

# The Relationship between Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Interpersonal Trust among Chinese High School Students: The Mediating Role of Sense of Coherence

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## Abstract

This study aims to understand the relationship between family situation and interpersonal trust among Chinese high school students. A questionnaire survey was conducted on 400 Chinese high school students to investigate the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, sense of coherence and interpersonal trust. Specifically, the mediating role of sense of coherence in the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, and interpersonal trust was examined. Results showed that there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of family adaptability and cohesion, sense of meaning, and interpersonal trust; There are significant differences in the dimensions of sense of coherence, comprehensibility, and controllability. There is a significant difference in family adaptability between grades one and two, but there is no significant difference in other variables. Sense of coherence plays a complete mediating role in predicting interpersonal trust through family adaptability and cohesion.

**Keywords:** Family Adaptability, Family Cohesion, Sense of Coherence, Interpersonal Trust

## Introduction

High school is an important life stage, encompassing a critical and challenging adolescence. Adolescence is known as the 'psychological weaning period', and significant physiological changes may lead to the problem of cognitive, emotional, and social skills. The current research is particularly interested in adolescents' social and emotional trust relationships. Although most high school students can pass the developmental stage of adolescence without significant impact, they may develop a sense of distrust towards high school students who are disconnected from their families.

### *Family Adaptability and Cohesion*

As the initial venue for interpersonal communication, an individual's interpersonal relationships are largely influenced by their family. There has been an increasing amount of research on the function and role of the family, with Olson's "Circle Model" theory being a

representative one. In the 1970s, Olson discovered three dimensions: cohesion, adaptability, and communication through cluster analysis of over 200 concepts in the field of family (Olson et al., 1979). Family cohesion refers to the emotional relationships between family members, including the emotional distance between family members, the time and space they spend together, the consistency of family members in terms of interests, hobbies, or entertainment, and family decision-making methods; Family adaptability refers to the ability of the family system to change its power structure, role allocation, or family rules in order to cope with external environmental pressure or the development needs of marriage and family. Family communication refers to the exchange of information between family members, which plays an important role in promoting the development of family cohesion and adaptability. Previously, most people believed that family function was linear, meaning that the higher the evaluation score, the better. However, Olson found that the scores of cohesion and adaptability were curved, meaning that very high and low evaluation scores indicated that family function was problematic, hence the term "Circuplex Model" (Olson et al., 2019). The Circle Model theory is very effective for diagnosing relationships, as it systematically focuses and integrates three dimensions that are repeatedly considered highly relevant in various family theories. The 'Circle Model' is not only used to understand the family system, but also to understand various aspects of research such as parenting styles and mental health. The quality of family adaptability and cohesion plays an important role in a person's social development (Hossain et al., 2018). Good family function enables individuals to have strong psychological resilience, and even when facing life difficulties and pressures, individuals are still able to cope better.

#### *Sense of coherence (SOC)*

The term sense of coherence (SOC) belongs to the category of psychological resilience, initially proposed by (Antonovsky, 1993). Through studying people who remained healthy in concentration camps after World War II, he believed that people's lifestyles and the essence of survival had a positive impact on their health, serving as a comprehensive assessment of their worldview and personal environment. Researchers have attempted to broaden the concept of SOC and see it as the origin of psychological power in the general population. Antonovsky believes that SOC is an individual's overall perception and cognition of life, which comprehensively reflects the individual's stress to the internal and external environment, the resources they have to cope with stress, and expresses a universal, lasting, and dynamic sense of confidence (Jiang & Luo, 2021). SOC is made up of three primary factors.

One of these factors is comprehensibility, which is a cognitive component of SOC. It refers to an individual's belief that stressors from both internal and external environments are structured, predictable, and understandable. However, it's important to note that perceiving events as comprehensible doesn't necessarily mean that they are harmless, nor does it mean that they are entirely foreseeable. In other words, individuals discover a certain degree of SOC from one experience to another during the progression of events.

