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## Family Size Decreases Conversation Orientation and Increases Conformity Orientation

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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**Family Size Decreases Conversation Orientation and Increases Conformity Orientation****Jenn Anderson<sup>1</sup>**Assistant Professor  
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**Abstract**

The family is a critical context for the development and maintenance of communication patterns and relationships. Family's communication patterns are derived from two orientations: conversation and conformity. Family members also use relational maintenance strategies to sustain their relationships. Previous research has established the association between communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies, but has not explored how family size (i.e., number of siblings) may impact these variables. This study reports on results from an online survey of  $N = 784$  participants. Our results indicate that number of siblings negatively predicted conversation orientation, but positively predicted conformity orientation. In addition, conversation orientation positively predicted the use of all relational maintenance strategies; conformity orientation positively predicted all the relational maintenance strategies except positivity and conflict resolution. These results demonstrate that family size impacts family communication orientations and suggest that future research on family communication should measure family size alongside other demographic variables that impact family dynamics.

**Introduction**

The family is a critical context for the development and maintenance of communication patterns and relationships (Dindia, 2003; Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008). Indeed, many decades of research have been devoted to better understanding two key aspects of family interactions: family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies (Dindia, 2003; Schrodt et al., 2008). Family communication orientations focus on central familial beliefs that determine how families communicate (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The first belief is conversation orientation, which refers to the degree to which a family creates a climate where each family member feels free to communicate about a wide range of topics. The second belief is conformity orientation, which refers to the degree to which a family creates a climate that emphasizes shared beliefs, attitudes, and values (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b). These family communication orientations influence psychological, behavioral, and information processing outcomes (Schrodt et al., 2008). In particular, conversation and conformity

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orientation predict the use of relational maintenance strategies in families (Hall & McNallie, 2016; Ledbetter & Beck, 2014).

Relational maintenance strategies are strategic behaviors used by relational partners to sustain a relationship (Stafford, 2003). In a meta-analysis of studies measuring Stafford and Canary's (1991) original five relational maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks), Ogolsky and Bowers (2013) observed that these strategies were positively associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, love, and liking. Later research on relational maintenance strategies often includes two additional strategies: conflict management and advice (Stafford, 2003). Relational maintenance strategies are utilized within families (Dindia, 2003; Hall & McNallie, 2016; Ledbetter, 2009; Ledbetter & Beck, 2014; Stafford, 2003) and, specifically, between siblings (Goodboy, Myers, & Patterson, 2009; Mikkelsen, Myers, & Hannawa, 2011; Myers et al., 2001). Previous research indicates that conversation and conformity orientations predict the use of relational maintenance strategies in families in general (Ledbetter & Beck, 2014) and among siblings, in particular (Hall & McNallie, 2016). However, there are no studies that examine how the *number* of siblings, i.e., the size of the family, might affect both family communication orientations and the use of relational maintenance strategies. The current study examines the relationships among number of siblings, family communication orientations, and the use of relational maintenance strategies in families.

## Literature Review

### Family Communication Orientations

Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002a) theory of family communication posits that interactions between family members are based on family relationship schemas. These schemas are cognitive representations of how family relationships work within the family structure. Family communication orientations are part of these family relationship schemas. That is, beliefs about how the family communicates are integrated into beliefs about how family members, including siblings, relate to one another (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Family communication orientations can also be thought of as a family's habits of establishing and executing adequately secure methods of communicating (High & Scharp, 2015). There are two basic family communication orientations: conversation orientation and conformity orientation (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990).

Conversation orientation refers to the extent to which family members utilize open and honest communication (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Families with high conversation orientation share their personal feelings and thoughts and are characterized by high levels of interaction. Families low in conversation orientation connect less frequently and discuss fewer issues openly (Keating, 2016). Conformity orientation deals with how deeply family communication emphasizes homogeneity of values, attitudes, and beliefs (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Families with high conformity orientation commonly avoid conflict, value harmony, and accentuate holding like attitudes and beliefs. Children in high-conformity families are typically compliant with their parents, whereas families with low conformity orientation generally advocate possessing independent attitudes and beliefs, and the individuality, autonomy, and equality of all family members (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Family communication orientations can impact sibling relationships as well as relational maintenance among siblings. Schrodtt and Phillips (2016) surveyed 329 emerging adults and

found that conversation orientation was positively associated with sibling self-disclosure, closeness, and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, conformity orientation was negatively associated with sibling self-disclosure, closeness, and relational satisfaction (Schrodt & Phillips, 2016). In a different study examining siblings' families' communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies, Hall and McNallie (2016) surveyed 327 adult siblings across the United States. The authors' observed that the conversation and conformity orientations both positively predicted the use of relational maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and shared tasks) among siblings.

