Understanding Stress:
Theories of Individual and Family Stress

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= Abstract =

In this paper, general stress theories and family stress models were examined to enhance understanding on how stress affects the individual and the family. Previous researches on both general and family stress have mainly concentrated on identification of problems and concerns of individuals. They lacked in theory base and, therefore, did not have systematic ways of approaching the research question. This paper provides much needed theory base and identifies key variables which can be used in future research in the field of stress and adjustment.

I. Introduction

Throughout life, families and individual members of the family encounter many changes. They can be expected, normative life transitions or sudden, unexpected, non-normative changes. Some families are able to successfully negotiate their way through these changes and transitions, while others struggle with the same incidents and easily give up. One of the consequences of the families’ and individual family members’ coping with transition and change is the stress produced in the process (Brammer & Abrego, 1981).

In this paper, general stress theories and family stress models will be presented to enhance understanding on how stress affects both the individual and the family. This paper will also identify important concepts of stress and adjustment which can be used as key variables for systematic research in the field of family stress.
II. Theories of stress

It has not been long since theoretical and clinical interest in family stress and coping styles gained popularity. Family behavior in response to predictable and unpredictable life events has gained respect as an important area of theory building, research, and intervention only 20 years ago (McCubbin, Cauble, & Patterson, 1982). However, the concept of stress certainly is not new. Cofer and Appley (1964) pointed out that the term stress "has all but preempted a field previously shared by a number of other concepts including anxiety, conflict, frustration, emotional disturbance, trauma, alienation, and anomie" (p.441).

In this section, theories of stress from various disciplines are examined in order to enhance understanding of the mechanisms and effects of stress. This enhanced knowledge will enable study of the relationship between family system and individual member's well-being by linking individual stress theories with family stress models. There are several levels of systems, i.e., cell, tissue, organ, person, family, community, culture, and society, that can affect well-being of an individual and a family (Patterson, 1988). Different models of stress focus on one or more of these levels and take into account the interactions between different systems. Therefore, in order to examine relationship between stress and coping of family system and that of individual members, it is necessary to understand individual stress theories based on physiology, psychology, and sociology as well as family stress models.

While reviewing various stress models, it was found that most of these models consist of three domains: 1) sources of stress, 2) mediators of stress, and 3) outcomes of stress. In addition, there were similarities in definitions of those domains. The sources of stress, for most models, are physical or psychological demands that upset the system's normal state of functioning. The mediators are physical, psychological, or social resources and coping behaviors. The outcomes are changes in functioning of the system. The level of system focused on in terms of outcome usually reflects the discipline of the model: physiology, psychology, or sociology.

Even though there are some similarities in definitions of domains, it is difficult to define stress and relevant concepts in a concise manner. It includes various phenomena from one-time physiological disturbance to on-going disturbing situations in a community. From examining general stress theories, working definitions of stress and other relevant concepts were established and is presented below.

1. Physiological theories

Physiological theorists have been most interested in biological impact of stress. Cannon (1932) considered stress a disturbance of bodily homeostasis under conditions of cold, lack of oxygen, and low blood sugar as a result of neuroendocrine secretions. He saw the source of stress as physical or emotional conditions such as fear or rage which disturb the body's homeostasis. Wolff (1953)
considered the source of stress as physical or psychosocial noxious stimulus and outcome as disease or organic abnormality. He said,

"I have used the word stress in biology to indicate that state within a living creature which results from the interaction of the organism with noxious stimuli or circumstance, i.e., it is a dynamic state within the organism; it is not a stimulus, assault, load, symbol, burden, or any aspect of environment, internal, external, social or otherwise" (p.31).

Selye (1956) used the term stress in a very special way to mean a set of bodily reactions to any demand, physical or psychological that places demand on the body for readjustment or adaptation. The outcome of the stress which he called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) has three stages; alarm reaction, the state of adaptation or resistance, and the stage of exhaustion. Alarm reaction is the initial response to the stressor where the body call for its defensive forces. After continued exposure of the body to any noxious agent capable of eliciting this reaction, a stage of adaptation or resistance ensues. If the organism can survive the initial stage, the stage of resistance follows with different manifestations from, in many cases the opposite of, the first stage. After still more exposure to the noxious stimulus, the acquired adaptation is lost. Then, the body enters the stage of exhaustion that continues as long as the demand is severe enough and applied for a sufficient length of time. This triphasic nature of the GAS indicates that the body's adaptability is finite, since under constant stress, exhaustion eventually occurs.

