

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### Introduction

This study explored how parents perceive, respond to, and interpret the transition of their oldest child to adolescence in a context of normal family processes, meaning that there are few, if any, high-risk behaviors or family crises occurring. To do this, I recruited a criteria-based sample of two-parent and one-parent families in a large metropolitan area whose oldest or only child was between 13 and 16 years old. Most of the ten families who participated took part in a focus group session, and a total of five were interviewed in their homes. I found that they readily shared their experiences and discussed their perceptions, responses, and interpretations with me. My research questions were guided by family systems theory as well as family stress and coping theory. Data analysis consisted of qualitative coding based on the constant comparative method. Out of this, core categories and subcategories emerged that described the experiences of the parents I interviewed both in focus groups and at home. I developed a theoretical model that suggests relationships between these categories. In Chapter IV, the core categories and subcategories are defined and discussed in detail, using verbatim quotes from interview transcripts. In this discussion, I summarize my findings and explore how they fit with previous research. Next, I consider this study's limitations, implications for clinical practice, and possible directions for future research. A personal reflection about this study ends the chapter.

#### Summary of Findings

The results of my interviews with parents seemed to suggest a process of adaptation, or “rebalancing,” that occurs at the transition to adolescence. To describe this process, I developed a theoretical model that organizes it into three components, each of which influences, and is influenced by, aspects of past and current family context. The adaptation or rebalancing process seemed to begin when parents noticed something different about their teenager, in terms of physical, social/emotional, or parent-teen relational change. Most participant parents described this as a sudden change that took them by surprise, or made them feel as if the “apple cart” had been upset. For a few parents, the changes they noticed were gradual but nonetheless marked a distinct shift in their perception of family equilibrium. Elements of family context, both past and current, seemed to influence how this event was experienced and managed. Participants

mentioned their expectations, as well as memories of their own teen experiences. They reflected on what their teen had been like as a child, and how the relationship with the child was seeming to shift.

Another component of this rebalancing process is the parents' response, which found expression through affect, cognition, and behavior. The parents I interviewed described and demonstrated strong affect brought on by the "apple-cart experience." Often this took the form of worry and concern; in other cases, feelings ranged from sadness and wistfulness to anger and deep frustration. The parents also experienced cognitive responses. Two that seemed most prominent included first, how parents attribute cause and effect to their teen's changes, and second, how they assessed the degree of influence they have with their teen. The parents' behavioral response, in most cases, seemed to emerge from a combination of affect and cognition in which "thinking" frequently gained the upper hand. In other words, most of these parents, most of the time, thought before they acted and said they were able to hold strong emotional reactivity in check. Parents' responses also involved elements of context such as their individual characteristics, sociocultural changes, and family dynamics.

Another component of the rebalancing process consists of parental interpretations, or how they assign meaning to this stage in their family life cycle. How they evaluated themselves and their children; how they reoriented toward a future when the child would leave home; and the overarching frame they placed on their family's experience forms the meaning-making part of this process model. This component, more so than the others, is theorized as setting the family on a trajectory toward a new round of "apple-cart experiences" as the teen continues to grow and change. Parental interpretations are perhaps influenced most directly by family of origin context, in terms of these parents defining a family legacy they wish to pass on to their children

#### Links to Previous Research

This multiple case, qualitative study was designed to contribute to a contemporary flow of research in psychology and family therapy that examines bidirectional rather than unidirectional influences in families, meaning that adolescents are viewed as affecting parents as well as being affected by their parents. This contrasts with older research that tended to

exclusively examine parental influences on children. Second, this study was meant to build on accumulating research studies showing that most families maintain harmony and interpersonal connectedness across the transition to adolescence, even when that transition presents serious challenges to parents and teens. My study explored the processes that are occurring in families as this transition goes forward, in order to examine how some parents see themselves participating in a family project of maintaining harmony and connectedness. This perspective is at variance with “storm and stress” theories that held sway primarily before the 1970s and were grounded in analytic frameworks, which characterized emotional detachment between parents and teens as expectable and healthy.

By exploring how parents perceive, respond to, and interpret their child’s transition to adolescence, this study confirmed research findings such as Baumrind’s (1991), that particular aspects of teen development challenge parents. These aspects include processes of identity formation, cognitive and moral development, and shifts of power due to greater peer influence. All of these factors were cited in their own way by parents in this study as they discussed various “apple-cart experiences,” or times when they felt thrown off balance by the ways they saw their young teen changing.

