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Karen Dail Atwater

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A POST-POSITIVIST STUDY OF THE

EXPERIENCE OF PARENTING FROM

A STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

A Project

Presented to the Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

Karen Dail Atwater

June 1996

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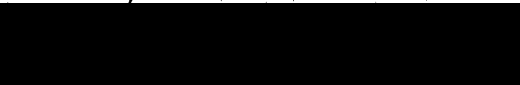by

Karen Dail Atwater

June 1996

Approved by:

_____   6-11-96
Dr. Morley Glicken, Project Advisor, Social Work   Date

_____
Dr. Teresa Morris, Chair of Research Sequence,
Social Work

_____
Charlotte Laiva, LCSW, Lutheran Social Services

ABSTRACT

In an effort to explore the multi-faceted subject of parenting in a more holistic manner, a Post-Positivist model of research was utilized for this study of the experience of parenting from a strengths perspective. Twelve parents were interviewed in-depth, exploring their experiences of having been parented and their experiences of parenting their own children. Qualitative data analysis techniques were utilized to create a theory of the experience of parenting. Data was analyzed by open coding to generate categories, and the category "receiving support" was analyzed by axial coding to discover causal conditions and consequences for the category. Although there was insufficient data to ground the theory, the patterns suggested by the analysis indicated that those parents who feel supported in their parenting, and especially those who actively seek support, express feeling confident and hopeful in their jobs as parents. Implications for practice, especially in parenting education, are discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTING

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The subject of parenting is a multifaceted issue. Many have explored this topic, pulling bit by bit at the layers in order to reach the core of the parenting experience and it's importance for children. Each generation of explorers has been guided by the questions: What do children need from their parents? How important is parental influence? What is a "good" parent? What can parents do to best give their children what they need?

Historically, the role and tasks of parents have been defined by the perception of the role and tasks of children. A society's definition of childhood, and therefore the definition of parenthood, is shaped by historical and economic forces of each era and locality (Ambert, 1994). These same forces direct current explorers as they strive to define and direct the experience of parenting.

In Europe, the Protestant Reformation saw a shift in the role of children from that of heir to name and property to persons with needs for nurturance. Duties of parents included the training of children to honor God and parents with firmness and joy (Calhoun, 1917/1945). Parents no longer would sacrifice several children in order to assure the success of one or two offspring. All children, including girls were entitled to receive education and nurturance (Aries, 1962, Calhoun, 1917/1945).

In Colonial America, the primary function of the family was to serve as the "nurseries of the church" (Calhoun, 1917/1945, p. 75). It became widely accepted that the parent had the capability and responsibility to mold the child's personality. The role of the parent was to train the child in the family religion, upright behaviors, and in honest work. Fear was used to facilitate education in religion, so the child could escape Hell by abstaining from the desires of the flesh and obeying the commands of the parent. Play, an instinct of the flesh, was not allowed, and children were often given academic training at an age as early as four years. Children were expected to be precocious and to interact in a formal manner with adults. Parents for the first time were interested in advice from experts as to how to most effectively train up their progeny. Locke's "Thoughts on Education," published in England in 1690, was widely read. It contained practical advice on many matters, including parenting practices. Among the sage advice given by Locke was that an infant's feet should be regularly dipped into cold water in order to make them tough (Calhoun 1917/1945).

During the period after the Revolutionary War through the Civil war, the ideas of childhood changed radically. It was now thought that what children needed from their parents was gentle nurturance, rather than strict authority. Children were now to be indulged in whenever possible, and

play was encouraged. Childhood as a phase of life was greatly lengthened, and youth was a time for exuberance. It is important to understand that this was reality only for the upper- and blossoming middle-classes. The pioneer families were living a life of hardship in order to provide opportunity for their children, who were an economic asset. In the cities, lower-class adults worked long, hard hours in the factories or as servants in the homes of the middle and upper classes, so that their children might enjoy their childhood. The children of the lower classes were left without parents for nurturance, and many worked long hours themselves, to contribute to the family's survival. The establishment of the school system also played an important role in legitimizing childhood as a phase of life (Calhoun, 1918/1945).

The trends of the pre-Civil War era into extremes continued as the children of the well-off were increasingly seen as pets by their parents and were being raised exclusively by servants. The children of the poor, meanwhile, were being forced into factory work, as low wages made it impossible for the parents to support their families. The resulting independence being fostered in the youth resulted in the form of unruly and disrespectful behaviors. Scientists were vigorously studying everything which could be studied, including childhood, and soon the experts were declaring that the trouble with youth lay with

overindulgence by parents. Thus, the beginnings of parental guilt for irresponsible parenting practices (Calhoun, 1919/1946).

The 1920s through the 1940s saw the introduction of the idea of the marital dyad as the basis for the family unit. Children were to be raised according to rigid schedules, so that they might grow up to be well-ordered adults. Parents were instructed by the experts not to play with their babies and not to "fuss" over them or give them too much physical consolation (Coontz, 1992).

By the 1950s all value of children for economic reasons was replaced by emotional value (Ambert, 1994). Women were expected to remain at home in order to nurture the children, and men were expected to marry and assume the roles of family man and breadwinner. Men and women who failed to conform to these patterns were looked on with suspicion and concern. Some were even diagnosed with mental illness or moral depravity. Parents were now solely responsible for how their children turned out, and mothers especially took the blame for ruining their children. Mothers were cautioned to provide all the necessary nurturing without smothering the child. The advent of birth control allowed parents to space children in order to be able to give adequate nurturance to each child (Coontz, 1992).

