230 minutes ($M = 58.95$, $SD = 33.1$). Interviews began by asking the participant to describe in detail their own and their parent(s)'s religious identities and to tell the story of how the religious difference developed. While the study's ultimate purpose was to have participants articulate their understanding of parental communicated acceptance, the interviewer waited until establishing rapport and hearing their own retelling of their religious difference to determine whether the desire for acceptance emerged without prompting. To answer the research questions, participants were asked about halfway through the interview how (non)accepted they felt by their parent in the context of their religious difference and then were asked to provide examples. The interviewer asked a number of follow-up questions, including "what are your feelings and emotions

in response to this specific feeling of (non)acceptance"? Then, to answer the second research question more fully, participants were asked a series of questions including "what do you see as being the opposite of communicated acceptance?" and "what does your parent do or say that communicates the opposite of acceptance?" In the final portion of the interview, participants were asked about the advice they could provide to other adult children as well as parents who experienced significant religious difference.

Data analysis

After completing the interviews, the first author transcribed the audio files. This process resulted in 766 pages of single-spaced data. Analysis of the interviews was guided by Tracy's (2020) explanation of phronetic iterative analysis which "alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations and theories" (p. 209). Because we began data collection and analysis with existing theories and constructs in mind, this approach was appropriate. The stages of phronetic iterative analysis were informed by the sensitizing constructs of (dis)confirmation (Sieburg, 1973, 1985), CPT (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013), and (non)accommodation (Colaner et al., 2014; Dragojevic et al., 2015). This first stage of phronetic iterative analysis is primary cycle coding (Tracy, 2020) and involves reading and re-reading the data multiple times while also making descriptive notes of what is happening in the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). In this way, the first author engaged in constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) while identifying patterns and making lists of the characteristics of (non)acceptance.

The second stage of phronetic iterative analysis is secondary cycle coding, which occurs when the researcher examines all of the codes that they have identified and begins looking for ways to collapse categories and synthesize codes (Tracy, 2020). At this stage, the first author began grouping primary cycle codes into larger categories and also began grouping categories along a continuum of communicated (non)acceptance.

Although Tracy's (2020) phronetic iterative analysis does not have a specified third step, she noted that toward the end of data analysis, researchers will "come to better understand how their data analysis

significantly attends to salient research foci/questions" (p. 226). To conclude our analysis, we focused on arranging the characteristics of communicated (non)acceptance in the most parsimonious way possible. During this final phase of analysis, we discussed ways of re-naming or labeling characteristics of communicated acceptance and refined the continuum of communicated (non) acceptance discussed in the results that follow.

We then engaged in a number of data verification strategies throughout the data analysis and report writing process. The first was formal data conferencing, which included convening a group of seven interpersonal and family communication scholars in a data conference (Braithwaite et al., 2017) in which the first author presented initial findings and attendees discussed the themes and emergent continuum of communicated (non)acceptance. Data conference attendees suggested that the data be revisited to take into account whether participants were discussing real lived experiences or discussing ways that they *wished* their parents would communicate. Based on this feedback, the data were re-coded in order to sort between "real" communicated acceptance and "idealized" communicated acceptance, a distinction reflected in the final results. We also engaged in member-checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Suter, 2009), through providing nine participants emailed by the first author with a written, abbreviated copy of the results of the phronetic iterative analysis and asking them for their feedback. Three participants responded to the e-mail, reviewed the final results, and said that the phronetic iterative analysis findings resonated strongly with their experiences.

Findings

The first research question asked how participants conceptualized communicated acceptance and the second research question asked how participants conceptualized communicated nonacceptance. The phronetic iterative analyses revealed a wide variety of strategies/themes that participants felt parents used to communicate (non)acceptance; the analysis also revealed that participants' experiences of communicated (non)acceptance could be placed along a continuum that ranged from nonacceptance to idealized acceptance rather than

