

# Parenting Stress, Family Adaptability, Family Cohesion, and Family Communication of Parents of a Preschool Laboratory

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**ABSTRACT :** *This study focused on the relationships among the parenting stress, family adaptability, cohesion, and communication of parents of enrolled children at a preschool laboratory. Forty parent-respondents accomplished a self-administered questionnaire. Spearman's correlation was used for data analysis. Findings show that the average parenting stress level is low at 37.37 (SD=8.24). Family adaptability and cohesion levels were moderate to high, falling in the balanced range of Olson's circumplex map. Family communication level was high. Parenting stress was weakly positively correlated with family adaptability, weakly negatively correlated with family cohesion, and moderately negatively correlated with family communication. Parenting stress needs to be addressed adequately for positive family functioning. Further studies can consider other family functioning aspects and respondents from other socio-economic backgrounds, locations, and family life cycle stages.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Family adaptability, family cohesion, family communication, families with preschool children, Parenting stress*

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## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Parenting Stress

As they perform their parenting duties and tasks in their daily family lives, parents may experience parenting stress. Parenting stress is “the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent [1].” It includes negative emotions felt toward the self, the co-parent, and the children [2]. Some demands which may lead to parenting stress are feeding the children, cleaning them up, washing their clothes, childcare, and school activities [3]. Aside from these are other demands related to child-rearing such as bringing to and fetching the child from school, helping the child in schoolwork, buying needed school supplies, and extracurricular activities such as sports or arts activities. While trying to meet the child's needs, the parent may also feel the need to consider his/her own needs and to consider societal expectations about being a good parent [2].

These challenges may give rise to a variety of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. On one end, parents may become better organizers and providers, and appreciate their involvement in their child's life. On the other hand, they may experience burnout and nag the child, get angry or frustrated, or doubt their parental capabilities. These are called as parental “occupational hazards [3].”

Parenting stress is related to various factors such as child characteristics or temperament [2; 4], individual characteristics such as parental self-efficacy [5], maternal age [4] and ecological/contextual factors such as socioeconomic status [6], workload, social support, negative life events, child caretaking difficulties, number of children in the family [4] and age of the children [7]. When parents are in an environment with numerous stressors, they tend to be more vulnerable to the negative outcomes of parenting stress [2]. Thus, it is the main interest of this study due to its possible damaging effects on family well-being and on child outcomes [8; 9]. There may be a transfer of emotions or behaviors from one family domain to another or from one relationship to another [10;11]. This is the main idea of the Spillover Hypothesis. Thus, if there is negative affect in the marital subsystem, this may carry over to the parenting subsystem or vice versa [10; 11].

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## **1.2 Olson's Circumplex Model of Family Systems: Adaptability, Cohesion and Communication**

This model has been widely used to analyze family functioning [12] and has been used in research, theory-building and interventions. Family adaptability, family cohesion and family communication are the three important dimensions of marital and family systems [13]. These are significant family functioning variables used to assess normal or dysfunctional families.

Family adaptability or flexibility refers to the leadership quality, role relationships, and relationship rules [14]. It has four levels: rigid (very low), structured (low to moderate), flexible (moderate to high), and ending at chaotic (very high). Both rigid and chaotic levels of flexibility reflect unbalanced relations and can lead to family relationship problems. Relationships with flexible and structured flexibility levels, however, reflect the ability to balance stability and change in a more functional way [15].

Family cohesion is the degree to which there is emotional bonding between and among family members [14]. Cohesion is separated into four levels ranging from disengaged (very low cohesion), separated (low to moderate), connected (moderate to high), and ending at enmeshed (very high). Both disengaged and enmeshed levels of cohesion indicate unbalanced relationships and can lead to family relationship problems. Relationships with separated and connected cohesion levels, however, have the ability to balance "aloneness" versus "togetherness" in a more functional way [15]. Generally, families who show balanced levels in cohesion and adaptability will generally function better [13].

Family communication refers to positive communication skills such as listening, self-disclosure, and respectful communication which are present in the family system [14] and help it to function better. It is the facilitating factor to change a family's level of cohesion or adaptability in response to developmental transitions and environmental stressors [16]. Different patterns of marital communication and parent-child communication emerge for each family and may remain consistent over time [17].

