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ABSTRACT

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families, but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems. Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources, and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation; and coping skills. Implications of this model may be considered at these levels: (1) church leadership may seek to reduce stressors while providing resources to help families; (2) seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination; (3) workshops for those currently pastoring churches can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and provide suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns; (4) written materials to minimize stress while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness can be published; and (5) diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and adaptation in ministerial families. (Author/ABL)

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Toward Understanding Stress in Ministers' Families:  
An Application of the Double ABCX Model\*

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An Application of the Double ABCX Model\*

Abstract

The paper presents an integration of the existing literature on stress in ministers' families, utilizing the Double ABCX model of family stress (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation and coping skills. Within the context of this model, issues specifically related to ministers' families are presented.

An Application of the Double ABCX Model\*

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982), but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems (Lee & Balswick, 1989): This paper is designed to provide an integration of the literature regarding stress and coping in ministers' families within the framework of family stress theory (Boss, 1987; Hill, 1958; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

The Double ABCX model of family stress (see Figure 1) proposed that families vary in their ability to adapt to stressors (XX) based upon: the particular stressor event (a); the family resources; (b) the family definition of the stressor (c); the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition (x); the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships (aA); the resources and support (bB); the redefinition of the situation (cC) and coping skills (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). In the following pages, summaries of issues for ministers' families are described according to each element of the Double ABCX model of family stress.

First, ministers' families face a variety of church, family, and individual stressors (Ostrander, Henry & Hendrix, 1990). These stressors include the normative developmental stressors for individual family members and for the family unit. Further, normative stressors occur due to the relationship between the church and family, resulting in occupational/family lifestyle linkages in ministers' families (Lee & Balswick, 1989). Normative stressors for church, family, and individual stressors among ministers' families are listed in Table 1, under "The Stressor Event". Further, ministers' families vary in their existing resources available to manage stressor events.

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Examples of external and family resources for ministers' families are presented in Table 1 (see "b. Existing Resources"). In addition, variation in how ministers' families define stressor events is expected. Family stress theory proposed that the perceptions and meanings families attribute to stressors influences the degree of disruption a particular stressor creates for a family (Hill, 1958; see Table 1). Finally, the state of balance or imbalance a family experiences based upon the combination of the stressor event, existing resources, the family definition of the situation (x) results during the crisis phase (see Table 1).

As a ministers' family begins to make initial attempts to adjust to a stressor, many times a pile-up of stressors occurs. The pile-up may include attempts to deal with the initial stressor or other developmental tasks for the individuals or family unit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). See Table 2 for a summary of the church, family, and individual stressors that may result in a pile-up of stress (aA) as ministers' families attempt to manage stressors. In addition, during the adaptation phase, ministers' families call upon existing and new resources for dealing with the stressor. For example, new community or church-related resources may be called upon when family internal strengths are insufficient to manage a particular stressor. Table 2 details the new and existing resources that ministers' families may mobilize during stress (bB, see Table 2). Finally, as a ministers' family passes through the initial response to a stressor event, they may redefine the resources and previous coping attempts in new ways. Thus, the family establishes a redefinition or new perceptions of the stressor event, as indicated by cC on Table 2. Finally, during the adaptation phase, the ministers' family may utilize a variety of coping skills, some effective and some

ineffective, to manage the stressor. A number of coping patterns<sup>5</sup> utilized by ministers' families are presented in Table 2.

