

“Beautiful Boy” - Final Critical Application Paper

Junnelle Maala

Department of Child Development and Family Studies, California State University, Long Beach

CDFS 319: Family Stress and Coping

Professor Janice M. Falberg

December 12, 2021

As I conclude the semester learning about family stress and coping, I decided to unpack the concept of substance abuse and the consequential stressors that surface in families. In this essay I will summarize the film, “Beautiful Boy”, explain the ABC-X and Double ABC-X models, display how those models are exemplified within the movie, and touch on the importance of ethnicity and gender when discussing stress and familial coping. It is important to capture all of the elements of a family’s state of affairs and the stress that follows. Due to the differences of every individual’s story, background, and perspectives on the world, efforts to understand the bigger picture are valuable.

In order to review family stress and coping, I chose to look at the 2018 film, “Beautiful Boy”, directed by Felix van Groeningen. This movie stars Steve Carrell as the character, “David Sheff” and Timothée Chalamet as the character, “Nicholas ‘Nic’ Sheff.” David and Nic are a father and son duo who have a loving turned rocky relationship due to rising tensions rooting from Nic’s newfound addiction to crystal meth.

Nic is a charismatic eighteen-year-old boy who is very intelligent and hardworking, as he got accepted into all six of the universities he applied to. As for David, he is a caring and empathetic father of three children, with Nic being his oldest. David’s two younger children are from his current wife, as he and Nic’s biological mother divorced when Nic was a preteen.

In the film, David takes Nic to the rehabilitation center in hopes that he will recover from his addiction. As the four weeks in rehab pass, Nic calls David to tell him that he has recovered well and wants to attend college. It’s not until he is in the middle of his college experience when he relapses and finds himself getting hooked on heroin. The cycle of David trying to save his son

continues, and towards the end of the movie, David creates a heart-aching yet healthy boundary for himself and ceases to provide help for Nic. David and Nic are together again at the end of the film, though their future is still uncertain.

This film illustrates family stress and coping because it shows that any tensions happening to one member of a family can directly affect the other members. Nic's addiction directly affects how David goes on with his life with his new wife and younger children. It also shows that family dynamics play a large role in how families cope with stress. I chose this film because I'm interested in the idea that regardless of someone's cultural background, how they were born, what they look like, etc., getting involved in substance use can affect almost anyone's personal and family life.

To further analyze the family stress and coping within this film, we take a look at The ABC-X Model and The Double ABC-X Model.

To begin, The ABC-X Model is a framework that was developed by Hill (1942) that is used to understand and analyze stress and coping amongst families (Bush & Price, 2020, p. 5). The "A" factor represents the provoking stressor event that is adequate enough to create a potential change within a family. The "B" factor represents the family's resources or strengths that may help families manage their stressors. The "C" factor represents the family's perception of the situation. It is the meaning/importance seen by the family, in regards to the stressful circumstances at hand. The "X" factor represents the stress or crisis that results from the family's stressor, resources, and perception (Bush & Price, 2020, p. 8).

As for the Double ABC-X Model, it is an extension of Hill's work done by McCubbin and Patterson (1982), "adding post-crisis/post-stress factors to explain how families achieve a

satisfactory adaptation to stress or crisis" (Bush & Price, 2020, p.16). The Double ABC-X Model can be explained through the basic foundation of Hill's ABC-X Model.

The Double "A" factor is the initial stressor presented to the family plus the stress that results from that stressor. This factor is also known as stressor pileups within a family system. Additional stressors that may be discussed as pileups included unresolved details that arise from the initial stressor, changes/events that happen despite the initial stressor (such as changes in family dynamics and memberships), and the repercussions of the family's efforts to cope with the tribulations within the situation (such as changing of roles within the family) (Bush & Price, 2020, p.16). The Double "B" factor is the resources they have plus resources that are acquired during the conflict. The Double "C" factor is the initial perception plus the perception of the current stressor. Lastly, the Double "X" factor is the original response to the family crisis plus the subsequent adaptation during the crisis (Bush & Price, 2020, p.17). The xX factor ranges from one end of a spectrum to another. One end of the continuum includes bonadaptation and the other is maladaptation. Bonadaptation is the type of adaption that is considered to be positive, whereas maladaptation may be perceived to be negative. Bonadaptation within family stress can look like a healthy and strong family who return to their previous strength before the stressor event, or families who return much more resilient and stronger than before. Maladaptation can look like a family splitting up due to the stressor events and the pileups that come along with it, or one family member leaves the family unit in hopes to discipline the family.

