



Coping strategies and marital quality of university student couples
by Kevin Cole

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Stress is prevalent in student marriages yet student couples report high marital quality scores. For this reason the married student population was investigated to determine what resources and responses they utilize to reduce stress.

The problem of this study was to determine the relationship between selected demographic variables, coping strategies and marital quality reported by married student couples. This was done by administering a questionnaire to determine (1) demographic information, (2) coping strategies utilized in response to problems or difficulties (F-COPES), and (3) marital quality (DAS) reported by MSU student couples. Ninety-two couples residing in university student housing completed the questionnaire.

Nine null hypotheses were tested at the $.05$ level of significance. Significant findings included: couples with children reported lower marital quality than couples without children; wives utilized external coping strategies more than their husbands; and length of marriage and marital quality reported are negatively correlated. It was concluded that when internal and external coping strategies are used complementarily, stress in marriage is reduced.

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OF UNIVERSITY STUDENT COUPLES

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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Kevin Cole

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5/16/85
Date

Richard Hoesevill
Chairperson, Graduate Committee

Approved for the Major Department

5-16-85
Date

Donald L. Robson
Head, Major Department

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

5-20-85
Date

Ms Malne
Graduate Dean

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ABSTRACT

Stress is prevalent in student marriages yet student couples report high marital quality scores. For this reason the married student population was investigated to determine what resources and responses they utilize to reduce stress.

The problem of this study was to determine the relationship between selected demographic variables, coping strategies and marital quality reported by married student couples. This was done by administering a questionnaire to determine (1) demographic information, (2) coping strategies utilized in response to problems or difficulties (F-COPES), and (3) marital quality (DAS) reported by MSU student couples. Ninety-two couples residing in university student housing completed the questionnaire.

Nine null hypotheses were tested at the $-.05$ level of significance. Significant findings included: couples with children reported lower marital quality than couples without children; wives utilized external coping strategies more than their husbands; and length of marriage and marital quality reported are negatively correlated. It was concluded that when internal and external coping strategies are used complementarily, stress in marriage is reduced.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Most student marriages are plagued with problems (Bayer 1972). Problems of time, money, communication, and sex, although not unique to student couples, appear to be particularly troublesome due to the multiple roles of student and spouse (Bergen and Bergen 1978; Taifoori 1979; Gruver and Labadie, 1975). Problems specific to student couples (e.g. grades, study time, tuition, and career opportunities) coupled with normative life changes (e.g. beginning parenthood, child launching) and societal changes (e.g. changing roles for women) are demands or needs which call for change, hence are stressor events for the family. Since families seldom deal with a single stressor event, it has been suggested that they experience a "pile up" of stressors particularly in the aftermath of a major stressor such as a major role change for a family member (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981). Clearly many potential areas of stress exist for the student couple.

Despite many studies enumerating the stresses affecting married college students, research indicates that most student marriages are relatively happy. The overall quality of student marriages has been found to be high (Bergen and Bergen, 1978) while the percentage considering divorce relatively low (Gruver and Labadie, 1975). This apparent contradiction is a major focus of this study.

Research by McCubbin and Patterson (1981), Lazarus (1966), Pearlin and Schooler (1978) has raised the question "Why do some families falter under stress while others overcome or even thrive on it?" How do married student couples cope with student and family life stressors? What strategies do they utilize in preventing, avoiding, or controlling emotional and marital distress? While it is not suggested that coping strategies are singularly responsible for fluctuations in marital quality, leading researches on family stress and coping (McCubbin, Olson, and Larsen, 1981) hypothesize that families who utilize a variety of coping responses adapt to stressful situations more successfully than families who utilize single levels of coping responses. Better adaptation to stress is likely to have a positive effect on marital quality.

The two levels of coping responses discussed by McCubbin et. al. (1981) include internal and external coping strategies. Internal coping strategies refer to problem solving responses within the family; external coping strategies refer to the the use of outside resources.

In the present study it is hypothesized that married students who utilize internal and external coping strategies will report greater marital quality than those student couples utilizing single levels of coping responses.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study was:

1. To determine the relationship between coping strategies utilized and marital quality reported by married university students.
2. To study the relationship between presence of children, gender, length of marriage, income, and student status of married university students and marital quality reported.
3. To study the relationship between the presence of children, gender, length of marriage, income, and student status of married university students and coping strategies utilized.

Hypotheses

1. Married students utilizing both levels of coping strategies (internal and external) will report a higher level of marital quality than married students utilizing a single level of coping strategies.
2. Married students with children living at home will utilize external coping strategies more than married students without children.
3. Married students with children living at home will report lower marital quality than married students without children.
4. Wives will utilize external coping strategies more than husbands.
5. Wives will report lower marital quality than husbands.
6. Marital quality of university students will decrease as length of marriage increases.
7. Married students indicating they have adequate income to meet their financial needs will report higher levels of marital quality than married students indicating their financial needs are not adequately met.
8. Graduate students will report lower levels of marital quality than undergraduate students.
9. Married students with only one spouse enrolled in school will report lower levels of marital quality than married students with both spouses enrolled.

Need for the Study

The active processes of family adaptation involving coping strategies within the family as well as in transactions with the community have received limited attention in both research and theory building.

(McCubbin 1979:59)

There is mounting belief among researchers and clinicians that understanding how families cope with stress is just as important as understanding the frequency and severity of life changes and transitions themselves (Coelho, Hamburg, and Adams, 1974; Moos, 1977). The emphasis of this study focuses on the adaptive nature of student couples. Specifically, it is an attempt to determine which coping behaviors are associated with high quality marriages.