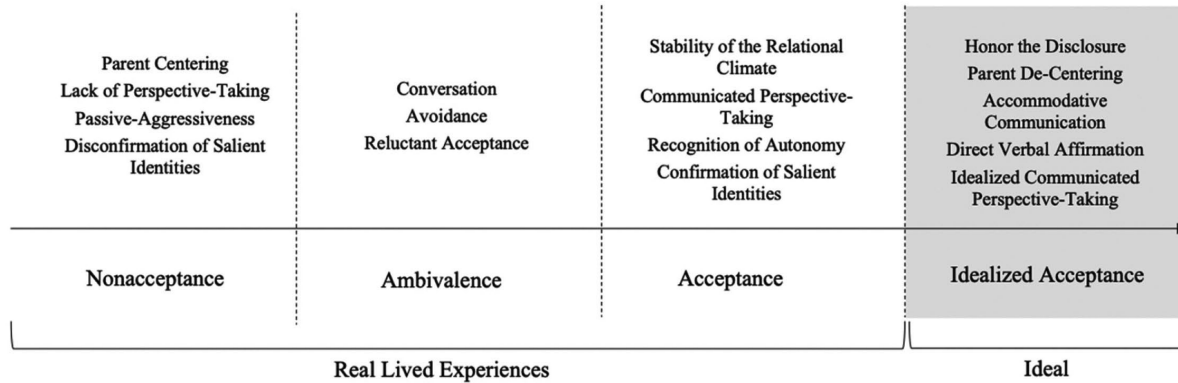| Parent Centering Lack of Perspective-Taking Passive-Aggressiveness Disconfirmation of Salient Identities	Conversation Avoidance Reluctant Acceptance	Stability of the Relational Climate Communicated Perspective- Taking Recognition of Autonomy Confirmation of Salient Identities	Honor the Disclosure Parent De-Centering Accommodative Communication Direct Verbal Affirmation Idealized Communicated Perspective-Taking
Nonacceptance	Ambivalence	Acceptance	Idealized Acceptance

Real Lived Experiences	Ideal

Figure 1. Continuum of communicated (non)acceptance.

a binary of acceptance and nonacceptance (see, **Figure 1**). All participants were given pseudonyms which are used here, with each quotation is followed by the participant number and transcript lines from their interview.

The continuum included aspects of communicated (non)acceptance that participants had experienced and other aspects that they *wished* their parents would use. Therefore, the continuum reflects three types of real, lived strategies of communicated (non)acceptance (nonacceptance, ambivalence, acceptance) as well as a set of strategies that constitute participants' view of idealized communicated acceptance. In what follows, we discuss each of the themes/strategies for communicated (non) acceptance as they are grouped along the continuum.

Communicated nonacceptance

Participants described a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways their parent(s) used to communicate that they were not accepting of their religious difference or less accepting than they wished. Communicating nonacceptance included four characteristics: parent-centering, lack of communicated perspective-taking, passive aggressive behavior, and disconfirmation of salient identities.

Parent-centering

Adult children reported that they felt parents communicated nonacceptance when parents centered themselves in their response to the

religious difference, focusing on their own feelings rather than their child's feelings. This was reportedly pronounced for parents who believed that their child was in danger of going to hell and involved the communication of guilt. For example, Alaina, who is atheist, explained one instance when her mom told her,

> Sorry, I'm just so tired because I spent . . . the entire night just so worried about you and your eternal soul and how like you're not going to Heaven and so I'm just really tired and I'm really upset and emotional because I didn't sleep cause I was worried about you . . . it conveyed to me that . . . like, she did not accept that part of me so much so that she wanted me to feel like I had wronged her . . . (P2; 399–408)

Participants explained that parent-centering communicated nonacceptance because it prioritized the parent's reaction/feelings over the child's experience and suggested that the child's religious beliefs were wrong, both because of the long-term implications and because they caused the parent to be upset.

Lack of communicated perspective-taking

For many of the participants, a lack of CPT (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013) by their parents resulted in the experience of nonacceptance. In earlier research on CPT, disagreement, inattentiveness, making irrelevant contributions, lack of coordination, negative tone, and constraint in storytelling all indicated a *lack* of CPT (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). In this study, participants noted ways in which their parents were inattentive, unwilling, or unable to consider their perspective. For example, Angela, felt that her mom seemed to "accept" an older version of her, without attending to her new perspectives and who she is *now*:

> I think slowly by like me standing up or like saying, "Hey, I'm not as religious as you thought I was," I think it tears down some of those perceptions and it creates even further misunderstanding on her part . . . she hasn't made an effort as much to get to know that side . . . she still thinks of me as who I was a decade ago . . . she hasn't really caught up. (P39; 182–187)

In this example, Angela perceived her mom as both *inattentive* to her present perspective and also *uncoordinated* and out of sync with who she is now. Attentiveness in CPT refers to the effort a person makes to seek, listen to, and understand another person's perspectives (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). Ultimately, those participants who perceived a lack of attentiveness from their parent felt like their parent did not take their perspective or understand them.

Passive-aggressiveness

Participants described a wide variety of passive aggressive communication strategies. In this study, passive aggressive behavior refers to indirect parental attempts to affect religious change in their adult children, including nagging or checking in about adult children's religious practice, making comments directed at convincing adult children to return to the family's religious identity, or indirectly communicating in ways that emphasized the difference.

