

Kari Adamsons · April L. Few-Demo  
Christine M. Proulx · Kevin Roy *Editors*

# Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies

A Dynamic Approach

 Springer

# Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies

Kari Adamsons • April L. Few-Demo  
Christine M. Proulx • Kevin Roy  
Editors

# Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies

A Dynamic Approach

 Springer

*Editors*

Kari Adamsons  
Department of Human Development and  
Family Sciences  
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, CT, USA

April L. Few-Demo  
Department of Human Development and  
Family Sciences  
College of Liberal Arts and Human  
Sciences Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA, USA

Christine M. Proulx  
Department of Human Development and  
Family Sciences  
College of Education and Human  
Development University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO, USA

Kevin Roy  
Department of Family Science, School of  
Public Health  
University of Maryland  
College Park, MD, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-92001-2                      ISBN 978-3-030-92002-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9>

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Preface

At the TCRM business meeting in November 2015, Kevin Roy raised the idea that it might be time to start thinking about creating a new Sourcebook. It had been 10 years since the last one was published, and we were reaching a turning point in the field where a number of senior scholars were retiring, and if we wished to include them in one more Sourcebook, now would be the time. Kari Adamsons volunteered to help Kevin talk to people about the idea and put together a proposal, so that others could move it to the next steps if it was decided that the time was right. Over the next several months, Kari and Kevin talked with a number of scholars, including previous Sourcebook editors, to get their thoughts on (a) whether a new Sourcebook was needed and (b) what such a Sourcebook should look like. These efforts culminated in a panel discussion at TCRM in fall 2016, where it was decided that the process of creating a new Sourcebook should begin, and Katherine Allen, Libby Balter Blume, and Ron Sabatelli agreed to serve as a selection committee for the editors of the new volume. A call for editors was sent out in February of 2017, and a team of five editors was named by the selection committee at the end of March. One selected editor decided to step down in the summer of 2017 due to growing administrative responsibilities, and after consulting with the selection committee, the decision was made to move forward with the Sourcebook as a team of four editors: Kari Adamsons, April L. Few-Demo, Christine M. Proulx, and Kevin Roy.

From the time we were selected, we met as a team by phone (and later by Zoom) approximately every 2 to 4 weeks. We decided early on that this would be a team effort and that we would not name a “lead” editor, instead listing editor names alphabetically; all editorial decisions were fully collaborative. Between March and November of 2017, we created a tentative table of contents and guidelines for authors, and a call for proposals for primary chapters was announced at NCFR and TCRM and distributed via listservs in fall 2017. As a team, we reviewed all chapter proposals and made decisions on chapter authorship teams in spring 2018. Once we had a sense of the primary chapters that would be included and were getting drafts of the chapters from authors, we created and distributed a call for proposals for applications to accompany each primary chapter in fall 2018.

In creating this Sourcebook, we made several intentional decisions (which we discuss more in our introductory chapter). First, we decided on a theory-forward approach, with each chapter focusing on a particular theory/methodology. Second, we followed the sociohistorical approach of the 1993 Sourcebook, clustering our chapters by historical period. Third, we decided to include applications for almost every chapter, so that readers can gain a sense of the cutting-edge work and debates that surround each theory and methodology. We made an intentional change from “methods” to “methodologies,” so that we could address broad approaches to research rather than specific statistical or analytical techniques. We sought to be inclusive of as diverse an array of theories and methodologies as possible, bringing in a number of chapters that have not been formally included before in a Sourcebook. We attempted to include diverse perspectives in terms of both the chapter authors and the topics addressed in the primary chapters and the applications.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we named our approach to theories and methodologies *a dynamic approach*. In our view, theories and methodologies are active and organic creations; they are products of the sociohistorical periods within which they originated, and they are (or should be) constantly evolving and adapting over time to the changing cultural contexts within which we employ them as scholars. The purpose of this volume is to tell the ongoing stories of the theories and methodologies employed in the field of family science – not simply as static lists of constructs and propositions, but as dynamic ideas viewed through our current socio-historical and cultural lenses and the individual perspectives of the authors.

Although our primary goal was to let authors “tell the story” of their theories and methodologies as they saw fit, we did provide general guidelines to authors about content that should be addressed in each chapter to provide some parallel structure to the volume as a whole. For authors of theory chapters, we asked them to discuss the historical origins and development of the theory, including major historical events, individuals, and key primary sources; the core assumptions and concepts of the theory and how they evolved over time; the main problems and questions that the theory addresses; debates within and limitations of the theory; examples of research using the theory in family science; and future directions. For methodology chapters, we asked authors to address the historical origins of the methodology, including key historical events and individuals; basic assumptions of the methodology; an overview of the methodology, including key concepts and advances over time; the types of research questions that the methodology can address and theories that it might be particularly well matched with for use; examples of applications of the methodology to family research; limitations of and current debates about the methodology; and future directions for use of this methodology with families.

In total, the current Sourcebook contains 55 chapters and 99 authors that span the globe and a vast array of disciplines and academic/professional ranks. It is, like the theories and methodologies it contains, a product of the current times. Numerous debates mentioned herein remain unresolved, and new ones are emerging. We hope you enjoy and find the contents of this volume useful to your work and scholarship, and we look forward to watching the continued evolution of the theories and methodologies of family science in years to come.

Storrs, CT, USA  
Blacksburg, VA, USA  
Columbia, MO, USA  
College Park, MD, USA

Kari Adamsons  
April L. Few-Demo  
Christine M. Proulx  
Kevin Roy

# Acknowledgments

We want to acknowledge the many scholars who contributed to this volume, many of whom did so in the midst of a global pandemic. Nearly 100 contributors helped us bring this book to fruition, and we are grateful for their commitment to the Sourcebook.

The Theory Construction and Research Methodology (TCRM) workshop and the Research and Theory (R&T) section of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) are, in many ways, the home of the *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*. Since its founding in 1971, TCRM has been the place that family scientists have gone to develop, debate, and discuss theory, and the R&T section is one of the earliest and largest membership groups within NCFR, which highlights important work and theoretical advances in the field of family science. We thank the executive committees of TCRM and R&T for supporting this project, and the attendees of TCRM and R&T business meetings and Sourcebook sessions who helped this book take shape. Royalties from past Sourcebooks supported the creation of this volume, and royalties resulting from this newest edition will support the next update.

We also would like to thank Katherine Allen, Libby Balter Blume, and Ronald Sabatelli for their faith and encouragement in selecting us to be the editorial team for this volume, and their support when we had questions along the way.

We would like to thank Springer Nature for their assistance throughout the creation of this volume and their patience with its many delays – publishing during a pandemic is not for the faint of heart. We would like to express a special thanks to Jennifer Hadley for her initial enthusiasm that convinced us the time was right, and that this volume was a needed addition to the field.

We would like to thank our families and loved ones, who provided support, sanity checks, sounding boards, and sympathetic ears throughout the years of this project.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the true team editorial effort that built this Sourcebook. We were appointed as co-editors in March of 2017, all as mid-career scholars, and entrusted with the daunting task of creating the defining collection of theories and methodologies for our field. Our names are listed in alphabetical order



as editors to reflect the fact that no single one of us was the lead on this project. All decisions were jointly made during our regular (at least monthly, and usually more frequently) phone and Zoom meetings and our couple of “writing retreats.” As difficult and as winding a path as this project followed at times, we can’t imagine a team we would have wanted to take this journey with more.

# Contents

<b>Part I Setting the Context for Contemporary Family Science</b>	
<b>Family Theories and Methodologies: A Dynamic Approach . . . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
Kari Adamsons, April L. Few-Demo, Christine M. Proulx, and Kevin Roy	
<b>Metatheorizing in Family Theory . . . . .</b>	<b>21</b>
David C. Bell	
<b>History of Family Science . . . . .</b>	<b>41</b>
Barbara H. Settles and Karen L. Doneker	
<b>Part II The Great Depression, World War, and the Rise of Pragmatism in Family Science</b>	
<b>Family Resilience Theory . . . . .</b>	<b>65</b>
Carolyn S. Henry and Amanda W. Harrist	
<b>Application: Resilience Among Sibling Caregivers . . . . .</b>	<b>93</b>
Mamta Saxena	
<b>Conceptualizing Family Stress: A Trend Toward Greater Context . . . . .</b>	<b>99</b>
Chalandra M. Bryant and Christiana I. Awosan	
<b>Application: Family Stress Theories and Custodial Grandfamilies . . . . .</b>	<b>119</b>
Megan L. Dolbin-MacNab	
<b>Through the Looking Glass: Reexamining Symbolic Interactionism’s Past and Forecasting its Future . . . . .</b>	<b>127</b>
Kari Adamsons and Michael Carter	
<b>Application: Symbolic Interactionism as a Framework for Marital Meaning . . . . .</b>	<b>147</b>
Scott Hall	
<b>Ethnographic Methodologies in Family Research . . . . .</b>	<b>155</b>
Katherine MacTavish	

**Application: Inside the “Brotherhood of Fatherhood”:** Notes on Doing Ethnography in the Dad 2.0 Community ..... 169  
Casey Scheibling

**Part III Normalism, Post-War Challenges, and Pluralism**

**Family Development Theory** ..... 179  
Todd F. Martin and James M. White

**Application: Moving Beyond “Traditional:” Applying MFDT to the Development of Refugee Families** ..... 203  
J. Scott Crapo and Kay Bradford

**Family Systems Theory** ..... 209  
Joyce Baptist and Raeann R. Hamon

**Application: Family Systems Theory in the Military Context** ..... 227  
J. Kale Monk and Christina M. Marini

**Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory: Its Development, Core Concepts, and Critical Issues** ..... 235  
Jonathan R. H. Tudge, Elisa A. Merçon-Vargas, and Ayse Payir

**Application: The Role of Epigenetics in Human Development** ..... 255  
Hilary A. Rose

**Social Exchange Theories** ..... 259  
Ronald M. Sabatelli

**Application: Relational (in) Justice in Context** ..... 279  
Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth and Maureen Perry-Jenkins

**The Family Life Course Framework: Perspectives on Interdependent Lives and Inequality** ..... 287  
Kevin M. Roy and Richard A. Settersten Jr.

**Application: Life Course Theory: Implications for Sexual Minority Youth Research and Practice** ..... 309  
Jessica N. Fish

**Grounded Theory Methods** ..... 315  
Jennifer L. Hardesty, Kimberly A. Crossman, and Megan L. Haselschwerdt

**Application: Addressing Sexual Health Disparities Among Black Girls and Women** ..... 335  
Natasha Crooks

**Longitudinal Research** ..... 343  
Spencer James and Jeremy Yorgason

**Dyadic Data in Family Science** ..... 359  
 Christine M. Proulx and Brian G. Ogolsky

**Application: Dyadic Growth Mixture Modeling** ..... 369  
 Nathan D. Leonhardt and W. Justin Dyer

**Part IV Social Movements, Critical Theory, and Contextualism**

**Feminist Theories: Knowledge, Method, and Practice** ..... 379  
 Katherine R. Allen, Abbie E. Goldberg, and Ana L. Jaramillo-Sierra

**Application: How a Gender-as-Relational Perspective  
 Has Been Applied in Quantitative Studies of Emotion Work  
 in Romantic Relationships** ..... 401  
 Amanda M. Pollitt and Melissa A. Curran

**Critical Race Theory: Historical Roots, Contemporary Use, and its  
 Contributions to Understanding Latinx Immigrant Families** ..... 407  
 San Juanita García, Ellen Reese, and Mary Romero

**Application: Critical Race Theory as Frame for Health Research  
 with Young Black Fathers Who Survive Violent Injury** ..... 425  
 William Wical and Joseph Richardson

**Intersectionality Theory: A Critical Theory to Push Family Science  
 Forward** ..... 433  
 April L. Few-Demo, Andrea G. Hunter, and Bertranna A. Muruthi

**Application: Reimagining Intersectional Family Science: Reflections  
 on URM Families, Wealth, and Health** ..... 453  
 Ruth Enid Zambrana

**Queer Theory** ..... 459  
 Jenifer McGuire

**Application: Queering Family Science: Applications  
 of Queer Theory for Family Research and Practice** ..... 477  
 Samuel H. Allen

**Family-Centered Participatory Action Research: *With, by, and for*  
 Families** ..... 483  
 Bethany L. Letiecq, Colleen K. Vesely, and Rachael D. Goodman

**Application: Photovoice: An Application of PAR** ..... 505  
 Abigail J. Rolbiecki and Jacquelyn J. Benson

**Part V Family Theories and Health, Interdisciplinarity, and Translational Family Science Theories**

**Ambiguous Loss: Contemporary Applications and Theoretical Extensions** ..... 513  
 Tai J. Mendenhall and Pauline Boss

**Family Communication** ..... 531  
 Dawn O. Braithwaite and Elizabeth A. Suter

**Application: Family Communication: Adoptive Family Communication** ..... 549  
 Haley Kranstuber Horstman and Colleen Warner Colaner

**Understanding Developmental Attachment Theory in the Context of Family Diversity** ..... 555  
 Caitlin M. Lombardi, Mindy E. Scott, and Dana Thomson

**Application: Advancing Loneliness Research Within an Attachment Framework** ..... 573  
 Alex Molaver

**Promoting the General Welfare: Family Science and Family Policy** ..... 579  
 Anne F. Farrell and Melissa A. Kull

**Application: Mass Incarceration and Families** ..... 597  
 Joyce A. Arditti

**A Biopsychosocial Model of Family Process** ..... 603  
 W. Roger Mills-Koonce and Nissa Towe-Goodman

**Application: Childrearing and the Health of Working-Age Parents** ..... 621  
 Reed DeAngelis

**Stress-Related Biomarkers Methods in Family Research** ..... 629  
 Deadric T. Williams, Bridget J. Goosby, and Jacob E. Cheadle

**Application: Salivary Biomarkers of Stress: Research Application in Dementia Family Caregiving** ..... 645  
 Yin Liu and Courtney A. Polenick

**Mixed-Methods Approaches** ..... 653  
 J. Jill Sutor and Megan Gilligan

**Application: Survey Driven Narrative Construction** ..... 673  
 Karina Shreffler and Julia McQuillan

**Evaluation in Family Science: Developing an Equitable and Relevant Evidence Base for Family-Serving Programs** ..... 679  
 Amy Lewin, Ghaffar Ali Hurtado Chocque, and Beth Russell

**Application: Evaluation of the *ELEVATE* Program** ..... 699  
Ted G. Futris and Evin Winkelman Richardson

**Translation and Prevention in Family Science** ..... 705  
Steven M. Kogan and Allen W. Barton

**Application: Teaching Prevention and Translation in Family Science** . . . 725  
Kim M. Gans

**Part VI The Future of Family Science**

**Transdisciplinary Family Science** ..... 733  
Libby Balter Blume and Mark A. Fine

**Future Directions for Family Theories and Methodologies** ..... 753  
Kari Adamsons, April L. Few-Demo, Christine M. Proulx, and Kevin Roy

**Index** ..... 761

# Contributors

**Kari Adamsons, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**Katherine R. Allen, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

**Samuel H. Allen, Ph.D.** The Family Institute, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

**Joyce A. Arditti, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

**Christiana I. Awosan, Ph.D.** Department of Social Work & Marriage and Family Therapy, School of Arts and Science, Iona College, New Rochelle, NY, USA

**Joyce Baptist, Ph.D.** Department of Applied Human Sciences, College of Health and Human Sciences, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, USA

**Allen W. Barton, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environment Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

**David C. Bell, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA

**Jacquelyn J. Benson, Ph.D.** Institute of Clinical and Translational Sciences, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA

**Libby Balter Blume, Ph.D.** Psychology, Architecture, and Community Development, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, MI, USA

**Pauline Boss, Ph.D.** Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Saint Paul, MN, USA

**Kay Bradford, Ph.D., LMFT** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

**Dawn O. Braithwaite, Ph.D.** Interpersonal & Family Communication, Communication Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, USA

**Chalandra M. Bryant, Ph.D.** Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

**Michael Carter, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA, USA

**Jacob E. Cheadle, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

**Ghaffar Ali Hurtado Chocque, Ph.D.** Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Colleen Warner Colaner, Ph.D.** Department of Communication, College of Arts and Science, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

**J. Scott Crapo, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

**Natasha Crooks, Ph.D., R.N.** Department of Human Development Nursing Science, College of Nursing, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

**Kimberly A. Crossman, Ph.D.** Department of Liberal Studies, College of Education, California State University, Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA, USA

**Melissa A. Curran, Ph.D.** Family Studies and Human Development, Norton School of Family & Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

**Reed DeAngelis, M.S.** Department of Sociology, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Megan L. Dolbin-MacNab, Ph.D., LMFT** Virginia Tech Marriage and Family Therapy Doctoral Program, Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

**Karen L. Doneker, Ph.D.** Department of Family Studies and Community Development, College of Liberal Arts, Towson University, Towson, MD, USA

**W. Justin Dyer, Ph.D.** Department of Religious Education, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

**Anne F. Farrell, Ph.D.** Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA



**April L. Few-Demo, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

**Mark A. Fine, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

**Jessica N. Fish, Ph.D.** Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Ted G. Futris, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

**Kim M. Gans, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**San Juanita García, PhD** Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, College of Letters and Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

**Megan Gilligan, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Human Sciences, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

**Abbie E. Goldberg, Ph.D.** Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

**Rachael D. Goodman, Ph.D., LPC** Counseling and Development Program, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

**Bridget J. Goosby, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

**Scott Hall, Ph.D.** Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies, Teachers College, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

**Raeann R. Hamon, Ph.D., CFLE** Messiah University, Mechanicsburg, PA, USA

**Jennifer L. Hardesty, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Agricultural, Consumer, & Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

**Amanda W. Harrist, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA

**Megan L. Haselschwerdt, Ph.D.** Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Knoxville, TN, USA

**Carolyn S. Henry, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA

**Haley Kranstuber Horstman, Ph.D.** Department of Communication, College of Arts and Science, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

**Andrea G. Hunter, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

**Spencer James, Ph.D.** School of Family Life, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

**Ana L. Jaramillo-Sierra, Ph.D.** Department of Psychology, University de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

**Steven M. Kogan, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

**Melissa A. Kull** Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

**Nathan D. Leonhardt, M.S.** Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, USA

**Bethany L. Letiecq, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

**Amy Lewin, Psy.D.** Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Yin Liu, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

**Caitlin M. Lombardi, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**Katherine MacTavish, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Public Health and Human Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA

**Christina M. Marini, Ph.D.** Department of Psychology, Gordon F. Derner School of Psychology, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY, USA

**Todd F. Martin, Ph.D., CFLE** Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada

**Jenifer McGuire, Ph.D.** Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

**Julia McQuillan, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

**Tai J. Mendenhall, Ph.D.** Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Saint Paul, MN, USA

**Elisa A. Merçon-Vargas, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

**W. Roger Mills-Koonce, Ph.D.** Human Development & Family Studies Undergraduate Program, Applied Developmental Science & Special Education Doctoral Program, School of Education, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Alex Molaver, M.A.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**J. Kale Monk, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

**Bertranna A. Muruthi, Ph.D.** Couple and Family Therapy Program, Counseling Psychology Program, Department of Counseling Psychology and Human Services, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

**Brian G. Ogolsky, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Agricultural, Consumer, & Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

**Ayse Payir, Ph.D.** Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

**Maureen Perry-Jenkins, Ph.D.** Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, College of Natural Sciences, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA

**Courtney A. Polenick, Ph.D.** Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

**Amanda M. Pollitt, Ph.D.** Department of Health Sciences, College of Health and Human Services, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA

**Christine M. Proulx, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development & Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

**Ellen Reese, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA

**Evin Winkelman Richardson, Ph.D., CFLE** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

**Joseph Richardson, Jr., Ph.D** Department of African American Studies, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Abigail J. Rolbiecki, Ph.D., MPH, MSW** Family and Community Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

**Mary Romero, Ph.D.** Department of School of Justice and Social Inquiry, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

**Hilary A. Rose, Ph.D.** Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada

**Kevin Roy, Ph.D.** Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Beth Russell, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**Ronald M. Sabatelli** Human Development and Family Studies, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

**Mamta Saxena, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, State University of New York Oswego, Oswego, NY, USA

**Casey Scheibling, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Social Sciences, McMaster University, Burlington, ON, Canada

**Mindy E. Scott, Ph.D.** Child Trends, Bethesda, MD, USA

**Richard A. Settersten, Jr Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, School of Health and Human Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA

**Barbara H. Settles, Ph.D.** College of Education and Human Development, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

**Karina Shreffler, Ph.D.** Nursing Academic Programs, Health Sciences Center, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

**J. Jill Sutor, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

**Elizabeth A. Suter, Ph.D.** Department of Communication Studies, College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

**Dana Thomson, Ph.D.** Child Trends, Bethesda, MD, USA

**Nissa Towe-Goodman, Ph.D.** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Jonathan R. H. Tudge, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

**Colleen K. Vesely, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

**Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Ph.D.** Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Health and Human Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

**James M. White, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

**William Wical, M.A.** Department of Anthropology, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Deadríc T. Williams, Ph.D.** Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, USA

**Jeremy Yorgason, Ph.D.** School of Family Life, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

**Ruth Enid Zambrana, Ph.D.** Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, College of Arts and Humanities, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

**Part I**  
**Setting the Context for Contemporary**  
**Family Science**

# Family Theories and Methodologies: A Dynamic Approach



Kari Adamsons, April L. Few-Demo, Christine M. Proulx, and Kevin Roy

For over 50 years, scholars have developed edited volumes that attempt to capture the “big picture” of progress in the field of family science and to recognize the contextual and historical moments that shape such progress. This *Sourcebook* follows in the footsteps of a number of projects designed to summarize and consolidate theoretical (and sometimes methodological) frameworks in family research and practice. In this edition, we expand on prior projects to offer a historical *dynamic approach* to the study of family theories and methodologies.

Our task in this introductory chapter is not only to evaluate developments in family theories and methodologies, particularly over the past 30 years, but also to revisit history, presenting our own lens on the people and events that have shaped theory and methodology in family science. First, we define theory and methodology from our perspective. We next briefly discuss the history of theorizing and methodologies in family science and the “Sourcebook tradition,” as well as differences between theory-forward and content-forward approaches. Next we discuss what we mean by a “dynamic approach.” Finally, we address the organization of the current volume, covering the historical periods and social movements that gave rise to the family

---

K. Adamsons (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [kari.adamsons@uconn.edu](mailto:kari.adamsons@uconn.edu)

A. L. Few-Demo

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

C. M. Proulx

Department of Human Development & Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

K. Roy

Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

theories and methodologies we include. It is our sincere hope that this volume provides a comprehensive and in-depth look at the theoretical and methodological journeys our field has taken over the last hundred years and at the paths which lie ahead in our future.

## Theory and Theorizing, Methods and Methodologies

What are *theory* and *theorizing*? Theory and theorizing have been characterized by scholars as active, dynamic, and progressive; realist or pragmatic; definitive, causal, or predictive; explanatory, descriptive, interpretative, and/or expansive; deductive, inductive, or transductive; and/or analytical and contextual (Boss et al., 1993; Lloyd et al., 2009; see also Bell, chapter “[Metatheorizing in Family Theory](#)”, this volume). Abend (2008), a psychologist, asked three basic questions about theory and theorizing: *What is theory? (ontological)*; *What is a good theory? (evaluative)*; and *What is theory for? (teleological)*. Abend argued that we get ourselves into a semantic predicament when we hold on to a singular definition of the word theory and recommended that scholars adopt a *principle of practical reason* and the *principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism* (p. 184). He advocated that researchers acknowledge that “theory” is political. Therefore, rigorous discourses among diverse scientific communities are necessities (Abend, 2008, pp. 193–195), and these debates provide the groundwork for mutual understanding and acceptance of contradictions, within ontological and epistemological pluralism. Theory is a relative term (Alexander, 1982), so it is important to distinguish which meaning of theory is being used, the history of the theory’s development, and an open eye toward where new findings or results can lead the field.

Swedberg (2016) stated that “theorizing belongs to the context of discovery and theory to the context of justification” (pp. 6–7). Thus, theory evidences our rationales in decision-making throughout the discovery process, and it reflects our orientation toward understanding the world (e.g., epistemologies). The premise for the utility of theory in the research process, and the reason we position theory as dynamic in this edition of the *Sourcebook*, is that it informs the development of research questions; determines a population, samples, and subgroups (e.g., control, treatment groups); identifies relevant variables and instruments; influences the analytic strategy; and guides the interpretation of results and implications (Bengtson et al., 2005; Roberto et al., 2006).

Theorizing is the active “process of systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a particular phenomenon” (Doherty et al., 1993, p. 20). This systematic process is indicative of an ongoing pursuit of clarity, coherence, contestation, and consensus to explain diverse individual behaviors and family processes over the life span. Theorizing helps us to create, refine, and promote a theory above other explanations of phenomena. Weick (1989) argued that “theorists are both the source of variation and the source of selection when they construct and select theoretical representations of a certain target subject” (p. 520). Our “disciplined



imagination” (Weick, 1989) both constrains and expands the possibilities for theory construction and our revisiting of assumptions, propositions, and concepts. Theorizing undergirds the legitimacy of a predominant paradigm, which Kuhn (1962) defined as a framework consisting of universally recognized assumptions, theories, methodologies, and findings that are commonly accepted by members of a scientific community.

We also should place our volume within the tradition of linking theory and method. The 1993 *Sourcebook* referred to Methods, and the 2005 volume focused on theory and research, with no mention of either methods or methodologies in the title. When we decided on the name for this *Sourcebook* project, we made an intentional switch from Methods to Methodologies. In this volume, drawing on the work of family methodologist Kerry Daly (2007), we define methodologies as a “set of broader scientific beliefs and practices that provide direction to inquiry” (p. 83). This shifts the focus from specific methods or research tools, such as structural equation modeling or open-ended survey questions, to the broader set of practices or beliefs we use to approach our research questions and interests. For example, if we are interested in developmental change in a family dyad, our research design is likely to be both longitudinal and dyadic and designed in such a way that change in constructs of interest can be captured (i.e., repeated measures). The specific methods we might select to assess and analyze this change are secondary to the belief that, to best understand development, we must track a construct over time, and that to understand a dyad, we must gather information from both partners.

In sum, these unique configurations of theory and theorizing, methods, and methodologies provide an identity for family scientists to a broader scientific community. They also offer a bridge to such communities and an opportunity to create new synergies that are required for transdisciplinary projects in coming decades.

## **A Brief History of Family Theory and Methodology**

Perhaps the first and longest-standing dedicated space in the family science field to support scholars’ theory work is the Groves Conference, which began in 1934 and continues today (see Doneker and Settles, chapter “[History of Family Science](#)”, this volume, for a full description). By 1951, the Groves Conference was rebranded as the Groves Conference on Marriage and the Family. Although its general focus on theorizing and research has not altered, its focus evolved from working primarily with local and regional family education-focused professionals to a more scholarly venue, involving multidisciplinary scholars studying family process and professional organizations working with families (e.g., Planned Parenthood, National Council on Family Relations).

In 1964, Harold Christensen presented “Development of the Family Field of Study” in the first *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*. In carving out the contours of the field of family science, he argued for a historical approach to understanding the emergence of a mature science. Christensen identified four stages of

development, including: “pre-research” prior to 1850; “Social Darwinism,” rooted in library research on evolutionary and historical patterns that compared Western and non-Western “primitive” family structures; “emerging science,” in the first half of the 1900s; and “systematic theory building” in the latter half of the 1900s, when family scholars solidified studies with conceptual frameworks that could guide and summarize the field itself. He identified four frameworks that had reached some level of maturity: structural functionalism, family developmental theory, interactional and situational approaches, and an institutional approach (see also Adams & Steinmetz, 1993).

Fifteen years later, a two-volume project emerged from the theoretical dialogues of Wesley Burr, Reuben Hill, F. Ivan Nye, and Ira Weiss. The first volume of *Contemporary Theories about the Family* (1979a) began with findings in an array of content areas, such as mate selection and intergenerational relations, and offered midrange theories within this limited scope. The second volume (1979b) went further to present broad, generalizable theoretical frameworks that could represent the progress of the maturing field of Family Science. Although not without challenges of integration across macro and micro approaches, the authors settled on five foundational and formal frameworks in Family Science: symbolic interactionism, social exchange, systems theory, conflict theory, and phenomenology.

Doherty et al. (1993) argued that this project was the high watermark for a movement to construct formal theoretical frameworks in family science. What has ensued since has been an engaged critique of those traditional family theories, alongside the emergence of a range of post-positivist theorizing. In 1987, Darwin Thomas and Jean Edmondson Wilcox discussed “The Rise of Family Theory” in the edited volume *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (edited by Sussman and Steinmetz). They noted the acceptance of these theoretical frameworks, based in a positivist science, while critiquing this approach to science, drawing on assumptions in the philosophy of science. Their chapter captured the ethos of new research and theorizing in the 1970s that questioned the goals and purpose of the family science field.

In 1993, William Doherty, Pauline Boss, Ralph LaRossa, Walter Schumm, and Susan Steinmetz wrote their introductory chapter “Family Theories and Methods: A Contextual Approach,” in the edited volume of the same title. Almost 30 years later, their chapter still represents perhaps the most rigorous and engaging description of theorizing family life in the latter half of the twentieth century. They utilized the term “family science” to note the full range of positivist and post-positivist science that comprised the field. It gave legitimacy to a field that had accepted the core set of theoretical frameworks and yet recognized the critique of them. The 1993 *Sourcebook* also took a critical next step by situating theoretical pathways within historical and sociocultural contexts. Chapter authors in the volume balanced the preservation of the history of theoretical frameworks with the need to allow for change. Organizing the book by first describing the historical origins and key concepts of a theory, and then exploring diverse areas of content and method addressed by each theory, is what we call a *theory-forward approach*.

In 1999, Marvin Sussman, Suzanne Steinmetz, and Gary Petersen introduced a second edition of their *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (a third edition was produced in 2013, edited by Petersen and Kevin Bush). These volumes were focused primarily on evaluative overviews of specific content areas within family science, with only a few chapters devoted to evaluation of theory development. In the 1999 edition, Vargus critiqued the reactionary assumptions that undergird classical family theory, and Doherty addressed the consequences of a postmodernist stance in family theory. Another key edited volume, the *Handbook of Family Diversity* (Demo et al., 2000), focused on infusing content areas with a critical approach to recognizing diversity of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality (seen through the lens of family structure). In the penultimate chapter in that volume, the editors examined the consequences of recognizing family diversity for theory development.

The *content-forward approach* (i.e., organizing a volume first by content areas, and then by theories utilized to explore each of these areas) was prominent in the next *Sourcebook*. In 2005, editors Vern Bengtson, Alan Acock, Katherine Allen, Peggy Dilworth-Anderson, and David Klein offered a new vision for the *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*. The emphasis for this volume was the act of theorizing, not the repeated assessment of core theoretical frameworks. The project challenged scholars to become theorists; this was in response to a felt need to promote theory development within family science, which seemed to have become increasingly atheoretical. In the post-positivist vein, each editor took space to articulate their own definition of theorizing. The volume encouraged inclusion through multiple case studies, methods spotlights, discussion and extension pieces, and a website that invited engagement. The 2005 *Sourcebook* fit well with an era of increasing use of midrange theorizing.

The 2005 *Sourcebook* did not sidestep the tensions that continued in the field between “traditional” and “emergent” theories (Doherty et al., 1993). In fact, the editors recognized these tensions explicitly in the concluding “Controversies and Firestorms” chapter, which examined clashing positivist and post-positivist paradigms, queering versus heteronormativity in the family, the utility of family theory (compared to theories applied to families), and divergent definitions of family. Each editor wrote about deeply held values and scientific assumptions that shaped their theorizing. The volume sat directly in sometimes productive, sometimes conflicting tensions of an era of profound family change and contested grounds of family theory and research.

