

Chapter 2

The Theoretical Context of Family Therapy

Chapter Overview

Historical Perspective

- Families have played an important part throughout history in the lives of peoples and nations
- Families provide deep emotional experiences such as love, devotion, attachment, belonging, fun, and joy
- A family also can be a therapeutic environment for its members by listening, sympathizing, assisting, and reassuring each other
- Over time, families have been shaped by social, cultural, economic, and governmental changes

Family Definitions

- Families are systems in which the members interact with one another
- Family members influence each other and, in turn, are influenced by each other
- Because of this mutual interaction, a family is greater than the sum of its parts
- The interrelatedness of the family is known as cybernetics
- Definitions of what a family is and how it is structured vary across cultures and are constantly changing and evolving
- Families are both universal and unique, each family having its own set of rules, sequences, subsystems, feedback loops, hierarchy, and organization
- Common family types in American society include nuclear, single parent, and blended, with variations of these three family forms described as dual career, child free, special needs children, gay/lesbian, aging, multigenerational, grandparent headed, and military
- The family one grew up in is known as one's family-of-origin

Individual and Family Development

- It is useful to study families from a developmental perspective, (i.e., the predictable changes that occur in individuals and families over time)
- The 'life course' refers to different time dimensions such as individual time (the time from birth to death), social time (important social events such as marriage, parenthood, and retirement), and historical time (the era and culture in which one lives)
- The term 'life cycle' is used to describe the continuous development of people over time
- Individuals and families experience predictable events and developmental crises (changes) which are often sequential
- Life cycle stages require some level of success at each stage before proceeding to the next stage. There are times of predictable developmental crises (times of turmoil and opportunity) in each stage.
- Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the area of human growth and development, described human life in terms of stages or sequential developmental occurrences. He developed an influential eight stage model of individual development. The first five stages focus on individual skill and identity development, the last three are more interpersonally based
- Evelyn Duvall first proposed a family life cycle model based on the intact, middle class nuclear family in 1956. This model has lost influence due to the decrease in number and percentage of nuclear families in the United States
- In 1999, Carter and McGoldrick proposed a six-stage family life cycle model of the intact middle class nuclear family that begins with the unattached adult and continues through retirement
- Each stage in this model requires key adjustments, tasks, and changes for the individuals to survive and thrive. There is often intergenerational ambivalence in families as children, especially young adults, move to more independence and yet need assistance

Stage 1 *Single Young Adults: Leaving Home*

- ❖ the numbers of single young adults is increasing
- ❖ traditional family oriented activities are being reshaped to accommodate singles
- ❖ a major task of single young adults is to disconnect and reconnect with one's family on a different level and to develop a strong identity – a “solid self”
- ❖ cohabitation (living together without being married) is increasing with positive, negative and neutral aspects to it
- ❖ singlehood is a viable alternative to marriage; more accepted now than in the past
- ❖ singles are the second happiest group (married couples being the happiest)
- ❖ society continues to promote marriage, creating internal and external pressures on singles to marry
- ❖ singles must establish social networks, find meaning in work or avocations, and live a balanced life to be physically and psychologically healthy
- ❖ singles typically seek family therapy due to a weak sense of self, inability to separate from their family of origin, and a lack of social skills to establish significant relationships with others

Stage 2 *The New Couple: Joining of Families Through Marriage*

- ❖ new couple relationships begin with courtship, in which individuals test their compatibility and tend to idealize the relationship
- ❖ individuals tend to be most comfortable with others at the same or similar developmental level (e.g., secure men tend to be involved with secure women; anxious women may be attracted to less committed and more disengaged men)
- ❖ the new couple stage is a period of adjustment and accommodation and requires time, energy, good will, and the ability to compromise
- ❖ this stage can be quite satisfying for those who are able to resolve differences successfully – they maintain a high level of idealistic distortion about their marriage and spouse,
- ❖ this stage can result in divorce for those unable to make the necessary adjustments
- ❖ new couples typically seek family therapy due to the inability to adjust to living as a couple instead of individually, difficulty with relatives (in laws and/or family of origin), inability to develop effective communication and problem solving skills, and differences over whether and when to have children

Stage 3 *Families with Young Children*

- ❖ this stage is characterized by dramatic changes in lifestyle which stress a couple's lifestyle and marital relationship,
- ❖ this stage create new parenting/maternal demands and unbalances the patterns and interactions previously developed – at least temporarily
- ❖ although marital satisfaction tends to decrease in this stage, strong marital bonds can mediate the stresses associated with children and work issues
- ❖ families with young children typically seek family therapy due to inability to reorganize and restructure following the arrival of children as well as differences over how to raise and discipline children

