

# Becoming a Family

Parents' Stories  
and Their Implications  
for Practice, Policy, and Research



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2000

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Mahwah, New Jersey  
London

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## Telling the Family Story: The Process



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As chapter 1 indicated, when viewed from a systems perspective, the family is a complex, integrated whole whose patterns of interaction are circular rather than linear in form (Minuchin, 1988). What, then, are the appropriate strategies for studying the family's developmental process? Traditional research has focused on effects rather than process, constructing the family statistically, and has often been limited to exploring dyadic relationships, that is, subsystems of family units, rather than examining the whole. Thus, research is needed that

will take the family as a naturally occurring unit, gather data from multiple family members, and document the nature of their interactions over time (Minuchin, 1988). Giving "voice" to parents, as we have done in this book, allows them to tell their own story, that is, to define themselves, their family members, and the way they interact with their world, that impacts the thinking, affect, and behavior of family members (Watzlawick, 1996). The challenge in investigating families and their relationships both within and outside the family structure is "to try to assess not only the behavior of the participants but also the experience or meaning the interactions have for them" (Ratke-Yarrow, Richters, & Wilson, 1988, p. 61).

Our interest in the ways in which families develop stems from the notion that family dynamics and relationships affect the ideas and beliefs of children, the choices they make, and how they learn to define themselves within a family system (e.g., Eccles [Parsons], 1983). We began our research quantitatively with a set of ideas about how family environments affect children's self-perceptions and their achievement motivation. As we collected data from the families, however, we became intrigued by the themes the families themselves identified as important. We decided to add a qualitative component to our study in order to explore these themes in greater depth, allowing parents' own voices to be heard. This chapter describes how we gathered information from families, how this information was used to identify significant issues in family development, and how a similar "storytelling" process could be used in other settings to understand the meanings people assign to important events in their lives (Harold, Palmiter, Freedman-Doan, Lynch, & Eccles, 1993; Harold, Palmiter, Lynch, & Freedman-Doan, 1995).

Storytelling as a form of narrative is one type of data collection method that encourages individuals to give information about their lives in their own words. This qualitative method has become an increasingly popular tool for understanding human behavior and experience (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1984; McAdams, 1985) because individuals can relate the information about their experiences that is most relevant to them and organize this information in a way that is representative of how they see themselves (Veroff, Chadiha, Leber, & Sutherland, 1993a; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993b). We used an adaptation of narrative and storytelling techniques in our family development study to provide parents with an opportunity to talk about experiences and beliefs they found meaningful. With the storytelling technique, we gained information about how the parents viewed themselves as parents, how this view may have changed over time, and the events they thought led to these changes.

## THE FAMILIES

The families who told us their stories were selected from a large-scale longitudinal study conducted in 12 schools, in four primarily White, lower-middle to middle-class school districts in a midwestern urban community (Eccles & Blumenfeld, 1984; Eccles, Blumenfeld, Harold, & Wigfield, 1990). The study began with groups of children in kindergarten and the first and third grades, and followed them for 4 years, at which time the children were in the third, fourth, and sixth grades, thus spanning the elementary school years.

Approximately 900 students, two thirds of their parents, and their teachers participated by completing questionnaires and interviews. A unique opportunity existed within the larger study to examine sibling pairs. Because of the grades originally targeted (i.e., kindergarten, first, and third), there were several naturally occurring sibling pairs in the sample. We became interested in the differences that often characterize members of the same family, and that were already apparent in our findings.

How many times have you heard someone say, "I can't believe how different my children are—you'd think they had different parents and were raised in different homes!?" In fact, siblings can be quite different from each other in terms of their personalities and learning styles (Plomin & Foch, 1981; Scarr & Grajek, 1982). Some studies have found that siblings are no more similar to each other than randomly paired individuals (Plomin & Daniels, 1987). This influenced our decision to supplement our sample in the third year of the original study by adding the elementary-aged siblings of students already participating. The decision to limit the age span of the children was made to facilitate the comparison of the siblings within the family, that is, the likelihood of siblings experiencing a similar family environment. We also contacted the parents of these siblings to see if they would agree to be interviewed more extensively on the development of their families. In all, 88 families agreed to tell us their "story."

This chapter will include information from 60 participating families whose children were first and second in birth order. Of these families, there were stories from 38 sets of parents, 18 additional mothers, and 4 additional fathers. Thirty-seven pairs of parents were married and one set of parents was divorced at the time of the interview. Of the 18 additional mothers, 14 were married but their spouses declined to participate, 3 were divorced and were custodial parents, and one was widowed. All four of the additional fathers were married, but their spouses chose not to participate. The average age of the mothers was 34 years; for fathers it was 40 years.

