Circumplex Model
of Marital & Family Systems

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This chapter presents an update of the 25-year journey of development and refinement of both the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems and the related assessment scales of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES) and the Clinical Rating Scale (CRS). Over 700 studies have been published on the Circumplex Model using the self-report family assessment called FACES (Kouneski, 2001), making it one of the most researched family model. The model has also been used with diverse couple and family systems in terms of ethnicity/race, marital status (cohabitating, married), family structure (single parent, stepfamilies), sexual orientation (gay and lesbian couples), stage of family life cycle (newlywed to retired couples), and social class and educational levels. This chapter reviews the past research and theory development, and the clinical applications that use the Circumplex Model.

The Circumplex Model, its historical roots, basic concepts, and dimensions, are grounded in systems theory. An updated graphic representation of the Circumplex Model is called the Couple and Family Map. Changes that families go through developmentally and in reaction to stressors are illustrated with the model. Research regarding the validity of the model and the clinical usefulness of both the self-report (FACES) and observational assessment (CRS) are described. The model is also incorporat-

ed into the PREPARE/ENRICH Program to prepare couples for marriage and to treat troubled marriages.

Significant updates include a revision of the graphic representation called the Couple and Family Map, with additional levels that provide a more useful assessment of couple and family systems. FACES IV is a significant revision to the self-report assessment designed to tap Circumplex Model dimensions. This revised version of the FACES is designed to address concerns that past versions of the FACES instrument. FACES IV was designed to tap the high and low extremes of the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility, as well as the moderate regions that had been tapped by previous versions of FACES. The instrument did tap key dimensions of family functioning. An updated assessment package, the Family Inventories Package, includes FACES IV and other family dynamics that have been found to be central to family functioning (family stress, strengths, communication, and satisfaction). It is hoped that this step in the journey of the development of the model and instruments will continue to generate continued research, theory development, and clinical application, as it has over the history of the Circumplex Model.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODEL OVER TIME

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems was initially developed in an attempt to bridge the gap that typically exists between research, theory and practice (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989). The Circumplex Model is particularly useful as a “relational diagnosis,” because it is focused on the relational system and integrates three dimensions that have repeatedly been considered highly relevant in a variety of family theory models and family therapy approaches (see Table 19.1). Family cohesion, flexibility, and communication, the three dimensions in the Circumplex Model, emerged from a conceptual clustering of over 50 concepts developed to describe marital and family dynamics. The model is specifically designed for family research, clinical assessment, treatment planning, and outcome effectiveness of marital and family therapy (Olson, 2000).

A variety of other therapists and theorists have focused independently on variables related to the cohesion, flexibility, and communication dimensions. Table 19.1 summarizes the historical research of 10 family theorists who have worked on describing marital and family systems. Most of these models have been developed in the last 20 years by individuals who utilize a family systems perspective. One source of evidence regarding the value and importance of these three dimensions is the fact that these theorists have independently concluded that these dimensions are critical for understanding and treating marital and family systems.
TABLE 19.1 Theoretical Models Using Cohesion, Flexibility, and Communication

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<td>Stylistic</td>
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<td>Parsons &amp; Bales (1955)</td>
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<td>Reiss (1981)</td>
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<td>Walsh (1998)</td>
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COUPLE AND FAMILY COHESION (TOGETHERNESS)

Family cohesion is defined as the emotional bonding that couple and family members have toward one another. Within the Circumplex Model, some of the specific concepts or variables used to diagnose and measure the family cohesion dimensions are emotional bonding, boundaries, coalitions, time, space, friends, decision making, interests, and recreation (see Clinical Rating Scale in Appendices 19.1–19.3 for how each concept is operationally defined). Cohesion focuses on how systems balance separateness versus togetherness.

There are five levels of cohesion ranging from disengaged/disconnected (extremely low) to somewhat connected (low to moderate), to connected (moderate), to very connected (moderate to high), to enmeshed/overly connected (extremely high). The terms “disengaged” and “enmeshed,” used for consistency with previous versions of the model, are used primarily throughout this chapter; the terms “disconnected” and “overly connected” are introduced to be used with clients/patients in order to simplify terminology and reduce pathological terms (see Figure 19.1).

This five-level approach for each dimension is a change from previous versions of the model that had only four levels. There are now three balanced levels and two unbalanced levels. It is hypothesized that the three central or balanced levels of cohesion (somewhat connected, connected,
FIGURE 19.1. Couple and family map.
and very connected) make for optimal family functioning. The extremes or unbalanced levels (disengaged or enmeshed) are generally seen as problematic for relationships over the long term.

In the model’s balanced area of cohesion, families are able to strike equilibrium, moderating both separateness and togetherness. Individuals are able to be both independent from and connected to their families. Couples and families that present for therapy services often fall into one of the extremes or unbalanced areas of too much separateness and togetherness.

When cohesion levels are very high (enmeshed systems), there is too much consensus/emotional closeness within the family and too little independence. At the other extreme (disengaged systems), family members “do their own thing,” with limited attachment or commitment to their family.

Balanced couple and family systems (somewhat connected, connected, and very connected types) tend to be more functional across the life cycle. More specifically, a somewhat connected relationship has some emotional separateness but is not as extreme as the disengaged system. Although time apart is more important, there is some time together, some joint decision making and marital support. Activities and interests are generally separate, but a few are shared. A connected relationship is characterized by the greatest degree of balance between connectedness and separateness. A very connected relationship has emotional closeness and loyalty to the relationship. There is an emphasis on togetherness; time together is more important than time alone. There are not only separate friends but also friends shared by the couple. Shared interests are common with some separate activities (see Appendix 19.1, Family Cohesion).

