



The Impact of Family Disharmony and Poor Communication Patterns on Children

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Abstract

This study examines how family disharmony characterized by poor communication patterns affects children across diverse family backgrounds and communication approaches. This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically a case study design. The study includes four university students who have experienced family disharmony, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that poor communication broadly affects all four Informants, emotionally, socially, and psychologically. The identified communication patterns include the "unbalanced split pattern" and the "monopoly pattern," in which one party dominates, reducing balance, openness, and participation among family members. These results highlight the need for effective family communication; by fostering balanced communication patterns, family members can interact more equitably and create a more harmonious, supportive, and adaptive family environment. This research contributes to the existing literature on communication patterns, specifically regarding the "unbalanced split pattern" and the "monopoly pattern".

Keywords: communication patterns, family disharmony, monopoly pattern, unbalanced split pattern

INTRODUCTION

According to Law number 52 of 2009 concerning population development and family development, (2009), a family is defined as the smallest unit of society, consisting of a married couple, a married couple with their children, or a father and his child(ren), or a mother and her child(ren). Every individual naturally aspires to a harmonious, peaceful, and happy family (Nikmah & Sa'adah, 2021); however, family disharmony remains prevalent.

Data from family counseling agencies indicate increased family conflict stemming from ineffective communication between parents and children and between spouses (IFF Research, 2023). According to Hadi et al. (2020), family disharmony occurs when a family cannot fulfill its functions and responsibilities, leaving individual members unable to carry out their roles and obligations. This disharmony often stems from poor communication patterns among family members, which can undermine mutual respect (Heyman et al., 2023).

Communication patterns refer to how individuals interact to convey messages through words, actions, or gestures based on shared understanding, aiming to foster positive change or ensure the intended message is clearly understood (Apriana & Mesra, 2024; Asmarani et al., 2023). Poor communication patterns are characterized by family members' inability to express their thoughts and feelings openly, a lack of active listening skills, frequent verbal conflict, and few opportunities for constructive dialogue (Shrout et al., 2023). According to Paramita et al. (2025), poor communication patterns can foster distrust and negative thinking, often leading to misunderstandings that can result in conflict.

Thus, it is essential to understand effective communication patterns within a family and the depth of communication between individuals, particularly in families experiencing disharmony (Yang et al., 2025). Sound communication patterns can provide a vital foundation for building strong, balanced bonds among family members, potentially helping a family restore harmony and foster a supportive environment where every individual feels heard, understood, and fully accepted (Roman et al., 2025). Theoretically, this research draws on DeVito (2018), which identifies four communication patterns: the equality pattern, the balanced split pattern, the unbalanced split pattern, and the monopoly pattern. These four patterns illustrate

differences in power distribution and the roles family members assume during communication (Najib, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

Approaches and Types of Research

This research employs a qualitative approach, specifically a case study design. According to Nasution (2023), a case study involves a descriptive, analytical, interpretive, and evaluative treatment of in-depth data in case records. The researcher chose the case study method to examine how poor communication patterns within a family can affect familial relationships and children's psychological well-being.

Research Subject

This study's subjects are university students experiencing family disharmony. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: willingness to serve as Informants, ages 19–23, and membership in a family characterized by disharmony and poor communication.

Research Instrument

This study uses Bowen (2016), family systems theory, DeVito (2018), family communication patterns theory, and Mead et al. (2015) symbolic interactionism theory as the foundation for developing the research instrument. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. This technique allows the researcher to adapt questions and the setting, enabling deeper exploration without being constrained by rigid questioning, while still adhering to established guidelines (Ridwan & Tungka, 2024).

Data Analysis

This study uses thematic analysis, a process in which the researcher identifies, evaluates, and reports information by organizing it into themes or patterns for the conclusion and interpretation. Thematic analysis involves several key steps, such as coding, data segmentation, and data grouping, that allow researchers to extract information with greater detail and depth (Pradono et al., 2018; Rozali, 2022).