The advantage of a content-forward approach was perhaps best captured in the *Handbook of Family Theories: A Content-Based Approach* (2013). Editors Mark Fine and Frank Fincham indicated that while the “theory of the week” approach could describe tenets, strengths, and weaknesses of theories, it failed to show “direct linkages between theory and research.” The content-forward approach allowed authors to highlight how core content areas (derived from two decade-in-review volumes of *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 2000 and 2010) can draw from multiple theoretical frameworks.

The most significant turning point in theory development in family science in the past 30 years came with the establishment of a new journal dedicated to theory and

review. *Journal of Family Theory and Review (JFTR)* was founded by editor Robert Milardo in 2007, and under continued direction of editors Libby Balter Blume and Mark Fine, its aims have been to “encourage integration and growth in the multidisciplinary and international domains of inquiry that define contemporary family studies” (See *JFTR’s Aims and Scope*). It publishes original contributions to family theory, new advances in theory development, reviews of existing theory, analyses of the interface of theory and method, and integrative theory-based reviews of content areas in the field. By its tenth year, *JFTR* produced an anniversary issue (March, 2018) of over 300 pages that examined the past, present, and future of family theory. Currently, if we can identify a space where the greatest number of family scholars consistently “do theory,” it would be in the pages of that journal.

In this *Sourcebook*, we chose to take a theory-forward approach for several reasons. First, *JFTR* has established itself as a space for the interactive nature of theorizing that was emphasized as a need in the 2005 *Sourcebook*. With 15 years of theorizing occurring within the volumes of *JFTR*, we felt that it was an appropriate time to take a deep dive into our grand theories and methodologies. Second, in challenging times where family science departments tend to be less understood by those outside the field and therefore discounted, devalued, and sometimes academically disbanded into other more “traditional” disciplines, we felt that it would be helpful to the identity of the field to present a unified volume of what we believe constitutes the prominent theories and methodologies of the discipline of family science. A *Sourcebook* project, then, becomes a necessary exercise in expansion and consolidation of progress in the field over the nearly 30 years since the last theory-forward *Sourcebook*. Our theories and methodologies provide not only an important source of identity for ourselves but also an outward face to others as they read our work. From a broader perspective, our current world also has become increasingly politicized, polarized, and divided. This presents both a need and an opportunity for family scientists to come together and draw from the strengths we have among ourselves and our interdisciplinary backgrounds, as well as to draw from other fields in creative, transdisciplinary ways.

## **A Dynamic Approach**

We knew early on that we would organize theories and methodologies within socio-historical contexts, similar to the approach taken in the 1993 *Sourcebook*. We also saw value in having authors “tell the story” or “describe the journey” of the theory or methodology they wrote about. How has a theoretical framework changed or evolved over time? What debates have occurred about a methodology, and how have they resolved (or have they)?

This dynamic approach emerges from three critical shifts in the field of family science. First, this field now recognizes over a century of research and applications that are unique among the social sciences, as well as constantly interactive with other disciplines. Hand in hand with a theory-forward volume, we can appreciate

the depth and span of over 100 years of development of multiple related strands of theoretical traditions. Second, the vital activities of a journal dedicated to theorizing (*Journal of Family Theory and Review*) are now an ongoing and regular quarterly discourse. We have required authors in this volume to examine changes in theoretical traditions over time. The journal, this volume, and their community of family theorists and methodologists bring the tools required for dynamic growth in a mature discipline. Finally, and perhaps most markedly, such growth is not possible without embracing diversification and inclusion of the scholars and perspectives that drive our theories and methodologies. By intentionally centering theories, methodologies, and voices that historically have been marginalized, we nurture the strengths of family science and ensure that the field remains vital, relevant, flexible, and dynamic.

We do not see theories and methodologies as static creations; they are never perfected or finished. Theoretical frameworks are not precious products that we occasionally take down from a shelf, dust off, and use to frame our work and make it look more polished. Rather, theories and methodologies are organic, living, and socially constructed processes that are created and thereafter develop; that are challenged and contested; that may take on a life of their own that their creators never anticipated; and that find ways to successfully adapt to changing circumstances and contexts, or die. Figure 1 illustrates the ebb and flow of prominent family theories over the past half century, which we adapted and extended from an original figure from Thomas and Wilcox (1987) in their chapter on the rise of family theory. Five of the major volumes that consolidate prominent theories in the field of family science are noted as columns, alongside a list of 16 theoretical frameworks. This figure illustrates how theories “rise and fall” – and how they may surge back into relevance.

Although we had our predecessors to fall back upon, inclusion of a particular theory or methodology in a previous *Sourcebook* or handbook did not guarantee admission into the current volume, and the changing nature of the family science landscape gave us ample fodder for discussion of just what theories should be included in the *Sourcebook* “family.” Ultimately, we removed Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory from this volume, and we added Family Development Theory back into the fold. There also are a number of newer (and in

	Christiansen, 1964	Burr, 1979	Sourcebook, 1993	Sourcebook, 2005	Sourcebook, 2022
Structural functionalism	█				
Symbolic interactionism	█	█	█	█	█
Resilience					█
Stress					█
Family development	█			█	█
Systems	█	█	█	█	█
Conflict		█	█	█	
Ecological			█	█	█
Social exchange		█	█	█	█
Developmental			█	█	█
Life course			█	█	█
Feminisms		█	█	█	█
Critical race				█	█
Intersectionality				█	█
Queer theory				█	█
Ambiguous loss					█

Fig. 1 Appearance of key family theories in select family theory volumes over time

some cases, not so new) theories and methodologies that we are including in a *Sourcebook* for the first time.

With both Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory, we faced a conundrum. Both have been longstanding “classic” members of the family theory realm; however, although several of the core ideas and propositions of these theories are alive and well, they are alive and well largely as either new evolutions of, or critical responses to, the original theories. Although they may be foundational frameworks to help emerging family scholars understand the origins of the field (Allen & Henderson, 2017), they have largely fallen out of use in contemporary family science. Structural Functionalism has fallen out of use due to its stereotypical gender tropes and heteronormative assumptions about the family structures and roles that “work best” for families and their members. In its stead, feminist and queer theories (among others) now address gender relations and practices in families using a critical lens, as well as the challenges associated with a heteronormative approach to romantic relationships, and such perspectives more accurately reflect the diverse pathways to success (and challenges) of today’s families.

For its part, Conflict Theory evolved and diverged into Social Exchange Theory on the one hand, and on the other, into a host of critical theories that emphasize the influence of power (whether institutional or individual) on families, including Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Queer Theory. Although alive and well in economics and political science, Marx’s original tenets of Conflict Theory have seen little use in family science in the last few decades in favor of more nuanced analyses of particular instances and sources of power within families and communities.

Conversely, Family Development Theory largely had fallen out of use due to its reliance on outdated notions of family structure and norms of family level experiences, debates about the stages that families travel through, and its general lack of predictive power when applied to actual families. However, in recent years, scholars have made attempts to deal with some of the long-standing critiques leveled at FDT, thereby reinvigorating the theory and its usefulness to family scholars. Some of these challenges also have become easier to address due to recent advances in methodologies.

We have included a number of theories and methodologies that are appearing in a (theory-forward) *Sourcebook* for the first time: grounded theory; longitudinal methods; dyadic methodologies; critical race theory; queer theory; intersectionality theory; participatory action research; biomarker methods; mixed methods; evaluation; translation and prevention; and transdisciplinary family science. We also brought in chapters that mixed theory, methods, and disciplines via chapters on family communication and family policy. In addition, although not a “new” theory or set of theories, sourcebooks of family theories typically have stayed away from theories of individual development, seeing those as belonging to the realm of “developmental theory” rather than being part of “family theory” per se. However, given that development occurs within the context of families and is influenced by family contexts, and given the critical role that attachment theory specifically has played in understanding both parent-child relationships and adult romantic

relationships, we felt that the inclusion of a chapter on Attachment Theory was appropriate.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that there are theories which did not gain thorough consideration in this volume but nevertheless are significant developments over the past two decades in the study of families. Although most theorizing about and with families has unfolded in the midrange, with a limited scope attuned to family dynamics and relationships, the discipline has also been shaped by interdisciplinary efforts at macro theorizing. Emergent theoretical frameworks take a cells to society approach and link individual biomarker data to relationship, family, and community-level variables and then potentially to population-level variables as well (in nursing research, for example, see Szanton & Gill, 2010). White's transition theory (2004) sought common ground in the study of change over time, prioritizing traditional family development stage models, with additional sensitivity to individual development similar to lifespan approaches, and to ways in which social change shaped family relationships and individual lives through a life course approach. From a concerted NIH-led effort to organize theories and methods on family change (Morgan et al., 2008), articles and a volume on conjunctural action theory (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011) were developed. Lerner et al. (2015) presented the relational developmental systems metatheory, which became the foundation for Life Course Health Development theory (Halfon & Forrest, 2018), one of the most promising theories to examine health and families. Although promising and interesting, we did not feel that these theories had yet reached a level which warranted their inclusion in this *Sourcebook*.

A dynamic approach to family theories and methodologies – one that recognizes the rise, fall, and reemergence of theories and methodologies over time – fits with an expanded definition of what theory is and does in our field. Theory is a critical component of a mature science, as it reflects communication and consensus building among communities of scholars. Theorizing is key as well. The active creation of new theoretical perspectives, the critique of long-standing theories, and the synthesis of multiple related theories all reflect the health of a body of science. Similarly, our science and knowledge are constrained and expanded by the methodologies we employ. We believe that family theories and methodologies can promote understanding as well as prediction, and they can advocate for justice as well. As we have seen clearly in recent decades, theories and methodologies have the potential to both oppress and empower families and communities.

## **Organization of the *Sourcebook***

For the present *Sourcebook*, we felt that the volume would best tell a coherent story if we organized the theories and methodologies according to key historical periods. Similar to the approach of the 1993 *Sourcebook*, and integral to our notion of a dynamic approach to theorizing, we believe that theories and methodologies emerge as the products of particular sociohistorical contexts, and similarly, they evolved in

different ways over different eras. The next sections describe the historical contexts that we used to delineate the different sections of this *Sourcebook* and how they shaped the origins of particular theories and methodologies.

### ***The Great Depression, World War, and the Rise of Pragmatism in Family Science***

Developments in the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology during the 1920s and 1930s set the stage for several seminal family theories as well as the ethnographic methodology. This period of history saw the chaos and catastrophic loss of WWI, the transition from war to peacetime (and back toward war again), the “Roaring 20s,” and the Great Depression. For a country still healing from the relatively recent Civil War and Reconstruction, and still swinging between integration and segregation, this was a tumultuous and traumatic time. Scholars were interested in what led families, marriages, and individuals to succeed in the face of stress and trauma, giving rise to perspectives about risk and resilience. The American public (as well as the global public) largely pinned their hopes on science and technology as the keys to progress and the solutions to a host of societal ills, and “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps” was seen as the individualistic goal and hallmark of personal achievement (ironic, given the phrase’s origins as referring to an impossible task or feat).

At the same time, Americans were intrigued by the ideas of Freud, the unconscious, and the “hidden” self as separate from the public sphere and one’s own conscious awareness (Burnham, 1988; Doherty et al., 1993). The new “science” of individuals and families began to take hold as a possible way of curing individual (and societal) ills. It was now that sociology and family science began to take shape as separate fields, as many family sociologists focused on the “social” aspects of family, whereas scholars such as Ernest Burgess focused primarily on the family as the unit of analysis. Burgess defined the family as a particular and unique group of individuals, distinct from other social groups, and as a “unity of interacting personalities” (Burgess, 1926, as cited in Doherty et al., 1993). Both he and other scholars in the field of family science began studying marriages and family groups in terms of their well-being, their processes, and their influence on the well-being of their individual members (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939; Doherty et al., 1993). Notable exceptions were Mead and W.I. Thomas, pioneers of the Symbolic Interactionist framework, who focused on the individual or family in society, the creation of self, and the influence of society on the self’s creation and ongoing negotiation.

At the same time as they discovered families, “Americans discovered culture” (Susman, 1984, as cited in Doherty et al., p. 8), including their own, sparking an interest in ethnographic research and cross-cultural studies, as well as, to a lesser extent, the cultural variation that existed within the US. Frazier’s (1939) *The Negro Family in the United States* explored life for African American families, and with



women gaining the right to vote in 1920, increased attention was being paid to gender roles in American society and within the family unit.

Despite this context of change and the birth of methods and theories which could have helped to account for growing diversity, a decided lack of diversity still characterized much of family science. Most family scholars were White, middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual men, and much of the research of the 1920s and 1930s reflected their limited experiences and concerns. Recent scholarship on the emergence of home economics after the turn of the century (Dreilinger, 2021) uncovers and highlights the contributions of women, and specifically African American women, in the early years of applied science dedicated to “better living” for family households. However, it was not until much later in the development of family science that theories and methods began to better reflect and explain the diversity and plurality of families and individuals, and, as we will discuss below, such movements have not been uniformly celebrated in the field.

### *Normalism, Post-War Challenges, and Pluralism*

Coming out of two world wars at mid-century, the field of family science gained a firmer foundation in the social sciences. Just as global society sought to return to “normalcy,” family researchers were encouraged by Hill to “go beyond journalistic-type descriptive writing...to the level of explanation and verification...that is, the formulation of propositions” (1966). In effect, these post-war years became a time of consolidation of diverse studies, when family science produced cohesive propositions and a range of conceptual frameworks for the first time. Symbolic interactionism had been growing and changing for decades, alongside structural functionalist assumptions that were codified in the work of sociologist Talcott Parsons (1943, 1951), with a clear view on “the family” as a functional component of a global system of structures. By the 1960s, the field had crafted a unique take on Parsons’ assumptions with family development theory, which identified family as an essential subsystem in society. Families were traced through a set sequence of stages, which proved a useful tool to analyze family formation and marriage in particular. From general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) emerged the general systems approach to families (Broderick & Smith, 1979) later in the decade. This framework set in place core assumptions about interaction internal to the common family, and it proved effective for researchers focused on family processes, such as marital and family therapists.

However, by the early 1970s, the nascent consensus on family theories began to dissolve under challenges to the basic propositions that drove traditional social science. Positivist scientific assumptions were reassessed across the hard and soft scientific disciplines, in particular criticism of the strict distinctions between fact and theory (Kuhn, 1962). Family scientists seemed to disagree about the process of theory construction and to reconsider how conceptual frameworks or propositions may be “theory-like,” but not rise to the level of formal theory. With a diversity of

disciplinary views, family research focused on individuals within families as well as broad social forces. It was unclear how the field might adjudicate and consolidate equivalent theoretical propositions at distinctly micro, meso, or macro levels of analyses. With Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory methods, a growing interest in meaning making and social constructivist approaches revitalized the traditions of symbolic interactionism in the field. Structural functionalism was found by many scholars to be too rigid in its description of family experiences. In response, social exchange theory emerged from more conservatively oriented perspectives, and conflict theory was embraced by more critically oriented perspectives. In 1971, social exchange and family systems were identified as the primary family theories; by 1979, in a two-volume exploration of family theories (Burr et al., 1979a, b), 22 different theoretical domains were identified.

The era of the 1980s and 1990s was marked by the rise and acceptance of pluralism in theories and methodologies within the field. The 1993 *Sourcebook* recognized the emerging trend of theoretical and methodological diversity. In part, such diversity was due to a blending of theory, interdisciplinarity, and inclusion of multiple "voices." The shifting ground of family science also reflected "turning toward" interpretive and critical perspectives across all sciences, as the philosophical foundations of positivist science gave way. Alongside traditional positivist science emerged a new post-positivist paradigm which prioritized context and discovery, recognized how facts are shaped by values and assumptions, and critically examined the relationship between researchers and research participants. Family scholars acknowledged that the foundational assumption that families are defined by biological blood ties presented a limited view of family experiences, one that was not liberating to individuals. Noting the paucity of women and minoritized scholars in family science, the 1993 *Sourcebook* editors drew attention to emerging trends, including feminist and ethnic minoritized perspectives, the loss of a consensus definition of family, the need for contextual approaches (reflected in the growth of dyadic and family-level methodological tools), and a consistent emphasis on quantitative designs that fit with new longitudinal and nationally representative datasets.

### ***Social Movements, Critical Theory, and Contextualism***

As alluded to above, the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s marked a tumultuous period of time for social sciences. Social grassroots movements highlighted polarizing identity and sexual politics in the cultural milieu as individual and government roles in family life were changing as a result of ongoing global warfare, genocide, terrorism, demographic shifts, pandemics, and medical and technological advances. Social movements and global events influenced some researchers and practitioners to challenge traditional family theories and accepted disciplinary norms and engage in scholarly critiques of dominant discourses that center the heteronormative, androcentric SNAF model (Standard North American Family; Smith, 1993) as the

standard bearer of normative family processes. Thus, theory building during this time was grounded by critical epistemologies that posit that reality is socially constructed, subjective, multifaceted, and contextual (Allen & Henderson, 2017). Using a critical lens, theorists embraced contextualism, holding the assumption that knowledge building is context-sensitive, subjective, and interpretative, and that there is not a singular “Truth,” but rather a constellation of “partial truths” (Collins, 1990). Theorists who see the world as contextual are concerned with analyzing the quality and experienced nature of an act or phenomenon as well as the texture, details, and relations that characterize a phenomenon (Pepper, 1942).

Critical perspectives acknowledge that theories are products of their time and social context (Marks, 2008, p. 50) and ask different questions about diverse families. Critical theories decenter dominant theories and paradigms by raising questions that concern differential access to resources, oppressions, and power experienced across and within groups (Osmond, 1987). As noted by Few-Demo and Allen (2020), critical perspectives highlight how intersecting oppressive practices have informed how we conduct social science, determine what are “real” problems to be solved or what are legitimate solutions, and normalize specific behaviors, attitudes, processes, and motivations (in turn, labeling others as “deviant” or “pathological”). Critical theories also shed light on how systems of White supremacy, colonialism, hegemonic heteronormativity, racism, classism, and sexism influence family process, structure, and identities over time and geography.

Critical theories such as feminist theories, including intersectionality theory, and queer theory emerged within the humanities (e.g., History, Philosophy) and social science disciplines (e.g., Lesbian and Gay Studies; Black Studies and Africana Studies; Hispanic Studies; Sociology; Family Science; Political Science) in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Queer scholars and activists blurred binary notions of gender, gender display, and performativity in the 1980s (e.g., Feinberg, 2004; Halberstam, 1998). Theories about queer and transgender (family) identity processes and experiences are the newest theoretical extensions of cisgender feminist and queer theories, in that they promote the articulation of gender complexity as fluid, contingent, and transcendent, and as processual within the context of families (Allen & Mendez, 2018; McGuire et al., 2016). In this *Sourcebook*, the chapters that review critical perspectives also provide empirical examples for (a) how families form and “perform” identities, processes, and roles in diverse relational and situational contexts publicly and privately across time; (b) how individuals within families exert power and influence; and (c) how families navigate access, negotiate oppressive contexts, and create opportunities for agency, empowerment, and social justice.

Critical theories and their accompanying methodologies are inherently dynamic in nature due to their active discursive and dialectical engagement with power through the examination of identities, positioning, privilege, historical oppressions, inequities, and social justice. In this *Sourcebook*, we have brought critical theories and the scientific tools they use from the margins of family science to the center of analysis and disciplinary discourse.

## ***Family Theories and Health, Interdisciplinarity, and Translational Family Science***

In the mid to late 1990s, the field of family science began to pay increasing attention to the intersection of families and health. While the field of family science has always been interdisciplinary and translational (Hamon & Smith, 2017), the need for it to explicitly position itself as such likely grew alongside funders', especially federal funders', growing interest in biopsychosocial understandings of human health and behavior. In the year 2000, biosocial perspectives on the family made their first appearance in a *Journal of Marriage and Family* decade in review volume (Booth et al., 2000), although a chapter on emerging biosocial perspectives also appeared in the 1993 *Sourcebook* (Troost & Filsinger, 1993). In their article, Booth and colleagues introduced family scientists to existing work in the field and to incorporating biological systems and ways of thinking into science on family relationships, such as marriage and parenting. Facilitating these advances in understanding biopsychosocial processes within families were advances in the collection, storage, and processing of biological data. Whereas these processes used to consume significant time, money, and space, by the 2010s, advances in science and in mass market genetic testing made noninvasively collecting saliva or dried blood spots common in large scale, multi-wave public use datasets.

Although life course theory predates this era, key concepts drawn from life course theory have informed work in biosocial theory, biomarker methods, translation, prevention, and family policy. Specifically, life course's emphasis on linked lives is foundational for understanding family relations, and the key concepts of cumulative advantage and disadvantage are increasingly used to illustrate the link between children's resources and risks and their well-being in adulthood (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). Continued exploration of these constructs holds much promise for informing family policy, especially prevention and policy aimed at maximizing children's resources and family strengths, given what we already know about the long-term effects of early-life adversity. During the last two decades, mixed methods (e.g., combining self-report surveys with biomarker collection), as well as longitudinal, dyadic, and social network designs, have led to breakthroughs in understanding the contagion of various health indicators, such as obesity, drug use, and depression, among family and network relations (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Thomeer et al., 2019). This work on contagion pushes past the myopic view of genetics as destiny and increasingly recognizes the powerful force of social relationships and network behavior in influencing our health.

We would be remiss to neglect mentioning the emerging influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. When we began editing this volume, we had no way of knowing a pandemic would occur while working on the book, nor the ways a global pandemic like COVID-19 would impact family life. As we bring this project to a close, vaccines are available, but highly contagious variants of the virus have threatened and delayed the return to pre-pandemic normalcy (not to mention the continuing strain to families whose members remain vulnerable or are too young to be

vaccinated, or whose members disagree about whether or not to get vaccinated). Scholarly work on the impact of the pandemic on families is beginning to emerge, and many scholars are collecting data as the pandemic evolves. It is premature to fully assess how the pandemic is impacting families, but it is safe to say that the pandemic exposed weaknesses in the public health infrastructure in the US, illuminated the politics of health care and measures to mitigate disease spread (e.g., face masks, vaccinations), and elevated the stress levels of many.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, science itself is an ongoing conversation. Very few questions in family science could be (or ever will be) considered definitively resolved. In 1993, family scholars in the *Sourcebook* noted (somewhat cautiously) the emergence of diverse and often divergent theories and methodologies, and by 2005, they noted the sustained growth of this diversity. In 2022, this *Sourcebook* embraces the strength of pluralism, as evidenced in the chapters and applications that follow. We have neither resolved (nor are we necessarily seeking to resolve) which theoretical perspectives or methodological approaches are the “best” ones to use to study families. By raising these diverse theories and methodologies to visibility, we hope to normalize such diversity. Ultimately, we seek to advance the conversation and to encourage other scholars to continue moving the conversation forward even further. These advances provide the field of family science with integrity and advance its relevance and value in understanding the experiences of families. From our perspective, it is important that this *Sourcebook* provides the history and the journeys of these theories, as we can only understand where we are if we understand where we have been.

However, it is equally if not more important for us to provide a glimpse of the path that lies ahead. Where do these theories and methodologies seem to be moving, what possibilities and obstacles do we see in their futures, and what recommendations do we have for their future use? Ultimately, it is in the hands of researchers, theorists, and readers themselves to take these theories and methodologies and contribute to their ongoing and vital growth. Without rigorous critique and testing to confirm their utility (or their lack of it), theories and methodologies are nothing more than historical anecdotes about interesting ideas that someone once had.

## References

- Abend, G. (2008). The meaning of ‘theory’. *Sociological Theory*, 26, 173–199.
- Adams, B. N., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1993). Family theory and methods in the classics. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 71–94). Plenum.
- Alexander, J. C. (1982). *Positivism, presuppositions, and current controversies in sociology* (Vol. 1). University of California Press.

- Allen, K. R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Allen, S., & Mendez, S. (2018). Hegemonic heteronormativity: Toward a new era of queer family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, 70–86.
- Arias, E., Tejada-Vera, B., Ahmad, F., & Kochanek, K. D. (2021). *Provisional life expectancy estimates for 2020*. National Center for Health Statistics.
- Bengtson, V., Acocck, A., Allen, K., Dilworth Anderson, P., & Klein, D. (2005). *Sourcebook of family theory and research*. Sage.
- Booth, A., Carver, K., & Granger, D. A. (2000). Biosocial perspectives on the family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1018–1034.
- Boss, P., Doherty, W. J., LaRossa, R., Schumm, W. R., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1993). *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach*. Springer.
- Broderick, C., & Smith, J. (1979). The general systems approach to the family. In W. R. Burr, R. Hill, F. I. Nye, & I. L. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 2, pp. 112–129). Free Press.
- Burgess, E. W. (1926). The family as a unity of interacting personalities. *The Family*, 7(1), 3–9.
- Burgess, E. W., & Cottrell, L. S., Jr. (1939). *Predicting success or failure in marriage*. Prentice-Hall.
- Burnham, J. C. (1988). *Paths into American culture: Psychology, medicine, and morals*. Temple University Press.
- Burr, W., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Weiss, I. (1979a). *Contemporary theories about the family: Research-based theories, volume 1*. Free Press.
- Burr, W., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Weiss, I. (1979b). *Contemporary theories about the family: General theories/theoretical orientations, volume 2*. Free Press.
- Christensen, H. T. (1964). Development of the family field of study. In H. T. Christensen (Ed.), *Handbook of marriage the family*. Rand McNally and Co.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Unwin Hyman.
- Daly, K. (2003). Family theory versus the theories families live by. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(4), 771–784.
- Daly, K. (2007). *Qualitative methods for family studies & human development*. Sage.
- Demo, D. H., Allen, K. R., & Fine, M. A. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of family diversity*. Oxford University Press.
- Doherty, W. (1999). Postmodernism and family theory. In I. M. Sussman, S. Steinmetz, & G. Petersen (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (2nd ed., pp. 205–214). Plenum.
- Dreilinger, D. (2021). *The secret history of home economics: How trailblazing women harnessed the power of home and changed the way we live*. Norton.
- Feinberg, L. (2004). *Stone butch blues: A novel*. Alyson Books.
- Few-Demo, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2020). Gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives on families: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 326–345.
- Fine, M. A., & Fincham, F. (2013). *Handbook of family theories: A content-based approach*. Routledge.
- Frazier, E. F. (1939). *The negro family in the United States*. Dryden.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.
- Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Duke University Press.
- Halfon, N., & Forrest, C. (2018). The emerging theoretical framework of life course health development. In N. Halfon, C. Forrest, R. Lerner, & E. Faustman (Eds.), *Handbook of life course health development* (pp. 19–43). Springer Science.
- Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. R. (2017). Family science as translational science: A history of the discipline. *Family Relations*, 66, 550–567.
- Hill, R. (1966). Contemporary developments in family theory. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 28, 10–26.

- Johnson-Hanks, J., Bachrach, C., Morgan, S., & Kohler, H. P. (2011). *Understanding family change and variation: Toward a theory of conjunctural action*. Springer.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development and relational-developmental-systems. In W. F. Overton, P. C. M. Molenaar, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Theory and method* (pp. 607–651). Wiley.
- Lloyd, S., Few, A., & Allen, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of feminist family studies*. Sage.
- Marks, C. (2008). Methodologically eliminating race and racism. In T. Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology* (pp. 47–62). Rowman & Littlefield.
- McGuire, J., Kuvalanka, K., Catalpa, J., & Toomey, R. (2016). Transfamily theory: How the presence of trans\* family members informs gender development in families. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 8, 60–73.
- Morgan, P., Bledsoe, C., Bianchi, S., Chase-Lansdale, P. L., DiPrete, T., Hotz, V. J., Sanders, S., Seltzer, J., & Thomas, D. (2008). *Designing new models for explaining family change and variation*. Recommendations to Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Duke University.
- Osmond, M. W. (1987). Radical-critical theories. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 103–124). Plenum.
- Oswald, R., Kuvalanka, K., Blume, L., & Berkowitz, D. (2009). Queering “the family”. In S. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 43–55). Sage.
- Parsons, T. (1943). The kinship system of the contemporary United States. *American Anthropologist*, 45, 22–38.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.
- Pepper, S. (1942). *World hypotheses: A study in evidence*. University of California.
- Petersen, G., & Bush, K. (2013). *Handbook of marriage and the family* (3rd ed.). Springer.
- Roberto, K. A., Blieszner, R., & Allen, K. R. (2006). Theorizing in family gerontology: New opportunities for research and practice. *Family Relations*, 55(5), 513–525.
- Smith, D. E. (1993). The standard North American family: SNAF as an ideological code, the standard North American family. *Journal of Family Issues*, 14, 50–65.
- Susman, W. I. (1984). *Culture as history: The transformation of American society in the twentieth century*. Pantheon Books.
- Sussman, M., Steinmetz, S., & Petersen, G. (1999). *Handbook of marriage and the family* (2nd ed.). Plenum.
- Swedberg, R. (2016). Before theory comes theorizing or how to make social science more interesting. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 67, 5–22.
- Szanton, S., & Gill, J. (2010). Facilitating resilience using a society-to-cells framework. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 33, 329–343.
- Thomas, D., & Wilcox, J. E. (1987). The rise of family theory. In M. Sussman & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 81–102). Springer.
- Thomeer, M. B., Hernandez, E., Umberson, D., & Thomas, P. A. (2019). Influence of social connections on smoking behavior across the life course. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 42, 100294.
- Troost, K. M., & Filsinger, E. (1993). Emerging biosocial perspectives on the family. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 677–710). Plenum.
- Umberson, D., & Thomeer, M. B. (2020). Family matters: Research on family ties and health, 2010 to 2020. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 404–419.
- Vargus, B. (1999). Classical social theory and family studies: The triumph of reactionary thought in contemporary family studies. In M. Sussman, S. Steinmetz, & G. Petersen (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (2nd ed., pp. 179–204). Plenum.

- von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications*. George Braziller.
- Weick, K. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, *14*, 516–531.
- White, J. (2004). *Advancing family theories*. Sage.
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield.



# Metatheorizing in Family Theory



David C. Bell

A key purpose of theorizing in family science is to develop explanations of family phenomena. There are other purposes for which theory might be constructed (Klein & White, 1996; Schneider, 2006; Swedberg, 2014), but in this chapter, I will discuss theory for the purpose of explanation (Bengtson et al., 2005a; Fine & Fincham, 2013a). Theories are created by theorizing, and theorizing is thus any process by which a researcher develops explanations. While theorizing is about understanding the world, metatheorizing is about understanding theorizing. One may distinguish three different kinds of metatheorizing (Ritzer, 1988):

- Metatheorizing to summarize, interpret, and/or critique (the contents of) prior theory.
- Metatheorizing to propose rules for effective theorizing. This includes textbooks on theorizing (D. C. Bell, 2009; Chafetz, 1978; Hage, 1972; Swedberg, 2014).
- Metatheorizing to describe and evaluate methods of theorizing, largely conducted by philosophers (e.g., Godfrey-Smith, 2003; Hempel, 1965; Popper, 1965; Staley, 2014).

This chapter will emphasize the third type of metatheorizing, a discussion which will naturally touch to some extent on metatheorizing of the second type.

