

# Being open with your mouth shut: the meaning of ‘openness’ in family communication about sexuality

Maggie Kirkman<sup>\*</sup>, Doreen A. Rosenthal<sup>a</sup> and  
S. Shirley Feldman<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia;* <sup>b</sup>*Stanford University, USA*

An Australian study of parent–adolescent communication about sexuality revealed complex meanings inherent in the understanding of ‘openness’. These included willingness to answer questions while not keeping a spotlight on the topic; having an open-minded attitude; balancing openness with privacy; and being responsive to characteristics of the child. Various constraints applied to the application of open communication in this sensitive area. Given the range of meanings encompassed by ‘openness’, the authors recommend that social scientists limit their application of this term in the study of communication in families, and that sex educators take care to be more specific in recommending openness in communication about sexuality.

As part of a large project (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999; Kirkman *et al.*, 2001, 2002), in-depth interviews with adolescents and their parents were used to investigate discourses of communication about sexuality. One of the most intriguing discourses to emerge surrounded the notion of ‘openness’. The term ‘open communication’ was not raised by the research interviewers, but the almost invariable description by the participants of good communication as open, in conjunction with their apparently paradoxical usage of the term (exemplified by the title of this paper), alerted us to the need to interrogate the meaning of ‘openness’. This paper presents the results of our investigation of what people actually mean when they describe family communication as ‘open’. It is based on an assumption of the significance of subjective meaning in communication and relationships (Dixon, 1995).

The desirability of openness in family communication is generally endorsed in the research literature (Neer & Warren, 1988; Kafka & London, 1991; Nolin & Petersen, 1992; Duncan, 1996; Riesch *et al.*, 1997). For example, it has been argued that open communication is essential to the development of social and coping skills

---

\*Corresponding author. Key Centre for Women’s Health in Society, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia. Email: m.kirkman@unimelb.edu.au

in adolescents (Noller & Callan, 1991); that well-functioning families tend to have open communication styles (Barnes & Olson, 1985); that open and receptive communication styles by parents are associated with less adolescent sexual risk-taking (Kotchick *et al.*, 1999); and that less open communication is associated with more, and more serious, delinquency in adolescents (Clark & Shields, 1997). Emotional disclosure to parents is associated with adolescent perceptions of the openness of family communication (Papini *et al.*, 1990), and adolescent–mother dyads who perceive their communication as open and problem-free have been found to be more likely to agree on the source of influence in decision-making than adolescent–mother dyads who perceive their communication as less open and problem-free (White, 1996).

Differences in openness according to gender have been investigated; it is often found that mothers are credited with being more open communicators than fathers (Youniss & Smollar, 1985; Miller *et al.*, 1998; Rosenthal *et al.*, 1998; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). All family members, however, find sexuality to be a difficult topic about which to communicate (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002), although adolescents reporting open family communication also reported gaining more sex education at home (Baldwin & Baranoski, 1990); and the more openly families communicate about sex and alcohol, the greater the likelihood that students will act safely in relation to sex and alcohol (Booth-Butterfield & Sideling, 1998). One study found that adult daughters remembered exchanges about sex with their mothers as primarily negative, not much more than rules and warnings; what the adult daughters had desired was emotionally responsive, open communication (Brock & Jennings, 1993). Warren (1995, p.183) concluded that ‘Supportive communication about sex depends more on an attitude of openness, with all the accompanying nonverbal trappings, and less on discursive strategies.’

The meaning of ‘openness’ is so taken for granted in the literature that it is usually not defined. Some definitions given or implied can be simplistic, such as rating openness on the sum of specified (sexual) topics reported to have been discussed in the family (Miller *et al.*, 1998). The most common means of operationalizing openness is to use the Parent–Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS) (Barnes & Olson, 1982). Examples of this approach include, Barnes and Olson (1985), Fisher (1990), White (1996), and Clark and Shields (1997). (Fisher uses the PACS as a measure of general communication; in relation to communication about sex, openness is taken as the number and frequency of various sexual topics discussed.) The PACS consists of two scales, each of 10 items. One scale is designed to measure the degree of openness and the other to assess the extent of problems in family communication. The Open Family Communication Scale includes items such as ‘My [mother/father/child] tries to understand my point of view’, ‘It is easy for me to express all my true feelings to my [mother/father/child]’, and ‘My [mother/father/child] is always a good listener.’ The Problems in Family Communication Scale includes ‘My [mother/father/child] has a tendency to say things to me which would be better left unsaid’, ‘I don’t think I can tell my [mother/father/child] how I really feel about some things’, and ‘When we are having a problem, I often give my

[mother/father/child] the silent treatment.’ The PACS is an attempt to specify the components of openness. However, the analysis of our interviews indicates that the discourse around open communication is even more complex.

In order to capture the period of communication about sexuality that precedes the negotiation of an adolescent sexual relationship, we chose to study families that included at least one child in early adolescence. Because all participants in social interaction contribute to the construction of meaning, we interviewed parents and children from the same family in order to gain insight into shared meanings and contrasting perspectives. Our attention to the discourse surrounding communication about sexuality in families (relating to three—sometimes four—generations) permitted insight into discourses of family communication about sexuality.

## **Method**

Interviews were conducted with 51 people from 19 families during the last few months of 1998.

### *Participants*

Participants were the families of 10 female and 9 male students (aged 12–14) in Year 8 at four secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. Invitations to participate were sent to families with two parents living with the adolescent (about 70 families); they had been among participants in an earlier segment of this research project (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). In 13 of the 19 participating families, the adolescent and both parents were interviewed; in six families, the adolescent and one parent (five mothers, one father) were interviewed. This gave a total of 32 parents (14 fathers, 18 mothers), who were aged from 30 to about 50. In three of the families, step-fathers lived with the adolescents.

