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2 authors:

Leslie R. Nelson
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

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University of Missouri

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Fostering "Family": Communication Orientations in the Foster Parent-Child Relationship

Leslie R. Nelson ⓘ & Colleen W. Colaner ⓘ

Although foster families serve a critical societal role, little is known about foster family communication dynamics. The present study investigated the relationship of current foster parents' (n = 158) communication with his/her foster child on foster parents' perceptions of relational and child well-being. Structural equation modeling analysis revealed that foster parent-child communication is associated with foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity, relational closeness, and child resiliency. These findings suggest the importance of domain-specific family communication orientations and underscore the critical role of open communication in foster families.

Keywords: Child Resiliency; Family Communication Patterns; Foster Family Communication; Relational Closeness; Shared Family Identity

Of the 427,910 children currently in the United States foster care system (AFCARS, 2016), many have experienced neglect, violence, or abuse in their family of origin and thus are at high risk for emotional, social, and psychological issues (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010). Upon entering the foster care system, many children are placed into homes with foster parents – who undergo intensive training and are regularly surveilled to ensure the safety and well-being of the child – while the child's biological parents undergo the necessary rehabilitation to be reunified with their child (United States Department of Health and Human

Services, 2013). Family communication scholars suggest that foster families rely heavily on communication to construct, maintain, and negotiate family relationships (Galvin, 2006; Nelson & Horstman, 2017; Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014). Given the unique parameters of foster care (i.e., often-temporary family status, reunification goal) and foster families' reliance on discourse, a nuanced look into how communication facilitates the foster parent-child relationship is essential.

One way of understanding communication in foster families is to consider the preexisting communication environment of the foster family. According to family communication patterns (FCP) theory, families have predictable, patterned ways of communicating (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Foster children enter into a home with established communication norms and expectations which serve as a backdrop for foster parent-child interactions.

Subsumed in these larger communication norms, foster families negotiate disclosures about the child's situation in the foster care system and placement in the foster home. Research on adoptive family communication provides a model for understanding foster family communication. Adoption communication openness (ACO), in particular, is among the most established communication constructs in understanding adoption-related disclosures (Brodzinsky, 2005). ACO refers to the degree to which adoptive parents are willing to engage in free-flowing dialogue about adoption-related issues and emotions with their adopted child. Together, ACO and FCP offer important insight into general and adoption-specific communication norms.

Researchers have explored both ACO and FCP in adoptive families, noting the important role these processes play in identity building and relational maintenance (Colaner & Soliz, 2017; Horstman, Colaner, & Rittenour, 2016). In particular, both adoptive and foster families depend on communication to create individual and familial identities, build relationships, and reveal and conceal information about birth family experiences leading to the child's placement in the family (Brodzinsky, 2005; Galvin, 2006). Yet, unlike adoptive families, placement in foster care is often temporary (Patrick & Galvin, 2012), foster children tend to be older than adoptive children (AFCARS, 2016), and trauma is central to foster children's entrance into the home (Oswald et al., 2010). Given such similarities and differences, it is worthwhile to explore the degree to which FCP and adoption communication research speak to the foster family experience.

Thus, drawing from family and adoptive communication literature, the purpose of the current study is to understand how foster parents' general and foster-specific communicative schemata relate to foster parents' perceptions of foster child well-being and relational solidarity. Through structural equation modeling, we explore the degree to which adoption-based communication constructs explain foster family functioning. We also investigate the links between foster parent-child communication and foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. In so doing, we provide a portrait of foster parents' perceptions of communication and well-being in the foster family form.

Family Communication Patterns Theorizing

FCP postulates that family members' beliefs about communication are closely related to the communication behaviors family members perform, such that families tend to have predictable ways of communicating that are categorized by visible patterns (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a; Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008). While FCP emerged with reference to traditional biogenetic families, family relationship schemas exist cognitively and do not require any specific assemblage of family members to constitute a family (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a), making it suitable for studying foster family communication dynamics. Central to FCP theorizing are the dimensions of conversation and conformity orientation, which influence how the family operates, shape the family's shared reality, and dictate family functioning (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2012; Schrodt et al., 2008). *Conversation orientation* is defined as the "degree to which families create a climate in which all family members are encouraged to participate in unrestrained interaction about a wide array of topics" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 85). Families *high* in conversation orientation encourage open and frequent communication about family member's individual thoughts, feelings and activities, resulting in a warm and supportive communication environment (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Families *low* in conversation orientation tend to believe "open and frequent exchanges of ideas, opinion[s], and values are not necessary for the function of the family in general, and for the children's education and socialization in particular" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 85). As a result, families with a low conversation orientation discuss fewer topics, interact less frequently, and have fewer private exchanges about thoughts, activities, and feelings (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). *Conformity orientation* refers to the "degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, p. 85). Families *high* in conformity orientation are cohesive, obedient, hierarchical, and traditional whereas families *low* in conformity orientation encourage personal growth, value personal space, and tend to believe in the independence of family members (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a).

FCP and Child Well-Being in Foster Families

FCP is related to child well-being in a variety of family forms (see Rueter & Koerner, 2008). *Shared family identity*, an important indicator of relational well-being, refers to the way family members characterize, experience, or perceive the family as a group across interactional contexts (Manning, 2006). Family communication plays a critical role in constructing, negotiating, and maintaining a shared family identity (Galvin, 2006; Soliz & Rittenour, 2012). *Relational closeness*, a second indicator of relational well-being, refers to the social intimacy inherent to a given relationship. Relational closeness is positively associated with family functioning and supportive, satisfactory relationships (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002; Sobol, Delaney, & Earn, 1994). Taken together, shared family identity and relational closeness are unique, yet related indicators of relational

well-being. Concerning foster child well-being, research points to *child resiliency* (i.e., referencing a child's strengths present even among difficult circumstances) as an important indicator of child adjustment (Goodman, 1997). Although research on foster child adjustment has largely focused on developmental difficulties (Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, & Marshall, 2007; Viadero, 2010), the present study joins others (Goodman, 1997) in emphasizing strengths, thus exploring how foster parents' perceptions of their communication with their foster child may impact their evaluation of their child's ability to thrive and demonstrate resiliency. Considerable theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that family communication patterns are likely important to relational and child well-being in foster families.

