INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY PROCESSES

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Theories About Family Life

□ Chapter Preview

In this chapter, readers will learn:

- That theoretical orientations flow from deeper philosophical traditions. Among those are the traditions of rationalism, empiricism, and existentialism.
- How theoretical approaches assist us in our study of family life. Among them are rational/exchange, developmental/family life cycle, symbolic interaction, conflict, and systems theory.
- That individuals join together to form a family and a family is an entity.
- How an entity or group of individuals can be tied together by a common set of goals and beliefs, and how families have systemic properties. This is sometimes called “wholeness” and refers to the idea that a system is a complexity of elements standing in interaction as an underlying pattern or structure.
- That family groups or systems attempt to maintain stability over time. This is called homeostasis. Family systems also must adapt and change over time and this is called morphogenesis.
- That it is difficult to speak of causality when referring to system processes. Instead, one tries to identify patterns of interaction.

□ Introduction

The theories we use in social science are representations or models for something tangible and real. Remember the discussion in Chapter 2 within which I proposed that empirical and theoretical ideas change and develop over time and are never meant to represent a position of truth, per se. Instead, theories are perspectives that help us understand reality and are merely constructs that we use as tools to approximate our understanding of the “real” world. An important question to ask in response to that last statement could be “Is there a real world?”

It is also important to realize that most of the methodological and theoretical ideas and terms presented here did not originate in the young discipline of family science. Instead,
these ideas have, for the most part, a long and rich history in other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and psychology.

Within the pages of this chapter, several theories used in family sciences are presented. There are two important limitations you should know about the following synopsis of these theoretical ideas. First, each of the theories mentioned has a prominent history in the social sciences. Our glimpse of these complicated ideas only captures a small portion of the volumes written about each.

Second, these are not the only theories used by family scholars. The following overview represents a quick look at the theories most frequently used. If you continue studying family science, you might wish to take a course that examines these and other theoretical ideas in depth. Additionally, the suggested readings at the end of this chapter provide a starting place for extended study about theoretical orientations in the discipline of family science.

What Is Theory?

The word theory can sometimes produce a chill in everyday conversation, but an understanding of theoretical ideas is essential when embarking on voyages of scientific discovery. Theoretical ideas have inspired discoveries in astronomy, biology, economics, and medicine. Whether one wants to discover new knowledge or to apply ideas already known, efforts are much more effective if they are done within the context of established theories.

When scholars or application specialists try to answer the question “What is going on here?” they are always building on the accumulated findings of others. In everyday life, people refer to this phenomenon when they say there is “no need to reinvent the wheel.” One of the most important tasks of scholars and thinkers in family science is the work of collecting and organizing ideas into theories. From these core, fundamental ideas and principles of family life, come a wealth of notions that can assist us in explaining why people do what they do. These constructs also can assist when we decide to change behaviors in our life that do not help meet the goals we have in mind.

In sum, theories are combinations of hunches, collected facts (or ideas we think are facts), and the accepted wisdom about aspects of a situation. They provide a common language for discussion about a topic and provide suggestions for research and application directions. Most of the theoretical ideas presented here will sound familiar and you might discover that many of them are rather commonsense notions. However, these collected ideas represent a “language”; in other words, terms and constructs summarize our best thinking about the ways families and individuals in families set out to solve life’s problems, build stronger relationships, and make daily decisions. The following are several key terms, constructs, and ideas that constitute many of the theoretical viewpoints discussed later.

Reductionism

One of the more important questions in studying families (or any other social process) is how we approach the complexity of social life. An ongoing debate in social science centers on the topic of reductionism. On the one hand, some believe that it is inappropriate and ineffective to “reduce” life to small fragments or parts of behavior. For example, a reductionist-oriented researcher would try to identify the tiny pieces of daily behavior that make up life. He or she would attempt to show that the parts matter and are connected.
Additionally, a reductionist would suggest ways of intervening in a problem by targeting one or more of the parts for change.

A reductionistic perspective takes the view that one can successfully focus on the small parts of a family and figure out what that family will do in a variety of situations (Sprey, 2000). The small parts are usually the people within the family. The approach for many years in family studies, therefore, has been to focus on each person in the family and note what roles each one plays (i.e., father, provider, caretaker, defender, etc). For example, to measure marital satisfaction, each partner was asked a few questions about how he or she thought the marriage was going. Sometimes the responses from both partners were statistically merged and guesses were made about how “happy” the marriage was. This created some problems for theorists and researchers. Many began to realize that marriages and families were more dynamic than merely the sum of the two scores.

**PRINCIPLE 3.1 REDUCTIONISM**

Reductionism focuses on the small atomic parts of a system. Many scientists, especially those who study physics, math, and chemistry, for example, believe that understanding comes from studying the smallest atomic fragments of a system as a strategy to understanding how the system works. This philosophical orientation was made popular by such scientists as Galileo and Newton. Applying reductionism to social science is a pragmatic approach but has serious limitations.

In other words, one point of view is that it might be very difficult if not impossible to measure the wholeness of a family by gathering information about each of its members and then somehow combining their answers to get an overall picture of the family. As a result, it seems there are only a few theoretical choices with regard to the study of the family.

First, we could continue with the typical questionnaire-based approach in which a researcher asks a family member (and usually it is only one member) some questions about his or her experience in that family. Using this method, we would have to assume that one person’s view of the larger activities and beliefs of a group of people is sufficient. We would assume that this person’s analysis of family life (and often it is the mother’s view) is accurate enough, so we use that view as a summary for what the entire family believes, thinks, and does behaviorally—and we treat that one view as reality.
For example, suppose we are measuring something like father involvement (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Many researchers want to know if father involvement really matters in the lives of children. Although the research in this area of study is relatively new, the findings have a wide variety of implications for public policy, custody issues, and what we think about children’s well-being.