Unbalanced levels of cohesion are at the extremes of being either extremely low (disengaged) or extremely high (enmeshed). A disengaged relationship often has extreme emotional separateness. There is little involvement among family members and a great deal of personal separateness and independence. Individuals often do their own thing; separate time, space, and interests predominate; and members are unable to turn to one another for support and problem solving. In an enmeshed relationship, there is an extreme amount of emotional closeness, and loyalty is demanded. Individuals are very dependent on and reactive to one another. There is a lack of personal separateness, and little private space is permitted. The energy of the individuals is focused almost exclusively inside the family, and there are few outside individual friends or interests.

In summary, extremely high levels of cohesion (enmeshed) and extremely low levels of cohesion (disengaged) tend to be problematic for individuals and relationship development in the long run. On the other hand, relationships having moderate scores are able to balance being separate and together in a more functional way. Although there is no absolute best level for any relationship, many will have problems if they function at either extreme levels for too long. Also, it is expected that couple and family systems will change levels of cohesion over time.
COUPLE AND FAMILY FLEXIBILITY

Family flexibility is the amount of change in its leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules. The specific concepts include leadership (control, discipline), negotiation styles, role relationships, and relationship rules (see Clinical Rating Scale in Appendices 19.1–19.3 for how each concept is defined). Flexibility concerns how systems balance stability with change.

The five levels of flexibility range from rigid/inflexible (extremely low) to somewhat flexible (low to moderate), to flexible (moderate), to very flexible (moderate to high), to chaotic/overly flexible (extremely high). The terms “rigid” and “chaotic” used throughout this chapter are consistent with previous versions of the model. The terms “inflexible” and “overly flexible” were introduced to be used with clients/patients in order to simplify terminology (see Figure 19.1). As with cohesion, it is hypothesized that central or balanced levels of flexibility (somewhat flexible, flexible, and very flexible) are more conducive to good couple and family functioning, with the extremes (rigid and chaotic) being the most problematic for families as they move through their life cycle.

Basically, flexibility focuses on the change in a family’s leadership, roles, and rules. Early application of systems theory to families emphasized the rigidity of the family and its tendency to maintain the status quo. Subsequently, the importance of potential for change and flexibility of systems was realized (Olson & Olson, 2000). Couples and families need both stability and change. The ability to change, when appropriate, is one of the characteristics that distinguishes functional couples and families from dysfunctional ones.

Couple and family systems balanced on flexibility are able to manage both stability and change. A somewhat flexible relationship tends to have democratic leadership characteristics, with some negotiations including the children. Roles are stable, with some role sharing, and rules are firmly enforced, with few changes. There are few rule changes, with rules firmly enforced. A flexible relationship has an equalitarian leadership with a democratic approach to decision making. Negotiations are open and actively include the children. Roles are shared and there is fluid change, when necessary. Rules can be changed and are age-appropriate. A very flexible relationship has a tendency toward frequent change in leadership and roles. Rules are very flexible and adjusted readily when there is a need for change (see Appendix 19.2, Family Flexibility).

Unbalanced couples and families tend to be either at the extreme of too much stability (rigid) or of too much change (chaotic). In a rigid relationship, one individual is in charge and is highly controlling. These tend to be limited negotiations with most decisions imposed by the leader. Roles are strictly defined, and rules do not change. A chaotic relationship has erratic or limited leadership. Decisions are impulsive and not well thought out. Roles are unclear and often shift from individual to individual.
In summary, extremely high (chaotic) and extremely low levels of flexibility (rigid) tend to be problematic for individuals and relationship development in the long run. Relationships having moderate scores (structured and flexible) are able to balance change and stability in a more functional way. Although there is no absolute best level for any relationship, many relationships tend to have problems if they always function at either extreme of the model (rigid or chaotic) for an extended period of time.

**COUPLE AND FAMILY COMMUNICATION**

Communication, the third dimension in the Circumplex Model, is considered a facilitating dimension. Communication is considered critical for facilitating couples and families to alter their levels of cohesion and flexibility. Using positive communication skills enables couples and families to alter their levels of cohesion and flexibility to meet developmental or situational demands. Because it is a facilitating dimension, communication is not graphically included in the model along with cohesion and flexibility (see Clinical Rating Scale in Appendix 19.3 for assessment of communication).

Couple and family communication is measured by focusing on the family as a group with regard to its listening skills, speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, continuity tracking, and respect and regard. Listening skills include empathy and attentive listening. Speaking skills include speaking for oneself and not speaking for others. Self-disclosure relates to sharing feelings about oneself and the relationship. Tracking refers to staying on topic, and respect and regard refer to the affective aspects of communication. Several studies investigating communication and problem-solving skills in couples and families have found that systems balanced on cohesion and flexibility tend to have very good communication, whereas systems unbalanced on these dimensions tend to have poor communication.

**CIRCUMPLEX MODEL: A COUPLE AND FAMILY MAP**

Another way to consider the model is as a descriptive Couple Map and Family Map of 25 types of couple and family relationships (Figure 19.1). This graphic representation of the model is an expansion of an earlier 16-type graphic representation. The expansion was implemented by increasing the number of balanced or healthy levels for each of the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility, thus increasing the number of balanced family types from four to nine.

The type of marriage is illustrated in the Couple Map (see Figure 19.1). Couples need to balance their levels of separateness—togetherness
on cohesion and their levels of stability–change on flexibility. When partners differ in their preferences regarding the balance on these dimensions, these levels can be altered by a couple to achieve a level that is acceptable to each individual. In other words, the levels are dynamic, in that they can and do change over time.

The Family Map is useful not only for describing how the family is but also for addressing past and future multigenerational dynamics and issues. Knowing one’s family is important, because people often use their own family of origin as a reference for the type of marriage and family they either want or do not want. Individuals often either attempt to recreate the type of family system they had as a child or react to this family of origin by attempting to do the opposite. If partners come from two quite different family systems or prefer different types of family dynamics, it is more difficult to create a compatible relationship style that works for them. Thus, the fit between individuals and their respective families of origin is a critical variable in determining how functional and satisfying a relationship system is likely to be.