Conversation Orientation and Well-being

Where other family forms have biological ties and shared history to make them feel like family, foster families must rely on communication (see Galvin, 2006; Nelson, 2017; Nelson & Horstman, 2017) to build and sustain feelings of family inclusion and family ingroup membership. Because foster parents enter into the world of foster care with the understanding that the child's placement in the family is temporary (i.e., foster families are not "forever" families; the child's biological parent(s) are often still in the picture), the current study seeks to examine whether or not foster parents communicate in ways that build a sense of shared family membership. Research has revealed that open and supportive communication – characteristic of conversation orientation – is instrumental to establishing a sense of shared family identity in a variety of contexts, such as grandparent-grandchild and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009; Soliz & Harwood, 2006; Soliz & Rittenour, 2012). Moreover, warm and supportive conversations, characteristic of high conversation orientation, are often associated with positive relational outcomes, such as relational closeness (Samek & Rueter, 2011). In part, this may be due to the fact that open communication tends to makes individuals feel more unified and connected (Colaner & Soliz, 2017; Galvin, 2006; Horstman et al., 2016; Soliz & Rittenour, 2012) through communicatively establishing a shared history and anticipated relational future – especially in diverse family contexts. Thus, it is likely foster parents may also rely heavily on open, supportive, and free-flowing dialogue to foster shared family identity and relational closeness with their foster child.

Research has shown that forming healthy relationships and attachments with foster parents has positive effects on children's well-being (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005; Legault, Anawati, & Flynn, 2006) and also that conversation orientation is positively associated with self-esteem and negatively associated with stress, depression, and anxiety (Isaacs, Koerner, & Croatt, 2009). Thus, the following is predicted:

> H1: Conversation orientation is positively associated with foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency.

Conformity Orientation and Well-being

The relationship between conformity orientation and relational and child well-being is less clear. Generally, conversation orientation tends to be a stronger predictor of child outcomes than conformity orientation (Schrodt et al., 2008). Concerning the specific relational and child well-being variables of interest in the current study, empirical support is mixed. In a recent study examining parent-child communication, the association between conformity orientation and shared family identity was tested but no significance was found (Beck & Ledbetter, 2013). Research on family members' concealment of secrets revealed conformity orientation and relational closeness were significantly inversely related (Afifi & Olson, 2005). In terms of child resiliency, past research has revealed high levels of conformity orientation were related to increased anxiety, depression, and stress (Hamon & Schrodt, 2012; Isaacs et al., 2009).

At the same time, family communication scholars have not yet considered the role of conformity orientation in foster families. It is plausible that the foster family context may be a unique environment where conformity orientation – when coupled with conversation orientation – could provide a means for foster children to have certainty about what is expected, needed, and rewarded in the foster family unit. Consequently, foster parents' stressing of a high conformity orientation may serve to create a sense of shared family identity.

It is also possible that foster parents' preference for communication that privileges a cohesive and traditional family structure may lead to perceptions of relational closeness due to the mirroring of, "forever family" communication dynamics. It is also possible that communication that prioritizes structure and hierarchy may be positively associated with foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency as a pathway for foster children to thrive.

Taken together, conformity orientation may be positively associated with foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity, foster parent-child relational closeness, and child resiliency. However, due to the mixed support and lack of application in the foster care context to date, the association between conformity orientation and foster parents' perceptions of the outcome variables cannot be predicted. Thus, the following research question is set forth:

> RQ1: Is conformity orientation associated with foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency?

Conversation and Conformity Intersections and Well-Being

Additionally, research shows that the effects of the dimensions of conversation and conformity orientation often interact to create complex patterns (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Rueter & Koerner, 2008). Considering conversation and conformity together often provides more information than considering either pattern in isolation. Researchers have noted that some of these intersecting patterns are more conducive to children's positive adjustment than others (Koerner & Fitzpatrick,

2002a, 2012). For example, adopted adolescents are at greater risk for adjustment problems than non-adopted adolescents when conformity is high and conversation is low; however, adolescents in families in which conversation is high and conformity is low tend to be at lower risk for adjustment problems regardless of adoption status (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). Therefore, the second hypothesis is presented:

> H2: Conformity and conversation orientations interact to predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency.

Communication Openness in Foster Families

The importance of open communication in diverse family forms has been argued for decades (Kirk, 1964). However, the construct of adoption communication openness (ACO) has surfaced more recently through the work of Brodzinsky (2005, 2006). ACO "reflects the general attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioral inclinations that people have in relation to adoption" (Brodzinsky, 2005, p. 149). Thus, ACO refers to communication schema that dictates communication behaviors, such as bringing up adoption in conversations with the child, inviting the child to ask questions about the adoption, and conveying a willingness to engage in free-flowing dialogue about adoption-related issues and emotions with their adopted child (Brodzinsky, 2005; Jones & Hackett, 2007). ACO shares a core structure with conversation orientation, in that both variables point toward a quality of conversation characterized by dialogue, expression, and approachability with few taboo topics.