Parent characteristics that contribute to the experience of this transition emerged in the course of data collection and analysis. In my interviews and focus group sessions, parents spoke openly about having a sense of vulnerability in light of family of origin memories, sociocultural change, and intrapsychic traits they identified, such as “perfectionism.” At the same time, they identified many factors that seemed to buffer them from severe stress and turmoil. These “buffering” factors included what Steinberg (1994, p. 231) terms their “cognitive set,” or expectations about adolescence, as well as a balance between their parenting role and their investment in other roles, such as paid work or volunteer responsibilities. According to Bogenschneider and colleagues (1997), parent characteristics are the best predictors of parents’ perceived competence, and this hypothesized relationship seemed to be supported by what the participants in this study told me.

One quality seems to merit special attention here: a characteristic of family dynamics called “cohesion,” by Olson (1993). Because I selected families who reported they were functioning well, it seemed they fit within the healthy, “balanced” range, resembling the Olson Circumplex Model’s definition of flexible connectedness, with some variation in the direction of flexible enmeshment (e.g., a single mom who avoids conflict with her son by saying to him, “we’re all we’ve got”) and structural connectedness (a dad who insists on strict adherence to rules). In terms of what this meant for their experience of a transition to adolescence, these parents responded to developmental changes in their children attentively and with offers of guidance and support from a position of authority. This is in marked contrast to many families seen in therapy who often function at the poles of the Circumplex Model, for example with an enmeshed mother-adolescent coalition and a disengaged father.

Cohesion and adaptability, the two scales measured by the Circumplex Model, seem to inform the proposed sequential rebalancing process model in this study in several ways. These parents were sufficiently connected with their adolescents to notice change occurring. Based on clinical knowledge and literature on dysfunctional families, it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which disengaged parents pay scant attention to their child’s development, and the child intensifies his or her bids for independence and individuation to a point of severe stress or risk. These engaged parents also responded in a way that appeared to fit the “sensitively attuned” criteria Belsky (1984) defined in his landmark work on the determinants of parenting. There appeared to be concerted efforts by parents in my study to use affective skills such as empathy as well as cognitive strategies, such as generous attributions, to guide their response to apple-cart events. Cohesion appeared to be a feature of these families from the time their child was small, and a pre-existing close relationship seemed to assure these parents that they could navigate the challenges of adolescence as well. Intergenerational cohesion is suggested as well by what the parents in this study said about their families of origin, and the healthy ways in which they appeared to draw on family of origin influences. In this way, cohesive family dynamics appear to knit together contextual factors and parents’ interpretation of the direction their family is heading. For example, a robust theme among these families consisted of expressing a clear set of values and beliefs from their parents and extended family, and using these to define future-oriented hopes and dreams for their young adolescent.

Another systemic feature of these families—differentiation—appeared to bolster previous findings in the literature. Differentiation, as it is used in Bowen theory (Papero, 1990), refers to family members' ability to maintain a balance between separateness and connectedness in relation to one another. It is characterized by actions arising out of thoughts, not feelings, as well as avoidance of the two relational extremes of enmeshment or cutoff. While cohesion may be viewed as a measure of healthy connectedness, differentiation indicates healthy individuation within a connected family context. This trait seemed evident, to varying degrees, in this study's participants, as indicated by their tendency to think before they act, to encourage their teens to take appropriate risks (e.g., take a driver's license test), and to welcome displays of assertiveness by the teen even though it may have made the parent feel uncomfortable. These indicators of differentiation seemed congruent with findings from studies on parents of adolescents that relate generous attributions and shared parent-teen perceptions to healthy family functioning (Collins, 1990; Dix, et al., 1986; Freedman-Doan, et al., 1993; Grace, et al., 1993; Joiner & Wagner, 1996; Papini & Micka, 1991). As in the attribution and shared perception literature, most of the parents in this study tended to evaluate their teen's changing interactions and social/emotional development as normal, expectable, and in some cases, even welcome. They assigned cause and effect in ways that affirmed their regard for their teen, for example by attributing positive outcomes to the teen's innate, stable traits. They often attributed negative outcomes to transient, external causes such as peer influence or sociocultural pressures. In the empirical literature, healthy family organization and individuation are linked to an ability to establish and maintain accurate, consistent, and generally positive beliefs about each family member. Evaluations and attributions in this study suggested that this was happening in the participant families. Also, Steinberg (1994) alluded to healthy differentiation when he concluded that parents may experience their child's transition to adolescence as a loss (requiring them to redefine their parenting *role*) or as an abandonment (suggesting poor differentiation in which a *relationship*, not just a role, is perceived as being lost). None of the parents I interviewed expressed a sense of abandonment due to their child's transition, even when the transition evoked strong feelings and caused them to struggle to rebalance. My results suggested that participant parents fall along a continuum of differentiation, such as a Bowen scale (Papero, 1990), with most of them clustered

