

The Mediating Role of Assertiveness in the Association between Family Communication Patterns and Relationships with the Opposite Sex among Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Background: Considering the expansion of friendship between boys and girls during adolescence as abnormal behavior in our society and the important role of communication patterns in the family, it is important to investigate the effect of mediating variables on this social phenomenon.

Objectives: The present research has investigated the model of communication with the opposite sex among teenage girls in Birjand city under the influence of communication patterns in the family and the mediating variable of assertiveness.

Methods: This is a correlational study. The sample size was 360 female students of Birjand city. The sampling method was multi-stage cluster random sampling. The data collection tool was a set of questionnaires. We use correlational analysis methods and Structural Equation Model to interpret data.

Results: The fitted model showed that family communication patterns have a significant effect on the relationship with the opposite sex through mediating variables.

Conclusions: The communication pattern of dialogue alone does not play a role in the relationship with the opposite sex, but with increasing assertiveness; it decreases the relationship with the opposite sex.

Keywords: Assertiveness; Family Communication Patterns; Opposite Sex; Teenage Girls

1. Background

The teenage years or adolescence is a critical age in creating, expanding coping behaviors, and responding to environmental needs. Moreover, this period is accompanied by rapid and continuous changes in physical, psychological, and social relationships. Many teenagers in this period face serious and new conflicts that they have never experienced before. Sometimes these conflicts can lead to psychological and emotional problems in teenagers. Many health-threatening factors and risky behaviors of teenagers start gradually at this age. In many cases, these factors may lead teenagers to behaviors that have unfortunate physical and psychological consequences and sometimes put people in high-risk behaviors (1-3).

One of these high-risk behaviors is communicating with the opposite sex. Today, in most countries (even Islamic countries), the relationship with the opposite sex has exceeded the accepted cultural norms and has

caused the concern of families and government officials. The consequences of this form of social relations have also covered Western societies. Although this form of social relationship does not conflict with some values and norms of Western societies, its consequences, such as the increase of illegitimate children, orphaned and single-parent children, and the risk of contracting diseases such as AIDS and hepatitis, cause serious concerns in these societies (4-7).

Several factors affect the relationship with the opposite sex. Regarding communication with the opposite sex in teenagers, two components of attitude towards communication and the experience of communication are debatable. Attitude is a multidimensional concept that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. The cognitive component means the information and thoughts of a person about the subject in question.



The emotional component refers to the feeling that the subject in question evokes, and the behavioral component refers to the practical manifestation of the person in front of the subject. There is no doubt that attitude is influenced by factors such as cultural, social, and economic changes (8-10).

Among the many factors affecting risky sexual behaviors during adolescence, we can mention the family and the relationship with parents as the first and most important influential factors. Parents play a crucial role in socializing children toward sexual issues (11, 12). Family is one of the most important institutions of society and a shaper of human personality; therefore, it has special rules and principles and plays various roles for its members. The main value of the family is the result of the relationship network created by its members (13, 14). One of the most crucial aspects related to the family is the communication patterns within the family, which seem to

influence attitudes and perceptions of communication with the opposite sex. The family communication pattern refers to the structure of communication within a family, including how family members interact with each other, what they say, what they do, and the meaning behind these interactions.

The stated topics prompted the authors to investigate the mediating role of self-expression in the relationship between family communication patterns and relationships with the opposite sex among teenage girls, and the proposed conceptual model was drawn based on theoretical foundations and research findings. The mentioned model addresses whether family communication patterns indirectly affect the relationship with the opposite sex through increasing self-expression skills. The proposed conceptual model based on theoretical foundations and research findings that is the basis of this study is shown in Figure 1.

