

Exploring the Communication of Evangelical Families: The Association Between Evangelical Gender Role Ideology and Family Communication Patterns

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This study examines the relationship between the Evangelical gender role ideologies termed Complementarianism and Egalitarianism and conversation- and conformity-orientation communication patterns stemming from the general theory of family communication. A nonrandom group (N = 124) of Evangelical parents were surveyed using a cross-sectional, self-report survey design. Specific differences were discovered in the perceptions of communication in families for individuals holding conservative Complementarian and progressive Egalitarian gender role ideologies. Evangelical parents who endorsed a more Egalitarian family gender role ideology reported greater use of conversation-oriented communication patterns in their families whereas respondents holding a more Complementarian family gender role ideology reported more use of conformity-oriented communication patterns in their families.

Keywords: Conformity-orientation; Conversation-orientation; Evangelical; Family Communication; Gender Role Ideology; Gender Roles

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Gender roles have seen substantial attention in family research. For example, Amato and Booth (1995) and more recently Wilcox and Nock (2006) demonstrated that gender roles have a strong tie to marital satisfaction. Gender roles have also been shown to influence relationship openness (Aylor & Dainton, 2004) and relationship maintenance (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). It is clear from this research that gender roles are intimately tied to communication. However, less research has been done concerning gender role ideologies. Whereas gender roles are typically understood as recurring patterns of behavior based on masculine and feminine traits used by family members to fulfill functions (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2004), gender role ideologies are described as a mechanism through which individuals make decisions concerning the enactment and fairness of gendered behaviors (Greenstein, 1996; Lavee & Katz, 2002). Such ideologies, then, refer to the larger belief systems about gender (Colaner & Warner, 2005). Extant research on gender role ideologies has largely been housed in the critical, rhetorical, or feminist paradigm (Bartkowski, 1997) and is helpful in order to understand the intricacies and possible implications of these ideologies on a cultural level. Supplementing this research, the current study focuses on specific communication constructs in order to understand associations between ideology and other relevant family constructs such as conversation- and conformity-orientation.

Similar data-based research has focused on gender role ideologies, but this research has paid little attention to communication elements, focusing instead on associations to marital quality, division of household labor, and maternal employment (Ferree, 1991; Greenstein, 1996; Kamo, 1988; Lavee & Katz, 2002). An exception to this is Denton's (2004) examination of gender role ideology and marital decision making; Denton discovered that conservative Protestants were more likely than liberal Protestants to say that the husband is the head of the home, but they were no more likely to report Egalitarian decision-making patterns. This finding presents an inconsistent picture between ideology and communication, suggesting that there is still much to discover in terms of communication.

Additionally, gender role research has largely been conducted without regard to religious affiliation. There is a need to focus upon religious gender role ideologies as these are prime sites of discourse within Evangelical communities (Bartkowski, 1997). Two main types of gender role ideologies are prevalent in Evangelical co-cultures. The Complementarian ideology asserts that the man is the head of the household and holds ultimate authority in family matters (Piper & Grudem, 1991). The Egalitarian ideology, however, puts forth that men and women are equal in family interactions and decisions (Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989). There is a substantial emphasis placed on gender role ideologies in Evangelical communities wherein a myriad of books, articles, workshops, and sermons encourage conformity to specific gender role ideologies.

Evangelical gender role ideologies deserve the attention of family communication researchers in that some Evangelical churches have brought the Biblical hermeneutic concerning family issues into the public sphere particularly in response to the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, and the sexual revolution (Smith,

1998). These Evangelicals present a literalist interpretation of family passages in the Bible, thus prescribing norms and presenting a case for adherence to a particular ideology for family structure. Such Evangelicals offer these Biblical interpretations of gender role ideology as morally superior to societal norms, thus prescribing a “best” way to manage family (Piper & Grudem, 1991). Although this literalist stance has been the prevailing message from the Evangelical church, Denton (2004) notes that often there is a discrepancy between the official rhetoric of religious groups and individual ideology with an additional discrepancy between individual ideology and actual practice. It is insufficient to presume that we understand Evangelical families based on such public messages from only a portion of the Evangelical churches. Additionally, there is a wide variety of thought in the Evangelical church concerning family issues including not only conservative literalist groups but also progressive groups (Bartkowski, 1997). Inaccuracies are inevitable when individuals make assumptions of the entire Evangelical community based upon the outspoken conservative group. Therefore, it is necessary to further investigate a more representative sample of Evangelicals concerning their family characteristics.

