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Family Communication Patterns: Measuring Intra-personal Perceptions of Inter-personal Relationships

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MEASURING INTRA-PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS
OF INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Mass communication researchers interested in family communication have traditionally assumed that family norms are shared by all family members, and apparent disagreement has been ascribed to instrument unreliability rather than to the influence of family structure. A survey of 308 adolescent children and their parents, using the Family Communication Pattern (FCP) instrument, yields evidence of systematic patterns of disagreement between mothers and fathers as well as between parents and children. These results suggest that future theories of family communication cannot ignore the influence of intra-familial conflict and power relationships on communication norms and habits.

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Introduction

The Family Communication Patterns (FCP) instrument has been widely used by mass communication researchers to measure family communication norms, but the underlying theory has yet to be fully developed (McLeod & Chaffee, 1979). In a previous study Ritchie (1988) re-examined the basis for Family Communication Patterns in the coorientation model, and demonstrated a theoretical and empirical relationship between the FCP scales and a family climate of either openness or conformity to hierarchical authority. In this article, we challenge the traditional assumption that the FCP scales measure a shared view of the family communication environment and show how the FCP scales can be used effectively to explore the family's internal structure.

The major goals of this paper are to examine empirically the assumption of intra-familial agreement, and to illustrate the advantages of relaxing this assumption in order to use the coorientation model to analyze the influence of hierarchical position on the family member's interpretation of communication norms. To achieve these goals this paper will contain six major parts. In the first part, the interpersonal model of coorientation will be briefly reviewed, as a basis for a description and critique of the FCP scales in the second part. The third part will examine the assumption that family members share a common perspective on communication norms. The fourth part will present empirical evidence that challenges the assumption of intra-familial agreement and supports an alternative hypothesis of consistent patterns of disagreement as well as agreement among family members. The fifth part will present a cluster analysis to

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illustrate how our typologies of family communication patterns may be improved by examining patterns of disagreements as well as agreements within the family.

In a sixth and concluding section we discuss theoretical and methodological implications of these findings for family research. In particular, we suggest that recognizing the influence of family power structures on individual perspectives and the consequent patterns of agreement and disagreement will yield a much richer theoretical understanding of family communication.

<div align="center">Coorientation and Family Communication Patterns</div>

McLeod and Chaffee (1972; 1973; Chaffee et al., 1966; 1970) analyzed the family communication environment as a set of norms governing the tradeoff between informational and relational objectives of communication. Their Family Communication Patterns construct classifies families according to whether the child is encouraged to develop and express autonomous opinions and ideas ("concept-orientation") or to pursue relational objectives by conforming to parental authority ("socio-orientation"). The coorientation model (Newcomb, 1953; McLeod and Chaffee, 1973) provided a basis for examining the logical tension between these objectives; it also provides a basis for examining the structure of agreement and disagreement among family members.

Coorientation among family members

The coorientation model is based on the idea that, for any topic, each family member has her own thoughts as well as some impression of what every other family member thinks. If Mom's impression of what Junior thinks matches Junior's actual thoughts, Mom is said to have accuracy. If Dad's impression of what Junior thinks matches Dad's own thoughts, Dad is said to have congruency, or the impression of agreement. Any individual can have both accuracy and congruency with respect to another only if the two actually do agree, but no individual can ever know whether the other actually agrees or not.

<div align="center">4</div>

Congruency is an intra-personal condition that may be pursued for the sense of satisfaction it brings; accuracy is an inter-personal condition that may be pursued as a basis either for cooperation or control. Agreement is also an inter-personal condition that may be pursued either cooperatively through mutual accommodation or through persuasion, coercion, and conformity.

Consistent with the practice of other researchers (see for example Eisenberg et al., 1984), McLeod and Chaffee interpreted accuracy, agreement, and congruency as qualities of the social unit. However, each individual may have a distinct view of the situation, in which case the social-level outcomes will result not from the aggregate of individual views but rather from their dynamic interaction. If Dad wants Son to accept Dad's beliefs, and has the ability to reward overt agreement and punish overt disagreement, both Dad and Son will be motivated to value Dad's congruency. But Son can support Dad's congruency without surrendering his own autonomy: he need only diminish Dad's accuracy by lying or equivocating. The social level outcome depends on the interaction between the way Dad asserts his power and the way Son reacts to that power (Ritchie, 1987).