The information obtained in this study will serve university counselors and clinicians dealing with troubled individuals and couples. The study will provide (1) demographic information; (2) statistics on the present state of marital quality of the student population; and (3) the efficacy of various coping strategies utilized by student couples. Information provided by this study presents an opportunity to positively influence coping abilities of couples/families seeking counselor aid. By focusing on student couples reporting high levels of marital quality and ascertaining coping strategies utilized by these couples, helping professionals can offer a positive role model to those couples coping less effectively with married student stress.

General Procedures

The problem of this study was to determine the relationship between coping strategies utilized and marital quality reported by university student couples. The relationship was determined by administering F-Copes (Olson and McCubbin, 1981), an instrument created to identify coping strategies; a demographic questionnaire designed to obtain background information; and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) a measure of marital quality. The instruments were delivered and retrieved by this researcher.

The review of literature included research pertaining to marital quality, married students, stress and coping. Research cited in the review of literature coupled with responses obtained from the instruments were aimed at more fully understanding the relationship between coping and marital quality and thereby the needs of the married university students. By determining the efficacy of various coping strategies it is hoped that a positive role model may be forwarded.

The subjects of the investigation consisted of a random sample of all couples residing in married student housing on the Montana State University campus.

Definitions

1. Adaptation -- The ability of a couple/family to change its power structure, role relationships and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress (Olson et al., 1979).

2. Coping -- The overt and covert behaviors individuals use to prevent, alleviate, or respond to stressful situations (George, 1980:30).
3. Couple/Family -- Any husband-wife dyad occupying married student housing.
4. Crisis -- The amount of incapacitatedness or disorganization in the family where resources are inadequate (Hill, 1949).
5. Family life cycle -- The span of time from the beginning of a family with the marriage of a young couple, the bearing, rearing and launching of their children, through the time when they are again alone together, until retirement and inevitable death of one or both (Duvall, 1971:144).
6. Hardships -- Those demands on the family unit specifically associated with the stressor event.
7. Marital Quality -- The subjective evaluation of an individual's marital relationship (Spanier, 1980).
8. Strains -- Those enduring problems that have the potential for arousing threat (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).
9. Stress - A state which arises from an actual or perceived demand - capability imbalance in functioning, and which is characterized by a nonspecific demand for adaptive behavior (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981).
10. Stressor -- Those life events or occurrences of sufficient magnitude to bring about change in the family system (Hill, 1949).

Limitations

The population of the study included all married student couples living in family housing on the campus of Montana State University (MSU).

Summary

More than one-fourth of all university students are married (Gruver and Labadie, 1975). This fact coupled with research

indicating that married student life is stressful (Khan and Sharpley, 1980) indicates a need to further study the married student population in hopes of providing those coping ineffectively with effective means of preventing, alleviating, and controlling stress. By determining coping strategies utilized by student couples in response to stress, and by measuring marital quality reported by those couples, it is hoped that the efficacy of coping strategies can be ascertained. It is hypothesized that couples utilizing both internal and external coping strategies in response to problems or difficulties will adapt more successfully than couples using single levels of coping strategies.

A review of literature coupled with results from this study shall enable the reader and this researcher to better understand the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of married student couples.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature was reviewed in the following areas: marital quality, married students, stress and coping. The purpose is to determine which coping strategies are associated with marital quality of married university students. Current knowledge of each area of this literature review is requisite to understanding the effects of coping on the marital quality of student couples.

Marital Quality

The importance of marital satisfaction to satisfaction with total quality of life has been well documented (Andrews and Witney, 1976; Bharaducy and Wilkening, 1977; Bubolz et al., 1980; Cambell et al., 1976; Glenn and Weaver, 1981; Jackson, 1979; Mancini, 1978; Reltig, 1980). A sound marital and family life has significant positive impact on an individual. Hence, as the quality of marriage is strengthened, so is the quality of life (Retting and Bubolz, 1983). It seems worthwhile, therefore, to pursue quality of marriage research not only focusing on areas of weakness but also focusing on areas of strength. Research of this nature contributes to those who are helping couples/families deal with their weaknesses by focusing on those who have displayed strengths.

"Marital quality" as a concept has been gaining greater usage among marriage and family researchers, since it includes the entire range of variables which have been the traditional dependent variables in marital research (i.e. marital adjustment, marital satisfaction, marital happiness) (Spanier and Lewis, 1980: 825).

Overall, marital quality is defined for the purpose of this study as the subjective evaluation of a married couple's relationship on a number of dimensions and evaluations:

The range of evaluations constitutes a continuum reflecting numerous characteristics of marital interaction and marital functioning. High marital quality, therefore, is associated with good adjustment, adequate communication, a high level of marital happiness, integration, and a high degree of satisfaction with the relationship. The definition does not convey a fixed picture of discrete categories, i.e. a high-versus low-quality marriage, but rather suggests the existence of a continuum ranging from high to low.

(Lewis and Spanier, 1979:269)

Due to the sheer volume of marital quality research it is out of the scope of this study to review the literature extensively. However, the major contributions which have captured the greatest amount of interest pertaining to this study shall be reviewed.

Specifically, literature pertaining to (1) the family life cycle and marital quality, (2) the presence of children and marital quality, and (3) the focus of this study, married students and marital quality. For a further review of marital quality see Spanier and Lewis (1980).

