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A psychological process by which parents incorporate humor into their relationships with their children, aged birth to six.

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A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS BY WHICH PARENTS

INCORPORATE HUMOR INTO THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

WITH THEIR CHILDREN, AGED BIRTH TO SIX

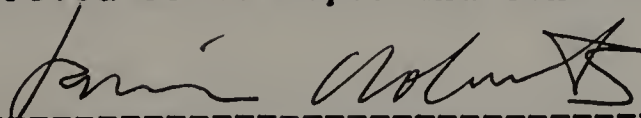A Dissertation Presented

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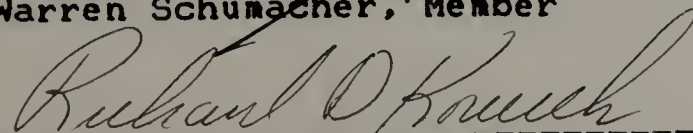

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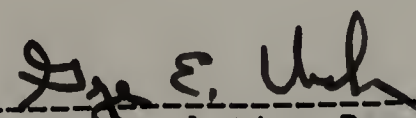Approved as to style and content by:

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ABSTRACT

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS BY WHICH PARENTS

INCORPORATE HUMOR INTO THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

WITH THEIR CHILDREN, AGED BIRTH TO SIX

May, 1988

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This research was an investigation of the use of humor
by parents of children aged birth to 6 years. Based in the
phenomenological tradition, the study used parents' accounts
of their own experiences as the ground from which to
generate substantive theory. The grounded theory method of
constant comparative analysis was used to uncover the nature
of the interactional process between parents and children
when humorous incidents occurred.

Qualitative data was collected in four small group
interviews with a total of 17 parents. Data analysis
highlighted the difference between incidents in which
parents effectively incorporated humor and the "worst case
scenarios" in which they did not. A psychological shift on
the part of the parent was identified as the factor which
could differentiate the humorous incidents from the "worst
case scenarios." This shift involved an instantaneous

interruption (<u>letting up</u>) of a stressful parent-child interactional chain and a change in the emphasis of the situation (<u>shifting frames</u>).

This change in emphasis was accounted for by the postulation of three distinct psychological frames of reference which influence parents' perceptions and behavior. The <u>Utility Frame of Reference</u> was defined as tthe single-minded pursuit of purposeful, predictable outcomes. The <u>Meta-utility (beyond utility) Frame</u> referred to an openness to multiple interpretations of events. When parents function in this frame, the unexpected is predictable, surprises are intentional, silliness is practical and fun is useful. An intermediate frame, labelled the <u>Ambivalence Frame</u>, implied the dilemma parents face about whether to laugh in a particular situation (Meta-utility Frame) or to remain serious (Utility Frame).

Participants' ideas were integrated into a composite definition of sense of humor in parenting: the ability to look for and laugh about the funny, absurd, ironical side of daily life and the willingness to use that ability. The many ways parents saw themselves maintaining their sense of humor included taking time alone, making human connections with other adults, and staying connected on a regular basis with their children through playful, enjoyable activities.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

An advertisement a few years ago for the Peace Corps
showed a glass tumbler filled halfway with water and asked
the question, "Is this glass half-full or half-empty?" The
text of the ad implied that readers who considered the glass
half-full were prime candidates for Peace Corps service,
being optimistic and inclined to look for what is present in
a situation rather than what is missing.

The study of the family in North American society has
long been a history of seeing half-empty glass tumblers,
while ignoring the water in the bottom half. We have
focused so long on weaknesses in today's families that we've
ignored their strengths" (Curran, 1983, p. 13). To believe
that families have inherent strengths and that there is
reason for hope about "the family" as a basic social unit
may seem to some a bit like Pollyanna--excessively
optimistic--or the ostrich--naively ignorant of social
problems. This belief seems a logical extension of the
"either-or" fallacy implicit in the question posed by the
Peace Corps ad, for there actually is a third answer which
supersedes the first two: the glass tumbler is both half-
full and half-empty. By venturing into the study of
families with this "both-and" approach, one can discover and

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describe family strengths and resources without ignoring problems and crises (Curran, 1983; Hill, 1949; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

This proposed research study will be conducted within two frames of reference, both of which currently enjoy increasing acceptance and popularity among professionals. The first is the "Building Family Strengths" movement which works to give families support, encouragement and methods for looking to themselves and their own resources, rather than to experts and institutions, to give their lives meaning and value. The University of Nebraska has sponsored national "Building Family Strengths" symposia for the past 8 years (Van Zandt, et al., 1986) while Penn State University's Eastern Regional "Building Family Strengths" symposium will meet for the fourth time in the spring of 1988. The Family Resource Coalition is a national organization of over 1,000 grassroots, community -based family centers, dedicated to helping families identify, utilize and develop their own resources.

The second frame of reference for this study is the growing attention being given to the power of humor, laughter and playfulness to promote healthy, adaptive functioning. The Institute for the Advancement of Human Behavior in California has sponsored major conferences on the "The Power of Laughter and Play" for the past five years, and the Sagamore Institute in New York state

sponsored its 2nd annual conference on "The Positive Power of Humor and Creativity" in the spring of 1987.

The Peace Corps' glass tumbler which turned out to be both half-full and half-empty serves as a metaphor for an additional theme which weaves itself throughout this dissertation. The wholistic "both-and" perspective embraces the opposites of "empty" and "full" and allows both to be true at the same time. It is systemic because one condition (e.g., half-empty) could not exist without its opposite (i.e., half-full), and a change in either would affect the other as well as the overall picture of the glass.

Although a variety of approaches to family health and normality has been described in the literature (Offer & Sabshin, 1974), the present research work is based on a view of the family as system, a "dynamic order of parts and processes standing in mutual interaction" (Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 208), involved in a living process that encompasses both functional and dysfunctional aspects. Dysfunctional is used to mean neither "sick" nor "unhealthy," but rather to imply "incomplete functioning" (Guralnik, 1980). "Incomplete functioning" is seen as inherent in any living organism, for without some incompleteness, there would be no ongoing movement toward completeness.

Family systems grow and develop through a series of life cycle stages (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Duvall, 1977; Hill & Rodgers, 1964; Minuchin & Fishaan, 1981; Olson,

McCubbin & associates, 1983) to increasingly complex levels of organization and structure. The family system both influences and is influenced by the needs, values and aspirations of each of its individual members as well as by the external systems (neighborhood, educational, religious, economic, health care) with which it interacts. The family's main function is relational, providing a place where family members can give and be given love, support and caring by people with whom they share a history and a future (Curran, 1983). An underlying motif of this study is a notion of family as "that irreducible unit of willed and unwilled . . . connections whose reality lies entirely outside our inclination and whose inescapability is absolute" (Farber, quoted in Howard, 1978, p. 31). Each and every family is "a unique microculture," defined by its "hidden rules, the subtle nuances of language, the private rituals and dances" (Napier & Whitaker, 1978, p. 79), to which each member is emotionally bonded and experiences the dynamic tension of wanting to be separate while still belonging.

From the intersection of these three frameworks (building family strengths, the positive power of humor and laughter and families as living systems), this study is focused on a specific stage of family life cycle development--"Families with Pre-schoolers" (children up to the age of six). This period in the family life span has

been chosen for several reasons: (a) Successful completion of the developmental tasks of the child's first five years are widely regarded as crucial to later development; (b) The arrival of the first child significantly changes the multi-generational family system. Everyone moves up one generation, the grown children becoming parents and the parents becoming grandparents (Combrinck-Graham, 1985); (c) In these years children spend more of their time at home than they will once they begin kindergarten, and the parents are the primary source of information and control (Olson, McCubbin & associates, 1983); (d) Patterns of family interaction begin to be established as soon as the baby is born, if not earlier (Verny, 1981). In their first three years, children learn relationship expectations without even being aware they are learning (Pearce, 1977). The templates of parent-child interaction are laid out in the preconscious mind of the child and, as such, have a strong tendency to self-perpetuate. These factors make the "Families with Pre-Schoolers" stage a crucial period well worth examining.

With humor and laughter as a study topic, this family development stage has the added attraction of being of immediate practical interest to the researcher, i.e., how to effectively use and maintain one's sense of humor while parenting a 4-year-old child. Studying a personal life-cycle interest adds vitality and energy to the study because of the reciprocal interaction between the progressing

research and the researcher's personal growth and development (Glaser, 1978). More specifically, this study is stimulated by a provocative question posed in a recent article on family laughter: "How do we get ourselves to use humor when we are at the end of our tether and our children just don't seem to deserve it?" (Isaacs, 1983, p. 45)

This is intended to be a systemic, wholistic study which will investigate both the "half-full" and "half-empty" aspects of using humor in parenting, not overlooking the difficult parts in order to emphasize the funny ones, but embracing the pleasant and unpleasant times as all part of the "glass tumbler" of family life.

Background of the Problem

This section is a general overview of the problem situation, covering some of the significant aspects of parental stress, then building a picture of the growing recognition and use of humor and laughter in a variety of fields. Uses of humor in business, health care, psychotherapy, and education are summarized. Against this backdrop, the present situation with regard to humor and parenting is discussed.

The Stresses of Parenting

The transition to parenthood is a major transition in adult life (Rossi, 1968), bringing changes in roles and

responsibilities that often are accompanied by an increase
in personal and marital stress and a decline in personal
sense of well-being (Hobbs & Cole, 1976; Miller & Sollie,
1980). The addition of a new member changes the family
system, activating an integrative process referred to as
"making place" in which new relationships are created and
new meaning given to existing relationships (Stanitis,
1985). Prenatal education classes and books about
parenting newborns only begin to touch on the gap that
exists between the expectations and the reality. Expectant
parents can be encouraged to think ahead to the postpartum
period through the use of "What if . . . ?" questions, e.g.,
"What if the baby will not stop crying?" They can read
descriptions of life with a newborn, but there is no
training for the enormous emotional sense of responsibility
new parents feel when their baby is born. Dramatic changes
in everyday routines take place: lack of sleep, the nearly
chronic feeling of exhaustion, a reduction in time together
as spouses, and a decline in social contacts, especially for
the mother (Miller & Sollie, 1980; Yarrow, 1982).

The expectations and responsibilities society places on
parents make the stakes in the job very high. "It is
parents who, through their influence in the kind of adults
their children become, play a primary role in determining
the future of the culture" (Polster & Dangel, 1984, p. 2).
The influence society expects parents to have over their

children is mitigated by the influence society allows, as
pointed out by a Carnegie Council on Children report:
"Although parents have the responsibility for their
children's lives, they hardly ever have the voice, the
authority, or the power to make others listen to them"
(Kenniston, 1977, p. 123).

In their efforts to fulfill these responsibilities,
parents must wade through a maze of often-contradictory
information from a wide variety of "expert" sources.
Confusion often results because "no dependable way has been
offered for parents to determine whether or not the
suggestions are correct or applicable to their children"
(Polster & Dangel, 1984, p. 3). The compelling need to
provide both nurturance and discipline in a child's early
years is often outweighed by parents' lack of information on
how to do that (Galinsky, 1981; Minuchin, 1974; Olson,
McCubbin & associates, 1983).

These normative stresses inherent in raising children
are compounded for today's parents by the economic, social
and technological changes sweeping through society, leaving
few families unaffected. No longer is there a "typical"
family structure that a majority of families fit. The era
when the two-parent, husband-earner, wife-at-home family
with 2.5 children monopolized our collective image of
"family" is gone, at least based on statistical reports.
Over 25% of American families are headed by single parents,

90% of whom are mothers (U. S. Census Bureau, 1986). The number of families headed by single working mothers now exceeds the number of families that fit the traditional, "nuclear family" image (U. S. Census Bureau, 1986).

Economic necessity and the women's movement have been significant factors in the decision of many mothers to enter the paid work force, putting added strain on their parenting role. In 1982, over one-third of all mothers with children under the age of 6 were employed outside the home (Farel & Dobelstein, 1982). The most appropriate people to share the child-rearing work with the employed mothers are the fathers, who, as a rule, have little preparation or experience for the responsibilities (Ciampa, 1984; Lein, 1984). Men are certainly capable of providing child-rearing support, but a social context that remains highly patriarchal gives very little support for men as nurturers. This leaves many families stuck with a difficult dilemma. When mothers are paid to work outside the home, they have less time and energy for the childrearing and household tasks that traditionally adhered to their role. Men's participation in child care and housework has increased only slightly over the past two decades (Pleck, 1984a, 1984b) and has not nearly kept pace with the increase in mothers' time employed outside the home. Support from male partners correlates with less depression in mothers and a better overall feeling about their parenting (Belle, 1982).

These stresses on parents are intensified when a woman or a man must raise children alone. One out of four American families is headed by a single parent, and 90% of these are women. Loneliness, financial difficulties and the struggle to balance child care with work demands are experiences found to be common to both single mothers and single fathers, although the economic pressures rest much more heavily on single mothers (Kabatznick, 1984).

Humor and Laughter Applications

Research and practice in a variety of fields over the past decade have begun to document and utilize the positive power of humor and laughter. William F. Fry, Jr. (1977), a leading researcher into the physiological effects of laughter, has found that laughter increases the heart rate temporarily and that when laughter subsides, the heart rate falls to a level below the pre-laughter level. Fry describes laughter as "stationary jogging" (Begley, 1982; Robinson, 1983). Laughter exercises the lungs, increases the oxygen supply to the blood, activates the diaphragm and causes the muscles to go limp. These physiological effects help to reduce tension and promote relaxation. Laughter is an excellent antidote to physical and psychological stress (Peter & Dana, 1982).

Humor in Business

Humor and laughter are being introduced into various aspects of the business world, following to some extent James March's (1976) advocacy of the "need to supplement the technology of reason with a technology of foolishness" (p. 75) in business organizations. Humor and laughter have been used to spruce up advertising campaigns, perk up business meetings ("Funny Business," 1985), teach stress management to corporate employees, and to educate Silicon Valley computer companies that "high tech doesn't have to be dry tech" (Jaynes, 1985, p. 8). A naturalistic study of "Humor in Task-Oriented Management Meetings" (Consalvo, 1986) described the patterns of humor in small task-oriented groups, related the role played by these patterns in managerial functions and suggested the overall relevance of humor to leadership and management.

Humor in Health Care

The use of humor and laughter in the health care professions has been increasing rapidly ever since the fabled recovery of Norman Cousins from a potentially fatal collagen disease. Cousins got himself laughing with Marx Brothers films and old "Candid Camera" television shows to promote his own inherent healing process (Cousins, 1979). The Cancer Counseling and Research Center in Fort Worth, Texas, uses play and humor in planned ways to interrupt the

cycle of hopelessness most cancer patients feel and to restore their body's ability to heal itself (Simonton, 1985).

Nurses report using humor in caring for hospital patients to ease tension and reduce the feelings of anger, frustration and powerlessness many hospitalized patients experience (McCarthy, 1983). Deborah Leiber, a registered nurse and an instructor in the School of Nursing at Oregon Health Sciences University, started an organization called Nurses For Laughter (N.F.L.) to promote the benefits of humor in health care. The organization's motto is "WARNING: Humor may be hazardous to your illness" (McCarthy, 1983). Cancer patients at the Shawnee Mission Medical Center in Kansas City, Missouri, can obtain doses of laughter in the manner Norman Cousins did by visiting the Laughing Room where videotapes of comedy acts are shown. The purpose of the Laughing Room is to ease the stress of illness and thus to stimulate patients' immune systems to work ("Cancer Patients," 1984).

Humor in Therapy

Despite concerns about the use of humor in therapy (Kubie, 1970; Rosenheim & Golan, 1986), a growing number of psychotherapy and family therapy practitioners take humorous interventions seriously (Fry & Salameh, 1987; Mahrer & Gervaize, 1984; Rosenheim & Golan, 1986; Sands, 1984). The

paradoxical interventions of the Brief Therapy Project (Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick & Bodin, 1974) instructed clients to "have" their symptoms rather than using a more direct, logical instruction to help "get rid" of the symptom. Clients were sometimes able to perceive the humor of these interventions (Fisch, 1977). In documenting a number of examples from family therapy sessions, Cloé Madanes (1984) concluded that humorous interventions usually take a family by surprise and thereby add strength, drama and impact to the intervention. Annette Goodheart is a psychotherapist who helps her clients use the cathartic powers of laughter to relieve physical and emotional hurts. Calling herself the "laughter therapist," Goodheart's therapy techniques with surgery patients are designed to help them gain perspective by being able to play with their pain (Goodheart, 1985; Pine, 1983).

A recent dissertation completed at the University of Massachusetts (Christiansen, 1985) explored the use of playfulness by six family therapists in their work with families. Humor was the most familiar form of playfulness identified by the participants in this study, who recognized the value of humor in easing the tensions within a family. The author noted that "family strengths seem to surface in the playful process" (Christiansen, p. 155). When this occurs in therapy, it enables the family and the therapist to focus on strengths rather than on limitations, helping to

enhance the family's hopes and confidence about the outcome of the therapy.

Humor in Education

The literature on humor in education reflects the range of potential benefits from conscious, thoughtful use of humor in the classroom. Humor is seen to have positive effects on student-teacher relationships (Larson, 1982), on students' attitude, motivation and affect (Kelly, 1983) as well as their attitudes to material being presented (Larson). Humor aids in the development of self-esteem and self-confidence as long as care is taken not to use humor at the expense of others (Woods, 1983; Kelly). The effectiveness of humor as an aid to teaching in post-secondary schools has also been noted (Larson; Mogavero, 1979).

Humor and Parenting

This brief review of humor and laughter applications in fields other than parenting education raises some intriguing ideas. Despite the apparent seriousness of life-threatening cancer, family dysfunction, the quest for profit in the business marketplace or other equally crucial issues of our time, professionals in these fields are making effective use of humor and laughter, not just as diversionary amusements or recreations, but as planned steps towards their goals, be

they therapeutic, educational or profit-making.

Developments such as these can no longer be dismissed as the

trivial contributions of a lunatic fringe.

To consider together the many factors contributing to

parenting stress in the late 1980's and the wide variety of

humor applications described here, the nearly complete

absence of study, writing or research on the uses of humor

in parenting becomes obvious.   The evidence gathered in this

description of the "background of the problem" throws the

words of Susan Isaacs (1983) into stark relief: "In all the

writing on parenting, humor is probably the least talked

about parental resource and the most unacknowledged and

untaught parental skill" (p. 42).   From all that is

currently known about parenting stress and about the stress-

reducing benefits of humor and laughter, a study of humor in

parenting appears to be a most fertile field of inquiry.

Statement of the Problem Situation

Since the mid-1970's, there has been a dramatic upswing

of interest and activity in humor research (Chapmann, 1983).

The development of humor in children has been studied in

great detail (McGhee, 1979), and some of this knowledge has

been used to help teachers facilitate humor among their

students (Aho, 1979; Kelly, 1983; Rogers, 1984).   While

numerous studies have been made of the relationship between

humor and stress (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; O'Connell, 1976;

Safranek & Schill, 1982; Schill & O'Laughlin, 1984) as well as laughter as one aspect of developing parent-infant relationships (Lamb, 1977a, 1977b; Sagi, 1985), there is a lack of research on humor as a modifier of stress within adult-child relationships.

A most reliable setting in which to find stress within adult-child relationships is the family, and yet it has only been quite recently that work has begun to appear on humor as a component of family health and strength (Curran, 1983; Isaacs, 1983; Schneyer, 1981; Walsh, 1982; Welliver, 1986; Wuerffel, 1986b). Only two of these authors describe how humor might be a practical, useful tool in parenting. Schneyer's research indicated that a willingness to laugh and to use humor when appropriate could make at least one aspect of parenting (assisting the child's process of separation) easier and more effective. Isaacs provides some examples of how parents could use humor to defuse tense situations, communicate difficult messages or accomplish a task more cooperatively. To this researcher's knowledge at this point in time, however, no data has been gathered and analyzed in a systematic manner about how parents actually do use humor in their relationships with their children, and what the effects of these uses of humor are.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to understand how parents of children under the age of six maintain their sense of humor and how they use their humor in a variety of family situations. This understanding will be developed through the following research questions:

1. In what specific situations have parents said or done something humorous and what were the apparent effects of their use of humor? This question investigates the context of the incidents (time of day, family members involved, physical and emotional state of parents and children) and whether or not the use of humor produced favorable, unfavorable or negligible change in the situation.

2. What do parents see themselves doing to maintain their sense of humor and how well does it work? Personal values about humor, laughter and lightheartedness may be brought into focus by this question: parents who interpret certain activities in their lives as "humor maintenance" could be said to value the presence of humor more than parents whose reponse to this question is vague and indefinite.

3. How do parents define "sense of humor" in the context of their parenting roles and responsibilities? Listening to individual parents define this quality will

create a meaningful context for understanding their uses of humor with their children.

In summary, the purpose of this study is to determine, through systematic collection, coding and analysis of parents' actual experiences, the variety of ways that parents use humor in their families and the underlying social process that connects those various uses of humor into a unifying pattern.

Rationale and Theoretical Framework

This section reviews the rationale for two vital components of this research study, the selection of the grounded theory research methodology and an approach to the study of parents' experiences based on taking the time to listen to them talk about their lives.

Grounded Theory

One approach to a study of social processes is to begin with a theory derived from a set of logical assumptions and to collect data to support or disprove that theory. This "verification" approach has long held primacy in sociological research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). An alternative approach is to begin gathering and analyzing data from the field of study and to allow a theory to emerge from the data. This "generation" approach is the basis of

"grounded theory," which is "the discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The "grounded theory" method of qualitative research was chosen for this study because the field of inquiry is new, unexplored territory. Indeed, one problem cited with sociological research on humor has been that "humor researchers typically take established sociological traditions and attempt to apply them to humor rather than generating new theories [emphasis added]" (Fine, 1983, p. 160). It would be presumptuous and extremely limiting for a researcher, based on the scant research available on humor and laughter in family relations (Schneyer, 1981; Welliver, 1986; Wuerffel, 1986a, 1986b), to assume to know the relevant theoretical variables before actually gathering data on parent-child interactions and scrutinizing them for humorous episodes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Such an approach could lead to force-fitting data into unnatural categories and neglecting relevant concepts that may emerge but not fit the pre-chosen variables. This would be similar to the bespectacled glazier who kept himself busy replacing broken windows until he realized that his glasses were cracked.

The "grounded theory" approach to the problem allows the researcher to work somewhat like the medieval cartographers who used the data generated by explorers like Columbus, Magellan and Balboa to draw models (maps) of the

newly discovered lands. "The attempt to map the world was an attempt to understand the world, to reduce the complexity of reality to a model that men [sic] could hold in their hands and share" (Judson, 1980, p. 104). The lands being discovered were the tangible data; the maps drawn were "grounded theories" emerging from the explorers' journals and sketches. Today, these medieval maps look funny in their naivete and inaccuracies, but, in their own time, they were "state of the art" cartography. The maps clearly reflected the mapmakers' biases, beliefs and dreams (Judson), but as time passed, these cartographic "theories" evolved to more closely resemble "reality".

Researching an area as fluid as that of humorous interactions between parents and their children was best done from the perspective of a "family cartographer". The researcher entered a relatively new area of study in family dynamics to begin sketching a map to represent the "territory" under study. Each new foray (research interview) generated new information which contributed additional nuances to the emerging theory. The conceptual framework growing from the data was simply "the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 33). As with early cartographers in the Middle Ages, the researcher's emerging "map" reflected personal biases, beliefs and,

perhaps, dreams, but also served as a guide to any who might follow into the same field of study.

Listening to Parents

Although a majority of parenting education books are written from the perspective of the specialist (Berges, Neiderbach, et al., 1983), there are precedents for parent research and education based on listening to parents talk about their lives as parents. Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim (1962), wrote:

> Parents cannot be told what to do, or how to do it. . . . The most appropriate advice, the most carefully explained theory, is of little use when it comes to handling specific everyday events with a child. . . . What does help is increasing clarification about what they want for their child, and how, in everyday practice, to make this desire . . . become reality. (pp. 12, 14)

More recently, in a report on a program to provide alternative living environments for youth called Primary Families, Weber, Jansen, et al. (1985), noted that when parents are emotionally exhausted, they lack the energy to follow through with solutions to problems presented by their children. "Gaining this energy," they point out,

> is not necessarily accomplished by having someone tell you what to do [emphasis added] but is acquired through the sharing of your joys and sorrows with others in need, helping others through their needs, feeling the sense of accomplishment when you succeed, and gaining a new perspective of your own problems and solutions (p. 166).

A number of recent parenting studies has utilized
this theoretical approach of listening to parents as a way
of advancing the collective understanding of the parenting
experience (Berges, Neiderbach, et al., 1983; Galinsky,
1981; O'Donnell, 1985; Wilk, 1986). O'Donnell found most
women contacted eager to participate in her study of The
Unheralded Majority (1985) and to recount their
experiences as mothers. Berges, Neiderbach, et al. (1983)
decided to conduct their inquiry into "the ways parents
react in their daily lives towards their children's sexual
growth" not by studying the theories and ideas of
specialists but by "seeking the insights of those who were
engaged in the adult-child dialectic every day of their
lives, who had the awareness that comes from living up
close" (p. xiv). Wilk (1986) chose to use a qualitative
interview methodology for her study of career women's
decisions to have children because of (a) the lack of any
baseline data from which to generate a theoretical model,
and (b) the intimate nature of the subject matter.
Galinsky's (1981) articulation of the six stages of
parenthood emerged from her interviews with 228 parents from
across the United States. She describes parenting as a
developmental process of growth and change with very
different feelings and issues to be faced at each stage of
development.

While the contention may be made that adults involved
in the daily give-and-take of parenting are too
emotionally close to their experiences to understand them
enough to relate them to a research interviewer, it is
nevertheless true that in the very process of telling
one's own story, one begins to understand the incident
being related and to make sense of it. Telling a story
"requires that participants link action and character and
develop a progression from beginning to middle, to end"
(Seidman, et al, 1983). This "reconstruction of
experience" contains indications of what the experience
means to the person telling the story.

Methodological Framework

The research methodology was designed to combine these
two themes of grounded theory and regarding parents as "the
experts" on their own parenting lives. The subjects were
parents who were simply asked to describe their experiences
raising their children, without needing to justify, explain
or interpret their behavior. Their words were listened to
and accepted the way the parents said them. The parents'
stories became "the ground" from which the theory was
developed and to which the emerging concepts were constantly
referred for substantiation. In these ways, the initial
theoretical framework for the study was constructed.

Statement of Hypotheses

This study proceeded on the basis of the following hypotheses:

1. That there are parents who use their sense of humor in a variety of family situations.

2. That the use of humor has positive effects in family relationships.

3. That the use of humor also has negative effects on family relationships.

4. That the ways parents use their sense of humor can be conceptualized into a number of categories of parent "humor behavior" using a "grounded theory" method of systematic qualitative research.

Significance of the Study

The crucial role of humor and laughter in healthy lifestyles is receiving increasing attention in both popular (Begley, 1982; Isaacs, 1983; Pine, 1983; Stedman, 1984) and academic literature (Herth, 1984; Mahrer & Gervaize, 1984; Martin & Lefcourt, 1983, 1984; Nevo & Shapira, 1986; Safranek & Schill, 1982). This research study is an initial exploration into a relatively new area of humor research: parent-child relationships.

Through the systematic collection, coding and analysis of qualitative data and the generation of theory grounded in parents' actual experiences, knowledge has been produced of

immediate practical use to parents and to people who train,
educate or counsel parents, or facilitate parent support
networks. Educational modules can be developed from this
research for use by therapists, counselors and others who
work with parents. The findings of this research can also
be useful in daycare, preschool and other settings where
adults work with young children.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the term "parents"
is used to refer to adults who are "engaged in the
adult-child dialectic" (Berges, Neiderbach, et al., 1983)
in their homes on a regular and frequent, although not
necessarily full-time or daily, basis with children with
whom they have blood relationships and/or enduring
emotional bonds.

One purpose of this study is to determine how parents
who are willing to talk about sense of humor actually
define it. In order to develop a definition based on
parents' own wo2ds and relevant to the parenting context, no
definition borrowed from the dictionary or the theoretical
literature is presented at this point. A composite
definition of "sense of humor" grounded in the words of the
participants can be found in Table 7 (page 108).

Scope and Delimitations

This study did not specifically investigate children's use of humor (McGhee & Chapman, 1980). In talking with parents about their uses of humor with their children, funny things that the children said and did were mentioned. The primary focus here, however, was on parental behavior. In a similar way, the development of humor creation and appreciation ability in children, described by McGhee (1979), was not an issue here.

As an initial inquiry into an area of family life that has received scant attention, this study attempted to build an emergent theory from the stories parents told, without dividing them into sub-groups such as "single parents", "dual-earner couples", "stepparents" or any other classification which may apply to a unique parenting situation. The purpose was not to compare and contrast different sub-groups of parents according to how they use humor at home, but to discover the connecting links among a variety of parenting experiences.

This study was limited to parents whose children were age 6 or under. Much of what children learn in these years about themselves, the world and their relationship to the world takes place at home on a pre-conscious level and tends to self-perpetuate. This study may have relevance for parents of older children, but it ventures no such conjectures or assumptions.

The qualitative research methodology chosen for this study created an experiential grounding from which theoretical constructs emerged. The work was phenomenological, in that it attempted to recreate the details of the participants' experiences and draw conceptual connections between them. No claims of representativeness are made for such research. Its usefulness lies in its ability to make connections between the experiences of the reader and those of the participants (Seidman, et al., 1983). This study is intended to be primarily descriptive, rather than prescriptive, in nature.

Summary and Preview of Remaining Chapters

This chapter has introduced the problem of the lack of research in the field of humor in parenting by framing it in the context of the complex stresses faced by parents and the increasing variety of applications of humor and laughter research in other fields.

The remainder of the dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the literature on humor and laughter theories and focuses specifically on works dealing with humor, laughter, family health and parenting. Chapter 3 presents the grounded theory methodology in detail and reports the outcome of the initial coding and analysis of data. The development of the grounded theory is described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 summarizes and critiques the

research process, cites the implications for further
research and education and draws conclusions about parenting
humor.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of literature is divided into two main sections: General Integrative Reviews and Literature Related to this Study. The section on General Integrative Reviews includes an overview of humor and laughter theories, some elements of the psychology of humor and an illustration of the theoretical connection between humor and creativity. The Related Literature section (a) cites some of the evidence in humor research literature supporting the approach proposed in this study, (b) presents the available literature on humor and laughter in family life, (c) reviews a dissertation specifically related to parenting and humor and (d) concludes with a discussion of Re-evaluation Counseling theory as applied to parenting young children.

General Integrative Reviews

This section provides an overview of three major humor and laughter theories, some elements of the psychology of humor and an description of the theoretical connection between humor and creativity.

Humor and Laughter Theories

The number and description of humor and laughter theories one discovers in the literature depends upon whom one decides to read. Keith-Spiegel (1972) lists 8 major varieties of early humor theories and 22 issues arising from these theories, such as, the relationship of humor to laughter and the debate over whether humor is healthy or unhealthy. Piddington (1963) individually summarizes the theories of 50 scientists, philosophers, psychologists and poets. Morreall (1983) reviews the work of early theorists, but goes a step beyond Keith-Spiegel and Piddington by developing his own "new theory" of laughter and humor. Combining essential elements of the incongruity, superiority and relief theories, Morreall devises a general formula for laughter situations, that is, "Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift" (p. 39). Three theories of humor--Incongruity, Superiority and Release/Relief (see Table 1, page 31)--stand up across a wide variety of sources in the literature and have been selected for description here.