Participants reported feeling less accepted when their parent would implicitly or explicitly "check up on" their religious practice. For example, Madison, who was raised Jewish and was not currently practicing any religion, explained of her Christian mom, "she'll be like talking about a friend that's going through a hard time, like 'I prayed for her every night. Do you pray?'" (P43; 323–325). Passive aggressive behavior was not a direct rejection of the adult child. Instead, it functioned as a passive, indirect irritant that consistently reminded the adult child that their parent did not accept them as they were. Although it was less direct and occurred in more subtle ways, participants who experienced passive aggressive behaviors were aware of its impacts and how it communicated nonacceptance.

Disconfirmation of salient identities

Disconfirmation occurred when parents communicated in ways about religion that invalidated important parts of adult children's identities (e.g., sexual identity, political identity). These salient identities overlapped with religious identity because parents' beliefs about social issues, such as marriage equality and abortion, were usually motivated by religious beliefs and/or adherence to a religious institution's

teachings. For example, as a fundamentalist Christian, Amber's mom believed that same-sex marriage is sinful. Amber, who is lesbian, explained:

> [My mom] likes to tell other people that she prays for [my wife] and I to come out of our homosexual lifestyle . . . that she's had a vision that [my wife] will convert to Christianity because she knows [my wife] is an atheist . . . I was hurt by that. So that, that's a clear communication . . . in her heart she doesn't accept our current life. (P4; 344–355)

Amber had been married for several years, already had one child with her wife, and was expecting another child soon. When Amber discovered that her mom was vocally hoping and praying for Amber's wife to "lead us out of this lifestyle," it was not only invalidating to her sexual or (non) religious identity. Amber's mom was also disconfirming Amber's identity as a wife and a mother. Parents who disconfirmed salient identities communicated nonacceptance by rejecting important parts of their adult children's identities in the name of religious belief.

Ambivalence

We also identified communication strategies that were ambivalent across participant interviews. In this range of the continuum, behaviors were either functionally ambivalent (i.e., functioned productively for some participants and unproductively for others; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011) or neutrally valanced (i.e., neither clearly unaccepting nor enthusiastically accepting). Thus, ambivalent communication could suggest acceptance and nonacceptance, depending on the personal and relational context of each participant. Three types of ambivalent communicated (non)acceptance emerged: conversation, avoidance, and reluctant acceptance.

Conversation

Conversation as an ambivalent form of communicated (non)acceptance refers to open and honest discussions about religious belief and religious disagreement. A number of participants said that the fact

that they could openly and honestly discuss religious issues with their parent, even though they had significant religious difference, was the main reason that they knew their parent accepted them. For example, when we asked Evan (agnostic) why he felt accepted by his mom (Catholic), he explained: "I think it's just mostly the fact that we can have conversations about it and it doesn't get emotional. We can have very, uh, nonchalant discussions about it . . . " (P35; 193–197). In other words, Evan's relaxed conversations with his mom about religious and political beliefs communicated to him that she still accepts him fully.

A number of other participants, however, found open and honest conversations served more as irritants or unwanted emphasis on the religious difference. For example, Angela identifies as spiritual but not religious and her mom identifies as Protestant Christian. One day, Angela's mom said "I don't want us to get torn apart by differences in religion or politics" (P39; 103). Angela agreed, but said that one thing that would help would be if they stopped bringing up both politics and religion. She suggested to her mom,

> "If you could maybe just not bring up God or like Jesus and that sense, that'd be great." And [my mom] said, "I don't think I can do that . . . because that's a core value." I said, "Okay, so can you maybe just try to like not bring it up as much?" (P39; 110–114)

Honest conversations about their individual beliefs were not functional from Angela's perspective, and the fact that her mom did not seem to understand this only aggravated the tension in their relationship.

Avoidance

Avoidance was another characteristic of communicated (non)acceptance that we coded as ambivalent – positive for some participants and negative for other participants. Avoidance refers to parents and/or adult children strategically avoiding the topic of religious belief or difference. Some participants explained that avoidance of religious difference in conversation was functional because it helped parents and children de-prioritize the difference in their relationship. For example, Heidi, who is spiritual but no longer Christian, explained that

her Christian parents' avoidance communicated acceptance: "I think that their way of demonstrating acceptance is by not bringing [religion] up very much" (P41; 406–407).

Avoidance also proved to be dysfunctional for other participants. Several nonreligious participants noted that they knew that talking about religious belief and faith was important to their parents, so the fact that their parent completely avoided this conversation conveyed nonacceptance. For example, Becca (atheist) explained that she and her mom (Catholic), never discuss Becca's atheism: "We don't talk about it, but . . . I think that tells you a lot right there . . . And that to me does not signify acceptance. I mean, her silence to me indicates nonacceptance" (P29; 279–283). For Becca and several other participants, avoidance became a constant, silent reminder of the relational tension that existed because of religious difference.

