

Affirming communication and its association with family functioning

by
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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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SUMMARY

Affirming or positive family communication is an important aspect in helping families and individuals protect themselves against various life challenges (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004; Norman, 2000). According to Barnes and Olson (1985), affirming family communication plays an important role in an adolescent's development. The present study aimed to determine the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. The relationships between family functioning and the quality of communication between the adolescent and the father and mother respectively were also investigated. Then, as the main focus of the present study, affirming family communication was explored qualitatively from the perspective of the adolescents.

A quantitative survey research design was combined with an exploratory, qualitative design. The quantitative data was collected with self-report questionnaires, while the qualitative data was gathered by recording a discussion of affirming family communication in focus groups. The participants were first-year Psychology students of the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. A total of 83 females and 17 males took part in the quantitative component of the present study (N = 100). Fourteen of these 100 students also took part in the focus group discussions.

Pearson correlation coefficients revealed a significant positive correlation between affirming family communication and family functioning. Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was found between family functioning and openness in communication between the adolescent and the mother and father respectively. The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed that openness in communication with the mother, affirming family communication and problems in communication with the father were important predictors of family functioning. Three core categories (with sub-categories) emerged from the content analysis of the focus group discussions on affirming family communication. These core categories were verbal affirming

communication, non-verbal affirming communication and functional affirming communication. The findings of the present study highlight the importance of affirming family communication, especially in families with adolescent children, while also providing a description of affirming family communication from the adolescents' perspectives.

OPSOMMING

Bevestigende of positiewe gesinskommunikasie is 'n belangrike aspek wat gesinne en individue in staat stel om hulself teen verskeie lewensuitdagings te beskerm (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004; Norman, 2000). Volgens Barnes and Olson (1985) speel bevestigende gesinskommunikasie 'n belangrike rol in die ontwikkeling van 'n adolessent. Hierdie studie het gepoog om die verhouding tussen bevestigende gesinskommunikasie en gesinsfunksionering te bepaal. Die verhoudings tussen gesinsfunksionering en die kwaliteit van kommunikasie tussen die adolessent en elk van die ouers is ook ondersoek. Laastens is bevestigende gesinskommunikasie, as die hoof fokus van hierdie ondersoek, op 'n kwalitatiewe wyse vanaf die adolessent se perspektief ondersoek.

'n Kwantitatiewe opname-navorsingsontwerp is gekombineer met 'n eksploratiewe, kwalitatiewe ontwerp. Die kwantitatiewe data is met behulp van selfrapporteringsvraelyste ingesamel en die kwalitatiewe data is ingesamel deur 'n opname te maak van 'n bespreking van bevestigende gesinskommunikasie in fokusgroepe. Die deelnemers was eerstejaar Sielkunde-studente van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch in Suid-Afrika. 'n Totaal van 83 vroue en 17 mans het aan die kwantitatiewe komponent van die ondersoek deelgeneem ($N = 100$). Veertien van hierdie 100 studente het ook aan die fokusgroepbesprekings deelgeneem.

Pearson korrelasiekoëffisiënte toon hoogs beduidende korrelasies tussen bevestigende gesinskommunikasie en gesinsfunksionering. Verder is daar ook hoogs beduidende korrelasies gevind tussen gesinsfunksionering en openheid in kommunikasie tussen die adolessent en die ma en pa onderskeidelik. Die resultate van die meervoudige regressieontledings het getoon dat openheid in kommunikasie met die ma, bevestigende gesinskommunikasie en probleme in kommunikasie met die pa belangrike voorspellers was van gesinsfunksionering. Op grond van die fokusgroepbesprekings oor bevestigende gesinskommunikasie het drie kernkategorieë (met

subtemas) deur 'n inhoudsanalise na vore gekom. Hierdie kernkategorieë is verbale bevestigende kommunikasie, nie-verbale bevestigende kommunikasie en funksionele bevestigende kommunikasie. Die bevindinge van hierdie ondersoek beklemtoon die belangrikheid van bevestigende gesinskommunikasie, veral in gesinne met adolessente kinders, terwyl dit ook 'n beskrywing bied van bevestigende gesinskommunikasie vanuit die perspektief van adolessente.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

In order to understand a family one must look at the communication that occurs between its members (Arnold, 2008). In a family setting one finds affirming and incendiary communication (McCubbin, Thomson, & McCubbin, 1996). Affirming communication is positive, effective or supportive in nature, while incendiary communication is negative or ineffective. The focus of the present study was to explore affirming communication, as this type of communication, according to Kingstone and Endler (1997), has thus far been underexplored in published research.

1.2 Context and background of study

1.2.1 Communication

Communication can be seen as a process through which meaning is produced, negotiated and shared via verbal and nonverbal channels (Arnold, 2008). Communication is considered a process because there is continuous change in human interactions. Broderick (1993) states that the communication patterns of social beings can be described as complex because they involve a variety of concurrent signals. These signals include facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice and terminology used, immediate context and shared history. Thus, these signals all add to the meaning conveyed via communication and may be verbal or nonverbal (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

Besides being conveyed through the content, a message can also be conveyed through tone of voice, body language and posture. It could also happen that a message on one level contradicts a message sent on another level, or that a message sent on one level reinforces a message on

another. The content level involves what is being said, while the second level, which contradicts or reinforces the content level, is called metacommunication (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

It is also important to note that one cannot 'not' communicate. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008, p. 264), "all behaviour is communication at some level". Therefore, communication occurs not only when something is being said, in the manner in which it is said and in the accompanying body language, but also when one person ignores another. Not acknowledging or ignoring someone contributes to the message being sent and how that message is negotiated by the other person.

Communication is a way of sharing beliefs with others (Arnold, 2008). It is important to remember that different people, or groups of people, understand and attach meaning to things and concepts differently. Therefore, even though the person conveying the message has a specific meaning in mind, for the individuals or groups of people receiving the message it will be a process of negotiation of meaning.

1.2.2 Family communication

Epstein, Ryan, Bishop, Miller and Keitner (2003, p. 589) define family communication as the "exchange of verbal information within a family". Although they acknowledge that communication consists of behaviour as well as verbal information, the focus is on the verbal communication because it can be measured. Communication is a significant aspect of family life and may be seen as an instrument used by families to share feelings, views, needs and preferences (Barnes & Olson, 1985).

According to Galvin, Bylund and Brommel (2004), communication forms, defines and manages the family system. Communication is important in the creation and reflection of standards and rules within a family, the establishment of the roles of family members and the development of

an understanding of the environment in which family life takes place (Arnold, 2008). According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008), communication accomplishes more than just conveying a message. Communication between family members also defines or portrays relationships.

Through family communication, our understanding of our family and our experiences is constructed (Arnold, 2008). Even though we use family communication to construct or create family, the family also produces our patterns of communication. Therefore, although the “family is a product of communication”, communication is also a “product of the family” (Arnold, 2008, p. 4). A family cannot be fully understood without considering communication between the members, because without communication there would not be a family.

Arnold (2008) states that the family setting is connected to the larger social system, because the family setting is where family members learn about their place in the larger society. In a family setting the members are informed of cultural norms and expectations. Communication is an instrument through which this information is conveyed. The family context is also the space in which family members develop communication skills to use in the larger community or society (Galvin et al., 2004). Family communication is thus not only important in a family setting, but also in how the family fits into the larger social system (Arnold, 2008).

1.2.3 Affirming and incendiary family communication

Affirming communication can be defined as “the pattern of family communication which conveys support and caring and exerts a calming influence” (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thomson, 1988, p. 640). Positive communication skills include sending unambiguous messages, listening and understanding with empathy, reflecting while listening and making supportive comments (Olson, 1993). These skills also lead to the deflating of stressful situations and contribute to creating a more positive environment. As the term affirming communication has

not been explored much in other research, the terms positive, supportive or effective communication can also be used to describe this type of family communication (Kingstone & Endler, 1997). Among the literature on affirming or positive family communication, no studies of note could be found exploring its nature from an adolescent's point of view. A study conducted by Mallick (2007) explored how adolescents wanted to communicate with their parents, but this related only to communication during drug education.

Incendiary, defensive or negative communication is "inflammatory in nature and tends to exacerbate a stressful situation" (McCubbin et al., 1988, p. 640). Criticism, lack of empathy and sending double messages may be seen as negative communication skills (Olson, 1993). According to Alexander (1973), defensive communication by family members produces a defensive environment, which makes it difficult to solve problems. This is an example of how negative communication is inflammatory and may lead to more negative communication and a defensive environment. Domineering, apathetic and critical behaviour all contribute to a defensive and negative environment (Alexander, 1973).

1.3 Motivation for and aims of the study

Positive family communication has been identified as an important family characteristic that promotes family resilience (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004). Resilience is defined by Walsh (2003) as not only surviving unsettling life challenges, but also having the ability to bounce back from these challenges. According to Norman (2000), protective factors, such as positive communication, help individuals and families safeguard or buffer themselves against any life challenges.

Barnes and Olson (1985) state that positive family communication is also very important for an adolescent's development. Adolescence is a time when rules and family structures should be

adjusted by family members. It is also a time of increased risk-taking and experimenting by the adolescent. This behaviour contributes to the formation of an own identity, which is central to this life stage (Goldberg & Goldberg, 2008). Although conflict arises mostly from an adolescent's search for autonomy, most adolescents actually do accept the norms and values of their parents (Meyer, 2005). Meyer (2005) also states that conflict between adolescents and their parents is less if adolescents' individual identities are not suppressed and if they receive enough empathy and warmth.

According to Ramphele (cited in Shefer, 2008), there are a small number of South African studies on the adolescent-parent relationship, and in most of these studies the main focus is on adolescent-parent conflict (Shefer, 2008). The main focus in the international research that could be found on adolescent-parent communication was also on the exploration of the negative aspects of communication between adolescents and their parents, as well as the effects thereof. Many studies explored problematic parent-adolescent communication and its correlates. Examples of these correlates include risk behaviour, psychological distress, behavioural problems, depression, suicide ideation, as well as suicide (Garcia, Skay, Sieving, Naughton, & Bearinger, 2008; Vuchinich, Ozretich, Pratt, & Kneedler, 2002; Yu et al., 2006). Therefore, the present study will focus mainly on positive family interactions, including parent-adolescent communication, from the perspective of adolescents.

Firstly, the present study investigates the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. The relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning has been explored by other international and national studies, such as Barnes and Olson (1985), Greeff and Du Toit (2009) and Jonker and Greeff (2009). Although this relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning is not the main focus of the present study, it serves to confirm and support what these other studies have already

found. The relationships between family functioning and the perceived quality of communication between the adolescent and both parents are also investigated in the present study. The quantitative component of the present study focuses on the adolescent's perspective of the quality of family communication and on the quality of communication between the adolescent and both parents. This, then, leads to the main focus of the present study, in which affirming communication is explored qualitatively from the adolescent's perspective. This qualitative exploration of affirming communication serves to bridge an existing gap in the international as well as national research.

1.4 Presentation of the thesis

Following the introduction to the study, Chapter Two presents a discussion of the relevant theoretical frameworks that can be used to obtain a better understanding of family communication. The theoretical frameworks discussed are Bowen's family systems theory, the circumplex model of family systems, and the developmental perspective on adolescence. Chapter Three provides a review of the relevant literature on family communication. Studies defining affirming and incendiary communication are reviewed. The effects of affirming and incendiary family communication will be discussed, but the main focus of the literature review will be on affirming, or positive, family communication. Chapter Four covers the research methodology, starting with the research aims and objectives. It includes discussions on the research design, the participants, the measures used, the procedure of data collection, ethical considerations and, finally, an explanation of how the data was analysed. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are presented in Chapter Five. This is followed by a discussion of the results in Chapter Six. Chapter Six also includes a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research and the final conclusion.

1.5 Conclusion

It is clear that family communication is more than just an important aspect of family life. Family communication defines the family and also the relationships between members. As stated previously, communication is a product of the family and the family is also a product of the communication in the family. Affirming communication is vital for the wellbeing of family members and contributes to the family making the necessary changes to its structure and roles. It is important that some changes are made to family routines, structure and roles when any of the members reach adolescence. Affirming family communication enables families to adapt to these required changes. The present study therefore explores affirming family communication from the adolescent's point of view in order to identify, or define, what adolescents view as positive interaction and communication with family members.

CHAPTER 2

RELEVANT THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, two relevant theoretical perspectives, namely family systems theory and the circumplex model of Family Systems, are discussed to provide theoretical conceptualisations of family communication. This is followed by a brief discussion of a developmental perspective on adolescence to portray the importance of family communication during this period of a person's life.

2.2 Family systems theory

Bowen's family systems theory, which forms the basis of many studies of family communication, was derived mainly from General Systems Theory developed by Von Bertalanffy (Arnold, 2008). According to Rosenblatt (1997, p.152), family systems theory is fundamentally a "theory of communication" because, without communication, a family will not be able to exist. The system is able to regulate itself and make changes and is bound by, and because of, communication.

Families are interactive and reciprocal in nature and are therefore better understood when seen from a systems point of view (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). Broderick (1993, p. 37) concludes that "the family is an example of an open, ongoing, goal-seeking, self-regulating, social system". Every family system is formed differently and differs in size, life stage and compilation. The individual members in a family differ in gender, age and physical condition. Each family also has its own history, culture and character (Arnold, 2008).

The systems view of families includes the society, the family as a whole, members of the family and the relationships between all of these members. According to Eshleman (1978, p. 101),

family systems form a “functional and interdependent part of the larger totality”. The family system is affected by and also affects government and laws, schools, churches, the economy and occupations. Therefore, in the same way that the family may be considered the context for the individual, the broader society may be seen as the context for the family (Minuchin, 2002).

In order to understand family systems theory better, the main principles of the theory will be discussed in the following sections. These include the concepts of wholeness, interdependence, causality, hierarchy, self-regulation, feedback loops, equilibrium, the managing of information, and boundaries.

2.2.1 Wholeness

Cowan (2002) states that the whole is greater than and different from the sum of its parts. According to Montgomery and Fewer (1998), a system is seen as a compilation of parts (family members) that are all related. When looking at a system, the focus is not only on the related parts (family members), but also on the relationships between these parts. These related parts (family members) and the relationships between them form a whole, or a system (family). However, a family is more than just the individual members influencing one another; members sometimes come and go, but the family remains (Arnold, 2008).

The focus of family systems theory is therefore on the whole, or the family system, rather than on the individual (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Instead of just looking at the individuals in the family, the relationships between the members of the family should be considered the most important aspect. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008), a system, or family, cannot be fully understood if it is broken down into separate components, because these parts cannot be understood in isolation.

2.2.2 Interdependence

From a family systems perspective, the family may be seen as a system in which the various parts have an impact on one another (Arnold, 2008). The family system is made up of subsystems, which are interconnected. Examples of these are the marital relationship, the sibling relationship, and the parent-child relationship. Because of this interconnectedness, any change in an individual or relationship within the family system will have an influence on the other individuals or relationships in the family (Cowan, 2002).

