Using Grounded Theory to Understand Resiliency in Pre-Teen Children of High-Conflict Families

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Using grounded theory, this study identified factors that contributed to children's ability to utilize their resilient attributes. Children between the ages of 9 and 12 from high-conflict separated or divorced families participated in a study that examined how family and community interactions promote resilient behaviour. Substantive-level theory gained from this study yielded that children from separated or divorced, high-conflict families exhibit resilient characteristics when family cohesion is used to incorporate additional family support systems, particularly step-parents and extended family members. External support systems, particularly peers, augment these resilient characteristics. In order to build resilience in pre-teen children parents need to encourage relationships with external and internal support systems. Key Words: Grounded Theory, High-Conflict Families, Separation and Divorce, Resilience, and Pre-Teen Children

Research Approach and Rationale

Using a qualitative approach, this study incorporated the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) as a way of assessing resilient attributes of pre-teen children. To more fully understand the impact of ongoing interparental conflict on children, I utilized data grounded in the field to formulate a substantive-level theory regarding resiliency within children from high-conflict separated or divorced families. More specifically, I focused on three main questions. The first question examined how family and community interactions promote resilient behaviours in children within this population. Secondly, this study attempted to understand both how the children perceive their parents' ongoing conflict and how they understand the mediating attempts of both family and community members. The third question was designed to identify barriers to resiliency as experienced by these children and how they attempted to overcome these barriers.

In order to understand children's ideas and definitions of the essence of resilience, I utilized an epistemological approach that integrates a social constructionist framework. Social constructionism "references knowledge neither in the observed nor the observer, but rather in the place between the two, in the social arena among interpreting subjects" (Pare, 1995, p. 5). "Social construction theory sees meaning as a fluid process of constantly changing narratives that are socially derived and exist in language" (Slovik & Griffith, 1992, p. 232). It emphasizes social interaction as a basis for creating meaning. Social constructionism uses "the intersubjective influence of language and culture, as well as the hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation" (Pare, p. 5). If our experience

is regarded as the basis of meaning, discussing this experience through our language gives us a way of understanding the meaning of the experience. "People consider and reconsider reality through their conceptions of and experiences with it. It is not discovered; rather, it is created and recreated" (Laird, 1995, p. 152). "Realities are socially constructed, constituted through language and organized and maintained through narrative" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 22). In other words, realities are organized and maintained through stories. These stories represent how people know themselves and their worlds. Within this study the stories told by the children represented their ideas of resilience and how they have managed to adapt to the ongoing parental conflict. As well, the parents conveyed ideas and insights through their stories about the relationship between the two parents and how this impacted on the family.

Social constructionism provides the broad framework for this study, whereas qualitative methods reflect the approach to design and data collection. Social constructs can be measured only by understanding context, and this is inconsistent with a quantitative approach. Within this study, a qualitative method of social inquiry allowed the researcher to ask questions, observe, and permit children to be part of the process by hearing their stories.

In general, research in resilience has concentrated on risk mechanisms and protective factors. Researchers (e.g., Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001) undertook long-term, prospective studies. They studied how people overcame adversity over many years, while other research has focused on the interaction between parental conflict and children's coping strategies (Cummings & Davis, 1994; Emery, 1999; Radovanovic, 1993). Research on family stress has usually been conducted through large-scale surveys and standardized instruments (Gilgun, 1999). It is difficult to find research that has examined how family interaction has promoted particular protective factors within the context of high-conflict, separated families. In order to understand both risk mechanisms and protective factors from an individual and family perspective, we need to look more closely at how the family interacts within this context.

Within this study, family's interaction was used as a way of understanding the meaning of the child's behaviour. As a way of gaining an understanding of the family interaction, I asked the parents how the child interacted with siblings, step-parents, or other members of a newly blended family. Other questions focused on the interaction between the parent and child, and how the parent assisted the child in his/her adaptation to the separation.

In order to ensure that policies and programs are properly developed, it is important to understand the way family members understand the concept of resilience. Questions were asked of both the children and parents in order to gain ideas about the child's resilience and coping abilities. For example, the children were asked about peer and community resources, and if these resources helped them to cope. Parents were also asked how their child coped with the ongoing conflict in the family. This allowed for the study to focus on the transactional assessment of family stress and resilience with particular emphasis on resilient characteristics of the children. The integration of knowledge from the current research on separated or divorced high-conflict families, and a better understanding of the strengths of these children that incorporate the resiliency perspective, was a targeted outcome with this study. New information from this study suggested how children use protective factors to enhance their resiliency within the

context of ongoing parental conflict. New issues connected with risk factors and protective factors emerged from the data analysis. The results from the analysis enabled the researcher to link ideas from existing theories with new thoughts related to how children cope with ongoing interparental conflict.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a method of social inquiry associated with a qualitative approach to research. This inductive research process utilizes generalized knowledge that is derived from specific observations of phenomena from the field. In turn, this can be used to build theory. For example, grounded theorists aim to create theoretical categories from collected data and then analyze relationships between key categories (Charmaz, 1990). Indeed, the main purpose of using a grounded theory approach is to develop theory through understanding concepts that are related by means of statements of relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using the concepts from grounded theory, this study starts from understanding the experience of the research participants (i.e., how they construct their worlds). The data analysis stage focused on finding recurrent themes or issues in the data, and finally into developing or refining a theory about the phenomenon.

