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Glenn Shields

*Bowling Green State University*

Richard D. Clark

*Bowling Green State University*

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# Family Correlates of Delinquency: Cohesion And Adaptability

GLENN SHIELDS, D.S.W.

Department of Social Work  
Bowling Green State University

RICHARD D. CLARK, PH.D.

Criminal Justice Program  
Bowling Green State University

*The Circumplex Model of family functioning, which includes measures of cohesion and adaptability, was used with a community-based sample of youth (N = 480) to test its usefulness for explaining delinquent behavior. Results from the research indicate that the Circumplex Model is inadequate for explaining delinquency. It was concluded that the two major components of the model, cohesion and adaptability, do not operate in the curvilinear fashion as hypothesized. Rather, the results suggest the both factors are linear in their relationship with delinquency.*

Social science research has established a causal link between juvenile delinquency and family relationships with a variety of relationship factors identified as important. Two major factors in family relationships and delinquency are family attachment, the relationship between a parent and a child; and family management, the manner in which families assign roles, rules and discipline.

Numerous authors have noted the importance of family attachment to delinquency. For example, McCord (1991), Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger (1991), Rosenbaum (1989), Cernkovich and Giordano (1987), Patterson (1986), Patterson & Dishion (1985), Hirschi (1969), and Nye (1958) all conclude that quality of family interactions are important variables to consider in studying delinquency. Families exhibiting poorer interactions appear to show higher rates of juvenile delinquency.

Attachment, defined as the emotional bond between the parent(s) and the child, is thought to insulate a child from delinquent behavior. Both Nye (1958) and Hirschi (1969) have stated that delinquent behavior is inhibited when children have a positive attachment to their parent(s). Both researchers argue that it is not the structure of the family that is linked to delinquency as much as it is the relationship and the interactional patterns among family members. Rosenbaum (1989) reports that research has consistently shown that those youths whose bond to their parents is weak are more likely to be delinquent. Loeber and Dishion (1983) noted that the families of children who displayed aggressiveness in school and at home evidenced low levels of maternal acceptance. According to Henggeler (1985), evidence consistently suggests parental rejection, low family cohesion, and marital conflict are linked causally to delinquent behavior. Cernkovich and Giordano (1987) found measures of family relationships significantly related to delinquency in all family contexts with positive communication and support important controls for delinquency. Thus, the research on attachment is consistent in suggesting that adolescents in families with low cohesion or attachment are more likely to be delinquent.

An additional variable that has been considered of primary importance to family researchers is parental management. Parental, or family management has been variously defined to include monitoring, discipline, problem solving, and reinforcement. Some researchers maintain that these variables, rather than variables such as cohesion and attachment, are the most important variables in predicting delinquency (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Larzelere & Patterson, 1990). Loeber and Dishion (1983) reviewed early research and concluded that composite measures of parental family management techniques were the strongest predictors of delinquent behavior. More recent research regarding adaptability, the family systems ability to change its power structure, role relations, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress, has also suggested a link to delinquency. Rodrick, Henggeler, and Hanson (1986) found that families of delinquents were more chaotic and disorganized than families with nondelinquents. Geismar and Wood (1986) had similar findings in their study of

parental control strategies and delinquents; families with adolescents who were delinquent were identified as highly chaotic and rigid.

Attachment and parental management therefore emerge as two important factors in trying to understand the link between families and delinquent behavior. As Maccoby and Martin (1983) state, the study of the association between family problems and child psychosocial functioning has focused upon these two major areas; the affective nature of family interactions and the control strategies used by parents. Each area represents a continuum of related behaviors and attitudes. Concerning the affective nature of the association, at one extreme are parents who are accepting, responsive to child needs, and generally child-centered. At the opposite end of that continuum, parents are rejecting, unresponsive, and parent-centered. Control strategies, the second area, incorporates parental behaviors and attitudes; at one extreme undemanding and flexible; the opposite are parents who are relatively demanding, controlling, and restrictive.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the relationship between levels of self-reported delinquent activities and an adolescents' perception of family functioning (e.g. attachment and family management). The vehicle for this was the Circumplex Model of Family Functioning which incorporates measures of attachment and family functioning as its main components (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1979).