Another component is manageability, which is a tool component of SOC. It refers to the extent to which an individual perceives that they have the resources to handle challenges. This does not mean that these resources are under the direct control of a person, but may depend on others who can provide support, such as parents or peers who have the resources. From this, it can be seen that even without direct control, it is not necessary to conclude that life is uncontrollable or that we lack strength. On the contrary, when encountering adversity, we

hope to overcome it or obtain resources from others to cope, rather than being overwhelmed by it.

The third component is meaningfulness, the motivational component of SOC, which refers to the extent to which an individual believes that life is meaningful, and the stress and challenges from the outside world are worth investing their time and energy, that is, emotional investment in life.

It is far from clear whether individuals with strong SOC are the result of natural selection or survival issues, but psychologists prefer the second explanation. Previous studies have shown that SOC is influenced by self-identity, knowledge and wisdom, coping styles, social support, commitment, cultural stability, religious philosophy, and preventive health orientation, building a person's ability to cope with stress. Antonovsky emphasizes that SOC is a strategy aimed at disposition orientation in daily life, rather than personality traits or problem-solving. SOC is developed throughout a person's life experience, especially during childhood and adolescence (Saleh et al., 2023). The basic principle behind the concept of SOC is that life is complex and complex, with everyone facing a lot of chaos and sometimes receiving various stimuli in daily contradictory lives. This in turn may cause tension between people and social structures between people. SOC may lead individuals to choose between defense and trust when facing those around them.

### *Interpersonal Trust*

According to Morton Deutsch, who many consider the founder of modern theory and research on trust. Trust is an important factor that affects various interpersonal relationships among individuals (Hossain et al., 2018), and it is also an important indicator of individual social adaptation. Interpersonal trust is the most primitive and fundamental form of trust establishment. Trust is conceptualized as a belief, expectancy, or feeling deeply rooted in the personality, with origins in the individual's early psychosocial development (Worchel, 1979). Trust and distrust are different. Trust refers to attributing goodwill to the other party and being willing to take action based on their actions (Sandy et al., 2000). Distrust implies fear of the other party and tends to attribute malicious intentions to the other party. The desire to protect oneself from the actions of others. Sociologist Weber divided trust into two categories: universal trust and particularistic trust. Special trust only includes people with blood or nepotism, while universal trust extends to every one of the same faith.

### **Problem Statement**

According to a survey conducted by the China Youth Research Center on Chinese high school students, out of the eight things that high school students generally experience distress, five involve interpersonal trust. 53.9% feel that they are not understood, 28.2% suffer from unfair treatment, 24% have family discord, 23.8% have difficulties without help, and 21.7% have poor relationships with classmates. Trust is important for social and economic well-being, for enhancing social cohesion and strengthening resilience, and for maintaining security and order in our societies (Borgonovi & Burns, 2015). The initial source of interpersonal trust comes from the intimacy between family members. If family members do not get along well and do not trust each other, it cannot bring a good relationship environment to children (24% of families do not have peace). But high school students have a certain level of cognitive

regulation ability and adaptability, and it is also possible that their strong psychological resilience can handle interpersonal relationships well, resulting in better interpersonal trust.

### **Limitations**

Research relies on self-reported measurement, which carries the risk of bias due to social expectations or inaccurate self-evaluation. It may be difficult to establish a clearer causal relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust using cross-sectional design.

### **Literature Review**

Coll et al (2010) examined the formation of family cohesion, adaptability, and trust relationships among 328 adolescents aged 12-18 (evaluation of psychological and social development measures), revealing the relationship between family cohesion, adaptability, and trust. Stepwise regression was conducted to explore the accuracy of family cohesion and adaptability in predicting the level of trust.

Dehshiri (2019) selected 216 female students from the universities of Shiraz and Zahra using a convenient sampling method. The results indicate that social intimacy is significantly positively correlated with various subscales of family cohesion, adaptability, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, regression analysis shows that family adaptability and emotional regulation play an important role in predicting social intimacy. Generally speaking, in cohesive and adaptable families, children have the tools to rearrange or balance their emotions, helping them successfully manage their daily lives and establish intimate relationships with others.

