

# Region and Religion as Predictors of Family Communication Quality

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## Abstract

This quantitative study seeks to find out how two demographic variables – region and religion- influence Family Communication Quality (FCQ) in heterogeneous families in Kerala, a south Indian state. The study is set against the background of two critical theories in family communication –Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) and System Theory (ST). While the former argues communication in a family relies on some patterns followed and characteristics possessed by family members, the later establishes that a family functions as a complex social system and this systemic formation of families influence their behavioral pattern including communication among members. Data was collected from 405 families from northern, central and southern Kerala using stratification process and earmarking 135 families to each region. The researchers collected data on two socio economic factors, area (rural or urban) and religion of family (Hindu, Muslim and Christian)that may influence families' communication quality. The statistical analysis of the data suggests that there is a significant difference between rural and urban families in their Family Communication Quality (FCQ) while all major religious groups follow similar pattern in FCQ.

## Keywords

Family Communication, Family Communication Quality (FCQ), Cross Cultural Communication

## Introduction

In any collectivistic society like India, families and their inner dynamics are more decisive in forming cultural and political perspectives and proportions. However, studies in this direction, especially those focusing on family communication, are very less in Indian settings, though the theoretical

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frameworks already set in western contexts acquiescently scaffold investigations in both collectivistic as well as individualistic cultural contexts by providing outlines for meaningful inquiry. Taking cue from some such frameworks, in this study, the researchers investigate how family communication quality with multiple dimensions is determined by region and religion, two demographic variables that are deeply embedded in cultural characteristics of families in a collectivistic society.

As envisaged in the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, family communication is one among the three dimensions of the interconnected behavioral patterns in every society and culture. The other two are family cohesion and family adaptability (Olson & DeFrain, 2000). The Circumplex Model hypothesizes that balanced family systems tend to be more functional compared to unbalanced systems because of their greater adaptability, better cohesion and quality communication. Family communication encompasses any verbal and non-verbal interaction and information sharing between /among members of a family.

The type of the families and the cultural ethos by and large regulate the level and size of such an exchange model –interpersonal/small group/group communication – in currency (Epstein et al., 1993). Communication within the family environment helps the stakeholders resolve problems, express needs, share concerns and take collective actions though they are bound by strict cultural and moral values (Peterson & Green, 2009). Olson and DeFrain (2000) observed that members of a family with good communication skills and free communication environment are more likely to be cohesive and be able to solve their problems easily.

### **Theoretical Background**

Many major family communication theories like Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) and System Theory (ST) firmly support Circumplex Model hypothesis extending its scope to the association among demographic variables and Family Communication Quality (FCQ). Developed by McLeod and Chaffee Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) (1973) describes the tendencies of a family to develop a stable and predictable way of communication between the family members. There are two different ways of agreement formation among the family members. One is the socio- orientation and the other is the concept- orientation. In socio- orientation family adopts an evaluation on an object made by anyone of the family members. In concept-orientation family member's altogether arrives at a shared perception about an object. (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Family Communication has two dimensions based on the degree of interaction between the family members. They are conversation orientation and conformity orientation. In conversation orientation family members are free to interact with others frequently and spontaneously without any limitations. In higher degree of conversation orientation the time spent for interaction by the family members is more than that of the families with low degree of conversation. In lower degree of conversation the exchange of feelings, thoughts will be lesser. In conformity orientation uniformity is maintained as part of beliefs and attitudes of family members. This will help the family to avoid conflict and have a harmony among the members. This two dimensions and their degrees determine the family type we come across in our daily life. There are four types of family based on this namely Consensual, Pluralistic, Protective and Laissez- Faire families.

Family communication patterns theory helps the researcher to deal with heterogeneous families existing in Kerala. Families of the state fall in any one of the four types explained above. Apart from understanding different types of families the whole system has to be monitored since the study focuses on family and considers it as a unit. So system theory is applied to address the issue.

In system theory persons are considered as individuals but as parts of overall patterns; family members serve as a background while their interaction patterns surface in foreground; patterns take precedence over persons. Communication is central to understanding these family patterns. When two or more persons form a relational system “the most important feature of such a relationship is communication. Relationships are established, maintained, and changed by communicated interaction among members” (Duncan & Rock, 1993, p.48). System theory also helps clarify how communication enhances functionality of each family as a comprehensive unit (Beavers &Voeller, 1983; Bloom, 1985;). It says that open communication in families facilitates an environment of positive change, understanding, and development.

## **Method**

The prime objective of this study is to determine the significance of the association between family communication quality and demographic variables of families in Kerala and by nature the association was measured using the data collected from families across Kerala. In this process, each family was taken as a unit and respondent to the questionnaire as family representative. The population of the study is the whole families within the state. According to the Census data (2011) the state has 7,853,754 families.