Family Communication Patterns

Chaffee et al. (1966) developed a set of ten questions to measure communication norms within the family. Each item represents a parental assertion or demand concerning the expression of ideas and opinions in the family: respondents are asked to estimate how frequently the parents make similar statements, or how typical the statement is in their families. Factor-analysis of the responses yielded two scales with five questions each. The first scale, labelled "socio-orientation," was interpreted as a measure of norms that encourage congruency. The second scale, labelled "concept-orientation," was interpreted as a measure of norms that encourage accuracy.

Since accuracy and congruency are compatible objectives only if agreement can be assumed, the two scales are potentially contradictory, and research by Wade (1984), Good (1985), and Ritchie (1985; 1989) has found negative correlations between the two scales ranging from $r = -.23$ to $r = -.39$. However, McLeod and Chaffee (1972) report a series of studies in which the scales were found to be statistically independent, or orthogonal. Based on the assumption of orthogonality, families are often classified into one of four family types. Families scoring high on concept-orientation but low on socio-orientation are labelled "pluralistic." Families low on concept-orientation and high on socio-orientation are labelled "protective." Families high on both scales are labelled "consensual." Families low on both scales are labelled "laissez-faire."

Consistent with the assumption that Family Communication Patterns measure shared norms, FCP researchers have traditionally regarded the responses of each family member as equally valid and interchangeable. Responses are rarely obtained from more than one family member and when they are, they are usually averaged (Chaffee et al., 1966; Jackson-Beeck and Chaffee, 1975).

However, the assumption that family members agree about communication norms is not supported by the available evidence. Chaffee et al (1966) report parent-child correlations of $r = .07$ for "socio-orientation" and $r = .12$ for "concept-orientation." When they split the sample along the median on each scale for both parent and child and compared the resulting classifications, they found that parent and child agreed in approximately 25% of the cases, or about as often as would be expected by random coincidence.

Tims and Masland (1985) report somewhat higher correlations (for adolescents) of $r = .48$ for "concept-orientation" (using a single item) and $r = .33$ for "socio-orientation" (using a three-item scale). For children under 13, Tims and Masland found similar correlations for "socio-orientation" but a much lower correlation ($r = .18$) for "concept-orientation." Implicitly

accepting the traditional assumption, that family members agree about family norms, Tims and Masland suggest that younger children may not really understand the "concept-orientation" items, and interpret the low parent-child correlations as evidence of unreliability in the instrument.

The logic of coorientation as an interaction between independent cognitive systems undermines the assumption that family members must necessarily agree about family communication patterns. The same communication behavior that an assertive parent might intend as free and open exchange of information might well be interpreted by a timid (or rebellious) child as a demand for acquiescence and conformity; we need only imagine a family discussion about drugs, the teenager's sexual behavior, or planning for college and career decisions. The opposite pattern is also possible: an independent-minded child may honestly interpret as an opinion or preference what the parent intends as an order. Parents may also differ in their own interpretation of the family (Hampson & Beavers, 1987).

If the FCP responses measure beliefs about or attitudes toward family communication, then the issue is not the frequency of objectively observable behaviors but rather the clarity with which the parents express their intentions and the accuracy with which the child interprets the parents' intentions. Agreement or disagreement can be taken as an indicator of the structure of intra-familial relationships rather than as an indicator of the reliability of the measurement instrument (Moos and Moos, 1986). By comparing the responses of different family members we can draw inferences about how the family functions as an information producing and consuming unit. A family in which the members give radically different responses is no less interesting than a family in which all members give identical responses.

Hypotheses

Our analysis suggests several hypotheses that can be readily tested, as well as several less formal propositions that will be useful in future theory development.

If the FCP instrument describes the family as a system, we would predict that accuracy in perceiving these norms will increase with maturity, and older family members would be more likely to agree with one another about the family's norms. But if the FCP instrument describes the individual's perceptions of or attitudes toward family communication, agreement would be a function of the interpersonal relationships rather than age or family position. Since our analysis is most consistent with the absence of a simple relationship we will state it as a proposition rather than as an hypothesis.