Selye compared this triphasic model of stress to three stages of human's life: childhood (with its characteristics of low resistance and excessive responses to any kind of stimulus), adulthood (during which adaptation to most commonly encountered agents has occurred and resistance is increased), and finally, senility (characterized by irreversible loss of adaptability and eventual exhaustion) ending with death. He distinguished two different kinds of stress: eustress and distress. Eustress is the pleasant stress which drives a person to fulfillment. Distress is the harmful stress that can damage a person.

Selye (1956) called the mediators which can selectively enhance or inhibit one or the other stressor "conditioning factors (p.50)". These conditioning factors may be internal or external. Under the influence of these factors, a normally well-tolerated degree of stress can become pathogenic and cause "disease of adaptation (p.59)", selectively affecting the predisposed body area. Selye noted that the laws governing life's response at such different levels as the cell, the whole person, the community, and even the nation is essentially similar.

2. Psychological theories

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), notable psychological theorists on stress, pointed out that Selye's publication and his invited address to the American Psychological Association in 1955 helped spread
interest in stress from physiology to psychology and other behavioral sciences. They assert that Selye’s GAS along with Wolff’s notion of dynamic state were very important for several reasons. First, the term "stress" as used in the physical sciences refers to an inactive or passive body that is deformed by environmental hardship or adversity. However, in the biological usage, stress is an active process of fighting back: the living body engages in adaptational efforts to maintain equilibrium. Second, stress as a biological process of defense offers analogy to the psychological process called "coping" in which a person struggles to manage psychological stress. Third, the concept of a dynamic state points to important aspects of the stress process that might otherwise be missed, such as the resources available for coping, their costs, including disease and distress, and their benefits, including growth of competence and the joy of triumph against adversity. Finally, when one views stress as a dynamic state, attention is turned toward the ongoing relationship between the organism and the environment, and interplay and feedback.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that stress is "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p.21). They go on to explain processes that mediate the person-environment relationship. They called them "cognitive appraisal and coping." Cognitive appraisal is an evaluative process that determines why and to what extent a particular transaction or series of transactions between the person and the environment is stressful. Coping is the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions that they generate.

Lazarus and Folkman saw that adaptational outcomes have three intertwined components: morale, social functioning, and somatic health. Morale is concerned with how people feel about themselves and their conditions of life. It is related to satisfaction, happiness, and subjective well-being. Social functioning is defined as the ways the individual fulfills his or her various roles, as satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, or in terms of the skills necessary for maintaining roles and relationships. A person’s overall social functioning is largely determined by the effectiveness with which he or she appraises and copes with the events of day-to-day living. The link with illness is the conventional one that massive bodily changes are associated with emotions, especially strong, negative ones such as fear and anger. In conclusion, Lazarus and Folkman emphasized that when consequences of coping are considered, we must take into account multiple outcomes and not just single adaptational outcome.

Other psychological theorists also viewed the role of perception or cognitive appraisal as an important mediator. Scott and Howard (1970) saw the source of stress as a stimulus arising from internal or external, physical or symbolic environments that produces demands on the human organism requiring it to diverge above or below its ordinary level of functioning. They listed a number of mediators of stress: 1) adequate physical and psychological energy, 2) general and specific resources for resolving problems, 3) definition of problem as solvable, 4) appraisal of problem, and 5) coping responses that are assertive, divergent, or inert. An assertive response is one in which the organism meets the problem directly and attempts to solve it; a divergent
response is one in which the organism diverts energy and resources away from the confronting problem; and an inert response is one in which the organism simply fails to mobilize its resources or to respond actively. They perceived that the outcome of stress has two opposite states. One is to have successful mastery of problems as evidenced by dissipated tension and return to usual functioning that is called homeostasis. The other is to have stress as excess tension produced by failure of organism to master threats from environment.

Eisdorfer (1985) saw stress as activators which can be endogenous or exogenous events that change an individual's present state. He viewed mediators to stress having process (e.g., appraisal), environmental (e.g., support networks), and person (e.g., personality) elements that filter and modify activators, reactions, and consequences. He asserts that the outcomes of stress have two levels. The first level is called reactions which are biological or psychological responses of an individual to an activator. The second level is called consequences which is prolonged biological, psychological, and psychosocial effects of reactions.