---

D. C. Bell (✉)

Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, Indiana University Purdue University  
Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA

e-mail: [dcbell@iupui.edu](mailto:dcbell@iupui.edu)

## The Structure of Explanatory Theory

Explanatory theory comes in different forms, and one may distinguish four levels of theoretical structure. Three ontological levels are explanatory types of theory (theoretical framework, abstract theory, contextual theory) and the fourth (descriptive statement: hypothesis, narrative description, or empirical generalization) is an epistemological level used to evaluate or generate theory. These levels of theory are primarily distinguished by level of abstraction.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

In family science, a theoretical framework is a viewpoint, a lens for describing family life, and it is the most abstract form of theory. A theoretical framework generally identifies one limited and therefore biased and incomplete vantage point. It specifies concepts and general processes relevant to that view. Compilations of theoretical frameworks in family science have been published since 1951 (Hill, 1951) in family theory texts (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Smith & Hamon, 2017; White, 2005; White et al., 2015; White & Klein, 2008) and handbooks/sourcebooks (Bengtson et al., 2005b; Boss et al., 1993; Burr et al., 1979b; Fine & Fincham, 2013b).

In family science, a theoretical framework describes some concepts and very general processes, often using a metaphor. Each framework suggests an abstract viewpoint that focuses on some aspect of family and identifies concepts relevant to that viewpoint (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005), but it is not tied to a specific phenomenon or topical area. For example, the family systems theoretical framework sees the family as a whole entity with interacting parts, and family interactions are seen as patterned and repetitive. The symbolic interaction framework emphasizes how family members develop and communicate meanings and identities through their interactions. Many chapters in this *Sourcebook* describe frameworks.

### *Abstract Theory*

An abstract theory is where the causal or interpretive links between concepts within a framework are specified in detail. While the family systems theoretical framework suggests that family-level concepts emerge from consistent patterns of interacting among members, it is the role of a family systems abstract theory to propose how a specific pattern produces a specific emergent family characteristic. For many theorists, an abstract theory merely needs to be a statement that there is a link between two or more abstract concepts (Babbie, 1989; Blalock Jr., 1969; Burr et al., 1979a; Chafetz, 1978; Kerlinger, 1973). We may refer to such a statement as an *implicit abstract theory*. For example, the statement “caregiving by group members toward

one another causes group cohesion” is an implicit abstract theory within the family systems theoretical framework. In this abstract theory, caregiving refers to meeting a partner’s attachment needs, such as a need for support, and cohesion is a group-level concept that refers to a group’s climate of acceptance.

A more advanced form of abstract theory is an *explicit abstract theory*, which starts with an implicit abstract theory and adds a “because-clause” containing the logical mechanism that connects the abstract concepts. Several authors have emphasized the importance of a because-clause in abstract theory (D. C. Bell, 2009; Hage, 1972; Keat & Urry, 1982; Turner, 1991). An explicit abstract theory would be something like the following (after L. G. Bell & Bell, 2016):

Caregiving by family members toward one another causes family cohesion, *because* as one member’s caregiving supports the attachment needs of another, the second member feels appreciated and valued. When appreciated and valued, members reduce defensiveness and increase trust in one another. As members feel trusted and appreciated, the family as a system develops a warm cohesive climate.

Unlike the first statement about caregiving, this example describes *how* a system of supportive interactions among family members leads to the emergence of family cohesion. Both theoretical frameworks and abstract theories are abstract; the theoretical framework tells the theorist where to look, and the abstract theory records what the theorist sees when they get there.

One theoretical framework can generate many abstract theories. For example, the exchange framework directs the theorist to look for exchanges of equal value. Within that, direct exchange abstract theory describes simultaneous exchanges in value between actors denominated in a currency; direct social exchange abstract theory describes simultaneous exchanges in value without a common currency; and indirect social exchange abstract theory describes benefits to an actor paid for by another actor who does not themselves benefit (D. C. Bell, 2009).

## ***Contextual Theory***

Contextual theories begin to connect abstract theory to the real world. Contextual theories, sometimes called midrange theories (Merton, 1957), apply the logic of an abstract theory to specific social contexts. While abstract theories are described in abstract terms like “actors” and “action,” contextual theories are described in more concrete terms like “persons” and “behaviors,” or more specifically “parents” and “discipline,” or “adolescents” and “acting-out behaviors.” Unlike theoretical frameworks and abstract theories, contextual theories are testable because they can (relatively) directly connect abstract theory with observations of the social context. As contextual theories are tested and modified, confirmed, or rejected, these outcomes then have implications for the abstract theories whose logic they incorporate.

An abstract theory can be applied to a family context by translating its abstract concepts and because-clause to concepts appropriate to the empirical context. For

example, the general idea of group cohesion from the abstract theory above can be applied to family belonging in the specific context of stepfamilies (King et al., 2015 in Smith & Hamon, 2017): “Mother-child and stepfather-child closeness in a stepfamily cause family belongingness.” The contextual concept of “stepfamily” is substituted for abstract “family.” The contextual concept of “mother-child closeness” is substituted for “caregiving.” Contextual “family belongingness” captures the meaning of abstract “family cohesion.” Mothers, stepfathers, and children therefore are asserted to be the kind of actors that this contextual theory is about. Differences between concepts in abstract theory and concepts in contextual theories can be seen in other examples: abstract “life course stage” versus contextual “birth of first child,” abstract “love” versus contextual “parental love for a child.” So, while an abstract theory describes a logical process, a contextual theory is a claim that the abstract logic of the contextual theory describes an observable phenomenon.

### *Descriptive Statements*

A descriptive statement is not a kind of theory, but it is important in the discussion of metatheorizing because of its association with the epistemological evaluation of contextual theory. Descriptive statements are about what one can see or otherwise record and can take at least three forms. A *hypothesis* tells what a researcher expects to see in a test of a contextual theory, and a *narrative description* (usually in qualitative research) or an *empirical generalization* (usually in quantitative research) summarizes empirical observations, often as a precursor to creating contextual theory. The theoretical language of “actor” and “action” of an abstract theory that became “person” and “behavior” of a contextual theory become what philosophers call “observation language” of “a stepfather in the sample” and “child report of mother-child closeness” in a descriptive statement. A theoretical concept like family cohesion in a contextual theory might appear in a hypothesis as a set of survey questions about how close people in a family feel to one another, in a narrative description as an informant’s story about family celebrations, or in an empirical generalization as the frequency of family meals. A descriptive statement related to the contextual theory above might be: “The higher the score for mother-child closeness in a sample of stepfamilies, the higher the score for family belonging.”

Note that a descriptive statement is written in observation language: mother-child closeness is unobservable, but a closeness survey *score* is observable. A contextual theory may say that parent-child caregiving *causes* family cohesion, because cause is an abstract and unobservable concept. A descriptive statement only describes observable associations among observable variables. An empirical generalization may say that families who score higher on parent-child closeness score higher on a measure of family cohesion and may be expressed numerically (“A correlation of 0.32 between closeness score and family belonging score”), or qualitatively (“parents in families with a stronger feeling of belonging hug children more”).

## Science as Logical and Determinate: Philosophy of Science

Of many questions about science that philosophers have tried to answer, three are directly relevant here. (1) What is a theory about? (2) Where does a theory come from? (3) How is a theory evaluated once it has been created? Answers to the first question are the subject of ontology. Answers to the last two questions are the subject of epistemology. The first two involve theorizing and the creation of theory, whereas the third involves research methods and the testing of theory. An answer to any one of these questions depends on answers to the others.

### *Ontology*

“‘Ontology’ is the study of what there is and of ‘what there is’ is like” (Cartwright & Montuschi, 2014 ebook). It asks, “What is a family?” and how one might explain social facts, relations, and processes (Wylie, 2014). Theories as explanations are ideas, but are they “just” useful ideas or do they connect to some fundamental “real” structure of the world?

*Realism* is the philosophical position that (a) there is a Real World that our theories are about and (b) it is a goal that our theories attempt to describe that Real World accurately, where the capitalization indicates something whose existence is independent of how we think of it or even whether we think of it at all. The realist argument is that “observed regularities are eventually explainable in terms of underlying ‘[R]eal’ causal structures and/or mechanisms” (Blaikie & Priest, 2017 ebook). From a realist point of view, happiness, discipline, and family cohesion are all ideas that should represent Real things (Happiness, Discipline, Cohesion). Thus, for a realist, not only does a contextual theory about how family cohesion is caused by individual dispositions and interactions in the family describe Real Family Cohesion, but a corresponding abstract theory will describe Real Cohesion that exists at some level in all groups.

The influence of realists has been prominent in the social sciences in recent years. *Critical realism* starts with an assertion of a single Reality and a commitment to search for the Real mechanisms that govern the operation of human agency within social structure. In this view, causal mechanisms are best explained through narrative, which appears to refer to explicit contextual theory. Critical realists (Porpora, 2015), especially Margaret Archer (1985), have made claims that they have formulated “an ontology” (i.e., a theoretical framework) that successfully represents the Real World.

The alternative to realism is *skepticism* in several forms. “Many empiricists have been willing to say they don’t *care* about the possibility that there might be [R]eal things” (Godfrey-Smith, 2003 ebook, emphasis in original). Even if the concept of family cohesion is intended to describe a Real characteristic of the world, a skeptical view emphasizes that one cannot know how close the approximation is. From a

skeptical perspective, concepts need only be judged for whether they are useful in explanations (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Abstract theories are useful “devices for systematizing our observations” (Rosenberg, 2016, ebook). For both realists and skeptics, whether our concepts and theories are Real or just useful, we can use them to predict and make sense of the world.

## *Epistemology*

While ontology asks what the world consists of, epistemology asks how we know. That is, what are the rules that people follow when they try to understand the world? Epistemology considers the match between theories and empirical observations. For a realist, epistemology is about how our observations and experiences determine our understanding of the Real World (what we know to be True). For a skeptic, epistemology is about how we decide to consider something understood (as far as we know, so far). There are three ways that have been analyzed for moving back and forth between observation and theory: deduction, induction, and abduction.

### **Deduction**

Deduction is intended to be a logical tool for transmitting truth with certainty. If you absolutely know something about the world (“all men are mortal”), then you can unerringly draw conclusions about what is seen in the world. Socrates was a man, so I can be confident that he was mortal (and thus I can trust accounts that the hemlock was able to kill him). If you specify measurement rules for each concept of your contextual theory, then deduction allows you to deduce a descriptive statement (hypothesis) that you can test. The purpose of deduction is that, if the contextual theory is true, then any hypothesis you deduce using logical rules is guaranteed to be true and thus should agree with observations. If a correctly deduced hypothesis is not observed, then you can confidently say that the theory it was deduced from is not true.

### **Induction**

Induction is intended to be a logical tool for moving from observation to theory with certainty. It intends to move logically from specific observations to perception of general patterns to true theory about how the world is. Induction (all swans are white) has been noted to depend on the uniformity principle, which is the idea that what will happen in the future is the same as what has happened in the past (Hume, 1739/2001). The human mind intrinsically expects such regularity (Hume, 1739/2001; Peirce, 1878/1958). However, there is no logical path from however many white swans one has seen to a certainty that the next swan will be white. If 50

families in a sample with high cohesion all have adolescents who do not do drugs, induction allows one to reasonably expect that high family cohesion will probably (but not certainly) be associated with low drug use in the next 50 families. But there is no certain logical path from observing an association of family cohesion with drug use in the past to concluding that family cohesion *causes* low drug use in adolescence (Hume, 1739/2001). With no logical process to certainty about future observations, there is no determinate logical process from observation to explanation, and no certain logical path from observation to theory. Thus, induction is unable to provide logical rules that people can follow to produce theory that is guaranteed to be true.

As we will see below, philosophers who tried to develop logical methods of induction for generating “true theory” from observation gave up. Nevertheless, while induction is no longer seen as an infallible way to create theory, the term “induction” is still in popular use as a general way to describe making sense of observations. If there are no logical rules for induction to true theory, is there another explanation for how theories are developed from observations?

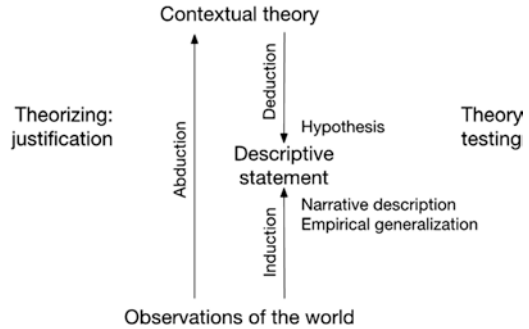
## Abduction

One solution to the problem of the indeterminacy of induction is abduction (Peirce, 1878/1958; Swedberg, 2014). Peirce was ignored for most of a century, while philosophers tried to find a logical path for induction. But as philosophers eventually gave up on the promise of infallible induction, abduction has emerged to provide a sense of what theorists actually do. Peirce’s contribution was to recognize that instead of being a logical process (“induction”), the creation of theory from observation is a creative process (“abduction”). A theorist can look at any number of observations, but the only way to get from observation to theory is through the theorist’s imagination. If one wants to explain some observational pattern, there is no specific *logical* link between the observation and an explanation. Because “cause” and “meaning” are invisible, theorists must create an imaginative link to an explanation that makes sense.

Abduction is a two-step process. First, the theorist may use intuition, art, personal experience, or the vicarious experience of disciplinary literature. Abduction can be structured by making lists and drawing pictures, or it can be completely unstructured in the form of a hunch. But imagination is just the first step. As the logical empiricists realized, imagination has no reliable connection to observation. For the second step, Peirce notes that abduction also requires justification. Along with the insight that precedes a theory, the theorist must be able to provide a logical, persuasive account of why that theory is plausible. This abduction link between observation and contextual or abstract theory can easily be imperfect and can often be wrong.

Peirce’s view of the working of science can be seen in Fig. 1 showing the interplay of abduction, deduction, and induction. The reasonable and achievable goal of theorizing is a plausible theory. In the figure, abduction describes the imaginative,

**Fig. 1** Abduction, deduction, and induction



ineffable process of creating a justifiable contextual theory. Once you have created a plausible contextual theory, the way to find out whether you are right involves a deduction-induction process. Deduction is the process for creating a justifiable, testable hypothesis from the contextual theory, and induction is the process for generating a summary of observations that can be compared to the hypothesis. With caveats that I will discuss over the rest of the chapter, this procedure can be used to decide whether a contextual theory is true.

## *Empiricism*

The story of epistemology logically starts with empiricism and in modern history goes back to Hume (1739/2001). Empiricism holds that observation is the only source of understanding. For the philosophers I consider in the next sections, the kinds of understanding they usually talk about are implicit abstract theories. However, among family scientists, understanding is more likely to be expressed as contextual theory. I will discuss the development of empiricist methods of theorizing, but first there have been several alternatives to empiricism.

## **Standpoint Epistemology**

The empiricist idea of observation leading to understanding has been taken by most philosophers to imply that all observers will reach the same understanding. Standpoint epistemology instead suggests that observers will differ depending on their social position (Harding, 1991; Longino, 1990). Perceived reality in this view is subjective (Schutz, 1967). Different life contexts may have different rules and expectations because of the observer's situatedness in society (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This view applied to research suggests that family scientists can only explain what they know. While scientists can enlarge their viewpoint vicariously by cross-cultural experiences and studying different literatures, standpoint epistemology points out that one's personal experiences create biases that affect understanding



people with different experiences (Longino, 1990). A conflict perspective has suggested that certain people (especially the disadvantaged) can see certain parts of reality (especially power relations) better than those with privilege can (Hrды, 2009; Longino, 1990; Wylie, 2014). Such viewpoints can be seen in several chapters of this Sourcebook, such as the feminist framework, the intersectionality framework, and the critical race framework.

## **Postmodern Skepticism**

Some postmodernists believe that the limitations of epistemology make all scientific undertakings worthy of extreme skepticism: the idea of a Reality is untenable because we cannot know it (Seidman, 1992). One way to read postmodernism is as a rejection of abstract theory. Abstract theory is too universal, too ambiguous in terms of specific experiences, too connected to theorists' cultural positions, and too susceptible to power (Nicholson, 1992).

## **A Brief History of Recent Philosophy of Science**

### ***Empiricism and Logical Positivism***

To understand contemporary theorizing in family science, it is useful to examine the history of the past 100 years or so. Logical positivism was an organized attempt to formulate rules of empiricism during the early twentieth century in Vienna, Austria. Living in proximity to Nazi Germany during the early deployment of large-scale propaganda, the logical positivists were concerned to provide an understanding of how to produce unbiased research, to provide a “scientific way of knowing that would be free of bias, free of dogma and superstition, free of nationalist ideology, and beneficial to humankind” (Staley, 2014 ebook). “The positivists championed reason over the obscure, the logical over the intuitive” (Godfrey-Smith, 2003 ebook). Taking to heart Hume’s position that explanation cannot be logically achieved through induction, the logical positivists decided to instead focus on deduction and not to worry about where abstract theory comes from. They chose not to ask why something occurs; it would be enough if the phenomenon could be understood well enough to be predicted (Godfrey-Smith, 2003). They were mainly concerned with developing rules for how empirical observation could be reliably used to evaluate deductions from theory. As in Fig. 1, their concern was to make deductive predictions for theory and to test them with inductive observation.

The first part of developing the rules, they thought, was to conceptualize theorizing as a matter of language. By basing it in language, they were able to disconnect theorizing from realism (Hempel, 1965). Next, they thought that the language of theory could be directly tied to the language of observations. “Correspondence

rules” could be used to directly translate the theoretical language of any abstract theory into a descriptive statement in observation language. With a robust language- and logic-based method, it was felt that any abstract theory could be directly and definitively tested (Godfrey-Smith, 2003; Staley, 2014). Additional tests of an abstract theory would allow one to increase confidence in the theory (verification). But this approach fell apart with the awareness that correspondence rules are themselves theory-laden (Quine, 1951). Once logical positivists could find no purely logical way to definitively verify an abstract theory by observation, its practitioners transitioned to logical empiricism.

### *Logical Empiricism*

Logical empiricism began to emerge from logical positivism just before World War II as logical positivists critiqued their own approach (and as most fled from Nazi Germany to the United States). In the shift from Europe to largely US universities, emphasis moved from the politicized philosophical climate of prewar central Europe to the more practical optimistic culture of postwar US universities. Logical empiricists came to accept a sharp distinction between theoretical and observable language and thus to question how a scientist could definitively test an abstract theory, when the abstract theory and the measurement link were both being tested together. So the logical empiricists pivoted from verification to a holistic idea of meaning (Godfrey-Smith, 2003), where abstract theories were seen as webs of theoretical and empirical meaning. Instead of directly connecting an abstract theory to an observation statement, they argued that a scientist only had to show that the observation statement could be produced by logical deduction from an abstract theory and that prediction (not explanation) was the only legitimate goal of science. However, by giving up on explanation, “By the middle of the 1970s, [logical empiricism] had well and truly broken down” (Godfrey-Smith, 2003).

### *Falsificationism*

Developing alongside logical empiricism was the idea of falsification (Popper, 1965). Falsification replaced the idea of verifying the truth of a good abstract theory with the idea of falsifying a bad abstract theory. Karl Popper was also from Vienna, but he emigrated to England. While the logical empiricists used science to understand philosophy, one might say that Popper used philosophy to understand science. While they were trying to find a way to certainty, Popper was convinced early that there was no way. Like the logical empiricists, Popper did not worry about the origin of explanations. He simply allowed that an abstract theory could come from the scientist’s fertile imagination; thereafter, it was the scientist’s job to try to falsify the abstract theory (and hope to fail to falsify). A true theory should predict what one

sees in the world, so a comparison of theoretical prediction to observation could be a definitive test of a theory. Falsificationism is the idea that you can never empirically prove a theory is true, but you *can* empirically prove that a theory is false. Any theory that has passed all of its empirical tests is not false—so far. Falsification foundered on the same holistic problem of testing as the logical empiricists faced (Duhem, 1962; Kuhn, 1962). The experience of our observations “constrains our beliefs about the world in some way, but only weakly” (Staley, 2014). The eventual decline in influence of both logical empiricism and falsificationism was set in motion in 1962.

## Science As Socially Organized: Philosophy and Kuhn

Before 1962, one could have said that the philosophy of science was almost exclusively about the logic of formalizing and testing abstract theory. In 1962, the first edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962, 1970) was published. Up until Kuhn, proponents of a realist ontology had pictured abstract theories in a subject matter becoming closer and closer to a Real depiction of the world by successive approximations (Staley, 2014). Anti-realist empiricists just thought the ability to predict was getting better. Kuhn proposed that this view was reasonably accurate during what he called “normal science.” During normal science, a mature discipline was seen to have a single *paradigm*. Although Kuhn gave the term as many as 20-plus meanings (Masterman, 1970), for our purposes, a paradigm is a theoretical framework.

With a single framework, Kuhn saw scientists as able to work securely to proliferate abstract theories to solve various “puzzles” presented by the framework’s overarching viewpoint. For example, in the 1950s, the structural functional theoretical framework focused on the puzzle of understanding how a social system preserved its stability by developing norms to guide behavior—such as gender roles for mothers and fathers that told them how to act so that society’s socialization needs could be reliably met (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

However, Kuhn described major punctuations (or paroxysms) within science when the overarching framework began to confront anomalies it could not solve (Kuhn, 1970). Within sociology and family science, for example, the structural functional framework was critiqued for not addressing secular change, cultural differences, or conflict. Anomalies were said by Kuhn to create anxiety within the discipline, until a traumatic scientific revolution replaced the former theoretical framework with a new and different one. Kuhn’s historical review was restricted to the natural sciences, each of which had, he argued, a single overarching theoretical framework at any given time. In contrast, all social sciences except perhaps economics operate with multiple theoretical frameworks. After Kuhn, multiple frameworks were identified and described within sociology (Denisoff et al., 1974; Ritzer, 1975) and then family science (Klein & White, 1996). Various texts have named

between five and ten family frameworks (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Smith & Hamon, 2017; White et al., 2019). This *Sourcebook* has its own list.

Unlike Kuhn's model where revolution replaces one regime by another, family scientists did not "replace" structural functionalism with a new theoretical framework (at least not immediately). Family scientists were not willing to give up the explanatory importance of norms and roles (e.g., Horne, 2001; Tibesigwa & Visser, 2015; Wang et al., 2019; Wrong, 1994), but they have adopted these concepts into other frameworks (e.g., feminism, family development theory), and they have also found many other useful frameworks that could help explain other aspects of family life. Just as there was competition in natural science (Newtonian vs. Einsteinian physics; phlogiston vs. oxygen chemistry; earth-centered vs. sun-centered astronomy), there also have been conflicts in family and social science: structural functional vs. power frameworks in the 1960s and 1970s; social choice vs. symbolic interactionist frameworks in the 1980s; postmodernists vs. everyone else in the 1990s and 2000s; and causal vs. interpretive approaches to theorizing since the 1970s. Not only have there been multiple theoretical frameworks at use in family theory, but there has been normal science operating simultaneously within each. Theorists using the family development framework have continued to incrementally develop abstract and contextual family development theories, while theorists using the feminist framework have similarly and in parallel developed feminist contextual and abstract theories.

Using multiple frameworks becomes problematic when differences in meanings and methods between two frameworks create *incommensurability* (Kuhn, 1970). For the structural functionalist framework, parental roles were seen as developed by society to protect itself: unsocialized children would weaken society (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Mothers and fathers were a unified team with an efficient, specialized division of labor directed toward a common goal. For the conflict framework, however, men and women were on different teams (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Burton et al., 2010). Socialization of children was still an important goal, but mothers were seen as doing that job because fathers did not want to and had the resources from occupational involvement to coerce women. The meaning of a gender role in structural functionalism was thus different from its meaning under the conflict framework.

An important consequence of incommensurability is that it undercut the logical empiricist and falsificationist assumption that conflicts over frameworks and abstract theories could be resolved strictly by logical comparison. Kuhn instead pointed out that disputes among frameworks were often carried out as a form of scientific politics (Kuhn, 1970). For example, disputes between the gendered tenets of structural functionalism and conflict frameworks in the 1960s reflected changes in gender and family roles in the larger society in the USA, with the increasing prominence of the feminist movement, the legalization of no-fault divorces in many states, and an increase in dual-earner households. The conflict framework was better suited to understanding second wave feminist political activity because of its emphasis on social roles. The symbolic interaction framework with its emphasis on negotiation, identities, and meaning was more helpful to understand interactions and internal dynamics within third wave feminism.

This claim of scientific politics was deeply disturbing among philosophers. In the edited volume of Lakatos and Musgrave (1970), multiple philosophers argued defensively that normal science was dull and unimaginative science and politics in science was disgusting. However, these complaints have since been rejected as the accuracy of many of Kuhn's points sunk in and came to be (sometimes grudgingly) accepted. Not only has the idea of multiple theoretical frameworks in the social sciences become acknowledged within philosophy, but family scientists have enlarged on Kuhn. They have noted that incommensurability can also be created not only across frameworks but also across researchers within frameworks. For example, researchers' class position, cultural background, and other characteristics can be a source of bias (standpoint epistemology). Many contextual theories are now seen as narrow because predominantly European and American White male upper middle-class theorists were limited by their single-context experiences. Cross-cultural, feminist, racially sensitive, and intersectional research and contextual theories have challenged explanations derived from such privileged viewpoints.

These issues are also historical. The "traditional" American middle class two-heterosexual-married-biological parent family may have been modal in the 1950s, but only for particular races and classes of individuals even then, and changes in marriage, divorce, and childbearing have made this family form even less prevalent. Early contextual theories at best were unaware of, and at worst denied, excluded, or demonized other experiences and ways of thinking, doing, and being, including other ways of doing science, theory, and theorizing (see Chap. 1 – Editors' introduction for more on the ways in which theory is and has been political).

## **The Contributions of Philosophy to Family Science**

Thus far, this chapter has reviewed philosophical contributions to theorizing as relevant to family science. Ontological positions such as realism (there is a Real World behind our observations) and versions of skepticism (we imagine ideas that, even if they may not be Real, make sense of our observations) provide overall viewpoints for family scientists as they try to explain family experiences. An epistemological stance like empiricism directs family scientists to use abduction (even if they call it "induction") to build explanations from observation, while deduction and induction are used to test these explanations despite the limitations of these methods. And family scientists have come (after some resistance) to appreciate standpoint epistemology, where concepts and explanations are constrained by social positions.

Even given debts to philosophy, family theorists generally have avoided blindly conforming to the conclusions of philosophers of science. For one thing, the abstract theories that philosophers of science talk about testing usually are not very much like the contextual theories that family scientists formulate and test. Family scientists have also found that some of the questions they want to ask are better answered with methods of theorizing that would not be recognized in the natural sciences. For example, sometimes theorists are interested in asking research subjects to reflect

and give feedback on the theories that theorists create (Israel, 2005; Tobin et al., 1989). Few philosophers consider contextual theories that use variables and variable concepts like most family theorists use (but see Woodward, 2003).

It is clear that family theorists are indebted to the epistemological work on measurement and theory testing of philosophers of science, but family scientists have also clearly taken those ideas to places where philosophers were mostly not comfortable going. The logical positivists and logical empiricists could not provide a satisfactory (to philosophers) explanation of how induction and abstract theory testing work. Nevertheless, the collection of data and inductive (or abductive) development of abstract theory in medicine, neurobiology, material science, astronomy, economics, sociology, and family science has continued apace. Recognizing, like the logical positivists and logical empiricists, that measurement is uncertain, family scientists have accepted uncertainty and quantified it with measures of reliability like Cronbach's alpha and eigenvalues in factor analysis. Approaches like structural equation modeling were developed to make explicit the links between theoretical concepts and observable variables. The method of falsification has been incorporated into standard theory testing procedures. Neither the logical empiricists nor the falsificationists could develop a consistent logical case for positive belief in a theory, so instead of adopting the absolute standards that philosophers keep trying to codify, social scientists have created their own procedures to measure and adapt to uncertainty. Statistical concepts like effect sizes and p-values are used to manage the inherent uncertainty of scientific decision-making. Literature reviews and meta-analyses can provide qualitative and quantitative judgments of support for a given theory.

In the view of most family scientists, it turns out that in ontology as well as epistemology, philosophers were too hard on themselves. One may argue that excellence (philosophers endlessly wrangling over ontology and epistemology) has been the enemy of good (practical theorizing and research methods). Because the philosophers were telling us that we could not do what we were in fact doing (and although some family scientists have echoed the philosophers), in response, most family scientists have been practicing their craft without much overt interest in or awareness of philosophy.

Family scientists accepted—well before philosophers—that our work was uncertain. When philosophers of science have said that what social scientists were doing wouldn't work, social scientists have mostly decided to do science anyway and not try to do philosophy, perhaps channeling Turner: "My bias is that philosophizing is best left to the philosophers—they are certainly better trained for it and they need the work" (Turner, 1992, p. 156). Furthermore, the epistemology of philosophers has included only abstract theory and observation, compared to the multiple levels often involved in family science. Consider a study of Taiwanese adolescents (Lin & Yi, 2019) that involved four levels: contextual theory (cohesive Taiwanese families have low adolescent deviance), hypothesis (family cohesion score will correlate with index of deviant behaviors), data (participants' scores on cohesion and deviance), and observation (participants' views of their own lives). Family scientists are aware of the potential for misconstrual, mismeasurement, or misperception in the

transition from each of these levels to the next. We seem to be aware of even more problems than philosophers, and yet we marshal on.

Family scientists and other social scientists have found value in philosophical ideas while often dismissing philosophers' doubts as too perfectionist, insisting instead on being reasonable about incorporating philosophical ideas into practice. Family scientists are mostly reasonable realists who anticipate that there is probably a Real World out there; we really do believe there are families. However, we also recognize that there are many distinct but overlapping perspectives (frameworks) from which family life can be multiply and simultaneously understood. Family scientists recognize that the nature of the Real World and our conceptions of it are attenuated by the limitations of epistemology. At the same time, family scientists are reasonable skeptics who recognize that many, if not most, of our concepts are made up from our imaginations, and that we will never know how much—or if—they match Reality.

Epistemologically, few family theorists seem to be concerned about the limitations of induction. Most may only recently have heard of abduction, but in fact most have been unwitting abductionists who provide reasonable logical justifications for the theories we imagine. We recognize that our imaginings are tied to our observations but are not limited to them. Most family theorists are reasonable logical empiricists in that we use operationalization to measure our concepts while recognizing the imprecision in the match between theory and observation. Epistemological ideas of risks in matching theoretical concepts to observable variables or categories are now part of all academic training in research methods. We mostly accept an obligation to adapt to and compensate for the theory-ladenness and perceptual standpoints that affect observation. When it comes to theory testing, most family theorists are aware of the limits of falsification, but within those limits are comfortable employing its procedures. We are willing to test the implications of our explanations, whether this is a formal test of a deduced hypothesis or a reflexive check of insights over the course of a series of interviews. Most family scientists believe in verification, sometimes implicitly using Bayesian concepts of probability, so that our confidence in an abstract or contextual theory increases with additional empirical support.

Philosophy has shown that every practice in science is fraught. None work to always provide clear and definite answers; each can at any unanticipated moment provide bad answers and can never be guaranteed. However, family scientists believe that an accumulation of differently flawed observations can begin to approximate the boundaries of Reality.

## **Future Challenges and Opportunities for Theorizing**

Kuhn (1962) raised important questions about normal science and his view that normal science consists of incremental improvements applies just as well to multiple frameworks as it does to a single framework. Within each of the frameworks

discussed in this volume, family scientists have developed and tested contextual theories, and these theories and frameworks themselves have evolved over time to fill in the normal science puzzle of that framework. Between theoretical frameworks, there can be conflict, often simply because each framework provides an intentionally partial (whether incommensurable or complementary) view. Contextual stage theories of family development often did not deal with cultural differences. Rational choice contextual theories often did not deal with family subsystems and mutual support.