Previous research has demonstrated that ACO and conversation orientation share considerable variance, yet predict unique features of adoptee adjustment (Horstman et al., 2016). ACO provides a specific domain in which attitudes about openness may take on increased importance, particularly for identity development. Additionally, parents may be willing to be open about general life topics as measured by conversation orientation but more guarded on sensitive adoption-related topics. Thus, ACO dovetails conversation orientation, providing insight on adoption-related communication within the backdrop of conversation orientation's more general communication tendencies. The current study integrates these constructs within the foster care context to provide a fuller understanding of foster family functioning.

Adapting ACO for Foster Family Functioning

Parallels between adoptive and foster family functioning provide a mechanism by which foster family interactions may be better understood (Nelson, 2017). Because foster families are neither permanent nor biological, foster parents likely have a unique family communication orientation. Thus, we position foster communication openness (FCO) as a third family communication orientation in the current study.

Essentially, FCO orientation centers on foster parents' approach to discussing foster-related issues and emotions with their foster child. Foster parents are socialized to talk in certain ways after planning to become a foster parent, interacting with other foster parents, and going through foster parent training. Thus, foster parents develop schemas about preferred and ideal communication behaviors via FCO orientation before the child arrives.

Jones and Hackett (2007) found adoption talk involves sensitive matters, contentious issues, and emotionally-laden topics, often resulting in the "development of shared family values and a family identity" (p. 170). Given the typically negative circumstances prompting children's placement into foster care, such as abuse and/or neglect (Oswald et al., 2010), equally diverse and sensitive topics are expected to surface during "foster talk" and it is plausible engaging in open discussions would also benefit the foster parent-child relationship and promote foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity. Therefore, examining the link between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity is imperative.

Research has revealed ACO is associated with family functioning and relational closeness in adoptive families (Kohler et al., 2002; Sobol et al., 1994). Therefore, FCO orientation may be positively associated with foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness. Concerning the link between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency, Brodzinsky (2005) asserted that "what is primary for healthy psychological adjustment is the creation of an open, honest, nondefensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue not only about adoption [or foster] related issues but in fact any issue that impacts the child's and family's life" (p. 151). Past research has indicated high levels of ACO led to parents' perceptions of fewer exhibited behavioral problems in adoptive children (Brodzinsky, 2006). Exploring these associations in the foster family context may provide insight into whether adoption-targeted communication trends apply to foster families. Thus, the third hypothesis is set forth:

> H3: FCO orientation will be positively associated with foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency.

Combined Influence of Family Communication Orientations

While similar to conversation orientation, FCO orientation is unique in that it is domain-specific concerning communication about foster-related issues and topics. Although conversation and FCO orientations share the language of openness, FCO orientation is unique in that it accounts for foster families' discourse-dependent status and the values and ideas behind foster parents' communication with their child about foster-related topics and emotions, specifically. It is important to understand the dual nature of these communication processes.

Communication about adoption-related issues with the adopted child and empathy for the adopted child are two key elements of communication openness (Neil, 2009). Thus, foster families who exhibit more openness about specific foster-related information and emotions (i.e., high FCO orientation) may simultaneously encourage a more

free-flowing dialogue about topics and emotions more generally (i.e., high conversation orientation). Past research has shown conversation-orientation is associated with higher levels of ACO (Horstman et al., 2016). Thus, similar associations are likely in the foster family context. Foster parents who encourage questions and communication from the child about his/her background, current place in the foster family, and future status allow the child to think freely and independently. This likely engenders foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity, relational closeness, and child resiliency, as was shown in previous research (Brodzinsky, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Kohler et al., 2002; Sobol et al., 1994) Therefore, the following is predicted:

> H4: FCO orientation and conversation orientation interact to predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency.

Concerning the interaction between FCO orientation and conformity orientation in relation to shared family identity, relational closeness, and child resiliency, much less is known. Conformity orientation was not related to adoption communication openness in previous research (Horstman et al., 2016). Importantly, conversations about foster care in which the child is encouraged to conform to the foster parents' thinking may prompt foster children to feel limited in their ability to express and discuss general concerns and/or foster-related issues. As a result, the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of relational and child well-being variables will likely be strongest at low levels of conformity orientation. In order to explore these relationships, the second research question is set forth:

> RQ2: Do FCO orientation and conformity orientation interact to predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency?

Last, similar to the way in which FCP suggests conversation and conformity orientation are often dependent on one another (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2012), the current study explores the interaction between conversation orientation, conformity orientation, and FCO orientation. By assessing the three-way interaction, a fuller picture of the orientations' collective contribution to foster parents' perceptions of relational and child well-being outcomes variables will be assessed. Thus, we propose the final hypothesis:

> H5: Conversation orientation, conformity orientation, and FCO orientation interact to predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency.

Method

Sample

Participants were 158 current foster parents (women: $n = 145$, 94.8%; men: $n = 8$, 5.2%) between the ages of 22 and 61 years old ($M = 41$, $SD = 8.3$). White foster parents accounted for 81% ($n = 141$) of the current sample, with the remainder identifying as Native American ($n = 7$, 4.4%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 4$, 2.5%), Asian

American (*n* = 2, 1.3%), Black/African-American (*n* = 2, 1.3%) and "Other" (*n* = 1.6%). Participants also reported on years served as a foster parent (*M* = 5.36, *SD* = 5.10) and how many children he/she has fostered (*M* = 8.44, *SD* = 7.1).

Foster parents were also directed to report on a current foster child. If currently fostering more than one child, participants were asked to report on the child who had been in their care for the longest amount of time (*M* = 1.23 years, *SD* = 1.87). Foster parents reported caring for both female (*n* = 74, 46.8%) and male (*n* = 83, 52.5%) foster children whose ages ranged from under one year to 18 years old (*M* = 8.1, *SD* = 4.9). Concerning child race, White foster children accounted for 65.2% (*n* = 103) of the current sample, with the remainder being identified as Black/African American (*n* = 30, 19.0%), Hispanic/Latino (*n* = 23, 14.6%), Native American (*n* = 12, 7.6%), Asian American (*n* = 5, 3.2%), and "Other" (*n* = 7, 4.4%).