Proposition 1: the strength of correlation between family members will not be a simple function of the age of either person.

If "concept-orientation" measures a set of attitudes favoring open exchange of information among family members, then we would expect to find similarity between parents' and children's views of the communication climate as a function of the family members' "concept-orientation."

Hypothesis 1: Higher scores on "concept-orientation" by all family members will be associated with greater (and lower scores with lesser) agreement among family members on "socio-orientation."

The implications of "socio-orientation" are somewhat more complex. "Socio-orientation" is associated with the parents' congruency and with the parents' assertion of power; it allows us to make no direct predictions about how accurately the child understands the parents' ideas about communication. However, if the parents value their own congruency more than their own accuracy, they are less likely either to pay attention to feedback from the child, or to correct

the child's impressions as to the parents' degree of "concept-orientation." By a more indirect, and hence weaker, chain of reasoning we can derive a second and symmetrical hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Higher scores on "socio-orientation" by all family members will be associated with less (and lower scores on "socio-orientation" with more) agreement among family members on "concept-orientation."

If parent-child agreement on the family's communication norms is itself a function of those norms, then we would expect similar results for the way family members classify the families. This expectation is also best expressed as a proposition:

Proposition 2: Family members will disagree in the way they classify the family as often as they agree.

Given the dynamics of intra-familial relationships (Reiss, 1981) we would expect to observe coalitions within the family, marked by consistent patterns of agreement with each other and disagreement with the third person. Cluster analysis provides one way to identify these consistent patterns. The logical tension between accuracy and congruency, as expressed in our two hypotheses, leads us to expect that family members are more likely to agree in classifying their family as either entirely concept-oriented or entirely socio-oriented.

Proposition 3: a stable cluster will emerge in which all family members depict the family as "pluralistic," high on concept-orientation and low on socio-orientation

Proposition 4: no stable clusters will emerge that correspond to the "mixed" types of "consensual" or "laissez-faire."

Methods

A sample of families was drawn at random from a list of parents with children enrolled in the public high schools of Madison, Wisconsin. Of a total of 675 numbers called, 56 calls were not completed (no answer on three separate occasions), 311 families refused to participate in the study, and 308 interviews were completed with a child and at least one parent. The sample included 110 children in the 7th grade, 82 in the 9th grade, and 116 children in the 11th grade. Responses were obtained from a total of 283 mothers and 211 fathers. In most cases the parents were interviewed first; although it is possible that other family members could overhear the responses, the nature and length of the questionnaire makes it unlikely that one member would be influenced by another member's responses. To obtain test-retest correlations, a random sub-sample of adolescents was re-interviewed three weeks later.

The items in the original FCP scale have been used in many combinations and new items have been added and sometimes substituted for the original items. There is no definitive FCP instrument, nor any definitive interpretation of the FCP scales against which all the various studies can be evaluated. With inter-item correlations often in the range of .30, adequate scale reliabilities require several items (Tims and Masland, 1985), but it is not unusual to see a theoretical argument built around a <u>single</u> item as a measure of one of the FCP dimensions; nor is it always the same item. Even Tims and Masland based their 1985 critique of the FCP tradition on a survey in which "concept-orientation" was measured by a single item, and "socio-orientation" by only three items. Under the circumstances, it is impossible to assure complete comparability with previous research findings.

Two strategies were employed to deal with this situation. First, the traditional approach was represented by fourteen of the most commonly used FCP items, including the ten items from Chaffee et al (1966). Second, an expanded and more reliable scale, including the ten basic FCP

items along with additional, theoretically-based items (Ritchie, 1989) was used in a set of parallel analyses. Both versions of the FCP instrument are reported in the following: "socio-orientation" and "concept-orientation" refer to analyses using the shorter version of the scale; "conformity-orientation" and "conversation-orientation" refer to comparable analyses using the expanded version.

For the original FCP instrument (seven items per scale) coefficients of reliability (combining the responses of all family members) are: "concept-orientation," alpha = .61; "socio-orientation," alpha = .66. For the expanded fifteen-item conversation-orientation scale, alpha = .84; for the expanded eleven-item conformity-orientation scale, alpha = .76. Test-retest correlations are r = .71 for "socio-orientation," r = .56 for "concept-orientation," r = .78 for conformity-orientation, and r =.66 for conversation-orientation.