Reluctant acceptance

Reluctant acceptance was coded as ambivalent because it was neutrally valenced when participants talked about it and it occurred when the absence of outright rejection conveyed some level of reluctant, obligated acceptance. For example, Melanie, a non-denominational Christian, had an already-strained relationship with her mom, who was devoutly Catholic. She mentioned that even though their relationship was challenging and difficult, she also knew that her mom would not stop seeing her. When asked why, she explained: "we've disagreed like in the past on certain things and . . . like we've never *not* had a mother-daughter relationship" (P14; 205–209). Therefore, the absence of relational dissolution with her mom in the past signals to Melanie that the relationship will continue and she is accepted to some extent. Ultimately, reluctant acceptance was ambivalent because it communicated acceptance to some extent; however, this acceptance was negatively or neutrally valanced and tended to be conveyed through the absence of hostility rather than an active admission of acceptance.

Communicated acceptance

In contrast with nonacceptance and ambivalent communication, participants identified a number of parental verbal and nonverbal

behaviors that clearly communicated acceptance of them in spite of significant religious difference. The characteristics of communicated acceptance included stability of the relational climate, communicated perspective-taking, recognition of autonomy, and confirmation of salient identities.

Stability of the relational climate

Parents communicated acceptance when their words, behavior, and relational history with the adult child created a familial climate of unconditional, unchanging stability. Participants often noted how their parent had created a stable climate throughout their entire life, suggesting to the adult child that nothing (including religious difference) would interrupt this stability and security. Liam, for example, grew up practicing the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) faith, and now identifies as agnostic and inactive LDS. In general, he felt accepted by his parents, even though he knew that they had a completely irreconcilable difference of beliefs because his parents' LDS faith was so strict. He explained, "I would say that they're conveying that [acceptance] by . . . the relationship before this and after this is largely, largely the same. They treat me with as much love and respect and investment as they did before this" (P16; 250–252). In other words, when parents responded to religious difference by reassuring the adult child through words and actions that their relationship would remain the same no matter what, participants tended to feel more accepted.

Communicated perspective-taking

CPT emerged as an important way that parents communicated acceptance of their children. Given the nature of religious difference, parents did not engage in CPT through communicating agreement. However, parents were able to communicate acceptance by engaging in attentiveness, making relevant contributions to the conversation, using a positive tone, and granting freedom in sharing perspectives (Koenig Kellas et al., 2013). For example, Margot explained that when she and her mom, who is Catholic, talked about Margot's atheism: "She heard me out. She didn't try to convince me. She . . . took my answers as valid and though she was disappointed that I didn't have

the same beliefs, she didn't treat me as less than or as a child because of it" (P31; 549–551). Margot's mom was *attentive* to her perspective, made *relevant contributions* to their conversation by asking her questions, and presented her with the *freedom to share* her perspective. Overall, CPT was a way that participants said that their parents communicated acceptance of them because it allowed them to be seen and acknowledged by their parents even if their views were not embraced.

Recognition of autonomy

Recognition of autonomy was another important way for parents to communicate acceptance, because it affirmed the adult child's right to develop their own individual beliefs. In this study, recognition of autonomy refers to explicit or implicit parental acknowledgment of the adult child's agency and ability to make their own decisions. For example, Amber recalled how her dad responded when she came out to her parents, a disclosure that also served to highlight their religious differences due to her parents' religious beliefs about marriage:

> I just remember him like letting me know he loved me and that he wanted me to be happy and that this is what he believed the Bible says, but that he knows I'm a grown woman and that I can make my own decisions. (P4; 107–111)

Through explicitly acknowledging Amber's right to make her own decisions when it came to who she loved, Amber's dad was able to communicate acceptance of her without condoning her beliefs or actions. It is important to note that Amber's dad was not confirming her sexual identity, but acknowledging her right to make her own decisions. Participants suggested that when their parents recognized this autonomy and agency, it provided a way for them to communicate acceptance of them even though they still had significant disagreements.