Procedures

Participant recruitment occurred in four steps. Foster parents were recruited via (1) open and closed foster care blogs and forums, (2) social networking sites (i.e., Twitter and Facebook), (3) local, regional, and national foster care groups, agencies, and organizations, and (4) snowball convenience sampling. Participants completed an anonymous online survey, which was estimated to take approximately 30 minutes.

Measures

High scores on each scale indicate high levels of the construct. Possible responses for all items ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree* except where noted. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and manifest-level correlations for all measures are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, Reliabilities

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conversation Orientation	–					
2. Conformity Orientation	−.32**	–				
3. FCO Orientation	.65**	−.26**	–			
4. Shared Family Identity	.27**	−.21**	.07	–		
5. Relational Closeness	.48**	−.19*	.24**	.57**	–	
6. Child Resiliency (SDQ)	.36**	−.14	.31**	.19*	.37**	–
M	5.81	3.09	6.00	6.37	3.80	2.34
SD	.67	.91	.76	.89	.53	.51
α	.85	.81	.82	.82	.87	.81
Skewness	−1.15	1.42	−1.20	−1.91	−1.25	−.52
Kurtosis	1.53	2.81	1.53	4.09	1.64	−.43

Note. Child resiliency scale endpoints were 1–3; relational closeness scale endpoints were 1–5; all other scale endpoints for measures were 1–7.
*p <.05; **p <.01

Family Communication Patterns

The Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (RFCPI: Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b; Ritchie, 1991) consists of two subscales measuring parents' perceptions of conformity and conversation orientation. The RFCPI is a 26-item measure that asks respondents to evaluate the extent to which their family communication patterns reflect conversation (15 items, e.g., "I like to hear my child's opinions, even when s/he doesn't agree with me") and conformity (11 items, e.g., "I sometimes become irritated with my child's views if they are different from mine") orientations. Scholars have argued for the content, criterion, and construct validity over the last two decades of research with these measures (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b for a full discussion of scale validity).

FCO Orientation

The Adoption Communication Openness Scale was adapted to gauge foster parents' perceptions of FCO orientation with their foster child (e.g., "I am a good listener when it comes to my child's thoughts and feelings about being placed in foster care"). The Adoption Openness Scale has evidence of criterion validity with the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale and demonstrated high test-retest reliability (Brodzinsky, 2006). Originally a 14-item measure (Brodzinsky, 2006), recent applications of this scale have shortened the measure to 11 items due to validity issues (Colaner & Soliz, 2017; Horstman et al., 2016). Thus, the shortened measure was used in the current study, and questions that originally addressed the adoption context were reworded to reflect the foster context. The revised scale was further examined for validity in the foster care context (discussed below).

Shared Family Identity

A six–item measure gauged the extent to which foster parents identified as members of the same family as their foster child (e.g., "Above all else, I think of my foster child as a member of my family," "My foster child is an important part of my family," "I feel as if my foster child and I are members of the same family"; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). The SFI measure demonstrated reliability and validity in a series of pilot studies in previous research (see Soliz & Harwood, 2006 for full details on validation procedures).

Relational Closeness

The Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982) gauged foster parents' perceptions of relational closeness. This 17-item measure has evidence of convergent, discriminant, and construct validity (see Miller & Lefcourt, 1982 for full details on validation procedures). Items were reworded to assess foster parent-child relational closeness from the foster parents' perspective (e.g., "How important is your relationship with your foster child in your life?"). Possible responses for all items ranged from (1) *not a lot* to (5) *a lot.*

Child Resiliency

The prosocial subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (e.g. SDQ; Goodman, 1997) was used to assess foster child resiliency from the foster parent perspective. This SDQ subscale consists of 5 items that measure children's exhibited behavioral strengths (e.g., "often offers to help others," "considerate of other people's feelings," "helpful if

someone is hurt, upset, or feeling ill"). Possible responses for all items ranged from (1) *not true* to (3) *absolutely true*. Past research demonstrated reliability and validity for the SDQ prosocial subscale (i.e., α =.74) (Becker, Woerner, Hasselhorn, Banaschewski, & Rothen-berger, 2004).

Data Analysis

Due to its ability to correct for measurement error and to estimate multiple variable relationships simultaneously (including multiple dependent variables), structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized model. Kline's (2005) two-step modeling procedure was employed. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the measurement model was conducted to assess the relationships among indicators and their latent constructs. The χ2 statistic, comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were examined to evaluate model fit. Prior to model fitting, a small amount of missing data (<1%) was imputed in SPSS using an expectation-maximization algorithm. According to Little's MCAR test, the data were missing completely at random and thus met the assumptions of missing data imputation (Baraldi & Enders, 2010).

Measurement Model Analysis

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the measurement model to assess the relationships among indicators and their latent constructs. One goal of the present study was to determine the degree to which FCP and ACO could be adapted to explain communication processes in foster families. Thus, scales were adapted to the foster care context. The CFA gave insight into the degree to which these measures retained measurement validity after the adaptations and within the foster context. The initial CFA demonstrated poor model fit, χ^2 (N = 158, 2000) = 3952.34, p <.00, χ^2/df = 1.98, CFI =.63; RMSEA =.08 (CI = 0.075– 0.082), SRMR =.10, as would be expected in such a complicated model. Our focus in the analysis was on the inspection of item-level data to assess the consistency of the measures in the current study to our foster parent sample by examining (*1*) the R^2 values to examine how much variance each of the items explained, (*2*) the residual variance to examine how much was "left over" with respect to each item, and (*3*) modification indices to examine if items were highly correlated with items in other constructs. Modification indices reveal that items were not highly correlated with items in other latent constructs; however, findings revealed that several items exhibited low variance explained by the latent variable (<.35) and high residual variances (>.65), which suggested these problematic items were not adequately measuring the intended construct. Items that emerged as problematic were assessed for theoretical consistency to the given construct and removed from the analysis if there was theoretical reasoning to do so.

