

COUPLE AND FAMILY MAPS

Maps are Built on the Circumplex Model

The Couple and Family Maps are based on the two key concepts of closeness and flexibility. The Maps are derived from the *Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems*, originally developed by David H. Olson, Douglas Sprenkle and Candyce Russell (1980). This chapter provides an overview of the Model including descriptions of the basic concepts and hypotheses. A comprehensive overview of the Circumplex Model can also be found at the website: www.facesiv.com

Historically, the *Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems* identified 16 types of couple and family relationships. It was developed in an attempt to bridge a gap that typically exists among research, theory and practice. One major approach used to bridge this gap has been the systematic development of self-report scales based on the Circumplex Model called **FACES** (Versions I, II, III and IV), which is an acronym for *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale*. Over 1,000 studies have been done using FACES and it has become one of the most popular self-report scales for assessing family functioning. See www.facesiv.com for a historical overview and the latest updates.

The Couple and Family Maps used in PREPARE/ENRICH are a revised and simplified version of the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems. The theoretical ideas and scales used in the Couple and Family Maps are still very similar to the original Circumplex Model, which was developed for marital and family therapists and used more clinical language related to family system theory.

Because the revised Couple and Family Maps are designed to be shared directly with couples, the Maps are different from the original Circumplex Model in several ways:

- The descriptive terminology in the Couple and Family Maps has been simplified and the clinical terms replaced. “Closeness” replaces Cohesion and “Flexibility” replaces Adaptability. Descriptive terms related to closeness and flexibility are used instead of the clinical terms (e.g., enmeshed, disengaged, chaotic, rigid).
- The number of levels of cohesion and flexibility have been increased from four to five levels. Increasing the number of levels from 4 to 5 on both dimensions increased the number of types of couples and family systems from 16 to 25. This higher number of types provides a more accurate representation of the range of normal and clinical families.
- The layout has changed from a circular design to a square design.

(See Figure of Couple and Family Map)

COUPLE AND FAMILY MAP



C L O S E N E S S

FLEXIBILITY	OVERLY FLEXIBLE	DISCONNECTED	CONNECTED	CONNECTED	CONNECTED	FLEXIBILITY INDICATORS	UNBALANCED OVERLY FLEXIBLE	
						CHANGE	Too Much Change	
	VERY FLEXIBLE					LEADERSHIP	Lack of Leadership	
		FLEXIBLE					ROLE SHARING	Dramatic role shifts
	SOMEWHAT FLEXIBLE						DISCIPLINE	Erratic discipline
		INFLEXIBLE						
							FLEXIBILITY INDICATOR	BALANCED SOMEWHAT FLEXIBLE TO VERY FLEXIBLE
							CHANGE	Can change when necessary
							LEADERSHIP	Shared leadership
							ROLE SHARING	Role Sharing
						DISCIPLINE	Democratic discipline	
						FLEXIBILITY INDICATORS	UNBALANCED INFLEXIBLE	
						CHANGE	Too little Change	
						LEADERSHIP	Authoritarian leadership	
						ROLE SHARING	Roles seldom change	
						DISCIPLINE	Strict discipline	
CLOSENESS INDICATORS		UNBALANCED Disconnected	BALANCED Somewhat Connected to Very Connected			UNBALANCED Overly Connected	BALANCED MID-RANGE UNBALANCED	
"I" vs. "We"		Too Much (I) Separateness	Good I-We Balance			Too Much (We) Togetherness		
CLOSENESS		Little Closeness	Moderate to High Closeness			Too Much Closeness		
LOYALTY		Lack of Loyalty	Moderate to High Loyalty			Loyalty Demanded		
INDEPENDENCE		High Independence	Interdependent			High Dependency		

	BALANCED
	MID-RANGE
	UNBALANCED

Couple and Family Closeness

Closeness is defined as the *emotional bonding that couple and family members have toward one another*. There are five levels of closeness ranging from disconnected (very low) to somewhat connected, connected, very connected, to overly connected (very high)—see Map.

It is hypothesized the three central or *balanced* levels of cohesion (somewhat connected, connected, and very connected) make for optimal marriage and family life. The extremes or unbalanced levels (disconnected or overly connected) are generally more problematic for relationships over the long term.

Closeness focuses on how systems balance separateness versus togetherness. 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.

Four indicators are used to assess closeness in couples and families: **separateness (I) vs. togetherness (We)**, **closeness**, **loyalty**, and **independence vs. dependence** (see Map). A summary of the dynamic balanced and unbalanced couple/family types is provided below.

Couples and families experiencing marital problems often fall into the disconnected or *unbalanced* areas of too much separateness. Disconnected people “do their own thing,” with limited attachment or commitment to their relationship. When cohesion levels are very high (overly connected), there is too much consensus/emotional closeness within the family and too little independence.

Balanced couple and family systems (somewhat connected, connected, and very connected) tend to be more functional across the life cycle. They are able to balance both the I (separateness) and the We (togetherness) in their relationship. At the lower balanced side there is more separateness and at the upper side more togetherness. In terms of loyalty, it increases from the somewhat to the very connected levels. There is higher independence in somewhat connected relationships and higher dependence in the very connected levels. All balanced levels, however, have some degree of interdependence.

