

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A wealth of professional literature exists on adolescent development from the perspective of the child and from an interactional perspective. Few studies address how this transition is experienced by parents. Research tends to show that parents and adolescents profoundly influence each other as the family system experiences a normative move toward differently defined roles, rules, boundaries, and hierarchy as children mature from approximately age 10 to 14. Parenting literature encourages parents to preserve emotional warmth and closeness while negotiating increasing degrees of autonomy, independence, and shared decision making with their adolescent (Brooks, 1987; Gottman, 1997; Taffel, 1991). Yet what happens to parents in the process of doing so remains largely unexplored. This is surprising, considering that this stage of the family life cycle is when families are most likely to seek therapy (Preto, 1989). This qualitative study focuses on how parents perceive their oldest child's transition to adolescence, how they respond to it, and how they assign meaning to the process. It is intended to provide practical data for therapists using a competency-based, systemic approach to working with families at this stage.

Statement of the Problem

Historical Perspective

Contemporary American views of adolescence as an extension of childhood emerged as recently as the post-World War II decade (Walsh, 1993). From that time until the mid-1970s, the transition to adolescence was viewed as disjunctive, with an emphasis on conflict, divergent parent-adolescent values, and declining parental influence (Collins, 1990; Paikoff, 1991). Both psychoanalytic and symbolic-interactionist traditions tended to emphasize the individual's interpretation of events related to this transition and did not pay attention to developmental processes or systemic phenomena. Instead, theoretical work on the family posited a "generation gap" and an adolescent "counterculture" (Paikoff, 1991, p. 4), although little empirical data supported this.

As a result, it has been widely accepted as common wisdom in American society that conflict and detachment mark family life with an adolescent, rather than harmony and attachment (Steinberg, 1990). Further, research has tended to explore how much, why, and how families grow apart rather

than examining processes that keep them together. This has clinical implications in terms of what a family therapist anticipates and finds when working with families with adolescents.

In the past two decades, a new perspective has begun to take hold and to gain empirical credibility. It is characterized by the view that the transition to adolescence is a normative part of life-span development marked by a gradual realignment of interactions and patterns of influence in the family. Most adolescents, according to this perspective, accomplish the task of achieving autonomy without breaking the emotional bond they have with their parents (Steinberg, 1990). Nonetheless, it is a challenging time of family adjustment for which there is often little preparation. In addition to Steinberg's research, other studies have emphasized understanding this transition in light of the parents' psychological development as well as the adolescents', and viewing the family as a web of interconnected relationships (Collins, 1990; Feldman, Wentzel, Weinberger & Munson, 1990; Gecas & Seff, 1990; Papini & Roggman, 1993; Sanders, Nicholson, & Floyd, 1997; Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995).

The shift in research emphasis has involved exploring differences between parents' and adolescents' mutual perceptions and expectations. It also has taken into account gender differences for both parents and adolescents (Feldman, et al., 1990; Herman & McHale, 1993; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1995; Thornton, et al., 1995). According to Collins (1991), "researchers are increasingly attempting to understand the nature and significance of joint patterns of perception, behavior, and emotion in parent-child relationships" (p. 103). This study builds on this new direction in research and focuses specifically on how some parents experience their oldest child's early adolescence.

Sociocultural Context

American parents tend to have high expectations of themselves in terms of the parenting role but little preparation for the transition to early adolescence. Parents-to-be can find a wealth of literature on the transition to parenthood and the adjustments they can expect during their child's infancy and toddler years. They can find a growing literature on the "empty nest" transition when children leave home. In between, however, there are few resources that address what parents can expect to experience in their own lives with a young adolescent in the home (Lindahl, Malik, & Bradbury, 1997; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990). Steinberg

(1994) pointed out that “to focus on these extremes and ignore everything in the middle is to assume a constancy in adult development and family life that is mythical” (p. 251).

A result of this gap in the literature is that parents are often taken by surprise when the teen years arrive for their oldest child (Brooks, 1987). They are confronted by pubertal changes that are weighted with social significance regarding sexual activity, peer pressure, body image, and role expectations for children as well as parents (Boxer & Petersen, 1986). The value society places on youthfulness in general, and on standards of attractiveness that more frequently characterize adolescents than their parents, can provoke envy and mark a profound shift in a parent’s self-image.