Of the children who were represented in their parents' stories, 65 were girls and 55 were boys. Nineteen of the sibling pairs were both girls, 14 were both boys, 11 consisted of an older sister with a younger brother, and 16 consisted of an older brother with a younger sister. The average age of firstborn children at the time of the interviews was 10 years old and the average age of second-born children was 8 years old.

Approximately 47% of the families were Catholic, approximately 34% identified themselves as some denomination of Protestant, and another 19% listed no preference for their religion. The average education level for mothers was some college education, whereas the average education level for fathers was college graduate. About 60% of the mothers worked for pay, averaging between 21 and 30 hours of work per week, whereas 94% of the fathers worked for pay, averaging between 41 and 50 hours of work per week.

### GATHERING FAMILY STORIES

The family interview of the parents consisted of two parts: an open-ended narrative relating the development of the family in story form; and a structured interview containing both open- and close-ended questions asking the parents about each child's specific interests, abilities, and behaviors and then asking them to compare the siblings to each other on these dimensions.

Our process for having families tell us their stories grew out of a method developed by Veroff and his colleagues (1993a; 1993b). We first practiced using this method on several families who were not in the study. These practice interviews reinforced our belief that the family-story technique would give us information about how parents view their parenting, how their expectations about parenting have been influenced by having children, and how they have adapted their parenting to the needs and temperaments of their two children.

For the study, each parent was interviewed separately in a private room of their home where there were few interruptions or distractions. All interviews were tape recorded, after receiving participant consent, and later transcribed verbatim. The following instructions were given to the parents:

When we began this project we had several pairs of brothers and/or sisters (siblings) in the study because of the grades that we targeted. We noticed that some of these sib pairs were quite alike in their interests and abilities, but others were not. This year, we have asked many other families who have more than one child in elementary school if they would be interested in participating and, as you know, the purpose of this interview is to take a more in depth look at how children within the same family are both similar to and different from one another. The interview is divided into two sections: The first is more informal; the second asks you to respond to specific questions.

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To begin, I'd like to take about 20 minutes and ask you to tell me in your own words the story of your family. I have no set questions to ask you. I'd just like you to tell me about your family as if it were a story with a beginning, a middle, and how things will look in the future. Most parents enjoy talking about their family, and there is no right or wrong way to tell the story. Just tell me in any way that is most comfortable.

Parents were then shown the storyboard depicted in Fig. 2.1 (Harold et al., 1995) and told:

To help you think of your story, we've put together this storyboard that seems to describe most people's story line. You see that a story line for the formation of a family includes each of these parts [interviewer points to parts of the storyboard]: Your family relationships Prior to the Birth of Child A; Becoming the Parent of Child A [birth experiences and complications]; Living with Child A; Becoming the Parent of Child B [birth experiences and complications]; Living with Children A and B [then and now].

Interviewers also told parents that they were especially interested in changes parents had experienced in their family relationships, in their expectations of themselves as parents, and in their expectations for their children's development. Interviewers also asked parents how critical life events had affected everyone in the family. Finally, parents were told:

As you see, this is a very different way of getting a picture of the formation of a family [i.e., different from the close-ended questionnaires used previously in this study]. Everyone seems to come up with a different and interesting story. Please use the story line as a guide, a way to think of what to include in your story. Would you begin by talking about your family relationships prior to the birth of [first child's name]?

Interviewers were chosen purposely for their ability to collect information of this nature without allowing their own biases to influence what they heard. Interviewers were told to keep this part of the interview as open ended as possible. They were also told that what parents say spontaneously often provides an accurate reflection of their thoughts and feelings about their family's development. Interviewers were given suggestions on how to keep the story moving along and how to ask questions effectively without implying a specific response (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?" "And then what happened?").

We trained each interviewer extensively. During this training, each interviewer practiced the storytelling technique on nonparticipating families in preparation for beginning with the actual study participants. After the actual interviews began, regular group meetings were held with the interviewers to

give them an opportunity to discuss questions or problems, and also to allow them to get feedback on the interviews they had completed. In keeping with the principles of qualitative data collection, these meetings encouraged an interactive relationship between data collection and data analysis (Altheide, 1987; Berg, 1989).

### ORGANIZING AND CODING THE STORIES

In the next few sections of this chapter we discuss how we coded the family stories and how we then began to analyze some of the information we had gained. Although the technical aspects of this process will not be of interest to everyone, our intention is to provide a road map of the qualitative methods we used so that they will be useful to others in exploring the richness of these types of data.