3. Sociological theories

Sociological theorists also used an interactional approach to stress, emphasizing aspects of the social environment that either mediate or give rise to stress. Antonovsky (1979) viewed the source of stress as a demand made by the internal or external environment of an organism that upsets its homeostasis, restoration of which depends on a nonautomatic and not readily available energy-expending action. For the outcome of stress he created Health-ease/Dis-ease continuum which is a multifaceted (e.g., pain, functional limitation, prognostic implication, action implication) state or condition. He saw stress mediators having two aspects: 1) generalized resistance resources which are characteristics of person, group, sub-culture, or society that are effective in avoiding or combatting stressors; 2) coherence which is a belief or meaning that the environment is predictable and things will work out as well as possible.

Mechanic (1974) thought of stress as a complex set of changing social and environmental conditions often symbolically created. He, similarly, saw mediators of stress having two aspects. One aspect is called "coping" that is defined as an ability to react, influence, and control demands. Another aspect is resources that are intrapsychic (i.e. pretense and motivation), social (i.e. support network and institutionalized), and cultural solutions for dealing with demands. In his view, the outcome of stress can be either mastery where sufficient personal and social resources are used to meet demands or discomforting response when there are inadequate resources to meet demands.

Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Muller (1981) saw sources of stress as the occurrence of discrete life events converging with the presence of relatively continuous problems that place demands on individuals and contribute to diminishment of self-concept. They added ongoing strains from roles that each individual has as a source of demands. They considered outcomes of stress to be responses of the organism to experienced noxious stimuli as reflected in 1) cell, organ, or organism; 2) biochemical, physiological, or emotional functioning; 3) endocrine, immunologic,
metabolic, cardiovascular system; or 4) physical or psychological disease. They viewed that mediators of stress have coping and social support aspects. Coping is behavior that 1) modifies sources of stress, 2) modifies the meaning of problems, or 3) manages symptoms of stress. Social support is access to and use of individuals, groups, or organizations for exchange of intimate communications and presence of solidarity and trust.

From the above review of stress models, it was found that defining stress and the relevant concepts can be a difficult task. However, an attempt to understand several important concepts will be made here. First, the term stress seemed to be used, in most models, to denote the reaction to any demand, from either inside or outside of the person, that requires adjustment. Second, "stressor" is the source of stress that can be physical, psychological or social demands that upsets normal state of functioning. Third, resources are one type of stress mediator. Resources can be defined as what the person has at physical, psychological, and/or social levels to use in response to the stressor. Fourth, coping behavior is another type of mediator which is a specific effort, whether covert or overt, by which the person attempts to reduce or to manage demands. These concepts can be useful when applied to various situations of individuals and families.

III. Models of Family Stress and Coping

The theorists presented above have focused on the individual level of system or organ systems within the person. In comparison with long and continuous history of research in the general area of stress and coping, the area of family stress flourished in 1970s yielding both new findings of substantive nature and extension of the theory and the original models (McCubbin, et. al., 1980).

Hill’s (1949 & 1958) ABCX model which is considered to be the foundation of family stress models is presented below. Other models have evolved from the original ABCX model: the Double ABCX and the FAAR models are discussed in detail to enhance the knowledge on family stress and how it affects the family system and its individual members.

1. ABCX Model

The foundation for the recent family stress research can be traced to Hill’s (1958) classic work on war-induced separation and reunion. In his ABCX family crisis model, Hill outlined a set of major variables and their relationships as:

A (the stressor event and related hardship) - interacting with B (the family’s crisis-meeting resources) - interacting with C (the definition the family makes of the events) - produces X (the crisis) (p.141).

Detailed description of the variables is presented below.
(1) **Crisis precipitating events, the A factor**

A stressor, according to Hill, is a situation for which the family has had little or no prior preparation and must therefore be viewed as problematic. Hardship is defined as those complications in a crisis precipitating events which demand competencies from the family which the event itself may have temporarily paralyzed or made unavailable. Hill classified stressor events by the source of trouble. The stressor can be 1) extra-family events, 2) intra-family events, or 3) universal extra-familial events (Hill, 1968). The stressor can be defined in terms of their impact upon the family unit: 1) accession - changed family structure by adding a member (e.g., birth of a child); 2) dismemberment - changed family structure by losing a member (e.g., death of a child); 3) loss of family morale and unity (e.g., alcoholism, substance abuse); and 4) changed structure and morale (e.g., desertion, divorce). With the range of types of stressful events explained, Hill talks about the factors making for crisis-proneness and freedom from crisis among families. According to Hill, crisis-proneness is in effect the phenomenon of experiencing stressor events (A) with greater frequency and greater severity and defining these (C) more frequently as crises. Crisis-prone families appear to be more vulnerable to stressor events and more likely because of meager crisis-meeting resources (B) and failure to have learned from past experience with crisis to define these events as crisis-provoking. Therefore, the explanation for crisis-proneness lies primarily in the B and C factors.