Ambert (1994) describes the current era in parenting as the "professionalization of parenting" (p. 537). The

increased policing of family behavior by child welfare agencies, as well as the influence of schools, daycare, and child-rearing professionals, has decreased the power of parents while society still holds them accountable for the results. As always, the definition of the role of parenting is dependent upon the prevailing view of the role of childhood, which is currently based on American culture with European influences (Ambert, 1994). Research and discussion on childhood and parenting centers on recent historical and economic forces such as the increase in single parenting and divorce, mothers employed outside the home (Ambert, 1994, Coontz, 1992, Berardo, 1990), economic fluctuations, adolescence as a life stage and the youth subculture (Ambert, 1994, Berardo 1990), a culture of consumerism (Ambert, 1994), and accelerated social change (Berardo, 1990). Alwin (1990) sees "a significant change in parental values in the direction of greater preference for autonomy in children and less preference for obedience" (p. 347) which is explained by the values of the current cohort of parents. The change in values and the economic and historical forces mentioned have embroiled explorers in parenting in a debate over whether there should be concern for the decline of the family (Popenoe, 1993) or a re-definition of the family and the strength of its adaptability (Berardo, 1990, Demo, 1992).

EXPLORING THE FACETS OF PARENTING

Since parenting is such a multifaceted topic, most exploration has centered on one perspective of the parenting experience. The intergenerational transmission of both parenting competence (Barratt, Roach, and Colbert, 1991, Belsky, 1984) and incompetence as demonstrated by violence (Belsky, 1984, Hemenway, Solnick, and Carter, 1994) has been investigated and documented. Others have examined how parental nurturance, or lack thereof, has affected the functioning of offspring. Lack of sufficient nurturance has been shown to increase the incidence in children's lives for aggressiveness and delinquency (Bank, Forgatch, Patterson, and Fetrow, 1993, Simons, Johnson, and Conger, 1994), substance abuse (Stice and Barrera, 1995), and narcissistic disorders (Watson, Hickman, Morris, Milliron, and Whiting, 1995). Good parental nurturance has been linked with high self-esteem in teen- and college-aged children (Buri, Murphy, Richtsmeier, and Komar, 1992). Additionally, studies have been done which correlate parenting style with outcomes of children. College students whose parents have been described as high in control and low in affection have increased incidence of insomnia (Brassington, 1994) and depression (Oliver and Paull, 1995). Adolescents with parents who are high in acceptance and control have been found to have better functioning in school (Shucksmith, Hendry, and Glendinning, 1995), and less depression

(McFarlane, Bellissimo, and Norman, 1995).

Other arenas for exploration include parents' feelings and cognitions. Dix (1991) discusses how strong emotions are central to the parenting experience. Emotions which are too weak, too strong, or inappropriate to the situation are destructive to effective parenting, as is chronic negative emotion. The exploration of anger in particular, is of special interest. Kagan (1984) reminds us of how American society allows the expression of anger in men towards their wives, while frowning on the expression of anger in mothers towards their children. Mothers are supposed to love their children so much that they should never act in an unloving way by expressing anger. Alice Miller (1990) posits that expression of anger in children is suppressed because parents are uncomfortable dealing with this intense emotion. By not allowing the healthy expression of feelings of anger, she further argues, the emotion is not integrated into the child's psyche, and mental pathology occurs.

Others have explored the role of empathy in child-rearing practices. It has been found that when parents act empathically, they were more likely to utilize reward and talking strategies, whereas absence of empathy was correlated to negative and ignoring practices (Brems and Sohl, 1995). A parent's cognitive attribution of a child's motivation for behavior also has been shown to be an important factor in parent actions. Parents who interrupt

judgment, consider the context of their child's behavior, show understanding and acceptance of the child, and reward good behavior are seen as more nurturing and effective as parents (Goddard and Miller, 1993).

MEASURING PARENTAL ATTRIBUTES

In an attempt to examine several facets of the parenting experience together, many have tried to measure and describe the attributes of an effective parent. The literature in this area is derived from two sources, academic and popular publications. Parenting, like weight control and romance, is a topic of great concern to the public, and literally thousands of books on child care and rearing have been written for the lay person.

The academic literature has focused on devising instruments for measuring attributes of effective parents. Many scales have been devised to assess parenting style based on Baumrind's (1971) model of parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive). Some of these scales are Parental Attitudes toward Childrearing (PACR), Raising Children scale (McGuire and Earls, 1993), and the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) (Buri, 1991). Others have devised scales to measure values (Rank Order of Parental values, as reported in Luster, Rhoades, and Haas, 1989), parenting behavior (Emotional Climate for Children Questionnaire, as reported in Haapasalo and Tremblay, 1994),

overprotectiveness (Vulnerable Child/Overprotecting Parent
Scale - VCOP, Wright, Mullen, West, and Wyatt, 1993),
parent-child relationships (Parental Acceptance Rejection
Questionnaire - PARQ, as reported in McGuire and Earls,
1993), intrafamily conflict and violence (Conflict Tactics
Scale - CTS, as reported in McGuire and Earls, 1993), and
parental support (Parental-Child Interaction Rating Scale,
Cornell Parent Behavior Description, and the Parent Behavior
Inventory, as reported in Ellis, Thomas, and Rollins, 1976).
A comprehensive scale has been devised to assess fathering
by Roid and Canfield (Personal Fathering Profile, 1994)
which measures an array of content areas. Others have found
scales to be unsatisfactory, and have utilized qualitative
methods to explore parent's cognitions (Cooke, 1991) and
parents' behaviors from the child's perspective (Schaefer,
1965).

From the popular literature, two similar popular
studies have attempted to describe the effective parent.
Both studies sought out references for parents considered by
experts to be excellent and then interviewed those parents
to search for characteristics shared by most. Dolores
Curran (1983) in "Traits of a Healthy Family" delineates
fifteen attributes, including (a) communicates and listens,
(b) affirms and supports one another, (c) teaches respect
for others, (d) develops a sense of trust, and (e) has a
sense of play and humor. Dr. Ray Guarendi (1990) in "Back

to the Family" discusses many more than fifteen points, in general categories such as communication, time, discipline, and what excellent parents are not.