Within the grounded theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) there are three basic elements. They are referred to as concepts, categories, and propositions. According to Strauss and Corbin, it is from the conceptualization of the data, not the actual data per se, that theory is developed. Within this study, the research considered the interactions of family members in the context of high-conflict separated parents. Data gained from describing these interactions was used as a background to explore the phenomenon of resilience within the children of these families. From this background, specific categories related to protective factors emerged. For example, ideas associated with the external support systems of the children emerged as a category. Part of this analysis included discovering the relationships amongst and then between the categories. For example, included in the category of "post-separation changes" were ideas associated with the differences in communication as well as how the parents coped with the separation. The relationships defined within this category allowed for a thorough examination of the issues and how they then fit with other categories. Grounded theory methodology allows for the development of specific relationships between categories as a way to substantiate an emerging hypothesis from the data. The final phase of the research analysis consisted of constructing a proposition and substantive-level theory about the interactions of family members and how this relates to the phenomenon of resilience.

Location

Within qualitative research, the researcher is a primary research instrument. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to have a thorough understanding of the issues related to the study. Also, well-developed interview techniques and observational skills are important tools to bring to this type of study.

I worked at the study site, for approximately 15 years in the capacity of mediator, assessor, and counsellor. Clinical work included interviewing children, assessing family situations, and becoming grounded in the issues facing separated and divorcing families. While assessing family situations, it is necessary to observe the family interactions as

well as ask pertinent questions relating to a newly blended family or ongoing conflict between the parents. Working with families in mediation increases communication and interviewing skills. This combined experience has allowed for a thorough understanding of the day-to-day issues facing families who continue to experience post-separation conflict. As well, it has helped to develop the necessary skills to move into research in this area. For example, in this study in-depth interviews were completed with parents, children, extended family members, and community members. Experience in interviewing and working with this population allowed me to ask the necessary questions to obtain the information needed for this study. Clinical expertise in this area was helpful in understanding the issues associated with the family interactions that in turn produced effective research questions. However, due to the need to keep clinical work and research as separate as possible, it was necessary for ongoing vigilance while interviewing and meeting with family members. For example, during some interviews many of the parents were still having a difficult time finding appropriate ways to communicate with the other parent. A clinically-focused interview would have involved intervention activities such as offering information or talking about how to make some changes. However, as this was a research interview, it required some effort to simply obtain the information needed for the study and refrain from other comments or suggestions. Referrals to appropriate counselling services were then made after the interviews were completed.

Data-Gathering Methods

Approval of the procedures used in conducting this research was obtained from the Ethics Protocol Submission Committee at the University of Manitoba. These included using consent forms for the individual interviews, with both the children and parents. As well, consent forms were signed by participants in the focus group. Participants for this study were recruited through putting up notices; advertising the study at community agencies, counseling centres, parent education seminars; and through referrals by counselors working with this population.

Within grounded theory, generating theory is "grounded" in semi-structured interviews, field-work observations, case-study documentation, and other forms of textual material (Pidgeon, 1996). The grounded theory approach is based on the notion that data should be collected and analyzed in a way that allows the basic social, psychological, and structural processes inherent in a given phenomenon to emerge naturally. In order to do so, family or court files pertinent to the study were reviewed. These reviews gave background information on issues connected with the family with respect to the conflict. It also provided information related to past attempts at resolution of the conflict, interactions of various family members, or how the children had witnessed the conflict. At times it provided information with respect to the barriers of children utilizing protective factors. Alternatively, it provided information of conflict resolution mechanisms that helped the children find other ways of coping. As well, it provided some information on socio-economic status and the cultural background of the participants. Pertinent information from the file was used as field notes, transcribed, and then compiled as raw data in conjunction with information gained through both the individual interviews and the focus group.

The main questions of this research were linked to understanding which mediating factors within the family and the community promotes resilience in children within these families and, secondly, how the children perceive them. The other component of this study explored the barriers to resilient behaviour for the children. As a way of exploring the complexities of this phenomenon, questions were asked of the research participants. Questions for the parents included information on the interparental conflict prior to the separation, changes since the separation, and how the child had adapted to the separation. These questions were asked in semi-structured interviews, both with the parents and the children. Questions for the children were divided into five sections. The first one included asking about their situation prior to the separation (e.g., what they remembered about their parents before the separation). The second section included questions about the changes since the separation and what helped them cope with those changes. The third section included questions about how the children coped with the ongoing parental conflict, (e.g., what they did to make themselves feel better when their parents were in conflict). The fourth section focused on the barriers to the children coping with the ongoing parental conflict (e.g., what kept them from doing as well as they could at school or at home). The final section focused on peer and community resources (e.g., which people have been the most helpful since the separation as well as questions about extracurricular activities and relationships with community members). When the children talked about witnessing conflict between their parents they also showed elements of individual strengths, or individual ways of coping, one of the categories eventually identified from the data. As an example, one child stated,

> When my parents argued, I just tried to close the door and not listen. My sister and I would just go to her room. We would listen to music and try not to hear what was going on between my parents.