Incongruity

The incongruity theory of humor essentially states that humor and laughter result from a juxtaposition of opposites. This theory can be traced as far back as Plato who spoke of the "mixed feeling of the soul," fusing pain and pleasure

Table 1. Identification of Three Major Humor Theories

1. Incongruity: usually "victimless" humor; juxtaposition
of opposites; simultaneity; ambivalence; surprise; paradox;
when one thing appears to be another.
----

2. Superiority: "victim" humor; sarcasm; putdowns;
ridicule; satire; teasing; usually oppressive by reinforcing
stereotypes of sex, race, class, etc.
----

3. Relief/Release: tension relief; energy release;
catharsis; discharge; panic-reduction.

(Plato, 1871). James Beattie's theory of the ludicrous held

that "laughter arises from the view of two or more

inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or

circumstances, considered as united in one complex object"

(as cited in Piddington, 1963, p. 167). Beattie accents the

crucial role of personal perception in humor appreciation as

"the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them

[i.e., the incongruous parts]" (as cited in Piddington, p.

167).

A second aspect of this theory is raised by Bergson,

who labels a situation as "comic" when "it belongs

simultaneously to two altogether independent series of

events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely

different meanings at the same time" (as cited in Keith-

Spiegel, 1972, p. 8). This notion of simultaneity is

essential to the incongruity theory. The timing of one's

perceptions of disparate elements determines how funny they will be. If a child's noisy behavior indoors in the middle of February were getting too much for a parent too take and the parent could sing his/her message, "Will you please quiet down?!?", the simultaneity of impatience and melody might be seen humorously by the child.

When the incongruous elements are emotions, rather than ideas or perceptions, ambivalence results. The ambivalence theory states that if this mixture of feelings is perceived simultaneously and pleasurably, laughter results (Keith-Spiegel, 1972; Morreall, 1983). By its very nature of dealing daily with equivocal situations, parenting is rife with ambivalence. The perception of these feelings as pleasurable is necessary to the perception of them as humorous: "The essence of humor lies in the enjoyment of incongruity [emphasis added]" (Morreall, p. 47).

The discrepancy between what is and what ought to be forms another kind of incongruity (Sully, as cited in Piddington, 1963). Humor is "the synapse between the perfection we seek and the imperfection we have" (Goodman, 1983, p. 9). The difficult task for parents of reconciling their images with the realities of parenting is an example of this discrepancy. The ability to construe this task as a pleasure, instead of as a chore, is the key to seeing it humorously.

The element of <u>surprise</u>, or unexpectedness, has been regarded by humor theorists as a necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, condition for a humorous experience (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Many theorists have blended the surprise and incongruity elements because both involve "an instantaneous breaking up of the routine course of thought or action" (Keith-Spiegel, p. 9).

Incongruity also results when <u>one thing appears to be another</u>. The subtle humor of the mime, forming, manipulating, then discarding realities out of thin air, illustrates this aspect of incongruity. Doubletakes, imposters, mimicry, and coincidence are other examples. The violation of logical principles in paradoxes such as "Be spontaneous" or "Please do not read this message" are another form of incongruous humor (Wuerffel, 1986b). Paradoxical messages make one statement plus a second statement that contradicts the first, creating a struggle of logic between "true" and "not true."

Ambivalence, surprise, paradox, and illogical situations are common in the day-to-day realities of parenting. Parents are continually faced with the necessity of making sense out of illogical leaps: One segment of the family comic strip, "For Better or For Worse," for example, shows father and son in the boy's bedroom:

        Father: "Michael! I asked you to clean up your room!"
        Son: "Aw, Dad . . ."
        Father: "Go on, you haven't done a thing!"

Son: "Why do I hafta clean it up today? I'm just gonna mess it up again tomorrow!" (Johnston, 1984, p. 58)

The child's sense of "logic" confounds the adult, just as the adult's logic confounds the child. Parenting is not just an on-the-job training ground for the development of child management skills, communication skills, and financial management skills. Parenting also provides frequent opportunities to grapple with the logic of the illogical.

Superiority

This theory sees humor arising from the feeling of elation that ensues when one can compare oneself favorably to others and find oneself less ugly, less stupid, less incompetent, etc. (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Superiority humor takes the form of sarcasm, putdowns, ridicule and satire in the areas of race, sex, creed, class, age, etc. and may be directed at oneself (self-disparaging humor) or at others (Wuerffel, 1986b). Despite the fact that most of the current literature on using humor in families points out the negative, isolating aspects of this kind of "laughing at" humor (Curran, 1983: Isaacs, 1983; Welliver, 1986), it is included here because at this point in time, it is still a prevalent form of family humor which needs to be acknowledged.

Relief/Release

The idea that humor and laughter provide relief from tension and a release of built-up physical or psychic energy is not a new one (cf. Spencer, 1860; Freud, 1916, 1928). Physiological research on laughter conducted by Fry (1977, 1982) has shown its relaxing effect on heart rate, blood pressure and respiration levels. Norman Cousins' (1979) story of his use of laughter to promote his recovery from a supposedly incurable disease documents the power of laughter to release the tension and panic that accompany pain and to allow the body's healing processes to function more effectively.

Goodheart's (1983) theoretical framework for catharsis shows laughter to be a form of emotional release for light angers and light fears, such as embarassment. Goodheart's work is drawn in part from the theory of Re-evaluation Counseling which identifies six forms of emotional discharge: crying, trembling, laughing, anger discharge, yawning and interested, non-repetitive talking (Jackins, H., 1978).

This section has described three major theories of humor and laughter. The following section highlights those aspects of the psychology of humor found to be most relevant to the study of humor within parent-child interactions.

Some Elements of the Psychology of Humor

Sense of humor is inherent in all human beings. The
form it takes is different for every individual because
sense of humor results from the interaction of inherent
biological factors and environmental influences. "Genetic
inheritance provides fields of potential . . . in which
our learned forms and content of humor are localized" (Fry,
1982, p. 1). Individual differences in the creation and
appreciation of humor is a fundamental aspect of the
psychology of humor (Keith-Speigel, 1972). Take the case of
Bill Cosby, for example, a black comedian who has had
tremendous success in making millions of people laugh.
Being a successful comedian does not, however, imply that
Cosby finds everything funny: "The race situation . . . is
not funny, and I don't see jokes making it any better"
(Darrach, 1985). Cosby's sense of humor, like everyone's,
results from his interaction with the influences of his
unique personal environments.

Having a sense of humor about life does not mean being
silly and frivolous all the time, and taking nothing
seriously. It does imply the ability to incorporate both
sides of a paradox into one's life (O'Connell, 1977) and to
move between them as a "spark [which leaps] between the
paradoxical poles" (O'Connell, 1976, p. 321). A prime
condition for sense of humor is a playful orientation to the
world which implies a mid-point position between the

"nothing-but" world of work and the "anything goes" world of
fantasy. Humor and playfulness are neither avoidance of
reality nor preoccupation with reality. Play is the
overlapping zone between the two (Hershkowitz, 1977).
Having a sense of humor involves flexibility and openness to
experience. The ability to laugh at our own misfortunes
allows us objectivity about them and an increased measure of
control over them (Morreall, 1983).

Security and safety are key psychological elements in
the experience of humor (Rothbart, 1977; Morreall, 1983).
Being in the company of friends is more likely to produce
laughter than being among strangers (Chapman, 1983). Poking
fun at someone else is "a risky venture" if the relationship
in the dyad involved is not equal (O'Connell, 1977).
Goodman (1983) advocates not only developing a sense of
humor but also a "sensitivity" to humor, using it to "laugh
with" others rather than to "laugh at" them. This factor
bears remembering when considering parents' use of humor
with their children. Without the supportive net of a secure
relationship, humorous remarks can damage the parent-child
relationship, rather than build it in a positive direction
(Isaacs, 1983).

The difference between being able to view a negative
situation in a humorous way and being unable to is very
slight (Morreall, 1983). Being "harassed, irritable,
actively engrossed in an idea, or in a mood or passion"

(Keith-Spiegel, 1972, p. 30) is likely to cause humorous

incidents or comments to fall unnoticed (Robinson, 1983).

The combination of feeling secure and feeling in control are

prerequisites for perceiving negative incidents humorously

(Morreall, 1983).

Humor and its frequent partner, laughter, are social

connecting agents. Laughter has been called "a gesture of

communion through shared freedom from constraint" (Pollio,

1983, p. 221). Laughter is contagious and cohesive

(Morreall, 1983). Strangers who are able to share a

humorous perception of an unexpected, negative predicament,

like being trapped in an elevator, form a bond that a

negative, pessimistic view would not have formed. When the

"negative" situation is an error or mistake, a humorous

approach becomes a new way of looking at things without in

reality changing things at all (Morreall, 1983). While some

believe that humor is not a matter of skill that can be

summoned on demand (Faber & Mazlish, 1974), Goodman (1983)

believes that a humorous attitude, or "a comic vision of

life," can be intentionally nurtured.

Humor and Creativity: A Theoretical Link

Understanding some of the psychological aspects of

humor is only a part of interpreting and analyzing humorous

interactions in families. Seeing humor as one of Koestler's

(1964) "three domains of creativity" (the other two being

Scientific Discovery and Artistic Originality) offers some
insights into the actual process of humor production and
appreciation.

Bisociation

Much of the fun families derive from humor results from
various forms of the incongruity theory, whose potential for
building family strengths has been pointed out by Wuerffel
(1986). A great deal of the humor that occurs in family
life, however, is spontaneous and unplanned. It is as hard
to see it coming as it is to remember afterwards where it
came from. The various aspects of the incongruity theory of
humor, however, suggest that specific processes take place
when humor occurs. In order to understand parents' use of
humor and to analyze these interactions with their children,
it is useful to understand the process that takes place in
the humor-maker's mind. This process is described best in
Arthur Koestler's theory of "bisociation" (Koestler, 1964,
1978).

In conventional modes of thinking, numerous
associations are made among ideas within single frames of
reference. Texas and Israel are two distinctly different
geographic locations defining two unique frames of reference
which have at least two things in common: automobiles and
farms. Texas farmers have one way of thinking about cars
and farms and Israeli farmers have another. Arthur Koestler

(1964) says that "bisociation" occurs when two frames of reference which are consistent within themselves but mutually exclusive of each other are perceived together, as in the following story:

> A Texan is visiting Israel, and feeling thirsty, he stops at a house along the road. "Can you give me a drink of water?" asks the Texan.
> "Of course," says the Israeli, and invites the Texan to come in.
> "What do you do?" says the Texan.
> "I raise a few chickens," says the Israeli.
> "Really?" says the Texan. "I'm also a farmer. How much land do you have?"
> "Well," says the Israeli, "out front it's fifty meters, as you can see, and in the back we have close to a hundred meters of property. And what about your place?"
> "Well," says the Texan, "on my ranch, I have breakfast and get into the car, and I drive and drive-- and I don't reach the end of the ranch until dinnertime."
> "_Really_," replies the Israeli. "I once had a car like that." (Novak & Waldoks, 1981, p. 141)

In describing his own farm, the Texan thought he was talking about farms, while the Israeli thought he was talking about cars. Each farmer's perspective on cars and farms becomes humorous only when it collides with the other's in the story's punch line. The bisociation of these two mutually exclusive, yet self-consistent, contexts creates "the delightful mental jolt of a sudden leap from one plane or associative context to another" (Koestler, 1978, p. 113), or an "intellectual somersault" (p. 118). This "sudden leap" is the essence of the creative process (Rothenberg, 1979a, 1979b).

Oxymoron

An useful conceptual tool to introduce at this point is "oxymoron," a two-word expression in which a noun or a verb is preceded by a contradictory adjective or adverb. An often-heard oxymoron is "jumbo shrimp." Erasmus once made an oxymoron out of one word: "foolosophers" (Espy, 1975). Oxymorons are usually perceived humorously (if not with a laugh, then with a smile or a chuckle) because they juxtapose contradictory ideas, stimulating new, unexpected insights. An oxymoron is bisociation in its most condensed form. Oxymorons, which are expressions of "compressed conflicts" (cf. Prince, 1970; Jimenez, 1975), such as, "logical non sequitur", "familiar surprise", or "generous selfishness", convey the essence of the Incongruity theory of humor, an unexpected juxtaposition of opposites.

Situations in which such combinations of opposites occur might be called "two-in-one" occurrences because of the merger of two distinct frames of reference into a single new idea or feeling. A number of works on laughter, humor and creativity have referred to the Janus-like quality of these incongruous occurrences (Koestler, 1978; Rothenberg, 1979a; Schneyer, 1981). Janus, the Greek god of beginnings and endings, is often depicted with two heads facing in opposite directions.

This first section of the review of literature has highlighted humor's ability to combine opposites, bridge

paradoxes, relieve tension, and build connections between people. These key factors form the basis for the study's initial local concepts and are found to recur often in the actual research process.

The next section of this chapter examines the literature more directly related to the present study. The section begins with evidence from previous humor research pointing towards the type of investigation proposed here. This is followed by discussion of research in the area of humor in family life, from both "healthy" and therapeutic perspectives. The section concludes with a review of the only dissertation found that investigated parenting and humor and presentation of a counseling theory emphasizing lightness, humor and playfulness as key tools for parents who want to be counselors for their children.

Literature Related to This Study

This section draws upon humor research literature and research on the role of humor and laughter in family life to establish support for the present study and to illuminate some of the gaps and limitations in the existing research.

Humor Research

Evidence can be found in the literature on humor research to support the kind of study being proposed here. The stress-moderating role of humor was investigated in

three separate studies by Martin and Lefcourt (1983). Their results gave "considerable support" to the hypothesis that humor reduces the negative impact of stress, but the ability to notice potentially humorous situations was not, by itself, sufficient to reduce stress: "For humor to moderate the effects of stress, the individual must also place a high value on humor and, more importantly, produce humor, particularly in the stressful situations that he or she encounters in daily life" (p. 1322). This suggests that for humor to be useful to parents in their parenting, they would need to value it as well as make efforts to use humor in their daily interactions with their children. The procedure of selecting participants for this present study from among a pool of volunteers with the assumption that parents willing to talk about humor would value it and probably use it in their families is supported by Martin and Lefcourt's conclusions.

A limitation of many studies of humor is the context-stripping that results from laboratory-based experiments. Humor research has tended to be "insensitive, truncated, and even asocial," sacrificing "mundane realism" on the altar of "scientific realism." Despite a recent upsurge in humor research, very little is known of its function in everyday interactions (Chapman, 1983). Because humor is "a fragile phenomenon quite dependent on social and interpersonal conditions present in a particular situation" (Pollio, 1983,

p. 217), it behooves the researcher to pay attention to the social function of humor as it occurs in people's everyday lives (Chapman; Fine, 1983; Goodchilds, 1972; Pollio). The present study, utilizing qualitative interviews and a grounded theory methodology is designed to produce the context-conscious research these writers call for.

Humor and Laughter in Family Life

The study of the role of humor and laughter in family health is of very recent vintage, inhibited in large part, perhaps, by a preoccupation among professionals with building a picture of healthy family functioning by describing what it is not through the study of severely dysfunctional families. Because of the long-held belief that healthy families do not need help or attention or else they would not be considered "healthy", family research has been predominantly directed toward "clinical," "dysfunctional" families, those who are in need of professional help.

Little clinical research on humor in healthy functioning families has been done. In a study of "nonlabeled" families, Riskin (1982) conducted longitudinal interviews with two families in order to generate hypotheses, not to test them. Among the qualitative hypotheses focused on family "emotional climate" and communication patterns was the tendency of "nonlabeled"

families to have a sense of humor. Although limited in scope, this study's inclusion of sense of humor as a tentative quality of "nonlabeled" (i.e., nonclinical, or "normal") families is worth noting.

Froma Walsh (1982) concludes her overview of the literature on Normal Family Processes with a reference to a study of her own, which indicated that the clinicians she surveyed considered humor and a family's ability to have fun together to be areas that deserved further attention and research. The literature search done for this dissertation confirmed the fact that little work has been done in this area.

One study has been done which begins to fill the void. Dolores Curran (1983) organized a major survey of professionals in education, church work, health, family counseling and voluntary organizations in order to assemble a list of "the traits of a healthy family." Of the 56 possible choices of healthy traits listed on her questionnaire, "a sense of play and humor" was rated fifth in importance by the 551 respondents. Among the "hallmarks" of this quality in healthy families are the positive use of humor and the recognition of the need for play.

A recent dissertation (Wuerffel, 1986b) explored the amount and effect of humor use in families (measured by an instrument called the Wuerffel Inventory of Family Humor—WIFH) and compared the types of humor used with the family's

scores on a Family Strengths Inventory (FSI). Findings from this quantitative study conducted at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado indicate that healthier families used fewer putdowns than families that scored lower on the FSI. This finding supports the assertion made by others (Curran, 1983; Goodman, 1983; Isaacs, 1983) that "laughing with" humor is healthier than "laughing at" humor.

To enable children to respond to the written survey, Wuerffel limited the sample to families with children over the age of 13. It is important to note that of the four humor categories used in the WIFH--Wit, Jokes, Putdowns, and Family Fun--the first three are defined on the survey form as predominantly verbal humor. "Wit," for example, lists puns, verbal slips, double entendres and spoonerisms as examples. The humor categories which emerge from the present study of families with much younger, perhaps even pre-verbal, children, may be expected to differ from the categories in Wuerffel's study.

The Wuerffel Inventory of Family Humor (WIFH) identified ten ways in which families use humor. These categories were developed from the literature on humor and laughter, rather than from responses of survey participants. Families use humor to (a) reduce daily tension, (b) facilitate conversations, (c) express feelings of warmth, (d) lessen anxiety, (e) point out mistakes made by others, (f) entertain, (g) put down other family members, (h) help

cope with difficult situations, (i) put others at ease, and (j) help maintain a positive outlook on life (Wuerffel, 1986b).

Although Wuerffel's work validates an hypothesis of this present study that there is a correlation between family health and family use of humor, it is limited in other respects. Because it was a quantitative study, it generated numerous tables of data and multiple comparisons of humor use between various family subsystems. Limitations of the methodology are not described, however, and the author later noted that people do not know how to put humor into categories because they have never been asked to think about it before (Wuerffel, 1986a). The first conceptual stage of analyzing everyday family situations in terms of type of humor used was, thus, completed by the research subjects themselves who were untutored in how to make such judgments.

The present study takes a different approach to humor in the family. Some of the differences in emphasis are shown in Table 2 (page 48).

The only book located which is devoted entirely to the topic of family humor and laughter is Laughing Together: The Value of Humor in Family Life by Welliver (1986), a short (110 pages), readable book extolling the positive aspects of humor and laughter in family life from a Protestant religious perspective. Humor and laughter are

Table 2. Family Humor: Two Research Approaches Compared

WUERFFEL	ZINK
Quantitative Study	Qualitative Study
Predetermined Categories Derived from Literature	Fluid Initial Categories Developed in order to be Abandoned
Subjects analyze own experience and place into Categories	Participants describe own Experience in detail
Categories not affected by Experience of Subjects	Categories emerge from Experience of Participants
Researcher analyzes and compares quantitative contents of Categories	Researcher compares and analyzes Experience in order to let Categories emerge

portrayed as gifts from God to be used wisely by people in

order to derive the blessings from them that God intended.

Welliver's religious background gives her book a linear

cause-effect perspective, stemming from a dichotomous,

either-or world view (God/Satan, holy/sinful, etc.) and

leads to some unsubstantiated judgments, such as, "When

someone laughs at an inappropriate time or in inappropriate

places, that is abnormal. It is a sign of mental illness

and needs to be treated" (Welliver, 1986, p. 30).

Of potential use to this study are Welliver's (1986)

descriptions of ways families can use humor:

1. as a solvent for minor daily irritations;

2. as a way to understand things as others see them;

3. as a way to make learning enjoyable by humorous

retelling of incidents that are instructive;

4. to criticize without hurting feelings;

5. to reveal simple truths without hurting others (unveil others' foolishness, folly, pomposity);

6. to communicate family love and affection;

The Strategic Family Therapy work of Cloé Madanes (1982, 1984) utilizing techniques of pretend and humor to achieve therapeutic goals has potential relevance for this study. Using pretend techniques creates a frame for family interactions which has no effect on the family's "real" relationships. This shift to a play frame allows ordinary behaviors to be done without their usual consequences (DeKoven, 1978; Kobak & Waters, 1984). Madanes (1984) also describes five devices for introducing humor into family therapy: (a) changing positions or roles in the family; (b) reframing or relabeling a situation, such as, defining the weak as powerful and the powerful as weak; (c) presenting authority as fallible, a variation of the reframing device; (d) incongruity between a situation and the framework in which it occurs, for example, directing a firesetting child to set a fire in a coffee can during a therapy session aimed at eliminating the firesetting behavior; and (e) understating the problem. Using humor with families in therapy requires the ability to look for the funny fragments in grim situations and to think on multiple levels.

Humor in Parenting

Mothering is a Ticklish Situation

The literature related specifically to the topic of
humor and parenting is very sparse and recent, but highly
illuminating of the possibilities in this area. The only
research found on the topic is Schneyer's (1981)
dissertation on "the contributions of a sense of humor to
mothering." Using personality testing, in-depth
interviewing and detailed observation in the ongoing
meetings of a small group of mothers, Schneyer wanted to
know if and how a ready love of laughter contributed to a
woman's effectiveness as a mother. Her findings appeared to
support her assumptions that approaching the task of
parenting with "a willingness to laugh and to use humor when
appropriate would make the task easier and more effective"
(Schneyer, p. 212).

In her observations of the mothers' group, Schneyer
noticed that most occurrences of laughter reflected the
Janus-like, or two-in-one, quality of humor described in the
"Oxymoron" section earlier in this chapter. For example,
one mother laughed when she disclosed feelings that seemed
to propel her in opposite directions at the same time, while
another's laughter "often preceded or followed statements
which appeared to contradict her own value system"
(Schneyer, p. 124). This would suggest that some forms of

parents' use of humor with their children might have this
same two-in-one, or oxymoronic, quality to them.

Schneyer indicates a variety of functions humor and
laughter served for the five mothers/participants in her
study, which she sums up as metacommunication. When
laughter accompanies another behavior, it adds the comment
that the behavior "is not to be taken seriously for it is
'in fun' and therefore not real" (Schneyer, p. 197).
Laughter is a metacommunication that modifies a behavior,
expressing something complementary or contradictory to the
original behavior, leaving room for ambiguous
interpretation.

Re-evaluation Counseling

Re-evaluation Counseling ("co-counseling") is a peer
counseling program (see Appendix A for basic information
about Re-evaluation Counseling theory) with a developing set
of theoretical and practical ideas for improving family
relationships. (The ideas discussed here are most effective
when used in the context of R. C. theory and with the
support of other co-counseling families.) A recurring theme
in this R. C. family work with relevance to this study is
the usefulness for adults to maintain a lighthearted, loving
attitude when they are around children. This approach has
been shown to be a very useful way to loosen up behavioral

rigidities of children through giggling, laughter and physical play (Jackins, T., 1983a, 1983b; Wiplfer, 1983).

The goal of Re-evaluation Counseling work in families is to build respectful relationships between parents and children in which children can show all of themselves, including the places where they feel desperate, unloved, and disappointed, (Esser, 1983). Parents use their co-counseling sessions with other adults to talk about, discharge and gain perspective on their own regrets, disappointments and frustrations from their childhoods and in their present lives. By using this support from other adults, parents become more able to relax around their children and have more free attention available for their children's needs and feelings.

Summary

This chapter reviewed three theories of humor and laughter--incongruity, superiority and relief/release. The often-contrasting worlds of adults and children were presented as a prelude to discussion of the powers of humor and laughter to bring people closer together. This theme of humor as a social connector recurred throughout the conduct of the research. The notion of the paradoxical combination of opposites in incongruity humor and creativity led to one of the initial, local concepts, that is, that the introduction of humor in stressful family situations could

hold the possibility of blurring the lines of conflict so that mutual satisfaction of differing needs could occur.

The review of literature on humor and family life lent credence to the present study while pointing out limitations in existing literature: viewing family humor from a linear, dichotomous, world-view (Welliver, 1986); and forcing family experiences into predetermined categories (Wuerffel, 1986b). The aspect that distinguishes this study from other research in this area is its attempt to investigate the role of humor in daily family living from a systemic perspective. The logical-deductive nature of Grounded Theory makes it particularly suitable for a study such as this utilizing a well-accepted paradigm (family systems theory) in a relatively unexplored area: humor in parenting. The next chapter elaborates the rationale for the selection of Grounded Theory and describes its application in the present study.

CHAPTER 3

THE METHODOLOGY

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Introduction

This chapter on the Methodology is divided into four

sections. Section One lays the groundwork by raising four

basic issues of concern in the conduct of a qualitative

research study such as this. Section Two introduces the

basic principles of Grounded Theory, including the research

design, the four-stage process of data analysis, and the

assumptions and limitations of the methodology. Section

Three illustrates how the researcher's three pilot studies

led naturally into the interview procedures and data

collection decisions for the present study. Section Four

presents the outcome of the first stage of coding and

analysis, i.e., the four major categories of data.

Section One: Basic Issues

This section sets a philosophical framework for the

research, highlighting four concerns that guided the

researcher's investigation.

Phenomenological Research

This research study is part of the growing tradition

of phenomenological research whose goal is to maintain the

integrity of the phenomena under study in order to

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understand the experience of the participants from their own perspective (Johnson, 1975; Seidman, Sullivan & Schatzkamer, 1983). This approach seeks to understand a particular social process (in this case, humorous interactions between parents and children up to the age of 6) in terms of what the participants know, see and understand about that process in contrast to the scientific positivist approach of "discovering things about a social world those in it do not know" (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). The scientific positivist approach to sociological research "tries to accentuate a dichotomy between subject and object, between knower and what is known" (Seidman et al., 1983, p. 640) when, indeed, the relationship between participant and context is the researcher's key to understanding the phenomena under study (Mishler, 1975).

The Role of Context

Building an empirically grounded theory, especially one dealing with social processes of humor, requires that the researcher take context into account as much as possible (Fine, 1983). Context can be thought of as the "immediately relevant aspects of the situation . . . as well as the relevant aspects of the social system in which the person is functioning" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 92). The present study will use parents' self-reported observations to elicit such contextual factors as the time

of day, the physical and emotional condition of parents and children, the presence of other people, the nature of interactions directly preceding the humorous interchange, and the familiarity of the place (e.g., home, store, friend's home) to build a detailed picture of the humorous interactions. The goal of a grounded theory approach to the study of social processes is to "make substantive theory 'grow,' more or less naturally, out of observed data in daily situations" (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979, p. 31). Grounded theory in this study will grow from data observed by parents and reported to the researcher in small group interviews.

Connectiveness not Representativeness

The "mountains" of data collected in a context-sensitive qualitative study must be handled adroitly by the researcher to avoid getting overwhelmed with details. Yet it is these details which give flesh and blood to the developing theory, and demonstrate the uniqueness of the participants' stories and situations. It is this realization that has led some qualitative researchers to point out that their research findings may be used to illustrate the particular kinds of experience under study, but not to generalize with much confidence (Seidman, et al., 1983; Miles & Huberman, 1984). The issue in the present study is not whether the parents interviewed are

representative of the general population of parents, but
whether their experiences cal be presented in enough
complexity so that other parents can connect their own
experiences with those of the participants (cf. Seidman,
et al., 1983).

The Role of Trust

A fourth issue central to a phenomenological research
study such as this one, using open-ended unstructured
interviews to gather data, is the need for developing trust
in the relationship between the researcher and the
participants. Since phenomenological research rejects the
notion of marking a clear line of distinction between the
knower (participant) and what is known (information), the
more trusting the research relationship becomes, the more
fruitful the work will be. In their research with community
college faculty, Seidman et al. (1983) came to see "equity"
as the essential ingredient in building trust in the
interviewer-participant relationship. This study sought to
establish equitable relationships by:

1. Being as explicit as possible about the nature of
the work being done.

2. Establishing reciprocity with the participants so
that they know what is expected of them and what they can
expect from the interviewer. This helps to assure that they
participate with informed willingness.

3. Establishing interest in and respect for the participants' own stories.

4. Being aware of and working to counteract the implicit social inequities which may result from sex, race, gender and status differences between the interviewer and the participants.

The reader will note that, in both the Introductory Letter (Appendix C) and in the Confirmation Letter (Appendix E), the researcher stated a belief that "all parents are good parents who love their children." This assertion was made with the awareness that a case could be made by some to refute this belief about certain families. This belief about parents was fundamental to this researcher's work. Communicating it to the participants in the Introductory and Confirmation Letters and at the start of the interviews helped to foster the safety and trust needed to facilitate open exchange of opinions and experiences that might have been inhibited by a more evaluative and judgmental research approach.

Section Two: Introduction to Grounded Theory

This section is a general introduction to the grounded theory methodology and the four stages in the development of theory.

Research Design

Synectics, an approach to creative problem-solving developed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, made use of the connection-building power of metaphors to "make the strange familiar" (Gordon, 1961). This researcher favors the use of analogies and metaphors to understand and, subsequently, to explain unfamiliar concepts or processes. The principles and procedures of grounded theory, as described by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967 & 1978), can be understood in terms of the familiar social situation of meeting a stranger (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979).

When we meet someone for the first time about whom we know little or nothing, we need ways to begin a conversation. That presents a problem, however, because we have no idea how the person will interpret what we say or what his or her interests, abilities or tastes might be. A series of steps is needed that will do two things at once: (a) help us start a conversation with the stranger and (b) provide feedback upon which to continue getting acquainted.

One solution is to use stereotypes or cliches to get started: "Where are you from originally? . . . Oh, the South. How do you like these New England winters?" Each question yields information at the same time that it leads to a succeeding question. Although using cliches and stereotypes may sound like we are being unfair to the person we are meeting, they serve well as starting points for

getting acquainted with complete strangers as long as their importance is not prolonged past the conversation's early stages. These "initial cliches are used _in_ _order_ _to_ be abandoned" (Schwartz & Jacobs, p. 27).

This commonsense procedure for meeting a stranger has parallels in the grounded theory approach to the study of social processes. The researcher sets out with a set of loosely-defined preconceived notions (like the "cliches and stereotypes" used to begin talking to a stranger) in hand to get himself started asking questions and collecting information. These _local_ _concepts_, like the cliches about the stranger, are used in order to be abandoned. Those to be used in this study are, first, that there are parents who use humor in their parenting, second, that the use of humor can have either positive or negative effects, and, third, that humorous interactions may reflect a two-in-one, Janus-like quality as described in Chapter 2. As soon as information starts to arrive, it begins to interact with these preconceptions to either support, deny, or transcend them. Just as someone getting to know a stranger makes unconscious decisions regarding what to ask about next, and how long to continue the conversation, the researcher using grounded theory methods makes _sampling_ _decisions_ regarding who to interview, what to ask about and watch for, where to look for more data, and what to write down (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

This decision-making process, called theoretical sampling, is the researcher's way of selecting groups "that will help generate, to the fullest extent, as many properties of the categories as possible, and that will help relate categories to each other and to their properties" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 49). The sampling decisions the researcher makes are controlled by the emerging theory. Choices of settings, people, events or processes to study are based on their theoretical purpose and relevance. If a person getting to know a stranger learns that she was raised in the South, hates New England winters and plans to return to the warm South as soon as possible, it would be "theoretically irrelevant" to ask her if she'd ever considered vacationing in Alaska. The evolving theory about this stranger would preclude such a line of questioning.