All families were white; all but one had English as a first language. Occupations of the parents included managerial, professional, and manual classifications. Most mothers nominated home duties or part-time employment. No parent was unemployed.

### *Procedure*

Participants were interviewed individually in their homes by one of six trained interviewers, experienced in dealing with sensitive topics, who visited in pairs. The first two family members were interviewed simultaneously by different interviewers in separate rooms; the third interview was begun as soon as the first was concluded. Where possible, the interviewer was the same gender as the interviewee.

The in-depth, open-ended interviews were designed to encourage family members to describe, interpret, and justify their communication on sexual issues. Parents were asked, among other things, to give accounts of the communication about sexuality in their families of origin as well as in their current families, and to describe the advice they would give about such matters to young parents. Adolescents were asked,

among other things, to discuss examples of communications about sexuality, to explain parental attitudes to sexuality, and to describe how they plan to deal with sexual issues with their own children. No question was asked about 'openness'. The term 'sexuality' was used without definition. Men and women coped equally well with the sensitivity of the subject matter. Each interview lasted about 1–2 hours. (Copies of the interview schedule are available from the authors.)

### *Analysis*

Interviews were read many times in order to familiarize the researchers with the central issues for each person and family and among all participants. The main tasks of each reading relevant to this paper were: (1) Names and identifying details were changed. (These changes have not affected interpretation.) (2) Themes and discourses of communication about sexuality were sought from each interview; frequently occurring themes were categorized and elaborated. (3) Themes and discourses about openness were collated. (4) Each interview was read to discover the meaning of openness in context. (5) Interviews from each family were read consecutively; similarities and differences among family members in relation to openness were noted.

By focusing on individuals and family groups as well as on themes, we were able to discover particular constellations of meaning revealed through language (Bruner, 1987). The theme approach focused attention on the issues; the individual and family approach placed information in the context of personal meaning, highlighting continuities as well as the contradictions and inconsistencies indicative of positioning in discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

## **Results and discussion**

### *Open communication is important*

Although no questions were asked about open communication, most participants spontaneously said that openness was important. All but two mothers directly advocated openness; one did so by implication (that is, not using the word 'open' but describing communication using the criteria that we develop throughout this paper). Nine fathers directly and three by implication advocated openness; one did not refer to it either directly or implicitly. Seven adolescents said directly and seven implied that communication about sexuality should be open; five did not refer to openness. Openness was the most commonly named criterion of good communication about sexuality (such as in advice to young parents or regrets about parents' own parental communication).

Of the 52 people interviewed, only two (a married couple) said that there was too much openness about sexuality. (Their daughter was one of the adolescents who did not refer to openness.) Ivan Finch (*father*) said that he did not want his daughter to feel comfortable talking to him about sexuality and would like 'a little bit less' family communication on the subject. Ivan's daughter said that, apart from occasional

conversations on scientific or biological matters, her father does not discuss sexuality with her. The Finch family was the only family whose first language is not English; their divergence from the group trend may be an indication of cultural variation in discourses of communication about sexuality. Ivan said that he dislikes the 'freedom' of communication about sexuality in Australia.

In contrast, Dylan Otway (*adolescent male*) said of his communication about sexuality with his parents that, 'I just want them to be open and truthful, and I suppose that's what they expect of me whenever I talk to them'. Yvonne White (*mother*) advised young parents to 'Be open and honest. That's it. ... And if you talk to your kids you don't have a problem'; and Sarah Barber (*mother*) said that, 'I really do think they should be very open with them.' Some parents regretted the lack of openness in their families of origin. Alan Adams (*father*) said, 'I would have liked it to have been more open and I would have liked my parents a lot more relaxed about talking about sex.'

Parents, especially mothers, described open communication about sexuality as essential in guiding adolescent behaviour. For example, Sarah Barber (*mother*) said, 'I think it should be an open relationship and I think, well, I think mothers should be able to discuss everything, tell them everything, so they don't go out there in the real world naïve.' Hazel Martin (*mother*) said:

I would have liked my mum to have been open with me. ... I wish that somebody had given me some tools that I could have used. Because I ended up going the way that I thought everyone was going. ... I ended up going what I felt was the wrong way. Because I would have liked to have abstained. ... Not necessarily until marriage but until I found someone special.

Yvonne White (*mother*) elaborated on the topic when she said that mothers:

should be as open as possible. If they don't know they should make the effort to learn. You are responsible for that child's education. ... As a mother ... I've got more chances of influencing that child than anyone else. But you've also got to allow that child to grow. And finding that balance is so damned difficult.

The difficulty of finding a balance in dealing with a problematic topic for communication may contribute to apparent contradictions in the meaning of openness.

*The meaning of 'open' is apparently contradictory*

We're pretty open. I sort of try and keep my mouth shut. (Bill Paterson, *stepfather*)

When we first encountered apparent contradictions such as Mr Paterson's statement, we assumed that what we were hearing was the dominant discourse of desirable parent-child communication in conflict with competing discourses. Further examples include adolescents, such as Abby Everett, who described their parents as open in communicating about sexuality while at the same time declaring that they never discuss the subject. Abby's father echoed her views; Hal Everett said, 'we don't really talk great deals about it. I mean if they want to talk about it, I'm quite open'. Similarly, Joseph Turner (*father*) said, 'It's been an open house if anything needs to be discussed or asked. He doesn't ask anything, Paul.'