Another child stated that he tried to get away from his parents' conflict because "there was no point in getting involved and it's best if they stop the argument themselves so they can learn something from that." This boy showed a high level of analytical sophistication, as he was able to understand the need for his parents to work out the issues between them. Both these comments show that the children were able to use their individual strengths and resources to distance themselves from the interparental conflict. The answers to these questions formed much of the data for the analysis of this research. Within the grounded theory approach it is important to saturate all the categories in order to ensure that all the topics are fully explored. This sometimes required asking different or related questions to better understand the essence of resilience. Thus, as the research process evolved, I often asked additional questions of the participants.

Collateral informants were part of the data collection process. Each family identified external collateral (e.g., teacher, counsellor, grandparent that had been involved with the child over the past year). This person was interviewed as a way of further understanding the issues. In total, 38 interviews were completed with family members and collateral contacts.

A final way of collecting data was through a focus group with the parents. A focus group allowed the parents to discuss the relevant issues and gave the researcher the ability to arrive at conclusions that moved beyond information from individual

interviews. This way of collecting information augmented the existing data. It was also used as a form of member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility is through member checks" (p. 314). This involves going back to the research participants after initial coding and categorizing is complete, and then asking the participants if the information adequately states what they had intended. This was done with the children, parents, and collateral contacts in this study. This ensured that previously collected data was organized and coded as the participants had intended. The focus group was conducted after all the individual interviews were completed. By this time, categories had begun to emerge from the analysis. Using the concept of theoretical saturation, additional questions were asked in an effort to saturate the evolving categories obtained from previous data. The information obtained was helpful both in saturating the existing categories and building additional ones. The questions were structured as open-ended ones in an effort to allow the parents more options in how to discuss the issues relevant to the subject matter. Using open-ended questions proved helpful to the generation of ideas amongst the group participants. For example, when a question was framed using the words "how did that work for your family," it generated a great deal of information about the issues.

Sample Characteristics

Twelve families participated in this research study. Except for 2 families, one parent was interviewed from each family. In the other 2 families, both parents were interviewed. One child between the age of 9 and 12 was interviewed from each family. The gender breakdown of the children interviewed was four boys and eight girls. Of the children interviewed, there were three 9-year olds, four 10-year olds, four 11-year olds, and one 12-year old, the mean being 10.25 years of age.

Of the 12 families involved in this study, half the parents were in common law unions and half were married during the time they were together. The time spent in their relationships ranged from 8 months to 13 years, and the mean was 5.9 years. The length of time these parents were separated ranged from 18 months to 13 years. The average length of separation was 6.2 years. The number of children in the families ranged from one to three, with the mean being 1.5 children per family. In 7 of the 12 families both parents were living with new partners. In 3 families, only the mother was with a new partner and in one family only the father was in a new relationship. In the remaining family both the mother and father have remained single since the separation.

The families were asked about their cultural background. Out of the 12 families both parents from 2 families stated that they were of Aboriginal descent. Both parents from another family immigrated from Poland. The parents from the other families were all born in Canada and they were Caucasian.

With respect to the custodial arrangements for the children, the parents from 4 families had joint custody; in 3 families there were joint custody agreements with one parent having final decision-making authority. In the other four families one parent had sole custody.

Results from Open Coding

This first step in the analysis of the data, open coding, included the examination of the transcribed texts of all the information collected in the data collection phase of the study, including the interviews, focus group, and document review. Over 375 individual concepts or ideas expressed by the parents, the children, the focus group, or file documentation were coded from the raw data. For example, parents' description of the conflict or children witnessing conflict between their parents was highlighted as coded data. When the children talked about witnessing conflict between their parents, they also showed elements of individual strengths, or individual ways of coping, one of the categories eventually identified from the data. As an example, one child stated,

> When my parents argued, I just tried to close the door and not listen. My sister and I would just go to her room. We would listen to music and try not to hear what was going on between my parents.

Data were then grouped into categories. In other words, the codes were clustered into related categories. Twenty-four categories were developed from the initial 375 individual concepts. The task was to find ways of describing the process. This includes specific words or phrases describing the interactions and finding categories that encompass these concepts. For example, one category was entitled "Post-separation changes." This category described the process and the interactions of both the parents and children that changed after the separation. These changes were related to communication, resolution of issues, and access between the child and non-custodial parent. This category represents a set of concepts directed to a particular process (i.e., changes since the separation).

