Parenthood as Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT decades the impact of various crises on the American family has been subjected to intensive analysis. Eliot,[1] Waller,[2] Angell,[3] Komarovsky,[4] Cavan and Ranck,[5] Koos,[6] Hill,[7] and Goode[8] have published what is perhaps the most solid block of empirical research in the field of family sociology.

In all of these studies of how the modern family reacts to crisis, it appears that the shock is related to the fact that the crisis event forces a reorganization of the family as a social system. Roles have to be reassigned, status positions shifted, values reoriented, and needs met through new channels.

These studies have shown that crises may originate either from within the family itself or from the outside. It has also been demonstrated that the total impact of the crisis will depend upon a number of variables: (1) the nature of the crisis event; (2) the state of organization or disorganization of the family at the point of impact; (3) the resources of the family; and (4) its previous experience with crisis.[9]

These studies report a sequence of events somewhat as follows: level of organization before the crisis, point of impact, period of dis-

organization, recovery, and subsequent level of reorganization.

This study was conceived and designed within the conceptual framework of the above research.

THE PRESENT STUDY

In the study being described in this report, the main hypothesis was derived through the following line of analysis:

A. If the family is conceptualized as a small social system, would it not follow that the *adding* of a new member to the system could force a reorganization of the system as drastic (or nearly so) as does the *removal* of a member?

B. If the above were correct, would it not follow that the arrival of the *first* child could be construed as a "crisis" or critical event?[10]

To test this hypothesis, a group of young parents were interviewed, using a relatively unstructured interviewing technique. In order to control socio-economic variables, couples had to possess the following characteristics to be included in the study: (1) unbroken marriage; (2) urban or suburban residence; (3) between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age at the time of the study; (4) husband college graduate; (5) husband's occupation middle class; (6) wife not employed after birth of first child; (7) must have had their first child within five years of the date interviewed. Race and religion were not controlled.

Using these criteria, forty-eight couples were located by the device of asking various persons in the community for names. As a precaution, the exact nature of the study was not stated in soliciting names for the sample—the project was described as a study of "modern young parents."

Once a name was obtained that met the spe-

[1] See Thomas D. Eliot, "Bereavement: Inevitable but Not Insurmountable," in *Family, Marriage, and Parenthood,* edited by Howard Becker and Reuben Hill, Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, Second Edition, 1955.

[2] Willard Waller, *The Old Love and the New,* New York: Liveright, 1930.

[3] Robert C. Angell, *The Family Encounters the Depression,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

[4] Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family,* New York: Dryden Press, 1940.

[5] Ruth Cavan and Katherine Ranck, *The Family and the Depression,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938.

[6] E. L. Koos, *Families in Trouble,* New York: King's Crown Press, 1946.

[7] Reuben Hill, *Families Under Stress,* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.

[8] William J. Goode, *After Divorce,* Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956.

[9] See Hill, *op. cit.,* for an excellent review of this research.

[10] To some extent, the original idea for this study was derived from Hill's discussion. See *op. cit.,* ch. 2.

cifications, every effort was made to secure an interview. No refusals were encountered, but two couples left the community before they could participate, leaving forty-six couples for the final study group. The couples, then, were not volunteers. All of the interviewing was done by the writer during the years 1953-1956. Both the husband and wife were interviewed.

Typical occupations represented include minister, social worker, high school teacher, college professor, bank teller, accountant, athletic coach, and small business owner.

Various definitions of "crisis" are available to the worker in this area. Webster, for example, states that the term means a "decisive" or "crucial" period, a "turning point."[11] Koos specifies that crises are situations "which block the usual patterns of action and call for new ones."[12] Hill defines as a crisis "any sharp or decisive change for which old patterns are inadequate."[13] This is the definition used in this analysis.

A five point scale was used in coding the interview data: (1) no crisis; (2) slight crisis; (3) moderate crisis; (4) extensive crisis; (5) severe crisis.

THE FINDINGS

The essential findings of this exploratory study are as follows:

1. Thirty-eight of the forty-six couples (83 per cent) reported "extensive" or "severe" crisis in adjusting to the first child. This rating was arrived at jointly by the interviewer and the parents.