### Relational Maintenance Strategies

Each member of a family engages in both routine and strategic behaviors that can impact the maintenance of their relationships. Stafford and Canary's (1991) relational maintenance strategy typology is a useful tool for understanding those intentional actions taken by family members to maintain their relationships with one another. Stafford and Canary's seminal work on relational maintenance strategies suggested five strategies that are widely used in research on this topic:

*positivity* (making interactions cheerful and pleasant), *openness* (direct discussions about one's own feelings and about the relationship), *assurances* (implicitly or explicitly reassuring the partner about the future of the relationship), *networks* (relying on the support and love of family and friends), and *sharing tasks* (performing tasks the partners jointly face) (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000, p. 307).

Stafford et al. (2000) used this basic conceptualization to develop and test a scale designed to measure relational maintenance strategies. The factor analysis of that scale yielded two additional categories not proposed in their original conceptualization of relational maintenance strategies: advice and conflict management. In the factor analysis, the strategy of openness split into two categories: openness and advice. The authors concluded that advice operates as a specific type of self-disclosure in discussions about one's feelings and the relationship. Similarly, positivity split into two categories, with conflict management emerging as its own factor. Conflict management emphasizes specific forms of pleasant communication, such as "cooperation, apologizing, forgiving, and being patient" (Stafford et al., 2000, p. 317). All seven strategies occur in sibling relationships (Goodboy et al., 2009).

Relational maintenance strategies among siblings are particularly important to understand because the sibling relationship is likely the longest relationship a person will have (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Many studies have examined the use of relational maintenance strategies among siblings (Goodboy et al., 2009; Hall & McNallie, 2016; Mikkelsen et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2001). For example, Goodboy et al. (2009) studied 184 participants 65 years of age and older and found that those siblings used all seven relational maintenance strategies and that these strategies were positively related to perceptions of relationship quality. For example, in a survey of 257 individuals with a sibling, Myers et al. (2001) found that sibling liking was positively associated with the use of each of the five basic relational maintenance strategies. Within that study, female siblings used more positivity, openness, and assurances than their male counterparts. Similarly, Mikkelsen et al. (2011) found that female siblings used assurances and openness significantly more often than male siblings.

Given their use among siblings, it is not surprising that relational maintenance strategies are also associated with family communication orientations. For example, in a study of 374 college-aged adults, Ledbetter and Beck (2014) observed that conversation and conformity orientations both positively predicted the use of relational maintenance strategies in families. In a different study, Ledbetter (2009) surveyed 417 college-aged adults and found that conversation orientation was positively associated with the use of both online and face-to-face relational maintenance behaviors. However, in this study, conformity orientation was *negatively* associated with face-to-face maintenance behaviors; it was not significantly related to online relational maintenance behaviors. Thus, family communication orientations are associated with relational maintenance strategies, and relational maintenance strategies are utilized to maintain sibling relationships. Furthermore, Hall and McNallie's (2016) study demonstrated that family communication orientations predict siblings' use of relational maintenance strategies. However, no previous studies have examined how the *number* of siblings in a family may affect family communication orientations and the use of relational maintenance strategies. This study investigates the relationship between number of siblings and conversation orientation, conformity orientation, and each relational maintenance strategy.

### **Siblings, Family Communication Orientations, and Relational Maintenance Strategies**

Research outside the communication discipline has examined how family size (i.e., number of siblings) impacts various aspects of family interaction and/or social outcomes for children. For example, Bobbit-Zeher and Downey (2012) note that siblings can be extremely beneficial to a child's social skills, as siblings provide the opportunity to observe both adult-adult and adult-child interactions. From a communication perspective, this suggests that the development of family communication orientations could be impacted by the size of one's family, or the number of siblings within a family. However, to our knowledge, no previous research has examined the relationship between the *number* of siblings and family communication orientations. Hence, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: Does number siblings explain significant variance in family conversation orientation?

RQ2: Does number siblings explain significant variance in family conformity orientation?

In addition to impacting family communication orientations, the presence of siblings helps children to develop relational maintenance strategies because they can practice these strategies with siblings (Bobbitt-Zeher & Downey, 2012). The relational maintenance strategy of openness appears to be impacted by birth order of siblings, with later-born siblings reporting higher levels of openness both within and beyond their family relationships (Salmon, Cuthbertson, & Figuerdo, 2016). Hall and McNallie (2016) specifically observed that conversation and conformity orientations predicted the use of relational maintenance strategies among siblings. However, much like family communication orientations, previous research indicates that siblings use relational maintenance strategies, but does not indicate how the *number* of siblings might impact the use of relational maintenance strategies. Hence, we pose the following research question:

RQ3a-g: Does number of siblings explain significant variance in the use of relational maintenance strategies (a: positivity, b: openness, c: assurances, d: social networks, e: sharing tasks, f: conflict resolution, and g: advice)?

Finally, previous research (Hall & McNallie, 2016; Ledbetter & Beck, 2014) indicates that conversation and conformity orientation will positively predict each relational maintenance strategy (a: positivity, b: openness, c: assurances, d: social networks, e: sharing tasks, f: conflict resolution, and g: advice). Hence, we offer the following hypotheses:

H1a-g: Conversation orientation is a positive predictor of each relational maintenance strategy (a: positivity, b: openness, c: assurances, d: social networks, e: sharing tasks, f: conflict resolution, and g: advice).