(2) **Crisis-meeting resources, the B factor**

Hill incorporated Angell’s (1936) concept for his crisis-meeting resources, the B factor which he defined as a set of resources in family organization which, by their presence or absence, kept the family from crisis or urged it into crisis. These resources in family organization were named as family integration and family adaptability. Family integration is defined by Angell as "bonds of coherence and unity running through family life, of which common interests, affection, and a sense of economic interdependence are perhaps the most prominent" (p. 15). By family adaptability, he meant "the family’s capacity to meet obstacles in its way and shift courses as a family" (p.16). Angell was trying to get at the family’s latent predisposition to action in the face of challenges to its usual mode of existence. These latent action patterns, which are most clearly observable at times of crisis, are integrated, in turn, held by the family.

Hill also added concepts by Cavan and Ranck (1938) and Koos (1946). To them, a crisis-proof family must have agreement in its role structure, subordination of personal ambitions to family goals, satisfactions within the family obtained because it is successfully meeting the physical and emotional needs of its members, and goals toward which the family is moving collectively. Having all of these, the family is adequately organized. Lacking them, the family is inadequately organized and likely to be vulnerable to crisis-precipitating events.

(3) **Family definitions, the C factor**

Hill suggested three possible definitions of the crisis-precipitating events: 1) an objective
definition, formulated by an impartial observer, 2) a cultural definition, formulated by the community, and 3) a subjective definition, provided by the family. The most relevant definition in determining a family’s crisis-proneness is the subjective definition provided by the family. In other words, other people and the community stand outside the situation looking in, but the family members are on the inside, and the family’s attitudes toward the event are most important.

A family’s definition of the event reflects partly the value system held by the family, partly its previous experience in meeting crises, and partly the mechanisms employed in previous definitions of events, that is, according to Hill, “the meaning aspects of the crisis, the interpretation made of it.” It is not unusual that families with objective resources adequate to meet the hardships of sickness or job loss crack under the stress because they define such hardship situations as insurmountable. Crisis-proneness in families is related to outlook, to whether or not the event is defined as challenging or crisis-provoking.

(4) Family Crisis, X factor

Crisis is a distinct concept from stress, which is a state that arises from an actual or perceived imbalance between demand and capability in the family’s functioning. Stress is characterized by a nonspecific demand for adjustment or adaptive behavior. Crisis, on the other hand, is characterized by the family’s inability to restore stability and the constant pressure to make changes in the family structure and/or patterns of interaction (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). It is conceptualized by Burr (1973) as a continuous variable denoting the amount of disruptiveness, disorganization, or incapacitation in the family system. In brief, if the family is able to utilize existing resources and define the situation as surmountable, their stress may not reach crisis level.

Since 1970, researchers have carried on family stress research in an effort to render clarity and empirical support to Hill’s original conceptualization. Burr (1973), in particular, has been involved in an effort to formulate the ABCX model into a theory. In his synthesis of research and theory, Burr was able to identify and define 6 variables and advance 9 propositions to explain family behavior in response to stressors, as well as 12 variables and 13 propositions to explain family behavior in response to family crisis. From this work, his central concepts of vulnerability and regenerative power emerged as major new additions to Hill’s ABCX model. These two concepts are factors that prevent a stressor from creating a crisis (invulnerability) and help the family recover from a crisis (regenerative power). The variables identified by Burr were primarily associated with Hill’s B factor of crisis-meeting resources, and included concepts such as family integration, family adaptability, marital adjustment, and amount of extended familism. Burr’s propositions about families under stress is shown in Figure 1.

In short, the stressor event and related family hardships and the family’s vulnerability influences the amount of crisis in the family. The definition the family assigns to the seriousness of the changes influences the family’s vulnerability to crisis. Concomitantly, regenerative power, which Burr borrowed from Hansen (1965), explains the variation in the family system’s ability to recover from the disruptiveness that results from stressor events. Hill’s ABCX model and Burr’s
modification of the model focused on primarily pre-crisis factors that account for family’s differences in coping ability when a stressor event happens and that determine whether and to what degree the outcome is a crisis for the family.

