

**A Review of Books, Studies and Journal Articles Published in  
the U.S.A. from 1955-1995 Relating to the Sociological Impact of  
Corporate Relocation on the Family System**

by  
**Barbara W. Cummings, Ph.D.**

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RELATING TO THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT  
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THE FAMILY SYSTEM**

Barbara W. Cummings, B.S., M.A.

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Saint Louis University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

1998

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1998

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

While the “mobility of peoples is a historic and universal phenomenon as certain as death and taxes” (Sussman & Settles, 1993, p. 213), America is a mobile nation even by world standards. The average American moves 14 times, while in Great Britain the number is eight, in Japan five, and France seven, (Glueck, 1974; Long, 1970; Packard, 1972).

According to the latest census report, one in five Americans moves each year for an average of forty-three million Americans changing residences (Hansen, U.S. Bureau of Census, 1996). It is estimated that of these, “twenty-two million made moves that were job related” (Ammons, Nelson, & Wodarski, 1982, p. 207; Gaylord & Symons, 1986, p. 31).

Corporate relocation has become a way of life for many executives and their families who frequently move every two to three years (Anderson & Stark, 1985; Bayes, 1989). Porter and Rand said, “one of the interesting things about this phenomenon is that while we are moving a great deal, it is not something that we do easily or without pain”(1992, p. 7). In addition, according to Anderson and Stark (1988, p. 38),

relocating families have been found to share a common array of stresses, including loss of support networks and valued persons and things (such as friendship groups or the family home); acquisition of greater role burdens (a traditional example would be the wife covering for the husband while he moved ahead to a

new job); and interruption of personal growth and development (a teenager might forfeit autonomy when forced to leave a part-time job).

Friedman believes that this mobility “has profound and often negative consequences for the spouse, the marriage, children and the family” (1989, p. 1).

### Brief Review of Related Literature

One of the earliest mobility researchers was Peter Rossi who wrote Why Families Move in 1955. His book examined the forces at work in the decision making process of relocating families. By the sixties, corporate transfers accounted for 296,000 relocations annually (Sell, 1982). By the mid seventies, that number was estimated at 750,000 and executives at IBM joked that the initials stood for “I’ve Been Moved” (Loomis, 1992, p. 7).

Transfers became accepted as a routine part of corporate life. Vance Packard’s A Nation of Strangers in 1972 and Robert Seidenberg’s Corporate Wives—Corporate Casualties the following year both hit a collective nerve, but mobility statistics were rising. Sociologists often refer to the seventies as the beginning of *the me generation*. With priorities focused on material gain, this generation was emotionally well equipped for climbing the corporate ladder relocation by relocation. Apparently, little thought was being given to whether competitive individualistic values were healthy for themselves or their families. Some felt,

. . . repeated uprooting tends to reinforce a materialistic orientation to life, because as the family is perpetually having to present an image to strangers and getting fewer rewards from emotional connections, issues of status and appearance come to dominate. In turn, the materialistic, rather than relational, striving reinforces mobility, which again reinforces materialism, and we get caught in an American vicious circle. (Nicols & Schwartz, 1991, p. 92)

Not all researchers even agree that relocation is stressful. Landis and Stoetger (1966) and Glueck (1974) reported no apparent related stress among families. Another conflict arises between Edstrom and Galbraith (1977) and Pinder (1979). Edstrom and Galbraith report transfers serve to reinforce one's commitment to one's company and Pinder reports that transfers have the opposite effect.

More recent studies have focused on dual-career issues. Brett and Werbel reported in 1980 that a wife's involvement in her work was a factor in her willingness to relocate. At the time "the sample of mobile working wives was quite small, and less than 50% of these women were working full time" (Brett, 1982, p. 461). Current studies indicate that 55% of all couples relocating have both husband and wife working. It is predicted that by the year 2000 it will be 63% (Brett, Stroh, & Reilly, 1990). This is one of several trends to be examined in the review.

There appear to be a great number of books, studies, and research articles dealing with corporate relocation. Each seems to have its own particular focus or approach such as: Relocation following divorce; self-esteem of the trailing

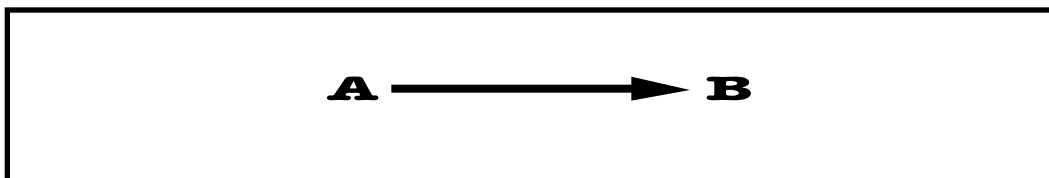
spouse; dual-career couples; developing social networks following relocation; residential change and school adjustment; geographic relocation and extended family cohesion; residential mobility as an adaptive experience; mothers' anxieties versus the effects of long distance moves on children; to name only a few. Each looks at part of the relocation picture, but not the picture as a whole.