The grounded theory study begins not with a specific theory to verify, but with a general problem area to investigate. By defining several local concepts with which to begin the investigation, the researcher creates "a beginning foothold on his research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45), a partial conceptual framework from which to collect and analyze data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). These beginning local concepts may come from the theoretical literature related to the problem area or from the researcher's own experience or "hunches" about the problem. These "pre-existing categories" are subjected to constant empirically-

based analysis as the data collection and coding proceed. A few of them may prove to have continuing relevance, but the key elements in the grounded thory process are the emergent categories which spring out of the data and are the building blocks of the emerging theory.

Data Analysis

Constant comparative analysis is the metthodological glue that holds together the various parts of the grounded theory research process. Constant comparative analysis is concerned with "generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104). Analysis takes place as the data are collected and coded, not after those processes are complete. The simultaneity of data collection, coding and analysis is necessary if the researcher is to be truly generating theory and not replicating or verifying theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) because it allows the researcher to move back and forth between the particulars of the data and the theoretical categories that emerge from the coding and analysis in an interactive, cyclical process (Miles & uberman, 1984). "The ideal model for data collection and analysis is one that interweaves them from the beginning" (Miles & Huberman, p. 49).

The simultaneity of collection, coding and analysis, the underlying operation of theory generation, has been described with phrases like "discovering novelty," "being open to new possibilities," "going with the flow" and "working with loosely held chunks of meaning" (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984). To comprehend and concretize this process, the researcher has found it useful to explore the metaphor of whitewater rafting. Paddling a raft through raging rapids forces one to collect data, code it and analyze it very rapidly. The time gap between seeing the stationary plume of water dead ahead splashing 5 feet high like a giant drinking fountain, coding it as a "standing wave" (water flowing over a large submerged boulder), and paddling one's raft to one side or the other to avoid getting all wet is practically nonexistent. A river rafter is absolutely unable to reserve "data analysis" of the river until "data collection" is completed. Isolating the three processes from one another while whitewater rafting could result in a rafter who is all wet. Isolating them while attempting to generate theory could lead to a researcher and his theory being "all wet."

The research process, of necessity, climbs progressively higher on the ladder of abstraction in order to make sense of a diverse collection of data (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). The four stages outlined by Glaser and

Strauss (1967) specify the theoretical development from the particulars of the data to the generalities of the grounded theory.

Stage One: Comparing Incidents

Open coding is the technique used in this stage to sort individual incidents into as many different categories as possible while comparing each incident with others already placed in that category. Coding is a shorthand the researcher develops to make the data more easily compared, shuffled, retrieved and analyzed. Categories can be thought of as "bins" (Miles & Huberman) which collect related incidents and to which the researcher adds fluid labels as more incidents collect and the properties of the bins begin to be better understood.

This essential process of grounded theory, the Concept-Indicator Model shown in Figure 1 (Glaser, 1978) (see page 65), links data and concepts through the constant comparison of incidents, properties and categories.

Whenever the researcher hits a point in the coding and comparing of incidents where his or her own theoretical notions start to distract attention away from the data, s/he stops coding and writes a memo. A memo is to be jotted down whenever a conceptual/theoretical idea strikes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Called the "bedrock of theory generation," memos are an efficient way to hold onto thought processes

Concept

I-1   I-2   I-3   I-4   I-5   I-6   I-7   I-8
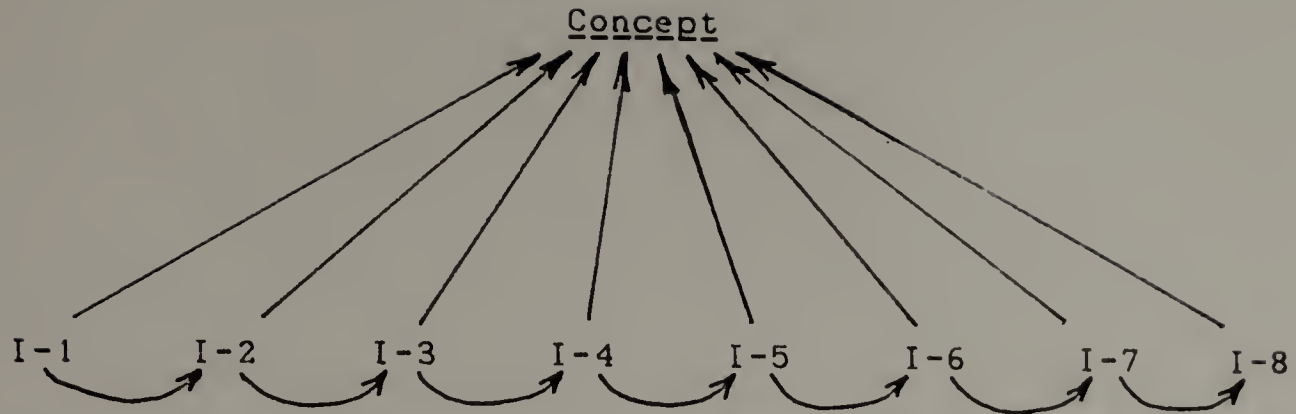
Figure 1.   The Concept Indicator Model

"I" stands for "indicator"; ⤵ means "comparison between".
When compared between and among each other, indicators
suggest the properties of the concept as well as their
relationship to each other and to the emerging concept
(Stanitis, 1985).

that occur throughout data collection, coding and analysis

(Glaser; Miles & Huberman, 1984).   Memos are labeled or

captioned and placed into a "memo fund" for easy recall

later on in the research.

Stage Two: Integrating Categories

As the coding of data proceeds and categories take

shape, the units of constant comparison shift from

comparing incidents with each other to comparing incidents

with the properties of the categories that emerged from

the initial comparison of incidents in Stage One. Figure

2 (see page 66) illustrates the higher level of comparison

that takes place at this stage. By shifting comparisons to

this higher level of abstraction, the researcher begins to

discover an emergent theoretical integration of the

"The Ground"

[<u>Local</u> <u>Concepts</u>--hypothesis identification]

STAGE ONE: I-1 I-2 I-3 I-4   I-5 I-6 I-7 I-8, etc.
 <u>Compare</u>
  incidents

Techniques: Open
  Coding & Memoing

STAGE TWO: <u>Integrate</u>
  categories   C-1   C-2   C-3   etc.

Techniques: Selective
  Coding & Memoing

STAGE THREE: <u>Delimit</u>   CV   CV
  theory by reducing to
  Core Variables

Techniques: Densification,
        Saturation

STAGE FOUR: <u>Write</u> the theory
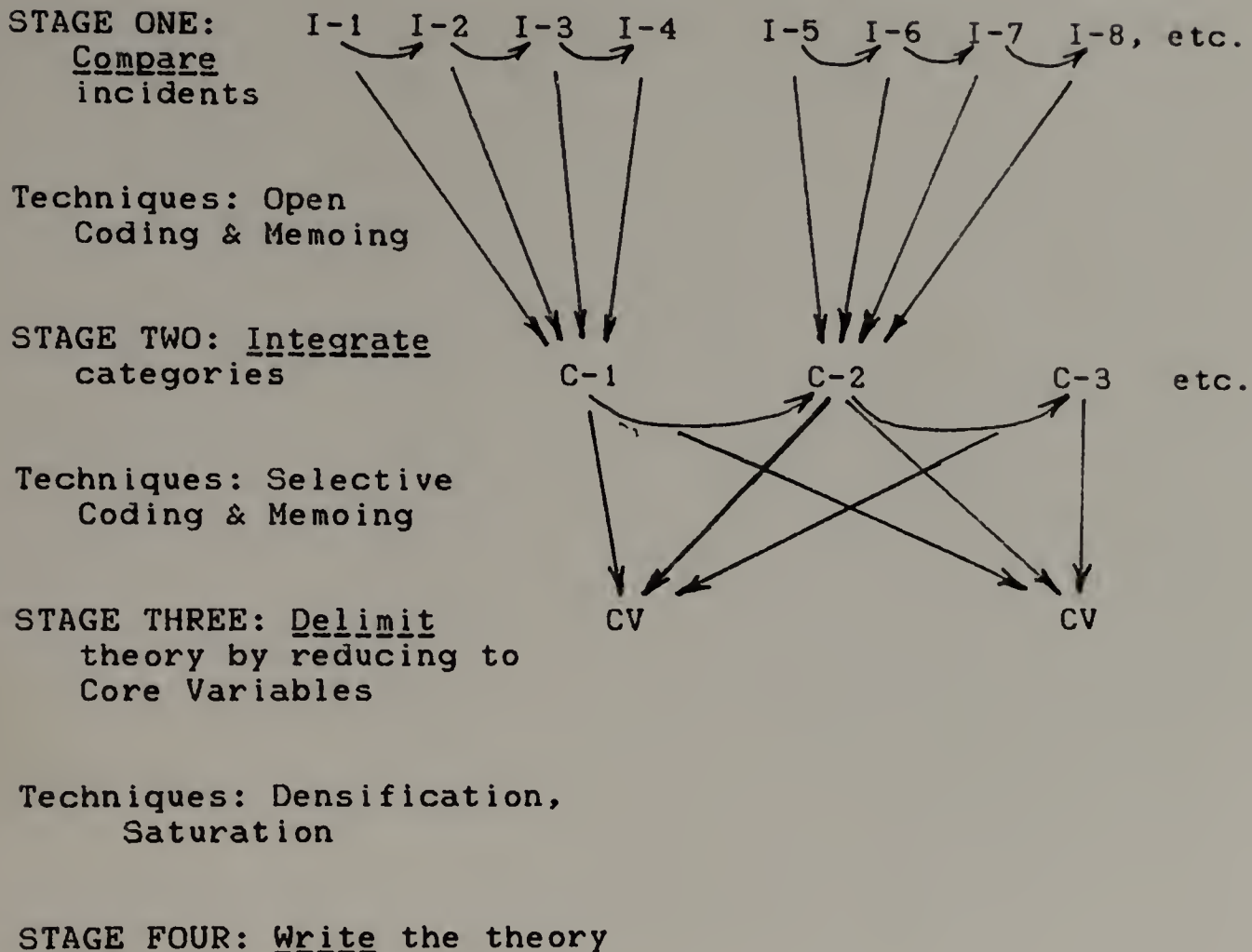
"The Written Theory"

Figure 2.   The Constant Comparative Method for the Discovery
            of Grounded Theory

Legend: I = incidents from raw data
         C = category
         CV = core variable
         ⤴ = comparison between

categories. "The theory develops," write Glaser and Strauss
(1967), "as different categories and their properties tend
to become integrated through constant comparisons that force
the analyst to make some related theoretical sense of each
comparison" (p. 109).

Stage Three: Delimiting the Theory

The goal of this stage of analysis is the reduction
of the theory by discovering "underlying uniformities in
the original set of categories or their properties, and
[formulating] the theory with a smaller set of higher
level concepts" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.110). Figure 2
(page 66) is again illustrative of the progressive movement
through higher levels of abstraction. At this stage, the
researcher decides to use selective coding as a technique
for reducing the original list of categories to an
integrated central theoretical framework, the core of the
emerging theory. Once the researcher begins to tentatively
articulate these core variables, s/he can organize the
categories, properties and incidents from the lower levels
of analysis around this central framework. When the coding
and analysis of additional data begins to seem superfluous
to the theoretical integrity of the core variables, they are
said to be theoretically saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Stage Four: Writing the Theory

Writing the theory can begin when the researcher is convinced that (a) his/her central theoretical framework forms a systematic substantive theory, (b) it reflects reasonably well the social processes under study, and (c) it will be useful to others wishing to study the same phenomena. By dipping into the memo fund, the researcher assembles the work, the memos providing "the content behind the categories, which become the major themes of the theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 113).

Assumptions

The qualitative research methodology used in this study assumed the following to be true:

1. Participants related their personal experiences as accurately and honestly as possible, without intentionally trying to misrepresent them or mislead the interviewer.

2. Using the open-ended interview format, the researcher was able to reconstruct sufficient details of humorous parent-child interactions to code and analyze the content and context of each interaction for use in the generation of theory.

Limitations

This study was conducted in full awareness of the fact that the ways people talk about themselves often tend to

conform more to how they need to believe they are and have others believe they are than how they actually think and behave (Galinsky, 1981; Schneyer, 1981; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). It is in the nature of phenomenological research such as this, however, to acknowledge the existence of multiple truths. "Since reality is knowable in an infinite number of ways, many equally valid descriptions are possible" (Mishler, 1979, p. 10). The factual truth of participants' stories were a less crucial element of the research than the realization that their stories were their personal interpretations, or ways of making meaning, of the events they described.

It was also recognized that unintended bias may have entered into the data collection, coding and analysis process because it was the work of a single investigator. No contention can be made for a study such as this that a second independent investigation of the same subject using the same methodology with the same participants would produce the same outcomes because in "grounded" research like this, there is no way around the fact that "who we are and what we say affects what we will hear" (Seidman, et al., 1983, p. 659). Just like the example of starting a conversation with a stranger described above, no two people would go about it in exactly the same way and, thus, would initially learn different things about the same stranger.

Humorous interactions in families are highly context dependent. The situation in which the humor occurs is crucial to an understanding and analysis of the incident. A limitation of this methodology was its reliance on parents' self-report of humorous incidents rather than on direct observation of families in their homes. The choice for interviews rather than in-home observation was made following the Fall 1985 pilot study because of the higher proportion of useful data obtainable from interviews.

Section Three: The Present Study

This section traces the development of this dissertation's research procedures through three preliminary studies. Logistical details regarding the interviews and basic participant information is then covered.

Pilot Studies

The researcher conducted three pilot studies in the two years prior to the present research to develop and refine the research design, instrumentation and overall approach for this study.

Spring 1985

The first pilot consisted of a series of audiotaped in-depth interviews with two mothers of young children in the spring of 1985. Each mother participated in three 1 1/2-

hour interviews generally focused on the development of her relationship with her 2-year-old child. The purpose was to understand these early parent-child relationships by having the mothers describe in detail any experiences they could recall, without the specific intention of collecting humorous incidents. Of the 9 hours of data collected, each participant described only one or two humorous interactions with her child. It was decided that this general, unfocused style of interviewing yielded far too little relevant data.

Fall 1985

The second pilot, conducted in the fall of 1985, consisted of one-hour videotaped interviews with two different families, each with one child about 3 years old. Each couple was interviewed in its own home with the child present. The interview was designed to direct the parents' attention to the topic of humor and laughter both in their families of origin and in their families of procreation. The researcher asked about the parents' definition of humor, specific instances when using humor improved situations or made them worse, and, in general, what form humorous interactions took in the family. Videotaping the sessions also produced a wealth of observational data about the interactions between the parents and the children.

Two potential methodological approaches to the study of humor in parent-child interactions were attempted in this

pilot: (a) talking to parents about specific situations in which humor occurred, and (b) observing parent-child interactions which may or may not involve humor and/or laughter. The amount of humor and laughter present in the parent-child interactions observed in this pilot may well have been skewed by the nature of the topic and the presence of the video camera and operator. The parents may have felt that they had to be "on" and, in some cases, made valiant efforts to continue to be positive towards their child while, at the same time, remaining part of the interview discussion. The researcher felt that the structure of this study, combining the two research approaches, reduced the "natural"-ness observed in family interactions.

To make either of the two approaches used in this pilot (parent interviews and naturalistic observation) workable, it was deemed essential to use them separately. As in the first pilot (Spring 1985), the researcher decided that videotaped in-home naturalistic observations would yield an unsatisfactorily low percentage of useful data. The first approach, i.e., parent interviews, while subject to the limits of self-reporting bias, generated much more useful information.

Winter 1986

A third pilot 3tudy was conducted by the researcher in December 1986 in an attempt to incorporate the lessons

learned in the previous two pilots while gaining practice in unstructured interviewing and in the use of grounded theory. The study sample consisted of five parents: two couples plus one mother whose husband had stayed home sick. The researcher knew all of the participants prior to the interview, but did not have regular social contact with any of them. The audiotaped interview was conducted in a single 3-hour session without children present.

Assumptions

This study represented a shift in approach from the earlier studies in that parents were interviewed in a small group rather than alone or with just their own family present. This format was used to make preliminary assessments of the following assumptions:

1. That the variety of data obtainable would be increased by the interactions among group members and that hearing other parents' stories would help participants more readily recall their own.

2. That a group size of 4-7 people would be lare enough to stimulate group interaction and a cross-fertilization of stories and ideas, yet small enough to allow each participant adequate "air time".

3. That the interview setting could be made psychologically safe enough to allow participants to share negative parenting experiences (when their use of humor was

not effective or when their sense of humor was absent) with people had never met before.

4. That a small group interview would begin to establish an empirical "ground" for a developing theory related to the variety of ways parents use and maintain their senses of humor. The researcher's intention was to find out what topics and issues would actually arise in a small-group interview with parents guided by the following discussion questions (the number following each question refers to the research questions initially set out in the Purpose of the Study in Chapter One, pages 17-18):

(a) When did your use of humor seem to change things for the better? (#1)

(b) When did your use of humor seem to make things worse? (#1)

(c) When did you use humor on the spur of the moment, and find it effective? (#1)

(d) When did you use humor, or try to use it, even though you were exhausted, ill or depressed? (#1)

(e) When did you wish you could be humorous, but found it impossible? (#1)

(f) What do you see yourself doing to maintain your sense of humor in the short run and the long run and does it seem to work? (#2)

(g) How do you define "sense of humor"? (#3)

Findings

A review of the audiotapes and notes made during the
interview carried the researcher's thinking forward to the
following places:

1. The group interaction appeared to facilitate
participants' recollection of stories, as had been
anticipate. All of the participants said they had not
specifically prepared themselves for the interview by trying
to recall anecdotes beforehand, but none were at a loss for
stories to tell, with one exception. The woman whose
husband did not come said she had difficulty remembering
incidents. She recommended that future participants be
encouraged to come as couples and that, had her husband
come, it would have been "a very different experience." The
inclusion of single parents as participants in this study
was not precluded by this recommendation. The researcher
made plans to place single parents together in the same
interview group when possible and to invite them to
participate with a trusted friend/caregiver.

2. Although the group interaction did facilitate
participants' recall and promote a cross-fertilization of
ideas, the distribution of air time revealed some problems.
An "Air Time Count" was made by counting the cumulative
length of time each person spoke. This tally showed that
one father talked 32% of the 90 minutes, the other father
spoke only 4% of the time and two of the mothers talked 7%

and 8% of the time. A more fair breakdown of air time would have been 15-20% for each participant (including the researcher's questions and comments), but this breakdown must take into account that some people tend to talk more than others. For example, while the more talkative father spoke 8 times longer than the less talkative father, the number of different times he spoke was less than twice as great (22 times vs. 13 times). This means that when he started telling a story, he elaborated much more than the other father, who spoke more succinctly.

Based on these indications, the following guidelines were used in subsequent interviews to maintain more balanced air time: (a) In the introductory part of the interviews, the researcher would take note of the talkativeness of participants relative to each other; (b) Use of a flexible questioning approach, alternating between posing questions to the group as a whole and directing questions to specific individuals, would include less talkative participants; (c) Allowing brief periods of silence, if necessary, would give less talkative participants time to think about what they want to say without feeling pressured.

3. The researcher's primary criteria for assessing the psychological safety of the intervview was the extent to which participants shared difficult, frustrating experiences. One couple talked at some length about working through the misunderstandings and hurt feelings caused by

the husband coming home late for dinner several times in a few weeks. One mother described in detail a recent situation with her 2-year-old daughter which she called her "worst case scenario," when everything she did to make things right were wrong. A father talked about the night his frustration in trying to put his tired baby to bed reached the limit and he yelled at him. These examples indicate that it is possible to create a research environment that is safe enough for participants to share unpleasant experiences with people who may have been strangers at the beginning of the interview.

4.   This pilot study was conducted to empirically test several assumptions about the small group interview process. These process findings were incorporated into the structure of the three succeeding interviews. Subsequent analysis of the transcript of this pilot study indicated that it had yielded useful data on a content level as well, i.e., parents had related humorous incidents which could be coded, compared and analyzed using the constant comparative analysis methods of grounded theory. Pilot study data were, thus, incorporated into the overall research.

Interview Procedures

Three unstructured small group interviews recorded on audiotape were used to collect data. The choice of an unstructured interview format was based on a number of

assumptions about the topic being explored (humorous parent-child interactions), the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the nature of the anticipated outcomes. It was assumed that the researcher could not know beforehand: (a) in what order to ask the pre-planned questions; (b) which questions to include or exclude in order to explore the topic sufficiently; (c) how to word the questions so they would be non-threatening and unambiguous; (d) what new questions would occur during the interviews; and (e) which "digressions" during the interviews might later lead to the development of a major category of the emerging theory (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). These initial uncertainties were allowed to be resolved in the interview process itself rather than settling them beforehand.

Since the order, wording and content of the interview questions were open and responsive to participants' input, they may be called recursively defined questions, a term used by mathematicians. Questions are said to be more or less recursively defined to the extent that "what has already been said in a given situation [is] being used to determine or define the next question to be asked" (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979, p.45). The use of recursively defined questions enabled the researcher to respond to the uniqueness of people and situations without being rigidly bound by the limitations of a pre-planned inflexible instrument. Incorporating this kind of latitude added

strength to this study which strived to realize principles of equity, fairness and psychological safety between researcher and participants.

This researcher went through several shifts regarding the number of people to interview at a time. Familiarity with the process of interviewing individuals or couples in the first two pilot studies plus extensive experience with one-to-one peer counseling (Re-evaluation Counseling) led to an initial decision to continue talking with parents from one family at a time. Discussions with colleagues highlighted some significant benefits of group interviews (e.g., cross-fertilization of ideas), but these benefits were weighed against the possibility that parents' inhibitions and defensiveness might be heightened if they were asked to share their experiences in a group. The comparative advantages and disadvantages of small group vs. single family interviews were eventually seen to hinge on one critical factor: Could the researcher himself make the small group format safe enough (thus mitigating its major disadvantage) to allow the free flow of stories and ideas (thus realizing its major advantage)? Analysis of the findings of the Winter 1986 pilot showed that study to have been both an experiment and a substantiation that this indeed could be done.

The small group format encouraged participants to interact, to compare and contrast stories and give each

other feedback which was difficult for the researcher to do
in his role as researcher. The give-and-take among
participants gave the researcher initial points of
similarity and difference from which to proceed. According
to Schwartz and Jacobs (1979), "This strategy [interviewing
people in small groups] is especially provocative when
studying groups . . . who may have individual ways of
dealing with common problems but have never talked about
this among themselves" (p. 45).

Data Collection

This section describes the basic logistics of the data
collection process, including how interviews were scheduled,
how participants were chosen, who they were, and where they
lived.

Selection of Participants

Participants for the study were recruited in one of
three ways:

1. Word-of-mouth. Of the 20 families who considered
participating, 13 were initially contacted through word-of-
mouth from parents who had taken part in one of the pilot
studies or were acquainted with a friend or colleague of the
researcher;

2. Workshops. Five families were reached through
"Humor in Parenting" programs facilitated by the researcher

in various locations in western Massachusetts in the winter and spring of 1987;

3. Newspaper article. Two families learned of the project by reading "Use Humor to Dispel Family Tension," a newspaper article written by the researcher, appearing in the Springfield (MA) Sunday Republican (June 7, 1987) as part of a weekly "How's the Family" series, authored by Dr. Warren F. Schmacher, University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension (see Appendix B).

Once contact was established with families, they were given or sent an Introductory Letter (see Appendix C) about the project. About a week later, the families were phoned to see if they were still interested in participating; had any questions; and to make sure they understood that they would be responsible for making their own child care arrangements. This phone call was also used to record basic family information and to find some possible dates for their participation. All this information was recorded on a "Family Information Form" (see Appendix D) which became an ongoing record of communications with the families. When participation had been confirmed with a family and an agreeable interview date scheduled, they were sent a Confirmation Letter (see Appendix E) and the Written Consent Form (see Appendix F) which they signed and brought with them to the interview.

The fact that the only way parents could participate in this study was by volunteering meant that there was an implicit selectiveness involved. The act of volunteering indicated a readiness and an interest in talking about humor in parenting and, thus, perhaps, some tendency to believe that humor has value in parenting. No claim can be made that this is a demographic study to determine the opinions of the general public about humor in parenti.g (although that could become the thrust of another researcher's work). The purpose of this study has been to understand the experience of parents who feel that they actually do use humor in their parenting and to discover a theory about humor in parenting based on their everyday experiences. The apparent limitation of a self-selected sample has become, in fact, a strength of the study. The parents' expressed intention to participate indicated their willingness to discuss the topic under study which maximized the number and variety of data (stories) obtainable and enriched the quality of the findings.

Interview Scheduling

Sunday afternoon was initially chosen as the time for the (December 1986) Pilot Study because it is an unscheduled time in many families. The five participants in the Pilot Study concurred with this thinking about Sunday afternoons. The decision to leave this one scheduling variable fixed and

to plan the remaining three interviews on Sunday afternoons helped to simplify the researcher's task.

Interview dates were initially set at three weeks apart during the summer, and were based on the available dates given by families in each county. The planned three-week interval between interviews allowed time for transcription, coding and initial analysis of the data so that what was learned in one interview could be used to inform the researcher's questioning in the following interview. This process is described in more detail in Chapter 4.

A number of scheduling variables (families' availability, site availability, unexpected schedule conflicts, etc.) had to be negotiated simultaneously in order to pull parents from two or three different families together. One mother who was expected to participate in the Franklin County interview called on the morning of the interview to say that the arrival of unexpected house guests the evening before would prevent her from coming. Another family called two days before the interview to say they were having their usual difficulty finding child care and asked if the research could proceed with only one of them attending. The researcher tried to assist them in their child care search, but to no avail. The father of this family participated while the mother stayed home with the two children.

To aid in the orchestration of the scheduling process, a "Participant Pool" chart was created, with separate columns for: (a) family last name(s), (b) town and county of residence, (c) ages of children, (d) the date the Introductory Letter was sent, (e) the interview date for their county, (f) the date their Written Consent Form was sent, and (g) the word "YES" when their participation was complete. This chart gave the researcher a single place to record the progress with all potential participating families.

Geographic Locations

The families who participated in this research study live in a three-county area of Western Massachusetts comprising Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden Counties. Because of its early settlement history in the 1600's and its location astride the Connecticut River, this region is known as the Pioneer Valley. Education is the Valley's leading industry with its 15 colleges and the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. The Pioneer Valley offers a unique combination of intellectual and cultural activity, cosmopolitan excitement, natural beauty and a calmer pace than major urban centers in Eastern Massachusetts. These features plus the charm of traditional New England towns and historic buildings attract many newcomers who arrive in order to pursue their education or seek a more relaxed

lifestyle and decide to remain in the region (O'Connell, 1986).

Franklin County, northernmost of the three, is largely rural and the least populated county in the state, excluding the two islands of Nantucket and Martha' Vineyrd (Rand McNally, 1985). Hampshire County is one of the foremost centers of education in the United States with its Five College Consortium of the University of Massachusetts, Smith College, Hampshire College. Mt. Holyoke College and Amherst College. Northampton, the Hampshire County seat, is an urbane, vibrant center for the arts, education, shopping and entertainment. Hampden County's seat is Springfield, the largest city in the Pioneer Valley and third largest in the state. Springfield, a thriving metropolis, is home to the Basketball Hall of Fame, a bustling Civic Center and numerous museums, theaters and stately homes (O'Connell, 1986).

Description of Interviews and Families

The primary data collection method was the audiotape recordings of the four small group interviews with parents described briefly below. The transcribed versions of these interviews served as the raw data for the research investigation.

Summary of Families

This study was not designed to produce generalizable results from a representative sample of families. The following description of families is given as background information for an understanding of the data gathered. Seventeen parents from 10 families took part in the research interviews. Of the 10 families interviewed, 9 were dual-parent families and 1 was a single-parent family. One of the 9 dual-parent families was a blended family. Due to unexpected complications with child care and illness, one mother and one father were unable to participate in the interview with their spouses. Eight fathers and nine mothers were interviewed. Six of the 10 families had one child living with them at the time of the interview, while four families had two children. None of the families had more than two children.

In all nine of the dual-parent families, the father was the principal wage-earner and held a full-time job at the time of the interview. One of the mothers operated a full-time family daycare in the home; three mothers were part-time wage-earners outside the home; one mother was home full-time with her child, but did some accounting work at home; two mothers were home full-time and were not wage-earners at the time of their interviews; one mother was a part-time wage-earner and part-time student; and one mother

was a part-time student, spending a majority of her time at home with her children.

Interviews and Family Genograms

One stipulation of the Written Consent Form (see Appendix F) signed by participants was that pseudonyms would be used to protect their and their families' anonymity. Each of the following family descriptions (including children's ages and parents' roles and responsibilities in the family regarding wage-earning and weekday child care) applies to the time period in which the parent(s) participated in the study. Simple genograms (family diagrams) are included to provide quick reference to family structure and composition.

Pilot Study. This preliminary interview held in December 1986 is described on pages 72-77. Participants in this interview were:

1. The Caplan Family. Susan Caplan was at the end of the first trimester of her second pregnancy when the interview took place; Henry Caplan, who had planned to attend, stayed home sick that day. Susan mentioned that her pregnancy fatigue and her husband's absence seemed to limit her ability to recall humorous incidents. Henry Caplan was working full-time as a graphic designer, while Susan was doing part-time work in a food program for family day care providers. Rebecca (aged 2 years, 4 months) was at a

babysitter's home two mornings a week while her mom worked.
She was in Susan's care the rest of the week.