Most of the research about father involvement, however, has been done by asking mothers what fathers do in families. Does that seem odd to you? Many researchers think that approach is odd and have begun trying to get information from fathers. However, fathers are more difficult to find and they typically do not like to answer surveys, so in general, they are a more difficult group (than mothers) with whom to do research. A reductionistic approach has been to gather a few pieces of data from mothers about fathers with regard to a few activities he might do in family life. Then researchers would make some guesses about what that means for family life. To many researchers, that approach has seemed less than adequate.

Another approach that is gaining popularity is to move away from a purely reductionistic view, gather information from several people in the family, and then, using sophisticated statistics, researchers could find shared beliefs about what has happened in a particular family. For example, if we wanted to know more about father involvement we would ask mothers, fathers, and even children for their perceptions about what the father does and what it means to them. The idea is that by combining the views of several people we might get closer to understanding the processes that occur in family life. This type of research is costly and still only provides an approximation about inner family life.

Still another approach rejects the idea that we can research inner family life by asking simple questions like “How many times did you spank your child last week?” Instead, qualitative researchers approach the study of family life by gathering narrative stories, observing the families in their homes, and then extracting from what they see and hear any patterns or themes that reemerge.

The Approach in This Text

The information used within this text is taken from many different kinds of research studies, some of which are extremely reductionistic in nature and others that are excellent examples of narrative-qualitative studies. My belief is that each of the approaches we use has strengths, limitations, successes, and problems. Each is another way to tell the story about family life behind closed doors. However, a clear bias found in this text is that I believe that it is important to at least attempt to study families rather than only focus on the individuals within families.

Family Systems Theory

One metaphor that is often used to understand family life is to think of families as an interactive system. Systems are often defined as a group of interacting parts (Broderick, 1993; Klein & White, 1996). This idea simply means that when describing any entity (a football team, a habitat in the forest, or a complex factory), it is assumed that all of the parts are somehow connected and interrelated. In the case of family science, families are not a closed system like an airplane. A modern jet passenger plane is a self-contained closed system.
All of the parts (e.g., the compass, engines, and rudders) are parts of a complex group of parts collected together in one place and labeled an airplane. The airplane does receive fuel and supplies from outside sources and from time to time the pilot gets messages from other systems outside plane (e.g., other airplanes and the control tower). The pilot, one could argue, is not really a part of the plane system, but he or she uses that systemic object to get from point A to point B. For the most part, the airplane, itself, is a closed system of parts and it has a rather singular mission.

Families, on the other hand, are a relatively open system (Broderick, 1993). The boundaries of a family are rather permeable. Boundaries, by definition, are “invisible lines drawn within and among family members that form subsystems—for example, the lines within the individual self, the marital coalition, and the children” (Sauber, L’Abate, Weeks, & Buchanan, 1993, p. 38). Boundaries are discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

**The Family as a Whole**

A basic notion proposed by systems researchers and family intervention workers is that it is impossible to understand family life without viewing the family as a whole (Broderick, 1993; Hall & Fagen, 1956; Klein & White, 1996). In Freudian psychology and other general social science approaches, the unit of analysis is almost always an individual, with other family members playing a supporting role in the story. In a systemic view of family life, the primary story centers on what the whole family is doing and the focus on a particular individual (even if she or he is the person with the most obvious “problem”) is secondary to understanding how family life works. Indeed, solving an individual’s “problem” often involves changing patterns that involve other family members.

Often when researchers examine family life, the interaction in families is viewed as larger than any one person or even any one rule or pattern. Okun and Rapport (1980) summarized this idea as follows:
The system in an integrated coherent entity is more than the mere composite of independent elements. This wholeness transcends the sum of the system’s component elements. . . . a change in one part of the system may cause a change in many parts (subsystems) of the larger system and in the larger system itself. (pp. 8–9)

We cannot understand the Browns simply by understanding each individual member of the family. We must also understand (i.e., we have to observe, take note of, and record) the relationships and interactions that occur with this family entity (or systemic unit). Another way to say this is that each role found within the family is dependent on the others. For example, one cannot be a mother unless there are people to “mother.”

**PRINCIPLE 3.2 THE FAMILY UNIT AS A WHOLE**

When using a systems approach to understanding family life, one has to view the family unit as a whole and, therefore, not use the individual as the primary focus of interest.

Families are thus not a closed a system like an airplane but, in many ways, are more complicated. Some family systems scholars consider the people in the family to be the “parts,” but others write about the family system as being even more complicated than simply a collection of people. For these family scientists, the unit of analysis is the interaction found within the inner life of the family. That is, many family science researchers examine how patterns of interaction are formed, what effect those exchanges of feeling and information hold, and how family interaction can be changed.

One way to think of family interaction and the difficulty of studying it is to imagine you are doing research about families. If you were approaching family life from a mostly reductionistic point of view, you would seek information about the family from one or more of the family members. Possibly, you would ask each one what he or she thinks about the quality of the relationships within the family. However, if you were trying to assess a family-level measure, you would have to find a way to measure some attribute or aspect of family life that exists or inheres within the group. For example, we could give them a difficult interpersonal task to solve and with the video camera running (and the interviewer out of the room) we could capture how they solve this problem. Trained coders could then evaluate the recorded interaction and try to assess some family-level characteristic that transcends any one person.