TRAINING THE PARENT

Assuming that parents exert a great deal of influence, and that if skills were improved children will profit, it follows that parents should be taught to be better parents. Guides for training parents in theories and techniques for effective parenting abound and are widely available. Most Parenting systems are based in one or a combination of three schools. Adlerian therapy as adapted by Rudolf Dreikurs forms the basis for many parenting programs. Dreikurs' (1964) key features are instruction in determining the motivation of child misbehavior and the use of natural and logical consequences in discipline. The popular "Systematic Training for Effective Parenting" (STEP) books (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1989) are based in Dreikurs' ideas. Another highly utilized parenting manual is "Parent Effectiveness Training" (P.E.T.) by Dr. Thomas Gordon (1970). P.E.T. is based in Ginott's communication principles, and parents are instructed in techniques such as active listening and "I" messages to encourage child cooperation. Discipline techniques based on the precepts of behavioral modification form the basis for other parenting systems. In those manuals, parents are instructed in techniques to reinforce

desired behaviors in children while utilizing negative

reinforcement to decrease undesired behaviors (Barkley,

1987, Gookin, 1995, Sears and Sears, 1995, Thompson, Grow,

Ruma, Daly, and Burke, 1993).

NEWER PERSPECTIVES

As parenting theory and practices continue to evolve,

new ideas for training in discipline of children appear.

Goddard and Miller (1993) outline a parenting program which

is eclectic, drawing on established concepts from Dreikurs,

Ginott and behavioral modification. To this they have

incorporated ideas from parent-child socialization

literature and attribution theory, the process by which

cause is assigned to behavior. Also innovative in the field

of parent education is the application of Systems theory.

Proponents of this approach to child-rearing advocate

looking holistically at a discipline problem and analyzing

for influences outside the child. Changes are then made at

both the immediate level of the child's behavior through

traditional techniques, and at the systems level in order to

address the underlying issues influencing the child's

behavior (Roberts, 1994).

Newer perspectives in parenting theory are attempting

to search out new facets to examine, and combine several

perspectives into a more holistic view. The competence

model of family functioning has been applied to African

American families (Hurd, Moore, and Rogers, 1995). This model focuses on the strengths of a family, and uses those strengths to redefine problems and search for solutions. Others eschew the concept of the child as a lump of clay which the parent molds into the final product. They are re-introducing theory on the child's temperament and role in interaction (Belsky, 1984, Blanck, 1987, Chess and Thomas, 1996, Coontz, 1992). It is the "goodness of fit" between parent and child, these theorists argue, which plays the major role in the formation of the child. Another recent trend in thinking on parenting is towards enlarging the focus of responsibility to include the influence of fathers (Bailey, 1994, Gable, Crinic and Belsky, 1994, Meyers, 1993, Siegal, 1985). Finally, some are urging that parents are in need of social support in their efforts to raise their children. "The debate over whether one parent can raise a child alone..." states Coontz (1992) "...diverts attention from the fact that good Childrearing has always required more than two parents" (p. 230).

THE FOCUS OF THE INQUIRY

Since the topic of parenting is such a multi-faceted issue, the Post-Positivist approach was chosen for this study. This approach will allow for a more holistic exploration of the complex subject of the parenting experience, through the use of qualitative data collection

techniques and data analysis methods designed to generate a theory of the experience of parenting which is grounded in the data.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) method of research for creating grounded theory through qualitative data was used as the model for the research project. Unlike traditional, Positivist research, sampling in the Post-Positivist paradigm is not done with the intention of generalizability. Rather, sampling is purposeful, persons are chosen for the study based on their potential value for contributing as many ideas into the data as possible. Participants are interviewed, the questions being open-ended to allow for the client's perceptions to emerge without the pressure of conforming to a predetermined format or idea. The researcher is the instrument. He or she thus guides the direction of the data collection process, and creates and interprets the categories. The questioning format is modified as the data collection progresses to explore in more depth the various categories as they are identified. The purpose of the study is to create theory, not to prove or disprove a hypothesis, and it is not presumed that all possible patterns and meanings are exhausted.

The responses of the participants are the data. In addition, literature, professional experience, and personal experience can also be used as data and as guides for questioning, creation of categories, and in validating what

is discovered in the data. Analysis is done continuously throughout the data collection process, and consists of three steps. The first is open coding, wherein categories are generated from the data. The second process is axial coding, which searches for connections among the categories by fitting the data into a model to explain causality and consequences surrounding an identified phenomenon. The third process, selective coding, seeks to describe patterns found in relation to one central phenomenon and laying out and grounding the theory.

In this study, the focus was on the experience of parenting. It was expected that the parents would give a great deal of information on specific behaviors and styles employed in parenting, and it was hoped that the parents would also give insight into other phenomenon which is often overlooked in conventional research.

Questions were formulated to explore this experience from a strengths perspective. That is, the goal was to discover what the parents believe based on their experience to be right, good and helpful. Each participant was seen as having the potential to contribute valuable information to the study, simply because he or she has had the experience of having been parented and of parenting their own children. Every effort was made to avoid labeling participants as "good" or "bad", "effective" or "ineffective." Experiences which may be viewed by others as negative, or practices or

values which could be labeled poor, were seen as another viable construct, worthy of consideration, and evidence of the strength of persons to survive and thrive.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with twelve persons. Participants were required to be over the age of eighteen, and directly responsible for one or more children in their home. Participation in the project was voluntary, and participants were given the option to discontinue the interview at any time during the process. All twelve participants completed their interviews.

The participants were drawn from three sources, designed to introduce as many different experiences of parenting as possible. The first source was the congregation of a mainline Protestant church in the Inland Valley area of San Bernardino County, California. The neighborhoods which supply this church are primarily middle class. The ethnic make up of the congregation is primarily Caucasian, with fairly large representations of African-Americans, and African immigrants. Six persons were interviewed from this source, and the interviews were conducted at the church or in participants' homes.

The second source was a long-term homeless shelter which serves women and families with children in Riverside

County, California. Families in the shelter come from a variety of backgrounds, but the majority are unemployed at the time of their entrance to the shelter and are receiving public assistance. The shelter serves essentially equal numbers of Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic families, with occasional utilization by the Native American population. Four persons were interviewed from this source. The interviews were all conducted at the shelter.