Marital Quality and the Family Life Cycle

Marital quality research continues to be of interest in many disciplines despite the theoretical, methodological, and measurement problems it presents (Retting and Bubolz, 1983). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the family life cycle research. The research has received considerable attention yielding contradictory and confusing results. In their review of research on the quality of marriage during the 1970's, Spanier and Lewis (1980) highlighted the continued interests of researchers in the effects of children on marital quality and the changes in perceived marital quality over the marital career. They found that since the first empirical exploration of marital quality and family life cycle (Hamilton, 1929), many researchers have found a U-shaped curvilinear model. The U-shaped curve refers to the high level of marital quality beginning with marriage, dropping after the birth of the first child, and eventually returning to a high level in the later stages of life. Rollins and Feldman (1970), for example, in their study of middle-class couples in Syracuse, and Rollins and Cannon (1974), in their nonprobability sample of Mormons, found a U-shaped curve. Spanier et al. (1975) also discovered a U-shaped pattern for the marital adjustment of their random sample of working class couples in Ohio. (See also Burr, 1970; Figley, 1973).

However, other researchers have either found no curvilinear relationship (Spanier et al., 1975), or they concluded that the research was flawed (Nock, 1979; Spanier et al. 1979). Nock (1979)

found that marital quality was not so much affected by family life cycle per se, but rather by two variables: the length of marriage and the presence of children.

In a 1983 study by Anderson, Russell, and Schumm, an attempt was made to clear up some of the controversy concerning perceived marital quality and the family life cycle. The study addressed three main areas of controversy: (1) the utility of the family life cycle category as a predictor of marital quality; (2) the shape of the relationship; and (3) the influence of conventionalization (which has been defined by Edmonds, 1976).

The 'conventional' or socially desirable manner in which to respond to questions about the quality of one's marriage is to report that things are going well.

Three research questions were generated to address these areas of interest. Research Question 1 attempted to determine what predictors or combinations of predictors account for the greatest proportion of variance in perceived marital quality; more specifically the criterion variables of (a) marital satisfaction, (b) regard, (c) empathy, (d) discussion, and (e) self-disclosure. Research Question 2 asked if the relationship between perceived marital quality and category of the family life cycle was best predicted by a linear or a curvilinear model; and Research Question 3 asked if the relationship between perceived marital quality and family life cycle categories were an artifact of marital conventionalization.

The results of that study stated that: (1) both family life cycle and total number of children were significant predictors of

marital quality but length of marriage was not; (2) marital quality was shown to be accounted for best by a statistically significant curvilinear, U-shaped trend over the family life cycle; and (3) marital conventionalization were not found to be responsible for reports of improved marital quality at later stages of the family life cycle (Russell, Anderson, and Schumm, 1983:127).

Olson and McCubbin (1983) in an intensive study of families over the family life cycle confirmed the findings of a great deal of research indicating that marital satisfaction, indeed, tends to have a U-shaped curve over the family life cycle. The seven stages of the family life cycle created by Olson and McCubbin (1983) follow:

- Stage 1. Young couples without children
- Stage 2. Families with preschool children
- Stage 3. Families with school-age children
- Stage 4. Families with adolescents in the home
- Stage 5. Launching families (adolescents leaving the home)
- Stage 6. Empty nest families (all children gone)
- Stage 7. Families in retirement

The authors found that beginning with Stage 1, family satisfaction, including marital satisfaction, declines steadily until children begin leaving the home (stage 5). Schram (1979) explains the increase in "post parental" marital satisfaction as a result of relaxation of sex roles between parents. Women are freer to pursue interests outside the home and men find themselves with decreased financial responsibility and more opportunity to be passive and dependent.

Although differences in marital satisfaction across the family life cycle were found to be statistically significant for the large sample (N = 2,692). Olson et al. (1983) caution that the practical value of these findings account for very little variance in marital satisfaction scores, of greater importance was the effect of children.

The Effects of Children on Marital Quality

One of the most surprising summaries of the marital research of the 1960's was the conclusion that children tended to detract rather than contribute to the marital quality of their parents (Hicks and Platt, 1970). Research in the 1970's has continued to confirm this relationship (Lewis and Spanier, 1980). Luckey and Bain, 1970; Feldman, 1971; Ryder, 1973; Russell, 1974; Rollins and Galligan, 1978 and others have found that the birth of a child has a negative impact on most marriages, especially for wives.

Although the majority of the literature concerning marital quality and transition to parenthood focused on the dissatisfactions with becoming a parent, a few researchers (Russell, 1974; Luckey and Bain, 1970) reported the satisfactions children brought to parents. Parents of low quality marriages especially, reported the presence of children to be a major source of mutual satisfaction (Luckey and Bain, 1970).

Transition to parenthood research has been a popular focus of inquiry particularly for those who conceptualize the family as an integrated social system. The primary concern in past research has

been whether the addition of a first child creates a crisis for the marital dyad as it evolves from a two-person to a three-person system (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine, 1983:567). Again the evidence is inconclusive, Dyer (1963); Lemasters, (1957); Wainwright, (1966) conclude that, indeed, transition to parenthood is a crisis, while Hobbs et al. (1977) has stressed the positive consequences of having a baby, while still others are somewhere in between, Rollins and Galligan (1978).