An important distinction in the Circumplex Model is between balanced and unbalanced types of couple and family relationships. There are nine balanced types that exhibit somewhat connected, connected, or very connected levels on cohesion and somewhat flexible, flexible, or very flexible levels on flexibility. Figure 19.1 illustrates the nine balanced and the four extreme or unbalanced relationship types. Unbalanced relationship types are characterized by either extremely high or extremely low cohesion levels, combined with either extremely high or extremely low levels of flexibility: chaotically disengaged, chaotically enmeshed, rigidly disengaged, and rigidly enmeshed. The nine midrange family types consist of families that are balanced on one dimension and extremely high or low on the other dimension.

**HYPOTHESES DERIVED FROM THE CIRCUMPLEX MODEL**

One value of a theoretical model is that hypotheses can be deduced from that model and tested in order to evaluate and further develop the model. The following hypotheses are derived from the Circumplex Model:

1. Balanced type couples and families will generally function more adequately across the family life cycle than unbalanced types. An important issue in the Circumplex Model relates to the concept of balance. Individuals and family systems need to balance their “separateness versus togetherness” on cohesion and their level of “stability versus change” on flexibility. Even though a balanced family system is placed at the three central levels of the model, these families do not always operate in a “moderate” manner. Being bal-
anced means that a family system can experience the extremes on the dimension when appropriate, but they do not typically function at these extremes for long periods of time.

Couples and families in the balanced area of the cohesion dimension allow their members to experience being both independent from and connected to their family. On flexibility, balance means maintaining some level of stability in a system with openness to some chance when it is necessary. Being extreme on these two dimensions might be appropriate for certain stages of the life cycle or when a family is under stress, but it can be problematic when families are stuck at the extremes.

1a. If a couple's/family's expectations or subcultural group norms support more extreme patterns, families can function well as long as all family members desire the family to function in that manner. Ethnicity has a large influence on the functioning of families and needs to be seriously considered in assessing family dynamics. What might appear to be an “enmeshed” ethnic family to a Caucasian outsider may be a normative style of functioning for an ethnic group. Unbalanced types of family systems are not necessarily dysfunctional, especially if the family in question belongs to a ethnic group (e.g., Hmong) or religious groups (e.g., Amish, Mormon) in which the norms support these more extreme behavior patterns.

2. Positive communication skills will enable balanced types of couples/families to change their levels of cohesion and flexibility. In general, positive communication skills are seen as helping family systems facilitate and maintain a balance on the two dimensions. Conversely, poor communication impedes movement in unbalanced systems and increases the likelihood these systems will remain extreme.

3. Couples/families will modify their levels of cohesion and/or flexibility to deal effectively with situational stress and developmental changes across the family life cycle. This hypothesis deals with the capacity of the couple/family system to change (second-order change) in order to deal with stress or to accommodate changes in members’ development and expectations. The Circumplex Model is dynamic in that it assumes that couples and families will change levels of cohesion and flexibility, and thus family system type, and it is hypothesized that change is beneficial to the maintenance and improvement of couple and family functioning.

When one member’s needs or preferences change, the system must somehow respond. For example, wives increasingly seek to develop more autonomy from their husbands (cohesion dimension), and also want more power and equality in their relationships (flexibility dimension). If their husbands are unwilling to understand and change in accordance with these expectations, these marriages will suffer from increasing levels of stress and dissatisfaction. Another common example of changing expectations occurs when a child reaches adolescence and wants more freedom, independence, and power in the family system. These pressures to
change the family system by one member can facilitate change in the family despite family resistance.

**DYNAMIC BALANCE ON THE CIRCUMPLEX AND SKIING: AN ANALOGY**

An analogy can be made between *balanced* versus *unbalanced* family systems and professional versus novice skiers, a comparison first made in an article by Walsh and Olson (1989). Professional skiers function more like a *balanced* system, whereas novice skiers function more like an *unbalanced* system. In terms of cohesion, couples and families need to balance *separateness* versus *togetherness*. These two areas can be compared to the legs of a skier. Professional skiers keep their legs together and smoothly shift between their legs and the edges of the skis, creating a balance on separateness and togetherness. Similarly, *balanced* couples and families are also able to shift between being apart and being connected in a fluid manner. Conversely, novice skiers tend to keep their legs too far apart (too much separateness) or too close together (enmeshed), thereby creating an unbalanced system. Unbalanced couples and families also tend to be stuck at either extreme of separateness or togetherness and are unable to find a balance.

In terms of flexibility, couples and families need to balance *stability* and *change*. These two areas can be equated to the movements of the body of the skier. In watching professional skiers come down a ski slope, one sees fluidity in their movement left and right; they move their legs up and down to absorb the moguls while keeping the upper part of their body upright. In other words, there is both stability in the body and the ability to change. Likewise, in balanced couples and families, there is the ability not only to maintain stability but also to change, when necessary. Conversely, novice skiers tend to keep their body rather rigid; then, when they hit a mogul, they become even more rigid (unbalanced), which often results in a chaotic fall. Unbalanced couples and families also seem to be either too focused on stability (leading to rigidity) or too open to change (leading to chaos).

In regard to communication, there is also a clear analogy between skiing and couple/family systems. Professional skiers are very much “in touch” with all aspects of the hill, including the moguls and type of snow conditions, and they use this feedback to make good decisions. Likewise, *balanced* couples and families are open to communication and feedback from other sources, so that they can better adjust their levels of cohesion and flexibility. Conversely, novice skiers are often unaware of the conditions of the hill or how to use that information. Lacking the feedback and information they need, they fail to improve their skiing. *Unbalanced* cou-
pies and families also ignore or are unable to accept feedback from others that could help them improve their ability to change their level of cohe-
sion and flexibility.