In sum, due to the public nature of the Evangelical response to the changing family and the importance placed on gender role ideologies within the Evangelical community, the current study focuses upon Evangelical gender role ideologies. Of specific importance to the current study is the association between these Evangelical ideologies and family communication.

Family Communication Patterns

The general theory of family communication is particularly useful when assessing the communication environment within families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). According to this perspective, communication can be assessed along two dimensions: conformity-orientation and conversation-orientation. *Conformity-orientation* refers to the degree to which families create homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs. Families who are high on the conformity dimension generally place a great deal of emphasis on obedience and uniformity in behavior. As such, their interactions serve to enforce the desired behavior in other members of the family by focusing on conformity and minimizing conflict. Families low on this dimension encourage individuality and allow each family member to form a unique opinion.

The second dimension, *conversation-orientation*, refers to the degree to which families create a climate where all family members are encouraged to participate freely in interactions about a wide array of topics. Generally, adequate levels of conversation are considered to be an important aspect of functional and enjoyable family life. Families high on this dimension exhibit high levels of expressiveness and frequent interaction. Such families are comfortable with disagreement and debate, involve everyone in the family in decisions and appreciate individual input. Conversely, families low on conversation-orientation have little interaction with one another, high levels of separation, and a lack of connection (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a).

Several factors can influence the use of conversation- and conformity-oriented communication patterns, such as personality characteristics (Huang, 1999), conflict styles (Dumlao & Botta, 2000), reticence (Kelly et al., 2002), and communication competence (Koesten, 2004). Additionally, a substantial line of research positions gender as a substantial influencer of communication styles (Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Hochschild, 1989; Montalbano-Phelps, 2003; Sprecher, 1986; Stafford et al., 2000). In the following section I first explain Evangelical gender role ideologies and then discuss the relationship between Evangelical gender role ideologies and communication patterns.

Evangelical Gender Role Ideologies

Virtually all marriages operate according to some gender role identity, and some social contexts emphasize the importance of adhering to gender roles more than others. Evangelical churches in particular strongly encourage families to conform to a particular family structure by housing gender roles within a larger belief system. Evangelical gender role ideologies are not defined in terms of functional roles but rather as ideals based on perceived truth supported through the Bible (Piper & Grudem, 1991). These ideologies do not necessarily define what is properly considered masculine and feminine but rather the roles that are appropriate for men and women to fulfill. In this sense, gender roles stem from gender role ideologies.

Gender role ideologies within Evangelical contexts are most accurately conceptualized as a continuum, with extremes on either side corresponding to Complementarianism and Egalitarianism (Endicott, 2002; Piper & Grudem, 1991). The Complementarian position is on the conservative side of the continuum. The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (1988) has articulated this ideology in *The Danvers Statement*, the poster document for this ideology. This position advocates a distinction between men and women where the man has ultimate headship, authority, and responsibility in the marriage. Proponents of this position argue that the distinction between male and female roles stems from the “created order” that has existed since the beginning of humanity. Complementarians take a literal interpretation of Biblical passages concerning marital roles such as the following passage found in Ephesians 5:22–23, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.”