Five categories appeared to cover the general ideas uncovered from the initial coding process. The remaining categories are referred to as sub-categories of these concepts. These sub-categories are included in the ideas for the key concept of that main category. The sub-categories fit along a continuum within the main category (i.e., they are listed according to how they fit into the key concept). The sub-categories include data related to the category. However, this information may not hold as much interest or relevance towards answering the research questions. Alternatively, the sub-categories may provide more of a description or explanation of the main category. For example, in the category, "interparental conflict," sub-categories may explain the scope, nature, and level of the conflict.

The five categories are listed below along with their sub-categories. The sub-categories are listed in the relative order of their significance to the overall category. For example, in the category "Internal support systems of the child," concepts associated with "child's strengths" were discussed in greater depth by both the children and the parents, than concepts associated with "coping skills of the child." As well, the hierarchy of the listed categories denotes the frequency counts of how often codes occurred (i.e., the sub-category listed first suggests more data was collected in this area).

1. *Interparental conflict.* The sub-categories are: children witnessing conflict and barriers to resilient behaviour. As an example, one child stated, "When my parents argue, I try to stop them sometimes. Like I won't talk to each one of them. Sometimes I just wait until everything stops. And sometimes if my mom's hurt I'll try and make her feel better."

2. *Post-separation changes.* The sub-categories include: communication, differences since the separation, types of access, relationship with the other parent, parents' coping, and children's advice. One child stated, "Since the separation my parents get along better, they can talk with each other at my extra-curricular activities." Another child stated, "my parents get along better now than before the separation."

3. *Internal support systems of child.* The sub-categories include: children's assets, coping skills of child, how children handle stress, how children handle conflict, and dreams of child. Some examples are, children playing with their animals, listening to music, or escaping to their room when they needed a place of refuge. One parent stated, "His strengths are that he is in a superior range of vocabulary and verbal comprehension. He is very intelligent."

4. *External support systems.* The sub-categories include social supports, collateral supports, and cultural and religious affiliation. Examples were found through children's stories of their relationships with peers, the importance of being with friends or attending peer functions. Other children described positive experiences with teachers and counselors.

5. *Family strengths.* The sub-categories include family coherence, step-parent involvement, extended family involvement, resolution of issues, and children's advice. For example, one child stated, "the first person I now turn to for help is my step-mother." Another child stated, "I feel good when I am able to spend time with my family, especially my mother and step-father." Another child stated that she "enjoys having two different homes as it gives her two spaces to call her own." She also stated, "My step-grandparents are extremely important to me because they make me feel secure."

Results from Axial Coding

In grounded theory methodology axial coding follows open coding. It allows the researcher to begin identifying the central phenomenon from the categories and defining how this category is related to the others. In grounded theory methodology the idea of "constant comparison" is used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to identify the central phenomenon in this study the initial categories needed to be refined. While constant comparison begins with sifting through information gained in the interviews, it continues with comparing data found in various categories. Some categories seemed to be connected, that is they pertained to the same phenomenon. For example, the area of conflict appeared to fit in one category, but related concepts included the children witnessing conflict as well as barriers to resilience. The concept of barriers was included, as many of the ideas expressed about these barriers, by both the parents and the children, suggested that ongoing interparental conflict was one of the key barriers to children being able to exhibit resilient characteristics. This category was given the name of "interparental conflict" as it now encompassed all the concepts pertaining to conflict

between parents. After some reflection and comparison of the initial categories, further categorizing was completed, yielding increasingly complex and inclusive categories. The categories that appeared to fit together were regrouped with some of the labels changed to encompass the general phenomena of that category.

In this study family strengths emerged as the central category. From that category, connections were drawn to other categories. Interrelationships between the various categories are described and examined.

The phrase "paradigm model" is used in conjunction with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (1998) defines this model as a "coding paradigm." It reflects how data becomes organized by linking causal conditions or antecedent conditions that become part of the phenomenon. This is considered within a particular context. The intervening conditions and actions, or interactions, within this context help to determine the consequences. Ideas gained through coding the data give rise to more questions. These questions can be asked in a different context with the participants in an attempt to gain a further understanding of the phenomenon. In this study the focus group allowed the researcher to ask questions that had arisen from the initial coding of the interviews, as the focus group occurred after the individual interviews. In the end, the "selective coding" determines the core category and relates it to the other categories, allowing for a way of determining how the final theory will be shaped.