Multistage stratified sampling technique was adopted, as the characteristics of the family from different strata of the state will differ from each other due to socio economic factors and geographical location of their residential settings. The sampling technique helped the researcher to identify the targeted families

within the time frame of the research. Heterogeneous or maximum variation technique provides as much as insight as possible into the families in which the study was conducted. For this process, the state is divided into three areas – South, Central and North.

A total number of 405 families from three clusters were selected for the study with 135 families from each area, earmarking 65 for urban settings and 70 for rural background. Researchers collected data on two socio economic factors that may influence families' communication quality. They are Area (Rural or Urban) and Religion of family (Hindu, Muslim and Christian).

The researchers employed Family Communication Standards Instrument (FCSI) developed by Caughlin (2003) after contextualizing it with a focus on seven quality dimensions of family communication. In his original instrument Caughlin suggested ten dimensions: openness, maintaining structural stability, expression of affection, emotional or instrumental support, mind reading, politeness, discipline, humour or sarcasm, regular routine interaction and avoidance and he set them as standard levels up to which family members live, sometimes but no other times. He also set them as quality dimensions that reflect good family communication.

The researcher after reviewing the rich body of literature in the family communication domain produced over the last five decades and analyzing cultural, social and political and economic contexts in which the studies were conducted, re-appropriated the quality dimensions in Caughlin's instrument either by combining some of its sub-factors into one, or entirely deleting some of them. The remaining ones in the contextualized tool with proper re-appropriation are: transparency, control, consideration, affection, discipline, sarcasm or humour and everyday interaction. Though Caughlin's was the central instrument adapted for preparing the tool, the researcher took clues from many other instruments/theoretical frameworks as well.

Each of these quality dimensions were measured based on the responses to the statements. The quality dimension 'Transparency' was measured on the responses to seven statements while yet another dimensions 'Control' was evaluated on the responses to four statements. Similar method was followed in constructing other dimensions as well. It means there is no quantitative consistency followed in identifying and incorporating sub factors under each dimension, rather the dimensions were constructed based on the concepts taken from various theories and instruments after proper pilot study and appropriate reliability and validity tests.

Caughlin assessed validity and Reliability of Family Communication Standards Instrument by conducting two studies. Following the same procedure the

researchers also tested validity and reliability of their sample. While the formulated seven components of communication quality when tested for reliability following Cronbach alphas were revealed: Transparency=.87; Control=.70; Consideration=.30; Affection=.30; Discipline=.88; Sarcasm=.13; Everyday Interaction=.70.

After validation and reliability checking the researcher identified seven dimensions. They are: Transparency, Control, Consideration, Affection, Discipline, Sarcasm / Humor and Everyday Interaction

## Results

FCQ score derived out of the analysis of the data based on the scale used in this study was considered as dependent variable and the socio-economic factors as independent variables. As mentioned earlier, the researcher had identified four socio economic factors that may influence families' communication quality. They are Area (Rural or Urban), Economic Status (Low, Medium high), Family Size (Small, Medium, and Large) and Religion of family (Hindu, Muslim, Christian).

The first variable that was crosschecked with family communication quality was the area of the sampled families. For the study families were sampled from rural (N= 198) and urban (N= 174) settings and an independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the level of communication quality scores of families belonging to rural and urban conditions.

**Table 1: Comparison of FCQ Mean Scores of Rural and Urban Families**

| Group Statistics |     |       |      |            |              |               |
|------------------|-----|-------|------|------------|--------------|---------------|
|                  | N   | Mean  | SD   | Error Mean | t – value    | Sig.          |
| Rural            | 196 | 46.38 | 8.40 | 0.60       | <b>-2.69</b> | <b>0.007*</b> |
| Urban            | 174 | 48.61 | 7.83 | 0.59       |              |               |

*\*Significant at p value 0.05*

The data was subjected to *t*-test after ensuring that the data from these categories followed normality as per Shapiro Wilk and Kolmogorov – Smirnov tests. The *t*-test proved that there was a significant difference between the communication qualities scores for rural (Mean Score = 46.38, SD = 8.40) and for urban (Mean Score = 48.61, SD= 7.83) conditions; *t*= -2.69, *p*= 0.007.

These results suggest that area of residence really does have an effect on family communication quality. Specifically family communication in urban families has more quality than their counterparts in rural settings as per the parameters set in the standard instrument. All the parameters used in this study to measure

the communication quality are oriented to modern family settings. In that sense, it is natural that urban families have better performances in these indices and fare well in communication quality. It is noteworthy that, though the difference is statistically significant, it is of two scores only. It denotes that there is a chance for this gap between urban and rural settings get filled in the near future. The urban-rural divide in the state is fast disappearing due to the equitable distribution of development facilities, spread of education and richness of mass and digital media, which serves as a vital catalyst for cultural homogenization.