Egalitarianism, the gender role ideology on the opposite end of the continuum, represents an integration of feminist concepts and Evangelical faith. This ideology is supported by Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), a nonprofit organization of individual and church members from over 80 denominations worldwide. In the document entitled *Statement on Men, Women, and Biblical Equality*, CBE (1989) states that the Bible when properly interpreted advocates the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnicities and economic classes, based on the teachings of scripture as reflected in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” As such, men and women are to share authority as equals who together exercise leadership within society. Egalitarianism involves mutuality in all

aspects of life including home, church, and career; such a position gives women the freedom to negotiate responsibilities regardless of biological sex and hold a strong voice in family matters, options not afforded in the Complementarian ideology (Riesenbordt & Chong, 1999).

The current study focuses on ideologies rather than actual gender roles within Evangelical families. However, research has established that there are often discrepancies between ideology and practice both in secular and Evangelical communities. For example, conservative Protestants spoke of the husband having the final decision in family matters; yet, when the husband and wife were making decisions, there were very few situations calling for the husband's authority as the spouses generally reached consensus (Gallagher & Smith, 1999). Similarly, Denton (2004) found that conservative Protestants report Egalitarian decision-making patterns. Structural forces often compel conservative households to share authority and responsibility, such as the need for both parents to work outside of the home in order to financially support the family even though the family does not espouse feminist principles. Subsequently, the lines between the Complementarian and Egalitarian ideology are often blurred in everyday life in response to structural and practical forces.

Clearly, ideology and practice do not always correspond. It is important to investigate the differential associations that both have to family interactions. As previously discussed, gender roles have seen considerable attention in the research; therefore, this study addresses the gap for ideology in order to determine the potential role of ideology in family interactions. This study may be important in understanding how ideology is related to family life given the lack of associations between ideology and behavior.

Gender Role Ideologies and Family Communication

Gender roles have an intricate tie to communication in that they are not only influenced by family interactions (Horan, Houser, & Cowan, 2007) but also have a tie to specific communication constructs including openness (Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Montalbano-Phelps, 2003), likelihood of confrontation (Miller & Roloff, 2005), and relationship maintenance (Stafford et al., 2000). Such associations demonstrate the relevance of gender roles when considering communication. Yet, this work only addresses some aspects of family communication and does not address gender role ideologies.

Although gender roles clearly influence family interaction, there is limited research linking gender role ideologies in general and Evangelical gender role ideologies in particular to specific communication behaviors. The bulk of the extant research in this area focuses on the association between gender role ideologies and marital decision-making patterns. According to this literature, ideology has a complex relationship to decision making. Gender role ideology plays a role in major decisions such as participation in work outside the home (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede, & Hall, 1996). More liberal gender role ideologies have been associated with a greater likelihood of reaching consensus on disagreements (Godwin & Scanzoni, 1989)

and greater use of direct and indirect influence strategies upon the spouse (Zvonkovic, Schmiege, & Hall, 1994). However, in some studies, very few differences exist between conservative and liberal ideologies and decision-making patterns (Denton, 2004) and perceived power in decisions (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1989; Sexton & Perlman, 1989). This line of research suggests that gender role ideologies play an important albeit inconsistent role in marital interactions. Even with this research, we still know very little about how gender role ideologies may be associated with family communication beyond the husband-wife dyad. It is important to investigate factors related to overall family communication patterns given their associations to several important aspects of family and relational health. Conversation-oriented communication has been linked to children's well-being (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007) and family cohesion and flexibility (Schrodt, 2005), yet conformity-oriented communication seems to play a part in a child's experience of low self-esteem and depression (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007) and family disengagement and rigidity (Schrodt, 2005). In light of these associations, it is important to determine what ideologies are associated with family communication patterns.

There is substantial theoretical support for the association of Evangelical gender role ideologies to communication when considering the general theory of family communication. Evangelical gender role ideologies are likely related to both conformity-orientation and conversation-orientation. For example, Koerner and Cavanaugh (2002) note that high levels of conformity are associated with the traditional family structure in that a hierarchy of family members is reinforced through communication that aims to minimize conflict, particularly conflict that confronts family members in leadership. Given that high conformity is associated with the encouragement of a hierarchy, such communication may reflect the symbolic hierarchy in the Complementarian model by reinforcing the authoritative position of the husband. Conversely, low levels of conformity are associated with less hierarchically organized families wherein interactions encourage independence and individuality of family members, even at the risk of weakening the family structure. This kind of communication implies a greater degree of equality among marital dyads, consistent with the Egalitarian ideology.