2. Double ABCX Model

The Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) emerged from studies of war-induced family crisis in the 1970s. When the authors used the ABCX model to guide a longitudinal study of families who had a husband/father who was missing in action or a prisoner of war in Vietnam, they realized that additional factors beyond A, B, C, and X were needed to describe and explain the course of family adaptation over time. For example, families appeared to 1) experience a pileup of family demands in addition to or as a result of the stressor of separation; 2) employ various coping strategies in an effort to manage the demands; and 3) modify their perceptions of their total situation in an effort to adjust and eventually adapt. The Double ABCX model expands on Hill’s original ABCX model and adds post-crisis variables to it

   "in an effort to describe: 1) the additional life stressors and changes which may influence the family’s ability to achieve adaptation; 2) the critical psychological and social factors families call upon and use in managing crisis situations; 3) the processes families engage in to achieve satisfactory resolution; and 4) the outcome of these family efforts” (1983, p. 11).

This Double ABCX model is shown in Figure 2.

(1) Family demands: Pile-up, aA factor

The demands or needs of individuals, families and society are not stationary but change over time. Because family crises evolve and are resolved over a period of time, families seldom are dealing with a single stressor. Rather, they experience a pile-up of demands, particularly from a chronic stressor such as caring for a disabled family member or in the aftermath of a major stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). McCubbin and Patterson, suggested five broad types of stressors and strains contributing to a pile-up in the family system in a crisis situation: 1) the initial stressor and its hardships; 2) normative transitions; 3) prior strains; 4) the consequences of family efforts to cope; and 5) ambiguity, both intrafamily and social.

Stressor and its hardship. Inherent in the occurrence of a stressful event are specific hardships which increase and possibly intensify their difficulties families face.

Normative transitions. Families experience the normal growth and development of child members, of adult members, of the extended family, and family life cycle changes. Such transitions occur at the same time, but often quite independent of the initial stressor. These demands or opportunities place additional demands upon the family unit, since they also call for family adjustment and adaptation.

Prior strains. When a new stressor is experienced by the family, the prior strain, which
may be the result of unresolved hardships from earlier stressors or transitions or may be inherent ongoing roles, are exacerbated and families become aware of them as demands in and of themselves. The prior strains are not usually discrete events, rather, they emerge more covertly in the family.

Consequences of family efforts to cope. This includes stressors and strains which emerge from specific behaviors the family may use in an effort to cope with the crisis situation.

Intrafamily and social ambiguity. Boss and Greenberg (1984) have suggested that boundary ambiguity, a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system, is a major stressor. In addition to intrafamilial ambiguity, it is probable that families will face the added strain of social ambiguity in those situations where needed social prescriptions for crisis resolution are unclear or absent.

(2) Family adaptive resources, B factor

Resources are part of the family’s capabilities for meeting demands and needs in a crisis. Three kinds of resources affecting a family’s adaptation to crises are: 1) family members’ personal resources; 2) the family system’s internal resources; and 3) social support.

Personal resources refers to the broad range of characteristics of individual family members which are potentially available to any family member in times of crisis. There are four basic components of personal resources: financial, education, health, and psychological resources (Lazarus, 1966). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) have identified two personal psychological resources residing within the self which can reduce the stressful consequences of social strain: 1) self-esteem/positiveness of one’s attitude toward one’s self; and 2) mastery/the extent to which one perceives control over one’s life chances in contrast to being fatalistically ruled.

Family system resources evolved out of Pratt’s (1976) analysis of family health behavior. Pratt has described the “energized family” as being equipped with a fluid internal organization characterized by flexible role relationships and shared power: this organization promotes personal growth and member autonomy. Family cohesion and adaptability are two of the most important family resources in the management of crises (Olson & McCubbin, 1982). Family cohesion is defined as the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another and the degree of individual autonomy they experience. Variables that can be considered as family cohesion are emotional bonding, independence, boundaries, coalitions, time, space, friends, decision making, and interests and recreation. Family adaptability is defined as the ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress. Family power (assertiveness, control, discipline), negotiation styles, role relationships, relationship rules, and feedback are some of variables that are considered to be family adaptability.

Social support offers families information at an interpersonal level that provides 1) emotional support; 2) esteem support; and 3) network support. In general, social support serves as a protector against the effects of stressors and promotes recovery from stress or crises experienced in the
family.