A longitudinal study of 72 couples in 1983 was undertaken by Belsky, Spanier and Rovine. The couples were studied from the last trimester of pregnancy through the ninth postpartum month. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), (Spanier, 1976), was used to determine the stability and change in marriage across the transition to parenthood. The results of the study indicate that the transition to parenthood results in modest, but significant changes in the marital relationship which most would regard as somewhat unfavorable. Not only does marital quality decline following the transition to parenthood, but also the decline continues as additional children are added to the family (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine, 1983:575).

These findings are consistent with most of the current evidence that:

...the presence of dependent children in the home puts a 'crunch' on the time, energy, and economic resources of parents and results in a decrease of marital satisfaction of parents.

(Rollins and Galligan, 1978:83)

While the majority of the research indicates the negative impact children have on marriage, Menaghan (1983) concludes that family

transitions were not responsible for fluctuations in marital quality, rather the efficacy of coping strategies determined the quality of marriage. This key concept will be addressed in greater detail later in this review.

While children appear to have a significant impact on the marital quality of their parents, researchers using multivariate analyses report that variables of gender, length of marriage, income, and time spent together also effect marital quality, but to a lesser degree than children (Lewis and Spanier, 1980).

Hicks and Platt (1970), Lewis and Spanier (1980), and more recently Patterson and McCubbin (1984), all suggest that men are more satisfied with their marriages than their wives. It appears that women have a greater decrease in marital satisfaction during the childbearing and childrearing years than do men. Mothers report significantly greater difficulties than fathers in adjusting to their infants (Lewis and Spanier, 1980). While Ryder (1973) suggests that fathers seemed to pay less attention to their wives during these years, Komarovsky (1976) contends that wives bear a far greater burden of childrearing, thus accounting for a greater degree of marital dissatisfaction than their husbands.

Length of marriage research has also yielded contradictory results. As stated previously, Anderson, Russell, and Schumm (1983) contend that the family life cycle and total number of children were significant predictors of marital quality, but length of marriage was not. Nock (1979), however, reports that simple years married may have more explanatory power than the family life cycle in explaining

fluctuations in marital quality over time. Both studies concur, however, that there is a U-shaped curve of marital quality over time. Marital quality decreases as time and stage of family life cycle progress until the "post parental" stage.

While variables of income and time spent together have been reported as effecting marital quality, the relationship is not clear. Bergen and Bergen (1978) found it was more the source of income rather than the total amount of income that effects marital quality (e.g. income from wages versus loans). Research generated in the 50's and 60's has been virtually unanimous in its support for the hypothesis that socioeconomic rewards such as income and social prestige levels are causally linked to favorable marital outcomes (Jorgensen, 1979). More recent research, however, generalizes that income and prestige levels alone are unrelated to perceived happiness (Glenn and Weaver, 1978); marital stability (Galligan and Bahr, 1978); and marital quality (Jorgensen, 1979). While lack of adequate finances have been found to be stressors for the family (Olson and McCubbin, 1983), a direct relationship between income and marital quality is not justified by current research.

The situation is similar to that of time married couples spend together. Husband-wife interaction has consistently been found to be an important determinant of positive marital evaluation (White, 1983). Ana Marie Williams (1979), working from the theoretical rationale forwarded by Stuart (1969), maintains that attraction and liking are associated with the exchange of positive behaviors, while repulsion and disliking are associated with negative, punitive, and

coercive social exchanges. Her work suggests an "access opportunity" hypothesis namely, that marital partners who are usually made happy by their interactions will arrange to spend more time together. An effort is made, therefore, to gain access to the rewarding person and thereby arrange the opportunity to be reinforced (Williams, 1979). One purpose of White's (1983) study was to see how the quantity and quality of marital interaction (as recorded on time lines) were related to marital satisfaction (as measured by the Locke-Wallace (1959), marital adjustment scale. The results of the study report that the quality of interaction influences the quantity of interaction, as does the quantity of interaction influence the quality, and they both affect marital satisfaction. It is not the amount of time spent together nor just the quality of time spent together that affects marital quality, it appears to be the proportion of available time and quality of the interaction (Williams, 1979).

White (1983) also examined the relationship between spousal interaction and marital happiness. Reviewing the literature she found that Burr (1973), Miller (1976) and Snyder (1979) all found a strong positive effect on marital satisfaction and spousal interaction. In fact, Spanier (1979:283) stated the relationship in one of his second order propositions that: the greater the interaction, the greater the marital quality.

Her survey study of 2,034 married men and women participating in the labor force suggests that both men and women participating in the labor force reduces the amount of spousal interaction. In addition,

interaction was reduced by the presence of children in the household, and division of labor. White found the most important determinant of interaction is not time constraints like work hours or children but rather the quality of the marriage. The finding of a feedback loop between interaction and marital happiness tends to suggest that it is not the interaction that effects marital quality rather it is the quality that effects the interaction.

While a host of factors such as: self concept (Hall and Valine, 1977); self-esteem (Filsinger and Lamke, 1983); sex role competency (Bahr et. al., 1983) have been posited as having a significant effect on marital quality, they are not critical concerns of the present study. Of greater importance to this study are those factors specifically effecting married university students. While marital quality research appears to be pervasive, the population of married students has yet to receive a proportionate share of this essential research. The following section reviews the major contributions to marital quality of university student research.

