Abstract

This study analyzed self-reported measures of inclusion through interactional behaviors of both parents and children (n = 407 families, or 1115 individuals). Results indicated that parents were more likely to report inclusion than their children, that mothers were more likely to report inclusion than fathers, and that mother-child dyads were more likely to report inclusion than father-child dyads within families. Results also indicated that sons were more likely than daughters to report inclusion across families.
Comparison of Self-reports of Inclusion in Parent-adolescent Interaction

Introduction

Communication is the process through which relationships are formed and maintained, and communication is a learned activity achieved within multiple contexts including that of the family. Developmental models assume that the individual moves through a process of separation/individuation in order to achieve independence from his or her parents (Duvall, 1967; Becvar & Becvar, 1993). The movement from dependence to independence within the context of the family can result in conflict between parents and children due to separation and redefinition of family roles and boundaries which are negotiated through interaction. The purpose of this study was to examine how parents and children deal with the normal processes of the maturation of children in their everyday interaction. This study examined the perceptions of family members regarding their interactions with each other in order to determine the characteristics of communication which define family system boundaries. More specifically, this study examined the perceptions of parents and their adolescent children regarding their use of inclusionary interaction behaviors.

Theoretical Framework. Characteristics of families, from a systems perspective, include roles which specify system and subsystem boundaries. Communication within the family may demonstrate how these characteristics are constituted. For example, subsystem boundaries between parents and children may be specified by participants in a number of ways: (a) through expectations derived from the culture, such as how the culture defines the role of parents; (b) through structural elements of the family system determined by relational definitions, such as familial role expectations and the characteristics of the parent-child relationship; (c) through explicit or implicit statements of rules for interaction, movement, and access to resources; and (d)
through implicit and explicit relational inclusionary and exclusionary statements within the context of a family interaction. Boundaries are the set of symbolic rules or expectations “. . . which specify the rights, obligations, possessions, and space of individuals” within a group (Vuchinich, 1984, p. 219).

The period of adolescence is marked by negotiation and renegotiation of family boundaries thus bringing about changes in family structure. However, changes in system structure require interaction by members of the system. Grotevant and Cooper (1985) posit that development into adolescence heightens the need for renegotiation of openness and connectedness. Baxter (1988) maintains that this renegotiation is managed through communication. The particulars of managing family boundaries during the separation/individuation stage of the family life cycle contribute to characteristics of parent-adolescent interaction. For the adolescent, personal control over decision-making, access to resources, and movement within, between and beyond boundaries may require exclusion. For the parent, attempts to maintain family boundaries may require inclusion. Depending on the goal of family members, to maintain intimacy or seek autonomy, the use of these strategies may serve to include self or others within the system or subsystem, or to exclude self or others from the system or subsystem.

Review of Literature

Petronio (1991) proposed that individuals regulate openness or closedness in their relationships by implementing rules for managing the flow of private information. An individual may choose to manage the flow of private information to protect himself or herself from perceived potential harm to the self or self-identity. In prior studies, Petronio (1991) found that “. . . when boundaries are tightly controlled . . . autonomy is achieved” (p. 314). The opposite effect may occur when boundaries are loosened, namely that the other has access to private information
thus increasing risk. This increased risk requires relational trust. Provided the trust is not violated, such increased risk can lead to greater perceived intimacy in the relationship.

In boundary negotiation, the need for relational complementarity is increased (Petronio, 1991). When relational complementarity occurs, the needs of one person are fulfilled by the other, and vice versa, producing relational satisfaction. In the context of family relationships, the complementary needs of connectedness and separateness are managed and negotiated. However, altering the position on one need, such as the need for connectedness and intimacy, necessarily affects the position of the other opposing need (Hess & Handel, 1959). It is the management of these opposing needs of the individual within the context of the family that becomes the primary developmental task of the family during the adolescent stage (V) of the family life cycle.

The both/and nature of opposing needs of the individual describes a paradox of family relationships. How parents, for example, assist their children with the normal processes of maturation including separation/individuation, while still seeking intimacy and control in their relationship with their children poses difficult and sometimes stressful dilemmas. For the child as well, perhaps, the need for separateness from parents while concurrently requiring support can create conflict. Baxter (1988) proposed that individuals experience contradictory tensions in their relationships with others. These dialectical tensions include: (a) the need for autonomy versus the need for intimacy, (b) the need for openness versus the need for closedness, and (c) the need for stability versus the need for change.

