
Defining Families

Historically, family was defined as “married partners and children residing in a household.” Over time there is no doubt that there has been a shift in the societal definition of families to include single parents, biracial couples, blended families, biologically unrelated individuals living cooperatively, and gay and lesbian couples, among others. The perspective taken with this book is that in spite of this diversity of family forms found in contemporary society, families share common tasks that they must execute. They must also develop unique interaction patterns and dynamics to manage these tasks. These common tasks and the patterns related to them are the primary focus of this text.

This book is guided by the assumptions that all families are unique and that this uniqueness is reflected in the patterns of interaction found within them. Aided by family researchers, theorists, and clinicians, the book focuses on a number of core concepts that help us to understand the unique interactional patterns found inside the family. To accomplish this objective, families are examined from a multigenerational developmental perspective. The book introduces relevant data on the changing character of contemporary families, presents research findings on how families cope with the stress of developmental transitions, and incorporates what is currently known about functional and dysfunctional families. Finally, the book touches upon some of the most common problems faced by families as they manage developmental transitions.

We begin this discourse by detailing the defining features of families when they are conceived of as a system. Despite the dramatic changes that families undergo over their life span, there are a number of predictable and identifiable tasks that all family systems must contend with regardless of the specific form that a family takes. That is, all family systems, regardless of who comprises the family, must (1) establish a clear identity for the family as a whole and for each individual member; (2) develop clearly defined boundaries between the family and the outside world and between individual members within the family; (3) manage the family household (allocate chores, handle finances, solve problems, etc.); and (4) manage the emotional demands of family life. In addition, families must adapt how they execute their tasks in response to the normative and non-normative stresses encountered over time.

It is the patterns of interaction that the family establishes for managing these basic tasks in the face of inevitable change that is the centerpiece of this book. In our view, family members establish routine, habitual patterns of interaction with one another over time that are then continually altered over the course of family development. These patterns give the family its distinctive identity, define the family's boundaries, determine how the household is managed, and prescribe the quality of the family's emotional environment. In sum, the exploration of the uniqueness of each of our families requires that we have at our disposal a conceptualization of the family that addresses the tasks that are common to all family systems and simultaneously embraces the diversity and distinctiveness of the patterns of interaction found within each family system. What makes each family unique are the distinct strategies it employs for executing a core of fundamental family system tasks. These unique strategies influence the trajectory of each family member's development—that is, the strategies determine how our lives unfold by influencing the patterns of nurturance and support we experience within our families, the values and attitudes that we come to embrace, and the developmental legacy that affects how we approach and sustain intimate relationships over our lifetime.

The Family as a System

Chapter Overview

Focusing on family patterns of interaction requires a basic understanding of what is meant by the term “family.” This chapter will define the concept of family, and provide an overview of the central assumptions and core concepts that are basic to an understanding of families when considered as a system. Within a family-systems framework, families are defined as complex structures consisting of an interdependent group of individuals who (1) have a shared sense of history; (2) share emotional ties to one another; and (3) devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual family members and the group as a whole. Implicit in the use of the system metaphor to define families is the premise that they are structurally complex. Families are comprised of multiple subsystems, have common purposes and tasks that must be fulfilled, and must devise strategies for the execution of these tasks. Within this systems perspective, the assessment of family functioning revolves around a theoretical consideration of the common tasks that a family must fulfill and the effectiveness of the strategies devised for executing these tasks.

The Family as a System

This book focuses on families and the interactional patterns and dynamics found within them. It further focuses on the developmental tasks that all families may encounter over their life course. This book’s goal is simple: to provide an understanding of what a family is and how a family operates. Accomplishing this goal requires an ability to conceive of the family as a complex system and to conduct an in-depth analysis of the many forces that shape the patterns of interaction found within the family. Accomplishing this goal also requires an understanding of how the experiences of individuals within their families establish a legacy that influences their values and orientations, determines their strategies for dealing with people and events, and, ultimately, serves as the foundation for many of the choices those individuals make about their lives.

Writing a book about something with which everyone is familiar is a difficult challenge in that personal experiences, as well as exposure to family issues through books, television, and film, lead people to feel that they know all they

need to know about the family. This can obscure one's objectivity and receptivity to new thinking. Consequently, at the outset of this book, readers are encouraged to be open to the diversity found within and among families. It is hoped that as a result of this openness readers will gain insight into their own family experiences—insight that will underscore the importance of the study of family dynamics and reinforce the view that the family touches on all aspects of our lives.

The Difficulty of Defining the Family

The task of defining the family is not a simple one, and the difficulty is derived from the mythology that surrounds the concept of family. When asked to define the family, most of us think of it as being comprised of a stable and harmonious group of people, monolithic in form, operating on the principles of harmony and love. We think of the family as comprised of a married couple and their biological children. This couple is happily married; the children all feel nurtured and supported by their parents; and each family member's experience of the family is the same—all share the perception of the family as a safe haven providing for each member's physical and emotional needs.