Within theoretical frameworks, mini-revolutions (referred to elsewhere as “epi-cycles”: D. C. Bell, 2009) have occurred when family scientists created successively more nuanced abstract theories. For example, within the social bond framework, abstract theories have been developed of a structural bond (Durkheim, 1933), an identity bond (Chodorow, 1978), a belonging bond (Scanzoni et al., 1989), an attachment bond (Bowlby, 1982), and a caregiving bond (D. C. Bell, 2010; Heard & Lake, 1997). Many of these mini-revolutions are described in Bell (2009).

Will family science have its Newton, who will create a new, grand theoretical framework to replace all the current ones? Coleman (1990) showed how a single rational choice theoretical framework could subsume exchange abstract theories, power abstract theories, and adaptation abstract theories. Or is the future to create ever more complex contextual theories that combine elements from many frameworks? Family scientists often simultaneously work on multiple puzzles at the same time, and sometimes they develop content from multiple abstract theories from the same framework at the same time. For example, Altschul et al. (2016) used the social exchange framework to test whether negative reward in the form of spanking or positive reward in the form of maternal warmth will affect children’s prosocial behavior. Other times, theorists work simultaneously on puzzles from two frameworks. For example, Jackson (2016) used neighborhood efficacy from a human ecology framework and women’s resources from a feminist framework to account for exposure to intimate partner violence.

One issue family scientists will need to confront is the role of meaning. One trend in the long history of the natural sciences has been successively to remove meaning from explanation (Rosenberg, 2016). Supernatural explanations for disease, divine spheres for planetary motion, falling objects seeking their proper place, and the “invisible hand” of economics were replaced by germs, gravity, and individual preference schedules. Why people think they are ill, where a falling object “wants” to be: these sorts of meaning-based explanations are no longer proposed. In these historical cases, meaning explanations have been replaced by causal explanations.

Will the historical trend from meaning explanation to causal explanation apply to family explanations? Subjective meanings in the form of attitudes and opinions are often incorporated in family theory. Meaning in interpretive explanations in family science seems to have a different role than meaning in physical science explanations. Instead of pondering the meaning of undetectable mysterious intentions, interpretive explanations examine human intentions that can be indirectly observed, questioned, and understood. Interpretive theorizing has contributed understanding



of the ways that meaning underlies many family processes. A study by Katz and Gish (2015, reprinted in Smith and Hamon, 2017) examines social responses to biological aging. Improved understanding of biology leads to reinterpreting the meaning of aging as a betrayal of how one feels by how one looks. The “molecularization” of aging allows physicians to offer (lucrative) antiaging treatments so that individuals can actively manage their own aging process.

One can argue that the ultimate goal of philosophers of science has been to discover (or invent) invariable rules by which disputes about theories could be settled dispassionately and impersonally. The search within philosophy to describe impersonal logical processes for identifying true theories has not developed any consensus on how to achieve that goal. After Kuhn, we learned that, however comforting it would be to have such rules, actual decisions within science could not be guaranteed to work that way. Instead, decisions within science are based on persuasion, not proof, and accumulation, not static conclusions. During normal science, persuasion is supported by accepted methods. Researchers provide reliability estimates for their measures because they cannot guarantee validity. In what are often called “quantitative” methods, researchers let standardized procedures persuade by describing deductions from literature, research instruments, research procedures, and statistical tests. In what are often called “qualitative” methods, researchers persuade by using computer technology for textual organization and display, providing rich textual examples to display context in detail, discussing own standpoints, and using narrative to tell a meaningful, explanatory story.

One thing we learned from Kuhn is that research is accepted when it is persuasive. What is considered persuasive does not distinguish realists from skeptics. Quantitative realists and quantitative skeptics will both use persuasive statistics. And qualitative realists and qualitative skeptics will both use thick description for persuasion. In the end, both realists and skeptics agree that there are limits to what we can know, so whether improved explanations are closer to Truth as realists claim or more useful as practical understanding as skeptics claim, it doesn’t actually make a difference in what we do with our explanations. An indifference to the contending claims of realism and skepticism does not seem to have inhibited the practice of family science.

What family science understands is not determined by invariant rules of logical deduction or induction. Understanding comes from the collaborative efforts of fallible, creative human researchers. Politics and marketing persuade by rhetoric and reputation, and such processes affect family science; research agendas reflect shifts in attention in the broader society. However, contention and critique are collectively regulated and evaluated, so persuasion by family scientists is informed and constrained by the fallible logics of ontology and epistemology.

**Acknowledgement** I would like to thank Kari Adamsons, April Few-Demo, Rob Palkovitz, David Klein, and the audiences at TCRM Workshops within the National Conference on Family Relations for critique of earlier versions of this chapter.

## References

- Allen, K. R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Wiley.
- Altschul, I., Lee, S. J., & Gershoff, E. T. (2016). Hugs, not hits: Warmth and spanking as predictors of child social competence. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78, 695–714.
- Archer, M. (1985). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Babbie, E. (1989). *The practice of social research*. Wadsworth.
- Bell, D. C. (2009). *Constructing social theory*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bell, D. C. (2010). *The dynamics of connection: How evolution and biology create caregiving and attachment*. Lexington Books.
- Bell, L. G., & Bell, D. C. (2016). Covert assessment of the family system: Patterns, pictures and codes. *Journal of Methods and Measurement in the Social Sciences*, 7(2), 95–121.
- Bengtson, V. L., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (2005a). Theory and theorizing in family research: Puzzle building and puzzle solving. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 3–33). Sage.
- Bengtson, V. L., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (Eds.). (2005b). *Sourcebook of family theory & research*. Sage.
- Blaikie, N., & Priest, J. (2017). *Social research: Paradigms in action*. Polity Press Ebook.
- Blalock, H. M., Jr. (1969). *Theory construction: From verbal to mathematical formulations*. Prentice-Hall.
- Blood, R. O., & Wolfe, D. M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of married living*. Free Press.
- Boss, P., Doherty, W., Larossa, R., Schumm, W., & Steinmetz, S. (Eds.). (1993). *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach*. Plenum.
- Bobly, J. (1982). *Attachment*. Basic.
- Burr, W. R., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Reiss, I. L. (Eds.). (1979a). *Contemporary theories about the family, Vol. 1: Research-based theories*. Free Press.
- Burr, W. R., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Reiss, I. L. (Eds.). (1979b). *Contemporary theories about the family, Vol. 2: General theories/theoretical orientations*. Free Press.
- Burton, C. W., Halpern-Felsher, R., Rankin, S. H., Rehm, R. S., & Humphreys, J. C. (Eds.). (2010). Relationships and betrayal among young women: Theoretical perspectives on adolescent dating abuse. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 67(6), 1393–1405.
- Cartwright, N., & Montuschi, E. (2014). Introduction. In N. Cartwright & E. Montuschi (Eds.), *Philosophy of social science: A new introduction*. Oxford University Press Ebook.
- Chafetz, J. S. (1978). *A primer on the construction and testing of theories in sociology*. Peacock.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Chodorow, N. J. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering*. University of California Press.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Harvard.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Sage Ebook.
- Denisoff, R. S., Callahan, O., & Levine, M. H. (Eds.). (1974). *Theories and paradigms in contemporary sociology*. F. E. Peacock Publishers.
- Dilworth-Anderson, P., Burton, L. M., & Klein, D. M. (2005). Contemporary and emerging theories in studying families. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 35–58). Sage.
- Duhem, P. (1962). *The aim and structure of physical theory* (P. P. Wiener, Trans.). Atheneum.
- Durkheim, E. (1933). *The division of labor in society* (G. Simpson, Trans.). Free Press.
- Fine, M. A., & Fincham, F. D. (2013a). The role of theory in family science. In M. A. Fine & F. D. Fincham (Eds.), *Handbook of family theories: A content-based approach* (pp. 1–7). Routledge.
- Fine, M. A., & Fincham, F. D. (Eds.). (2013b). *Handbook of family theories: A content-based approach*. Routledge.

- Godfrey-Smith, P. (2003). *Theory and reality: An introduction to the philosophy of science*. University of Chicago Press Ebook.
- Hage, J. (1972). *Techniques and problems of theory construction in sociology*. Wiley.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Cornell.
- Heard, D., & Lake, B. (1997). *The challenge of attachment for caregiving*. Routledge.
- Hempel, C. G. (1965). *Aspects of scientific explanation*. Free Press.
- Hill, R. (1951). Review of current research on marriage and the family. *American Sociological Review*, 16, 694–701.
- Horne, C. (2001). Sociological perspectives on the emergence of social norms. In M. Hechter & K.-D. Opp (Eds.), *Social norms* (pp. 3–34). Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hrdy, S. B. (2009). *The woman that never evolved*. Harvard University Press.
- Hume, D. (1739/2001). *A treatise of human nature*. Oxford University Press.
- Israel, B. A. (2005). *Methods in community-based participatory research for health*. Jossey-Bass.
- Jackson, A. L. (2016). The combined effect of women's neighborhood resources and collective efficacy on IPV. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78, 890–907.
- Katz, S., & Gish, J. (2015). Aging in the biosocial order: Repairing time and cosmetic rejuvenation in a medical spa clinic. *Sociological Quarterly*, 56(1), 40–61.
- Keat, R., & Urry, J. (1982). *Social theory as science* (2nd ed.). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kerlinger, F. N. (1973). *Foundations of behavioral research* (2nd ed.). Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- King, V., Boyd, L. M., & Thorsen, M. L. (2015). Adolescents' perceptions of family belonging in stepfamilies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(3), 761–774.
- Klein, D. M., & White, J. M. (1996). *Family theories: An introduction*. Sage.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd Enlarged ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Lakatos, I., & Musgrave, A. (Eds.). (1970). *Criticism and the growth of knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lin, W.-H., & Yi, C.-C. (2019). The effect of family cohesion and life satisfaction during adolescence on later adolescent outcomes: A prospective study. *Youth & Society*, 51(5), 680–706.
- Longino, H. E. (1990). *Science as social knowledge: Values and objectivity in scientific inquiry*. Princeton University Press.
- Masterman, M. (1970). The nature of a paradigm. In I. Lakatos & A. Musgrave (Eds.), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* (pp. 59–89). Cambridge University Press.
- Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure* (Rev ed.). Free Press.
- Nicholson, L. (1992). On the postmodern barricades: Feminism, politics, and theory. In S. Seidman & D. G. Wagner (Eds.), *Postmodernism and social theory* (pp. 82–100). Blackwell.
- Parsons, T., & Bales, R. F. (1955). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Free Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1878/1958). *Collected papers*. Harvard University Press.
- Popper, K. R. (1965). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*. Harper & Row.
- Porpora, D. V. (2015). *Reconstructing sociology: The critical realist approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Quine, W. V. (1951). Two dogmas of empiricism. *The Philosophical Review*, 60, 20–43.
- Ritzer, G. (1975). *Sociology: A multiple paradigm science*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Ritzer, G. (1988). Sociological metatheory: A defense of a subfield by a delineation of its parameters. *Sociological Theory*, 6, 187–200.
- Rosenberg, A. (2016). *Philosophy of social science* (5th ed.). Westview Press Ebook.
- Scanzoni, J., Polonko, K., Teachman, J., & Thompson, L. (1989). *The sexual bond: Rethinking families and close relationships*. Sage.
- Schneider, M. A. (2006). *The theory primer: A sociological guide*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Northwestern University Press.
- Seidman, S. (1992). Postmodern social theory as narrative with a moral intent. In S. Seidman & D. G. Wagner (Eds.), *Postmodernism and social theory* (pp. 47–81). Blackwell.

- Smith, S. R., & Hamon, R. R. (2017). *Exploring family theories* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Staley, K. W. (2014). *An introduction to the philosophy of science*. Cambridge University Press Ebook.
- Swedberg, R. (2014). *The art of social theory*. Princeton University Press.
- Tibesigwa, B., & Visser, M. (2015). Multiple and concurrent sex partnerships and social norms: Young adults' sexual relationships in the metropolitan communities of Cape Town, South Africa. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 12, 301–316.
- Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y. H., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China and the United States*. Yale University.
- Turner, J. H. (1991). *The structure of sociological theory* (5th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Turner, J. H. (1992). The promise of positivism. In S. Seidman & D. G. Wagner (Eds.), *Postmodernism and social theory: The debate over general theory* (pp. 156–178). Blackwell.
- Wang, Y., Chen, M., & Lee, J. H. (2019). Adolescents' social norms across family, peer, and school settings: Linking social norm profiles to adolescent risky health behaviors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48(5), 935–948.
- White, J. M. (2005). *Advancing family theories*. Sage.
- White, J. M., & Klein, D. M. (2008). *Family theories* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- White, J. M., Klein, D. M., & Martin, T. F. (2015). *Family theories: An introduction* (4th ed.). Sage.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). *Family theories: An introduction* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Woodward, J. (2003). *Making things happen: A theory of causal explanation*. Oxford University Press.
- Wrong, D. H. (1994). *The problem of order: What unites and divides society*. Harvard University Press.
- Wylie, A. (2014). Community-based collaborative archaeology. In N. Cartwright & E. Montuschi (Eds.), *Philosophy of social science: A new introduction*. Oxford University Press Ebook.

# History of Family Science



**Barbara H. Settles and Karen L. Doneker**

Family Science encompasses the scholarly study of families as well as applying best practices for intervention and education. Family Science programs are tied to distinct, although related, disciplines and academic units founded to address issues related to families. An exploration of the discipline across three centuries facilitates an understanding not only of the history but also the future promise of Family Science. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the history of the Family Science discipline and demonstrate how social, cultural, and academic forces shaped the study of the family. The epistemology and assumptions inherent in the discipline are a product of the context, norms, and stakeholders involved. Changes in the terminology used to describe the discipline itself (from Domestic Science to Home Economics, to Family Studies and Human Development, and finally to Family Science) indicate shifts in the theoretical conception of the discipline and the practical application of knowledge.

As the formal discipline developed, different topics, data analysis methods, and underlying theories dominated the field. While priorities were driven by government policy and private funding from charitable, religious, and civic organizations, the discipline was founded by scholars who advocated for policies and programs that advance the family and home. The field has historical ties with social forces that expanded equality, equity, and diversity. The roots of American Family Science reach back into the nineteenth century to examine how home, as well as family,

---

B. H. Settles (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA  
e-mail: [settlesb@udel.edu](mailto:settlesb@udel.edu)

K. L. Doneker

Department of Family Studies and Community Development, College of Liberal Arts, Towson University, Towson, MD, USA  
e-mail: [kdonekermancini@towson.edu](mailto:kdonekermancini@towson.edu)

began to reflect new opportunities as well as religious life choices such as Old Order Amish, Shakers, Mormons, and Hutterites (Kephart, 1982).

The focus on family scholarship became possible with expansion of the middle class, technological household innovations, and the development of incentives for educational institutions to include women and reduce racial discrimination. In addition, the creation of the cooperative extension system and departments at Land Grant Colleges through the Smith-Lever and Smith-Hughes Acts of 1914 and 1917 provided an institutional framework for the study of the family and related fields (Bane, 1955). Social movements such as abolition, temperance, women's suffrage, women's education, the development of home economics, rural sociology, and economics as modern disciplines, as well as the health and sex education movements, were central to the development of Family Science. The need to teach cutting-edge information and advocate on these diverse topics caused scholars to create cross-disciplinary conferences such as the Groves Conference on Marriage and the Family and the National Council on Family Relations. Family scholars also engaged professionals focusing on social issues such as the clergy, secondary teachers, lawyers, doctors, and social activists. The great reform movements and experiments with alternative families and organizations developed in the nineteenth century continue to be promoted and evolve (Foster, 1991). Family Science has a legacy of advocacy and a humanistic commitment to the betterment of both individuals and families. This chapter seeks to provide a historical context for the development of the discipline and key social changes that influence current views of the field.

## **Nineteenth-Century Foundations of Family Science**

The United States experienced massive social change during the nineteenth century. The western land expansion initiated by the Louisiana Purchase and American industrialization was transformational for families (Meacham, 2012), reordering the economic basis of the family while shifting societal norms changed dynamics within the family. As families moved westward, families were separated, work outside the home became more prevalent, and death rates were still high; as such, the formation of stepfamilies was common.

Science and technology also played an important role in changes to work, homes, family relationships, and family structures. New technologies such as the cotton gin reinforced economic incentives for slavery (Boorstin, 1965). Northern industrialization changed the character of work and created demand for paid labor from women and migrants from the south. Rapid expansion of towns and cities created the need for a greater role in government planning and policy that included funding and support for infrastructure and technology advancement. Sanitation, clean water, roads, ports, and other public works were priorities. Roads and railroads were initially developed privately but became a national system under the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, which led to the railway to the Pacific coast (Boorstin, 1965). The new ease of travel and communication enabled academic and social change organizations to

develop, and women emerged as leaders advocating for family and social reform. The US Postal Service and the telegraph facilitated coordination for reform movements across the country (Boorstin, 1965). Rapid technological advances changed how people worked and lived, which brought about a need to understand the impact of technology on the family.

Americans transitioned from mostly living in wooden shacks, log cabins, and sod houses to a greater proportion living in cities with improved sanitation, lighting, heating, and food preservation. New technologies such as the sewing machine and canning were adapted for household use (McGavran, 1975). By contrast, many products that were once handmade at home became manufactured. Society needed a better understanding of nutrition, family planning, child development, and home management in order to adapt. Early family scientists contributed to an active discourse by disseminating information through magazines and books as well as developing adult education models with teachers and county extension (McGavran, 1975).

The US government recognized that understanding how families functioned and survived in these new and different contexts needed to be a public policy priority. Regulations were needed to protect workers, children, and women, and attention to both compulsory education and higher education was needed. A parallel movement saw family issues included in volunteer organizations and community activism. As policies and programs addressed these ideas, the foundations of Family Science as a discipline were established.

## The Lyceum Movement and Adult Education

The development of adult education facilitated the development of family science as a discipline. Informal adult education, known as the Lyceum Movement, developed in parallel with formal education during the early nineteenth century. The Lyceum Movement gave birth to a model of adult education similar to contemporary university extension programs (Knowles, 1960). Local communities pooled resources to hold lectures, debates, meetings, and conferences. By 1831, the United States had developed over 1000 town lyceums, libraries, and education organizations for “useful” purposes (Knowles, 1960). The system provided education and critical discussion on topics including politics, literature, poetry, character, and morality, as well as ways to better one’s life and family.

Notably, the Lyceum Movement provided a forum for women to speak on topics related to family, home management, and women’s rights. By the 1830s, women’s groups were expanding rapidly, and their activities created “rising expectations” for women and families (O’Neill, 1969, p. 18). Lectures and books on family and home topics are found throughout the nineteenth century in America (Boylan, 2002). Although nineteenth-century women’s roles were typically seen as restricted to the home, female speakers and authors also brought early attention to topics of gender, race, and marriage. For example, the Grimke sisters spoke publicly against slavery and for women’s rights in the 1830s (O’Neill, 1969).

Important to family science, lyceum lecturers included women such as Margaret Fuller, Maria Child, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Catherine Beecher, who advocated for women's rights as well as improved homemaking and parenting (Brown, 1995; McGavran, 1975). For example, in 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. It was a rather local affair, but the Declaration of Principles and call for women's suffrage were influential for the sustained activism that eventually led to women's right to vote (O'Neill, 1969). Catherine Beecher was an organizer of the American Women's Education Association in 1852 and wrote about the evolving responsibilities of the domestic economy (Brown, 1995). Local and county Lyceums continued to be active until the Civil War (Knowles, 1960). The lectures and associated publications provided income for speakers and paved a new career path for women to earn a living through adult education on family and child development.

## **Establishment of Family-Centered Disciplines**

The need for family scholarship arose from technological, political, and societal changes, while the discipline developed out of the liberalization of education to include women and women's demands for a greater understanding and consideration of families. As noted by O'Neill (1969), "The rapid rising curve of female activism was the extraordinary ferment that characterized American society in the 1830s and '40's" (p. 19). Women were active in social reform efforts, with an emphasis on supporting women and children in need (Boylan, 2002). Family science developed out of the Women's Suffragette, Women's Rights, and Women's Education movements and has a basis in and has been intertwined with the development of feminism and feminist theory ever since.

Although schools and colleges had existed previously in the American colonies, the nineteenth century saw a major expansion in secondary and higher education as a tool for economic development activity (Boorstin, 1965; Brown, 1995). The pace in founding educational institutions increased, and these new institutions introduced a broader range of subject matters, including family- and home-related topics. Many teaching positions in the nineteenth century required a year or two of college, increasing demand, and building a college was prestigious for a community (Boorstin, 1965).

Government funding supported both practical curricula and the education of women at the local, state, and national levels. Reading was seen as a universal necessity, except in the south, where it was still illegal to teach slaves. The Protestant heritage of the United States made reading the Bible at home an expectation, and therefore women often were literate. The need for elementary school teachers in the nineteenth century also opened opportunities for women, and many newly developed high schools began to have more girls than boys graduate. However, these opportunities were double-edged swords, as women frequently were hired as teachers because they would work for a lower wage than men (Boorstin, 1965).



Opportunities for women to work and expand their education as teachers and as family or home economists were therefore intertwined with the exploitation of female labor, and the resultant feminization of family science continues to be reflected in the lower relative earning power of human services fields.

Along with the expansion in labor demand for women was an expansion of educational institutions for women and African Americans. In 1837, Oberlin College opened as a coeducational institution (Brown, 1995), and Cheyney University, the first Historically Black College and University (HBCU), was founded with a donation from Richard Humphries, a white Quaker ([www.Cheyney.edu](http://www.Cheyney.edu)). Early coeducational and minority-serving colleges taught liberal arts curricula, had normal (teacher's) schools, and many provided coursework in domestic economy (Brown, 1995). While the colleges were founded to address discrimination, what resulted were schools that addressed families with applied programs.

The Morrill Act of 1862 further increased the breadth and depth of higher education by establishing Land Grant universities and colleges. For each delegate in Congress, a state received 30,000 acres of land or certificates from the federal government to develop the campuses of the educational institutions. It is important to note, however, that these parcels of land were primarily Native American territories that were taken by the US Government by force or fraudulent treaties (although beyond the scope of this review, see Nash, 2019; Stein, 2017, for more information on the ties between Land Grant universities and the displacement and continued exploitation of Native Americans and their land). In addition to traditional liberal arts, the Morrill Act (1862) promoted practical and scientific studies. The Land Grant universities were intended to provide technical and practical information, including domestic science and cooperative extension services, and they also featured open admissions and service to the community with either coeducational or parallel women's colleges (Gravassi & Gee, 2018).

However, proponents of Land Grant systems had underestimated the level of discrimination that would arise in the post-civil war era. In the north and west, most Land Grant colleges admitted any high school graduate or equivalent, regardless of race or ethnicity. Twenty-eight years after the original Morrill Act (1862), the Morrill Act of 1890 established the 1890s institutions to serve black students in southern states that discriminated by race, which now comprise the bulk of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Brown, 1995). The Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) supported "separate but equal" accommodations and schools and crystallized the continuance of segregation into the twentieth and twenty-first century. The long-term impact of these systemic racist policies is still felt today, with HBCUs receiving far less funding relative to historically white Land Grant universities. Even with limited resources, HBCU programs have been critical for research focused on Black and African American families. By 1900, there were nine Land Grant Universities with full-fledged domestic science programs (a precursor to contemporary Family Science), and domestic science courses were being taught in many other colleges (Bane, 1955). Domestic science programs included many aspects of household activities: nutrition, food processing, food preparation, textiles, clothing, household management, household economics, child

development, and family studies. As these programs developed, they became recognized and named “home economics”.

The Land Grant institutions were responsible for promoting research that was relevant to its communities (Kelsey & Hearne, 1949). Agricultural Experiment Stations were funded for applied research, and the Cooperative Extension Service was established for outreach and dissemination of applied research at the county level. Federally funded vocational teacher education home economics programs were typically housed in Colleges of Agriculture and so benefitted from financial support. The scientific study of families was expanded under the auspices of family resource management and home economics. A 1923 bulletin noted the reconstruction of the home economics curriculum to include health education, child development, parental education, social and family relationships, research, and vocational opportunities (Dalrymple, 1981). These programs were predominantly enrolled in and taught by women. Vocational teacher education programs under the Smith Hughes (1917) Act funded college faculty and public school teachers, providing salary and tuition remission that allowed women to better support their own families and pursue graduate degrees. This pathway to graduate education and financial support was integral in providing both professional positions for women and research for the discipline.

The early leaders in domestic science and/or home economics were excited to promote family health and well-being via new knowledge in nutrition, textiles, and household economics and child development that was emerging from discoveries across disciplines. For example, Ellen Swallow Richards (who organized the home economics discipline) became the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1871 (Hunt, 1958). After pursuing studies in chemistry and sanitation in waterways, her interest shifted to home management, and she became an expert in school lunch programs (Hunt, 1958, p. 37) as well as family dissolution and the deteriorating care of children due to social change and the industrial revolution (Brown, 1995, p. 248). She inspired many researchers across universities to organize and identify their work in connection to family and ultimately within an umbrella of family scholarship.

## **Twentieth Century: Founding of Interdisciplinary Family Science Organizations**

The first half of the twentieth century saw the growth and professionalization of numerous social science fields and organizations. Organizations were founded in anthropology, psychology, sociology, rural sociology, social work, and home economics. Professional specializations such as marriage and family therapy and family/parent education also were developed and formalized. Critically for Family Science, Ellen Swallow Richards was active in organizing yearly professional conferences at Lake Placid that ultimately led to founding the American Home

Economics Association in 1908 (Bane, 1955). The conferences debated scientific studies underpinning applied aspects of home economics as well as professional standards and curriculum for home economics teachers. Many of the Lake Placid conference participants were leaders in domestic science (Bane, 1955). For example, Isabel Bevier had taught at women's colleges and pursued graduate education in the sciences in the 1890s. She moved from teaching at Lake Erie College to the University of Illinois in 1900 to become professor and head of Household Science, a name intended to broaden the course offerings of home economics and domestic science beyond cooking and sewing. However, when the national Smith Lever (1914) and Smith Hughes (1917) Acts referred to this type of work as Home Economics, she swiftly changed the department name to Home Economics (Bane, 1955).

Although an important precursor to family science, home economics was not the only discipline that had some focus on families. Ernest Groves, a clergyman and sociologist, offered the first college level "family" course in 1922 through Boston University's sociology department (Rubin & Settles, 2012a, 2012b, p. xiv). He wrote the first college textbook on marriage and contributed over 200 books and publications on marriage throughout his career. He moved to the sociology department at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1927, and his wife, Gladys, who had taught home economics previously, developed a private consulting practice on family issues. They jointly began to organize small, informal conferences with students to discuss family issues. Initially, postcards were used to invite participants, who were encouraged to ask others to come. In 1934, they expanded to a national group that brought together "family scholars" from many disciplines as well as representatives from government agencies; this became the eponymously named The Groves Conference on Marriage and Family (Settles et al., 2012). The Groves Conference was influential as an interdisciplinary forum to consider controversial topics, such as sexuality, family health and medicine, and marriage and family counseling.

It is important to note that segregationist state laws prevented the inclusion of African American scholars in the early years of this influential movement to bring together family researchers and practitioners (Rubin, 2012). Therefore, in an effort to "integrate" producers of family science and theory, Gladys Groves collaborated with Dr. Joseph S. Himes, an African American professor, to make scholarship about and by African Americans visible. The Groves-Himes collaboration resulted in Himes leading parallel conferences that could be attended by racially diverse audiences. The first parallel conference that focused on research on African Americans was called the "North Carolina Conference for the Conservation of Marriage and Families Among Negroes," and it was held on the campus of the North Carolina College (NCC) for Negroes in Durham, NC. White family scholars and speakers who attended the Groves Conference held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also attended the NCC conference, although these conferences still had to be held on separate campuses. Later they were able to entertain both conferences in a building on UNC Chapel Hill that had been built with private funds. By no means do we suggest that these parallel conferences changed racist

and pathologizing discourses persistent within sociology and psychology during this period. However, as Rubin (2012) noted, the Groves Conferences created an intellectual space for inclusivity of family topics and members, for it “continued to make specific statements of its integrated nature in these conferences held outside of North Carolina in their promotion literature and invitations” (p. 200).

In 1938, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) was founded by Paul Sayre, a professor of law who also served as its first president. He organized the first NCFR conference with Sydney Goldstein and Ernest Burgess. Goldstein was a rabbi who advocated for birth control and wrote two texts on family and family counseling (NCFR, biographical note). Burgess was a sociologist who served on the first board of NCFR, as president, and organized the regional leadership structure (Bernard, 1983). NCFR’s goal was to bring together family scholars and professionals from diverse disciplines. The first NCFR meeting in 1938 addressed social issues of family, home, and human development within each of the different social sciences such as sociology, psychology, social work, anthropology, mental health, theology, home economics, and medicine. As a professional organization, NCFR also founded journals about family scholarship. *Marriage and Family Living*, its first journal, included many articles addressing both applied practice and research which would evolve in 1964 into *The Journal of Marriage and The Family*, and finally in 2000, to its current title, *The Journal of Marriage and Family*. *The Family Coordinator*, which focused on applied research, was established as NCFR’s second journal in 1952, and it transitioned into its current title, *Family Relations*, in 1980. Its third journal, the *Journal of Family Theory and Review* (described in more detail later in this chapter), was created in 2009. The interactions promoted by NCFR laid the foundation for Family Science to evolve into a distinct field of study in the later part of the twentieth century.

One of NCFR’s purposes was to nurture state “Affiliated Councils” to focus on state policy work. The affiliated councils were created in response to the White House Conferences on Children, held periodically in the early twentieth century and which were then able to be funded by state legislatures. These state and community organizations participated in public discussion of family issues. For example, The National Conference on Family Life called upon Evelyn Duvall and Reuben Hill in 1947 to prepare background papers and chair a conference to describe the various life stages (which would later become family development theory, see “Family Development Theory”, this volume). Similarly, Duvall, as executive director of NCFR in 1950, organized and held a workshop that further formulated family developmental tasks (Duvall, 1971).

By the end of the twentieth century, the technology of homemaking again had advanced and changed the way families functioned in the home (e.g., the self-cleaning oven, the microwave, the home freezer, washing machines and answering machines, etc.). At the same time, the specialties within home economics that were not specific to family studies (textiles and clothing, nutrition and foods, institutional management, etc.) grew rapidly and formed their own organizations as universities and colleges recognized them as separate departments with a wide variety of department names. The American Home Economics Association engaged in a self-study

to reconfigure the association, and in 1994, the association decided to change their name to the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, with a new statement of purpose and focus areas ([www.aafcs.org](http://www.aafcs.org)). However, most of the topics covered by the new AAFCS already had other specialized professional organizations associated with them, and in family area, the Family Science Association (<https://www.familyscienceassociation.org>) and its Teaching Family Science Conference wrote in protest of the new name for Home Economics (Personal communication, July, 1994, letters and exchanged by Settles, B. H. & Taylor, B. concerning the AHEA change to AAFCS). The shakeout on academic name changes included arguments over intellectual territory, with phrases like “human development” being claimed by more than one department. It was during the late twentieth century that Family Studies and Family Science departments became common on campuses. Some of these departments had a history in home economics, but there were also new departments founded more recently specifically as Family Studies or Family Science. In addition to having different names, family studies/science departments also are found in many different colleges within universities, from Colleges of Education to Human Ecology to Liberal Arts and Sciences. The shift to a more universal use of the term “Family Science” as a name for the field (still in varying combinations with or without Human Development and/or other fields like Public Health) appears to be in line with the current fashion of branding in higher education, and it is possible that a different characterization may replace it in academia in the future.

Throughout the twentieth century, the diversity of departments representing scholarly activity in Family Science resulted in several major trends that unfolded in parallel. Although some tend to think of the history of a field as a linear process, it is more of a concurrent series of examinations, reconfiguring, experiments, and jousting for attention. Family scholarship has had robust interdisciplinary interactions that influenced public perception of family structure, professionalized family and marriage counseling, and focused on women’s rights, racial justice, gender, and ethnicity. We review the history of these major branches of Family Science below.