The poem “on marriage” by Khalil Gibran from *The Prophet* clearly describes the concept of balance of separateness versus togetherness.

*“Sing and dance together and be joyous
But let each of you be alone—
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
Though they quiver with the same music
But let there be spaces in your togetherness
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.”*

Unbalanced levels of cohesion are at the extremes of being either extremely low (disconnected) or extremely high (overly connected). A *disconnected relationship* often has extreme emotional separateness and very little closeness. There is a lack of loyalty and most people are generally independent. There is little involvement among family members and a great deal of personal

separateness and independence. In an *overly connected 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 family is focused inside the family and there are few outside individual friends.

In summary, very high levels of closeness (overly connected) and very low levels of closeness (disconnected) 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. Many relationships will have problems if they function at either extreme levels for too long. Also, it is expected couple and family systems will change levels of closeness over time.

Couple and Family Flexibility

Flexibility is the *amount of change in leadership, role relationships and relationship rules*. The specific concepts designed to measure flexibility include: change, leadership role sharing and discipline. The five levels of flexibility range from *inflexible* (very low) to *somewhat flexible* (low to moderate) to *flexible* (moderate) to *very flexible* (moderate to high) to *overly flexible* (very high).

Flexibility focuses on how systems *balance stability with change*. As with closeness, it is hypothesized central or balanced levels of flexibility (somewhat flexible, flexible, and very flexible) are more conducive to good couple and family functioning, with the extremes (inflexible and overly flexible) being the most problematic for couples and families as they move through the life cycle.

Four indicators are used to assess flexibility in couples and families: **change, leadership, roles, and discipline** (see Map). A summary of the dynamics of balanced and unbalanced couple/family types is provided in the following paragraphs.

Balanced couple and family systems 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. 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 towards sharing in leadership and roles. Rules are very flexible and adjusted readily when there is a need for change.

Unbalanced couples and families tend to be at either the extreme of too much stability (inflexible) or too much change (overly flexible). In an *inflexible relationship*, one individual is in charge and is highly controlling. There tend to be limited negotiations with most decisions imposed by the leader. Roles are strictly defined and rules do not change. An *overly flexible 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, very high levels of flexibility (overly flexible) and extremely low levels of flexibility (inflexible) tend to be problematic for individuals and relationship development in the long run. Relationships having moderate scores (somewhat flexible to very flexible) are able to balance change and stability in a more functional way.

Couple and Family System Types

The Couple and Family Map describes 25 types of couples and families. There are five levels of closeness and five levels of flexibility and when they are put together in the Map they create 25 types. There are **9 balanced types**, **12 mid-range types** and **4 unbalanced types** (see Map).

The **9 balanced types** are found in the balanced levels (3 central areas) of both closeness and flexibility. These couples and families are considered the most functional and healthy. They are able to balance both separateness versus togetherness (Closeness) and stability versus change (Flexibility).

The **12 mid-range types** are balanced on one dimension (closeness or flexibility) and unbalanced on the other. These couples and families generally function well until they are under stress. Then they often tend to slip into a more Unbalanced level.

The **4 unbalanced types** are found in the unbalanced levels of both closeness and flexibility. These couples and families are considered the most dysfunctional and unhealthy. They tend to be stuck at the extremes, being either “Disconnected” or “Overly connected” (Closeness) and either “Inflexible” or “Overly flexible” (Flexibility).

Dynamic Balance on the Map and Skiing: An Analogy

An analogy can be made between *balanced* versus *unbalanced* family systems and expert versus novice skiers, a comparison first made in an article by Walsh and Olson (1989). Expert skiers function more like a balanced system, while novice skiers function more like an *unbalanced* system.

In terms of closeness, couples and families need to balance *separateness versus togetherness*. These two areas can be compared to the legs of a skier. As an analogy, expert 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 (overly connected), 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 movement of the body of a skier. In watching expert skiers come down a ski slope, you see fluidity in their movement left and right and their legs move 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 to maintain stability but also to change when necessary. Conversely, novice skiers tend to keep their body rather rigid and 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 useful analogy between skiing and couple/family systems. In skiing, expert skiers are very much “in touch” with all aspects of the hill including the moguls, *light*, 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 they can better adjust their levels of closeness 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* couples and families also ignore or are unable to accept feedback from others that could help them improve their ability to change their level of cohesion and flexibility.

Stress clearly highlights the differences between expert and novice skiers and balanced versus unbalanced couples/families. Expert 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. As with skiing, couples and families need to become more cohesive and flexible in order to cope successfully with life’s ever changing terrain.

Family Dynamics in Television and Movies

Movies and television shows often do an excellent job of portraying couple and family dynamics. Because they tend to be more dramatically interesting, the unbalanced family types are depicted more often than the balanced types. Some movies also illustrate how families change in response to a stressor or over time as people age. In this section we will take a look at some family movies vividly depict several family types. Many classic and current movie families could serve as examples of the various family types. We chose the following selections because they are particularly good examples of various family types.