Through the process of axial coding a central phenomenon from one of the five main categories was then systematically related to the central phenomenon of the other categories. This is seen through the "Coding Paradigm" in Figure 1.
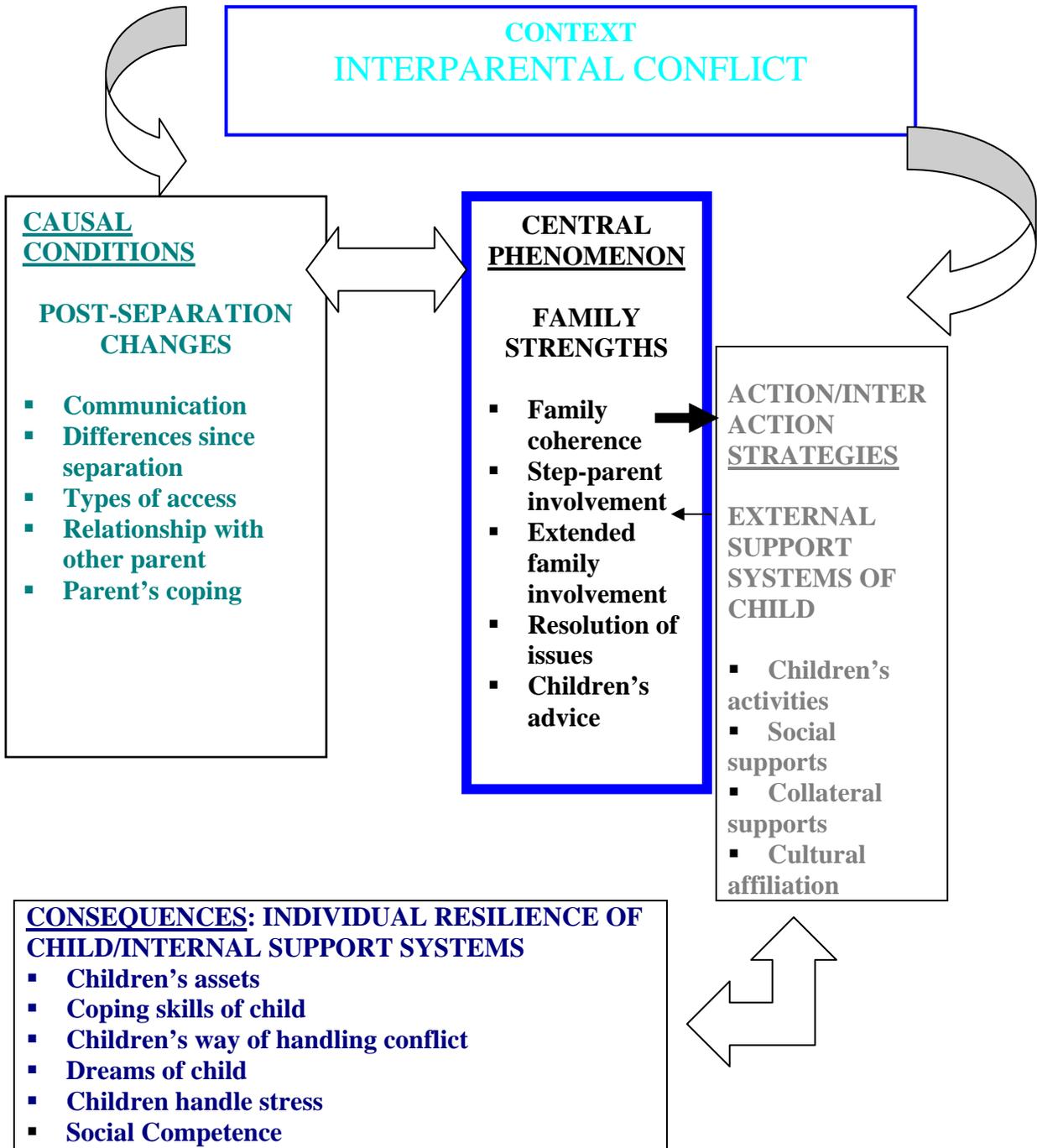
The following provides information about each aspect of the coding paradigm.

Central Phenomenon

Within grounded theory the central phenomenon is chosen from one category, a starting point from which to link the other categories. In this study the category chosen was "family strengths." This category provides the key information from both the children and parents. It appears to be the central category that connects to all other categories. For example, one of its sub-categories, "step-parent involvement," appears to be highly relevant with respect to how well the children cope with the ongoing parental conflict. It is a theme that frequently appeared in discussions with the parents and the children. One mother stated, "I remarried in 1999. We started living together in 1997. He (step-father) basically took over the father role." Another mother stated, "My daughter always longed for the father-daughter bond. She didn't seem to have it with her father. Now she has it with her step-father and seems to thrive on it." A different mother stated, "Her step-father treats her exactly like his own child. You know, she calls him dad and that wasn't my choice, it was her choice." It appears that these new attachments created a sense of security for the children.

Many of the children expressed a great deal of satisfaction from their relationships with their step-parents. It was a predominant theme. One of the children stated, "my step-father feels like my real dad." Another child stated, "my step-mother has been the most helpful person to me since the separation."

Figure 1. Coding paradigm.