A family system is a collection of people whose behaviour influences each member as well as the relationships between them (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). Something that affects one family member psychologically, socially or physically also has an effect on the other family members because of the interaction and interdependence of the members (Caldwell & Pichert, 1985).

2.2.3 Causality

Although the influence that family members have on one another is a vital aspect of family systems theory, it is important to note that this influence is not unidirectional (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). In a family system, causality is not linear. It is, instead, multidirectional, as family members all influence one another. One cannot therefore really say that something happened because of a specific event (Cowan, 2002). Thus A is not the cause of B, leading to event C. This linear causality, or the view that one event is the cause of the next, is not an adequate way of understanding families in all their complexities. Any search for the real cause is a waste of time (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). The process of relationships within a family is thus multidimensional, and it may be referred to as circular causality. The focus is on reciprocity, joint responsibility and recursion (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). A and B are in a relationship with each other and both are equally the cause and effect of each other's behaviour.

The focus of family systems is also on the present and the relationship between members of a family, at this moment in time.

2.2.4 Hierarchy

Eshleman (1974) acknowledges that people are part of a family system, but emphasises that the rankings or statuses, roles, norms and values of these people are very important when dealing with social systems, including family systems. The units to look at, or explore, are thus not the members only, but rather the interconnected statuses or positions of members and the expectations, values and roles accompanying these statuses. An example of an interrelated status in a family system is the parent-child relationship (Eshleman, 1974). There are certain roles and expectations linked to each status and the interactions between the members are important. Therefore, family systems theory rather considers the behaviour that occurs between family members than look at individual feelings or individual personality traits (Arnold, 2008).

According to Montgomery and Fewer (1988) there are three levels in a family system. The first level is the family as a whole, the second is the coalitions of members, and the third is the individual members of the family. A member may leave the family and both (the member and the family) will be able to adapt to the changing situation and survive. The existence of two of the levels is evident in this example.

A family subsystem consisting of two or more members is called a coalition. Coalitions form because “family members have stronger functional, generational, personality or affectional ties” with some family members than with others (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988, p. 107). Coalitions are very useful in a family situation, especially when two parents form a coalition to solve problems together. On the other hand, coalitions may also be negative for family functioning, such as when two members are in conflict and both try to form a coalition with a third member in

order to “win” a disagreement or argument. If this happens, the conflict will not necessarily be resolved and the relationships between the members may be affected negatively (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988).

2.2.5 Self-regulation

Systems, including family systems, are self-regulating and self-balancing (Cowan, 2002). Families, like trees and people, are biological systems and can therefore adapt to new information (Montgomery & Fewer, 1998). Biological systems receive information, make meaning of the information and then modify or change themselves to adapt to the changed situation (Cowan, 2002). This adaptation to a changed situation is influenced by the family’s previously established patterns of interaction. Each family therefore will adapt differently to different situations, because the existing interaction patterns differ from family to family (Montgomery & Fewer, 1998).

2.2.6 Feedback loops

As discussed in the previous section, a human system can regulate itself (Arnold, 2008; Cowan, 2002; Montgomery & Fewer, 1998). Self-regulating systems, or cybernetic systems, create stability or change by providing internal feedback. This feedback includes verbal and nonverbal communication. Positive feedback is feedback that attempts to produce a change in the system, and negative feedback is behaviour that tries to maintain the norm of the system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

Every family system will display positive and negative feedback (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). A new behaviour, role, rule or norm will be created in a family system if there is enough positive feedback. An example is the change of rules and roles when some family members reach adolescence and seek more independence and responsibility. The word positive should not

be confused with something good, as not all new behaviours can be considered positive (Arnold, 2008). Negative feedback attempts to return the system to the norm, whether the norm is something good or bad. An example is when a family tries to maintain old roles and rules, and continue with the same family activities, after moving to a new town or city.

2.2.7 Equilibrium

Positive and negative feedback often work against each other (Arnold, 2008). When there is too much positive feedback, negative feedback will emerge to stop the change. According to Arnold (2008, p. 100), “the system tends to act to maintain the norm”. In a family system, feedback is thus necessary to create change and also maintain stability. As stated previously, feedback is usually in the form of behaviour, including verbal and non-verbal communication (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). One can therefore conclude that communication is an important factor in how family systems produce change or maintain stability.

2.2.8 Managing information

An important aspect of family systems is how information is managed, and this is where family communication is very significant (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). There are three ways of managing information: It may be expressed accurately, withheld or expressed selectively, or expressed in a distorted way. Family characteristics will influence the degree to which a family member shares information. Conflict between members, harmony and intimacy are all factors that influence the way in which this sharing takes place. Other family members may then contribute to the shared information, agree or disagree with it, and make meaning of the information. The sharing of information therefore starts at an individual level, and is influenced by family dynamics. It then engages all members, at which point the sharing of information becomes communication (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988).

2.2.9 Boundaries

According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008, p. 89), “a boundary is an invisible line that separates an individual, a subsystem, or a system from outside surroundings”. Boundaries preserve the individuality of members, or contribute to the differentiation between one subsystem and another. Boundaries to the system also determine who is an insider and who is an outsider, and serve as “gatekeepers”, controlling the flow of information to and from the system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 89).

The amount of information that enters and leaves a system is referred to as the “relative openness” of the system’s boundaries (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). A family system is not totally open or closed. Openness and closure should rather be seen on a continuum. Therefore, in every family, some transmission of information will be restricted and some will be received freely. The openness and closedness of a family also depends on the specific context (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). When a system’s identity is threatened by a specific context or influence, closedness is a more appropriate option to maintain this identity of the system. On the other hand, openness can be appropriate when a system tries to adapt to a specific context. According to Becvar and Becvar (2003), a family should maintain a balance between openness and closure in order to function optimally.

When looking at families from a systems point of view, the members should not be considered in isolation. The most important aspect should be the relationships between the members (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). These relationships are defined and expressed by family communication. The following section, on the circumplex model of family systems, will focus more on the role of communication in defining and expressing the changing relationships between members.

2.3 The circumplex model of family systems

Olson and colleagues developed a family functioning theory based on the basic principles of family systems theory (Arnold, 2008). It was developed to narrow the space between theory, research and practice (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). The circumplex model of family systems is concerned with the interactions of family adaptability, family cohesion and family communication, and how these factors relate to family stress. According to Olson (2000), these three dimensions of the circumplex model, namely family adaptability, family cohesion and family communication, are often considered very significant in theoretical family frameworks and also in family therapy models.

2.3.1 Family cohesion

Cohesion may be described as the level of emotional closeness or bonding in a family (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). It includes coalitions, boundaries, space, time and emotional bonding and is essentially the way in which a family system creates a balance between togetherness and separation (Olson, 2000). Family systems that are overly connected, or too disconnected, are considered unbalanced and may create problems in relationships in the long term (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Family members in systems that are disengaged or too disconnected have limited commitment and attachment to their family. Enmeshed families, or families in which the levels of cohesion are very high, have too little independence (Olson, 2000). Individuals in a balanced family should maintain a balance between being independent of their families and staying connected to other family members. According to Olson (2000), families tend to be more functional in the long run if they balance independence and cohesion between members.

2.3.2 Family adaptability

Family adaptability refers to the ability of a family to achieve a balance between stability and change. It also refers to “the amount of change that exists in a family’s leadership patterns, roles and rules” (Arnold, 2008, p. 74). Olson (2000) refers to it as family flexibility. It is important that a family system has both stability and change (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Sometimes it is necessary for a family to make changes in roles, rules or relationships. According to Olson (1993), these changes in rules, relationships and the distribution of power are usually the result of developmental or situational stress.

A family system should maintain a balance between change and stability (flexibility) and not be too rigid or chaotic (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). As is the case with family cohesion, the extreme levels of family adaptation (rigid and chaotic) may create problems for families moving through different life cycles (Olson, 2000). Balanced or flexible family systems are families in which there is collaborative decision making and in which issues are open for negotiation. The roles of members are shared, and rules are age appropriate and can therefore change when necessary (Olson, 2000).

2.3.3 Family communication

It is important for families to maintain a balance regarding both cohesion and adaptability. The third or facilitating aspect of the circumplex model of family functioning is family communication. It is considered a “facilitating dimension” because it assists family members in changing the levels of cohesion and flexibility to meet the demands of certain situations or developmental tasks (Olson & Gorall, 2003, p. 520). Communication is thus seen as necessary to maintain a balance when it comes to closeness and separation, as well as change and stability (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

When looking at family communication, one must consider listening and speaking skills, the showing of respect, the amount of self-disclosure and the clarity of the messages conveyed by the whole family (Olson, 2000). Positive communication skills can assist a family in negotiating the levels of cohesion and flexibility. A study by Olson (2000) has found that families with good communication and problem-solving abilities are usually balanced with regard to family cohesion and family adaptability. Becvar and Becvar (2003) also state that positive communication may help families to change their levels of cohesion and flexibility, should the situation require it. These may be developmental changes, like a child becoming an adolescent, or certain events that take place in family members' lives.

2.4 Developmental perspective on adolescence

Shefer (2008, p. 86) states that adolescence begins with the appearance of "biological changes of puberty" and ends with "the cultural identity of adulthood". Newman and Newman (2008) identified 11 psychosocial developmental phases, based on the work of Erik Erikson. Newman and Newman differed from Erikson in distinguishing between early adolescence and late adolescence. The age range of the late adolescent stage, according to Newman and Newman (2008), is 18 to 24. The first-year students participating in the present study were all in the late adolescent stage of their lives, with ages ranging from 18 to 22. This is a stage in which important, and relatively permanent, decisions are made about career and lifestyle. Some important developmental tasks of this life stage include developing an own identity, making a career choice, being more independent, forming a gender role identity and deciding by which moral code to live (Meyer, 2005).

The psychosocial crisis or developmental issue of this stage is identity versus role or identity confusion (Wait, 2005). Identity, according to Erikson (cited in Eshleman, 1978), is the ability to achieve a sense of connection between a person's past, present and future. Identity attainment

includes the integration of different roles and the preservation of “a sense of personal continuity” in the integration of many different roles (Newman & Newman, 2008, p. 72). If all these roles cannot be integrated into a clear identity, role confusion becomes apparent.

Whereas the developmental theories of Ericson, and Newman and Newman, focused on individual characteristics, McGoldrick and Carter (2003) focused on the development of individuals within the family life cycle. It is not only the individuals within the family system, but also the family system as a whole, that are moving through different life stages. Relationships between members go through changes as the family moves from one life stage to the next. Therefore roles, boundaries and the relationships between members should continuously be redefined (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003).

Families with adolescents need to establish new roles for the parents and the adolescents, as the developmental stage of adolescence “marks a new definition of children within the family” (McGoldrick & Carter, 2003, p. 389). The parents need to maintain some degree of authority, but it is important that adolescents also have input in decision making. This can lead to the renegotiation of rules, limits and roles (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

When children in a family reach adolescence, factors such as the need for independence and autonomy may also challenge the family’s way of doing things (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Adolescents depend less on their parents and move towards peers for assistance and guidance. During this time of negotiation of independence, adolescents need to find a balance between individual freedom and connectedness to the family. The family system may experience strain if the adolescent becomes too isolated, or even if the adolescent is too dependent on the family members. It is not just the adolescents who have trouble with these changes. The parents

also have to learn to adapt to the changes in the family structure, the newfound independence of the adolescent, and the changing of rules and roles (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

Communication therefore is an important factor that may influence the way in which roles, limits and rules are negotiated. It has to facilitate the changes that the family faces and influences the family's ability to adapt to the changing situation. Communication also has an influence on the connectedness, or lack thereof, in the family system.

2.5 Conclusion

The present study explores affirming family communication from the adolescent's perspective. The discussion of family systems theory and the circumplex model has created a context in which the importance of family communication is to be understood. This was followed by a description of the developmental perspective on adolescence, portraying the importance of affirming communication within the family during this period. For the purpose of this study, the circumplex model and the developmental perspective on adolescence will mostly be used to conceptualise the research findings.

The relevant literature on family communication will be reviewed in Chapter Three, with specific attention being paid to the positive aspects of communication.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of relevant literature on family communication. Although the effects of incendiary communication in families are taken into account, the main focus of this chapter is on the effects of affirming family communication. A review of the literature in which affirming and incendiary communication is defined is provided, followed by a discussion of communication as a resilience factor. The way in which affirming family communication acts as a resilience factor is then explored by discussing various studies that examine the correlates of affirming and incendiary communication.

3.2 Exploring and defining affirming and incendiary communication

According to Vuchinich et al. (2002), positive communication includes the provision of warmth, support, agreement and intimacy. Gibb (cited in Alexander, 1973, p. 224) defines supportive communication as “genuine information seeking and information giving, spontaneous problem solving, empathic understanding, and equality”. From a systems theory point of view, Alexander (cited in Kingstone & Endler, 1997, p. 45) describes supportive communication as “system-integrating and adaptive”. Family communication that shows support, empathy and kindness therefore enables the family system to adapt to changes in structure, roles and circumstances, or changes in life stages.

Defensive communication, in contrast to supportive communication, is intimidating or harsh to others and elicits more defensive communication or behaviour from them. In this way a defensive or distrustful environment is created (Gibb, cited in Alexander, 1973). An example of defensive communication patterns is controlling or domineering behaviour, which comes across as indifference or superiority. Negative communication is portrayed by showing anger, and by

criticising or insulting the other person (Vuchinich et al., 2002). Defensive communication is also defined as “maladaptive and system-deteriorating” (Gibb, cited in Alexander, 1973). Thus, negative or defensive communication does not enable the family system to adapt to the necessary changes in structure or roles of particular life stages.

A study by Park, Tsong and Vo (2009) focused on affectionate communication between adolescents and their parents in Asian-American families. The participants were 421 college students from a West Coast university in North America. Park et al. (2009) defined affectionate communication as warmth and fondness communicated through verbal, nonverbal and supportive channels. Examples of nonverbal affection are hugging and kissing, or any other physical sign of affection, whereas verbal affection is defined as affection displayed through verbal statements (Floyd & Morman, cited in Park et al., 2009). Supportive affection is shown by helping or assisting someone experiencing problems. The results of Park et al.’s study showed that the parents of the participants displayed more supportive affection than nonverbal or verbal affection. Mothers also displayed more verbal affection than fathers in communicating with their children (Park et al., 2009). Furthermore, the study showed that there was no difference in the amount of affectionate communication received by male and female participants from their parents.