HENRY
Graphic designer

SUSAN
Part-time
income

REBECCA
b. 8/84
2.4 yrs
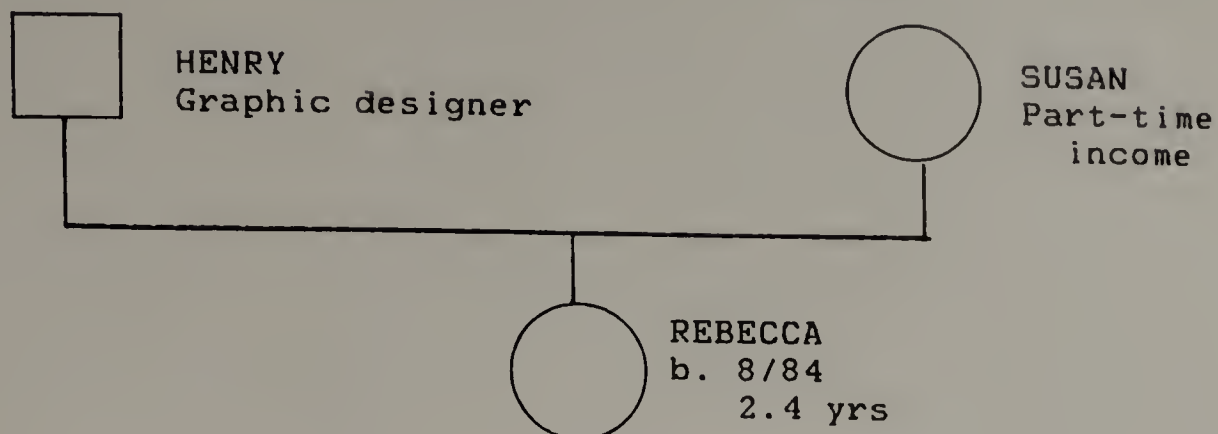
Figure 3.   Caplan Family Genogram

Symbols:

MALE   FEMALE |_____| - MARRIAGE   _____ - CHILD
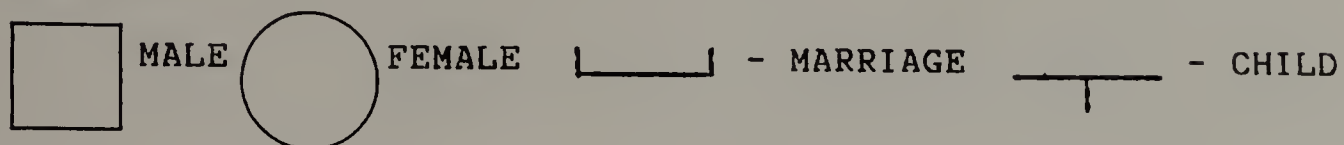
2.   The Higgins Family.   Dennis Higgins was working as
a customer service representative for an advertising company
at the time of the interview.   Kelly Higgins was a family
day care provider using a relative's home until the family
could move into their new house in a few months.   They had
designed the house to include space for home-based day care.
Todd (aged 11 months) was with his mother full-time, either
at home or at the relative's house.

DENNIS
Customer
service rep.

KELLY
Family day
care provider

TODD
b. 1/86
11 mos.
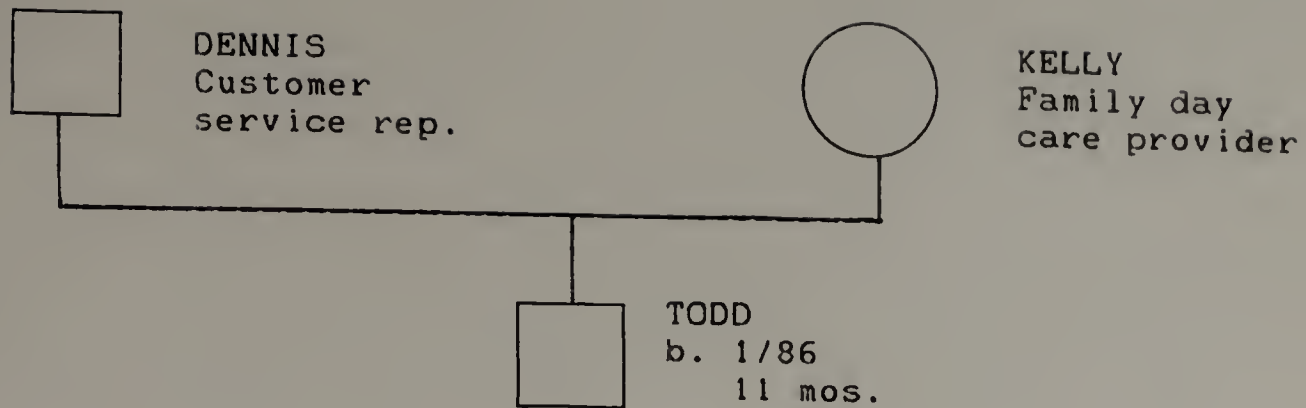
Figure 4.   Higgins Family Genogram

Symbols:

☐ MALE   ◯ FEMALE |_____| - MARRIAGE   _____ - CHILD

3.   The Rosenthal Family.   Karl Rosenthal was a
computer programmer for a large insurance company in western
Massachusetts.   At the time of the interview, Marie
Rosenthal was home full-time with Laura (aged 1 year, 6
months), but had begun looking for part-time employment
outside the home.

KARL
Programmer

MARIE
Full-time
mother

LAURA
b. 7/85
1.5 yrs
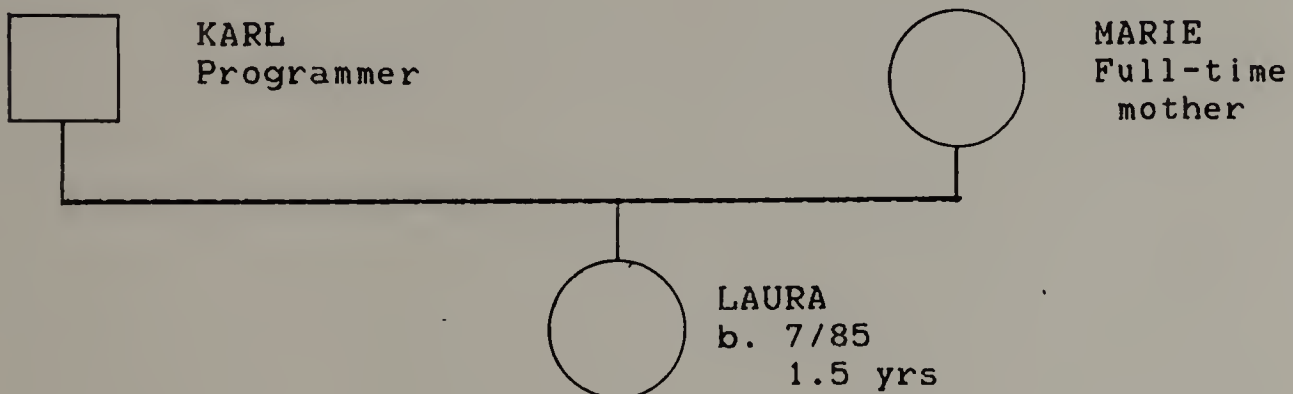
Figure 5.   Rosenthal Family Genogram

Symbols:

☐ MALE   ◯ FEMALE |_____| - MARRIAGE   _____ - CHILD
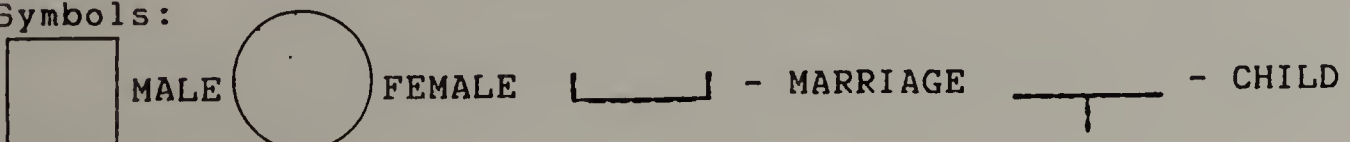
Franklin County. The Franklin County interview was held
at the Greenfield Girls' Club in June 1987.   The
participants in this interview were:

1.   The Glazewski Family.   Miriam Glazewski was a
single parent, who was working "very part-time" in a photo
lab at the time of the interview and attending summer
sessions in order to complete her Bachelor's degree in the
spring of 1988.   She was making plans to apply to law school
for the fall of 1988.   Randy (aged 2 years, 3 months)
attended day care two or three mornings a week while his mom
worked or went to school.   Miriam reported that Randy's
father does not have much to do with Randy, but that he
financially supports her and her son "to some degree."
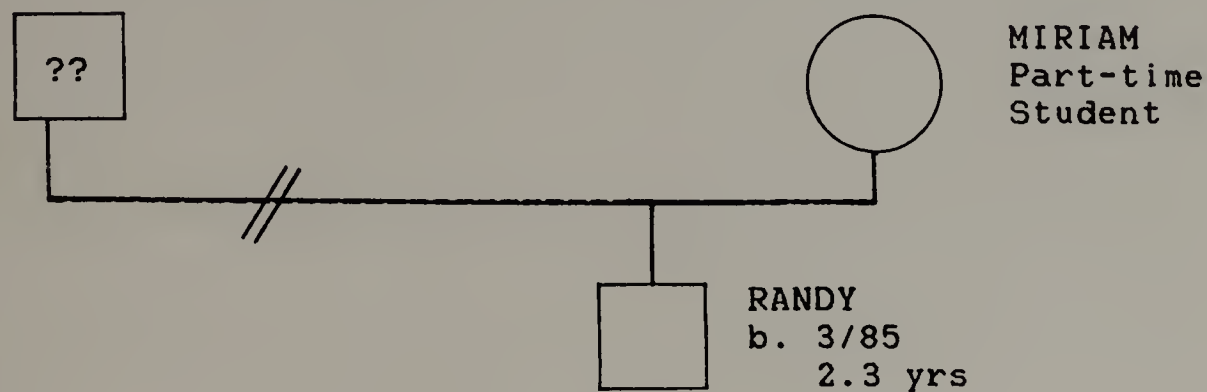
Figure 6.   Glazewski Family Genogram

Symbols:

MALE   FEMALE |_____| - MARIAGE   _____ - CHILD

|__//__| - DIVORCE   ?? - INFORMATION NOT AVAILABLE
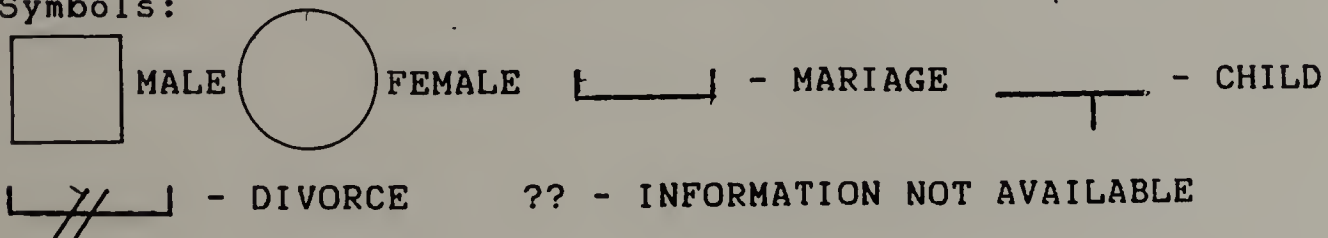
2. The Sayre Family. Nathan and Frances Sayre owned and operated a "Bed-and-Breakfast" in a small rural community. Nathan worked full-time in construction, a workday which starts early and ends early, allowing him several hours at the end of each day to be with Eric (aged 1 year, 5 months). During Eric's first winter, Nathan was laid off (a common situation in the construction industry) and enjoyed having a lot of time to be home with his son. Frances was sending Eric to a babysitter a couple of days a week so she could do bookkeeping at home for her brother, owner of a nearby country market. Otherwise, Eric was in her care full time. The Sayre's were expecting their second child in December 1987.
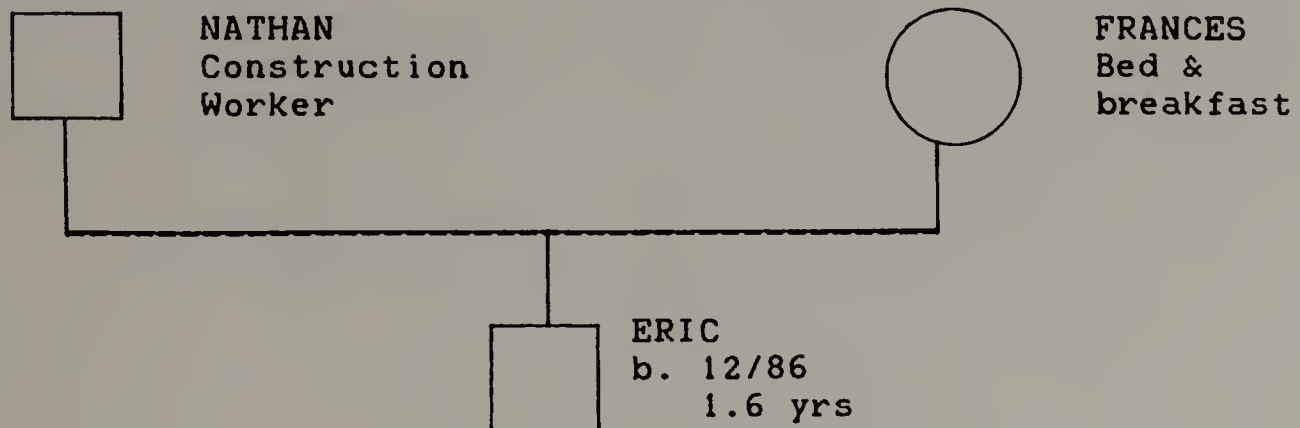
Figure 7. Sayre Family Genogram

Symbols:

☐ MALE ◯ FEMALE ⌊___⌋ - MARRIAGE ___ - CHILD
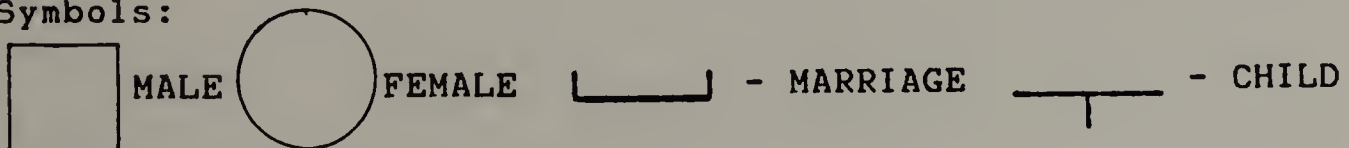
Hampshire County. This interview was held in the library of St. John's Episcopal Church near the center of

Northampton in July 1987. Families participating in this interview were:

1. The Neilson-Erlinbach Family. The Hampshire interview took place three weeks before a major change in this family's life. Connor Neilson planned to be leaving his full-time job as a physical therapist at a nursing home and switching to half-time work doing home health care. Doris Erlinbach, also a physical therapist, was already working part-time in home health care. The decision to change Connor's work situation was based in large part on his and Doris' mutual desire to more equally share child care responsibilities. At the time of the interview, Doris did a majority of the child care, taking their daughter Lisa (aged 1 year, 1 month) to a babysitter's house during the times she was working.

CONNOR NEILSON
Physical
therapist

DORIS ERLINBACH
Physical
Therapist

LISA
b. 6/86
    1.1 yrs
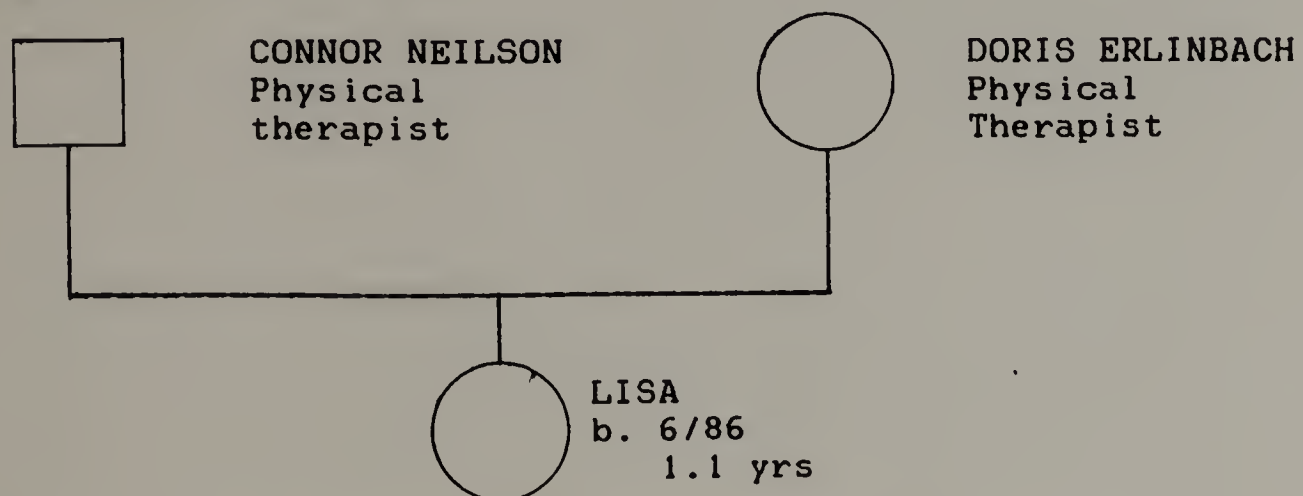
Figure 8. Neilson-Erlinbach Family Genogram

Symbols: MALE   FEMALE |_____| - MARRIAGE _____ - CHILD
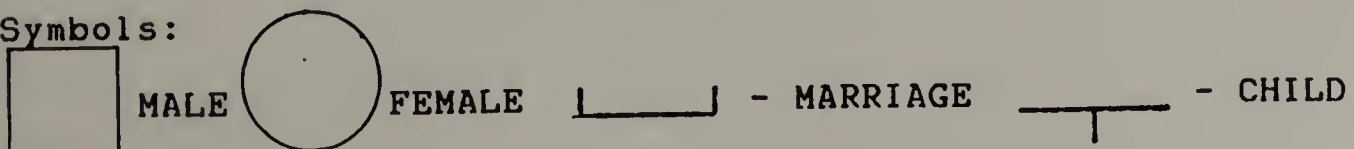
2. The Taft-Tompkins Family, represented by Ben Taft.
As an administrator of a social service agency in
Springfield, Massachusetts, Ben Taft had been able to build
some flexibility into his work schedule, so that he finished
his work week in 4 1/2 days and took care of Stacy (aged 5
years, 3 months) and Max (aged 1 year, 7 months) every
Friday afternoon. Trish Tompkins worked 2 full days a week
at a non-profit agency in Northampton. On those 2 days,
Stacy and Max were in day care. On the other 2 1/2 days of
an average week, Trish was at home with both children.
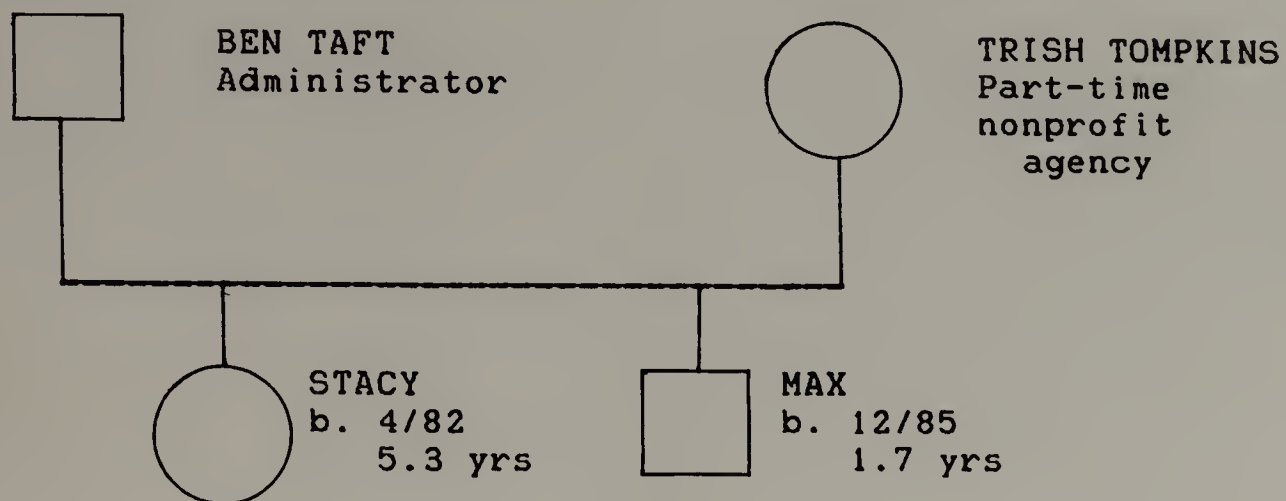
Figure 9. Taft-Tompkins Family Genogram
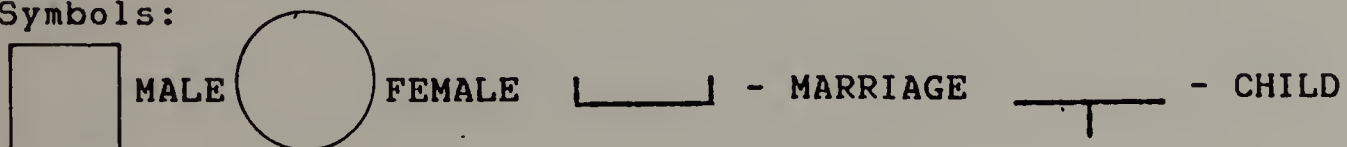
<u>Hampden County</u>. This interview was held at the
Children's Museum in Holyoke in August 1987 with the
following participants:

1. The Hood-Ewing Family. Laura Hood had worked part-time as a potter (she has a studio in her home) until Abe (their second child) was born in March 1987. She had been home full-time with her children since then. Caleb Ewing worked from 9 a.m. to 3:30 or 4 p.m. as an editor at the city's daily newspaper. He would be up early every morning with the children so that Laura could sleep in, and he took over from her when he came home from work. Erin (aged 3 years, 3 months) was in daycare 3 full days a week and at home with her mother and baby brother on the other 2 days. Abe (aged 5 months) accompanied his parents to the interview, adding broad smiles and animated bouncing to the group process.

CALEB EWING
Newspaper
editor

LIBBY HOOD
part-time
potter

ERIN
b. 5/84
3.3 yrs

ABE
b. 3/87
5 mos
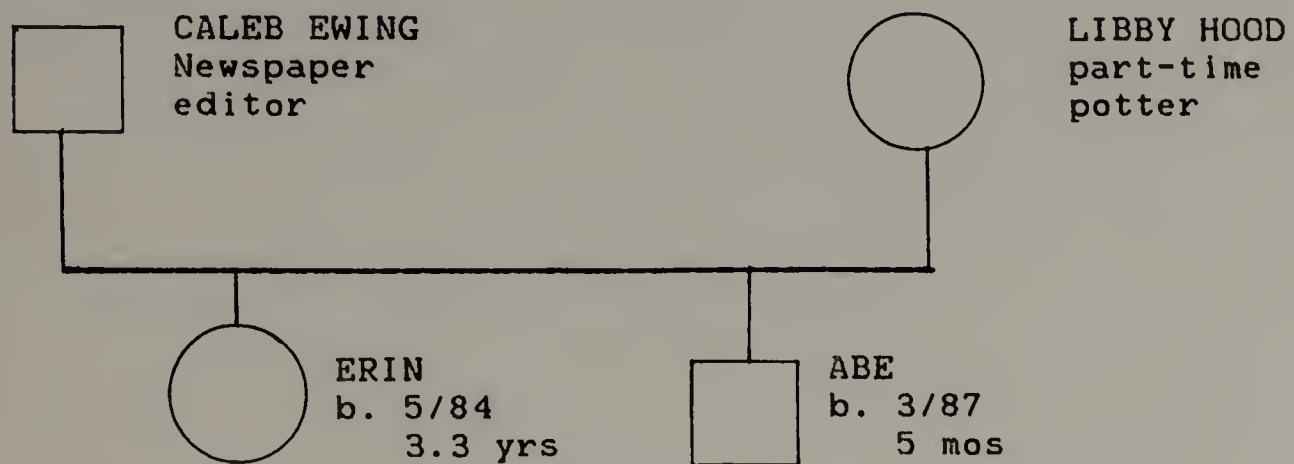
Figure 10. Hood-Ewing Family Genogram

Symbols:

MALE   FEMALE |_____| - MARRIAGE   _____ - CHILD
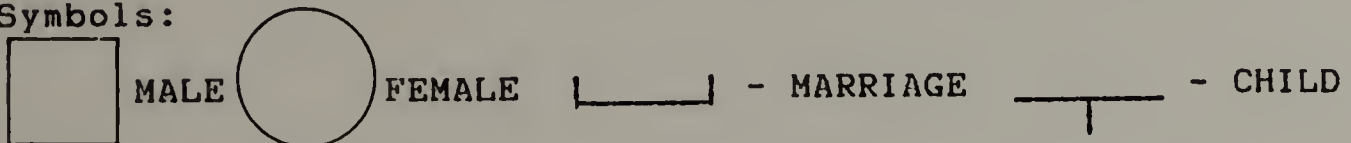
2. The Nelson Family. Vern Nelson was a dentist, and Naomi Nelson worked in his office on a very flexible

schedule. She said that she tried to work half days, but
sometimes they would turn into full days, a flexibility
assisted by Vern's parents, who looked after Kyle (aged 2
years, 9 months) whenever Naomi is at work. Kyle enjoyed
being with his grandparents very much. Vern had two
children from a previous marriage, one of whom, Barbara
(aged 14 years), lived with them on a continuing basis.
Barbara sometimes took care of Kyle as well, affording Vern
and Naomi additional flexibility.
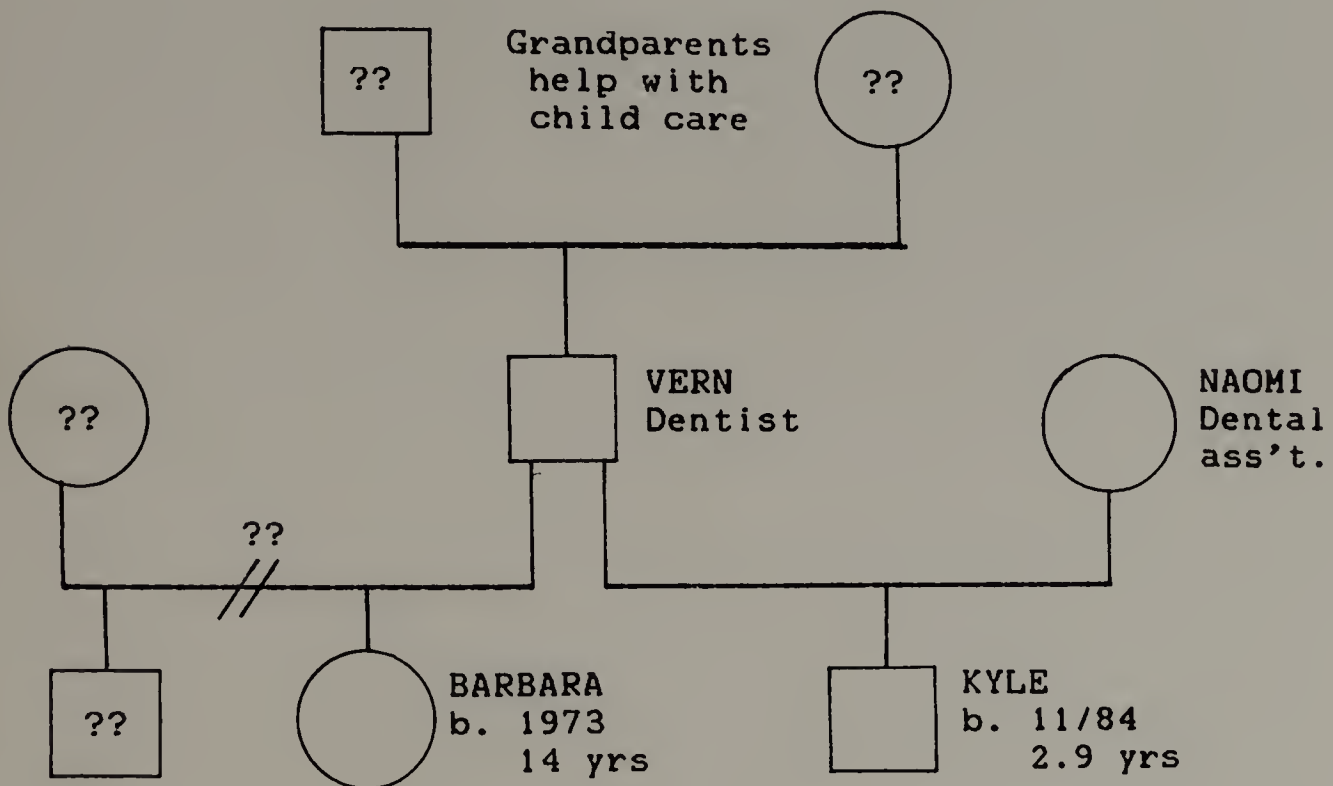
Figure 11. Nelson Family Genogram

Symbols:

MALE   FEMALE   ⌐___⌐ - MARRIAGE   _____ - CHILD

?? - INFORMATION NOT AVAILABLE

3.   The Nylander Family. Nancy Nylander had recently resigned from a two-day-a-week job to become a part-time student a couple of evenings a week.   Keith Nylander took off one afternoon a week from his contracting business (home remodeling) to be with the two boys, Andy (aged 6 years, 9 months) and Bert (aged 4 years, 3 months).   Andy had just completed kindergarten two months before the interview; Bert was at home with Nancy.   Both Nancy's and Keith's parents would sometimes help out with day-time child care.
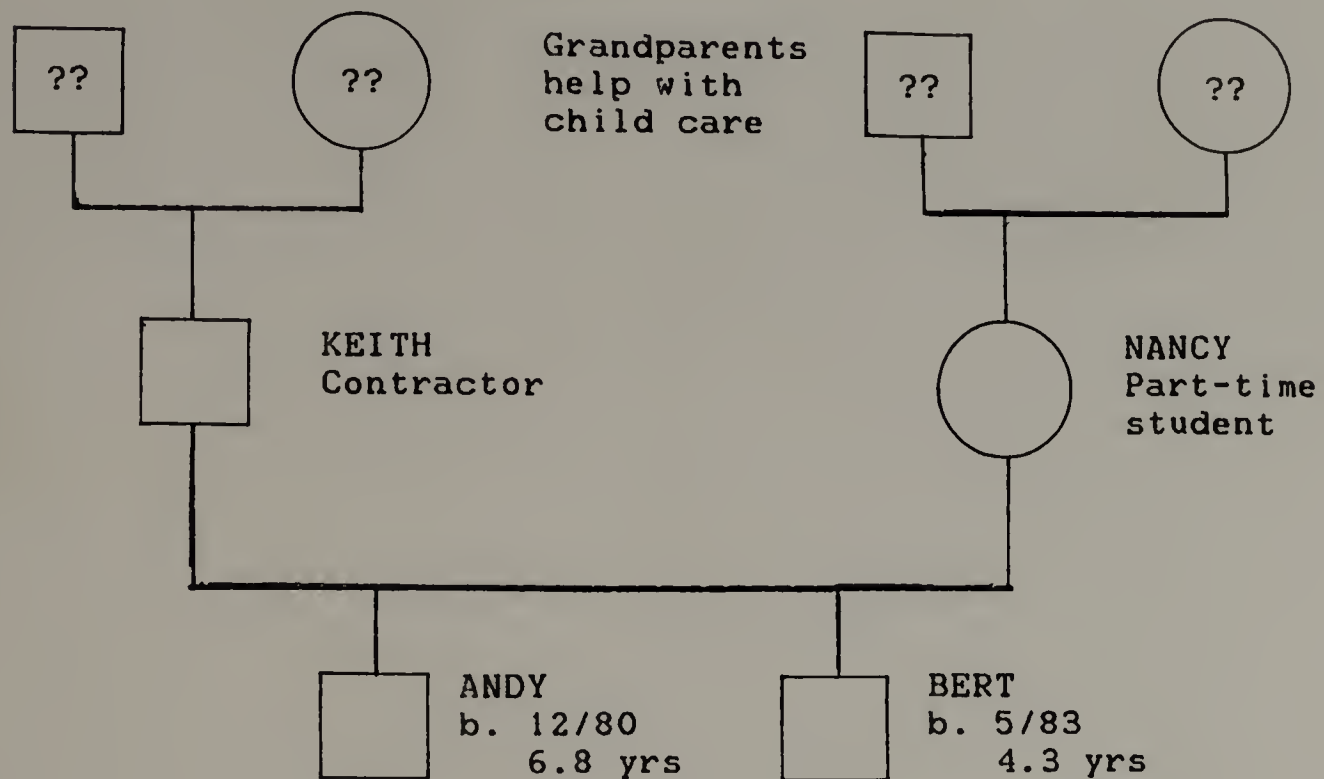
Figure 12.   Nylander Family Genogram

Symbols:

[square] MALE   [circle] FEMALE |____| - MARRIAGE   ___|___ - CHILD
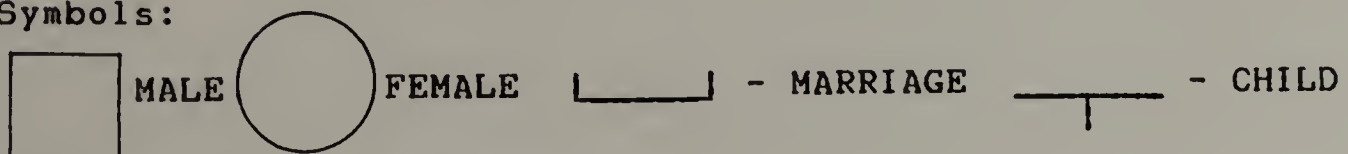
?? - INFORMATION NOT AVAILABLE

Section Four: Initial Coding and Analysis

During the six-month period between the Pilot Study (December 1986) and the Franklin interview (June 1987), a system of handling the qualitative interview data was developed by working with the Pilot Study material. This system was used with the remaining three interviews and necessary modifications made as the work progressed. This section describes the data handling techniques used in this study, then illustrate3 the application of the constant comparative method of analysis to four categories in the data. These analytical activities constitute the first stage of the grounded theory process (see Figure 2 on page 66).