### *The Circumplex Model*

The Circumplex Model was developed from marital and family systems theory in order to bridge research and practice. It identifies two major dimensions of the family that are helpful in making differentiation among functional and dysfunctional families. The two dimensions are family cohesion and family adaptability.

Family cohesion involves the interplay between an individual's autonomy and emotional bonding on the part of family members. Very low cohesion suggest that family members view themselves as "disengaged." The bonding between the members may be described as weak, thus limiting family unity. On the

other hand, when bonding is very high, individuals are said to lose their sense of identity and may become "enmeshed" within their family system. Both excessively high and excessively low levels of cohesion represent extremes and are described as unhealthy, and leading to family dysfunction (Olson et al., 1979, 1983). Within these two extremes are families described as balanced. Cohesion resembles the concept of attachment, since both concepts attempt to measure the strength of the relationship or bond between the parent and the child.

Family adaptability is the ability of a marital or family system to change its structure, roles, and rules in response to both situational and developmental pressures (Olson et al., 1983). Like cohesion, the model describes both extreme and balanced family types. The lowest level of adaptability is defined as "rigid." In such families, rules are strictly defined, the power structure is inflexible, leadership is authoritarian, and discipline is managed in an autocratic manner. At the other extreme are "chaotic" families where ambiguity exist regarding rules, roles, and decision making. In addition, these families tend to display a great deal of inconsistency in interpersonal relations and, where children are concerned, differing types of discipline. Similar to cohesion, these two family types are considered extreme and unhealthy from a family management viewpoint. Located between these two extremes are management styles that are considered balanced.

Cohesion and adaptability are likely to differ by stages of family development. Cohesion, for example, is said to ebb during latter adolescence. Adolescents are preparing to leave home and beginning to develop an identity independent from their family. It seems reasonable to predict that lower levels of cohesion may be experienced during this time. Similarly, parent-adolescent differences with regard to adaptability may be much more apparent. It is at this time in an adolescent's life that greater freedom and autonomy is sought.

The Circumplex Model with its two main dimensions, cohesion and adaptability, provides a foundation for analysis of families. By utilizing this model, families can be classified along two separate dimensions. Based on this classification, the family can be placed into one of sixteen types, which are then organized

into three main groups, or family types: balanced, mid-range, extreme (see Figure 1). Families that are extreme on both dimensions are classified as extreme, while families that are extreme on one dimension only are classified as mid-range, and families that are located at or near the center on both dimensions are classified as balanced. Balanced families are considered to be functional within the framework of the Circumplex Model. Families are best able to handle situational and developmental stress when both cohesion and adaptability are in the balanced range.

Prior research with the Circumplex Model has suggested that it may be useful for assessing family dysfunction. Extreme levels of cohesion and adaptability have been positively correlated with adolescent delinquent activities such as sexual offending, assaultive behavior, drug abuse, poor ego development, and poor school performance (Novy, Gaa, Frankiewicz, Liberman, & Amerikaner, 1992; Smart, Chibucos, & Didier, 1990; Protinsky & Shilts, 1990; Masselam, Marcus, & Stunkard, 1990). However, many of these studies have focused primarily on psychological development, minor delinquent behavior and have used non-random or clinical samples. The research reported

Figure 1

*Circumplex Model: 16 Types of Martial and Family Systems*

		Cohesion			
		Disengaged (Low)	Separated	Connected	Enmeshed (High)
Adaptability	Chaotic (High)	Extreme	Midrange	Midrange	Extreme
	Flexible	Extreme	Midrange	Midrange	Extreme
	Structured	Extreme	Midrange	Midrange	Extreme
	Rigid (Low)	Extreme	Midrange	Midrange	Extreme

herein focuses on a community-based representative sample and includes a wide range of self-reported delinquent behavior.