Sarour & Keshky (2022) survey of 286 Saudi university students showed a positive correlation between family function (especially adaptability and cohesion) and mental health ( $r=0.25$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The relationship between family function and extremism is completely mediated by mental health, indicating that family function has an indirect impact on extremism ( $\beta = -0.094$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Using an online survey, Limarutti et al (2023) attempted to explore for the first time the relationship between loneliness and coherence among 584 college students with an average age of 25.16 years old. In addition, a graphical model is used to display the structural relationship between loneliness and SOC and control variables. The results showed that students who felt moderate or severe loneliness had lower SOC scores than students who felt low or not lonely. Manageability is the key point of this model, as it is inversely proportional to the two measures of loneliness. The conclusion indicates that in order to meet learning related needs, it is necessary to activate appropriate resources for students (such as social support).

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions

Do different genders have differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust?

Do different grades have differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust?

What is the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust?

### Research Objectives

To identify the differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust between different genders.

To analyse the differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust among different grades.

To explore the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust.

### Research Hypothesis

The paper also outlines the following hypotheses which are congruent to the research questions and objective of the study. Demographic factors such as gender, grade as the independent variable (IV) and family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust as the dependent variable (DV).

1. H<sub>01</sub> : There are no significant differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust between different genders.

2. H<sub>02</sub> : There are no significant differences in family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust between different grades.

3. H<sub>03</sub> : There is no relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust.

### Research Methodology

#### *Method of Research*

This study uses self-statement questionnaire research methods to investigate the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC and interpersonal trust.

#### *Population*

The number of high school students in China is 26050300(National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The research subjects selected a high school from four regions in China, namely the east, south, west, and north. Collect data from eight high schools to ensure that the data selected by these eight schools represents the majority of Chinese high school students.

#### *Sample*

The population size of this study is 400 students from 8 high schools in China. Its calculations will be done using the Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967). (random sampling technique formula), the sample size for 95% confidence level is

$$n = \frac{26050300}{1 + 26050300 \times 0.05 \times 0.05} = 400$$

The sample size of these 400 high school students is considered to represent the entire population, and they expressed their opinions on the relationship between family adaptability and cohesion, SOC, and interpersonal trust.

#### *Instrument Used for Data Collection*

Data is gathered using google form questionnaire and were analyzed using a SPSS Statistics 25.

*Family Adaptability and Cohesion Questionnaire*

This scale was compiled by Olson et al. in 1985. The scale consists of two subscales: Cohesion (10 items) and adaptability (10 items), with a total of 20 questions and a five-level rating. 1 point for 'not', 2 points for 'occasionally', 3 points for 'sometimes', 4 points for ' frequently ', and 5 points for ' always'. Cohesion internal consistency reliability is 0.77, adaptability internal consistency reliability is 0.62, and total is 0.68.

SOC

Developed by (Antonovsky, 1993). The scale consists of 13 items, divided into three dimensions: sense of control, sense of meaning, and sense of understanding. The dimension of sense of control and sense of meaning each includes 4 items, while the dimension of sense of understanding includes 5 items. Each item is rated at a 1-7 level. The scores of each factor are the sum of the scores of the corresponding items, and the total score of the three factors is the psychological consistency score. The higher the score, the better the level of SOC.

Interpersonal Trust Scales

This study used the interpersonal trust scale developed by Root. J.B. The testing content includes interpersonal trust in various situations. There are a total of 25 items in this scale, and the Likert 5-point self-evaluation scale is used, with a score of 1-5 from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". The score ranges from 25 to 125, and the higher the score the subject receives, the higher their interpersonal trust.

**Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is done with reference to the objectives of the study. This study mainly uses basic descriptive statistical means, standard deviations and t-test to investigate the variable differences between high school boys and girls, as well as the variable differences between high school grade1 and grade 2 and three analysis methods, including, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

*Data Analysis*

*Research on Gender Differences in Various Variables*

Table 1 lists the mean and standard deviation of males and females for each variable. The t-test shows that there is a significant difference between male and female students in the dimensions of SOC, comprehensibility, and controllability, meaning that male students have stronger SOC and a higher level of comprehensibility and controllability than female students; There is no significant difference in the dimensions of family cohesion and adaptability, sense of meaning, and interpersonal trust.