We decided that the initial approach to organizing the stories should be influenced by the design of the collection process and our beginning assumptions. Thus, the stories were first divided into the initial theoretical classes outlined on the storyboard (e.g., Prior to the Birth of A). However, it became clear that the families had attached their own meanings to these classes. These meanings emerged by examining the story classes, and a set of categories were developed for each class (e.g., *Birth Decisions*). The characteristics of the particular categories (e.g., *planned or unplanned births*) and their connecting themes have been the result of an interactive process between our initial assumptions and the meanings of the various classes and categories to the families (Fig. 2.2).

#### Level I Coding—Classes

The storyboard placed a developmental framework on the process of the families telling their story. An important first step in coding the stories was to organize the information presented by the families into each class: Prior to the Birth of Child A, the Birth of Child A, Living with Child A, the Birth of Child B, and Living with Children A and B.

Two of the classes were coded on a copy of the family story by two of the coders. Each coder worked independently, using the definitions of the particular class outlined in the previous discussions. The other two coders coded three classes on a second copy of the family story, again working independently. Mothers' and fathers' stories were coded separately. Coders responsible for coding the mothers' stories for classes Prior to the Birth of A and Birth of B, for instance, coded the corresponding fathers' stories for Birth of A, Living with A, and Living with A and B. This helped to keep coders open to the content of the stories themselves, rather than the influences of other coders or other family members.

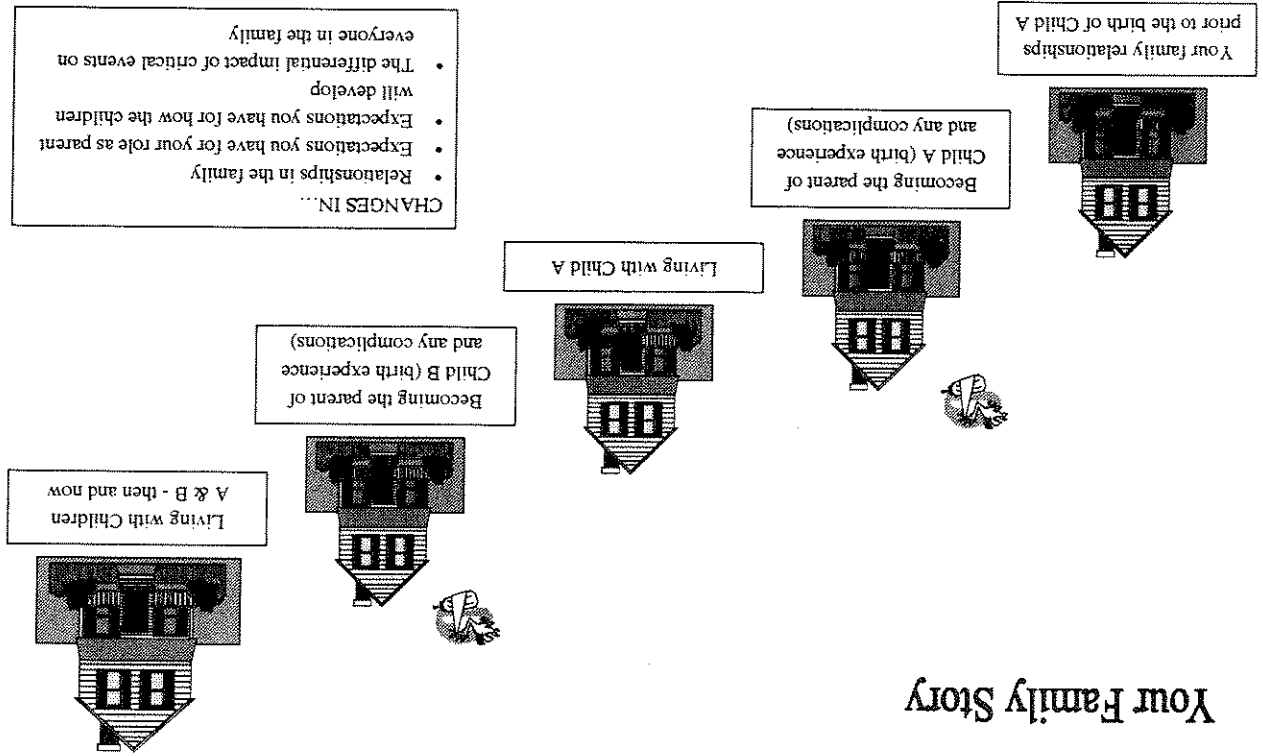


FIG. 2.1 Storyboard.