A major purpose of the study was to test the efficacy of the Circumplex Model as a tool for assessing delinquency by focusing on cohesion and adaptability. There are three hypotheses. First, it is hypothesized that the Circumplex model will *not* have a direct positive relationship between the three levels of family functioning; balanced, midrange, and extreme and levels of delinquency. While it is anticipated that those classified as balanced will have the lowest delinquency rates, it is not anticipated that those classified as extreme will have the highest rates of delinquency. The reasoning is that contrary to the model, cohesion is linear to delinquency, and therefore those classified as "enmeshed", will evince low levels of delinquent behavior. The combining of these individuals with those low on cohesion or "disconnected" - who it is anticipated will have high delinquent rates - will moderate the impact of extreme cohesion on delinquency. Second, it is hypothesized that respondent demographics, age, sex, race and family structure will be unimportant in assessing the relationships uncovered by the model. While family interactions may change as the adolescent ages, the basic premise of the model—that balanced families are "healthy"—should not change simply because family members age. Nor should the underlying premise of the model be different, depending upon the race, sex or family structure of the respondent. Third, it is hypothesized that the two components of circumplex model, cohesion and adaptability are of equal importance in predicting delinquency.

## Methods

### *Sample*

The sample (N = 480) for this study was derived from a medium sized, rural, predominately white, Midwestern community. It consisted of the following; high school students (N = 338), first time juvenile court referrals (N = 100), and youth who were on probation (N = 42). The composition of the sample included participants from each of the three areas in order to

increase the range and the variance of delinquency to enable a more precise test of the Circumplex Model.

There were slightly more males (51.7 percent) than females in the sample. The age range was 10 to 19 (mean = 15.6), with the largest group, (62.7 percent) being 15 and 16. Only a small portion of the sample, (13.3 percent) was minority. Family structure was somewhat diverse with the predominate characteristic being both biological parents present in the home (56 percent). A comparison of the sample demographics to the total population revealed no significant differences on age, sex, or race.

#### *Procedure and Instrumentation*

Participants for the study were recruited from a local high school with the assistance of the school administration. Students who volunteered to participate were administered questionnaires in English classes. The data from the juvenile justice sample were collected over a one year period from questionnaires administered to each court referral and probationer. Participation was voluntary with each respondent being assured of complete confidentiality through the use of an anonymous questionnaire. The overall response rate was 74 percent; with a response rate for the high school sample of 70 percent and the juvenile justice sample response rate of 86 percent.

#### Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales

Participants in the study completed the *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES III)* (Olson, Porter, & Lavee, 1985) which consists of 20 negatively and positively stated questions scored in a Likert type scale. Developers of the instrument posit a theoretical link between FACES III and the Circumplex Model of family functioning. Subscores were obtained for adolescents regarding their perceptions of family functioning. Reliability and validity of the instrument has been established (Olson, Porter, & Lavee 1985). Table 1 shows the distribution of the family classification based for the complete sample.

Table 1

*Family Classification On Circumplex Model  
(Total Sample)*

Family Type	N	%
Balanced	125	26.2
Mid-Range	226	47.3
Extreme	127	26.5
	478	100.0

*Self-Report Delinquency Scale*

A modified version of Elliot and Ageton's (1980) Self-Report Delinquency Scale was used to measure delinquent activity (see Cernkovich and Giordano, 1987). This questionnaire consists of 27 items related to delinquent behaviors. The delinquent acts ranged from relatively minor things such as cheating on a school exam and lying about one's age to gain entry to an adult establishment to more serious delinquent acts such as carrying a concealed weapon or auto theft.

