

# Triangulation and Adolescent Development in the U.S. and Japan\*

LINDA G. BELL, Ph.D.†  
 DAVID C. BELL, Ph.D.‡  
 YOJIRO NAKATA, M.A.§

*Using an indirect measure of family structure, relationships between parents and adolescents were studied in 99 U. S. and 60 Japanese families. As two-person relationships tend toward instability under stress, a third person may be drawn in to stabilize the system. Parents, for example, may avoid the tension in the marital relationship by focusing together on an adolescent's problem, or pull the adolescent into a coalition with one parent. Either way the parents are said to have "triangled" the adolescent. In this study, a relationship is found between parents avoiding tension in their own relationship and their tendency to triangle an adolescent. Triangled daughters, in both cultures, had lower scores on ego development, supporting the hypothesis that such*

*patterns can be detrimental to the adolescent's personal development. The discussion includes comments on cross-cultural research.*

*Fam Proc 40:173-186, 2001*

**F**AMILIES are dynamic mixtures of self-interest and attachment where conflicts of interest and feelings are in continuous flux. Husbands and wives create families by their marriages, and they contribute significantly to the creation and maintenance of the family's climate and structure as children enter the family. Family structure and dynamics change over time because of processes both internal and external to the family. A primary internal factor in family process is the couple's ability to solve problems within their relationship. Some parents and families seem to be able to resolve problems and issues as they arise without significant difficulty. Others struggle with differences and disagreements, unable to resolve effectively their interpersonal difficulties and developmental issues.

Sociologists have often noted the instability of the dyad in the face of conflict or stress (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1955). The instability may be addressed in a number of ways, depending on the culture, the

\* This research was supported by the National Institutes of Mental Health in the U.S. and Japan, and by a Japan Foundation fellowship to David Bell and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Yojiro Nakata. Earlier versions of this article were presented at meetings of the American Psychological Association (August, 1998) and the American Sociological Association (August, 1999).

† Professor of Psychology and Family Therapy. Send correspondence to Linda G. Bell, University of Houston - Clear Lake, Houston TX 77058-1098; e-mail: belllinda@cl.uh.edu.

‡ Senior Research Scientist, Affiliated Systems, Houston TX.

§ Professor of Clinical Psychology, Fukushima University, Fukushima, Japan.

history of the dyadic relationship, the couple's problem-solving skills, and so forth. One class of responses to dyadic tension is to bring in a third party to help stabilize the system (Toker, 1972). This process has been called triangulation (Anonymous, 1972; Bowen, 1978). Triangulation is a ubiquitous pattern in human and even nonhuman relationships (Harcourt & de Waal, 1992). Examples include complaining to a friend about one's mate, colleagues focusing together on the shortcomings of the boss, or a child asking a parent to solve a problem with a sibling.

One triangulation structure involves a third party who is "pushed out" and distanced as a way of resolving or avoiding conflict in the dyad. Stability in the dyad is achieved by focusing on the third party, for example, a difficult child, as a common problem, thus focusing attention away from problems in the dyad. For Simmel (1955), this process involves the "centralization" of the dyad. Such a triangulation process leads to a stable structure providing unity within the dyad (Harary, Norman, & Cartwright, 1965; Heider, 1958). This "pushing out" process is not confined to families. Pulling together inside the dyad by identifying an external object is a common form of triangulation in politics (Schattschneider, 1960) and other forms of social mobilization (Blalock, 1989).