This idealized image of the intact, multigenerational family household distorts the diversity and instability that has always characterized American families (Hareven, 2000). The 1950s model of the white, middle-class, intact nuclear family, headed by a breadwinner father and supported by a homemaker mother, is only a narrow band on the broad spectrum of contemporary families (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). In its place, the "postmodern family" has emerged (Stacey, 1996), characterized by a multitude of family structures—working mothers and two-earner households; divorced, single-parent, remarried and adoptive families; and domestic partners, both gay and straight.

For example, currently, married couples residing with their biological children account for only 24 percent of all households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a). Not surprisingly, single-parent households have become increasingly common, making up 26 percent of all American families with children under the age of eighteen, a dramatic 58 percent increase since 1970. There are now more than 12 million single-parent households, approximately 10 million of which are maintained by mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a). In an expanded look at the structure of the American family the U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2007, of the nearly 74 million children under the age of eighteen living in the United States, 67.8 percent lived with married parents, 2.9 percent with two unmarried parents, 25.8 percent with one parent, and 3.5 percent with no parent present.

Consider as well the fact that a century ago, only 5 percent of married women participated in the labor market. In 1940, fewer than one married woman in seven worked outside the home. Since 1995, the dual-income family has become more common than the formerly more traditional one-income married household. Now over 60 percent of wives work outside the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

In addition, over the past thirty years, divorce replaced death as the most common end point of a marriage as the rates of divorce dramatically increased (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2003). In the United States, the proportion of marriages begun each year that ended in divorce steadily increased from less than 10 percent in 1867 to over 55 percent in 1985 (Cherlin, 1992). Recent data suggest that since the mid-1980s the divorce rate in the United States has decreased slightly (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Even so, demographers expect that 25 percent of contemporary marriages will dissolve by their seventh year, and approximately half will end before their twentieth year as a result of divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Pinsoff, 2002). Not surprisingly, these shifts in divorce rates have generated social and political discourse on the problems of divorce. With few exceptions (Ahrons, 2004), divorce has been defined as an undesirable end to marriage. Many studies have been devoted to the documentation of the deleterious short- and long-term effects of divorce on children and adults, and divorce has been viewed as a social disorder whose frequency approaches epidemic proportions and urgently needs to be reduced (Gallagher, 1996; Popenoe, 1996). The ending of marriages presumably threatens social order, disrupts kinship ties, creates economic instability, and potentially disrupts the lives of children. There is a lot at stake, in other words, when marriages fail to function as the pivotal and key subsystem within the family system.

In addition, the typical image of the family distorts the wide range of interpersonal dynamics found within the contemporary family. Certainly, most of us would be reluctant to label U.S. families as violent. "Violence" and "family" are not words that go together. Yet, research tells a different tale. The home is the single most violent location in U.S. society (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Statistics on intimate partner violence indicate that it is a widespread problem. For example, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (Catalano, 2006), more than 625,000 substantiated non-lethal violent acts were committed by current spouses, former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends in 2004 (the most recent year for which such figures are available). Other studies place the rates for intimate partner violence higher. Specifically, the National Violence Against Women Survey found that of the over 16,000 men and women surveyed, nearly 25% of the women and 7.6% of the men said that they have been raped or physically assaulted by a spouse, partner, or date at some point in their lifetimes. Within the previous 12 months, 1.5% of women and 0.9% of men reported incidences of violence. And if relatively minor acts of violence such as pushing, grabbing, shoving, and slapping were taken into consideration, the incidence of intimate violence would rise to more than 3 million for men and 5 million for women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), there were about 900,000 substantiated cases of child abuse and/or neglect in 2005. Because the vast majority of child abuse incidents involve victims who cannot protect themselves and remain hidden from police and social service agencies, many researchers think that the actual figures are much higher. What is known for sure is that slightly over 1,500 children died of abuse or neglect in 2004, and 90% of the victims were killed by parents or other family members (Administration for Children and Families, 2006).

In summary, the typical view of the family includes several closely related but distinct myths about the family, myths bound up with nostalgic memory, selective perception, and cultural values concerning what is correct, typical, and true about the family. This typical view makes it difficult for us to consider the diversity in form found among families and the complexity of dynamics found within families. When defining the family, therefore, we must move beyond the mythological image of the family and address the basic or core features that comprise all families, while not losing sight of the diverse structures and dynamics within families.

The Characteristics of Family Systems

In recent years, in an effort to discuss the common features of families while embracing the complexity and diversity found within them, family social scientists have come to view the family as a system. When viewed as a system, the **family** can be defined as a complex structure comprised of an interdependent group of individuals who (1) have a shared sense of history; (2) experience some degree of emotional bonding; and (3) devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual family members and the group as a whole. Implicit in the use of the system metaphor to define the family is the premise that the family is structurally complex, is comprised of multiple subsystems, has common purposes and tasks that must be fulfilled, and devises strategies for the execution of these tasks.