Stage 4 *Families with Adolescents*

- ❖ this stage is one of the most active and exciting yet it can be very stressful and demanding for many families
- ❖ couples may be caring for aging parents in addition to adolescent family members they are often squeezed psychologically and physically -- sometimes referred to as the 'sandwich generation'
- ❖ stressors may include difficulty in setting limits, redefining relationships, and caring and supporting one another; decreasing parental influence and increasing peer influence; generational and gender differences; and maintaining open communication
- ❖ when adolescents develop 'planful competence' they come to have a realistic understanding of their intellectual, social, and personal responses in their relationships with others

- ❖ families with adolescents typically seek family therapy due to parent-adolescent conflict, developmental and psychological stress of marital partners who see their dreams 'slipping away,' and the stresses involved with caring for multiple generations of family members as well as for themselves

Stage 5 *Launching Children and Moving On*

- ❖ the 'empty nest' describes parents whose children have left home for college, marriage, careers, etc.
- ❖ this can be a positive time for couples, (e.g., some rediscovering the couple relationship and enjoying new freedoms from responsibility)
- ❖ this can be a negative time for couples, especially those who have defined themselves primarily as parents and have been heavily focused on their children.
- ❖ children who leave and then return ('boomerang children') can create tension among family members
- ❖ families in the launching and moving on stage typically seek family therapy due to a sense of loss of self, the marriage or the child who has left; conflict with the child who is not independent enough; or frustration/anger over the marriage and/or career ambitions

Stage 6 *Families in Later Life*

- ❖ within this stage are three groups: the young old (65-74), the old (75-84), and the oldest old (85 and after)
- ❖ characterized by decline in finances, health, loss of spouse, chronic illness, depression, and helplessness
- ❖ positive aspects of this stage include interacting with grandchildren, doing what one wants and setting one's own pace, and reflecting on important life activities
- ❖ families in later life typically seek family therapy due to a lack of meaning or enjoyment in life, concern over the aging process, the lack of quality relationships with family members (for example, children, in-laws, grandchildren)

Unifying Individual and Family Life Cycles

- Although outwardly the individual life cycle stages do not appear to have much in common with family life cycle stage, they do share some commonalities
- Both share an emphasis on growth and development
- Growth is seen as a conscious process that involves a fair amount of risk and courage
- Both can be viewed from a systemic theory perspective, which emphasizes the interrelatedness of the entire unit, that a family is greater than just the sum of its parts, and that families have organization, rules, and repetitive patterns
- The concept of 'circular causality' is based on the idea that family member's actions influence others and are in turn influenced by others. This differs from 'linear causality' in which actions move in one direction only, with each action causing another
 - ❖ in linear causality, a mother may be seen as the cause of a child's problem
 - ❖ in circular causality, the parent and child interact in a way that results in the problem repeating and intensifying (e.g., the more a parent protects a shy child, the more shy the child becomes, which results in more protection and more shyness, etc.)
- Life cycle models are complementary in the development and 'readiness' of persons; they tend to strengthen and prepare people for challenges and work
- Life cycle models are competitive in that the needs of individuals often are in competition with the needs of the family and can create tension

Implications of Life Cycles and Family Therapy

- The 'fit' between the therapist and the family can influence the outcome of therapy
 - ❖ therapists bringing unresolved issues into their clinical work can create problems
 - ❖ therapists may not have experienced the family's developmental stage, may be currently experiencing the same stage as the family, or may already have been through the family's stage – all of these situations can cause problems
 - ❖ race, gender, ethnicity, class, sibling position, and sexual orientation of the therapist can positively or negatively influence the 'fit' and outcome of therapy.
 - ❖ therapists can improve the 'fit' or match with families by increasing their sensitivity to particular families, obtaining peer or clinical supervision to overcome deficiencies, or receiving continuing education to increase knowledge and skills
- Therapists must be sensitive to cultural differences which require adjustments to life cycle models
- Illness in a family member, either temporary or permanent, disrupts life cycles and can wear down a family's ability to handle the situation or can provide opportunities for growth and cohesion
- Therapists can assess the family's present and prior functioning and assist them to better understand the illness, resolve developmental disruptions, and develop more effective coping methods
- Special-needs children, i.e., those with disabilities, may affect parents/family positively or negatively; regardless expected life cycle of family is affected and therapist must take this matter into consideration
- Poverty and professionalism are economic and social factors that influence families in different ways, with poor families having fewer resources and struggling more with unexpected life events as compared with more affluent professional families

Key Terms

boomerang children adult children who, after being out on their own for awhile, return to live with their parents because of financial problems, unemployment, or an inability or reluctance to grow up

circular causality the idea that actions are part of a causal chain, each influencing and being influenced by the other.

cohabitation effect the phenomenon of lower marital quality, more negative communication, less dedication, and higher rates of divorce for couples who cohabitated before marriage

courage the ability to take calculated risks without knowing the exact consequences

cybernetics a type of systemic interrelatedness governed by rules, sequences, and feedback. The term was introduced as a concept to family therapy by Gregory Bateson. See also new epistemology.

development predictable physical, mental, and social changes over life that occur in relationship to the environment.