In a qualitative study by Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004) the focus was on communication about sexuality between low- and middle-income African-American mothers and daughters. Two dimensions of the process of communication, an affective element and a stylistic element, emerged from the data. The affective dimension included empathy conveyed, listening skills, comfort given and also the connection between the people communicating. It thus focused on the emotions conveyed while communicating, and also on the relationship between the communicators. Aspects of the stylistic dimension included body language, the setting and also

the level of interaction between the communicators. It focused more on the way things were said and included verbal and non-verbal aspects. The study did not focus so much on the content of what was being said, but more on the process of communication during these discussions on sexuality. The results suggest that the process of communication is just as important as the content (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004).

A programme developed by Drugsbridge, which educates young people on the dangers of drug use, was evaluated in a study by Mallick (2007). The main purpose of the study was to evaluate parent drug education as one of the most important aspects of drug prevention. The study portrayed certain aspects of communication that are important in drug education as identified by parents and unrelated adolescents. The adolescents were from a suburban London school and the sample was thus not limited to those considered to be at high risk for drug use. The parents in the sample all volunteered after seeing an advertisement promoting the study. The parents and adolescents said that an important aspect of communication was equality between generations. The adolescent participants said that they did not want to feel that they were being talked down to. It was important for them to be able to express their perspectives and to feel that these were being considered. The parents also commented that it was very valuable to hear the adolescents' perspectives on drug use. Both the parental and adolescent groups identified listening as another significant aspect of effective communication regarding drug education (Mallick, 2007).

Now that the review of studies defining and exploring affirming and incendiary communication in different circumstances is complete, positive communication as a resilience factor will be illustrated further in the next section.

3.3 Communication as a resilience factor

As discussed in Chapter One, positive family communication has been identified as a significant quality that promotes resilience in families (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004). Walsh (2003) defines resilience as the ability to survive life's challenges, and also the potential to bounce back from these problems. McCubbin et al. (1996) define family resilience as behaviours and abilities within families that help them withstand and cope with stressful conditions.

A study by Greeff and Van der Merwe (2004) focused on identifying the factors that promote resilience in post-divorce families. The participants were 98 families in which there had been a divorce one to four years before the families were contacted. The questionnaires, including an open-ended question, were completed by one child and one parent of the family. When asked in the open-ended question to identify important factors that enabled the family to adapt during the time after the divorce, 27.6% of the families reported open family communication.

In a study by Greeff and Du Toit (2009), resilience factors that helped remarried families to endure the challenges posed by the change in family structure were identified. Thirty-eight South African families in which the parents had remarried were approached. Both the parents and the children were asked to complete the questionnaires. A significant correlation was found between family functioning and affirming family communication. The results also showed that 68% of the participants believed that communication within the family promoted family resilience, and that honest and open communication had a significant supportive value (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009).

The above results were also confirmed by a study that identified resilience factors in 34 South African families that had a member suffering from a mental illness (Jonker & Greeff, 2009). The results showed that affirming communication correlated strongly with better family functioning

during a crisis. The study also found that incendiary or negative family communication had a significant negative correlation with family functioning. Although positive family communication correlated significantly with better family functioning in the quantitative results, it did not feature in the qualitative results. When participants were asked, in an open-ended question, to identify family qualities that enabled the family to cope with a member who had a mental illness, none of them identified family communication.

Garcia et al. (2008) conducted a study on the role of family protective factors, such as communication, caring and connection, in preventing emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. The participants were 3 178 Latino learners in grades 9 to 12. The study found a significant positive correlation between not being able to talk to one's parents and suicide attempts. A significant positive correlation was also found between suicidal ideation, emotional distress and not being able to talk to one's parents. The results showed that all gender groups and grades reported a higher level of communication with their mothers than with their fathers. The learners also reported that their mothers were around more than their fathers (Garcia et al., 2008).

A study conducted in northern Italy by Rosnati, Iafrate and Scabini (2007) focused on communication between parents and adolescents in biological, foster and adoptive families. Of these three family types or groups, parents in foster families reported having more difficulty with communication than parents in the two other groups. According to Rosnati et al. (2007), this shows that parent-adolescent communication is more difficult when the child is still formally part of his/her family of origin. The parents in biological and adoptive families reported a similar quality of communication. The adolescents in adoptive families reported a higher quality of communication with their parents than those in the two other groups. The results also showed that female adolescents in all three groups reported better communication with their parents than

male adolescents. Both male and female adolescents reported better communication with their mothers than with their fathers. The mothers participating in the study, in contrast to the fathers, reported more open communication with their children (Rosnati et al., 2007).

A study by Vuchinich et al. (2002) focused on levels of behavioural problems in children living with foster families. Sixty-nine foster families took part in the study and two parents and one foster child from each family were asked to complete the research questionnaires. The results showed that positive parent-child communication leads to lower levels of behavioural problems in children living with foster families. A significant relationship was also found between negative parent-child communication and higher levels of behavioural problems (Vuchinich et al., 2002).

Communication may also be considered a protective factor against high-risk sexual activities. A study by Pick, Givaudan, Sirkin and Ortega (2007) measured the outcome of a life skills programme developed to prevent HIV/AIDS by improving interpersonal skills such as communication, problem solving and negotiation among adolescents. The results showed that the programme had a significant effect on the adolescents' ability to discuss difficult topics such as sexual risk behaviour. Pick et al. (2007) also report that the gender of the child and parent often correlated with the amount and content of the discussions about difficult topics. Girls displayed a more positive attitude towards communicating about difficult topics, and both boys and girls found it easier to discuss sensitive topics with their mothers.

Another study exploring communication and its relationship to sexual behaviour was conducted by Dilorio, Dudley, Lehr and Soet (2000). This study examined factors that promote safe sex among college students in the United States of America. Dilorio et al. (2000) used a sample of 1349 college students between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The results showed that effective and

open communication in a family setting was positively correlated with the adolescents' ability to discuss safe sex with their partners. These adolescents not only found it easier to discuss safe sex with their partners, but their communication also led to safer sex practices.

A study by Wen, Van Duker and Olson (2009) on adolescent smoking illustrated that, although parent-adolescent closeness is a protective factor related to adolescents not smoking, positive parent-adolescent communication was not significantly related to adolescents not smoking. The results did show that when parent-adolescent communication is better, the protective effect of parent-adolescent closeness is even stronger. Although positive parent-adolescent communication on its own is not significantly related to adolescents not smoking, the interactive effect between parent-adolescent closeness and parent-adolescent communication correlates significantly with adolescents not smoking (Wen et al., 2009).

All the above studies show that communication is an important resilience factor in families. The next section focuses on the manner in which affirming communication promotes resilience in families. This happens in three ways: elucidating stressful conditions, facilitating open emotional expression and encouraging mutual problem solving.

3.4 Correlates of affirming or positive family communication

3.4.1 Clarifying stressful circumstances

According to Walsh (2003), effective communication practices lead to family members sharing information with and understanding one another. This, in turn, will lead to a better understanding of a stressful situation. Effective communication calms and clarifies stressful situations by encouraging and facilitating the sharing of important information. Family members are not always aware of all the facts and may jump to conclusions without listening to the whole explanation.

A study of the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and parenting stress in Hispanic families found that open parent-adolescent communication was associated with lower levels of parenting stress (Joshi & Gutierrez, 2006). Openness in communication also correlated positively with the quality of the relationship between parents and adolescents. Therefore, parents who have a mutually supportive relationship and engage in more open communication with their adolescents experience less stress in parenting. No significant gender differences were found in the communication, parental stress or relationships between the adolescents and their parents.

Open communication may also act as a protective factor in stressful situations, such as when an adolescent has a parent who has been diagnosed with cancer. Lindqvist, Schmitt, Santalahti, Romer and Piha (2007) found that adolescents who had a parent diagnosed with cancer experienced less psychological distress when there was open communication and flexible problem solving in the family. The results also showed that open family communication correlated significantly with healthy family functioning for the control group as well as for the experimental group. This demonstrates that open family communication may act as a protective factor for all adolescents, and not just of adolescents who have parents with cancer. Healthy family functioning also correlated with better mental health in the adolescents from both the control and experimental groups. Therefore, according to Lindqvist et al. (2007), open family communication contributes to healthy family functioning and this, in turn, contributes to better mental health in adolescents.

Heiman, Zinck and Heath (2008) conducted a study on families with adolescents with learning disabilities. They examined these families' perceptions of family communication and compared these to families with adolescents without learning disabilities. Heiman et al. (2008) found that,

contrary to their hypothesis, the parents of adolescents with learning disabilities and the parents of adolescents without learning disabilities had related perceptions of their family's communication. This included their perceptions of openness in communication and problems in communication. They also found that both groups of adolescents believed that their family communication was more problematic and less open than their parents perceived it to be. Both groups showed a higher perception of problematic maternal involvement. According to Heiman et al. (2008), adolescents may perceive attempts at parental communication as an intrusion into their personal space. This confirms the belief of Olson (1993) that adolescents need to have more autonomy and be more self-sufficient during this developmental stage.

A study by Barnes and Olson (1985) also showed that parents report more positive communication and fewer problems in communication than adolescents. Adolescents clearly describe family communication "with greater negativism" (Barnes & Olson, 1985, p. 443). The study showed that mothers believed that they had more positive communication with adolescents than what fathers have. The adolescents reported no significant difference in communication with their mothers or fathers (Barnes & Olson, 1985).

3.4.2 Emotional expression

Open emotional expression is also the result of effective communication (Walsh, 2003). Family members can create an environment in which there is trust, understanding and empathy. This secure environment may lead to family members sharing their feelings with one another. A study by Barnes and Olson (1985) focused on the quality of communication between parents and their adolescent children and its relationship with family functioning. The results showed that positive parent-adolescent communication correlates highly not only with family adaptability, but also with family cohesion and satisfaction with family life.

Negative communication in a family restricts family members from openly sharing feelings (Olson, 1993). When feelings cannot be shared with family members, it may lead to conflict. Family members may drift apart, the risk of substance abuse may increase, and destructive behaviour or depression may follow (Walsh, 2003).

Slesnick and Waldron (1997) conducted a study of communication patterns in 17 families with depressed adolescents and 20 families with non-depressed adolescents living in New Mexico. The results showed that families with depressed adolescents communicated differently from families with non-depressed adolescents. Communication in families with depressed adolescents tended to be unclear and the messages conveyed tended to be mixed. The parents in the group with depressed adolescents also tended to be more hostile towards their children than the parents with non-depressed adolescents.

A study by Yu et al. (2006) in the Bahamas aimed to determine the relationship between risk behaviour and depression in youths, and communication between parents and their children. The results showed that youths who perceived communication with their parents as strained were more likely to be involved in future high-risk behaviours such as substance abuse, unprotected sex and violent conduct. The results also illustrated that there was a significant positive relationship between past high-risk behaviour and adolescents' perceptions of impaired parent-adolescent communication. They also found that those youths who were depressed perceived communication with their parents as being less open and more problematic (Yu et al., 2006).

A study by Davalos, Chavez and Guardiola (2005) aimed to determine the relationship between family communication and delinquency. The participants in this study were 576 adolescents: the experimental group consisting of school dropouts and the control group made up of learners attending school. The questionnaires included questions on a wide range of delinquent

behaviour, convictions, parental school support and family communication. The results showed that there was a relationship between delinquency in adolescence and perceived lack of family communication. According to Davalos et al. (2005), adolescents may feel that no concern about their lives or problems is shown, and this could lead to high-risk behaviour. The results also illustrated that the better the perceived family communication, the less likely learners were to engage in delinquent behaviour. No significant difference was found in the importance of positive family communication between males and females.

3.4.3 Mutual problem solving

Effective communication encourages mutual problem solving, which includes joint decision making and conflict management (Walsh, 2003). Positive communication includes accommodating the points of view of other family members and working together to find solutions to problems and conflict.

A study by Egeci and Gencöz (2006) aimed to determine the relationship between communication skills and relationship satisfaction for intimate partners in Turkey. The participants were 142 college students involved in romantic relationships. The results showed that communication skills correlated positively with relationship satisfaction. The researchers also found that negative communication weakened a couple's ability to handle conflict and solve problems constructively. According to Egeci and Gencöz (2006), listening to the views of one's partner, being open to new perspectives and trying to clear up any misunderstandings before coming to a conclusion all contribute to constructive problem solving.

Giallo and Gavidia-Payne (2006) conducted a study on family, parent and child factors acting as predictors of better adjustment for the siblings of children with a disability. The participants were 49 Australian families with children who had physical, sensory, developmental or intellectual

disabilities. The results for the family factors showed that effective problem solving and family communication were both factors that promoted better adjustment in the siblings of children with a disability. According to Giallo and Gavidia-Payne (2006), poor problem solving and communication within the family tend to worsen any adjustment problems that siblings are experiencing.

Barnes and Olson (1985) say that positive family communication is vital during the adolescent years because it facilitates identity development and the ability to accept certain roles. Family communication affects the way that adolescents explore and form their identities, and supportive family communication leads to the unrestricted exploration of identity issues. Olson (1993) states that adolescents need more independence, autonomy and control in the family system. If they desire some sort of change in the family system, the only way these changes can be made effectively is through positive communication. Positive family communication is important because it facilitates the way in which family members, especially adolescents, balance independence from and connectedness to the family (Cooper, Grotevant, Moore, & Condon, cited in Barnes & Olson, 1985). Meyer (2005) states that autonomy from parents is successfully achieved through clear communication between parents and their children. If expectations and boundaries are clearly and reasonably communicated by parents, the result will be more assertive, independent and responsible children.

3.5 Conclusion

The review of the literature concerning affirming family communication, or positive communication between parents and adolescents, shows the importance of clear and supportive communication between family members. The literature also illustrates that communication acts as a resilience factor, buffering families and adolescents from life challenges or stressful

circumstances. Following this review of the related literature, the research methodology of the study will be discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the research method of the present study will be discussed by focusing on the research aims and objectives, the research design and the characteristics of the participants. This is followed by an overview of the measures used in the study and a discussion of the procedure used to collect the data. The ethical considerations and methods of qualitative and quantitative data analysis will be described toward the end of the chapter.

4.2 Research aims and objectives

The aim of the present study was to determine the nature of the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. The relationship between family functioning and the perceived quality of communication between the adolescent and both parents was also considered. This was followed by the main aim of this research, which was to explore and define affirming communication from an adolescent's perspective.

The objectives of the present study were:

- To quantitatively determine the relationship between family functioning and affirming family communication,
- To quantitatively determine the relationship between family functioning and openness in communication with the mother and the father respectively,
- To quantitatively determine the relationship between family functioning and incendiary family communication, and

- To quantitatively determine the relationship between family functioning and problems in communication with the mother and father respectively.

The main objective of the present study was to qualitatively explore, from an adolescent's point of view, the nature of affirming family communication and how it is portrayed in families. Then, as the second qualitative component, the meaning of affirming family communication for the individual and the family as a whole was explored.

4.3 Research design

For the purpose of the present study, a cross-sectional, quantitative survey research design was combined with an exploratory, qualitative design. The quantitative data was collected by asking the participants to complete self-report questionnaires. The qualitative component of the present study consisted of focus groups discussing the topic of affirming family communication. The purpose of exploratory focus groups is the creation, discovery, identification and explanation of thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Fern, 2001).