Individuals experience the autonomy/intimacy dialectic as opposing desires to create, maintain or preserve a sense of self separate from other while simultaneously desiring closeness or a sense of oneness with the other. Although this tension may be felt by individuals in a relationship, the interaction of this tension as it is felt by two persons in relation to each other may
increase the effect. This tension may become particularly problematic during the adolescent stage of separation/individuation.

The openness/closedness dialectic involves desires to maintain privacy while wanting the other person to know and understand. During adolescence, for example, the child might want his or her parents to understand the emotions he or she is experiencing. However, some of those emotions could be linked to experiences, such as sexual experiences (see Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), which the child might not want his or her parents to know about. Likewise, the adolescent may desire the family to be flexible and adaptable to change (as he or she is experiencing considerable physiological change, for example) while still desiring stability in the family environment (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). According to Wood (1997), these dialectical tensions play out in the interactions between individuals, as well as between the relationship, such as the parent-child subsystem, and the outside world. This would suggest that parents may also be attempting to balance needs of intimacy and autonomy in their interactions with their children.

Taken together, these theories and models suggest that parents and their adolescent children negotiate changing relational definitions through boundary management which is accomplished interactionally. More specifically, parents and adolescent children negotiate relational boundaries by performing inclusionary and exclusionary interactional behaviors. For example, Guerrero and Afifi (1995) demonstrated that adolescents avoid discussing certain topics with their parents in order to maintain privacy, a goal associated with developing autonomy. The authors demonstrated that as children reach adolescence, they increase demands for privacy particularly in reference to topics of parent-child relational issues, negative life experiences, friendships, dating relationships, and sexual experiences. If children choose to avoid discussing topics with their parents, these interactional choices effectively exclude their parents from those
aspects of their lives. However, the authors note that despite children’s tendencies toward topic avoidance, adolescents continue to talk with their parents about potentially sensitive subjects.

Inclusion occurs when individuals attempt to involve others in their life experiences through interaction. In a previous study, LeBlanc (1996a) examined characteristics of inclusion through observation of family interaction. In particular, LeBlanc described the following characteristics as inclusionary: (a) planning future shared activities, (b) requesting information about daily events, and (c) sharing the construction of meaning.

In another study, LeBlanc (1996b) examined characteristics of disconfirming relational talk. These disconfirming behaviors included interruptions, ignoring, and minimal responses or non-listening. These disconfirming behaviors may be attempts at exclusion by emphasizing the desires of the individual committing the disconfirming act over the desires or needs of the individual being disconfirmed. In contrast, confirming behaviors, such as demonstrated attentiveness, active listening and expressions of agreement or empathy, emphasize the needs of the other as important to the individual and are thus inclusive.

Olson, et al. (1983) suggested that discrepancies between parents and children’s reports of family communication increase during the adolescent stage of the family life cycle as a result of the individuation process. In a study comparing children’s responses to their parents, Olson, et al. (1983) found that parents tend to report better communication with their adolescent children than children report. The authors also found a gender difference in reports of communication between parents and adolescents. Specifically, they found that adolescents report better communication with their mothers than with their fathers. Conversely, mothers report better communication with adolescents than do fathers (Olson, et al., 1983).
The study conducted by Guerrero and Afifi (1995), partially supports this finding. The authors found that adolescents avoid talking to their fathers more than their mothers. However, they also found that adolescents avoid talking about sexual experiences with their opposite sex parents more than with their same sex parents. When comparing sons’ to daughters’ reports of communication, the authors noted that sons avoid talking to their parents about their friendships more than daughters. Both sons and daughters report that communication with their parents is difficult compared to parents’ reports.

Youniss and Smollar (1985) noted that mothers and fathers communicate differently with their adolescent children. Specifically, mothers tend to be more open and tend to talk about the daily lives of children. Fathers, on the other hand, tend to be more task oriented in their interactions with their children. Noller and Callan (1991) found that the highest level of mutual self-disclosure in the parent-adolescent subsystem is between mothers and daughters.