RESEARCH RESULT

Based on the thematic analysis conducted by the researcher on four informants, AA, BB, CC, and DD, information was gathered regarding the factors causing disharmony, the adverse effects of poor communication, and the efforts to resolve conflicts arising from family disharmony, as follows:

Family Relationship

The interview results indicate that the four Informants come from diverse family backgrounds, yet all have experienced disharmonious relationship dynamics. Informant AA lives in an extended family household with a father, a mother, two older siblings, and one younger sibling. While Informant AA shares a close and supportive relationship with their siblings, frequent tension arises with their father, who often instigates conflict.

“My relationship with my siblings is neutral, but there is a significant gap with my parents... and with my father, it is even less harmonious—we are constantly clashing.” (Informant AA)

Informant AA’s relationship with their father is not harmonious, as their interactions often end in arguments.

“...I really cannot refuse my father’s orders, because if I do, it will just lead to another fight, especially since he has such a temper.”
(Informant AA)

Unlike Informant AA, Informant BB grew up with a father, a mother, and a younger sibling. Informant BB feels quite close to their younger sibling, while their communication with their mother remains limited, though possible. Meanwhile, Informant CC is an only child who lives with both parents. Their relationship with their father was once strained but has since improved somewhat; conversely, their relationship with their mother creates a sense of pressure, as they frequently feel judged and unheard.

“...my communication with my mom is poor; most of the negative interactions at home happen with her. It is just that... whenever I try to talk to her, I feel like I am being judged right from the start.”
(Informant CC)

Informant DD lives with their father, mother, and younger sibling but describes the home atmosphere as cold because of a lack of communication. Each family member is occupied with their own affairs: the father is rarely home because of work, the mother often goes to **sholawatan** (religious chanting or prayer) gatherings, and the younger sibling is busy with extracurricular lessons, leaving Informant DD alone most of the time.

*“...in my opinion, my family is cold. There is very little communication. My father is rarely home because of work, my mother is often out attending **sholawatan** events, and my younger sibling is busy with religious lessons. So, I am often home by myself.”* (Informant DD)

Family Communication Patterns

Regarding communication patterns, all four Informants tend toward closed, restricted communication. Informant AA revealed that daily communication primarily takes place via a WhatsApp group involving their mother and siblings, while their father is not included.

Informant AA feels more at ease communicating when their father is away, but tends to hold back when he is at home, out of concern that it might trigger a conflict.

“...when it comes to interactions at home, there is a lot of silence, especially when Father is around.” (Informant AA)

A similar situation is experienced by Informant BB, who feels more comfortable communicating with their mother than with their father. When they disagree, arguments often escalate, so Informant BB chooses silence to avoid confrontation.

“...with my mother and sibling, there is at least some feedback; but with my father, I rarely talk, partly because I just do not feel like it, and it is better to stay quiet than to end up in a fight” (Informant BB)

Family conflicts are typically left to subside on their own, without any open discussion or healthy resolution.

For Informant CC, communication with her mother is often marked by criticism and rejection, leaving her feeling she has no space to express her opinions.

“...with my mom, it is mostly just rejection. For instance, if I say I want to see a psychologist, she forbids it because, in her view, successful people go into fields like medicine or engineering.” (Informant CC)

Although communication with her father is relatively calmer, the dynamic remains unequal, as the child's opinions are rarely heard. Informant CC often has to lie to avoid her mother's anger, as she explained.

“...Dad eventually came up with the idea of bringing a motorcycle from his side of the family in Malang, my grandfather's bike. To this day, no one else knows about it; only Dad does.” (Informant CC)

Communication with Informant DD is almost nonexistent. Conversations occur only when necessary; conflicts are typically avoided through the “silent treatment,” and meaningful, in-depth discussions are rare. Even when they disagree, especially with their mother, Informant DD tends to concede or stay silent.

“...In my family, the communication style is quite closed off. I feel like our communication is really poor; it is just very cold. Especially when my father is not home, it feels like we are all living separate lives. We often have misunderstandings, too. So, rather than fighting, I choose to stay quiet. My family prefers to walk away; if my father and mother argue, my father leaves, and if my mother and I argue, I leave. As a result, problems are never actually resolved. We are all the ‘silent treatment’ type.” (Informant DD)

Factors Contributing to Family Disharmony

Each Informant identified different factors that lead to communication disharmony within the family. For Informant AA, the primary source is the father figure, who is perceived as harsh and demanding, expecting to be understood without offering any space to listen to his child and who frequently employs negative labeling, sometimes even resorting to violence.