Stress clearly highlights the differences between professional and
novice skiers, and balanced versus unbalanced couples/families. Profes-
sional skiers, like balanced systems, are able to become more cohesive and
flexible under stress. On the other hand, like unbalanced systems, novice
skiers become stuck at the extremes of cohesion and flexibility, which only
adds to their lack of success in managing the stress or crises. So, as with ski-
ing, couples and families need to become more cohesive and flexible in
order to cope successfully with life’s moguls.

CHANGES IN COUPLE AND FAMILY SYSTEMS
OVER TIME

The Circumplex Model allows one to integrate systems theory and family
developmental theory. Building on the family development approach, it is
hypothesized that the stage of the family life cycle and composition of the
family will have considerable impact on the type of family system. It is hy-
pothesized that at any stage of the family life cycle, there will be diversity in
the types of family systems as described in the Circumplex Model. Never-
theless, it is predicted that at different stages of the family life cycle, many
of the families will cluster together—in some types more frequently than
others.

The Circumplex Model is dynamic in that it assumes that changes can
and do occur in family types over time. Families can move in any direction
that the situation, stage of the family life cycle, or socialization of family
members may require. The model can be used to illustrate developmental
change of couples as they progress from dating to marriage; to pregnancy,
childbirth and child rearing; to raising and launching adolescents, and
moving into life as a couple again.

Figure 19.2 illustrates the changes one young couple experienced in a
period of only 5 years, from dating to having their first child, and up to the
time the child was 4 years old. During the dating period (1), the couple
had a very flexible/very connected relationship. They felt close (very connect-
ed) and had a very flexible style in terms of leadership and decision mak-
ing. If dating moves them toward marriage, they often become increasingly
close and try out different ways of operating as a couple in term of
flexibility.

During the first year of marriage (2), the newlywed couple can best be
described as flexible/overly connected. They are generally flexible, because
they are still getting more organized in terms of their roles and leadership.
Being in love and enjoying maximum time together, they are still in the
"honeymoon" phase and emotionally enmeshed.
FIGURE 19.2. Dating and early marriage: Couple and family map.
By the end of their second year of marriage (3), the so-called “honeymoon” effect has worn off, and the couple becomes somewhat flexible/connected. The excitement with each other is not as great as it has been, and their togetherness has become more balanced, with each getting more into his or her individual life. They also develop more routines in their roles and life style and are now somewhat flexible.

During the third year of the marriage, the couple has a baby (4). The infant dramatically changes the couple relationship and they become a very flexible/somewhat connected family. Change is high at this time, and the couple is forced to adapt to the new challenges of parenting. Their life is in relative turmoil because they are up each night to feed and attend to the baby. The infant’s unpredictable behavior often creates chaos and it is very difficult for the couple to keep on a fixed routine; hence, they become a very flexible family. The baby’s presence initially increases the sense of bonding between the husband and wife, who feel united in their goal of rearing their child. But the infant takes a great deal of the mother’s time and energy, and the couple finds it difficult to spend time to stay connected as a couple. Although the mother and infant are very close, the couple becomes somewhat connected.

By the time the child is 4 years old, life has stabilized for this family (5). They are now functioning as a flexible/connected family and experiencing very few changes. Formerly a dual career couple, they have shifted toward more traditional gender roles, with the mother staying at home, but she has now returned to work part-time. Although he spends a little time with the infant, the husband is more focused on his job and seeking a promotion. Both their closeness and flexibility have dropped one level and life is now more manageable for them both.

In summary, this example illustrates how a couple’s relationship can change from dating across the early stages of marriage. The changes can occur gradually over months or more rapidly, after the birth of a child. These changes often occur without specific planning. However, couples can negotiate the type of relationship they want and be more proactive in creating the type of relationship they both prefer. These changes in a couple/family system are a snapshot version of the changes that occur in couple/family levels of cohesion and flexibility over their family life cycle.

**FAMILY SYSTEM CHANGES AND FAMILY STRESS FROM THE “ATTACK ON AMERICA”**

One hypothesis of the Circumpiex Model relates to how family systems adapt to major stressors. Balanced types of families will more effectively manage stress than unbalanced types, because they are able to change their system (second-order change) in order to cope with the stressor.

An example of how a family system reacts to stress can be drawn from
the tragic attack on America on September 11, 2001. Let us consider the hypothetical Greenberg family before and after the bombing of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (see Figure 19.3). The father, Henry, worked on the 92nd floor and it was initially unclear whether he was able to escape. Married for 26 years, he had three children ages 22, 20, and 17.

Before the bombing attack (point A), the family was flexible/somewhat connected, which is appropriate for their stage of the life cycle. Hours after the bombing attack (point B), the family system became overly flexible/overly connected (chaotically enmeshed), because the family did not know if the father had escaped from his office. The family, along with close relatives and friends, gathered at their home and huddled together in a mutually supportive way. A very high level of closeness and bonding was created, and uncertainty regarding the father’s survival created a great deal of chaos in their family (Boss, 1999). This is an example of how levels of cohesion or flexibility that would otherwise be hypothesized as problematic for family functioning can indeed be highly functional.

During the next day or two after the bombing, family members stayed together and were emotionally enmeshed, but they developed a highly structured style of operating, creating a somewhat flexible/overly connected system (point C). They got very organized as a group in an attempt to find out what happened to Henry. This added structure was an attempt to bring some order to the chaos. They decided that their home would be the headquarters, and everyone needed to be in touch by phone. They divided up into teams so they could better find out what happened to Henry. Some family members went to the bombing site, others went to check out the hospitals, and still others stayed at home. They checked in at home every few hours.

On the third day, a miracle occurred, from their point of view. They found that Henry was in a downtown hospital but severely injured in one leg and arm, and he had some memory loss. He could not remember his phone number but did know his name, which enabled the hospital to post his name on the second day.