Further, a changing cultural context is reshaping family expectations and interactions, and often mitigates against increasing autonomy for the adolescent. Behaviors that test limits and run risks are more hazardous today, for example, the threat of contracting HIV/AIDS. Cultural coarsening, such as explicit violence and graphic sex in music, entertainment media, and on the Internet, challenges parents to a greater extent now than in the very recent past. These influences also reach children at younger ages (Larson & Richards, 1994). Opportunities for alcohol and other substance abuse confront young adolescents as well. Changes in family structure (including more one-parent families and more dual-income families) and a deterioration in community are seen as factors that potentially place today’s adolescents at greater risk than in past generations, and these changes may also affect parental confidence and choices (Cornwell, Eggebeen, & Meschke, 1996). However, Cornwell et al. have posited that changes in sociocultural context, such as fewer children per household and higher levels of educational attainment, help some parents adapt well to new challenges. Even so, Cornwell et al. suggested that parents today are more vulnerable to stress during their oldest child’s transition to adolescence than parents in the recent past.

Family Context

The two factors considered above—a lack of preparation and a changing social context—combine with a third factor to define the problem addressed in this study. The third factor is the family context in which the transition to adolescence takes place.

In many families, this transition occurs in an environment of warmth and connection; in others,

it is accompanied by severe parental stress and self-doubt, along with adolescent alienation and a range of difficulties. Even in the best of circumstances, the shift at adolescence has been pictured as rearranging the family like pieces of a puzzle that no longer fit together (Larson & Richards, 1994).

A key concern involves marital distress, which often accompanies this transition. Feldman, et al. (1990) noted that marital satisfaction is a consistent, significant, and independent predictor of family functioning and pointed out that early adolescents are highly attuned to displays of hostility and affection between parents. They found differences in husbands' and wives' reported marital satisfaction during this transition, with mothers' satisfaction related to overall family functioning and fathers' satisfaction related to sons' development of self-control and school achievement.

The transition to adolescence usually comes at a time when parents are confronting midlife issues, and this is significant for family functioning as well. Steinberg (1994) found that a sense of powerlessness and insecurity often characterizes parents at this stage. Emotional distress at midlife, according to Steinberg, was less strongly correlated with work or worries about physical decline, than with "the intersecting journeys of the adolescent and the middle-aged parent" (p. 51). Conversely, he reported that many midlife adults feel more powerful and stable than at any other time in their lives.

Significance of the Study

Existing studies in this area report a common theme of the researchers' sense of mapping uncharted territory. Collins (1991) pointed out that almost nothing is known about the consequences parents experience due to conflict with adolescents and the realignment of relationships that accompanies this transition. He also noted that previous work on this topic pictures disagreement as a uniform characteristic of parent-adolescent relationships. Newer studies have begun to detect important variations in conflict across topics, dyads, and developmental phases of adolescence. Many studies have concluded that process-oriented research that examines families in context and explores bidirectional influences would contribute significantly to this field (Collins, 1990; Gecas & Seff, 1990; Ohannessian, et al., 1995).

Quantitative findings have isolated a number of observations about parental adjustment during the transition to adolescence, including, for example, a strong correlation between parents' work-role

orientation and their emotional well-being (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990); the different ways depressed and non-depressed mothers perceive their children (Kochanska, 1990); and a finding that a parent's distress over a child's misbehavior increases with the child's age and with parental attributions of the behavior to the child's character rather than to circumstances (Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon, 1986). Studies of the effects of adolescence on marital quality have yielded mixed results. Belsky (1990) pointed out that research examining adolescent development and marital satisfaction needs to focus not on the linear view of how the adolescent impacts the marriage, but instead "on the processes by which and the conditions under which the presence of teenagers in the family does and does not influence the spousal relationship" (p. 183). I have explored this aspect of parental experience as part of this study.

Carlton-Ford, Paikoff, and Brooks-Gunn (1991) noted that qualitative approaches have not yet been used in examining views of parents around this transition. Using qualitative research in this area is seen as a way to clarify the process by which parents' views develop and are maintained. In this study, I asked parents about their views of the family; their experiences during the transition to adolescence; and the meaning they made of this transition for themselves as individuals, marital partners, and the family as a whole. The qualitative approach I used incorporated many of the themes from other research and explored them from the perspective of parents who are going through this transition or who have experienced it recently.