Everybody Loves Raymond: An “Overly Connected & Inflexible” Family

Everybody Loves Raymond revolves around Ray Barone, a successful sportswriter living on Long Island with his wife, Debra, daughter, Ally, and twin sons, Geoffrey and Michael. Ray’s parents, Frank and Marie, live directly across the street, which provides plenty of opportunity to intrude upon Ray’s life.

Brother Robert, a divorced policeman, is constantly moving in and out of his parents’ house, and loves to drop over and resent Ray’s successful career and happy family life. His jealousy is captured in his belief that Marie, their mother, has always viewed Raymond as her favorite son.

The family displays a great deal of enmeshment (being overly connected) in as much as Ray’s parents

and brother are constantly at his house. As is typical in an enmeshed family, Debra and Ray's personal lives and relationship are often the topic of family conversation. Family members also have difficulty differentiating themselves from the enmeshed system. Debra hopelessly pursues more space and autonomy from Ray's parents, but seldom gets it without paying the price of Marie's signature guilt trips.

Marie is the matriarch of the family and she tries to control others, a typical pattern in a rigid system. In-laws have a hard time breaking into this family. The inflexibility of their system is also seen in the inability of the boys to make any changes in their own lives or to ever go against their mother's wishes without paying a relational price.

As is characteristic of an unbalanced system, the communication is poor, filled with secrets, and characterized by indirect messages and put-downs. In fact, you rarely see examples of positive and healthy communication in the family.

What About Bob?: A Connected and Inflexible Family

The Marvin family is headed by a prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Leo Marvin (Richard Dreyfuss), author of a book called *Baby Steps*. He and his wife, Fay (Julie Hagerty), have a teenage daughter, Anna, and a 9-year-old son, Sigmund. Leo is very self confident and maintains strong control over his family. Fay is a warm and caring homemaker who tries to support her husband; both children are rather distant from their family.

As a family, the Marvin's operate as an inflexibly connected system because their father is so controlling and there is a low level of emotional closeness in the family. Their communication skills are poor, mainly because the father attempts to control the exchange of information and does not let others have much say about the family.

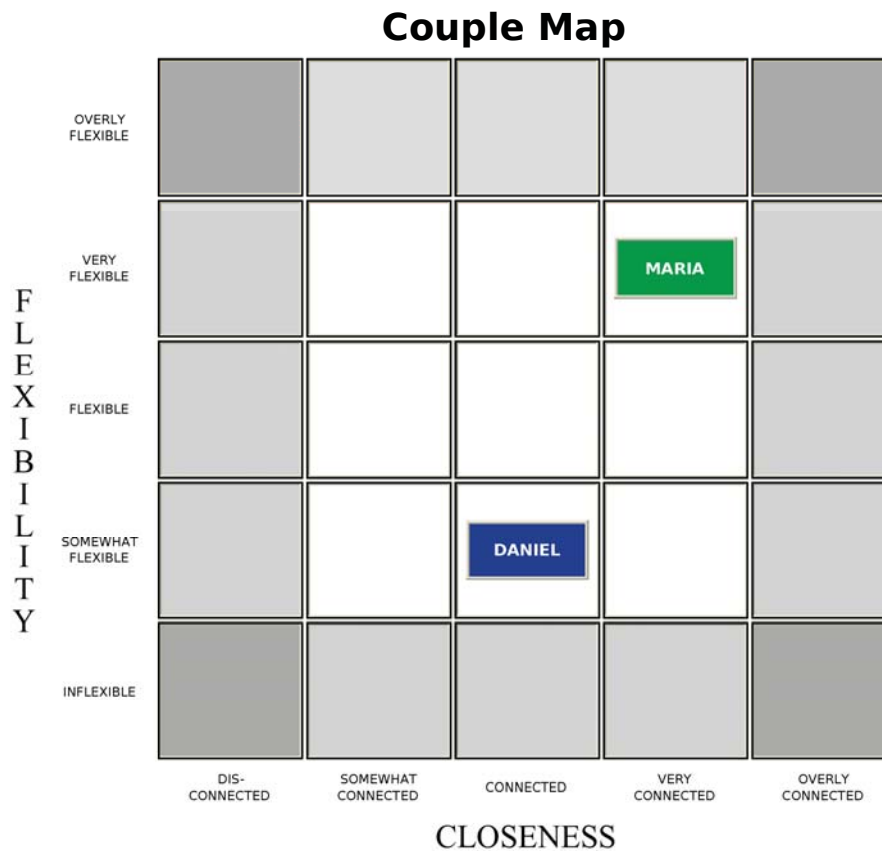
The family experiences a great deal of change when Bob Wiley (Bill Murray) becomes a patient of Dr. Marvin. Bob becomes so dependent on Dr. Marvin that he follows him to the family's vacation home. About the same time, *Good Morning America* contacts Dr. Marvin and arranges to interview him at his lake home. Bob becomes involved in the production because he wants to share how helpful Dr. Marvin's counsel was. During the filming of the interview, Bob is very articulate; Dr. Marvin, on the other hand, becomes so flustered and frustrated he is left speechless.