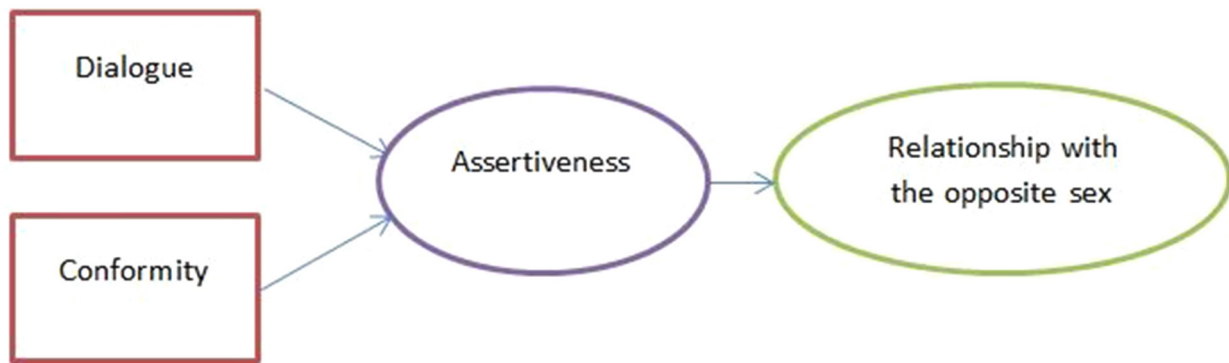


Figure 1. Hypothetical model of relationship with the opposite sex; the role of family communication patterns and assertiveness

2. Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the model of communication with the opposite sex among teenage girls in Birjand city under the influence of communication patterns in the family and the mediating variable of assertiveness.

3. Methods

This study is correlational, in which structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. The statistical population of the current study consists of all female secondary school students studying in the first grade in Birjand city in the academic year 1400 - 1401 (2021 - 2022). According to the Birjand Education Department report, the total number of these participants was 6346. Although there is no general agreement about the sample size required for structural equation modeling, according to many researchers, the minimum sample size required for this purpose is 200 samples (15, 16). Kline also believes that the minimum sample size in confirmatory factor analysis is 200 people (17). Based on these explanations, 360 students

were selected using a multi-stage cluster random sampling method. The questionnaires used in this research were: The assertiveness questionnaire (Gambrill and Richey (18)), the family communication questionnaire (Koerner and Fitzpatrick (19)), and the premarital relationship attitude questionnaire (Kordloo (20)).

The Assertiveness Questionnaire (Gambrill and Richey (18)): This survey contains 40 items divided into two parts. Each item presents a situation that requires assertive behavior. In the first part, the subject is asked to express the level and intensity of his discomfort when faced with these situations. In the next part, he should use a five-point Likert scale to state the probability of his behavior in the situations mentioned in the questionnaire. In this research, the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.88. This value is considered acceptable.

Family Communication Questionnaire (Koerner and Fitzpatrick (19)): This tool is a self-assessment questionnaire that assesses the respondent's agreement or disagreement with 26 statements about the state of his family's communication using a 5-point Likert scale. A score

of 5 is equivalent to “completely agree”, and a score of 1 is equivalent to “completely disagree”. The first 15 propositions are related to the dimension of dialogue and listening, while the next 11 propositions are related to the dimension of conformity. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the dimensions. The value was 0.81 for the listening and speaking orientation dimension and 0.92 for the conformity orientation dimension.

Premarital Relationship Attitude Questionnaire (Kordloo (20)): This questionnaire has 25 items designed to examine people’s views on the relationship of premarital friendship with the opposite sex. This test is on a Likert scale, which is considered as “completely agree” (score 5), “agree” (score 4), “have no opinion” (score 3), “disagree” (score 2), and “completely disagree” (score 1). The obtained score shows the person’s attitude towards premarital relationships with the opposite sex. In the research of Riahi and Khayatan (21), the reliability of this tool was obtained using Cronbach’s alpha method of 0.87. Also, in the research of Saqzezi and Yazdani (22), the reliability of this tool was obtained using Cronbach’s alpha method of 0.86.

The structural equation model was used in LISREL 8.80

software to test the research’s conceptual model and its hypotheses. After controlling the assumptions of the structural equation model, the research model was drawn according to the theoretical model; this means that a path was drawn from each latent variable to its corresponding indicators, and then the causal paths between the latent variables were also drawn. The conventional maximum likelihood (ML) method, which works under the assumption of multivariate normality, along with the covariance matrix (instead of the correlation matrix), was used to estimate the parameters. In order to ensure the overall fit of the model, some important indicators for assessing the fit of the model, such as the significance of the chi-square statistic (P), the ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom (χ^2/df), the root mean square error of estimation (RMSEA), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), normalized fit index (NFI), non-normalized fit index (NNFI), and comparative fit index (CFI) were considered.