Confirmation of salient identities

Parents also communicated acceptance through confirming the child's salient social identities, often by affirming them as good students or successful individuals in fulfilling careers. The most common way that

parents confirmed salient identities was through expressions of pride and bragging about their child's success. If parents felt proud of their adult children and even told other people about how proud they were of their adult children, it communicated that they embraced important aspects of their adult child's identity despite–and over and above–the religious difference. For example, Kyle recounted a recent trip home to see his mom for the holidays:

> She took me over to her neighbor's house and she kind of paraded me. "This is my son, he's a teacher." And then, uh, and you know, she'd be like "Kyle, tell him about the story when . . . " "Or tell him about the thing that kid said." Things like that. Where, yeah . . . she'll tell me she's proud of me, like without people around, but I think there's something very heartwarming and affirming when she takes it to like actual people and she's like, "Oh, my kid's so great. Talk to him." (P1; 584–590)

Kyle's mom not only expressed that she was proud of his identity as a teacher to him directly, but also wanted her own friends to know about how proud she was of him. When parents expressed pride and bragging, they communicated to their children that they validated important aspects of the adult child's identity beyond their (non)religious identity. Ultimately, expressions of pride and bragging were a very common way that parents communicated acceptance.

Idealized communicated acceptance

Whereas nonacceptance, ambivalence, and communicated acceptance represent communication that participants experienced with their parents, the final range on the continuum includes behaviors that participants *wished* their parents had used to communicate acceptance in the face of religious difference and/or advice that they would give to other parents to succeed in communicating acceptance of their child. In this way, participants identified characteristics of *idealized communicated acceptance*, including: honoring the disclosure of difference, parent decentering, accommodative communication, direct verbal affirmations, and a more idealized version of communicated perspective- taking.

Honor the disclosure

The decision to disclose individual (non)religious beliefs, such as atheism, was a difficult one for participants. Sometimes, participants completely avoided a full disclosure of their beliefs about religion because they were nervous about their parent's response. Therefore, if participants did choose to disclose their beliefs to their parent, they tended to believe that the relationship was strong enough to withstand the implications of the disclosure. Several participants wished that their parent would acknowledge the courage it took to disclose their beliefs as well as to acknowledge what the disclosure said about their relationship. Alaina explained that when she first disclosed her atheism to her Christian parents, it was a huge decision to tell them:

> . . . when I shared that with my parents, I had been thinking about it for a long time . . . I really thought about it and [it was] really important to me and I made a very difficult decision, just like stop lying to them basically. Um, [I wish they would have] honor[ed] that, you know . . . to really appreciate and to like be thankful that their kid made the hard choice in talking to them about it. (P2; 964–971)

None of the participants identified real instances of times their parent thanked them for disclosing or recognized how hard it was to disclose; yet, several participants noted that honoring the disclosure of religious difference would be a simple, valuable way for parents to recognize their child's courage and communicate acceptance.

Parent de-centering

Parent centering was one of the primary ways that participants felt parents communicated nonacceptance, although participants also identified parent de-centering as an idealized way of communicating acceptance. Parent de-centering refers to the parent doing the emotional labor necessary to withhold emotional distress in reaction to the adult child's religious difference. Participants acknowledged that their parent would likely be upset because of the religious difference, but wished that parents would address that distress on their own and

avoid "taking it out" on their children. Justin suggested that parents de-center their disapproval and concern and deal with that on their own time: " . . . they [parents] can sit with their own sort of like disapproval . . . But . . . let it pass and realize this is like an individual journey for everybody" (P24; 478–486). Ultimately, participants felt parents could communicate acceptance of their children by the reassurance that the parents will be fine and not emotionally wrecked as a result of the child's decision.

Accommodative communication

Accommodative communication (Colaner et al., 2014; Dragojevic et al., 2015) occurs when speakers adjust their communication to be more like their conversational partners in order to decrease social distance between people. In this study, participants spoke about how they would appreciate their parents making these adjustments, most often through avoiding inappropriate self-disclosure about specific religious issues. For example, Luke wished that his dad would avoid " . . . suggesting like church events on a Sunday or um, like when they're in town, like going to like visit like the cathedral or something like that" (P32; 206–208). Overall, participants explained that in an ideal world, parents would avoid engaging in nonaccommodative communication, specifically through avoiding inappropriate self-disclosure about topics that were not helpful to talk about.

Direct verbal affirmation

In an ideal world, participants wished that their parent would communicate acceptance using direct verbal affirmation. Direct verbal affirmation refers to straightforward messages from parents to children, such as "I accept you." When participants reflected on their lived experiences, most examples of parental communicated acceptance came through everyday behaviors and interactions rather directly acknowledging that the parent accepted the adult child, something participants reported wanting. For example, Brody explained in detail how a direct message from his mom would have helped:

> I think more explicit verbal affirmation . . . would've communicated that full acceptance for me if she said something

along the lines of . . . 'I respect you for having your own perspectives and views on this matter and on your faith in general. I respect the fact that you are very thoughtful about these things and that you don't take this lightly.' (P9; 1198–1207)

Sometimes, the simplest and most straightforward means of explicitly communicating acceptance seemed the most desired.