CONTEXT
INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

CAUSAL CONDITIONS

POST-SEPARATION CHANGES

- **Communication**
- **Differences since separation**
- **Types of access**
- **Relationship with other parent**
- **Parent's coping**

CENTRAL PHENOMENON

FAMILY STRENGTHS

- **Family coherence**
- **Step-parent involvement**
- **Extended family involvement**
- **Resolution of issues**
- **Children's advice**

ACTION/INTER ACTION STRATEGIES

EXTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS OF CHILD

- **Children's activities**
- **Social supports**
- **Collateral supports**
- **Cultural affiliation**

CONSEQUENCES: INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE OF CHILD/INTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS
- **Children's assets**
- **Coping skills of child**
- **Children's way of handling conflict**
- **Dreams of child**
- **Children handle stress**
- **Social Competence**

This is the core category around which a theory was developed. It holds the most information and interest, and helped to move towards integrating the remaining categories. Integrating these categories provided answers to the research questions.

Context

Context refers to the particular set of conditions within which the strategies occur or the underlying conditions that pertain to the phenomenon in question. In this study the context was the interparental conflict, the ongoing conflict between the parents. This context was predominant, as it was the environment in which these families continued to struggle. Ongoing interparental conflict led to the particular set of conditions that needed a strategy or action. The category of "interparental conflict" reflected the stories of the parents and the children, and their need to find strategies or ways to help them to cope with the ongoing conflict. The context in this study represents a continuum of conflict. Some families continued to experience it at a greater level than others. How family members understood the interparental conflict or managed it is reflected in various ways through their stories, but it is the ongoing context in all of their stories. For example, one mother stated,

> The conflict between us (she and the other parent) is still horrible. He will phone me and leave me these mean messages and stuff like that on the phone. He will say something about my boyfriend that shouldn't be said over the phone, especially in messages that my children could listen to later.

One child commented on how he would come home and find his parents in conflict over many issues. "My father often starts yelling and then my mother yells back. My father uses such strong words and I see my mother crying. It makes me feel mad and sad." Another child stated, "My parents fight mostly over the phone. I hear them talking about who wants to take me for holiday or a weekend. All that stuff that doesn't make any sense to me."

Causal Conditions

Causal conditions influence the central phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define this term as "the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon" (p. 100). From the main categories of this data the particular causal conditions are post-separation changes. The separation can trigger issues leading to high conflict or exacerbate interparental conflict. Alternatively, the separation can reduce the level of conflict between the parents. Sub-categories include communication, differences since the separation, types of access, relationship with the other parent, and parents' coping. This category reflects the changes and developments leading to the central phenomenon that are located within the data. For example, the parents' ability to cope with their circumstances included being in a new relationship or taking a parent education seminar that allowed them the opportunity to learn more about the issues involved in co-parenting after a separation. Changes since the separation led to many of these families finding the strengths necessary to move forward, despite the ongoing interparental conflict. For example, some of the parents were able to find new partners and form strong secure relationships with them. Other parents were still struggling to maintain their equilibrium several years after the separation. One of the parents stated that she got along better with the step-mother than the father. "He (the father) and I communicate very

rarely and when we do we argue. I get along better with his wife and we talk about our child. It just works better this way."

One of the children found that since the separation "her mother gets along better with her father now." This allowed the child to feel better about having to make moving to a different home and having to find new friends in the neighbourhood.

Action/Interaction Strategies

Action/interaction strategies refer to the tactics or responses that manage or have consequences with respect to the central phenomenon. They can also be seen as the intervening conditions that facilitate or constrain the strategies for change. From the categories, it appears that the external support systems of the child augment family strengths. External support systems include social or collateral supports. They are intervening conditions or alternative support systems that impact on family strengths and integrate with the child's ability to cope with the ongoing conflict. Examples of the children's responses to questions about the impact of external support systems are: "lots of aunts and uncles who help me out when I am down" and "a couple of good friends from school. I have known them for quite a while and they all know what is happening with me. They help me out. It is a good thing that is happening for me." Another child talked about the intervening support of her youth group church. She stated,

> On Friday we have youth group. What we do is go to church on Friday
> night. We go out rallying or doing something fun. Or sometimes we'll just
> stay in and have some fun – play sports or pray with each other.

Parents' responses included, "she has the support not only from her step-father and I but she also has support from her step-father's grandparents." Another parent talked about the community support for her son. She stated, "He goes to the co-op to visit his friends. He is able to talk to other kids about what is going on for him there."

These examples show that the children use their external support system to augment the strengths of the family, thereby helping them to cope with the conflict between their parents. Many of the children had access to strong supports within the family (i.e., step-parents or grandparents, and peers, teachers or extra-curricular activities). Other children only had access to friends and limited community supports. Still others were placed with a more formal set of external support systems (e.g., counselors, or group therapy). The children who had access to both external support systems and family support systems exhibited more resilient characteristics than those who only utilized external support systems.

Consequences/Outcomes

The last aspect of the coding paradigm includes the consequences or the outcomes of the action/interaction that work in conjunction with the central phenomenon. From this data it appears the individual resilience of the children is gained or sustained through the interaction of family strengths in conjunction with the external support systems of the child. Specifically, the internal support system of the child is the category delineated for this component of the paradigm.