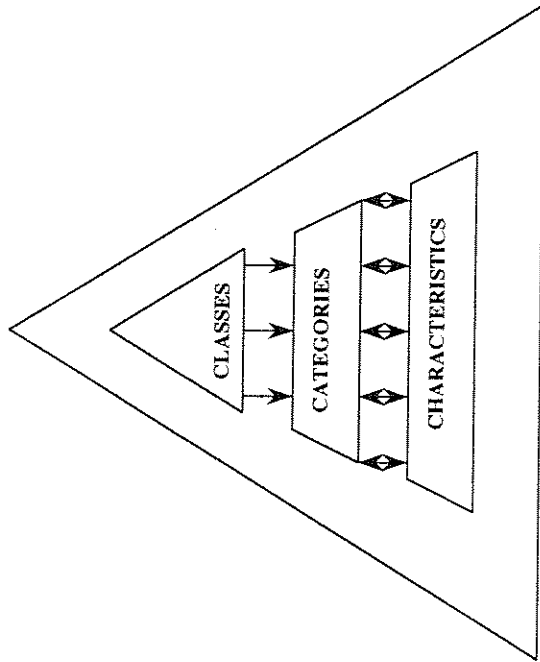


FIG. 2.2. Coding frame: Classes are divided into categories that are described by characteristics.

Each coder included in a class those statements that reflected that stage of family development. For example, comments about dating, the influence of extended families on marriage decisions, and descriptions of how the couple met were coded in Prior to the Birth of A. This approach is referred to by Altheide (1987) as conceptual coding, and requires that coders identify a series of comments that reflect information about a particular concept.

The amount of information within each class varied from family to family. For example, a couple whose first child was born 10 months after their marriage may have spent relatively little time commenting on the period Prior to the Birth of A. In addition, comments were sometimes made that seemed out of sequence, in that they referred to a time period different from the one currently being examined. However, these comments were often made in the context of the parents' current living situation. For example, a divorced mother describing Living with A and B, made the statement: "I am their sole disciplinarian." She followed this with a recollection from her childhood that was coded in the class Prior to the Birth of A: "And I remember when I was growing up, my mother's word never meant as much as my father's word. Dad held more power behind his words than Mom did." Although this might seem to be out of sequence, in that it came at the end of her story, it appeared that she said this as a

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comment on her role as a single parent to her two children. Conversely, some parents told about the time period Prior to the Birth of A and interjected comments about how something that occurred in their past related to their current parenting practices: "And I guess I was most disappointed in the experiences that were offered to me.... Because of that I've always wanted to kind of overdo for my own children." This comment was coded in Living with A and B.

Once each coder had assigned comments to a class, the coders compared their decisions. To accomplish this, the group read through each story, and each coder indicated which comments they had assigned to which classes. When the two primary coders were in agreement, the comment was placed in the class they had chosen. In cases of disagreement between the two primary coders, the other group members gave their opinions. This process increased the likelihood that there would be a shared understanding about which story data should be included in the coding of each class.

This coding process resulted in several important phenomena that would influence the analysis. First, classes were not mutually exclusive. It became clear that, as Altheide suggests, one item is frequently relevant for several purposes, in this case, for several classes (Altheide, 1987). This phenomenon was incorporated into the coding process during all of the stages. For example, statements regarding the birth and infancy of the second child may have been coded in the class Birth of B and in the class Living with A and B where data that compared the two children were coded:

And I did have another baby, and things were totally different with the second child. I think it was much more exhausting, it was more than twice the work. But the new baby slept better immediately, nursed real well, was a better baby, a much more pleasant baby.

The second phenomenon was that the information presented by the participants in their description of the various theoretical classes, or developmental stages, elicited content that had not been of primary interest to the researchers, but was significant to the parents who told their family stories. For example, while the researchers anticipated parents talking about planned or unplanned pregnancies, they had not identified some of the specific factors that parents felt precipitated the decision to have children, such as the purchase of a new home or the celebration of holidays. Quantitative, close ended questions about decisions to have children might not have tapped this rich and interesting data about birth decisions. This began an interplay between the deductive framework of the researchers and the topics, issues, and meanings that had been inductively derived from the participants themselves.

### Level II Coding—Categories and Characteristics

This first level of coding organized the data to make it more manageable and produced a framework that laid a path for the next level of analysis. In keeping with the commitment to utilize an interactive approach between deductive (the original research framework) and inductive (meanings that were identified by parents) analyses, and because the foundation for the Level I classes was the theoretical frame of the researchers, Level II coding began with a return to the stories. Coders reviewed the stories and recorded all topical areas discussed. Some of these were present in the initial description of the class developed by the researchers, and others came from the participants' discussion of issues that were important for them in that particular class. This list of topics became the *categories for Level II coding*.