These studies, as well as the individual and family developmental theories, suggest that adolescents, and their parents, both perform inclusionary and exclusionary behaviors. Inclusion may be performed when the individual involves others in his or her life experience interactionally. Exclusion may be performed when the individual interactionally attempts to block another, with whom he or she has a close or intimate relationship, from sharing in or knowing about his or her life experiences. Inclusion and exclusion may be viewed as diametrically opposed behaviors on a continuum related to the dialectical tension of intimacy/autonomy. However, it is the child's primary developmental task of separation/individuation that must be accomplished. Given this framework, I propose the following hypothesis:

$$H_1$$ Parents are more likely to report inclusion in their relationships with their children than children are likely to report.
If as Olson, et al. (1983) suggested, that parents report better communication with their children than children report with their parents, then parents and their children likely perceive particular interactional behaviors with each other differently. As developmental theories and the dialectical tensions perspective suggest, those particular interactive behaviors are likely to involve both topic avoidance and inclusionary moves, with parents more likely reporting inclusion, and children more likely reporting exclusion.

Furthermore, as reported above, gender is likely to play a role in perceptions of communication between parents and children (see Olson, et al., 1983). When considering possible differences between male and female parents, mothers are more likely to report better communication with their children than fathers will report. Therefore, the following hypothesis is also proposed:

\[ H_2 \quad \text{Mothers are more likely to report inclusion in their relationships with their children than fathers are likely to report.} \]

As mothers are more likely to report better communication with their adolescent children than fathers will report (see Olson, et al., 1983), mothers may be more likely to experience higher levels of intimacy in their relationships with their children than fathers will experience with their children. The authors also suggested that children avoid talking to their fathers more than their mothers. Fathers, therefore, would be more likely to experience exclusionary communicative behaviors from their children than mothers would experience.

Gender differences may also play a role in children’s perceptions of their relationships with their parents. As reported above, Guerrero and Afifi (1995) found gender differences between children, with sons avoiding talk more often than daughters. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H_3 Daughters are more likely to report inclusion in their relationships with their parents than sons are likely to report.

If gender differences play a role in both children’s and parent’s perceptions of their relationships with each other, where males tend to report less talk with their parent or child than their female counterpart, then it stands to reason that differences in perceptions regarding communication between parent-child dyads may be predicted by gender. As reported above, Noller and Callan (1991) found that mother-daughter dyads had the highest level of mutual self-disclosure when compared to any other parent-child dyad. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_4 Mother-son dyads are more likely to report inclusion in their relationships than father-son dyads are likely to report.

H_5 Mother-daughter dyads are more likely to report inclusion in their relationships than father-daughter dyads are likely to report.

Method

Participants. The design of the study, given the hypotheses to be tested, required an appropriate sampling strategy. The unit of measure for several tests to be run was a family subsystem dyad. These dyads were being compared to other similar dyads both within and across families. For example, father-son dyads were compared to mother-son dyads within the family. As well, several tests measured the differences between children and their parents in matched sets across families. Given these constraints on units of measure, that the main treatment level or block was family and that individual family member’s perceptions were being compared, a single-stage cluster sampling design was utilized (see Blalock, 1979).
College students serving as points of contact were asked to distribute a given number of survey packets containing questionnaires for families which fit the selection criterion. All students taking an introductory communication course at a large Southern university were requested to participate in the collection of data. A total of 270 students were asked to participate, of which 215 (or 79.63%) collected data. Students were asked to contact all families known which met the inclusion criterion (at least one parent/guardian and one adolescent between the ages of thirteen and fifteen residing at the same domicile).

Each selected family was requested to have the following members participate: (a) father or male parent/guardian, (b) mother or female parent/guardian, and (c) one child within the age range of thirteen to fifteen. If the family was a dual-parent family, both parents were required to participate and one child was asked to complete a questionnaire for each parent. If the family was a single-parent family, the parent and the child both were asked to complete a questionnaire in reference to each other. Families with more than one child between the ages of thirteen and fifteen were asked to select only one child within the age range to participate.