Over time, the combination of the stressor event (aA), the family crisis meeting resource (bB), the definition of the situation (cC), the degree of crisis experienced (x), the pile-up of stressors (aA), the new and existing resources (bB), the redefinition of the situation (cC), and the coping patterns yields an overall effectiveness in the ministerial family response to a stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The extent to which families effectively deals with a stressor has an impact upon the functioning of individuals within the family, of the family unit, and in the family-community fit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) propose that families vary in their level of adaptation to stress, ranging from bonadaptation (i.e., individual, family, and family-community fit enhanced) to maladaptation (i.e., reduced individual, family, and family-community fit functioning). Consequently, ministers' families may be described as reaching a level of adaptation to stress over time. The level of adaptation has consequences for various family members (i.e., adults, adolescents, and children, see Table 3), for family integrity, and in terms of the family interface with the church. Ministers' families in a state of bonadaptation will experience enhanced development for individual family members, for the family unit, and a strengthened quality of relationship with the church. In contrast ministers' families who have difficulty effectively dealing with the stressors in this lifestyle are at risk for developmental problems within individual family members, for less effective family functioning, and for reduced effectiveness in the church-family interface.

In summary, ministers' families may be expected to vary in their ability to deal with normative individual and family developmental

stressors and with the stressors of the ministerial family lifestyle. The Double ABCX model of family stress provides a basis for examining elements in the process of managing ministerial families' responses to stress. This integration of ideas relating to stress in ministers' families and family stress theory provides a foundation for helping ministers' families to be strengthened, even when faced with stressors. Implications of this model may be considered at several levels:

(1) Church leadership (i.e., denominational leadership, local leaders) may seek to reduce the stressors emerging from policies and procedures within the church system, while providing resources (e.g., counseling or support services) to help ministers' families better manage stress.

(2) Seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and that the ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination that recognizes the stressors and seeks to maximize family and ministerial effectiveness.

(3) Workshops with ministers' families currently pastoring churches can also emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and give suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns in a way that recognizes the stressors and seeks to increase family and ministerial effectiveness.

(4) Written materials available to ministers and their spouses covering normative aspects of stress, and written matter containing suggestions or helps in organizing the family and occupation in a way that minimizes this stress, while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness, can be published. Written material may be an

especially effective media for aiding ministerial families who feel unable to attend counseling sessions and/or workshops.

(5) Diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and adaptation in ministerial families and their individual family members, so that when counseling is sought, appropriate measures will be used with these families.

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**Table 1**  
**Pre-Crisis and Crisis Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress**  
**as Applied to Ministers' Families**

**a. The Stressor Event**

**Church stressors**

1. Boundary ambiguity
2. Work schedule/timing issues
3. Mobility
4. Financial Strain

**Family stressors**

1. Family life cycle stage
2. Marital dyad relationship
3. Parent-child relationships
4. Parent-adolescent relationship
5. Extended family relationships

**Individual stressors**

1. Adult development issues
2. Child development issues
3. Adolescent development issues
4. Physical changes
5. Losses:  
health  
job (church or other)  
death in family  
divorce  
member runs away
6. Alcohol/drug abuse
7. Child enters/leaves school
8. Member gets new job

**b. Existing Resources**

**External Resources**

1. Congregational Support
2. Denominational Support
3. Community Support/  
Resources  
(Counseling,  
financial)
4. Social Support networks

**Family Resources**

1. Extended family
2. Family flexibility
3. Family sense of humor
4. Family loyalty, commitment to each other
5. Family caring
6. Family sense of purpose in life
7. Family commitment to ministry
8. Financial assets
9. Open communication
10. Family strengths

**c. Perception of stressor (a event)**

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

**Crisis (X)**

The degree of imbalance a family experiences based on the stressor, level of resources and definition interacting