Kerala society is constituted with a high majority of Hindus and notable representation of Christians and Muslims. The data collected for this study reflects almost the same proportion of these three religions in the state. Christian families (M = 48.93, SD = 5.40) reported to have highest family communication score followed by Hindu (M = 47.39, SD = 8.49) and Muslim (M = 45.95, SD = 8.46) families respectively. Conservative concepts and rigid structural hierarchy existing in families with different religious background may be one of the reasons for decrease in FCQ score among Muslim families. It is also to be noted that only Christian families crossed the average FCQ score (M = 47.40, SD = 8.21) of the total sample, that too with a thin margin of 1.53.

**Table 2: Comparison of FCQ Mean Scores of Christian, Muslim and Hindu Families**

| Descriptive Statistics |     |       |      |          |             |             | ANOVA Results  |                |     |             |      |      |
|------------------------|-----|-------|------|----------|-------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|------|
|                        | N   | Mean  | SD   | Std. Err | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
| Christian              | 42  | 48.93 | 5.40 | .83      | 47.24       | 50.61       | Between Groups | 190.07         | 2   | 95.03       | 1.41 | .24  |
| Muslim                 | 44  | 45.95 | 8.46 | 1.27     | 43.38       | 48.53       |                |                |     |             |      |      |
| Hindu                  | 284 | 47.39 | 8.49 | .50      | 46.40       | 48.39       | Within Groups  | 24684.52       | 367 | 67.26       |      |      |
| Total                  | 370 | 47.40 | 8.21 | .42      | 46.56       | 48.24       | Total          | 24874.59       | 369 |             |      |      |

However, ANOVA results show that this difference among the families based on religion is only by chance and not statistically significant at a p value of 0.05. From this finding it can be concluded that all the major religious communities in Kerala faring on an equal foot in the matter of family behavior, particularly in their communication quality.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Classical sociological theorists like Durkheim (1933) and Tonnies (1964) found larger distinctions between families from urban and rural localities. And, these differences were mainly attributed to cultural, social and economic factors. However, recent research works indicate that these gaps are being fast bridged

due to a variety of factors that accelerate socio cultural and technological homogenization (King R. 1992). Demographic transitions in rural urban settings also contribute to this waning of differences (Bowler et al. 1992). But, most of these studies were set in western developed social environments. When it comes to eastern developing nations, many studies in communication categorically proved that there was a significant relationship between the demographic settings and family behaviors. Some studies found that socio-economic environment of the family significantly influences parenting patterns and socialization factors. It's a general fact that socialization and parenting have mutual relationships and they in turn affect the communication behavior of family members. Similarly, they determine parent-child relationship, the parent's capacity for parenting, child's perception of the family environment and relationship building process among them. They all directly contribute to the nature of family environment and family structure and finally the communication environment in the family.

In this study it was found that family communication quality scores are significantly different among rural and urban areas with the urban families having higher mean scores. The instrument used for measuring FCQ included seven factors. But, the result means scores compared in the t-test were cumulative ones. For that, it is not possible to identify the FCQ factors that account for higher mean score in each residential area. In the similar fashion, it is not feasible to ferret out the intervening variables that characterize the residential settings. It is reasonable to attribute this significant variance to the differences between rural and urban settings in terms of their cultural values, technological development, educational status, gender equations and flexibility in family structures.

Conversation orientation and conformity orientation, the two fundamental dimensions of family communication as envisaged in Family Communication Pattern Theory (FCPT) are other possible influencing factors that predict this difference. In conversation orientation, family members are free to interact with others frequently and spontaneously without any limitations. This will enhance FCQ dimensions such as openness, sarcasm/humour, consideration and control. In urban families these factors are more common than rural counterparts.

Interestingly religious belief of the families have now influence on their communication quality among the members. All the three religious groups follow same behavioral pattern. But, how area of resident as a variable interact with the association between religious belief and FCQ is an interesting

dimension though not covered in this study. There is scope for exploring this aspect.

The absence of significant difference among religious groups in terms of their FCQ scores suggest that in Kerala all major streams of faith follow same level of family structure and internal tenets. All progressive family indices like higher level of education, openness and transparency, control and discipline, freedom and flexibility in relationships and strength of family structure are somewhat equal across the streams of faith in the state and it is well reflected in FCQ scores. The study will have implications in future studies especially that in cultural communication in regional settings. The finding that FCQ trend is similar across streams of faith reflects the cultural closeness among them as family is considered to be the basic cultural unit is every society.

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