As the movie progresses with Bob more involved with the family, it changes to more balanced levels—very flexible and very connected, with good communication skills. Bob encourages the family to express their feelings and have fun together. He helps the son, Sigmund (Siggy), learn to dive in the lake, something Leo had failed to do. Leo loses his total control over his family, and they enjoy the more flexible style of operating Bob encourages. Leo becomes increasingly frustrated and disconnected from his family, which leads him to depression. Eventually he is hospitalized. But, in the end, the family changes and is more balanced as a result of Bob's becoming part of the family.

FACILITATOR'S REPORT

(taken directly from the Facilitator's report)

The **Couple Map** describes how each person perceives the couple relationship. Individuals often see their relationship differently, often because they have different expectations and life experiences which affect their frame of reference.



Couple Closeness is defined as the emotional closeness one feels toward their partner. On this dimension, relationships can range from *disconnected* to *overly connected*.

- **Daniel** describes this relationship as **Connected**. These individuals experience a healthy balance of "We" and "I", or closeness and separateness, which reflects an interdependent relationship. Most healthy marriages not only foster connection, but also leave room for each partner to continue to grow and develop as individuals.
- **Maria** describes this relationship as **Very Connected**. Very connected couples often have a good balance of closeness and separateness, which reflects an interdependent relationship. Healthy marriages foster connection, but also leave room for each partner to pursue individual interests and activities.

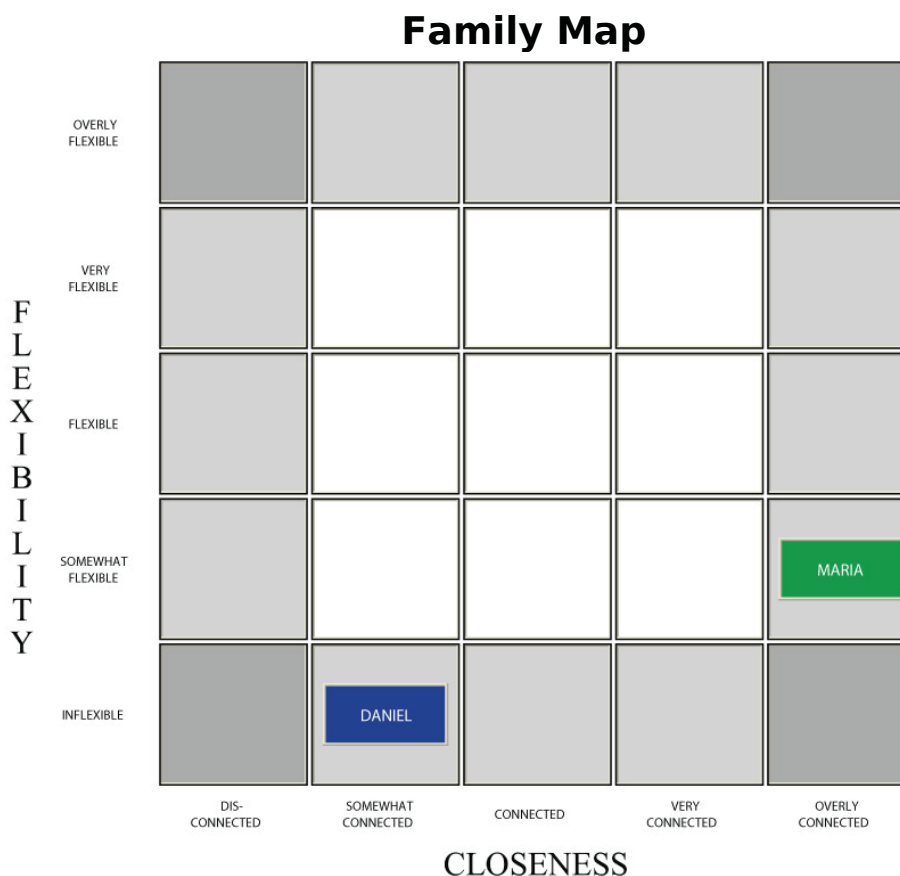
Couple Flexibility is defined as the ability to adjust to changes in roles and leadership in response to life's demands. On this dimension, relationships can range from *inflexible* to *overly flexible*.

- **Daniel** feels the relationship is **Somewhat Flexible**, with more stability and less openness to change. They may sometimes resist changes in leadership or roles and may need to remember that healthy relationships often require the ability to be flexible while meeting the demands of busy lives.
- **Maria** feels the relationship is **Very Flexible**, with a good balance between stability and change. They may often share decision making and are able to adjust to ongoing issues. Most couples function well with this level of flexibility.

Couple Discussion: Review the closeness and flexibility results. It can be helpful to discuss what is positive about the current levels of closeness and flexibility. It can also be helpful to discuss any desired changes (increases or decreases) in closeness and flexibility.

PREPARE/ENRICH Exercises: *Mapping Your Relationship, Closeness Exercises, Flexibility Exercises*

The **Family Map** (taken directly from the Facilitator's Report) describes how they see their family of origin. It is important because individuals often tend to recreate the type of family system they had as a child or to react to it by doing the opposite. Thus, if partners come from two different family systems on either closeness or flexibility, this may cause some conflict for them as a couple.