Included in this paradigm is the concept of bidirectional causality portrayed through the use of arrows. The assumptions of a bilateral model of parent-child relations include the parent-child relationship as the context for parent-child interaction (Kuczynski, 2003). The concepts described in this paradigm do not simply move in a unilateral direction. Information from this study suggests that although there are various outcomes due to family strengths, they are also the result of the interactions and interrelationships between and amongst various family members. For example, how the primary parent copes with the ongoing interparental conflict may relate to the interdependence of family members (i.e., how they understand and cope with this issue). All family members influence how the environment of interparental conflict becomes the central context of these families. In another example, the child's ability to use external resources may be affected by both the parent's understanding of the child's needs and the child's ability to voice his/her needs.

Results of Selective Coding

Selective coding involves the integration of the categories that have been developed to form the initial theoretical framework (Pandit, 1996). This involves noting patterns (i.e., how the interactions between family members promote resiliency in children). It allows for a further look at the categories and their interrelationships, filling in the necessary information from the existing data where needed. This includes examining the sub-categories in order to understand how they impact on the central phenomenon. It sets the stage for the development of a proposition in which a core category is systemically related to the other categories.

Within each of the central five categories, there are particular sub-categories that need to be recognized. Some of the sub-categories play an important part in the understanding of the interrelationships within the central categories. Some of these sub-categories are given a higher priority due to the number of times they were observed during the initial coding of the data. This is evident from the main category of "family strengths" with the sub-categories of "step-parent involvement" and "family coherence" both playing a major role in understanding how the various family members both create and utilize the family strengths. As family members interact with each other they find existing strengths and create new ones through mutual support and respect. Family coherence involves shared values, loyalty, caring, trust, and respect for each other. It expresses the family's shared feelings of confidence that an event or crisis can be managed. For example, through family coherence many of these families were able to work together at various stressful times in order to manage the impact of the family conflict. This was often seen through the custodial parent and child having an open and trusting relationship, from which they could discuss issues and problem-solve together, as matters of trust and shared values are key components in the concept of family coherence. One mother stated, "one of the strengths in our family is that we have discussions and make decisions together." A child talked about how she goes to her mother for advice, "One day I got into an argument with a friend. I talked to my parents about what happened and they gave me some ideas of how to handle it. I took their advice." A father stated, "My daughter is responsible and does her homework. She also participates in chores at the house; we are a team within the house."

The sub-category of family coherence suggests that families are able to work together due to an ability to trust each other and maintain family functioning. Family coherence is one of the properties or concepts in the category of "family strengths" that suggests this category is the central phenomenon. Ideas related to family coherence were noted in many of the families. Examples of family coherence included the primary parent and child discussing how changes in the family structure affected family members. However, some families did not appear to exhibit family coherence or have any positive step-parent involvement. In these families, fewer family strengths were noted and the children from these families exhibited fewer coping skills and fewer resilient characteristics. This suggests there is a continuum of individual resilience that is dependent and connected to how families can work together and incorporate new family members after the separation. This information helps to substantiate the authenticity of this study as it suggests that family strengths are connected to the child's ability to successfully cope with the ongoing interparental conflict.

Proposition

From the interrelationships built within the coding paradigm, a proposition with respect to children's ability to cope was identified. The proposition builds on the coding paradigm and provides further clarification of how the family provides the strength that enables the child to exhibit resilient characteristics. It provides a broader systemic view of the information gained through the study. It is the final step leading to the development of substantive-level theory. The proposition states,

> Families who are able to reorganize by expanding to include blended or extended family members exhibit a strength that is connected to their ability to adapt. This strength becomes a basis for mutual support as step-parents and grandparents provide a sense of security and refuge for the children. External supports systems including friends, teachers, counselors, and extra-curricular activities supplement family strengths. These cohesive families then enable the children to draw on individual resilient attributes in spite of the ongoing interparental conflict.

The children who exhibited the most resilient characteristics from this study had the emotional support of their primary parent and a step-parent or grandparent/s. They were able to form new secure attachments with either step-parents or grandparents. The children exhibiting resilient attributes talked about having at least one close friend. Some of them had also discussed their family situation with a school counselor.

The following provides an example of how the proposition ties the coding paradigm together. It shows how the child finds support through her parental grandmother. This is augmented by an external support system.

> *Child*: Since the separation I got to become friends with my grandmother. Now I see much more of my (paternal) grandma which I like. I see her once a week and we do things together. Before the separation I didn't see her too much. But since the separation I get to see her more and we have

got quite close to each other. I also get to continue to spend time with my friends, both from school and from the neighborhood. I have known them for a long time and get along good with them. I can talk with them about anything, when I am upset about stuff or anything.

Father: I know my daughter counts on my mother in her life now. My mom comes in once a week and we do a Tuesday supper and mom supervises a girly bath. Something that I can't do. And they talk. My daughter will say that she wants to be with her grandmother and I know she appreciates the time she spends with her.

Grandmother: I love my granddaughter and am happy to spend time with her. She and I have gotten very close since the separation, I provide her with a lot of mentoring. I give her some direction, help her to be creative and teach her many things. She turns to me when her parents argue, especially since the separation.