Similarly, families low in conversation-orientation generally exhibit a lack of communication between family members. The communication that is present in the family serves to enforce family norms rather than to exchange ideas (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002c). Within such families, members are not encouraged to express ideas or disagreements but rather are expected to submit to the standard created by the authority figure in the family. The emphasis on authority in low-conversation families is reminiscent of Complementarian families who value power structure, particularly male-led power structure. Conversely, families high in conversation-orientation encourage input from all family members wherein each member's input is considered important and valuable. The equality given to individual input is similar to the equality included in the Egalitarian model. The similarities between Evangelical gender role ideologies and conversation- and conformity-orientation communication patterns demonstrate the possibility of an intricate relationship between the two models.

The Role of Religiosity in Evangelical Gender Role Ideologies

There is substantial theoretical support that Evangelical gender role ideologies are associated to some degree to family communication (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a); however, the degree to which religion itself is related to communication is likely related to the level of commitment one has to religion. One may believe that certain gender roles should be enacted in family relationships, yet the motivation to take action on such beliefs will not be strong to someone who is not committed to his/her religion. Conversely, individuals who are very committed to Evangelical beliefs will be highly motivated to adapt behavior so that there is consistency with gender role ideologies. Therefore, in considering the role of Evangelical gender role ideologies, it is important to consider one's religiosity in order to determine the true association between gender role ideologies and communication. Remembering that an individual's beliefs comprising his/her Evangelical gender role ideology fall onto a continuum with Complementarianism and Egalitarianism as polar opposites, the following relationships are proposed:

- H1: When controlling for religiosity, a relationship exists between Evangelical gender role ideology and conformity-orientation such that Complementarianism is positively associated with conformity-orientation.
- H2: When controlling for religiosity, a relationship exists between Evangelical gender role ideology and conversation-orientation such that Complementarianism is negatively associated with conversation-orientation.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Self-report data were gathered from church-going parents ($N=124$) in North Carolina (87.1%) and Ohio (12.9%). For this project, I surveyed parents (67.2% female, 32.8% male) with children under 18 years of age given that communication with emerging adults is qualitatively different than with young children (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). The mean age for participants was 40.09 ($SD=7.28$), and ages ranged from 26–58 years. The number of children ranged from one to seven ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.03$). Ages of children ranged from under 1 year to 18 years, with the mean age being 8.53 ($SD=5.92$).

Additionally, to participate in the study, parents needed to attend an Evangelical church, or a church that believes in the authority of Scripture, supports the importance of telling others about one's faith, upholds a missionary obligation, and encourages a personal relationship with Jesus (Boorstein, 2006). The term "Evangelical" has been described as a "complex aggregate entity" due to the fact that it is broad and transcends denominational divisions (Carpenter, 1998, p. 391). Even still, the study of Evangelicalism primarily concentrates on the Protestant traditions, both progressive and conservative Protestantism (Wilcox, 2004), although some sects

of Catholicism and Lutheranism can be included under this umbrella term (Dolan, 1998). Given that my sample criteria relies upon the broad distinguisher “Evangelical,” participating churches varied in denominational affiliation; specific denominations included in this sample include Baptist (55.6%), Methodist (22.6%), Nondenominational (14.5%), Presbyterian (4.8%), and Lutheran (2.4%). A snowball-method convenience sample was utilized in this research project. Eighteen churches were included in the sample at the end of data collection. Surveys were distributed during regularly scheduled group meeting times within churches and church-related groups such as Sunday School, Bible Study, and prayer groups. Participation was completely voluntary, and no incentives were offered for survey completion.