This combination of data collection methods is known as the triangulation of methods. According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004), triangulation refers to the act of considering something from more than one angle. One form of triangulation is the use of multiple research methods, but triangulation may also refer to the use of more than one investigator, or the use of various theories, or multiple data sets (Todd, Nerlich & McKeown, 2004). The benefit of triangulation is that the two research methods complement each other because they have different weaknesses and strengths. A more comprehensive view of the topic under investigation can thus be obtained.

4.4 Participants

4.4.1 Sampling strategy

After receiving permission from the Ethics Committee of the University of Stellenbosch to continue with the research, the Department of Psychology and the lecturer responsible for supervision were asked for permission to approach first-year Psychology students. Permission was obtained and the three first-year Psychology classes at the University of Stellenbosch in the Western Cape, South Africa were approached. There were 1 167 students registered for first-year Psychology and each class consisted of approximately 300 students. The reason for this lower total number is that some students might have dropped the module after a few weeks of class, or did not attend classes regularly. Having obtained the lecturer's consent, the researcher spoke to the students during the last ten minutes of one of their lectures.

Firstly, the aims and goals of the study were explained to the students. Secondly, the researcher informed them of the inclusion criteria of the study and invited those who qualified to participate. The inclusion criteria will be explained in detail in the next section. The students who qualified could choose whether they wanted to participate. Thus none of the other classmates could distinguish between students who chose not to participate and those who did not qualify to participate. The researcher made it clear that participation was voluntary and that participants could resign at any time without consequences. Thirdly, the researcher explained the procedure to the students in detail. They were also informed that there was no material or monetary reward for participating in the present study.

The students who volunteered to participate were asked to complete the research questionnaires, which constituted the quantitative component of the study. The students were also invited to participate in the focus groups in which the topic of affirming family communication was

discussed. They volunteered to be part of the focus groups by providing the researcher with their e-mail addresses and choosing one of the time slots set out on the cover page of the questionnaires (see Appendix A). The proposed times were between one o'clock and two o'clock every afternoon of the following week. The students were asked to mark more than one time slot so that most of them could be accommodated.

Fourteen students volunteered to take part in the focus group discussions and the researcher divided them into three groups according to the time slots that they had chosen. The researcher also tried to put students of the same mother tongue in the same focus groups. This proved to be a difficult task and only one focus group consisted of only English-speaking participants. The participants from the other two focus groups were both English and Afrikaans speaking.

4.4.2 Inclusion criteria

Only first-year Psychology students between the ages of 18 and 22 who were living with both parents in 2009, or 2010, were invited to participate in the present study. The parents did not have to be the biological parents of the adolescent, but for the purpose of the present study they had to be mother and father figures.

4.4.3 Demographic information of participants

Of the approximately 900 students approached by the researcher in the three classes of psychology students, 100 students agreed to participate in the quantitative component of the present study. All 100 students who agreed to take part in the study met the inclusion criteria, namely being first-year Psychology students, in the age range of 18 to 22 years, and living with two parental figures. A further 17 out of the 100 students who took part in the quantitative component of this research volunteered to take part in the focus groups. These students were e-

mailed by the researcher and informed of the time slot allocated to them. Of these 17 students, 14 replied to the e-mails from the researcher and attended the focus groups.

Of the 100 data sets completed, 83 (83%) of the participants indicated that they were female and 17 (17%) indicated that they were male. Of the 1 167 students registered for first-year Psychology, 820 (70%) were female and 347 (30%) were male. According to Fife-Shaw (2000), females generally tend to be more co-operative than males when it comes to volunteering for participation in research studies. This is evident when taking into account the gender of the students who volunteered to participate in the present study, particularly in the focus groups. The mean age of the participants was 18.7 years ($SD = 0.9$), with 54 participants (54%) being 18 years old and only one (1%) being 22. When asked about their race, 84 (84%) stated that they were white, 14 (14%) coloured, one (1%) Indian and one (1%) African. This is in accordance with the race ratio of students registered for the module. Of the students registered for first-year Psychology, 863 (74%) were white, 195 (17%) were coloured, 11 (1%) were Indian and 98 (8%) were African. The home language of 58 (58%) was Afrikaans, of 41 (41%) was English and one participant (1%) was Xhosa speaking.

Information about the parents and siblings of the participants was also obtained from the demographic questionnaires completed by the participants. For 83 (83%) of the parents it was their first marriage, for 14 (14%) it was their second marriage, and two (2%) of the parents were living together without being married. The mean age of the mothers was 47.2 years ($SD = 4.3$), and 74 (74%) had an occupation outside of the home. The fathers' mean age was 49.55 years ($SD = 4.8$), and 96 (96%) of them were working outside the home. Of the 100 families, the mean number of children per family was 2.7 ($SD = 1.2$). The minimum number of children per family was one and the maximum number of children was twelve.

4.5 Measures

4.5.1 Demographic questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was developed (see Appendix B) to obtain information such as gender, age, race and home language. The questionnaire also had questions about the parents, siblings and family structure. This demographic questionnaire was available in both Afrikaans and English.

4.5.2 Quantitative measures

In addition to the demographic questionnaire, quantitative data was collected by using the Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSC) (see Appendix C), the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) (see Appendix D) and the Family Attachment Changeability Index 8 (FACI8) (see Appendix E). The research questionnaires were originally developed in English and the Afrikaans translation was done professionally by using the translation and back-translation technique. For the purpose of the present study, the questionnaires were available in English and Afrikaans and participants could choose to complete the questionnaires in the language with which they were most comfortable. The questionnaires are discussed in the following section.

4.5.2.1 The Family Problem Solving and Communication Index

The Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSC) (see Appendix C) was developed by McCubbin, McCubbin and Thomson (1988) and is used to measure positive and negative communication patterns that play a part in family coping. The FPSC consists of 10 items and the items are completed on a four-point Likert-type scale (0 = False, 1 = Mostly false, 2 = Mostly true, 3 = True). It has two subscales, Affirming communication and Incendiary communication, each consisting of five items. Affirming communication refers to positive

communication that expresses support and understanding. This type of communication has a calming effect on a situation. Incendiary communication is a negative form of family communication in that it intensifies conflict situations. “We are respectful of each other’s feelings” is an example of an item from the Affirming communication subscale, and “We yell and scream at each other” is an example from the Incendiary communication subscale. For the purpose of the present study, only the total scores for the subscales were used to determine the amount of affirming communication and incendiary communication used by the families of the participants.

The internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for the total scale is .89. The internal reliability for the Affirming communication subscale is .86 and for the Incendiary communication subscale it is .78 (McCubbin et al., 1988). Affirming communication has been correlated positively with family coherence, family hardiness, and self-actualisation (McCubbin et al., 1988). In the present study the following Cronbach’s alphas were found: FPSC total scale = .84; Affirming communication subscale = .82; and Incendiary communication subscale = .73.

4.5.2.2 The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) (see Appendix D) was developed by Barnes and Olson in 1982 and can be used to assess adolescents’ perceptions of communication with their parents and vice versa (Heiman et al., 2008). The scale consists of three questionnaires, two to be completed by the adolescent and one to be completed by each parent. Only the adolescents participating in the present study were asked to complete questionnaires: one on communication with the mother figure and one on communication with the father figure.

The 20 items of the scale are completed on a five-point Likert-type scale with choices ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The PACS has two subscales: Openness in family

communication and Problems in family communication, each consisting of 10 items. Positive family communication is measured with the Open family communication subscale. An example of an item from this subscale is “My mother/father tries to understand my point of view”. According to Brassard (2002), the Openness in family communication subscale measures the amount of freely expressed emotions and ideas in parent-adolescent communication. It also reflects communication that conveys understanding and honesty. The Problems in family communication subscale measures negative family communication (Brassard, 2002). An example of an item is “There are topics I avoid discussing with my mother/father”. The Problems in family communication subscale reflects negative communication, such as caution and hesitancy when sharing thoughts and feelings. As with the Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSC), only the total scores of the two subscales were used to determine the openness and problems in communication between the participants and their mothers and fathers.

The alpha reliability for the total scale is .88. The internal reliability from the total sample of parents and adolescents is .87 for Open communication and .78 for Problems in family communication (Heiman et al., 2008). In the present study, the alpha reliability for the Openness in communication with the mother subscale was .93; Problems in communication with the mother subscale was .80; Openness in communication with the father subscale was .92; and Problems in communication with the father subscale was .82. The internal reliability for the Communication with the mother subscale (total score) was .80, and the reliability for the Communication with the father subscale (total score) was .86.

4.5.2.3 The Family Attachment Changeability Index 8

The Family Attachment Changeability Index (FACI8) (see Appendix E) is a measure of family functioning and was adapted by McCubbin, Thomson and Elver from the Family Adaptability

and Cohesion Evaluation Scale IIA (FACES IIA) (McCubbin, Thomson & Elver, 1995). For the purpose of the present study, the total score was calculated and used as a measure of family functioning. The measure was designed to be sensitive to ethnicity, but can still be used to measure family functioning in both Caucasian and African-American families (McCubbin et al., 1995).

The FACI8 has 16 five-point Likert-type items and consists of two subscales, each with eight items. The two subscales are Attachment and Changeability. The Attachment subscale measures the attachment of the family members to each other. This subscale therefore signifies the strength of the attachment between members. An example of an item is “In our family everyone goes his/her own way”. The Changeability subscale determines the amount of flexibility in the relationships between family members. This may refer to the flexibility of rules and the consideration of other family members’ ideas and opinions. An example of an item from the Changeability subscale is “Each family member has input in major family decisions” (McCubbin et al., 1995).

The internal reliability of the Attachment scale for the youth is .73 and it is .80 for the Changeability scale (McCubbin et al., 1995). In the present study, the alpha reliability for the total scale was .82; for the Attachment subscale it was .81; and for the Changeability subscale it was .86.

4.5.3 Qualitative measure

The qualitative data was gathered by conducting focus groups. Focus groups are a type of group interview and may lead to new ideas emerging from within a social context (Breen, 2006). The data gathered from focus groups may consist of many different ideas and feelings from the individuals. It may also show where individuals disagree on certain topics. In this way, focus

groups may generate group discussions and are suitable for the exploration of social behaviour, the explanation of social issues and the study of group dynamics (Hennink, 2007).

Focus groups may consist of four to eight participants and are usually conducted in a semi-structured way (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006). When a focus group is too big, it may be difficult to manage the group and it also limits input being given by all the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups that are too small limit the number of ideas and opinions being offered. According to Millward (2000), most researchers agree that the standard duration of a focus group should be between one and two hours. About ten focus group interviews are needed for a complex research question (Breen, 2006). Rabiee (2004) suggests that, for a less complicated research question, about three or four focus groups will be necessary to gain enough information.

According to Krueger and Casey (2000), the facilitator of the focus groups should have the ability to listen closely to what the participants are saying and should not influence them by giving his/her own opinion. A relaxed atmosphere should be created to encourage participants to share their feelings and opinions. The facilitator must also make it clear that he/she is there to learn from the participants (Millward, 2000).

Even though the facilitator may manage to create a relaxed atmosphere and try not to influence the participants by giving his/her own opinion, the participants are still influenced by the presence of the facilitator or interviewer. This is called the interviewer effect (Breakwell, 2000). To control for interviewer effects, and to ensure that the stimulus influencing the participants remained constant, the same interviewer facilitated all the focus groups. According to Breakwell (2000), people who are interviewed also disclose more information if they think the interviewer is similar to themselves. It therefore was an advantage that the facilitator, or interviewer, in the

present study was also a student who dressed and talked similarly to the first-year students being interviewed.

An advantage of using focus groups is that a large amount of data can be collected in a relatively short time (Rabiee, 2004). More advantages are that the participants learn from each other's viewpoints, and that they are able to discuss certain issues regarding the topic. Each participant has a different point of view and this may lead to a wider range of ideas and discussions (Bless et al., 2006). If the setting in which the focus groups take place is relaxed, participants are able to enjoy the social interaction with each other while gaining new ideas (Hennink, 2007).

There are also some disadvantages to gathering data by conducting focus groups (Bless et al., 2006). Some participants may find it difficult to express their views openly, while others, with better verbal skills, may dominate the discussion. In a group situation, social desirability may also play a role, especially when the participants talk about sensitive topics. The facilitator must ensure that the respondents have a safe and comfortable environment in which they can talk to each other. Everyone in the group should also have the opportunity to voice their opinions freely and without being judged (Bless et al., 2006).

Affirming communication was explored by discussing the following questions in the focus groups:

- How would you describe affirming communication in your family?
- What verbal communication used by family members contributes to affirming communication?
- What non-verbal communication used by family members contributes to affirming family communication?
- What does affirming communication look like in your family?

- What does affirming family communication mean to you as an individual?
- What does affirming family communication mean to the family as a whole?

4.6 Procedure

The students who met the requirements for participation and who were willing to participate in the study were asked to complete consent forms and the demographic questionnaires. These were handed out by the researcher for the students to complete in the lecture hall. The research questionnaires took about fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. The researcher made sure that the classes were conducted in a lecture hall and time slot with no lecture immediately afterwards. The students could therefore sit in the Psychology lecture venue and complete the questionnaires without interruptions from students arriving early for the next lecture. The students who wanted to participate in the study but who had to go to another lecture were allowed to take the questionnaires with them to complete at home. The researcher was available during the next Psychology lecture so that they could return the completed questionnaires. The lecturer also volunteered to collect any questionnaires that were handed in the following week.

All the research questionnaires were available in both English and Afrikaans to ensure that the students were able to complete the questionnaires in the language with which they felt most comfortable. The participants were also informed about the second part of the study and asked to participate in the focus groups.

The researcher then divided the students who had volunteered to take part in the focus groups into three groups. The students were contacted via e-mail and informed of the venue and time for the focus group discussions. The night before each focus group discussion, the researcher sent each participant a text message reminding him/her of the time and venue for the focus group discussion.

A private and quiet room in the Psychology department was chosen as the area in which the focus groups took place. There were three focus groups consisting of five, five and four students respectively – two on the same day and one the following day. The researcher explained to the participants that everyone should be given the opportunity to voice their opinions freely and that each participant's culture, religion, language and opinions should be respected. The researcher facilitated the groups by asking the semi-structured questions (see Appendix F) and encouraging further discussion of the topic. The discussions were recorded and the voice recordings of the focus groups were deleted after the data had been saved in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. The duration of the focus groups was 46 minutes, 42 minutes and 40 minutes respectively.

4.7 Ethical considerations

4.7.1 Informed consent

The goals and aims of the present study were explained to all the participants. They were also informed of the procedure that would be followed. The researcher emphasised the fact that participation was voluntary and that the participants could withdraw at any point in the study. An informed consent form, available in Afrikaans and English, was attached to all the research questionnaires and the participants were asked to read through it before giving written consent. The informed consent form contained information about confidentiality, anonymity and the right of participants to refuse to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable.