Family cohesion and adaptability have important predictive power in coping with trauma or stress, however, there were more studies regarding family cohesion. As cohesion increases, optimal family functioning increases [18] and adaptation was found to be directly related to optimal functioning, but only for girls. It was also found that higher levels of family cohesion and adaptability were associated with positive coping strategies used by family members to adapt to stressors [19]. In another study, it was found that family cohesion was the best predictor of parent stress in that it was a buffer; higher family cohesion was associated with lower parent stress [20]. Further, parent stress was associated with lower family cohesion [21].

Studies on family communication have been done usually on families with adolescent children. Along these lines, findings show that positive family communication is related to adolescent family satisfaction [22], family leisure involvement [23], lower levels of aggressive discipline [24] and household structure [25].

In terms of Olson's family typing, there are balanced family relationships (e.g. structurally-separated, structurally-connected, flexibly-separated, flexibly-connected) and there are extreme types [26]. The balanced relationships are graphically located at the center of the Circumplex Model (Fig. 1). Families located in the balanced areas allow their family members to experience both flexibility and structure in terms of roles and rules and also, both independence and connectedness to the family. Thus, balanced families are considered more functional than those families found in the extreme types [13].

There is few research that have examined parenting stress and its influence on family adaptability, cohesion and communication among parents of preschoolers in the Philippines. Thus, the study determined selected Filipino parents' parenting stress, levels of family adaptability, cohesion, and communication, and examined the relationship of parenting stress with these three elements of family systems to contribute to the literature and to aid in family development.

## **II. Methodology**

The study utilized a quantitative and cross-sectional research design to gather information from the parents of preschoolers enrolled in the nursery and prekindergarten levels of the laboratory preschool. This preschool is a program of the national university in a suburban municipality south of the country's National Capital Region. This program serves the faculty and staff of the university and its allied institutions by providing educational experiences to children aged 3-5 years old.

There were 59 children enrolled in the preschool. Complete enumeration was done and there was a 67.7% response rate from the parents. The mean age is 35.73 (SD=5.64) with more than half of the respondents aged 30-39 years. More than three-fourths (77.5%) of those who responded were the mothers. More than half (52.5%) have two children. Nearly two-thirds of the children (62.3%) were aged 3-5 years. Seventy percent of the fathers and 85% of the mothers have college and post-graduate degrees. Two-thirds (67.5%) were from middle income families with monthly incomes ranging from Php11,915- 49,256, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority [27]. They were chosen as the respondents since parenting stress has been found to be

associated with socioeconomic status [6], child caretaking difficulties, number of children in the family [4] and age of the children [7].

A questionnaire with four parts was prepared. The first part gathered parental and family information such as age, educational attainment, family income, and number and ages of children. The second part consisted of the Parental Stress Scale [28], an 18-item test to which the respondent will agree on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). It includes positive and negative components of parenthood. The possible score range is 18-90. Higher scores mean higher parental stress. Cronbach's alpha was 0.83. The third part was the short version of Olson's Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale or FACES [29]. It is a self-administered 10-item questionnaire to assess perceived adaptability and cohesion of a family. A Likert scale with a range from 1-4 is used to answer each statement. A total score, based on the responses, can be calculated for adaptability and cohesion. The possible score range for each is 4-20 with higher scores meaning higher adaptability and cohesion. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for cohesion and 0.78 for adaptability. The last part was the Family Communication Scale [30], a 10-item self-report measure. A Likert scale with a range from 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) is used to answer each statement. The possible score range is 10-50. Higher scores mean high or positive family communication. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

After permission was granted by the school, the informed consent form was given to the parents to ensure their voluntary participation. No invasive or harmful procedures were done. The procedures were in accordance with ethical standards. The parents who participated accomplished the questionnaire and gave it back to the school for data collection.

Data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively. Frequencies, percentages, and means were used to describe the sociodemographic profile of the respondents and scale scores. Spearman Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the association of parenting stress levels with the other variables.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Parenting Stress Levels of the Respondents

The mean parenting stress score is 37.38 (SD=8.24), which is in the low level (Table 1). Two-thirds of the respondents had low levels of perceived parenting stress.