When viewed as a system, the family is defined by two central dimensions: its **structure** and its tasks. Structure includes both the family's composition and its organization. Composition refers to the family's membership, or simply, the persons who make up the family. The family's structural organization refers to the unique set of rules governing the patterns of interaction found within the extended family system. Tasks refer primarily to the "business" of the family—its common and essential responsibilities. All families have tasks that they fulfill for society and family members alike.

Structural Properties of Families

Over the past thirty years, family systems perspectives have been widely accepted in the family sciences because they offer insight into the unique patterns and processes found within and between families (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). System thinking is grounded in the simple but elegant notion that what makes a system are the relationships among its parts and not the parts themselves. To simply illustrate this point, it should be evident that what makes an engineered system like a bridge unique is the relationships among the various components, or parts, of the bridge. That is, knowing the components that go into building a bridge can never provide sufficient insight into what makes a particular bridge a unique system. To understand the bridge as a system requires an understanding

of how all of the component parts and subsystems—cement foundation, steel supports, and paved roadways—are connected to one another.

While of course the family is not an engineered system, the application of the systems metaphor to the family truly transforms our thinking about what contributes to the uniqueness of each family. When conceived of as a system, it becomes clear that the interrelationships among family members, more so than the individuals who comprise the family, are central to our understanding of the uniqueness of each family. Knowing that a single mother heads a family, for example, does not tell us anything about what goes on inside the family. To know what truly makes this single-mother-headed family unique (unique from all other single-parent-headed families and unique from all other types of families), we must understand how the members of this family interact with one another. That is, the unit of analysis is the relationships that occur among the members of the family. Consider the following illustration:

Judy is a thirty-eight-year-old mother of three children who has been divorced for nearly three years. Judy has a job as an executive assistant in a downtown insurance firm. Her three children range in age from seven to fourteen. Melissa, the oldest, is a ninth-grader. In order for Judy to manage her job, Melissa is responsible for much of the care of her sister, Molly, age nine, and her brother, Todd, age seven.

At the start of each day, Judy wakes up and prepares for her workday. While Mom is showering and dressing, Melissa wakes her brother and sister, gets them dressed, prepares breakfast for the family, and makes lunch for the “kids” to take to school. Melissa, Molly, and Todd eat together while Judy has a cup of coffee and irons her clothes, puts on her makeup, gets dressed, etc. Molly and Todd talk with Melissa about the day ahead. They ask Melissa for help with the homework they did not finish the night before. Only after Judy, Molly, and Todd are settled does Melissa get herself ready for school.

This illustration makes it clear that any effort to understand family dynamics must consider the rules of relating, or the unique patterns of interaction found within the family. In this particular family system, parental authority and responsibility have been delegated to Melissa by her mother. This arrangement is determined, in part, by the unique composition of the family and the demands placed upon it. Because Judy, a single parent, cannot manage the demands of the morning rush hour on her own, the younger children in this household interact with Melissa during breakfast as though she were their parent. They know whom to go to during this time with questions and concerns. Melissa, in turn, knows the boundaries of her roles and responsibilities, and Judy is free to get herself ready for work without worrying about whether her children are being cared for properly. This illustration makes it clear that any effort to understand the uniqueness of a family must consider its structural properties—both the people who make up the family AND the rules of relating that direct the unique patterns of interaction found within the family.

Wholeness

Family systems are characterized by the property of **wholeness**, that is, the family system is made up of a group of individuals who together form a complex and unitary whole (Buckley, 1967; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). The whole is distinctly different from the simple sum of the contributions of individual members, because each family system is characterized by structural rules of relating that determine how family members interact with one another. To understand the uniqueness of the family system, we must go beyond an analysis of the individuals who comprise the system. In the above example, we would not be able to understand the uniqueness of this particular family system simply by knowing that it is comprised of a single parent and her three children or by knowing the individual personalities of each family member. The uniqueness of this particular family can only be understood through an analysis of the rules that structure how family members interact with each other.

The property of wholeness suggests that there is a uniqueness to each family that can be understood only by understanding the interactional rules that structure the system. Knowing who is in the system is important because the composition of the family places demands upon the system and influences interactional patterns. At the same time, to analyze the uniqueness of each system we must consider what joins the individuals within the system together—in other words, the rules of relating within the system. When these rules become our focus, it becomes apparent that the system is greater than the sum of its parts.

