

# Thai Family Communication Patterns: Parent-Adolescent Communication and the Well-Being of Thai Families

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**Abstract-** This study draws from family studies, communication studies, sociology, and psychology to explore Thai parent – adolescent communication. Analysis of the data points to consensual patterns as best representing Thai family communication patterns. As might be expected, hierarchy plays a major role in Thai family communication, with parents striving to maintain their power. However, in consensual family communication, parents try to promote family discussions and initiate open dialogue within in their family while adolescents struggle to share their opinions and to re-negotiate their relationship with their parents. The findings are discussed in terms of their significance for understanding Thai families and family well-being

**Keywords-** family communication patterns, family well-being, parentadolescent communication, parentadolescent relationship, Thai family

## I. INTRODUCTION

Family is the first institution people encounter in life and typically the institution that accompanies us for the longest time. The family entity is viewed by some as among the simplest things in life, but truly, the notion of family is complex with appreciations of the roles played by and

significance of family varying across cultures. Arliss ([1]) observed, “individuals tend to define family connections in terms of their feelings for one another, not arbitrary residential terms” (p. 6). Every human being is a member of a family, at least in the sense of a biological membership, thus we all have some level of understanding of the term.

Given the significance of the family, happy and healthy families are important to the well-being of a culture because such families nurture their children towards becoming well-adjusted adults. Studies emerging from a wide variety of disciplines have sought to uncover what makes for a healthy family. At the top of most lists is communication.

When compared to the wealth of research that exists within the West (US), few studies focus on Thai family communication, especially, parent-adolescent relationship. Theoretical frameworks underlying the studies that do exist have typically been borrowed either from the West or Europe. Given the significance of culture, we cannot simply assume that imported models accurately describe Asian family communication, especially Thai family communication. The focus of this study is on communication within Thai families. The purpose is to identify family communication patterns and

family well-being with a focus on parent-adolescent relationships.

### **Family Communication Patterns**

Chaffe, McLeod and Wackman ([2]) first introduced the concept of “family communication patterns” as a vehicle for exploring family communication structure. They suggested that two dimensions are central to family communication patterns: socio-orientation and concept-orientation. A family’s socio-orientation is reflected in the inclination to maintain harmonious relationships within the family. In concept-oriented families, children are expected to openly express and discuss their ideas with anyone, including their parents. These two dimensions were used to identify 4 different family types: consensual (high on both scales), protective (low concept-orientation but high socio-orientation), pluralistic (high concept-orientation but low socioorientation), and laissez-faire (low on both scales).

Although they live together within the same family, perceptions and beliefs about a family’s communication patterns can be different among family members (see [3]). Their perceptions and beliefs help individual family members make sense of their family reality. A family member’s interactions with other family members are influenced by his/her perceptions and beliefs.

Ritchie ([3]) developed the Revised Family Communication Patterns instrument (RFCP). The revisions were based on basic family communication norms reflecting (a) the parents’ power/control and (b) the parent’s support/care. Ritchie argued that it was important to acknowledge that the RFCP focuses on perceptions of family communication patterns as opposed to actual communication patterns. The two dimensions of concept-orientation and socioorientation were subsequently renamed conversation-orientation and conformityorientation, respectively.

### **Family Well-being**

Family is central to one’s well-being, and plays a major role in the growth and learning process of a human. As Floyd and Morman ([4]) argued “To call the family an important human institution is to understate its value profoundly.”

In the process of creating one’s identity, a person will come to know him/herself through his/her family life and interactions. Family members, especially parents, reflect who we are and shape us to be what they want to see. There is the well-known English expression “*Like father, like son.*” Similarly, the Thai proverb “*Loog Mai Lon Mai Klai Ton*” means we are what our parents are. For some, the shaping process will be comfortable and reflect naturally who they are. For others, expectations communicated within the family might seem far away from their real self. Their desires might contradict what other family members want and how those other family members see them. Inner struggles and self-fragmentation can occur and can be painful. In the shadow of negative parenting, children grow up hurt, ashamed, emotionally abused, and lacking in selfworth ([5]).

### **Characteristic of Thai family**

To some extent, it is certainly possible that those theories based in another culture could explain Thai family communication. At the same time, we should not dismiss the potential significance of cultural differences. The challenge that exists is in balancing the need to be informed by “foreign” theories with the desire to be open to “other-culture” ways of interacting.

Pinyuchon & Gray [6] identify 6 influences on Thai families: religious beliefs, rural and urban considerations, family relationships, societal values, masculine and feminine roles, and sexuality.