H2a-g: Conformity orientation is a positive predictor of each relational maintenance strategy (a: positivity, b: openness, c: assurances, d: social networks, e: sharing tasks, f: conflict resolution, and g: advice).

## Method

### Study Design and Context

For this study, an online survey was designed using QuestionPro.com. The survey included a consent page, demographic questions, and questions to gather information about various communication topics. The results reported here are based on a subset of those questions which are described in the Instrumentation section.

### Sampling

The study used convenience and network sampling. The convenience sample included participants who were recruited from two introductory communication courses at a Midwestern public university. Network sampling occurred through students in a research methods course sharing the link with their social networks via Facebook. The study only included participants who were at least 18 years old. All study and recruitment procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

### Sample

The survey was completed by  $N = 784$  participants. The sample population was 90.7% Caucasian, 2.6% Black/African American, 1.9% Multiracial/Non-Listed Race, and 1.4% Asian. The sample was 64.0% female and 35.3% male. Of the participants, 92.5% were heterosexual; 1.8% were bisexual; and 1.5% were homosexual, with 1.1% of the population not responding. The mean age of the sample was 24.81 years old ( $SD = 12.45$  years), with a mode of 18.

## Instrumentation

All theoretical variables were measured with Likert-type response scales, ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*, where higher scores indicated a greater presence or frequency of the variable.

**Conversation and conformity orientation.** Conversation orientation and conformity orientation were measured using the Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Conversation orientation was measured using 15 items. Example items included “My parents often ask my opinion when the family is talking about something,” and “In my family we talk about our feelings and emotions” (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Conversation orientation was moderate in this sample,  $M = 3.48$  ( $SD = .70$ ); the scale was reliable,  $\alpha = .90$ . Conformity orientation was measured using 11 items. Example items included “My parents feel that it is important to be the boss,” and “When I am at home, I am expected to obey my parents’ rules” (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The scale was reliable with all items,  $\alpha = .79$ . However, dropping item 1 (“When anything really important is involved, my parents expect me to obey without question”) improved the scale reliability to  $\alpha = .85$ . Thus, we dropped that item from all analyses with this scale. Conformity orientation was somewhat below average in this sample,  $M = 2.94$  ( $SD = .65$ ).

**Relational maintenance.** Relational maintenance was measured using Stafford et al.’s (2000) relational maintenance scale to measure assurances, positivity, sharing tasks, social networks, openness, advice, and conflict resolution. Relational maintenance was split into individual strategies that each had their own subscale (Stafford et al., 2000). Each subscale was slightly adapted by removing statements that only applied to romantic relationships because we looked at relational maintenance in family relationships. Scale reliabilities were calculated using Cronbach’s alpha measure of internal consistency for scales with three or more items. For scales with two items, we report correlations between the items.

*Positivity* was measured with two items: “I try to be upbeat when we are together as a family” and “I act cheerful and positive around my family.” Positivity was used a moderate amount,  $M = 3.86$  ( $SD = .74$ ). The scale items were strongly correlated,  $r(653) = .609$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Openness* was measured with seven items, including “I disclose what I want or need from my relationship with my family,” and “I encourage my family members to share their feelings with me.” Openness was the least often used relational maintenance strategy in this sample,  $M = 3.45$  ( $SD = .90$ ); the scale was reliable,  $\alpha = .92$ .

*Assurances* were measured with five items, including “I show my family how much they mean to me,” and “I stress my commitment to my family.” Assurances were the most often used relational maintenance strategy in this sample,  $M = 4.19$  ( $SD = .76$ ); the scale was reliable,  $\alpha = .91$ .

*Use of social networks* was measured with two items: “I like to spend time with friends of the family,” and “I focus on our family’s common friends and affiliations.” Social networks were used a modest amount,  $M = 3.84$  ( $SD = .78$ ). These scale items were strongly correlated,  $r(653) = .609$ ,  $p < .001$ .

*Shared tasks* were measured with five items, including “I offer to do things that aren’t my responsibility,” and “I do not shirk/avoid my duties.” Shared tasks were used commonly,  $M = 4.01$  ( $SD = .68$ ); the scale was reliable,  $\alpha = .90$ .

*Advice* was measured using two items: “I tell my family what they should do about their problems,” and “I give my family members my opinion on things going on in their lives.” Participants provided and received a moderate amount of advice within their families,  $M = 3.49$  ( $SD = .86$ ). These scale items were strongly correlated,  $r(650) = .688, p < .001$ .

*Conflict resolution* was measured with five items, including: “I apologize when I am wrong,” and “I am patient and forgiving with my family.” Conflict resolution was used somewhat often in this sample,  $M = 4.03$  ( $SD = .60$ ); the scale was reliable,  $\alpha = .86$ .

**Number of siblings.** Number of siblings was measured with a single item: “How many siblings do you have?” with response options of integers 0 through 9 or 10+. Participants had an average of 2.44 siblings ( $SD = 1.67$  siblings) with a mode of 2 siblings.

