

Difficult Family Dialogues

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Purpose Statement

This project seeks to understand what topics are difficult for emerging adults to discuss with members of their immediate family. An emerging adult is defined by Arnett as a person age 18-25 who no longer falls into adolescence (15-17) but is not yet a young adult (30s).

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480. doi:10.1037//0003-066X.55.5.469

Research Questions

RQ 1: What topics are difficult for emerging adults to discuss with family members?

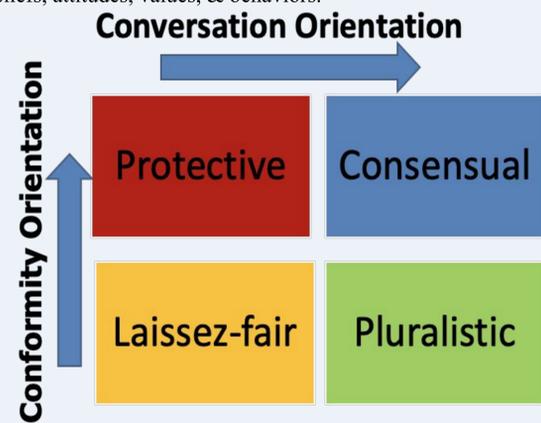
RQ 2: How do emerging adults attempt to manage these conversations?

RQ 3: What strategies are effective and ineffective when it comes to managing these conversations?

Typology of Families

Conversation Orientation is the degree to which families are open and talkative about issues.

Conformity Orientation is the degree to which a family expects people to be alike in terms of beliefs, attitudes, values, & behaviors.



Koerner, Ascan & Fitzpatrick, Mary. (2002). Toward a Theory of Family Communication. *Communication Theory*. 12. 70 - 91. 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00260.x.

Methods & Materials

This study targeted college students ages 18-25, participants were asked to complete an anonymous survey that asked questions about topics they find difficult to discuss with members of their immediate family. Immediate family was defined to participants as a person's family unit that includes the closest family members such as parents and siblings. There were a total of 60 participants for this study. Participants were asked to provide their age, gender, and who is included in their immediate family. Then they were asked to list at least 1 but up to 10 topics that are difficult to talk about with their immediate family in order of most to least difficult. They were then asked to answer the following questions for each topic listed:

- With which family members is it difficult to discuss?
- Why is it difficult to discuss?
- How do you manage talking about this topic?
- What have you tried to help you feel more comfortable when having these conversations?
- What have you tried to help you feel more comfortable that hasn't worked when having these conversations?

Using qualitative thematic analysis the responses were looked at in order to find what the most difficult topics and what strategies were ineffective and effective in management of conversations containing those topics.

Summary of Findings (Management Strategies)

The most difficult topics for emerging adults to discuss with their families included Relationships, Identities, Education, Future, Health & Wellbeing, Finances, and Politics. Within some of these topics main subtopics were found to also be difficult for many of the participants to discuss. Table 1 includes a list of topics, subtopics, and examples of why topics were difficult to discuss. When it came to managing conversations with these topics participants used Intrapersonal Communication, Openness, Third Party Support, or Avoidance. Sometimes these methods of managing the topics work and other times they did not. Table 2 lists out the strategies, subtopics of those strategies, and examples of how participants employed those strategies. The examples are broken down into effective and ineffective management strategies, examples highlighted in green were effective in helping manage the conversation and examples highlighted in red were ineffective in helping manage the conversation.