One item from the conversation orientation measure (" … we talk about topics like politics and religion") and two items from the conformity orientation measure ("I often say things like you'll know better when you grow up"; " … my child is expected to obey my rules") emerged as problematic. These same three items were removed from analysis in a study of adoptive family communication for theoretical and methodological reasons (Horstman et al., 2016). Thus, these items were removed from the present study.

Additionally, findings from the CFA suggested that some items in three of the scales did not translate to the foster family context. Two items in the FCO orientation scale were problematic ("I understand my child's feelings about foster care without having to ask"; "I tell my child all I know about why s/he is in foster care"). Given the temporary nature of the foster care relationship, foster parents may not have the relational history to know their child's feelings without needing to ask. Additionally, foster parents may withhold details about abuse or neglect in the child's history. Thus, these items were removed. Second, the relational closeness scale had four items that referenced the child's level of support of the parent (e.g., "confide very personal information to the child"). Because foster parents are providing care for children in difficult family situations, it is probable that foster parents will monitor their disclosures to their foster children to avoid additional stressors. Thus, these items were removed. Finally, one item from the shared family identity scale had very low R^2 values (0.05). This item referenced the importance of the foster child's shared family identity and departed a bit from other questions inquiring about the degree to which family membership is shared. Because foster care is temporary, some may view family identity in unique ways that depart from other family forms. Thus, this item was conceptually unique and removed from the analysis.

After removing problematic items, model fit was improved, χ^2 (N = 158, 1362) = 2807.21, p <.00, χ^2/df = 2.06, CFI =.69; RMSEA =.08; (CI = 0.07– 0.09), SRMR =.10. Though the model fit was below standards, analysis revealed a clean loading of items onto latent variables. Thus, the revised set of items was retained and parceled for structural model analysis.

Structural Model Analysis

All hypothesized relationships and research questions were assessed using structural equation modeling. The hypothesized model consisted of six latent constructs: conversation orientation, conformity orientation, FCO orientation, shared family identity, relational closeness, and child resiliency. To reduce parameter estimates and increase precision in latent construct identification, each latent was identified by three parcels, or indicators, consisting of the average of two or more items (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Parcels were created for all variables by randomly dividing the items into thirds. To test the proposed moderation, the interaction effect was modeled using an orthogonalized interaction term to solve collinearity (Little, 2013). To do this, nine product terms were created between the parcels of each construct and then used to identify the interaction term. The unstandardized residuals were correlated with all other residuals. The interaction latent variable was then used in the structural model.

The model had acceptable fit, χ^2 (N = 158, 120) = 282.74, p <.001, χ^2/df = 2.36, CFI =.89; RMSEA =.09; (CI = 0.08– 0.11), SRMR =.08. However, the measurement model showed a strong covariance between conversation orientation and FCO orientation (ψ =.80). Strong covariance between latent constructs suggests collinearity, which can "affect model convergence or severely bias parameter estimates and standard errors" (Geldhof, Pornprasertmanit, Schoemann, & Little, 2013, p. 34). This collinearity is consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of the study in that conversation orientation provides a larger

communication environment in which domain-specific foster-related communication emerges. To better reflect this theoretical relationship between the variables and to alleviate collinearity for analysis, conversation orientation was residual centered with respect to FCO orientation. The residual-centered variable was included in the structural equation model. This change significantly improved model fit, χ^2 ($N = 158, 120$) = 250.54, $p < .00$, $\chi^2/df = 2.09$, CFI =.90; RMSEA =.08; ($CI = 0.07–0.10$), SRMR =.07.[1]

The final structural model accounted for 18.6% of the variance in shared family identity, 41.1% in foster parent-child relational closeness, and 14.0% in child resiliency. This model was used as the baseline structural model. Significance of regressed pathways was assessed by using the χ^2 difference test. Each regressed path was constrained to 0 and each nested constrained model was compared to the baseline structural model (Kline, 2005). A significant worsening of the constrained model suggests a significant regression path.

Results

The first hypothesis examined the link between conversation orientation and foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. Findings indicated increases in conversation orientation were not related to increases in foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency (β =.20, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 1.99, p = 16). However, conversation orientation significantly predicted foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness (β =.53, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 18.19, p <.001) and shared family identity (β =.32, $\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 7.43, p <.001). Thus, H1 was partially supported.

The first research question assessed the relationship between conformity orientation and foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. Findings revealed no significant association between conformity orientation and foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity (β =.07, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) =.2.61, p =.11), foster parent-child relational closeness (β = −.10, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) =.81, p =.37), or child resiliency (β = −.01, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) =.00, p =.96).

Hypothesis two posited conversation and conformity orientations would interact to predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. The interaction of conversation and conformity orientations did not predict foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity (β = −.03, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) =.10, p =.76), relational closeness (β = −.06, $\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 0.39, p =.53), and child resiliency (β =.05, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 0.28, p =.59). H2 was not supported.

Hypothesis three posited FCO orientation would predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. No significant relationship emerged between FCO and foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity (β =.02, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) =.06, p =.81). However, findings revealed increases in FCO were significantly associated with increases in foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness (β =.25, $\Delta\chi^2$

(1) = 8.01, p <.01) and child resiliency (β =.32, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 9.24, p <.01). Therefore, partial support was found for H3.