As it is the national religion of Thailand, most Thai people live life according to Buddhist tenets. Karma teaches that a good person treats his/her parents well.

Parents are, in a sense, perceived as the “house gods” (who gave life to the child). Children are expected to obey and respect their parents.

The pace of life for Thais who live in rural communities is very different from that of families living in metropolitan areas. Urban areas of Thailand are more Westernized [6]. The strains of city life might mean that less time exists to sit together as a family for a meal. The demands of school and work, combined with other obligations, argue against the kind of close contact that one might witness in more rural parts of Thailand.

Rather than finding 3 or more generations under the same roof, today it is becoming more common to find only 2 generations. That said, unlike some other cultures, it is still common for children to remain in the home of their parents until they (the children) marry and begin their own family. This characteristic has the potential to affect family communication flow and volume.

Societal values (see [6]) shape Thai families in a variety of ways. Parents, for example, are never wrong; children are children forever in the eyes of their parents, and children cannot do anything without their parents' permission or guidance.

Hofstede [7] observed the Thai culture is high context in nature; father, mother, and children are expected to play certain roles. Father is the leader, expected to be strong, to make correct decisions for the family, to take care of all major family issues. The role of mother is to be a good follower; she must support her husband, thinking and caring for the needs of the family rather than her own needs, being kind, gentle, and humble [6]

According to Charoenthaweesub [8], sexuality is a taboo topic in Thai society as a whole. Parents view sexuality as something that they should avoid discussing, even with adolescent children. In her study, almost all of the parents cited doctors, teachers, or

sexuality professionals as preferred sex education teachers for adolescents. Almost all confirmed that their own parents never, or rarely, talked about this topic. At the same time, almost of the parents admitted that they were worried that their adolescents would learn from the wrong sources, e.g., friends, pornography, even learning by doing.

This admittedly sketchy picture of the factors that influence communication within Thai families provides a foundation as we now turn attention to family communication patterns and the theories that informed data collection in this research.

## **II. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

High school students and their parents were recruited from 5 provinces throughout Thailand (16.7% Bangkok, 20.8% Chiang Mai, 20.8% Khon Kaen, 20.8% Tak, and 20.8% Phuket). 59.8% of the respondents were female and 40.2% were male; the age range was from 14-63 years old ( $M = 31.35$ ;  $SD = 15.72$ ); the number of members of each family ranged from 2-13 people ( $M = 4.36$ ;  $SD = 1.20$ ), and 97% were Buddhist. Respondents completed two instruments—the RFCP and the FWA—followed by several open-ended questions.

### **A. Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP)**

The Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) instrument (see [9]) was used to measure respondents' perceptions of their family's communication patterns. The RFCP is a 26 item Likert-scale with 15 items measuring perception of conversation orientation and 11 items measuring perception of conformity orientation. A 7-point scale is employed, responses ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. This study reported a good reliability for conversation orientation (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ) and an acceptable reliability for conformity orientation ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**B. Family Well-Being Assessment (FWA)**

The Family Well-Being Assessment (FWA) instrument was developed by Caldwell [10] and is designed to measure various aspects of family life on a continuum from well-being to stress. There are two versions of the instrument: a 45 item (10 subscales) instrument for adolescents and a 57 item (11 subscales) instrument for parents. Items are measured using a six-point Likert scale ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement, with reverse coding used for negative questions. The FWA scale is composed of three dimensions:

- Family structure
- Family role processes
- Family vulnerability

This study reported a good reliability for the adolescent version (Cronbach’s alpha = .90) and an acceptable reliability for the parent version ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**C. Open-ended questions**

Topics covered in the open-ended question portion of the questionnaire were:

- Perceived gaps in family communication

- Family communication satisfaction
- The most difficult topics in parentadolescent conversations

**III. RESULTS**

Family Communication Patterns and Family well-being The highest percentage of respondents (47.7%) reported that a consensual style represented their families’ communication pattern. While this pattern was the most prevalent among family participants in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen, the consensual style was the second most prevalent style in Bangkok. 6.4% of the family participants reported that their family employs a protective style communication pattern; 4.8% reported mixed patterns (the least popular style in Chiang Mai and Tak).

316 (41%) of the respondents reported a high or moderate level of family well-being. The highest rates of well-being were in Phuket and Khon Kaen, followed by Bangkok. Across all of the provinces, less than 20% of the participating families reported low levels of well-being. Bangkok had the highest percentage of families falling in this category.