Organizational Complexity

The term **organizational complexity** refers to the fact that family systems are comprised of various smaller units or subsystems that together compose the larger family system (Minuchin, 1974). Each individual family member can be thought of as a subsystem. Similarly, subsystems can be organized by gender, with the males in the family comprising one subsystem and the females comprising another, or each generation can be thought of as a subsystem within the whole. When considering subsystems in terms of generations, three primary subsystems are generally emphasized: marital, parental, and sibling. Each is distinguished by the family members who comprise them as well as by the primary tasks performed by each. The marital subsystem, for example, teaches children about the nature of intimate relationships and provides a model of transactions between men and women. The parental subsystem is involved with child rearing and serves such functions as nurturing, guidance, socialization, and control. Wives and husbands may comprise the parental subsystem; or others, such as grandparents or older children, may be involved. The sibling subsystem is typically the child's first peer group and offers opportunities for learning patterns of negotiation, cooperation, competition, and personal disclosure.

The tasks performed by each of these subsystems will be covered in greater detail in later chapters. For now, it is important to emphasize that the concept of organizational complexity addresses the organization of the family system as a

whole and the relationship between the whole and its various subsystems. The operation and effectiveness of the whole system is influenced by the operation and effectiveness of each of the subsystems.

Interdependence

Implicit in the discussion of the structural dimension of a system is the idea that individuals and subsystems that comprise the whole system are mutually dependent and mutually influenced by one another (Von Bertalanffy, 1975; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). This mutual dependence and influence speaks to the **interdependence** among the system's members. In the context of the family system, even factors that appear to influence only one person have an impact on everyone. Similarly, a change in one part of the family system reverberates throughout the rest of the system.

Take, for example, the developmental changes that accompany adolescence. Adolescents need to establish their own identity as they prepare to make commitments to adult roles and responsibilities. While these developmental demands may appear to have consequences only for the adolescent, they affect the entire family system. The increased autonomy required by adolescents necessitates changes in the parental subsystem. Parents or other caretakers will have to adjust how they control their adolescents, just as the adolescents will have to change how much they depend on their parents and other caretakers. At the same time, the parents' or caretakers' changing relationship with their adolescent may have an effect on the marital relationship and other relationships within the family. Therefore, what appears as a change for one family member, in reality has a reverberating effect on the entire system.

The concepts of wholeness, organizational complexity, and interdependence encourage us to be aware of the many factors that potentially affect how a system operates. In this context, it is important to note that the family system is simply one subsystem within broader community and societal systems. The social, political, economic, educational, and ethical agendas of these broader social systems also have a reverberating impact on the family system and on the individuals within the family. In other words, both family system dynamics and functioning will be affected by the characteristics and functioning of these larger social systems.

Strategies and Rules

The patterns of interaction found within a given family system are structured in large part by the **strategies** that the family adopts for the execution of its tasks. In the above example of the single-parent family, it is clear that the family has evolved a set of strategies for dealing with the morning rush hour. The strategies involve having the older daughter, Melissa, take on parenting tasks to enable the mother, Judy, to get ready to go to work. This suggests that one way to make sense of the unique patterns of interaction observed within a family is to conceive of them as strategies that have been developed for managing its demands or tasks.

Consequently, all families are unique not only because they are comprised of a unique collection of individuals but because they evolve unique strategies and rules in an effort to execute their essential tasks.

The structure of the family is reflected in the unique strategies and rules that a family adopts for managing its demands or tasks. The strategies become the patterns of interaction observed within the family. As another example, consider the fact that all families have as one of their tasks the socialization of children. To accomplish this task, parents evolve socialization strategies and rules that determine how they purposively interact with their children. If the parents believe that boys should be masculine and girls feminine, they will interact differently with their sons and daughters. Daughters and sons will be encouraged to engage in different activities. The patterns of communication and interaction between the parents and their sons and daughters will be different as well. The strategies and rules employed by the parents create a unique interactional context that has a profound impact on the trajectory of each child's development.

Strategies are the specific methods and procedures used within a family to accomplish its tasks. These strategies are influenced by such factors as the historical era and the family's generational legacy, class, race, and ethnicity. Within each system, particular strategies become well established and routine over time. They recur with regularity and become the governing principles of family life.

These well-established strategies are called **rules**. Rules are recurring patterns of interaction that define the limits of acceptable and appropriate behavior in the family. By reflecting the values of the family system and defining the roles of individual family members, rules further contribute to the maintenance and stability of the family system.

Rules, in other words, can be thought of as the customs found within the family that govern the patterns of interaction found within it and, hence, define the family as unique. Each family, as an example, has a unique set of rules that are reflected in how meals are customarily managed. Who is responsible for different meal-time tasks, where individuals sit at the dinner table, what family members do during the consumption of the meal (e.g., talk, read, watch TV), and who is responsible for cleaning up after the meal (e.g., mom cleans up while dad watches the nightly news on TV) are a reflection of the unique rules that have come to be adopted within the family.

Rules may be **overt** or **covert**. Overt rules are explicit and openly stated. Covert rules are implicit, meaning that everyone knows the rules although no one has explicitly stated them. It appears as if most of the rules within a family system are covert or implicit. Referring to the meal-time example, in most families everyone has an assigned seat at the dinner table, even though the assignment of the seats has not been explicitly discussed. The existence of these seating rules becomes overt only when someone breaks the rule (i.e., think about what would happen in your family if you all of a sudden decided not to sit in your customary seat).