At both the church and the homeless shelter, participants were solicited for the project by calling for volunteers. The researcher then chose from among those who volunteered, those persons who were the most accessible and who were perceived by the researcher to offer the widest variety of experiences.

The third source consisted of two persons known by the researcher to have done a great deal of work professionally with parents through teaching parenting classes and providing counseling, and who were, themselves, parents. These "experts" in parenting were approached by the researcher and asked to participate in the study. Both reside in San Bernardino County. These interviews were conducted in an office and at a residence for the convenience of the participants.

Each participant was interviewed one time, the interviews taking place over the course of several weeks. At the start of each interview, the participant was given a

consent form to read and sign, and the project was briefly explained and any questions answered. Each participant was assigned a three-digit code number which describes to which source he or she belonged, their placement in the interview sequence within the source, and the number of the round of analysis in which the particular interview was analyzed. Each interview was audio-tape recorded, then the tapes professionally transcribed by persons known to the researcher. Each tape and transcribed dialog was identified only by the code number assigned to it. The transcriptionists were instructed to treat the information in the tapes as confidential and to delete any names referred to by participants. The transcribed tapes were the primary source of data. Secondarily, literature which addressed certain categories in the data was also used as a source of data.

Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit lengthy, full responses with a minimum of prompting from the researcher. Questions which encouraged more depth were added in the middle and later stages of the interview/analysis process, to explore more fully the categories which appeared to be most salient to the emerging theory.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The final body of participants consisted of a variety
of persons. There were eight women and four men, ranging in
age from 30 years old to 50 years old. Ten of the
participants reported having a partner living in the home
with them who shares parenting responsibilities; two were
parenting alone. The number of children being raised by the
individual parents ranged from one to five, and there were a
total of 31 children being influenced by these twelve
persons. The age of the youngest child reported being cared
for was thirteen months, and the oldest child still living
at home was 19 years old. Eight children had already moved
out of the parent's home, the oldest being 26 years old.

The participants reported educational levels ranging
from three years of high school to graduate level work.
Most respondents reported one to four years of college. The
participants were invited to describe their ethnic identity
rather than to be identified with pre-determined categories.

The participants identified themselves as White,
Caucasian (2), of European background, of Mixed Caucasian
ancestry, Black, African-American, "Person of color,"
African (this person is an immigrant), Mexican-American (1st
generation), Hispanic, and Japanese-American (2nd
generation). Among the participants were two who were also
grandparents, a first-time parent, and the parent of an
adopted child.

RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS BY OPEN CODING

Analysis of the data was done after every set of two interviews. The first four interviews were subjected to open coding to generate categories. Open coding was accomplished by the constant comparative method described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In this process, the data (the transcribed interviews) was photocopied and cut apart into separate ideas or phenomenons. Each fragment of data was fastened to an index card, and the cards laid out into piles according to their perceived relation to one another: "Alike" cards went into a pile together, "not alike" cards began a new potential category. As the process of assigning data to categories was being accomplished, and again at the end of each analysis session, data piles were consolidated and rearranged as it seemed appropriate in order to establish well-defined categories.

At the end of the second analysis session, the following categories had been generated:

1) A list of positive and negative attributes of parents. Examples of this category were "remaining married," "having a sense of humor," and "father worked too much."

2) Several relating patterns, or styles of parents. Examples from this category referred to as "styles" included "losing temper," "being understanding," and "perseverance."

3) A list of specific actions/behaviors of parents. Some

of these actions were "having family together time", "reading books on parenting", "going to church", and "utilizing self-talk".

4) Values. Most of the values named were passed to the participants from their parents and some were named as values held, and included "ethnic pride" and "respect for others."

5) A description of support received by parents. Often mentioned was the involvement of the spouse in the parenting process. Also mentioned were "extended family" and "friends."

6) Comments made by parents which were appraisals or perceptions of the experience of parenting. Appraisals included observations on the difficulty of the job of parenting, and whether the participant believed that they themselves were doing a good job as a parent.

Dimensions were explored for each of the categories labeled "styles" and "support". The dimensions of each of the sub-categories in "styles" related to the frequency of the named style or pattern. The dimensions of the "support" category delineated frequency/consistency, level of intimacy of the support source, and whether or not the support was solicited by the parent.

DATA ANALYSIS BY AXIAL CODING

Analysis rounds three through five were subjected to axial coding by applying the data to the Paradigm Model described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). During the analysis session, two or three phenomena from each interview were explored by use of the model. One category, that of "support" was mentioned by every respondent, and so this particular category was coded for each interview, including the first four. The purpose of the model is to link sub-categories to one category in order to describe a set of relationships. It seeks to identify causal conditions for a specific phenomenon, and then to explore conditions, consequences and specific actions taken in relation to the phenomenon. The transcribed interviews were searched thoroughly for data which could be placed into the model as follows (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 99):

(A)CAUSAL CONDITIONS -> (B)PHENOMENON -> (C)CONTEXT ->
(D)INTERVENING CONDITIONS -> (E)ACTION/INTERACTION
STRATEGIES -> (F)CONSEQUENCES.

Figure 1. Paradigm Model (Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

Most of the attempts at axial coding with various phenomena failed to produce a complete and full paradigm model due to insufficient data on that phenomenon. The category of "support," however yielded a complete model for

each of the participants. A more complete conceptualization of the dimensions of the category was formed and patterns of "receiving support" began to become apparent.

The three dimensions of "receiving support" were conceptualized as 1) frequency/consistency of the support, 2) level of intimacy of the support source, and 3) whether or not the parent sought out the support. This idea of seeking support appears to be especially pivotal in the emerging theory, as the researcher was struck with how many of the parents who were especially proactive in their support seeking, also had the highest levels of confidence in their abilities to do the job of parenting. One participant who was parenting alone described how she established a network of other mothers with similar interests and needs to herself. This group met regularly on both formal and informal occasions, and were described as being so in tune with each other that the mothers instinctively provided for the immediate needs of other mothers and their children who were in need at a particular time.