**Table 2**  
**Post-Crisis and Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families**

<u>aA. Pile-Up of Stressors, Strains, and Hardships</u> <u>Church Pile-Up</u>	<u>Coping Patterns</u> <u>Family-Church Coping</u>
Exhaustion from too much "positive stress" Excessive congregational expectations	Confrontation of family church member
Lack of privacy	Avoidance/ denial used to address problems
Insecurity-who is in the family and who is not? Scapegoating family problems onto the Church system	Identify more with the ministry
Scapegoating church problems onto the ministerial family Long hours of ministerial-parent absence	Identify more with the family Develop an identity separate from ministry
Ministerial commitments conflict with adolescent/child's activities (sports, plays, etc.)	Become more flexible Blame the church
Disrupted eating/sleeping from odd-houred calls/emergencies with the church	Blame the family Announce a definite work schedule & days off
Mobility issues: Loss of the familiar	The grieving process Take vacations
Adjustment to a new community 1.) New social contacts to be made 2.) New ministerial association	Redefine church people as part of the family
3.) Unknown community expectations Adjustment to a new home	Develop social support in church
Adjustment to a new school 1.) Peer group changes	The grieving process Access external sources
2.) Academic changes	of social support Join a support group
Family secrets about family's actual financial situation Out-of-pocket business expenses that are not reimbursed	Meet with denom- inational leadership
Lobbying for a pay raise and its social implications in the church system	Trust in God Have faith
Embarrassment due to large income- gossip about this income	

Keeping up the pastoral image  
Feelings of being victimized

### Family Pile-up

Parent role overload-less access  
to the adolescent/child

Discipline/guidance concerns  
Parental expectations of children  
Parental hypocrisy seen in a  
negative light by children  
Marital quality impacts  
Marital conflict effects-inability  
to admit to marital problems or  
anger or negative emotions

Parental separation/divorce effects

Sibling relationship effects  
Parent-child relationship effects:  
i.e., if ministerial parent  
abdicates parental responsibilities,  
other parent feels overloaded  
Jealousy, breakdown in trust  
Inability to get marriage/family  
counseling

Carry over of stress from one  
family member to another

Communication breakdowns

Birth of a child, or  
other developmental stage  
stage issues close to a move  
or other major stressors

Excessive extended family  
expectations

Developmental milestones from  
several family members coincide  
(i.e., adolescent identity  
development with parents' midlife  
developmental tasks)

### Individual Pile-up

Minister's stress carryover from  
work (female ministers may face  
stressors males do not)  
Stress carryover from nonministerial  
spouse's job  
Children's stress carryover from  
school  
Child's feelings of ambivalence  
due to entering new school  
Adolescent's stress carryover from  
school/work

### Family coping skills

Make plans to  
improve family  
devotions  
Family uses denial/  
avoidance tactics  
Confrontation of  
family  
Ask for counseling  
Access social  
support and  
help from church  
members  
Look for parenting  
help from  
extended family  
Family abuse  
Yelling  
Try to talk problems  
Hire help  
Trust in God  
Have faith  
Defining the  
ministerial  
family lifestyle  
Defining church  
people as the  
"enemy" to be  
overcome  
Defining family as a  
priority  
Talking with  
extended family  
about realities of  
ministerial  
lifestyle

Accepting change as  
inevitable  
Develop family  
social competence

### Individual Coping Skills

Participate actively in  
a move  
Alcohol/drugs used  
Denial/avoidance  
Develop high self esteem  
Make plans to read Bible/  
pray more  
Prayer  
Trust in God  
Having faith  
Acting out

Worry/guilt/anxiety  
 Self image concerns  
 Consequences of feeling alienated/  
 isolated  
 Identity problems may result in  
 acting out, or high conformity  
 and resultant problems  
 Alcohol/drug abuse  
 Side-effects of mental/emotional/  
 physical problems

Ruining away  
 Take a self-improvement course  
 Stress reduction activities  
 Confront a family member  
 Grieving process  
 Individual involvement in  
 a move  
 Angry outbursts/cry  
 Assess one's own strengths &  
 weaknesses  
 Giving up  
 Access social support  
 Seek counseling  
 Talk to school counselor  
 Talk to a teacher  
 Talk to parents/spouse

bB. Existing and New Resources

1. Any resources used before  
that are not depleted
2. New resources such as new  
knowledge of a community  
resource
3. Newly acquired skills of the  
family and its members
4. A better home, more privacy,  
better pay, etc.

cC. Definition of pile-up,  
resources, and coping  
attempts

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

Table 3

Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied  
to Ministers' Families