4.7.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

The participants were informed that their privacy would be protected and that participation was anonymous. The participants were not required to provide their names on the research questionnaires, but those who volunteered to participate in the focus groups were required to

provide their e-mail addresses on the cover page of the questionnaires. These were seen by the researcher only and will be kept confidential. The completed questionnaires were viewed only by the researcher, the supervisor of the researcher and the statistician who had access to the Excel sheets with the data from the questionnaires.

4.7.3 Interview ethics

Before the focus group discussions started, the researcher explained to the participants that they were not required to answer questions that made them uncomfortable in any way, and that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the questions. The focus group participants introduced themselves to one another and were told by the researcher that their names would be kept confidential. They were also asked not to disclose any information about the other participants. The participants were asked if they were comfortable with the voice recordings of the focus groups. The researcher assured them that the voice recordings would be deleted after the data had been saved in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. They were informed that their information would not be linked to their names in any way. The participants were also provided with the e-mail addresses and telephone numbers of both the researcher and the researcher's supervisor, should they have any further questions or problems.

4.8 Data analyses

4.8.1 Quantitative data analyses

The quantitative data was analysed using Statistica 7 (StatSoft Inc., 2005), a statistical software package. Firstly, descriptive statistics were obtained for the demographic information of the participants. Percentages and frequencies were calculated to describe the participants' gender, age, race and home language. Information about the siblings, parents' ages, and the work and living conditions of the participants was also portrayed.

A reliability analysis was conducted and the Cronbach's alphas for each measurement scale used in the study were calculated. Pearson correlation coefficients were also calculated to determine the relationships between variables (Field, 2005). According to Graziano and Raulin (2007), this correlation index is the one most commonly used to determine the degree of linear relationship between variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationship between family functioning and affirming family communication. They were also used to determine the relationship between family functioning and openness in communication with the mother and father respectively.

Multiple regression analyses were then performed on the data. Multiple regression is a statistical method in which the relationship between multiple independent variables and a single dependent variable is examined (Field, 2005). Best-subsets regression analyses were conducted, with family functioning as the dependent variable and the demographic variables and different communication variables as predictor, or independent, variables. According to M. Kidd (personal communication, August 20, 2010), best-subsets regression analyses are conducted by putting all the potential combinations of variables into regression models. To determine which predictor, or independent, variables predict family functioning best, the set that gives the best fit, based on the R^2 value, was identified. A statistician was consulted regarding the analysis of the quantitative data.

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were also conducted to determine whether there were any differences between genders in the adolescents' evaluation of the family's functioning, affirming family communication, openness in communication with the mother, and openness in communication with the father.

4.8.2 Qualitative data analysis

After the voice recordings of the focus groups had been transcribed by the researcher, thematic content analysis was performed to make meaning of the large amount of raw data. This entailed the continued reading of the transcript and the identification of units of meaning, or codes, and emerging themes relating to the research topic (Henning et al., 2004). The emphasis in content analysis is primarily on meaning and not on quantification (Millward, 2000). According to Krippendorff (cited in Wilson & Hammond, 2000), content analysis is the categorisation of open-ended material. Content analysis is “mechanical” because it involves the organisation of data into categories. It is also “interpretative” as it involves the interpretation of the meaningfulness of these categories in terms of the questions that were asked (Millward, 2000, p. 319).

Firstly, the transcripts were read and reread to gain an overall impression of the data. The next step was to work through the data and identify important units of meaning. This division of data into small units of meaning is called coding (Henning et al., 2004). These codes may be groups of words, phrases or sentences (Millward, 2000). The units were then systematically named or labelled. First-level coding, or open coding, is merely descriptive and may be viewed as labels for groups of words (Neuman, 2003). In the present study the codes were produced inductively by examining the data first.

According to Neuman (2003), axial coding is the grouping together of the codes into categories. In axial coding the focus is more on the examination of the coded themes from the open coding than on the data itself. In a thematic content analysis, a coding frame has to be created. A coding frame is a set of categories to which the codes are allocated (Millward, 2000). Categories contain similar codes (Henning et al., 2004). The categories were then grouped together and themes were

identified. According to Neuman (2003, p. 190), all categories should be “mutually exclusive”, which means that each item or code can be attributed to only one category.

According to Neuman (2003, p. 444), the last stage is called selective coding and it occurs during the last pass through the data. It involves scanning the data and codes again and looking for cases from the data that illustrate themes. The search through the data was guided by the major themes identified previously. It is important to remember that qualitative research is “nonlinear and cyclical” and that the researcher can collect new data and gain new insights with every pass through the data (Neuman, 2003, p. 141). It therefore is important to go through the transcripts many times to remain close to the data.

4.8.2.1 Trustworthiness

Although the trustworthiness of qualitative research is sometimes questioned by positivists, there are qualitative researchers who have attempted to enhance the trustworthiness of this form of research (Shenton, 2004). Guba (cited in Shenton, 2004) suggested four criteria that can be applied to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative research. These are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility refers to the way in which the findings are congruent with reality (Shenton, 2004). According to Lyons (2000) there are various ways of giving credibility to qualitative findings. As discussed in the previous section, it is important to keep close to the data. The analysis of the data should therefore be indicative and reflective of the raw data. Breakwell (2000) suggests that audio taping the interviews ensures their permanence and will enable other researchers to verify the interpretation of the data. Interview data may also be validated by complementing it with other types of data (Breakwell, 2000). In the present study, quantitative measures, such as

questionnaires, were used to supplement the qualitative data. This mixture of methods is known as triangulation (Henning et al., 2004).

According to Shenton (2004), transferability is the degree to which the results of a study can be generalised to a wider population. This is problematic in qualitative research, as the sample is usually too small to apply the findings to other situations and populations. Some researchers still argue that transferability can be enhanced by including a full description of the demographic details of the participants.

Dependability, or reliability, refers to the degree to which similar results would be obtained if the study was to be repeated (Shenton, 2004). The researcher provides a thorough description of the research design, including the methods of data collection. This will enable other researchers to repeat or duplicate the present study to see if similar results are obtained. The focus group questions are also included so that readers can see how the qualitative data was gathered and to assist other researchers in repeating the study. Sufficient documentation, such as audiotapes, transcripts of these tapes and a thorough description of the research procedure, guarantee the transparency of the process of data analysis (Lyons, 2000).

In qualitative research the researcher is part of the research process and his/her views influence the data and data interpretation (Lyons, 2000). Confirmability refers to making certain that the results are based on the thoughts, feelings and ideas of the participants and not on those of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). One way in which this may be ensured is for the researcher to admit to his/her own predispositions. Reflexivity is when the researcher discusses and reflects on his/her own beliefs and involvement in the study (Lyons, 2000). It is necessary to be self-reflective when working with the data, because these reflections may have an impact on the processes of data collection and analysis.

4.9 Conclusion

The present study aimed to ascertain the nature of the relationship between family functioning and affirming family communication, as well as the relationship between family functioning and the amount of positive communication between the adolescent and the mother and father respectively. These relationships were examined using quantitative data analysis methods, including Pearson's correlations and multiple regression analysis. The main objective of the present study, which was to explore the nature of affirming family communication, was performed in a qualitative manner by using thematic content analysis. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are reported in Chapter 5, followed by the discussion of these results in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The research aims and objectives of the present study were discussed in Chapter Four. In this chapter, the results of the quantitative data are presented first. The Pearson correlation coefficients and multiple regression analysis will then be displayed. This is followed by some additional quantitative data consisting of gender comparisons regarding family functioning and family communication. After the presentation of the quantitative results, the results of the content analysis of the focus groups are provided. These qualitative results, examining and defining affirming family communication from an adolescent's point of view, are the main focus of the this study.

5.2 Quantitative results

5.2.1 Pearson correlations

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. Furthermore, the relationship between family functioning and openness in communication between mother and adolescent, as well as the relationship between family functioning and openness in communication between father and adolescent, was also examined. In addition, Pearson correlations between incendiary family communication and family functioning, and family functioning and problems in communication with the mother and father respectively, were also calculated.

Affirming and incendiary family communication were measured using the Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSC). Openness and problems in communication, with the mother and father respectively, were measured with the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale

(PACS). The Family Attachment Changeability Index (FACI8 Total score) was used to get an indication of family functioning.

5.2.1.1 Affirming family communication (Affirming communication subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

A Pearson correlation was calculated to determine the relationship between affirming family communication (measured with the FPSC) and family functioning (FACI8). The result is shown graphically in Figure 1.

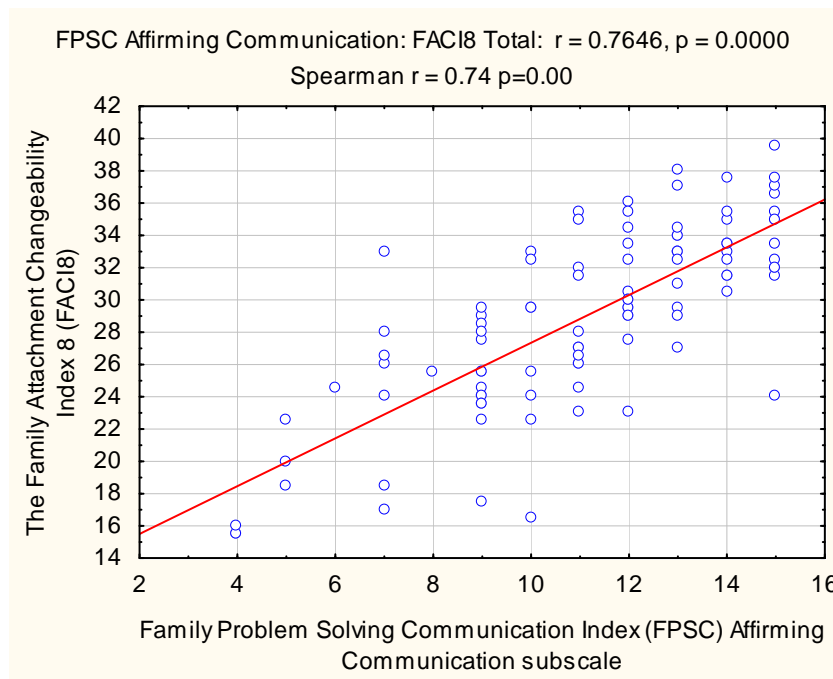


Figure 1. Scatterplot showing the relationship between affirming communication (FPSC) and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

It is evident from the scatterplot in Figure 1 that a significant and strong positive correlation was found between affirming communication and family functioning ($r = 0.7646$, $p < .001$). This significant positive correlation suggests that more affirming communication in a family is related to better family functioning.

5.2.1.2 Openness in communication with mother (Openness in communication with mother subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

The relationship between openness in communication between the adolescent and the mother (measured with the PACS) and family functioning (FACI8) is graphically illustrated in Figure 2.

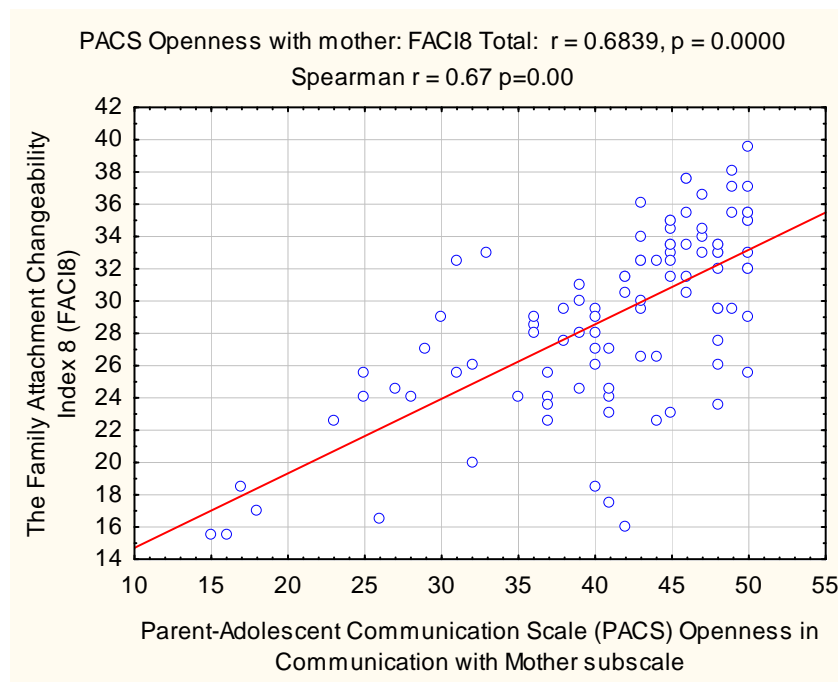


Figure 2. Scatterplot showing the relationship between openness in communication with the mother (PACS) and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

As illustrated in Figure 2, a significant positive correlation was found between openness in communication with the mother and family functioning ($r = 0.6839$, $p < .001$). Therefore, according to the perceptions of the adolescents, increased levels of openness in communication with the mother are related to higher levels of family functioning.

5.2.1.3 Openness in communication with father (Openness in communication with father subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

A Pearson correlation test statistic was calculated to examine the relationship between openness in communication between the adolescent and the father (measured with the PACS) and family functioning (FACI8). The relationship is shown in graph form in Figure 3.

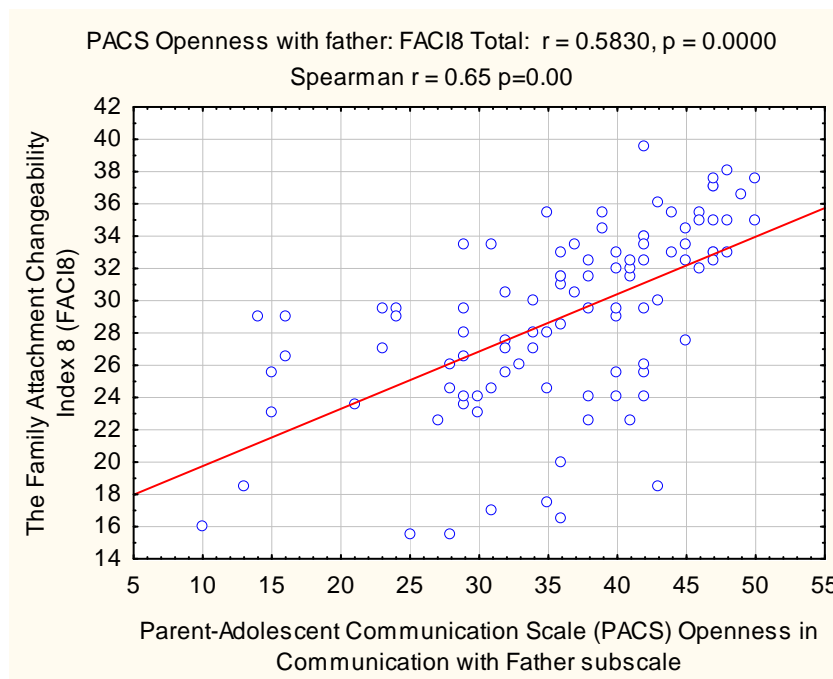


Figure 3. Scatterplot showing the relationship between openness in communication (PACS) with the father and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

It is evident from the scatterplot in Figure 3 that a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.5830$, $p < .001$) was found between open communication between the adolescent and the father and the level of family functioning. This suggests that, according to the perceptions of the adolescents, increased levels of openness in communication with the father are related to higher levels of family functioning.