We could, for example, code their interaction with regard to playfulness, contention, cooperation, or intrusive control. We would not get those family-level measures just by asking one person her opinion of how she feels about cooperating in these kinds of situations. Instead, a disinterested third party (like the judge in a courtroom) codes and rates the collective notion of cooperation as viewed in real time. We would, of course, have to make sure that the coder was well trained to recognize the elements of playfulness, cooperation, and so on. In addition (remember Chapter 2), we would want the coder’s scores to be valid and reliable.

Systems theory posits that when theorists invented system theory, they were, for the most part, interested in closed systems consisting of machine parts (e.g., radar, rocket ships, and robots). Although families, family members, and the interactions found within a family system are not nearly as predictable as pieces of metal and wire, there are some
attributes of family life that are system-like. For example, the first idea we explore here is the notion that systems theory assumes that every system has an underlying “structure.”

**Underlying Structures**

A primary theme of family science research from a systems point of view is the idea that the role of the therapist or researcher is to discover underlying, hidden “structures.” There are many social science researchers who have adopted this theme over the years. For example, this idea is at the heart of the writings of Sigmund Freud. In the Freudian approach to understanding the human psyche, the notion is that the skilled observer can detect hidden patterns or undiscovered, unresolved conflicts deep within the subconscious of the individual. By finding, identifying, and revealing those hidden conflicts, one can attain a higher level of mental health.

This type of idea also extends to theories that describe the cognitive abilities of children and adults. Piaget, for example, suggested that there were hidden, internal schemata or mental structures that direct our ability to solve problems and make sense out of life’s puzzles. Likewise, several writers of family theory have suggested that within family life there are underlying structures or patterns of interactions that direct what occurs in family life. As mentioned earlier, though, families are not mechanical entities. The metaphor of a system is easier to understand if one thinks of a mechanical device or group of devices welded together and designed to solve some problem in a factory. Think of a complex factory, for example, in which there are hundreds of steps performed by hundreds of machines to produce an item, like an automobile, for example. Most systems like the automobile factory receive inputs (e.g., metal, plastic, paint, and glass) and the parts of the system (e.g., the metal press, the paint robots, and the glass-installing arms) work together to solve a central problem (i.e., to have an automobile exit the output door, completed and working and looking like it is supposed to). The workers in the factory are really extensions of the robotic arms and levers, moving in unison (if all goes well) to produce a specific goal. The patterns of interaction (e.g., the metal is pressed and cut before it is painted) are all thoughtfully mapped out, timed, and executed according to a massive collaborative effort by all involved.

In the world of human and family systemic thinking, the idea is that you can observe the movement of the actors, how they communicate, what comes into the system, and what happens to the system (whether it be factory workers or family members). Based on those observations, one could deduce what the goals of the system are and how effective that particular system is at achieving its apparent goals.

Like Freud trying to discover the underlying patterns of the mind, the researcher or therapist who works with family systems theory tries to understand the underlying patterns of family life by watching how families solve problems, how family members communicate with one another, and how they allocate resources. So, family systems theorists are fond of saying, “a system is a group of interacting parts that comprise a whole.”

**Families Have Goals**

This view of the world reflects not only the system perspective, but also the social-exchange and conflict theory ideas. All of these approaches assume that the system is goal seeking: Families have goals they are trying to achieve. For the most part, this process is not really apparent to a typical family. They rarely sit down and discuss the overall meaning or goal
of their family. In fact, it probably takes a skilled observer from the outside to watch the repeating patterns of a family before some of the underlying themes or goals surface.

### PRINCIPLE 3.3 FAMILIES ARE GOAL DIRECTED

Families are a collective and usually form an entity. Such entities are thought to be goal directed. That is, whether the actors know it or not, groups have a tendency to try and achieve stated or implicit goals. Understanding family life is about understanding how efficient a particular family group is at achieving appropriate goals and aims.

### Subscription and Efficiency

These goals vary widely from family to family (see Chapter 8 for more on this topic). In addition, there is always a good chance that one or more of the family members will not subscribe to the overall family direction, goal, aim, purpose, ambition, or aspiration. We do not know very much about this idea, as few family researchers have attempted to assess it. However, one can imagine that if the subscription rate were low in a family—that is, there was low consensus about what that family’s mission, aim, goal, or purpose was—we would speculate that the family would be less efficient in solving problems, making decisions, and getting the daily business of family completed (Day et al., 2001). Why? Efficiencies of goal achievement (getting children educated, saving money, becoming healthy, etc.) are more likely to be achieved when all involved agree on the desired outcome. If some family member only half-heartedly subscribes to the idea of education for all then it will take much more effort on the part of those who do value that goal to make it happen.

Therefore, there are three take-home ideas from this discussion. The first is that a system (including a family system) is a group of interacting parts (family members and the patterns of interaction that occur). Second, families have aims, goals, themes, and missions they are trying to attain. Further, families use strategies that are pattern-like to make those goals happen. That is, they are more likely to do the same routines over and over than they are to try some new approach to achieve goals and deal with problems that might affect goal achievement. Third, there is a subscription rate involved in the family goal attainment process. Consequently when family members are fully subscribed and focus their energy and resources on a given theme, aim, or goal, the goal will be easier and faster to obtain.