Table 2-Effective and Ineffective Management Strategies:

Strategy	Subtopics	Exemplars
Intrapersonal Communication	Self-Talk	“tell myself it's better to talk about it than not to”
		“I have tried to handle things by myself and not talk to anyone about my problems and that just doesn't hurt me academically but it also puts a lot of stress on me mentally.”
Interpersonal Communication	Full Disclosure	“try to ease into it and just say what I'm thinking”
		“I once tried to be fully open with my dad about my thoughts on sex and my concerns, kind of like ripping off the band-aid, in hopes that we could have an open conversation. He scolded me saying I was being inappropriate and that this wasn't a conversation we should be having.”
	Surface Level Interaction	“Small comments here and there to let my opinion be known”
		“Hiding things from my parents and keeping conversations on the surface level.”
Humor	“Hinting or using humor to address the problem”	
Agreement	“Attempting to “agree” with them and then explain why I think what I do”	
Ask Questions	“I have tried to ask questions so I completely understand what they are saying instead of arguing.”	
	“When I ask specific questions and keep asking for more details I can tell it makes my mother uncomfortable so I try not to ask too many questions. I know she would answer my questions, but I do not want to make her uncomfortable so I stop asking when I can tell she is uncomfortable.”	
Third Party Support		“My brother and I are on the same page about this topic, so it is easier when I have him to talk to our parents about it with.”
Avoidance		“nothing, I don't feel comfortable talking to them about it”
		“Tried to remove myself from the situation”

Value of Study

This study has found some of the most difficult topics emerging adults have discussing with family members. It also has allowed for understanding of what makes these topics difficult and what does or does not work when trying to have a conversation. Although the most common method among participants of managing these conversations is by avoiding the topic completely as they feel it is not possible to discuss with family members, often parents. I think this study was a great introduction to possible further research on difficult dialogues with family. Some ideas for future studies are to study what topics parents of emerging adults find difficult to discuss with their children which could be done via a survey similar to the one used in this study. Another possible future study could be to interview emerging adults in order to get more detailed information about what topics are difficult and why. By doing this type of study more information and understanding may come from each participant on what they find difficult about a given topic and how they try to manage it.

Summary of Findings (Difficult Topics)

Table 1-Difficult Topics:

Topics	Subtopics	Exemplars
Relationships	Friendships	“she [mother] likes to play devil's advocate when i am having an issue with a friend”
	Parental Relationships	“Many issues between my mother and father and I usually get put in the middle”
	Romantic/Sexual Relationships	“I'm not too interested in relationships and they question if something is wrong with me” “Our religion does not accept sex before marriage.”
Identities	Sexuality	“Mom doesn't understand my sexual identity” “Because they don't know that I'm bisexual”
	Religious	“They are devoutly religious while my brother and I are not as devoted or interested, or really religious in general”
	Gender	“He [father] is used to what he grew up with and flocks to that as a foundation, or has sworn it away due to his conservatism. It is a topic I struggle with in terms of my own identity and the identities of people I associate with, so it is hard to make myself vulnerable to a family member, and my family as a whole, when I know I will (at the very least) initially be invalidated or questioned.”
	Race	“My brother and I are of a different race than our parents due to adoption, so there is an experiential barrier that prevents understanding when I have concerns about the issue. As white people, I do not want to incriminate them or make them feel attacked when I talk about race issues that affect me. My brother and I do not discuss it often because we are not sure what each other's stances on our racial identities are in terms of acceptance or rejection, so we generally avoid the topic rather than bonding over it.”
Education	Struggles with School	“If I am doing bad, they are disappointed because they are helping me pay for school, they might feel like its a waste of money if im not trying my best”
Health & Wellbeing	Mental Health	“He [father] does not understand that sometimes my mental state stops me from doing things that he wants me to do.”
	Physical Health	“Talking about body image with anyone can be uncomfortable” “It [cancer] is something that scares us and that impacts us every day.”
	Death	“I don't like talking about it because I'm not very open with my emotions, I like to be alone and grieve alone”
	Emotions	“Speaking about emotions can make one feel very vulnerable which can be uncomfortable.”
Future		“Because I feel that he [father] puts a lot of pressure on me to find a job and that makes me overwhelmed and frustrated with him” “my future may not included my parents ideals”
Finances		“I want to be independent financially, but my parents still do provide some things for me. Often leads to fights on where my money made should go (education, rent etc).”
Politics		“Huge differences in opinion. Mainly on social issues. Leads to personal attacks regularly”