## **Interdisciplinary Connections Critical to the Family Science Discipline**

After World War II, federal policy shifted to focus on providing returning veterans with jobs and higher educational opportunities, and a campaign was created to encourage women to leave their jobs so that they were available to men returning from the war (Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, 1946). This policy shift encouraged a return to more traditional gender roles, and a boom in both marriage and childbearing resulted. However, within a decade, the trend reversed, and more women were returning to work and seeking higher education.

Colleges responded to the increased number of female students, and departments or schools of family studies (and often human development) emerged. Family studies often started as the smallest program or department within a larger department or school of home economics; however, as family studies programs expanded, they evolved into independent departments and often moved to liberal arts or education colleges. Home Economics transformed in the latter part of the twentieth century into Family and Consumer Sciences, with a mission to provide education initiatives in the K-12 education system. Family Science, on the other hand, focused on intersections between research in human development and psychology with education, marriage and family therapy, sociology, and social work programs, and as part of family life education initiatives that professionalized Family Science as a field. Multiple disciplines contributed to this transformation of Family Science; notable examples are discussed below.

### *Anthropology's Influence on Family Science*

Anthropology evolved as a field at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and quickly gained traction in the United States. Franz Boas, who came to the United States in 1886 from Prussia, pioneered the methodological case study approach in his studies of the Innuits of Canada (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Menand, 2019). After serving as a lecturer for 3 years, Boas became the first professor of anthropology at Columbia University in 1899. He was one of a few scientists in the early twentieth century who argued that differences in societal outcomes for racial minorities were culturally constructed, not biologically determined, and he was inclusive of women in his research. He was cited as evidence against racially discriminatory immigration laws (Menand, 2019), and the focus on secluded societies was exciting and exotic to nonacademic audiences. The different sexual norms and behaviors of other societies were quickly used in debates about male and female behavior and desires in modern society.

Margaret Mead (1928) was a student of Franz Boas, and her work was both regarded and critiqued for its reliance on observational instead of more traditional quantitative data. Her contributions to the exploration of male and female sexual behavior, child rearing, and women's rights continue to be taught today. She proposed that every person will have three marriages in their lifetime, and while it was criticized as being supportive of divorce, she actually was innovative in proposing that for marriages to sustain, couples needed to transform their relationship at each stage of life. Ruth Benedict, another student of Boas, studied the complexity of culture through a humanistic approach. Her publication of *Race: Science and Politics* advanced the discourse on race and culture, as she argued against racist theories and advocated for more inclusive definitions of family (Benedict, 1959).

## ***Psychology and Family Science***

In contrast to anthropology, psychology emphasized the use of experimental studies and statistics to focus on human development, learning, perception, and influences on behavior (Wolman, 1960). Developing valid and reliable measures of psychological constructs was an early twentieth century goal, as the federal government funded the development of measures to evaluate and classify recruits for intellectual function in the military in World War I (Samuelson, 1977). This important accomplishment would be the foundation of the current IQ tests and expanded government funding for research and testing in psychology as well as education in the second half of the twentieth century. The technological advances of computers led to even more advanced statistical practices, and the use of census data to examine family and household trends was grounded in the field of psychology. It is important to note that the first large-scale computers on college campuses were federally funded to supported agricultural research at experiment stations. Because home economics was housed in many agricultural departments, many family and rural sociologists expanded other fields' access to these tools by working on interdisciplinary projects with psychology and education faculty.

In the beginning, the target for study for psychology was the individual, or perhaps a dyad such as the mother/child. Offering advice on parenting to a broad audience was common by the 1920s (Hall & Lindsey, 1957). Psychology and human development often included families and focused on both parenting and developmental milestones. Measurement and assessment of developmental concerns guided data that were gathered and analyzed, and studies in psychology made early use of sound and visual recordings as well as longitudinal data.

Psychology also focuses on therapeutic interventions, counseling, and treatment of learning problems, usually directed at the individual who was diagnosed with mental or behavioral problems. While the institutionalization of individuals with mental illness and/or disabilities continued as a common practice into the second half of the twentieth century, a reform movement evolved, based on research and energized by families who were unsatisfied with institutional care of their children and relatives (Parish et al., 2016). The study of family development was the impetus for some psychology scholars to specialize and identify as “family scholars.” Family scholars often belonged to a variety of professional organizations that allowed for cross-disciplinary meetings.

## ***Sociology and Family Science***

In the mid-twentieth century, sociology shifted its focus from small samples, interviews, and questionnaires focused on a single marriage/family issue, to more comprehensive sampling and theories that considered the intersection of multiple variables on family outcomes. This shift was enabled by advances in data collection,

statistics, and computing to effectively process larger samples and test more variables simultaneously (Gravassi & Gee, 2018). Sociology departments also focused on families, with many offering a general education course on marriage, modeled after Ernest Groves' first course, because it appealed to the personal interests of students. There was a niche for family research in both rural and mainstream sociology (Settles et al., 2012), and some sociology departments had family counseling clinics (Cole & Cole, 2012). Theory was seen as essential, and Talcott Parsons led early efforts toward a comprehensive sociological theory including family and individual interactions. He brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to develop a theory that tied to other disciplines including psychology (Parsons et al., 1955). The family they described was small and mobile with traditional male provider roles and female emotional caregiving roles; it followed Freudian ideas about patriarchy and was connected with early attachment studies by Bowlby (1969) that emphasized the mother as the critical attachment figure. Parsons' "structural functional theory" suggested that the isolation of modern families was due to the need to be mobile for employment and the incentive to reduce investment in extended family (Parsons et al., 1955).

However, the theory was challenged even early on. Family sociologist Marvin Sussman (1983), early in his graduate research, challenged this structural functional theory by calling attention to studies showing that ongoing connections to kin and communities were very common. Another sociologist, Bert Adams (1970), had also noted that families often kept residence within a 100-mile visitation circle of other family members, with only a few families moving cross-country. Another demographic change that countered Parson's theory was the increasing number of women returning to work. Having had large families (not the small families Parsons predicted), women wanted to improve their standard of living and support their children to pursue higher education (Sussman, 1983). They were not content with only a caregiving role, as a new wave of feminism validated women's agency in their family life.

As the structural functional theory was being promoted as a "standard," other family scholars trained in sociology (and who were often leaders or contributors to NCFR) were creating theoretical models that were more specific to the Family Science discipline. For example, Rueben Hill, examined family adjustment after the World War II and considered the role of stress and coping in the functioning of families (Hill & Hansen, 1964). He also worked with Evelyn Millis Duvall on what evolved into family development theory. Paul Glick, a statistician and demographer with the US Census, used census data to illustrate that family development theory better fit the reality of society than structural functionalism (Glick, 1987). While both Duvall and Hill had written popular books and texts for high school and college, Duvall specifically was interested in the family developmental task as being useful in college curricula that addressed the family and developed a text based on the developmental task theory (Duvall, 1957); the family development model dominated family life education through many decades and editions of college level texts within the Family Science discipline. While many family scholars have discredited structural functionalism (and it was not included in this volume or many family



theory textbooks), the theory continues to impact legal and social policies that hold the nuclear family as the “ideal” and privileges such families.

The ties mentioned here are only a few of the many interdisciplinary interactions that were facilitated by NCFR, Groves Conference, and AHEA. While this section only featured three disciplines, it should be noted that home economics, social work, demography, religion, and other related fields were involved and continue to be part of the evolution of Family Science.

## **Family Science, Theory, and Social Issues**

By the 1970s, the social issues influencing families were not new but were viewed through different theoretical lenses by researchers, policy advocates, and practitioners within the evolving field of Family Science. In 1971, a Task Force on Women’s Rights and Responsibilities chaired by Rose Somerville invited participation by NCFR members (NCFR, Annual meeting program 1971). The discourse included a push to expand family life education to keep pace with other areas of family research, specifically including families that had not been fully represented in research in the past, including Black families, cohabitation, communes, same-sex marriages, and divorced and remarried families. Family policy was similarly expanded as a specialization within Family Science. For example, family scholars were integral in fighting for no-fault divorce in the United States (Rubin & Settles, 2012b).

In 1971, the NCFR program chair, Eleanor Lucky, attempted to be more inclusive and reduce barriers for members by inviting any member to propose and organize a session. There were no limits to the number of topics or presenters – all interested researchers were accepted without review. This open acceptance allowed for the inclusion of many underrepresented topics and more diverse presenters. In addition, a number of new working groups continued after the conference met, including a key gathering on theory and methodology. The research section of NCFR had been breaking new ground in their meetings with some attention to theory, and Reuben Hill and Ivan Nye had an invitational session at the 1971 meeting to present their ideas for a theory workshop. The format was novel in that, rather than focusing on the presentation of completed research, attendees would read papers that focused on theoretical works in progress ahead of the conference, and discussion and improvement of the research would be the objective of the session. This was the foundation for the Theory Construction and Methodology Workshop (TCRM), which still meets annually immediately preceding the NCFR conference. The forum grew to include a methodology track to improve research design and analysis, the appropriate use of statistical software and avoid misuse of data. Its culture has encouraged both new and experienced scholars and all those who have a specific interest in critical analysis of theory and methods as a developmental process (Klein, 2018). The workshop’s openness to ideas in the early stages of development provided support for the deeper development of Family Science. The workshop

provided a developmental process to authors that provided constructive criticism in advance of manuscript submission for publication. Constantine (1995), writing about collaborative software development and groups process, characterized the TCRM workshop as among the “best collaborative groups” he had known, because of its openness and tradition to “enhance communication and cooperation” (p. 74).

Although theory was encouraged at all levels within the discipline, by 2000, most studies published in the NCFR journals still did not explicitly name a theoretical perspective that framed the research, and only 39.2% were explicit in using theory (Taylor & Bagd, 2005). It would not be until 2009 that the *Journal of Family Theory and Review* would be created to provide a larger forum for publication of theoretical papers and reviews (Milardo, 2009). A group of NCFR members saw the need for a publication outlet focused on family theory and proposed the journal, including founding editor Robert M. Milardo, the next editor Libby Balter Blume, and current editor Mark A. Fine. *JFTR* has a mission “to encourage integration and growth in the multidisciplinary and international domains of inquiry that define family studies” (Milardo, 2009, p. 2). It includes reviews and provides opportunities for collegiality and less traditional material (e.g., reviews of popular films or books related to family issues).

The desire to have a forum for discussion of the content, structure, and approach of family studies departments at universities also was inspired by several special program sessions at NCFR meetings throughout the 1980s (NCFR). These sessions generated interest in a summer conference in 1989 in Utah focused on Teaching Family Science in the higher education context. The conference was well attended, but the scale was too small to incorporate within NCFR and scheduled in the summer, so a separate committee was organized and the first conference of the Family Science Association (FSA) was held in 1991 (Settles, contemporaneous notes when participating on *Family Science Review* editorial board 1987–1989 and organizing committee Family Science Association 1988–1993). FSA membership included Family Science scholars that were interested in college teaching and the association published the *Family Science Review*. While the scope of the journal has changed over time, it was instrumental in the validation of the Science of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) within the FS discipline. Today, the *Family Science Review* publishes scholarly research in all areas of Family Science, as well as articles that support the dissemination of best practice in the teaching of Family Science. The Teaching Family Science conference continues to be offered by the Family Science Association (<https://www.familyscienceassociation.org>) each June and selects themes that support the advancement of teaching and learning of Family Science in higher education as well as issues of social justice and their representation in college courses. NCFR also has supported the continued discussion of the advancement of the discipline with the establishment of the Family Science Section (originally titled, Advancing Family Science, and Family Discipline in NCFR programs).

Gender and race as both social justice issues and as of scholarly importance have been critical in the development of Family Science, reaching back to the discrimination that was built into educational institutions, but challenged by family

organizations and, within these organizations, by informal and formal working groups and social interaction. The Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities was formed at the 1971 conference to discuss issues of gender. The NCFR Black caucus was also formed in the early 1970s, leading to an issue of *Family Relations* devoted to family diversity (July, 1973) and to a special issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* dedicated to research on the issues facing African American families in 1978, which, according to the editor, "investigates black families from a non-pejorative "normal" perspective" (Peters, 1979, p. 655). By 1979, the NCFR Ethnic Minorities Focus group (now Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Families) was formed, primarily focused on African American families.

Policy issues were addressed by NCFR both through the publication of research on the social issues but also through debate at the national meetings that resulted in policy recommendations and advocacy at all levels of US government and internationally. Social issues such as gender, race ethnicity, immigration, LGBTQ, aging, disabilities and health, and violence were also addressed on the conference programs. For example, at different points over the decades, the NCFR board of directors facilitated the creation of policy briefs that included both majority and minority opinions such as the NCFR paper on abortion (1971), Affirmative Action and the Equal Rights Amendment (1972), and Family Income Maintenance (1976). Other initiatives included surveys on The Family Protection Act (1981; 1982). By 1982, NCFR joined a group of professional associations to coordinate their policy work on family, the Committee of Family Organizations (COFO). COFO organized policy conferences in Washington DC (Wakefield & Kates, 1981; see also NCFR, 2021). More attention was paid to policy by adding a vice president for family policy to the board in the 1990s. In 1995, NCFR published a statement on Family Policy principles that spoke to women's rights, family, and inclusion.

Beyond equal rights in family formation and definitions, scholars that address social justice continue to debate competing interests when funding is limited and when evidence-based practice must be prioritized. In NCFR, discourse and research on policy are well integrated in the program sections and represented in the plenary and invited speakers. The Groves Conference in particular has often developed whole conferences around policy issues, and policy is an area that has grown in employment opportunities for family science graduates. The White House Conference on Families (1980) recommended a national requirement for a family impact analysis of federal policies before they reach the congressional floor (Family Impact Institute, <https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/family-impact/>); however, while there were several executive orders and legislative acts during the 1990s that address family impact, the requirement has not been enacted. As such, family scientists have not yet been recognized as having a clear role in advocating for policy beyond scholarly analysis.

Quite early in the development of the field, various handbooks on family scholarship included major sections on family theories as they were seen in various disciplines and as they related to family concerns (see Editors Introduction, chapter "Family Theories and Methodologies: A Dynamic Approach", this volume). The *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, edited by Sussman and Steinmetz (1987),

included 30 chapters, and over half of the chapters were authored by women and 5 were coauthored by women (one woman of color). This represented progress in the discipline in comparison to the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* edited by Christensen (1964), which had 24 chapters but only 3 women authors (Bernard, 1987). The range of topics grew and reflected current family experiences and mirrored the commitment of NCFR to address diversity and inclusion. The range of contributing authors began to include women scholars who had specialized in family scholarship from the start of their career, in contrast to prior generations of female scholars who came to the field later in life. Although Black scholars were participating in the meetings and publishing, progress was slower as Black scholars were still less likely to be published, find tenured positions, or be elevated to leadership roles. In response, by 1993, NCFR had established the Diversity and Inclusion committee and national initiatives to address racism and sexism in the discipline within the structures and leadership of NCFR (MacAdoo, 1993).

In 1984, there was an NCFR Task Force for the Development of a Family Discipline. Wesley Burr had put forward a suggestion of naming the field “famology” in an NCFR newsletter (1988). The discussion at the NCFR meeting attracted attention to both “famology” and family ecology, via a New York Times article reporting the presentation. The Task Force on Family Discipline recommended changing the name of the field to Family Science and the NCFR board approved this recommendation in 1985. However, the name of the organization continued (and continues) referring to Family Relations, and few departments changed their names to Family Science until the early 2000s.

The range of outlets for family science research has multiplied both for general family research and for more specialized and technical topics. From the 1920s, when a yearly review of articles on families was a short paper, to today’s searchable lists of 1000s of studies, the depth and breadth of studies on families suggest a strong scholarly underpinning to the Family Science discipline. Among the sections of NCFR, the family life education (FLE) section was always quite strong, and after decades of discussion, in 1984 NCFR formalized a set of standards for an FLE curriculum in higher education, the intent of which was to “professionalize” the field by creating a formal profession and certification that would result from the study of Family Science (Family Life Educator). In 1985, NCFR instituted a formal certification process for Family Life Educators through a portfolio review, and in 1996, formal FLE program reviews and an abbreviated certification process for graduates of a certified FLE program were established (Cassidy, 2009). While this certification is not yet tied to any regulations or certifying bodies at the state level (e.g., as is done in therapy), it was and continues to be influential in shaping curricula, experiential learning, and how Family Science is understood as a field.

The Family Science discipline articulated ten key content areas of family science. Although the purpose of this exercise originally was to guide family life education curriculum specifically, it was inclusive. That same process could inform a standard set of questions, variables, or measures recommended for inclusion in all federal data collection involving families. The census serves as a measure of households (Settles, 2005); in a similar way, the FS discipline is equipped with measures

of family and family functioning that could serve to answer questions on effectiveness, trends, and outcomes of programs and policies that have not been explicitly identified in grant proposals and funding. Often programs collect outcomes data that is tailored to the specific grant and may lose the funding if the specific outcome is not met. Family science can make clearer recommendations for policy and practice by establishing a minimum standard of outcomes for program evaluation.

By the end of the twentieth century, there were several parallel developments that strengthened the Family Science discipline and its standing among the related disciplines and in academe. The Family Science Association advanced college teaching and provided an outlet for research through its journal, currently, *The Family Science Review*. NCFR's section on family life education codified the standards and certification process for family life educators. The TCRM workshop solidified a focus on continued advancement of research methodology and theory. Continued publication and discussion of relevant social issues and their connection to policy established the efficacy of family scholars informing policy. The discipline of Family Science had become clearly identified as an appropriate umbrella for all scholarship related to families. However, the future of scholarship in Family Science is not just in those departments and colleges that carry the name but also in the many other fields where families are studied.

## The Family Science Discipline in the Twenty-First Century

In the past 20 years, family science has thrived and refers to programs and research in the field, departments and schools in higher education, and applied family research. Still, there are many who continue to prefer the term “family studies” rather than family science. At the turn of the twentieth century, Steinmetz and Peterson (2002) documented the perspectives on the field of family science itself, compiling qualitative data on 40 family scholars regarding their life and careers and published each autobiographical essay individually. In introducing the essays, they describe the scholars as from “diverse family fields” and discuss how these essays establish how the “interdisciplinary (multidisciplinary)” field is “socially constructed” (pp. xxiii–xxvi). In their *Sourcebook on Theory and Research*, Bengston et al. (2005) searched for family scholarship broadly across disciplines, and in their introductory chapter, they use the phrase “paradigms of family studies” when referencing proposals and “family studies” when referring to the field. Another example, the *Handbook of Feminist Family Studies*, uses “discipline of family studies” in its preface, the introductory paragraph, and in the editors' chapter (Allen et al., 2009). That is not to say there are not many contemporary works that refer to Family science as the discipline, but rather that the usage of family science is not universal.

Concurrently, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences continues to present their version of family science and teacher education, and the family science Association actively promotes Family Science as a collegiate unit and as a discipline. NCFR includes in its listing of Family Science programs many

different titles and descriptions and offers assistance to programs contemplating a name change to Family Science. Blume (2015), as editor of the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, notes the journal's role as an innovative outlet "in Family Science and the allied disciplines that study families such as sociology, psychology, human development, family therapy, social work, communication studies, anthropology, and many, many others" (p. 1). She has dedicated issues to exploring these other related disciplines and their ties to Family Science as a potential move "toward a transdisciplinary science" (Blume, 2014, p.1; see also Blume & Fine, chapter "Transdisciplinary Family Science", this volume). Hamon and Smith (2017) also set up the idea of Family Science as translational science, with a history of the field and the current supports and utility of Family Science as the identifier of family scholarship.

Finally, Allen and Lavender-Stott (2020) addressed the institutional challenges in teaching family life education when including politically charged topics and were straightforward in suggesting that their department's title of Human Development and Family Science "integrates a world view with critical pedagogy and feminist praxis in Family Science that explicitly calls attention to inequality, oppression, and the need to empower individual, families, communities and societies" (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020, p. 442). Buehler and Few-Demo (2018) similarly questioned what topics should be covered first in classes and curricula and found it necessary to move race, ethnicity, and gender up to the beginning of their syllabi.

The argument in this chapter is intended to provide a historical and contextual examination of the identity of the discipline that can support "next steps" for the field. Zvonkovic (2014) referred to the cycles of debates over the discipline of Family Science and advocated for greater acceptance of the interdisciplinary accomplishments and more focus on research rather than branding within the field. Here, we argue that family science will continue to be recognized and effective as a title for the discipline; however, efforts to advance the field need to be in the advancement of theory, methodology, and applied research that allow for a continued acceptance of both the history of the discipline and the interdisciplinary nature of Family Science that may need to continue acknowledging diverse names and settings.

This chapter has identified key markers in the history of the discipline that can be utilized to both inform attempts to solidify the naming and identity of the field and also secure the discipline's historical and future contributions in addressing social issues. Attempts to identify a single methodology (Sussman, 1987), a single definition of family, or a purist approach in the use of theory, have historically resulted in a narrow ability to actually describe and predict behavior. Similarly, the definition of a theory as only describing and predicting behavior was adopted more than a half century ago but does not address the need for theory to attempt to address and advocate on social problems. As Zvonkovic (2014) identified, worry over the exclusivity of family science and a strict adherence to who is and is not a family scientist dismisses the true value of the field in its ability to provide relevant knowledge that should be utilized, articulated, and interpreted into both the research and the related fields to which it should proudly align. Too much focus on the exclusive identity of family science may result in a loss of acceptance of the value of family science to

the success of related applications in Family and Consumer Sciences, family life education, and marriage and family therapy. In a review of department names that included “family,” Family and Consumer Sciences (21) and Human Development and Family Studies (26) were the only two names utilized by more than ten departments in the United States (Hans, 2014). Department chairs, deans, and provosts will have a critical role in the future of the discipline through how they articulate and name the departments and colleges (Gravassi, 2014). Still further, a more active role of researchers in not just summarizing and describing social issues but in actively advocating for evidence-based policy and practice should be realized.

While the status of an academic field is not its only rationale for moving toward clarity and consistency, it is an important arena for examining how recruitment, support, and inclusiveness can be supported by clear labels. In contrast to viewing Family Science as an instrument for parsing out an area of study, it may best be viewed as the content, insights, and tools that it makes available. Family-related research in other disciplines (Hans, 2014) can be enhanced with interdisciplinary (and transdisciplinary) research by family scientists, who can address social issues and policies and ensure that evidence is acknowledged and ethically utilized. Family Science remains vibrant, useful, and prevalent. It has and continues to serve the needs of families and will continue to be a collaborative evolution of thought, theories, and methodologies. The relevant social issues in the twenty-first century are intertwined with the history that produced Family Science, and it is Family Science that is best equipped to address them.

## References

- Adams, B. N. (1970). Isolation, function, and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 32(4), 575–597.
- Allen, K. R., & Lavender-Stott, E. S. (2020). Preparing the educators who teach about families: Engaging family science in the university setting. *Family Relations*, 69(3), 442–460.
- Allen, K. R., Lloyd, S. A., Few, A., & I. (2009). Preface and reclaiming feminist theory, method, and praxes for family studies. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies*. (pp. vii–ix & pp. 3–17). Sage.
- Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, P. (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 248–261). Sage.
- Bane, L. (1955). *The story of Isabel Bevier*. Chas. A. Bennett, Inc.
- Benedict, R. (1959). *Race: Science and politics*. The Viking Press.
- Bengtson, V. L., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Sourcebook of family theory & research*. Sage Publications.
- Bernard, J. (1983). In B. H. Settles & M. L. Liprie (Eds.), [Video]. *The development of women's studies and family sociology in higher education: An interview with Jessie Bernard*. University of Delaware.
- Bernard, J. (1987). Preface and introduction. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage & the family* (pp. xii–xiv). Plenum Press.
- Blume, L. B. (2014). Making connections: Toward a transdisciplinary family science. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(1), 1–4.
- Blume, L. B. (2015). Enter act II: JFTR, 2014–18. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7(1), 1–4.

- Boorstin, D. J. (1965). *The Americans: The national experience*. Vintage Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. Basic Books.
- Boylan, A. M. (2002). *The origins of Women's activism: New York and Boston 1797–1840*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Brown, M. M. (1995). *Philosophical studies of home economics in the United States: Our practical intellectual heritage, I & II*. Michigan State University.
- Buehler, C., & Few-Demo, A. L. (2018). Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(2), 327–329.
- Cassidy, D. (2009). Challenges in FLE: Defining and promoting the profession. In D. J. Bredehoft (Ed.), *Family life education: Integrating theory and practice*. National Council on Family Relations.
- Christensen, H. T. (1964). Development of the family field of study. In H. T. Christensen (Ed.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 3–32). Rand McNally & Company.
- Cole, C. L., & Cole, A. L. (2012). The initiation of marriage and family therapy. In R. H. Rubin & B. H. Settles (Eds.), *Groves monographs on marriage and family: Vol. 2. The groves conference on marriage and family: History and impact on family science* (pp. 63–86). University of Michigan Library.
- Constantine, L. (1995). *On peopleware*. Yourdon Press.
- Dalrymple, J. (1981). Contributions of the United States Office of Education to home economics teacher education. In E. M. Ray (Ed.), *Home economics education: Sixty significant years* (pp. 187–225). McKnight Publishing.
- Department of Labor. (1946). *Women's Bureau [Brochure]*.
- Duvall, E. M. (1957, 1967, 1971). *Family development*. J. B. Lippincott.
- Foster, L. (1991). *Women, family, and utopia*. Syracuse University Press.
- Glick, P. C. (1987). video. In B. H. Settles & M. L. Liprie (Eds.), *Demography and the family: An interview with Paul C. Glick*. University of Delaware.
- Gravassi, S. M. (2014). Locating the family field on academia's map: Taking the path toward intentional leadership or inadvertently following the road to perdition? In Gravassi, S. M., Wilson, S.M., Ganong, L. & Zvonkovic, A., Furthering the conversation on the future of the discipline of family science: Comments on the articles of Hamon & Smith and Hans. *Family Relations*, 63(3), 335–342.
- Gravassi, S. M., & Gee, G. (2018). *Land- Grant universities for the future: Higher education for the public good*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hall, C. S., & Lindsey, G. (1957). *Theories of personality*. John Wiley & Son.
- Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. S. (2017). Family science as translational science: A history of the discipline. *Family Relations*, 66(4), 550–567.
- Hans, J. C. (2014). Whither famology? Department trends across four decades. *Family Relations*, 63(3), 323–332.
- Hill, R., & Hansen, D. A. (1964). Families under stress. In H. T. Christensen & H. T. (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 782–822). Rand McNally & Company.
- Hunt, C. L. (1942, 1958). *The life of Ellen H. Richards*. American Home Economics Association.
- Kelsey, L. D., & Hearne, C. C. (1949). *Cooperative extension work*. Comstock Publishing.
- Kephart, W. M. (1982). *Extraordinary groups: The sociology of unconventional life styles* (2nd ed.). St. Martin's Press.
- Klein, D. (2018, November 7–10). *How theory construction methods have shaped the sourcebook tradition [plenary on video]*. National Council on Family Relations.
- Knowles, M. S. (1960). Historical development of adult education movement in the United States. In M. K. Knowles (Ed.), *Handbook of adult education in the United States* (pp. 7–28). Adult Education Association of USA.
- MacAdoo, H. (1993). Membership structure, diversity key issues. *NCFR Report*, 38(4), 2.
- McGavran, M. B. (1975). The role of domesticity transcended. In M. Fuller, L. M. Child, M. S. Chestnut, I. H. H. Quint, & M. Cantor (Eds.), *Men, women, and issues in American history* (Vol. 1, pp. 172–191). The Dorsey Press.



- Meacham, J. (2012). *Thomas Jefferson: The art of power*. Random House.
- Mead, M. (1928). *Coming of age in Samoa*. William Morrow & Co.
- Menand, L. (2019, August 26). The Looking Glass: How cultural anthropologists redefined humanity: A brave band of scholars set out to save us from racism and sexism. *The New Yorker*.
- Milardo, R. M. (2009). Editorial: Following a sociological imagination. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 1(1), 1–3.
- Morrill Act of 1862, 7 U.S.C. § 301 (1862). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/7/301>
- N.C.F.R. (2021). *N.C.F.R. History*. <https://www.ncfr.org/about/history>
- Nash, M. A. (2019, November 8). The dark history of land-grant universities. *The Washington Post*.
- O'Neill, W. L. (1969). *The woman movement: Feminism in the United State and England*. Quadrangle Books.
- Parish, S. L., Saville, A. W., Swaine, J. C., & Igdalsky, L. (2016). Policies and programs for children and youth with disabilities. In J. M. Jenson & M. W. Fraser (Eds.), *Social policy for children and families: A risk and resiliency perspective* (3rd ed., pp. 201–226). Sage.
- Parsons, T., Bales, R. F., with Olds, J., Zelditch, M., Jr., & Slater, P. E. (1955). *Family as socialization and interaction process*. The Free Press.
- Peters, M. F. (1979). Notes from the guest editor. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 4(4), 655–660.
- Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537. (1896). <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537>
- Rubin, R. H. (2012). African American families, ethnicity, and scholarship. In *Groves monographs on marriage and family: Vol. 2. The groves conference on marriage and family: History and impact on family science* (pp. 195–232). University of Michigan Library.
- Rubin, R. H., & Settles, B. H. (2012a). *Groves monographs on marriage and family: Vol. 2. The groves conference on marriage and family: History and impact on family science*. University of Michigan Library.
- Rubin, R. H., & Settles, B. H. (2012b). Family policy and advocacy. In R. H. Rubin & B. H. Settles (Eds.), *Groves monographs on marriage and family: Vol. 2. The groves conference on marriage and family: History and impact on family science* (pp. 87–105). University of Michigan Library.
- Samuelson, F. (1977). World War I intelligence testing and the development of psychology. *Journal of History: Behavioral Science*, 3, 274–282.
- Settles, B. H. (2005). USA families. In B. Adams & J. Trost (Eds.), *Handbook of world families* (pp. 560–601). Sage.
- Settles, B. H., Rubin, R., & Sibbison, V. H. (2012). The groves way: History, process and family process. In R. H. Rubin & B. H. Settles (Eds.), *Groves monographs on marriage and family: Vol. 2. The groves conference on marriage and family: History and impact on family science* (pp. 1–38). University of Michigan Library.
- Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 11. (1917). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/11>
- Smith-Lever Act, 7 U.S.C. 341. (1914). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/7/341>
- Stein, S. (2017). A colonial history of the higher education present: Rethinking land-grant institutions through processes of accumulation and relations of conquest. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(2), 212–228.
- Steinmetz, S. K., & Peterson, G. W. (Eds.). (2002). *Pioneering paths in the study of families*. The Haworth Press.
- Sussman, M. B. (1983). [video]. The development of family studies in higher education: An interview with Marvin Sussman. In I. B. H. Settles & M. L. Liprie (Eds.), *Demography and the family: An interview with Paul C. Glick*. University of Delaware.
- Sussman, M. B. (1987). Introduction: From the catbird seat: Observations on marriage and the family. In M. B. Sussman & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage & the family* (pp. xxxi–xlii). Plenum Press.
- Sussman, M. B., & Steinmetz, S. K. (Eds.). (1987). *Handbook of marriage and the family*. Plenum Press.