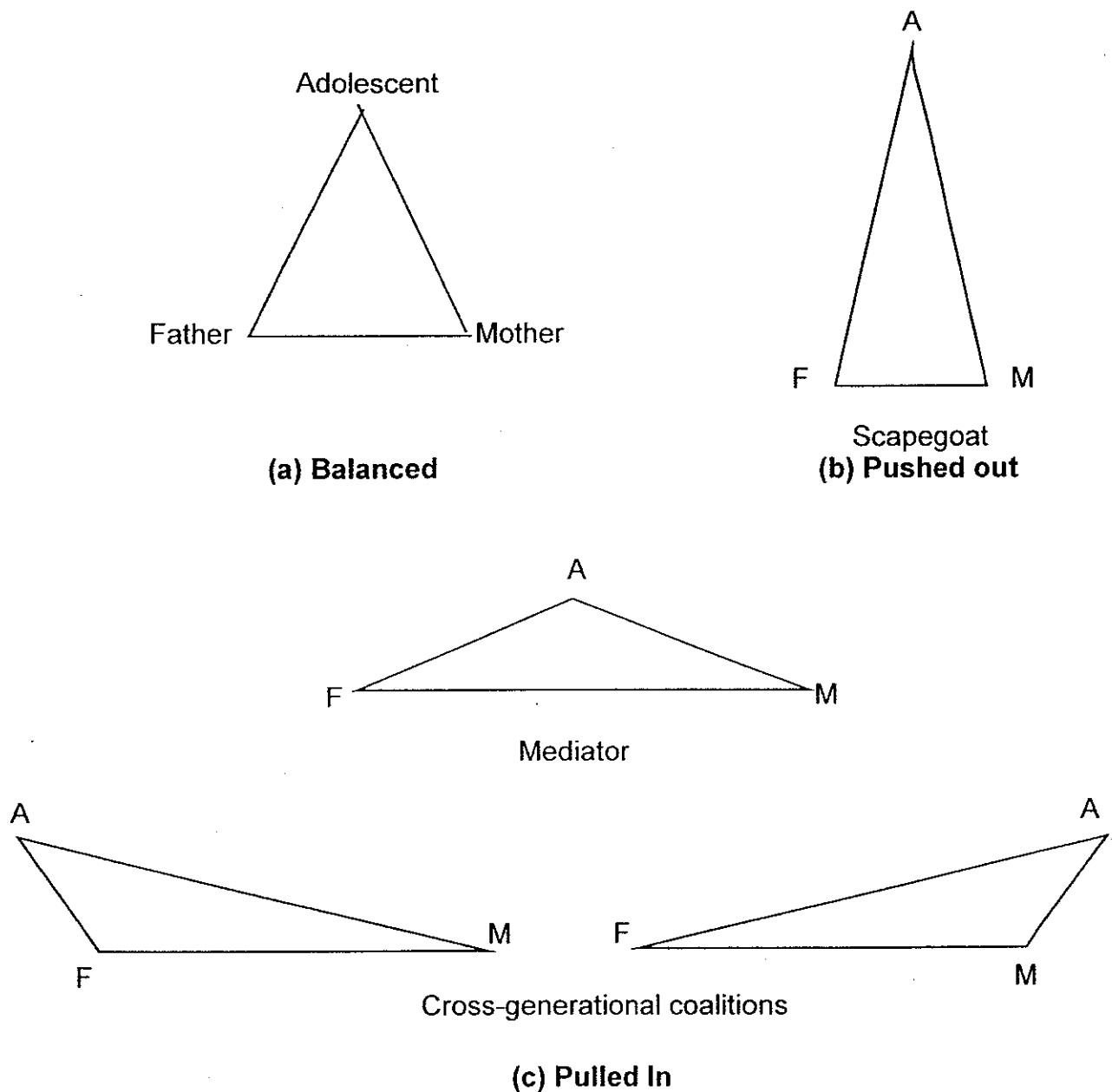
Another triangulation structure involves a third party who is "pulled in" as a coalition partner to one of the original dyad, or as a mediator or go-between for the dyad. On the one hand, coalition formation may provide a threat to the dyad, tending to pull the dyad apart. On the other hand, a cross-generational coalition may stabilize a family by easing tensions between the parents, thus supporting the continuation of the marriage. When Mom discusses her concerns with her daughter, rather than directly with Dad, tension may be less likely to build up in the system. Because triangulation structures

meet a need within a system of individuals, they tend to be relatively stable in the long run (Coser, 1956).

Most sociological accounts of triangulation emphasize the purposive action of the dyad members in selecting an external threat or in seeking coalition partners (Blalock 1989; Coser, 1956; Rapoport, 1960; Schattschneider, 1960; Simmel, 1955). Triangulation, however, does not necessarily involve an essentially passive third party. A third party might bring herself or himself in. A sensitive child, or friends, might initiate their own involvement in an attempt to help the dyad, or the third party may choose to intervene on behalf of one dyad member. The child may try to protect Mom from Dad, or comfort Dad after a fight with Mom. The third party may attempt to reduce or remove the conflict within the dyad by performing a mediator role or even by provoking rejection by the dyad members in either a conscious or unconscious effort to distract them from their interpersonal conflict (Rollins, Lord, Walsh, & Weil, 1973).

When there is stress in the marital system, the husband and wife are challenged to resolve their conflicts constructively. When they cannot find a resolution on their own, they may act to diffuse the tension by involving a child or adolescent (Anonymous, 1972; Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1967). The determining factor in involving the child may be the marital couple's inability to deal with hurt (L'Abate, Weeks, & Weeks, 1979), their inability to cope with stress (Fish & Jain, 1985), or their weak problem-solving ability (Vuchinich, Wood & Vuchinich, 1994). A healthy couple can talk about the full range of their personal issues and feelings without experiencing undue anxiety. Less healthy or less competent dyads are more likely to involve others in order to maintain stability in their relationship.

The Figure (see below) depicts types of triangles that can form between parents



Note: Line length represents difference/ disagreement.

FIGURE: Parent-adolescent patterns.

and an adolescent in the family. The length of a line represents difference or disagreement between two people. The closer they are, the more they agree and the shorter the line. The balanced pattern (a) represents the family in which the parents are resolving their own issues and relating to their adolescent according to her own needs. In this pattern, differences among family members are fairly

equal in the three relationships. The scapegoat pattern (b) represents a situation in which an adolescent's problem, illness, or other "special" trait, allows parents to avoid focusing on difficulties in their own relationship. This is a pattern in which the marital dyad "pushes out" the third party to protect the dyad as a unit. The adolescent in such a pattern is more different from both parents than

they are from each other. Three types of triangulation (c) involve "pulling in." In the mediator pattern, the adolescent is closer to each parent than they are to each other. The mediating adolescent stands "between" the parents. In a cross-generational coalition, the adolescent is pulled in on the side of one parent (a coalition of father and adolescent or of mother and adolescent).