Hypothesis four predicted conversation orientation moderated the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. This interaction was not predictive of foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity (β =.10, $\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 1.14, p =.29) or child resiliency (β =.13, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 1.88, p =.17). One proposed moderation was significant at the p <.10 level: conversation orientation moderated the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness (β = −.15, $\Delta\chi^2$(1) = 2.99, p =.08). Probing the interaction revealed the nature of this moderation. Effects coding was used to create latent means and variances to produce three levels of conversation orientation (one *standard deviation* above the mean, the mean, and one *standard deviation* below the mean), slopes, and intercepts for linear regression equations to produce a visual representation of the interaction. Findings revealed that the positive relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness is negative at low levels of conversation orientation (see Figure 1). Although this relationship approached significance, the effect was rather small, with the moderator explaining 0.6% of the variance in relational closeness.

Research question two assessed whether conformity orientation moderated the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. The interaction was not significant for foster parents' perceptions of shared family
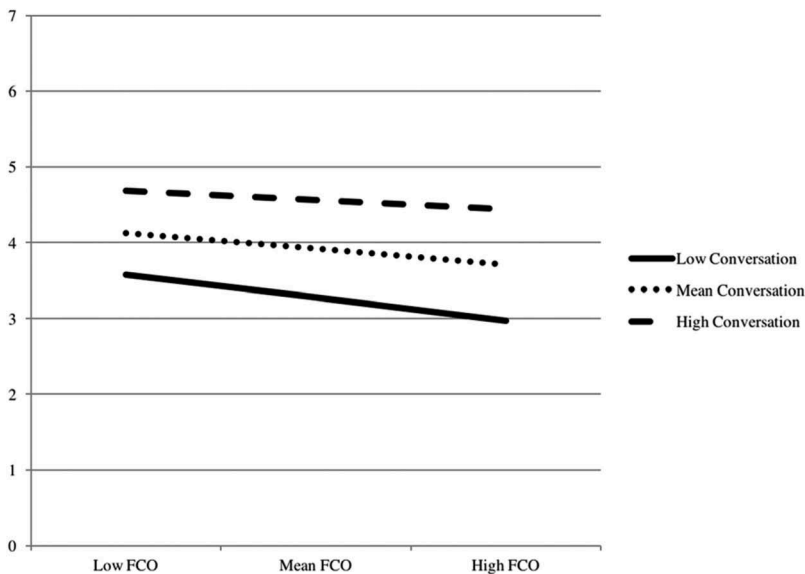

Figure 1. Illustration of interaction: FCO orientation and conversation orientation for relational closeness.

identity ($\beta = -.04$, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.21$, $p = .65$) or relational closeness ($\beta = -.05$, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.35$, $p = .55$). One proposed moderation was significant at the $p < .10$ level: conformity orientation moderated the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency ($\beta = -0.15$, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 2.75$, $p = .09$). Probing the interaction revealed the nature of this moderation. Effects coding was used to create latent means and variances to produce three levels of conformity orientation (one *standard deviation* above the mean, the mean, and one *standard deviation* below the mean), slopes, and intercepts for linear regression equations to produce a visual representation of the interaction. Findings revealed the positive relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency is strongest at low levels of conformity orientation (see Figure 2). In addition to only approaching significance, the effect was rather small, explaining 3.1% of the variance in child resiliency.

Hypothesis five predicted that a 3-way interaction between conversation orientation, conformity orientation, and FCO orientation would predict foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) child resiliency. The 3-way interaction was not significant for foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .26$), relational closeness ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .40$), or child resiliency ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .82$). Therefore, H5 was not supported. See Table 2 for structural equation modeling results with standardized coefficients and standard errors.
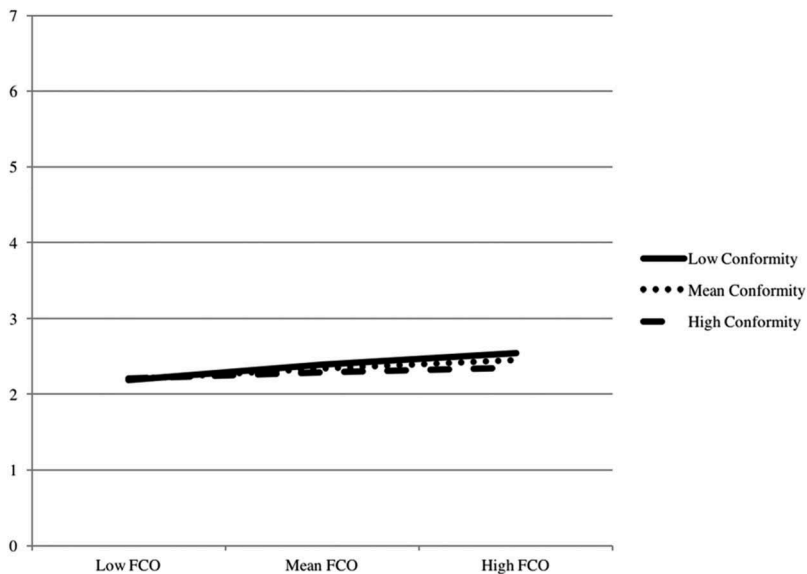

Figure 2. Illustration of interaction: FCO orientation and conformity orientation for child resiliency.