Family Closeness is defined as the emotional closeness one felt growing up in their family of origin. On this dimension, family relationships can range from *disconnected* to *overly connected*.

- **Daniel** grew up in a family that was **Somewhat Connected**. These individuals experienced some family closeness, with plenty of freedom to be an individual and pursue outside relationships.
- **Maria** grew up in an **Overly Connected** family. These individuals often describe feeling a high level of closeness in their family of origin, with closeness and loyalty being the priorities. At times they may have experienced too much connection and wished for more freedom from their family.

Family Flexibility is defined as a family's ability to adjust to changes in roles, leadership and discipline. On this dimension, family relationships can range from *inflexible* to *overly flexible*.

- **Daniel** experienced a family of origin that felt **Inflexible**. These families are not very open to change. Family members are often too rigid and resist changes in leadership, roles, and routines. These families also have trouble adjusting to stress and finding new ways to deal with issues.
- **Maria** experienced a family of origin that felt **Somewhat Flexible**. These families maintain a high level of structure and organization. Leadership, decision-making, and roles are clearly defined with little flexibility. They can have some difficulty adjusting to stress and finding new ways to deal with challenges.

Couple Discussion: Review family of origin closeness and flexibility results. Discuss family closeness and flexibility with actual examples such as observing a holiday, celebrating a birthday, or handling discipline. What does each person want to bring from their family into the current relationship? What does each person want to leave behind?

PREPARE/ENRICH Exercises: *Mapping Your Relationship, Closeness Exercises, Flexibility Exercises*

HYPOTHESES: BALANCED RELATIONSHIPS ARE MORE HEALTHY

Several hypotheses have been derived from the Map (Circumplex Model) and have been tested in hundreds of studies using a self report inventory called FACES. In general, there has been strong support for these hypotheses.

One of the most important hypotheses from the Couple and Family Map is between balanced and unbalanced types of couple and family relationships. Balanced relationships tend to be close and flexible. The nine types of balanced relationships are located graphically at the center of the Couple and Family Maps.

Unbalanced couples or families are inflexible or overly flexible and/or disconnected or overly connected. The four types of unbalanced relationships are, in fact, graphically represented at the four extreme corners of the Couple and Family Map.

Hypothesis 1:

Couples or families with balanced closeness and flexibility will generally function more adequately across the family life cycle than those at the extremes of these dimensions.

An important issue in the Couple and Family Map relates to the concept of balance. Even though a balanced family system is located at the central levels of the Couple and Family Map, they can experience the extremes on the dimension at times. However, balanced couples/families do not typically function at these extremes for long periods of time.

Couples and families in the balanced area of the closeness dimension allow family members to experience being both independent from and connected to their family. Both extremes are tolerated and expected, but the family does not continually function at the extreme. Conversely, unbalanced family types tend to function only at one extreme and are not encouraged to change the way they function as a family. This leads to the second Hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2:

Balanced couple and family types have a larger behavioral repertoire and are more able to change than unbalanced family types.

Because balanced couple and family types have to balance separateness and togetherness (on closeness) and balance stability and change (on flexibility), they develop and use a range of behaviors. Conversely, unbalanced relationship typically have a more extreme type of behavior they typically use.

Hypothesis 3:

If the normative expectations of a couple or family support behaviors extreme on one or both dimensions of the Couple and Family Maps, they will function well as long as the couple or all family members accept these expectations.

The normative expectations in our culture provide two conflicting themes that can create problems

for couples and families. One theme is family members are expected to do things together as a family. Yet, the second theme encourages individuals to “do your own thing” and “develop yourself.” The theme of independence becomes more prominent as children approach adolescence and has taken on greater importance for an increasing number of women in our culture. As a result, many American families find balancing the two themes has become a difficult issue.

Families in our culture still vary greatly in the extent to which they encourage family closeness and individual development. Although most parents would prefer their children to develop values and ideas similar to theirs, most parents also want their children to become somewhat autonomous and differentiated from the family system.

A growing number of families, however, have normative expectations that strongly emphasize high family togetherness rather than independence in family members. Their family norms emphasize emotional and physical togetherness, and they strive for high levels of consensus and loyalty.

Some ethnic groups in our country also have high expectations regarding family togetherness versus independence of family members. Many of these families could be described as extreme on the closeness dimension (e.g., overly connected) but they function well as long as the couple or all family members are willing to go along with those expectations.

Hypothesis 4:

Balanced couples/families will tend to have more positive communication skills than extreme couples/families.

Communication is a critical dimension to the Couple and Family Maps because it facilitates movement on the two dimensions. This leads to two specific hypotheses linking communication to balanced couple/family types and to change on closeness and flexibility.

In general, positive communication skills are seen as helping marital and family systems facilitate and maintain a balance on the two dimensions of closeness and flexibility. Conversely, negative communication skills keep couple/families from moving into the two central areas and thereby increase the probability extreme systems will remain extreme.

Positive communication skills include the following:

- Assertiveness
- Active listening
- Sending clear and congruent messages
- Supportive statements
- Effective problem-solving skills

Negative communication skills include the following:

- Avoidance
- Poor listening skills
- Sending incongruent messages
- Non-supportive statements
- Poor problem-solving skills

Hypothesis 5:

Positive communication skills will enable balanced couples/families to change their levels of closeness and flexibility more easily than unbalanced couple/families can.