An adolescent may be "pushed out" when the parents avoid dealing with the conflict or tension between them by focusing instead on a son's special needs or talent, or on a daughter's school problems. The parents maintain a fragile connection by focusing together on the problems of their daughter (or on their "problem daughter," as the case may be). In the "pushed out" pattern, the adolescent is seen as a scapegoat (Vogel & Bell, 1968). As long as the parents are focusing on the adolescent, they can avoid having to face their own issues. Such parents often exhibit a strong denial of any real differences or disagreements between them; there is a stated closeness without a real sense of warmth—a pseudo-closeness. In the "pushing out" kind of triangulation, the couple often projects a united front, not looking at each other or at the anxieties between them but, rather, looking outward together toward the common problem, thus allowing a false sense of closeness between them and an avoidance of relationship tension or difficulties (Ford & Harrick, 1974; Vuchinich et al., 1994). The child finds herself in a position where she needs to have a problem in order to support her parents' relationship.

When a son or daughter is "pulled in" as a mediator, or as an emotional support or coalition partner to the mother or father, an important intergenerational boundary can be said to have been breached (Minuchin, 1974). There is a dissolution or weakening of a generational boundary. Boundary dissolution may involve paren-

tal reliance on the adolescent for support and aid, rather than reliance on the spouse. There may be a parent-adolescent role-reversal in which the adolescent is expected to listen to, empathize with, and provide support for the parent (rather than the other way around), or a parent-adolescent enmeshment in which the parent turns to the adolescent, rather than to the mate, for emotional fulfillment (Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993). This role can be destructive for the child if it interferes with age-appropriate development, or with parenting that is responsive to the parent's needs rather than to the personal needs of the child.

The common element in triangulation is imbalance in a three-way relationship. In a family, this imbalance often seems aimed at protecting the marital/parental relationship. Whether the two partners remain close by distancing a child, or the two remain distant while a child becomes a mediator or a coalition partner of one, a triangle exists in which two members are close and a third is distanced; and once a family has evolved such a pattern, it tends to stick.

The effect of a particular family structure will be different for each child, depending on the child's role in the family. In a family system, marital conflict can be diverted by engaging a single child. Thus one often finds "successful" children in the same family with symptomatic children. L. Bell and D. Bell (1982) present evidence that when one child is triangled, that child's sibling is not. One child pulled in to "save" the parents' marriage can leave others "free" to develop naturally. Over time families develop relatively stable patterns of triangulation, and common patterns may be found from generation to generation (Bowen, 1978; Pillari, 1991).

Family triangulation patterns can have both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, triangulation may help sus-

tain the parents' marriage. On the other hand, triangulation may have negative consequences either inside the dyad or on others outside the dyad. The difficulty comes for children when they are recruited as the third point of a triangle, and the triangulation becomes both strong and persistent. The parents' attempt to maintain a stable marriage by triangulation of the adolescent can create problems in the adolescent's development. The energy the child devotes to "marriage maintenance" is energy that could be invested in her own personal and developmental interests. Triangulation is also unhealthy for the adolescent because it interferes with her being perceived accurately by parents, thus interfering with the parents' ability to respond appropriately to the adolescent's own needs.

Most of the research on triangulation in the family has focused on negative outcomes for children and adolescents. Distressed families have often been shown to have conflicted marriages and strong parent-child alliances (Gilbert, Christensen, & Margolin, 1984; Lewis, Beavers, Gossett, & Phillips, 1976). Families that have better problem-solving skills are less likely to scapegoat and are less likely to have disturbed or drug-abusing adolescents (Gantman, 1978). Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz (1993) found that young adults who scored higher on boundary dissolution (cross-generational coalition) scored lower on identity development. Daughters who had lower scores on a global measure of personal maturity have been found more likely to be caught in a marital conflict, either as a scapegoat or as a coalition partner with one parent against the other (L. Bell & D. Bell, 1979, 1982). Scapegoated children are prone to rage (Dare, 1993), and are likely to perpetuate their scapegoat role with peers and adults outside of the family (Bender, 1976). College students who reported cross-generational attachments in which

they described themselves as emotionally closer to a parent than the parents were to each other also reported more problems with intimacy (West, Zarski & Harvill, 1986).

Recent studies of triangulation have focused primarily on cross-generational coalitions (Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988; Williamson & Bray, 1988), and most of this research has involved the study of girls. It has been suggested that girls are more affected by family system stresses because it is expected that they will be relationship-oriented and take more responsibility for interpersonal relationships (Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993; Gilligan, 1982). Vuchinich, Emery, and Cassidy (1988) found that mothers and daughters were more likely to intervene in family disputes, and to take on caregiving roles, compared with fathers and sons. Eating disorders in women have been related to overinvolved or enmeshed family system patterns (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). Families with an anorectic adolescent daughter are often characterized by excessive closeness between the adolescent and one or both parents (Kalucy, Crisp, & Harding, 1977).