at the higher end. I viewed them also as parents who seemed to actively encourage differentiation in their children.

While this study did not emphasize gender differences, the fathers who participated were notable for several reasons. They all expressed a firm resolve not to over-invest their time and energy at work at the expense of family; they seemed equally as engaged in parenting as their wives; and they appeared to derive personal satisfaction from their parenting successes. This is congruent with a number of studies indicating that fathers' relationships with adolescent children contribute positively to their sense of generativity (Snarey, 1993) and predict midlife stress more strongly than variation in marital satisfaction does (Julian, et al., 1990; Julian, et al., 1991).

Parenting practices described by study participants, including monitoring, networking, adapting family rules, and taking time to talk with their teens, seemed to arise out of a general sense of self-efficacy, or the parent's belief that he or she is capable of achieving desired outcomes. To me, this was especially evident in parents' ratings of their sense of influence over their children, on a 1 to 10 scale. With one exception, parents reported a rating of 7 or 8; the one that deviated by saying 4 clearly expressed a sense that underlying parental influence still informed his daughter's choices, and that he would "take" a stronger influence if she made bad decisions. Self-efficacy, and similar concepts such as "evaluative differentiation" (Showers & Ryff, 1996) and "perceived current influence" (Freedman-Doan, et al., 1993), are strongly associated with positive outcomes in families.

Another concept shared by most study participants consisted of "willing sacrifice," seen in this study's parents in terms of giving up career advancement and, in some cases, marital satisfaction. The sacrifice of marital closeness, due to time pressures and choices the parents made, evoked a range of responses from frustration to resignation. These findings seem to fit results reported by Papini and Roggman (1993), who used resource and exchange theory to suggest that spouses tolerate a decline in marital satisfaction during a transition to adolescence to meet parenting demands.

How the context of parenting adolescents has changed since the parents in this study grew up appeared to have a substantial impact on parents' perceptions, responses, and interpretations. Most of these parents—and particularly the mothers of daughters—said they perceived today's challenges as more complex and daunting than what they recall as adolescents. They enumerated sexual temptations and sexually transmitted diseases, threats of violence, media saturation, and drugs and alcohol as dangers they worried about in relation to their adolescent children. This finding appeared to fit with research documenting an earlier pubertal transition for many teens (Larson & Richards, 1994) as well as profoundly contradictory values imparted by media and popular culture (Baumrind, 1991).

Parents in this study acknowledged and displayed their strengths as individuals, marriage partners, and parents. Even when they were caught off guard by an apple-cart experience, they responded in ways that preserved their place at the top of the family hierarchy. They reported a range of feelings about their changing teen, but even when they felt dangerously “unbalanced,” they appeared to recover their footing and to maintain connections with their children despite the depth of their worry, concern, confusion, or frustration. They appeared to fit a description of “struggling well,” used by theorists examining resilience in families (Walsh, 1998). Walsh points out that theoretical work on resilience originally examined traits of individuals (primarily children) and tended to equate resilience with being non-stressed. However, in her work, resilience is viewed as a family process in which belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication contribute to healthy and connected functioning across a range of difficulties and challenges. The findings of this study seem congruent with Walsh's work, and perhaps explain certain features of resilient processes operating in the parental dyad or the individual parent.

### Study Limitations

There are a number of factors limiting the findings of this study. The first involves diversity, in terms of socioeconomic status or ethnic origin. Many studies of parents are conducted on white, middle-class, suburban parents, so a gap in the research exists with respect to other parents. This means that this study is useful in confirming prior research and extending explorations of healthy family processes to a time in the life-cycle stage when parents have traditionally been viewed as influencing their children, and not being influenced by them.

However, it does not break new ground with regard to variations among American parents at this stage.