4. Results

The degree of correlation between pairs of research variables is determined using Pearson’s correlation coefficient and is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Degree of Correlation Between Pairs of Research Variables

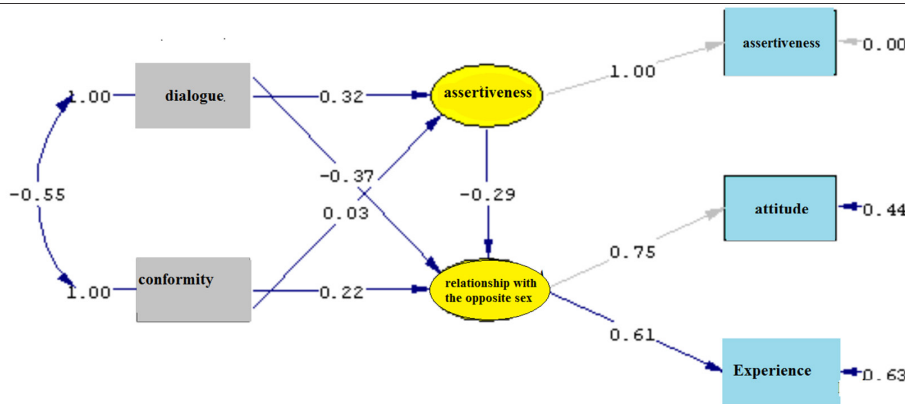
Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1 Dialogue	1				
2 Conformity	-0.539**	1			
3 Assertiveness	0.298**	-0.148*	1		
4 Attitude	-0.451**	0.326**	-0.331**	1	
5 Experience	-0.325**	0.328**	-0.261**	0.452**	1

** = error level smaller than 0.010

* = error level less than 0.05

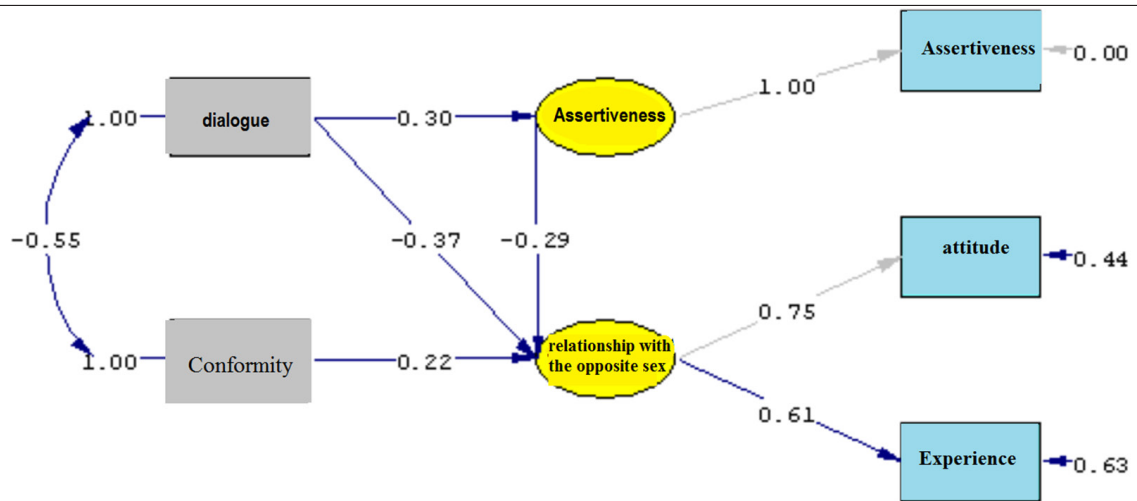
The research model, along with the standardized path

coefficients for the initial and final models, is presented in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. In these figures, only significant causal paths are included, while non-significant paths have been removed.



Chi-Square=3.18, df=2, P-value=0.20393, RMSEA=0.049

Figure 2. The theoretical model of the research along with the standardized coefficients of the paths (with the presence of all the paths)



Chi-Square=3.39, df=3, P-value=0.33557, RMSEA=0.023

Figure 3. The final research model, along with the standardized path coefficients (with the presence of significant paths)

Because it was necessary to check the coefficients of all the paths and their significance to reject or confirm the research hypotheses, the results of the initial model in which all the paths were present were used. The coefficients of the standardized path (β) and the corresponding t-statistics of the paths from the primary model are

important in examining the hypotheses of the research, separating the direct and indirect effects of the exogenous variables on the endogenous variables, in addition to the results of the hypothesis test related to each of the paths, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Standardized Coefficients of the Causal Paths of the Structural Model and the Test Results of the Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Direct Effect		Indirect Effect		Result
		β	t	β	t	
1	Dialogue → relation with the opposite sex	-0.15	-1.55	-	-	Reject
2	Conformity → relation with the opposite sex	0.17	2.21	-	-	Approve
3	Dialogue → assertiveness → relation with the opposite sex	-	-	-0.09	-2.97	Approve
4	Conformity → assertiveness → relation with the opposite sex	-	-	-0.01	-0.47	Reject

5. Discussion

Based on the results of our study, the fitted model showed that the communication pattern of dialogue alone does not play a role in the relationship with the opposite sex. However, increasing assertiveness decreases the relationship with the opposite sex. Studies show that intra-family relationships are extremely important and sensitive and how these relationships play a significant role in forming social attitudes and feedback, preparation, and development of social skills of family members.