Theory and research in this area have seldom looked at the context of culture. Theories of triangulation were developed primarily within the experience of Western culture, where the eventual autonomy and separation of the child is a cultural ideal. Within Western culture, the marital dyad is considered the central organizing subsystem of the family. Difficulties in that relationship shape the family system that develops around it. It is worth questioning the universality of this expectation. In many non-Western cultures, a parent-child or a sibling dyad is seen as central (Falicov, 1983; Hsu, 1971). In Japan, for example, the family is not considered to exist socially until the birth of a child, and the mother-son dyad has tradi-

tionally been central (Bell, 1989; Lebra, 1976). Furthermore, in addition to global cultural patterns, within-cultural variations are also important. Of these, history or cohort, as well as gender, are important cultural variables (Bell, Bell, Nakata, & Bell, 1996; Matsumoto, Kudoh, & Takeuchi, 1996). A particular role held by a child may be positive for girls, but negative for boys in the culture. A role common and functional in one historical period, for example, pre-war Japan or Depression-era U.S., may become dysfunctional in a later period. These aspects of culture may interact in highly specific ways. For example, in a particular culture, a given role (e.g., the oldest daughter as a go-between for parents) may be both common and expected. It could also be the case that whether or not a role is culturally supported influences whether or not it has a detrimental effect. Thus, the extent to which the concept of triangulation may be universally applicable is clearly an empirical question.

In this study, we will test two hypotheses derived from the literature described above. The first hypothesis focuses on difficulties in the marital dyad as a precursor of triangulation; the second hypothesis, on the consequences of triangulation for an adolescent.

**Hypothesis 1:** Parents who are described as avoiding acknowledgment of disagreement or tension in their own relationship are more likely to have an adolescent who is triangled than are parents who do not deny their disagreements or tension.

**Hypothesis 2:** Adolescents who are in triangled relationship patterns with parents are likely to have lower levels of personal development than do adolescents who are not triangled. A similar effect is predicted for the U. S. and Japan.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample for this study consisted of adolescents from 99 U. S. families and 60 Japanese families. Families in both countries were middle-class. All families had married parents with two or more children, including at least one adolescent. None were blended or stepfamilies. Families in the U. S. were recruited through high schools. Families in Japan were recruited by chain referral. Japanese families were initially recommended by acquaintances of the research team; subsequent families were recommended and introduced by previously interviewed families. U. S. families were interviewed in 1975–76; Japanese families were interviewed in 1984–86.

Only teenagers from these families—children between the ages of 11 and 19—are included in the analyses. Siblings who were under age 11 or over age 19 are excluded. Hypothesis 1 is evaluated using data from U. S. families, because the relevant marital measure was available only for the U. S. sample. Some of the analyses for testing Hypothesis 2 include only girls, because not all measures were available for U. S. boys.

### Family Interview

Families in both countries participated in a structured home interview involving questionnaires, marital and family interaction around revealed difference tasks (Strodtbeck, 1951), and a projective family exercise, the Family Paper Sculpture (Bell, 1986). Marital and family interactions were coded on micro- and macroanalytic scales. A detailed description of the family interview can be found in D. Bell and L. Bell (1982) and Bell, Cornwell, and Bell (1988).

### Measures

#### *Marital Avoidance of Disagreement*

As part of the in-home family interview, family members completed 7 subscales of

the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos, 1974), a true-false instrument describing aspects of the family system (e.g., cohesiveness, expression of feelings, conflict). In the marital revealed difference exercise (D. Bell & L. Bell, 1982; Strodtbeck, 1951), the parents were given a list of about 8 FES items on which they had disagreed and were asked to arrive at a joint answer for each item. This interaction was audiotaped in the U. S. sample and coded by trained coders on global scales (Bell, Cornwell, & Bell, 1983). On the variable used here, United Front, each couple was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 "Almost not at all" to 5 "Very much." United Front was defined as strong denial of any real differences or disagreements between the mates.

#### *Adolescent Triangulation*

Triangulation was measured indirectly by looking at patterns of agreement and disagreement on the FES. Coding of triangulation patterns was based on an underlying assumption that if two family members were close to each other, they would see the family similarly (that is, have a high level of agreement in their description of the family on the FES); and vice versa, if they were distant, they would see the family differently (have a higher level of disagreement in how they experience and describe the family). The pattern of disagreements on the FES was used to create an indirect measure of the adolescent's role vis-à-vis parents. For each pair of persons, the number of items on which they disagreed provided a basic measure of interpersonal closeness. Difference scores were created for the father-mother (FM) relationship, the father-adolescent (FA) relationship, and the mother-adolescent (MA) relationship.

For each triad, the Adolescent Triangulation measure was created from the pattern of the three difference scores, FM, FA, and MA. This was done by first add-

ing together the three disagreement scores, then proportioning the total disagreement in the triad, that is, what percentage of the disagreement was in each relationship, e.g.,  $MA\% = MA / (MA + FA + FM)$ . A global measure, Adolescent Triangulation, was computed as the arithmetic difference between the relationship with the highest percentage score and that with the lowest. Less balance in the triangle results in a higher score on Adolescent Triangulation, regardless of the direction of the imbalance (See Figure). A perfectly balanced triangle has an Adolescent Triangulation score of zero (since all percentages are 33.3, the maximum difference in any two scores is zero).

Quantitative measures of triangulation styles were computed for Scapegoat and for Coalition. A Scapegoat score was computed as the sum of FA and MA divided by FM. A coalition score was computed as the absolute value of the difference between FA and MA divided by FM.

Finally, patterns in the three percentage scores (FM, FA, & MA) were used to classify each triad as one of those described in the Figure. A Balanced triad was taken to be one in which the amount of difference between the closest relationship and the most distant relationship was 10 or less. That is, given 100 total disagreement points for all three relationships added together (100%), is the difference between the closest relationship (lowest number of points) and the most distant relationship (highest number of points) 10 or less? When this number was more than 10:

- the triad was coded as Scapegoat when both the FA and MA scores were larger than the FM score
- the triad was coded as a Coalition when one parent-child (FA or MA) score was smaller than or equal to the FM score, while the other was larger.