Transcription

The first step was to transcribe the interview tapes. Most of this work was done by the researcher with some assistance from others. Incidents of laughter during the interviews were noted on the transcripts in the following manner: (a) If a laugh by the person speaking occurred in mid-sentence, "(laughs)" was inserted into the sentence. (b) If the speaker started laughing and continued talking at the same time, the word "(laughing)" was added at the point where the laughing began. (c) If a listener laughed at something the speaker said, the first initial of that person's name followed by "laughs" was inserted. (d) If

general laughter (more than one person laughing at the same
time) occurred, the word "(laughter)" was added to the
transcript. This notation of laughter occurrences was not
directly related to the subject of this study, but did
provide some interesting insights about the interaction
between parents in a group discussion of parenting.

Whenever any non-verbal messages, such as a speaker
making a face at the end of a sentence or using a gesture to
describe a reaction to a situation, the absence of which
would have made the sentence or story meaningless, the
researcher used notes from the interview to record these on
the transcript. Two copies of each transcript were made,
one to be left intact to retain the context for later
reference, and the other coded and cut apart for indexing
and analysis.

Transcript Labeling and Indexing

One copy of the transcript was then analyzed for
relevant segments which were labeled as shown in Table 3
(page 99). Each identifying letter was followed by a
number, indicating the sequence of segments in the
transcript, e.g., the first pilot study incident was PS-1,
the second PS-2, etc. Numbering of humor incidents began
with "1" for each new interview. The other segments (D, M,
C) were numbered consecutively throughout the entire study.

Table 3.   Transcript Labeling Symbols

D   Statement of Definition of "sense of humor"

M   Statement regarding Maintenance of "sense of humor"

C   Commentary statement about humor in parenting

PS   Incidents from Pilot Study

F   Incidents from Franklin Interview

N   Incidents from Hampshire (Northampton) Interview

H   Incidents from Hampden (Holyoke) Interview

Once given an identifying label, each segment was indexed on the transcript by the identifying initial of the interview and the page number. All labeled and indexed segments were cut out of the second copy of the transcript and attached to 5 x 8 file cards. The segment identifier (e.g., PS-1, D-3, etc.) was placed in the upper left-hand corner and below it the page number and interview initial. This allowed the researcher ready access to the context of an incident or statement once it had been cut out and placed in the card file. See Appendix G for several examples illustrating this method of labeling and identification.

Analysis of Major Categories

These file cards were then divided into the four major emergent categories for analysis: (1) Humorous (and Non-humorous) Incidents, (2) Definition statements, (3) Maintenance statements, and (4) Commentaries about humor in

parenting. Descriptions follow of the constant comparison method of analysis used with each category.

Humorous (and Non-humorous) Incidents

An identification system was developed for initial open coding of those incidents in which humor occurred, using the system of abbreviations shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Humor Incident Identification System

F (Father) M (Mother)	To indicate which parent(s) were the primary participant(s) in the incident.
B (Boy) G (Girl)	To indicate the sex of the child involved.
Y.M (Years.Months)	To indicate the age of the child at the time of the incident (e.g., 2.11 would mean 2 years, 11 months).
H (Home) W (Work) C (Riding in car) O (Outside of the home) ST (Store) Ch/S (Church/Synagogue) RH (Relative's House) V (on Vacation)	To indicate the location of the incident.

Each incident was then given a label describing thee type of humor that occurred. The constant comparative analysis of similar types led to the development of a typology of humor categories. For example, several incidents were initially found to include some kind of

movement by parent or child. By comparing each of these to the others, it became evident that movement alone was not usually funny, but that sounds (e.g., radio music, singing, nonsense sounds) coordinated with movement consistently produced laughter. The operational definitions of the 13 humor categories (see Table 5, page 102-103) were based as closely as possible on the actual words of the participants. Examples of this labeling system appear in Appendix G.

In addition to telling of times when humor did occur, participants also related incidents when humor did not occur due to the stressfulness of the situation or the parent's uncertainty about how to respond to an unexpected, funny behavior by their child. A typology of incidents is presented in Table 6 (page 104), illustrating four basic kinds of situations described by parents. Although this classification actually emerged later in the discovery process, it is presented here to give the reader an introductory "map" into the "territory" that follows in Chapter 4.

Table 5. Typology of Humor Categories

1. Changing the Child's Physical Position

    Parent physically picks up the child and carries
    him/her around in a playful (i.e., while dancing,
    singing) manner.

2. A New or Funny Behavior Done by the Child

    The child does something which the parent either has
    not seen before or does not expect to see in a given
    situation.

3. Exaggeration: Physical

    In the process of carrying out a certain behavior, the
    parent enlarges it, making the movement more noticeable
    than it would normally be.

    Exaggeration: Verbal

    In the process of saying something, the parent enlarges
    it by increasing the volume, emphasis or emotional
    content of the words.

4. Imitating Each Other: Mutual Reciprocity

    A mutual interaction sequence in which the child's
    behavior is copied by the parent whose behavior is, in
    turn, copied by the child. The reverse sequence
    (parent copied by child who is, in turn, copied by the
    parent) also occurs. The initiator's second action in
    these sequences (i.e., the third behavior) is not an
    exact replica of his/her first action. It resembles
    the first, but because it is a copy of a copy, it
    incorporates some or all of the other person's
    behavior.

5. Mimicking Child's Behavior

    A behavior by a parent in a stressful situation which
    copies the child's behavior but embellishes it with the
    intention of stopping or changing that particular
    behavior by the child.

6. Movement and Sounds Coordinated

    A behavior by parent and/or child in which some form of
    music, singing, body sounds, rhymes, etc. is done in
    conjunction with physical movements.

7. Nonsense Words, Actions, Faces

    Any behavior by parent or child which appears to make
    no logical sense in a situation or which appears to
    have no logical meaning.

8. Pretending

    The parent acts as if something were true which is not
    true, for example, acting as if she had been kicked
    when she had not been, or role-playing a fairy-tale
    character.

9. Reframing

    A cognitive maneuver by a parent which changes his/her
    perception of a situation to make it more manageable.

10. Repetition

    Any time a certain behavior becomes funny and produces
    laughter by being done several times in succession.

11. Retrospect

    The retelling of an unpleasant incident by a parent to
    one or more listeners changes the parent's perception
    of the incident, allowing its humorous elements to
    emerge.

12. Role Reversal

    An incident in which either a parent or a child
    initiates a switching of customary roles.

13. Surprise

    A behavior by either a parent or a child which occurs
    quite suddenly and departs from the normal, anticipated
    routines of the family.

Table 6. <u>Typology</u> <u>of</u> <u>Incidents</u>

Type I: FAMILY FUN

    Characteristics: Parents and children share fun,
laughter, affection, pleasure.

    Examples: Making faces, playing peek-a-boo together

Type II: "TO LAUGH OR NOT TO LAUGH"

    Characteristics: Parent feels confused about how to
respond to a humorous situation.

    Examples: One-year-old making faces and playing peek-
a-boo in church

Type III: HUMOR PRODUCES A "SHIFT"

    Characteristics: Parent-child relational context
<u>shifts</u> from tension, struggle and conflict to more relaxed,
give-and-take interaction.

    Example: Parent brings an abrupt, giggling halt to a
two-year-old's tantrum by playfully imitating her and then
asking, "Am I doing it right?"

Type IV: NON-HUMOROUS INCIDENTS

    Characteristics: Parent's needs and intentions are
in conflict with child's needs and intentions in an ever-
worsening cycle of stress.

    Example: Exhausted and overburdened with grocery
bags, a parent "loses it" and yells at the 3-year-old to
stop the tantrum.

Defining Sense of Humor

This study approached the occurrence of humor in
families from the phenomenological perspective of listening
to parents talk about humorous incidents in the lives of
their families. The questions posed in the four research
interviews emerged from a theoretical framework which began
with a broad initial area of interest and then evolved from
the interviewing process itself rather than from a pre-
existing theory or definition about what "should" constitute
a "humorous incident." This approach allowed parents leeway
to interpret their own lives in terms of "humor" or its
absence without force-fitting their experiences into a pre-
determined theoretical structure.

One implication of this approach is that incidents that
parents described as "humorous" may not necessarily match a
dictionary definition of "humor" nor fit very easily into
one or more of the humor theories reviewed in Chapter 2. In
fact, some of the things parents did talk about had little
to do with being funny, telling jokes, or making other
people laugh. This is not a regrettable research outcome
because of the fact that the fundamental purpose of this
study was to begin to understand the role of humor in family
relationships _from the perspective of the people who are
living those relationships_. In the analysis of definitional
statements that follows, parents' words were taken at face
value. Thus, a working definition of "humor" in parenting

was allowed to emerge from the interviews by a process of
the researcher providing the term--"humor"--and allowing
parents to respond as they chose.

Each group of parents was asked to define "sense of
humor" in their own words in relation to their roles as
parents of pre-school children. The constant comparative
analysis of definitions from all four interviews yielded a
composite definition, the key to which was a distinction
between "humor by chance" and "humor by choice." "Humor by
choice" was mentioned in some form by almost all of the
parents, and implied <u>the ability to look for and laugh about
the funny, absurd, ironical side of daily life and the
willingness to use that ability</u>. The parents used phrases
like "making light," "rising above," "stepping back,"
"twisting the situation," "finding the humor," and "the
inner strength" to speak of the active decision-making
process involved in accessing their sense of humor in
parenting situations.

Those parents who saw humor as a gift (i.e., "humor by
chance") occurring at times in "the grace of the moment,"
felt that unexpected, outlandishly difficult situations
could pass without the humor of them being appreciated if
one did not have the ability and willingness to choose a
humorous perspective. One parent summarized the difference
between "humor by chance" and "humor by choice" with a
metaphor of fruit growing on a tree. The fact that the

fruit is there is a gift, but one needs to pick it and use it before it can be nourishing.

The composite definition presented in Table 7 (page 108) shows the many features parents attributed to this elusive human characteristic. It is interesting to note the importance parents gave to recognizing one's stress, being comfortable with oneself and being able to change one's perceptions to make things humorous and, thus, more acceptable.

Maintaining Sense of Humor

Parents were asked to describe how they saw themselves maintaining their sense of humor. Responses varied widely, reflecting the interests, personality and values of the individual parents. The coding and constant comparative analysis done on 25 different responses yielded three major categories of humor-maintenance behavior by parents of pre-school children. Examples are used to illustrate each category and sub-category.

1. Taking time alone and/or time away from family demands to meet personal needs, such as exercise, entertainment, taking a walk, or simply being alone to think. Susan Caplan meditates,

> because it makes me more of a witness to my experiences
> rather than totally and completely identifying with
> them. So by stepping back and having that time to
> myself, it cultivates and makes grow a part of me
> that's more detached. . . . It's a necessary
> freshening.

Table 7. Defining "Sense of Humor"

Having a sense of humor is being able and willing to:

A.   Acknowledge the stress in a situation without letting it take control. This includes:
1.   "Rising above" and finding a way to laugh about the distress of the moment.
2.   Surrendering your stress and remembering that there is more to life than stress.
3.   Exercising the "inner strength" to decide that everything is not so serious and to "lift it up, make a joke, and be light" about it.

B.   See the funny aspects of situations. This includes:
1.   Looking at the light side of things.
2.   Finding the humor in whatever happens to you.
3.   Seeing things around you that are absurd or different or funny.
4.   Recognizing that often there is more to a situation (e.g., irony or absurdity) than meets the eye.

C.   Be comfortable enough with yourself to relax, play and look foolish. This includes:
1.   Being able to laugh at yourself and accept your imperfections.
2.   Choosing to do something "off the wall" rather than yelling at or striking a child.
3.   Being secure enough with yourself to "get out of yourself," act silly and be on the child's level.

D.   Shift, twist, or reframe things to make them humorous. This includes:
1.   Shifting things to make them funny.
2.   Twisting things around so you can see the absurdity or funniness in them.
3.   Making light of the oddities that occur.

E.   Sharing humor with other people. This includes:
1.   Appreciating the humor of others and the positive aspects of any situation.
2.   Laughing and smiling at situations that occur.
3.   Sharing funny stories, jokes and life's absurdities with others.

Getting some time for herself helps Libby Hood maintain her sense of humor because "I feel like I'm always doing for everyone else. That can really drain your sense of humor very fast."

2. Making human connections with other adults, not necessarily to "be funny," but to shar experiences.

a. Connecting with the co-parent. Most of the couples interviewed relied on each other in various ways, for example, by saying something funny that is way over the child's head about what the child has done, singing or saying sardonic lines to each other, or allowing the other parent to name their mood, e.g., "You're a real grump today." Caleb Ewing emphasized the value of having "somebody at the end of the day to share stories with and get a few chuckles." In single parent families, making this connection is more difficult, but other significant adults can help: Miriam Glazewski's sister would sometimes call and read hilarious newspaper stories to her over the phone.

b. Connecting with other parents. Nancy Nylander referred to the mothers' group she was in when her sons were younger as "a salvation, a support system where we knew we were all experiencing the same kind of emotions." Susan Caplan saw her mothers' group helping to maintain her sense of humor because they could laugh about their situations as parents: "We get so involved in our own little scene that when we're together, it's fun!"

c. Connecting with other families. Ben Taft said that spending time with other parents and their children helps make parenting a little easier because it begins to build the kind of extended family connections that many families have lost.

d. Connecting with friends, adult siblings, or co-workers about humorous experiences. Several parents mentioned that sharing funny stories or the daily comics with another adult helps them to maintain their sense of humor.

3. Keeping connected with your children by playing with them and having fun on a regular basis. Dennis Higgins makes it a daily routine to play with his son and dance him around the room, "just to maintain that connection that life can be fun. . . . [because] playing with him . . . helps keep the stress level down." Miriam Glazewski said that "I do it [funny things] sometimes more for myself than for him . . . because it helps relieve the tension." Frances Sayre said "you do it [something light] for yourself because you don't want to be a mean parent." Marie Rosenthal maintains her sense of humor by taking advantage of the permission given by the presence of a young child to act foolish. One thing she likes to do is to walk by her oven door, look in the window and say, in a cheerful, sing-song voice, "Hello in there!" and attributes this "idiotic thing to do" to the fact that she has a 17-month-old at home.

Commenting on Humor in Parenting

Participant responses coded as "Commentaries" were ideas expressed about humor in parenting which were neither descriptions of specific humorous incidents nor statements of definition or maintenance of humor, but were nevertheless deemed salient by the researcher. In making these comments, participants abstracted their experience to a level above the simple description of incidents. Open coding and memoing, used in the constant comparative analysis of these comments, generated 12 categories shown in Table 8 (page 112).

Summary

The sysematic structure of Grounded Theory forms the skeleton of this study. The four stages of theory development shown in Figure 2 (page 66) illustrate the connection of each to the others, just as in a human body, the "head-bone's connected to the neck-bone." Beginning with this skeletal framework, the researcher's task was to build a body of knowledge about humor in parenting. A unique feature of the Grounded Theory methodology is that this body-building process takes place from the inside out by listening to and looking closely at the participants' experiences and then extracting the categories, core variables and theory. This feature made Grounded Theory especially well-suited to the topic of humor in parenting.

Table 8.   Commentary Categories

** 1. Parents faced the "to laugh or not to laugh" dilemma in a variety of situations with their children. (Ambivalence Frame)

** 2. Sometimes humor did not work, while at other times, certain feelings inhibited its occurrence or appreciation. (Utility Frame--"Vicious Circles")

** 3. Parents' made decisions to shift stressful situations to more pleasurable interaction. (The "Letting Up" Shift)

** 4. Societal values inhibit humor; humor was seen as the antithesis of accomplishment, neatness, practicality. (Utility Frame)

** 5. Parents' humor styles vary, often depending on their child care role in the family. (Implications for Further Research)

** 6. Imitation, mimickry puts parents on the child's level. (Meta-utility Frame)

** 7. Outlandish events sometimes force a humorous perspective, as one considers the relationship between anger and humor. (Utility Frame)

8. Sense of humor in families may be related to parent's lifestyle choices.

9. Parents at times used humor to lighten things for themselves.

10. Parents used "comic labelling" to defuse a situation.

11. Parent's modeling and parent's emotional state translate to the children.

12. Siblings' may struggle with each other in order to get their parent's attention.

** - Indicates commentary topics used in the development of the grounded theory. Titles in parentheses refer to sections in Chapter 4 or 5.

The lack of previous research or theory-making strongly indicated the need for a theory-generating, rather than a theory-verifying methodology.

Chapter 3, indicating the results of the initial coding and analysis, begins to flesh out the skeleton. The major categories of incidents may be compared to the major muscle groups in a human body. The Typology of Humor Categories and the Typology of Incidents more basic physiological components to the body. As this body-building continues, the researcher serves as the "connective tissue," providing the ongoing thread of continuity.

The following chapter on "The Findings" illuminates the heart and soul of this new body of knowledge, lifting it from simply a collection of body parts to an integrated, living whole. A key element in the discovery of the social processes of <u>letting up</u> and <u>shifting frames</u>, identified in Chapter 4 as the unifying themes of the study, was the researcher's trust that core variables would "percolate to the top," given the time and patience necessary. The Grounded Theory researcher's responsibility is not to manipulate variables and circumstances, but to take people and their situations and experiences as they are. The researcher's respect for the participants' and his belief that all parents are good parents who love their children very much and that each has unique story to tell given the right setting was the lifeblood of the research process.

CHAPTER 4

THE FINDINGS

Section One:

Steps in the Discovery of the Grounded Theory

This section is a detailed description of the developmental steps in the discovery of a grounded theory related to parents' incorporation of humor in their relationships with their children. Those steps in Table 9 (see page 115) which are analagous to the stages depicted in Figure 2 ("The Constant Comparative Method for the Discovery of Grounded Theory," page 66) are noted as such. Table 9 serves as an outline guide to this section.

Initial Interest Area

The researcher was interested in gathering qualitative data in response to the hypothesis that parents of pre-schoolers do use humor in their parenting and that their use of humor could have either positive or negative effects. To place these uses of humor within the family context, additional information was desired about how parents would define the term "sense of humor" in the context of parenting and how they would see themselves maintaining their own sense of humor. This general area of interest was the starting point of the study.

Table 9.   Steps in the Discovery of a Grounded Theory

1. Initial Area of Interest

2. Initial Research Question (STAGES 1 ---> 2)

        In what kinds of situations do parents use humor
        with their pre-school-aged children?

3. Open Coding and Constant Comparative Analysis of Pilot
Study and Franklin Interviews (STAGES 2 ---> 3)

        A. Initial Interest Area expands, leading to Research
Question Form 2:

        In what kinds of situations does humor between
        parents and children occur in families with pre-
        school-aged children?

        B. A four-phase process in humorous occurrences:
Setting, Intent, Humor Used, Effect (cf. Table 10, page 119)

        C. The Control Issue emerges leading to Research
Question Form 3:

        How does the occurrence of humor help families
        with pre-school-aged children resolve the issue of
        control in everyday situations?

        D. "Worst Case Scenarios" emerge leading to Research
Question Form 4:

        What is the nature of the process that
        differentiates incidents in which parents are able
        to incorporate humor in their relationships with
        their children from those in which they are not
        able to do so?

4. Open Coding and Constant Comparative Analysis of
Hampshire and Hampden Interviews (STAGES 2 ---> 3)

5. Analysis of The "Shift", i.e., the "gap" between Intent
and Humor Used (STAGES 3 ---> 4)

        A. Proposed Definition of the psychological shift
            that occurs when parents incorporate humor

        B. Letting Up--the first phase of the shift

        C. Shifting Frames--the second phase of the shift

Initial Research Question

The gathering of data relative to the initial area of
interest was to be based on the initial Research Question:

**In what kinds of situations have parents done or said
something humorous?**

This data was to be supplemented by information gathered by
two auxiliary questions:

1. What do parents see themselves doing to maintain
their sense of humor and how well do these maintenance
activities work?

2. How do parents define the term "sense of humor" in
the context of parenting?

Open Coding and Constant Comparative Analysis
of the Pilot Study and Franklin Interviews

Initial questioning of participants in the first two
interviews (Pilot Study and Franklin) centered primarily on
their recollection of incidents when they had used humor
with their children. Responses began to cluster around (a)
incidents that were mutually pleasurable for both parents
and children (Type I Incidents), (b) incidents in which the
humor seemed to shift a stressful situation into a more
pleasurable interactional mode (Type III incidents), and (c)
incidents in which the parent simply "lost it" and was
unable to make use of humor (Type IV incidents) (cf. Table
6, page 104).

Initial Interest Area Expands: Research Question Form 2

An unexpected, but significant, new perspective emerged during the coding, memoing and analysis of the first two interviews. Incidents began to be reported in the Pilot Study and Franklin interviews in which humorous behavior was initiated by children, rather than by parents. For example, Kelly Higgins walked into the bathroom to find her 11-month-old son Todd tossing clothes out of the changing table drawers. She immediately started laughing, thinking it looked funny. A few days later, Todd thought it was funny and would crawl in and start tossing clothes out. Kelly, however, no longer found it funny. Dumping a bowl of spaghetti on his head at suppertime was something Eric Sayre (aged 17 months) did that his parents thought was funny. Other such incidents led the researcher to broaden the scope of research interest from the use of humor by parents of pre-schoolers to the occurrence of humor in families with pre-schoolers. This led to the Research Question taking its second form:

> In what kinds of situations does humor between parents
> and children occur in families with pre-school-aged
> children?

This shift of the research focus was theoretically sound in that it was a means to account for the variety of incidents actually being related by the participants while it also

acknowledged the mutuality inherent in humorous occurrences in families. As a study of the interactive, give-and-take nature of humor, this broadening of the research focus was congruent with the purpose of the study.

Four-Phase Process in Humorous Occurrences

Open coding of Type III Incidents (cf. Table 6, page 104) in which humor occurred amid some kind of interpersonal stress pointed the researcher in the direction of four identifiable phases in these incidents which also provided four distinct perspectives from which to view the data. These four phases formed the basis of an initial grounded framework (see Table 10, page 119) within which to place various types of incidents. The four "slices of data" were: (a) the problem situation, or Setting, in which the incident took place, (b) the parent's explicit or implicit Intent in using humor, (c) the Type of Humor Occurring used, and (d) the Effect of the humor. While Table 10 (page 119) gives an overview of the results of initial coding of incidents into these emergent perspectives, a few comments are in order at this point:

1. Open coding on the Types of Humor Occurring by parents showed that they corresponded closely to the local concepts identified in Chapter 2. In other words, humor processes identified such as imitation/mimicking, pretending, reframing, reversals, and surprise

Table 10.   Four-Phase Process in Humorous Occurrences

PHASE ONE: THE SETTING

1. Parent's needs and child's needs differ because of:

   a. Changing diapers, clothes
   b. Having to go out to store, daycare, doctor, etc.
   c. Bedtime, naptime
   d. Mealtime, feeding time
   e. Sibling struggles

2. Child is in bad mood, throwing tantrum, etc.

3. Parent is feeling irritated, frustrated, impatient, etc.

4. A sudden unexpected complication occurs (e.g., being locked out of the house, finding birds flying around in kitchen)

PHASE TWO: PARENT'S INTENT

1. To calm the child down
2. To distract the child
3. To reassure the child
4. To change the child's behavior
5. To invite child's help with a task needing to be done
6. To relieve the parent's own tension, frustration, etc.

PHASE THREE: TYPE OF HUMOR OCCURRING
(cf. Table 5, pages 102-103)

1. Changing Child's Position
2. New/Funny Behavior by Child
3. Exaggeration
4. Imitation/Mimicking
5. Movement and Sound Coordinated
6. Nonsense Words, Actions, Faces

7. Pretending
8. Reframing
9. Repetition
10. Role reversal
11. Surprise

PHASE FOUR: EFFECT
The Difference in the Setting following the use of humor

1. Shared Laughter
    a. Parent-child bond re-established
    b. Child feels more relaxed
    c. Parent feels more relaxed
2. Child's attention turned away from own problem towards something different.

do reflect the two-in-one, Janus-like quality discussed in the Review of the Literature.

2. Open coding on the _Effect_ of the use of humor indicated a number of different kinds of shifts, e.g., the child became more calm, the parent became more relaxed, their attention was drawn away from other things and towards each other, or they felt a renewed sense of their connection to each other. The most consistent correlate of all these different shifts was the occurrence of laughter. The literature review (see Chapter 2) which showed humor and laughter contributing to reduction in emotional tension, to social connectedness and to perception shifts supports the finding that the occurrence of laughter could account for all of the aforementioned shifts.

A variety of behavioral descriptions was used by participants to communicate what happened following a humorous occurence. In 48 of the 93 incidents reported in the entire research study, a participant described a reaction to humor in the family. Words or phrases used are indicated in Table 11 (see page 121).

3. In using the grounded theory process of onstantly comparing incidents with respect to the problem inherent in the situation, the researcher discovered the crucial role of _intent_ in understanding these problems. It is necessary at this stage to differentiate two levels of intent: the first level is the parent's _intent_ in using humor; the second

Table 1.1.   Behavioral Descriptions of Humor's Effect

laughing	thinking it was crazy
burst out laughing	thinking it was a riot
dying laughing	thinking it was hysterical
shrieking	looking at each other
screaming	going suddenly alert
squealing	stopping (what they were doing)
roaring	forgetting the moment
cracking up	getting a whole new look at it
snorting air	shaking (trying not to laugh)
getting peeved	
getting embarassed	
getting confused	

level includes the intent of both the child and the parent

regarding the outcome of a particular situation.   One

example might help to illustrate this distinction.   Karl

Rosenthal remembered times when his daughter, Laura, aged 17

months, was "clingy" and he could not hold her anymore.   The

father's intent here was to be temporarily free from the

responsibility of being physically close to his daughter.

The daughter's intent was to stay physically close to a

parent, in this case, her father.   Karl described what

happened next:

> We know that one of us has to hold her, so I try to get
> out of it sometimes, if she's holding on, I do what's
> called "The Bullet," which she really likes.   I put her
> up and turn her over to the side and say, "Ready, Aim,
> Fire!" and I start flying, running all over with her.

Karl's intent in using humor was to have fun with his

daughter which proved more successful than his intention in

the situation of not holding her any longer.   Of the outcome

of "The Bullet," he later said, "It doesn't solve the clinging problem, but it makes us both laugh."

Control Issue Emerges: Research Question Form 3

An incident-by-incident analysis of the problem inherent in each Type III situation pointed to an hypothesis that the problems resulted from a difference between the parent's intent and the child's intent which had grown beyond a certain level of tolerance. In most cases, the issue could be reduced to the question, "Who is actually in charge here?" The discovery of this hypothesis at a mid-point in the process of data analysis (between Interviews Two and Three) turned the researcher's attention to the issue of control, which is seen as a major developmental task in the life cycle stage of Families with Pre-schoolers.

Each developmental stage of the family life cycle is characterized by several developmental tasks, successful completion of which is essential to the family's transition to the succeeding stage (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). One of the major developmental challenges for parents in the Families with Pre-schoolers stage is maintaining control while encouraging growth (Brown & Christensen, 1986; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Galinsky (1981) traces the development of the theme of control/lack of control through the first three of her six stages of parenthood: "This theme has been present in the Image-Making Stage

[pregnancy]; it approaches a crescendo in the Nurturing

Stage, until it reaches a peak and predominates: Then the

parents are in the Authority Stage" (p. 119). Based on the

ages of their children, all the parents interviewwed in this

study, are clearly faced with the control issue in their

daily lives.

Difficulties arise in this developmental task when

"encouraging growth" feels like "losing control" and,

conversely, when "maintaining control" feels like "stifling

growth." The dilemma of control parents face between giving

in and digging in often comes down to a specific, routine

situation which, without warning, turns into a colossal

battle of wills with the child. One mother (not a

participant in this study) wrotte her thoughts on this

dilemma in The Mother's Book (Friedland & Kort, 1981):

> The most mundane issues often prove the most
> challenging. What do I do, for example, when Seth, who
> has just asked me for juice, has a mild tantrum when I
> hand it to him in his blue cup? When he insists
> repeatedly, 'I want it in my Oscar the Grouch cup,' do
> I quickly pour it into the cup he wants, thereby both
> avoiding the unpleasant scene and encouraging him in
> his search for autonomy and self-determination? Or do
> I state emphatically that his juice is already poured,
> that he doesn't have to drink it, but that I am not
> going to dirty another cup? Does being firm and
> refusing to be manipulated by a child ensure that he
> will not develop into a demanding, spoiled adult who
> constantly insists on having his own way? I ask myself
> these questions practically every day. (Cooper, 1981,
> p. 175)

The resolution of the issue of control in countless

everyday incidents by families at this stage of development

is a thoroughly interactive process. Through an evolving

mutual interplay, parents and children assist each other in determining exactly where the limits will be set. As one father said, "Sometimes he [his 3-year-old son] has trouble figuring out exactly if we mean it [the limit they've set] or not, and he'll test and he'll test." Or, as Dennis Higgins observed about his 11-month-old son, Todd, "They influence you just as much as you influence them."

Clashes between parents and children result from differing intents regarding the outcome of the situation. To "intend" means to "have in mind as a purpose" (Guralnik, 1980, p. 732). The core issue in these parent-child conflicts, thus, is "Whose purpose will prevail in this situation?" Will the two-year-old's emotional outburst persuade the harried parent to fill the Oscar the Grouch cup instead of the blue cup? Will the parent's patient determination eventually convince the child that his tirade is destined to fail this time? Or will the parent lose patience, raise her voice, or use physical restraint or punishment to make her point?