Results

The results will be presented in the order suggested by our argument, beginning with evidence concerning the degree of correspondence among the various family members on the family's communication environment and the influence of sex and age of child on agreement and disagreement (Proposition #1). Next, evidence will be presented in support of the hypotheses concerning the influence of socio- and concept-orientation on intra-familial agreement, followed by evidence concerning intra-familial agreement about the family's FCP "type" (Proposition #2). Finally, relevant to Propositions #3 and #4, a sample cluster analysis will be presented, to demonstrate how intra-familial disagreements as well as agreements can be included in a classification of the structure of intra-familial communication.

<u>Agreement Among Family Members</u>

For the full sample (n = 168), the intrafamilial correlations for both versions of both scales are of similar magnitude to those reported by previous researchers, with coefficients ranging from r = .22 between mother's and father's "concept-orientation" to r = .43 between mother's and child's conversation-orientation (all significant at p < .001). Is this pattern of overall low parent-child correlations merely one more confirmation of the poor reliability of the scales? The fact that mother-father correlations are as weak as parent-child correlations suggest that it is not.

- Table 1 About Here -

Further evidence that the low parent-child correlations do not result merely from low scale reliabilities emerges from analysis of parent-child correlations by grade level. If the "concept-orientation" or conversation-orientation scale is difficult for younger subjects to understand, then we should find that responses from seventh grade children correlate poorly with both mothers and fathers. As Table 2 shows, however, the actual pattern is considerably more complex. Although seventh grade may not be sufficiently young to capture the essential differences, it is also possible that the pattern of weaker correlations for younger children observed by Tims and Masland (1985), Meadowcroft (1985) and Austin (1988) result from changes in the structure of the parenting relationship rather than from changes in the child's cognitive abilities or from lower scale reliabilities for younger children.

- Table 2 About Here -

The relationships shown in Table 2 (which could only be identified by interviewing all three family members) suggest that the father is primarily an authority figure to the younger child, who identifies more closely with the mother's attitudes toward openness in

communication. By the time the child is in the 11th grade, this pattern of parental relationships has reversed.

Hypothesis 1

To test Hypotheses 1, cluster analyses were used to classify the families as either generally high or generally low on "concept-orientation." Within each cluster, intra-familial correlations were then calculated for "socio-orientation." A similar analysis was then conducted for intra-familial correlations on the expanded conformity-orientation scale, based on a cluster-analysis for conversation-orientation.

The results of both analyses confirm the hypothesis for fathers but not for mothers. Mother-child agreement on conformity-orientation is at about the same level for both high conversation and low conversation families (Table 3). For fathers, however, agreement with both mother and child is much greater in the high conversation (high concept) families.

- Table 3 About Here -

Hypothesis 2:

Similar procedures were employed to test Hypothesis 2. The first analysis, using the original, shorter version of the FCP instrument did not reveal any detectable differences in intra-familial correlations between families low on "socio-orientation" and families high on "socio-orientation." However, the second analysis, using the expanded version of the FCP instrument, did produce results consistent with Hypothesis 2. Again, mother-child agreement was virtually identical regardless of the level of conformity-orientation, but the father's agreement with both other family members appears to be higher for families low on conformity-orientation than it is for families high on conformity-orientation (Table 3).

The results reported so far suggest that the structure of communication within the family may be considerably more complex than traditional FCP-based research would suggest. Patterns

of mother-child communication are quite distinct from patterns of father-child communication, and the nature of the child's communication with both parents changes radically as the child matures. These patterns are entirely obscured when data from the various family members are aggregated prior to analysis. The assumption that Family Communication Patterns represent norms that must be shared by all family members is misleading as well as theoretically counter-productive.

Four Family Types by Median Split

If Family Communication Patterns represent the respondent's individual perspective on familial relationships rather than shared norms, then we would expect to find almost as much direct disagreement as agreement in the way family members' responses to the instrument classify the family. The comparisons shown in Table 4 confirm this expectation.