Table 1

*Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of Coherence and Interpersonal Trust between Different Genders.*

	Family Cohesion		Family Adaptability		Sense of coherence		sense of understanding		sense of control		of sense meaning		of interpersona l trust		Ordinary trust		special trust	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
male	67.51	10.22	46.43	9.83	55.75	11.27	20.12	4.45	21.36	5.48	14.27	4.42	71.75	8.04	31.27	6.67	40.48	7.15
female	67.52	11.60	44.60	9.75	52.46	10.82	19.10	3.95	19.86	5.90	13.5	3.09	71.76	8.40	31.16	6.78	40.60	8.02
t	-0.015		1.633		2.589*		2.085*		2.318*		1.710		-0.01		0.149		-0.144	

Note:\* $P < 0.05$

*Research on Grade Differences in Various Variables*

Table 2 lists the mean and standard deviation of each variable for different Grades. The t-test shows that there is a significant difference in family adaptability between one and two Grades, but there is no significant difference in other variables.

Table 2

*Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of Coherence and Interpersonal Trust between Different Grades*

	Family Cohesion		Family Adaptability		Sense of coherence		of Sense Understanding		of Sense Control		of Sense Meaning		of Interpersonal Trust		Ordinary Trust		Special Trust	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Grade 1	67.04	11.47	44.04	9.81	54.71	12.20	19.94	4.72	20.77	6.02	14.00	4.69	70.97	7.83	30.66	7.02	40.31	7.50
Grade 2	68.00	10.00	47.45	9.56	54.19	10.08	19.49	3.77	20.76	5.34	13.94	3.04	72.57	8.46	31.82	6.32	40.75	7.51
t	-0.794		-3.153*		0.410		0.937		0.004		0.143		-1.762		-1.558		-0.523	

*Research on the Correlation between Various Variables*

Table 3 lists the Pearson correlation coefficients between each variable. Correlation analysis shows that there is a significant positive correlation between family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC, as well as the dimensions of "comprehensibility," "controllability," "sense of meaning," and interpersonal trust. Even students with good family adaptability and cohesion also have a good SOC and interpersonal trust. General trust is significantly positively correlated with SOC, "controllability" of SOC, and interpersonal trust, but not significantly correlated with family adaptability, comprehensibility, and sense of meaning. Special trust is significantly positively correlated with family adaptability and cohesion, SOC, "controllability" and "sense of meaning" dimensions of SOC, interpersonal trust, and "ordinary trust" of interpersonal trust, but not significantly correlated with "comprehensibility" of SOC.

The results of the above correlation analysis indicate that there is a significant linear correlation between family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC as predictive variables and interpersonal trust variables. In the next regression analysis, there are conditions for predicting interpersonal trust through family adaptability and cohesion, SOC.

Table 3

*The Correlation between Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of Coherence and Interpersonal Trust*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Family Cohesion	1								
2 Family Adaptability	0.684*	1							
3 Sense of coherence	0.398*	0.378*	1						
4 Sense of Understanding	0.253*	0.283*	0.829*	1					
5 Sense of Control	0.408*	0.356*	0.875*	0.587*	1				
6 Sense of Meaning	0.349*	0.320*	0.658*	0.422*	0.399*	1			
7 Interpersonal Trust	0.154*	0.170*	0.252*	0.136*	0.248*	0.248*	1		
8 Ordinary Trust	0.024	0.060	0.151*	0.107	0.210*	0.010	0.527*	1	
9 Special Trust	0.168*	0.153*	0.183*	0.097	0.139*	0.263*	0.633*	0.262*	1

Note : \*\* $P < 0.01$

#### 10.4 Regression Analysis of Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of coherence and Interpersonal Trust

One of the purposes of this study is to examine the joint predictive effects of family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC on interpersonal trust. Using the method of hierarchical regression analysis, with interpersonal trust as the dependent variable and family adaptability and cohesion, as well as SOC as the independent variables, a regression model of family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC on interpersonal trust was established, while controlling for demographic variables such as gender and grade. Specifically, in the first layer of the model, gender and grade are included; Add family adaptability and cohesion in the second layer of the model to explore the contribution of family adaptability and cohesion to interpersonal trust