Now that we have reviewed the concepts of the two models, we now see how Hill's ABC-X Model is employed in van Groenigen's "Beautiful Boy".

From the model, "A" factor is Nic's ongoing addiction to drugs such as crystal meth and heroin. This is a stressor for Nic's family because David, David's wife, and their two children

feel a sense of loss because of his addiction. They experience ambiguous loss, as Nic slowly becomes more and more psychologically absent when he is physically present. David especially feels as though he lost his son due to his substance abuse.

The stressor pileups or Double “A” factors that are exemplified are the thoughts that David has when reflecting on the ways he raised Nic. The small details that have been unresolved from David finding out that his eldest son has become addicted to drugs pile up as David tries to make sense of the situation. Thoughts that are shown through nonverbal scenes as well as dialogue within the film include: “Where did I go wrong?”, “How did he get access to those hard drugs?”, and “Am I a bad father?” David notices there is a shift in their once well-bonded father-son relationship, which leads him to think about those unanswerable questions.

The “B” factor includes the rehabilitation center and the college that Nic attends. Since David is able to afford both rehab and college for Nic, Nic has the opportunity to recover in a safe environment and has the chance to reinvent himself once he heads off to college.

The Double “B” factor in the film is money. As the film continues on, Nic goes off to college and is given money from his father. David is wealthy enough to give Nic money while he is attending college. Money is a resource that is acquired by Nic throughout the tumultuous stressor event. Nic uses his money to purchase hard drugs and inject himself with crystal meth. Money is also a factor on David’s end of the situation because he is blindly giving Nic money without knowledge of his newfound drug addiction to meth. David believed that he was helping Nic in college as he was able to provide for Nic’s extracurricular activities such as spending time with his friends and girlfriend, but little did he know that his son was using his money to feed his drug dependency.

The “C” factor or the family’s perception of the stressor is melancholic. David is broken and believes that his relationship with his son will not be able to revert back to the loving, healthy relationship they once had when he raised him. Nic feels as though he has been a continuous disappointment to his father, which is a reason why he continues to relapse and revert back to finding comfort in doing crystal meth. David’s wife and Nic’s stepmother, Karen, feels dejected because seeing David constantly searching for his son leaves her feeling helpless. Jasper and Daisy, David’s children and Nic’s half-siblings are young and are unable to fully understand what is going on with Nic. The two see Nic as their loving older brother, though he is often absent.

The Double “C” factor or Nic’s family’s perception of the stressor is hostile. David begins to understand that everything that he has done to help his son is not improving anything for anyone. He sees that he has done his fatherly duties but he can no longer do more for the situation at hand. Nic displays hostility to his father and family because he feels as though he is being shut out. Since he became addicted to hard drugs, he sees that his family is seeing him differently which makes him act defensive and resentful. Karen feels reluctant to further intervene between David and her stepson’s situation. Because David's hope to fix his son is fading, Karen advises David that he has done the most he could do for Nic, though she becomes hesitant to put her foot down for the both of them. Jasper and Daisy are confused with the situation since they still are not able to grasp what is going on with their older brother and their parents.

The “X” factor or the stress that is produced is that their family is in a constant state of conflict. David no longer knows if he can continue the cyclical pattern of giving Nic money to feel more independent. He feels obligated to help his son find his way back to recovery, though

he becomes more and more discouraged because of Nic's repetitive actions and rude attitude towards David and his family. Nic keeps reverting back to his old ways with drugs, Karen wants to support David with his final decisions regarding Nick, and Jasper and Daisy are unsure if they will ever have their older brother back.