Table 2 Structural Equation Modeling Results with Standardized Coefficients and Standard Errors

Communication Variables	Shared Family Identity	Relational Closeness	Child Resiliency
Conversation Orientation	.32** (.14)	.53*** (.17)	.20 (.11)
Conformity Orientation	−.19 (.12)	−.10 (.13)	−.01 (.14)
FCO Orientation	.02 (.11)	.25** (.12)	.32** (.11)
Conversation*Conformity	.03 (.09)	.08 (.11)[†]	.08 (.09)
Conversation*FCO	.10 (.10)	.15 (.12)	.13 (.10)
Conformity*FCO	−.04 (.10)	−.05 (.12)	−.15 (.10)[†]
Conversation*Conformity*FCO	−.09 (.09)	−.06 (.09)	−.02 (.10)

Note. Standard errors are depicted in parentheses.
[†]$p <.10$; **$p <.01$; ***$p <.001$

Discussion

In addition to assessing the overall communication environment of foster families, the current study addressed domain-specific communication trends in the foster family context. Specifically, the study explored how foster parents and children communicate and function as a family in ways that relate to foster parents' perceptions of relational and child well-being. This study built upon previous research examining foster family communication dynamics (Nelson, 2017; Nelson & Horstman, 2017; Suter et al., 2014; Thomas, 2014) by expanding knowledge about foster family communication in relation to foster parents' perceptions of (a) shared family identity, (b) foster parent-child relational closeness, and (c) foster child resiliency. In what follows, we call for researchers to continue to address the influence of domain-specific family communication patterns (see Horstman et al., 2016; Soliz & Rittenour, 2012).

Theoretical Considerations

FCPT (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a) is widely used in family communication research (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2012; Schrodt et al., 2008). By examining the role of conversation and conformity orientation and the predictive value of such constructs in the foster family form, this theory was extended to the foster family context. Importantly, results from this study support the importance of addressing the prevalence and influence of domain-specific communication orientations (e.g., FCO orientation) in future studies utilizing FCP to better understand the communication climate of diverse family forms.

Consistent with past research, we contend discourse-dependent families (e.g., foster families, adoptive families, LGBTQ families, etc.) likely develop their own, unique family communication climates (Soliz & Rittenour, 2012) that impact individual well-being and relational solidarity in meaningful ways (Horstman et al., 2016). The current study further posits that these unique communication climates

are better understand as domain-specific communication orientations that address the states and traits that render each diverse family structure as discourse-dependent. In the present study, this alludes to foster parents' cognitions and communication behaviors surrounding their foster family identity and the complexities associated with discussing foster-related issues and emotions. Importantly, results from the current study speak to the importance of taking family context into account when assessing family communication patterns. Specifically, we call for researchers to consider the specific communication tendencies of the family under investigation through establishing and testing domain-specific orientation variables (e.g., FCO orientation, ACO orientation, LGBTQ orientation, etc.) on individual and relational outcomes. Doing so may provide macro-level (e.g., conversation and conformity orientation) and micro-level (e.g., FCO, ACO, etc.) understandings of the influence and impact of general and domain-specific communication in diverse family forms.

In the current study, combining FCPT with FCO allowed insight into the general and specific communication tendencies of foster families. FCPT is commonly used in family communication research to provide a macro-level understanding of general family communication tendencies. Under this general communication umbrella, the current study introduced FCO as a domain-specific variable. Analysis revealed that these variables were closely related yet explained unique aspects of child adjustment. Specifically, the CFA revealed a high degree of collinearity between conversation and FCO. This was the case in past research assessing the relationship between adoption communication openness (from which FCO was adapted) and conversation orientation (Horstman et al., 2016). These findings suggest these general and domain-specific openness variables share theoretical and statistical roots. Once we residual-centered the variables, meaning that the shared variance was given to the generally-focused conversation orientation variable, the unique variance explained by FCO emerged in the model. SEM findings revealed that conversation orientation predicted shared family identity whereas FCO predicted child resiliency. Thus, openness in each regard may be helpful in developing family-level (via conversation) and child-level (via FCO) wellness indicators.

Results from the current study also revealed all three schemata (i.e., conversation, conformity, FCO orientation) associated to relational and child well-being in the foster care context in meaningful ways. Although temporary in status, foster parents who reported higher levels of conversation orientation tended to perceive that their foster child and themselves were part of the same family. This finding builds upon previous research on foster entrance narratives that revealed, through storytelling, foster parents established boundaries around family such that some foster parents emphasized being a *forever* family whereas others articulated their *temporary* family status to the child (Nelson & Horstman, 2017). Building upon this important work, the current study contends family communication patterns may also affect and reflect who is and who is not family. The propensity for foster parents to create a communication environment that affirms foster children's family status challenges traditional assumptions of family by emphasizing the

important role of discourse, rather than genes or legality, in constituting family (see Baxter, 2014). Consequently, it is imperative for scholars to go beyond genetics, law, and a long-term status when examining family cohesion in diverse family contexts.

Concerning the combined influence of the three schemata (i.e., conversation, conformity, and FCO orientations), results revealed schemas often interacted and predicted various relational and child well-being outcomes. Two interactions approached significance in the current study. First, findings revealed the positive relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of foster parent-child relational closeness was negative at low levels of conversation orientation. Although the effect size was rather small (i.e., explained .06% of the variance in relational closeness) and not at the level of significance ($p < .10$), this finding provides insight into the importance of creating an open climate in foster families by which dialogue and foster talk are simultaneously encouraged and communicated. In so doing, relational well-being may be supported despite the temporary nature of many foster parent-child relationships.