However, close analysis of the transcripts suggested that these could be better understood not as contradictions but as delineations of the meaning of ‘openness’. One mother, Yvonne White, devoted most of her interview to an account of the value of openness, the problems arising from families failing to be open about sexuality, and the ways in which she demonstrated her own open communication. She described her parents as ‘very open’, but said, ‘My mum and dad both, they never brought a subject up, but if you did they helped you through it.’ From Yvonne White it can be inferred that to be open about sexuality can mean to be willing to answer questions.

Other components of meaning are that openness can involve having an open-minded attitude; openness does not mean keeping a spotlight on the topic; openness and privacy need to be balanced; and that openness is adjusted to the maturity of the child. Limitations that further delineate meaning are that openness in communication, particularly about sexuality, is constrained by gender; it is limited by the degree of taboo of the topic; and moderated by social *mores* and parental limitations. Each of these aspects of meaning is discussed in turn. The discussion concludes with an indication that family members tend to assert that openness is the basis of all good family communication.

#### *Openness means answering questions*

My mum just says, ‘If there’s anything that you’re ever confused about, I’ll explain it to you’. She’s very open on that. (Joanna Jones, *adolescent female*)

Parents and adolescents often seem to equate being open with willingness to answer questions. Evelyn Adams (*mother*) said of her husband that ‘He’s very sort of open talking to them about it [sexuality]. So I suppose it’s just been assumed that we just answer whatever they wanted to know. We’ve never sort of made up a little talk to give them or anything like that’. When asked what she would tell her children about sexuality, Vicky Barber (*adolescent female*) said, ‘I’d want it to be sort of like open. Like, “You can come to me any time you like about this stuff”.’

However, knowing that parents are open and willing to answer questions does not ensure that questions will be asked, although the awareness of openness will be valued: Adam Carter (*adolescent male*) said of his father:

He’s very open about it [sexuality]. He says that if there’s anything that I want to know about something to do with that, he will tell me and he will explain. But usually I’m a bit embarrassed. ... I’d rather not.

Furthermore, merely stating a willingness to answer questions is not enough; one must demonstrate openness by one’s actions in actually discussing topics such as sexuality. Julie Otway (*mother*) described her mother as saying, ‘You know, “If you have any questions, ask me”’, but I knew that that was really, “Please don’t ask me”.’

It is implicit that questions must be answered honestly. Maree Paterson (*mother*) said, ‘I remember thinking, I’m not going to be like Mum. I’m going to answer questions, tell them the truth, and stuff like that.’ However, the truth might be

adapted to suit the circumstances, such as the age of the child (a theme that will be developed later). Maree Paterson also described her younger daughter as ‘think[ing] you only have sex when you have babies, you see. So I’m leaving that at that until they’re a bit older.’

Some participants explained their reasons for answering questions as a means of demonstrating openness. Typical is Duncan King (*father*), who said:

I would advise [parents] to be open. To answer questions honestly and not to force information on children before they want it. I’ve seen a lot of children whose parents have been more than open. They’ve really given them the whole box and dice at an early age, and kids take in only as much as they want and the other confuses them. ... [Or] kids learn all about sex from their peers and often that’s a very garbled situation as well. The balance is very hard to find. ... The only way you can go too far wrong is not to say anything at all or to force information on children when they’re not ready for it.

A few parents, such as David Jones (*father*), regret having to wait for questions, preferring ‘a discussion generated, started, by anybody. That it shouldn’t be just left for myself or Erica to lead it as an issue.’ Others, like Carl Inglis (*father*) try to balance waiting to be asked questions and raising the topic of sexuality from time to time. Mr Inglis has ‘discussed fairly openly’, but has tried not to be dogmatic:

I’ve never made statements about, ‘You have to be married to have babies’, or ‘It’s better to be married’. I’ve only ever said, ‘In my view it’s better to have a long-term relationship before you have a kid’. ... He’s [adolescent son] been a bit young to discuss those sorts of things. I think my attitude’s far more open [than my parents’]. I haven’t just made that escapist remark, ‘If you want to know something, ask me’. I have proffered some things forward at appropriate times.

It is clearly difficult to strike a balance between being intrusive and avoiding the topic. Carl Inglis also reveals a component of the meaning of openness: having an open-minded attitude.

#### *Openness can mean having an open-minded attitude*

[Parents should] be open, have an open mind. ... I think just keeping an open mind that you were young once too and just listen to what they have to say, I think. Try and answer the best you can. (Elisabeth Norris, *mother*)

Bridget Smith (*mother*) regretted the fact that her mother was not open-minded. She described giving her own daughter warnings about the dangers of sex without love and commitment, but said, ‘My mother should have been more open and not to have said it was wicked.’ Evelyn Adams (*mother*) was proud of her mother’s open-mindedness:

She was pretty open about things, probably more than, you know, some other parents, friends’ parents, of that time. So, you know, she was easy to talk to about things. Probably pretty liberal sort of attitude, I suppose. ... As long as you’re in a permanent relationship with someone, she wasn’t sort of one of these people that said, you know, you shouldn’t have sex before marriage, whereas some other parents of that time—. And she’d talk about contraception and say you should be on the Pill or whatever if you

had a permanent boyfriend, and things like that. ... She didn't sort of go out of her way to bring things up, but she made sure you knew that—you know, how she felt about things. ... Yeah, she was pretty open about things.

So openness can embrace open-mindedness, and willingness to give information; but it may exclude intrusive discussion.