Idealized communicated perspective-taking

While CPT emerged in participant descriptions of communicated acceptance, in an ideal world, participants wished that parents would engage in CPT through more curious and open-minded attentiveness to their perspective. For example, Kyle desired this kind of genuine curiosity:

> I think acceptance will look like discussion. I think it would be her trying to understand every aspect of my life . . . because she is interested in who I am as a person and she just wants to know truly so she can get closer to me. (P1; 520–525)

Idealized CPT also included a level of *agreement*, a characteristic of CPT that was not evident in participant's lived experiences of communicated acceptance. For example, Kim said ideally,

> I think here is when I was describing like them being like, "okay, well what's the answer for you?" . . . Let's say I found an answer in a different religion. They could understand it. "Okay. I know why you've picked that religion. I know why that makes sense to you. I'm okay with that." (P3; 796–800)

Although participants acknowledged that open-minded curiosity and agreement may not be completely realistic for their parent, they did feel that it would be an *ideal* way for their parent to communicate acceptance of them.

Summary

Taking the entire continuum into account, it is important to note that many participants identified behaviors that were nonaccepting, ambivalent, and accepting. For participants whose parents had more time to process the religious difference, their parents often grew and developed in their own ability to communicate acceptance. As Margot explained metaphorically,

> It's like running a marathon and you're at the finish line and they're just starting and . . . you've had this news for a while. But the second you disclose it, you're doing so because you've already come to terms with it and they're just starting a marathon. You're at mile five or you're at mile 26, whatever it is. Um, so you need to remember that, give them till mile 5 . . . you just need to remember to give people that time so they can do their own personal work with that information. (P31; 525–537)

Discussion

Previous research suggests that religious differences between parents and children can be challenging to navigate. Yet parents are some of the most important sources of acceptance in their children's lives. When religious differences put parents' ability to communicate acceptance in jeopardy, how do families respond? Understanding the complicated ways in which parents communicate (non)acceptance was the primary goal of this study. The findings revealed a number of different characteristics of communicated (non)acceptance, spanning four different ranges along a continuum, and offer several key implications for research moving forward, including translational implications for practitioners and families.

The communicated (non)acceptance continuum

A primary contribution of this study was the identification of communicated (non)acceptance along a continuum insofar as parents

communicated acceptance to varying degrees. Frequently, parents engaged in behaviors from multiple ranges of the continuum, especially when taking into account the passage of time. Often, participants noted that their parent's initial reaction to the religious difference was nonaccepting or ambivalent, but over time new norms were established, the relationship developed, and the parent communicated acceptance more frequently.

The continuum of communicated (non)acceptance also underscores the importance of developing a climate of communicated acceptance in which messages of acceptance outweigh messages of nonacceptance. While it is beyond the scope of this study to quantify communicated acceptance behavior, we noted that the general climate of communicated acceptance, evidenced through consistently engaging in communicated acceptance behaviors, seemed especially important. It is possible that communicated acceptance functions in ways similar to Gottman and Levenson's (1992) finding that a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions is important in stable marriages. Gottman and Levenson suggested that it is unrealistic to expect every single negative interaction to be avoided and some negative interactions may be inevitable, but it is the greater proportion of positive interactions that may help preserve relationships. In other words, parents that endeavor to consistently communicate acceptance may still be able to cultivate a general familial climate of communicated acceptance even if there are occasional and sparing instances where nonacceptance is conveyed. It may be that if the general communicative climate in families is one of communicated acceptance, as evidenced through the stability of the relational climate, communicated perspective-taking, recognition of autonomy, and confirmation of other salient identities, those accepting behaviors may outweigh the negative implications of prior messages of nonacceptance. Thus, the communicated (non)acceptance continuum leaves open the possibility that parents can always learn how to move farther along the continuum and aim for engaging in more idealized communicated acceptance over time.

Integration of sensitizing constructs

The communicated (non)acceptance continuum integrates elements of three sensitizing constructs from previous research: (dis)confirmation

(Sieburg, 1985), CPT (and lack thereof; Koenig Kellas et al., 2013) and (non)accommodative communication (Colaner et al., 2014; Dragojevic et al., 2015). We theorized that these concepts would be involved in communicating (non)acceptance, and while we found evidence for this theorizing, these concepts oftentimes functioned in surprising ways. For example, while Sieburg's (1985) conceptualization of disconfirming messages includes elements of avoidance (indifference to communication), avoidance of the subject of religious difference itself was functionally ambivalent in our findings. Some participants suggested that avoidance directly communicated nonacceptance, while others explained that it directly communicated acceptance. The (dis) confirmation of other salient identities was also a novel finding in that parents often communicated (non)acceptance through their (dis)confirmation of identities *other than* the adult child's (non) religious identity, such as their career, their sexual identity, or their political identity.