### Results

The first hypothesis regarding the relationship between the Circumplex Model and delinquency was supported. Based on the relative frequencies from the FACES III scores, adolescents who reported higher rates of self-reported delinquency were more likely to locate in the mid-range versus the extreme areas of the Circumplex Model (see Table 2). In addition, as predicted by the model, adolescents who reported residing in the balanced area, self-reported the lowest rates of delinquency.

The finding regarding cohesion and delinquency was confirmed by an analysis which examined the levels of delinquency within each of the four levels of cohesion. This analysis shows that as one moves from enmeshed to disconnected, rates of delinquency increase. For example, the mean number of delinquent acts committed within the last year by respondents

Table 2

*ANOVA Mean Number of Delinquent Acts by Family Types  
(Total Sample)*

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	F
Balanced	125	127.8	208.2	4.26*
Mid-Range	226	207.2	276.8	
Extreme	127	182.5	213.7	

\* $p < .05$

Note: Scheffe Post Hoc comparison showed Balanced differed significantly when compared to Mid-Range.

classified as "enmeshed" was 60.1, while respondents classified as "disengaged" reported committing 235.0 delinquent acts over the same time period. Thus the hypothesized relationship between cohesion and delinquency was confirmed; the more cohesive a family, the less likely the children are to be delinquent. Cohesion therefore, is linearly related to delinquency, unlike the direction specified by the Circumplex Model.

The results for adaptability are somewhat mixed. The results show that families described as flexible have the highest overall delinquency rate ( $X = 192.1$ ) followed by families classified as rigid ( $X = 186.4$ ). Conversely, the family classification with the lowest overall crime rate is chaotic ( $X = 161.4$ ). Adaptability does not operate in the non-linear fashion hypothesized by the Circumplex Model. The high rate of delinquency for families classified as rigid is consistent with the hypothesis derived from the Circumplex Model. The finding of a "low" rate of delinquency for chaotic families is not. While the results are not consistent, there is a general trend for delinquency rates to increase as one moves from chaotic to rigid. The more rigid the family, the greater the likelihood for delinquency to occur.

The next step was to explore the data by the demographic variables of age (15 and under versus 16 and older), sex, race and family structure. Family structure was dichotomized into families with both the mother and father present versus all other family situations. As noted above, it was hypothesized that

there would be no differences in the findings derived from the Circumplex Model based upon our four demographic variables.

In general, with the exception of youth under the age of 16 and female respondents this hypothesis was confirmed. For respondents under the age of sixteen and female respondents, we noted that youth in the extreme category self-reported the highest rates of delinquency, with youth in the balanced reporting the lowest rates of delinquency. These differences however were non-significant and in the cases of females, very small. For all other demographic categories, youth in the balanced classification reported the lowest rate of delinquency while youth in the midrange category reported the highest rates of delinquency.

The next step in the analysis was to determine the relative value of both cohesion and adaptability for delinquency. Zero-order correlations between the levels of cohesion and adaptability and self-reported delinquency were preformed. In addition, mean levels of cohesion and adaptability and the three categories of delinquency (none, minor and major) were compared. The analysis revealed a significant correlation between levels of cohesion, and three measures of delinquency (total, minor, and major). In all the categories, higher levels of cohesion were related to lower levels of delinquency. The specific correlations for each category of delinquency were: Total,  $-.24$ ; Minor,  $-.25$ ; and Major,  $-.15$ . All three correlations were significant at  $p < .001$ .

Results from a comparison of mean scores also revealed a significant difference between levels of cohesion and levels of delinquency. Respondents who reported higher levels of cohesion are significantly more likely to have reported committing either no delinquent acts or minor delinquency only ( $p < .05$ ). For example, respondents who reported no delinquent acts reported a mean level of cohesion of 39.3. The mean levels of cohesion for minor and major offenders was 32.7 and 28.8, respectfully. Within the context of the Circumplex Model, the attributes of connectedness to family, emotional closeness, loyalty, time together, and a focus inside the family are related to lower rates and less serious forms of delinquency. These relationships did not change when we controlled for age, sex, race or family situation of the respondent.