The Level II coding process outlined here is modeled, in part, after Glaser and Strauss's (1967) description of constant comparison. Qualitative analysis takes a grounded approach to the data, expecting ideas, concepts, and even theories to develop from the data. But perhaps even more importantly, the approach of this project reflects the interaction of induction, deduction, and verification (Strauss, 1987). It demonstrates how concepts, issues, and hypotheses can be derived either from theory or from the data. Level II coding used a process of joint coding and analysis. Discussion and comparison were used to ground the theoretical classes to the data, thereby creating data-driven categories (Berg, 1989; Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

After organizing the stories into the five classes, the coders independently read the material in each of the five classes for mothers and fathers to get an overall sense of that particular class. The coders then met as a group and reviewed the first class, Prior to the Birth of A—mothers' stories. As this material was read aloud, each coder identified concepts, events, ideas, and/or feelings that emerged from within that class. This group review process allowed the coders to discuss and compare these issues, and develop a list. The interaction between the coders resulted in further clarification of several issues, and the addition of some that no individual coder had identified alone. Some examples of these issues were the motivation for having children, definitions of "good/bad" babies; characteristics of the birth/delivery; relationships with spouse, friends, and extended families; and work issues around pregnancy or birth.

Once the issues were identified, the coders examined the list looking for ways in which the various ideas fit together or reflected similar categories. Using the issues that had been lifted from the stories, the coders organized the second level of the coding frame around the following four *categories* that were

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identified across all classes: *Birth Issues, Family Life, Description or Expectations of the Children, and Work Life*.

The next step was to continue coding the data to this further level of specificity, organizing the issues within each class by *category*. The coders met as a group to read each class of material, line by line, and describe the nature of the issues in the class. Decisions to place issues within certain categories were discussed among the coders until consensus was reached regarding the appropriate placement. These issues within each *category* became the *characteristics* that defined that category.

The categories and their various characteristics allowed for a logical coding of the data for the first four classes. When beginning the coding process on the class Living with A and B, however, it became clear to the coders that this particular class contained a large amount of varying information. The decision was made to divide the Living with A and B class into more than the four categories. It was the category *Family Life* that seemed to hold the largest amount of varying information. For example, one mother told us:

I find that as they get older, more independent, there's more time for us. Uh, it's like today, he had the day off, I had the day off, so we spent the day together.

You know, [Child A] is in soccer, so we spend quite a bit of time at practice, at games and so forth. [Child B] is in Girl Scouts, I'm like assistant teacher to that. So, we do spend enough time with the kids. I don't want to miss the field trips and the involvement with the kids, you know.

So, I think some of my expectations as a parent, I feel I'm hard on myself, I feel the pressure of being a responsible parent, you know, because it's my job to raise them to be good adults. You know, I think that's the hardest part of parenting for me that, you know, I don't come on too strong so that I turn them off to the values that we have, that I don't, you know, that I do come on strong enough when I need to be the disciplinarian and that kind of thing.

This story typifies the varied topics parents included in describing their family life: the relationship between the spouses as well as with extended family members, the activities the children and family get involved in, and the parent's beliefs and values. Consequently, the coders divided the category *Family Life* into three separate categories: *Family Relationships, Family Activities, and Family Goals and Beliefs*. These categories were defined and described using the same process that was outlined previously. The coders then returned to the *Family Life* category in the other four classes and recoded the data into these three categories.

The only other difference for coding the class Living with A and B was the addition of comparative data regarding the two children. This particular cate-

gory is only appropriate for that class. There are now six categories for each class, with the exception of the class Living with A and B, which has seven. The final coding frame is shown in Table 2.1 (Harold et al., 1995).

### Level III Coding—Linkages and Connecting Themes

The data were then divided, utilizing the entire coding frame, into the 31 categories depicted in Table 2.1. The next step in the process was to examine meanings and connections between various sets of categories. The 31 categories were analyzed using a number of approaches. Relationships between the various categories were explored, looking both vertically and horizontally. For example, looking at how the families describe birth decisions across the developmental cycle of the family may tell us something about how decisions to have children change as the needs and demands of the families change. Looking at the relationships between categories during the developmental stage of the Birth of Child A, on the other hand, could give us insight into the preparation families do before they begin to have their children.

Additionally, data were examined in depth within a particular category prior to exploring linkages and connecting themes. For example, the decision to have children has provided an interesting example of data analysis within a particular class around a specific process identified by the parents. Information about the decision to have Child A was contained in the class Prior to the Birth of A. This class was read for mothers and fathers and coded for such comments, and the data were analyzed. Out of the 56 mothers, 26 indicated that their first pregnancy was planned, and 15 said it was unplanned. Four were unclear and 11 did not mention the decision. In contrast, 18 fathers said the pregnancy was planned, 7 said it was unplanned, and 17 did not mention a birth decision. Before hypothesizing about any possible meaning of the differences in numbers between mothers and fathers regarding the mention of birth decisions, it was important to examine the stories to see if anyone who did not mention a decision explicitly, did so implicitly. Of the 17 fathers, only 2 implied a decision making process, although they did not state how or when they enacted that process. For example, one of the fathers said: "We had more or less decided that we were going to have children early ... because I felt it would be easier to understand what the kids were thinking and why if we were younger than if we were older." Only one of the mothers who did not explicitly discuss their birth decision referred to motivation for having children: "Basically I grew up in a big family. I had like two sisters and four brothers. So I've always been around kids and I've always wanted a big family myself."