- Table 4 About Here -

When the types are calculated for each member of the 97 families in which no member scored exactly on the median on either scale, all three agree in only 14 of the 97 families. In 12 of the families, at least two members give precisely opposite classifications. Analysis of the expanded version of the FCP instrument by the "median split" method yields quite similar results.

Several things are worth noting in Table 4. First, the more persons are added to the classification scheme, the fewer cases retain complete agreement. Second, family members seem to be more likely to agree about the "pure types," pluralistic and protective, than about the "mixed types." The "laissez-faire" type, in particular, seems to vanish as soon as multiple family members are taken into account. Since the three-way crosstabulation of family types yields sixty-four cells, the pattern of agreement and disagreement among family members can more effectively be explored through cluster analysis.

Splitting a sample along the median is often arbitrary, inasmuch as it forces the sample into categories that bear no necessary relationship to the underlying concepts. Although the technique can be useful, it can also produce conceptually vague classifications even as it obscures important relationships within the data. In the following section we will discuss evidence that both the "laissez-faire" and "consensual" family types may be oversimplifications at best and, at worst, merely artifacts of the median split method.

Family Types by Cluster Analysis

In addition to reducing the total number of types to a manageable level and avoiding empty cells, cluster analysis has several other advantages. By classifying cases according to distance from cluster centers, it eliminates the problem of what to do with cases that score exactly on the median. Since cluster analysis considers the relative strength of the various members' responses, ambiguous responses will have less influence on the family's classification than more clear-cut responses.

This section presents an illustrative cluster analysis, using the more reliable expanded version of the FCP instrument. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, since the analyses reported in the foregoing suggest that the mother-child and father-child relationships may have different structures, separate solutions were calculated for the mother-child and father-child dyads, using starting values based on the four FCP types. These solutions were cross-tabulated: seven of the sixteen cells had more than a handful of cases. Average values for conformity and conversation-orientation for each family member were computed for each cell and entered into a seven-cluster solution.

- Table 5 About Here -

The results are shown in Table 5, with the clusters displayed in order of their stability across solutions with varying starting values. This seven-cluster classification of families

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according to coorientation norms produces clusters identical to the "protective" and "pluralistic" types (Cluster #1 and #2, respectively), but produces only an approximation to the "consensual" type, and shows a pattern of direct disagreement between parents and children who classify their families as "laissez-faire." Either both parents emphasize conformity-orientation, in which case the child's laissez-faire responses might be interpreted as rejection of the parents' norms, or the father is also "laizzez-faire," in which case the mother's conversation-orientation might be interpreted as a valiant attempt to hold or bring the family together.

To test whether the omission of "laissez-faire" and "consensual" families might be merely an artifact of the various methods by which starting values were selected, two eight-cluster analyses were run. In each, starting values for seven clusters were based on the final seven-cluster solution; starting values for the eighth cluster were set to reflect either a laissez-faire pattern (all family members below the median on both scales) or a consensual pattern (all family members above the median on both scales). The laissez-faire solution classified only five families as laissez-faire (two each from clusters #3 and #6 and one from cluster #7), and shifted eight of the remaining 163 families into different clusters. The consensual solution classified six families as consensual (three from #5, 2 from #1, and 1 from #4), and shifted only two of the remaining 162 families into different clusters. These results offer scant justification for expanding the number of clusters beyond the original seven, and undermine the basis for using either "laissez-faire" or "consensual" classifications.

Discussion

Several researchers have reported a low correlation between parent and child with respect to the two FCP dimensions (Tims and Masland, 1985; Meadowcroft, 1986; Austin, 1988). The analyses discussed in the foregoing show relatively low correlations not only between parent and child but also between parents. However, within the families in which members' responses are either relatively high on conversation-orientation or relatively low on conformity-orientation, intra-familial agreement is quite high. Within families in which members' responses are either low on conversation-orientation or high on conformity-orientation, agreement between the father and other family members is no greater than chance.

These results are precisely as the coorientation model would predict, and they are consistent with work by theorists in other disciplines (Reiss, 1981; Moos & Moos, 1986; Hampson & Beavers, 1987). They raise serious doubts about the usefulness of the four-fold FCP typology, based as it is on the faulty assumption that family members share a common perception of their family's communication environment. Cluster analysis appears to provide a better way of classifying families, since it allows us to dispense with the assumption of agreement and to analyze the patterns of consistent agreement and disagreement that may result from coalitions within the family.