- Taylor, A. C., & Bagd, A. (2005). The lack of explicit theory on family scholarship. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 22–25). Sage Publications.
- Wakefield, R. A., & Kates, A. M. (1981). *The Washington Memo of the Coalition of Family Organizations*, 3.
- White House Conference on Families. (1980). *White House Conference on Families: Listening to America's Families, Action for the 80's. A Summary of the Report to the President, Congress and Families of the Nation*.
- Wolman, B. B. (1960). *Contemporary theories and systems in psychology*. Harper & Row.
- Zvonkovic, A. (2014). The perennial problem of the field of family studies in an academic environment in constant flux: Broadening the scope of our ragtag group of starfighters. In Gravassi, S. M. Wilson, S.M., Ganong, L. & Zvonkovic, A., *Furthering the conversation on the future of the discipline of family science: Comments on the articles of Hamon & Smith and Hans. Family Relations*, 63(3), 335–342.

**Part II**  
**The Great Depression, World War, and the**  
**Rise of Pragmatism in Family Science**

# Family Resilience Theory



Carolyn S. Henry and Amanda W. Harrist

A key challenge for individuals and families is to maintain and restore competent functioning despite adversities or transitions. Inspired by individual resilience, family stress, family systems, and related perspectives, family scholars and other professionals are increasingly embracing family resilience theory. Family resilience theory focuses on mobilizing or accessing capabilities to function effectively despite significant risk (Henry et al., 2015). This theory provides a framework for research and practice addressing specific challenges (or risks), adaptive success, and processes fostering adaptive success (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). We provide a synopsis of family resilience theory, addressing the origins and historical development; core assumptions, key constructs, and interrelations among constructs; main problems, questions, and limitations; examples of research; and areas for future growth.

## Origins and Historical Development of Family Resilience Theory

Family resilience theory emerged primarily through the integration of ideas from *three origins*—individual resilience work, general systems theory applied to families, and family stress theory—with additional influences from ecosystems, developmental, and symbolic interaction theories (Boss et al., 2017; Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Walsh, 2016). Contemporary family resilience theory incorporates ideas from related scholarship during four eras: precursors to family resilience (1920s to the 1950s); advancements in family systems, family development, and family stress

---

C. S. Henry (✉) · A. W. Harrist

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Sciences, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA

e-mail: [carolyn.henry@okstate.edu](mailto:carolyn.henry@okstate.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_4)

theories, and individual resilience (1960s–1983); Waves 1 and 2 of family resilience theory (1984–2012); and Wave 3 of family resilience theory (2013–present).

### ***1920s–1950s: Precursors to Family Resilience Theory***

Precursors to family resilience theory occurred during World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-World War II expansion with the emergence of symbolic interaction, family stress theory, family developmental theory, and general systems theory. Prior to the 1920s, families were viewed as part of the broader social structure fulfilling key functions for societies such as producing and socializing new members. Propositions from symbolic interactionism (see Adamsons & Carter, chapter “[Symbolic Interactionism](#)”, this volume) were integrated into family resilience theory, namely, that (a) social interactions are the basic unit of analysis; (b) the sense of self (and shared symbolic meaning) arises through interactions first with significant others, then with generalized others; (c) subjective appraisals of situations are critical to understanding individual and relational experiences; and (d) the sense of self and others evolves through ongoing interactions (Mead, 1934; Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Hess and Handel’s (1959) classic research identified key aspects of the interplay of self and family in family interaction: establishing patterns of separation and connection; congruent images based on discussion; boundaries between family and the world; evolving interaction patterns around key themes; and key biosocial family issues.

Another precursor of family resilience theory was the incorporation of symbolic interactionist constructs to identify why families with seemingly similar stressors had different experiences (see Boss et al., 2017; Nichols, 2013). The ABC-X model of family stress explained the interconnectedness of family stressors, psychosocial resources, and perceptions of situations (Hill, 1958). Meanwhile, family developmental theory incorporated ideas about life cycles, social systems, human development, life span and life course, and life events to identify normative transitions and developmental tasks across family life cycles (see Martin, 2018).

Family perspectives also influenced therapy fields. In the 1930s, selected professionals moved from viewing mental health as an individual issue toward a focus on the role of families as relational systems (see Ackerman, 1967). In the mid-1940s, biologist von Bertalanffy proposed general systems theory, conceptualizing living systems as open, adapting, and changing over time (von Bertalanffy, 1968). By the 1950s, family therapy pioneers including Ackerman, Bateson, Bowen, Haley, Jackson, Weakland, and Satir embraced this systemic approach by conceptualizing mental health issues as occurring in concert with interactions in overall family systems rather than within only individuals or dyadic relationships (see Olson, 1970).

## ***1960s–1983: Advancements in Family Systems, Family Development, and Family Stress Theories and the Emergence of Individual Resilience***

In the USA, the 1960s and 1970s brought social unrest and changes, questioning of social norms and processes, and a focus on social disparities; with this, the foundations of family resilience progressed. The increasing application of general systems constructs in family theory and the integration of both systems and family developmental constructs into family stress theory occurred, combined with increased attention to social changes and family diversity. Pioneering resilience researchers Garnezy, Rutter, and Werner experienced World War II as children or young adults and later researched resilience, focusing on children functioning adequately despite adversities such as disadvantage, poverty, or health problems (see Masten & Cicchetti, 2016).

By 1980, the application of general systems theory to families emerged as a major family theory focused on the dynamic, rather than static, aspects of families (Holman & Burr, 1980). Advances included (a) applying systems constructs to family experiences, including changes and the processes of restoring balance (Hill, 1971); (b) identifying affect, power, and meaning as aspects of family interaction self-regulated by feedback loops; (c) self-report and clinical assessments of typologies of family functioning (see Olson et al., 2019); and (d) the development of ecological theories on families (see White et al., 2019).

Several developments prompted integration across *family development*, *family systems*, *family stress*, and *ecological* theories in the early 1980s. Specifically, (a) family developmental theory began to lose favor due to the focus on positions, roles, and developmental tasks in a singular family form (viz., a married couple with children born soon after marriage), (b) family systems and family developmental theories were increasingly integrated, and (c) family developmental theory and ecological perspectives were integrated into family stress theory. In addition, a family therapy systems-based approach to family life cycles focused on change through emotional transitions, as well as extending family life cycles to diverse family forms, racial and ethnic groups, and socioeconomic levels (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980).

Family stress theory increasingly addressed “normative” family stress based on family life cycle transitions and unpredictable stressors. Family systems assumptions such as circular causality and family processes as reflexive rather than linear became part of family stress theory, challenging earlier critiques of family stress theory as deterministic. Restoring balance in family systems after stress was conceptualized as involving two phases: (a) *adjustment* or minor change such as adding new responsibilities to existing responsibilities, often continuing or exacerbating vulnerability, and (b) *adaptation* or transformational change such as families synergizing to do together what they could not do alone. In addition, the intertwined levels of family dynamics (individuals, family system, and family-community fit) were conceptualized as representing the system construct of *wholeness* (McCubbin

& Patterson, 1983). Family resources (e.g., positive communication, enjoyable time together, spiritual well-being, successful stress, or crisis management) increasingly were viewed as family strengths (see DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

By the late 1970s, resilience emerged as a research area, initially focusing on empirically identifying the traits of resilient children. For example, Werner's classic longitudinal Kauai study showed that child resilience was fostered by low distress/emotionality; high vigor, drive, and sociability; easy temperament; positive self-concept; internal locus of control; special talents and hobbies; achievement motivation and success; above-average language and problem-solving skills; planning and foresight; strong religious orientation/faith; and connectedness to a caring and competent parent, grandparent, sibling, teacher, peer, or mentor (see Werner, 2000).

### ***1984–2012: Waves 1 and 2 of Family Resilience Theory Building***

Both family stress and systems theories were established approaches to studying family stress and crisis as a focus on family resilience emerged. In Wave 1 of family resilience research, McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) coined the term *resilient families* to describe families functioning well despite developmental or unpredictable changes. These authors identified three family typologies, each combining high and low levels of two family qualities. These were (a) *balanced families*, combining family bonding and flexibility; (b) *rhythmic families*, combining regularity and valuing family time and routines; and (c) *regenerative families*, combining family coherence (a sense of life as “comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful,” Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988, p. 79) and family hardiness, or a commitment to explore new challenges through a sense of control over and meaningfulness in life.

In Wave 2, family resilience theory advanced through the integration of individual resilience constructs with family stress and family systems theories (see Henry et al., 2015). McCubbin and McCubbin (1993) incorporated their typologies of resilient families into the *resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation* which emphasized family processes and meanings; the interface of risk with vulnerabilities; short-term adjustment; and, when needed, long-term adaptation. In this model, resilience involved recursive processes such that efforts to manage risk might inadvertently increase vulnerabilities or yield new risks, potentially making long-term positive adaptation challenging.

Hawley and DeHaan (1996) integrated constructs from individual resilience, family systems, and family stress theories to conceptualize resilience at the overall family system level, and Walsh (1998) developed a family resilience framework to guide family therapy. Meanwhile, resilience constructs and assumptions were integrated into earlier family stress models (see Nichols, 2013). Family resilience was viewed as occurring within ecosystems and involving resisting and managing risk, reframing adversity to increase empowerment, and mobilizing or accessing new protection to restore—and in some cases, improve—functioning after significant risk (Boss, 2002; Walsh, 1998).

Patterson (2002) distinguished two key aspects of family resilience, *family resilience processes* (how families manage risk through protection) and *family resilience outcomes* (how families function short- and long-term despite risk). Resilience processes involve protecting against the potential negative effects of significant risk through increasing family perceptions of a balance between demands and capabilities (Patterson, 2002). Walsh (1998) conceptualized three types of family adaptive processes with potential to help families forge through adversity: organizational, belief, and communication processes. Resilience outcomes, emphasized in Wave 2 of family resilience, focused on how family processes and meanings combined with stressors to initially disrupt family functioning and later foster positive family adaptation (Patterson, 2002).

In Wave 2, family resilience was established as a family systems, strengths-focused, ecologically and family-life-cycle-sensitive approach to understanding how families function effectively during or after adversity. Multiple family resilience models emerged, emphasizing the centrality of family perceptions and dynamics to how families experience and navigate risk (see Boss, 2002; McCubbin & McCubbin, 2013; Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 1998). Family resilience grew as a conceptual approach as leading family journals (*Family Process*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Family Relations*) published special issues/sections on family resilience. Meanwhile, individual resilience work focused on resilience processes and interventions and moved toward multilevel, multidisciplinary research including advances in genetics, epigenetics, and brain activity as well as identifying resilience trajectories using complex multivariate data with multiple indicators of adaptation (see Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Yet, an overarching family resilience theory encompassing key elements of existing models was lacking.

### ***2013–Present: Wave 3 of Family Resilience Theory Building***

In Wave 3, scholars extended and identified opportunities for theory development, research, and applications in family resilience. For example, Becvar's (2013) edited volume on family resilience addressed multiple risk areas (e.g., family form, military families, grief and loss, challenges in ability, trauma) and challenges in specific racial/ethnic groups, signaling the transition into Wave 3. Progress in Wave 3 thus far includes (a) the development of the family resilience model (FRM) encompassing key constructs from across existing family resilience models and frameworks, (b) increasing synergies between family resilience and individual resilience theories and research, and (c) situating family resilience in the emerging multilevel, multidisciplinary field of resilience science.

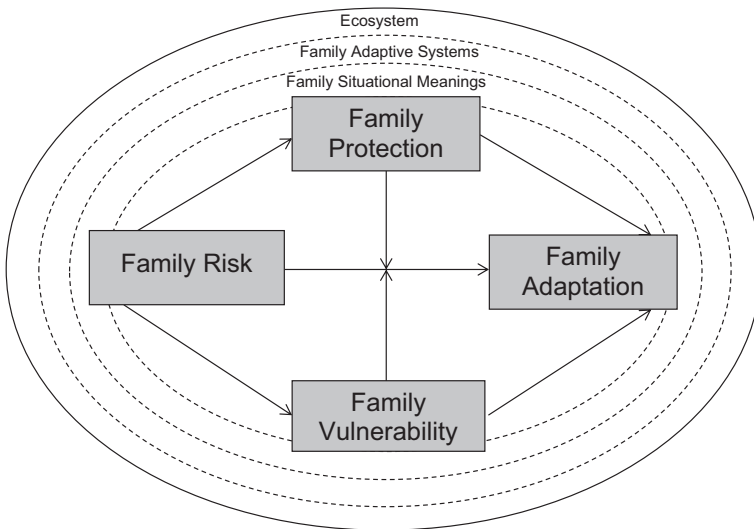
The Center for Family Resilience at Oklahoma State University held a Chautauqua in 2013 for scholars to consider how individual and family resilience scholarship might inform each other. Stimulated by this deliberation, a special issue of *Family Relations* (see Criss et al., 2015) included theoretical papers on strengthening child



and family resilience work (Henry et al., 2015; Masten & Monn, 2015). These articles demonstrated that in the same way individual resilience occurs through the ordinary magic of human adaptive systems (e.g., self-regulation, attachment, schools; Masten & Monn, 2015), family resilience emerges through the ordinary magic of family adaptive systems (e.g., emotion, control, meaning, maintenance, stress response; Henry et al., 2015). Resilience in individuals or families was defined as “the capacity for successful adaptation to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2018, p. 2).

### The Family Resilience Model (FRM)

Several models and frameworks of family resilience were evident as Wave 2 ended. Yet, an overarching model of family resilience as both processes and outcome (or adaptation) awaited clarification. Thus, Henry et al. (2015) proposed the FRM (Fig. 1) to provide an overarching schema for family resilience theory that encompasses key constructs from existing family resilience models.



Notes: Ecosystems range from the molecular to the broad context; the model can be applied to either short-term or long term family adaptation to family risk.

**Fig. 1** The family resilience model. (From Henry et al. 2015, p. 31. Copyright @ 2015 by John Wiley and Sons. Reprinted with permission. Notes: Ecosystems range from the molecular to the broad context; the model can be applied to either short-term or long-term family adaptation to family risk)

## **Core Assumptions, Key Constructs, and Interrelationships of Constructs**

In this section, we provide an overview of the (a) core assumptions, (b) key constructs, and (c) interrelations among major constructs of family resilience theory based on the FRM.

### ***Core Assumptions***

Although family resilience theory has historical roots as noted above, it offers a unique perspective. Here we highlight six assumptions that are specific to family resilience theory.

#### **Significant Risk Is Necessary for Family Resilience**

Greater risk increases the potential for negative outcomes, whereas family resilience involves adequate family functioning despite significant risk (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987).

#### **Family Strengths Are Central to Family Resilience**

Families have strengths that can be identified, developed, and mobilized to prevent or reduce the severity of risk and foster positive adaptation to significant risk (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Walsh, 1998). Based on *salutogenesis*, or a focus on well-being rather than pathology (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988), research and intervention for families that experience significant risk emphasize protection against potential negative outcomes.

#### **Family Meaning Is Central to Risk and Resilience**

Shared family meanings are co-constructed through interaction as families experience, make meaning of, and foster positive adaptation despite risk (Hill, 1958; Walsh, 1998).

#### **Family Resilience Involves Both Processes and Outcomes Over Time**

Resilience is a process over time rather than an enduring quality of families. Resilience processes that show short-term positive family adaptation may or may not yield long-term positive adaptation (Patterson, 2002). Resilience may take

varied pathways or trajectories in families experiencing specific risks. In response to risk, short- and long-term resilience outcomes range from returning to a family's previous level of functioning to experiencing post-traumatic growth (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Walsh, 1998). Competent functioning despite adversity within part of a family system does not imply competent functioning across system levels.

### **The Developmental Timing of Risk Is Important to Resilience**

The developmental timing of adversity in family and individual life cycles is important to resilience processes and outcomes (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Walsh, 1998). The protection available to individuals or families varies, in part, depending on family developmental processes that arise at or about a particular phase of the family life cycle.

### **Family Diversity Has External and Internal Influences on Family Risk and Resilience**

Diversities in families influence family risk and resilience both internally and externally and intersectionalities among forms of diversity may be present in specific families. Diversity includes ethnicity, race, socioeconomic level, family form, and other aspects of diversity. Internally, family meaning systems include family world-views, identities, and situational meanings (Boss et al., 2017; Walsh, 1998). External influences include policies and resources available to support families with diverse qualities. Families may experience intersectionality between two or more forms of diversity such as culture and family form that may yield unique strengths or deficits in family ecosystems (Few-Demo, 2014).

### ***Key Constructs and Interrelations Among Major Constructs***

Based on a review of conceptualizations of both individual and family resilience, we (with A. S. Morris) developed the FRM as an overarching conceptual model addressing family resilience processes and outcomes that can serve as the foundation for family resilience theory. The FRM illustrates how the key constructs of family resilience work in concert with family situational meanings, family adaptive systems, and ecosystems to explain family resilience processes and outcomes (Henry et al., 2015). Key concepts in the FRM are summarized below.

**Family Risk**

*Risk* refers to statuses or specific stressors (internal or external) that increase the odds for negative outcomes (Rutter, 1987). *Significant risk* occurs as family systems experience disruption in their steady state of functioning, evidenced by family perceptions that the demands of risk(s) and other vulnerabilities exceed family capabilities for addressing the risk (Patterson, 2002; see Table 1 for examples of family risk).

**Table 1** Examples of family risk and adaptation at multiple family system levels

Family system levels	Examples of family risk <sup>a</sup>		Examples of indicators of adaptation
	Internal <sup>b</sup>	External <sup>c</sup>	
Individual	Three or more life stressors (status or situations); life cycle transitions, disabilities, limited life skills; trauma; loss; vulnerabilities in one or more human adaptive systems	Oppression based on “isms” (e.g., ethnic, racial, religion, age, abilities or disabilities); job loss; limited connections to social support	Progression through life cycle with adequate functioning across multiple human adaptive systems; satisfaction with life
Family systems and subsystems	Family relational patterns that inhibit effective communication or problem-solving; family violence, untimely loss; family life cycle transitions; psychological or physical absence of a family member; vulnerabilities in one or more family adaptive systems	Military family member deployed or missing; estrangement of family members based on differences in worldviews	Progression through family life cycle with adequate functioning across multiple family adaptive systems; satisfaction with family life
Family-ecosystem interface	Social isolation; family beliefs that prohibit access to available resources; limited sense of family coherence or hardiness; language barriers; tensions between family and proximal services	Natural disasters, mass trauma, war, economic recession; unsafe neighborhood; lack of access to critical social, educational, or medical or religious supports	Family engages in ways that at least minimally meet needs in multiple aspects of the proximal ecosystem (e.g., school, work, neighborhood, religious group), family system needs consistent with their identity and ecosystem standards; satisfaction in relationships with ecosystems

Table based upon an integration of conceptualizations from Boss (2002), Henry et al. (2015), Hill (1958), McCubbin and Patterson (1983), and McGoldrick and Shibusawa (2012)

<sup>a</sup>Family risk varies by **type** (*normative developmental/predictable vs. catastrophic/situational/unexpected, ambiguous vs. clear, and volitional vs. non-volitional*) **duration** (*chronic vs. acute*) and **density** (*cumulative vs. isolated*)

<sup>b</sup>Risk over which families have some control

<sup>c</sup>Risks over which families have little or no control

## Family Resilience

Family resilience occurs as family systems address disturbances in family systems in ways that create or restore adequate short- and long-term functioning across family adaptive systems at multiple family systems levels (Henry et al., 2015; Patterson, 2002). Family resilience is multidimensional involving (a) accessing and navigating culturally meaningful protection and (b) showing culturally relevant family functioning outcomes (or adaptation) despite significant risk and other vulnerabilities (Henry et al., 2015).

## Family Protection

*Protection* refers to factors or processes involved in building capacity for resilience or, when significant risk is present, decreasing negative outcomes. Protection arises through processes embedded in *family adaptive systems* that develop and regulate ongoing family dynamics and interface with ecosystems (Harrist et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2015). Two aspects of family protection are evident: (a) *protective factors and processes* or qualities and mechanisms with promise to promote resilience by lessening the potential detrimental effects of adversity or facilitating positive outcomes despite risk; and (b) *promotive factors and processes* or qualities and mechanisms that promote family competence when significant risk is not present (also known as family strengths). Protective factors and processes foster positive outcomes for families and their members despite risk. Promotive factors and processes are similar to protective factors and processes except they function at all levels of risk (functioning as statistical main effects), whereas protective factors and processes operate at levels of high risk (functioning in statistical interaction effects on outcomes; Masten, 2001).

Internal family strengths that may afford protection include nurturing and caring; connections to others; establishing and maintaining boundaries, expectations, and integrity; agency and active coping; regulation of self and family; hope, faith, and optimism; meaning-making and a sense of meaning of life; positive views of self and family; and rules and rituals (see Masten, 2018). Protection through family-ecosystem interfaces involves multiple levels such as family-microsystemic (e.g., communication), family-mesosystemic (e.g., family involvement with school), family-exosystemic (e.g., media), and family-macrosystemic (e.g., cultural beliefs) interactions. The abilities of families to respond to adversity involve both their physical and social ecologies such as community resources (e.g., educational, social, and health services) and consideration of the positive family impact of social policies ranging from local to national levels (Ungar, 2021).

## Family Vulnerabilities

*Vulnerabilities* are factors or processes that increase the potential for family hardships associated with significant risk (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). *Cumulative risks* (or the pileup of stressors) and the progression of negative chain reactions (or *risk chains*) sequentially follow the initial risk, increasing vulnerability to risk (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993; Rutter, 1987).

## Family Adaptation

*Adaptation* refers to short- and long-term positive or negative outcomes associated with significant risk (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Outcomes also can serve as ongoing vulnerabilities or protection against later risk (Boss, 2002; Henry et al., 2015).

## Family Situational Meanings

As families experience risk and resilience, a *collective meaning* of situations arises. Over time, the meaning-making process typically involves an initial assessment followed by redefinition to increase manageability (Patterson & Garwick, 1994). Family situational meanings occur in concert with ongoing family meaning systems involving family worldviews and identities. Shared meaning arises through within-family interactions. For example, shared family stories may involve some members buying into the stories, while others may modify them; some may talk with others outside the family, while others try to suppress discussion of stories about difficulties or failures. Family members communicate with each other until a shared meaning emerges. This process can empower families to make meaning of their adversity.

## Family Adaptive Systems (FAS)

Family adaptive systems (FAS) are complex interaction patterns among family members and ecosystems and are central in developing responses to risk (Henry et al., 2015). FAS arise through interaction and regulate basic areas of family functioning (emotion, control, meaning, and maintenance; see Table 2 for examples) and a meta-level family stress response system that regulates feedback loops as families navigate day-to-day stressors, mild chronic stressors, or vulnerabilities over time (Henry et al., 2015). Family protection and vulnerability arise within FAS or through family-proximal ecosystem interfaces and can be developed, mobilized, or modified as families experience risk. FAS are evident in the routines and rituals that regulate daily family life and may require modification as families address adversity (Harrist et al., 2018).

**Table 2** Examples of family resilience protection and vulnerability at multiple levels of family adaptive systems

Family adaptive systems (FAS)			
<i>Emotion system</i>			
<i>Function:</i> Family emotional climate that regulates emotions and connections with others.			
<i>Protection<sup>a</sup>:</i> Interactions among family members show support, encouragement, commitment, and cooperation; emotion is valued and emotional intelligence is taught			
Family system levels	<i>Individual family member</i>	<i>Overall family system<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Family-ecosystem interface</i>
Examples of protection <sup>b</sup>	Adults and child <sup>c</sup> exhibit emotional intelligence; adults aware of own emotion, practice mindfulness, express positive and negative emotions, refrain from emotional manipulation; child regulates emotions, expresses emotional needs	Family is cohesive; family relationships are warm and close; family members allowed to express emotion; couples have open communication, supporting each other's work and personal goals; parents are sensitively responsive toward child, validate child emotions, teach and model emotional intelligence to child, and are supportive of child activities	Family receives social support from extended family, friends, neighbors; child care and schools are safe supportive of child socioemotional development; religious organizations are inclusive, supportive, and non-shaming; community has mental health resources
Examples of vulnerability	Dysregulation of anger, worry, or sadness; emotional manipulation; repressed emotion; poor emotion understanding	Family is enmeshed or disengaged; frequent or unresolved conflict; expression of emotion discouraged; partner in couple not respected; parent punitive or dismissive of child emotion; parent uses love withdrawal as punishment	Family is socially isolated; neighborhood is not safe; child is bullied at school; community is exclusive or intolerant
<i>Control system</i>			
<i>Function:</i> Climate of authority and power creating boundaries, roles, rules, and behavior.			
<i>Protection<sup>b</sup>:</i> Mutual respect, clear authority structure and family rules (with acceptable variation), effective problem-solving and decision-making processes			
Family system level	<i>Individual family member</i>	<i>Overall family system<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Family ecosystem</i>

(continued)

**Table 2** (continued)

Family adaptive systems (FAS)			
Examples of protection <sup>b</sup>	Individuals know/enact roles; adult and child roles differ; members respect each other; parents have approp. Authority; child views parental authority as legitimate; marital roles acceptable to both partners; all members/ voices heard	Expectations for family roles are clearly communicated between marital partners and from parent to child; couples make decisions together; child perspectives are solicited and valued when family rules are being made; parents monitor child behavior appropriately; parenting style is authoritative and discipline is enacted by both parents; rules are adjusted to reflect developmental/ contextual change	Expectations for adult and child roles are in line with community expectations; non-parental adults support teaching and discipline of child; parent education, intervention services are available in community; social institutions allow for diverse family authority structure
Examples of vulnerability	Adult and child role expectations are unclear; child is parentified, view parental authority as illegitimate, and is overly submissive or rebellious; individuals externalize problems	Family roles are rigid; power used coercively, capriciously, or manipulatively in couples or between parent and child; parenting is authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful; punishment inconsistent or harsh; child views not solicited or respected when rules or family decisions made; older siblings in charge of younger; child expected to be submissive without question; family rules are inflexible	Family is isolated due to closed or rigid boundaries; social institutions do not allow family autonomy in decision making; parents are not supported in teaching and discipline of child; social service agencies viewed as intrusive or punitive rather than supportive
<i>Meaning system</i>			
<i>Function:</i> Process for creating a family world view, identity; family perceptions of situations are central. <i>Protection</i> <sup>b</sup> : Making meaning of how the family fits into the broader scheme of life and specific situations; positive, strengths-based outlook			
Family system level:	<i>Individual family member</i>	<i>Overall family system</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>Family ecosystem</i>

(continued)



**Table 2** (continued)

Family adaptive systems (FAS)			
Examples of protection <sup>b</sup>	Adults have consolidated individual identities; adolescents are allowed to experience identity moratorium; child is exposed to a diversity of ideologies, lifestyles, work roles, and gender roles	Family identity coherent, reflects shared history, values; is inclusive of all members; parents socialize child regarding gender, ethnicity; parents teach spiritual/religious beliefs, tell stories about ancestral beliefs, practices; family routines, rituals develop and support a family identity; family world view is positive and optimistic while based in reality	Family identity incorporates or fits social expectations; family identity incorporates a role in larger social contexts (e.g., extended family, community) and institutions (e.g., religious group, educational)
Examples of vulnerability	Adults or adolescents have diffused or foreclosed identity; parents discourage adolescents from identity exploration in 1 or > area; child exposure to ideologies, social roles other than those in their family is limited	Coherent family-level identity lacking or rigid; meaning-making not open to outside feedback; parents are dismissive or punitive regarding child meaning-making and adolescent identity search; divergence of ideologies are not accepted; autonomy-granting is difficult for parents; world views between couples are so different they regularly create conflict	Family identity is at odds with social or cultural expectations; family world view leads to exclusion of others or social isolation of the family

*Maintenance system*

*Function:* Processes or statuses that meet basic needs in families and protect vulnerable members. *Protection<sup>b</sup>:* Family interaction patterns and responsibilities are organized such that basic needs are met

Family system level	<i>Individual family member</i>	<i>Overall family system<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Family ecosystem</i>
---------------------	---------------------------------	--	-------------------------

(continued)

**Table 2** (continued)

Family adaptive systems (FAS)			
Examples of protection <sup>b</sup>	Family members have adequate nutrition, shelter, and clothing; adults and child engage in regular physical activity; members are healthy or have health needs met; child is being educated; adults plan and save for their retirement	Family home is safe and secure; parents provide proper nutrition to child; parents assess child health and education needs and seek intervention when needed; parents support child learning; at least one adult in the family is employed; each member of couple ensures the other will be provided for in case of untimely death; adult child involved in care of aging parents or extended family members	Neighborhood is safe, provides space for physical activity; accessible food outlets; food banks provide nutritious options; city/state/federal governments attuned to needs of individuals with intellectual or develop. Disabilities, people living in poverty, and older citizens
Examples of vulnerability	Members undernourished; health problems, disabilities not dealt with; adults or child abuses drugs, alcohol; child associates with dangerous peers, gangs; adults struggle to handle money responsibly; child employment interferes with socioemotional needs	Family does not engage in family meals together; parents do not facilitate preventative medical/dental practices in child; parents do not ensure child compliance to medical/dental treatment or intervention; parents do not monitor child activities; child does not disclose activities to parents; parents are uninvolved in child educational efforts; couples do not share own needs ahead of family needs	Lack of high-quality housing or day care for aging adults; unemployment rate is high; discriminatory practices hamper education, employment, or housing opportunities; societal situation (e.g., war) endangers citizens; social services are scarce or difficult to access

*Family stress system*

*Function:* Meta-level process addressing change in family interaction patterns as systems. Acts as system or sub-systems attempts to move toward a new steady state or return to previous state, serving as a facilitator of either resistance or adaptation to change

*Notes.* <sup>a</sup>Here we refer to family subsystems (marital, parent-child, and sibling dyads; parent-child-sibling triad, etc.) as well as the overall family system, examples include families with at least one child in the home

<sup>b</sup>Includes promotive processes and factors

<sup>c</sup>Includes adolescents

Processes within FAS can be protective or increase vulnerability. For example, a family identity that focuses on togetherness may be protective when threatened with separation (e.g., parental incarceration) or a vulnerability if the family identity results in isolation (see Table 2).

## Ecosystems

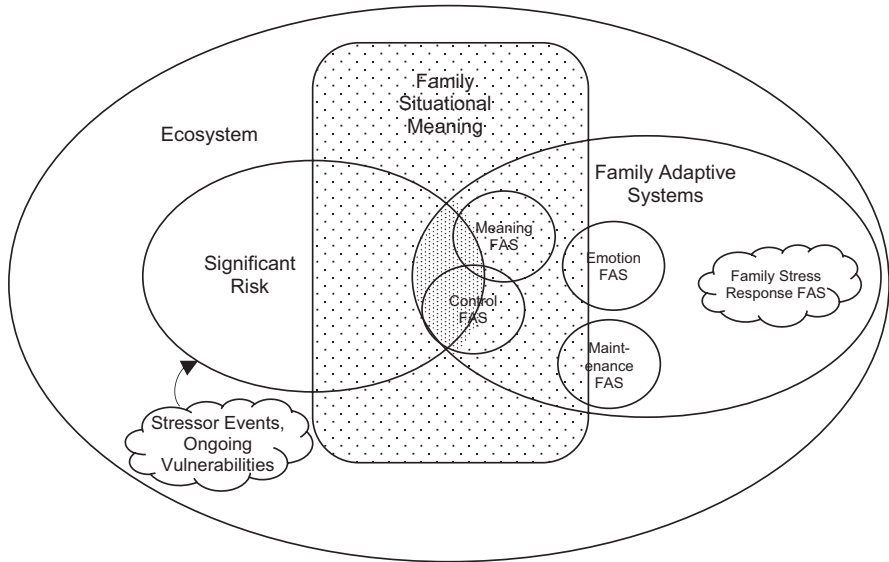
*Ecosystems* are the social-biological-physical systems of families (Henry et al., 2015). Family systems directly interact with *proximal ecosystems* (neighborhood, school, medical service providers), whereas *distal ecosystems* interact with family systems in less direct ways (e.g., educational systems, broader structural inequities; Henry et al., 2018).