“...whenever I talk to my father, it always veers toward something negative; for instance, I might be accused of doing bad things, and at times, it has even escalated to domestic abuse.” (Informant AA)

This situation causes the child to distance themselves and choose to avoid direct communication with their father.

For Informant BB, the disharmony is triggered by the father's temperamental nature; he is prone to anger and has even engaged in destructive behavior.

“...well, my father has a temper; when he gets angry, he tends to overreact, shouting and even throwing or smashing objects.” (Informant BB)

External factors, such as extended family members who spread slander, further exacerbate the situation; meanwhile, a family culture that does not practice apologizing lets conflicts go unaddressed.

"...usually, when there is an issue with my father, I stay quiet while he is angry. Once his anger subsides, he also remains silent and never brings up the issue again. There is typically no communication at all for about three days no apologies or discussions about what happened until, by the fourth day, he usually breaks the silence by asking me to get him some food..." (Informant BB)

For Informant CC, the primary cause is a lack of mutual listening between the child and the parents, particularly the mother. According to Informant CC, the mother often assumes she is always right and refuses to consider the child's perspective; furthermore, she has a habit of sharing family problems with outsiders, which makes the child feel uncomfortable. This creates an imbalance in the parent-child relationship.

"...in my opinion, what makes family communication difficult and leads to misunderstandings is when no one is willing to listen to one another."

"...family matters should stay within the family; they should not be discussed with anyone else, not even other relatives. It is a private matter, and spreading it around only makes things more complicated." (Informant CC)

For Informant DD, disharmony is largely triggered by a divergence in values between the parents, specifically regarding the child's future, gender roles, and financial management. The conflict is further complicated because both parents often speak negatively about each other to the child, leaving the child confused about whose side to take.

"...communication in my family is difficult because our values differ fundamentally. My mother is more conservative when it comes to religion, largely because her social circle shares those same views, whereas my father is more flexible. Since I am closer to my father, I tend to lean toward his values. For instance, regarding whether a

woman should pursue higher education: my mother is quite conservative and argued that it was unnecessary, or that if I did go to college, it should only be to become a religious teacher, reasoning that once I am married, my husband would take care of everything. My father, on the other hand, believes that a woman should have her own convictions. These differences often lead to conflict, especially concerning my future. Then there is the issue of money: should a child even know about their parents' income and expenses? My father believes a child should know because it is a learning experience, but my mother disagrees; she feels it is a private matter for parents and that the child does not need to know. These kinds of differences sometimes cause arguments in my family. ” (Informant DD)

The Impact of Poor Communication

Poor communication had far-reaching emotional, social, and psychological impacts on the four Informants. Informant AA felt that home was no longer a safe place because her emotional expression was always inhibited. She even felt like a burden, leading to unmet emotional needs, feelings of suspicion, difficulty thinking clearly, and difficulty making decisions.

“... I am never comfortable at home alone.... when we show emotions, my father rarely gives us space to express them comfortably.... when we interact with others, we feel anxious and wonder if they have other intentions or if they are sincere in what they say. So I tend to view people negatively if they try to interact with me.” (Informant AA)

Informant BB is accustomed to suppressing emotions and has frequently been forbidden to cry. When faced with conflict, the Informant often experiences tremors. This history has made it difficult for them to adapt in social settings; they have faced alienation from peers, a sense of not being fully accepted, and challenges in building healthy social relationships.

“...because my father had such a severe temper he would shout and even throw things I would always start trembling whenever he got angry. If I cried, he would only become angrier, so I learned to

hold it all in. Even now, I still experience tremors whenever someone else snaps at me."

"...I also do not know how to apologize to others because I was never taught, nor did I ever learn what a proper apology looks like. Once, I took a joke too far with a friend, and it ended up causing us to become estranged..." (Informant BB)

Informant CC experienced more serious repercussions, specifically psychological distress that has necessitated psychiatric care since high school. Informant CC developed a habit of concealing feelings and lying to avoid triggering anger, and often feels stifled when at home. Conflicts with their mother also affect their mood, which in turn interferes with their social activities.

