Gender-Role Beliefs Affect Family Communication

A new study finds that gender-role ideology significantly impacts how evangelical Christians communicate within their families.

Published in a recent issue of the academic journal Communication Studies, the study considers the communication styles of “egalitarians,” those who hold to gender equality, and “complementarians,” those who emphasize differences between the roles assigned to men and women.

The study is developed from Colleen Warner Colaner’s master’s thesis at Wake Forest University titled “Exploring the Communication of Evangelical Families: The Association Between Evangelical Gender Role Ideology and Family Communication Patterns.”

Evangelicals who hold to the egalitarian view were found to make “greater use of conversation-oriented communication patterns,” which Colaner described as “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.”

“Families high on this dimension exhibit high levels of expressiveness and frequent interaction,” Colaner added. “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 each other, high levels of separation and a lack of connection.”
Evangelicals who hold to the complementarian view were instead found to make “more use of conformity-oriented communication patterns,” which Colaner explained is “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,” she added. “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.”

While egalitarians surveyed were found to be high on conversation-oriented communication patterns, they were low on conformity-oriented communication patterns. Complementarians were found to be low on conversation-oriented communication patterns and high on conformity-oriented ones.

Complementarian beliefs are generally more prevalent among conservative evangelicals. The version of “The Baptist Faith and Message” adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000 promotes a complementarian approach to gender roles.

The results of the study suggest that one’s beliefs about gender roles have consequences within one’s own family. Such perspectives impact not only one’s beliefs about the biblical role of women in churches and families, but also affect how one communicates with one’s spouse and children.

“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,” Colaner wrote. “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.”

Colaner concluded that her findings are important because of the effects of conversation-oriented and conformity-oriented communication patterns on children. She explained that “[c]onversation-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.”

She offered a caveat that the research on the impact of the two family communication patterns was conducted on the general population and so results could vary among evangelicals. Thus, she calls for more research to consider the relationship between gender role ideology and family communication.

“As churches and church-related groups advocate a certain family role structure (ranging from [e]galitarian to [c]omplementarian), parents internalize such positions that are likely manifested in family communication patterns,” she added. “Such a relationship highlights the potentially influential status of the church in generating real-life consequences for family life.”

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