A Critical Analysis of Family Stress in *Ordinary People* (1980)

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 *Ordinary People* (1980)

*Ordinary People* (1980) is a movie that portrays a family undergoing a tremendous amount of family stress. Family stress is defined as distress or strain on the family unit (Boss 2002). Conrad Jarrett is struggling with the coping process of his brother, Buck, dying in a boating accident. Conrad tried to kill himself, because he could not take the pain anymore of not forgiving himself. He has returned home from the hospital and is trying to live a normal life. His mother, Beth, continues to not show affection towards Conrad. His father, Calvin, denies Beth’s apathetic attitude towards Conrad, and Conrad lacks genuine friendships. He visits a psychiatrist, Dr. Berger, to help him gain control of his life. Through the film, Conrad learns to cope with the death of his brother, forgive himself for surviving the boating accident, and accept that his mother will never show him love. Beth cannot forgive Conrad for attempting suicide and acts of violence, such as this, disturbs the normal bonding relationships between parent and child (Swick 2008). He treasures Dr. Berger’s friendship, confiding in him the suicide of his friend, Karen. With Dr. Berger’s help, Conrad learns how to gain control on his life. The movie ends with Beth leaving the family, and Conrad and Calvin embracing, realizing they can rely on their family through tumultuous times. The stress the Jarrett family experiences due to Conrad attempting suicide is intensified, because it occurs in the internal context of the family (Hill 1958). *Ordinary People* (1980) portrays a family experiencing stress due to a crisis, and each member of the Jarrett family must decide how they will cope with the family stress. In this critical analysis of *Ordinary People*, (1980) the Jarrett’s family stress, crisis, ambivalence, boundary ambiguity, values and beliefs systems, family boundary, and members in denial will all be analyzed and expounded upon.

**Results**

Conrad Jarrett engages in several key behaviors, indicating he is experiencing a crisis in his life. A family crisis is defined as an overwhelming disruption in the equilibrium, causing the family to become immobilized (Hill 1958). A severity of a crisis is defined as the assessment 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). The crisis Conrad is dealing with is the death of his older brother, Buck, in a boating accident. Conrad demonstrates he is experiencing a crisis by trying to hide his sleep problems. It is evident that Conrad is experiencing trouble sleeping at night, but he lies to his parents, reassuring them nothing is wrong. Another important indicator of crisis in Conrad’s life is the appointment made with Dr. Berger. Conrad reveals he is experiencing a crisis during the entirety of the movie, because he continues to visit Dr. Berger several times in an attempt to cope with this crisis. In his visits to the doctor, Conrad appears tense, anxious, and fidgety. Conrad expresses a desire to cope and move on from this crisis, explaining to the doctor he wants to learn to be more in control, so people do not worry about him anymore. Conrad feels the accumulation of stress from several sources intensifying the crisis he experiences. Not only does Conrad try to cope with the stress from his brother’s death, but also the stress of his mother’s lack of affection towards him, and the stress from not being able to forgive himself for trying to commit suicide. The accumulation of several traumatizing events makes the coping process even more difficult (Marks et al 2006).

There is clear ambivalence experienced by the Jarrett family surrounding Buck’s death. Ambivalence is defined as the simultaneous feeling of both positive and negative emotions towards one person, event, or object (Boss 2002). Ambivalence pulls someone in two opposite directions regarding the same stimulus (Boss 2002).The Jarrett family struggles with ambivalence surrounding Buck’s death each in their own way. Beth experiences ambivalence through her feelings toward Conrad after Buck’s death. As a mother, she cares and loves Conrad, but she cannot bring herself to display these feelings to him. Instead, she acts distant and cold toward Conrad, neglecting him of any affection and love. She struggles with the feelings of happiness that Conrad is still alive today. However, she also experiences sadness that Buck died, Conrad could not save him during the boating accident, and Conrad attempted to take his own life away. Calvin experiences ambivalence through his feelings toward his wife and her relationship with Conrad. Calvin loves his wife dearly and knows she cares about Conrad deeply, but disagrees with the way she does not demonstrate affection to Conrad. He struggles with communicating with his wife about his concern of her and Conrad’s relationship, because he does not want to argue with Beth or Conrad. Conrad experiences ambivalence through his own personal struggle with the loss of Buck. He is glad he lived through the boating accident, but cannot seem to forgive himself for letting Buck die. He cannot realize his brother did not possess the same strength as him, which helped Conrad to survive the accident. Conrad also cannot forgive himself for hurting his family by attempting suicide. He understands his family is thrilled he is still alive, but he is angry at himself that he caused a tremendous amount of turmoil for them. Each member of the Jarrett family experiences ambivalence due to Buck’s death in their own, personal way.