A number of the dimensions of CPT emerged in unique ways across the continuum. Inattentiveness to the adult child's perspective was a clear way that parents communicated nonacceptance, causing many participants to feel frustrated and invalidated because their parent was unwilling or unable to engage with their perspective. Conversely, parents who showed attentiveness to their adult child's perspective even if there was not agreement communicated acceptance by making this effort. Agreement and a general sense of curiosity about exploring different belief systems emerged in the idealized communicated acceptance as a type of CPT that participants wished that they could experience. While agreement may never be possible due to the nature of religious difference, genuine curiosity without attempting to proselytize or convert the child may be an aspect of idealized communicated acceptance that parents could enact.

While there were fewer elements of (non)accommodative communication as conceptualized by Colaner et al. (2014), participants noted that they wished that their parent would adjust their communication to the needs of the situation by not raising religious topics (e.g., church attendance). This element of accommodative communication most closely mirrors avoiding inappropriate self-disclosure. In this way, participants hoped that their parent would adjust their communication about the religious difference in the future by disclosing less.

The novelty of these findings lies in the additive nature of a parental

communication climate that is characterized by confirmation, CPT, and avoids inappropriate self-disclosure. A communication climate characterized by all three concepts may be an effective means of helping adult children feel accepted by their parent. Additionally, when these sensitizing concepts complemented the new elements of communicated acceptance that participants identified in this study, including conveying stability and recognition of autonomy, it was clear that the whole of communicated acceptance was greater than the sum of its parts.

Functional ambivalence

Another important implication of this study was the finding that conversation and avoidance were both functionally ambivalent, meaning that communication behaviors can simultaneously have preferred and functional outcomes for one participant while having dysfunctional outcomes for the other (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). This finding mirrors existing research on each of these topics. For example, while the topic avoidance literature consistently identifies negative relational correlates of topic avoidance (e.g., Dailey & Palomares, 2004), there may be situations in which it is entirely functional for families (e.g., Caughlin et al., 2011). It is notable that in the disconfirmation literature, avoidance can function as a form of disconfirmation, specifically indifference to others' communication (Sieburg, 1985). However, in this study, some participants reported that well-intentioned avoidance of religious topics or questions could actually promote more functional relationships with their parents. At the same time, other participants' experience mirrored Sieburg's (1985) conceptualization, and they explained that when their parents completely avoided the topic of religion, it communicated nonacceptance.

This finding is important because it suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to cultivating a family climate of communicated acceptance. In other words, what communicates acceptance within one family may be communicating nonacceptance in another family. Contextual factors, such as previous relational history, family communication norms, or even the length of time that the religious difference had been known, all add nuance to the (dys)functionality of avoidance and open conversation.

Translational section

Although religious differences were frequently challenging to negotiate, participants in this study still identified a number of concrete ways that parents can cultivate a climate of communicated acceptance. Importantly, because the participants were almost entirely white and from Judeo-Christian religious backgrounds, it is unclear if these recommendations can or should be generalized to other families. However, for families from this background, we identify several suggestions for practitioners, parents, and children.

Practitioners

For counselors and therapists working with families who are negotiating significant religious differences based on Judeo-Christian traditions, they can help families identify conversational boundaries and preferences for communicating about matters relating to religious difference. The finding that some participants prefer open conversation and other participants prefer avoidance suggests that communicative expectations of families need to be carefully negotiated in light of these preferences. This finding is also consistent with the literature on (non)accommodative communication (e.g., Colaner et al., 2014) which suggests that religiously-dissimilar families may benefit when members avoid giving unwanted advice and inappropriate self-disclosures about religion. Practitioners working with families could ask clients to think about their own communication preferences and brainstorm ways that the family could communicate (e.g., strategic topic avoidance, avoiding the topic altogether) taking everyone's preferences into account. In instances of family therapy with all family members present, practitioners could help facilitate important discussions about *how* the family communicates about religion and religious difference in the future. This discussion could include helping each family member express their own truth without inappropriately crossing the boundaries into another member's values, choices, and beliefs as boundaries are essential to individual and family functioning (see, Reedy, 2020).

The findings of this study are also consistent with past literature on the value of CPT (Koenig Kellas, 2022; Koenig Kellas et al., 2013;

Kranstuber Horstman & Holman, 2018; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009), and suggest that when parents communicate that they are truly attempting to understand their child's perspective without changing their mind, they may be able to communicate acceptance. Therapists and counselors could serve as valuable facilitators of teaching practical CPT skills, such as attentiveness and providing an open space for sharing perspectives.

