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Family Communication Patterns: A Comparative Study of Adolescent Psychological Well-Being in Consensual, Pluralistic, and Protective Patterns

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine differences in adolescents' psychological well-being (PWB) based on family communication patterns, namely consensual, pluralistic, and protective, using Ritchie and Fitzpatrick's family communication pattern theory. The research method used a quantitative approach utilising questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. The sample consisted of 167 adolescents aged 15–18 years in Medan City, selected using cluster random sampling. The research instruments used the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) to measure family communication patterns and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale to assess the six dimensions of PWB. Data analysis was conducted using the JASP application with one-way ANOVA to test differences in psychological well-being between communication pattern groups, supplemented with Tukey's post-hoc test to identify specific differences. The results showed that there were significant differences in adolescents' psychological well-being based on family communication patterns ($p = <.001$). The majority of adolescents had a consensual (64, 38%), pluralistic (55, 33%), and protective (48, 29%). Post hoc tests indicated that adolescents with consensual and pluralistic communication patterns had better well-being than adolescents with protective communication patterns. The findings suggest that open and attentive family communication patterns enhance adolescent psychological well-being, while limited communication that emphasises obedience can decrease psychological well-being.

Keywords: Adolescents, consensual communication pattern, pluralistic communication pattern, protective communication pattern, psychological well-being

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a dynamic and important period of development, characterised by physical, emotional, and social changes.

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During this stage, adolescents begin to form their identity and confront various pressures from their environment, such as school, social interaction, and family (Steinberg, 2014). The quality of communication can foster a harmonious family and have a positive impact on the mental and emotional well-being of adolescents (Nasir & Johari, 2024). Research by Zapf et al. (2023) shows that open and warm family communication significantly contributes to improving adolescents' psychological well-being. Positive communication allows adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts freely, thereby helping them manage stress and build a positive self-identity. Supportive family communication patterns also play a role in developing dimensions of psychological well-being, including self-acceptance, positive relationships, and autonomy. Adolescents who experience open family communication tend to have higher levels of self-acceptance and build healthy interpersonal relationships. Moreover, supportive communication also encourages adolescent autonomy in decision-making, which is an important aspect of their psychological development (Zhan & You, 2024). Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) captured this variation through their *Family Communication Patterns Theory* (FCPT), which maps family communication along two intersecting dimensions, conversation orientation and conformity orientation, who giving rise to four distinct patterns: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire. Consensual families are warm and open, yet parental authority ultimately prevails, pluralistic families create a genuinely democratic space where every voice carries equal weight, while protective families maintain high conformity with limited room for children to question or deliberate (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Research has consistently shown that families with high conversation orientation tend to produce adolescents who are more emotionally resilient, better equipped to handle social pressure, and more capable of forming healthy interpersonal relationships (Carlson et al., 2022; Miller-Day et al., 2020), yet precisely how these different patterns translate into measurable differences in PWB remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western, collectivist societies. In Medan, Indonesia, preliminary data collected from 1,379 adolescents revealed that consensual communication was the most prevalent pattern (42.6%), followed by pluralistic (26.6%) and protective (18.2%), reflecting a cultural landscape where parental authority remains strong yet meaningful shifts toward more open communication are underway. Empirical evidence directly comparing PWB outcomes across these three communication patterns, however, remains limited a gap that is particularly pronounced in the Indonesian context, where cultural norms around parental authority and family hierarchy add a distinct layer of complexity to these dynamics. This study therefore aims to examine differences in psychological well-being among adolescents from families with consensual, pluralistic, and protective communication patterns in Medan, Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Well-Being in Adolescence

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct that extends well beyond the absence of distress or the presence of positive affect. It originally proposed a six-dimension model of PWB comprising self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Premised on the view that optimal human functioning involves the realisation of one's full potential across multiple life domains. Individuals who score highly across these dimensions are characterised not simply by happiness, but by a coherent sense of meaning, personal integrity, and continued self-development (Ryff, 2014). The construct has since been applied extensively across age groups and cultural contexts, consistently demonstrating its relevance as an indicator of healthy psychological functioning (Gao & McLellan, 2018; Tibubos et al., 2025).