Two weeks later, he was home, and the family then shifted again, becoming a somewhat flexible/very connected system (point D). They were still rather organized in order to care for him and to start to get back to their normal routines. Some of the closeness decreased from extreme levels. Yet the family was closer and more organized than before the attack, which is a useful style while the family recovers from the stress that they all experienced.

This example illustrates one family’s ability to adapt to a crisis. The family changed system levels several times over the few weeks following the attack, and these changes were beneficial in helping them to deal more effectively with this major trauma. The ability of the family to change in a fluid manner rather than stay stuck in a particular level is very functional, since it enables them to adapt more adequately to the major events.
FIGURE 19.3. Attack on America: Couple and family map.
The following general principles of stress-related change were developed after studying the impact of stress on several hundred couples and families with the Couple and Family Map (Olson, 2000). First, under stress, couples and families often become more extreme on both flexibility (a move toward a more chaotic system) and on cohesion (a move toward a more enmeshed system). Second, communication almost always increases during a stressful event. Third, once the stress has abated, couples and families usually return to a similar—but rarely to the same—type of system they had in place before the stress. Fourth, couples and families often require a minimum of 6 months to a year to adjust to a major stress. Fifth, balanced couple and family systems tend to become unbalanced during the stress and then return to another balanced system type.

In summary, it is expected that family systems will change in response to a crisis. As hypothesized in the Circumplex Model, balanced families have the resources and skills to shift their system in an appropriate way to cope more effectively with a crisis. In contrast, unbalanced families lack the resources needed to change their family and, therefore, have more difficulty adapting to a crisis. Balanced families, therefore, possess greater ability to achieve second-order change, because they are able to alter their family system to adapt to family crises.

STUDIES VALIDATING THE CIRCUMPLEX MODEL

Balanced versus Unbalanced Families

A central hypothesis derived from the model is that balanced couples and families function more adequately than unbalanced couples and families. More than 250 studies (Kouneski, 2001; Olson, 2000) have supported this major hypothesis. These studies have generally compared families with a variety of emotional problems and symptoms to nonclinical families. Most of these studies have used the self-report scale, FACES, in which higher scores on cohesion and flexibility represent balanced couples and families. This means that there is a linear relationship between healthy functioning and scores on FACES (Olson, 2000). Earlier versions of FACES did not tap the enmeshment) chaos, but FACES IV achieves this goal.

Strong support for the major hypothesis that balanced families function more adequately are from about 10 studies using the CRS, the observational assessment designed to assess Circumplex Model dimensions (Kouneski, 2001). In contrast to FACES, the CRS does tap the full continuum of the cohesion and flexibility dimensions and reveals a curvilinear relationship with family functioning (Thomas & Olson, 1993; Thomas & Ozechowski, 2000).
Balanced Couples/Families and Communication

Another hypothesis is that balanced couples and families have more positive communication skills than unbalanced families. Communication can be measured at both the marital and family levels.

In a national survey of 21,501 married couples who took the ENRICH couple inventory, it was found that the most happy marriages were balanced on cohesion and flexibility and had very good communication (Olson & Olson, 2000). In a review of over 20 studies of families, Kouneski (2001) found that most of the studies provided strong support for the hypothesis that balanced families have more positive communication than unbalanced families.

ASSESSMENT: MULTIMETHOD, MULTIPERSON, MULTITRAIT, AND MULTISYSTEM

Multimethod assessment utilizes self-report scales, which provide an "insider's perspective" on the family relationship, and the therapists' or observers' ratings, which provide an "outsider's perspective" on that same system. That these two approaches often provide different perspectives provides an important rationale for why both approaches should be used in work with families (Olson, 2000).

In order to assess the three major dimensions of the Circumplex Model and other related family concepts, Olson, Gorall, and Tiesel (2002) developed a variety of self-report instruments, which are described later in this chapter. The self-report instrument package, called the Family Inventories Package (FIP), provides the insider's perspective, whereas the CRS completed by the researcher or therapist provides the outsider's perspective. Both perspectives are useful, but they often yield apparently conflicting data. Used together, however, they help capture the complexity of marital and family systems.

Multiperson assessment is also important, because family members often do not agree in describing their family system. This is understandable, because an adolescence, marriage, and family occupy unique locations in the family system, which gives each person a unique experience and perspective on that system. Assessment using multiple family members, therefore, provides a more complete picture of how various family members view the system and the level of agreement or disagreement between them.

Multitrait assessment is based on the three central dimensions of the Circumplex Model: cohesion, flexibility, and communication. Although other traits can be incorporated into couple and family assessment, these three dimensions provide the foundation and central core of these relationship systems.
Multisystem assessment ideally focuses on the individual, the couple system, the parent–child system, and the total family—including extended family relationships. One important question to ask family members is whom they each consider to be members of their family. It is surprising to us how often family members disagree regarding who are the current members in their family system. This question becomes even more important when we consider the increasing complexity of families today, with so much divorce and increasing numbers of stepfamilies. These changes raise important questions about boundary issues and who is psychologically and/or physically present in a given family system (Boss, 1999). This is especially important given the increasing diversity of family forms, particularly with respect to the changes accompanying divorce and remarriage.

**UPDATED FAMILY INVENTORIES PACKAGE (FIP)**

The new FIP is the latest in a series of self-report assessments based on the Circumplex Model (Olson et al., 2002). This procedure is multidimensional in that it assesses the three Circumplex Model dimensions of cohesion, flexibility and communication. In addition, there are scales measuring family satisfaction, stress, and strengths.

**FACES I, II, and III**

The FACES self-report instrument has gone through multiple revisions over the past 20 years, with alterations that attempt to improve the reliability and validity of the instrument. Critiques of the instrument and of the Circumplex Model have encouraged these revisions, which continue to the present day. FACES IV was created because the earlier versions of the instrument (FACES I, II, and III) had linear relationships with family functioning rather than the curvilinear relationship, as hypothesized by the Circumplex Model. The earlier versions of FACES did not adequately capture the high extremes of cohesion (enmeshment) or flexibility (chaos). FACES IV was developed in an attempt to address this limitation.