The control issue is complicated by the fact that intent, by definition, resides in the mind and very often, parents do not have or do not take sufficient time to communicate their intentions to their children prior to an interaction. Parents are responsible for their children and for working through the major task of this stage, thatt is, becoming authorities in the family while continuing to

provide nurturance and love (Galinsky, 1981). Their intentions, although they may at times be anxious, overprotective or uninformed, are a critical variable in their interactions with their children.

It is also important to take into account the intent of the child. Infants and young children are unable to communicate the intent of their behavior in easily understood verbal messages, and trying to make sense of late-night crying, temper tantrums or bed-wetting often leaves parents at their wits' end. These realities are usually mistaken for an absence of intent on the child's part. Developmental theorists note, however, that human beings are born with "an astonishing capacity for creative power" and "a driving intent to express this capacity" (Pearce, 1977, p. 3). From the moment of birth on, therefore, family life "is a battleground between the biological plan's intent, which drives the child from within, and our anxious intentions, pressing the child from without" (Pearce, p. xi).

The viewpoint chosen for the analysis of incidents in this study was a systemic viewpoint, that is, one that would use positive connotation of parent-child interactions. For example, a story of a father having difficulty calming a fussy baby at bedtime was not labeled as "The baby's being too fussy" or "The father should be more patient", but as non-congruence of intentions. An incident of a mother who

is getting frustrated trying to change her squirming,
kicking daughter's diaper was seen not as a matter of the
daughter being "bad" or the mother being "too intolerant of
her child's needs" but as the dynamic tension between
simultaneously conflicting, though valid intents. This
particular perspective on parent-child interactions permits
the analyst access to the systemic model of family
functioning (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, Prata,
1978).

By the beginning of the third interview (Hampshire),
these two emergent considerations--the expansion of the
research focus to include child-initiated humor, nd the
identification of the control/loss of control issue as a
central concern--led to the third form of the Research
Question:

> **How does the occurrence of humor help families with
> pre-school-aged children resolve the ongoing issue of
> control in everyday life situations?**

"Worst Case Scenarios" Emerge: Research Question Form 4

As this third form of the Research Question evolved
during the constant comparative analysis of the Pilot Study
and Franklin Interviews, a contrasting perspective emerged
as a result of the open-ended nature of the interviews,
which allowed parents to talk about ideas and incidents
which were not directly related to the interview questions.

This latitude permitted unexpected digressions which later became central issues in the developing theory. One example of this process is the notion of "worst case scenarios."

In the Pilot Study discussion of the group's definitions of sense of humor, one father said that part of humor for him was knowing that, as a parent, he would be acting foolish sometimes to make his child laugh. The interviewer then related a personal story of a day when he felt foolish after having spent a long time getting two 3-year-olds dressed to go out on a wet, winter day, only to have one of them slip and fall flat on her back in a mud puddle. The interviewer followed this anecdote by asking if other parents had similar stories of times when everything they did to make things go right simply failed. This question led to some extensive discussion of dinner-hour difficulties. One mother added a couple of thoughts on the dinner-hour topic, but then returned to the interviewer's previous question, saying it reminded her of the times when "you get them all ready to go and then it just totally falls apart," to which she gave the name "worst case scenarios." These incidents would be grouped under Type IV, "Non-Humorous Incidents," in Table 6 (page 104).

This emergent concept, which at first glance might seem out of place in a research framework dealing with incidents of humor, became the topic of an interview question in the succeeding interviews, providing a pattern of incidents that

could stand in contrast to stories of effective use of humor. In the ensuing constant comparative analysis, these two patterns of incidents were used interchangeably as figure-ground for each other, and from this interplay came the fourth form of the Research Question:

What is the nature of the process that differentiates incidents in which parents are able to incorporate humor into their relationships with their children from those in which they are not able to do so?

This reformulation shifted the emphasis from what "humor" does to what parents do to incorporate humor. This shift recognizes what the data suggest, that is, that even when humor seems to "just happen," a decision by the parent to recognize or appreciate it is needed in order for it to be incorporated into the situation.

Open Coding and Constant Comparative Analysis of Hampshire and Hampden Interviews

The expansion of the initial area of interest and the development of the form of the research question, which both ensued from the coding and analysis of the first two interviews, led to two theoretical sampling decisions regarding the conduct of the third and fourth interviews (Hampshire and Hampden):

1. The expansion of the initial area of interest to include child-initiated humor led to inquiries about (a)

things children did that their parents thought were funny
(like Todd Higgins' clothes-tossing or Eric Sayre's bowl-
dumping), (b) times that parents wondered whether or not to
laugh at these things, and (c) times when parents did laugh,
but, for some reason, later regretted doing so (as did Kelly
Higgins when Todd was tossing clothes).

2. Having articulated two basic types of incidents--
"worst case scenarios" and those in which humor was
incorporated--in the fourth form of the research question,
the researcher asked participants how they would describe or
assess the "shift" which seemed to be present when parents
effectively incorporated humor into situations but was
absent in the so-called "worst case scenarios."

Collection, coding and analysis of incidents in the
Hampshire and Hampden interviews continued to follow the
outlines of the analytical template provided by the four-
phase process described in Table 10 (page 119): Setting,
Intent, Humor Type, and Effect. It was in the midst of this
analytical process that the researcher met with two doctoral
student colleagues to discuss the current state of the
research and the emerging theory. It was in this dialogue
that the researcher's attention was drawn to a closer
investigation of the gap between the Intent phase and the
Humor phase. That a psychological shift of some kind was
taking place that enabled parents to incorporate humor into
family situations seemed evident from the data. It was

hypothesized that this shift might be the element that could differentiate situations where parents incorporated humor from the "worst case scenarios" in which they did not. Examples of both kinds of situations with analysis are used here to provide the reader an understanding of the difference this phase in the investigation sought to address. In each of the first three cases, the "{ X }" indicates a possible time in the sequence when the shift could have occurred. Based on the systemic perspective, however, it is not necessary to pinpoint an exact temporal location for the shift, but rather to understand it as a key transition in the interactive process.

Humor Incorporated into Situations

Marie Rosenthal told how she handled her 17-month-old daughter Laura's resistance to having her diaper changed:

When she gets her diapers changed, she hates it, that's the worst thing in the world so she's always kicking and everything and I think it's sort of the surprise element like she kicked me once { X } and I went, "OOOFF!" [does a startled movement, tossing arms back]. And she looked at me and she burst out laughing. . . . And then you know her legs are still for ten seconds so I go [ahead and finish changing her].

Setting (Problem):
  Parent Intent:change diaper

  Child Intent:to move freely

Humor Intent:to calm child

"The Shift"
Use of Humor (Surprise)

Effect: Laughter, legs still

Miriam Glazewski described an instance in which she effectively used a surprise reversal with her 2 1/2-year-old son:

So he's into the stage that he just doesn't want to do what I want him to do all the time. There was something, I don't even remember what it was, but he kept saying, "No!" and I said, "Yes!" and then he said, "No!" and I said, "Yes!" and this went back and forth about 20 times. Finally, he said, "No!" { X } and then I said, "No!" And he looked like this [makes a startled face] (she laughs), like, "What happened?" So we do that once in a while and that relieves some tension.	<u>Setting</u> (Problem): Parent and Child intentions are directly opposed <u>Humor</u> <u>Intent</u>: to resolve the disagreement "The Shift" <u>Humor</u> <u>Used</u>: Surprise Reversal <u>Effect</u>: Tension relief, Disagreement disappears

Nathan Sayre was trying to cook supper one evening when his 17-month-old son, Eric, wanted some attention:

He was hanging on my leg while I was cooking or he wanted to eat or whatever and he threw himself on the ground. { X } So I jumped on the ground and started, you know, like the Three Stooges, going around in a circle and the whole bit. He got a kick out of that; it took his mind off of being hungry.	<u>Setting</u> (Problem): Parent Intent:cook supper Child Intent:eat now! <u>Humor</u> <u>Intent</u>:distract child "The Shift" <u>Humor</u> <u>Used</u>:Nonsense Movement <u>Effect</u>:child enjoyed it, distracted from hunger

<u>Humor</u> <u>Not</u> <u>Incorporated:</u> "<u>Worst</u> <u>Case</u> <u>Scenarios</u>"

Susan Caplan related a story about a morning when she was finally going to be on time:

I think I was very proud of myself because I knew I had
to get there and I was going to be there on time. It
was five of nine and we were leaving, and then ebecca
pooped. And it was like, oh, I'm gonna be late. So
then, it just triggered . . . Luckily, she wasn't in
her snowsuit already and boots. I went up and changed
her, then I was mad at her for that timing and wanted
to really get her out in the car fast. Of course, the
more I pushed her the worse it became. I think I
really yelled at her and then I had to like whisk her
up and throw her into the car seat basically. And she
likes to do it by herself and I didn't want to wait,
and we get to Parents' Center and it's sort of icy, but
we make it and we walk in the wrong door and the
secretary of the church says, "You people ought to get
yourselves together."

In this story, the parent's intent--to get there on time--

ran afoul of nature taking her course with her young

daughter. The reader's attention is directed to the

affective content communicated by this mother in words such

as, "it just triggered," "mad," and "yelled at her," as well

as the clear description of the two different speeds at

which she and her daughter wanted to function.

Miriam told a story of a sudden unexpeected complication

when she came home with her 2-year-old son one day:

I was coming home from where I had been, and I had
Randy. He had fallen asleep in the car so it was 35
pounds of that kid, and my cat had been out and I live
on the second floor so he very rarely wants to come in.
The weather was nice this day, and he's at the top step
meowing like crazy to get in and I thought, "What is
going on with this cat?" And, of course, I had my
pocket book and Randy's diaper bag and Randy.
    I put the key in the door. I opened up the door
and there's two birds flying around my kitchen and my
first thought was, "Did I buy some birds? [others in
the group laugh] And did they get loose?" I didn't
know so, of course, with that same flash, the cat was
in and had one of the birds in his mouth, so I ran in
[more laughter] and put Randy down quickly, ran out and
took the bird out of the cat's mouth 'cause the bird

was dead at that point and still this other bird is flying around the kitchen, so as soon as Lefty, my cat, had the bird taken out of his mouth, he went running after the other one. So I'm standing with a dead bird in my hand, grabbed my cat, threw him out and I didn't throw the bird out 'cause I knew he would make a mess of it outside.

Anyway, Randy woke up at this point because I'd put him down rather quickly. He came out; he's crying, wondering what's going on, rubbing his eyes, while his mom is chasing this bird around the kitchen. So I finally got the other bird out. I opened up the screen and shooed him out, but it was like, "Why did this happen?" . . . I laughed about it later but I wasn't laughing then.

This situation involved a series of incessant, unexpected demands on this parent at a frequency that allowed no slack whatsoever for humor or laughter. Her final comment places this story in the category of incidents which were not funny when they took place, but seemed so later, another description of "worst case scenarios."

The following story, told by Libby, contains a reference to a generic parenting behavior, (i.e., "losing it") most typically found in "worst case scenarios" such as these:

We were on vacation, we were at the beach and Abe fell asleep at the beach and so Caleb stayed with him. Erin and I were going to go back to the house and, of course, I had everything to carry: three bags on one arm (another mother laughs) and something else on the other arm and Erin wants me to carry her. "You've got to carry me too." Well, there's no way that I could do it. "My legs are broken," she says, "you have to carry me, I can't [Libby laughs] walk."
And I said, "You've got to walk. Look at me, I'm a beast of burden here and I can't carry you." And she starts to throw a tantrum in front of everyone on the beach because I can't carry her. It's a big crowded beach. Everyone's watching. I'm [she laughs] under pressure, I'm sweating. It's hot and I just lost it. I couldn't figure out how to get myself out of it. I

just like dropped everything I was carrying--it was
literally four or five bundles--and I went over and
picked her up and started screaming, "You jerk, you
jerk, you jerk!!" [she laughs] [others in group
laugh], and I carried her home, leaving all the bundles
at the beach.

When I look back on it now I can laugh and I
really try to think, what could I have done, is there
any way possible to get out of this without having lost
my self control?

This mother, like Miriam, commented that the vantage point

of time had allowed her to laugh about this incident, but

that when it had been happening, she had felt stuck. These

three stories typify the "worst case scenario" category

which were used as a contrasting set of data to probe the

nature of "the shift."

Analysis of "The Shift"

The technique of constant comparative analysis was

applied in the attempt to discover what took place in the

gap between the Intent Phase and the Humor Phase and what

was the nature of the shift. Incidents in which such a

shift took place were identified and compared; various trial

descriptions of the shift were generated and compared;

participants' interpretations and comments about the shift

were compared; and the researcher's intuition and experience

were brought into play. Four central qualities of the shift

began to emerge from this part of the analytical process:

1. The shift appeared to be almost instantaneous. In

relating stories in which somthing shifted, several parents

snapped their fingers as a way of communicating the nature

of the shift. Conner Nielson used the phrase "it's just that light bulb going off," that makes the parent think, "Wait a minute. That [being rushed and impatient] is not what it's all about."

2. The shift often included a <u>decision</u> on the part of the parent. Whether the choice was to do something humorous in a stressful situation, to humorously recognize and point out something funny in the situation, or to simply stop doing something that was accelerating the stress level, parents many times spoke of their decision that led to a shift.

3. The shift consistently appeared to comprise two parts: an <u>interruption</u> of an increasingly stressful interactional chain along with a <u>change in the emphasis</u> of the interaction.

4. The shift--whatever the psychological nature of the process might turn out to be--enabled parents to resolve control issues in <u>paradoxical</u> ways. A brief analysis of incidents already reported here will explain this point. In playing "The Bullet" with his daughter, Karl Rosenthal could be said to have held his daughter so that he would not have to hold her. Marie Rosenthal could be described as having suddenly interrupted her diaper-changing behavior in order to continue her diaper-changing behavior. Miriam Glazewski was able to attain her position in the "Yes! No!" argument with her son by abandoning her position. Nathan Sayre could

be said to have momentarily given up his hunger-reducing
activity (cooking supper) in order to reduce his son's
hunger.

The term "paradox" is used here in a non-pathological
way to imply "a statement that seems contradictory or
absurd, but may actually be true in fact" (Guralnik, 1980,
p. 1029). These apparently self-contradictory, yet
nevertheless true, analytical statements are the essence of
the "paradox of control," which implies that by momentarily
relinquishing the need to control the outcome of a
situation, one can actually retain control.

Proposed Definition of "The Shift"

These four qualities constitute the proposed definition
of the shift that occurs when parent incorporate humor into
stressful interactions with their children. The shift is an
instantaneous interruption of a stressful interactional
chain between parent and child which changes the emphasis of
the situation by means of a paradoxical resolution of the
control issue.

Letting Up

The realization that this "paradox of control" played a
crucial role in parents' abilit to incorporate humor led to
the identification of the two-part shift as a process which
provides parents access to the paradox of control. From

this point, the discovery of the initial part of the
process, that which interrupts the increasingly stressful
chain of ineractions, took the following steps:

1.   The shift gives parents access to the transforming
power of the paradox of control.

2.   The paradox of control involves a relinquishing, or
"letting go", of control in order to retain control.

3.   The "letting go" of control is more of a temporary
hiatus than a complete abdication of control in a family
situation.

4.   Parents commented about the "elevating," "lifting,"
"lightening," "rising above" aspect of humor often enough to
make this "up" quality an essential part of the shift.

5.   The term "letting" can connote "negligence or lack
of power," while the term "letting up" implies "slackening,
relaxing, or ceasing" (Guralnik, 1980, p. 805). An useful
metaphorical image is that of two people engaged in a tug-
of-war. "Letting go" would end the contest and be
tantamount to "giving up." One person's act of "letting go"
would be a "let-down" for the other, who in fact would
probably fall over ackwards. The act of "letting up,"
however, conveys a slackening, as though one person were
taking a momentary break from the tug-of-war without
abandoning it altogether. "Letting up" implies a relaxing
of control without completely losing or abandoning control.

6. The first significant finding of this research study is that the term _letting up_ describes the psychological process of stress-interruption which most clearly differentiates the incidents in which parents effectively incorporated humor into their interactions with their children from those in which they did not do so. A description of the ways parents involved in this study actually did "let up" is found in Table 12.

Selected comments by parents help to flesh out the description of this part of the shift. The added emphases draw the reader's attention to the actual "letting up" process. Connor Neilson and his wife have made "an effort to really _give her a lot of leeway_ and not just be concerned

Table 12. _Description of "Letting Up"_

According to the data, parents were seen to incorporate humor into their relationships with their children by _letting up_ on:

1. Their expectations of neatness, punctuality, or task-completion.

2. Their own feelings of self-reproach, frustration, guilt, irritation, or fear.

3. The perceived intensity of the demands (the "shoulds") of the situation.

4. Their need to understand their children's behavior, to make sense of the situation and/or to see it realistically.

5. Continuing a behavior which had only been making things worse.

with our 'important' lives." As an example, he told about
the time "we'd shovelled up the food and let her [13-month-
old Lisa] do a hand-on-hand [to feed herself], but she
wanted to hold the spoon and she'd spill it and it would be
all over. And finally, we just said, "Well, forget it,
here's your food [he covers his face and turns away]. Go
ahead." Naomi Nelson found that

> after a while, I find I lose it because life can get
> going so fast, and I just do the next thing that I'm
> expecting to do . . . and I don't really get a kick out
> of it until I stop, unexpectedly, and say, 'Okay,
> that's it.'

A third example of a parent describing this shift is given
by Frances Sayre when she is with her 18-month-old son Eric:

> I'm trying to do this bookkeeping [for my brother's
> store] and [laughing as she speaks] he just won't leave
> me alone. He wants to get up on my lap and throw the
> papers all over the place. Finally, I just leave it;
> my brother will have to wait. I know this [the
> bookkeeping work] is important, but Eric will have to
> come first.

Shifting Frames

The "letting up" process creates the possibility for a
"change in emphasis" in the situation to a psychological
frame of reference in which a different group of behaviors
becomes available to the parent than had seemed possible
before the shift. This shifting frames constitutes the
second significant finding of this study. In Naomi Nelson's
words, the shift is that "you stop and begin to look at
things and feel things again, and participate instead of

achieve." Frances Sayre saw this shift of frames as sometimes keeping her from hitting her son:

> You don't want to be a mean parent. You don't want to hit them [she laughs]. It's so easy to crack, so instead you're like, "Allright, now what do I do? Okay, let's do something totally off the wall." That's a choice.

Other parents referred to finding ways:

(a) to shift things and "to make it something that will make him laugh";

(b) to "sit back and realize that everything's absurd";

(c) "to slow down and have some fun"; and

(d) to "stop worrying about the mess and see it for the value of the play."

"Shifting frames" brings about contextual shifts on a number of different levels. The relationship between parent and child is allowed to take precedence over behavior. The parent's focus switches from what is happening in the situation to who is involved in it. Parent and child notice each oth%r again, and the issue that divided them fades in importance. The parent's expectations for what "should be" happening slip into the background to be replaced by awareness of what "is" happening.

Section Two: Three Frames of Reference

Following the discovery of the two-part process of
"letting up" and "shifting frames," the researcher returned
to the data in search of answers to the question: What is
the nature of these psychological frames of reference
between which parents at times seem to shift? The
investigation of this question led to the postulation of a
three-part model describing three distinct orientations from
which parents may, at various times, view their
responsibilities as parents and their relationships with
their children. These three frames of reference are
described in this section.

Introduction

This theoretical framework was developed as a way to
describe in more detail "the shift" that occurs when parents
incorporate humor into their relationships with their pre-
school children. The risk of over-simplification of the
complex network of human interactions that exist in any
family is acknowledged. This framework, grounded in the
words, emotions and experiences of the parents who
participated in this study, provides a clear, consistent
vehicle for communicating the interconnectedness among the
four basic types of data: Incidents, Definition statements,
Maintenance statements and Commentaries. The customary
caution that "the map is not the territory" must be

observed. This map is presented as a means toward understanding the nature of the process by which humor is incorporated into parent-child interactions in families with pre-schoolers and is not meant to have wider applications or implications for parenting practice in general.

A Photographic Metaphor

A popular attachment for 35 mm. single lens reflex cameras is the zoom lens. Made in various sizes, zoom lenses essentially give a photographer the ability to change the magnification of an image by simply turning the shaft of the lens. The focal length of the lens can be adjusted almost instantaneously from a distance view to a close-up shot, or vice versa, while keeping the image in clear focus. A close-up shot enlarges the subject, makes it appear to be closer to the photographer than it actually is and narrows the field of vision seen through the camera lens. As a photographer zooms in on the subject, less and less of its surroundings are visible. Backing off to a distance view makes the subject appear to be smaller and farther away than it actually is, while expanding the field of vision. As the photographer backs off from the subject, more and more of its surroundings become visible.

In this three-part theoretical framework, the "letting up/shifting frames" process described in Section One of this chapter is seen as analogous to a photographer using a zoom

lens to "back off" from the subject in order to get a
"distance view" of it, seeing it more in context than in
isolation (see Figure 4). The three frames of reference
will first be defined and illustrated in a schematic drawing
utilizing the concept of the zoom lens. Each frame will
then be described, using the words of the participants.

UTILITY FRAME
Pre-occupation
with purposeful,
predictable
outcomes

AMBIVALENCE FRAME
Having conflicting
feelings about
behaviors & events

META-UTILITY FRAME
Openness to
multiple interpretations
of behaviors & events
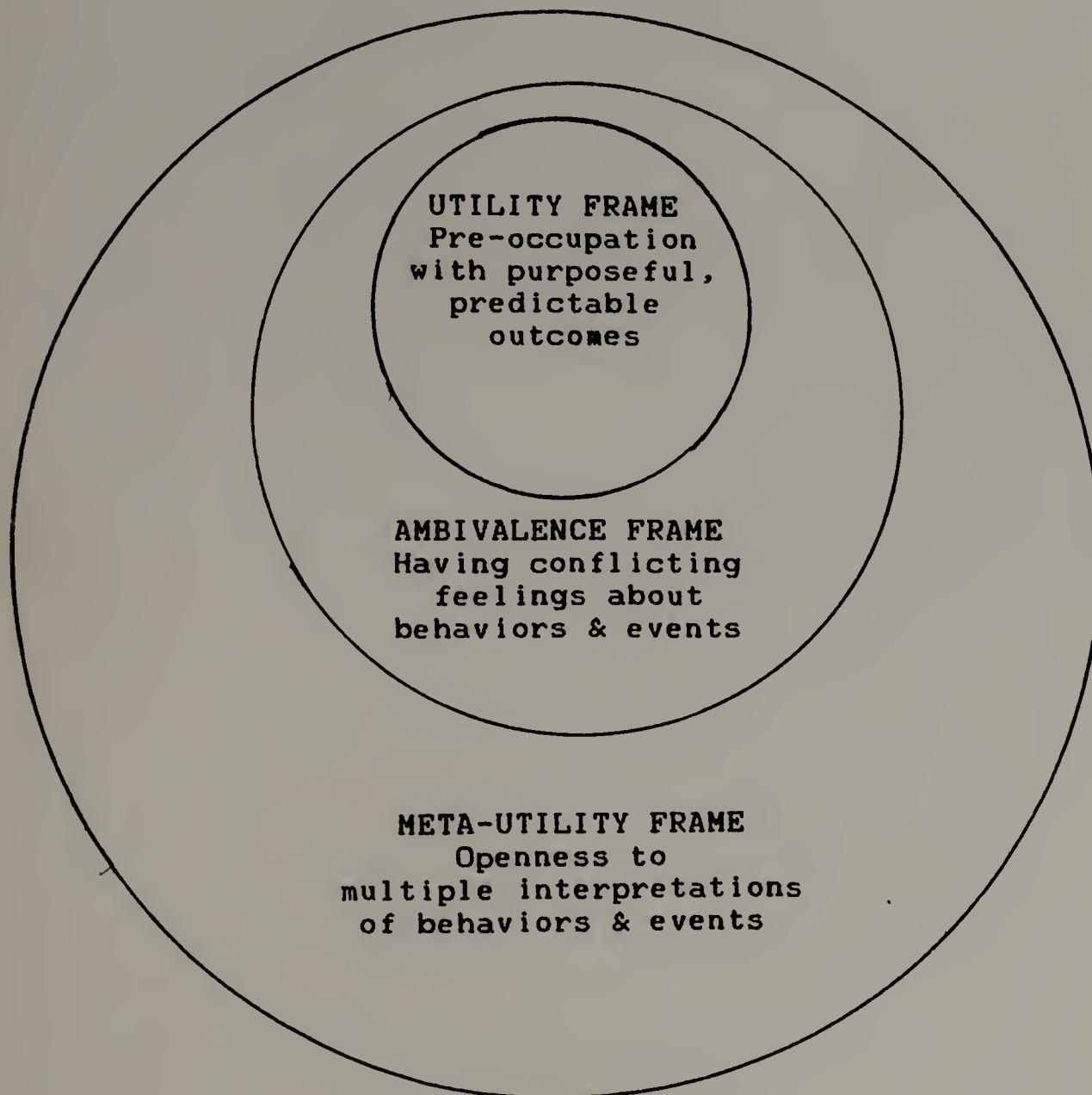
Figure 13.   The Three Frames of Reference

Definitions

The theoretical framework postulates three psychological frames of reference within which parents perceive their responsibilities as parents and their interactions with their children. The dominant frame of reference is The Utility Frame, defined as a single-minded pre-occupation with ordering behaviors and events in the pursuit of purposeful, predictable outcomes. The next frame of reference, The Meta-utility Frame, is defined as a dual-minded openness to multiple interpretations of behaviors, events and outcomes. The intermediate frame, known as The Ambivalance Frame, is defined as a condition of having simultaneous, conflicting feelings about behaviors, events and potential outcomes.

The Three Frames Described

The Utility and Meta-utility Frames are assumed to constitute a bistable system, which has two preferred states instead of just one (Apter & Smith, 1977). Both states contribute to the viability of the system, with neither "more equal" than the other. The characteristics of each frame resemble, but are not equivalent to, the "telic-paratelic bistability" described by Apter and Smith. Essentially, telic means purposeful and paratelic means beyond purpose. In the telic state, an individual strives to attain goals perceived as essential and imposed:

behaviors are chosen to achieve goals. In the paratelic state, an individual does enjoyable activities and, if goals are involved, they are freely chosen and somewhat inessential: goals are chosen to give reason to behavior (whose main purpose is enjoyment).

The Utility Frame

The Utility Frame is characterized by single-minded preoccupation with the ordering of behaviors and events in the pursuit of purposeful, predictable outcomes. Operating from within this psychological mind-set becomes a compelling necessity for parents when their children are born because of the enormous responsibilities of providing for the developing emotional, physical, social and moral needs of growing children. Societal norms and values, limitations and restrictions acquired in childhood from family, school and/or religious involvement, and the anxieties and worries of current concern to the parent all tend to circumscribe parents' perceptions and restrict them to this frame. When parents are in this frame, it is as if they were using the close-up feature on a zoom lens, which sacrifices perspective and contextual awareness for magnification of detail.

The words of some of the participants amplify this picture of the Utility Frame's restrictions. Doris Erlinbach remembered that "[in my family] it was: you don't

talk at dinnertime, you're supposed to eat, you're supposed
to eat neatly, you're not suppoed to spill things, eat
what's on your plate." Miriam Glazewski believed that "as
adults we think we have to be responsible and have to be
stoic. We're taught that we have to be responsible adults,
and to be humorous . . .is almost like we're not being
responsible adults." Ben Taft found that the more he was
"really cranking on projects . . . , the less [he] focused
on the needs of the kids." Nancy Nylander's phrase "getting
caught up in the everyday business kind of things," and
Naomi Nelson's reference to "seeing life as a series of
things to be accomplished" are both descriptions of the
Utility Frame. Several parents talked about the achievement
orientation of the culture; this also is a reflection of the
Utility Frame, that is, activities should be evaluated with
regard to their contribution to making progress towards
intended goals or outcomes.

Internal Stress

Pressure to function from within a purposeful, orderly
frame of reference was seen by participants to come from
both internal and external sources. Internal sources are
the feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and isolation that
can be triggered by parenting young children. One mother
said, "It seems like when I'm feeling real guilty, I'm so
pre-occupied that I don't really have much attention for my

daughter." Another mother described a difficult naptime in which

> I finally just got mad at myself for giving in to this tooth-brushing idea--we don't even brush our teeth at naptime--so why did I do that? I knew she was tired, but I was mad at myself. So I picked her up--Fast!-- and . . . that freaked her out.

This mother's single-minded preoccupation with a predictable outcome (the nap) contributed to her feeling of self-reproach at a tactic (brushing teeth) that, done with good intentions, had back-fired. Her emotional reaction burrowed her even deeper into her pursuit of the planned outcome which was followed by her daughter's emotional resistance ("freaked out"). The mother persisted and found that "one thing just led to a worse and worse situation."

The internalized expectations of society about how adults should behave have a limiting effect on parent's interactions with their children as well. While playing in the water with his kids at the beach, Ben Taft noticed there were not many other parents splashing around in the water "because, you know, parents should sit on the beach and get tan." Parents can sometimes actually create stress for themselves because of the adult expectations they carry into situations with their children. As an example of this, Naomi Nelson told about the time her husband, Vern, hurriedly tried to get his camera equipment together in time to capture a cute scene with their two-year-old son. In Vern's words, "You put the lenses on, you gotta get the

flash, you gotta fire up the flash, you got to hook
everything up together. It all takes time." Naomi's
comment was that "we're actually making our own stress from
our expectations, not wanting to miss a moment."

External Stress

External sources of stress can be any of the numerous
tasks and duties associated with parenting, from changing
diapers and cooking supper to earning enough money to pay
the bills as well as meeting as many of the ongoing needs of
the growing child as possible. As one father put it, "The
more I'm cranking on projects at work or at home, and not
really focused on the kids, the less I'm likely to take
stock and say, 'Hey, let's be funny or let's be cute.'"

Internal Plus External Stress

The words of Caleb Ewing, recalling a recent incident
in his family, describe most eloquently a parent operating
in the Utility Frame. The reader's attention is drawn to
the complex web of factors, many beyond his personal
control, which impinged on this father's ability to act
calmly and rationally. The story is quoted at length as
this is the best way to follow the crescendo of tension that
can build to a peak in a parent and, when confronted with a
mundane but unexpected complication, snap.