**Control variables.** In addition to the theoretical variables, we also measured several demographic variables to use as covariates. We measured participants’ gender (male or female) and age as well as whether they were enrolled as a student at our university; 69.1% of the sample were students at our university. We also gathered data about the participants’ parents’ relationship status (72.4% married, 1.5% separated, 12.6% divorced, 5.4% widowed/widower, 5.4% both parents deceased, and 2.6% other). Finally, we measured political ideology on a 1 (*Extremely Liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely Conservative*) scale,  $M = 4.45$  ( $SD = 1.54$ ). The most common political ideology was moderately conservative (27.2%), followed by neither liberal nor conservative (24.8%), then slightly conservative (15.4%), slightly liberal (12.4%), moderately liberal (12.2%), extremely conservative (5.9%), and extremely liberal (2.1%).

## Analysis

Hierarchical, linear regression was used to test each hypothesis and to answer each research question. We report the overall model statistics for each step as well as the unstandardized beta weights, standard errors, and significance levels for each predictor. For each regression, we included covariates, using Tabachnick and Fidell’s (1996) recommendations for inclusion of covariates. Prior to conducting hypothesis tests, the data were examined for potential covariates. We included a variable as a covariate in the analysis if we observed a significant, linear relationship between a continuous variable and an outcome variable or if a categorical variable produced significant differences in the outcome variable.

Age served as a covariate for regressions with assurances, openness, shared tasks, and positivity as outcome variables. Political ideology served as a covariate in regressions with assurances, shared tasks, and social network as outcome variables. Parents’ relationship status served as a covariate for regressions with conformity orientation, assurances, shared tasks, and social networks as outcome variables. Gender served as a covariate for regressions with conformity orientation, assurances, openness, conflict resolution, shared tasks, positivity, and social networks as outcome variables. Finally, student status served as a covariate for regressions with assurances, openness, and shared tasks as outcome variables.

Additionally, in a recent meta-analysis of 28 independent studies examining family communication orientations, Keating (2016) observed a moderate negative relationship between conversation and conformity orientation. Given this finding, Keating (2016) recommended that researchers consistently account for the effects of *both* orientations in any statistical analysis

examining the relationship between one or both orientations and some outcome variable. We followed this recommendation in every analysis that includes the orientations as predictors.

## Results

Research question 1 asked whether number of siblings would explain significant variance in family conversation orientation. A hierarchical, linear regression model with no covariates was significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .005$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .005$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 718) = 4.64$ ,  $p = .032$ . Number of siblings negatively predicted conversation orientation,  $b(SE) = -.034(.016)$ ,  $p = .032$ . This indicated that, as the number of siblings increased, conversation orientation decreased.

Research question 2 asked whether number of siblings would explain significant variance in family conformity orientation. In Step 1 of the hierarchical linear regression, we controlled for gender and parents' relationship status. This step explained significant variance in conformity orientation,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .024$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .027$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 707) = 9.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Gender explained significant variance in conformity orientation, with men more likely to report this orientation than women,  $b(SE) = -.171(.051)$ ,  $p = .001$ . Parents' relationship status also explained significant variance in conformity orientation,  $b(SE) = .061(.018)$ ,  $p = .001$ . Children of divorced parents reported the lowest level of conformity orientation ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = .63$ ), followed by children with married ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) and separated parents ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). Children who had one ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) or both parents deceased ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) reported the highest levels of conformity orientation. Then, in Step 2, we entered number of siblings. This step also explained significant variance in conformity orientation,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .029$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .007$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 706) = 4.89$ ,  $p = .027$ . The number of siblings was a positive predictor of conformity orientation,  $b(SE) = .034(.015)$ ,  $p = .027$ . That is, as the number of siblings rose, conformity orientation increased.

Research question 3 asked whether number of siblings would explain significant variance in the use of relational maintenance strategies. A separate hierarchical, linear regression was conducted for each relational maintenance strategy. For each regression, previously specified covariates were entered in Step 1, and number of siblings was entered in Step 2. In answer to RQ3, number of siblings was not a significant predictor of any relational maintenance strategy.

Hypotheses 1a-g stated that conversation orientation would positively predict all relational maintenance strategies. Similarly, hypotheses 2a-g stated that conformity orientation would positively predict the use of relational maintenance strategies. A separate hierarchical, linear regression was conducted for each relational maintenance strategy. For each regression, covariates were entered in Step 1, and—following Keating's (2016) recommendations—both conversation and conformity orientation were entered in Step 2. Thus, each regression provides results both hypotheses. Overall, H1 was supported; conversation orientation positively predicted each relational maintenance strategy. The results for H2 were mixed; conformity orientation positively predicted (b) openness, (c) assurances, (d) social networks, (e) shared tasks, and (g) advice. However, conformity orientation was not a significant predictor of (a) positivity or (f) conflict resolution.