Families also develop **metarules**, or "rules about the rules" (Laing, 1971). There are always limits and exceptions to rules. There are circumstances in which they always apply and circumstances in which they can be violated. Some rules, in

addition, are more important than others. All of this information about the rules—about the importance of different rules and about how and when the rules apply—is contained within the metarules. Metarules are the rules that apply to the family's rules.

Here are some examples of family rules: "You kids can always come to us and talk about anything and everything." "We always treat our children, all our children, equally." Each of these rules, however, could be qualified by a metarule. In the first instance, a metarule might specify what, in reality, can and cannot be discussed with the parents (e.g., sex and drugs). In the latter instance, the metarule might allow a particular child to be treated "more equally" than the others.

While it may appear as if the discussion of metarules introduces some unnecessary complexity to the analysis of family rules, an understanding of the ways in which metarules operate within systems contributes to an understanding of one of the more subtle, but nonetheless powerful, forces that direct the patterns of interaction observed within families. Metarules operate to modify and qualify family rules. These metarules, as do all family rules, delineate acceptable and appropriate behavior. They differ from overt and covert rules, however, in the sense that we are usually prohibited from having any insight into them (Laing, 1971). Although we can usually list the rules that apply to our family, it is much more difficult to arrive at an understanding of the metarules that apply to these rules.

In sum, each family is structurally complex. The family is comprised of individuals who are interdependently connected to one another. Together this interdependent constellation of individuals evolves a system of rules that shapes the patterns of interaction found within the family system. This system of rules is purposive (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) in the sense that the family has tasks that it must execute and therefore must evolve strategies for the execution of these tasks.

The Tasks That Families Must Execute

Implicit in the use of the system's metaphor to define the family is the view that the family is structurally complex. It is comprised of multiple subsystems, and the relationships among the members of the system and the subsystems are governed by a system of rules. This system of rules is reflected in how family members interact with one another, and is organized around the common purposes or tasks that all families must execute (Broderick, 1993). What makes a family unique, in other words, is the unique system of rules found within the family. These rules are organized around the tasks that all families must manage.

The tasks that the family must manage are a key defining feature of family life (Hess & Handel, 1985; Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Within this text we divide tasks into two broad categories—first-order and second-order tasks. **First-order tasks** can be thought of as the essential business of the family—the objectives that the family is charged with fulfilling regardless of its particular composition, socioeconomic status, and cultural, ethnic, or racial heritage. These first-order tasks are common to all families. Among family-systems theorists, there appears to be a

consensus that all family systems must manage a constellation of identity tasks, regulate boundaries, regulate the emotional climate of the family, and devise strategies for the maintenance of the household. The strategies and rules that the family employs in its efforts to manage these tasks are in large part what determines the uniqueness of each family. And, it is these unique strategies that are evaluated whenever judgments of family functioning are made.

At the same time, all families must make adjustments in these strategies and rules in response to new information and the changes that occur within families over time. In this regard, systems theorists refer to adaptability as a property of all systems. **Adaptability**, as a system's concept, focuses attention on how the family customarily responds to stress or the demands for changes in its existing customs. Thus, families are not only charged with the responsibility for devising strategies for the execution of their basic tasks, but are charged with the responsibility of adapting the strategies and rules found within the family in response to new information and change. This sets adaptability off as a different kind of a task—a **second-order task**—in that it refers to the customs that exist within a family system for modifying existing strategies and rules (Bartle-Haring & Sabatelli, 1998). Effective families recalibrate or fine tune the ways in which they manage their first-order tasks in response to the changing developmental and contextual realities of the family system.

First-Order Tasks

Identity Tasks

All families must facilitate the development of a sense of identity for both individual family members and the family as a whole. In this regard, there are three interrelated identity tasks that family systems must execute: (1) constructing family themes; (2) socializing family members with respect to biological and social issues such as sexuality and gender; and (3) establishing a satisfactory congruence of images for the individuals within the family (Hess & Handel, 1985).

Family themes are those elements of the family experience that become organizing principles for family life (Bagarozzi & Anderson, 1989). They include both conscious and unconscious elements as well as intellectual (attitudes, beliefs, values) and emotional aspects. The family's themes become the threads that help organize the family's identity. These themes provide the individuals within the family with a framework of meaning influencing how family members interact with others and expect others to interact with them. Such themes also contribute to family members' personal identities by influencing how they orient themselves to others within and outside the family.

Family themes may also be related to ethnic and cultural heritage. For example, being Italian, Irish Catholic, or Jewish can become a family theme and influence the orientations and behaviors of family members. Other themes reflect the predominant values of a particular system. For example, the members of a family may share a view of themselves as competitors, survivors, winners, or losers, and

these views may be accompanied by feelings of potency, elation, or despair. Each of these orientations or values translates into actions as individuals act in accordance with the themes.