There are three specific ways in which this study may inform the practice of family therapy. First, by emphasizing the parent, this study is consistent with clinical practice that looks for sequential processes when presented with a child as the identified patient. A child's problems, such as those that may arise at adolescence, may serve as the family's "ticket" into therapy (Fischer & Brown-Standridge, 1989). Other issues, such as marital conflict, may be hidden from view. The child's presenting problems at adolescence may be compelling and even overwhelming, making it more difficult for a therapist to be aware of other family issues. This study, which explores parental experiences and meanings in depth, offers insight into areas that may warrant attention in therapy but may not be recognized at first by either the parents or the therapist.

Second, the clinical significance of this study extends beyond considerations of work with adolescents and their families to encompass the broader area of "transitions." Many people seek or are

referred to therapy at times of change—both normative and non-normative. The more family therapists understand about the nature of transitions and why some families thrive and others do not during times of change, the more they can help families during these times. Cowan (1991) viewed transitions, such as the one to adolescence, as “naturally occurring experiments” (p. 22) that offer clinicians as well as researchers a strategic opportunity to observe and understand individual and family development. Cowan noted that transitions may stimulate growth and adaptation in some families, while provoking crises in others, and leaving still others apparently unchanged. This study attempted to add a piece to this puzzle by exploring a particular transition in the course of adult development.

Finally, by focusing on normally stressed parents, this study may offer clinicians a glimpse of what it looks like when families negotiate this transition in ways that promote a sense of well-being. When therapists work with families who are trying solutions that no longer work or are deeply entrenched in conflict over roles, rules, and hierarchy, it may be difficult to know how to help them reach their own goals. This study is meant to serve as a source of hope and an expanded map of possibilities for therapists seeing troubled families.

The study also may help illuminate adaptive parenting styles and ways to preserve good mental health and close relationships during this key family transition. A strength-based study such as this one may identify some of the building blocks that parents of younger children can put in place as they anticipate the transition to adolescence. For example, one study suggested that the “synchrony” established between parents and young children has lasting effects on family relations (Chu & Powers, 1995). This might mean that gaining confidence in their ability to negotiate with parents may give young children a sense of personal mastery that affects their social and emotional adjustment as adolescents.

This study was designed to fill a gap in existing research by exploring parents’ perceptions of the systemic and developmental changes occurring as their oldest child enters adolescence. It describes how parents experience this transition in terms of what they expected. It also examines how other factors, such as midlife issues, intersect with parenting at this stage, as well as how marital relationships seem to be affected by it. The study examines the meanings parents assigned to this transition and the attributions they tended to make concerning their families. By exploring the process of this transition

on parents who are not currently seeking mental health services, this study aims to go beyond normalizing. It is meant to offer insight into adaptive parenting strategies that may amplify the view of possible outcomes in therapy with more distressed populations.

Theoretical Framework

Family Systems Theory

This study was informed by systems theory, which focuses on interactional processes of family life rather than viewing adolescents or parents in isolation. The bidirectional push and pull of children negotiating this transition with parents fits a non-linear perspective, which is a key component of systems theory (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Systems theorists posit that certain properties or behaviors of a system do not emerge from its component parts, but rather from the parts' specific arrangement in the system and from the transactions among them. As a family negotiates a transition to adolescence, pressure for change in the system occurs around such systemic constructs as rules, boundaries, and hierarchy (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). Efforts to maintain a system's stability during a time of transition challenges previous patterns of interaction. Becvar and Becvar pointed out that the process of adapting to change while preserving system integrity is seen clearly in the rebalancing of dependence/independence between parent and child at adolescence.

In systems terminology, the transition to adolescence means a change process over time in family rules and roles; it is marked by a shift in boundaries toward more openness to systems outside the family, such as peer groups, school, and work. Within the family, hierarchical boundaries are challenged as the adolescent bids for autonomy, participation in family decision making, and freedom of expression (Preto, 1989).

Systems theory is conducive to research questions that do not focus on “input” variables (such as personality characteristics) or “output” variables (such as the eventual successful or unsuccessful launching of the young adult child). Instead, a systems-based study asks how family processes, such as communication, conflict, cohesion, and adaptability, may be understood by examining transactions among family members (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). It also invites questions about how change occurs within the system. In this study, I used systems theory as a guide in asking these kinds of questions of parents experiencing their oldest child's transition to adolescence.