Substantive-Level Theory

From the proposition a theory emerges that has been grounded in the data. Creswell (1998) describes this low-level theory as differentiated from theories of greater abstraction and applicability. In this study a low-level theoretical model was formed based on the concept of family strengths as this category emerged as the central one. This low-level or substantive theory is only applicable to the population of high-conflict families as this was the situation studied. It incorporates information from existing literature on family stress theory, separation and divorce as well as resilience.

Substantive-level theory gained from this study states,

Children from separated or divorced, high-conflict families' exhibit resilient characteristics when family cohesion is used to incorporate additional family support systems, particularly step-parents and extended family members. External support systems, particularly peers, augment these resilient characteristics.

The following provides an example to illustrate the theory.

Child: My parents still argue, call each other names and swear at each other. I am not sure what they argue about. Since my parents separated I can have my friends over when I'm at my mom's house. And I have a lot of friends. My father would never let me have them over when my parents were together. I still see my father three days each week. But on Friday nights I get to stay at my (paternal) grandmother's house overnight. I like that because we get along really well…

If I have a problem at school I would go to my teacher and once I went to a school counselor. I also went to something called a children's group for

kids whose parents were separated. That was okay. But my dad didn't want me to go back so I quit going. But if I had a real problem I would go to my mom, because I can talk to her about anything. And she has a boyfriend who lives with us sometimes and I get along good with him. Cause my dad doesn't really understand me….

If I was talking to other kids about what I went through I would tell them to "Be strong." And find something to help them be strong. My music has helped me, it gives me a lot of strength.

Parent: My child initially coped with all his anger by keeping a journal. He went to see a child psychologist for several sessions. This helped him and afterwards he felt much better. He is also close to his (paternal) grandmother. He can talk to her. He also talks to me. He talks to me about issues like his pre-teen outlook on life. He talks about his friends, what they are doing and then we come to some understandings of what he should be allowed to do at his age. At first when he was so angry we couldn't communicate so well, but now that he is less angry we can talk about things again. I try to let him have his own time cause I know he's growing up which is hard for me to accept. But I've given him his space and I try to continue to improve in that area. There are times when he gets cheeky with me and says things like stand up for yourself. Stand up for yourself when it comes to dad saying bad things to you. Be strong. I think that he copes a lot better now mostly because he is stronger. He is a lot stronger than he was. He has come a long way from saying in his journal that he hated his father. His journal was a constant "I hate you." There are people in his journal that he drew with knives going through them and blood squirting everywhere. He's come a long way. We make it through things together.

Teacher: Both parents are very involved with this child and his academic work. He is a high achiever and has excellent reading skills. Other children like him; he attracts friends. He plays many sports. He has a great sense of humor that helps him to cope with his situation. He is clear about his morals and values and is willing to take responsibility for his actions. He talks a lot about his new step-father and his grandparents. He seems to be very close to both of them.

Conclusions and Future Considerations

Through this study a substantive level theory was postulated. This theory augments existing resilience research as well as providing a unique understanding of pre-teen children's abilities to cope in the face of ongoing interparental conflict. Although the tenets of this theory are not out of line with other results from resilience research, it needs to be further tested through intervention studies. Masten (1999) suggests that the central task for this generation of resilience researchers is to test theories through intervention

studies. As the theoretical proposition from this study was developed in conjunction with a particular population, it can be tested through specific interventions with these families. In turn, these interventions could be evaluated. For example, an intervention could be designed that included a clinician working with family members in an attempt to support the internal family structure over a period of family re-organization and reconstitution. The rationale for this intervention would include helping family members to find a sense of coherence and using their strengths at the time of the transition. This intervention would be evaluation-based, as it would provide feedback with respect to the clinician's role and monitor the changes in the family. The results of this evaluation could provide some answers with respect to whether resilient attributes of the children from these families could be enhanced or created through intervention.

Using grounded theory as a methodology provided a richness and depth to the results of this study. It allowed for the "voices of the children" to be heard and incorporated into the evolving literature in this area. Children are active players in their own identity, thereby playing a role in their ongoing development. For example, within this study some of the children stated that they had not benefited from their counseling sessions with either psychologists or other counselors. As a way of respecting the child's knowledge and interdependence, the child should be consulted with respect to what external resources they could best utilize. As well, it is necessary to understand which support systems need to be augmented, in an effort to fully support the existing resources for a particular family. External support systems for the child could include children's support groups, cultural activities, extra-curricular activities, or becoming involved in a neighborhood community center. Policy changes may need to be made in an effort to make the above resources available, as many communities do not have access to children's support groups or appropriate cultural activities. It is incumbent upon the clinician or social worker to continue to ensure that the child's voice is heard with respect to what resources are needed to ensure the child's needs are met. This can occur through ongoing discussions with the child. The results of this study exemplify the need for understanding the resources children need and utilize in their attempts to use their resilient attributes in the face of their parents' ongoing interparental conflict.

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