## 2. THE PROCESS

Thus, even considering implied decisions, mothers were still more likely to discuss the decision-making process than fathers. This may be because as child bearers, mothers are more cognizant of the birth decision process or may find it a more salient memory. However, the nature of qualitative stories where individuals may make conscious or unconscious choices about what to discuss makes it difficult to accurately interpret the absence of data on a particular topic.

Among those families who said they planned their first birth, the precipitating factors fell into seven different areas:

1. They had enough resources
2. Biological or physical reasons were compelling (e.g., the "biological clock was ticking")
3. They liked children
4. There had been a recent death in their family prompting the decision to honor or celebrate life with a new pregnancy
5. They experienced pressure from their family(ies) of origin
6. They felt they had attained a psychological readiness to have children
7. It was the correct timing in their work/career

Both mothers and fathers frequently endorsed the first two factors. However, more fathers mentioned being "psychologically ready" to take on family responsibilities, while more mothers discussed the pressure they felt from their family or their spouse's family of origin to produce children.

A careful analysis of the small number of stories where parents indicated that the birth of Child A was unplanned versus those who said it was planned revealed no systematic differences in how the child or their relationship with the child were described. The planfulness of the birth decision may also be diagnostic of the parents' relationship. For example, do parents who plan when to have children communicate more effectively than parents who do not plan? Although these data cannot answer this question conclusively, there were some indications that parents who describe the process as planned, continue to work at their relationship as an entity separate from their roles as parents and family members:

We had waited 5 years before we had any kids and they used to refer to us as the married single people... But we started thinking about if we wanted to have kids ... and we talked about what it was going to be like. Your lifestyle changes as soon as you have a kid ... You know we traveled an awful lot still. We would still take the kid with us, and we made time to make sure we always went on vacation by ourselves. So we tried not to let the baby dominate our life.





The similarities and differences in the stories that couples tell about their birth decision process can also be examined. The following process discussed by one couple demonstrates their different views or memories of what that time was like for them:

*Mother.* Well, my husband and I were married for 6 years before we had [Child A]. And that time was spent working. We both had jobs and we worked until we got enough money to buy the house, and we got the house and worked on it for a while and then we were ready to start a family so we had [Child A] and she was born a month before she was expected so we've been catching up ever since it seems like.

*Father.* I didn't really care to have kids until my sister-in-law got divorced. She had a 3-year-old and a 3-month-old, and he just left. Then she moved in the house, so I started helping out and taking care of the kids and found out I liked it. I finally decided to myself, hey, I want to have kids. And then we decided to try, took us a while. And we had [Child A], and that was a big event.

Two questions raised by the this example are whether the differences in their recollections reflect individual differences between couples (e.g., communication patterns or differences in interpretation of events), or whether the differences reflect how gender plays a role in viewing life events. It is interesting to note that in discussing resources, this mother's story is representative of the reasons that 31% of mothers (as compared to 17% of the fathers) gave for planning to have their first child. This father's story discusses his psychological readiness to have children and is indicative of the reasons that 22% of the fathers (as compared to 8% of the mothers) gave for planning their first child. This suggests that men and women may find different issues salient in their view of family development.

The above examples demonstrate how a thick, richer picture of family development begins to emerge from the stories. These findings can be compared to existing research and theory. Furthermore, quantitative analyses linking these data with data collected from parents and their children for the larger study may reveal how birth decisions impact on other family development issues.

It is also possible to analyze the data by examining an issue important to how the family relates to external people and/or institutions, such as will be found in chapter 6, "Job Talk: The Role of Work in Family Life." As the parents talk about the development of their family, they frequently refer to the interaction between that development and the rest of the social structure within which they live. For example, what have been the influences of various stages of family development on the work lives of men and women, and vice versa. Is the im-

port different for men than for women? How do the experiences of this group of families compare to those of families in other studies?

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter describes a process for investigating the development of families as described by the parents themselves. The methods of both data collection and analysis have allowed the meanings that parents attach to family development to emerge from the data. The large number of interviews conducted as well as the use of constant comparison between these meanings and the theoretical frame of the researchers provide a thick data set that allows for the investigation of many aspects of family life and development. In the following chapters, we relate the information we gained from parents as they discussed such issues as deciding to become parents and creating a family identity; the causes for the similarities or differences they see in their children; changes in their relationship with each other, with their extended families, and with their friends after they became parents; and, for mothers, making the decision about when, or if, to return to work.