In a related manner, family systems function to provide individuals with socialization experiences, which in turn further contribute to the development of each member's personal identity by providing additional information about the self. Through our ongoing interactions with significant others, we obtain information about how we are supposed to act as males or females. We also learn about our personal qualities, our physical and sexual attributes, our strengths and weaknesses, and the differences between right and wrong. These attributes likewise contribute to our framework of meaning in that they influence how we interact with others and how we expect others to interact with us.

Finally, each family strives to achieve a congruence of images (Hess & Handel, 1985) that reflects the shared views that family members have of one another. When the family holds an image of an individual that is consistent with the image the individual holds of himself or herself, this congruence facilitates social interaction. This congruence, furthermore, fosters one's personal identity by defining, in part, one's role and position within the family. Such critical identity images often endure for many years. Being the smart one, the athletic one, or the baby are family images that can have enduring influence upon how family members interact with one another over the years (Kantor, 1980).

It bears mentioning, in the context of discussing the identity tasks executed by the family system, that families can create family myths (Bagarozzi & Anderson, 1989; Ferreira, 1966). These myths can take the form of a family holding an image of itself that is incongruent with that held by outsiders. In this instance, the family themes may be inconsistent with the capabilities of the family and create tension between the family and other, outside systems. An example would be the situation in which a school system's effort to provide a child with remedial help conflicts with the family's theme of self-sufficiency. Such a myth can result in a family resisting the school system's intervention, with unfortunate consequences for the child.

In addition, a myth can take the form of an incongruence of family images; that is, the family may hold an image of a family member that is inconsistent with the abilities of the individual or the image the individual holds of himself or herself. For example, the family may hold an image of one member as being dumb when, in fact, the person is quite smart. Concomitantly, the family may hold to the belief that the women within the family need to be protected and are incapable of taking care of themselves. In each of these instances, the myth may serve to limit the behavior and potential of individuals and can create considerable family stress if individuals attempt to alter the image that others have of them.

Boundary Tasks

All families have as one of their tasks the establishment and maintenance of **boundaries** (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). A boundary marks the limits of a system, and boundaries delineate one system from other systems. Similarly, boundaries

delineate one subsystem from other subsystems within a larger system. The concept of boundaries as applied to the family system is largely a metaphorical one (Steinglass, 1987), which suggests that information about family boundaries is not directly observable but rather is derived from the observer's subjective impressions of how the systems and subsystems relate to one another. In essence, the flow of information between and within systems provides insight into how systems and subsystems are delineated.

Two types of family boundaries exist: external boundaries and internal boundaries. External boundaries delineate the family from other systems. They determine family membership by delineating who is in, and out, of the family. External boundaries also regulate the flow of information between the family and other social systems. Internal boundaries regulate the flow of information between and within family subsystems. In addition, they influence the degree of autonomy and individuality permitted within the family.

Maintenance Tasks

All families strive to maintain the physical environment of the family in a way that promotes the health and well-being of the family and its members (Epstein, Ryan, Bishop, Miller, & Keitner, 2003). We readily recognize that families are responsible for providing basic necessities such as food, shelter, and education. To accomplish these tasks, families establish priorities and make decisions about the use of resources. Therefore, while maintenance tasks can be described in a direct and straightforward manner, the various decision-making strategies families develop to execute these tasks contribute substantially to the complexity of the family organization. Furthermore, the fact that the health and effectiveness of a family may be judged, to a large extent, according to how well these maintenance tasks are executed, attests to their importance.

Managing the Family's Emotional Climate

Family systems are responsible for managing the emotional climate of the family in a way that promotes the emotional and psychological well-being of its members (Epstein et al., 2003). Family systems function in this regard by providing for members' needs for closeness, involvement, acceptance, and nurturance. Management of its emotional climate requires the family to establish methods of dealing with conflict and distributing power within the family. Conflict is inevitable in all ongoing systems, and yet it has the potential to disrupt a system's functioning seriously. For these reasons, all systems must develop strategies for the management of conflict. In addition, patterns of authority, control, and power have the ability to promote or inhibit the experience of cohesion and cooperation within a system. The promotion of cohesion and cooperation is among those factors that contribute to the experience of intimacy and the emotional and psychological health of family members.

Second-Order Tasks

Adaptability and Managing System Stress

Quite clearly, events occur over time within families that require adaptations. All family systems must manage the need for change in their established structure. The concepts of **openness**, **stress**, and adaptability are linked within a system's perspective to the second-order task of managing the demands for change that occur within family systems over time.