Because balanced relationships typically have better communication skills, they are more open to feedback from various family members about what they each would like and need in terms of closeness and flexibility. Conversely, unbalanced often have poor communication skills and are often not responsive to feedback from family members.

Hypothesis 6:

To deal with situational stress and developmental changes across the family life cycle, balanced families will change their closeness and flexibility, whereas unbalanced families will resist change over time.

The Couple and Family Maps allow integration of systems theory with family development, a proposal made more than three decades ago by Reuben Hill. Building on the family development approach, it is hypothesized families must change as they deal with normal transitions in the family. It is expected the stage of the family life cycle and composition of the family will have considerable impact on the type of family system.

The Couple and Family Maps are dynamic in that they assume change can occur in family relationships over time. Families are free to move in any direction the situation, stage of the family life cycle or socialization of family members may require.

STUDIES VALIDATING HYPOTHESES ABOUT MAP

Balanced versus Unbalanced Families

A central hypothesis derived from the model is balanced couples and families will function more adequately than unbalanced couples and families. More than 250 studies (Kouneski, 2001; Olson and Gorall, 2003) have supported this major hypothesis. These studies have generally compared families with a variety of emotional problems and symptoms to non-clinical families. Most of these studies have used the self report scale called **FACES (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales)**, where higher scores on cohesion and flexibility represent balanced couples and families. This means there is a linear relationship between healthy functioning and scores on FACES (Olson, 2000). This is because the earlier versions of FACES do not tap the extremely high levels of cohesion (enmeshment) or flexibility (chaos), but FACES IV does achieve this goal (learn more about FACES IV at the website—www.facesiv.com).

Strong support for the major hypothesis that balanced families function more adequately also comes from about 10 studies using the Clinical Rating Scale (CRS), the observational assessment designed to assess the Circumplex 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 balanced couples and families will 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 the most happy marriages were balanced on cohesion and flexibility and had very good communication compared to those who were unbalanced (Olson and Olson, 2000). In a review of over 20 studies of families, Kouneski (2001) found most of the studies provided strong support for the hypothesis that balanced families had more positive communication than unbalanced families.

CHANGES IN FAMILY TYPE ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE

The Couple and Family Maps are dynamic in that they assume changes can and do occur in family types over time. Families can move in any direction 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 a couple as they progress from dating to marriage, to pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing, raising and launching adolescents, and moving into life as a couple again.

The figure illustrates the changes one young couple experienced in a period of only 5 years from dating to having their first child and up to when the child was 4 years old. During the dating period (1), the couple had a *very connected/very flexible* relationship. They felt close (very connected) and had a very flexible style in terms of leadership and decision making.

During the first year of marriage (2), the newlywed couple could best be described as *overly connected/flexible*. Being in love and enjoying spending maximum time together, they are still in the “honeymoon” phase and are emotionally very connected. They were generally flexible because they were still getting more organized in terms of their roles and leadership.