- the triad was classified as Mediator when the FA and MA disagreement scores were both smaller than the FM score

### *Family System Triangulation*

Hypothesis 1 requires looking at triangulation from the viewpoint of the family system: to what extent does a marital pair triangle a child, any child. As noted previously, it is both theoretically possible, and consistent with clinical experience, that in a particular family only one child may be triangled. Thus a Family Triangulation score was created by taking the largest triangulation score for any adolescent in the family.

### *Adolescent Development*

The personal development measure was Loevinger's sentence completion test for ego development (Loevinger, 1966; Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). In the U. S. sample, ego development was measured for only one adolescent daughter in each U.S. family, except for one family that had two identified adolescent daughters in the study. There was no ego development coding for U. S. sons or for other daughters in the families. Ego development was measured for the 54 adolescent daughters and the 53 adolescent sons in the Japanese families.

## RESULTS

### Sample Characteristics

The sample are described in Tables 1 and 2. U. S. families were slightly larger than Japanese families. Forty percent of Japanese families and 62% of American families had three or more children (one or two children vs. three or more,  $\chi^2 = 7.30$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Japanese parents had more education than U. S. parents. Japanese fathers in particular had attended college more than those in the U. S. sample (for fathers,  $\chi^2 = 10.92$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for mothers,  $\chi^2 = 3.13$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Parents in Japanese families were slightly older (for fathers,  $\chi^2 = 8.42$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ; for mothers,  $\chi^2 = 16.06$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Ages of the adolescents in the total sample are given in Table 2. For neither boys nor girls was there a significant country difference in age. However, within each country, girls were older than boys (for Japan,  $\chi^2 = 10.35$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for the U. S.,  $\chi^2 = 16.54$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Patterns of Triangulation

Triangulation patterns, shown in Table 3, were similar across cultures. There were significant main effects for closeness to mother (MA), for both country ( $p < .05$ ) and gender ( $p < .05$ ), Americans and

TABLE 1  
*Description of Sample Parents*

	Fathers		Mothers	
	Japan (N = 59)	U. S. (N = 95)	Japan (N = 58)	U. S. (N = 100)
Parent Education				
High school or less	12%	36%	38%	52%
College	88	64	62	48
Ages of parents				
20s, 30s	3	16	5	33
40s	72	71	86	61
50s	25	13	9	6



TABLE 2  
Ages (%) of Sample Adolescents

	Boys		Girls	
	Japan (N = 59)	U. S. (N = 67)	Japan (N = 58)	U. S. (N = 150)
11-13	31%	31%	9%	13%
14-16	49	48	53	41
17-19	20	21	38	46

girls being closer. The other significant difference was between boys and girls on the Scapegoat measure. Boys scored higher ( $p < .01$ ). This can be seen in the relative difference score patterns. For boys, the base of the triangle (FM) was smaller, and the sides of the triangle (FA and MA, particularly MA) were longer than was the case for girls. That is, boys differed more from their parents, in how they saw the family, than did girls. This may reflect gender differences in parental expectation or acceptance of disagreement from sons relative to daughters.

Looking at families that scored highest on Family Triangulation (those in the top 50% in each country) gives another perspective on gender differences. When the triangled adolescent was a boy, he was in the Pushed Out position (15 out of 17 U. S. boys; 15 out of 16 Japanese boys). The pattern was more complex for girls. Girls were more likely than boys to be in

the Pulled In position—either as a coalition partner with a parent (usually with mother) or as a mediator. But whether a daughter was “pushed out” or “pulled in” depended to some extent on whether or not she had brothers. A triangled daughter was more likely to be in the Pushed Out (Scapegoat) position if she was in a family where all of the adolescents were girls, than if she was in a family where there were both male and female adolescents. In the U. S., for girls in all-girl families, 43% (9 out of 21) were in the Pushed Out position. But for U.S. families with both boys and girls, only 17% (2 out of 12) were Pushed Out. In Japan, for girls in all-girl families, 75% (6 out of 8) were in the Pushed Out position. For families with both boys and girls, 50% (3 out of 6) were Pushed Out.

**Hypothesis 1. Effect of marital system dynamics on triangulation:** It was hypothesized that parents who are unable to deal with disagreement and conflict within their own relationship are likely to triangle a child as a way dealing with the tension. This hypothesis was tested with family-level data. Only data from U. S. families were available since Japanese couples were not evaluated on the United Front measure. To test the hypothesis, the United Front marital pattern was related to the family-level triangulation score (Family Triangulation),

TABLE 3  
Patterns of Triangulation by Country and Gender

	Japanese Girls	Japanese Boys	US Girls	US Boys
<b>Average distance scores</b>				
FM	30.1 (5.4)	28.5 (6.4)	31.6 (5.4)	28.4 (5.1)
FA	35.3 (4.9)	35.8 (4.5)	35.6 (5.0)	36.7 (4.2)
MA	34.6 (5.0)	35.7 (5.1)	32.8 (5.4)	34.9 (4.9)
<b>Triangulation measures</b>				
Adolescent				
Triangulation	11.9 (5.3)	13.0 (7.0)	11.3 (6.0)	12.2 (5.9)
Scapegoat	2.44 (0.7)	2.71 (0.9)	2.28 (0.7)	2.65 (0.8)
Coalition	0.21 (0.2)	0.20 (0.2)	0.23 (0.2)	0.22 (0.2)