Instruments

In addition to demographic questions, the survey included three scales: the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990), the Egalitarian/Complementarian Scale (Colaner & Warner, 2005), and the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967). Each of these scales relies upon perceptions of family communication and interaction from the perspective of one family member. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1.

Family communication patterns

The Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (RFCPI; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) contains two subscales measuring levels of conformity-orientation (e.g., “When anything really important is involved, I expect my child to obey me without question”) and conversation-orientation (e.g., “In our family we often talk about topics like politics and religion where some persons disagree with others”). The RFCPI is comprised of 26 items measuring family perceptions of communication on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Reliability scores for the current project were acceptable for conversation-orientation ($\alpha = .78$) and conformity-orientation ($\alpha = .73$).

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations of Interval-Level Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Religiosity	4.24	.61	–					
2. Conversation-orientation	2.81	.51	.13	–				
3. Conformity-orientation	3.84	.42	.02	–.40**	–			
4. Gender Role ideology	2.47	.86	–.39**	–.26**	.26**	–		
5. Age	40.09	7.28	–.04	–.05	–.18	.02	–	
6. Number of children	3.35	1.03	.13	–.17	–.01	.25**	.29*	–

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Evangelical gender role ideology

The Egalitarian/Complementarian Scale (Colaner & Warner, 2005) was used to measure Evangelical gender role ideology. Endicott (2002) originally created this scale by adapting questions from the Dunn Marriage Role Expectation Inventory (MREI), a measure of marital expectations, to tenets of both Complementarianism and Egalitarianism, thus establishing concurrent validity. Endicott further established validity for the scale using a panel approach in which theological scholars familiar with Evangelical gender role ideology approved the measure as a quality indicator of Evangelical gender role ideology. Additional use of the scale has demonstrated its reliability with scores consistently ranging from .72 to .94 (Colaner & Giles, 2008). The reliability score for the scale in the current project was .93. The scale contains 15 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5). Ten questions reference beliefs specific to the Complementarian ideology, such as, “The wife should defer her goals and interests to support to her husband’s pursuits.” Likewise, five questions refer to Egalitarian ideology, such as, “Ultimate responsibility and therefore authority over the family should be jointly held by the husband and wife.”

Responses to the five Egalitarian questions were reversed scored, and all 15 items were combined to produce a measurement of this construct. This method of scoring resulted in high scores on this scale indicating agreement with Complementarian ideology, and low scores indicating agreement with Egalitarian ideology. In this way, gender role ideology is operationalized as a continuum where participants can score anywhere between the two extremes.

Religiosity

The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS) and (Allport & Ross, 1967) represents one of the most widely used religiosity scales in empirical research (Burriss, 1999). The original 20-item measure contains items related to extrinsic and intrinsic orientations. The extrinsic orientation of religiosity refers to a utilitarian perspective toward religion wherein an individual engages in or endorses religious acts to the extent that the religious acts assist in the achievement of goals such as emotional comfort or social status. The intrinsic orientation refers to commitment to religious tradition wherein religion drives action through stipulation of specific norms of behavior. In the current project, I am concerned with religiosity as an indicator of the degree of commitment individuals have to their religion. Therefore, only the intrinsic subscale is necessary for the given data analysis.

The intrinsic subscale contains nine items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) with questions such as, “It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and meditation.” Numerous studies have aided in establishing the reliability and validity of the intrinsic subscale of the ROS (Burriss, 1999). Reliability estimates for the intrinsic subscale are typically in the mid-.80s (Donahue, 1985); this project experienced a similar reliability score at .80.

Results

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, descriptive statistics were run. All variables were normally distributed with the exception of Evangelical gender role ideology, which was slightly skewed towards Complementarianism but not to a problematic extent ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .86$). For each regression, tolerance statistics and variance inflation factors were assessed for all coefficients, and none was in violation of accepted levels. In preliminary data analysis, age of participant, sex, and number of children were significantly associated with the outcome variables. These variables were included in the analysis as controls in order to measure the association between Evangelical gender role ideology and communication patterns beyond that which may be present as a result of sample characteristics.