### Equilibrium

Another useful term that comes from the systems perspective is equilibration or equilibrium. Of course, this idea refers to the balancing act that families must perform. As family entities attempt to reach goals, they have to respond constantly to the changes that happen in their world—money comes in, children get sick, the local factory announces layoffs, the mother is depressed, and so on. Family units are not static systems. A closed system, like a watch, can be wound and then you do not have to bother with it until it needs winding or a battery. On the other hand, families are interactive systems that require constant adaptation, change, and response. One cannot get a family organized, arranged, thought out, and defined and then walk away as you would with the clock. Instead, on a daily or
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even hourly basis family members are changing and influencing the other family members. Therefore, family units try to reach goals by keeping life's events in balance. We have to change the rules, adapt our traditions, and alter how we get daily chores done.

Morphostasis and Morphogenesis

Morphostasis and morphogenesis are two forces that occur each day in family life. According to the family systems way of thinking, as various events occur (e.g., a child is injured on the playground), family entities try to keep the rules of everyday living intact and keep life moving along. Morphostasis means that we want there to be continuity and sameness. The other pull is that families realize that there is constant genesis or creation and change. So, when the child is injured on the playground, we collectively ask if the old way of doing things will work today. Does someone else need to make the dinner? Who can help with homework tonight while someone takes her to the doctor? Who will call her friend and tell her she is not going to be able to play? Later in this book, we talk much more about family crises and how families adapt to events that change the nature of family interaction as the Browns try to keep the daily events of life running smoothly and at the same time re-create how they meet the changes that occur as people get older and the family is altered. (See Chapter 8 for a more detailed explanation of these ideas.)

Boundaries

As mentioned earlier, families are rather open systems that have permeable boundaries. The idea of a boundary is a key to understanding systems thinking. System boundaries occur where two or more systems or subsystems interface, interact, or come together. They are borders of a system. Sometimes these boundaries can be very solid and rigid and other times they are very permeable. Boundaries occur at every level in the system and between systems. Often, we understand where a boundary is by listening to the rules families construct about where people can and cannot go, what they can and cannot do, and who is allowed in the family and who is not allowed to leave. For example, some families might have a very open system and family members are allowed to come and go without much restriction.
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**PRINCIPLE 3.4 FAMILIES ARE SYSTEMS WITH BOUNDARIES**

Like all systems, families develop, maintain, and use boundaries. These boundaries define membership and information flow. They also help specify membership expectations.

When we say that system boundaries are permeable, we mean that the system is not tightly closed. In fact, in some families they are so permeable they are like a sieve. Other families are more protective and they construct boundaries that resemble castle walls. The “drawbridge” is only lowered for certain events and a castle-family member has to return on time or trouble will ensue. Likewise, there might be strict rules about who can enter other family members’ rooms or study areas. We speak more of this issue in Chapter 9 on rules and patterns of interaction.

Boss (1998) illuminated another type of boundary issue. As a family scientist, she has researched the idea of boundaries in many settings and recently applied her work to the problem of families who have a member with Alzheimer’s disease. In her book, she shows how the physical and mental awareness of family members can greatly influence our ideas about family membership and responsibility.

**Subsystems**

Within the family system there might be smaller units of analysis. Another element that researchers speak of is the idea of subsystems within the family realm. There are several possible subsystems, which include the spousal or executive subsystem, the parent–child subsystem, and the parental subsystem (in which the husband and wife relate to each other with regard to a parenting role). One of the key tasks of subsystems is boundary maintenance.

Family therapists have long known that a sure sign of a family in difficulty is when their subsystems are not kept separate and distinct (Minuchin, 1981, 1996). For example, when family members build coalitions across subsystems, the family’s ability to achieve goals is weakened. If a mother builds a stronger relationship with a child than she does with her spouse, then the family system is weakened. If a parent (in this case often the father) blurs the boundaries between himself and a child emotionally and sexually the entire family system is weakened and can even be destroyed, as is often the case when incest occurs.

The concept of the subsystem helps us understand that the primary “parts” of the system are not the individuals but instead are the interactions between and among the various subsystems within a family group. The father influences his partner, and in turn, the response of those two people influences how they allocate resources, make decisions, and monitor their children. The great American playwright Arthur Miller once said “all human interaction is 98% historical,” referring to the simple idea that the patterns of previous interactions and decisions live on and direct the next thing we say to a family member in the next situation. The study of those patterns of interaction is a characteristic of the study of the family using a systems approach.

**Equifinality**

One of the more unique concepts used in family system thinking is the idea of equifinality. Simply put, equifinality captures the idea that “many beginnings can lead to the same
outcome, and the same beginning can lead to quite different outcomes” (Bavelas & Segal, 1982, p. 103). In other words, any outcome you can imagine can be brought about by multiple causes. Further, because there are so many events that can cause a given outcome, paying attention to this idea turns our attention away from worrying about those causes as much as some other theoretical orientations do.

For example, we know from various studies on parent–child interaction that parental overinvolvement can lead to two very different outcomes in children. Being an over-responsive parent can push children to overachieve and it could push some children to underachieve. Friedman (1985) listed several research ideas that seem to lead us to the conclusion that one beginning can have many different outcomes. Having an alcoholic parent could produce children who are diametrically opposed to drinking or children who abuse alcohol themselves; if a parent takes a stand on some ideological issue (e.g., a strong religious conviction) children might see the parent as a hero or a controlling, demanding dictator.

Likewise, the same effect could have come from very opposite causes. For example, the death of a child could bring a family close together and their level of functioning could dramatically increase, or it could devastate them and great distance and unresolved negative feelings could result.

**Equipotentiality**

In like manner, there are several factors that can lead to early sexuality, including early menstruation, contact with other youth who are sexually active, influence from a sibling who is sexually active, low sense of self-worth, and so on. There are thus many causes that can lead to one single outcome.