Note: Cell entries are means (standard deviations).

which was the largest triangulation score for any adolescent in the family. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the association between the marital system United Front measure and Family Triangulation. United Front correlated with Family Triangulation ( $r = .33, p < .01$ ). Of methodological concern is the fact that United Front was also significantly correlated with the amount of disagreement between husbands and wives. Couples who scored high on United Front also had fewer disagreements in how they described the family on the FES. When regressions analyses were run controlling for this relationship, the standardized regression coefficient for the effect of United Front on Adolescent Triangulation was .21, still significant at the .01 level.

**Hypothesis 2. Effect of triangulation on ego development:** It was hypothesized that triangulation would interfere with an adolescent's personal development. The sample for testing this hypothesis included one adolescent girl in each of the U.S. families, and all of the adolescent girls and boys in the Japanese families. For the adolescent daughters involved in the testing of Hypothesis 2, those in Japanese families were slightly younger on average than those in the U. S. families (11-16 vs. 17-19:  $\chi^2 = 4.88, df = 1, p < .05$ ). Age was correlated with ego development for both boys ( $r = .45$ ) and girls ( $r = .26$ ) in Japan. This relationship is not testable, however, in the U. S. sample because there is little variance in age. All U. S. girls were either 16 or 17 years old at the time they were tested for ego development.

Ego Development patterns for adolescents are given in Table 4. Preconformists (Loevinger's stages Delta/3 and below) are characterized by impulsivity, self-centeredness, and self-protection. At the Conformist level (Loevinger stage 3) the individual identifies own welfare with that of the group. Approval and acceptance by the group are very important. The Transitional level (Loevinger stage 3/4) involves the transformation from Conformist to Conscientious. This is the most frequently coded stage for both U. S. and Japanese girls. At the Conscientious level (Loevinger stage 4), the individual has internalized self-selected standards, goals, and ideals. There is a clear sense of responsibility for self and others, conceptual complexity, and a rich, differentiated inner life.

Japanese coders gave higher ego development scores to Japanese girls than the U. S. coders gave to U. S. girls ( $\chi^2 = 15.5, df = 3, p < .001$ ). Because of the difference in language and because different coders coded in each language, there is of course no way to tell whether this difference represents measurement bias or a substantive difference in development. Japanese boys were coded lower than Japanese girls. This is consistent with their younger age.

It was hypothesized that triangulation of an adolescent interferes with ego development. The most straightforward test of this hypothesis was to regress Ego Devel-

TABLE 4  
*Ego Development Scores for Teens*

	US Girls (N = 100)	Japanese Girls (N = 54)	Japanese Boys (N = 53)
<b>Ego development</b>			
Preconformist	22%	0%	11%
Conformist	11	7	25
Transitional	41	59	47
Conscientious	26	33	17

opment on Adolescent Triangulation, the global measure of imbalance in the father-mother-adolescent triangle. Because there were no ego development measures for U. S. boys, the analyses were performed separately for girls (U. S. and Japan) and boys (Japan).

Regressing Ego Development on Adolescent Triangulation for girls, controlling for country and age, gave significant effects for both Adolescent Triangulation ( $\beta = -.22, p < .01$ ) and for Country ( $\beta = -.24, p < .01$ ). As noted above, the Japanese girls were scored higher on ego development than the U. S. girls. There was no independent effect of age. Conducting separate regressions for the U. S. girls and Japanese girls revealed significant effects for each sample (Japanese sample,  $\beta = -.29, p < .05$ ; U. S. sample,  $\beta = -.23, p < .05$ ). There was a small but not significant relationship in the predicted direction between Adolescent Triangulation and Ego Development for (Japanese) boys ( $\beta = -.12$ ). The data presented in Table 5 elaborate these findings for girls.

Table 5 describes the relationship between particular triangulation structures and ego development. This Table shows, for girls in each country, the percentage of adolescents in each triangulation pattern who were scored as Preconscientious or

Conscientious. These patterns show that girls in Balanced triangles had higher ego development scores (a higher percentage were coded as Conscientious) than girls in any of the other patterns. Girls in Pulled In triangles (coalition and mediator patterns) and Pushed Out triangles (scapegoat pattern) have similar patterns of ego development. The overall similarity in the U.S. and Japanese patterns is striking. Concerning cross-generational coalitions, in the Japanese samples 17% of the adolescent girls were in cross-generational coalitions; 7 out of 10 (70%) were mother-daughter coalitions. In the U. S. sample, 20% of the adolescent girls were in cross-generational coalitions; 13 out of 20 (65%) were with the mother.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis relating marital system dynamics to triangulation was tested on a middle-class U. S. sample. The results supported the hypothesis that a couple's inability to handle differences and disagreements may lead to the triangulation of an adolescent, either pushed out as a scapegoat or pulled in as a coalition partner or mediator.