In a study, it was found that 62% of the Filipino parents of early graders in their study had low parenting stress levels [31]. This was attributed to resilience factors and social support received from family members and community social support systems. On the other hand, 83% of Filipino mothers of early graders and preschoolers in a study had high levels of parenting stress [32]. This was attributed to maternal perceptions of children as financial burdens, low family income, having young children, and difficulty in balancing family responsibilities.

The power of cognitive appraisal and meaning making of the stressful situation to the outcome was emphasized by Holroyd and Lazarus [33]. If the individual judges the stressor as a challenge to be overcome rather than as a threat, the individual may more likely cope well with the situation. Looked at this way, the stressor will not give rise to emotional distress but rather, more optimistic emotions [33].

Parenting stress can be further delved into in terms of the contributory factors which may heighten or lessen its impact on parenting.

Table 1. Parenting stress levels of the respondents

Score Categories	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)
Low (18-42)	27	67.50%
Average (43-66)	13	32.50%
High (67-90)	-	-

#### 3.2 Family Adaptability Levels of the Respondents

The mean family adaptability score is 12.35 (SD=1.58), which is in the moderate to high category. Majority of the respondents have adaptability scores in this level (Table 2). Based on Fig. 1, these scores fall in the balanced (flexible-structured) range with only 5% of the remaining respondents falling in the extreme (chaotic) range.

Table 2. Family adaptability levels of the respondents

Score Categories	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)
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Very low (0-5)	0	-
Low to moderate (6-10)	3	7.50%
Moderate to high (11-15)	35	87.50%
Very high (16-20)	2	5.00%

In a study, it was found that 60% of the parents reported average adaptability levels with family members engaging in deliberative decision-making and often help each other [34]. Similarly, 87.3% of the respondents were found in the moderate to high category [35]. The respondents manifested a shared leadership between the husband and wife and employed a democratic style of child-rearing.

Families in the balanced range tend to be more functional over time since they are able to respond favorably to internal and external stressors by altering role relationships, family rules, and power structure as needed [15]. They are characterized as having more egalitarian leadership, usually democratic in the use of discipline, and open to negotiations, role sharing, and changing rules. Also, the parents are educated, from middle income families, and relatively young adults, factors which may help in manifesting flexibility to changes.

Moderate scores, which the respondents manifested here, are a positive sign of the ability to function by balancing change and stability in the leadership, roles in the family, and enforced rules rather than having scores in the extreme levels [13].

### 3.3 Family Cohesion Score of the Respondents

The mean family cohesion score is 14.52 (SD=2.01), which is in the moderate to high category. More than two-thirds of the respondents have cohesion scores in this category (Table 3). Fig. 1 shows that these scores fall in the balanced (connected) area while 30% were in the extreme (enmeshed) area. Moderate levels of cohesion are conducive for children in developing social competence, identity formation, and positive life goals [36].

In a similar study, it was found that 54% of their respondents were in the very high category [35]. Some scores fell in the balanced area, but some also were in the midrange and extreme areas of the Circumplex map, meaning there was greater closeness, loyalty and dependency which may not bode well for family functioning. Caution must be emphasized against enmeshed families since the members may not develop a strong sense of identity [37]. This may lead them to seek the approval of others too much or to try to be too pleasing or pressure other members to conform.

Family cohesion has been associated with better developmental outcomes for children [38]. In their study, cohesion was a predictor for better self-esteem, social problem-solving and social self-efficacy in children. As children practice social interaction skills and observe their parents in social interactions with them and others, they learn how to get along with other people and think of solutions and consequences to social dilemmas.

It was emphasized that connected families are more resilient than separated families, although both are in the balanced areas (Fig. 1) [39]. This is due to the availability of opportunities for both independence from and connectedness to family members. Further, connected families are characterized as having emotional closeness, loyalty, involvement in family matters, joint decision-making, and time spent together [15].

Moderate cohesion scores may mean better functionality as the family progresses through the family life cycle [13]. There is a balance between aloneness and togetherness in the family, joint decision-making, loyalty, support, and shared interests.