In all, 988 family packets were distributed. Of that number, 368 packets (or 37.25%) were not returned. Of the remaining 620 packets, 407 were determined to be completed thoroughly by all family members in each participating family and were coded. The number of participating dual-parent families totaled 301, or approximately 74%. Of that number, 291 families included the biological mother and 269 families included the biological father. In total, 259 families in the study were nuclear families, and 42 families were blended families (with at least one stepparent). The number of participating single-parent families was 106, or 26%. The majority of single-parent families (83%) were led by a female adult, whereas only 17% of single-parent families were led by
a male adult. The total number of subjects for the study was 1115 (or 2.74 persons per family on average).

The number of adult males in the role of parents was 319, whereas 389 parents were females. Of the 407 adolescent children in the sample, 175 (43%) were male, whereas 232 (57%) were female. Approximately 40% of female adolescents resided in single-parent families. A smaller percentage of male adolescents (29.63%) resided in single-parent families. All children in single-parent families were biological offspring of their custodial parent. The total number of stepchildren participants in dual-parent families was 38 (17 stepdaughters and 21 stepsons). Mother-daughter dyads had the highest percentage of occurrence in the sample (n = 230, or 32.48%). The other dyadic coalitions were approximately equal in percentage occurrence. The number of father-daughter dyads totaled 168 or 23.73%. The number of mother-son dyads totaled 159 (22.46%), whereas the number of father-son dyads totaled 151 (21.33%).

**Procedures.** The Family Inclusiveness Assessment Survey (FIAS) was distributed in packets containing one questionnaire for each parent in reference to the child, and two questionnaires for the participating child (one in reference to each parent). Several steps were involved in the development of the Family Inclusiveness Assessment Survey used for this study: (a) the review of previous studies and instruments which measured or observed inclusion or exclusion in the family context, (b) the development of operational definitions for inclusion and exclusion, (c) the selection of scale items measuring inclusion (confirmation and intimacy) and exclusion (disconfirmation and autonomy), (d) the selection of appropriate independent variables, (e) testing of the preliminary instrument in a pilot study, (f) measuring the validity and reliability of the pilot instrument, and (g) the development of the test instrument based on the results of the pilot study.
The scale items measuring disconfirmation included: (a) interruption, (b) repetition, and (c) impervious responses. The scale items measuring confirmation included: (a) attentive listening, (b) response when called, and (c) expression of agreement. The scale items measuring intimacy included: (a) talk about friendships, dating and sexuality; (b) talk about the state of the relationship and relational issues; and (c) planning and sharing activities. The scale items measuring autonomy included: (a) physical retreat and avoidance, and (b) keeping secrets and a personal diary.

Confirmation and disconfirmation were conceptualized as diametrically opposed variables where measuring high on confirmation would result in measuring low on disconfirmation and vice versa. As well, intimacy and autonomy are conceptualized as bipolar opposites. Scale items measuring each of these dependent variables were developed using Likert type scaling, where a low score (1, never) measured a particular dependent variable, and a high score (7, always) measured the opposite dependent variable.

**Data Analysis.** To test the hypotheses, an exploratory factor analysis using principle components extraction and varimax rotation was utilized for the data analysis to determine whether the scale items could be clustered as the theorized dependent variables (autonomy, intimacy, confirmation and disconfirmation). To conduct the factor analysis, all scale items were considered together for all cases. The resulting factors were analyzed utilizing Cronbach's alpha to determine reliability. The results of the factor analysis and reliability tests for factors are reported below.

Once the factors were determined, a comparison of factor means by group was completed to test each hypothesis. For each of hypotheses one, two, four and five (H₁, H₂, H₄, H₅), a randomized complete block design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted (see Ostle &
Malone, 1988). A randomized complete block design was utilized to control for empty cells which resulted from comparison of groups with different numbers of members. Family structure taken into consideration accounted for six possible variations: (a) dual-parent families with a daughter, (b) dual-parent families with a son, (c) single-mother families with a daughter, (d) single-mother families with a son, (e) single-father families with a daughter, and (f) single-father families with a son. For example, direct comparisons of parent-child dyads both within and between families in single-parent versus dual-parent families required that the family unit be treated as a blocking variable. As the sampling design required only one adolescent per family to be selected for participation in the study, male and female adolescent child participants are necessarily selected independently. For hypotheses five (H₅), a one-way ANOVA was performed.