#### Theoretical Framework – Family Systems Theory

A systems perspective says that each of our interactions affects the other and, in part, we become responsible for another's actions because our actions have in part affected their reaction (Becvar & Becvar, 1982).

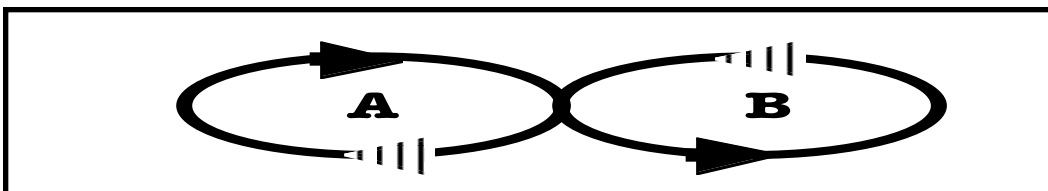
An individual perspective would say – A causes B.

Figure 1. - Linear cause-effect



A systems perspective would say – There is a reciprocal dynamic interaction between A and B.

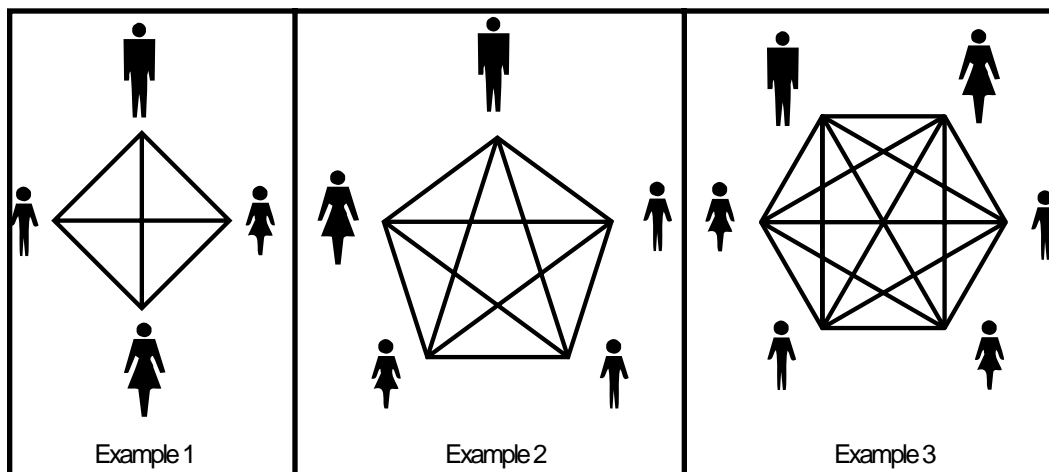
Figure 2. - Reciprocal cause-effect





According to Carter and McGoldrick, “families can be seen as a network of interlocking triangles in which each member is close to some and distant from others in a complicated web of alliances and tensions” (1989, p. 204). The more members in the family, the more complex the interaction. The Becvars believe that in a nuclear family of two parents and two children there are four triangles (see Figure 3 - Example 1). If you increase this by just one other child the triangles increase to 10 (see Figure 3 - Example 2). The Becvars add even more triangles because they say a family of five has five persons but ten relationships and 27 triangles for a total of 42 units. They say that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, or one plus one equals three, for two people relating to each other are not independent but interact with each other forming an extra unit. Therefore, if one considers larger families, the complexity of the relationships multiplies rapidly as shown by the six-person group (see Figure 3 - Example 3).

Figure 3. - Illustration of Bossard's law of family interaction



Bossard pointed out that “an arithmetic increase or decrease in the number of members in a primary group is accompanied by a corresponding geometric increase or decrease in the number of relationships in that group” (Bossard, 1945, p. 293). When a geographic relocation is viewed from a systems perspective we can see how it affects everyone in the system. The more members in the family, the more complex the interaction.

Boundaries serve to protect systems from outside forces and help maintain the integrity of its subsystems. How easily systems boundaries are crossed differentiate a system as open or closed. Open systems interact with the outside environment. Closed systems do not. Closed family systems that hold on to the traditions of the past and avoid change are in danger of becoming rigid and isolated. Most experts seem to agree that a healthy system is one that has the ability to adapt and change. In a healthy family system morphogenesis (change) and morphostasis (stability) are both necessary, and an extreme in either would be considered dysfunctional.