(3) Family definition and meaning, cC factor

In the Double ABCX model, the cC factor is family definition and meaning. Specifically, in the face of crises and the demand for changes in the family unit, the family unit struggles to give new “meaning” to the situation. When families are able to redefine the situation and give it new meaning (i.e., purpose, value, understanding and direction), it works to: 1) clarify the issues, hardships, and tasks so as to render them more manageable and responsive to problem-solving efforts; 2) decrease the intensity of the emotional burdens associated with the crisis situation; and 3) encourage the family unit to carry on with its fundamental tasks of promoting members’ social and emotional development. Generally, family efforts to redefine a situation as a “challenge,” and “opportunity for growth,” or to bestow the crisis with a special meaning appear to facilitate family coping and adaptation.

(4) Family adaptation, xX factor

According to McCubbin and Patterson, there are three units of analysis in the Double ABCX model: 1) the individual family member, 2) the family unit, and 3) the community of which family members and the family unit are a part. Each of these units consists of both demands and capabilities. Family adaptation is achieved through reciprocal relationships, where the demands of one of these units are met by the capabilities at another, so as to achieve a “balance” simultaneously at two primary levels of interaction: between individual family members and the family unit and between the family unit and the community. In crisis situations, the family struggles to achieve a balance at both the individual–family and family community levels of family functioning.

Family adaptation is the central concept in the Double ABCX model used to describe the outcome of family efforts to achieve a new level of balance after a family crisis. The outcome is described in terms of continuum where the positive end is called bonadaptation and the negative end is maladaptation.

McCubbin later added family types to his model and introduced the Typology Model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1987 & 1989).

3. FAAR Model

The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model evolved out of Double ABCX model by McCubbin and Patterson in an effort to describe the processes by which families achieve precrisis adjustment and postcrisis adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Therefore, most concepts used in this model are basically the same as those of the Double ABCX model. In this section, an effort to highlight some new concepts will be made.

The family attempts to maintain balanced functioning or homeostasis by using its capabilities
(resources and coping behaviors) to meet its demands (stressors and strains). The meanings the family ascribes to what is happening to them (demands) and to what they have for dealing with it (capabilities) are critical factors in achieving balanced functioning (Patterson, 1988). These processes, which families use to achieve stability when they encounter stressful normative and nonnormative life events and transitions have two phases - adjustment and adaptation - separated by family crisis. The adjustment phase refers to a relatively stable period during which only minor changes are made as the family attempts to meet demands with existing (resistance) capabilities. The patterns of family interaction are predictable and stable. A crisis emerges in the family system when the nature and/or number of demands exceed the existing capabilities of the family and this imbalance persists. During the adaptation phase, the family attempts to restore homeostasis by 1) acquiring new (adaptive) resources and coping behaviors, 2) reducing the demands they must deal with, and/or 3) changing the way they view their situation.

Several levels of systems are considered where all of them are characterized by both demands and capabilities. They are individual family members, the family unit and its subsystems, and the community. Over time, families attempt to maintain or arrive at a balance by using capabilities from one level of the system to meet demands at another level. In addition, shared meanings evolve or disintegrate from transactions across these levels of systems. The FAAR model is presented in Figure 3.

(1) Demands

A family demand is defined the same way as in the Double ABC model, i.e., a stimulus or condition the produces or calls for change in the family system. These demands for change produce tension in the system that persists until some capability is directed toward meeting the demand. When there is no available capability, a state of stress arises. Thus, stress is as an actual or perceived demand-capability imbalance. There are two major conditions that give rise to demands: stressors and strains. Since these concepts are covered in the prior section, they will not be repeated here.

It appears that stressors interact with strains and contribute to demands in more than an additive way. When a new stressor occurs, it often exacerbates existing strains, making the family more aware of them as demands in and of themselves. In the FAAR model, three sources of demands impacting on the family system are emphasized: individual members of the family system, the family system and its subsystems, and the larger community in which the family resides.

Family response to any identified stressor can best be understood in the context of the multiple demands confronting a family at any point in time. Families seldom, if ever, are managing a single demand. Rather, they are continuously faced with multiple demands, the nature of which change over time as some demands are resolved and new ones emerge. Because demands accumulate and interact with each other, it does not necessarily require a major event to push the demand load beyond the family’s management threshold. Given this perspective on the multiple sources of demands confronting families, it is hard to conceive of a family that can meet
every demand perfectly. There always will be some unresolved residue of strain creating a certain level of stress in the family. The family may be able to maintain some kind of balanced functioning by using all or most of their existing capabilities to manage ongoing strains. However, they may have little reserve capability to absorb any additional demands, and hence would be more prone to crisis or exhaustion.