Thinking more systemically, the search for single causes and single outcomes takes a back seat. Instead, at center stage are the search for outcomes and their related processes. In the example of the death of a child, a family systems researcher focuses not on the events of the child’s death but rather on how the family entity responds and tries to adapt. The focus would be on the strategies they use to resolve the loss.

When using a family systemic way of thinking, one asks “what” questions rather than “why” questions. The systemic way of viewing family life is to focus more on what can be done once some event happens, rather than a postmortem approach to find out why something happened. By examining how families and family members respond to daily life, we can make guesses about what they value, how they solve problems, and how they think about the world. Armed with those insights, family systems researchers believe they have a better chance of helping families cope with life’s difficult events than if they focus only on why the child died, why the farm lost money, why the unmarried teen got pregnant, and so on.

**PRINCIPLE 3.5 FAMILIES REACHING GOALS**

Family members are more effective in reaching goals when they focus more on the “how and what” part of life than spending their energy on the “why” and causal aspects of daily life.

Imagine a family floating down a river in a raft. The river is in a scenic wilderness. The surroundings all contribute to the experience of the family. Specifically, the slope of the river as it cuts through a canyon will determine how fast the water is flowing. Although
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the family members might note these determining factors, such as the speed of the water, the number of rocks, and the position of the raft in the river, it is the rowing that is the focus of their attention. No one pays too much attention to why a rock is there; it is simply there and must be avoided. In only a few instances (like if my mother were there) would a family member be rehearsing why he or she came here in the first place. Certainly no one would be thinking much about how the family formed and why they were born with children who could not row better (although it might cross someone’s mind). Instead of focusing on causes, the most effective families learn to focus on the problem at hand.

As you can see from this example, our focus has shifted from thinking about the researcher to the family itself. Both family researchers or therapists and family members themselves can benefit from the principle of equifinality. Certainly, there is a never-ending list of causes that one could examine in the river example. However, strong families and researchers who use this perspective spend most of their energy focusing on rowing better, spotting rocks earlier, and having some fun while the event is in progress. According to this

FIGURE 3.4 This diagram illuminates the two terms equifinality and equipotentiality. Equifinality describes the idea that many beginnings can lead to the same outcome. Equipotentiality refers to the notion that one beginning can have a variety of outcomes.
perspective, researchers have less impact when they focus on the reasons why the family is rafting in the first place. Families are less effective when family members evaluate, rehash, rehearse, and criticize family activity instead of learning how to row better, so to speak.

### Theories of Change and Family Development

One of the giants and founders of family science research was Rubin Hill. As early as 1949, Hill developed the idea that a family was composed of social roles and that the nature and assignment of these roles changed over time (Hill & Hansen, 1960). Theorists who use this perspective make several key assumptions, as described next.

The first assumption found in this approach can be labeled the change assumption. The change assumption states that any living system (be it the individual or a complicated family group) has a path it follows and that all living entities change over time. The job of the researcher is to note those changes and find out how they influence individual or family decisions.

**PRINCIPLE 3.6 CHANGE HAPPENS**

Individuals, family structure, and interactions among family members change over time.

The second assumption we learn from family life course theory is that changes over time in family life have to be examined from a number of different levels. This idea surfaces in many theories about the family and has several different labels. Basically, the idea is that individuals live in some type of family group. Obviously, there are exceptional cases in which some children do not grow up in some type of family group, but that is clearly atypical. Family groups (whatever the makeup) are social by nature. By that we mean that a primary purpose of families is to care for, nurture, and facilitate an optimal outcome for each member. Again, a basic notion of this theory is that family groups organize around the idea of well-being. In every culture and in every historical time period, there are no examples of cultures that we know about in which the individuals have not banded together in these intimate family groups with the overall goal of helping each other “do better.” Said differently, in every culture we know about, families exist in some form and are not established with the intent of destroying each other.

At the next level of complexity is the community. Each community in the world is composed of clusters or groups of families that are more alike or homogenous than they are different. A small community of families living in northern England is probably more alike than different and the same would be true of a community of families living in Egypt, Bolivia, or Japan. Although the similarity begins to fade the wider we cast our community net, it also true that families living in the United States, generally, are more similar in ideology, beliefs, and organization than they are dissimilar. Additionally, it is important to understand that individuals are connected to families, families are connected to communities, and larger communities are formed from collections of smaller local or proximate communities. Each level influences the other levels: To more fully understand the complexity of family life one must take into consideration how the larger and more
distal community influences family life and how local family life influences the larger community. Chapter 4 explores this idea in depth but the principle of community life captures the core idea.

**PRINCIPLE 3.7 FAMILIES ARE CONNECTED**

Family development is influenced by the connections families have to their proximate and distal communities. Likewise, larger community life is influenced by smaller collections of families (i.e., one’s proximate community) and by individual families themselves.

Another key assumption that is a feature of the family life course perspective is the notion of transitions. Transitions occur in families as they change and try to adapt to the events that happen over time (Klein & White, 1996, p. 128). This concept will be explored in depth in Chapter 8, but the central idea is simply that the transitions we make in family life, such as getting married, having and raising children, and divorcing and remarrying, create a path of possible events. Depending on the paths one chooses, other events are more or less likely to result. For example, once a child is born into a family, family members find a new set of paths that were of little concern before the child was born. In a few short years, the child might be attending preschool, and parents might begin thinking ahead about other school plans, the child’s future, and how their family will be a part of the child’s future.

