A Critical Analysis of Family Stress in *Nine Lives* (2005)

Jessica A. Neel

Louisiana State University

Author Note

Jessica A. Neel, Studying Child and Family Studies, Louisiana State University. Correspondence in reflection to this paper should be directed to Jessica A. Neel.

Email: jneel1@tigers.lsu.edu.

A Critical Analysis of Family Stress in *Nine Lives* (2005)

Family stress is defined as distress or strain on the family unit (Boss, 2002). *Nine Lives* (2005) is a movie that portrays a family experiencing an overwhelming amount of family stress. The oldest daughter, Holly, is learning to deal and cope with the memories and scars of her father molesting her as a young girl. It seems as if Holly has not visited her home in quite some time, and she returns to talk to her father. After asking her younger sister, Vanessa, to tell her father to come home so he and Holly can talk, Holly recollects old memories, enjoys the back yard, and catches up on her sister’s life. The movie clips ends with Holly’s father returning home and Holly deciding whether to kill her father or herself. The stress of Holly’s family crisis is even more heightened, because the creator of the crisis is in Holly’s internal contexts of her family (Hill 1958). The internal contexts of a family include the structural context, the psychological context, and the philosophical context (Boss 2002). Holly is experiencing this family crisis in all three internal contexts of the family. The stress in the structural context is due to her boundary ambiguity and confusion of her role in the family. The stress in the psychological context is due to this family crisis being perceived as highly stressful and intense. The family’s perception is one of confusion, disarray, and hurt. The stress in the philosophical context is due to Holly and her father having conflicting moral views on her being molested as a child (Boss 2002). *Nine Lives* (2005) portrays a family experiencing a crisis and Holly is forced to decide how she will cope with her family crisis. In this critical analysis of the movie *Nine Lives* (2005), the crisis Holly is experiencing will be expounded upon; her palliative behaviors will be described in detail; the family member in denial will be identified; the family myths, boundary ambiguity, and situational meaning of the family crisis will all be explained; and the conclusion of the movie will be hypothesized.

**Results**

Holly clearly demonstrates she is experiencing a crisis by participating in several different behaviors. A severity of a crisis is defined as the evaluation of the hardships of the crisis, the family’s resources, and the perception of the crisis (Walker 1985). This is the formula for the ABCX family stress management model (Crosbie-Burnett 1989). Holly is experiencing a family crisis, because she demonstrates her father molesting her as detrimental, she does not have any family members or resources to turn to, and she perceives this event as a crisis. The first sign Holly shows she is experiencing stress is when she demands her younger sister, Vanessa, to keep the front door open. When Vanessa asks Holly why the door must remain open, Holly snaps and loses her cool, yelling at her younger sister. During the movie clip, Holly tries to talk to Vanessa about her life and how she has been, but sporadically Holly breaks down and cries while she waits for her father to arrive. Another behavior that demonstrates Holly is experiencing a crisis is how Holly paces around her old house several times, indicating she is uneasy and stressed.

Holly engages in several different palliative behaviors during the movie clip to temporarily decrease her stress levels. Palliative behaviors are defined as behaviors one uses to temporarily calm themselves down or distract themselves from the stressful situation (Boss 2002). The first palliative behavior Holly engages in is when she tells her sister her throat is dry and would like a glass of water. She tried to temporarily forget her father is coming home and the conversation she will have with him when he arrives. Holly continues to ask Vanessa about her life and what she has been preoccupied with lately, again, trying to distract herself from the stressful situation she is currently experiencing. In addition to the other palliative behaviors, Holly also twirls a dinosaur magnet on the refrigerator around in circles with her finger to alleviate the overwhelming anxiety from the current crisis. She continues these palliative behaviors by walking around outside in her backyard and observing the shed, trees, and swing. She proceeds to push herself on the swing and think about the times when her father would play with her outside in their back yard. She even laughs while she is enjoying herself on the swing. All of these behaviors Holly participates in are palliative behaviors. After coming in from her play time outside, Holly engages in another palliative behavior by recollecting a past Christmas she remembers when her father gave her a spy kit for a present. She laughs and talks about the face he made when he saw her open up the present and how she misses that face. The last palliative behavior Holly demonstrates to temporarily calm her nerves and anxiety is the preschool song she sings with Vanessa about planting of seeds in a home. Holly appears to be happy and at ease for a short moment, but when they finish singing, she begins her crying spells again.