The Jarrett family experiences boundary ambiguity surrounding Buck’s death. 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). The Jarrett family demonstrates they are experiencing boundary ambiguity after Buck’s death by all remaining in a state of denial. It is difficult for the Jarrett family to cope with Buck’s death and move on with their lives months later. Buck’s death is a physical absence, Buck dying and physically not being present in the Jarrett family’s life, but psychologically he is still extremely present for the Jarrett family. This psychological presence is evident, because Beth, Calvin, and Conrad are not able to fully cope and grieve the loss of Buck. Beth pretends nothing happened, Calvin refuses to see the unemotional relationship between his wife and son, and Conrad cannot forgive himself for surviving the boating accident. The boundary ambiguity of Buck’s death allows the boundary of the family to no longer be maintainable. The family roles and tasks are confused, and the structure of the Jarrett family is immobilized. High boundary ambiguity is experienced in the Jarrett family, due to Buck’s death, because of the physical absence of Buck, but his psychological presence still remains. This conflict between his physical and psychological presence disrupts the Jarrett’s family life and keeps them from progressing through the coping process. The family remembers Buck, wishes he was still alive, and acts as if he is coming back home by keeping his room intact, but their psychological presence of Buck will not negate his physical absence.

The Jarrett family holds conflicting values and belief systems. A value is defined as a continual desirable quality, and a belief is defined as a principle that can be changed over time (Boss 2002). Overall, all members of the Jarrett family value family and the sacrifice one must offer for the good of the whole family. However, the Jarrett family believes not all family members are capable of this sacrifice, and realize each member shows their value in family in a different way. The Jarrett family collectively holds the typical Western values and beliefs system of living in a “just” world. They believe a “just and good” person can control their fate. Each member of the family holds this Western belief to a certain degree. Beth values family, but holds a mastery value orientation, meaning she believes each person can and should control their actions and fate. She makes her values and belief system obvious by thinking Conrad does not need Dr. Berger to help him with his problems because Conrad is capable of fixing his issues himself. Calvin also values family, but holds a harmonious value orientation, meaning he believes people have partial control of their actions and fate and should maintain a balance. He displays his vales and belief systems by beginning to intervene in Beth’s and Conrad’s dysfunctional relationship, but stopping when the conflict becomes too intense. Conrad values family too, but holds a submissive value orientation, meaning he believes people do not have control over their actions and fate. Conrad exhibits his values and beliefs system by not understanding why Buck died and he lived.

Beth ensures certain members of the Jarrett family remain inside of the family boundary and other members remain outside of the family boundary. Family boundaries are the barriers that define who is considered inside the family and who is considered outside of the family. Boundary maintenance is the concept to ensure family boundaries are distinct and secured (Boss 2002). Beth allows Calvin to remain inside the family boundary, but she excludes Conrad and Buck. She displays a tremendous amount of affection toward Calvin through making extravagant travel plans with him and communicates with him daily. Because Buck has passed away, she keeps him from inside the family boundary, displaying a sense of control over the situation. She does not talk about his death, the accident, or his funeral. She blocks those memories and keeps him outside the family boundary. Beth ensures Conrad remains outside the family boundary by not communicating with him or displaying any signs of affection toward him. She does not invite him on family trips, hug him, or include him in conversations with Calvin. She clearly defines the fact that he is not included in the Jarrett family boundary. She keeps anyone else out of the Jarrett family boundary, except for herself and Calvin.