To test H1a and H2a, we used a regression model with positivity as the outcome variable and controlled for age and gender in Step 1. Age and gender were both significant predictors. This step was significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .023$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .026$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 640) = 8.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . Age and gender were both significant predictors. First, age positively predicted the use of positivity,  $b(SE) = .006(.003)$ ,  $p = .014$ , meaning that, as age increases, so does the use of positivity. Second,

gender positively predicted the use of positivity,  $b(SE) = .178 (.061)$ ,  $p = .014$ . This indicated that women use positivity more often ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) than men ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .74$ ). In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. Conversation orientation positively predicted shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .385 (.043)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of positivity. Conformity orientation was *not* a significant predictor of positivity,  $b(SE) = .014 (.045)$ ,  $p = .757$ . Thus, H1a was supported, but H2a was *not* supported.

To test H1b and H2b, we used a regression model with openness as the outcome variable and controlled for gender, student status, and age in Step 1. This step was significant,  $Adj. R^2 = .039$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .043$ ,  $\Delta F(3, 638) = 9.603$ ,  $p < .001$ . Age and gender were both significant predictors. First, age positively predicted the use of openness,  $b(SE) = .008 (.004)$ ,  $p = .042$ , meaning that, as age increases, so does the use of openness. Second, gender positively predicted the use of openness,  $b(SE) = .268 (.075)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that women use openness more often ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) than men ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. This step was also significant,  $Adj. R^2 = .415$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .376$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 636) = 206.141$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversation orientation positively predicted openness,  $b(SE) = .851 (.043)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of openness. Conformity orientation also positively predicted openness,  $b(SE) = .120 (.046)$ ,  $p = .010$ . This indicated that, as conformity orientation increases, so does the use of openness. Thus, H1b and H2b were supported.

To test H1c and H2c, we used a regression model with assurances as the outcome variable and controlled for age, gender, parents' relationship status, political ideology, and student status in Step 1. This step was significant,  $Adj. R^2 = .099$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .106$ ,  $\Delta F(5, 635) = 15.007$ ,  $p < .001$ . Within this step, there were three significant predictors. First, age positively predicted the use of assurances,  $b(SE) = .013 (.004)$ ,  $p < .001$ , meaning that, as age increases, so does the use of assurances. Second, gender positively predicted the use of assurances,  $b(SE) = .340 (.062)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that women use assurances more often ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) than men ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Third, political ideology positively predicted the use of assurances,  $b(SE) = .054 (.019)$ ,  $p = .005$ . This indicated that as participants' ideology became more conservative, the use of assurances increased. In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. This step was also significant,  $Adj. R^2 = .351$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .252$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 633) = 124.43$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversation orientation positively predicted assurances,  $b(SE) = .598 (.039)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of assurances. Conformity orientation also positively predicted assurances,  $b(SE) = .101 (.041)$ ,  $p = .015$ . This indicated that, as conformity orientation increases, so does the use of assurances. Thus, H1c and H2c were supported.

To test H1d and H2d, we used a regression model with social networks as the outcome variable, and we controlled for parents' relationship status, gender, and political ideology in Step 1. This step was *not* significant,  $Adj. R^2 = -.001$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .004$ ,  $\Delta F(3, 639) = .808$ ,  $p = .489$ . In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. Conversation orientation positively predicted the use of social networks,  $b(SE) = .575 (.049)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of social networks. Conformity orientation also positively predicted the use of social networks,  $b(SE) = .128 (.052)$ ,  $p = .014$ . This indicates that, as conformity orientation increases, so does the use of social networks. Thus, H1d and H2d were supported.

To test H1e and H2e, we used a regression model with shared tasks as the outcome variable, and we controlled for age, parents' relationship status, gender, political ideology, and student status in Step 1. This step was significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .080$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .087$ ,  $\Delta F(5, 634) = 12.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . Age, gender, and political ideology were significant predictors of using shared tasks. First, age positively predicted the use of shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .008(.003)$ ,  $p = .024$ , meaning that, as age increases, so does the use of shared tasks. Second, gender positively predicted the use of shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .184(.055)$ ,  $p = .001$ . This indicated that women use shared tasks more often ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) than men ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .69$ ). Third, political ideology positively predicted the use of shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .073(.017)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as political ideology became more conservative, the use of shared tasks increased. In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. Conversation orientation positively predicted shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .239(.040)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of shared tasks. Conformity orientation also positively predicted shared tasks,  $b(SE) = .10(.043)$ ,  $p = .019$ . This indicated that, as conformity orientation increases, so does the use of shared tasks. Thus, H1e and H2e were supported.

To test H1f and H2f, we used a regression model with conflict resolution as the outcome variable, and we controlled for gender in Step 1. This step was not significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .005$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .006$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 646) = 4.108$ ,  $p = .045$ . In Step 2, we entered conversation and conformity orientation as predictors. This step was significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .189$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .187$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 644) = 74.588$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversation orientation positively predicted conflict resolution,  $b(SE) = .371(.034)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of conflict resolution. In answer to RQ3, conformity orientation was *not* a significant predictor of conflict resolution,  $b(SE) = -.022(.036)$ ,  $p = .531$ . Thus, H1f was supported, but H2f was *not* supported.