In both the U. S. and Japanese samples, triangled sons were found to be scapegoated. This is consistent with a

TABLE 5  
*Ego Development by Triangulation Pattern for Adolescent Girls*

	Ego Development <sup>a</sup>	
	Preconscientious	Conscientious
<b>Japan</b>		
Balanced ( $n = 17$ )	53%	47%
Scapegoat ( $n = 20$ )	70	30
Coalition ( $n = 10$ )	70	30
Mediator ( $n = 7$ )	86	14
<b>U.S.</b>		
Balanced ( $n = 45$ )	64	36
Scapegoat ( $n = 25$ )	80	20
Coalition ( $n = 20$ )	80	20
Mediator ( $n = 10$ )	90	10

<sup>a</sup> Preconscientious = Loevinger Stage 3/4 or lower; Conscientious = Loevinger Stage 4 or higher.

general pattern in the data, across both cultures, for boys to be more distant from parents (especially mothers) than were girls. That is, boys, compared with girls, disagreed more with parents about the description of family life, relative to the amount of disagreement between the parents. Girls were more likely than boys to be pulled in as mediators or as a coalition partner with a parent. Girls in all-girl families, however, where there were no boys to be the object of scapegoating, were more likely to be scapegoated than were girls who had brothers.

Results also supported the second hypothesis, that triangulation of an adolescent can interfere with her personal development. This result was found for girls in both U. S. and Japanese samples. The hypothesis was also tested for Japanese sons. The results were in the predicted direction but were not significant. The fact that no relationship was found between adolescent development and triangulation for Japanese boys is consistent with the idea that girls are more affected by family system process than are boys. Likewise, sons in both cultures were seen to be slightly more distant from parents than were daughters, judging by the greater differences between sons and their parents concerning their view of the family.

The analyses reported here find a cross-cultural pattern suggesting a similar family process, the effect of triangulation, in both the Japan and the U.S. The implication is that there are some fundamentals of family structure and process that are common cross-culturally. These data, along with others we have reported elsewhere, suggest to us that some cultural differences between the United States and Japan may have been exaggerated in the past. We have found important similarities, along with differences, both in marital patterns (Bell & Bell, 2000), and

in conceptions of the healthy family (Bell et al., 1996).

When comparing two groups, there seems to be a natural tendency to polarize, to exaggerate differences, and to ignore differences within a culture according to gender or historical cohort. Cherished hypotheses concerning differences (for example, that Americans are more independent, Japanese more interdependent) tend to hang on despite of evidence to the contrary (Matsumoto, 1999). Hermans and Kempen (1998) provide a useful discussion of some of these issues. They suggest that new approaches are needed, in part because of our increasingly interconnected world society. Cross-cultural researchers must at least take care to describe both similarity and difference, within-culture variations, and change over time. Highlighting fundamental family processes in the context of cultural variation is both an important and a delicate task.

## REFERENCES

- Anonymous. (1972). Toward the differentiation of a self in one's family (pp. 111-166). In J. Framo (ed.), *Family interaction: A dialogue between family researchers and family therapists*. New York: Springer. Publishing Co.
- Bell, D.C., & Bell, L.G. (1982). Family process and child development in unlabeled (normal) families. *Australian Journal of Family Therapy* 3: 205-210.
- Bell, D.C., Bell, L.G., Nakata, Y., & Bell, E.M. (1996). Connection and individuality in Japan and the United States: Gender, culture, and conceptions of family health. *Journal of Gender, Culture, and Health* 1: 277-294.
- Bell, L.G. (1986). Using the Family Paper Sculpture for education, therapy, and research. *Contemporary Family Therapy* 8:291-300.
- Bell, L.G. (1989). Song without words. *The Family Therapy Networker* 13(2):48-53. Reprinted in R. Simon, C. Barrilleaus, M. S.