Married Students

Although one-fourth of all students attending colleges in the United States are married, few studies have focused on their specific plight in marriage (Gruver and Labadie, 1975). Gruver and Labadie (1975) in an attempt to address this issue, investigated 312 married college students living in a university student housing complex. The overall finding of the study reported that over 70% of the married college student population viewed their marriages as either extremely

happy or quite happy; only 2% of those responding viewed their marriages as quite unhappy or extremely unhappy. Despite the fact that their marriages were found to be relatively happy, they were not, of course, without problems. Both husband and wife agreed that sex and communication were the greatest problems, followed by a lack of recreation time, lack of money, and a need for more friends. The lack of time contributed to all areas of dissatisfaction and was not identified by a comparable nonstudent population to be a significant problem (Craven, 1974).

Gruver and Labadie's (1975) study concurred with Bayer's (1972) study, which concluded that most student marriages are plagued with problems, even the relatively happy ones. Marital problems he stated often carried over into college work and vice versa.

It is unfortunate that society loses trained talent due to the dropout rate of married students, but also because the married person may be deprived of many benefits that a college education could provide, including the satisfaction that comes from the full development of one's potential.

(Bayer, 1972:607)

Focusing on the student/marital status of graduate student couples as an indicator of marital adjustment, McRoy and Fisher (1982) compared groups where only the husband was a student (HOS), where both spouses were students (BSS) and where only the wife was a student (WOS). The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) and a background questionnaire were administered to husbands and wives separately. A 2x3 Analyses of Variance was used to test the effects of student/marital status and sex of respondents on DAS scores.

The results suggest that marital adjustment is affected by student/marital status of the spouses. Specifically, if only the husband was a student (HOS), marital adjustment was lower than both other groups (BSS, WOS). However, the findings suggest that variables other than student status relate to marital adjustment of the couples. When only the wife was a student, family income was higher and couples were older and had been married longer; when only the husband was a student, more preschool children were reported. Along with the presence of children and family income, there also appeared to be a relation between the primary breadwinner and marital adjustment (McRoy and Fisher, 1982).

Bergen and Bergen (1978) also found a relation between the bread winner and marital adjustment. In their study of the quality of marriages of university students in relation to sources of financial support, they found that stereotypical roles of males and females are still evident in marriages. Although the overall quality of marriages was found to be high, as determined by the DAS (Spanier 1976), statistical measures found the quality to be significantly higher if both spouses were enrolled simultaneously and if the couples did not depend on loans as a major source of income. There was more disagreement and lower DAS scores when the wife provided major financial support. Even minor support by the husband improved the marital relationship (Bergen and Bergen, 1978). The marital adjustment was highest when the husband provided the major source of financial support and if both spouses were enrolled in school.

In a study focusing on married students, Davidson, Balswick, and Halverson (1983) examined the relationship between affective self-disclosure and marital adjustment. This relationship was explained by the use of Equity Theory, an Offspring of Social Exchange Theory. Equity Theory predicts that when individuals find themselves participating in inequitable relationships, they will become distressed. The more inequitable the relationships, the more distress individuals will feel (Walster, Walster, and Berscheid, 1978:6).

One hundred sixty-two couples in university student housing complexes participated in the study. The relationship was tested by the use of the Affective Self-disclosure Scale for Couples (ASDC) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The results of the study support equity theory notions about the relations between discrepancies in spousal affective self-disclosure and marital adjustment. Imbalances in affective self-disclosure were, in fact, related to lower marital adjustment.

Conversely, a balance in levels of affective self-disclosure exchange between partners was considered to serve as a stabilizer producing feelings of equity (Davidson, Balswick, and Halverson, 1983). Not only did the reception of self-disclosure serve as a reward; also the exchange of disclosure at similar levels of intimacy seems to have a rewarding quality (Dahr and Banikiotes, 1979).

The tremendous amount of literature pertaining to roles, role strain, role congruence etc. has not escaped married student literature. While previous literature focused on the male student and concluded that role strain was particularly difficult for student

fathers (Isben, 1967; Hepker and Kloyd, 1974), present research has primarily focused on role strain of student mothers (VanMeter and Agronow, 1982; Calhoun, 1980; Bronzaft, 1974).

Komarovsky (1976) reported that while college men endorse equal opportunity in occupational and political positions for women, at the same time they believe the major responsibility for childrearing belongs to women. These men expected their wives to be homemakers and childrearers. Evidence today indicates that college women are preparing themselves for future work with the expectation of combining employment and family life (Epstein and Bronzaft, 1974). The increased employment of married women and the evidence that married women receive little help with housework from their husbands suggest an important source of stress, including role strain and role overload (Blake, 1974; Hoffreth and Moore, 1979).

The multiple roles of wife, homemaker, student, and mother may lead to stress and strain on the marital relationship (VanMeter and Agronow, 1982). However, the stress of multiple roles may be partially ameliorated through preventative strategies or coping strategies such as: establishing role priorities; family members role awareness; value clarification; and family goal setting (VanMeter and Agronow, 1982:137). The most conclusive findings of studies on role strain states that the husband's positive support helps to alleviate strain for the married college women (Berkove, 1979; Brandenburg, 1974; Epersson, 1975; Roach, 1976).

The experience of being a student or being married to a student is accompanied by tension as roles are developing or changing. The period of a person's life when he or she is studying for a university degree is one that often lacks formal external social structure. So marital relationships at this time would also seem to be under stress.

(Khan and Sharpley, 1980:202)

Flowers and Hughes (1975) suggested that the greater the similarity or congruence of value systems of spouses, the less stress would be on the marital relationship. Khan and Sharpley (1980) tested this hypothesis. The study measured the level of marital adjustment to determine if (1) student marriages were more or less satisfied than the norm and (2) there was a relationship between value systems and marital adjustment.