Add SOC in the third layer of the model to explore the joint prediction of family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC on interpersonal trust. The regression analysis results indicate that the regression model for predicting interpersonal trust based on family adaptability and cohesion is extremely significant, with  $F(4633)=4.233$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Under the control of demographic variables such as gender and grade, family adaptability and cohesion significantly positively predicted interpersonal trust. The regression model that predicted interpersonal trust with family adaptability and cohesion, and SOC was extremely significant, with  $F(5634)=7.677$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Under the control of demographic variables such as gender and grade, as well as family

adaptability and cohesion, SOC significantly positively predicted interpersonal trust (see Table 4 for the results).

For the nature of the mediating effect, if the influence of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust is still significant after adding the mediating variable SOC, then the mediating variable plays a partial mediating effect; If the influence of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust is not significant, then the mediating variable plays a complete mediating effect. In Table 4, after adding the mediating variable SOC, the impact of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust decreased: the standard regression coefficient for predicting interpersonal trust by family cohesion decreased from 0.093 to 0.023. The standard regression coefficient for predicting interpersonal trust based on family adaptability is from 0.081 to 0.053, the impact of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust is not significant. In summary, SOC plays a completely mediating role in the prediction process of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust.

Table 4

*Regression of Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of coherence and Interpersonal Trust*

Predictive Variables	Interpersonal Trust				
	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	β	t
Layer 1			1.552		
Gender	0.010	0.003	(2, 635)	0.090	0.096
Grade				0.608	0.762
Layer 2			4.233***		
Family Cohesion	0.051	0.039	(4, 633)	0.093*	0.570
Family Adaptability				0.081*	0.225
Layer 3			7.677***		
Family Cohesion	0.109	0.095	(5, 634)	0.023	0.383
Family Adaptability				0.053	0.723
Sense of coherence				0.198*	0.838

Note:\*\*\* $P < 0.001$

**Finding and Conclusion****Analysis of Differences in Gender and Grade among Various Variables**

Previous studies have shown that the SOC of males is usually slightly higher than that of females, but the difference is small. The research results indicate that there is a significant difference in SOC between boys and girls, with no significant difference in family and interpersonal trust, indicating that SOC may be an innate trait rather than an environmental factor.

There is a significant grade difference in family adaptability among high school students. Perhaps it is because first-year students have just entered high school, and parents often treat their children like children, which makes it difficult for them to express their opinions and participate in major family decisions. In the second year of high school, parents can start to change their mindset and realize that their children will become adults, enabling them to be a part of the family and better participate in the family in various forms. There is no significant grade difference in SOC. There was no evidence of SOC increasing with age throughout the

entire life span. There is also no instability or imbalance in the development of adolescents. There is no significant grade difference in interpersonal trust.

The mediating effect of Family Adaptability and Cohesion, Sense of coherence and Interpersonal Trust

Data analysis shows that SOC, as a mediating variable, plays a very important role in the positive promotion effect of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust among high school students, and has a completely mediating effect. In other words, the positive promotion effect of family adaptability and cohesion on interpersonal trust among high school students cannot be directly achieved, and it completely depends on the mediating effect of SOC.

### **Recommendation**

The active interaction between parents and their children in the process of family interaction enables individuals to have the ability to understand things happening around them. Through the establishment of close and equal relationships between parents in their family network, high school students are able to grasp their own situation and discover the significance of their situation. This allows them to feel a sense of security and firmly believe in being able to control their own life, thus making high school students more willing to trust those around them, especially those closest to them. Therefore, in the process of raising children, parents should establish more intimacy with their children. When their children are in difficulties, parents should make every effort to support them instead of satirizing and sarcastic, and give them a certain voice, rather than thinking it's a reason like 'children don't understand anything'. They should recklessly close the door to communication with their children, causing them to experience strong frustration and psychological pressure, believing that one cannot control one's own destiny, lacks status and power. Thus unwilling to trust anyone, including the closest family and friends. From this, it can be seen that it is through the mediating variable of psychological consistency that interpersonal relationships in families expand to children's interpersonal trust.

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