**FACES IV**

The FACES IV instrument (Olson et al., 2002) was developed to tap the full range of the cohesion and flexibility dimensions. Work was done to develop items to tap the high and low extremes (unbalanced) of the dimensions (Tiesel, 1994). These items were then added to the moderately worded items of the previous versions of FACES in an attempt to develop scale to tap the full theoretical range of the dimensions (Gorall, 2002). Reliabilities for FACES IV and validation scales are shown in Table 19.2.
The FACES IV scales have been found to be reliable and valid for research use and clinical use. The FACES IV scales have also been shown to discriminate between healthy and problematic-functioning families, showing clinical validity (Gorall, 2002; see Table 19.3). These findings are based on an ethnically representative sample of the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted.

**Family Communication**

Communication is assessed by the Family Communication Scale, which is a revised version of the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olson, 1989). Family communication focuses on the free-flowing exchange of information, both factual and emotional. It deals with the lack of constraint and degree of understanding and satisfaction experienced in family communication interactions. The Family Communication Scale has been used in a wide variety of studies examining family communication in conjunction with other family dynamics (Friedman, Terras, & Kreisher, 1995; Henry, Sager, & Plunkett, 1996; Tulloch, Blizzard, & Pinkus, 1997; White, 1996).

**Family Satisfaction**

Satisfaction with the current family system is assessed by the Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson & Wilson, 1989), specifically designed to assess satisfaction with family functioning, which is a sparsely studied area compared to the voluminous studies on marital satisfaction. The items in the scale are specifically designed to tap individuals' satisfaction with levels of cohe-
### TABLE 19.3. Discriminant Analysis of Problem and Nonproblem Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Top vs. Bottom 50% on SFI &amp; FAD</th>
<th>Top vs. Bottom 46% on SFI &amp; FAD</th>
<th>Top vs. Bottom 50% on Family Satisfaction</th>
<th>Problem Plus Therapy&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N for Each Group</td>
<td>Top = 199</td>
<td>Top = 142</td>
<td>Top = 231</td>
<td>No Problems = 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottom</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>Problems &amp; Therapy = 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbalanced Disengaged Subscale</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaos Subscale</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enmeshed Subscale</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid Subscale</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Closeness Subscale</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Subscale</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension Scales</td>
<td>Cohesion Scale</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility Scale</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation Scales</td>
<td>SFI</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAD</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Satisfaction</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Subject identified physical, sexual, emotional, or chemical abuse as a problem in their family as well as identifying the receipt or need for therapy services for the problem group, and identified none of these as problems or the receipt or need for therapy for the no-problems group.

—Not reported because the groups for discriminant analysis are based on the same scale(s).

...mission and flexibility in their family. It has been used widely in family research in studies both in conjunction with the FACES instrument and as a stand-alone assessment of family satisfaction (Cashwell & Vance, 1996; Kusada, 1995; Pillay & Wassenaar, 1997).

### Family Strengths

The Family Strengths Scale (Olson, Larsen, & McCubbin, 1989) is included to focus specifically on those family characteristics and dynamics that enable families to show resilience and deal successfully with family problems. It specifically taps the subdimensions of Pride and Accord. The Pride subscale incorporates pride, loyalty, trust, and respect, whereas the Accord subscale is designed to assess a family’s sense of competency. The
scale has been used in a variety of studies focused on issues of strengths within families (Brage & Meredith, 1994; Kashani, Canfield, Soltys, & Reid, 1995; Meske, Sanders, Meredith, & Abbott, 1994).

**Family Stress**

As described previously, families often react to stressful situations by altering their level of cohesion and/or flexibility. In order to assess the current levels of stressors with which a family is dealing, and thus assess the impact on their levels of cohesion and flexibility, an assessment of family stress is included in the FIP. The Family Stress Scale is designed to tap the levels of stress currently being experienced by family members within their family system. It is adapted from the Coping and Stress Profile (CSP) (Olson, 1997).

**CLINICAL RATING SCALE**

The CRS was initially developed in 1980 to operationalize the three dimensions of the Circumplex Model. The observational scale describes specific indicators for each level of the three dimensions. The current CRS was modified several times by Olson (1990). It was designed to be used by therapists and researchers for rating couple and family systems based on clinical interviews or observations of their interaction.

The CRS has been validated in an extensive study by Thomas and Olson (1993). A recent study revealed a curvilinear relationship between the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility in relation to family functioning (Thomas & Ozechowski, 2000). Recent research has also shown that the scale produces the same factor structure when raters using the scale are researchers or therapists (Lee, Jager, Whiting, & Kwantes, 2000).

This scale is a useful training device both for helping individuals learn more about the Circumplex Model and for family assessment and treatment planning. Lee et al. (2000) found that the CRS is a useful tool in training family therapists to examine family dynamics and develop treatment plans. (A list of the key concepts in the CRS is included in Appendices 19.1–19.3.)

**GOALS OF FAMILY THERAPY USING THE CIRCUMPLEX MODEL**

Family therapists' central goal of reducing presenting problems and symptoms of family members is achieved by interventions focused on changing dysfunctional patterns in the couple and/or family system. The basic assumption is that the current family system dynamics are helping
to maintain symptomatic behaviors. Such patterns of interaction need to be changed before the symptoms or presenting problems can be alleviated.

Table 19.4 summarizes the specific goals of family therapy based on the Circumplex Model. The first goal is ultimately to reduce any problems and symptoms. Because most dysfunctional families coming for therapy represent midrange or unbalanced family types, change often involves trying to shift the system one level on cohesion and one level on adaptability toward the balanced levels. It is, therefore, typically assumed that the family will function more adequately if the marital and/or family system is moved toward the balanced types.