Even though certain members of the Jarrett family exhibit denial more profoundly and explicitly than others, each member of the Jarrett family demonstrates denial in their own, personal way. Denial is defined as the rejection to believe what one sees or hears. It is the rejection to accept what is physically real (Boss 2002).Beth displays denial directly and explicitly throughout the film. She denies the repercussions and effects that Buck’s death has on her family. She reveals she is in a state of denial by acting as if nothing catastrophic happened in her life. She continues to travel around the world and plan vacations, excluding Conrad, when he clearly portrays a time of struggle in his life. She fusses at Calvin for telling their friend that Conrad is seeing a psychiatrist, because she does not want to display a sense of turmoil and dysfunction in her family to the public. It is evident Beth has been in a state of denial for quite some time, because she did not visit Conrad while he was in the hospital for trying to kill himself. She does not show Conrad affection or attention, and does not see how this affects him. She believes she is not distant or selfish toward her son. Beth remains in denial, because she does not interact with Conrad. She refuses to communicate with him and realize she is ignoring her own son. When Calvin tries to talk to her about her lack of feelings expressed toward Conrad, she cuts him off and explains she does, in fact, display affection toward her son. Calvin demonstrates a sense of denial by not realizing his wife shows Conrad no affection or love. When Conrad expresses his anger with his mother to his father, Calvin acts as if he has no recollection of this abandonment. He defends his wife and tries to diffuse the stressful situation. Calvin also presents a state of denial regarding his son’s psychological well-being. He shows concern and interest in Conrad’s health, but continues to travel with his wife on vacation. Calvin continues to remain in a state of denial, because he does not openly communicate with his wife about his concern of her lack of affection toward Conrad. Conrad struggles with denial with regards in forgiving himself. Because of a lack of affection and attention from his mother, the loss of his swimming teammates’ friendships, and not seeking professional psychiatric help before, Conrad has remained in this state of denial since Buck’s death. After several visits to Dr. Berger and Karen’s suicide, Conrad realizes he has blamed himself for his brother’s death. He suffers with the guilt of surviving the boating accident, because his brother was not as strong as him to hold on to the boat. Dr. Berger urges Conrad to give himself a break and forgive his own self for being the physically stronger person to survive the accident.

**Discussion**

The movie closes with a sense of hope for the Jarrett family. Even though Beth leaves the family, the future may look brighter for Conrad and Calvin. I believe Beth and Calvin will eventually work out their differences and issues. Hopefully, they will seek counseling and repair their marriage and family. I believe Calvin will learn to sort through his own issues with his wife and learn to stand up for himself. He and Conrad will have a better relationship and more open communication. I think the relationship between Conrad and Calvin will grow even stronger, and they will both benefit from the other’s support and love. Finally, I believe Conrad will forgive himself for his brother’s death and be able to move on and live his life. When males experience less stress in relationships with friends and family, they perceive to have more control over their lives (Darling et al 2007). Conrad will feel more in control of his life, restoring his relationships with his father, his old friends, and Jeannine, the girl he is interested in. The Jarrett family will seek further counseling and work through their dysfunctional relationships, having a more stable and secure family life. A coping mechanism for battling crisis is the display of courage (Hartshorne 2002). I believe the Jarrett family will learn to cope with the death of Buck and Conrad’s suicide attempt by portraying courage in their lives.

**Conclusion**

Given the opportunity, I would like to ask each member of the Jarrett family a question pertaining to their actions and response following Buck’s death. The one question I would ask Beth, Calvin, and Conrad is, “Do you believe you could have handled the coping process of Buck’s death in a better way than you did?” I believe Beth would respond with a simple no. She would pause and reflect and further her answer with a reasoning of how she did everything she could to cope and move on in her life from the death of her son. She would blame Calvin and Conrad for not being more mature about the entire situation and moving on with their lives too. Beth would not see any flaw in her coping process of Buck’s death. Calvin would answer the question with much thought and realize he could have handled the entire situation in a more manageable and controlled way. He would have expressed more concern for Conrad and how he was coping with his brother’s death, and Calvin would have encouraged Beth to show more affection to Conrad, so their family did not end in disarray and dysfunction. I believe Conrad would answer the question with regret about his response to his brother’s death. He would regret trying to kill himself and the pain it caused his parents. He would express a realization that he could have sought counseling after Buck’s death to manage his emotions and cope in a healthier way. I believe Calvin and Conrad would realize that there was a more successful way to cope with Buck’s death, but Beth would not come to this realization until she received professional counseling from Dr. Berger.

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.

Darling, C.A., McWey, L.M., Howard, S.N. & Olmstead, S.B. (2007). College student stress:

The influence of interpersonal relationships on sense of coherence. *Stress and Health, 23*, 215-229.

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.

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.

Marks, L., Nesteruk, O., Hopkins-Williams, K., & Swanson, M. (2006). Stressors in African

American marriages and families: A qualitative exploration. *Stress, Trauma, and Crisis, 9*, 203-225.

Redford, R. (Director). (1980). Ordinary people [Film]. Paramount Studios.

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.