The family system is conceived of as an open system in that it must adapt to changes from both within and outside the family. An open system is an information-processing system (Von Bertalanffy, 1975). Information is used by the system to determine whether the strategies employed by the system to execute its first-order task are operating effectively. In a sense, then, information-processing systems use information as a form of feedback. The feedback informs the system as to whether change or reorganization is required.

As an open system, the strategies employed by the family will need to be readjusted periodically in response to new information, such as family members' developmental changes. This information is often experienced within the system as stress. Stress is neither good nor bad in this instance. It simply tells the system whether established system interactional patterns require alteration (Von Bertalanffy, 1975; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). For example, over the life course of a family, individual and family circumstances change. These changes place stress upon established strategies and rules, and this stress can ultimately lead to a reorganization of strategies and rules such that a better fit is achieved within the family's present circumstances. Such reorganization is a form of system adaptability.

To understand the relationship between stress and adaptability, system theorists introduced the concepts of **morphostasis** and **morphogenesis** (Von Bertalanffy, 1975). Morphostasis refers to those processes operating within systems that resist changes in existing strategies. Morphogenesis, on the other hand, refers to those processes operating within systems that foster systemic growth and development. At all times, there exists within a system a dynamic tension between morphostasis (stability) and morphogenesis (change). Unless the need for reorganization within a system goes beyond some critical threshold, the system resists changing its existing strategies. This tendency to maintain constancy is referred to as morphostasis. When the need for reorganization exceeds some critical threshold, an adaptation or reorganization of system will occur, and this reorganization is referred to as morphogenesis. Both morphogenesis and morphostasis are essential for successful family functioning.

The changes that occur over time in the parent-child relationship help to illuminate the dynamic tension between stress and morphostatic and morphogenic processes. The toddler's growing need for more autonomy and personal control over the environment can place stress on the parents' current strategies for ensuring their daughter's physical safety and fostering her sense of competence and mastery. This stress results from two sources. First, parents may recognize that

they need to change their strategies for managing their daughter's behavior. Second, their daughter's insistence that she be allowed greater autonomy will further increase their awareness that they need to change their parenting strategies. As this stress reaches a critical level, the parents will begin to alter the amount of autonomy and control they permit her to have. They may encourage her to dress herself and allow her to ride her bike down the street. This is an ongoing and dynamic process in the sense that the parents will not alter their existing parenting strategies (morphostasis) unless the demand for change goes beyond a critical threshold, thereby making change (morphogenesis) more rewarding than constancy.

The tension between the need to maintain constancy and the need to make changes exists in all family systems. Due to the open nature of the family system, the strategies it employs to execute its first-order tasks will periodically require readjustment. But these readjustments will not occur unless the need for their reorganization is sufficiently great. Stress and information are important concepts in this regard because it is the stress generated by the pressure to alter existing strategies that informs the system when a change is required.

Some systems, however, fail to make adaptations when they are required. These systems are often referred to as closed or rigid. Other systems make adaptations when none are required. They are often referred to as chaotic, random, or disorganized (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989). In both instances, families, as open systems, are reacting to information and making adaptations. However, the adaptations made by these systems are not optimal, meaning that they may place the physical, emotional, and/or psychological health of family members at risk.

The Politics of the Family

Over the past couple of decades, our nation has become more concerned with the health and viability of the family, and the debate about the family has moved to the center of national politics. Much of this debate has focused on the problems of contemporary families and the prospects for the family's future. Views clearly differ about what form the family should take and about what factors contribute to the well-being of families. In the United States we debate the degree to which divorce and single parenthood undermine the quality of family life. We argue about the extent to which a mother's employment outside the home undermines the health and well-being of her children. Views clash whenever the question is raised as to whether gay and lesbian couples should be able to parent children or consider themselves a family.

At the heart of much of this debate are differences in opinion about the definition of (1) the family and (2) a functional family. From a systems perspective, a family exists whenever a group of individuals regularly interact with one another over time, experience some degree of emotional bonding, share a common history and legacy, and together devise strategies for the accomplishment of family goals

and tasks. Typically, this type of structure results when individuals become related to one another, over time, by blood or marriage. It is clear, however, that blood and marriage ties are not the only ways in which family groups form. Rather, in the broadest possible sense, any group of individuals who share these properties and thus provide for the physical, social, and emotional needs of the individual members can be thought of as a family.

Central to this broad definition of the family is an emphasis on the first- and second-order tasks that the family must fulfill. What defines a family as unique is its structure, which is reflected in large part by the strategies the family employs to execute its first-order tasks. This is not meant to undermine the importance of the family's composition, because that composition influences the family's choice of strategies. The single-parent-headed family often evolves strategies different from those of the two-parent-headed household. The dual-worker system evolves strategies different from those of the traditional family system. The lesbian family system may evolve strategies different from those of the heterosexual family system. The composition of the family affects family dynamics by shaping the strategies employed in the system's effort to accomplish its tasks.