Documenting the methodological process that was followed is, in and of itself, an important goal of this chapter. Although much has been written that uses qualitative methods, fewer writings detail the specific process that is used to collect, organize, and analyze such data. Sharing this information could be helpful for both researchers and practitioners. For example, the process described herein is particularly well suited to the collection, organization, and analysis of client data secured through clinical practice. What follows is a brief description of two client populations with which this method could be incorporated effectively, not only to increase immediate knowledge about the clients, but also to allow the practitioners to play a more integral role in on-going research, which might eventually impact on policy (see Harold et al., 1995 for a more complete discussion of this topic).

### Application for Use With Adoptive Families

Research evaluating the impact of adoptive family characteristics on adoption disruption has been contradictory. Some studies suggest that the presence of other biological children in the home increases the likelihood of disruption, whereas other studies suggest just the opposite. The income level of families has also been found to be a predictor of both the disruption and preservation of the adoption (Westhues & Cohen, 1990). Clear preferences about the characteristics of the child on the part of the adoptive family seem to support a sus-

tained adoption, if the list of preferences does not get too long or too specific (Partridge, Hornby, & McDonald, 1986). The involvement of the adoptive father also seems to be a strong predictor for a positive outcome in two-parent adoptive families (Partridge et al., 1986; Westhues & Cohen, 1990).

Adoption workers and supervisors continue to struggle with how these findings can inform practice. The contradictory results found in aggregate research also appear in case-by-case supervision, leaving adoption workers feeling uncertain about which characteristics of children, families, or their own practice can lead to a greater likelihood that an adoption will have a successful outcome. There is little research regarding the process of adoption placement (Meezan & Shireman, 1985; Westhues & Cohen, 1990). Because the impact of demographic variables are contradictory, it suggests that the process itself may be as significant as the characteristics of those who engage in it. An adaptation of the family storyboard, as seen in Fig. 2.3 (Harold et al., 1995) could be helpful both to individual practitioners and families in understanding the process dynamics in adoptive placements of special needs children. Information from this process could also lead to the development of themes and issues that families found significant in the process of their individual adoption situation.

Several questions begin to emerge. What are the dynamics of the placement process and integration of the child into the family that affect the success of that placement? How do the qualities of the adoptive family members interact with the qualities of the child and the services of the agency to result in successful adoptive placements? When participants are encouraged to "tell their family story," what themes or key issues emerge from that open recounting of the process? Is there a set of dynamics or components in the adoption process that can be identified and quantified, and then used by adoption practitioners to evaluate a placement that is being considered?

Given the inconsistent findings regarding the impact of family dynamics on the success of an adoptive placement, and the level of information about the process of the adoption itself, this method offers an excellent technique to inform adoption practice. The information would shed light on individual, clinical practice with adoptive families, and on the field of adoption practice as a whole.

### Application to the Field of Chemical Dependency

As with adoption agencies, the process outlined in this chapter can provide an innovative structure for gathering extensive client life-history information within chemical dependency treatment settings. Such an extensive history is important, especially in light of recent research suggesting that, to be effective, treatment must begin with an examination of historical and current biological,