Table 3. Family cohesion levels of the respondents

Score Categories	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)
Very low (0-5)	-	-
Low to moderate (6-10)	-	-
Moderate to high (11-15)	28	70.00%
Very high (16-20)	12	30.00%

### 3.4 Family Typing According to the Circumplex Model

Table 4 shows the distribution of the respondents according to the family types based on their adaptability and cohesion scores. Of the respondents, 92.5% are in the family types found in the balanced ranges, particularly in the structurally connected and flexibly connected types (see Fig. 1). Similarly, it was found that 73% of their respondents were in the balanced family types [35]. The current result is higher, and this could be attributed to possible factors such as higher knowledge on family functioning and parenting from various sources, printed, online or through seminars.

Balanced family types give rise to positive outcomes in functioning for families with young children due to the balanced adaptability and cohesion levels [36]. For the respondents, due to higher cohesion levels, 77.5% are in the structurally connected and flexibly connected family types. These families have a balance between the “I” and “We”, high loyalty, moderate to high closeness, and interdependence [16]. The difference between the two types is that the flexibly connected family shows more leadership sharing, democratic discipline, role sharing, and will change as needed based on circumstances. Balanced families have the necessary resources and skills to reorganize themselves and cope with stressors [35].

Table 4. Family typing of the respondents according to the Circumplex model

Family types	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)
Balanced		
Structurally connected	14	35.00%
Flexibly connected	17	42.50%
Flexibly separated	2	5.00%
Structurally separated	4	10.00%
Midrange		
Flexibly enmeshed	1	2.50%
Structurally enmeshed	1	2.50%
Rigidly connected	1	2.50%

The 7.5% of the families in the midrange also show higher cohesion levels and must be cautioned against too much closeness and dependency. These families have incomes in the middle range and usually have two preschool aged children. The family life cycle, income, and other resources may influence the current family type. As the family members grow older, the family type may change as they go through the family life cycle stages with all its unique needs, characteristics, and stressors.

Learning about family types based on family adaptability and cohesion can lead to parent education programs which will help enhance better family functioning in different family life cycle stages.

### 3.5 Family Communication Levels of the Respondents

The mean family communication score is 41.7 (SD=4.53), which is in the very high category. More than half of the respondents have communication scores in this category (Table 5). In a study, respondents from different family structures (two-parent families, solo parent and blended families) showed slightly different communication scores with the two-parent families scoring higher although, the mean average for all types of family structure was in the moderate-high category [25].

Families are communication systems due to the interactions of the members over time [37]. These interactions give rise to a collective experience which influences how the family views itself and maintains relationships. As children observe and interact with their family members, they learn to communicate and respond in certain ways.

Based on the responses to the statements of the scale, the respondents perceived that the family members listen to each other, calmly discuss ideas and problems, are able to express affection, are able to ask questions, and are generally satisfied with their family communication. Thus, positive family communication is important as it influences the quality of family functioning [23], family stability [37], children’s social skills [40; 41], and the use of less aggressive discipline [24].

Table 5. Family communication levels of the respondents

Score Categories	Frequency	Percentage (N=40)
Very low (0-10)	-	-
Low to moderate (11-20)	-	-
Average (21-30)	1	2.50%
Moderate to high (31-40)	16	40.00%
Very high (41-50)	23	57.50%

### 3.6 Relationship of Parenting Stress with Family Adaptability, Cohesion and Communication

#### 3.6.1 Parenting Stress and Family Adaptability

The correlation result (Table 6) indicated a significant positive association between parenting stress and family adaptability,  $r(40)=0.3270$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With increases in parenting stress, family adaptability also increases. There are only a few studies relating parenting stress with family adaptability of typically developing children. Usually, the studies are on families with a child with a disability or disorder. Thus, parenting stress of mothers with a child with cerebral palsy was predicted by low family adaptability since there was greater need for structure and stability to cope with the situation [42].