**TABLE I**  
PARENT-ADOLESCENT’S FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS ACROSS PROVINCES

Provinces	Family Communication Patterns					Total
	Mixed Patterns	Laissez faire	Protective	Pluralistic	Consensual	
Bangkok	6 (4.7%)	21 (16.4%)	11 (8.6%)	52 (40.6%)	38 (29.7%)	128 (100%)
Chiang Mai	3 (1.9%)	13 (8.1%)	15 (9.4%)	38 (23.8%)	91 (56.9%)	160 (100%)
Khon Kaen	8 (5.0%)	10 (6.3%)	9 (5.6%)	42 (26.3%)	91 (56.9%)	160 (100%)
Tak	3 (1.9%)	19 (11.9%)	8 (5.0%)	45 (28.1%)	85 (53.1%)	160 (100%)
Phuket	17 (10.6%)	17 (10.6%)	6 (3.8%)	59 (36.9%)	61 (38.1%)	160 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	37 (4.8%)	80 (10.4%)	49 (6.4%)	236 (30.7%)	366 (47.7%)	768 (100%)

**TABLE II**  
PARENT-ADOLESCENT’S FAMILY WELL-BEING ACROSS PROVINCES

Provinces	Family Well-Being Level				Total
	Very high well-being	High well-being	Moderate well-being	Almost low well-being	
Bangkok	9 (7.0%)	52 (40.6%)	44 (34.4%)	23 (18.0%)	128 (100%)
Chiang Mai	4 (2.5%)	58 (36.3%)	83 (51.9%)	15 (9.4%)	160 (100%)
Khon Kaen	5 (3.1%)	76 (47.5%)	63 (39.4%)	16 (10.0%)	160 (100%)
Tak	9 (5.6%)	53 (33.1%)	78 (48.8%)	20 (12.5%)	160 (100%)
Phuket	10 (6.3%)	78 (48.8%)	48 (30.0%)	24 (15.0%)	160 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	37 (4.8%)	317 (41.3%)	316 (41.1%)	98 (12.8%)	768 (100%)

**TABLE III**  
PARENT-ADOLESCENT'S FAMILY WELL-BEING ACROSS FAMILY COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Family Communication Patterns	Family Well-Being Level				
	Very high well-being	High well-being	Moderate well-being	Almost low well-being	Total
Mixed Patterns	0 (0%)	12 (32.4%)	20 (54.1%)	5 (13.5%)	37 (100%)
Laissez faire	0 (0%)	15 (18.8%)	39 (48.8%)	26 (32.5%)	80 (100%)
Protective	0 (0%)	4 (8.2%)	31 (63.3%)	14 (28.6%)	49 (100%)
Pluralistic	24 (10.2%)	148 (62.7%)	56 (23.7%)	8 (3.4%)	236 (100%)
Consensual	13 (3.6%)	138 (37.7%)	170 (46.4%)	45 (12.3%)	366 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	37 (4.8%)	317 (41.3%)	316 (41.1%)	98 (12.8%)	768 (100%)

The pluralistic family communication style was associated with the highest rates of family well-being, followed by the consensual style (Table 3). The lowest levels of family well-being were reported by families reporting either a laissez faire or a protective communication pattern.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between RFCP and FWA. The relationship between these variables was significant,  $\chi^2(12, N = 768) = 152.896, p < .001$ . The findings provide evidence that, at least for this sample of Thai families, family communication patterns and family wellbeing are relevant to each other.

**Self-report and Open-ended questions**

- 1) *Family Communication Gap*: 32.6% of the adolescent participants reported that they have small communication gaps with their father; 23.6% reported small gaps with their mother. A majority of the adolescents reported that there are no communication gaps in their family. With respect to parents, a majority of the parents reported having no communication gaps with their adolescent child while 34.6% parents reported experiencing small gaps.
- 2) *Family Communication Satisfaction*: 51.6% of the parents reported that they are somewhat satisfied with overall family communication while 42.4% reported being very satisfied, 3.9% unsatisfied, and 0.5% very unsatisfied.
- 3) *The most difficult topic*: A majority of the participating parents reported that higher

education and future careers served as difficult topics for discussion. A majority of the participating adolescents reported that the most difficult topics for them were their life, needs, wants, and personal issues (such as opposite sex relationships and sexuality).

**IV. CONCLUSIONS**

This study opens the door for a better understanding of Thai family communication patterns, family well-being, and the adolescent-parent relationship towards their communication. Thai families, as portrayed in this research, employ a consensual pattern of communication, with parents trying to maintain their power while also striving to be open-minded and to listen to their adolescent child. Importantly, a significant relationship exists between family communication patterns and family well-being.

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