*Openness does not mean keeping a spotlight on the topic*

Not for my parents but for a lot of parents, I'd tell them to relax. I mean, a lot of my friends come to school saying how their parents wouldn't shut up about sexual lectures last night. (Felicity Golding, *adolescent female*)

Felicity Golding reflects the views of most of the adolescents. They want their parents to be open, ready to answer questions honestly. They do not want parents to be too keen to keep a spotlight on sensitive topics such as sexuality. Amanda Dutton (*adolescent female*) is another example: 'I reckon if the children want to know, they'll definitely ask. Don't go just talking about it any old time.' Parents also included reticence in the meanings accruing to openness. When asked what advice she would give to young parents, Evelyn Adams (*mother*) said, 'I suppose just to talk to them when they're ready, or when they bring up the subject, perhaps; and just keep the subject open, sort of, without making too much of a big deal out of it.'

Such reticence can reduce embarrassment for the children and the parents, and may be seen as helping to maintain culturally endorsed social and moral standards. Our finding of the need for reticence is at odds with the equation of open communication with frequent discussions in families, including on risky topics (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998). Investigating mere frequency fails to take account of the tightrope some parents feel themselves to be walking in trying to balance availability and reticence, over-indulgence and taboo, affirmation and warning. A quotation from Ian Martin (*father*) exemplifies this:

Don't put any limitations on them. Don't be afraid. I think that was a lot of problems with my parents. People are uncomfortable talking about sex, whereas really I like it. And it is one of the blessings of a good marriage. And you shouldn't be afraid of it and you shouldn't hide it. Neither should you flog it as it is today. I feel it's been so pushed out with advertising and in movies so much, people get a second-rate idea of it: that it's just a fly-by-night thing. Where it's not, I don't think. But it's not a taboo; ... it's somewhere in the middle.

Family members also want to maintain areas of privacy within an open environment.

*Openness and privacy need to be balanced*

I think fathers have a role to—in particular their male children—to let them know what sexuality is and to openly discuss the issues. ... I'd never discuss personal experience. (David Jones, *father*)

It has been found that most young people do not want to talk to their parents about personal and private areas of sexual experience, such as sexual feelings and sexual

practices (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). The discourse of openness must be balanced with the discourse of privacy. Yvonne White (*mother*) said, 'I don't think it's right that I should question my children on their sexuality.' Openness does not include the invasion of personal privacy; there is an art in knowing when to keep silent. Sarah Barber (*mother*) said, 'Patrick kissed me on the lips once. I heard the kids say, "Oh Dad, would you stop that! Oh, that's disgusting". "Don't you think we still do it?" Vicky [adolescent daughter] says, "Yes, but not in front of us. And please don't talk about it".' In his advice to parents of adolescents, Daniel Martin (*adolescent male*) said, 'Don't talk about it [sexuality] when the kid's embarrassed or in public or anything.' Both topic and context need to be considered by family members who value open communication about sexuality.

One mother, Sarah Barber, described her desire for open communication about sexuality, her need for privacy in the parents' sexual relationship, and the way in which their children curtailed parental sexual activity: 'I like the kids all to be sound asleep and that's getting harder now because they're older, they stay awake later'. For Ms Barber, the balance of openness and privacy was difficult to judge. '[My daughter] doesn't want to think that we're having sex. I'm just at the crossroads whether to tell her that she's starting to interfere with it a bit. I don't know whether. Got any advice on that?' Ms Barber said that her husband was becoming frustrated at her sexual reticence (which can be related to the idea of the strict taboos around coital privacy in families (Gurney, 2000)), but she was reluctant to be open about it with her daughter because that would overstep the bounds of appropriate communication between parents and adolescents.

Although parents and children want to maintain open communication while keeping their lives as sexual beings separate from their parent-child relationships, there are personal details that some adolescents would like to know. For example, Benjamin Inglis (*adolescent male*) said that he was satisfied with his parents' open communication with him about sexuality, although he rarely discussed the topic with them because he and his siblings 'know all about it'. Nevertheless, he said:

I kind of don't know if Dad's done the things I've done. I mean, he probably has, but how am I supposed to know? ... I'd like to know if they've looked at pornos [pornographic videos] or anything. See if they haven't experienced them, thinking I'm filthy. Which I'm not.

Benjamin wanted enough personal (but not intimate) disclosure to normalize his interests and activities in his own eyes and those of his parents.

Some parents and adolescents are able to discuss the parents as adolescent sexual beings, as though the passage of years depersonalizes the disclosure: the parent is no longer that teenage rebel. Yvonne White (*mother*) described herself as 'very open about sex'. She had told her children that she had had sexual intercourse at 15 without condoms, and offered to buy some for her son. It is interesting to speculate that intergenerational privacy may be implicated in the assertion that the previous generation is always less open than the current generation. Bill Paterson (*stepfather*) said, 'Mum would always yell out to us boys, you know, something sexual, like, "Make sure you wear a condom", or whatever else. In a jokingly way. ... Our parents

were very open about it. Not open as, say, Maree is.' Maree, his wife, was then 37 years old; his mother was 48: about the same age as most of the mothers of adolescents in this group of families and (apparently) equally at ease in discussing sexual matters. It may be, therefore, that the generational relationship to some extent defines the expression of openness in communication about sexuality. Parents described both their parents and their children as prudish; it may be a product of the privacy that each generation demands from the adjacent generation. Openness must accommodate the need for privacy.

All the same, what is defined as private is adapted to the maturity of the child, although some things remain out of bounds even within open parent-child communication about sexuality. Christine Inglis (*mother*) said:

You become a lot more open about things as they get older. ... I think Carl [husband] tends to say a bit more about sex than I would say to our children. I'm sure they don't really want to know. And if he says something, the girls say, 'OK, don't go there, we don't want to know that'. ... Our sex life is private, their sex life is private.