Family structure (single or dual parent) and status (parent or child) were considered for possible interaction effects for hypothesis one (H₁), and family structure and parent (mother or father) were considered for possible interaction effects for hypothesis two (H₂). For hypotheses three (H₃) and four (H₄), family structure and parent-child dyad were considered for possible interaction effects. Tests for interaction effects of independent variables were conducted using a two (family structure) by two (status, parent or dyad) ANOVA due to possible linear associations between groups.

Additionally, Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation (r) was run on paired samples to determine whether the factors correlated between individuals within families. In particular, correlation between a child’s response regarding his or her father and the child’s response regarding his or her mother was examined. Likewise, correlation between mother’s response to child and father’s response to child was also examined. These correlations were
analyzed to determine if internal consistency regarding perceptions of interactional behavior existed in the family.

Analysis and Results

The proposed factors for the study included: (a) intimacy, (b) autonomy, (c) confirmation, and (d) disconfirmation. The constructs of intimacy and confirmation should be interrelated and correspond to a larger construct called inclusion. To test these assumptions, I performed an exploratory factor analysis. The results of the factor analysis revealed six factors which partially corresponded to the predicted factors. For purposes of brevity, only the results for the two factors which measure intimacy and confirmation to be used for further analysis are reported here.

Determination of factor loading for each dependent variable was based on the .50 decision rule. Variables which load at or above .50 are considered to be highly loaded (Smith, 1988). Cronbach’s alpha test for reliability was conducted on each factor and is reported below.

The first factor included items which were designed to measure confirmation and intimacy (see Table I below). All items included in this factor loaded above .59. Several items on the list were cross-loaded with other factors, particularly factor two, although primarily these loaded between .50 and .40, with two notable exceptions. First, the item regarding answering the other when he or she calls and the item reporting the other as listening to the respondent were negatively loaded on factor three, although both were loaded between -.41 and -.48. Factor three (see below) dealt with items regarding disconfirmation. Because these two items under factor three were negatively loaded, they are assumed to be inversely related to the construct of confirmation demonstrated by these two items cross-loaded on factor one. Three of the six items which loaded on factor one were predicted to measure confirmation. Thus factor one was labeled
confirmation. The other three items were all predicted to measure intimacy. Factor one accounted for 13.41% of the total variance (Eigenvalue = 3.488, \( \lambda = .77 \)).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Predicted measure</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. Subject shares information about events</td>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>0.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Subject includes other in activities</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>0.691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Subject answers other when called</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>0.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Other person listens to subject</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Subject reports daily activities to other</td>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>0.612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Subject expresses agreement with other</td>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>0.598</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second factor included items which were designed to measure intimacy (see Table 2 below). Factor two accounted for 10.67% of the total variance (Eigenvalue = 2.77, \( \lambda = .73 \)). All items included in this factor loaded above .55. All three items on this list were predicted to measure intimacy. As reported earlier, factors one and two had items which were cross-loaded, although all cross-loaded items under factor two loaded between .39 and .48. As both factor one and two contained items which measured intimacy, a Pearson \( r \) was performed to measure correlation between the two factors. Correlation analysis revealed that the two factors were moderately to strongly correlated (\( r = .55, p < .01 \)). Due to the significant and considerable correlation between these two factors, they are treated as measuring the construct of inclusion (\( \lambda = .82 \)).
Given these findings, the hypotheses were tested using the confirmation and intimacy factors to measure inclusion. These hypotheses were tested based on an inclusion score generated by taking the mean of the scale items which loaded on factors one (confirmation) and two (intimacy).

A moderately strong correlation existed between parents’ inclusion score and children’s inclusion score within families ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). A moderately strong correlation also existed between parent’s and child’s inclusion score when controlling for sex of parent: (a) father’s and child’s inclusion scores were moderately to strongly correlated ($r = .50$, $p < .01$), (b) mother’s and child’s inclusion scores were also moderately correlated ($r = .48$, $p < .01$).