## Interrelations of Key Constructs: The Family Resilience Model (FRM)

Henry et al. (2015) combined these constructs in an overarching model, the FRM. The FRM presents family resilience (a) interacting and varying in concert with protections and vulnerabilities within multiple intertwined FAS and (b) occurring in concert with family situational meanings that bridge risks and resilience with FAS and ecosystems. Ongoing, developmental, or situational stressors can disrupt balance in one or more basic FAS. Additional FAS will likely become evident as family resilience theory continues to advance.

FAS exist before significant risk, react to risk exposure, and are interrelated systems through which protective or vulnerability processes arise (see Fig. 2). The family stress response FAS manages function of the other FAS (and other protective factors and processes) as they respond to everyday and mild chronic stressors and vulnerabilities (Henry et al., 2015). However, when risk (or risk pileup) becomes significant, the FRM constructs can interact as resilience processes (Harrist et al., 2018). An example is illustrated in Fig. 2, where a risk has evoked two FAS—control and meaning systems—that were most salient in the family system's response to risk; their interaction with the risk is orchestrated by the family stress response system. At the same time, families often develop a shared family situational meaning that requires later reframing to make the situation more manageable or to align with the family identity and worldview (Patterson & Garwick, 1994). Family resilience occurs if (and when) family adaptation (represented as the inner gray leaf-shaped area in Fig. 2) is positive.

Figure 2 punctuates the ongoing FAS as having a starting and ending point. Yet, reflexive processes are involved and circular in nature. Indicators of family resilience (a) can be assessed at multiple levels (individuals, subsystems, overall systems, and family-ecosystem interfaces); (b) involve the interplay of significant risk, protection, vulnerability, adaptation, situational meanings, FAS, and ecosystem interfaces; and (c) include the potential of multiple directions of influence (e.g., if adaptation occurs only at one family system level this sets the stage for potential



**Fig. 2** Family resilience model punctuated at point of responding to significant risk. The risk has evoked two family adaptive systems (control and meaning FAS). (From Harrist et al., 2018, p. 227. Copyright © 2018 American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission)

stressors to arise at other levels). Therefore, FAS are useful both for conceptualizing ongoing family functioning when risk is not evident and when significant risk or vulnerabilities are evident, or to conceptualize short- and long-term trajectories of resilience outcomes.

### Areas of Debate

As with any theoretical perspective, family resilience is not without controversy. We highlight two key areas: the trait-process-outcome debate and the family-structural debate.

The language in extant literature shows the continuation of a *trait-process-outcome debate*: Are families resilient, do they exhibit resiliency, and/or what are the indicators of resilience if it is considered the outcome of a process? Ungar (2011) described the “trait-process” portion of the debate regarding whether resilience is static in families that function well despite adversity or if resilience involves processes. Rutter (1987) argued that resilience is not simply present or absent, since resilience may vary within or across time, domains, and risks. Patterson (2002) clarified that resilience can be a process or outcome, noting the term resiliency generally refers to resilience (or protective) processes whereas resilience connotes positive adaptation (or outcomes) despite adversity. We advocate moving beyond the

trait approach in favor of Patterson's (2002) twofold concept of resilience processes and outcomes and avoiding the term resiliency which is sometimes used to describe an ongoing static trait of families (Rutter, 1987).

Second, the *family-structural debate* focuses on whether family resilience occurs based primarily on internal family strengths or if structural strengths in ecosystems also are involved. For example, during a pandemic, families may experience financial, caregiving, and confinement-related stressors (Prine et al., 2020). Protection may involve internal family strengths based in the FAS such as emotional connectedness (family emotion system) or a positive outlook (family meaning system). Yet, structural protection may be critical, for example, to address income loss when a family member loses their job. Further, social disparities in healthcare systems may limit access to prevention or care for families in racial or ethnic minority groups or rural communities. Thus, it is difficult to determine if positive outcomes despite adversity are due to family strengths or to other factors such as structural policies or access to educational, health, social, or economic resources or opportunities (Ungar, 2021). Such protection often requires multiple protective processes at multiple system levels.

## **Main Questions of Family Resilience Theory**

Masten (2018) identified three major questions critical to resilience theory, research, and intervention: (a) What are the challenges (or risks)? (b) What fosters adaptive success? and (c) What does adaptive success look like? Each of these questions involves taking into account the meanings that specific family systems attribute to their challenges as well as cultural and ecosystem sensitivity. Thus, these questions can be addressed by examining family adaptive processes including emotion, control, meaning, and maintenance systems that involve multiple system levels: individual family members, family subsystems, overall family systems, and ecosystems (Harrist et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2015).

## **Aspects of Family Life Most Clearly Addressed by Family Resilience Theory**

Linking family adaptive systems to specific protective processes holds promise for understanding how specific family dynamics such as connectedness, flexibility, hardiness, coherence, family time, routines, and rituals interface with family functioning during and after adversity. Ultimately, family resilience may involve interfaces with ecosystems that support how families develop and mobilize protective processes to address adversity.

Pioneering family resilience scholars including the McCubbins, Patterson, Walsh, and Boss compiled reviews showing the promise of examining existing literature, identifying new areas of research guided by family resilience theory, and suggesting several pathways for future research. These paths lead to at least four focused areas of family research using family resilience theory: acute stressors, chronic stressors, the combination of acute and chronic stressors, and cultural considerations. These paths tend to involve one or more occasions of the activation of the family stress response system and the involvement of multiple FAS.

### *Acute Stressors*

One path to family resilience research focuses on families experiencing acute stressors such as natural disasters, community violence, economic crises, sudden relocation due to war, and the outbreak of contagious disease. With acute stressors, family trauma can occur in at least four ways: (a) through catastrophe directly impacting a family as a whole, (b) vicariously as family members experience trauma and are unable to contact other family members (e.g., war), (c) as secondary trauma when other family members connect with a traumatized family member, or (d) when families experience trauma within the home (e.g., incest).

Although resilience-focused trauma work often focuses on individuals, a family systems lens is increasingly used (Boss et al., 2017; Figley & Kiser, 2013; Nelson Goff et al., 2020). Family meaning-making can play a central role in facilitating family system recovery from an acute stressor (see Henry et al., 2015). Family system healing, recovery and reorganization after trauma, and sometimes post-traumatic growth draw on protection grounded in family adaptive systems and ecosystems. Family resilience during or after an acute stressor or trauma involves both short- and long-term protective processes such as “continued adaptability and flexibility in the long term” (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996, p. 4) or restoring or creating new family routines and rituals (Harrist et al., 2018).

### *Chronic Stressors*

Another path leads to the study of families experiencing ongoing stressors, for example, military families, families living in poverty, or those dealing with ongoing health and disability issues. An illustration of family resilience-based work addressing ongoing stressors is facilitating the reintegration of military families after separation as well as after physical or psychological injury (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Saltzman et al.’s (2011) resilience intervention for military families focused on interrupting risk chains, increasing shared understanding of military deployment,

and addressing impaired family communication, parenting, family organization, and lack of guiding belief systems.

Poverty is another ongoing family stressor (or pileup of chronic stressors). A conceptual review revealed several factors that might foster family resilience against poverty: support networks with shared community, family, and individual resources; financial management (money-management skills, use of financial assistance, and health care); creatively providing for family members' basic needs; warmth and support among members; and a sense of hope despite economic challenges (Black & Lobo, 2008). Interfaces of family systems with supports such as structural changes that empower families to address the challenges of poverty through policies, economic, or community support also are part of family resilience in the face of poverty.

A specific area of ongoing stress where there is a growing interest in family resilience is in the study of families facing chronic illness or disability, particularly among children or older family members. In these studies, family process—the patterns of relationships within the family system—tends to be the focus. Reviews of empirical studies using a family resilience frame are available on topics such as childhood illness and disability (Rolland & Walsh, 2006), mental illness (Saunders, 2003), and family caregiving (Henry et al., 2018). Welch and Harrist's (2016) edited volume applied family resilience theory to clinical and research contexts by focusing on the ongoing stressor of chronic illness (e.g., premature birth, sickle cell disease, cystic fibrosis, breast cancer) and unique health issues in foster care and later-life families. Chesla and Leonard (2017) concluded that family resilience theory can help orient families new to the challenges of chronic illness, normalize their responses, and illustrate new patterns of family adaptation. For example, in the face of an unexpected diagnosis, narrative descriptions of resilient family response patterns that differ from what the family sees as being possible may provide pragmatic approaches that increase the prospects for family resilience.

### *Acute and Chronic Stressors*

A third path to family resilience occurs when the combination of acute and chronic stressors continues over time. One example is effective family functioning while living with ambiguous loss, or the complex grief associated with a discrepancy between the physical and psychological presence of a family member (see Mendenhall & Boss, chapter “[Ambiguous Loss and Applications](#)”, this volume). Family resilience with ambiguous loss involves living well with unanswered questions or lack of closure (see Boss, 2016) involving multiple FAS (e.g., emotion, meaning).

### ***Culture-and-Ethnicity-Based Stress and Trauma***

A fourth path that family resilience scientists are being encouraged to take is in the area of culture and ethnicity, including but not limited to structural oppression or historical trauma (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2013). For example, McCubbin and McCubbin (2005) used a family resilience approach to address culture, ethnic identity, other family factors, and post-traumatic growth in relation to adaptation of indigenous Hawaiian families (see McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005). Shared ethnic identity predicted other resilience processes such as family coherence and problem-solving communication. Other cultural characteristics, for example, the strong relational view of life—where individuals and families are intertwined with nature, the spiritual world, and society—and the practice of storytelling are integral to achieving harmony, a cultural indicator of resilience, among this population (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005).

Family worldviews and practices are mechanisms by which resilience is culturally specific and taught across generations (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2013). For example, the value and interpretation of “cohesiveness” vary depending on time, place, and history; yet very few empirical studies have examined family cohesion as a function of culture in risk situations. McCubbin and McCubbin brought ethnicity to the forefront of family resilience in the relational and resilience theory of ethnic family systems (R&RTEFS) which includes historic trauma as a stressor across generations. Similarly, an increase in long-term vulnerabilities in many African American families in the USA may involve chronic adversity (e.g., discrimination) through systematic oppression. For example, Arditto and Johnson (2020) call for research and policy addressing parental incarceration that contextualizes developmental and family strengths within systemic issues such as discrimination and oppression. Thus, family resilience to chronic adversity may require addressing such adverse environments.

### **The Growing Edge: Future Directions of Family Resilience Theory**

In this chapter, we reviewed the history and development of family resilience theory as well as progress through two waves and the current third wave of family resilience. We now turn to promising growth areas within Wave 3 in five areas: (a) expanded integration of resilience constructs, (b) time, place, culture, and ecosystems, (c) family resilience and systemic trauma, (d) biopsychosocial systems and family resilience, and (e) prevention and intervention.



## ***Expanded Integration of Resilience Constructs***

In Wave 3 of family resilience theory, one area for growth is more fully integrating additional resilience constructs including trajectories, turning points, steeling effects, cascades, and differential impact. Trajectories are the short- and long-term pathways of family functioning from risk to adaptation that often include disorganization on the pathway to recovery or reorganization (Hill, 1958). Bonanno (2005) distinguished among four types of trajectories: *resilience* (a brief period of disequilibrium, but continued healthy functioning), (b) *recovery* (quick return to the pre-risk state), (c) *delayed disruption* in normal functioning, or (d) *chronic disruption* in functioning.

*Turning points* are experiences that create change in the quality or direction of a family's trajectory. Turning points after adversity may occur as families progress from disorganization due to risk toward reorganization (Boss et al., 2017). Family resilience does not always involve turning points, but if it does, the turning points can be opportunities for meaning-making and creating (positive or negative) family life cycle effects (Boss, 2002).

Although adversity generally is viewed as increasing vulnerability, it is possible that *steeling effects* can occur such that families are strengthened through adversity (Rutter, 2012). Steeling effects may involve physiological or psychological processes in individual family members or increasing family capabilities in the FAS through addressing external risk or embracing protection. Steeling effects may be more likely if risk exposure is brief rather than occurring in a context of ongoing adversity (Rutter, 2012). This concept is similar to the notion that family post-traumatic growth—a greater capacity to navigate future challenges after adversity—is a possible resilience outcome (Walsh, 2016). Other resilience scholars conclude that adequate functioning after adversity shows resilience, and expecting increased capacity may overlook resilience among some families showing competence (but not growth) despite adversity (Masten, 2018).

*Cascades* of risk or resilience are the cumulative consequences of multiple transactions within systems (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Cascades may spread across multiple domains of family functioning (i.e., multiple FAS), levels of family systems, and/or generations (Doty et al., 2017).

*Differential impact* refers to how, when vulnerabilities within a family system vary, so does the ability of the system to use resources and affect positive change (Ungar, 2021). Thus, protective opportunities may be available to all families in a particular ecosystem (e.g., parent-teacher conferences at school), but differences within family systems (e.g., family work schedules, form, or flexibility) may preclude access or yield different outcomes. Alternatively, structural barriers may exist such that opportunities intended for all in an ecosystem may fall short of this goal without systemic transformation (Anderson, 2019). Anderson argues that interventions directed to helping families effectively manage adversity involving racism need to be complimented by social justice efforts designed to address challenges such as trust and historical oppression. Further, efforts that initially appear to foster

positive adaptation in the short term or in one family member could create dependency rather than empowerment within a family system. Sustaining positive adaptation may involve addressing multiple levels of family systems (individuals, subsystems, overall system, and family-ecosystem interface) as well as addressing underlying social justice issues.

### ***Time, Place, Culture, and Ecosystems***

Another path for further development of family resilience theory is a more central role for the concepts of time, place, and culture. Internal and external ecosystems as well as time and place for specific family experiences may influence whether or not particular processes are protective against specific risks and indicators of positive adaptation (Boss et al., 2017; Ungar, 2011). Examples include the inclusion of culture with a greater emphasis on historic trauma and systemic oppression, and moving from deficit-focused toward inclusive strengths perspectives in research and professional practice with families with multiple forms of diversity (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2013). Also, research on how families develop a sense of connecting the past, present, and future after mass trauma is needed (Landau, 2013).

### ***Family Resilience and Systemic Trauma***

Another promising path is pursuing the synergies of family resilience and systemic trauma theories. Figley and Kaiser's (2013) family adaptation to trauma model addresses both process and outcomes ranging from thriving to maintaining to struggling. When mass trauma occurs in communities through natural disasters or other traumatic events, families benefit from exosystemic healing supports (Figley & Kiser, 2013). Building culturally sensitive bridges across multiple system levels is likely to be important to post-trauma healing (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016).

### ***Biopsychosocial Systems and Family Resilience***

Technological and statistical advances open the door for increased specification of how the complex interplay of biopsychosocial, neurobiological, genetic, and epigenetic factors, and processes within family systems hold potential for resilience (see Reiss, 2016). Genetics predispose individuals toward differential sensitivity to risk and potential for resilience, while epigenetics describes how genetics play out as individuals with specific genetic qualities interact with their families and ecosystems. Social stress (e.g., racism, depression, father absence), for example, appears

to accelerate telomere shortening, which is associated with later poor health of individuals, but also can be examined at the family systems level (Reiss, 2016).

Ha and Granger (2016) offered a model of how, in stressful environments such as high family conflict, positive outcomes may be fostered through attunement and co-regulation of family members' biological stress processes. Regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis and sympathetic nervous system in one family member can facilitate regulation in another member as they share experiences and are physiologically reactive to each other. In turn, the malleability of individual's biological stress systems holds potential for fostering resilience through processes such as family members' providing social buffering of stress to modify processes in the HPA axis (Hostinar et al., 2014).

Guided by an integration of ideas from research on dyadic synchrony, early adversity and trauma, biopsychosocial development, and risk and resilience, Morris et al. (2018) developed a conceptual model of the intergenerational pathways for both parent and child risk and resilience. Extending this model to address multiple system levels holds potential for addressing family resilience. For example, both parent and child brain circuitry are involved in child emotion regulation (Kerr et al., 2019). Thus, additional research holds potential to extend this type of research to include interactions among multiple family members.

### ***Prevention and Intervention***

A final proposed path to advancing Wave 3 is to consolidate and test prevention and intervention programs designed to build the capacity to withstand or recover from adversity. Five strategies meriting investigation follow. *Risk-focused strategies* alter risk and build adaptive success through addressing low-level stress, reducing risk exposure, or risk chains. *Resource-focused strategies* mobilize family strengths to protect against negative outcomes. *Process-focused strategies* focus on one or more FAS. Strategies for *facilitating family progression through turning points* target changing trajectories from risk and vulnerability toward protection and adaptation. Last is the strategy of guiding families in *reframing family situational meanings* to redefine adversity in ways that empower progress toward positive adaptation (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Patterson, 2002; Rutter, 1987; Walsh, 2016).

In this chapter, we presented family resilience theory as a valuable approach to guide research and practice on how families can navigate adversity and show positive adaptation in both the short- and long-term. The association between family risk and adaptation may vary according to protections and vulnerabilities, and each of these constructs occurs in concert with family situational meanings, ongoing FAS, and broader ecosystems. We anticipate continued growth in the application of family resilience theory to address both acute and chronic family stressors and identify directions for continued refinement of the theory, research, and application.

## References

- Ackerman, N. W. (1967). The emergence of family diagnosis and treatment: A personal view. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, *4*, 125–129.
- Anderson, L. A. (2019). Rethinking resilience theory in African American families: Fostering positive adaptations and transformative social justice. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, *11*, 385–397.
- Antonovsky, A., & Sourani, T. (1988). Family sense of coherence and family adaptation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *50*, 79–92.
- Arditti, J. A., & Johnson, E. I. (2020). A family resilience agenda for understanding and responding to parental incarceration. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication.
- Becvar, D. S. (Ed.). (2013). *Handbook of family resilience*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Black, K., & Lobo, M. (2008). A conceptual review of family resilience factors. *Journal of Family Nursing*, *14*, 33–55.
- Bonanno, G. A. (2005). Resilience in the face of potential trauma. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *14*, 135–138.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Boss, P. (2016). The context and process of theory development: The story of ambiguous loss. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *8*, 269–286.
- Boss, P., Bryant, C., & Mancini, J. (2017). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Carter, E. A., & McGoldrick, M. (1980). *The family life cycle: A framework for family therapy*. Gardner Press. Distributed by Halstead Press.
- Chesla, C. A., & Leonard, V. (2017). Using a life-world approach to understand family resilience. In G. L. Welch & A. W. Harrist (Eds.), *Family resilience and chronic illness: Interdisciplinary and translational perspectives* (pp. 1–17). Springer.
- Criss, M. M., Henry, C. S., Harrist, A. W., & Larzelere, R. E. (2015). Interdisciplinary and innovative approaches to strengthening family and individual resilience: An introduction to the special issue. *Family Relations*, *64*, 1–4.
- DeFrain, J., & Asay, S. M. (2007). Strong families around the world: An introduction to the family strengths perspective. *Marriage and Family Review*, *41*, 1–10.
- Doty, J. L., Davis, L., & Arditti, J. A. (2017). Cascading resilience: Leverage points in promoting parent and child well-being. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *9*, 111–126.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *6*, 169–183.
- Figley, C. R., & Kiser, L. J. (2013). *Helping traumatized families*. Routledge.
- Ha, T., & Granger, D. A. (2016). Family relations, stress, and vulnerability: Biobehavioral implications for prevention and practice. *Family Relations*, *65*, 9–23.
- Harrist, A. W., Henry, C. S., Liu, C., & Morris, A. S. (2018). Family resilience: The power of rituals and routines in family adaptive systems. In B. H. Fiese (Ed.), *The APA handbook of contemporary family psychology: Foundations, methods, and changing forms, volume 1* (pp. 223–239). American Psychological Association Press.
- Hawley, D. R., & DeHaan, L. (1996). Toward a definition of family resilience: Integrating life-span and family perspectives. *Family Process*, *35*, 283–298.
- Henry, C. S., Hubbard, R. L., Struckmeyer, K. M., & Spencer, T. A. (2018). Family resilience and caregiving. In A. W. Harrist & S. M. Wilson (Series Eds.) & W. A. Bailey & A. W. Harrist, (Vol. Eds.), *Emerging issues in family and individual resilience: Vol. 2. Family caregiving: Fostering resilience across the life course* (pp. 1–26). Springer.
- Henry, C. S., Morris, A. S., & Harrist, A. W. (2015). Family resilience: Moving into the third wave. *Family Relations*, *64*, 22–43.
- Hess, R. D., & Handel, G. (1959). *Family worlds*. University of Chicago Press.

- Hill, R. (1958). Social stress and the family: 1. Generic features of families under stress. *Social Casework, 49*, 139–150.
- Hill, R. (1971). Modern systems theory and the family: A confrontation. *Information (International Social Science Council), 10*, 7–26.
- Holman, T. B., & Burr, W. R. (1980). Beyond the beyond: The growth of family theories in the 1970s. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42*, 729–741.
- Hostinar, C. E., Sullivan, R. M., & Gunnar, M. R. (2014). Psychobiological mechanisms underlying the social buffering of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical axis: A review of animal models and human studies across development. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*, 256–282.
- Kerr, K. L., Ratliff, E. L., Cosgrove, K. T., Bodurka, J., Morris, A. S., & Simmons, W. K. (2019). Parental influences on neural mechanisms underlying emotion regulation. *Trends in Neuroscience and Education, 16*.
- Landau, J. L. (2013). Family and community resilience relative to the experience of mass trauma: Connectedness to family and culture of origin as the core components of healing. In D. Becvar (Ed.), *Handbook of family resilience* (pp. 459–480). Springer.
- Martin, T. F. (2018). Family development theory 30 years later. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 10*, 49–69.
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*, 227–238.
- Masten, A. S. (2018). Resilience theory and research on children and families: Past, present, and promise. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*, 12–31.
- Masten, A. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2016). Resilience in development: Progress and transformation. In D. Cicchetti (Ed.), *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, resilience, and intervention* (pp. 271–333). Wiley.
- Masten, A. S., & Coatsworth, J. D. (1998). The development of competence in favorable and unfavorable environments: Lessons from research on successful children. *American Psychologist, 53*, 205–220.
- Masten, A. S., & Monn, A. R. (2015). Child and family resilience: A call for integrated science, practice, and professional training. *Family Relations, 64*, 5–21.
- McCubbin, H. I., & McCubbin, M. A. (1988). Typologies of resilient families: Emerging roles of social class and ethnicity. *Family Relations, 37*, 247–254.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage & Family Review, 6*, 7–37.
- McCubbin, L. D., & McCubbin, H. I. (2005). Culture and ethnic identity in family resilience: Dynamic processes in trauma and transformation of indigenous people. In M. Ungar (Ed.), *Handbook for working with children and youth: Pathways to resilience across cultures and contexts* (pp. 27–44). Sage.
- McCubbin, L. D., & McCubbin, H. I. (2013). Resilience in ethnic family systems: A relational theory for research and practice. In D. S. Becvar (Ed.), *Handbook of family resilience* (pp. 175–195). Springer.
- McCubbin, M. A., & McCubbin, H. I. (1993). Families coping with illness: The resiliency model of family stress, adjustment, and adaptation. In C. B. Danielson, B. Hamel-Bissell, & P. Winstead-Fry (Eds.), *Families, health, and illness: Perspectives on coping and intervention* (pp. 21–63). C.V. Mosby.
- McGoldrick, M., & Shibusawa, T. (2012). The family life cycle. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (4th ed., pp. 375–398). Guilford.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Morris, A. S., Treat, A., Hays-Grudo, J., Chesher, T., Williamson, A. C., & Mendez, J. (2018). Integrating research and theory on early relationships to guide intervention and prevention. In A. S. Morris & A. C. Williamson (Eds.), *Building early social and emotional relationships with infants and toddlers: Integrating research and practice* (pp. 1–25). Springer Nature.
- Nelson Goff, B., Ruhlmann, L. M., Dekel, R., & Huxman, S. A. J. (2020). Trauma, posttraumatic stress, and family systems. In K. S. Wampler, M. Rastogi, & R. Singh (Eds.), *The handbook of systemic family therapy*. Wiley.

- Nichols, W. C. (2013). Roads to understanding family resilience: From the 1920s to the twenty-first century. In D. S. Becvar (Ed.), *Handbook of family resilience* (pp. 3–16). Springer.
- Olson, D. H. (1970). Marital and family therapy: Integrative review and critique. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *32*, 501–538.
- Olson, D. H., Waldvogel, L., & Schlieff, M. (2019). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: An update. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *11*, 199–211.
- Patterson, J. M. (2002). Integrating family resilience and family stress theory. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *64*, 349–360.
- Patterson, J. M., & Garwick, A. W. (1994). Levels of meaning in family stress theory. *Family Process*, *33*, 387–304.
- Prime, H., Wade, M., & Browne, D. T. (2020). Risk and resilience in family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*, *75*(5), 631–643.
- Reiss, D. (2016). Genetics and family systems: Articulation and disarticulation. In D. Cicchetti (Ed.), *Developmental psychopathology: Developmental neuroscience, Vol. 2* (3rd ed., pp. 339–377). Wiley.
- Riggs, S. A., & Riggs, D. S. (2011). Risk and resilience in military families experiencing deployment: The role of the family attachment network. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *25*, 675–687.
- Rolland, J. S., & Walsh, F. (2006). Facilitating family resilience with childhood illness and disability. *Current Opinions in Pediatrics*, *18*, 527–438.
- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *57*, 316–331.
- Rutter, M. (2012). Resilience as a dynamic concept. *Development and Psychopathology*, *24*, 335–344.
- Saltzman, W. R., Lester, P., Beardslee, W. R., Layne, C. M., Woodward, K., & Nash, W. P. (2011). Mechanisms of risk and resilience in military families: Theoretical and empirical basis of a family-focused resilience enhancement program. *Clinical Child Family Psychology Review*, *14*, 213–230.
- Saunders, J. C. (2003). Families living with severe mental illness: A literature review. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, *24*, 175–198.
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. Knopf.
- Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *81*, 1–17.
- Ungar, M. (Ed.). (2021). *Multisystemic resilience: Adaptation and transformation in contexts of change*. Oxford University Press.
- von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General systems theory*. George Braziller.
- Walsh, F. (1998). *Strengthening family resilience*. Guilford.
- Walsh, F. (2016). *Strengthening family resilience* (3rd ed.). Guilford.
- Welch, G. L., & Harrist, A. W. (Eds.). (2016). *Emerging issues in family and individual resilience: Vol. 1. Resilience amongst families facing chronic health challenges. Interdisciplinary and translational perspectives*. Springer.
- Werner, E. E. (2000). Protective factors and individual resilience. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 115–132). Cambridge University Press.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). *Family theories: An introduction* (5th ed.). Sage.

# Application: Resilience Among Sibling Caregivers



**Mamta Saxena**

The idea of supporting your family members (particularly those that are genetically related) is universal, and therefore, in most cultures taking care of your brothers or sisters is a standard family practice. In collectivistic cultures with high maternal mortality rates, older siblings, especially sisters, take on a primary caregiver role, aka alloparent (Weisner et al., 1977), or are often designated to be the helpers-at-the-nest, who assist in taking care of siblings (Turke, 1988). In the USA, siblings have fewer obligations in typically developing families, but in the families of individuals with disabilities, sibling relationship patterns and roles are more likely to conform to those of alloparents or helpers-at-the-nest. Therefore, it is no surprise that 72% of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs) prefer to reside with siblings after their parents' death (Tanis, 2020). Although siblings contribute extensively to the quality of life of individuals with IDD, their own needs are discounted due to increasing demands on limited state and federal resources (The State of the States in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2019). Limited outside support and resources cause stress and vulnerabilities in some siblings (Tanis, 2020), while others adapt to caregiving responsibilities effectively and report feeling empowered (Saxena et al., 2019). Thus, a risk and resilience framework is an excellent fit for examining sibling caregivers. Here, the Family Resilience Model (Henry et al., 2015) is applied to examinations of both vulnerabilities (risk factors) and adaptations (promotive factors) of sibling caregivers. Applying this lens to sibling caregivers highlights the need for community resources to support resilience among sibling caregivers.

In the current chapter, the term caregiving encompasses “the expenditure of time or effort by siblings to support the individuals with IDD on a daily or intermittent

---

M. Saxena (✉)

Department of Human Development, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, State University of New York Oswego, Oswego, NY, USA  
e-mail: [mamta.saxena@oswego.edu](mailto:mamta.saxena@oswego.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_5)

93

basis” (Saxena et al., 2019, p. 2). A sense of empowerment integrates having adequate and appropriate attitudes, skills, and knowledge to navigate and access resources for caregiving, resulting in a higher sense of control and agency over life events and lower perceptions of stress (Koren et al., 1992). The term resilience refers to a(n) individual’s/family’s adaptation to stressful events (Henry et al., 2015). Resilience among sibling caregivers incorporates the cumulative impact of vulnerabilities and adaptations at each level (i.e., individual, family, and community), influencing the sustainability of caregiving and the caregiver’s mental health. Given below are a few illustrations of vulnerabilities and adaptations of sibling caregivers in the empirical literature.

## Vulnerabilities and Sibling Caregivers

One key individual factor associated with stress and termination of care is the gender of the sibling caregiver. Adult female siblings are more vulnerable as they are more likely to be caregivers (Lee et al., 2019) and consistently maintain relationships with individuals with IDD. They often begin caregiving at a young age, and it can be both self-imposed and situationally stipulated. Young girls are socialized to take care of their brothers or sisters with IDDs (Brody et al., 1991), and so they are more likely to co-reside with and provide care to them (Krauss et al., 1996). Because caregiving is often unpaid, it contributes to caregivers’ financial difficulties and stress via competing caregiving, household, and employment responsibilities, or neglect of personal health and family life (AARP, 2020). Unsurprisingly, adult female caregivers report higher levels of anxiety and depression (Tomeny et al., 2016).

At a family level, parents who experience heightened stress due to the greater physical and psychological demands of raising a child with IDDs (Feldman & Aunos, 2020) may inadvertently neglect their other children or have unrealistically high expectations regarding academic performance and assistance with chores and caregiving. Differential parental treatment and expectations can contribute to resentment and deterioration of relationships among all family members, resulting in higher stress, externalizing/internalizing behaviors, and lower likelihood of siblings providing future care (Conger & Conger, 1994; Rivers & Stoneman, 2008).

In terms of community-level vulnerabilities, cultures may differ in their beliefs and values toward caregiving and meaning-making of the experience of a family member with a disability (Saxena & Adamsons, 2013). For example, Lee et al. (2021) found that Latinx, Asian American, and African American families in the USA tend to emphasize *familism*; therefore, parents expect themselves and their children to provide current and future care for family members with IDDs. However, growing up in the USA also exposes their children to more individualistic American values, potentially leading the typically developing adults and their parents to have divergent views on caregiving. If adult siblings then are forced to make sacrifices of



their personal or professional goals, it can result in higher stress and disrupted caregiving.

## Adaptations and Sibling Caregivers

Despite the abovementioned potential vulnerabilities, many siblings reconcile effectively i.e., decide to caregive and report lower stress and higher motivations to continue caregiving because they experience higher levels of psychological growth (Findler & Vardi, 2009) and life enhancements (Mauldin & Saxena, 2017). For example, adult sibling caregivers have reported “symbolic reciprocity”; even though individuals with IDD are unable to provide tangible benefits to their siblings, sibling caregivers report indirect gains in terms of better understanding of disability and diversity, increased humility and compassion, a boost in self-esteem, and a sense of achievement (Meyer & Holl, 2014; Mauldin & Saxena, 2017, p. 2225).