The respondents were administered the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT)(1959) and the Flowers and Hughes Values for Marriage Analysis (FHVMA)(1975). The FHVMA is a theoretical framework quantifying value systems in marriage. The six value systems include: (1) security oriented; (2) self-oriented; (3) tradition-oriented; (4) success-oriented; (5) people-oriented; and (6) reality oriented.

The results of this study suggest that student marriages are not at a greater risk than non-student marriages, in fact, student marital quality was found to be higher than the norm (set by the LWMAT). But there was no significant relationship between congruency of primary value systems and marital adjustment for couples. It appeared to the researcher that:

Whatever tensions are being experienced by this sample of student marriages would seem to be alleviated before they become a serious threat to the stability of marriage.

(Khan and Sharpley, 1980:203)

They concluded that there were more powerful factors at work within student marriages than the obvious detrimental ones most commonly suggested (e.g. lack of finances, lack of congruity of interest areas, insecurity regarding future employment). These factors included "an effective internal adjustment process," in a word, the students could cope.

Despite the studies depicting married student stress and strain (Calhoun, 1980; VanMeter and Agronow, 1982; Barnhill, 1975; Eddy, 1977; Spanier, 1980; Bergen and Bergen, 1978), the overall quality of student marriages has consistently been found to be high (Khan and Sharpley, 1980; Gruver and Labadie, 1975; Bergen and Bergen, 1978; McRoy and Fisher, 1982). The evidence points to the adaptive nature of this particular population in the effective manner in which they prevent, alleviate or respond to stressful situations.

The ensuing body of literature to be reviewed shall illuminate this further.

Family Stress and Coping Theory

Family researchers, beginning with the work of Reuben Hill (1949) have attempted to identify which families, under what conditions, using what resources and coping behaviors are able to make positive adaptations to stressful situations (McCubbin and

Patterson, 1981). The purpose of this study is to identify which student couples are using what kind of coping behaviors to adapt to married student life. The foundation and theory upon which the proposed research is built stems from Hill's (1958, 1949) original ABCX model of family stress and McCubbin and Patterson's (1981) revision - the double ABCX model.

A brief review of these models are requisite to an understanding of family stress and coping theory utilized in this research.

The ABCX Model

A (the stressor event) -- interacting with B (the family's crisis meeting resources) -- interacting with C (the definition the family makes of the event) -- produce X (the crisis).

While Hill's (1958, 1949) model focused primarily on the pre-crisis variables which account for differences in family vulnerability to a stressor event, and whether and to what degree the outcome is a crisis for the family, McCubbin and Patterson's (1981) model incorporates the factor of a family's effort to deal with the stressor "over time."

Double ABCX Model

The Double ABCX Model adds post crisis variables to Hill's original model in an effort to describe: a) the additional/life stressors and change which may make family adaptation more difficult to achieve; (b) the critical psychological and social factors families call upon and use in managing crisis situations; (c) the

processes families engage in to achieve satisfactory resolution and; (d) the outcome of these family efforts (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981:9).

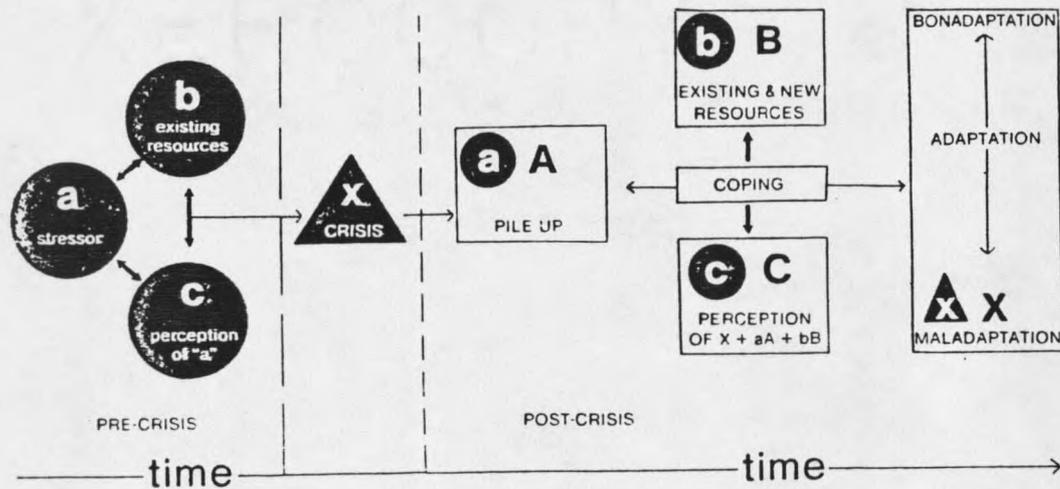


Figure 1. Double ABCX model family adaptation model (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981).

Burr (1973) in an effort to render clarity to Hill's (1958, 1949) model modified the ABCX model to include two lay concepts, vulnerability and regenerative power. For example, the stressor event (spouse(s) enrolled in school) and related hardships (e.g. barriers to communication, loss of income and/or homemaker) and the family's vulnerability (e.g. diminished, absence or paralysis of family resources) influences the amount of crisis in the family. The definition the family makes of the seriousness of the change(s) influences the family's vulnerability to crisis. Concomitantly

regenerative power explains the variation in the family system's ability to recover from the disruptiveness that results from a stressor event (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981:151).