(2) Capabilities

McCubbin and Patterson (1983) have advanced their notion of family adaptive resources, the bB factor of Double ABCX model and developed the concept of capability. In the FAAR model, a capability is defined as a potentiality the family has available to it for meeting demands. Two major types of capabilities are emphasized by the authors: resources, which are what the family has, and coping behaviors, which are what the family does. A resource is a characteristic, trait, competency, or means of individual family members, the family unit, and the community. Resources may be tangible, such as money, or intangible, such as self-esteem. The process of acquiring and allocating resources for meeting demands is a critical aspect of the adjustment and adaptation response. Some resources are acquired as the result of good outcomes of family adjustment and family adaptation. And just as poor outcomes become feedback increasing demands, in the same way, good outcomes are feedback to the family system that increases their capabilities.

A coping behavior is defined as a specific effort (covert or overt) by which an individual (or a group of individuals such as the family) attempts to reduce or manage a demand. Specific coping behaviors can be grouped together into patterns. Coping patterns are more generalized ways of responding that transcend different kinds of situation.

The function of coping is to maintain or restore that balance between demands and resources. There are five ways this can be accomplished by the family system. 1) Coping can involve direct action to reduce the number and/or intensity of demands. 2) Coping can involve direct action to acquire additional resources not already available to the family. 3) Coping also involves maintaining existing resources so they can be allocated and reallocated to meet changing demands. 4) Managing the tension associated with ongoing strains is another necessary function of coping because of the inevitable residue of strain families have as part of their demands. 5) Coping can also involve cognitive appraisal to change the meaning of a situation to make it more manageable.

In the FAAR model, a distinction is made between resistance capabilities in the adjustment phase and adaptive capabilities in the adaptation phase. This distinction implies the dynamic process of family change over time as new resources are acquired and new coping behaviors are developed in response to new demands. It also implies that some resources and coping behaviors are more general, and can be used to meet most any type of demand. Self-esteem or family flexibility would fall into this category. Other capabilities may be more stressor- or strain-specific, such as support groups.
(3) Meanings

In the FAAR model, advancing from Double ABCX model which had general concept of meaning, there are two levels of definitions or meanings. At the first level, there are situational meanings, which include the family’s subjective definitions of their demands, their capabilities, and of these two factors as related to each other. At the second level, there are global meanings, which make up the family schema for how it views the relationship of family members to each other, and the relationship of the family unit to the larger community. The family schema is a global orientation that transcends any one experience and provides a template linking repeated patterns of response. There are five discrete dimensions of the family schema: shared purpose, collectivity, framability, relativism, and shared control.

Shared purpose is the extent to which the family has developed and invested itself in commitments, values, and goals that they share and that guide their life and activity. Collectivity refers to the degree to which the family unit sees itself as part of something larger than itself, like the community, nation, and the degree to which members of the family see themselves as part of the family unit. Framability is the degree to which the family views life situations optimistically and with hope while still retaining realism. Relativism refers to the degree to which the family views their life experience in the context of present circumstances in contrast to viewing experiences and their responses as absolute, prescribed, and invariant. Shared control is defined as the degree to which the family balances personal/family control with trust in others.

Demands, capabilities, and meaning are major constructs that interact with each other in the stress process. Strains emerge as a result of conflict in individual meanings, or the discrepancy between family-member meanings. The difficulty of demands involves subjective appraisal, and includes some evaluation of the adequacy of capabilities for dealing with them. Since each member of a family may differ in the subjective appraisal and evaluation of the adequacy of capabilities, accurate measure of these concepts will be very difficult.

(4) Cycles of family adjustment–crisis–adaptation

In the FAAR model, there is an emphasis on the importance of viewing the family’s response over time. Figure 4 illustrates the cyclic nature of FAAR model.

Families go through repeated cycles of adjustment–crisis–adaptation. Some cycles are triggered by normal developmental changes which produce normative crises or transitions, followed by periods of relative stability. In other instances, the nature of a major stressor, like the diagnosis of a chronic illness in a family member, triggers a crisis because the demands exceed the family’s capabilities, at least temporarily. During adaptation, balance is restored and relative stability ensues until the next crisis. It is important to note that there is always a certain amount of fluctuation and change occurring in the family system, even during the adjustment phase. The difference between adjustment fluctuation (which can be considered as continuous, first-order change) and adaptation change (discontinuous, second-order change) is the amount and type of change called for.