When we were leaving for the beach that day, . . . it
had been an awful, awful string of days. My uncle died

and we all flew out to Pittsburgh for his funeral
largely so that my grandmother could see the kids and
especially Abe, who she had never seen. She lives in
Florida. And she was distraught, she was really beside
herself with grief, this was her only son and he
dropped dead of a heart attack at 53. We came back and
delayed our trip to the beach for a day because we
simply couldn't do all the things that we needed to do
in order to leave on Saturday so we ended up going to
leave on Sunday. Saturday was this day where we had
decided that we had chosen absolutely the wong
wallpaper for the majority of the house and we were
anguished about it. . . . After having gone through
months of decision-making about wallpaper, we _again_
were thinking: this could be wrong, [he laughs] this
could really be wrong. I took the kids for a couple of
hours, Libby raced down to another wallpaper store and
looked through another set of books and we talked about
it, should we do this before we leave? I mean this is
the kind of stress level that we've been operating on.
     Seven o'clock on Sunday morning I got up, I
couldn't sleep and my father calls to tell me that my
grandmother had died, she just couldn't live with the
grief of my uncle's death so she died as well. So I
was okay, we were about to go to the beach. I knew
that I was going to have to leave the next day, early
Monday, to fly down to her funeral in Florida. We
decided that we should not all go down for that one,
even though we were closer to my grandmother than my
uncle. It was just too much to again all pick up and
go down. We should simply try to get to the beach that
day and get settled and I would leave for a couple of
days and come back and we could still have our
vacation.
     I started putting things together, and . . .
packing our Honda for two weeks at the beach was an
epic [he laughs]. We had a dozen bags and the
bicycles. We really wanted to take enough stuff to
enjoy ourselves, so anyhow I was in an awful mood all
morning and I was really just trying to get out of it,
thinking if I could _get_ _out_ _of_ _the_ _house_, _get_ _on_ _the_
road, _get_ _to_ _the_ _beach_, _get_ _unpacked_, _get_ _in_ _the_ _water_,
I'll be okay and _that_ _was_ _all_ _I_ _could_ _think_ _about_
[emphases added].
     So Erin of course wanted to help pack and I . . .
just didn't have a shred of patience that morning and,
I practically had the car all packed and she was really
pretty good, she was just hanging around, doing little
things and handing me the bungies [elastic tie cords]
and stuff. Anyhow she's in the car and all of a sudden
she's sitting in her car seat, waiting to go ('course,
we're not going to be leaving for another hour and a

half) and she points to the seat in front of her and says, "Daddy, what is that?" There's dogshit all [group laughter] over the front. Not only is it all over the back of that seat, but then I look down and it's all over the carpet and all over the seat that her car seat is on and I say "Erin, can I see your shoes?" [he laughs] [more group laughter]

So I look on her shoes and she's stepped in dogshit, so I said, "Erin, get out of the car [group laughte], just get out of the car". She said, "Why, dad?" I said, "Just get out of the car." Libby's on the telephone inside with her parents telling her mother that my grandmother died and what was happening and I find myself screaming, I said "Libby-y-y, Erin's got shit on her shoes!" It's 8:00 on a Sunday morning [group laughter]. . . .

This is sort of like a metaphor for the way our lives had been running lately and once it happened, even I thought it was funny, but it just becomes too outlandish in some ways to really remain angry for any length of time. Something happens, and you snap [emphasis added] and that alleviates the anger, or the kid does something charming and cute and that alleviatesthe anger. . . . I think that the humor is largely an antidote to anger that you find yourself feeling a lot of the time and either you feel it later or you discover something at the moment that's humorous, but one way or another, that's what cures you.

Caleb's goal statement ("get out of the house, get on the road," etc.) portrays the urgent preoccupation with predictable outcomes defined as characteristic of the Utility Frame of reference.

"Vicious Circles"

The Utility Frame is depicted as a circle partly because the internal and external sources of stress which keep it in place contribute to deviation-amplifying, or positive feedback, loops, also known as "vicious circles," between parents and their children. Figure 14 (page 151)
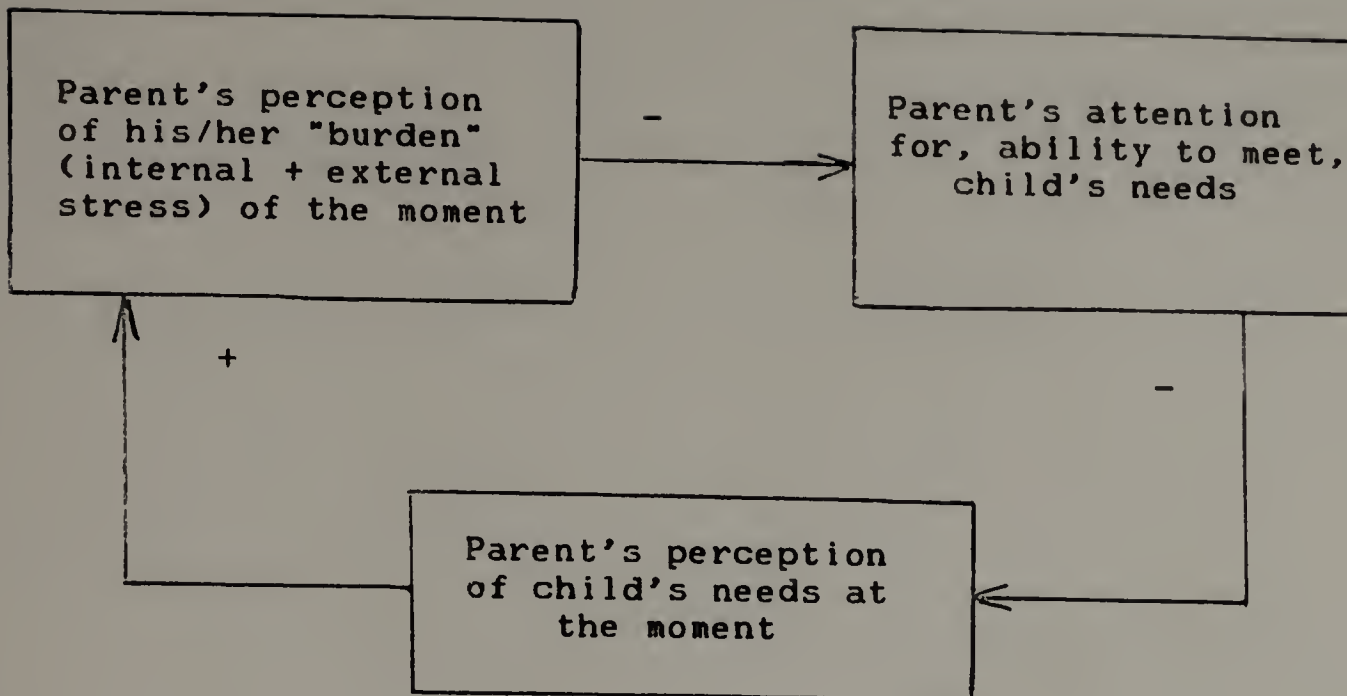
Figure 14. "Vicious Circles"

"+" indicates positive correlation
"-" indicates negative correlation

illustrates an example of these loops. Positive feedback
loops are loops of circular causality which contain an even
number (e.g., 0, 2, 4, etc.) of negatively correlated
relationships (Weick, 1979). The greater the psychological
burden of internal and external stress parents feel, the
less attention they have for their children's needs. The
less attention they have, the more pressing the children's
needs appear to be and, thus, the more burdensome the
responsibilities of the moment feel. Conflicts between
parents and children can spiral rapidly towards a point one
father referred to as "critical mass," when the conflict
reaches "the point of no return." This father went on to

ssay, "No matter how much we think we are trying to think about them as children, there's an adult expectation and it becomes more and more adult the more and more frustrated you get." The spiral of conflict seems to take on a power of its own, which feels beyond the ability of the parent to control. Doris Erlinbach compared it to being

> on this one track and even though you don't want to stay on there, it's like impossible to get off because [she laughs] you're in such a yukky frame of mind. Even things that are coming up that are funny or that wouldn't be a big deal all of a sudden are just because you're . . . stuck in that. You want to get out of it, but you can't.

The Meta-utility Frame

The Meta-utility Frame stands in contrast to the Utility Frame and is characterized by a dual-minded openness to multiple interpretations of behaviors, events and possible outcomes. In this Frame, it is as if parents were using the distance view feature of a zoom lens, which provides a broader perspective while giving up some detail. Parental behavior within this frame of reference transcends practical, utilitarian concerns. The parent's attitude shifts from frustration to enjoyment of the child's behavior. The child, in turn, enjoys the fact that the parent is now enjoying her, and the parent then enjoys the child enjoying how much the parent is enjoying the child. And so it continues; a mutually reinforcing cycle of pleasure is established in the Meta-utility Frame, replacing

the "vicious circle" of the Utility Frame with a "virtuous circle."

This mutually reinforcing cycle of enjoyment is illustrated by Nancy Nylander's story of what happened one day when she had had enough of her sons' bickering (the narration has been laid out to illustrate the mutual interplay between parent [P] and children [C]):

> I had had enough of listening to their fighting all day long so
> [P] I started talking in very strange kinds of voices and making up different characters,
> [C] and they just stopped what they wre doing and they were so amused by this. They thought it was a riot and [said], "Mommy, tell us another story like that."
> [P] So I'd wrap my lips around my teeth to make it sound like I didn't have any teeth or pretended it was 40 years down the road and I was old, in a rocking chair, and what were they going to do with their old, old mother? Probably put me on a wagon and send me down a hill or something. (laughter) Then I'll go into a different character,
> [C] and they'll start making up different characters. That's the part I like when they get really creative like that and they start playing along making up the different characters.

The Meta-utility Frame is a place where the unexpected is predictable, where surprises are intentional, silliness is practical and fun is useful. Creativity and imagination--both children's and parents'--thrive in an atmosphere where enjoyment takes precedence over outcomes, yet outcomes are not ignored. Marie Rosenthal shifted to this frame when her baby daughter's first fever (following her 2-month DPT shot) finally subsided. "I had been hysterical [about the fever], but when the fever went down,

I went rushing (laughs) around the house like Scarlett O'Hara, [spoken in breathless, Southern accent] 'The fevuh broke! Hallelujah! The fevuh broke!'"

Several stories told in the interviews paint graphic pictures of parents relating to their children from a Meta-utility Frame of Reference:

1. A father crawls around on the living room floor on his hands and knees, following the path of his 10-month-old son, "to help keep the stress level down." (Dennis Higgins)

2. A single mother folds a piece of paper and puts it on her head as she asks her 2-year-old son to help her pick up some papers from the floor. First he wants to try putting a piece of paper on his own head, then he wants to help her. (Miriam Glazewski)

3. A father, sitting at the kitchen table, calmly trades screams with his 1-year-old daughter in a "call-and-reponse" game. (Conner Neilson)

4. While changing his 18-month-old son's diaper, a father breaks out in "scat singing" (i.e., "Badoop, badoop, badoop, bop, bop, badoop, badoop") and then hums "Stars and Stripes Forever" while moving his finger back-and-forth between his lips. This cracks his son up and eases his own chore at the diaper-changing table. (Ben Taft)

5. A mother gets down on her hands and knees and "sticks her butt up in the air" to entertain her 17-month-old son. (Frances Sayre)

The affective tone of the Meta-utility Frame is more relaxed, playful and fun-loving than that of the Utility Zone. When parents are responding from this psychological frame of mind, they are open to instigating and appreciating humor, to playing and having fun with their children.

"The Shift": From Utility Frame to Meta-utility Frame

The two-part process of letting up and shifting frames discovered through constant comparative analysis and identified as the shift which enables parents to incorporate humor into their relationships with their children can now be seen as essentially a shift from the Utility Frame to the Meta-utility Frame. This shift is also isomorphic with the composite definition of "sense of humor" drawn from the participants' own words. A central component of that definition is to have both the ability and the willingness to look for and laugh about the funny, absurd, ironical side of daily life. Terms such as "rising above," "lightening things for myself," and "lifting it up" convey the metaphor of "upward" movement associated with "the shift" from Utility Frame to Meta-utility Frame.

Descriptions of humor found in the literature also match this framework for understanding the shift. Morreall (1983) points out humor's "ability to distance us from the practical aspects of the situation we're in." To

incorporate humor "is to put aside practical considerations
for the moment" (p. 115). May's (1953) notion of humor as a
way of "standing off and looking at one's problem with
perspective" (p. 54) is analagous to the effect of changing
the zoom lens from a close--up to a distance view. Moody's
(1978) description of a person with "a good sense of humor"
as "one who can see himself [or herself] and others in the
world in a somewhat distant and detached way" (p. 4) without
losing contact or emotional involvement with them also
substantiates the hypothesis that the ability to shift from
Utility to Meta-utility Frame indicates a sense of humor.

Once a parent has let up somewhat on a negative mood or
on extreme adult expectations (which tend to keep the
Utility Frame in place), the shift to a Meta-utility Frame
of Reference may take place through a series of steps in
which the child's enjoyment increases the parent's
relaxation. Doris Erlinbach turned on music and started
dancing one day when she was "in a rotten mood" and could
not pay attention to her 13-month-old daughter, Lisa, any
longer. Her daughter, who was being ignored, thought Mom's
dancing was quite amusing and held out her fingers to dance
with Doris. Doris was not yet in a mood to dance with Lisa,
but she remembered realizing that what had happened was
"fortuitous"--and usable. She has since used the idea of
turning on music and dancing when Lisa is irritable in her
high chair. "Sometimes she's just in the high chair being

crabby and (Doris laughs) I'm dancing 'cause it does make
her laugh. And it makes me relax too."

The Ambivalence Frame

Most adults, before becoming parents, live more or less
comfortably within the Utility Frame. There is, by and
large, an unquestioned acceptance in Western culture of the
need to apply one's energy towards predictable, orderly
outcomes in one's daily life and work. If a working couple
without children sets their clock radio for 6:30 a.m. so
that they can be on their way to work an hour later, it is
fairly certain that that is what will happen. Adapting to
adult life in a society which has only a slim edge of
tolerance for nonproductive, impractical, unpredictable
behavior means adapting to life within the Utility Frame.

The arrival of a baby into the lives of adults alters
this adaptation to practicality, although the change may
occur in almost imperceptibly slow stages. Because the
daily existence of very young children includes substantial
needs for attention and physical and emotional care-taking,
large quantities of time spent on exploratory, inventive
play, and a growing sense of will-power, none of which are
particularly practical from a Utility perpective, parents
are faced with some choices that never confronted them
before they became parents. An issue that has emerged from
the discovery process of this study has been the dilemma

parents face regarding behaviors of their children that force them to think beyond the confines of the Utility Frame, a dilemma best summed up by a rewording of a famous Shakespearean line, i.e., "To laugh or not to laugh."

The Ambivalence Frame is described as a state of having simultaneous conflicting feelings about behaviors, events and potential outcomes of situations. Many of the parents interviewed in this study faced the "To laugh or not to laugh" dilemma. Connor Neilson, for example, said that when his 1-year-old daughter Lisa hears the words, "Let us pray," in church, she seems to think it means, "Let us scream and make noise." "Sometimes I want to do it with her," he said, "I don't know which side of the fence to be on. But I can't laugh at her because it's not appropriate. I gotta teach her here, you know." The simultaneous opposite pulls are evident in Connor's story: the Utility Frame ("gotta teach her") pulls in one direction, while the Meta-utility Frame ("I want to do it with her.") pulls in the other. Keith and Nancy Nylander found themselves torn between laughter and solemnity once in church when their 4-year-old son, Bert, turned around and, looking up at the choir in the balcony, ordered, "Hey, shudup up there!"

The long-term ongoing interaction with young children precipitated by the transition to parenthood brings unconsciously-held values and attitudes into conscious awareness and places parents into certain kinds of choice-

making situations they may never before have faced as
adults. One concern of this study has been parents' values
and attitudes about what is funny and what is not, about
what can be laughed at and what should not be laughed at.
When in the Ambivalence Frame, parents face the choice of
whether or not to broaden their personal and family limits
about what is or ought to be laughable. To be stuck in this
Ambivalance Frame is not a sign of parental weakness but of
parental growth as old values are re-examined for their
relevance to current situations. In the data collected
here, this dilemma of choice was provoked by situations such
as: children making a mess at mealtime, making noise at
church, saying swear words, objecting to being told "No,"
tossing clothes about and attempting to do something new.

The Risks of Humor: Teasing

The Ambivalence Frame is an uncertain state of mind
because of the risks inherent in humor and laughter. As
illustrated in the Literature Review, humor is an ambiguous,
bi-level interaction in which a gesture, face, statement or
other activity is open to more than one interpretation.
Because humorous activity is always open to multiple
interpretations, the person who initiates humor faces the
risk that it will be misinterpreted. Ben, the father of two
children, used to tease his brothers and sisters when he was
a kid and now teases people with whom he works. He finds

that he has to monitor his teasing of his children because
they are "such literalists that they don't get the teasing."
On a day when the children knew he was planning to take them
to the park, for example, they asked him, "Can we go to the
park?" In a pretend gruff voice, he jokingly answered, "No!
We can't go to the park!" but the children took him
literally and anxiously pleaded, "You mean we can't go to
the park?" Ben had to quickly reasssure them, "Don't worry,
I was only teasing."

Thirteen-month-old Lisa's parents were just at the
stage of beginning to use the word "No" to set limits on her
behavior. Lisa's father, Connor, was quite a humorous,
playful man in both his and his wife's estimation. He and
his daughter were "goofing around" one day and, in the
spirit of their play, he suddenly said, "No!" which Lisa
took literally to mean "Stop that right now!" Connor
observed, "You can see the response is--(he snaps his
fingers) fun's over." This incident made him aware that his
humor contained "a very real potential for confusing the
poor kid."

Another father, Nathan, worked in construction where
"we have a lot of laughs because that's the way you cope
with the type of work that we do." With his nieces and
nephews, he would try the same type of humor, but the
children "don't get the joke." One day he was playing ball
with his three-year-old niece and she threw a ball that hit

him in the face. He wasn't hurt, so he reacted by trying to
be funny and screamed, "Yeow!" pretending he had been hurt.
"My niece ran and hid in the closet and was crying and she
wouldn't come out until I left because she thought I was
mad." Nathan called it "a missed line."

The few incidents of parents teasing children in this
study involved fathers. It is interesting to note that no
teasing incidents were reported by mothers. A subject
worthy of further investigation would be the relationship
between parent gender and use of a teasing form of humor
with children.

The Risks of Humor: Laughter = Approval

Another of the risks involved in laughing along with
children's behavior is that the child might see the laughter
as approval or encouragement for the behavior. Nathan Sayre
said,

> Everything he [18-month-old Eric] does I think is a
> riot. When he's throwing his food, I'm over on the
> other side of the room, covering my face, but I'm
> laughing! . . . But you don't want to have him do it
> every time he's eating supper just for a show.

His wife, Frances, added, "It just happens so fast, you just
don't know what to say." Doris Erlinbach found "sometimes
it's really funny when she [13-month-old Lisa] does throw
something or just clears something off [her high chair
tray], you just feel like, 'I can't laugh at this because
she's gonna think it's okay to do this.'" Keith Nylander

experienced a similar dilemma one day when his 4-year-old
son Bert

> was doing something and all of a sudden he goes, "Aw,
> shit!" and it just totally cracked me up! And I'm
> trying not to laugh but . . . he's cracking me up. How
> are you supposed to say, "Don't say that!" when you've
> said the same thing yourself?

The Risks of Humor: Hurting Children's Feelings

Another risk of humor is that the child's feelings may
be hurt seeing the parent laughing. Nancy Nylander
commented on the fine line between "humor" and "hurt" and
Ben Taft described that fine line in his attempts to not
laugh when his 18-month-old son Max's "big lip" comes out in
pouty protest to being told, "No": "He'd look so funny.
All you could do is try to keep from laughing. You feel
like if you laugh, you would hurt his feelings." As her 18-
month-old daughter, Laura, became less of a baby and more of
a child, Marie Rosenthal found herself questioning whether
her accustomed laughter at Laura's "cuteness" was still
appropriate. She had begun to realize that "her cuteness is
that she's trying to do things and so I'm still tied up with
laughing at her when she tries to do something new and I
think . . . maybe that's not really good for her."

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first
section summarizes the research study. A critique of the
methodology comprises the next section, followed by some of
the implications for further research into the area of humor
in parenting. Implications for parent education and family
therapy are elaborated in a fourth section. The final
section discusses conclusions emerging from this work.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of
humor by parents of pre-school children in order to generate
substantive theory related to the role of humor as a
modifier of stress in parent-child interactions. The study
also sought to understand how parents define sense of humor
within the parenting context and what they do to maintain
their sense of humor.

The literature review attempted to match the field of
humor and laughter theory with the field of normal family
processes and parenting education. This search revealed only
a few, very recent studies with even marginal reference to
the topic of humor in parenting. Viewed in the context of
the expanding literature on humor applications in closely

related fields such as psychotherapy, education and health
care, the lack of knowledge about humor in parenting became
obvious. Based on current knowledge about the multiple
factors contributing to parental stress, along with the
increasing awareness of the stress-modifying benefits of
humor and laughter, the topic of humor in parenting was seen
to be a fertile field of inquiry.

Being the unexplored territory that it is, the topic
was ideally suited to the qualitative research methods of
grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With no theories
extant on humor in parenting, theory verification was an
impossibility. A grounded theory methodology was chosen for
its theory generation capability, that is, the development
of substantive theory emerging from a systematic analysis of
the data.

Constant comparative analysis was the method utilized
to discover the process by which parents incorporate humor
into their relationships with their children. The
collection, coding and analysis of data were conducted
concurrently in order to insure that the developing
theoretical constructs fit the data as it was gathered.
Incidents in the data were compared in as many ways as
feasible so that categories could be abstracted. Comparison
among these categories then led to the development of the
core concept which was grounded in the data and, in turn,
served to explain and interpret the data.

The starting point of the research was the identification of several local concepts (initial hypotheses based on the literature review and the researcher's personal experience and insights). In theory-generation research, local concepts are selected in order to be discarded if the accumulating data do not fit them. The local concepts used to begin this study were (a) that there are parents who use humor with their children, (b) that these uses may have either positive or negative effects, and (c) that the humor process in families might reflect the bi-level, two-in-one qualities characteristic of most humor and laughter theories.

Four unstructured small group interviews with parents were conducted between December 1986 and August 1987. Group size varied from three to six, with a total sample of 17 parents. Transcription, coding and initial analysis of each interview were done prior to the succeeding interview so that one interview could inform the conduct of the next. As the study proceeded, the nature of the central research question changed in response to the data being collected. These modifications to the initial study topic were made with theoretical sensitivity such that data and theory interacted in mutually influential ways. The focus shifted from (a) parents' use of humor to (b) the occurrence of humor in families to (c) the psychological process by which

parents incorporate humor into their relationships with their children.

Incidents related by participants were classified into four basic types: I--relaxed, playful times; II-- parental ambivalence about laughing; III--parental incorporation of humor to modify stress; and IV--"worst case scenarios", that is, stressful situations in which humor was not incorporated. Humor was found to occur in the first three types of family situations.

Because the primary concern of this study was an increased understanding of humor as a modifier of parental stress, the constant comparative analysis method was used to zero in on factors which would differentiate Types III and IV. This focus led to the identification of a key psychological shift enabling parents to incorporate humor. This shift involved an instantaneous interruption (letting up) of a stressful parent-child interactional chain followed by a change in the emphasis of the situation (shifting frames).

Three distinct psychological frames of reference were then postulated which could account for this two-part interactional shift, as well as place all four types of incidents into a single theoretical framework. The Utility Frame of Reference was defined as the single-minded pursuit of purposeful, predictable outcomes. Being stuck in this frame can lead to "worst case scenarios." The Meta-utility

(beyond utility) Frame was defined as an openness to multiple interpretations of events, a perspective that can expect the unexpected, appreciate surprises and recognize humor. The process of parents incorporating humor as a modifier of stress can be seen as a shift from the Utility Frame to the Meta-utility Frame of Reference. The Ambivalence Frame, standing between the other two, was defined as the presence of simultaneous conflicting feelings about whether or not to laugh when something funny happens.

Critique of the Methodology

The Pilot Study interview (December 1986) had five participants. The Franklin and Hampshire County interviews were done with three parents in each. The Hampden County interview included six parents. Based on the experience of the four interviews, the maximum group size for interview research on humor was found to be no more than four participants.

The discovery that led to this conclusion occurred during the Hampden County interview. With a group double the size of the previous two groups, the researcher was prepared to allow twice as much time for each question, giving each parent an opportunity to respond. What the researcher did not anticipate was the degree of internal tension between two conflicting pulls--focusing on the topic questions and following fascinating digressions--which had

been nearly absent during the two previous interviews, with three parents in each. The Franklin and Hampshire County interviews were more relaxed and informal than the Hampden County interview. These ambient attributes (informality and relaxation) tend to enhance group discussion of a topic like humor in family life. Therefore, limiting group size to four would allow time to cover the pre-planned questions while also pursuing interesting digressions.

The Introductory Letter (see Appendix C) could have been more clear about the need for parents to make child care arrangements. Although the letter did mention only the word "parents" as research participants, it did not state that the interviews would be with parents "only," and several interested parents did ask whether they could bring their children along. The researcher's experience with a variety of other parent-oriented programs and events confirms the fact that the question, "Are the children included?" is often a source of uncertainty. Simply stating in the Introductory Letter that parents would have to arrange care for their children would have removed this misunderstanding.

This dissertation study involved the researcher in the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles of interviewer, analyst and parent. It is in the service of the grounded theory methodology that the researcher be engaged in analytical activity while in the midst of gathering data as

an interviewer. Theoretical insights about relevant variables or sampling decisions emerge from the interaction of the interview, and would be lost if the interviewer and analyst were not the same person. Glaser (1978) points out that grounded theory becomes "the most fun" (p. 28) when the topic involves a "personal life-cycle interest" of the researcher, in this case, parenting a pre-schooler. The researcher's current personal experience with situations similar to those related by the participants facilitated the trusting relationship needed in the interviews and added vital energy to the entire project.

Despite these benefits of combining multiple roles in one person, the researcher did occasionally find them confusing. As interviewer and analyst, the researcher would listen closely to the content of a parent's story in order to be able to respond appropriately when the story was finished while at the same time assessing which emergent category the incident might belong to or if it indicated the need for a new category.

The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences in a relaxed, informal atmosphere, as they might in a parent support group. Parents often identified with one another's feelings and predicaments by saying such things as, "That sounds familiar," or "Yeah, right, right." This unintended research outcome, however, also created some conflict

between the researcher's interviewer/analyst role and the parent role. As "interviewer/analyst," the researcher would try to maintain an objective, "meta" position to the parents' stories and supportive responses, while as "parent," he was eager to join the exchange and add personal stories. The researcher did respond at times as interviewer/analyst, while joining in as "parent" when appropriate.

Interviews were conducted with viable, functioning middle-class families. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, none of the families were seeking professional help for family problems (although this was not a criterion for participation). The findings, therefore, may be skewed towards parents who have evolved reasonable methods of keeping a rational balance between disciplining and nurturing their children. The application of these findings to severely dysfunctional families or families in which parents tend to be extremely controlling and punitive or extremely permissive and neglectful would require separate investigation.

Using audiotape to record these non-structured interviews enriched the quality of the data beyond what might have been gathered through the written surveys used in another family humor research study (Wuerffel, 1986b). Audio recordings, however, miss the nonverbal messages, which play a crucial meta-communicative role in humorous

interactions. The use of retrospective story-telling to recreate incidents sacrifices some accuracy and objectivity, as well as suffering from the participants' frequent inability to recall their thought processes before, during or after reported incidents. Capturing a more complete picture of parent-child interactions would require in-home observations with videotape, the logistical complexity of which was beyond the means of this particular study.

Implications for Further Research

It is in the nature of grounded theory research that a wealth of data is collected, the four-stage process of constant comparative analysis narrows the theoretical range down to one or more core variables, and ample material remains, teasing the researcher with other fascinating directions to explore. Some of the possible directions for further research in this area are as follows:

1. Data collection for this study was done in a location that was separate in time and space from the original contexts of the stories. This time-space gap could be bridged through the use of small voice-activated audiotape recorders. Parent volunteers willing to wear such a device for a specified time period would be asked to record and comment on stressful times with their children as well as the enjoyable, playful times. This arrangement could be used not only to record the verbal aspects of

family interactions, but also the parent's comments about the interactions afterwards. This method would possibly fill the gap in the present study created by parents' difficulty remembering their thought processes before, during or after reported incidents.

2. What major styles of parenting humor can be identified (e.g., rough-housing, singing, playing make-believe, word play, etc.)? Do fathers tend to prefer certain styles more than mothers and vice versa? Do parenting humor styles in dual-parent families complement each other or compete with each other? What form do these issues take in single-parent families? Indications from this study are that families evolve their own unique blend of humorous activities based on interests and skills of the various family members. Some families, for example, utilize music frequently, some incorporate spontaneous dramatic effects, while others play together in rowdy, physical ways.

3. What is the relationship between having the primary child care responsibility in the family and the frequency and types of humor used by each parent? Do parents who spend more time at home with the children tend to feel they use humor less often and less effectively than the parents who spend more time as full-time wage earners? Is the full-time wage-earning parent's perception similar or different? What form do these issues take in single-parent families?

This issue arose in part from the comments of a full-time wage-earning father who could recount a number of humorous moments when he would come home from work, but sometimes found himself extremely "hassled" and humorless after his one afternoon a week home with his two children. Besides its potential for being isolating and exhausting, keeping company with one's children for long periods of time drains away a parent's sense of humor. The classic line in this regard (bo4h fathers and mothers voiced it in this study) was the at-home parent handing the child to the parent coming home from work and saying, "HERE!" as soon as he or she walked in the door.

4. What is the relationship between parents' perception of their sense of humor, their observed and reported uses of humor and the style of humor with which they are most comfortable? Does any relationship exist between parents' perceptions of their sense of humor and their family roles vis-a-vis child care and income-production? The researcher noticed that several primary care-giving mothers who described themselves as unhumorous (in comparison to their spouses) related stories of their own use of humor and playfulness which seemed to contradict their unhumorous self-description. Might there be a limited preconception of what constitutes "being humorous," determined largely by male dominance of society and of the world of comedy entertainment that might blind people to

their own unique style of playfulness and humor? It became

obvious in this study that being "less humorous" than one's

spouse could by no means be equated with being "unhumorous."

     5. The issue of intent on the part of young children

in interactions where control becomes the issue has been

acknowledged already as a critical factor for consideration

as well as a difficult factor to identify and evaluate. One

potential method of accessing children's intent would be to

interview adults interested in recalling their own attempts

to be humorous as children. An unstructured interview

format could be used to collect stories from such adults

along with their comments about their intention or purpose

for using humor in specific situations. This type of

research could shed light on the important role children

play in lightening the family atmosphere. This study has

focused on the parents' role; family humor is highly

interactive and reciprocal, and this mutuality requires

further study.

     6. This study focused on humor occurring in

interactions between parents and their children. Placing

these interactions within the context of the parents' family

histories could deepen the understanding of the topic of

family humor. Further study could be done to assess

differences between the quality and frequency of humor in

each parent's family-of-origin and their family-of-

procreation (current family). These differences could be

understood by examining each parent's decisions about (a)
choice of spouse (i.e., from a more humorous or less
humorous family background), (b) choice of lifestyle, and
(c) which aspects of family-of-origin life they cherished
and which they rejected.

Implications for Parent Education and Family Therapy

Any application of the findings of this study to
parenting education must be done with the caution that
parents' incorporation of humornot be presented as another
parenting "should." Taking the humanistic approach modeled
in the Introductory Letter (see Appendix C) that "all
parents are good parents who love their children deeply and
are doing the very best they can" will hopefully keep
educators mindful that sometimes humor occurs, many times it
does not and that parents do have choices about it. The key
piece of new information discovered here seems to be that
(a) parents decide, either with awareness or without it, to
incorporate humor as they interactwith their children and
(b) that choices still exist even when an increase of stress
appears to narrow their options. Parents enter power
struggles with their children, but that also is a choice,
not an inevitability.