In a relocation many changes are taking place for family members who may experience these changes as losses in their life. Not only are there residence and job changes, there are often relationship, school, and social network changes as well. These changes may be enough to cause an overload or pile-up of stress on the family, especially if family members perceive them as losses. Kaplan (1983)

believed that it was the unscheduled life events, especially those involving loss, that caused the most stress. In addition, when the stress was experienced by an individual, because of the interrelated roles, it affected the entire family system.

In times of stress the tendency is for the family system to close in order to protect itself. This may result in behavior changes for family members, who after repeated uprooting, may be so enmeshed in a closed family system that they are no longer able to develop close friendships outside the family. This may leave the family less well equipped to deal with family crises at times when outside support is needed and no close friends or extended family members are available.

### Relocation and Stress

Almost all researchers agree that a relocation involves considerable stress for the family including Ammons et al. (1982), Anderson and Stark (1988), Bayes (1989), Gullotta and Donohue (1981), Jennings (1967), McCollum (1990), Weiss (1973), and Weissman and Paykel (1972).

Renshaw believed that stress is actually composed of two distinct and separate elements, the objective properties of the event and the subjective meaning that the event holds for the individual (1976, p. 164). The amount of *felt* stress is directly related to how stressful the individual perceives the stressor to be. "Stress in one system is not caused by events in the other system, but is a function of the interactive nature of the relationship of the two systems" (ibid.).

McCubbin and Patterson (1983a) said the family's perception of the event as stressful or not was an essential element in the family's ability to cope. Stress might never reach crisis proportions if the family did not perceive an event as stressful. However, they said that it was possible for a pile-up of changes to occur which would then exhaust the family's ability to cope and leave the family vulnerable to a crisis.

Kantor (1963) also believed that the number of stressors was significant and Anderson and Stark (1988) said that the number and frequency of relocations was significant in how the family coped with the current relocation. In another study by Loomis (1992), those families who had *difficult* moves had experienced twice the number of concurrent transitions.

Another factor influencing how the family experiences the move is whether the move is voluntary or involuntary. Renshaw (1976) believed that the greater the amount of control, or choice one had regarding the relocation, the less negative the experience would be. Renshaw added that the impact of the move "is systemic, as it involves both the work and the family system and the effects are apparent eventually in both systems" (p. 154). Feitler-Karchin and Getting agreed, saying that "moving was one of the most stressful events that can occur in one's life, particularly if the relocation is one that has not been made by positive personal choice" (1987, p. 59). Loomis believed that if one had no

control over the relocation process, one was vulnerable to “anger and negative consequences” (1992, p. 34).

### Relocation and Loss

Constable said, “a move is something like a death; a part of us dies, is separated, we mourn and we experience grief and loss” (1978, p. 419). Gaylord stated that psychoanalytic literature had dealt with the consequences of separation and loss for decades, but it was only in recent years that “the literature dealt with geographic moves and their potential detrimental effects on the individual or family” (1979, p. 186).

According to Starker (1988) and Mettelman (1993) a relocation involves many losses, including loss of friends, community, and familiar routines; it may involve giving up a job, volunteer work, schools and even sometimes the loss of family members who are left behind. Because relocation involves so many losses researchers have found parallels between the relocation process and the grief process.

Jones (1984), Loomis (1992), and Weissman and Paykel (1972) are among those who began referring to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ *Stages of Death and Dying* when discussing relocation. Dr. Kübler-Ross first published On Death and Dying in 1970 after working with terminally ill patients. It was a new way of looking at grief as a series of stages that one progresses through. It is now in common use by psychologists when working with clients who have

experienced traumatic events (Harrison & Rich, 1984).

### Stages of Relocation/Kübler-Ross

Stage One: Denial. A patient might refuse to discuss their illness or refuse medication saying they were not ill so they did not need medication.

In relocation a homeowner might refuse to put their house on the market to sell or family members might make long-term commitments in the community that they would not be able to keep.

Denial is the way that one protects oneself from hurt and pain. When denial can no longer be maintained it is replaced with:

Stage Two: Anger. Kübler-Ross said that this was the most difficult stage for the patient and staff as patients vent their anger and frustration.

In relocation, family members also might attack, blame, and criticize the family member or company responsible for the move.

The situation often feels out of control at this stage. When one attempts to regain control one begins moving into the next stage:

Stage Three: Bargaining. A patient might try to bargain with the Doctor for medication or a procedure in order to gain time to visit family or schedule a special holiday. On the other hand, if one is religious, one might make a promise to

their god in exchange for time.

In relocation, a spouse might ask for some concession as reward for going or teens might agree to go only if they are allowed to visit their friends the following summer.