Because the model is dynamic, intervention on either cohesion or flexibility often has a ripple effect, influencing the system on the other dimension. In terms of cohesion, problems in families often occur because of family members’ difficulty in balancing separateness (autonomy) and togetherness (intimacy). In couples coming for therapy, often there is a difference in the amount of separateness and togetherness the two partners experience or desire. For example, in disengaged couples, one or both individuals have emphasized looking out for themselves; thus, they have not maintained their emotional bond of intimacy.

In troubled families, the dynamics of cohesion are often more complicated. One family might have an enmeshed mother–adolescent coalition with a disengaged father. In this case, the marital dyad would not be emotionally close. Increasing their marital/parental collaboration is an effective strategy for breaking up the strong parent–child coalition.

In terms of flexibility, couples and families with problems often have difficulty balancing stability and change. These relationships are either too rigid or too chaotic. With rigid systems, the behavioral repertoire is often very narrow. When confronted with increasing stress, family members tend to become more rigid and inflexible. These families can often benefit from learning and using more democratic decision-making and better problem-solving skills. On the other hand, chaotic relationships often need in-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 19.4</th>
<th>Goals of Marital and Family Therapy Based on Circumplex Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goals regarding symptoms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduce presenting problems and symptoms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals regarding system (couple and/or family)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Change system one level on cohesion and one level on flexibility toward balanced types.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On cohesion, balancing togetherness and separateness.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• On flexibility, balancing stability and change.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improve communication skills.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metagoal regarding system (preventative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increase ability to negotiate system change over time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
creased structure and can also benefit from improved problem-solving skills.

Increasing the positive communication skills of couples and families can also facilitate systems change. Individuals in troubled families often need to learn how to be more assertive in expressing their wants and desires. They usually gain from learning how to express their feelings in a constructive manner, and how to listen and give empathetic feedback to each other.

However, improving the communication skills in a family is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change on the dimensions of cohesion and adaptability. Communication skills can help increase awareness of current needs and preferences. Systems change on cohesion and adaptability is more difficult and complex. Good communication skills enable families to express more clearly their relationship preferences. One desirable goal of couple and family therapy is ultimately not only to deal with their current issues but also to help families develop the necessary skills to negotiate system change over time. It is an assumption of the model that couples and families need to alter their system as their individual needs and preferences change. Being able to articulate and negotiate these changes on cohesion and adaptability will also enable couples or families to cope more adequately with stress and other problematic issues they encounter over time. This important preventive goal moves beyond dealing with the current presenting symptoms. Unfortunately, this metagoal is often not achieved in therapy, because most families, and even some therapists, are too focused on reducing the presenting problems.

TREATMENT PLANNING USING THE CIRCUMPLEX MODEL

The Circumplex Model is a valuable resource in assessment-based treatment planning with severely dysfunctional families. A major task for outcome research is to determine which elements of intervention are most appropriate and effective with specific presenting problems and elements of family functioning. The Circumplex Model and accompanying self-report scale (FACES IV) and CRS offer an empirically based family assessment tool that can be used for treatment planning and outcome evaluation.

The model provides a conceptual framework for assessing family system functioning on two fundamental dimensions of family organization: cohesion and flexibility. This descriptive typology of transactional patterns can be used to determine a family’s current level and style of functioning on each dimension and to guide treatment planning to strengthen particular components of functioning toward clearly specified and realistic ob-
jectives. Thus, family therapy is not limited to reduction or interruption of extreme dysfunctional patterns, but is directed systematically toward promotion of more functional patterns (Walsh & Olson, 1989).

For families assessed at either extreme on the dimensions, intervention strategies can be targeted to fit their particular pattern of organization and to guide change in a stepwise progression toward a more balanced system. A common therapeutic error with very dysfunctional families is to assume that patterns are unchangeable or that change toward the opposite pattern is necessary and desirable. In most significantly troubled families, a reachable therapeutic goal would be to move the family one level, from enmeshed to very connected. It would also be unrealistic to attempt to change family patterns more than two levels, such as moving a disengaged family to become very connected.

Chronically dysfunctional families often assume such extreme all-or-none positions regarding change. They are likely to alternate between feelings of hopelessness that any change can occur and unrealistic expectations for goals that are unlikely to be met. They commonly fluctuate between extremes of enmeshed/disengaged and of rigidity/chaos. An enmeshed family may resist a clinician’s efforts to promote physical separation, such as leaving home at launching, when they hold catastrophic expectations that any separation will result in a total cutoff.

Opposite extremes may also be found in different family subsystems. In many enmeshed families, some siblings may disengage completely from the family in order to avoid fusion, assuming positions of pseudoautonomy that dissolve in contact with the family. Clinicians must be cautious not to collude with presuppositions of the all-or-none position. Fears of runaway change or loss of patterns considered to be essential to individual or family survival are common sources of “resistance” to change and therapy dropouts. Clinicians need to be alert to prevent extreme family oscillation, which can occur much like a “short-circuiting” process. A therapist must actively structure and monitor family interaction to block or interrupt the all-or-none tendency in these families to flip to the opposite extreme. It is essential to set modest, concrete objectives to be reached through small increments of change, in order to reduce anxiety to a manageable level, to prevent extreme fluctuations, and to help the family modulate and moderate changes than can be maintained over time.

PREPARE/ENRICH PROGRAM: COUNSELING PREMARITAL AND MARRIED COUPLES

The PREPARE/ENRICH Program was developed to help couples prepare for marriage (PREPARE Program) and for marriage enrichment and marital therapy (ENRICH Program). The PREPARE/ENRICH Program is cur-
rently used by over 50,000 counselors with couples, and over 1,000,000 couples have taken the program nationally. It was originally developed in 1979 and has been modified and expanded four times since then by David Olson and colleagues (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1986; Olson & Olson, 1999). The Program is available in seven other languages (Chinese, French, German, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, and Swedish) and in 12 other countries (Australia, Canada, England, Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, and Taiwan). Computer scoring is done via the Internet. To learn more about the program, go to the website: www.lifeinnovations.com.