The dimension of the level of intimacy of support sources was conceptualized according to Figure 2. The level of "self" was added later in the coding process, when it emerged in later interviews through two participants who were clearly indicating that their primary source for confidence, hope and decision making came from within

22

themselves. Religious faith, when it was mentioned in a supportive role in a participant's parenting, was included in the self level as being the best niche for this source. Turning to expert sources such as books, parenting classes, audio and video tapes, and counseling, were also included later in the process as it became apparent that many parents utilized these sources as support in their parenting. This type of support was included into the community level of support, as this appeared to be the best disposition for this source.

The causal conditions identified for the phenomenon of receiving support varied with each participant. Some reported having many supportive persons in regular contact with them, who freely and often offered some type of support. For some respondents, this was their spouse. Participants used phrases like "If it wasn't for her, I think I would go crazy because those kids can really get to you" or "Mostly I had really terrific, wonderful, fulfilling experiences as a parent by having a sense of joint sharing and development with my wife in our children." As a participant perceived that the spousal relationship was inadequate, some relied on other, less intimate sources for support, finding it in a neighborhood, church congregation, or expert sources such as books and classes. All of the homeless shelter residents utilize public resources as well, such as AFDC, medical, and drug abuse treatment programs.

Public
Resources

Community

Friends

Family

Significant
Other

Self
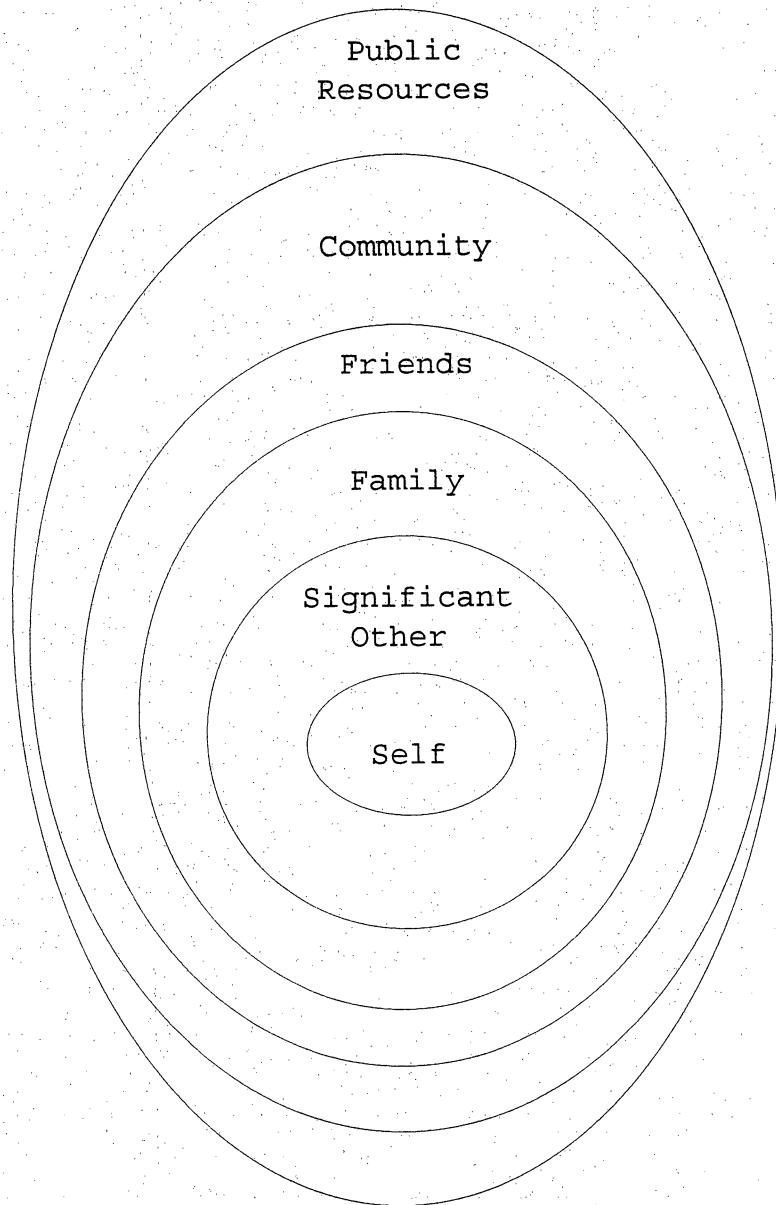
Figure 2: Conceptualization of the Dimension of
          Level of Intimacy

Other causal conditions appeared to be based in the value

systems of the participant. Some of these values were

passed from their parents, others were based in life

circumstances. For instance, some participants stated they

were motivated to do a good job as a parent in order to not

parent the way that they had been parented, or conversely,

wanted to be a good parent because their parents had made

them feel valued. Some related that they were open to

receiving help, that is, receiving help from others was not

viewed as weakness. Still other causal conditions were

based in a response to feelings, such as frustration or

enjoyment.

As could be expected, contexts varied widely with the

individual. Among the many contexts identified were being

homeless, poor spousal relationship, spouse as partner in

parenting, interference from relatives, being an immigrant,

living in the shelter community, being a single parent,

being black, and having had children at a relatively older

age. Intervening conditions were likewise extremely varied,

and ranged from divorce, injury and substance abuse to

having a person from a church congregation make regular

contributions of money in a time of financial crisis.

Among the specific action/interaction strategies

reported were joining a support group, fostering

friendships, going to church, taking courses in child

development, going to someone for advice, asking for

assistance, family activities, activities with child individually, self improvement, creating a network of adults to which the child could go to talk, spending time alone, and watching other parents. Consequences of the phenomenon of receiving support can be generalized into resulting feelings of confidence and hopefulness, or lack thereof.