In several cases there was some difference of opinion between the husband and wife as to what their response should be. In all but two cases, however, the difference was reconciled by further discussion between the interviewer and the couple. In the two cases, the wife's rating was recorded, on the theory that the mother makes the major adjustment to children in our culture.

[11] Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield: G. and C. Merriam Co., Second Edition, 1944, p. 240.
[12] Koos, op. cit., p. 9.
[13] Hill, op. cit., p. 51. See also his review of definitions in ch. 2.

For this sample, therefore, the evidence is quite strong in support of the hypothesis. The eight couples (17 per cent) who reported relatively mild crisis (values 1-2-3 in the above scale) must be considered the deviants in this sample.

Stated theoretically, this study supports the idea that adding the first child to the urban middle class married couple constitutes a crisis event.

2. In this study there was strong evidence that this crisis reaction was *not* the result of not wanting children. On the contrary, thirty-five of the thirty-eight pregnancies in the crisis group were either "planned" or "desired."

3. The data support the belief that the crisis pattern occurs whether the marriage is "good" or "poor"—for example: thirty-four of the thirty-eight in the crisis group (89 per cent) rated their marriages as "good" or better. With only three exceptions, these ratings were confirmed by close friends. By any reasonable standards, these marriages must be considered adequate.

4. There is considerable evidence that the crisis pattern in the thirty-eight cases was not the result of "neurosis" or other psychiatric disability on the part of these parents. Judging by their personal histories, their marriages, and the ratings of friends, it seemed clear that the vast bulk of the husbands and wives in the crisis group were average or above in personality adjustment.

5. The thirty-eight couples in the crisis group appear to have almost completely romanticized parenthood. They felt that they had had very little, if any, effective preparation for parental roles. As one mother said: "We knew where babies came from, but we didn't know *what they were like.*"

The mothers reported the following feelings or experiences in adjusting to the first child: loss of sleep (especially during the early months); chronic "tiredness" or exhaustion; extensive confinement to the home and the resulting curtailment of their social contacts; giving up the satisfactions and the income of outside employment; additional washing and iron-

ing; guilt at not being a "better" mother; the long hours and seven day (and night) week necessary in caring for an infant; decline in their housekeeping standards; worry over their appearance (increased weight after pregnancy, et cetera).

The fathers echoed most of the above adjustments but also added a few of their own: decline in sexual response of wife; economic pressure resulting from wife's retirement plus additional expenditures necessary for child; interference with social life; worry about a second pregnancy in the near future; and a general disenchantment with the parental role.

6. The mothers with professional training and extensive professional work experience (eight cases) suffered "extensive" or "severe" crisis in every case.

In analyzing these cases, it was apparent that these women were really involved in two major adjustments simultaneously: (1) they were giving up an occupation which had deep significance for them; and (2) they were assuming the role of mother for the first time.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

There are, of course, various ways of interpreting the findings in this study. It may be, for example, that the couples obtained for the sample are not typical of urban middle class parents. It might also be true that the interviewing, the design of the study, or both, may have been inadequate. If we assume, for the present, that the findings are reliable and valid for this social group, how are we to interpret such reactions to parenthood? It is suggested that the following conceptual tools may be helpful.

1. That parenthood (and not marriage) is the real "romantic complex" in our culture. This view, as a matter of fact, was expressed by many of the couples in the study.

In a brilliant article some years ago, Arnold Green[14] suggested as much—that urban middle class couples often find their parental roles in

conflict with their other socio-economic commitments. If this is true, one would expect to find the reconciliation of these conflicts most acute at the point of entering parenthood, with the first child. Our findings support this expectation.

2. Ruth Benedict has pointed out that young people in our society are often the victims of "discontinuity in cultural conditioning."[15] By this she means that we often have to "unlearn" previous training before we can move on to the next set of roles. Sex conditioning is perhaps the clearest illustration of this.