More important, our analysis suggests that the FCP instrument may provide a powerful tool for investigating the structure of power in the family. How do parents assert their authority, how do other family members react, and how do these lines of tension affect the communication environment of the family, including the formation of coalitions?

Relaxing the assumption that family norms are shared among all family members provides a basis for analyzing the structure of information exchange norms and expectations, and leads to a much richer and more theoretically complex view of the family. Future research on

family communication should treat the family, not as a monolithic unity, but rather as a field of complex interactions among individuals whose perspectives are distinct but not independent. One individual's responses to an instrument such as the Family Communication Patterns instrument can never be taken as representative of the entire family; responses need to be obtained from as many family members as possible, and analysed in terms of interactions rather than averages.

The coorientation model provides a powerful conceptual tool for analyzing the interaction of family members' individual perspectives and drawing inferences about the resultant family communication environment, and the Family Communication Patterns instrument provides a practical means for measuring and comparing the perspectives of the various family members. Once we have abandoned the faulty assumption that family members must necessarily share a common set of norms, we can use these tools to explore the dynamic patterns of communication within the family, to understand how these patterns influence the family's intake of information from the external environment, and to develop elaborated theories of family communication.

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Table 1
Family Communication Patterns
Intra-Familial Coefficients of Correlation

	Mother & Father	Mother & Child	Father & Child
"Socio-orientation"	.28***	.29***	.35***
Conformity-orientation	.29***	.31***	.33***
"Concept-orientation"	.22**	.33***	.26***
Conversation-orientation	.25***	.43***	.32***

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* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 2
Family Communication Norms: Parent-Child Agreement
Coefficients of Correlation

	7th Grade		9th Grade		11th Grade	
Child compared to:	Mom	Dad	Mom	Dad	Mom	Dad
n =	104	69	68	51	97	81
Orientation:						
"Socio"	.29***	.36***	.24*	.53***	.40***	.21*
Conformity	.18*	.39***	.31**	.48***	.38***	.21*
"Concept"	.30***	.09ns	.21*	.29*	.21*	.49***
Conversation	.49***	.20*	.36***	.34**	.33***	.45***

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* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 3

Agreement Among Family Members About Communication Norms

Correlation Coefficients

	n	mother-child	father-child	mother-father
Comparison of				
Conformity Scores by				
High Conversation	86	.30**	.40**	.30**
Low Conversation	82	.23*	n.s.	n.s.
Socio Scores by				
High Concept	73	.25*	.40***	.33**
Low Concept	95	.23**	n.s.	.23*
Conversation Scores by				
High Conformity	62	.34*	n.s.	n.s.
Low Conformity	106	.34**	.52**	.29*

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* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; n.s. not significant

Table 4
FCP Family Types by Median Split
Comparisons among Family Members

	Number in Each Type				Number in Opposite Types*
	L-F	Plural	Protect	Consens	
Child	22	24	31	23	
Mother	12	45	29	14	
Father	20	29	29	19	
Child & Mother	3	19	11	6	12
Child & Father	4	16	11	4	2
Mother & Father	1	15	12	5	11
All Three	0	9	3	2	12

*At least one person pluralistic and at least one protective. In almost every case it is the mother who is pluralistic, the child and father who give protective responses.

Table 5
Family Types: Seven-Cluster Solution
Cluster Centers

(Number in cluster)	Conversation-Orientation			Conformity-Orientation		
	Mother	Father	Child	Mother	Father	Child
Cluster 1 (29)	4.3	4.1	4.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
Cluster 2 (30)	3.6	3.4	3.0	2.9	2.9	3.4
Cluster 3 (30)	3.8	3.3	3.6	2.6	2.9	2.7
Cluster 4 (32)	3.7	4.0	3.7	2.9	2.7	3.1
Cluster 5 (14)	4.3	3.6	3.7	2.5	3.1	3.7
Cluster 6 (17)	4.1	3.6	3.7	2.1	2.5	2.4
Cluster 7 (16)	4.4	3.8	3.5	2.5	2.4	3.0
mean	4.0	3.7	3.7	2.6	2.7	2.9