Parents

These findings also yield important suggestions for parents from Judeo-Christian religious traditions specifically, particularly for those who are sincerely concerned about the eternal well-being of their children. Numerous participants in the present study identified the hurtful impact of parents' attempts to convert or convince them. While these parents may have the best intentions in their heart, they may want to consider the unintended consequences of trying to guilt their child into adopting a particular belief system. Thus, parents may want to consider how their adult child might interpret parental attempts to "bring them back into the fold" through exclusion or judgment. This implication is consistent with previous research, which suggests that parental toxic behavior and cruelty may motivate children to distance themselves from their families (Carr et al., 2015), and also represents a use of accommodative communication (Colaner et al., 2014). Parents should consider how they can adjust to the needs to of the new situation in order to preserve their relationship with their child.

Children

While our focus in this study was on understanding how parents can contribute to a climate of acceptance, adult children are still active participants in that process. Participants made a number of suggestions for how other adult children could cope with religious difference and potentially begin a conversation with their parents. Adult children can practice making generous attributions for their parent's communicated nonacceptance as a way of reframing a negative situation. Attributions are "the processes involved in interpreting or explaining our own and others' actions" as well as the actual explanation

that people make for a behavior (Manusov, 2018, p. 51). In this study, adult children often made generous and positive attributions for their parents' hurtful behavior, such as when parents expressed emotional distress. While participants never excused the hurtful impact of parental communicated nonacceptance and hoped that parents would change their approach, a number of them explained that they knew that their parent was expressing emotional distress because their parent cared deeply about them and wanted to see them in heaven. We make this suggestion with caution, however, because it is possible for patterns of communicated nonacceptance to develop into destructive emotional or verbal abuse, and in these circumstances family distancing may be the healthiest outcome that best protects the mental health of the adult child (Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). However, in cases where adult children feel like their family relationships are still worth preserving, engaging in generous attributions for parental behavior seems to be helpful.

Limitations & future directions

As with any study, this study has limitations. While this study was open to participants who identified any type of significant religious difference, nearly half of the sample identified as atheist or agnostic and had a Christian parent. Religious difference in the family is arguably different for an atheist or agnostic person versus a Christian person. For example, it may be easier for a more progressively Christian adult child or Jewish child to integrate their religious practices or traditions with their more conservatively Christian parent, compared with an atheist adult child who does not have specific religious practices to integrate with the family. The aim of this study was not focused on identifying such differences and the findings are therefore limited in their scope. Additionally, data were not collected on daily religious practice prior to religious change or the salience of the religious difference compared to other differences in the family, among many other possible considerations. Each limitation poses important opportunities for future researchers to consider investigating.

This study is also limited by the fact that it privileges the adult child's perspective on communicated acceptance. Communication is

a transactional process of continuous verbal and nonverbal meaning-making (Stewart, 2012) and in this case is collaboratively constituted through the family's communication norms that they establish together. The findings of this study are solely based on how the child perceived their parent's communication, which can be somewhat limited.

However, there is heuristic value in the future directions raised by this study. The participants consistently identified ways that their political and sexual identities overlapped and intersected with their (non)religious identity. Future researchers should consider the intersection of these identities, in addition to the intersection of racial and ethnic identity with (non)religious identity, as well as how (non)religious people's identity is impacted in multifaceted ways when coping with religious difference in the family. Communication Theory of Identity (CTI; Hecht, 1993; Hecht & Phillips, 2022), which suggests that identity is multifaceted and includes personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames, could be a useful perspective for such an inquiry. Often, tensions occur between these four identity layers, which may be exacerbated in religiously-dissimilar families (Morgan et al., 2020). Future researchers could investigate how family members who change their religious identity negotiate these identity tensions, especially as they relate to other larger social identities such racial and ethnic identity, political identity, or sexual identity.

Additionally, future research should consider the functional ambivalence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011) of communicated (non)acceptance. It is possible that communicated acceptance could create an unhealthy incentive to maintain relationships that are destructive or dysfunctional. Communicated acceptance itself may make adult children feel guilty about choosing to distance themselves from their family, even if such distancing is better for their individual mental health and well-being. Family distancing (Scharp, 2019) may be in some adult children's best interest under certain conditions of severe religious disagreement. Therefore, future research on communicating acceptance during religious difference should be intentional about examining both functional and dysfunctional outcomes associated with it.

Conclusion

Overall, this study paints a clearer portrait of how parents communicate (non)acceptance of their religiously dissimilar children and provides information about strategies that parents may use to cultivate a more accepting family climate in the face of religious difference. The findings present encouraging potential for families struggling to communicate across significant religious differences. With time, effort, and commitment, parents have the capability of learning how to communicate acceptance of their children, even when their religious identities span seemingly eternal chasms.

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