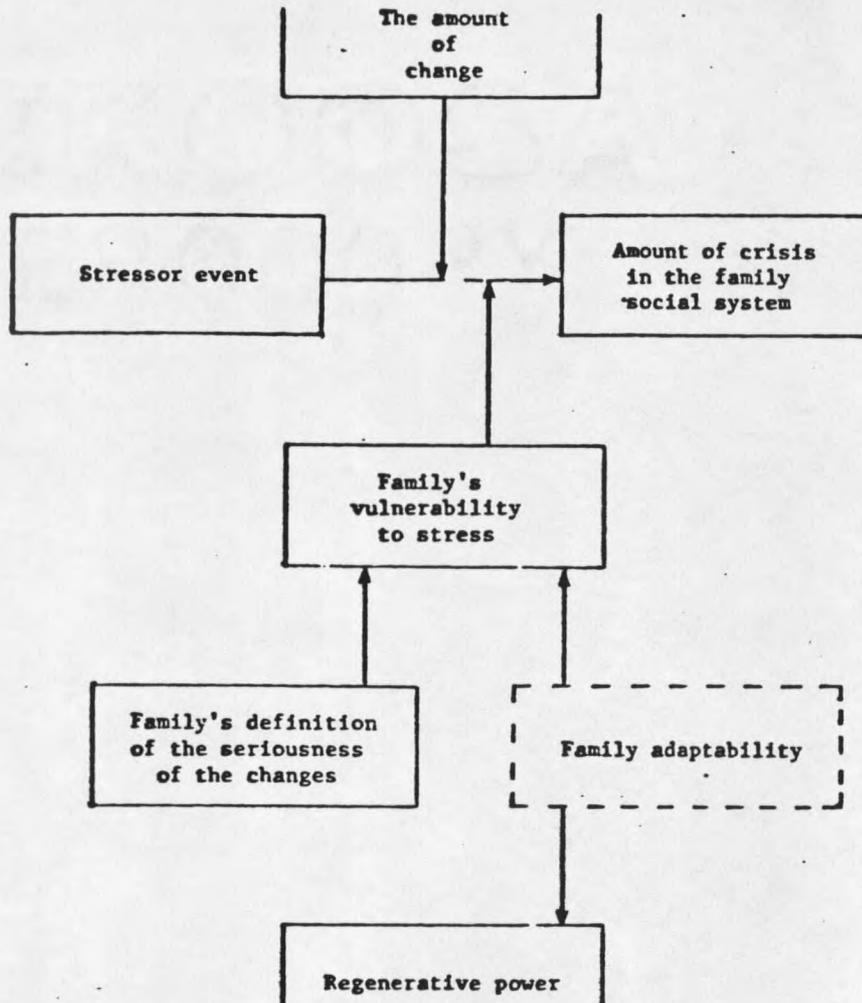


Figure 2. Vulnerability and regenerative power. (For further information and detail, see McCubbin and Patterson, 1981)

Family Stressors and Stress

Although the concept of family stress has been utilized with considerable frequency in both clinical and research literature, it was frequently used without explicit definition. For the sake of this research and in an effort to establish a link to physiological (Selye, 1976) and psychological (Mikhail, 1981; Lazarus, 1966) concepts of stress, a stressor shall be defined as a life event or occurrence in or impacting upon the family unit which produces change in the family social system. Family hardships are defined as those demands on the family unit specifically associated with the stressor event. Family stress is defined as a state which arises from an actual or perceived demand - capability imbalance in the family's functioning and which is characterized by a non-specific demand for adaptive behavior (McCubbin and Patterson, 1981).

Normative, Non-Normative Events and Family Stress

Of the two types of stressors, normative and non-normative, non-normative stressors have gained greater prominence in family stress research due to a greater amount of social interest and concern. Non-normative events are those events which may occur in addition to those which are typical and predictable. Such events may occur concomitantly but are independent of normative transitions. The impact of tornadoes on families (Erickson et al., 1976), World War II separation and reunion (Hill, 1949), and family adjustment to loss of family members (Lieberman, 1971) are a sample of non-normative events which have been investigated.

Normative events, transitions and stressors, however, are the focus of this study.

From a sociological perspective many of the difficult problems with which people cope are not unusual problems impinging on exceptional people in rare situations but are persistent hardships experienced by those engaged in mainstream activities within major institutions.

(Pearlin and Schooler 1978:3)

Whereas many studies of stress and coping have examined people faced with unusual threats and trials, such as impending surgery (Jan's, 1958), the present study focuses on people engaged in very ordinary pursuits. It has been assumed by this researcher that married and college life constitute normative events.

Normative events are those which evolve in the context of the family life cycle. They are both typical and expectable and range from the transition to spousehood to widowhood and death. Although these events or transitions are typical or expected, they may still be stressor events.

Normative Family Stress

All families, functional and dysfunctional, student and non-student experience stress - that is, change at various times throughout the life cycle (Boss, 1980). Individual and family systems change over time (Olson and McCubbin, 1983). In the course of their lives, both the individual and the family system must deal with various developmental tasks. Eric Erickson (1976) contends that individuals must master a succession of psychosocial crises. For instance the young married individual must master a sense of identity versus a sense of identity confusion. Also the young married

individual must master a sense of intimacy with his/her spouse versus a sense of isolation. The young family, on the other hand, must establish a mutually satisfying marriage and learn to cope with energy depletion and lack of privacy as parents (Duvall, 1977). The family struggles with changes in structure (e.g. the addition of children), shifts in family roles (e.g. spouse returning to school), and tension created by the needs of the individual family members. "Family stress emerges as a consequence of ongoing development and evolution, structural reorganization, and unpredictable disruptions" (Olson and McCubbin, 1983, p. 115).