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BonadaptationIndividual integrity enhanced:Adult:

Healthy level of social  
competence/ability of  
the adult to get along  
in their social environment  
High level of self esteem  
Balanced levels of conformity/  
autonomy

Healthy sense of identity  
Good physical health  
Good mental health  
Good emotional health  
Has a sense of purpose in life  
Flexibility sufficient to allow  
an adaptable outlook on life

Bible reading and prayer life  
compatible with adult's needs  
Behaviors consistent with  
beliefs

Ability to resolve individual  
stressors as they arise  
Resolving developmental issues  
in a timely fashion  
Ability to access social support

Having a sense of belonging

MaladaptationIndividual integritythreatenedAdult

Lack of social  
competence

Low self esteem  
Imbalance in  
conformity/  
autonomy

Identify confusion  
Failing health  
Mental problems  
Emotional problems  
Lacking purpose  
Rigidity or excess  
flexibility  
preventing  
adaptation

Devotional life not  
meeting needs

Inconsistent  
convictions  
and actions)

Even small stressors  
not overcome

Developmental issues  
not met adequately

Inability to access  
social support

Alienation/  
loneliness over  
long periods of  
time

Adolescent

Healthy level of social competence/ability of youth to get along in social environment

Active in a peer group

Gradually increasing levels of autonomy and decreasing levels conformity

Increasing positive sense of level of identity

High self esteem

Good physical health

Good mental health

Good emotional health

Has a sense of purpose in life

Bible reading and prayer life meeting individual needs

Enough individual flexibility to ensure an adaptable outlook on life

Resolving developmental issues in a timely fashion

Having a sense of belonging

Ability to access social support

Ability to resolve individual adolescent stressors when they arise

Child

High child social competence /ability of child to get along in their social environment

Functioning at their individual level in school

Good physical health

Good mental health

Good emotional health

Progressing through developmental stages in a timely fashion

Having a sense of belonging

Presence of a peer group

Ability to resolve individual child stressors when they arise

Having a gradually decreasing sense of dependence upon parents but still well-tied to parents

Difficult social relations

Lack of friends

Inappropriate levels of conformity/autonomy

Identity confusion

Low self esteem

Failing health

Mental problems

Emotional problems

Lack of purpose

Bible reading and Not meeting individual needs

Not enough/too much flexibility

Failure to address developmental issues

Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time

Lack of social support

Inability to resolve even minor stressors

Lack of social competence-evidence of not adapting to social environment

School problems

Failing health

Mental problems

Emotional problems

Failure to progress in an adequate manner through developmental stages

Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time

Lack of friends

Inability to resolve

Increased dependence/premature separation from parental figures

## Family integrity enhanced

Adequate levels of family social competence/ability of family to function as a family in its social environment

Levels of flexibility that give the family the ability to adapt to change

High level of family regenerativity

A relationship with the church community (family-church fit) that is acceptable to the family

A satisfactory sense of boundaries between family and church (i.e., a sense of family identity separate from the church, as well as a part of the church)

A relationship with the broader community (family-community fit) that is acceptable to the family

Family Bible reading and prayer compatible with family expectations

Healthy interaction between family members

High levels of positive communication between family members

High sense of family loyalty, caring, trust in family

A balance between church commitments and family commitments that is satisfactory for all involved