Family Communication Patterns Theory

The Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) was first introduced by McLeod and Chaffee in 1972 as a framework for understanding how families construct a shared social reality through communication. It was later developed into two dimensions: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Conversation orientation reflects the extent to which a family encourages open, frequent interaction that is not limited to specific topics; families scoring high on this dimension create an environment where members feel free to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and view communication as the cornerstone of family life. Conformity orientation, conversely, captures the extent to which a family prioritises uniformity in attitudes, values, and beliefs, expecting its members, especially children, to submit to parental authority and adopt prevailing family norms (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, 2006; Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). These two dimensions yield four distinct types of family communication patterns: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire. However, this study focuses on three patterns selected based on their empirical prevalence in the research sample and their theoretical relevance to PWB outcomes. Consensual families exhibit high levels of conversation orientation and conformity orientation. This type of family is warm and open in communication, yet parental authority remains the final arbiter; parents generally listen carefully and explain the reasoning behind their decisions, thereby fostering communication that balances openness with clear structure. Pluralistic families exhibit a high conversational orientation combined with a low conformity orientation, resulting in the most democratic communication environment among the four patterns.

All family members are actively encouraged to express independent views and engage in substantive discussions, with parents neither expecting nor demanding uniformity of opinion (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). Protective families exhibit a high orientation toward conformity but a low orientation toward conversation, where communication tends to be limited. Children in these families are expected to obey parental authority without in-depth discussion or explanation, leaving very limited room for the development of argumentation skills or self-expression (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach with a comparative research design, aimed at examining differences in psychological well-being (PWB) among adolescents based on family communication patterns. Data were collected from 167 adolescents aged 15–18 years in Medan City, selected using cluster random sampling. Family communication patterns were measured using the *Revised Family Communication Patterns* (RFCP) instrument based on Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002) two-dimensional conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Psychological well-being was assessed using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, covering six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 2013). Data were analysed using one-way ANOVA in JASP Version 0.17.2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hypothesis of this study is that there are differences in psychological well-being among adolescents based on family communication patterns. This study tests the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the level of psychological well-being among adolescents based on different family communication patterns (consensual, pluralistic, protective). The method used to test the hypothesis is the ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) test. The following table shows the results of the ANOVA test, which indicates values such as the F-statistic, degrees of freedom, and p-value to determine the significance of differences between groups.

Based on the results of the analysis in Table 5, the alternative hypothesis (Ha) is accepted, namely that there is a significant difference in the psychological well-being of adolescents when viewed from different family communication patterns. This can be seen from the low significance value, which is less than 0.001, below the p-value threshold of 0.05. This indicates that differences in psychological well-being do occur in each family communication pattern.

Table 5
One-way ANOVA test of categorical variables of family communication patterns on psychological well-being

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Family Communication Pattern	15206.031	2	7603.016	7.423	< .001
Residuals	167968.604	164	1024.199		

In this study, consensual and pluralistic family communication patterns were associated with better psychological well-being because both communication patterns used a high level of conversation orientation, where communication between family members was frequent, as evidenced by the exchange of ideas, emotional support, and effective communication within the family. Conversely, protective family communication patterns are characterised by strong control and avoidance of open discussion among family members. This tends to inhibit adolescents in expressing themselves, increase stress, and reduce their ability to make decisions.

The results of this study are in line with research conducted by Schrodt et al. (2021), which found that protective communication patterns can cause depression in adolescents. Koerner & Fitzpatrick (2006) stated that communication patterns not only affect how family members interact, but also affect adolescents' ability to socialise, which ultimately affects their psychological well-being. In consensual and pluralistic communication patterns, adolescents learn to respect the opinions of each family member so that they have a good self-concept. On the other hand, protective communication patterns create an environment that is less conducive for adolescents, where they feel pressured to obey the rules given by their parents without any explanation or discussion.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that family communication patterns are important for adolescent psychological well-being, with empirical findings indicating that there are significant differences in adolescent psychological well-being between consensual, pluralistic, and protective family communication patterns. Adolescents in families with consensual and pluralistic communication patterns, characterised by a high orientation toward conversation, have higher psychological well-being, which influences self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, life goals, and personal growth. Conversely, protective family communication patterns, with low conversation orientation and high conformity, tend to cause low psychological well-being by increasing barriers for adolescents in expressing themselves, relating to others, and negative self-acceptance. These findings not only support the Family Communication Patterns (FCP) theory by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), but also show how open communication within the

family can be an important factor in the psychological development of adolescents in the modern era.

This research can be a reference for further research to explore how these family communication patterns evolve in the digital age, where social media may change conversation orientation and conformity. Furthermore, subsequent research can integrate a multidisciplinary approach, such as longitudinal studies or experiments and interventions. In addition, this study not only states that family communication is an important factor in the psychological well-being of adolescents but also encourages adolescents to grow into confident individuals who are able to face future challenges in society.

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