Evangelical Gender Role Ideology and Communication Patterns

Hypothesis 1 predicted that, when controlling for religiosity, there would be a relationship between Evangelical gender role ideology and conformity-orientation such that Complementarianism would be positively associated with conformity-orientation. A hierarchical regression was performed with control variables (age, sex, number of children, and religiosity; sex was dummy coded such that 0 = male and 1 = female) entered into the first block. As a set, these were not significant predictors of conformity, $F(9, 114) = .57$, $p = .81$, $R^2 = .04$. Evangelical gender role ideology was entered into the next block. There was a significant change in R^2 , $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $p < .01$, and the model's statistical significance, $F(5, 116) = 3.26$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .12$. The beta coefficient for Evangelical gender role ideology was also significant,

Table 2 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Conformity-Orientation

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>pr</i>
Step 1				
Age	-.01	.01	-.20*	-.19
Number of children	.01	.05	.36	.04
Sex	-.07	.10	-.06	.06
Religiosity	.02	.08	.03	.03
Step 2				
Age	-.01	.01	-.18	-.18
Number of children	-.01	.05	-.04	-.04
Sex	.00	.10	.00	.00
Religiosity	-.08	.08	-.10	-.10
Evangelical gender role ideology	.20	.06	.33**	.30

Note. $R^2 = .04$, Adjusted $R^2 = .00$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .12$, Adjusted $R^2 = .09$ for Step 2.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Conversation-Orientation

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>pr</i>
Step 1				
Age	.00	.00	.06	.06
Number of children	-.08	.04	-.20*	-.20
Sex	.19	.08	.21*	.21
Religiosity	.08	.06	.12	.13
Step 2				
Age	.00	.01	.04	.05
Number of children	-.05	.04	-.13	.13
Sex	.13	.08	.15	.15
Religiosity	.17	.06	.25**	.24
Evangelical gender role ideology	-.16	.05	-.33**	-.31

Note. $R^2 = .00$, Adjusted $R^2 = .06$ for Step 1; $R^2 = .18$, Adjusted $R^2 = .14$ for Step 2.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

$\beta = .33$, $p < .01$. None of the control variables, however, was significant (see Table 2). Therefore, there was a significant relationship between Evangelical gender-role ideology and conformity-orientation with Complementarianism positively related to the use of conformity-orientation communication patterns.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that, when controlling for religiosity, there would be a relationship between Evangelical gender role ideology and conversation-orientation such that Complementarianism would be negatively associated with conversation-orientation. A hierarchical regression was performed with the same control variables entered into the first block. As a set, these were significant predictors of conversation, $F(4, 117) = 2.91$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .09$. Evangelical gender role ideology was entered into the second block as the independent variable. The change in R^2 was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p < .01$, as was the overall model, $F(5, 116) = 4.92$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .18$. Although none of the beta coefficients for the demographic control variables were significant in the second model, the beta coefficients for Evangelical gender-role ideology, $\beta = -.33$, $p < .01$, and religiosity, $\beta = .25$, $p < .01$, were significant (see Table 3). The original hypothesis was supported. As such, Complementarianism was negatively related to the use of conversation-orientation communication patterns when controlling for individual levels of religiosity.

Discussion

The principle goal of this study was to examine the relationship between Evangelical gender role ideologies and family communication patterns as characterized by the general theory of family communication. As hypothesized, Evangelical gender role ideologies were significantly related to both conformity- and

conversation-orientation patterns. Specifically, results suggest that spouses who responded in a manner more consistent with the conservative Complementarian position indicated greater uses of conformity-orientation patterns. Conversely, families tending toward an Egalitarian gender role ideology indicated greater uses of conversation-orientation patterns.