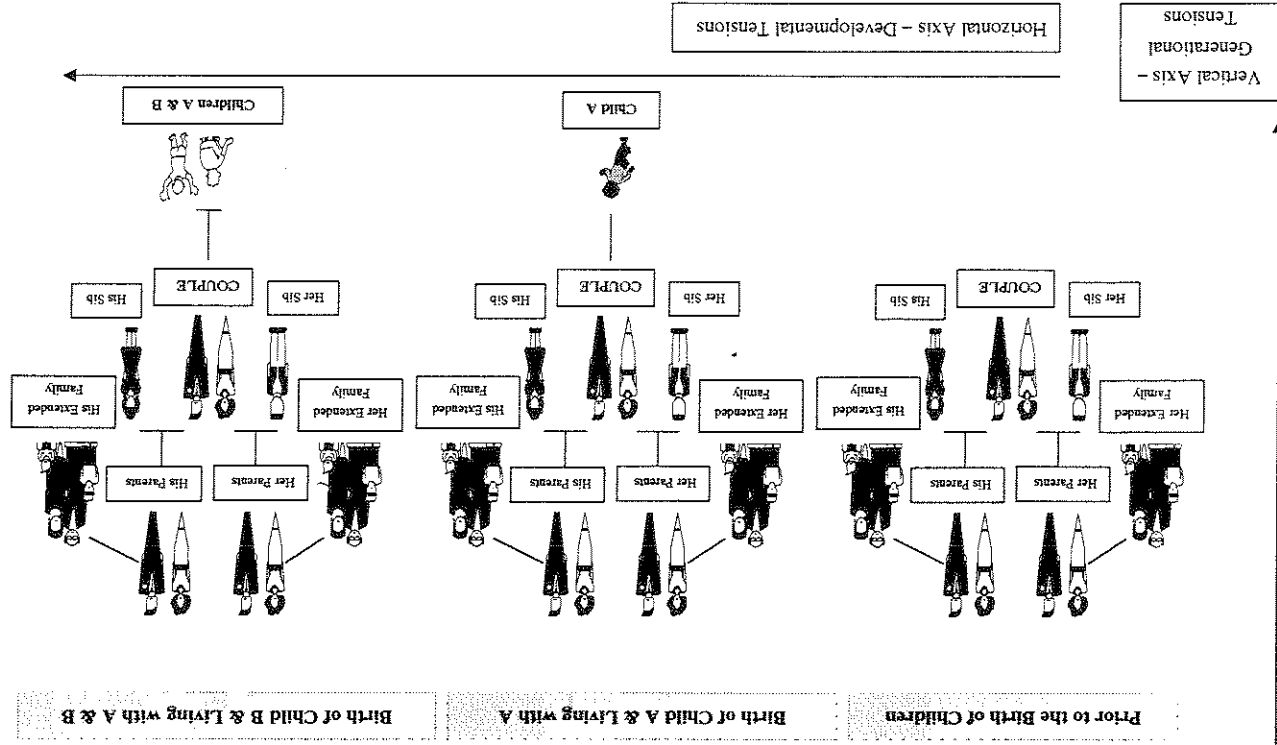


FIG. 2.3. The adoption story board

psychological, and social functioning. This bio/psycho/social history helps not only to determine the effects of the chemical use on each area of functioning, but also to identify those areas that may either facilitate or hamper recovery (Henderson & Anderson, 1989; Isaacson, 1991; Nirenberg & Maisto, 1990; Polcin, 1992; Smith, Frawley, & Howard, 1991; Smith & Margolis, 1991; Tarter, 1990; Weiner, Wallen, Wilson, & Deal, 1991).

Through the use of "storytelling," clients can provide a bio/psycho/social history of the development of their addiction in a way that is most congruent and meaningful to them. The practitioner would gain immediate knowledge about the events and influences the client believes to be most significant in shaping their addiction while also identifying current strengths and limitations in client functioning.

Once again, the storyboard could be adapted to establish parameters for the information to be provided by the client, utilizing stages/classes such as: Before the Use of Substances; Experimentation with Substances; Increased Use; Problems Due to Use; Acknowledged addiction; Living with addiction, etc. This would insure that certain topical areas are addressed, such as the history and pattern of drug use, the client's level of denial regarding the addiction and the motivation for treatment, at the same time also providing enough flexibility for the client to focus on the content most relevant to her or him.

The practitioner gains individualized information about how the client frames both the antecedents to and the present context of the addiction, as well as the client's current beliefs regarding her/his level of functioning. This information is important to the practitioner in formulating the diagnosis, the prognosis, and the treatment plan. Using more traditional means of data collection may result in information that is less personalized and thus lacks "depth." Consequently, clients who initially look very similar on paper may, in reality, have significant differences that would greatly influence treatment.

For example, when filling out an initial clinical questionnaire, two clients may both indicate that they began drinking at age 16, that they have recently lost a job, and that they currently drink every day. Although these clients may initially look very similar, the meaning each client attaches to this information will have a significant impact on treatment. Thus, Client A may perceive sixteen as an early age at which to start drinking, may attribute her/his recent job loss to her/his drinking, and may believe daily drinking is excessive. Client B, on the other hand, may believe sixteen is a normal age at which to begin drinking, may blame his/her job loss on his/her boss, and may believe daily drinking is not excessive at all. Obviously, these clients would have very different treatment plans.

## 2. THE PROCESS

Due to its capacity to function as both a practice and a research method, the process of information gathering outlined in this paper provides a rich source of data useful to both the researcher and the practitioner. In turn, the process strengthens the link between researcher and practitioner, and could lead to the development of policy based on the findings, i.e., the stories of the subjects, and their interpretations.

The process of encoding themes across parents' stories, as previously discussed, was used by each author in the following chapters to highlight areas of interest and concern for families. Although the chapters discuss different topics, they are all organized around the developmental time line of the storyboard. Each chapter also identifies themes, gives examples of the parents' statements reflecting these themes; and, based on these statements and the literature, discusses possible implications of these issues for practice, policy, and research developments.

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