In the dialogue phase, all family members are encour-

aged to interact and dialogue in different fields. Family members interact freely and continuously, and spontaneously with each other. Research has shown that families who talk and participate with their children about various issues show flexibility in defining roles, rules, and the position of people in facing various issues, and their children can solve problems, trust others, and have a sense of independence. Research has shown that the level of communication and harmony is related to the mental health of people in the family, so the level of family communication is a positive predictor of children's mental health. The amount of communication in the

family can be a significant predictor of children's anxiety and depression and negatively predicts their anxiety and depression (23-26).

Conformity means that families provide intimate conditions in which all family members are encouraged to participate freely and comfortably in interacting, discussing, and exchanging views on various topics. In this type of family, diverse and different opinions are accepted, and children can disagree with their parents while respecting their parents. Dialogue orientation refers to free and supportive dialogue between family members; so that each person is encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings independently. Research has shown that families who talk and participate with their children about various issues show flexibility in defining the roles, rules, and positions of people in facing various issues, their children can solve problems, trust others, and they have a greater sense of independence (27, 28).

People who can express their existence demand their rights from others and can say things they do not want to. They can easily express their feelings. All of this makes people experience more comfortable lives and more positive responses from others. This, in turn, can reduce anxiety and increase trust in interpersonal relationships. Wolpe (28) acknowledged that the main characteristic of expressive personalities is the ability to openly and spontaneously express their feelings. He defined it as "an effective social motivator or verbal expression of feelings." Things that people learn from listening and speaking in the form of communication patterns. According to Heisler (24), dialogue orientation refers to free and supportive dialogue between family members; so that each person is encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings independently (29-31).

It is not far from the mind that following the orientation of variable self-expression cannot reduce the relationship with the opposite sex. In families with high conformity, parents are authoritarian and controlling. They emphasize that their children should avoid conflict and confrontation with the crowd, submit to them in discussions, respect elders, and generally prevent interpersonal issues. Interactions in families with high harmony rely on avoiding conflict and family interdependence. The communication between two generations in these families reflects what is heard from parents and other adults. Children are expected to act according to their parents' wishes in these families. As a result, the children of such families learn to obey the sources of power and avoid discussing and expressing opinions on various issues, which reduces their ability to show bold behavior in social interactions (19, 32).

Families with less solidarity and communication with each other have more differences and incompatibility. Disagreement and conflict with parents can cause psychological problems and inconsistent behaviors in teenagers. In such families, due to the non-acceptance of teenagers' independence and their non-participation in

decision-making, there is an opportunity for communication in an aggressive manner. Aggressively, a person expresses his thoughts and feelings as non-compliant and without regard for the rights of others. Such a person cannot establish effective communication with others due to inconsistent and aggressive behavior. As a result, the need to be loved and respected by others, which is one of the basic needs of every person, needs to be fulfilled, and it cannot flourish his potential goals and talents. He will seek acceptance elsewhere and in another way (33-35).

In conclusion, the current research was to find the group of communication patterns that strengthen and facilitate the courage of children. Also, by examining the effect of this process on the relationship of teenagers with the opposite sex, it can be useful in the field of education and training, and parents can use it to improve their relationship with their children and, as a result, have children with courage and high self-respect. At the same time, awareness in the field of adolescent relations with the opposite sex among adolescents and the effective factors in creating this behavior can be accompanied by important strategies for educational centers and research. Therefore, the results of this research can be useful for researchers, therapists, and other consultants to use the results. In the end, considering the destructive effects that such relationships have during adolescence, both at the micro level (mental and emotional damage, especially for girls, educational drop, etc.) and at the macro level in society (increasing divorce rates, increasing age marriage, illicit acts, etc.), it is necessary to carry out scientific research on this matter to examine it professionally and from different angles.

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Authors' Contribution:

MA: Idea and design, writing the draft, and revising; MP: Design, statistical analyses, writing draft, and revising; SA: Data collection, analyses, writing draft. All authors approved the final draft before submission.

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