When the reality of the situation is faced and the losses that one is about to experience are realized one may experience the next stage:

Stage Four: Depression. In both grief and relocation, it is during this stage that one sees oneself as a victim; one generally rejects offers of help and is unable to envision any possibility of a positive outcome. A feeling of hopelessness and helplessness often accompany this stage. What is needed at this stage is to acknowledge the sense of loss. One must go through the pain of acknowledging the losses before healing can take place.

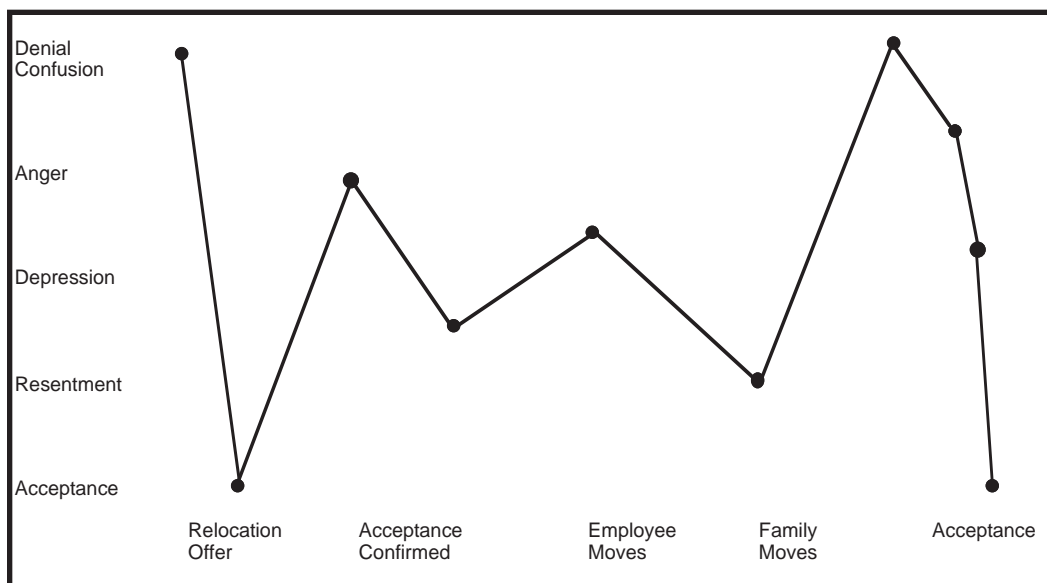
Stage Five: Acceptance. In both grief and relocation if one has had enough time to go through the stages, then hopefully one arrives at the final stage, which is acceptance.

This stage is often misinterpreted. When one hears the word *acceptance*, one may think that they have not arrived at this stage until they feel happy about the situation. What this stage actually means, according to Kübler-Ross (1970), is that one has finally incorporated this new and perhaps painful situation into their view of reality. When one begins asking for suggestions and ideas, and becomes interested in exploring some of the options open to them, they are

considered to have arrived at this stage.

Having now listed the stages, it should immediately be said that one rarely goes through these stages in a neat orderly way. The strong emotions evoked by a serious change in one's life are rarely expressed in a calm orderly way. Each member of a family may feel differently about a move and what seems like an opportunity for one may feel like an unbearable loss for another. One member may rush to acceptance in a matter of days; another may regress back to an earlier stage before moving ahead; and yet another may become *stuck* in a stage, unable move forward. Most researchers believe that as with the grief stages a relocation may take almost two years of adjustment time as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. - The stages of relocation (Herring, 1988b)





Marshall and Cooper described it well when they said that relocation is not simply moving from one geographic area to another, “in between is a fluid, disrupted period of belonging to neither world” (1976, p. 219). For some this can be a few weeks or months and for others this period of not belonging may be as long as two years.

We use the term jet-lag to describe the feelings of being out-of-sync with time when we travel. This process might be thought of as *Relo-Lag*<sup>TM</sup><sup>1</sup>, for during this time we are not only out-of-sync with our family, but our surroundings as well.

From a systems viewpoint, during a relocation the family system is reorganizing. Within the family system the ability of its members to communicate is vital and defines the nature of the relationships within the family. When family members are at different stages in the relocation process communication is difficult and there may be movement towards “entropy, a disorganized state characterized by a gradual but decreasing level of interaction between members” (Becvar & Becvar, 1982, p. 13). In order to reorganize the family system must find the opposing energy source called negentropy which “drives systems toward increased patterning, order, and organization” (Robbins, 1992, p. 27).

Relocation is a complex process and there are many factors that contribute to how the family perceives and experiences the relocation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Relo-Lag* is a Trademark of Barbara W. Cummings, 1998. All rights reserved.