Another limitation is that the conditions for participants were not as similar as they could have been. Two sets of parents did not participate in a focus group; one of those couples received questions in advance of the in-home interview, and one did not. The richest data seemed to come from the three families who participated in both a focus group and an in-home study, since the in-home interview provided an opportunity to follow up on conversations that began in the group setting. It would have strengthened this study to select in-home interviewees only from among focus group participants, but I did not do so because I wanted to assure balance in terms of gender and age of the adolescents in participant families. However, a study design that included two interviews with each participant may have added more depth to the data I collected.

Finally, a limitation involves the possibility of a “yes set” emerging from my expectations as well as from participants in this study. When I recruited parents, I made it clear, via my criteria, that I chose to include families experiencing the normal “ups and downs” of a transition to adolescence. The parents who responded generally had positive things to say about their children and their parenting, even in my initial telephone screening. They knew I was searching for family strengths that contributed to the positive outcomes they acknowledged, so this may have skewed their answers in an overly optimistic direction. Similarly, I felt myself pulled in the direction of looking primarily for strengths and asking fewer questions about areas of challenge. As I became more aware of this, I attempted to remain more neutral in the tone and wording of questions. I sought more details about difficulties participant parents reported, by asking sequential and circular questions (e.g., “What happened next?” “How did that turn out?” “How do you think your teenager viewed that?”).

### Clinical Relevance

According to Preto (1989), families are more likely to enter therapy when they have adolescents than at any other stage of the life cycle, so any study of families with teens may be viewed as having clinical relevance. This study, and others that emphasize family connections

and strengths, may have particular relevance in light of outmoded, but still influential, theoretical views that “storm and stress,” characterized by parent-teen conflict, is normal and to be expected. To the extent this notion holds sway, families in serious need of clinical help may not seek it, or may not be referred for help, because they accept their lot as it is defined by popular wisdom. This view also mitigates against healthy traits such as self-efficacy, in that parents may feel powerless to achieve parenting goals if they think teenagers are certain to rebel, not listen, or “do their own thing” despite parental efforts to guide. Fortunately, research emphasizing continuity of connection and harmonious family relationships across a challenging transition has gained credibility and may be altering views on what parents may expect.

Strength-based views are relevant not only for families and referral sources such as schools, but for therapists as well. Therapists who anticipate difficulties in families with teens, or attribute those difficulties to stable traits common to adolescents, may be less creative and less energized to help these families. On the other hand, therapists working from a competency basis informed by resilience literature may have much to offer struggling parents. The proposed “rebalancing” process model in this study suggests a number of avenues for intervention. In terms of the parent’s response, intervention could include cognitive restructuring to address negative attribution processes. Parent behaviors such as networking and monitoring could be explored in terms of how these might be implemented and what difference they might make. In terms of context, a therapist might search for exceptions in a parent’s family of origin and build on these as a way to reshape parental expectations and reframe interpretations. It may also help to explore the parent’s orientation to a future time when the child is living independently, to offer perspective and invite the parent to express hopes and dreams for the child.

Research on healthy families also has clinical relevance as a source of preventive parenting ideas. The parents in this study offered what seemed like a wealth of ideas and hope that could inform and expand choices for parents who face greater difficulties. Parenting education, particularly in a time of shifting sociocultural norms and early-onset puberty, needs to be fine-tuned and updated regularly. Most of the parents in this study cited “networking” and support from other parents as a crucial factor in their ability to cope and to feel assured they were

on the right track. Their experiences, as expressed in this study, could in turn be used to assist other parents in a support group or workshop context.

Clinical relevance could also come from linking findings about healthy families with studies examining families experiencing serious dysfunction, delinquency, or abuse. In 1984, Belsky asked whether processes operating in abusive families operate as well in healthy ones. That question appears to remain unanswered, or if it has been addressed, tends to be couched in terms of parents of infants or young children. Families experiencing sustained conflict with teens may benefit from clinical applications of healthy-family studies as models of alternative behaviors and cognitions, as well as a point of reference for assessing deficits or constraints in dysfunctional families.

Finally, this study assumes a bidirectional flow of influence between parent and child that is consistent with systemic approaches to therapy. This has clinical relevance because often, families who begin therapy view a child as the only person needing “help” or “change.” Problems arising at adolescence frequently serve as the reason a family seeks professional help, and it is often difficult for a therapist to resist a family’s pull in the direction of identifying one “patient.” Therapists grounded in interactional views will be more likely to examine each family member’s role in processes that are keeping them stuck or resulting in conflict. This study’s exploration of parental perceptions, responses, and interpretations may contribute to therapeutic competence by providing a more complete picture of what is going on with parents when their children enter adolescence.