Results indicate a significant difference between parents and children in reported inclusion behaviors as predicted in hypothesis one ($H_1$). Parents ($M = 4.45$, $SD = .74$) were more likely to report including their children through interaction than children ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .90$) reported including their parents, $F(1, 406) = 41.60$, $p < .01$, although there was no significant within family main effects, $F(1, 406) = 2.97$, $p < .01$ (critical F value is greater than 3.86). Tests for interaction effects failed to find any significant differences due to family structure (single versus dual parent) or due to an interaction between family structure and status (parent versus child).
Results also revealed a significant difference between mothers’ and fathers’ reported inclusion toward their children as predicted in hypothesis two (H_2). Mothers (M = 4.65, SD = .88) were more likely to report inclusion toward their children than fathers (M = 4.10, SD = .78), F(1,406) = 117.46, p < .01. A moderate correlation existed between father-child inclusion scores and mother-child inclusion scores for parent-child dyads within the same family (r = .36, p < .01, n = 301). As with hypothesis one (H_1), tests for interaction effects failed to find any significant differences between mothers’ and fathers’ inclusion scores due to family structure. Further tests also failed to find any significant interaction effects between family structure and parent (mother or father).

Because families participating in the study were limited to including only one adolescent child, male and female child subjects must have come from different families. Due to different family contexts for sons and daughters, comparisons between male and female children were assumed to be independent. To support this assumption, Levene’s test for equality of variance failed to find any difference between groups, F(1, 405) = 2.34, p > .13. Results indicated that sons (M = 3.90, SD = .52) reported committing more inclusionary behaviors than daughters (M = 3.81, SD = .44), although the difference is small, F(1, 707) = 6.64, p < .05. Interestingly, these results run counter to the direction predicted by hypothesis three (H_3). Results of this test suggest that gender of the child may play a role only within the context of particular parent-child dyads, although gender of the child, taken by itself, may not necessarily influence or only minimally influence the practice of inclusion.

However, when comparing parent-child dyads, gender of both the parent and the child may influence the use of inclusion behaviors. As predicted in hypothesis four (H_4), tests revealed that mother-son dyads (M = 3.79, SD = .44) reported more inclusion in their relationships than
father-son dyads ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .41$), $F(1, 173) = 9.40$, $p < .01$, although the within-family main effect showed no significant difference, $F(1, 173) = 3.84$, $p < .01$ (critical $F$ value is greater than 3.89). To conduct this test, and subsequent parent-child dyad comparisons, dyadic inclusion scores were generated by averaging the inclusion score of the parent with the inclusion score of the child in reference to that particular parent within each family. Results of the mother-son versus father-son inclusion comparison indicated a strong correlation between mother-son inclusion scores and father-son inclusion scores within families ($r = .69$, $p < .01$, $n = 135$).

Finally for hypothesis five ($H_5$), results demonstrated a significant difference between mother-daughter dyads ($M = 3.97$, $SD = .37$) and father-daughter dyads ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .42$), $F(1, 232) = 294.50$, $p < .01$, although the within family main effect showed no significant difference, $F(1, 232) = 3.65$, $p < .01$. Within families, father-daughter and mother-daughter inclusion scores were moderately to strongly correlated ($r = .51$, $p < .01$, $n = 166$). No significant interaction effects were due to family structure or interaction between family structure and parent-child dyad type in the parent-child dyad comparison tests.

These results generally support the hypotheses related to inclusion proposed in this study, with one exception: sons report committing more inclusion behaviors than daughters. Below, the implication for these findings, as well as the limitations of this study, will be discussed.

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of parents and their adolescent children regarding inclusionary behaviors in parent-adolescent interaction. The results of the study, discussed in the previous chapter, revealed that for families with an adolescent, status in the family as a parent or child played a significant role in influencing perceptions regarding inclusion between parents and
children. The study also revealed that the perceptions of family members were influenced by their gender. In general, the hypotheses proposed in this study regarding inclusion were supported.

The first hypothesis predicted that parents would report more inclusion in their relationships when compared with their children, and the findings support that prediction. As the literature on family interaction, family development and individual development suggested, a primary function of the family in the adolescent stage of the family life cycle is to assist the child in the process of separation/individuation. From the adolescent child’s perspective, this stage represents the struggle for independence from his or her parents. From the parent’s perspective, this stage represents the opportunity for granting their children more responsibility. Indeed, as Noller (1995) points out, parents and their adolescent children often view the family and family process very differently with adolescents typically taking a more negative view.