**PRINCIPLE 3.8 ANTICIPATING TRANSITIONS IN FAMILY LIFE**

When a transition occurs in family life that is unanticipated or does not occur when it was generally expected to occur, that transition is more likely to have a negative influence as that family attempts to achieve its goals.

There are two very important principles that emerge from this simple idea. First, is the idea of off-time transitions. Younger unmarried women who conceive and bear a child are less likely to contribute to their personal and family goals than are those young women who have children within a range of years that is more “on time.”

**Epigenesis**

A second important idea is the notion of epigenesis. Again, this is a simple idea that is useful and powerful in understanding everyday family life. What we do in life early on has a significant impact in our lives later. The choices we make early in our lives affect who we are, the type of family we raise, and the life we will lead later. This does not mean we cannot overcome the choices we make in times of family transitions, but those choices have the power to strongly influence our futures. For example, if a young couple decides to have several children early in their marriage, for better or worse, it will not only have an economic effect on future choices available to them, but can influence the resources available to their children, choice of family activities, where they can and cannot live, and even the educational pursuits of the parents.
In sum, family developmental theory is a useful perspective and some of its ideas help us understand important family processes. Throughout this text, two of its most powerful ideas are referred to frequently: First, family life has a course and that course can have many paths. Second, as family members make transitions, the choices they make within those transitional times can (and usually do) influence future opportunities and choices available to each family member.

### Rational Choice/Social Exchange Theory

One of the more frequently used theoretical ideas in family science is called rational choice or social exchange theory. At the heart of this perspective is the idea that each individual seeks to maximize individual self-interest. That is not to say that all people are necessarily “selfish” per se, but it does assume that each person acts with his or her personal welfare in mind as a primary motivating force (Klein & White, 1996).

The rational person goes about the task of maximizing. That is, he or she maximizes his or her position in life by avoiding situations in which the rewards are less than the costs. By definition, a reward is anything that is “perceived as beneficial to an actor’s interests” (Klein & White, 1996, p. 65).

Likewise, costs are defined as outcomes that are not beneficial to one’s interests. For example, when we make a decision to buy a car, choose a spouse, name a child, or select an occupation, those who subscribe to this point of view suggest that we weigh the costs and rewards and choose what we believe to be in our best interest at the time of the choice. This is called a rational theory because it assumes that each of us has the power to use our intellect in the selection process. It also assumes that (unless someone has a serious emotional problem or is under extreme distress) we do not make choices that are deliberately bad for us.

Another way to say this is that we make choices that seem to assist us in reaching goals we have selected as important. The concept of rationality does not suppose that people make good choices all of the time (or even most of the time). Nor does this approach assume that goals that have been consciously or implicitly selected are appropriate or worthy. Instead, it assumes that people weigh their choices, balance the costs and rewards, and try to do the best they can at the time.

Social exchange theory also helps us understand the nature of relationships. As explained in Chapter 6, when relationships are based on a principle of equity they will thrive and be more likely to achieve the desired goals. Equity means that partners in a
relationship work toward a balance of resources that each brings to the relationship and a climate of fairness pervades their relationship. When the balance is absent and one person has more resources (e.g., money, talents, or physical goods) it is assumed that the relationship will not be as effective in reaching the goals they set.

**PRINCIPLE 3.11 EQUALITY IN RESOURCES**

When partners in a relationship are more equal with regard to the resources they bring to the relationship, it is more likely the relationship will be stronger and is more likely that systemic goals will be achieved.

For example, we know that people who are of the same social or economic status tend to choose each other for marriage, and how decisions are made, resources are allocated, and time is used is reflected in the resources each person brings to the relationship.

There are two important criticisms of this approach that need to be mentioned. First, this perspective has a difficult time with the concept of altruism. Altruism reflects the idea that sometimes people seem to act without calculating the cost–reward ratio (e.g., when protecting a child). A perpetual discussion by those who write about social exchange ideas is the struggle to explain behavior that seems to not be “rational,” or in other words behavior that seemingly does not result from a cost–reward calculation.

Feminist writers have focused on this notion to show that this approach undervalues the contribution women make in relationships. For example, Sabatelli and Shehan (1993, p. 396) suggested that social exchange theory does not do a good job of considering the part played by family members whose mission in the family might be to create solidarity at the expense of individual gain. This is really an extension of the problem that social exchange theory has explaining seemingly selfless acts of contribution. That leads us to a brief discussion of the notion of tautology.

The concept of tautology is the label given to reasoning that is circular and there is no way of proving your assertion (Klein & White, 1996). In the case of social exchange theory, every aspect of the theory assumes that people act only when a reward is forthcoming (or to avoid cost). Therefore, it is impossible to find examples of someone doing something that is not rewarding (according to this theory). Scholars frequently bemoan this type of tautological thinking because it does not seem to be very helpful in understanding more complicated human interaction. In other words, it does help us to simply know that a “reward is something that is rewarding.”

**Family as an Entity**

Another difficulty with this approach is the idea that many family scientists are becoming more interested in studying the family as an entity. That means we want to see the family as a whole unit rather than trying to imagine all of the calculations that apparently occur in each family member’s mind. Social exchange theorists have only recently begun to talk about how this theory can move from describing only the behavior of individuals to describing the complex behavior of several people in a close-knit group like a family.

Like all theories, this one falls short of explaining everything we wish it would in family life. However, there are some aspects of family life that are easily explained and understood using the language of social exchanges. For example, I suggest later in this chapter
that families, like individuals, have goals and do maximize resources to attain those goals. The language for that construct comes from social exchange theory and it suggests that a unit, like a family, moves forward with a belief about what they would like to accomplish and, for the most part, they do not deliberately set out to fail.