The most frequently reported stressors and strains are very similar between student and nonstudent couples. Olson and McCubbin (1983) found the major sources of stress to be (1) intrafamily and marital stressors; (2) finance and business stressors; and (3) work/family transitions. Studies of student populations report similar findings, however, college couples/families experience more stress due to the additional role of being a student (Stats, 1983).

Extensive research on stress cites life changes (Holmes and Rahe, 1967), role conflict and role overload (Kahn et al., 1964) as frequent sources of stress. Since married students have experienced an additional set of life changes associated with marriage including a change in status, a role change and probably increased time pressure, married students seem likely to experience more stress.

(Stats, 1983:179)

Married Students and Stress

The stress of married college life has been documented in several studies. Heplar and Cloyd (1974) found the husband college

student to experience stress of role overload; VanMeter and Agronow (1982) found wife students to be experiencing stress from multiple roles; Gilbert (1982) concluded that graduate school produces familial stress and is potentially obstructive to family life; Gruver and Labadie (1975) found areas of sex, communication, time, money and friendships to be particularly stressful for the university couples and families; Bergen and Bergen (1978) found that the sources of income could stress the marital relations of student couples. Barnhill, 1975; Eddy, 1977 suggested that the experience of being a married student or the spouse of a married student is accompanied by tension and stress.

Since, in most cases, there is a change produced by a spouse or spouses enrolled in college that effects the family social system, married college life is a stressor event. Traditionally family stress has been viewed as dysfunctional and problematic; prior research focused on the negative aspects of stress. Currently, however, there appears to be a shift away from the dysfunctional view of family stress to an interest in why some families are better able to endure hardships than others. Understanding how people deal with stress is just as important as understanding the frequency and severity of stress itself (Olson and McCubbin, 1983).

The focus of this study, however, is not the stressful nature of married student life but rather the focus is on how married student couples and families cope with the stressful situation.

Coping

By coping we refer to the things that people do to avoid being harmed by life-strains. At the very heart of this concept is the fundamental assumption that people are actively responsive to forces that impinge upon them. Since many of these impinging forces are social in their origins, the understanding of coping is a prerequisite for understanding the impact that societies come to exert on their members.

(Pearlin and Schooler, 1978:2)

Like stress before it, coping is rapidly becoming an enormously popular and increasingly ambiguous concept (Menaghan, 1983). Due to this ambiguity it is necessary at this time to specify our conceptualization of coping. Essentially, the concept is used to refer to any response to external life-strains that serve to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress. Thus, we regard coping as inseparable both from the life-strains experienced by people and from the state of their inner emotional life (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).

Social resources, psychological resources, and specific coping responses are dimensions of coping. The primary distinction is that resources refer not to what people do, but to what is available to them in developing their coping repertoires (responses). Basically, social resources are represented in the interpersonal networks of people. They include family, classmates, friends, neighbors, and voluntary associations.

Psychological resources are the personality characteristics that people draw upon to help them withstand threats posed by events and objects in their environment. These resources include: self-esteem, self denigration, and mastery (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).

Specific coping responses are the behaviors, cognitions and perceptions in which people engage when actually contending with their life problems. The psychological resources represent some of the things people "are", coping responses represent some of the things people "do" and one of particular importance to this study.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) have posited three major types of coping that are distinguished from one another by the nature of their functions. These are: (1) responses that change the situation out of which strainful experience arises; (2) responses that control the meaning of the strainful experience after it occurs but before the emergence of stress; and (3) responses that function more for the control of stress itself after it has emerged.

While responses that modify the situation (e.g. negotiations in marriage, dropping out of school or reducing workload) represent the most direct way to cope with life-strains, it is surprising that it is not a more commonly used type of coping (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). In circumstances where coping does not succeed in changing the situation, the stressful impact of the problem may be buffered by responses that function to control the meaning of the problem (e.g. making positive comparisons, selective ignoring). These responses that control the meaning of the problem are the most commonly employed type of coping response (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). The third type of coping functions neither to alter the stressful situation nor to create congenial perceptions about it, rather this type of coping functions to manage the stress (e.g. denial, optimistic faith, emotional discharge).

To summarize, coping is not a unidimensional behavior. Coping functions at a number of levels and is attained by a plethora of behaviors, cognitions and perceptions. It is useful, moreover, that coping responses be distinguished from what we have identified as psychological resources for coping, those personality characteristics that minimize threat to self. As important as psychological resources may be in confronting life-strains, we cannot completely understand coping without looking beyond the personality attributes of individuals to the specific responses to problems in different social roles (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978:8).

Are there some coping responses and resources that are more effective than others?

The Efficacy of Coping

The efficacy of coping must be judged on how well it prevents hardships from resulting in emotional stress. To what extent do coping responses affect the relationship between the life-strains people experience and the emotional stress they feel? While Pearlin and Schooler (1978) point out that the same coping strategies are not equally effective in all role areas, what coping mechanisms actually work best?

Studying the efficacy of coping, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) examined the coping strategies family members used when faced with problems in four domains of family life: marriage, parenthood, household economics, and occupational goals and activities. Utilizing regression analyses, they found that when compared with