empty nest a term that describes couples who have launched their children and are without childrearing responsibilities.

family of origin the family a person was born or adopted into.

homeostasis the tendency to resist change and keep things as they are, in a state of equilibrium.

idealistic distortion viewing one's marriage and spouse to be better than they actually are

linear causality the concept of cause and effect—that is, forces being seen as moving in one direction, with each action causing another. Linear causality can be seen in, for example, the firing of a gun.

negative feedback loops behaviors that reduce deviation within a system and bring the system back to its former, homeostatic state.

organism a form of life composed of mutually dependent parts and processes standing in mutual interaction.

planful competence when adolescents have a reasonably realistic understanding of their intellectual abilities, social skills, and personal emotional responses in interrelationship with others.

positive feedback loops behaviors that amplify deviation within a system and take the system further away from homeostasis.

sandwich generation couples who have adolescents and their aging parents to take care of and are squeezed psychologically and physically.

senescence a gradual physical decline of individuals related to age. This decline begins after overall growth stops and varies greatly from individual to individual.

singlehood being single

solid self a Bowenian term for developing a sense of one's own identity where beliefs and convictions are not simply adaptive to others.

subsystems smaller units of the system as a whole, usually composed of members in a family who because of age or function are logically grouped together, such as parents. They exist to carry out various family tasks.

systems theory a theory, sometimes known as general systems theory, that focuses on the interconnectedness of elements within all living organisms, including the family. It is based on the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy.

Classroom Discussion

1. Discuss the pros and cons of the life cycle perspective in assessing and treating couples and families.
2. Pick a particular life cycle stage, discuss what tasks and challenges you may have encountered and what you and your family may have done to work through them.
3. It is believed that the 'fit' between the therapist and the family can influence the outcome of therapy. What are some of the issues that may cause difficulty in this area? What factors may be assets in this area?

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Families may respond to change by using negative feedback loops, which are loops that:
 - A. promote a return to the status quo
 - B. promote change
 - C. promote appreciation for each other
 - D. accommodate to new situations and challenges
2. Families may respond to change by using positive feedback loops, which are loops that:
 - A. promote a return to the status quo
 - B. promote change
 - C. promote appreciation for each other
 - D. accommodate to new situations and challenges

3. The family life cycle is useful in studying families from a(n) _____ perspective.
 - A. psychopathological
 - B. hierarchical
 - C. developmental
 - D. empathic
4. The three time dimensions referred to as the 'life course' are:
 - A. historical, evolutionary, predictable
 - B. developmental, historical, cultural
 - C. individual, social, historical
 - D. horizontal, vertical, transitional
5. Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the area of human growth and development, developed an eight stage model of individual development. The first five stages focus on individual skill and identity development. The last three stages focus on:
 - A. interpersonal development
 - B. cybernetics
 - C. idealistic distortion
 - D. hierarchical structure
6. Family subsystems include all the following except:
 - A. parents
 - B. siblings
 - C. boys/men
 - D. spouses
7. A key task of Stage 1, Leaving Home, of Carter and McGoldrick's life cycle model is:
 - A. separation from the family of origin
 - B. developing effective communication skills
 - C. developing skills in limit setting
 - D. developing the ability to compromise
8. In Stage 5, Launching Children and Moving On, families typically seek family therapy due to:
 - A. the stresses involved with caring for multiple generations
 - B. a lack of social skills to establish significant relationships with others
 - C. frustration/anger over the marriage and/or career ambitions
 - D. lack of meaning or enjoyment in life
9. During the New Couple stage, a major task for the couple is:
 - A. developing effective communication and problem solving skills
 - B. developing independence
 - C. developing effective social skills
 - D. all of the above
10. Circular causality differs from linear causality. In linear causality, _____.
 - A. each family member's actions influence others
 - B. family member's actions move in one direction only
 - C. family member's actions are complementary
 - D. family member's actions are interrelated
11. A relatively recent development is couples who have adolescents and their aging parents to take care of and who feel they are squeezed psychologically and physically. This development is called:
 - A. planful competence
 - B. empty nest
 - C. circular causality
 - D. sandwich generation

12. Although at first they seem very different, the individual and family life cycle models share an emphasis on:
- A. interpersonal development
 - B. intrapsychic development
 - C. pathological development
 - D. growth and development

True/False Questions

1. Definitions of what a family is have remained pretty much the same over generations and across cultures.
True ___ False ___
2. An inability to work through interpersonal issues, such as developing adequate or optimal communication patterns, is one of many issues that may prompt new couples to seek family therapy.
True ___ False ___
3. Life cycle stages are independent of one another and do not require some level of success before proceeding to the next step.
True ___ False ___
4. “The more a parent protects a shy child, the shyer the child becomes.” This fact is an example of the concept of ‘circular causality.’
True ___ False ___
5. In general, singles are the second happiest demographic group (married couples being the happiest).
True ___ False ___