#### *Openness is adjusted to the maturity of the child*

I think the children need to know and they want to know, and if they're showing an interest in how everything goes, I think you've got to be as honest as to what standard that they can cope with. You're not going to go and do something that they can't manage. Just give them what they can cope with. (Julie Otway, *mother*)

Parents are expected to be open in their communication about sexuality according to the maturity of the child. As Elisabeth Norris (*mother*) said, 'They don't need to know everything' before they are adolescent. Adolescents themselves endorse the notion of adapted openness. Stephanie Smith (*adolescent female*) plans to tell her own children:

Anything they want, really. Yeah. But not when they're young or anything. ... Like, if they ask me a question about [an unsuitable topic], I'd probably tell them that they're too young and just wait a couple of years or something. ... I wouldn't tell them about prostitution or nothing like that, or about periods or those kind of things until they were older. And about wet dreams and everything. ... They really don't need to know any younger.

A common reason for adapting openness to the child is that the child will not understand and remember if the information is given too young. Yvonne White (*mother*) said:

As the kids matured, their questions got more in-depth, the answers got more in-depth. The things that I glossed over when they were 4 and 6, they were expanded fully. ... When they needed to know it. ... There's no point me telling them something they don't want to know. ... But if I allow them to come to me, ask me questions, they get an answer. And I know they retain it. ... They'll ask a question, they want to know the answer to that specific question. And I might say to them after I've answered that question, 'Is there anything else?' 'No'. That's it. And I know if I keep going they will switch off. I did it once and they switched off. 'Oh Mum, that's enough, we don't want

to know all that'. 'Fine, OK, I won't tell you anything. If you want to know, come and ask me'. And that's basically it.

In adapting openness to the maturity of the child, the corollary of increasing information may be diminishing physical intimacy:

I'm more open than what my parents were. And I'm not—like Mum used to—would never let you see her naked or stuff. My girls still walk in on me in the shower. Ross and Heath, I think, stopped walking in on me about two or three years ago, when they started getting older. I just said, 'I think you're too old now'. I don't want them to be like I was. I used to go, 'Ooh!?', like this. Get embarrassed. (Maree Paterson, *mother*)

Openness, then, must adapt to the developing sexuality of the child (and the parent-child intimacy taboo), particularly in physical openness between parents and children of different sexes.

Adaptations to openness must also be made according to other attributes of the child, such as variations in personality and mood. Evelyn Adams (*mother*) described her daughter as more open than her son. 'We haven't really gone into things as much as I probably have with Olivia. But then she asks a lot more questions, probably.' Janet Golding (*mother*) emphasized the reciprocal nature of communication and the need for parents to be sensitive to their children when she said, 'Ideally, I'd probably like it to be a bit more relaxed, but I don't think that's going to occur because Felicity isn't ready for that, and when she is, then that'll be fine.' Louise King (*mother*) stressed the need for parents to 'be fairly perceptive of their children's mood swings', and Grant Norris (*father*) said that 'kids [are] individuals; ... some kids are shy'. Of his two children, one was shy and avoided communication about sexuality; the other asked questions. Mr Norris adapted his open communication accordingly. Sarah Barber (*mother*) said of her son, 'Nathan's just a private kid. He doesn't come home and say a lot. I don't know whether it's the female. You always find out more.' It is clear that one child characteristic that is implicated in parental openness is the gender of the child and the parent.

### *Openness is constrained by gender*

We've split this task on gender lines to a degree, but she's had more discussions with the girls and I've had more discussion with him. ... I can't discuss erections with my daughters like I could, to a degree, with him. (Carl Inglis, *father*)

It has often been found that parents are more likely to discuss various topics with adolescents of the same gender than the other gender (Miller *et al.*, 1998). In our study, parents and adolescents tended to prefer same-gender communication about sexuality: mothers with daughters, fathers with sons (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). This tendency may be associated with the sanction against the intrusion of sexuality into the parent-child relationship, as well as with belief in gender-linked knowledge and information. It is a constraint that needs to be accounted for within the meaning of openness.

For example, Felicity Golding (*adolescent female*) thinks that girls should talk to their mothers, boys to their fathers. Her father leaves sex as ‘a mother–daughter thing. Like, he’ll probably talk about it with Toby [brother] when Toby’s old enough. ... If I had to get an opinion, like what I thought the guy was feeling, then I’d probably talk to my dad about it because he’ll know, because he’s a guy.’ Similarly, Matilda White (*adolescent female*) thinks that mothers should talk about sexuality to daughters and fathers to sons, ‘because boys are the same sex and they communicate better, and girls exactly the same. If a mum and a son talk, it’s a bit hard.’ If she needed any information, Matilda said that she would ask her mother in preference to her father in order to minimize embarrassment. Yvonne White (*mother*) said, ‘there are some things that I’d prefer him [son] to talk to his father about. Simply because to me they were a male issue and I had absolutely no idea on that area. ... I really didn’t feel qualified to answer because I’m female, not male.’ Vicky Barber (*adolescent female*) said, ‘I wish sort of that I could talk to my dad a bit more about that stuff. ... I wish I could but I don’t think I would if I could. ... The fact that he’s a guy, I wouldn’t go up and say ... stuff like that.’

Gender-linked knowledge may be an aspect of the gender limitation on openness, but it may also be implicated in sexual taboos in the family.