This study also compared mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of inclusion in parent-adolescent communication within the family. As predicted, mothers typically reported higher frequency of inclusion behaviors in interactions with their children when compared to fathers. This finding is consistent with earlier studies, which found that mother-child, and in particular mother-daughter, relationships were more intimate than father-child relationships.

As with mothers’ reports, when examining children’s perceptions of interaction with their parents, results indicated that sons were more likely to report inclusion with their parents compared to daughters. These results were opposite of what was predicted, which is particularly interesting in that the preponderance of research on parent-adolescent interaction suggests that mother-daughter relationships are more intimate than any other parent-child relationship.

However, the construct of intimacy may be laden with connotations which may not be appropriate for parent-son relationships. As Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink, and Buerkel (1995) point
out, father-child relationships are characterized by shared activities. Indeed, this tendency to share activities may create a type of nonverbal bond which is as important to the development of relationships as relational talk. As discussed earlier, sharing activities is a form of inclusion. Connotations that link intimacy with talk, and more specifically with relational talk, do not take into consideration other forms of interaction which are nonverbal.

In this study, other evidence demonstrates that, indeed, mother-daughter relationships are more intimate than father-daughter relationships. Hypothesis five predicted that mother-daughter dyads would report higher levels of inclusion in their relationships with each other than father-daughter dyads. This prediction was supported by the findings. Additionally, mother-son dyads were more likely to report higher levels of inclusion compared to father-son dyads. Inclusion may be increased simultaneously with increased interaction of any sort, whether it is relational talk, shared activities, or information exchange.

Overall, within families, parents are more likely to report higher levels of inclusion than their children will report. Typically, mothers are more likely to report higher levels of inclusion than fathers. As well, mother-child dyads, regardless of sex of child, are more likely to report higher levels of inclusion than father-child dyads. This finding is consistent with previous studies which found that adolescents tend to confide in mothers more than fathers (Noller & Bagi, 1985).

Although gender of parent influenced reported levels of inclusion, where mothers were more likely than fathers to score highly, male children were more likely to report higher levels of inclusion compared to their female counterparts. It is important to point out, however, that sons and daughters as participants were independent samples. Direct comparisons within families between sons and daughters could not be performed. Family context may play a role, particularly
as the study sampled a higher number of female children, and a higher number of female children living with their single mothers.

Regardless of which group reported higher scores for inclusion, the dialectical tensions perspective proposes that as individuals experience an increased need for intimacy, that increased need comes in conflict with the opposing need for autonomy, thus making it more salient. As Baxter and Montgomery (1997) point out, contradiction is inherent in social life. Such contradiction between opposing needs creates and maintains a dynamism between the need for stability and the need for change. The dialectical perspective is consistent with the developmental notion of the adolescent task of separation/individuation when considered within the context of the parent-adolescent relationship. Adolescents work to become independent adults. Yet adolescents may choose to emphasize one need over the other, or oscillate between meeting needs depending on the actions of the persons with whom they are in relationship, including their parents.

Finally, no support was found for the assumption that family structure, distinguishing single-parent from dual-parent families, had any influence on perceptions of inclusion or disconfirmation between parents and children in custodial families. Yet, distinctions between blended and nuclear dual-parent families did somewhat confound results. However, no significant difference existed between different family types taken alone.

In general, parents and their adolescent children both interact in ways that are inclusionary and potentially exclusionary. Both parents and children navigate the dialectical tensions of intimacy and autonomy through their interaction with each other. In the process of navigating these individual needs, parents and their adolescent children go about the business of proceeding through adolescent separation/individuation. Yet, if separation/individuation is performed through
this dialogic process between parents and children, then consideration must be given to the theoretical limitations of developmental theories which tend to be unidirectional and individual centered.

Limitations of the Current Study. The study of family communication produces some considerable methodological challenges. Family members are necessarily both individuals and members of interdependent groups. As systems theory suggests, families have the characteristic of equifinality; that is, the whole of the family is greater than the sum of its parts. This quality of families, therefore, requires that the researcher consider the context of the communication phenomenon for all individuals involved.