"... I have become unable to be honest or open about how I feel. I actually dislike lying, but I am forced to; if I do not lie, I get scolded. Honestly, it is just exhausting to be scolded all the time."

"... Because communication is poor, they do not listen, and I often feel compelled to lie or get uncomfortable. It is definitely disruptive; it makes me prone to outbursts and puts me in a bad mood." (Informant CC)

Informant DD experiences emotional confusion, stemming from frequently receiving negative information from both their father and mother about one another. Informant DD feels there is no safe space to talk, finds it difficult to open up, and has even considered never getting married, viewing their parents' relationship as unhealthy. In social settings, Informant DD is perceived as awkward and lacking empathy, reflecting the long-term impact of their family's communication patterns.

"... I feel confused because whenever my parents have a conflict, they bring it to me. I struggle to process their issues and do not know how I am supposed to respond. It has made me think I might not want to get married at all, because seeing what my parents go through makes everything feel so complicated. The biggest impact is that I have become very reluctant to talk to people; I tend to bottle things up, and my emotions are not very stable. I am prone to

sudden outbursts. People have also told me that I lack empathy; sometimes, I cannot sense when someone else is sad. When that happens, I do not know what to do, so I stare blankly. I have never seen that kind of emotional expression in my own family, so I often do not know how to react. This has been a major struggle, especially since my field counseling requires a high level of empathy. In my friendships, I also feel incredibly awkward around others and find it very difficult to open up. I am constantly left wondering, 'How am I supposed to deal with this person?' (Informant DD)

Attempts at Resolution and Hopes

Despite facing communication barriers, each of the four Informants has their own way of trying to resolve the issues. Informant AA once tried to start a family discussion, but it failed and instead triggered new conflicts. Informant AA hopes that, at some point, the family might become more open to receiving help from a third party, such as a counselor or a family psychologist.

*"...the result was just as disappointing, leading to even greater problems than expected... In the end, nothing changed, and it did not help at all... Seeking help from a psychologist or counselor seems like one of the most viable paths. If they remain unwilling to accept help or gain awareness, the process will certainly be long, or perhaps the issues will never be resolved."*n (Informant AA)

Informant BB has begun learning how to manage their emotions and has even taken on the role of a mediator between their mother, father, and grandmother. Informant BB hopes to build a healthier, more open family in the future and to find a responsible partner.

"...I also received a diagnosis regarding my mental health, but fortunately, things are better now. Currently, I usually act as a bridge between my mother and my grandmother... I hope they do not hold grudges against each other."

"...I truly hope that in the future, I will not choose the wrong partner... I hope my partner will be a 'family man' so that these events do not happen all over again." (Informant BB)

Informant CC once tried to start an open discussion with their parents, but their mother rejected it, showing input resistance. As a result, Informant CC limited communication to maintain emotional stability, while hoping their parents might eventually become more open to professional help and self-reflection.

"...I did try. The three of us sat down together and attempted to talk... but I felt a sense of selfishness—a need for her always to be right—so, to this day, we have not been able to find any common ground." (Informant CC)

Informant DD also tried to talk with their parents, which improved their relationship compared to when the Informant was in middle or high school. At one point, the Informant also tried sharing family issues with a friend; however, the friend labeled Informant DD an "undutiful child" for discussing conflicts with their mother. Informant DD is also working to improve communication with their younger sibling to avoid repeating the same patterns, hoping their family will learn to respect differing opinions and feel comfortable discussing issues openly.

"...Because I am studying Guidance and Counseling, I have realized that things in my family are not quite right. That is why I once tried to get my parents to talk about my studies. Since then, communication has actually improved compared to when I was in middle or high school. I have shared this with friends, and they found it strange that I never talked about my family or called my parents. When I mentioned having a conflict with my mother, they labeled me 'disobedient', but that is fine. Honestly, sometimes I do not feel like sharing anything because it is all so complex; I do not even know where to start. Looking at my friends' families, I feel like a family should be an open space, but my own family does not seem very welcoming; that is just how things are. Yes I am also trying to help my younger sibling become an open person. Whenever they ask me something, I try to answer without judgment, even if the questions are unusual, like, 'What does God look like, [big sister]?' I try to answer as best I can. I do not want them to go through what I have experienced, so whenever they ask, I make sure to provide an answer." (Informant DD)