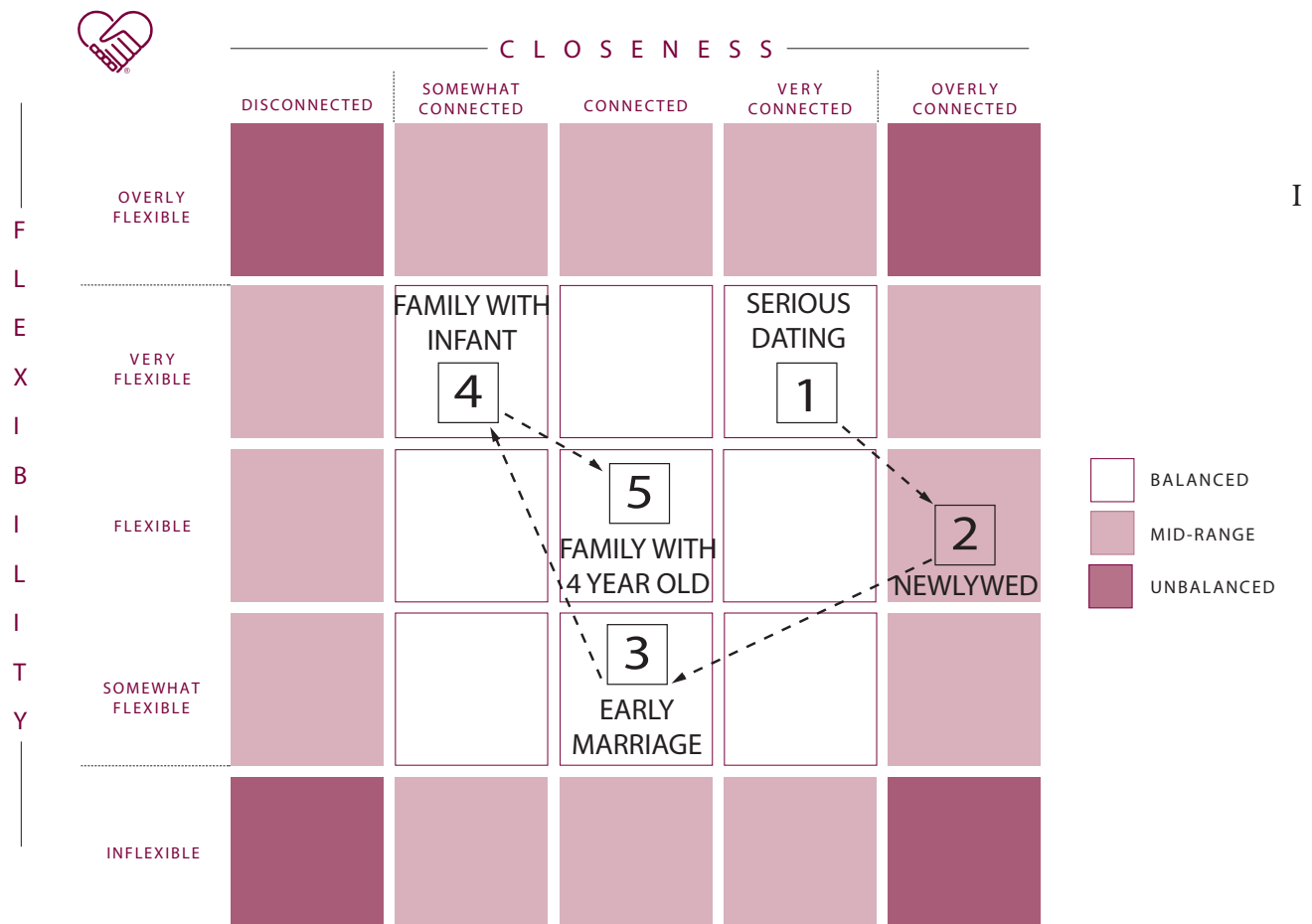
By the end of their second year of marriage (3), the so-called “honeymoon” effect had worn off, and the couple became *somewhat flexible/connected*. The excitement with each other was not as great as it had been, and their togetherness has become more balanced with each of them getting more into their individual life. They also developed more routines in their roles and lifestyle and were now *somewhat flexible*.

During the third year of the marriage the couple had a baby (4). The infant dramatically changed the couple relationship as they became a *somewhat connected/very flexible* family. The baby’s presence initially increased the sense of bonding between the husband and wife who feel united in their goal of rearing their child. But the infant took a great deal of the mother’s time and energy and the couple found it difficult to spend time to stay connected as a couple. While the mother and infant were very close, the couple became *somewhat connected*. Change was high at this time, and the couple was forced to adapt to the new challenges of parenting. Their life was in relative turmoil because they were up each night to feed and attend to the baby. The infant’s unpredictable behavior often created chaos and

it was very difficult for the couple to keep on a fixed routine; hence they became a *very flexible* family.

By the time the child was 4 years old, life has stabilized for this family (5) and they are now functioning as a *connected/flexible* family. Formerly a dual career couple, they have shifted toward more traditional gender roles with the mother staying at home, but she was now returning to work part-time. While he spends a little time with the child, 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 both of them.

CHANGES IN FAMILY SYSTEM ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE



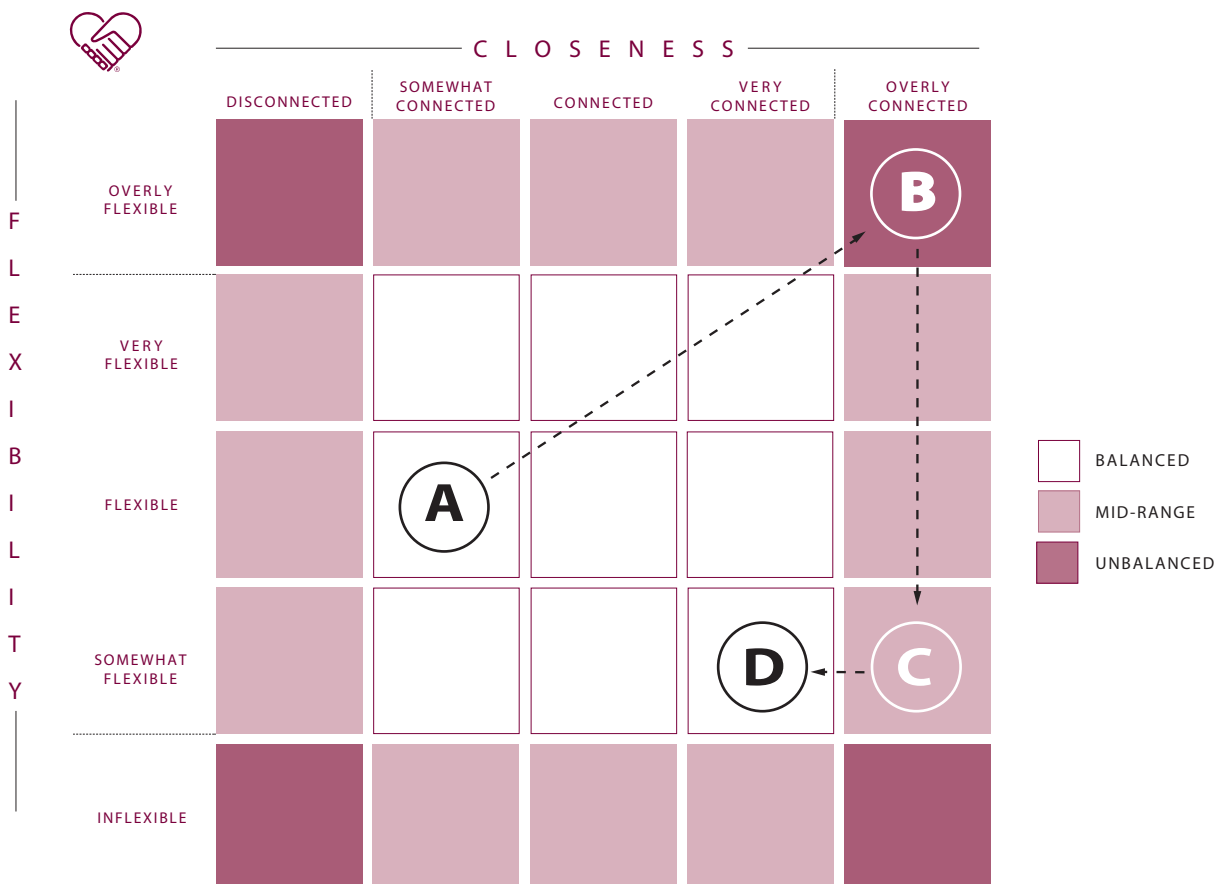
In summary, this example illustrates how a couple's relationship can change from dating and across the early stages of marriage. The changes can occur gradually over months or more rapidly after the birth of a child. These changes often occur without specific planning. However, couples can negotiate the type of relationship they want and can 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.