As demonstrated in the analysis, Evangelical gender role ideologies are clearly associated with family communication patterns in this sample. Specifically, findings from the current study suggest that respondents holding a more Complementarian family gender role ideology may be more likely to be part of a family that communicates in a way that encourages conformity and like-mindedness in attitudes and beliefs. Such communication is characterized by conflict avoidance and efforts to silence opposing opinions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b). One reason that Complementarian-oriented families may be associated with conformity-orientation in the present study is the maintenance of the hierarchical role structure particularly in relation to spiritual issues. Previous research has indicated that a strong presence of conformity-orientation within family interaction is associated with communication aimed at minimizing conflict, specifically conflict confronting members in leadership (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002). The belief in hierarchical roles is a defining characteristic within Complementarian families (Piper & Grudem, 1991), even though such hierarchy is seldom enacted (Denton, 2004). As such, maintenance of the hierarchy is likely of central importance and may be regulated by communication encouraging conformity.

Results also indicate that within homes in which parents tend to espouse an equality between husband and wife, communication may be more likely to be part of a family characterized by “the free and open exchange of information, ideas, and feelings” (Schrodt, 2005, p. 2). This is logical considering the role structure of Egalitarian-oriented families. Just as the roles of the husband and wife are believed to be equal within these families, the input of all family members is likely to be equal. As opposed to the symbolic hierarchy present in individuals who indicate a more Complementarian family gender role ideology, Evangelical parents from this sample who endorsed a more Egalitarian family gender role ideology tend to not be concerned with maintaining a hierarchical role structure. Therefore, they may not use communication as a mechanism to avoid confrontation to leadership. Because such individuals tend to believe in an equal and open role system, communication on a wide array of topics is encouraged within these families.

These results have implications in two main domains. First, this study expands our knowledge of communication in Evangelical families through the theoretical framework provided by the general theory of family communication. As the Evangelical population continues to grow (Boorstein, 2006), the influence of Complementarian and Egalitarian values will be important in understanding family communication and family functioning. If patterns from the current study are consistent with patterns in the population, conformity-oriented communication will likely be overrepresented in Complementarian-oriented families while conversation-oriented communication will dominate the bulk of Egalitarian-oriented families’ communication. When connecting these findings to the literature on family communication patterns,

the implications have greater weight. Conversation-oriented communication has a direct impact on children's well-being while conformity-oriented communication seems to play a part in a child's experience of low self-esteem and depression (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007). Additionally, aspects of conversation-orientation promote family cohesion and flexibility whereas aspects of conformity-orientation are linked to family disengagement and rigidity (Schrodt, 2005).

Of course, this literature is taken from the general population and does not specifically apply to Evangelical families. However, if similar associations are found in Evangelical families as are found in the general population, then these findings suggest that Complementarian-oriented families may be at a greater risk of experiencing family or individual dysfunction. For example, families with Complementarian beliefs who have children suffering from a lack of well-being may be relying on conformity-orientation communication patterns too heavily and could thus benefit from an increase in the utilization of conversation-oriented communication. Understanding of the gender role ideology commonly associated with conformity-orientation patterns and the potential subsequent negative family correlates is beneficial to scholars and practitioners interested in promoting family health and child well-being. Future research should explore the similarities between Evangelical families and families in the general population in order to determine the full scope of the association between ideology, family communication, and individual well-being.

A second implication from this study involves knowledge of additional factors associated with family communication patterns. The general theory of family communication is a robust theory that has been related to numerous individual and family level constructs. The findings from this study may further extend the theory by suggesting that Evangelical gender role ideologies, both conservative and progressive, may be related to communication behaviors within family interactions. Such a connection between religion and family life potentially highlights the church's power in influencing family relationships. As churches and church-related groups advocate a certain family role structure (ranging from Egalitarian to Complementarian), parents internalize such positions that are likely manifested in family communication patterns. Such a relationship highlights the potentially influential status of the church in generating real-life consequences for family life.