5.2.2 Additional Pearson correlations

5.2.2.1 Incendiary family communication (Incendiary communication subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

The relationship between incendiary family communication (measured with the FPSC) and family functioning (FACI8) is graphically illustrated in Figure 4.

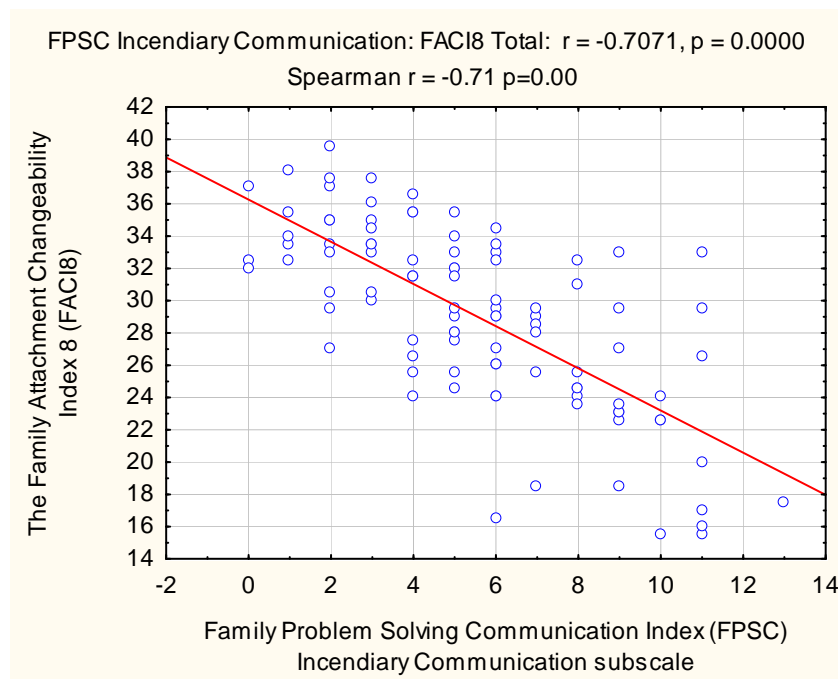


Figure 4. Scatterplot showing the relationship between incendiary communication (FPSC subscale) and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

As illustrated in Figure 4, a significant and strong negative correlation was found between incendiary family communication and family functioning ($r = -0.7071$, $p < .001$). A higher level of incendiary or negative communication in the family is thus indicative of lower levels of family functioning.

5.2.2.2 Problems in communication with mother (Problems in communication with mother subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

The relationship between problems in communication between the adolescent and the mother (measured with the PACS) and family functioning (FACI8) is graphically illustrated in Figure 5.

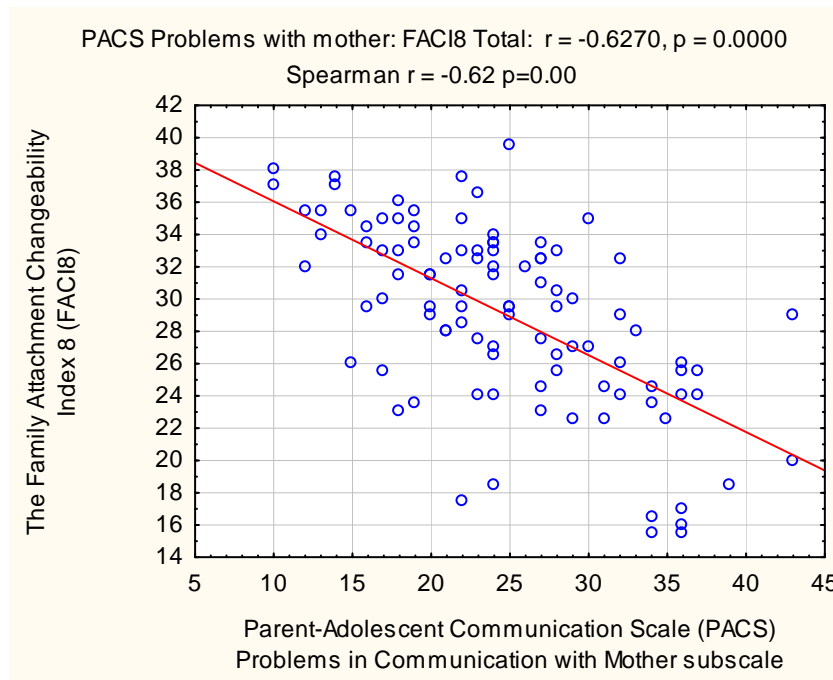


Figure 5. Scatterplot showing the relationship between problems in communication between the adolescent and the mother (Problems in communication with mother subscale) and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

Figure 5 illustrates the significant negative relationship between problems in communication with the mother and family functioning ($r = -0.6270$, $p < .001$). This suggests that an adolescent's perception of increased problems in communication with the mother is related to lower levels of family functioning.

5.2.2.3 Problems in communication with father (Problems in communication with father subscale) and family functioning (FACI8)

A Pearson correlation test statistic was calculated to examine the correlation between problems in communication between the adolescent and the father (measured with the PACS) and family functioning (FACI8). This relationship is graphically illustrated in Figure 6.

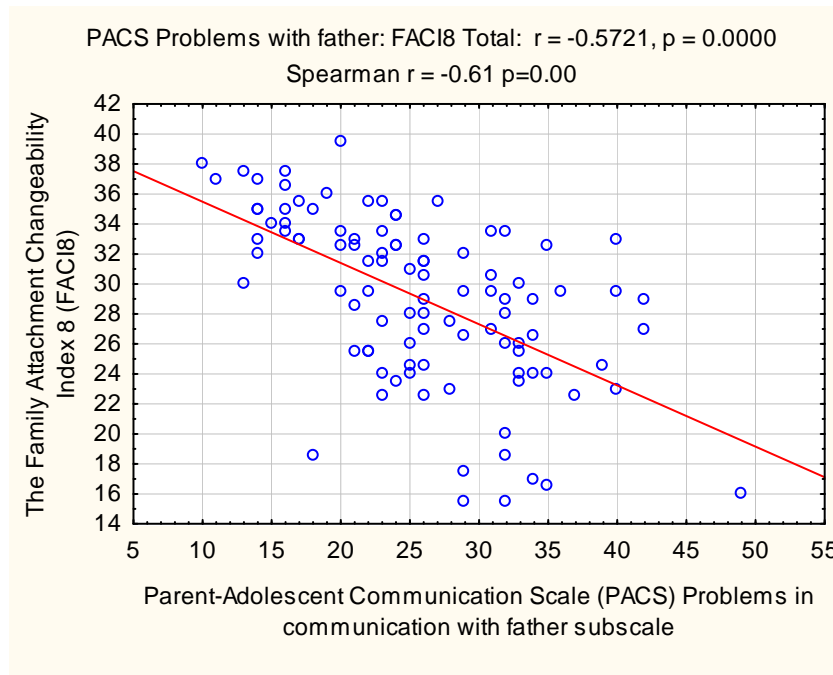


Figure 6. Scatterplot showing the relationship between problems in communication between the adolescent and the father (Problems in communication with father subscale) and family functioning (FACI8 total score)

It is evident from Figure 6 that a significant negative correlation was found ($r = -0.5721$, $p < .001$) between problems in communication with the father and family functioning. Therefore, the perception of increased problems in communication between the adolescent and the father is associated with lower levels of family functioning.

Table 1 presents a short summary of all the Pearson correlations shown in Figures 1 to 6.

Table 1

Pearson correlations between family functioning (Family Attachment and Changeability Index 8) and communication variables (N = 100)

| Communication variable | r | p |
|--|---------|--------|
| Affirming communication (FPSC) | 0.7646 | 0.0000 |
| Openness in communication with mother (PACS) | 0.6839 | 0.0000 |
| Openness in communication with father (PACS) | 0.5830 | 0.0000 |
| Incendiary family communication (FPSC) | -0.7071 | 0.0000 |
| Problems in communication with mother (PACS) | -0.6270 | 0.0000 |
| Problems in communication with father (PACS) | -0.5721 | 0.0000 |

Note: All r values are statistically significant, with $p < .001$

5.2.3 Multiple regression analyses

To determine the predictor variables that will explain most of the variance in family functioning (FACI8 total score), best-subsets regression analyses were performed. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the Best-Subsets Multiple Regression Analysis for the Dependent Variable Family Functioning (N = 100)

| Variable | β | $t(96)$ | p |
|--|----------|---------|--------|
| Openness in communication with mother (PACS) | 0.3780 | 6.1125 | 0.0000 |
| Affirming family communication (FPSC) | 0.4040 | 6.1319 | 0.0000 |
| Problems in communication with father (PACS) | -0.3471 | -6.4726 | 0.0000 |
| Openness in communication with father (PACS) | Excluded | | |
| Incendiary family communication (FPSC) | Excluded | | |
| Problems in communication with mother | Excluded | | |

$F(3, 96) = 104.75$

$R = .88$

$R^2 = .77$

$R^2(\text{adjusted}) = .77$

$SE = 2.76$

$p < .001$

The results illustrated in Table 2 indicate that the variables openness in communication with the mother, affirming family communication and problems in communication with the father account for most of the variance in family functioning (FACI8 total score) when they are entered together into the regression model.

Openness in communication with the mother (PACS) emerged as a significant positive predictor of family functioning ($\beta = 0.3780$, $p < .001$). This result implies that openness in communication with the mother figure was strongly associated with family functioning.

From Table 2 one can see that affirming family communication (FPSC) also emerged as a significant positive predictor of family functioning ($\beta = 0.4040$, $p < .001$). This implies that affirming family communication was strongly associated with family functioning.

Problems in communication with the father (PACS) emerged as a significant negative predictor of family functioning ($\beta = -0.3471$, $p < .001$). The negative sign in front of the β coefficient (problems in communication with the father) suggests that increased problems in communication with the father may lead to lower levels of family functioning.

Entered into the regression model together, these variables (openness in communication with the mother, affirming family communication and problems in communication with the father) account for 77% ($R^2 = 0.77$) of the variance in family functioning (FACI8 total score). The variables openness in communication with the father, incendiary family communication and problems in communication with the mother were excluded from the regression model, as these variables did not contribute significantly to predicting family functioning.

5.2.4 Differences between genders

Analyses of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted to determine whether differences exist between genders in the evaluation of the family's functioning (FACI8), affirming family communication (FPSC), openness in communication with the mother (PACS) and openness in communication with the father (PACS). The results of the ANOVAs are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of ANOVAs to Test for Differences Between Genders with Regard to Family Functioning and Aspects of Communication within the Family

| Variable | <u>Gender</u> | <u>n</u> | <u>Mean</u> | <u>SE</u> | <u>F</u> | <u>p</u> |
|--|---------------|----------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Family functioning (FACI8 total score) | Male | 17 | 29.65 | 1.37 | .24 | 0.63 |
| | Female | 83 | 28.91 | 0.62 | | |
| Affirming family communication | Male | 17 | 11.06 | 0.70 | .02 | 0.90 |
| | Female | 83 | 11.16 | 0.32 | | |
| Openness in communication with mother | Male | 17 | 39.88 | 2.03 | .38 | 0.54 |
| | Female | 83 | 41.25 | 0.92 | | |
| Openness in communication with father | Male | 17 | 36.47 | 2.25 | .03 | 0.87 |
| | Female | 83 | 36.06 | 1.02 | | |

Note. None of the p values were significant at $p < .05$

As portrayed in Table 3, no significant interaction effect was found between gender and any of the measured variables.

The quantitative results of the present study show that affirming family communication has a significant positive relationship with family functioning. The multiple regression analyses portrayed that the predictor variables that explained most of the variance in family functioning were openness in communication with the mother, affirming family communication and problems in communication with the father.

5.3 Qualitative results

The qualitative results of the study are presented in this section. In the focus groups, the participants discussed affirming communication and how it is portrayed in a family setting. The meaning of affirming communication for the whole family, as well as for the individual, was also considered.

The codes and categories that emerged from the content analysis are displayed in Tables 4 and 5. Some codes and categories that were not related to the research question also emerged from the data. These will be identified, but not discussed in depth. Additional themes that emerged from the data are aspects of negative family communication, the importance of the setting and time for affirming communication, and the influence of religion and culture on a family's way of communicating.

5.3.1 Defining affirming family communication

In the focus groups, the participants were asked to define affirming family communication and to describe how it was portrayed in their families. (See Appendix F for the semi-structured interview questions.) After the content analysis was conducted, some codes and categories emerged from the data. These are portrayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Responses to the Question: What is Affirming Family Communication?

| Core categories | Categories | Codes |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Verbal communication | Calmness | Calm language |
| | | Time-out |
| | | Focus on now |
| | | Focus on the problem |
| | | Apologise when wrong |
| | Clarity | Listen |
| | | Convey message clearly |
| | | Rephrasing |
| | Empathy | Understanding |
| | | Non-judgemental |
| | | Acceptance of the other person |
| | | Convey empathy |
| | | See point of view |
| | Equality | Not looking down on |
| Talking on same level | | |
| Interaction | Collaborative conflict and problem solving | |
| | Mutual decision making | |
| | Everyone's opinions heard and considered | |
| | Give feedback | |
| | Be interested | |
| | Debate | |
| | Informal chatting | |
| Kindness | Using pleasant words | |
| | Advice | |
| | Politeness | |
| | Patience | |
| | | |

Table 4 (continued)

| Core categories | Categories | Codes |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| | | Subtleness |
| | | Compliment |
| | Openness | Not preoccupied |
| | | Approachable |
| | | Freedom of speech |
| | | Honesty |
| | | Transparent |
| | | Open expression of feeling |
| | | Spontaneity |
| | | Open-minded |
| | Positivity | Light-hearted |
| | | Positive attitude |
| | | Humour including jokes |
| Non-verbal communication | Body language | Calm body language |
| | | Open posture |
| | Eye contact | Look at the person speaking to you |
| | Portraying affection | Show affection (hugs and kisses) |
| | Tone of voice | Soft tone of voice |
| Functional element of communication | Supportive | Use of phones, text messages and e-mail |
| | | Help someone |
| | | Write notes |
| | | Favours |

When the concept of affirming communication was discussed in the focus groups, three core categories emerged. These core categories are verbal affirming communication, non-verbal affirming communication and functional affirming communication.