The Double "X" factor is considered to be maladaptive in the movie. Toward the end of the film, David has come to a bittersweet conclusion that he no longer is equipped both mentally and physically to help Nic with his addiction. David realizes that Nic's addiction is far too harmful to the family's unity. Nic tries to return to ask David for more money, and David declines and essentially says goodbye to his son. Nic is no longer part of the family. The family loses Nic and the subsequent stressors that came along with his unfortunate circumstances.

Continuing on, the topic of ethnicity and gender arise when discussing this film. Seeing as though the two main characters are both cisgender, male, and Caucasian, their circumstances within the film are attributed by their ethnicity and gender. Resources for Caucasian males in the United States are much more accessible. David and Nic were introduced as wealthy in the beginning of the film. Their floor-to-ceiling glass windows in their secluded house with large trees surrounding it speaks volumes to the audience and gives a gauge of where they stand financially. If the script were to be flipped where the two main characters were transgender, women, and people of color, the story would not unfold the same as it would have in "Beautiful Boy". David and Nic both systematically are privileged to have money and resources given to them with ease. David is able to access a rehabilitation center for Nic without having to worry about his finances. Nic is also able to get accepted and attend university at a college of his choice with support from his father and stepmother. Although the movie ends with the family losing Nic relationally, David provided enough resources for Nic to remain alive throughout his addiction.

As Caucasian males, they can retrieve the help they need almost immediately. Because of the systemic interworking of society and foundational roots that were planted from injustice amongst people of color, David and Nic's experience is sought to be a situation derived from their ethnicity and gender. Although this is the case, it is not to discount the real stories and heartbreaking experiences of David and Nic Sheff. This conversation simply brings up the further implications of ethnicity and gender within broader family stressors and how families cope with their individual situations.

In conclusion, I analyzed the 2018 film, "Beautiful Boy", directed by Felix van Groenigen to understand the complexities of family stressors and the unique characteristics that surface in the process of managing them. I provided an overview of the movie's plot and main characters, described and applied the ABC-C model and Double ABC-X model to the movie, and addressed the connections of ethnicity and gender to the main characters' situation. This project contributed greatly to my learning because it allowed me to understand the details of family stress and coping on a deeper level. I now understand how intricate family affairs can be. I learned that families from different cultures, backgrounds, and environments handle stress in different ways. I now know that stress within families is delicate and being empathetic is one of the many keys to further expanding my knowledge on this topic.

Lastly, two ways in which individuals and families like David and Nic Sheff could better cope with family stressors is to find support groups and make time for self-reflection. Finding support groups to help individuals with substance abuse, familial affairs, or even personal problems can be very useful. There are many times where individuals who are going through a rough patch in their life truly believe that they are alone in the world. It can be difficult to do, but finding a support system that emphasizes and understands the hardships that those people go

through helps with finding that greater sense of belonging people yearn for. Being in an environment where you feel heard, supported, and loved can do wonders for individuals and could potentially help with the management of the stress life brings. If Nic found a support group in the film, he would have been more conscious of his actions and could have saved himself from his addiction. Finally, finding time to self-reflect is a way for individuals/families to manage stress. Oftentimes families get caught up in their interconnected lives without having a minute or two for themselves. Managing a life outside of family may seem impossible, but creating a safe space—whether physical or mental—may help people with stress. Self-reflection can be done through journaling, meditating, or just taking a moment of silence for yourself. David was constantly on edge throughout the course of the film. If David had created time for himself at least once, he could have operated in a clearer state of mind. Reflecting on oneself is essential to perception in stressful situations.

References

- Bush, K. & Price, C. (Eds.). (2020). *Families & Change: Coping with stressful events and transitions* (6th ed.). Los Angeles, CA. Sage Publications.
- van Groeningen F. (Director). (2018) *Beautiful Boy* [Film]. Plan B Entertainment.