To test H1g and H2g, we used a regression model with advice as the outcome variable and used no control variables. We entered conversation and conformity orientations as predictors in Step 1. This step was significant,  $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .178$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .181$ ,  $\Delta F(2, 647) = 71.30$ ,  $p < .001$ . Conversation orientation positively predicted use of advice,  $b(SE) = .573(.049)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicated that, as conversation orientation increases, so does the use of advice. Conformity orientation also positively predicted advice,  $b(SE) = .123(.051)$ ,  $p = .016$ . This indicated that, as conformity orientation increases, so does the use of advice. Thus, H1g and H2g were supported.

### Ad Hoc Analyses

The above results indicated that number of siblings negatively predicted conversation orientation, but number of siblings did not relate directly to any relational maintenance except social networks. Similarly, number of siblings positively predicted conformity orientation but did not directly relate to any relational maintenance strategies. This suggests that there might be an indirect relationship between number of siblings and relational maintenance strategies, with conversation and/or conformity orientation acting as a mediator. Thus, we used Maximum Likelihood Estimation in AMOS 22 to test the causal chain of siblings  $\rightarrow$  conversation orientation  $\rightarrow$  relational maintenance strategies. This structural equation model did not provide a good fit to the data in this study, which indicates that it is not an appropriate interpretation of the data. We used the same procedure to test the siblings  $\rightarrow$  conformity orientation  $\rightarrow$  relational maintenance strategies causal chain. This model also did not provide a good fit to the data.

## Discussion

This study proposed that number of siblings, or family size, could be a potential predictor of both family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies in families. The results from our study demonstrate that number of siblings negatively predicted conversation orientation (RQ1) and positively predicted conformity orientation (RQ2). However, number of siblings did not explain a significant amount of variance in relational maintenance strategies (RQ3). Additionally, family communication orientations explained significant variance in relational maintenance strategies. Conversation orientation positively predicted every relational maintenance strategy (H1a-g); conformity orientation positively predicted all strategies except positivity and conflict resolution (H2a-g).

### Family Size and Family Communication Orientations

The results from our study indicate that as family size increases (i.e., more siblings are present), conversation orientation decreases. This finding may be explained by differences in the amount and type of activities in which families engage. Blake (1992) examined decades of research on the differences between small and large families. In her review, she found that, as compared with children from large families, children from smaller families were more likely to have been read to by parents, more likely to engage in intellectual and cultural activities, and more likely to have had music or dance lessons or to have traveled internationally. Blake (1992) concluded that “children from small families and only children have more intellectually stimulating settings and a broader range of stimuli” (p. 270). This more limited exposure to a broad range of stimuli may then impact the frequency of open conversations spanning a range of topics, i.e., conversation orientation decreases.

Another potential explanation for the negative relationship between family size and conversation orientation may simply have to do with the finite resource of time. Recent research confirms an obvious distinction between small and large families: children in larger families spend less time with their parents than children in smaller families (Juhn, Rubinstein, & Zuppmann, 2015). These time constraints may limit the extent to which each family member feels free to communicate about a wide range of topics. That is, with time for each child to interact with their parents decreases—due to an increase in number of siblings—conversation orientation may decrease. Future researchers could observe interactions in small and large families, to understand how their interactions differ in terms of conversation orientation. Such studies could follow the methodological model of Koerner and Cvancara (2002) who analyzed family conversations to uncover how conformity orientation impacted the frequency of various speech acts.

In contrast to conversation orientation, conformity orientation was positively related to number of siblings. That is, as family size increased, so did conformity orientation. Previous scholars have argued that high conformity orientation is to be expected with a traditional family structure which is both cohesive and hierarchical, thus stressing shared values and beliefs (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Within the United States, large families are somewhat more likely to occur among conservative religious groups, with Mormons raising an average of 3.4 children as compared to the national average of 2.1 children (Pew Research Center, 2015). In fact, 46% of Mormons have families with four or more children, as do 18% of Catholics and 17% of Evangelical Protestants in the United States (Zauzmer, 2016).

Additionally, people who identify with conservative religious groups are also more likely to identify with conservative political platforms; for example, 70% of Mormons identify as Republicans (Lipka, 2016). Thus, conservative values, potentially stemming from conservative religious and/or political beliefs, could help explain the positive relationship between family size and conversation orientation.

We anticipated that these ideological leanings may somehow be associated with family size, so we measured the child's political ideology (*Very Liberal* to *Very Conservative*), the child's political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, None, Other), and the child's religious affiliation (Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant). We observed that there were no significant differences by political or religious affiliation, but political ideology was significantly, positively related to number of siblings. This indicates that—in our sample—as family size increased, a child's political ideology became more conservative. And, in our sample, family size—but not political ideology—was positively associated with conformity orientation. Given these findings, it is unclear exactly what is driving the positive relationship between family size and conformity orientation in this sample.