Conflict Theory and Family Science

The essence of this theoretical approach is to answer one central question: As family members come and go, age, and change, how is order achieved in such seemingly complicated and chaotic situations? The question of obtaining order out of chaos is one that has been asked for several hundred years (cf. Hobbes, 1651/1947).

At first glance, one might think that conflict theory is simply about why people argue and fight. That is too simple and does not capture the intent of this theoretical perspective. Instead, conflict theory is the struggle that we all have (in and out of family groups) to survive. This theory suggests that there is a natural state that humans live in that is rather unruly, nasty, and carnal. All men and women are in competition with each other because, in life, resources (e.g., money, time, space, etc.) are scarce and each person wants to not only survive, but also to compete for those resources and have the freedom to choose a personal direction. One person might want to buy a new car, whereas someone else wants to keep the old car and use the extra money to pay off debts.

A key idea in understanding conflict theory comes to us from German philosophers such as Hegel, who viewed the human condition as one of struggle. He suggested that although each of us is primarily self-interested (as in the exchange perspective from earlier), the process of struggling is a good thing. He did not say that fighting or having wars is an effective strategy. However, when we try to solve life’s difficult problems (like how to spend family income, who should sleep in what room, or who should do the dishes) and a family member suggests who should do the dishes, the resulting exchange can either build strength in the family system or it can tear it down. If prolonged conflict ensues and the balance of power is uneven, then families will be less likely to meet their goals. When families struggle together and are successful at reaching a consensus then they become stronger.

This process idea has the following elements. First is the original idea and we call this the thesis ("Sandra, I would like you to do the dishes tonight"). The thesis or original idea always comes attached to the other side of the coin, the antithesis. The antithesis is the opposite point of view in which someone says, “No, I don’t think so, it is your turn to do the dishes,” or “I think it would be better if we spent the tax refund on tires for the car,” or “Our apartment is not a big as you would like. You will have to share your room with your younger brother.” In this way a dialogue or dialectic emerges, or in other words, a struggle arises. When members of a family group struggle together and make decisions that consider both the thesis and antithesis, the hope is that a synthesis will emerge. When a synthesis occurs, it is assumed that this creates strength and the family is more effective. When there is no synthesis or consensus and agreement, the family is weakened and is less likely to meet its goals.

Scarce Resources

At the core of this theoretical idea is the notion of scarce resources (Klein & White, 1996; Sprey, 1979). Resources are more than just money, however (Klein & White, 1996). Resources
can be problem-solving skills, talents, abilities, or even the ability to control or exercise authority in a family. This theory also indicates that in most cases conflict is inevitable. That is, there is almost always an imbalance of resources or power in family relationships, and therefore conflict emerges.

The first principle of conflict theory is therefore the inequity principle.

**PRINCIPLE 3.12  INEQUITY CREATES CONFLICT**
Conflict arises in families when resources are not evenly distributed, and they are almost never equitably distributed.

There are many aspects to this perspective that I am not mentioning here. Many of the constructs and ideas that emerge from this perspective are used to describe how larger groups of people (e.g., a labor union and factory) struggle together to resolve their conflicts. However, in terms of the family, there is one more idea from this perspective that needs to be restated from earlier. This is the idea of struggle and synthesis. It is assumed that all families struggle as they allocate resources. Those families who are better able to meet their goals are the ones who share resources more equitably and are better able to experience true consensus and synthesis rather than prolonged conflict when allocating family resources.

**PRINCIPLE 3.13  FAMILIES STRUGGLE WITH RESOURCE ALLOCATION**
It is assumed that all families struggle as they allocate resources. Those families who are better able to meet their goals are the ones who share resources more equitably and are better able to experience true consensus and synthesis rather than prolonged conflict when allocating family resources.

The ideas from conflict theory are used in later chapters. In particular, we refer to these ideas in Chapter 10, Communicating in Families.

It is also important to note that from this intellectual tradition a strong, gender-oriented feminist critique of family life has emerged. In this view, social historians, family scientists, and feminist writers illuminate the idea that men have traditionally controlled most of the tangible resources and have typically had more power in family life. Therefore, when the power is unbalanced and the resources are not distributed equally, families are not as effective. This imbalance ensures the privilege of some (usually the males) in the family at the expense of others. This issue is more fully addressed in Chapter 5 on gender in family life.

## Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory is also a widely used perspective in family science. Originally, those writing from this perspective were describing individual psychological processes about how individuals place meaning on the events that happen to them. For example, when a researcher uses this perspective he or she might ask someone why they got a divorce
or inquire about who is responsible for the financial decisions in a family. Researchers who begin with these types of questions want to know what the family member thinks about the specific event being asked. In other words, what does it mean or symbolize, and how does the meaning or interpretation of their view of what happened affect how they reacted. The assumption is made that the meaning we bring to the situation has a significant impact on the decisions we make and the ways we interact with other people.