*Openness is limited by the degree of taboo of the topic*

I’m comfortable, but it’s a bit—you know, I just feel—I’m just a bit nervous about stuff like that to Mum. ... Just probably because it’s not really an open topic. Like everyone going around and talking about it. It’s a bit hard, sort of. It’s just a bit embarrassing. (Vicky Barber, *adolescent female*)

Vicky Barber went on to say that her mother was open, but implied that aspects of sexuality did not lend themselves to openness; Vicky prefers a degree of reticence. It is apparent that sexuality is a difficult topic for family communication. It also the focus of taboos within the family. Difficulties may arise because parents do not know the words to use or have other limitations and discomforts. Taboos are far stronger sanctions against behaviour or intimate communication.

Vicky’s mother, Sarah Barber, told a detailed anecdote of her great embarrassment at having to put cream on her daughter’s genital area because of thrush (Vicky was aged about 10):

We went to a nice lady doctor there and yeah, I had to rub the cream into her. ... It was very awkward, embarrassing, hard, and the doctor just said it wasn’t clearing up. She said, ‘Sarah, you might have to insert the tube’. I just said to her, ‘There’s no way!’ She said, ‘I’ll show you how to do it’. I said ‘no’. I said, ‘I’ll bring her here every day and you can do it. There’s no way I could do that to her’. Because it just, yeah, just wasn’t right. But thank God we got her on some tablets and fixed it up [after only one maternal application]. ... [Vicky said that she had a ‘funny feeling’ when the cream was applied.] I explained to her about that was a very delicate part of her body. I probably didn’t go into it too much, and I said, you know, ‘I’m only doing this because the doctor said this is where the cream’s to go and we’ve got to clear this thrush up’. I must admit I felt very, very awkward because, well, you know; kind of like inside my daughter.

Ms Barber prided herself on being open in sexual communication but felt that she was being asked to violate a taboo by touching her daughter intimately, even for medical purposes.

Ms Barber also described her discomfort at talking to her daughter about kissing; having to overstep the boundaries of intimacy. She had been shocked to discover that Vicky had a boyfriend whom she had kissed.

It was a real shock, so I ended up having, oh, look, a big long talk with her, and I must admit I thought we were—like, I was very open but I found it awkward at the same time, and I think maybe because it's never discussed with me, you know; like, I wanted to talk to her about kissing, about fondling, foreplay. Just prepare her for it. Because that was never—and I had no idea, and I thought, well, I want to give her some idea so when she, you know, she wants to say no, then she knows what she can and all that. And anyway so I did. We ended up talking about everything. ... I got a bit awkward, I must admit, and I was surprised at myself because I thought I was quite, you know, open, but I thought I had to tell her.

Heath Paterson (*adolescent male*) hopes to be open with his children as his parents are with him. His understanding of openness includes avoiding discussion of 'male stuff' with his mother. There is a suggestion of stronger limitations amounting to taboos on what he discusses outside the family, such as masturbation: 'I don't talk about that at school.' His communication about openness is constrained by social *mores*, which also influence the meaning of openness within the family.

*Openness is constrained by social mores*

I don't think he really minded. He just said, like, he didn't want other kids' parents thinking this was a place where that kind of thing is. (Benjamin Inglis, *adolescent male*)

When Benjamin's father found that Ben had been downloading pornography from the Internet, he was concerned about the judgements of society. Openness operates within social constraints. Community *mores* were taken into account in his understanding of openness, because it is important to retain the good opinion of other parents while dealing with the need for information of one's own children. Parents must be good citizens as well as good parents.

In this research, there is less information on social *mores* than on other aspects of openness, but it seems that privacy, confidentiality, and social constraints are intertwined in the restrictions operating on openness. When Dylan Otway (*adolescent male*) contemplated being open with his own children, as his parents are with him, he included the rider, 'I wouldn't tell them, "Oh, go tell your mates at school"', or anything like that. I'd just say, "That conversation is between me and you", you know.'

The way in which communication about sexuality is phrased is also governed by social constraints. When Christine Inglis (*mother*) recalled communication with her parents, she said (as did others), 'It wasn't greatly spoken of, anyway. I mean it was all very euphemistic, on the daughter nights and things, you know. It was all sort of

about “gently placing” and all very euphemistic.’ Such linguistic delicacy may reflect not only social constraints but parental limitations.

*Openness is constrained by parental limitations*

My dad went to [my brother’s room to give him] a sex book, and my brother turned around and said to Dad, ‘What do you want to know?’ And we just thought it was hilarious. (Yvonne White, *mother*)

Parents may espouse and practise open communication, but be limited by their own ignorance and discomfort in spite of their best efforts. Ms White went on:

[My mother] was pretty reserved, but she was open as much as she could. It was never, like I say, hushed up or anything like that. It was always very open. ... My mum, she didn’t—how could I put it? She didn’t realize that women had three openings. I don’t know whether she actually heard about it. So she could not have told you. ... I mean, that’s your own body, and I thought that was terrible. ... We discussed sex, and Mum learnt more, once we got into teen years, than she ever knew.

Tony Dutton (*father*) said that, with more sexual experience, he might have known more about sex and would be more confident in discussing it with his children. Sexually inexperienced parents may be open in their communication but find it difficult to discuss with their children issues which they themselves do not know about or understand. (Mr Dutton was not saying that more sexual experience was desirable, but that it would have made a difference to his communication with his children.) Other parents may be constrained by their discomfort with sexual topics. Hal Everett (*father*) said:

Sometimes we watch things on television that we squirm a bit, but we watch it because the kids think it’s fine. ... People kissing, or they’re in the bedroom. It’s the type of things that we allow that weren’t allowed in my day, but maybe they should have been.