On the other hand, mothers and fathers of typically developing children had parenting stress levels within the normative parameters [43]. The mothers had family adaptability scores in the structured range while the fathers' scores were in the flexible range. Although both are in the balanced areas, mothers seemed to need more structured routines and stable roles to keep the stress levels within normal limits. This could be their way to prevent role strain as they perform various roles for their family. Also, lower levels of anxiety were manifested by parents who had higher adaptability scores even during the hospitalization of a child [44]. Responsiveness to change and greater flexibility were associated to lower parental stress, given protective factors such as parenting skills and available resources [9].

Olson and colleagues [39] hypothesized that families with children are more structured due to the need for greater physical care and protection. In this study, however, majority of the families are in the flexible range, and more than two-thirds have low parenting stress levels. Circumstances have changed and as McCubbin and McCubbin [cited in 20] pointed out, family adaptability is a resource for effective family stress management. Family members use positive coping strategies to adapt to stressors [19].

#### 3.6.2 Parenting Stress and Family Cohesion

Parenting stress and family cohesion are negatively weakly correlated,  $r(40)=-0.3325$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With increases in parenting stress, family cohesion levels decrease or vice versa. It was found that cohesion was the strongest predictor of parent stress in two-parent and solo-parent families [20]. Higher cohesion was linked to lower parent stress. Parental stress was negatively related to family cohesion due to the parents' perceptions of the children's behaviors as more resistant to control, less obedient, less independent, and more emotionally distant [45]. Further, higher parental stress was associated with lower cohesion and less family routines [46].

As stated earlier, mothers and fathers of typically developing children had parenting stress levels within the normative limits [43]. In their study, the family cohesion scores of both the mothers and fathers were in the connected (balanced) range. Similarly, in this study, two thirds of the respondents have low parenting stress levels and 70% are in the connected range.

Families with young children tend to be moderately high in cohesion [39]. Parents care for and teach young children in their formative years, a time when the children are still dependent on their parents for their basic physical and socio-emotional needs. In fact, McCubbin and McCubbin [cited in 20] stated that family cohesion is a resource to effectively manage family stress and they expect that higher cohesion is associated with lower family stress. This is also due to higher cohesion linked to positive coping strategies to deal with stressors [19]. The number of household family members was linked to cohesion [20]. Extended family members like grandparents, aunts and uncles are a human resource which can help in child-rearing and household management tasks, thus, lightening the parental demands. Being together in the pursuit of family goals gives a sense of collective strength, making the members feel that as a team, they can handle life's difficulties. Thus, family cohesion acts as a buffer against stress [20; 21].

Table 6. Spearman rank correlation coefficients of parenting stress with the variables

Variables	Family adaptability	Family cohesion	Family communication
Parenting stress	0.3270*	-0.3325*	-0.4673*

\*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

### 3.6.3 Parenting Stress and Family Communication

Parenting stress and family communication were found to be negatively moderately correlated,  $r(40) = -0.4673$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With higher parenting stress, family communication decreases or vice versa. In this study, 97.5% of the parents have moderate to very high communication scores found in the balanced range and more than two-thirds have low parenting stress levels. Schulte et al. [46] reported similar results and included the importance of family routines in enhancing communication and cohesion. Olson et al. [47] believed that balanced families will most likely manifest positive communication skills which will help to deal with difficulties or stressors. There is enough empirical evidence to show that balanced families do communicate better [16].

In recent years, Professor Afifi of the University of Iowa [48] reported that daily management of stress should include investing in family relationships because this leads to a team concept. When family stressors arise, she believes that the members will communicate better due to the investment they have made in their relationships. Her Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (TRL) suggests that communication which validates or affirms the family member on a daily basis lead to greater “positive emotional reserves”, thus, aiding in the formation and maintenance of positive family relationships. Verbal techniques (i.e. recognizing their efforts, saying I love you) and non-verbal techniques (i.e. hugging a family member, spending time with them) can be used to make investments in the relationship. She stressed that how families communicate influences how they handle their stressors as a collective unit.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated parenting stress levels and perceptions of family adaptability, cohesion, and communication of 40 parents of children enrolled at a preschool laboratory. Parenting stress was studied as influenced by these three aspects of family functioning. Findings show that parenting stress levels of the respondents were low, family adaptability levels were moderate to high, family cohesion levels were moderate to high, and family communication levels were high. Most of the respondents’ family types were in the balanced range of the Circumplex model which mean adequate functioning [13]. Further, increases in parenting stress were related to higher adaptability levels, lower cohesion levels, and lower communication levels.