Family unable to function adequately in their social environment

Too much/not enough flexibility to adapt to changes

Low levels

Family-church fit is not acceptable

Unclear boundaries

Family identity poor or missing

Uncomfortable relationship with the Community

Unsatisfactory Bible reading and prayer time for the family

Interactions among family members that may be harmful to the family or

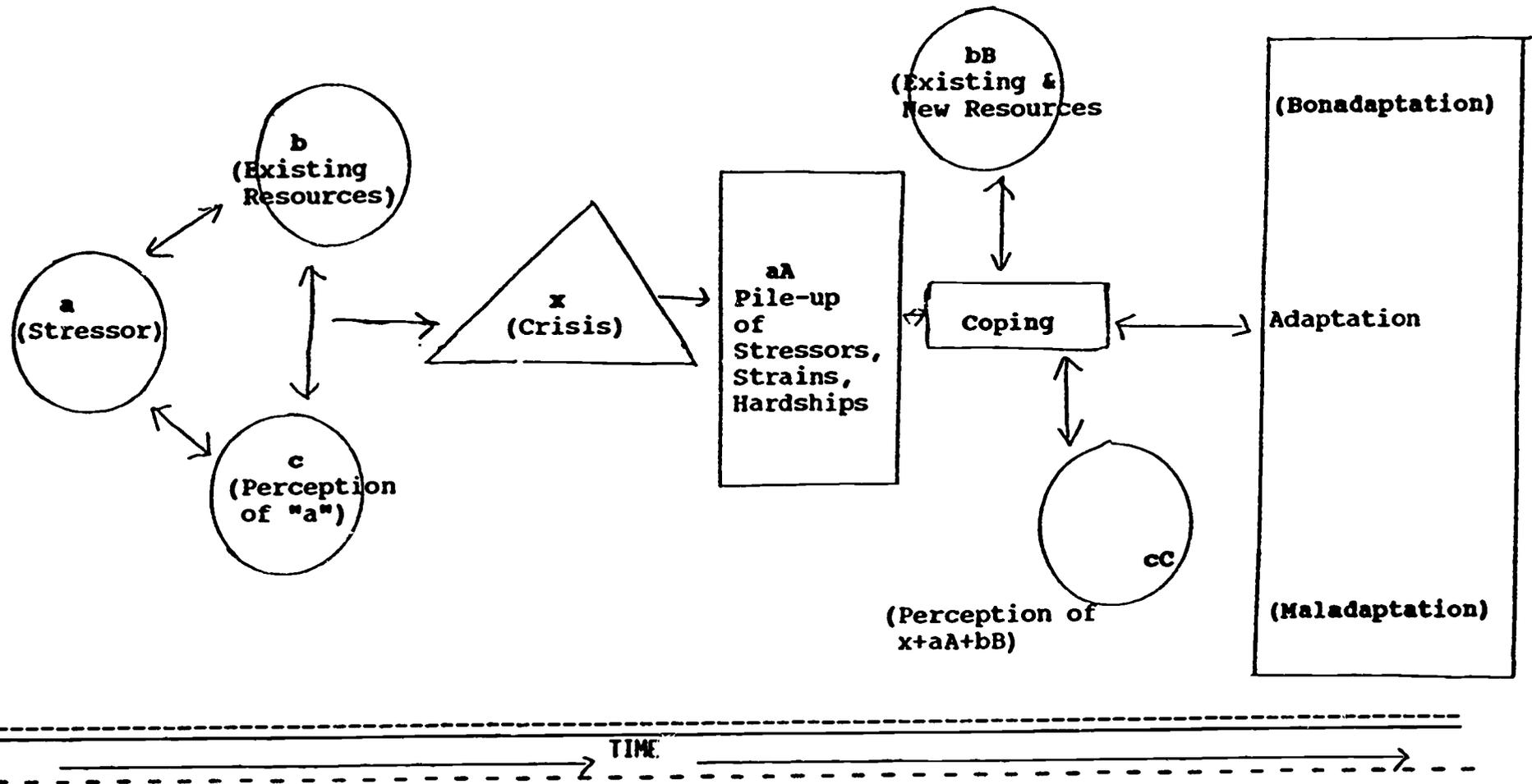
individual family members

Low communication levels, or high levels of negative

Lack of family loyalty, caring, trust

Imbalance between church and family commitments

**Figure 1. The Double ABCX Model: A theoretical perspective on stress in ministers' families.**



\*Adapted from McCubbin, H. & Patterson, J. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage and Family Review*, 6, 7-37.