Mr Everett is a parent endeavouring to be relaxed in his open communication about sexuality, but finding himself less comfortable with it than his children seem to be.

Other parents were aware of change and growth in themselves that influenced their communication about sexuality with their children. Hazel Martin (*mother*), for example, said:

I’ve grown and changed a lot. And I took myself through a 10-year period of emotional growth and healing and restoration of all that kind of stuff, and ...[now] we’re very open, talk about things. We don’t go looking for it, you know. ... We haven’t gone the other way. I think, myself personally, that we’re pretty balanced with what we talk about. We’re not excessive. ... I am still modest. I wouldn’t shower in front of my son or anything like that, and we don’t have any explicit publications. And even on TV, even though it’s hard to control, I do like to tell Daniel to avoid those types of things, and if something comes on, then I’ve always encouraged him to look away. ... And we often talk about it when it does come on. ... Had I not gone on that journey myself, ... I think I’d have been closed. Because that’s where I was.

Parents discussing their own journeys and limitations emphasize the importance of openness in communication in general as well as about sexuality in particular.

*Openness is the basis of all good family communication*

[Parents should] be absolutely dead honest. Speak from their own experiences. If they've learnt anything good from their experiences, to share that with them. And to be open and to let them know, I think, that they can come and talk to you about anything at all. To do with sexuality or whatever. But to be honest. Dead open, dead vulnerable, dead honest. (Hazel Martin, *mother*)

Tony Dutton (*father*) argued that a close family is a necessary prerequisite to communication on any topic. Adolescents made it clear that their parents' willingness to be open about sexuality was meaningful only if the relationship and the communication already existed: 'I don't really discuss sex with my father. ... I don't think he'd be that nervous about doing it, and he'd feel open. It's just that I don't have that kind of a relationship with my dad' (Abby Everett, *adolescent female*). Julie Otway (*mother*) said that good communication 'really does depend on your relationship on the whole, let alone to do with sex. I think if you've got a relationship then you can discuss whatever your problems are, it's got to be easy when it comes to talking about something to do with sex.' Erica Jones (*mother*) said, 'I don't think you can hide things at the beginning and then try and be more open later. It doesn't work for you or for them.' This theme was stated frequently:

I think you give them the grounding when they're younger. By the time you've hit adolescence, ... the horse has bolted. ... I think you prepare for everything in life. As much as you can. ... Even if I go to the supermarket, when the children were smaller, I would prepare. I prepare for them to be bored, I prepare for them to race up. I'd put all these things in, and I know people must have thought I was crazy, but I always had very good shopping trips with the kids. Because I tried very hard to think of the things that could occur. (Janet Golding, *mother*)

Openness is an attitude of mind in family communication, and one that takes work and effort. It can not begin at adolescence nor encompass only sexuality. Ms Golding continued:

I hope Felicity doesn't only have one partner in life. ... But at the same time I don't want her to have a million partners. I'd like her to be careful and to be aware of what she's actually getting into. Although she's funny; I mean, even at this young age she looks far more ahead than I know I ever did. And I think that's got a lot to do with the fact that, as a family, we do talk a trillion times more than I did in my family. Regardless of the sexuality issue. We didn't talk when we were children. My mother was a single mother. ... The welfare didn't exist. So she had to work other jobs to supplement the family income. She was just simply too tired to.

This mother has what could be considered fairly liberal views; she is seen deliberating the complicated topic of her attitude to her children as sexual beings. She reveals the effort and complexity behind the apparently straightforward notion of openness. The majority of the parents endorsed the view that open communication about sexuality (taken as willingness to answer questions honestly and to allow for the young person's point of view) must arise from open communication in general, which must begin from the child's earliest years. Ms Golding recalled:

I said to Mum—I had to discuss something with her and it was taking a long time, probably telling her I was pregnant. And I can remember her saying to me, ‘Well, why didn’t you discuss this with me before?’ And I’m thinking, ‘Why would I?’ ... Because it had never occurred to me to talk to her about anything.

In the absence of a pattern of communication, children cannot discuss with their parents even those issues that parents consider to be serious enough for their consideration. As researchers on parent–adolescent communication about sexuality, we can only endorse this conclusion.

It is in this aspect of the meaning of openness, however, that the divergence between discourse and practice can most clearly be discerned. Daryl Golding (*father*), for example, advised parents to ‘keep the communication streams open and bring more content and higher level content. ... There’s no embarrassment ... when they’re young. A piece of cake.’ Elsewhere in the interview it was apparent that he acknowledged playing almost no part in family communication. Other parents positioned themselves within the discourse of open and early communication with their children while stating that they would wait until their son or daughter had a girlfriend or boyfriend before discussing topics such as safe sexual practices. What we are dealing with in this paper, then, is both the meaning of a term, and how it is put into practice.

## **Conclusion**

The meaning of openness in communication about sexuality, as family members spontaneously use the term, has been shown to be far more complex than the number and frequency of sexual topics discussed within families. It includes the willingness to answer questions but not keeping a spotlight on the topic; having an open-minded attitude; balancing openness with privacy; and being responsive to characteristics of the child. The meaning of openness in operation includes constraints of gender, taboo, social *mores*, and parental limitations. Openness is the basis of all good family communication. Given the subtleties of meaning conveyed by these families, it makes excellent sense to keep your mouth shut while legitimately asserting that you are open in your family communication about sexuality.