The first core category, verbal affirming communication, refers to spoken communication by family members, whereas non-verbal affirming communication includes body language and tone of voice. The functional element of affirming family communication includes helping and

supporting family members in a practical manner, such as doing favours and sending notes and messages.

Each of these core categories were divided into secondary categories. These were also displayed in Table 4. There are eight categories that define affirming verbal communication. These categories are calmness, clarity, empathy, equality, interaction, kindness, openness and positivity.

The category of calmness includes the use of calm language and focusing only on the present problem or issue. It also includes admitting to doing or saying something wrong and taking some time to process what other family members have said. One participant illustrated this by saying that it is important to “take time and process” when communicating (Focus group 1, female 4). This ensures that family members calm down when they are feeling angry and also think about what others may have said. One participant stated that a “time-out reduces bad feelings all along” (Focus group 2, female 1).

The second category, clarity, focuses on how clearly the message is conveyed during communication. This relates to issues such as speaking clearly, listening and rephrasing what someone has said. The participants emphasised the importance of listening and one stated that she would want her family members to “listen and take in what you said” (Focus group 1, female 1). Listening to what the other family members have to say ensures that the messages sent during communication are received more clearly.

Empathic communication entails showing empathy and accepting the other person. One participant stated that “they must think like they’re in my position” (Focus group 3, female 6). When looking at this quote, it can be said that empathy entails “walking in the shoes of another person” (Focus group 3, female 4) and seeing situations from another person’s perspective.

Empathic communication is also about being non-judgemental and understanding. This is illustrated by a participant saying “the most important thing is that people in the family understand each other” (Focus group 2, female 4).

Equality includes not looking down on someone and communicating on the same level. One participant stated that “as we got older they (her parents) listened to us more and related to us on a more adult level” (Focus group 1, female 1). This is also an example of how communication changes as the children in the household grow older and become adolescents.

Affirming communication is also interactive and includes collaborative conflict resolution, joint problem solving and mutual decision making. It includes debates in which everyone’s opinions are heard, interest is shown in what other people are saying, feedback is provided on others’ opinions, and the participants chat together in an informal way. Phrases that illustrate this interactive component of verbal affirming communication were “if we ever had an argument or disagreement we would sit together and talk it through one at a time”, and then “make sure everyone’s points and opinions are heard” (Focus group 2, female 1).

Kindness entails using pleasant words, giving advice, being polite and patient. “The person has to give you time, have patience so that you finally get your problems out” (Focus group 2, female 3). Kindness also includes saying something in a subtle manner and giving compliments.

Openness is another aspect of affirming family communication. It is important that family members are not preoccupied when communicating. They should be approachable, open minded and prepared to listen to what other family members have to say. The freedom to express their thoughts and feelings in a spontaneous way was also deemed important. One participant illustrated this by saying: “We just speak, blurt it out” and “I can tell my parents everything” (Focus group 1, female 1). Family members should also be honest and transparent when

communicating. One participant demonstrated this by saying that “I don’t like it when my parents keep stuff from me” (Focus group 2, female 4).

The last category, positivity, entails a light-hearted approach and positive attitude towards communication. One participant said that “a joyful, maybe light-hearted approach would work for me” (Focus group 1, female 1). This includes making jokes and laughing together. An example of this from the focus groups is “we can talk for hours and make jokes and laugh at each other” (Focus group 1, female 3).

The next core category, non-verbal affirming communication, focuses on the non-verbal aspects of communication, such as body language and eye contact. “Turning your whole body towards the person and seeming engaged” is an example of body language that contributes to affirming communication (Focus group 1, female 2). Body language that is affirming includes a relaxed, calm and open posture, while eye contact refers to looking directly at the person you are communicating with. One participant stated that “when someone looks at you when you are talking you feel more appreciated” (Focus group 2, female 2). Non-verbal affirming communication also includes the portrayal of affection and the tone of voice that is used. Family members should talk to each other in a soft tone of voice and display affection through hugs and kisses.

The last core category is the functional element of affirming family communication. It includes being supportive by helping a family member in a practical way or doing someone a favour. Writing notes, letters and e-mails or phoning another family member all form part of this supportive element of family communication. One participant stated that she would “just write a note because sometimes it’s easier to write your message than speak it” (Focus group 2, female 2).

5.3.2 The meaning of affirming family communication for the whole family and for the individual members

The second qualitative component entails the exploration of the meaning of affirming communication for the family as a whole, as well as for individual family members. This is portrayed in Table 5.

Table 5

The Meaning of Affirming Family Communication for the Whole Family and for Individual Members

| Meaning for family | Meaning for individual | Codes |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Better functioning | | Functioning better as a family Dealing with problems |
| Values carried over | | Learning to communicate in the family Model for communication in other relationships Values and morals carried over to family members Values and morals carried over to community |
| Positive family atmosphere | | Positive family interaction Calm family atmosphere Everyone included Better family relationships Having fun Creating special memories |
| | Confidence | Freedom of speech Improving confidence to communicate Increasing self-esteem |
| | Better functioning | Individual functioning Handling peer pressure Balanced person Happiness |
| | Love and belonging | Unconditional love Appreciated Accepted |
| | Safety net | Encouraging environment Support system |

The themes relating to what it means for the family as a whole are better functioning, values carried over and a positive family atmosphere. Better functioning includes working together as a family and dealing with problems in a positive manner. One participant stated that, when her family experiences problems, “communication will help us through it” (Focus group 3, female 2). Another participant stated that “when me and my brother have conflicts, we would speak about it and it made us stronger” (Focus group 1, female 1). According to the focus group participants, communication therefore supports their families in functioning better as a unit.

Values carried over firstly entail transferring morals and values from one family member to another. “Other people, what they say won’t matter. It is my family’s values and what we spoke about that count” (Focus group 3, female 1). It also includes learning about family communication within the family setup, and using family communication as a model for communication within other relationships. An example of this from the focus group data was “if you have positive communication in your family, it will be like that with your friends and loved ones” (Focus group 1, female 2). These values that are transferred from family members to each other can also be transferred further to the broader community.

The third theme is a positive family atmosphere, which includes positive family interaction during which “everyone is getting along together” (Focus group 2, female 1). A family environment in which “everyone knows what is going on and everyone knows what is happening with everyone else” is an example of a positive family atmosphere being created (Focus group 2, female 3). A positive family atmosphere refers to good relationships, as well as a calm family environment in which everyone is included and having fun. Special memories are also created within this positive family atmosphere.

Affirming family communication also has meaning for the individual family members. These themes are increased confidence, better functioning, love and belonging, and experiencing a safety net. When individuals experience affirming communication within a family system, they feel that they have the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings to the other members. Affirming family communication encourages the confidence to communicate feelings and experiences to other family members, and one participant stated that it leads to “increased self-confidence” (Focus group 2, female 4). “It is mostly about being confident about who you are at home and being able to say what you want” (Focus group 2, female 2).

When looking at the meaning of affirming communication, the participants also identified better individual functioning. This includes better handling of peer pressure. One participant stated that “I never felt that peer pressure was such an issue. Other people can’t influence me because I have positive communication within the household” (Focus group 3, female 5). Better individual functioning also refers to a more balanced life and being happy in general. “Every parent just wants their family to get along and when there is positive communication they feel happy and satisfied” (Focus group 2, female 2).

The third theme, love and belonging, entails experiencing unconditional love, feeling appreciated and being accepted by other family members. One participant stated that affirming family communication made her feel “unconditionally loved” and “appreciated” by other family members (Focus group 2, female 1).

The fourth theme is experiencing a safety net and having a supportive and encouraging environment. One participant stated that “if you have a supportive home base you feel you can tackle other things” (Focus group 2, female 1). Another participant even added that “family communication has always been a pillar” (Focus group 1, female 5).

5.4 Conclusion

A number of statistically significant results were found in the analysis of the quantitative data. The results showed that family functioning correlates in a significantly positive way with affirming family communication, with openness in communication with the mother, and with openness in communication with the father. On the other hand, family functioning also correlates negatively with incendiary communication, problems in communication with the mother, and problems in communication with the father. From the results of the multiple regression analysis it was concluded that the predictor variables that account for most of the variation in family functioning are openness in communication with the mother (PACS), affirming family communication (FPSC) and problems in communication with the father (PACS). In addition, ANOVAs that were conducted to establish whether there were any significant differences between genders regarding their families' functioning or family communication could find no such differences.

Three core categories emerged from the qualitative exploration of what affirming communication entailed from an adolescent's point of view. These were that affirming communication in families may be expressed verbally, non-verbally and in a functional manner. Each of these core categories consists of secondary categories that explain what each of them entails. Furthermore, the meaning of affirming family communication for the family as a whole, as well as for the individual, was also considered.

In Chapter Six, the quantitative and qualitative results presented in this chapter will be discussed in further detail.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

The aim of the present study was to determine the nature of the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. Secondly, the relationship between family functioning and the perceived quality of communication between the adolescent and both parents was also considered. The main objective of this research was to explore and define affirming communication from an adolescent's perspective. In this chapter, some of the results reported in Chapter Five are discussed in detail. After the discussion of the results, the limitations of the present study are considered and recommendations are made for future research.

6.2 Discussion of the quantitative and qualitative results

To confirm the findings of other research, the quantitative aims of the present study were, firstly, to determine the relationship between affirming family communication and family functioning. Secondly, it was to determine the relationship between family functioning and open communication between the adolescent and the mother and father respectively. These results were summarised in Table 1.

The results show that affirming family communication correlates significantly and positively with family functioning. Therefore, more affirming family communication is associated with better family functioning. This confirms the quantitative results from studies conducted by Greeff and Du Toit (2009) and Jonker and Greeff (2009). A number of qualitative findings also confirm the importance of affirming communication in a family's functioning (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004; Jonker & Greeff, 2009). The qualitative results of the present study also confirmed the importance of affirming communication in family

functioning. When asked in the focus groups to explore the meaning of affirming communication, the participants concluded that it meant better family functioning. For the focus group participants, better family functioning refers to the family working together well and dealing with problems effectively. They further also expressed their beliefs that affirming communication would lead to better family functioning.

Openness in communication with the mother and openness in communication with the father correlated significantly with family functioning. This was also found in studies conducted by Joshi and Gutierrez (2006) and Lindqvist et al. (2007). The importance of openness in family communication was also emphasised in the qualitative results of the present study. Openness was identified as a secondary category of verbal affirming communication. This refers to family members being approachable and open-minded when listening to what other family members have to say. The participants also concluded that family members should feel free to express their feelings spontaneously and that communication within families should be honest and transparent.

In addition, the relationship between incendiary family communication and family functioning, as well as the relationship between family functioning and problems in communication with the mother and father, was considered (see Table 1). A significant negative correlation was found between incendiary family communication and family functioning. This means that increased incendiary family communication is associated with a decrease in the quality of family functioning. Results from the study by Jonker and Greeff (2009) showed that the negative correlation between incendiary family communication and family functioning was even stronger than the positive correlation between affirming family communication and family functioning. In the present study, problems in communication with the mother and in communication with the father also showed significant negative correlations with family functioning.

The results of the multiple regression analysis were portrayed in Table 2. When entered into the regression model together, the predictor variables that account for 77% of the variance in the family functioning score were openness in communication with the mother, affirming family communication, and problems in communication with the father. The strength of the relationship between family functioning and each predictor variable is illustrated by the β values (see Table 2). An increase in the predictor variables of openness in communication with the mother and affirming family communication signifies an increase in the dependent variable (family functioning).

On the other hand, an increase in problems in communication with the father may lead to a lower level of family functioning. The β coefficient for every predictor variable indicates that, on average, the dependent variable (family functioning) will alter by the estimated beta coefficient for every unit that the predictor variable increases. These results are partly consistent with the results of a study by Greeff and Du Toit (2009), which explored family factors best predicting family functioning in remarried families. Affirming family communication was identified as a significant positive predictor by both parents and children.

In addition to these results, ANOVAs were also conducted to investigate whether there were gender differences regarding the adolescents' perception of family functioning and family communication (see Table 3). The male and female participants reported no significant difference in their perception of family functioning. The different genders also reported no significant difference in perceived levels of affirming communication found in their families. While no previous study of note had a similar finding of no gender differences in the evaluation of family functioning, there were some studies that investigated whether or not adolescents communicated similarly or differently with their mother figures compared to their father figures.

These studies showed that no differential gender-based communication was found for either parent (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Joshi & Gutierrez, 2006).

It is also interesting to note that the findings of the present study are inconsistent with those of Rosnati et al. (2007), who found that female adolescents reported better communication with their parents than did male adolescents. Moreover, whereas Pick et al. (2007) found that female adolescents tended to communicate more openly with their mothers, in the present study no significant gender difference was found in the adolescents' perceived levels of openness in communication with their mothers and their fathers respectively.

For the qualitative component of the present study, affirming family communication was explored from the adolescent's perspective. The participants were asked to discuss their understanding of affirming, or positive, family communication and how it is portrayed in their families. Three core categories emerged from the content analysis. This finding was consistent with the categories identified by Park et al. (2009) to define affectionate communication. The three categories were verbal affirming communication, non-verbal affirming communication and the functional element of affirming communication. The core categories and their secondary categories were presented in Table 4.

Some of the secondary categories of verbal affirming communication identified in the present study were also found in other research. Gibb (cited in Alexander, 1973) identified empathic understanding as one of the important aspects of supportive communication. In the present study, conveying empathy through communication was identified as an important aspect of verbal affirming communication.

Gibb (cited in Alexander, 1973) identified equality in communication as an important aspect in increasing the positive interactions between people. Mallick (2007) also identified equality in communication as an aspect that increases positive interactions between adolescents and parents during drug education. In the present study, equality when communicating within the family was identified, through content analysis, as a secondary category of affirming family communication. Equality when communicating entails communicating on the same level and not looking down on someone. The adolescent participants felt that their parents should not look down on them and should communicate with them as equals. One participant concluded that, as they (the children in the family) grew older, her parents listened to her more on an adult level. This example not only portrays how parents and adolescents start to communicate differently as children grow older, but also how roles, rules and relationships should be renegotiated when children reach adolescence (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

McGoldrick and Carter (2003) also state that new roles should be established for parents and children, especially when the children reach the developmental stage of adolescence. Family communication could then be considered a “facilitating dimension” in the renegotiation of roles, rules and relationships (Olson & Gorall, 2003, p. 520). These changes and the stability maintained in the family system are facilitated by communication within the family. This idea of communication as a “facilitating dimension” in the changing of roles, rules and relationships correlates with the idea of communication as a “facilitating dimension” in assisting family members to change their levels of cohesion and flexibility, as seen in the circumplex model.