Adaptability, which includes such things as leadership, rules, discipline, role expectations, and the perception of the family's ability or willingness to negotiate, showed less promising results. The correlations between the levels of adaptability and our three measures of delinquency were non-significant. However, when mean levels of delinquency were analyzed, adolescents in the no delinquent acts category differed significantly in their level of adaptability ( $X = 28.6$ ) compared to those in the midrange ( $X = 25.5$ ) and extreme ( $X = 24.5$ ) classifications. Adolescents who reported no delinquent behavior perceived their family as more flexible compared to those who reported some delinquent behavior (minor or major).

### Discussion

This research had two main objectives; to explore the usefulness of the Circumplex Model of Family Functioning as an explanatory tool for delinquency and to explore the relative importance of cohesion and adaptability as explanatory variables for delinquency.

The model's usefulness for delinquency research is unclear. FACES was generally successful at locating adolescents who reported no delinquent behavior in the balanced area of the Circumplex Model. It was less successful for locating adolescents who reported the highest levels of delinquent behavior since they located in the midrange area of the model. The model predicted that adolescents who evidenced the highest rates of self-reported delinquency would locate in the extreme areas of the model and as hypothesized, that predicted outcome did not occur.

The Circumplex Model predicts that family dysfunction is likely when an individual locates in an extreme area at either end of the continuum for each respective variable, cohesion and adaptability. Extremes for cohesion (enmeshed or disengaged) are considered dysfunctional in the Circumplex Model. Our findings for cohesion differed from the model's central hypothesis: The more enmeshed the adolescent, the less likely he/she was to self-report delinquent behavior. While being enmeshed with one's family may be unhealthy from a clinical

viewpoint, it is functional for delinquency prevention. This finding was consistent across all demographic variables studied, and is consistent with the prior literature on family attachment and delinquency.

Results did not support a curvilinear relationship between adaptability and delinquency as hypothesized by the Circumplex Model. Results from our research suggest that, in general, delinquent behavior is more likely to occur in families where adaptability is low. Delinquent families are more likely to be characterized by a family system that is rigid. In conjunction with our second hypothesis, these findings were largely unchanged when we controlled for the demographic variables of age, sex, race, and family structure.

The third hypothesis dealt with the relative importance of each variable. This data indicates that cohesion is a better predictor of delinquent behavior when compared to adaptability. Not only is the relationship between cohesion and delinquency more consistent than the relationship between adaptability and delinquency, but the strength of the former relationship is greater than that of the latter. This finding indicates that control theory, as theorized by Nye and Hirschi, is a better predictor of delinquent behavior than the family management approach.

In defense of the model some notes of caution are needed. Within the model itself, caution is encouraged regarding the definition of balance. Even though a family system is in balance, it should not be assumed that families are free of conflict. Balance is not a guarantee of functions. Rather it implies that families experience extremes on the dimension when appropriate, but not typically for long periods of time (Olson et al., 1983). In addition it is possible that the findings are not generalizable. The sample was derived from a mostly white, small city. Finally, results are derived from cross-sectional data. Thus, the research was unable to test whether cohesion/adaptability *leads* to delinquent behavior, or whether the relationships uncovered herein are due to the disintegration of the family as a *result* of delinquent behavior.

Overall results from this study seem to suggest that the Circumplex Model is inadequate in explaining delinquent behavior. The Circumplex Model, however, has an important place in

family research. But its utility for assessing delinquent behavior is limited.

Parental acceptance, warmth, and support along with firm, mild, consistent discipline appear to be central to a child's or adolescent's positive self-concept and favorable emotional and social development. While the research presented herein is exploratory, further research into the differing components of family interaction is strongly encouraged. Problems of disturbed parent-child relationships such as delinquency can be addressed more clearly when they are understood vis-a-vis interaction with the family system as well as the environment.

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