This study has its limitations. First, the sample is small and restrictive, limiting the ability to empirically come up with modest effects. Generalization of results for all families with preschoolers cannot be done. Next, the mothers were mainly the sources of data for the family functioning. Further research may include a more diverse sample and qualitative data to further knowledge on parental stress and family functioning.

Still, the findings of the study extend the body of research on the parenting stress-family functioning relationship in the context of families with typically developing preschool aged children in developing countries. It also supports the Circumplex Model’s statements that balanced families tend to function more adequately and that balanced families have more positive communication skills. Further, positive or balanced family functioning can be viewed as a protective factor or a resiliency resource to deal with parenting stress. Attending to each family member and being flexible in the face of stressors is critical to strengthening the family system.

Parenting and family stressors and family environments change over time along with the family members’ vulnerabilities. Further studies can include respondents from other socio-economic backgrounds, residences, and other family life cycle stages to see differences in parenting stress levels and family functioning. Respondents can also be families of children with exceptionalities as it is still an area to be explored in the country. Differences in maternal and paternal parenting stress levels can also be considered. Further, qualitative data through in-depth interviews with parents regarding their parenting stress in their own environments can enrich future studies.

Since family communication is a facilitating factor for adaptability and cohesion, further studies can look at family communication and how it affects parental perceptions of stressors and coping strategies.

There is a lack of large-scale studies to monitor changes in family adaptability, cohesion, and communication for the same families over time. Longitudinal research may be done to contribute new knowledge on family functioning and how families change in the face of normative and critical transitions.

Parents and families may also benefit from school-based or community-based intervention programs or so-called Parent Training Programs on stress management techniques which have been proven to effectively

reduce negative affect and anxiety such as focused breathing, yoga, meditation, and time management. Like programs have significant effects on alleviating parent stress [8]. Also, trainings on enhancing family flexibility and responsiveness to changes, family cohesion and communication can facilitate strategies to successfully cope with parenting stress.

The family is one protective factor in life [49]. Attending to the lives of each parent and family member and the issues they face is critical to improving family environments and well-being.

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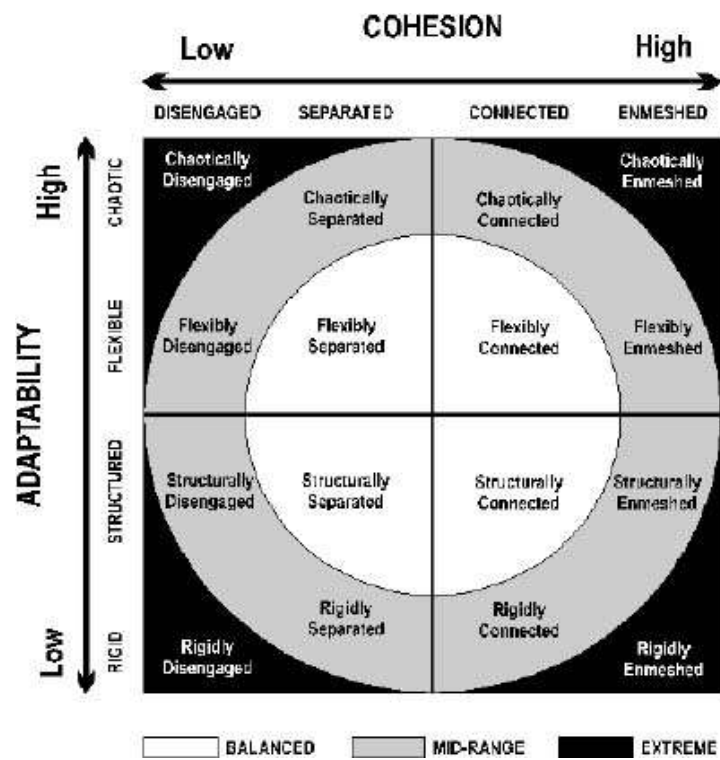


Figure 1. Olson's Family Circumplex Model