In my opinion, the younger sister, Vanessa, is in denial. Denial is defined as the rejection of reality or refusing to believe what a person sees or hears (Boss 2002). There is obviously negative family history that occurred in Holly’s family, but Vanessa seems to be in denial. It is clear that Vanessa is the family member in denial, because she is still living in the house with her father, who clearly has hurt Holly in life-long, traumatic ways. Vanessa even defends her father at times when she and Holly are talking. When Holly asks her younger sister if she knew their father had sexual relations with another woman at night when the family was asleep, Vanessa acknowledges that she did. She even further explains that their father told Vanessa and she acts as if it does not affect her. Vanessa could be using denial and ignoring the problem and history of her family as a coping strategy. She even tells Holly she cannot live like this, meaning ignoring their family and hating her own father. Vanessa seems to be in denial with her father’s past and is content with this state of mind. When Holly asks Vanessa if she knows about the weekend in Palm Springs between their father and herself, Vanessa does not seem fazed and acts oblivious at the same time. In my opinion, Vanessa finds her family’s past hard to understand and make sense of, so the easiest coping mechanism to resort to is denial.

There is a crucial family myth in the movie clip that drives the entire reason for Holly’s anger, confusion, and tears. A family myth or the represented family is the lie that the family concentrates on during the movie (Boss 2002). Someone can derive their family myth or represented family when they answer the question, “What does it mean to a member of your family?” (Boss 2002) The family myth or represented family for Holly is one of deceit, lies, infidelity, molestation, rape, hurt, anger, powerlessness, exclusion, and isolation. Holly was molested and raped by her father as a young girl. It is obvious she is still affected by these scarring memories, because she does not visit her home, talk to her sister, or have any sort of relationship with her father anymore. Because Holly does not agree or like her family myth or represented family, she is excluded and isolated from the family. She could not face her father for quite some time, but she finally finds the courage to talk to him the day she shows up at the house.

**Discussion**

Boundary ambiguity is a major underlying theme in this movie clip. Boundary ambiguity is defined as not knowing who is inside or outside the family and who is performing what tasks in the family (Faber, et al 2008). Holly demonstrates boundary ambiguity in their family. The family is not sure whether she is inside or outside of the family unit, because she does not live or talk to any of the family members anymore. The father and Vanessa do not know whether they will ever see her again or when she will visit them. Holly is unclear of her own roll in her family. She cannot determine whether she is inside or outside of the family unit either. If she is considered inside of the family, she is unsure of her tasks as a family member, because she experienced such a dysfunctional childhood.

The situational meaning of being a member of this family for Holly is one of catastrophic disaster. Situational meaning is defined as being readily available in the family’s consciousness and forcing the family to make changes (Boss 2002). Holly did not know her father would molest her, her own sister would deny it, and she would not have any family to turn to. She feels the only way to overcome this confusion, anger, and ambiguity of the entire situation is to kill her father. This conclusion is readily available for Holly. She feels she must make a change in her family for her to move on with her life.

**Conclusion**

I believe Holly chooses to live. Not only does she choose to live by not taking her own life, but I think she also chooses to share her feelings, anger, frustration, and hurt with her father. I think Holly does not kill anyone the day she went home to talk to her father. After her initial reaction of placing the gun against her head, then pointing it at her father, then aiming for her mouth, I think she calmed down and realized she did not like her father or his past actions, but she did not like the way she was living her life either. She did not have to forgive her father for all the hurtful memories he caused her, but she does not have to hold on and internalize this anger, hate, and frustration against her father forever. I think after explaining to her father how his demoralizing acts have scarred her, she can open his eyes to a new understanding of her and how this has affected her these last several years. In addition to hopefully changing the way her father acts, Holly can let go of the stress and anxiety of this crisis she has been experiencing and live a happier and more positive life. I believe she chooses to not kill herself or her father, because instead, Holly is looking for answers, clarification, and to be heard. She wants to share her feelings and her side of the story. Child abuse and molestation are acts of violence, and violence thrives on isolation, confusion, and despair (Swick 2008). She was powerless when she was the little girl being molested by her father, but now as a young adult, Holly can support herself and stand up for her beliefs. Holly exemplifies courage. A coping strategy for overcoming crises is portraying courage, which is exactly what Holly demonstrates wanting to talk to her dad (Hartshorne 2002). She remembers good times with her family and her father. I believe she would like to be a part of the family unit again. She just wants to be heard. Even though Holly is experiencing an overwhelming family crisis, she will find the strength to cope and rise above it all, portraying resilience.

References

Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks,

CA: Sage.

Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1989). Application of family stress theory to remarriage: A model for

assessing and helping stepfamilies. *Family Relations, 38*, 323-331.

Faber, A.J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S.R., MacDermid, S.M., & Weiss, H.M. (2008). Ambiguous

absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime.

*Journal of Family Psychology*, *22(2*), 222-230.

Garcia, R. (Director). (2005). Nine lives [Film]. Mockingbird Pictures.

Hartshorne, T.S. (2002). Mistaking courage for denial: Family resilience after the birth of a child

with severe disabilities. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 58(3),* 263-278.

Hill, R. (1958). Generic features of families under stress. In P. Boss & C. Mulligan (Ed.), *Family*

*stress: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp.177-190). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Swick, K.J. (2008). The dynamics of violence and homelessness among young families. *Journal*

*of Early Childhood Education, 36*, 81-85.

Walker, A.J. (1985). Reconceptualizing family stress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*,

827-837.