The unstructured small-group interview format for data
collection used in this study is recommended as a useful
parent education method for introducing the topic of humor

as a modifier of parental stress. Letting parents talk together in small groups about their own lives and the ways that humor fits into their lives would serve to (a) validate their experiences, (b) build self-esteem and (c) develop interparental connections. These outcomes would all help to enhance parents' sense of humor. Some of the experiences shared in these small group sessions would likely fit into the typology of incidents identified in Table 6 (page 104). Each type of incident could then be discussed, using a specific incident from the parent group to ground the theoretical ideas being presented.

Parent stories matching Type III incidents (cf. Table 6, page 104) in which the incorporation of humor changes the interaction could be informally analyzed to identify the four phases of Setting, Intent, Humor and Effect. This process could help parents identify these phases in their own personal experiences. Role plays and group problem-solving brainstorms could be used to illustrate the possibilities for choosing alternatives in stressful parenting situations.

Organizing groups of parents to focus on humorous occurrences can be an effective way of creating an upbeat, positive tone about their work as parents. One mother in this study said that conversations she has with other mothers usually center around the distressing, negative aspects of mothering because those are often uppermost in

their minds. The possibility exists that by modelling a lighthearted tone and encouraging laughter in parents' groups, parent educators and counselors could create an atmosphere for open discussion of small victories and "worst case scenarios" that would raise parents' hopes but not their despair.

The use of the special magic of humor and laughter to combine conflicted feelings into a single frame has been left largely untapped by educators, counselors and therapists who work with parents. Getting parents to laugh together about their lives as parents has significant potential for improving the quality of parents' and children's lives and the quality of their relationships with each other. Organizing educational initiatives to facilitate shared laughter and the open exchange of humorous (and non-humorous) experiences among parents could produce numerous benefits: laughter's physical release could relieve parenting tension; laughter's social connecting function could break through the isolation and build feelings of solidarity among parents; sharing "war stories" in an upbeat setting could help parents keep their everyday struggles in perspective; and the sharing of embarassing moments could drive away the dastardly demon myth of "parent perfection."

The findings of this research could be used by family therapists who could give prescriptions ("homework

assignments") to parents that would facilitate the "letting up" process in relation to their children. This could be as simple and straightforward as directing the parent to physically back off from a conflict or to stop and count to ten when anger arises. The therapeutic prescription could also involve assessing and using the family's own culturally appropriate forms of humor and prescribing their use in conflict situations.

Family therapists could be taught to include the family's rules about humor and laughter in their assessment of a family. This assessment could include: What makes this family laugh? Who usually laughs at whom? Who usually initiates the humor? Which family members are usually the butt of the humor? This information could be used in an initial family assessment and later incorporated in feedback to the family either in the form of a systemic opinion, a straightforward directive or a paradoxical directive. For example, the family joker could be instructed to "make a funny" when the tension escalates around a problem being treated.

Conclusions

From its beginning with an initial interest area and several preconceptions (i.e., local concepts) this study proceeded through the concurrent and interactive stages of data collection, coding and analysis to the generation of

substantive theory on humor in parenting grounded in the everyday experiences of parents of pre-school-aged children. The researcher went on this discovery process into relatively unexplored terrain intent on returning with a rudimentary "map" useful to others interested getting acquainted with the territory.

Thee "map" that has emerged as the final stage of the present work postulates three frames of reference (see Figure 13, page 143) and articulates a psychological process by which parents seem to be able to incorporate humor into their relationships with their pre-school-aged children. Attaining this vantage point has changed some of the researcher's initial preconceptions.

When the study began, the researcher's eye was turned towards the cognitive, two-in-one, processes involved in humor (cf. page 41). The literature review (Chapter 2) described juxtaposition of opposites, bisociation and incongruity as some of the ways theorists have explained the cognitive change that produces humorous preceptions and behaviors (Morreall, 1983; Koestler, 1964; Keith-Spiegel, 1972). As the research proceeded, however, it became clear that the exact nature of the two-in-one, incongruity process (e.g., pretending, surprise, imitation) that occurred was less important than the change in the tone of the parent-child relational context. To describe and explain the change adequately, something more was needed. That

"something more" turned out to be the psychological process known as <u>letting up</u>, which was seen to open the possibility for an incongruous event to be initiated, perceived and/or appreciated in the parent-child relationship. Letting up, the first step in parent's incorporation of humor in a problem situation with their children, necessarily involves both the heart and the head, affection as well as cognition.

When the parents' "letting up" had opened the door for humor to be incorporated, the <u>shifting frames</u> process was seen as a perceptual change allowing them to "see" both their own adult world and the world of their children at the same time. Shifting frames enabled parents to encompass both worlds into a single frame of reference. This broadened view of situations was described as the <u>Meta-utility Frame</u>, from which parents have access to both worlds.

This shift is not unlike the "shift to a play frame" described in Chapter 2 (cf. page 49), which allows ordinary behaviors to be done without their usual consequences. The development of the grounded theory has here led to point that parallels the Strategic Family Therapy work of Cloé Madanes (1981, 1984) using pretend techniques. Parents who operate from the perspective of the Meta-utility Frame could be said to be functioning with a "pretend" approach to situations.

If parents used this access to enter their children's world (e.g., Nathan Sayre who got down on the floor with his son and playfully joined him in kicking and screaming), they were creating an inherently incongruous situation. Because of their culturally assigned role as authorities in the family (Galinsky, 1981; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), parents typically have, and must exercise, the "one-up" position vis-a-vis their children. By incorporating humor and entering their children's world, parents "tturned the tables" and temporarily assumed a "one-down" position in relation to their children. From this position within the child's world, parents could then exert their influence in non-threatening, non-authoritarian ways that moved the relationship in a positive direction.

This strategy of joinig the child's world resembles a therapeutic technique of the same name used in Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). In fact, replacing a few words in Minuchin and Fishman's description of joining in a family therapy setting adds stimulating insights into the importance of the process by which parents incorporate humor into their relationships with their children. In the following quote, the words "parents" and "they" have replaced "therapist" and "he"; the word "children" has replaced "family" or "family system"; and "parent-child system" replaces "therapeutic system." Words

that are different from the original quotation are indicated
by bold type:

> Like every leader, **they** [parents] will have to
> accommodate, seduce, submit, support, direct, suggest,
> and follow in order to lead [emphasis added]. . . .
> **They** will be channeled into traveling certain roads in
> certain ways at certain times. Sometimes they will be
> aware of the channeling; other times **they** will not even
> recognize it. **They** must accept the fact that **they will**
> be buffeted by the implicit demands that organize **their**
> **children's** behavior.
>> Joining with **children** is more an attitude than a
> technique. . . . Joining is letting the **children** know
> that the **parents** understand them and [are] working with
> **them** and for **them.** Only under **their** protection can the
> **children** have the security to explore alternatives, try
> the unusual, and change. Joining is the glue that
> holds the **parent-child** system together.
>> **Parents** will accommodate to the **children,** but will
> also require the **children** to accommodate to **them**
> (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, pp. 29-32).

This description illustrates how useful joining can be when
parents accept the uncertainty, limited control and the
"driving intent" of their children's needs. Joining with
children through the incorporation of humor reflects a
systemic, "both-and" perspective; that is, the needs of
both the parents and the children are not necessarily
mutually exclusive. By "letting up" to laugh and be light
for a while, connections between the adult's perspective and
the child's perspective can be discovered, strengthened and
enjoyed.

Changes in my thinking about humor in parenting as a
research topic were mirrored by changes in my thinking about
humor in my own parenting. I used to think of humor in a
primarily cognitive fashion and used word plays, nonsense

rhymes, slapstick and similar forms of incongruity humor that were appropriate to my growing preschooler's experience and awareness. I would experience strong guilt feelings at those times when I had no sense of humor for my young son's behavior and needs. I also found that trying to be funny in order to keep laughter accessible in my family (a laudable goal) could sometimes be disrespectful, unthinking or simply inappropriate.

Each interview showed me that there was much more to this topic than I had originally thought. I came to see that there were many options for responding to children. As I pressed deeper into the data and arrived at new understandings of humor in parenting, I came to see that the true objective of my inquiry was not lightness for lightness' sake, but lightness for the sake of connectedness. The discovery of the <u>letting</u> <u>up</u> process has led to a realization that "humor" can sometimes mean stopping the incessant press of worldly demands and simply sitting on the floor with my son and finding out the latest news from his imaginary world of Lego buildings, Playmobil characters and cardboard roadways.

These intertwining themes of humor and connectedness are also echoed in the section on "Maintaining Sense of Humor." A majority of the participants' comments reflected the need to keep their various social bonds current in order to keep their sense of humor. Parents do not develop and

maintain their resources for humor in isolation. This fact contrasts with the modern reality of isolation for most parents, living in single-family homes, apartments or condominiums, cut off from easy, informal contact with other parents. Programs which build networks of support among parents and, thus, reduce isolation by fostering connectedness may be seen, in the context of the present study, as humor-enhancing and humor-maintaining activities.

Interactions between parents and children are predominantly directed towards incorporating children into the world of adults, a world of logic and reason, of winning and losing and of struggle and survival. Among the many ways this incorporation takes place are the transmission of culture thrugh formal education and the "civilizing" of childish impulses and fantasies through child-rearing practices and attitudes. Taking a long look at the precarious state of that adult world--the threat of nuclear holocaust and environmental deterioration and the increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, the fed and the hungry, the sheltered and the homeless--might provide some cause for re-examining the attitudes and assumptions about human existence and relationships that have brought humankind to this juncture. As Gregory Bateson, "the reluctant father of family therapy" (Shandler, 1986), writes:

> Moreover, the very meaning of "survival" becomes
> different when we stop talking about the survival of

something bounded by the skin and start to think of the
survival of the system of ideas in circuit.

What I am saying expands the mind outwards, . . .
a change [which] reduces the scope of the conscious
self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered
by the dignity or joy of being part of something much
bigger. A part--if you will--of God.

If you put God outside [yourself] and set him
[sic] vis-a-vis his creation and if you have the idea
that you are created in his image, you will logically
and naturally see yourself as outside and against
things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to
yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless
and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical
consideration. The environment will seem to be yours
to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your
folks . . . against the environment of other social
units, other races and the brutes and vegetables.

If this is your estimate of your relation to
nature _and_ _you_ _have_ _an_ _advanced_ _technology_, your
likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in
hell. . . . If I am right, the whole of our thinking
about what we are and what other people are has got to
be restructured. This is not funny, and I do not know
how long we have to do it in (Bateson, 1972, pp. 461-
462).

Within such an unhumorously-framed context, to discuss the

incorporation of humor in parenting may seem delusionary.

Whether or not a harried parent is able to let up

momentarily and respond humorously during a brief power

struggle with her two-year-old over who will pour the milk

on the breakfast cereal may seem far removed from the crises

of planetary survival. And, indeed, in a certain sense, it

is. And yet, just as the glass tumbler used to begin this

dissertation was both half-full and half-empty at the same

time, in another sense--a systemic sense--every person who

has ever lived is part of the coevolutionary development of

life on earth. The changes so desperately needed in the

ways we see things and think about things may actually be

facilitated by mother and son being able to laugh together
over spilled milk.

APPENDIX A

RE-EVALUATION COUNSELING THEORY

This description of Re-evaluation Counseling theory
is found on the back cover of every Re-evaluation
Counseling journal (30 in all) published by Rational
Island Publishers, Seattle, Washington:

Re-evaluation Counseling is a process whereby people
of all ages and of all backgrounds can learn how to
exchange effective help with each other in order to free
themselves from the effects of past distress experiences.

Re-evaluation Counseling theory provides a model of
what a human being can be like in the area of his/her
interaction with other human beings and his/her
environment. The theory assumes that everyone is born
with tremendous intellectual potential, natural zest, and
lovingness, but that these qualities have become blocked
and obscured in adults as the result of accumulated
distress experiences (fear, hurt, loss, pain, anger,
embarrassment, etc.) which begin early in our lives.

Any young person would recover from such distress
spontaneously by use of the natural process of emotional
discharge (crying, trembling, raging, laughing, etc.).
However, this natural process is usually interfered with
by well-meaning people ("Don't cry," "Be a big boy," etc.)
who erroneously equate the emotional discharge (the
healing of the hurt) with the hurt itself.

When adequate emotional discharge can take place, the
person is freed from the rigid pattern of behavior and
feeling left by the hurt. The basic loving, cooperative,
intelligent, and zestful nature is then free to operate.
Such a person will tend to be more effective in looking
out for his or her own interests and the interests of
others, and will be more capable of acting successfully
against injustice.

In recovering and using the natural discharge
process, two people take turns counseling and being
counseled. The one acting as counselor listens, draws the
other out and permits, encourages, and assists emotional
discharge. The one acting as client talks and discharges
and re-evaluates. With experience and increased
confidence and trust in each other, the process works
better and better.

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The person who learns to Co-Counsel well in a Fundamentals Class can become part of an existing community of Co-Counselors locally which has close ties with other such communities in many parts of the world. Co-Counselors in these communities share many ongoing Co-Counseling activities.

The belief in R. C. theory that emotional discharge is the healing of the hurt and not the hurt itself flies in the face of most traditionally-accepted beliefs about human emotions. A number of parallel distinctions follow from this fundamental difference between conventional beliefs about the meaning of emotional discharge and the theory of R.C. These are indicated by the following table:

Table 13. Convenional Beliefs and Re-evaluation Counseling: A Comparison

Conventional Beliefs	Re-evaluation Counseling
Discharge = Hurt, thus to stop discharge is to stop the hurt.	Discharge = Healing, thus to allow discharge allows the healing of the hurt.
Most forms of discharge are severely restricted, (except laughter in some situations), thus people attempt to restrain themselves.	All forms of discharge are permitted & encouraged, thus the effort is made to create enough psychological safety for discharge to occur.
Laughter allows some release & relief from "unacceptable impulses"-- Laughter short-circuits the more intense forms of discharge (Freud, 1928).	Laughter often allows access to more intense forms of dis- charge (e.g., crying, trembling) which are the "unacceptable impulses" normally proscribed.
Safety from unrestrained discharge is required.	Safety to allow unrestrained discharge actively created.

Use humor to dispel family tension

By TOM ZINK

Did you hear the one about the dad who brought an abrupt, giggling halt to his two-year-old daughter's temper tantrum by getting down on the floor to playfully imitate her and then asking, "Am I doing it right?"

Or how about the mother who broke through her preschool son's stubborn refusal to wear the T-shirt she had picked out by putting it on her own head and, with mock exasperation, saying, "If you don't wear it, I guess I'll just have to!"

Or maybe you've heard about the family with three teen-agers who hold regular "Woe Is Me!" contests where each tries to outdo the others with dramatically exaggerated complaints about how terrible life has been to them.

* * *

Gathering storms of conflict were melted into laughter in each of these stories by family members who were willing to try something a little ridiculous to ease the tension.

Often in family situations, we become like the bespectacled glazier who kept himself quite busy one day replacing broken windows until he realized that his glasses were cracked. If we wear our "problem" spectacles, everything looks like trouble. If we switch to our "humor" spectacles, the funny side of problems might just jump out and tickle us. A potential laugh lurks inside any unexpected turn of events. Putting on those "humor" spectacles helps us see the laugh and keep the problem in perspective.

Just as the glazier could have saved himself some unnecessary work by removing his glasses and looking a second time, we all might save ourselves some unneeded worry and frustration by taking a "second look" at family problems through our "humor spectacles." When family members are divided by walls of misunderstanding, a sense of humor can transform those walls into bridges. The well-timed pun, joke, or funny face lightens the mood, relieves tensions, and connects family members. Many times, a lighthearted, playful attitude towards family conflicts is all it takes to cool down situations ready to explode into disharmony.

How's the Family?

The release brought by laughter opens the channels of communication that had been strangled by tension.

Comic relief in moments of shared family laughter reminds us that beneath the mundane level of daily routines and petty hassles, there is the deeper level of caring, commitment, and love that binds the family together. Laughter builds rapport between family members, establishing and strengthening their common bonds.

* * *

Here are a few ways to develop your family's "sense" of humor and have it available more often:

● Keep a "Humor Journal" of funny, ironic, creative things that family members do. Read through it every month or so to recall your family's "humor history."

● Cut out cartoons, jokes, or comic strips that tickle your funny

> " Many times, a lighthearted, playful attitude towards family conflicts is all it takes to cool down situations ready to explode into disharmony. "

bone and share them: post them on the refrigerator, pack them in lunch boxes, serve them on dinner plates.

● Laugh with others, not at them; a recent study showed that families using fewer putdowns scored higher on an inventory of family strengths.

● Choose a humor role model — Bill Cosby, for example — and when faced with a sticky situation, ask yourself, "How would Cosby handle this?"

Often there is little we can do about the absurdities and contradictions of life; but we can do a lot about how we let them affect us. Learning to laugh at yourself is one of the best ways to help your children develop their own sense of humor.

* * *

Some of the information in this article is drawn from informal parent discussion groups conducted by the author in which parents have had a chance to recall some of the funny things that have happened in their families. The author is looking for parents of preschool children willing to participate in a research study on "humor in parenting" during June and July. Previous participants in this research who thought they did not use humor found that the process of telling their own stories helped them to see how often they actually did or said humorous things with their children. Interested parents in Franklin, Hampshire, or Hampden Counties with children under the age of six are urged to contact the author: Tom Zink, 20 Olive Street, Northampton, MA, 01060, Phone: (413) 586-2143 as soon as possible.

Tom Zink is a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts School of Education studying the role of humor and laughter in family health. He is a musician, songwriter, educational consultant, co-chair of the Northampton Parents' Center, and the father of a four-year-old son who loves doing somersaults on the brand new living room couch.

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

June 1987

Dear fellow parent:

Parenting is a tough job. Formal pre-training is practically non-existent, and the expectations placed on people when they become parents, both by themselves and by others, often leave a wide gap between what is "supposed" to happen and what actually does happen. Added to this are the economic demands of family life, finding quality child care, maintaining a relationship with one's partner, and a seemingly endless supply of other problems.

Considering all these sources of parental stress, a study of humor in parenting may seem like a joke! But being able to keep a sense of humor through all the trials, joys and petty aggravations of family life is extremely useful, if not downright necessary, for survival. As a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, I am interested in sense of humor as a parenting tool with children under the age of six. In the next few months, I will be conducting my dissertation research to find out how parents actually do use and maintain their sense of humor in their parenting.

Questions posed to the parents who participate in this study will in no way be used to determine how well their parenting "measures up" to some standardized model of "good" parenting. This research is based on a belief that all parents are good parents who love their children, and that all parents are subject to various amounts and kinds of stress which make parenting extremely difficult at times. My hypothesis is that many parents do use their sense of humor in parenting, although they may not realize it, and that using humor sometimes helps the situation and sometimes does not help.

Participating parents will take part in an audio-taped small-group interview/discussion. I am looking for parents:

1. interested in talking about themselves and their parenting experience;

2. whose oldest child is under six years old (the number of children in the family does not matter);

3. from two-parent, single-parent, blended, or adoptive families, or from separated/divorced families with joint custody arrangements;

4. able to participate in one 3-hour interview/discussion either in May, June or July at a reasonably convenient location.

Besides the intangible benefits of taking part in a parent group discussion such as this, participants will receive a selection of reading materials pertinent to coping with family stress through the use of humor.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please contact me at P.O. Box 442, Amherst, MA 01004 or by phone at 586-2143. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Zink, Ed.D. candidate
P. O. Box 442
Amherst, MA 01004
(413)-586-2143

FAMILY INFORMATION FORM

County of Residence: _____

Parents' Names: _____

_____

Children's Names & Ages: _____

_____

Home Address: _____

Home Phone: _____

Meeting times: Sunday afternoon OK _____

    Dates not available _____

****

Referrals they can make for possible participants:

    _____

Suggestions for possible site for interview:

    _____

Communications with this family:

    1. Date: _____ Describe: _____

    _____

    2. Date: _____ Describe: _____

    _____

    3. Date: _____ Describe: _____

    _____

    4. Date: _____ Describe: _____

    _____

    (Continue on reverse, if necessary)

CONFIRMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear

      Thank you for agreeing to participate in my
dissertation research study on the uses of humor in
parenting. This will be the first of my research
interviews, and I'm pleased to have you be a part of it.
Besides the intangible benefits of participating in a parent
group discussion like this, you'll be taking home two
articles, "Family Laughter" (from August 1983 Parents'
magazine) and "Dennis the Menace: Coping with Family
Stress" for some light reading on a summer's evening. We
will be a group of from five to seven parents, both fathers
and mothers.

      The meeting will take place on [date] between [hours]
at [name of place and street location]. Also, please let me
know as soon as possible if circumstances will prevent you
from coming. The meeting will be a semi-structured group
interview/discussion. The questions I have planned are
designed not so much to get "answers" as to stimulate your
thinking about parenting by eliciting stories from your
experience.

      The questions I pose in this meeting will in no way be
used to determine how well your parenting "measures up" to
some standardized model of "good" parenting. My research is
based on a belief that all parents are goodparents who love
their children, and that all of us are subject to various
amounts and kinds of stress which make parenting extremely
difficult at times. It seems to me that the conscious use
and nurturing of our sense of humor can help to reduce the
negative effects of parental stress and help to improve our
relationships with our children.

      Enclosed is a Written Consent Form, with more details
about the research study, how the information will be used
and your options and responsibilities as participants.
Don't be thrown off by its officialness; it needed to fit a
standard University format. Please read it over before the
meeting and give me a call (586-2143) if you have any
questions about it so that you can bring it signed on that
day.

      Again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this
study and I look forward to seeing you on the 28th.

                            Sincerely,
                            Tom Zink

APPENDIX F

<u>WRITTEN</u> <u>CONSENT</u> <u>FORM</u>

Dissertation Research Study: Summer 1987

Tom Zink, Ed.D. Candidate

1. This small group interview is part of my doctoral study
in the Human Services/Applied Behavioral Sciences division
of the School of Education at the University of
Massachusetts. My Comprehensive Exam, completed in December
1985, was on the topic "The Role of Humor and Laughter in
Family Health." For my dissertation I have narrowed that
topic to a study of the ways parents whose children are
under the age of six use their sense of humor in parenting.

2. This small group interview will take place at the
location described in the enclosed cover letter and will
last approximately three hours. The interview will begin
with questions to help all of us get acquainted. Most of
the time will be spent talking about the ways you have used
humor in a variety of parenting situations, either in
relation to your children or to your spouse. We will also
talk about ways that you see yourself maintaining your sense
of humor, as you define it.
     These interview guidelines are very general in nature.
I will not be seeking answers to a pre-planned set of
questions but rather to gain a better understanding of this
topic by listening to other parents. I will be looking for
concrete details of specific parenting experiences. Parents
who participated in a pilot study in the fall of 1986 found
that listening to other parents recall experiences in this
small group format helped them remember more of their own
stories.

3. The interview will be audio-taped, and written segments
of the transcript may be used in my dissertation. Written
or aaudio-taped segments may also be used in parenting
programs or presentations at conferences on parenting and
family issues.
     In all written materials or audio-taped presentations
using information from this interview, I will use pseudonyms
in place of your names, your children's names or the names
of people close to you to preserve your anonymity.

4. Although you are giving your consent to this interview
now, you may withdraw your consent to have specific portions
of the interview used in written or audio-taped
presentations by notifying me of this at the end of the
interview.

5. In signing this form you are agreeing to the uses of the audiotapes and written excerpts I have described in Part 3. If I were to decide to use the materials from this interview for any other purpose not described in Part 3, I would contact you first to get your additional written consent.

6. In signing this form, you are also assuring me that you will make no financial claim against me for the use of these materials.

7. Finally, in signing this you are stating that no medical treatment or compensation will be required by you from the University of Massachusetts should any physical injury result from participating in this interview.

We, _____, and _____
        (parent's name)   (parent's name)

have read the above statement and agree to participate in

this interview under the conditions described above.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Signature of Participant

_____
Signature of Interviewer

_____
Date

INITIAL CODING AND ANALYSIS: DATA SAMPLES

Humorous Incidents

PS-13   F, B/.11, H   NONSENSE
PS p16   SOUND & MOVEMENT COORDINATED

DH: "At one stage, Todd was shaking his head--I think
if you shake your head and you don't keep your eyes fixed,
you just sort of shake your head and your eyes go around the
world (laughs). We were watching him and he was going like
this and he laughed 'cause I suppose everything's dancing
around in front of him. So I said something like, 'What are
you doing--the "Booga-Looga-Loo"?' And, geeze, he laughed
and he really thought that was funny, and he started shaking
his head, 'Booga-Looga-Loo,' and every time you say that to
him, he'll do it."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
This is the 13th humor incident from the Pilot Study
and is found on page 16 of the transcript. A father (F) did
something humorous with his 11-month-old son (B/.11) in
their home (H), involving a nonsensical coordination of
sound ("Booga-Looga-Loo") and movement (shaking his head).

F-1   M, B/2.3, H   CHANGE OF CHILD'S POSITION
F p1   SOUND & MOVEMENT COORDINATED

MG: "This morning, we were doing something, making
peanut butter and crackers or something and he was
irritating me 'cause I was trying to do other things too,
and the radio was on. I was seeing what was going on and
because I was coming here [to the interview] today, I was
more conscious of things that I was doing. I was trying to
think of what I was doing and what could I do to change the
situation? So we were doing these crackers and there was a
song that came on from the 70's--I don't remember [the
title] now, but I remember it was from the 70's--so I picked
up Randy and we danced around the room, and we did dips and
stuff and he had a blast! He was laughing and I was
laughing. I felt better afterwards; I felt less tense. We
do things like that."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
     This is the first humor incident from the Franklin
County interview and is found on page 1 of the transcript.
A mother did something humorous with her 2-year-and-3-month-
old son in their home, involving changing the child's
physical position (picking him up) and coordinating sound
and movement (dancing to the tune on the radio).

<u>F-4</u>   M, B/1.5, H   SURPRISE
F p3,4   REPETITION

     FS: "I had to make a decision with Eric this morning.
We were outside and we heard a gunshot and he got scared.
And I thought, 'Hmmm, what do I tell him?' So I just went,
'Booo!!' (laughs; MG laughs) and he laughed. . . . It was a
way to help him deal with that noise that he didn't like.
It turned it around a little bit. And it helped me too
because I don't really want to tell him about guns and
stuff. . . ."

     TZ: "So what did you do when he looked scared?"

     FS: "I just said, 'Booo!!' You know, like as quickly
as the shot, as quick as I could say it anyway, and he
laughed and so then the next time the shot came, I did it
again. And then the next time, he was already doing it
too."

     TZ: "So he started doing the 'Booo!!'?"

     FS: "Yeah. (MG laughs) So he didn't get all upset
about the noise."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
     This is the 4th humor incident from the Franklin County
interview and is found on pages 3 and 4 of the transcript.
A mother did something humorous with her 1-year-5-month-old
son involving repetition of a surprise behavior.

Statements of Definition

D-6   DEFINITION: Acceptance of looking foolish
PS p16

   KR: "I think what's important in terms of humor in
parenting is that you really have to know that you're going
to be acting foolish and if you don't care about that, then
I think that's a real important aspect about that because
you know you're going to be acting foolish to make a year-
old kid laugh or something. Admittedly before I was a
parent, I would see somebody trying to make a kid laugh and
I'd think, 'Gee, this guy's a real jerk!' (laughs) And like
a year or two years later, you know, (laughter), I'm doing
the same thing."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
   This is the 6th definition statement of the study and
it is found on page 16 of the Pilot Study transcript. It
contributed to the creation of and was later coded into
Definition Category C (see Table 7, page 108)--"Be
comfortable enough with yourself to relax, play and look
foolish."

D-16   DEFINITION: Humor involves comfort:
H p42   --with surroundings
                                  --with your child
                                  --with yourself

   VN: "I think a sense of humor has to encompass some
form of comfort, comfort with the surrounding, with the
child, being able to associate in that surrounding with the
child. You [another parent in the group] bring up that one
of your sons is chubbier than your other son. You have to
face that with some form of being comfortable about that."

   LH: "Well, and you have to be comfortable with
yourself, you know, to be able to laugh at yourself, too,
and that's part of having a sense of humor, I think."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
   This is the 16th definition statement of the study; it
is found on page 42 of the Holyoke (Hampden County)
interview. This statement also helped to create
Definition Category C (see Table 7, page 108), and was coded
into it.

Maintenance Statements

M-16   MAINTENANCE: Taking Time Alone
N p52   Making sure parents have friends, interests,
                   activities at which they are really "off-
                   duty."

     BT: "The other thing is that, particularly what I'm
conscious of, is trying to make sure that both Trish and
myself have non-work, non-parenting activities or things or
interests that they try to pursue or friendships or whatever
that are out of there."

     TZ: "Out of home?"

     BT: "Well, out of the home or out of having the
responsibility. It may be in the home, but it may be, like,
'You're off-duty now.'" (laughter)

CODE INTERPRETATION:
     This is the 16th maintenance statement of the study and
it is found on page 52 of the Northampton (Hampshire County)
transcript. This parent's comment contributed to the
creation of and was, thus, coded into the "Taking Time
Alone" category of humor maintenance activity.

M-24   MAINTENANCE: Taking Time Alone
H p48   Getting time for myself to read, think, take
                   a walk.

     LH: "I think for me--just in my peculiar situation of
being home all the time and not being used to that, I mean,
that's not what I always did before--is getting some time
for myself helps me maintain my sense of humor, no matter
how little it is--and it seems (laughs) very little these
days."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
     This is the 24th maintennce statement of the study and
is found on page 48 of the Holyoke (Hampden County)
transcript. It contributed to the creation of, and was
coded into the "Taking Time Alone" category.

Commentary Statements

C-3   COMMENTARY: Mimicking=Communicating on
PS p8   the child's level

    DH: "Mimicking him makes him feel, I think maybe makes them feel like you're communicating on their level, at least, they're trying to imitate what you're saying and they can't, they haven't got the functions down yet, so you imitate them."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
    This is the third commentary of the study and it is found on page 8 of the Pilot Study transcript. It contributed to the creation of Commentary Category 6 (cf. Table 8, page 112) as well as adding insight into an understanding of the Meta-Utility Frame.

C-20   COMMENTARY: To play and use humor--
F, p35-36   Is it getting down to their level,
                                      or up?

    MG: "If everyone let their guard down and let their kids know that they're real people too, that they're not just the authority figure, that they can get down and play with them. Sometimes I'm not sure that it's even getting down to their level as maybe even going up to their level. Sometimes that's how I feel." (laughs)

    TZ: "Can you say some more about that? About going 'up'to their level? What did you mean?"

    MG: "I guess I don't want to think of kids as being down there, as down, as lower."

    NS: "As less than us."

    MG: "As less . . . sometimes maybe we're the ones, maybe I'm the one who needs to be picked up in a sense."

CODE INTERPRETATION:
    This is the 20th commentary of the study and it is found on pages 35 and 36 of the Franklin County transcript. It was one of several comments alluding to humor as a process of going "up" that contributed to the emergence of the core process of letting up.

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