DATA ANALYSIS BY SELECTIVE CODING

This phase was begun by verification of the results of the paradigm model with four of the participants from the earlier interviews. The analysis by the paradigm model for each participant was described briefly to the participant, and they were asked as to whether their experience was accurately reflected in the model. They were additionally given the opportunity to respond to or clarify anything in the data. All four participants were in agreement with the analysis described to them. The final two interviews were conducted, with those participants questioned heavily on the phenomenon and dimensions of receiving support, and verification of the new data was made during these interviews.

The final two interviews were analyzed by axial coding and the selective coding process was begun on the entire project. The first step, selecting a core category had already been accomplished. A story line was written, and the rudiments of the theory were diagrammed according to

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 129). The patterns suggested

by the dimensions of the phenomenon receiving support were

identified, and attempt was made to lay out the theory

within the structure of the patterns. It was found that

there was insufficient data to complete this step, even

after revision of the story line and patterns, therefore the

theory could not be grounded in the data.

DISCUSSION

RECEIVING SUPPORT

The main story of the study seems to be how the

phenomenon of receiving support relates to a parent's

experience of parenting. Receiving support from one or more

sources at varying levels of intimacy appears to be an

important factor in whether or not a parent feels confident

and hopeful in his or her job as a parent. Additionally,

whereas some parents have persons who interact with them

regularly in a supportive way, others have sought out

sources of support for themselves, either as their sole

supportive network or as a supplement to existing support.

There are a variety of antecedents to a parent's

receiving support. Circumstances of either having or not

having supportive persons interacting regularly, or of

having been the recipient of perceived adequate or

inadequate parenting, or feelings of aloneness or

frustration provide the basis for receiving support.

Parents tend to look to intimate relationships such as the self or the significant other for primary support. If there are real or perceived weaknesses in those sources of support, many parents choose to initiate opportunities for support from other sources. Parents who initiate support-seeking generally receive support. Parents who demonstrate a moderate to high level of initiative in seeking support experience as a result, feelings of confidence and hope. A parent's circumstances, style and values influence the specific actions taken in their parenting.

Although limited in scope by time and context, this study was able to generate a considerable amount of data. Some of the ideas presented by the participants are echoed in the literature. These parents revealed traits from their families of origin and current families which are described in Curran's (1983) "Traits of a Healthy Family." The participants described open communication, teaching respect for others, having a sense of play and humor, sharing leisure time, having a shared religious core, and admitting to and seeking help for problems. As McFarlane and others (1995) suggest and the participants confirm, family configuration, whether or not there is a mother and a father in the home, is not the key determinant of family functioning. As the parenting manuals put forth, these parents described open communication, active listening, self talk, negative and positive reinforcement techniques,

application of democratic principles, and gaining knowledge of child development.

Interestingly, the participants gave conflicting information on several ideas. Some thought that parents remaining married no matter what was a good thing. Others felt that parents divorcing was beneficial. Some expressed strong beliefs of the importance of a parent at home with the children, others felt strongly that mothers with a job/career were of benefit to the family. Others, still, held strong opinions about the number of children; one is the best number, one is not enough.

The category of support appeared early on to be one category where there was a good deal of agreement, thus the choice of support as the central idea of the research. In the literature, those interested in exploring further the subject of social support have developed several models to attempt to explain the effects of social support on individuals and families. The Stress Buffer model describes social support as having a suppressing effect on stress, mitigating the effects of stressful events (Barrera, 1988). The Direct Effects model is based in attachment theory and posits that since people have an inherent need for social contact, social support supplies this need and thus increases psychological well-being (Barrera, 1988). The Stress Prevention model hypothesizes that social support can affect the perception of stressful events, thus preventing

distress (Barrera, 1988). The Mediator model describes how social support acts to affect stress indirectly (Quittner, Glueckauf, and Jackson, 1990).

Research on social support is often designed to support one of these models by testing how an aspect of social support affects a stressful situation or the manifestation of stress in a disadvantaged population. Single mothers are one such at risk population. A study by Simons, Beaman, Conger, and Chao (1993) found that social support has an indirect effect on improving the quality of parenting behavior, and marital support has a direct effect on improving the quality of parental behavior. Stevens (1988) found that adult single, white mothers and black teen-aged mothers who seek out social support from amongst relatives tended to be more skillful parents. This idea appears to be supported by this study. Stevens also found that an internal locus of control was an important factor in the effectiveness of the white mothers and in black adult mothers.

Black parents are another population which has received attention in the research, especially in the exploration of social support from extended family. Wilson and Tolson (1990) found that children are generally benefited indirectly by their mothers' active participation in extended family networks. Taylor, Casten, and Flickinger (1993) describe how black parents' participation in kinship

relations was correlated with the parents' use of an authoritative parenting style, which in turn, enhanced the psychosocial adjustment of their teen-aged children. The Taylor, et al study also identified the support seeking behavior and considered it to be note-worthy, although the researchers were not able to determine the origin of this behavior.

Simons, Lorenz, Conger and Wu (1992) demonstrated how high quality spousal support has a direct effect on increasing the other parent's ability to be supportive in their parenting. It was also found that economic strain undermines parental support and involvement. Other studies have sought to explore the relationship of social support on chronic stress (Quittner, Glueckauf, and Jackson, 1990), and adolescent mothers (Nath, Borkowski, Whitman, and Schellenbach, 1991). The Nath, et al study shares the perception of this study of the multi-dimensionality of the construct of social support.

The definition of support seems to be a problem in social support exploration. Just as this researcher struggled with inclusion, exclusion and extent in the dimensions of support for this study, others have also sought to define what constitutes support. Stone, Helder, and Schneider (1988) have divided social support into two categories, problem-directed support and emotional support. "Problem-directed" support is roughly equivalent to the

31

family and friends levels of this study's intimacy dimension, and "emotional support" has to do with a support source utilized for venting of emotions and receiving sympathy. The use of books and other authorities in parenting are seen as merely "information seeking," which is in disagreement with the discovery in this study which perceived the use of expert sources for information for use in problem-solving and in receiving support through normalization of experiences and feelings. Stone, et al also places "religiosity" in a category of coping mechanisms separate from that of social support. This study does not limit the idea of support to only the social arena, and perceived the support received from faith as differentiated from observances of religious practices, as a source of support on which some parents rely.