Symbols

For example, when we ask an Irishman what the word *da* (the common Irish word for father) means to him, he might have a complicated and involved response that includes elements of his biological father, someone who was supportive and involved, or a strict authority figure. The symbol *da* represents a very complicated collection of feelings, thoughts, and ideas. These ideas might be tied to his own experience with his own *da*; images he has collected from movies, books, and television; and even impressions from watching other fathers interact with children. In terms of a family science application, scholars have for many years been asking family members what certain aspects of family life mean to them. A basic principle that we use when we search for the meanings family members place on the events, outcomes, and activities they experience is the idea of perception as reality. Family members define the activities, behaviors, and outcomes of family interactions, and the way they define those activities, behaviors, and outcomes is real for them. In other words, one's perception of an event is that person's reality and the perception has the power to contribute to consequences and outcomes. In several places throughout this text, we explore this idea and show how our perceptions and definitions of events and activities in family life become expectations and goals that direct what we do and how we evaluate family life. For example, it has often been noted that if our performances within our families do not match our expectations or the expectations of others, we feel less satisfied with how we are doing with that particular family role.

Roles

An important concept in symbolic interaction theory has been the development of the idea that each family member adopts and “plays” certain roles within the family. For example, a very important topic in the study of family life focuses on father involvement. Some family scientists approach this topic by asking first what roles fathers are expected to perform in families in the United States. Some have suggested that the most common response to this question is that fathers are providers, protectors, and nurturers, and that these larger ideas construct a father's identity as he evaluates his performance within that particular role (Marsiglio et al., 2000).

Another example of how this theory can be used is found in Chapter 13. When we study families experiencing crises, we often want to know how they define the event. Even the death of a family member could have several different meanings to different family members. It becomes critical in studying family life to know how each person is affected by life’s events, how events are defined generally by the family (as an entity), and how a family is generally affected by the struggles and challenges of life.

Our perception about our role performance in family life influences not only how we feel about our family experience, but it is important to note how much consensus there
is among family members about the collected idea about how a role is performed (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). This is a good example of a family-level idea that is used in the symbolic interaction tradition. Let’s return to our father involvement research.

One example of a research study that could be done would be to find out how all family members (a multiperspective research approach) felt about what was expected of the father in a family. The following principle would suggest that when family members have more agreement about what a father should do in his father role, there would be less strain on all family members as he performs that role. One of the problems with the changing nature of family life is that many of the roles we have assigned to us (or we choose voluntarily) are changing rapidly.

**PRINCIPLE 3.14  CONSENSUS DECREASES STRAIN**

The more consensus family and community members have about what should occur in a family role, the less strain a family member will have as he or she enters and performs that role.

A young father might not have a clear idea of what he should be doing as a father because the people around him (i.e., family and community members) do not have much consensus about what it is he should do in that part of his life. Therefore, this theory would suggest that as a young father enters the fathering role (e.g., at the birth of a child) he might feel anxiety and strain as he considers what he should do.

In roles where there is high consensus about what a person should do in the role, we would expect that the person would have much less anxiety as he or she takes on that new role.

In summary, symbolic interaction theory helps us understand that humans are thinking, choosing, and deliberate creatures. We humans place meaning on what we see and the events that impact us. Those who study families using this perspective pay attention to those meanings that family members hold. Additionally, family scientists attend to the roles performed in family life and the ease of adopting or exiting roles (e.g., becoming a parent, losing one’s parent, changing partners, gaining a partner).

**Summary**

All of the theories examined in this chapter can be used to describe and understand family life. From rational exchange theories we learn that individuals and groups of people (e.g., families) have a goal of maximizing self-interest. Within that idea, we expect families and family members to rise above individual interest and contribute to the well-being of the group. This is difficult for many and is a constant struggle for some.

We also note that family members and families change over time. This added complexity adds rich variety to family life as children get older and eventually leave the nest. Relationships change and effective families figure out how to adapt to a changing and chaotic world. Regardless of the changes, families (as entities) try to do the best they can (for the most part) and they make the best decisions they collectively can. It is my position that most families try to succeed and very few (only in excessively troubling situations) set out to fail. Families work each day at trying to find the best way to allocate
the scarce resources they have in ways that meet the deeply held goals and ideologies to which they subscribe.

We also note that the family can be thought of in terms of a system. The interactions that occur within that system are pattern-like and can be studied. The individuals within the family system are symbol-making, thinking individuals who bring personal meaning and definition to the world in which they live. It is critical to consider the ways in which family members view the family experience they create. As these individuals inevitably struggle together and make daily decisions about how to solve life’s daily problems, they either learn how to reach consensus and equity or they are unskilled in this attempt and long-term conflict erodes their ability to make decisions effectively. The task for each day is to find ways of rising above selfishness and conflict to create effective family units that turn chaos into productivity and success.

It is quite clear that some families seemed to be very skilled at accomplishing this feat, whereas others struggle and even fail at this daunting task. As you read the following chapters about family processes and daily life, you will begin to form a position statement about family life. It is your task at the conclusion of this chapter to begin writing some of your ideas down about how families can better succeed at the difficult task of family life. Activity 3.1 is designed to assist you in thinking about your view of family life and how that view was formed.

**Study Questions**

1. What do we mean by the idea of reductionism?
2. What is a theory and why do we care about them in family science?
3. Explain what is meant by equilibrium in a family system.
4. What is a family system?
5. Give an example of equifinality and explain how this idea can work in family life.
6. Look up the word *entity* and see how this term can be applied to a family.
7. What is the difference between a thesis and an antithesis?
8. Why is the idea of roles so important in the study of the family?
9. Pick your favorite theoretical orientation explained in this chapter and defend why it appeals to you.

**Key Terms**

Reductionism
Roles
Entity
Boundaries
Resources
Equilibrium
Morphostasis
Morphogenesis
Subsystems
Equifinality
Thesis
Antithesis
Synthesis
Symbolic interaction
Conflict theory
Development

☐ Suggested Readings