Adjustment phase. During the adjustment phase, the patterns of family interaction, family
roles, and rules of relationship have been established and guide day-to-day activity so that things are fairly predictable and members generally know what to expect from each other. During this adjustment phase, the family tries to deal with new demands by avoidance, elimination, or assimilation. Avoidance involves denying or ignoring the demand in the hope that it will go away or resolve itself and the family can remain the same. Elimination is an active effort to get rid of the demand, or at least redefine it so the family does not have to change. Assimilation involves accepting the demand into the family’s existing structure and patterns of interaction with only minor changes. How well the family is able to meet demands is reflected in their level of adjustment, which varies on a continuum from good to poor.

**Family crisis.** As already defined in the ABCX model, crisis is characterized by family disorganization and disruptiveness where old patterns and capabilities are no longer adequate and change is called for (Hill, 1958). A family crisis can be viewed as a turning point because the old family system no longer exists in the same way and something new must emerge.

**Adaptation phase.** Family adaptation, as it was defined in the Double ABCX model, a minimal discrepancy between demands and capabilities is sought at two primary levels of interaction: individual-to-family and family-to-community.

At the first level, a balance is sought between individual family member needs, tasks, and demands, and the family system’s capabilities to bring the necessary resources, coping behaviors, and perceptions into play for meeting member needs, and vice versa. The whole course of family development is an ongoing effort to shape and reshape the fit between the individual members and the family unit. In addition to individual-to-family fit, adaptation includes family-to-community fit. In order for the family to get what it needs for itself and its members from the larger community, the family has to reciprocate and give some of its capabilities to the community. Family-to-community fit occurs in many different contexts, such as work place, the school system, the church, the neighborhood, the peer group, and the subculture. Whenever, the family voluntarily or involuntarily changes one of these community environments, imbalance would most likely occur until a new fit could be achieved.

The concept of family adaptation is used to describe a continuum of outcomes that reflect family efforts to achieve a balance in functioning at the member-to-family and family-to-community levels. The positive end of the continuum, called bonadaptation, is characterized by 1) positive physical and mental health of individual family members, 2) the continued facilitation and promotion of individual member development, 3) optimal role functioning of individual members, 4) the maintenance of a family unit that can accomplish its life-cycle tasks, and 5) the maintenance of family integrity and sense of control over environmental influence. Family maladaptation, at the negative end of the continuum, is characterized by a continued imbalance at either level of family functioning, or the achievement of a balance at both levels but at a price in terms of 1) deterioration of individual member health and/or development or 2) deterioration of family-unit integrity, autonomy, or the ability to accomplish life-cycle tasks.
IV. Conclusion

In this paper, general stress theories and family stress models were presented to enhance understanding on how stress affects both the individual and the family. Based on above review of theories and models key concepts of stress and adjustment are identified. Brief definitions of the terms are presented below. These clearly defined variables may be used in the future research on stress and adjustment for utilization of more refined data collection and analysis methods.

**Family stress:** State which arises from an actual or perceived demand–capability imbalance in the family’s functioning and which is characterized by a non-specific demand for adaptive behavior.

**Crisis:** Characterized by the family’s inability to restore stability and the constant pressure to make changes in the family structure and/or patterns of interaction.

**Demand:** A stimulus or condition that produces or calls for change in the family system.

There are two major conditions that give rise to demand – stressors and strains.

**Stressor** – A life event that occurs at a discrete point in time and produces, or has the potential of producing, change in the family system.

**Strain** – A condition of felt tension associated with the need or desire to change something. Unlike stressors, strains usually do not have a discrete onset, but emerge more insidiously in the family.

**Capability:** A potentiality the family has available to it for meeting demands. There are two major types of capabilities – resources and coping behavior.

**Resource** – A characteristic, trait, competency, or means of individual family members, the family unit, and the community that is useful; it may be tangible or intangible.

**Coping behavior** – A specific effort by which an individual family member attempt to reduce or manage a demand.

**Meaning:** A family member’s definition of the event. There are two levels of definition – situational and global meanings.

**Situational meanings** – This includes the family member’s subjective definition of demands, capabilities, and of these two factors relative to each other.

**Global meanings** – This makes up the family schema for how it views the relationship of family members to each other and the relationship of the family unit to the larger community.

REFERENCES

IL, 1982.


Figure 1. Burr's Propositions About Families Under Stress
Figure 2. McCubbin & Patterson’s Double ABCX Model of Family Adaptation
Figure 3. FAAR - Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response
Figure 4. Cycles of Family Adjustment-Crisis-Adaptation