- Wylie, & L. M. Markowitz (eds.), *The evolving therapist: Ten years of The Family Therapy Networker* (pp. 81–86), 1992. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bell, L.G., & Bell, D.C. (1979). Triangulation: Pitfall for the developing child. *Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry (Handbook of International Sociometry District of Columbia)* 32:150–155.
- Bell, L.G., & Bell, D.C. (1982). Family climate and the role of the female adolescent: Determinants of adolescent functioning. *Family Relations* 31:519–517. Reprinted in D. H. Olson & B. C. Miller (eds.), *Family studies yearbook, Vol. II* (pp. 295–303), 1984, Beverly Hills CA: Sage Publications.
- Bell, L.G., & Bell, D.C. (2000). Similarity and traditionalism in Japanese and U. S. marriage experiences. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 31:309–319.
- Bell, L.G., Cornwell, C.S., & Bell, D.C. (1983). *Global scales*. Houston: University of Houston–Clear Lake. Available from ERIC (ED 248 420). Japanese scales (revised by D. Bell, L. Bell, H. Dendo, K. Kameguchi, & K. Kawanami) available from the authors.
- Bell, L.G., Cornwell, C.S., & Bell, D.C. (1988). Peer relationships of adolescent daughters: A reflection of family relationship patterns. *Family Relations* 37: 171–174.
- Bender, B. (1976). Self-chosen victims: Scapegoating behavior sequential to battering. *Child Welfare* 55:417–422.
- Blalock, H.M., Jr. (1989). *Power and conflict: Toward a general theory*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Coser, Lewis A. (1956). *The functions of social conflict*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Dare, C. (1993). The family scapegoat: An origin for hating (pp. 31–45). In V. P. Varma (ed.), *How and why children hate*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Falicov, C.J., ed. (1983). *Cultural perspectives in family therapy*. Rockville MD: Aspen Publications.
- Fish, M.C., & Jain, S. (1985). A systems approach in working with learning-disabled children: Implications for the school. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 18: 592–595.
- Ford, F.R., & Harrick, J. (1974). Family rules: Family life styles. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 44:61–69.
- Fullinwider-Bush, N., & Jacobvitz, D.B. (1993). The transition to young adulthood: Generational boundary dissolution and female identity development. *Family Process* 32: 87–103.
- Gantman, C.A. (1978). Family interaction patterns among families with normal, disturbed, and drug-abusing adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 7: 429–440.
- Gilbert, R., Christensen, A., & Margolin, G. (1984). Patterns of alliances in nondistressed and multiproblem families. *Family Process* 23: 75–87.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Haley, J. (1967). Toward a theory of pathological systems (pp. 11–27). In G.H. Zuk & I. Boszormenyi-Nagy (eds.), *Family therapy and disturbed families*. Palo Alto CA: Science & Behavior Books.
- Harary, F., Norman, R.Z., & Cartwright, D. (1965). *Structural models: An introduction to the theory of directed graphs*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harcourt, Alexander H., & de Waal, F.B.M. (eds.). (1992). *Coalitions and alliances in humans and other animals*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hermans, H.J.M., & Kempen, H.J.G. (1998). Moving cultures: The perilous problems of culture dichotomies in a globalizing society. *American Psychologist* 53: 1111–1120.
- Hsu, F.K. (ed). (1971). *Kinship and culture*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Kalucy, R.S., Crisp, A.H., & Harding, B. (1977). A study of 56 families with anorexia nervosa. *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 50:381–395.
- L'Abate, L., Weeks, G., & Weeks, K. (1979). Of scapegoats, strawmen, and scarecrows. *International Journal of Family Therapy* 1:86–96.
- Lebra, T.S. (1976). *Japanese patterns of behavior*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- Lewis, J.M., Beavers, W.R., Gossett, J.T., & Phillips, V.A. (1976). *No single thread: Psychological health in family systems*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Loevinger, J. (1966). Meaning and measurement of ego development. *American Psychologist* 21:195-206.
- Loevinger, J., & Wessler, R. (1970). *Measuring ego development I: Construction and use of a sentence completion test*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Matsumoto, D. (1999). Culture and self: An empirical assessment of Markus and Kitayama's theory of independent and interdependent self-constructs. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2:289-310.
- Matsumoto, D., Kudoh, T., & Takeuchi, S. (1996). Changing patterns of individualism and collectivism in the United States and Japan. *Culture & Psychology* 2:77-107.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families & family therapy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Minuchin, S., Rosman, B.L., & Baker, L. (1978). *Psychosomatic families: Anorexia nervosa in context*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moos, R.H. (1974). *Family Environment Scale*. Palo Alto CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. 1974.
- Pillari, V. (1991). *Scapegoating in families: Intergenerational patterns of physical and emotional abuse*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Rapoport, A. (1960). *Fights, games, and debates*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Rollins, N., Lord, J.P., Walsh, E., & Weil, G.R. (1973). Some roles children play in their families: Scapegoat, baby, pet, and peacemaker. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 12:511-530.
- Schattschneider, E.E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Schmidt, S.A. (1968). Special treatment applications: United front, acting-out adolescent, and only-adopted-child families (pp. 39-51). In C.H. Kramer, B. Liebowitz, R.L. Phillips, S. A. Schmidt, & J. Gibson (eds.), *Beginning phase of family treatment*. Chicago: The Family Institute of Chicago.
- Simmel, G. (1955). *Conflict and the web of group-affiliations* (K.H. Wolff & R. Bendix, Tsl.). New York: Free Press.
- Strodtbeck, F.L. (1951). Husband-wife interaction over revealed differences. *American Sociological Review* 16:468-473.
- Toker, E. (1972). The scapegoat as an essential group phenomenon. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 22:320-332.
- Vogel, E.F., & Bell, N.W. (1968). The emotionally disturbed child as the family scapegoat (pp. 412-427). In N.W. Bell & E.F. Vogel (eds.), *A modern introduction to the family*. New York: The Free Press.
- Vuchinich, S., Emery, R.E., & Cassidy, J. (1988). Family members as third parties in dyadic family conflict: Strategies, alliances, and outcomes. *Child Development* 59:1293-1302.
- Vuchinich, S., Wood, B., & Vuchinich, R. (1994). Coalitions and family problem solving with preadolescents in referred, at-risk, and comparison families. *Family Process* 33:409-424.
- Walters, M., Carter, B., Papp, P., & Silverstein, O. (1988). *The invisible web: Gender patterns in family relationships*. New York: Guilford Press.
- West, J.D., Zarski, J.J., & Harvill, R. (1986). The influence of the family triangle on intimacy. *American Mental Health Counselors Association Journal* 8:166-174.
- Williamson, D.S., & Bray, J.H. (1988). Family development and change across the generations: An intergenerational perspective (pp. 357-384). C. J. Falicov (ed.), *Family transitions: Continuity and change over the life cycle*. New York: Guilford Press.

Manuscript received October 3, 2000; revision submitted January 24, 2001; accepted January 29, 2001.