However, such subtleties and complexities ensure that openness is a slippery term that encompasses too much to be useful to researchers, theorists, and educators. It almost equates with the notion of good communication in general. There is likely to be reciprocity between lay and professional meanings: a term in common usage, openness, is adopted by social scientists, who convey the results of their research to the public, who accept that good communication must be open. The term is understood and applied in ways that overlap but do not coincide with professional usage.

We suggest that researchers investigate specific and clearly defined components of communication, to which they apply a term other than openness; and that educators also work with similar components without relying on ‘openness’ to convey what they mean. At the same time, it is important to maintain awareness of the complexity

of communication on sensitive topics and to acknowledge that the components of good communication do not operate in isolation.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank the participating families for giving so generously of their time and for speaking frankly about difficult topics. The skill of the interviewers is demonstrated in the quality and detail of the interviews: we thank Teresa Senserrick (who also set up the interviews), Amanda Allan (who also contributed to the design of the interview schedule and trained the interviewers), Lisa Beale, James Hands, Primrose Letcher, and Angela Rodaughan. The research was carried out at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. The project was funded by grants to Rosenthal and Feldman from the Australian Research Council and to Rosenthal from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

### **References**

- Baldwin, S. E. & Baranoski, M. V. (1990) Family interactions and sex education in the home, *Adolescence*, 25, 573–582.
- Barnes, H. L. & Olson, D. H. (1982) Parent–adolescent communication scale, in: D. H. Olson, H. I. McCubbin, H. Barnes, A. Larsen, M. Muxen & M. Wilson (Eds) *Inventories used in a national survey of families across the family life cycle* (St Paul, MN, University of Minnesota).
- Barnes, H. L. & Olson, D. H. (1985) Parent–adolescent communication and the circumplex model, *Child Development*, 56, 437–447.
- Booth-Butterfield, M. & Sidelinger, R. (1998) The influence of family communications on the college-aged child: openness, attitudes and actions about sex and alcohol, *Communication Quarterly*, 46, 295–301.
- Brock, L. J. & Jennings, G. H. (1993) Sexuality education: what daughters in their 30s wish their mothers had told them, *Family Relations*, 42, 61–65.
- Bruner, J. (1987) Life as narrative, *Social Research*, 54, 11–32.
- Clark, R. D. & Shields, G. (1997) Family communication and delinquency, *Adolescence*, 32, 81–92.
- Dixon, M. D. (1995) Models and perspectives of parent–child communication, in: T. J. Socha & G. H. Stamp (Eds) *Parents, children, and communication: frontiers of theory and research* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum).
- Duncan, D. F. (1996) Growing up under the gun: children and adolescents coping with violent neighbourhoods, *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 16, 343–356.
- Fisher, T. D. (1990) Characteristics of mothers and fathers who talk to their adolescent children about sexuality, *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 3, 53–70.
- Gurney, C. M. (2000) Transgressing public–private boundaries in the home: a sociological analysis of the coital noise taboo, *Venereology*, 13, 39–46.
- Kafka, R. R. & London, P. (1991) Communication in relationships and adolescent substance use: the influence of parents and friends, *Adolescence*, 26, 587–598.
- Kirkman, M., Rosenthal, D. A. & Feldman, S. S. (2001) Freeing up the subject: tension between traditional masculinity and involved fatherhood through communication with adolescents, *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 3, 391–411.

- Kirkman, M., Rosenthal, D. A. & Feldman, S. S. (2002) Talking to a tiger: fathers reveal their difficulties in communicating about sexuality with adolescents, in: S. S. Feldman & D. A. Rosenthal (Eds) *Talking sexuality: parent-adolescent communication* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass).
- Kotchick, B. A., Dorsey, S., Miller, K. S. & Forehand, R. (1999) Adolescent sexual risk-taking behavior in single-parent ethnic minority families, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13, 93–102.
- Miller, K. S., Kotchick, B. A., Dorsey, S., Forehand, R. & Ham, A. Y. (1998) Family communication about sex: what are parents saying and are their adolescents listening? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 30, 218–222, 235.
- Neer, M. R. & Warren, C. (1988) The relationship of supportive communication to sex discussion in the home, *Communication Research Reports*, 5, 154–160.
- Nolin, M. J. & Petersen, K. K. (1992) Gender differences in parent-child communication about sexuality: an exploratory study, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 7, 59–79.
- Noller, P. & Callan, V. (1991) *The adolescent in the family* (London, Routledge).
- Papini, D. R., Roggman, L. & Anderson, J. (1990) Early adolescent age and gender differences in patterns of emotional self-disclosure to parents and friends, *Adolescence*, 25, 959–976.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and social psychology* (London, Sage).
- Riesch, S. K., Coleman, R., Glowacki, J. S. & Konings, K. (1997) Understanding mothers' perceptions of what is important about themselves and parenting, *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 14, 49–66.
- Rosenthal, D. A. & Feldman, S. S. (1999) The importance of importance: the differentiated nature of parent-adolescent communication about sexuality, *Journal of Adolescence*, 22, 835–852.
- Rosenthal, D. A., Feldman, S. S. & Edwards, D. (1998) Mum's the word: mothers' perspectives on communication about sexuality with adolescents, *Journal of Adolescence*, 21, 727–743.
- Warren, C. (1995) Parent-child communication about sex, in: T. J. Socha & G. H. Stamp (Eds) *Parents, children, and communication: frontiers of theory and research* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).
- White, F. (1996) Parent-adolescent communication and adolescent decision-making, *Journal of Family Studies*, 2, 41–56.
- Youniss, J. & Smollar, J. (1985) *Adolescent relations with mothers, fathers, and friends* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press).