Other aspects of systems theory that inform this study come from the intergenerational work of Murray Bowen. Bowen theory describes a multigenerational transmission process in which emotional reactivity is projected from parent to child (Papero, 1990). In this view, the transition to adolescence activates intergenerational forces in the family, meaning that patterns from the past shape parental behaviors, thoughts, and emotions in the present. Research issues raised by Bowen theory and used in this study include questions involving how parents recall their own transition to adolescence. How are their recollections shaping their interactions with young adolescent children? How do memories inform the process of change that accompanies this transition?

These aspects of systems theory were particularly useful guides for this study because they go beyond a linear understanding of family interaction patterns and causation. Rather than focus only on the impact parents have on children, or the reverse, a systems perspective sees an interrelated whole that is more complex than the sum of its parts and more reflective of variations in family life.

Family Stress and Coping Theory

A second perspective that has guided this study is family stress and coping theory, an interactive variation on earlier stress and coping theoretical frameworks (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989). “Stress” is defined as a phenomenon that taxes the resources and capabilities of an individual or family, and which may be normative or catastrophic (Figley, 1983; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989). In research literature, stress has been viewed both as a stimulus (e.g., a threat to physical or psychological well-being) and a response (a set of integrated cognitive and behavioral reactions) (Cotton, 1990). Evolving views, such as those advanced by Lazarus (as cited in Cotton, 1990), have characterized stress as interactive, best understood as the relationship between a stressor and the stress response.

Stress theory was originally applied to families by Hill as a linear model with four components, ABC-X (Hill, as cited in McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989). “A” represents the stressor, “B” the individual’s or family’s resources, and “C” their perceptions of the stressor. These combine to form a product, or “X” factor, which is the severity of the crisis (Burr, 1990; Walker, 1985). This model has profoundly shaped understandings of family processes. It has evolved over the years in several ways that address original shortcomings and enhance its usefulness for conceptualizing change processes in families such as the transition to adolescence.

Refinements of the ABC-X model have focused on shifting understandings of stress and coping away from consideration of discrete events and toward the interactive process over time between stressors and responses to them. To accomplish this, McCubbin and Patterson (as cited in Patterson & Garwick, 1994) proposed a Double ABC-X Model. They expanded each factor, so for example, “A” encompasses a pile-up of stressors in addition to one precipitating event.

More recently, McCubbin and McCubbin (1989) proposed a Family Adjustment and Adaptation Model that incorporates family life-cycle stage, family typology, and coping skills into a recursively designed framework. Patterson and Garwick (1994) introduced three constructs to enhance understanding of the multiple levels of meaning families assign to stressors and resources. They did this in the context of chronic illness, but their model seems applicable to many other family coping processes as well, and particularly to this study. The three levels include situational meanings, family identity, and family world view, and the authors note that these three are themselves interconnected and not discrete.

Recent developments in stress and coping theory toward family adjustment and adaptation, and its current emphasis on how families construct meaning, undergird this study in several ways. These approaches take a non-pathologizing view of families and focus on the strengths they bring to the coping process, as well as the strengths they develop from it (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1989). In terms of research issues for this study, family stress and coping theory invites consideration of the coping processes families experience as the transition to adolescence introduces multiple stressors into the system over time. It also guides exploration of what meanings parents develop during this transition in terms of their unique circumstances, their family identity, and their world view. Because families tend to seek help from therapists at times when stress overwhelms their coping skills, this framework also lends clinical applicability to this study. A clear sense of how coping processes help non-distressed families navigate a transition to adolescence may inform clinical work with families seeking to strengthen their coping abilities.

Research Questions

Based on these theoretical frameworks, my interview questions for this study were guided by the following research issues:

1. What changes in their sons and daughters did parents first notice: pubertal, emotional, or interactional? What did these changes set in motion in their families, such as new rules, different communication patterns, new areas of concern? How did they cope with these changes?
2. Did this transition reactivate emotional issues from the parents' own adolescence? How did parents make sense of a changing sociocultural context for adolescence in light of their own teenage experience?
3. Did parents view the transition as a source of increased stress? If so, did they interpret this as normative? How did this transition relate to their understanding and experience of midlife development and marital satisfaction?
4. What strengths could these parents identify in themselves and their families that helped them cope with this transition? How was the process of negotiating this transition affecting their understanding of their family identity and world view?