A scale devised to measure social support, the Maternal Support Index (MSSI), assesses mothers on four levels which correspond partially with the intimacy levels described in this study. Those levels are people to count on in time of need, neighborhood support, spousal support, and community involvement (Chan, 1994). The Chan study examined physically abusive mothers in Hong Kong and found that the abusive mothers had more stress, more children, and less social support on all aspects of the MSSI.

Simons, Beaman, Conger, and Chao (1993) in their study of single mothers have two interesting dimensions to add to

the discussion. The first finding concerns the role of educational level on social support, and the second is the effects of antisocial personality traits on social support. Mothers found to have antisocial traits were more likely to have experienced divorce, have experienced more negative life events, have low social support, and ineffective parenting practices. It was also found that the lower the educational level of the parent, the lower her access to sources of social support. Her income level will also be lower, increasing her stress. The participants in this study have relatively high educational levels which have undoubtedly influenced the outcome of the study. The participants with the lowest educational attainment (both shelter residents) had, surprisingly, accomplished most or all of their high school work. The earning potential of the majority of the participants is also relatively higher than was expected.

WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

This study was limited in its size and scope due to the constraints of time and resources. The study could be improved by interviewing more parents and by conducting at least one follow-up interview for better verification and for additional questioning to fill out the gaps in the data which prevented the grounding of the theory.

Although the purpose of sampling is not to allow for

generalizability, but rather to explore as many constructs as possible, the sample was missing several constructs which could have given the theory more fullness. Missing from the sample were the experiences of step parents, older parents, adolescent and younger adult parents, parents living in alternate family constellation situations such as homosexual partnerships, and persons of ethnic groups not included in this sample. Because of the lack of generalizability, this study can only be said to reflect the parenting experience for this group of people in this locality, at this moment in time.

Only one researcher was involved in this study. Questions, interview direction, and generation of categories was done solely by this researcher. Although the researcher verified the analysis with some of the participants, the quality of the study could be improved by utilization of one or more peer debriefers and by verification of analysis with all of the participants.

GUIDANCE FOR CONTINUING EXPLORATION

It is the belief of this researcher that there is much to be gained by continuing to examine the multi-faceted issue of parenting through qualitative research methods. The grounded theory design could most likely be completed successfully with a larger sample and more interviews with each participant. The dimensions generated for the category

of support may need to be modified. As questioning is a hallmark technique in the analysis process, the dimensions should be questioned. How important is the dimension of frequency? Is a parent's perception of the adequacy of support a better dimension to assess? Quittner, Glueckauf, and Jackson (1990) relate how the mothers studied by them demonstrated a changed perception of the adequacy of social support based on their own feelings of inadequacy and unfortunate circumstances. Further exploration into the perception of social support is needed to better understand the phenomenon of social support.

One weakness of research on social support is that researchers generally measure the effects of external stressors and events on parenting behaviors or outcomes. Studies do not think to consider the raising of children as a stressor, preferring to study pathology. Studies are needed on the effect of social support on non-pathological situations and positive life events, in order that we might have a clearer picture of psychological well-being and successful outcomes. Additionally, studies on parental coping fail to consider the personality traits of the children being raised by the parents being studied and how this might affect a parent's stress and parenting effectiveness (Barrera, 1988).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of this study can be applied in the direct practice arena through incorporation of the idea of the need for support in effective parenting. Parenting classes could include information on recognizing the need for support and teach the skills necessary to develop support networks. Individual clinical work with parents and social workers involved in case management in child protective services agencies could also incorporate assessment for social support and training in initiating supportive networks.

At the Macro level, policy makers and administrators must realize the importance of effective social support for all parents, in order to work towards a society which values its children and is committed to prevention of problems in its citizenry. And as always, the fight against poverty must increase in intensity so that every parent has a chance at effective parenting with out the sabotaging effects of financial crisis.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PROJECT CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project exploring the experience of parenting. The project is being conducted by Karen Atwater as a requirement for the Master's degree in Social Work. Her work on this study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of California State University at San Bernardino and is being supervised by Dr. Morley Glicken, Professor of Social Work.

The most important source of ideas and skills about parenting comes from each person's own parents. The researcher will be interviewing you, as a parent, about your experience of having been parented and of parenting your own children. The focus will be on discovering each parent's strengths and those things which have been a positive influence for you and for your children. The interview will take about an hour, although you are free to discontinue with the interview at any time. Since we will be asking you to describe experiences and feelings, you may recall things which are pleasant or unpleasant and which may cause you to experience some strong emotions. Please be assured that you are under no obligation to discuss any experience which is unpleasant to recall or which may cause you emotional discomfort. After the interview is finished, you will be given some resources which you can contact should you wish to discuss any concerns with a professional.

Your participation in this study is completely confidential. I will ask you for some basic, statistical information about yourself. This information, together with the words which you say, will make up the data. For accuracy, the entire interview will be audio-tape recorded with your written permission, and professionally transcribed. Your responses will be identified by number only. No one but the researcher will have access to the statistical information. The transcriber will be instructed to delete any information which could identify you in any way. After the study, the tapes will be destroyed.

I must inform you of one limit to confidentiality. State law requires that I report suspicion of child abuse to a child protective agency (CPS). Child abuse is anything an adult may purposely do, or fail to do, to a child which jeopardizes the safety and well-being of the child. Incidents known to the researcher as currently being monitored by CPS will not be reported.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may request at any time that any information you have provided be excluded from the study with no risk of penalty. Residents of the homeless shelter are additionally assured that your responses will not be revealed to the shelter staff and that refusal to participate will not affect your stay or status at the shelter.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____

Researcher's Signature   Date

I give my consent to the researchers to audio-tape record my interview for use in the above mentioned research project and for no other purpose.