The significant findings in the present study may also help to clarify the puzzling association between gender role ideology and marital decision making. The findings from the present study speak to the general family communication environment, specifically communication between parents and children, uncovering significant associations between individuals who tend to agree with Complementarianism and the use of conformity-orientation in their families and between individuals who tend to agree with Egalitarianism and the use of conversation-orientation in their families within this sample of Evangelicals. The decision-making literature does not indicate an association to communication between spouses in relation to gender role ideology. Significant findings here suggest that the relationships to communication within the home may occur at the parent-child level rather than the husband-wife level.

Surprisingly, religiosity did not play a role in the relationship between Evangelical gender role ideology and communication patterns to the extent as predicted. Originally, I expected that religiosity would be relevant to the relationship between ideology and communication in that one's motivation to take action on beliefs concerning the proper roles of men and women would be a product of commitment to his/her religion. The fact that religiosity was not a factor for conformity-orientated communication in this sample may suggest the powerful impact Evangelical gender role ideologies have in routine interactions with family members. From the results in this study, it appears that the church's teachings on gender roles in family life may be related to communication behaviors regardless of the salience of religion in one's life. As such, one can be relatively detached from religion yet still incorporate aspects of religious gender role ideology in family interaction. Such a relationship between ideology and communication transcending religious commitment speaks to the powerful effect of Evangelical gender role ideologies in family communication.

At the same time, results suggest that religiosity is related to the use of conversation-oriented communication. Such a finding suggests that commitment to religion may be an important factor in the relationship between gender role ideology and open communication. One possible explanation for this finding could be that individuals who are self-identified as religious may be more inclined to utilize open communication in effort to socialize their children into their value system. Socialization research analyzing parent-child conversations in religious homes suggests that there is a bidirectional reciprocity between parent and child in which children are active participants in their religious socialization (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003). Such a reciprocity between parent and child requires open communication, thus providing a possible explanation for the significant association between religiosity and conversation-orientation.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of this research, the results should be interpreted within the limitations of the research design. This study utilized a nonrandom sample, and, as such, findings should be cautiously generalized to the greater population. Another obvious limitation involves the use of a predominately white, middle-class sample. Lack of variability on some control variables including race, family description, living arrangement, and relationship status may have attenuated the results presented in this project. I focused on two-parent families, but there are likely very different results to be discovered in single-parent homes; as such, the results may have been influenced by the current family demographic. Additionally, 67% of the respondents were mothers, meaning that we know more about women than men, and findings between men and women were not contrasted in this study. Therefore, researchers should interpret the findings in light of the sample and, in future research, explore the relationships of these constructs among various demographic groups as well as in the general population.

Additionally, five different religious denominations were included in the current study. Such denominational variation was necessary in order to include both liberal and conservative congregations in the sample so as to acquire a variety of responses on the gender role ideology variable. Exploratory data analysis, however, revealed that gender role ideology did differ somewhat based on denomination. The findings from the current study are best interpreted as relevant to individuals progressing toward a Complementarian or Egalitarian ideology rather than individuals from a specific denomination.

Finally, Evangelicals in the current study were grouped according to their ideology ranging on a continuum between Complementarianism and Egalitarianism. This methodology does not create conservative and liberal groups of Evangelicals but rather serves to demonstrate how ideology and communication may vary as a function of one another. Researchers have demonstrated that there is a wide variety of thought in Evangelical communities concerning family and gender roles (Bartkowski, 1997; Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996). To interpret the results from the present study as relating to Complementarians and Egalitarians would misrepresent the Evangelical community as well as the purpose of the study. Rather, findings here suggest associations with communication as ideologies progress to one end of the Complementarian-Egalitarian continuum. Future research should strive to identify more specific categories of ideology in effort to make more precise predictions based on Evangelical gender role ideology. One possibility may be to divide responses from the Egalitarian/Complementarian scale into high, moderate, and low scores. In this way, high scores would indicate a strong adherence to the Complementarian ideology, low scores would indicate adherence to the Egalitarian ideology, and moderate scores would represent individuals in the middle of the continuum who do not adhere strongly to either ideology.

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