In the first step, the couple takes one of five PREPARE/ENRICH Couple Inventories (PREPARE, PREPARE—Cohabiting Couple, PREPARE—Marriage with Children, ENRICH for married couples, and MATE for couples over 50). The counselor receives the inventory computer score and receives a 15-page computer report on the couple and a 25-page workbook for the couple called Building a Strong Marriage. Feedback from the computer report is integrated into counseling with the couple.

The counselor uses the feedback from the computer report to work with the couple. A semistructured feedback process was developed; it has six goals and matching couple exercises (see Table 19.5). The six couple exercises are designed to identify couple strengths, to teach couples assertiveness and active listening skills, and to learn how to effectively resolve conflict, deal with family-of-origin issues and financial planning, and achieve goals.

The Couple and Family Map is used to look at the couple dynamics and how they relate to the family of origin of each partner. Each person describes the couple relationship and his or her own family of origin. The findings are plotted onto the Map. The similarities and differences in families of origin are discussed. The spouses also discuss what they would like (proactively) to bring from their families into their couple/family, and what they do not want to bring (repeat). Couples enjoy this discussion and learn a great deal about their families and how they often repeat what they did in their family of origin.

### TABLE 19.5. Six Goals and Couple Exercises with PREPARE/ENRICH Program

- Explore relationship strength and growth areas.
- Strengthen couple communication skills, including assertiveness and active listening.
- Resolve couple conflict using the Ten-Step Procedure.
- Explore family-of-origin issues using Couple and Family Map (Circumplex Model).
- Develop a workable budget and financial plan.
- Develop personal, couple, and family goals.
Predictive Validity of Couple Scales

The five PREPARE/ENRICH scales tap 20 individual and couple content areas that have been found to be critical to the healthy or problematic functioning of couple relationships. The 20 areas each contain a 10-item scale and are organized into the following categories: Personality—4 scales (e.g., self confidence); Intrapersonal—5 scales (e.g., marriage expectations, spiritual beliefs); Interpersonal—5 scales (e.g., communication and conflict resolution); External—2 scales (e.g., financial); Couple and Family System—4 scales (e.g., closeness and flexibility). PREPARE, for premarital couples, has been found to predict couple satisfaction and which couples will divorce with 80–85% accuracy in 3-year longitudinal studies (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Larsen & Olson, 1989). ENRICH, designed for married couples, is able to discriminate happy, nonclinical couples from clinical couples with 90% accuracy (Fowers & Olson, 1989).

Couple Types

Using data from 5,036 premarital couples that took PREPARE, Fowers and Olson (1993) identified the four types of premarital couples: vitalized, harmonious, traditional, and conflicted (see Figure 19.4). Five types of married couples were identified using a sample of 6,267 married couples (Olson & Fowers, 1999) who took ENRICH. The same four premarital types were found in married couples, along with one additional type: devitalized.

- **Vitalized couples** were the happiest couple type, because they had many strengths (high Positive Couple Agreement [PCA] scores) and few growth areas (low PCA scores).
- **Harmonious couples** had many strengths, but fewer than the vitalized couples. They had high PCA scores in many areas, but often had low scores in the Children and Parenting area.
- **Traditional couples** had more strengths in traditional areas such as Children and Parenting, Family and Friends, Traditional Roles, and Spiritual Beliefs. However, they had lower scores on internal dynamics, where they indicated problems with Personality Issues, Communication, and Conflict Resolution.
- **Conflicted couples** had numerous growth areas and few relationship strengths. They are called conflicted because they had low scores on Communication, Conflict Resolution, and many other areas. Conflicted premarital couples are at high risk for divorce. Married couples of this type commonly seek therapy (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996).
- **Devitalized couples** (only from ENRICH) had growth areas in almost all aspects of their relationship. They were typically very unhappy, had few strengths as a couple. They are a common type of couple that seeks marital therapy.
FIGURE 19.4. Five types of married couples based on ENRICH.
Validity of Couple Types

In order to validate the four premarital types, 328 premarital couples were followed for 3 years after marriage to assess their marital success (Fowers et al., 1996). These couples were classified into the four premarital types. The outcome measure 3 years after marriage was whether they were happily married or separated/divorced.

The most significant validation of the typology was the finding related to the marital outcomes of the premarital couples. As hypothesized, the Vitalized couples had the highest percentage of happily married couples (60%) and the lowest percentage of separated and divorced couples (17%). Conversely, Conflicted couples had the most separated/divorced couples (49%) and the lowest number of happily married couples (17%). Traditional couples had the lowest percentage of separated/divorced couples (6%) but the highest percentage of unhappily married couples (50%).

There were also 89 couples who cancelled their wedding plans after taking PREPARE and receiving feedback. As predicted, the highest percentage of those who cancelled their wedding plans were Conflicted couple types (40%), followed by the Traditional couple type (26%), the Harmonious couple type (22%) and the Vitalized couple type (12%).

A study comparing the Couple and Family Map with the couple typology based on ENRICH by Ed Kouneski (2002) demonstrated a linear relationship between couple cohesion and couple flexibility in the five types. More specifically, Vitalized/Harmonious couples had the highest level of couple cohesion and flexibility, whereas Conflicted/Devitalized couples had the lowest levels.

SUMMARY

In summary, the Circumplex Model is both a theoretical model with testable hypotheses and a descriptive model for understanding couple and family functioning. The Model has been used increasingly in clinical work and research with diverse samples of couples and families in terms of ethnicity/race, family structure, sexual orientation, and social class. The Couple and Family Map is also designed for clinical assessment, treatment planning, and evaluation of therapeutic outcome. An assessment package includes both the self-report scales in the FIP and the observer (therapist/researcher) rating, the CRS. The ultimate goal of the Circumplex Model is to bridge research, theory, and clinical practice.

REFERENCES