CHANGES IN FAMILY TYPE RELATED TO STRESS

One hypothesis of the Map relates to how couple and 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.*

The following general principles of stress-related change were developed after studying the impact of stress on several hundred couples and families using 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 overly flexible system) and on cohesion (a move toward a overly connected 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 six 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.

FAMILY SYSTEM CHANGE RELATED TO HEART ATTACK



An important aspect of the Map is the ability to understand and graph changes in a family system before and after a major stress. Consider the following example in which the husband, John, had a major heart attack at the age of 58. He was a successful businessman and his wife, Martha, worked part-time. They had a son, Dan, in college and a daughter, Ava, who was a junior in high school. Before the heart attack (point A), the family was *somewhat connected/flexible*, which is appropriate for their stage of the life cycle. Hours after the heart attack (point B), the family system became *overly connected/overly flexible* because the family did not know if the father would survive. 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 his survival created a great deal of chaos in their family. This is an example of how levels of cohesion or flexibility would otherwise be hypothesized to be problematic for family functioning can indeed be highly functional.

During the next few days and weeks after the heart attack, they got very organized as a group in an attempt to help out and be supportive in an ongoing manner. The family stayed together and were highly emotionally connected, but they developed a structured style of operating, creating a *overly connected/somewhat flexible* system (point C). This added structure was an attempt to bring some order to the chaos. The family home became a gathering spot and everyone was in touch by phone.

Two months later John was home and the family then shifted again becoming a *connected/somewhat flexible* system (point D). They were still rather organized in order to care for him and were starting 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 was a useful style while the family was recovering from the stress 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 the family to more effectively deal with this major trauma. The ability of the family to change in a fluid manner rather than stay stuck in a particular type, is very functional since it enables them to more adequately adapt to events.

In summary, it is expected family systems will change in response to a crisis. As hypothesized in the Couple and Family Maps, *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 that are needed to change their family and, therefore, have more difficulty adapting to a crisis. *Balanced* families possess greater ability to achieve second order change because they are able to alter their family system to adapt to family crises.

GIVING FEEDBACK USING THE COUPLE AND FAMILY MAPS

Each person described his/her Couple Relationship and his/her Family-of-Origin on closeness and flexibility and the results are summarized on the Couple and Family Maps.

- Define couple and family closeness and balancing separateness versus togetherness.
- Define couple and family flexibility and balancing stability versus change.
- Describe both balanced and unbalanced types of couple and family relationships.
- Give a brief overview of the Couple and Family Maps and your personal experience using the maps with other couples. Show the couple where they are plotted on the Couple and Family Maps.
- Consider the following examples with the couple as you discuss the closeness and flexibility in their families of origin:

Family gatherings during a holiday

Dinner time/Meal time

Closeness in your parent's marriage

Caring for a sick family member

Celebrating a birthday or anniversary

Discipline and parenting responsibilities

Flexibility in your parent's marriage

Adjusting to a stressful change

- 1) How similar or different were your families in terms of closeness & flexibility?
- 2) How might the similarities or differences impact your current relationship?
- 3) What from your family of origin would you like to repeat in your couple relationship?
- 4) What from your family would you not like to repeat in your couple relationship?
- 5) How satisfied are you with the current level of closeness and flexibility in your couple relationship?
- 6) Consider ways you might increase or decrease these levels.