Political and religious ideologies are extremely complex, and understanding how they may be related to family size, as well as family communication patterns, is more complex still. Future studies should dive more deeply into the measurement and/or observation of political and religious ideologies and identification to understand the relationships between these variables and family communication orientations. Hoffman (2012) suggested that family communication orientations drive children's leanings toward different political ideologies. She suggested that families high in conformity orientation are driven toward conservative ideologies; families high in conversation orientation are driving toward more liberal ideologies (Hoffman, 2012). Although we did not observe such a relationship in the current study, we did observe that larger families were associated with both more conformity and more conservative ideology. These relationships deserve further scholarly exploration. Especially in the current deeply divided political climate of the United States (Pew Research Center, 2017), it is extraordinarily important to understand the relationship between political ideologies and family communication.

Finally, our findings on the relationship between family size and family communication orientations support and extend Keating's (2016) findings that conformity and conversation orientation are negatively related. Indeed, the two were negatively correlated in this study. But, more importantly, we observed that the same variable (i.e., number of siblings) positively predicted conformity orientation while negatively predicting conversation orientation. This may indicate that certain family structure variables, in this case number of siblings, may act as a reinforcing or lurking variable that serves as the driving force beneath that relationship between orientations. Future research should continue to examine the predictive capacity of various family structure variables on family communication orientations, to ascertain whether that relationship is confounded by those variables.

### **Family Communication Orientations and Relational Maintenance Strategies**

In the current study, conformity orientation positively predicted most strategies and was *not* a significant predictor of positivity or conflict resolution. This finding is somewhat consistent with previous research, which itself is somewhat mixed. For example, Hall and McNallie (2016) and Ledbetter and Beck (2014) found that conformity orientation positively predicted *all* relational maintenance strategies. Yet, Ledbetter (2009) found that conformity orientation

*negatively* predicted all relational maintenance strategies in families. Hence, the findings from the current study confirm some previous research (Hall & McNallie, 2016; Ledbetter & Beck, 2014) while running contrary to one other study (Ledbetter, 2009). Our findings suggest that Ledbetter's (2009) findings may be outliers for describing the relationship between conformity orientation and family relational maintenance strategies. It is not clear why conformity orientation differentially predicts relational maintenance strategies across studies, or why both conformity and conversation orientation positively predict relational maintenance strategies. Perhaps for both orientations, the more strongly those orientations are present in a family, the more salient family relationships are to the members, which then drives increased frequency of relational maintenance behaviors. Future research could use a mixed methods approach to understand family members' perceptions of how family communication orientations relate to relational maintenance strategies.

In our sample, conversation orientation also positively predicted every relational maintenance strategy. This finding is consistent with previous research (Hall & McNallie, 2014; Ledbetter, 2009; Ledbetter & Beck, 2014). However, all of findings from this study regarding family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies must be considered in tandem with the findings regarding family size and communication orientations. Namely, that variance in relational maintenance strategies is partially explained by family communication orientations, which are partly explained by family size. That is, number of siblings positively predicts conformity orientation and negatively predicts conversation orientation. Yet, family size is not a direct predictor of any relational maintenance strategies. These findings could have implied that there might be an indirect relationship between number of siblings and relational maintenance strategies, with conversation and/or conformity orientation acting as a mediator. However, we tested these mediation models and found that they did not provide a good fit to the data. This may be because family size negatively predicts one orientation (conversation) and positively predicts the other (conformity) so that the indirect effects of family size on relational maintenance strategies are cancelled out.

In general, the results of the current study suggest that scholars should give increased attention to family structure or dynamics when exploring how family communication orientations relate to outcomes such as relational maintenance strategies. For example, future studies could consider variables such as birth order, number of children living at home, or the genders of all children and parents involved as potential predictors of family communication orientations. Additionally, future studies could examine how major shifts in family dynamics, e.g., adding a child or a child moving away, might alter the family communication orientations.

### **Practical Implications**

One practical implication of this study stems from the relationship between family size and family communication orientations. These findings could be used by individuals who are thinking about adding children to their family as well as family planning experts or family counselors. Specifically, potential parents should consider how the number of children in a family can impact the type of family communication environment that can be created. For example, if a couple hopes to create a family that is high in conversation orientation and low in conformity orientation (i.e., a pluralistic family communication pattern), they could be informed that this outcome might be easier to achieve with a smaller family size. On the other hand, if a couple hopes to create a family high in conformity orientation and low in conversation

orientation (i.e., a protective family communication pattern), they could be informed that this outcome can likely be achieved with a larger family size. In terms of family planning, couples and experts could use family communication goals as one factor for helping to determine the ultimate number of children they would like to bring into a family.