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

APPENDIX B: DEBRIEFING STATEMENTS

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT GIVEN TO HOMELESS SHELTER PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your responses will be combined with those of other participants to create a theory about the experience of parenting. It is hoped that the ideas generated by this project can be used to help mental health professionals and other interested people to be more effective in their work with parents, especially in the development of parenting education programs and the prevention of child abuse.

Copies of the finished project with the results and discussion will be provided to the Genesis Homeless Shelter and to any interested participant. If you would like to review any part of the study, or have questions about the study, please contact your case manager or the counselor at the shelter. That person will contact the researcher for you so that you can receive information about the findings of the research at the conclusion of the study.

If by participating in this study, you feel you may need help with any issue related to your childhood or parenting, contact your case manager or Charlotte Laiva, LCSW at 909-689-7847, for counseling and referrals to any resources you require.

Thank you again for your willingness to spend some time sharing yourself with me!

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT GIVEN TO ALL OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your responses will be combined with those of other participants to create a theory about the experience of parenting. It is hoped that the ideas generated by this project can be used to help mental health professionals and other interested people to be more effective in their work with parents, especially in the development of parenting education programs and the prevention of child abuse.

Copies of the finished project with the results and discussion will be provided to the Genesis Homeless Shelter, the Cucamonga United Methodist Church, and any interested participant. If you would like to review any part of the study or if you have questions about the study, you can call Karen at 909-989-8475, so that you can be contacted at the conclusion of the study.

If by participating in this study, you feel that you may need help with any issue related to your childhood or parenting, you can call the San Bernardino County Department of Mental Health at 909-387-7000 for referrals for mental health services or other appropriate resources.

Thank you again for your willingness to spend some time sharing yourself with me!

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONING FORMATS

QUESTIONING FORMAT UTILIZED IN INTERVIEW ROUNDS 1 AND 2:

Subject ID code

Age of subject

Gender of subject

Presence of a Partner in the home who shares parenting

   responsibilities

Ages of children still in the home

Ages of children no longer living at home

Educational level

Ethnic identity

1.   Tell me about your parents. I am especially interested
     in what they did for you which was good.

2.   Tell me about your experience as a parent. Again, I am
     especially interested in those things which you think
     are right and good.

3.   What are some things which you do which have helped you
     to be a good parent? (habits, things you do regularly)

4.   What are some things which you think (say to yourself
     in your head) which have helped you to be a good
     parent?

5.   What are some things which have made it difficult for
     you to do your best job as a parent?

6.   What are some things which have made it easier?

7.   Is there anything else that you think is important for
     me to know?

QUESTIONING FORMAT

UTILIZED IN INTERVIEW ROUND 3

Subject ID code

Age of subject

Gender of subject

Presence of a Partner in the home who shares parenting

   responsibilities

Ages of children still in the home

Ages of children no longer living at home

Educational level

Ethnic identity

1.   Tell me about your parents. I am especially interested

     in what they did for you which was good.

          How did they show... pass...   you know...   etc

2.   Tell me about your experience as a parent. Again, I am

     especially interested in those things which you think

     are right and good.

     What are some things which you do which have helped you

     to be a good parent? (habits, things you do regularly)

     What are some ways that you have dealt with the

     feelings you've experienced as a parent?

What are some things which you think (say to yourself
in your head) which have helped you to be a good
parent?

What are some things which have made it difficult for
you to do your best job as a parent?

What are some things which have made it easier?

3.   What do you think is a parent's main job? What do you
think a good parent should do for his or her children?

4.   Is there anything else that you think it is important
for me to know?

QUESTIONING FORMAT

UTILIZED IN INTERVIEW ROUNDS 4 AND 5

Subject ID code

Age of subject

Gender of subject

Presence of a Partner in the home who shares parenting

responsibilities

Ages of children still in the home

Ages of children no longer living at home

Educational level

Ethnic identity

1. Tell me about your parents. I am especially interested

    in what they did for you which was good.

        How did they show... pass... you know...   etc

        How did you feel.... know... etc

        What/who helped in raising you?

        When (under what circumstances) were your parents

        able to a better job of parenting?

        Do/did you feel valuable to your parents?

2. Tell me about your experience as a parent. Again, I am

    especially interested in those things which you think

are right and good.

What are some things which you do that have helped you
to be a good parent? (habits, things you do regularly)

What are some ways that you have dealt with the
feelings you've experienced as a parent?

What are some things which you think (say to yourself
in your head) which have helped you to be a good
parent?

What are some things which have made it difficult for
you to do your best job as a parent?

What are some things which have made it easier?

What/who else helped you raise your children?

When are you able to do a better job?

What do you wish you'd had/done to do a better job of
parenting?

3.   What do you think is a parent's main job? What do you
think a good parent should do for his or her children?

4.   Is there anything else that you think it is important for me to know?

QUESTIONING FORMAT

UTILIZED IN INTERVIEW ROUND 6

Subject ID code

Age of subject

Gender of subject

Presence of a Partner in the home who shares parenting

responsibilities

Ages of children still in the home

Ages of children no longer living at home

Educational level

Ethnic identity

1.   Tell me about your parents. I am especially interested
     in what they did for you which was good.

          How did they show...   pass... you know...   etc

          What /who helped in raising you?

          Do/did you feel valuable to your parents?

          When the category of support is presented: How
          did they benefit from the support? How often did
          they receive support in this way?

2.   Tell me about your experience as a parent. Again, I am
     especially interested in those things which you think

49

are right and good.

What are some things which you do that have helped you to be a good parent? (habits, things you do regularly)

What are some things which have made it difficult for you to do your best job as a parent?

What are some things which have made it easier?

What/who else helped you raise your children?

When category of support is presented:

How often did you receive this support

Was it regular

Was it offered to you

How did you benefit from this support

How did it make you feel

How did it help you to do a better job

How did it affect your image of yourself

If support was sought: what made you seek support

What do you wish you'd had/done to do a better job of parenting?

3.   What do you think is a parent's main job? What do you

think a good parent should do for his or her children?

4.   Is there anything else that you think it is important
for me to know?

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