Another secondary category of verbal affirming communication that emerged from the focus groups’ data was kindness. This entails using pleasant words, being polite and patient, saying something and giving advice in a subtle manner, and complimenting someone else. Alexander

(cited in Kingstone & Endler, 1997) confirms this finding by stating that supportive and positive family communication should portray kindness and warmth.

Just as Walsh (2003) stated that calmness and clarity are the results of affirming communication, the focus group participants in the present study also identified these two factors when describing affirming communication. One could then conclude that calmness and clarity are not only products of affirming communication, but also defining characteristics.

According to the focus group participants, affirming family communication is also interactive. This interactive component includes mutual problem solving, as identified by Walsh (2003), and also collaborative decision making, considering everyone's opinions, giving feedback, debating as well as informal chatting.

Another secondary category, positivity, was emphasised by the adolescent participants as an important aspect when defining affirming communication. This quality was not reflected by any literature of note on affirming family communication. Positivity includes having a positive attitude when communicating, having light-hearted conversations, making jokes and laughing together.

This discussion of the verbal aspects of affirming family communication is now followed by an explanation of the second core category, non-verbal affirming communication. This category includes non-verbal aspects of communication such as open and relaxed body language, making eye contact and speaking in a soft tone of voice.

According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008), the content, or verbal, level of communication is reinforced or contradicted by non-verbal or metacommunication. The participants in the present study also confirmed the importance of the non-verbal communication that accompanies

the verbal communication within a family. The participants believed that showing affection through hugs and kisses is another way of portraying non-verbal affirming communication. The importance of portraying affection through hugs and kisses is also confirmed by Park et al. (2009).

The functional or supportive element of affirming communication, also identified by Park et al. (2009), includes showing support to family members by helping them, doing favours, sending supportive texts and e-mails and leaving encouraging notes. The results of the study by Park et al. (2009) showed that the parents of the adolescent participants displayed more supportive affection than verbal or non-verbal affection. One of the participants in the present study also stated that, from an adolescent's point of view, it is sometimes easier to write something than to say it.

The quantitative and qualitative results of the present study illustrate the importance, from an adolescent's point of view, of affirming family communication in family functioning. The qualitative results confirmed the quantitative results, which showed that affirming communication correlates significantly with family functioning. The adolescents' definitions and exploration of affirming communication were also discussed. The discussion of these results is now followed by a discussion of some of the limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for further research.

6.3 Limitations and recommendations

One of the limitations of the present study is that it included only adolescents' views of their families' functioning and communication. Other studies have shown that there usually is a discrepancy between adolescents' perspectives and their parents' points of view on family communication. Barnes and Olson (1985) and Heiman et al. (2008) found that adolescents

perceived communication in their families as less open and thus more problematic than their parents perceived it to be. The parents usually report fewer problems and more positive communication with their adolescents. The results, therefore, may have been different had the parents also participated in the present study.

Except for a possible discrepancy in perceptions of family communication between adolescents and their parents, another limitation of the present study is that only one family member was asked to evaluate the whole family unit. The level of family functioning and the amount of positive and negative communication was assessed from only one family member's point of view. An improvement on this would be to include multiple family members in the research sample.

Another limitation is that the results cannot be generalised, as convenience sampling was used to gain access to the participants. The sample is thus not representative of the wider South African adolescent student population. The students who volunteered to participate in the quantitative component, and especially in the qualitative component, of the present study were mostly white and female. Although this does not differ much from the race and gender ratio of students registered for first-year Psychology, it is suggested that random probability sampling be used in future studies.

In the focus groups the participants also spoke about themes not related to the research question. They discussed aspects of negative family communication, the significance of time and setting for affirming communication, and the influence of religion and culture on a family's expression of affirming communication. These themes were beyond the scope of the present study, but should be investigated in future research.

The functional or supportive element of affirming communication, and especially the role of technology in the way we express support, is another topic that could be investigated further. The participants identified making phone calls and sending supportive texts and e-mails as ways of expressing affirming family communication in a supportive manner. It would be interesting to see if parents would also emphasise the role of technology in expressing support.

It would also be interesting to investigate the role that affirming communication plays in families facing specific problems. The present study focussed only on affirming family communication in families with adolescents, and not on how affirming family communication might help families in dealing with specific crises or difficulties. When further research on affirming family communication is planned, the identified limitations of the present study should be borne in mind. Notwithstanding the limitations of the present study, the findings are supported by other research, as well as by the theory.

6.4 Conclusion

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of affirming family communication in families with adolescent children. It supports the view that changes should be made in the family structure, roles and rules when children reach adolescence. These changes are enhanced by effective communication within the family environment. Furthermore, the present study investigated affirming communication from the point of view of adolescents and highlighted what they consider to be affirming and supportive communication with their families. Although certain limitations of the present study were identified, the study makes a contribution to the literature concerning affirming communication. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of affirming communication in the wellbeing and functioning of families.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Cover Letter

Thank you for volunteering to complete the following questionnaires. You are also invited to participate in focus groups where the topic of affirming or positive family communication will be discussed. The focus groups will take approximately 60 minutes and will consist of 6 – 8 students per group. **You will be required to complete the cover letter only if you are willing to volunteer for the focus groups.** If you only want to complete the questionnaires and not participate in the focus groups you do not have to complete the cover page. The questionnaires are on the following pages.

If you want to volunteer to be part of the focus groups, you can provide your e-mail address here:

Please indicate on the table provided below which focus group time slots suit you best. You will be accommodated as far as possible and put into a focus group in one of the time slots that you have chosen. If some of the time slots have too little volunteers, you will be contacted and informed that there are not enough volunteers to fill the preferred time slots.

| Monday (12:50 – 14:00) | Tuesday (12:50 – 14:00) | Wednesday (12:50 – 14:00) | Thursday (12:50 – 14:00) | Friday (12:50 – 14:00) |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| | | | | |

Preferred language: _____

Thank you very much for you co-operation.

Appendix B

Demographic information

The information in these questionnaires will be considered strictly confidential. Read the questions carefully and mark the appropriate box with an 'X'. Please complete all the questions.

Gender:

| | |
|------|--------|
| Male | Female |
|------|--------|

Age:

Ethnic group:

| | | | | |
|---------|--------|----------|-------|------------------------|
| African | Indian | Coloured | White | Other (please specify) |
| | | | | |

Home Language:

| | | | | |
|-----------|---------|-------|------|------------------------|
| Afrikaans | English | Xhosa | Zulu | Other (please specify) |
| | | | | |

Residential area or town:

Your parents' ages?

| | |
|--------|--------|
| Mother | Father |
|--------|--------|

Do your parents work?

| | | | |
|------|-------------|-------------|------|
| Both | Father only | Mother only | None |
|------|-------------|-------------|------|

Parent's marital status:

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Married, first marriage | Married, previously married | Not married, living together |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|

Total number of children in the family?

| Sibling Information: | Relationship | Gender | Age | Living at home? | |
|----------------------|--------------|--------|-----|-----------------|----|
| | | | | Yes | No |
| Sibling 1 | | | | | |
| Sibling 2 | | | | | |
| Sibling 3 | | | | | |
| Sibling 4 | | | | | |
| Sibling 5 | | | | | |

Appendix C

The Family Problem Solving and Communication Index (FPSC)

McCubbin, McCubbin and Thomson (1996)

| When our family struggles with problems or conflicts which upset us, I would describe my family in the following way: | False | Mostly False | Mostly True | True |
|---|-------|--------------|-------------|------|
| 1. We yell and scream at each other | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. We are respectful of each others' feelings | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. We talk things through till we reach a resolution | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. We work hard to be sure family members are not hurt, emotionally or physically | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. We walk away from conflicts without much satisfaction | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. We share with each other how much we care for one another | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. We make matters more difficult by fighting and bring up old matters | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. We take time to hear what each other has to say or feel | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9. We work to be calm and talk things through | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 10. We get upset, but we try to end our conflicts on a positive note | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Appendix D

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS)

Barnes & Olson (1982)

Using the scale below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with EACH of the following statements about the communication between you and your parent/s. Please complete the adolescent and mother form as well as the adolescent and father form.

Adolescent and mother form:

With my mother...

| | Strongly Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Neither Agree Nor Disagree | Moderately Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. I can discuss my beliefs with my mother without feeling restrained or embarrassed. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Sometimes I have trouble believing everything my mother tells me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. My mother is always a good listener. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I am sometimes afraid to ask my mother for what I want. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. My mother has a tendency to say things to me which would be better left unsaid. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. My mother can tell how I'm feeling without asking. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I am very satisfied with how my mother and I talk together. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. If I were in trouble, I could tell my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I openly show affection to my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. When we are having a problem, I often give my mother the silent treatment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I am careful about what I say to my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. When talking to my mother, I have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. When I ask questions, I get honest answers from my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. My mother tries to understand my point of view. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. There are topics I avoid discussing with my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I find it easy to discuss problems with my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. It is very easy for me to express all my true feelings to my mother. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. My mother nags/bothers me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. My mother insults me when she is angry with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I don't think I can tell my mother how I really feel about some things. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS)

Barnes & Olson (1982)

Using the scale below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with EACH of the following statements about the communication between you and your parent/s. Please complete the adolescent and mother form as well as the adolescent and father form.

Adolescent and father form:

With my father...

| | Strongly Disagree | Moderately Disagree | Neither Agree Nor Disagree | Moderately Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1. I can discuss my beliefs with my father without feeling restrained or embarrassed. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Sometimes I have trouble believing everything my father tells me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. My father is always a good listener. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I am sometimes afraid to ask my father for what I want. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. My father has a tendency to say things to me which would be better left unsaid. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. My father can tell how I'm feeling without asking. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I am very satisfied with how my father and I talk together. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. If I were in trouble, I could tell my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I openly show affection to my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. When we are having a problem, I often give my father the silent treatment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I am careful about what I say to my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. When talking to my father, I have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. When I ask questions, I get honest answers from my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. My father tries to understand my point of view. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. There are topics I avoid discussing with my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I find it easy to discuss problems with my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. It is very easy for me to express all my true feelings to my father. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. My father nags/bothers me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. My father insults me when she is angry with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I don't think I can tell my father how I really feel about some things. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix E

The Family Attachment Changeability Index 8 (FACI8) McCubbin, Thomson & Elver (1995)

Decide how well each statement describes what is happening in your family. In the column headed **Now**, make an 'X' in the block with the number which best describes how often each thing is happening right now.

| | Now | | | | |
|--|--------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| | Never | Sometimes | Half the time | More than half | Always |
| 1. In our family it is easy for everyone to express his/her opinion. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. It is easier to discuss problems with people outside the family than with other family members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Each family member has input in major family decisions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Family members discuss problems and feel good about the solutions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. In our family everyone goes his/her own way. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Family members consult other family members on their decisions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. We have difficulty thinking of things to do as a family. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Discipline is fair in our family. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Family members feel closer to people outside the family than to other family members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Our family tries new ways of dealing with problems. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. In our family, everyone shares responsibilities. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. It is difficult to get a rule changed in our family | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Family members avoid each other at home. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. When problems arise, we compromise. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Family members are afraid to say what is on their minds. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Family members pair up rather than do things as a total family. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix F

Semi-structured interview:

Introduction:

After the researcher has introduced herself, the concept of affirming/positive family communication will be explained briefly to the participants. It will be made clear that all the participants should get an opportunity to freely voice their opinions and that the culture, religion, language and opinions of the participants will be respected. The researcher will facilitate the groups by asking the semi-structured questions and encouraging further discussions of the topic.

The following questions will be discussed in the semi-structured focus group:

a) How would you describe affirming/positive communication in your family?

Additional questions:

- b) What verbal communication used by family members contributes to affirming/positive communication?
- c) What non-verbal communication used by family members contributes to affirming/positive family communication?
- d) What does affirming/positive communication look like in your family?
- e) What does affirming/positive family communication mean to you as an individual?
- f) What does affirming/positive family communication mean to the family as a whole?

Appendix G

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

AFFIRMING / POSITIVE COMMUNICATION AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH FAMILY FUNCTIONING

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Cabrière Jordaan (B.A., B.A. (Hons), and currently registered for a M.A. Psychology), from the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University. The results from this study will form part of a research thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are between the ages of 18 and 22 and live at home with both your parents.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study will firstly look at the relationship between affirming / positive family communication and family functioning. The relationship between family functioning and the perceived quality of communication between adolescents and both parents will also be considered. This then leads to the main focus of this study where affirming / positive family communication will be explored qualitatively from an adolescent's point of view.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to complete three questionnaires in either English or Afrikaans. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. It will take you about 15 minutes to complete all the questionnaires and the researcher will be available to answer any questions you may have. The questionnaires will be handed out at the end of a Psychology 144 lecture and you can return it during the next lecture. A box will be available in the next lecture for you to put the completed questionnaires.

You will also be asked to participate in the next part of the study, which consists of focus groups. To volunteer for the focus groups, you will be asked to complete the cover page of the questionnaires. On the cover page will be a time table where you can indicate which time slots suits you best. You will also be asked to supply the researcher with your e-mail address so that you can be contacted and informed about the time and place of the focus groups. We will try and accommodate you as far as possible and put you into a focus group in one of the time slots that you have chosen. If some of the time slots have too little volunteers, you will be contacted and informed that there are not enough volunteers to fill your preferred time slots. Your privacy will be protected and only the researcher will have access to your e-mail address. The focus groups will take approximately 60 minutes.

3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no risks associated to this particular study. Your anonymity and privacy is guaranteed. You are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may resign at any time without any consequences. Also feel free to discuss with the researcher any part of the study that makes you uncomfortable.

4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Communication is very important in a family system as it is the medium through which roles, standards and rules are conveyed in a family setting. Family communication is also a reflection of the environment in which family life takes place. Family communication is therefore important because it helps people to understand families better. This research will contribute to the understanding of families by exploring positive family communication. Most research focus only on negative communication within families or between parents and adolescents. The family's functioning and the family communication will be explored from an adolescent's perspective, which may bring a new outlook on the topic. The participants in the focus groups will talk about how affirming / positive communication is expressed in their family settings and through this participants will have the opportunity to enrich each other and explore new ways to portray positive family communication.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no material or monetary reward for participating in this study.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymity and only the researcher, supervisor and statistician will have access to the raw data. The questionnaires will be locked away in a secure place and the data saved on the computer will be stored in a password protected folder. The voice recordings of the focus groups will be deleted after the data has been saved on the computer. The results of this study will be published as a research thesis, but participant anonymity is guaranteed.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Cabrière Jordaan (Principal Investigator) on 0721804084 or by sending an e-mail to cabsjordan@gmail.com, or Prof. A.P. Greeff (Supervisor) on 021-8083464 or apg@sun.ac.za.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to me [_____] by [_____] in [Afrikaans/English/Xhosa/other] and I am in command of this language or it was satisfactorily translated to me. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Signature of Participant or Legal Representative

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____. [He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in [Afrikaans/English/Xhosa/Other]

Signature of Investigator

Date