Another practical implication of this study stems from findings related to conformity orientation and parents' relationship status. Conformity orientation was highest in families where one or both parents were deceased; it was lowest in families where the parents were divorced. Emphasizing shared family values and beliefs likely aids in the grieving process after the loss of a parent. On the other hand, it follows that, after a divorce, the emphasis on shared beliefs, attitudes, and values, which characterizes conformity orientation, would wane. However, this weakened emphasis on shared values may be an additional source of psychological turmoil for children in the wake of divorce. Accordingly, family counselors may find it useful to encourage divorced parents to communicate with children about the values or beliefs that are still shared among the family members, even after the divorce. In fact, it may be useful for family counselors to inquire about the children's perceptions of family communication orientations prior to and after a divorce. Understanding the pre-divorce family communication patterns could then allow the counselor to guide the family back to (or into new) family communication patterns that can provide the children with a sense of stability. This may help to ease such a family transition.

### Limitations

The primary limitation of this study was the nature of sibling relationships in terms of whether participants currently, or ever, lived with their siblings. First, the study was targeted to college students, so many of our participants were adults who had moved away from their childhood homes. As a result, participants' responses, particularly about relational maintenance strategies, may have been impacted by the fact that they were physically separated from their families. Second, participants' responses may have based on relationships with siblings who were estranged or who never shared a permanent residence with the participant. This may have impacted the type and quality of both the family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies in unknown ways. In the current study, it is unclear whether or how these elements of sibling relationships may have impacted the participants' responses. Future studies could remedy this problem by asking participants to report whether they have ever shared a residence with their sibling(s), and if so, how many years they shared the same residence as their sibling(s) and whether they are currently sharing a residence with their sibling(s).

The sample of this study also poses specific limitations. First, participants were primarily adult siblings as opposed to childhood or adolescent relationships that are still developing. Particularly with this age group, it is unclear whether participants are answering questions in the mindset of their adult relationships with their family or recalling earlier family interactions, perhaps when everyone lived together. This, too, could be resolved by providing more specification in the survey. A simple instruction asking participants to answer questions about the nature of their family's communication *now*, or *in the last month*, would increase measurement specification. Second, our sample was quite racially homogeneous, with 90.7% of participants identifying as Caucasian. Previous research suggests that family interactions and socialization are shaped by the cultural background of parents (Varela, Vernberg, Sanchez-Sosa, Riveros, Mitchell, & Mashunkashey, 2004). As such, family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies may manifest in different ways across diverse cultural groups.

Unfortunately, due to the cultural and racial homogeneity of our sample, we were unable to observe any potential differences. Future research that includes a more diverse sample could determine the nature of these potential differences.

Finally, additional measurement concerns provide caveats for interpreting the results. First, we did not observe a relationship between number of siblings and family relational maintenance, and this may be due to measuring relational maintenance across the entire family rather than between siblings. It might be that number of siblings better relates to the use of relational maintenance strategies *with siblings*, rather than the more global measurement of relational maintenance strategies across all family members. Future research could use additional measures that could specify the use of specific relational maintenance strategies with specific siblings. Another way to improve this measurement validity would be to include multiple siblings from the same family to help triangulate the data collection. Second, although we included several demographic variables that could impact these relationships, we only measured them as characteristics of the participants rather than of the entire family. Particularly for variables like political ideology, political affiliation, and religious affiliation, it would be beneficial to measure the perception of these variables on a family level, i.e., is one's family generally liberal or conservative ideologically? Measuring these variables at both the individual and family level would provide a better picture of how those variables are operating in the family, and how they may impact variables such as family communication orientations as well as relational maintenance strategies.

### Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of family size (i.e., number of siblings) on family communication orientations and relational maintenance strategies. Although family size did not impact relational maintenance strategies, we observed that as families grow larger, conversation orientation decreases, and conformity orientation increases. These results suggest that future research on family communication orientations would benefit from increased attention to the family dynamics (e.g., family size) that drive different orientations. These results also provide a glimpse into family communication climates that can develop based on family size. The results can therefore be used as a tool to help guide family planning choices, as potential parents consider the type of family environment they hope to create.

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## Tables

Table 1. Correlations Among Study Variables

	Siblings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Conversation Orientation	-.080*										
2. Conformity Orientation	.093*	-.387**									
3. Assurances	0.06	.508**	-.131**								
4. Openness	0.01	.612**	-.177**	.691**							
5. Conflict Resolution	0.06	.430**	-.199**	.531**	.548**						
6. Shared Tasks	.100*	.210**	-0.01	.425**	.361**	.450**					
7. Positivity	.094*	.349**	-.134**	.462**	.458**	.504**	.413**				
8. Advice	0.03	.415**	-.084*	.379**	.542**	.318**	.273**	.362**			
9. Networks	-0.02	.447**	-.130**	.461**	.479**	.420**	.391**	.423**	.463**		
10. Age	.227**	-0.01	0.05	.218**	.145**	0.07	.212**	.123**	0.00	0.04	
Political Ideology	.108**	0.06	0.07	.125**	0.01	0.06	.172**	0.05	0.00	.107**	.092*

Note: \*Correlation is significant at  $p < .05$  (2-tailed). \*\*Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).