DISCUSSION

According to DeVito (2018), four communication patterns describe how family members interact. The first is the equality pattern, in which all family members have equal standing when expressing opinions and making decisions. Communication is open and democratic, as every individual is valued equally (Nuraida & Zaki, 2018). The second pattern is the balanced split pattern, which still emphasizes equality but divides responsibilities and authority by domain (Suciati & Indrani, 2025). For instance, one person may take a dominant role in financial matters, while another takes the lead in child-rearing.

The third pattern is the "unbalanced split pattern," characterized by imbalanced communication in which one party tends to be more dominant and controls most family decisions. Meanwhile, the other remains more passive and compliant (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). This disparity often fosters dependency and hinders healthy, two-way communication (McNallie & Gettings, 2023). The final pattern is the "monopoly pattern," in which one individual controls family communication. This person acts as the central decision-maker and rarely gives other family members space to express their opinions. The resulting communication is one-way and rigid, frequently leading to pressure and conflict within the family (Wijaya et al., 2023).

This study's results indicate that poor communication affects a child's emotional, social, and psychological well-being. These findings align with Fatimah and Holilah (2025), who suggest that a lack of open, supportive communication from parents can lead to difficulty expressing emotions, low self-confidence, and challenges in social interaction and adjusting to new environments. Therefore, meaningful emotional engagement from parents can foster an atmosphere that

supports the development of positive values (Luthfiyah & Yuliana, 2023).

According to Aminah et al. (2024), when parents are overly dominant and disregard their children's opinions, this can hinder openness and empathy in family relationships. As the Informant in this study experienced, conflict with their mother affected their mood, which in turn disrupted their social and academic activities. This is supported by Qisthi and Ramadhana (2024), who note that family communication patterns are linked to a child's academic achievement; poor communication within the family can hurt a child's academic performance. Furthermore, Salam and Purwanto (2025) state that family communication patterns characterized by a lack of openness can affect a child's psychological well-being. The Informant experienced emotional confusion because one parent frequently shared negative information about the other. Consequently, the Informant felt they had no safe space to confide in others, found it difficult to open up, and even considered the possibility of never getting married all because they perceived their parents' relationship as unhealthy.

Among the four communication patterns identified by DeVito (2018), the interviews revealed the "unbalanced split" pattern and the "monopoly" pattern. In these patterns, one party's dominance leads to a lack of balance, openness, and participation among family members. All Informants indicated that parents dominate communication and focus primarily on demands and criticism, without giving children the opportunity to express themselves. This situation reflects a communication pattern in which one party holds more power in directing the flow of communication, while the other remains silent or withdraws. However, communication among family members plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between parents and their children (Yulianti et al., 2023).

A limitation of this study is its scope, which focuses on how communication patterns in low-income families contribute to disharmony, specifically as experienced by children. Because the subjects were selected exclusively from among children living in disharmonious family environments, the data gathered primarily reflect experiences and perceptions from a single viewpoint. Furthermore, the study examines this phenomenon solely from the child's perspective. This narrow focus means that the findings do not provide a comprehensive picture of family communication dynamics, particularly as they lack the perspectives of parents or other family members, who might offer different insights.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, family communication patterns tend to exhibit "monopoly" and "unbalanced split" patterns, characterized by an authoritarian figure's dominance, divergent values, and a lack of openness among family members. These conditions hinder children from expressing their emotions, leave emotional needs unmet, cause emotional confusion, and make it difficult to form social relationships and engage in academic activities. Furthermore, children in such environments tend to suppress their emotions, struggle to open up, feel that they lack a safe space to share their thoughts, and face challenges in adapting to social environments. Therefore, fostering open, egalitarian, and balanced communication, a "balanced pattern", is essential to creating a more harmonious family dynamic that supports a child's emotional development. This study is expected to enrich the literature on family communication patterns, specifically monopoly and unbalanced split patterns, and serve as a reference for future research that examines family communication from both parents' and children's perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

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