While the composition of the family shapes the strategies the family employs, it is not by itself an indicator of family functioning. Judgments about a family system's functioning must take into account the organizational structure of the family and, in particular, whether the family is able to execute its tasks effectively. Regardless of the particular composition of a family, family functioning is tied to family dynamics. When the structure and strategies of the family support the physical, social, emotional, and psychological well-being of family members, it is reasonable to conclude that the family is functional.

It should be clear as well that each society determines the appropriateness of essential family strategies; that is, prevailing cultural value orientations both direct how tasks should be executed and determine the appropriateness of each family's strategies. When the strategies a family employs are consistent with those endorsed within the society, the family is judged to be effective. When the strategies employed by a particular family deviate sufficiently from the cultural norms, the family is more likely to be judged ineffective. There is no way to divorce the issue of family functioning from the prevailing cultural value orientations of a given society. Within the United States, the cultural heterogeneity of the society contributes to a certain degree of debate as to the appropriate ways of executing family system tasks. The disciplining of children is a case in point. As a society we agree that children are expected to behave in socially appropriate ways, and parents are charged with the task of regulating the behavior of their children. We do not as a society agree, however, on whether physical force and punishment should be employed to control children. Some believe that hitting children should be against the law, whereas others believe that corporal punishment is essential to mold the character of our children.

The confusion that results from these two competing cultural value orientations makes it difficult to determine when a particular parent's discipline strategies have crossed the line from acceptable to dysfunctional. This illustration is used to point out how a determination of family functioning is culturally

grounded. The strategies we approve of as a society become the standard by which effectiveness is judged. Therefore, the politics of the family are such that there is considerable disagreement about not only how a family should be comprised, but also how a family should operate. While a consensus has emerged over the years that the family is responsible for ensuring the physical, social, emotional, and psychological well-being of its members, there remains considerable debate as to what is, and what is not, an appropriate strategy.

Conclusions

A systems perspective focuses our attention upon the family's structural and functional features rather than on the family's particular composition. Specifically, it encourages us to be aware of the organizational complexity of the family and the reciprocal and interdependent relationships that exist between the family and broader social systems. Furthermore, a systems perspective encourages us to attend to the wide array of tasks that the family and each of its subsystems must execute in order for the family to function adequately. The family must devise strategies for executing these tasks. The family's choice of strategies is also at the heart of any judgment made regarding a family's effectiveness. The family's structural organization and its unique strategies only become apparent in examining the family's patterns of interaction. That is, only by observing the family's unique rules and patterns of interaction do we gain insight into how the family is structured and how it goes about fulfilling its basic tasks.

Finally, when the family is conceived of as an open system, we are encouraged to be aware of the dynamic and evolving nature of the family. Families, as open systems, develop in response to internal and external stresses that challenge the system to modify its way of executing its tasks. Each family system faces an ongoing challenge to accommodate the ordinary and extraordinary demands that are encountered over its life cycle.

Key Terms

Adaptability The capacity of the system to change its rules and strategies in response to situational or developmental stress.

Boundaries The concept used to delineate one system or subsystem from other systems or subsystems, or from the surrounding environment.

Covert rules Rules that are implicit rather than openly stated but are nonetheless understood by all family members.

Family An interdependent group of individuals who have a shared sense of history, experience some degree of emotional bonding, and devise

strategies for meeting the needs of individual members and the group as a whole.

Family themes Those elements of the family experience that become organizing principles for family life, including both conscious and unconscious elements as well as intellectual (attitudes, beliefs, values) and emotional aspects.

First-order tasks The tasks that are common to all families regardless of their particular composition, socioeconomic status, and cultural, ethnic, or racial heritage. Examples of first-order tasks include the formation of

family themes, the regulation of boundaries, and the management of the household.

Interdependence The idea that individuals and subsystems that compose the whole system are mutually dependent and mutually influenced by one another.

Metarules Rules about rules.

Morphogenesis Those processes operating within systems that foster systemic growth and development.

Morphostasis Those processes operating within systems that resist changes in existing strategies.

Openness The ease with which members and information cross the boundary from one system or subsystem to another.

Organizational complexity The organizational structure whereby family systems are comprised of various smaller units or subsystems that together comprise the larger family system.

Overt rules Explicit and openly stated rules.

Rules Recurring patterns of interaction that define the limits of acceptable and appropriate behavior in the family.

Second-order tasks The responsibility that all families have for adapting their strategies and rules in response to stress, information, and change.

Strategies The specific policies and procedures the family adopts to accomplish its tasks. Also the unique patterns of interaction that each family establishes to execute its basic tasks.

Stress Information transmitted to the system about whether established interactional patterns require alteration.

Structure Both the family's composition and its organization. Composition refers to the family's membership, that is, the persons who make up the family. Organization is the collection of interdependent relationships and subsystems that operate by established rules of interaction.

Wholeness The idea that systems must be understood in their entirety, which is distinctly different from the simple sum of the contributions of the individual parts.