To capture the context of the family, for this study, minimally required access to multiple subjects within each family unit. However, the size of the family unit for analysis had an upward practical limit of three persons. The triad consisted of two parents and an adolescent child. The triad was an upward practical limit due to potential problems associated with managing matched pairs in larger systems. For example, if a family had two adolescents within the criteria age range, the family was requested to choose one of the two adolescents to participate. If two adolescents in one family unit participated in the study, then each parent would have been required to fill out two questionnaires, one for each child. Each questionnaire would have required special coding which would distinguish it from the other questionnaires from family members in order to match responses between parents and children within families. Thus expanding the data collection procedures to include more than three family members would have introduced added complexity and costs to the research design.

Because the hypotheses required comparing individuals within a matched dyad or between two matched dyads, the family structure was open to single-parent or dual-parent families.
However, certain analyses in this study disallowed the use of single-parent family data, as in the case when comparing mother’s and father’s responses to the same child. Because the study was designed to measure perceptions regarding parent-child interaction, the study was limited to families residing in the same household, where daily interaction is more likely to take place.

Another methodological limitation of this study involves the sampling and data collection procedures. The majority of participating families were recruited using students as points of contact. All students in several sections of an introductory communication course were given packets to distribute to families of whom they were aware, which met the criteria for participation. Because students were utilized as points of contact, the selected families were not a true random sample. Furthermore, all members of each participating family were requested to participate. This selection procedure introduced error in two ways. First, not all members of families who met the selection criteria and from whom packets were collected participated. In this sense, individuals self-selected participation. Second, if a family had two adolescent children who met the participation criteria, that family was requested to select one of the two children to participate. For those families which had two children between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, self-selection also occurred.

Less error in the selection process may have been accomplished with a smaller pool of recruitment points of contact. In future studies, selection of participating families should be more random. This may be accomplished by distributing the family packets through secondary education systems, such as through local high schools or middle schools. This data collection procedure could resolve two sampling issues. First, schools could be chosen at random, thus introducing one level of random sampling as in cluster sampling. Second, the locale of the schools could be chosen randomly. In this study for example, the sample was taken from families in South
Louisiana. This geographic sample could introduce cultural bias to the data collected. To be sure, families and family members in South Louisiana may have different perceptions regarding communication between parents and adolescents than in other parts of the country.

The requirements for valid and reliable measurement must have some basis in replicable and directly observable phenomena. Valid instruments, therefore, should be based on prior observed phenomena. Measurement instrumentation gains its validity through a process of triangulation (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Denzin 1978). For this study, scale items were developed based on prior studies utilizing naturalistic observation. Naturalistic observation was not utilized for the current study, due primarily to the nature of the inquiry and the potential concern of privacy. However, the use of categories of interactional behavior based on directly observed naturalistic phenomena resulted in the confirmation of hypothesized underlying factors for the instrument scale items. Thus, the current study had as an additional strength the qualities of methodological triangulation. The principle strength of the current study is the systematic way it was conducted. This quality of quantitative studies in general, and this study in particular, allows for replication through future investigation.

**Direction for Future Research.** With these limitations in mind, future studies should address several key issues. First, further naturalistic observation research should be conducted on family interaction. Those studies should examine and describe more fully the interactional behaviors which may exist in families that function as inclusionary or exclusionary moves. Second, further tests of the constructs of inclusion and exclusion, and the subcomponents of intimacy, autonomy, confirmation, and disconfirmation should be conducted. Third, studies should examine the relationship between same-sex and cross-sex parent-child dyads in regard to inclusion and exclusion. Fourth, studies should examine whether inclusion and exclusion peaks at early
adolescence, or if it is a life-long process which occurs between parents and children. Finally, further studies should examine the relationship between perceived inclusion and the structure of the family as blended or nuclear.

Family research should take advantage of the full complement of research methods available. Families are comprised of several individuals each with his or her own developmental tasks which must be performed within context and in concert with other members of the family. Any undertaking which purports to examine its inner workings should both at once consider the totality of the family and its unique nuances.

Conclusion. Studying the relationship between the psychosocial development of the family system, its members, and the interaction of the family is necessarily a complex undertaking. First, the researcher has to demonstrate the behaviors which illustrate developmental changes. Then the researcher has to draw a connection between those behaviors and the developmental tasks of the family and individual family members. However, such a complex undertaking could go a long way in drawing a more encompassing picture of the family and family communication.
References