### Suggested Future Research

The proposed model that illustrates this study’s core categories and how they relate to one another suggests a number of directions for future research. Any component of the model—apple-cart experience, response, or interpretation—could be explored in depth by comparing and contrasting parent perceptions with teen perceptions. Adding the teen’s view to any part of the process would enhance its usefulness and provide an important validity check. Examining how different categories of teen change (pubertal, social/emotional, relational) function similarly or differently in terms of parental response could form the basis for several studies.

Choosing one aspect of past or current context and tracing its influence throughout the three-step sequence also would be useful. For instance, examining how family of origin influences affect perceived change, response, and meaning making in turn could test Bowen theory using this model and illuminate how one contextual factor operates and perhaps changes over the course of this transition. Similarly, parental expectations, intra- and extra-psychic characteristics, and sociocultural factors could receive this treatment as well.

The findings of this study could be enhanced greatly by replication with other subsets of the midlife parenting population. Hispanic, African-American, Asian-American parents; lower-income, urban-dwelling parents; and other groups experiencing what they consider the normal ups and downs of this transition would provide useful data comparisons with the current study population, which resembles the profile of many other parenting studies through the years.

Theoretical work could also be pursued in future research. Links between attribution patterns and conflict could be explored. The connection between midlife parenting and a decline in marital satisfaction would lend itself to further scrutiny, because some studies differ as to how to explain this phenomenon. Attachment research, which flourishes among parents of infants, could be extended to the pre-teen and teen years in terms of how parent-child synchrony is established and maintained, and how it may relate to shared or divergent perceptions as the child matures. Ambert (1995) recommended that future research examine adolescents as “co-producers of their development and co-initiators of their parents’ behavior” (p. 295) to extend knowledge premised on systemic, reciprocal theories.

This study also suggests the need for future research on transitions, as called for by Cowan (1991) and Palkovitz (1996). Both advocate longitudinal studies tracking the same families over the course of several different life-cycle transitions. Cowan, in particular, discussed transition research as a fairly new endeavor that could illuminate stages of adult development and clarify the nature of transitions and their effects on family functioning and on what stability and change look like over the course of family life.

## Personal Observation

Completing this study has challenged my thoughts and feelings on many different levels. As the parent of an 11-year-old son, I have begun to experience the first inklings of “apple-cart experiences” in my own home, in the form of my son’s requests for more time with peers, his discomfort at being seen with his parents in public, and his friends’ interest in music and movies we dislike. Talking with my study participants about their experiences left me feeling alternately worried and reassured. I found myself paying more attention to whether I was being emotionally reactive toward my son, or thoughtful in how I responded. The times I have felt thrown off balance have seemed like “early warnings” of more to come, and this is alternately exciting and scary. Like all of my married, in-home interviewees, I feel grateful for my husband’s balancing influence in our home.

As an academic researcher, I felt challenged by the breadth of the fields of research I undertook to summarize and assimilate into this study. Along with my interest in systemic views of the family, I grew fascinated with internal processes such as self-efficacy, attributions, and expectations, which seem to me to be formed extensively by family of origin influences. The ways in which this particular family transition fits with other transitions seems to be a relatively new, self-contained area of research that struck me as particularly useful for families in therapy and informative with regard to family processes. In my future clinical work, I found much in what these parents said to bring with me into the therapy room, and I also gained an awareness of the contextual factors that may not be in place for distressed families. I wondered how that would affect their perceptions, responses, and interpretations.

In my interactions with participants, I was touched by their overarching commitment to parenting and their deep investment in it. I found it particularly telling when they used an image to describe this time in their lives, either in answer to my question along those lines, or unsolicited. The images they described to convey how they felt about reorienting toward a future when their child would leave home seemed the most poignant to me, especially the father who pictured his son as “Don Quixote riding off into the sunset.” When I heard a comment such as this, it seemed as if I had reached a deep center of parental love and care that energized and brought into focus all the other subcategories of feeling, thought, and action. I am grateful to all

my participants for their open and generous sharing and their contribution to my understanding of how they are experiencing and managing a transition to adolescence.