Using this concept, one can see that these couples were not trained for parenthood, that practically nothing in school, or out of school, got them ready to be fathers and mothers— *husbands* and *wives*, yes, but not *parents*. This helps explain why some of the mothers interviewed were actually "bitter" about their high school and college training.

3. One can also interpret these findings by resorting to what is known about small groups. Wilson and Ryland, for example, in their standard text on group work make this comment about the two-person group: "This combination seems to be the most satisfactory of human relationships."[16] They then proceed to pass this judgment on the three-person group: "Upon analysis this pattern falls into a combination of a pair and an isolate. . . . This plurality pattern is the most volatile of all human relationships."[17] This, of course, supports an earlier analysis by von Wiese and Becker.[18]

Viewed in this conceptual system, married couples find the transition to parenthood painful because the arrival of the first child destroys the two-person or pair pattern of group interaction and forces a rapid reorganization of their life into a three-person or triangle group system. Due to the fact that their court-

[14] Arnold W. Green, "The Middle-Class Male Child and Neurosis," *American Sociological Review,* 11 (February, 1946), pp. 31-41.

[15] Ruth Benedict, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Cultural Conditioning," *Psychiatry,* 1 (May, 1939), pp. 161-67.
[16] Gertrude Wilson and Gladys Ryland, *Social Group Work Practice,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949, p. 49.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Leopold von Wiese, *Systematic Sociology,* adapted and amplified by Howard Becker, New York: Wiley, 1932.

ship and pre-parenthood pair relationship has persisted over a period of years, they find it difficult to give it up as a way of life.

In addition, however, they find that living as a trio is more complicated than living as a pair. The husband, for example, no longer ranks first in claims upon his wife but must accept the child's right to priority. In some cases, the husband may feel that he is the semi-isolate, the third party in the trio. In other cases, the wife may feel that her husband is more interested in the baby than in her. If they preserve their pair relationship and continue their previous way of life, relatives and friends may regard them as poor parents. In any event, their pattern of living has to be radically altered.

Since babies do not usually appear to married couples completely by surprise, it might be argued that this event is not really a crisis—"well adjusted" couples should be "prepared for it." The answer seems to be that children and parenthood have been so romanticized in our society that most middle class couples are caught unprepared, even though they have planned and waited for this event for years. The fact that parenthood is "normal" does not eliminate crisis. Death is also "normal" but continues to be a crisis event for most families.

4. One can also interpret the findings of this study by postulating that parenthood (not marriage) marks the final transition to maturity and adult responsibility in our culture.[19] Thus the arrival of the first child forces young married couples to take the last painful step into the adult world. This point, as a matter of fact, was stated or implied by most of the couples in the crisis group.

5. Finally, the cases in this sample confirm what the previous studies in this area have shown: that the event itself is only one factor

[19] This is essentially the point of view in Robert J. Havighurst's analysis, *Human Development and Education*, New York: Longmans, Green, 1953.

determining the extent and severity of the crisis on any given family. Their resources, their previous experience with crisis, the pattern of role organization before the crisis—these factors are equally important in determining the total reaction to the event.

CONCLUSION

In this study, it was hypothesized that the addition of the first child would constitute a crisis event, forcing the married couple to move from an adult-centered pair type of organization into child-centered triad group system. Of the forty-six middle class couples located for this study, thirty-eight (83 per cent) confirmed the hypothesis.

In all fairness to this group of parents, it should be reported that all but a few of them eventually made what seems to be a successful adjustment to parenthood. This does not alter the fact, however, that most of them found the transition difficult. Listening to them describe their experiences, it seemed that one could compare these young parents to veterans of military service—they had been through a rough experience, but it was worth it. As one father said: "I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

It is unfortunate that the number of parents in this sample who did not report crisis is so small (eight couples) that no general statements can be made about them. Somehow, however, they seem to have been better prepared for parenthood than was the crisis group. It is felt that future work on this problem might well include a more extensive analysis of couples who have made the transition to parenthood with relative ease.

If the basic findings of this study are confirmed by other workers, it would appear that family life educators could make a significant contribution by helping young people prepare more adequately for parenthood.