The second interaction revealed the positive relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of child resiliency was strongest at low levels of conformity orientation. Again, although the effect size was rather small (i.e., explains 3.1% of the variance in child resiliency) and not at the level of significance ($p < .10$), this result speaks to the potential of the combined associations of FCO and conformity orientations to child well-being outcomes. Specifically, when foster parents talked freely with their child about foster-related issues and emotions (i.e., high FCO orientation), they perceived that the child exhibited higher levels of resiliency when the overall communication environment at home encouraged personal growth, valued personal space, and recognized the personal interests and independence of family members (i.e., low conformity orientation). It is plausible this holds true because, while foster parents wish to talk with their child about their unique foster experiences, they may be hesitant to create a communication climate that emphasizes homogeneity given the child will likely reunify with their biological family. The climate foster parents create in the above scenario considers the temporary nature of foster care by encouraging open discussions about foster care yet not infringing on the child's independence. Moreover, the ambiguity inherent to a temporary family status may further serve as a barrier in foster parents' emphasizing of conformity orientation with regard to foster-related issues. It is plausible foster parents feel the need to be more open to differences in children's beliefs due to the ambiguous nature of the relationship. It is likely other diverse family forms must consider what may be best for the overall family climate in terms of emphasizing conversation, conformity, and their own unique family communication orientations individually and simultaneously.

Taken together, high conversation orientation in general family communication and low conformity orientation during foster talk are associated with the most positive individual and relational outcomes. Such a finding is consistent with empirical work on family communication. For example, Baxter and Akkoor (2011) found that topics such as friendships and everyday activities tend to be more conversationally-oriented than other, more substantial concepts such as religion and politics. Thus, certain domains are more

inclined to openness. Within diverse family scenarios, Horstman et al. (2016) concluded that adoption tends to be a conversation-oriented topic in which families avoided high-levels of conformity. This is consistent with the current study's findings, further demonstrating it is important to be able to openly discuss matters of family belongingness. Future work ought to examine these associations in light of diverse families' domain-specific family communication orientation as well as conversation and conformity orientations.

Importance of Open Communication in the Foster Family Context

A second contribution of the current study centers on the role of open communication in the foster family context. In response to a research call by Jones and Hackett (2007), the current study examined underpinnings that may facilitate FCO orientation and shared family identity in foster families. No significant relationship emerged between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity. While assessing the specifics of what foster parents do and do not discuss with their child was beyond the capacity of this study, it is possible that some topics may be too traumatizing to openly discuss. Thus, encouraging the child to discuss his/her placement in foster care could undermine feelings of belongingness in the foster family. Therefore, gauging the child's experienced trauma prior to entering the foster care system could be helpful for determining an optimal level of openness around certain foster-related topics.

Concerning the influence of FCO orientation on foster parents' perceptions of relational closeness and child resiliency, results indicated both paths were significant. First, in line with Sobol et al. (1994) and Kohler et al. (2002), a strong association between FCO orientation and parents' perceptions of relational closeness was found in the current study. By being attuned, available, and willing to discuss foster-related issues, a relational bond between foster parent and child took shape. Second, in light of Brodzinsky's (2006) study examining ACO in adoptive families, findings revealed that when foster parents were willing to broach foster-related topics they tended to perceive their foster child demonstrated higher levels of resiliency than when they did not broach those topics.

Regarding the interaction of FCO orientation and conversation orientation, the relationship between FCO orientation and foster parents' perceptions of relational closeness was negative at low levels of conversation orientation. These results illustrate the importance of engaging in dialogue about foster-related topics and emotions in addition to open, daily conversations within the home to promote perceptions of relational closeness. If foster parents provide the freedom to discuss issues, including those central to the child's foster care experience, it is likely foster parents will perceive a stronger bond between themselves and their child.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In addition to the implications for advancing theorizing and research above, limitations and directions for future research emerged. First, the majority of participants

identified as White foster mothers. Consequently, our findings are demographically limited and cannot be extrapolated to all foster parents. Future research should attempt to recruit a more diverse sample. A more representative sample of foster parents could provide additional insight into the communicative environment of foster families.

Moreover, the current study likely recruited foster parents with predominantly positive relationships. Examination of skewness and kurtosis statistics demonstrates that participant responses were overwhelmingly positive for conversation orientation, FCO orientation, relational closeness, and shared family identity and largely negative for conformity orientation. These skewed results suggest the sample may be biased with respect to communication and relational factors. It is also likely that the training and surveillance of foster parents encourages particular views on what qualifies as appropriate and productive parenting and family practices. Thus, it is possible that the training and surveillance of foster parents influenced participant responses regarding the schemata, practices, and perceptions investigated in the current study – resulting in the skewed results alluded to previously. Nonetheless, findings suggest that communicating about family is a productive process in the foster care context. Thus, it is critical that communication scholars continue to examine how communication dynamics impact foster families. Last, although research with foster children is often highly regulated, often requiring court approval, future research should explore foster family communication and well-being from the foster child perspective.

Given the cross-sectional research design, causal order of the variables could not be determined. Future studies ought to examine the potential impacts of foster family communication, both positive and negative, on relational and individual outcomes over time. Moreover, it is worth examining if there are consistencies in perceptions and outcomes of communication for foster children who enter care due to similar circumstances such as abuse or neglect. It is possible specific communication strategies and techniques work best depending on the child's reasons for placement. As such, placement-specific communication strategies should be examined in future research. Last, the current study adapted adoption communication scales to assess foster parent communication, reflecting ways in which adoption and foster may be similar; however, future research should assess ways in which the foster and adoption contexts require unique communication. Future research could expand the FCO scale with additional items assessed through a validity analysis to determine the criterion and construct validity of an expanded scale.

Conclusion

The present study explored the communication dynamics inherent to the foster parent-child relationship and the impact of communication on foster parents' evaluations of relational and child well-being. Results indicate everyday talk and foster talk serve different, yet equally vital roles in promoting foster parents' perceptions of shared family identity, foster parent-child relational closeness, and child resiliency.

Note

1. Residual centered variables were not used for the tests of moderation between the conversation orientation and FCO orientation. Rather, an interaction term was created based on the non-residual centered variable values, and the beta for the interaction term was examined in the model for significance.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Leslie R. Nelson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4478-2975
Colleen W. Colaner http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3742-4646

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