At a family level, ethnic and racial background and access to community resources also may buffer individual and family vulnerabilities. For example, Black families tend to have higher levels of support from family and friends, leading to positive meaning-making, and Black siblings reported being more resilient to stress than White siblings (Richardson & Stoneman, 2019, as cited in Lee et al., 2021). Notably, in the presence of adequate resources and support, there is a striking decrease in stress among White siblings (Heller et al., 2015; Kilmer et al., 2010), positively impacting their mental health and motivations to provide care.

Positive adaptations at the individual and family level often propel siblings to be advocates and sometimes even service providers at a community level, further enhancing their empowerment and resilience. Sibling caregivers often have greater empathy and understanding of the disability field, leading them to pursue careers in disability studies or special education; in turn, professional training in/for these careers offers caregivers a more sophisticated understanding of disabilities; improves information, skills, and knowledge; and enhances siblings’ relational context (Chambers, 2007). Sibling caregivers also can gain resilience through community sibling support programs, which strengthen a sense of connectedness and empowerment and lessen stress by imparting resources for social networks, information, skills, and advocacy opportunities, and by countering social isolation (Burke et al., 2020).

## Conclusions

Overall, the USA recognizes the needs of individuals with disabilities, but it falls short of providing adequate services to families of individuals with disabilities. Sibling caregivers often experience constraints at the individual, family, and community levels, which can negatively impact their ability to provide care, mental

health, and overall resilience. Nevertheless, many siblings adapt and experience growth because of positive meaning-making and family and community support systems and resources. Applications of the Family Resilience Model emphasize that to sustain resilience among sibling caregivers, their support needs cannot be dismissed, and programs that assist sibling caregivers are vital.

## References

- Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., Davis, C. H., & Crapps, J. M. (1991). Observations of the role relations and heavier between older children with mental retardation and their younger siblings. *American Journal of Mental Retardation, 95*, 527–536.
- Burke, M. M., Lee, C., Carlson, S. R., & Arnold, C. K. (2020). Exploring the preliminary outcomes of a sibling leadership program for adult siblings of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities, 66*(1), 82–89.
- Chambers, C. R. (2007). Siblings of individuals with disabilities who enter careers in the disability field. *Teacher Education & Special Education, 30*(3), 115–127.
- Conger, K. J., & Conger, R. D. (1994). Differential parenting and change in sibling differences in delinquency. *Journal of Family Psychology, 8*(3), 287–302.
- Feldman, M. A., & Aunos, M. (2020). Recent trends and future directions in research regarding parents with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Current Developmental Disorders, 7*, 173–181.
- Findler, L., & Vardi, A. (2009). Psychological growth among siblings of children with and without intellectual disabilities. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 47*(1), 1–12.
- Heller, T., Gibbons, H. M., & Fisher, D. (2015). Caregiving and family support interventions: Crossing networks of aging and developmental disabilities. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 53*(5), 329–345.
- Henry, C. S., Morris, A. S., & Harrist, A. W. (2015). Family resilience: Moving into the third wave. *Family Relations, 64*, 22–43.
- Kilmer, R. P., Cook, J. R., Palamaro, M. E., & Kane, S. R. (2010). Factors associated with positive adjustment in siblings of children with severe emotional disturbance: The roles of family resources and community life. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 80*(4), 473–481.
- Koren, P. E., DeChillo, N., & Friesen, B. J. (1992). Measuring empowerment in families whose children have emotional disabilities: A brief questionnaire. *Rehabilitation Psychology, 37*(4), 305–321.
- Krauss, M. W., Seltzer, M. M., & Gordon, R. M. (1996). Binding ties: The role of adult siblings in persons with mental retardation. *Mental Retardation, 34*, 83–93.
- Lee, C. E., Burke, M. M., & Arnold, C. K. (2019). Examining the relation between disability severity among older adults with disabilities and sibling caregiving. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 44*, 224–236.
- Lee, C. E., Hagiwara, M., & Black, H. (2021). A scoping review of cross-cultural experiences of siblings of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 112*, 103916–103916.
- Mauldin, L., & Saxena, M. (2017). Mutual exchange: Caregiving and life enhancement in siblings of individuals with developmental disabilities. *Journal of Family Issues, 39*(8), 2232–2264.
- Meyer, D., & Holl, E. (2014). *The sibling survival guide: Indispensable information for brothers and sisters of adults with disabilities*. Woodbine House.
- National Alliance for Caregiving. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/info-2020/caregiving-in-the-united-states.html>

- Rivers, J. W., & Stoneman, Z. (2008). Child temperaments, differential parenting, and the sibling relationships of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38(9), 1740–1750.
- Saxena, M., & Adamsons, K. (2013). Bioecological framework and siblings of individuals with disabilities. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 5, 300–316.
- Saxena, M., Farrell, A. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). An empirical examination of caregiving processes and outcomes among adult siblings of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *OBM Geriatrics*, 3(2), 1–17.
- Tanis, S. E. (2020). The state of the states in intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Data Brief 2020 (3)*. Retrieved from [https://stateofthestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/IL-SLN-Brief\\_3.26.2020.pdf](https://stateofthestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/IL-SLN-Brief_3.26.2020.pdf)
- The State of the States in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Data Brief. (2019). Retrieved from <https://fddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/State-of-the-State-Report.pdf>
- Tomeny, T. S., Baker, L. K., Barry, T. D., Eldred, S. W., & Rankin, J. A. (2016). Emotional and behavioral functioning of typically developing sisters of children with autism spectrum disorder: The roles of ASD severity, parental stress, and marital status. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 32, 130–142.
- Turke, P. W. (1988). Helpers at the nest: Childcare networks on Ifaluk. In *Human reproductive behavior: A Darwinian perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weisner, T. S., Gallimore, R., Bacon, M. K., Barry, H., III, Bell, C., Novaes, S. C., & Williams, T. R. (1977). My brother's keeper: Child and sibling caretaking [and comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 18, 169–190.

# Conceptualizing Family Stress: A Trend Toward Greater Context



Chalandra M. Bryant and Christiana I. Awosan

The past few years, particularly 2020 and 2021, were fraught with events that, for many individuals and families, evoked stress: a pandemic killing millions; a spike in the number of assaults on Asian Americans during the pandemic; schools, restaurants, gyms, theaters, and other businesses closing in an effort to slow the spread of a virus; many individuals unemployed indefinitely because of business shutdowns (some closed temporarily, some permanently); educational setbacks for thousands of children struggling with remote learning; social unrest sparked by heinous injustices; political uprisings; and mobs of mostly White people (some carrying rebel flags) rioting on Capitol Hill, breaking windows, and unlawfully entering federal buildings (NBC News, 2021; PBS News Hour, 2021). That is a mere snapshot of recent history; this is context. Many events occurred earlier. Between 2014 and 2015, hate crimes against Muslims increased by 67% (Sidahmed, 2016). In August 2017, White supremacists marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, shouting racist and anti-Semitic epithets; a car deliberately rammed through a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old taking a stand against hate (Dwilson, 2017). Between 2013 and the beginning of 2019, 128 members of the transgender community were killed, 80% of whom were People of Color (Christensen, 2019). This, too, is context.

We cannot say that these events evoked feelings of stress in everyone, lest we forget that stress is about perceptions. One must perceive an event (or circumstance) as being a stressor. While these events left some families traumatized and immobile,

---

C. M. Bryant (✉)

Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development,  
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA  
e-mail: [cmbryant@umn.edu](mailto:cmbryant@umn.edu)

C. I. Awosan

Department of Social Work & Marriage and Family Therapy, School of Arts and Science,  
Iona College, New Rochelle, NY, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_6)

those same events energized and mobilized others (in both positive and negative ways). Thus, it is a fitting time in our history to focus on stress. In this chapter, we (1) provide a historical overview of stress theories and models; (2) underscore challenges and shifts in family science that led to variations in those models; (3) highlight the revisioning of core assumptions; and (4) discuss future directions. Throughout the chapter, we draw attention to emerging areas of research.

Strain, stress, crisis, and trauma are not synonymous. Strain means that the family is still functioning, but its members are nearing their coping limits. Borrowing from the principles of disciplines such as engineering, psychology, sociology, and medicine, stress is described as pressure on a system's status quo (Boss et al., 2017). When pressure is greater than a structure's support, a collapse is likely to occur. Applying this concept to families means that an event, person, or thing generates a pressure so immense that a negative change ensues. If, however, supports are present or arise to fortify the family against the negative change, the family may be able to withstand the pressure, regain equilibrium, or develop a more flexible equilibrium (Boss, 2006; Boss et al., 2017). Stress can be a change that the family seeks to avoid, or it can be a change the family seeks to embrace, as not all stress is bad.

Family stress does not always result in crisis. When a crisis is the result of family stress, it means that the family system is incapacitated because a change is too acute, a disturbance is too overwhelming, or a pressure is too severe for the family to handle. Therefore, for a time, the family is not able to optimally function (Boss et al., 2017). Trauma is worse than crisis. Crises may pass, leaving the family in a state of equilibrium, whereas trauma may last for long periods of time, generating a high level of disruption and distress (see Rettig, 2007). All families will not experience trauma, but over the life course, all families will experience stress. Historically, the study of family stress revolved around negative economic circumstances.

## Brief Historical Overview

The initial inertia driving family stress research was the Great Depression of the 1930s—particularly the desire to determine how families were handling the stress associated with unemployment and household income loss (Angell, 1936; Cavan & Ranck, 1938). That period was marked by banks closing, families losing their savings, stock markets crashing, and soaring evictions. The stress generated by these circumstances left some families growing apart or spiraling into crises (e.g., alcohol addiction, family conflict, abuse). Conversely, some families grew closer (Elder, 2018). These differences garnered the interest of sociologists who began theorizing about why some families functioned well, while others did not. Robert Cooley Angell, Ruth Shonle Cavan, Katherine Howland Ranck, and Earl Lomon Koos were among the first to examine this phenomenon.

Robert Cooley Angell (1899–1984), an American sociologist known for his book, *The Family Encounters the Depression* (1936), studied families during the economic depression by commissioning students to collect data. Most of the

students collected qualitative data from their own families (Platt, 1992). They were given instructions regarding topics to address, which facilitated the task of describing families before and after the economic decline. Angell posited that a family's response to abrupt financial and household loss was based on integration and adaptability. Integration referred to the degree to which family members were close, affectionate, and financially interdependent (Hill, 1958). Adaptability referred to the degree to which family members were flexible in decision-making, problem-solving, roles, and rules. His findings suggested that those families who were integrated and able to adapt their roles to address the needs of the situation were better able to deal with the stress of the Depression (Angell, 1936; Smith & Hamon, 2012). Angell's sample has been described as largely upper class, White, heterosexual families; their experiences likely differed from families representing different social locations, particularly those experiencing chronic financial strain both before and during the Depression.

Ruth Shonle Cavan (1896–1993), a sociologist, expanded upon these ideas. She explored how stressors that were already present for families may intensify during difficult times (Heise, 1993). Over the course of 8 years during the Depression, she and Katherine Ranck, a psychiatric social worker, studied 100 families. Their work suggested that challenging times were not the cause of family breakdowns; instead, challenging times intensified propensities and predispositions that were already present (Heise, 1993). Like Angell, the work of Cavan and Ranck focused on a specific type of family—White, heterosexual, middle to upper class. Their study failed to answer *how* or *why* families that were better able to handle the financial strain of the Depression were those demonstrating cohesion and organization before the Depression.

Earl Lomon Koos (1905–1960), also a sociologist, attempted to address the *how* by exploring how working-class families faced difficulties (see *Families in Trouble*, 1946). Koos defined troubles as situations that were beyond ordinary life demands—situations that created heightened insecurities and obstructed a family's usual pattern of action. Over the course of 2 years, he focused on 62 families residing in an area of New York where tenements were old, unventilated, and inadequately heated. Of those 62 families, about 46 experienced serious crises; two-thirds of the troubles they experienced were interpersonal problems and a third involved finances. The primary cause of both types of troubles (interpersonal and financial) was illness. Koos found that life demands became troubles when families lacked solidarity or when family members' roles were unclear. Koos argued that some families were just trouble-prone. The assumption that some families were just trouble-prone was linear and one-dimensional, disregarding the complexities of the troubles that working-class families living in an impoverished neighborhood may be experiencing.

Koos further argued that there were more crises in middle-class (compared to lower-income) families. He explained that middle-class families, having more to lose, were more sensitive to frustrations of life because they were under greater pressure to maintain their style of living (Koos, 1950). Implicit in Koos' argument was that lower-income families were less sensitive to the vicissitudes of life and,

thus, accepted their plight. An assessment such as that fails to acknowledge ways that society (context) may make it more challenging for these families to improve their circumstances. Such an assessment could also suggest that society marginalizes families and individuals deemed to have “less to lose.”

In 1949, another sociologist, Reuben Hill (1912–1985), published *Families Under Stress: Adjustment to the Crises of War Separation and Return*. Hill identified four phases (in his Roller Coaster Profile of Adjustment) that families undergo when faced with stressful situations: (1) crisis, (2) disorganization, (3) recovery, and (4) reorganization (see Adams, 1988; Hill, 1949/1971, 1964). According to Hill, the crisis phase is the stress-provoking event that drove the family into crisis. This is followed by a disorganization phase—a period during which family members attempt to deal with the circumstances. It is during recovery that the family has developed or identified a way to handle the event. Sometimes recovery is slow; sometimes it is fast. During the final phase, the family has reached a new level of organization. Sometimes the new level of organization is even better than the original level, and sometimes it is worse. The Roller-Coaster Profile of Adjustment was followed by Reuben Hill’s ABC-X Model of Family Stress (Hill, 1958). That model formed the foundation of family stress theory and stands, still today, as the heuristic core of family stress theory (Boss et al., 2017). The framework that Hill developed revolved around four factors:

- A—The provoking event or stressor
- B—The family’s resources or strengths at the time of the event
- C—The meaning attached to the event by the family (individually and collectively)
- X—The outcome (coping or crisis)

Hill held the view that stress can be caused by negative and positive events (A, above). Events are neutral until a family interprets the event in a particular way. For example, a sought after and well-deserved promotion at work can be a positive event for a family because it means increased income for the household. It could be stressful for the family because it could lead to longer working hours for a member of the family, which means less family time together. A stressor event may or may not raise the family’s stress level. The level of stress depends upon the enormity of the event, and it also depends on the family’s perception of the event. Two different families may view the exact same stressor event very differently.

Family resources (B, above) appeared to be similar to Angell’s notion of family integration and adaptability, in that resources (such as the family’s ability to unite and demonstrate flexibility), aid the family in the process of determining how to deal with the stressor event.

The *C Factor* reflects the *what* and the *how* of the stressor situation, in that it allows us to explore how the family interprets the stressor. The appraisal process impacts the ability to manage and cope with stress (Fischer et al., 2018; Selye, 1976). Family perception is a product of the unity and unique systemic characteristics of families (Boss et al., 2017) and, thus, when examining the C Factor in Hill’s model, it is important to explore the collective view of family members with regard to the meaning they make of the stressor event.

Finally, the *X Factor* is the family crisis. Hill (1958) posited that sometimes family stress leads to crisis. Stress can lead to crisis for a family when the weight of the pressure is so devastating and severe that it immobilizes the family system; when a change occurs that is so dire that the family system is blocked; or when the disturbance in the family's equilibrium is so intense that the family is left incapacitated.

Although the ABC-X Model of family stress has been used quite extensively for decades, the model is not without flaws. Most notably, it does not underscore the context in which families are embedded. The linear depiction of the ABC-X model is also limiting.

Social scientists Hamilton I. McCubbin (born 1941) and Joan M. Patterson (born, circa 1943) developed the Double ABC-X model—adding pre-crisis and post-crisis stages which acknowledge stressors present both before and after the crisis-inducing event that caused demand pileup. By so doing, they were recognizing the role of time (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982, 1983; Patterson, 1988). This model was followed by the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model—a process model used to explain *how* families achieve pre-crisis adjustment and post-crisis adaptation (Patterson, 1988). Two other notable models drew upon Hill's ABC-X model—the Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress Model (Peters & Massey, 1983; Pierce, 1975), and the Contextual Model of Family Stress (Boss, 1987, 1988/2002; Boss et al., 2017).

## **A Significant Shift to a Focus on a Very Specific Context: Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress**

The Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress Model was conceptualized by Chester Pierce (1927–2016), Marie F. Peters (1918–1984), and Grace Carroll Massey (born circa 1949) to address racism as a ubiquitous extreme environmental stressor in the lives of Black Americans (Peters & Massey, 1983). Note that while some researchers use the terms *African American* and *Black American* interchangeably, we do not. Throughout this chapter, we use the term Black American, unless the authors we quote used a different term. In those cases, the quotes reflect the exact term those authors used. African Americans differ from other racial and ethnic immigrant groups because of their history in the United States as descendants of Africans who were forcefully brought to the United States (the Americas) against their will and enslaved between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; the term *African American* is typically used to describe those decedents. Their migration history and even their culture differ from individuals originating from Africa in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (for review, see Agyemang et al., 2005). While we recognize the great diversity within the Black American population, we will use this term as it reflects our desire to acknowledge that regardless of migration history, race-based stress in the United States is a salient part of the lives of this population by virtue of their skin color.



The legacy of servitude and bondage inflicted on Black Americans continues today in the form of socioeconomic oppression, institutional racism, and marginalization (Hardy, 2019).

Chester Pierce, a renowned Black psychiatrist and founding president of the Black Psychiatrists of America, argued that White psychiatry neglected to take racism seriously (Harrington, 2019). The Black Psychiatrists of America (then a newly established independent body) challenged their White colleagues to consider a new way of thinking about racism; this occurred after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination (Harrington, 2019). Pierce posited that because of race, ethnicity, and social status, additional stressors were levied on the lives of some families, specifically Black American families. Peters and Massey further explained:

Black Americans' lives are encumbered by the constant threat and actual periodic occurrences of intimidation, discrimination, or denial because of race. The stresses which Black families face—sometimes subtle, sometimes overt—are pervasive, continuous, and debilitating. Pierce (1975) has labeled this set of conditions for Black families Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) (Peters & Massey, 1983, p. 196).

Peters and Massey believed that family stress models neglected to capture the experiences of families and individuals who were oppressed on a regular basis because of their skin color. Racial discrimination is not simply an *additional* stressor, as implied by Hill's model, because this stressor is a daily aspect of the lives of Black Americans (Carroll, 1998; Peters & Massey, 1983). This prompted the development of the Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) model: (1) mundane, because this type of stress is quite common in the lives of Black Americans; (2) extreme, because it has a severe impact on how Black Americans view the world and themselves; (3) environmental, because it is generated and fostered within the environment of the lived experiences of Black Americans; and (4) stress, because energy-consuming efforts are required to deal with racism. Several researchers have found that daily experiences of racial discrimination (overt and covert) lead to race-related stress and race-based trauma for Blacks and other families of Color (Hemmings & Evans, 2018).

Peters and Massey noted that not only should family stress theories acknowledge the extreme yet mundane stress of ever-present racism (MEES), but they should also acknowledge the long-lasting and frequently random (yet, not unanticipated) racially based stressful events experienced over the life cycle. Racism is a stressor, and experiencing racism can impact the ability to recover from other forms of stress. Experiencing racism can complicate stress that may be considered a normal part of the family life cycle, such as a parent dealing with an adolescent's development. For example, most Black American families not only contend with the stressors of an adolescent beginning to drive, but they also contend with the very real possibility that their son or daughter will be racially profiled/targeted, or possibly killed (a.k.a., *Driving While Black*).

Peters and Massey (1983) added variables to Hill's original model to capture the stress in Black American families (see Fig. 1). In the MEES Model, ABC-X is as originally described by Hill. The A Factor is about the event itself as well as chronic, unpredictable acts of racial discrimination. The model is modified to include two

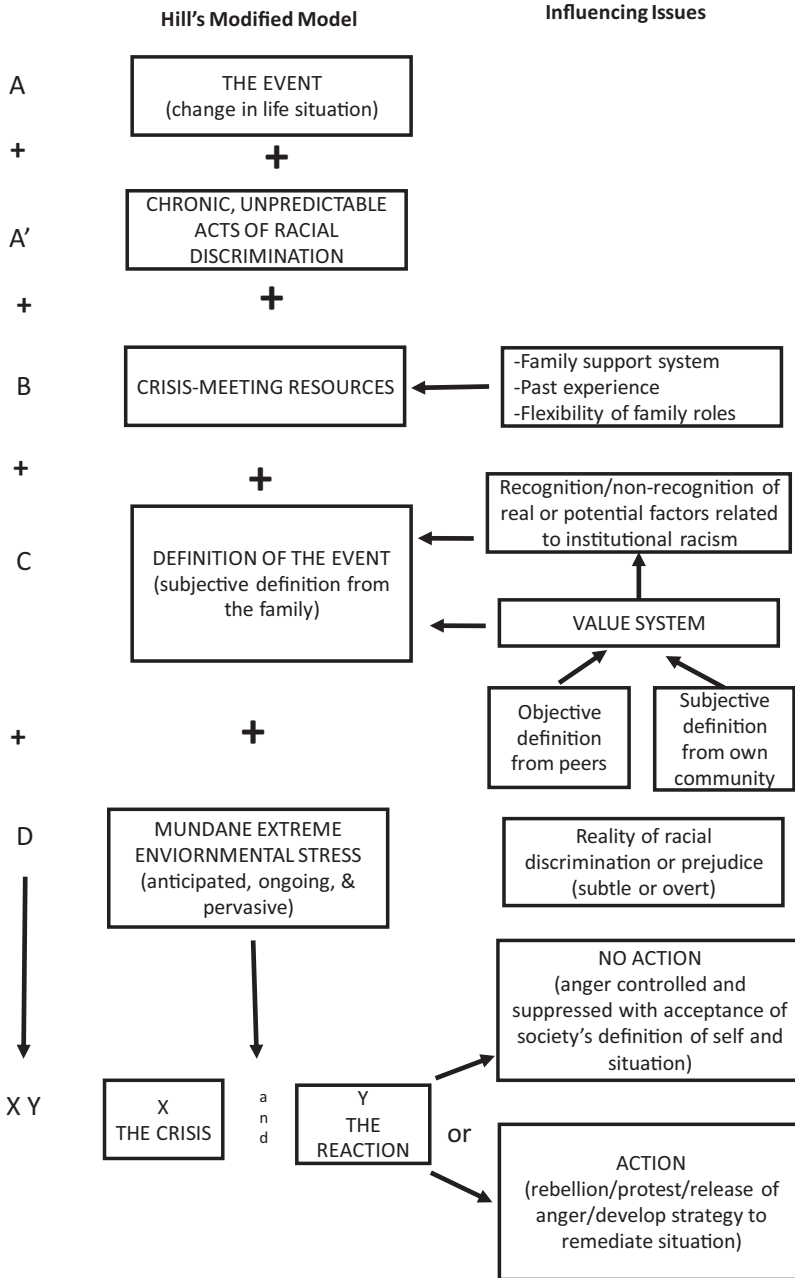


Fig. 1 MEES Model of Family Crisis for Black American Families (Peters & Massey, 1983, p. 204)

additional factors—D and Y. The D Factor reflects the pervasive environmental stress associated with being a Black individual in the United States; it reflects the mundane, extreme stress of belonging to a marginalized group. The Y Factor reflects how Black American families undergoing MEES cope with the stressor (or crisis) event. This is the family's reaction to the crisis (Peters & Massey, 1983). An example of taking *no action* would involve not informing supervisors or others in high positions at one's place of employment about racially motivated negative treatment experienced in the work environment. Examples of *action* would include lodging complaints about the racist treatment at work and/or moving in with relatives as one searches for a new job in a better work environment (Peters & Massey, 1983). The Y Factor reflects factors embedded in Black American values—e.g., survival strategies, role flexibility, and mutually reciprocal support from kin or neighbors. Factors C and D are particularly salient for Black American families, because Factor C reflects how the family defines the event, and Factor D reflects the stress of membership in a racially marginalized group (Peters & Massey, 1983). These ideas, an innovative expansion of the original ABC-X Model, marked a shift toward greater focus on context—race-specific context. As mentioned, another model also emerged from Hill's ABC-X Model—the Contextual Model of Family Stress.

## Another Shift to Context: The Contextual Model of Family Stress

Building upon the ABC-X Model, Pauline Boss (born 1934), pioneer in the interdisciplinary study of family stress and a leading family therapist, formulated the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS; Boss, 1987, 1988/2002; Boss et al., 2017). Her adaptations and changes resulted in a model that is more contextual, more focused on perception and meaning, and considerably less linear than the ABC-X Model (Boss et al., 2017). This, too, marked a shift in thinking about family stress.

Boss studies why some families weather stress better than others; she does so by attending to the primacy of perception, emphasizing the *C Factor* (comprehension and acceptance of the stress) and context. Her less linear model (see Fig. 2) depicts multifaceted contexts in which families are embedded. She highlights internal and external contexts of families.

**Internal Context** According to the CMFS, the family's internal context consists of structural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions. These are micro dimensions. A family typically has somewhat more control over its internal context (compared to its external context); thus, the likelihood that the family will be able to change or control those micro dimensions is greater (Boss et al., 2017). The structural context of the family is defined as boundaries, particularly rules regarding who falls inside and outside the family. Boundary ambiguity results when boundaries are not clear. Structural context also encompasses roles family members are assigned.

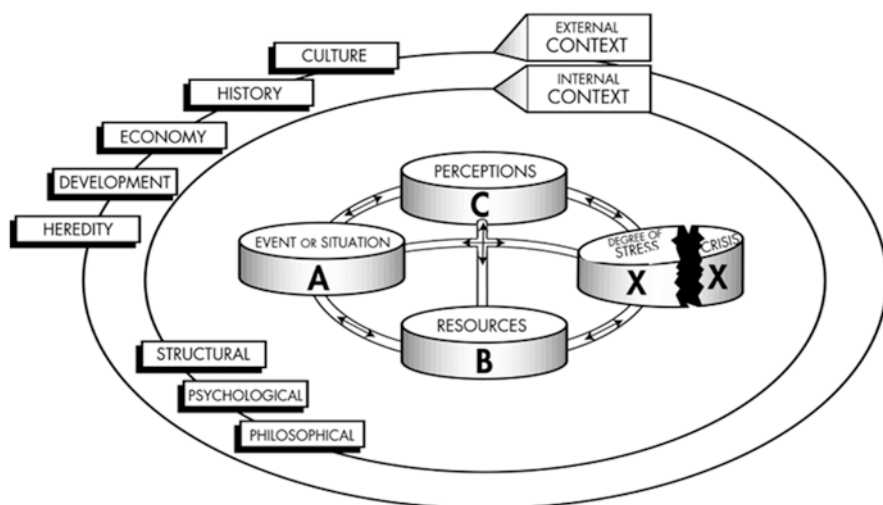


Fig. 2 Contextual Model of Family Stress (Boss et al., 2017)

The psychological context of the family is about perception—how the family as a whole appraises the stressor events. The term *perception* expresses both cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) processes (Boss et al., 2017). The philosophical context represents the family’s values. A family and the larger culture in which that family lives may not share the same values. That incongruence can create stress. For example, a large part of American society advocates that children receive vaccinations as protection against certain diseases. Some parents refuse to have their children vaccinated for philosophical reasons—one reason is the belief that the potential harmful side effects of the vaccines outweigh the benefits (McKee & Bohannon, 2016). In the United States, school-aged children are required to have specific vaccinations. There is a growing debate about this issue. Some schools have refused to admit unvaccinated children. Tension between pro- and anti-vaccine groups has escalated over the past few years in the wake of measles outbreaks; many people believe that the anti-vaccination movement puts everyone at risk (Blad, 2019; Ciolli, 2008; Offit, 2015; Urist, 2015). Even at this writing, as COVID-19 vaccines are made available, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health are encouraging Americans to get the vaccine. On one end of the continuum, some individuals are attempting to cut in front of others to get the vaccine shots (Kahn, 2020); on the other end, some individuals are avoiding the vaccine—again, for philosophical reasons. (Note, some Black Americans are wary of the vaccine given historical mistreatment by the medical establishment, e.g., Tuskegee syphilis experiment.)

**External Context** The family’s external context is made up of five dimensions: culture, history, economy, development, and heredity. Cultural context reflects the customs, beliefs, and behaviors that are shared by a group of individuals. People of

the same religion, race, or ethnicity may hold similar beliefs and practice similar customs. The larger society's cultural context can provide meta rules, like norms and principles guiding how a family functions, but the family may still hold certain private beliefs. A family may ascribe to the rules or customs of a particular community or subculture whose rules or customs conflict with the prevailing culture. For instance, think about the family portrayed in the reality television show, *Sister Wives*. This show chronicles the lives of a polygamist family in the United States. Polygamy is outside of the rules of the larger society in this country; thus, this family has a different view of polygamy compared to the larger US society. Much research has been conducted on this topic (Ault & Gilder, 2021; Raley, 2017).

Historical context refers to the particular period in time during which a given event affects the family. Knowing the historical milieu in which the stressor event occurred provides valuable clues about the conditions the family experienced, or the environment in which the family was embedded, during the stressor event. Was the historical context set in an environment of plentiful resources versus scarce resources; freedom versus captivity; privilege versus discrimination? Imagine, a decade from now, recalling events that characterized the past few years in the United States and around the world. During that period, the conditions of the pandemic brought about uncertainty, illness, death, and anxiety for families of various backgrounds. In high demand, disinfectant sprays and wipes quickly disappeared from grocery store shelves—leaving many vulnerable families without these products. Many stores limited the amount of water individuals were permitted to purchase. Notably, many lower income families, particularly those employed in service industries, were either laid off or, by virtue of their jobs, put in dangerously close contact with potentially contagious people. In the midst of the pandemic, some people were refusing to wear face masks despite public health guidance strongly recommending them. Also, in the midst of the pandemic, the United States was dealing with police brutality (witnessed and recorded), increases in racially motivated hate crimes, and heated politics dividing not only the nation but families as well. For many families, these events are stressors—stressors that will shape their perceptions of, and reactions to, stressors yet to come. As researchers and clinicians work with these families now, and 5–10 years from now, acknowledging and understanding this historical context will be crucial. Economic context at both the macro and microlevels is currently impacting families, as some families are dealing with no paychecks, reduced paychecks, and furloughs—while trying to care for, and/or grieving the loss of, loved ones stricken by COVID-19. A family may react very differently to job loss if a key provider for the family is laid off during a time when jobs are plentiful versus a time when jobs are scarce.

Developmental context reflects change that is out of the family's control—such as, for example, children growing up, or elders growing old and dying. This particular context includes the life cycle. This can be the life cycle of the individual as well as the life cycle of the family. Each member of the family may be experiencing his/her own (individual) life cycle changes, which can contribute additional stress to the family (Laszloffy, 2004).

Heredity is about the genetic background of the family. Given the emergence of the field of epigenetics, researchers are learning more about the heritability of stress and trauma. The biological underpinnings of stress and trauma, as well as the role of genetics in the pathogenesis of stress, are a growing area of research (Conching & Thayer, 2019; Pape & Binder, 2016). Stress and trauma can affect personal or offspring biology via epigenetic modifications which induce changes in gene expression. That, in turn, can impact physiological systems (e.g., cardiovascular, immune)—possibly across generations (for review, see Conching & Thayer, 2019). Those are components of CMFS' external context.

Fundamental assumptions underlie the CMFS. These assumptions encompass the basic components of the original ABC-X model. They are as follows (Boss et al., 2017, p. 1–2):

- Strong families are not exempt; they too can experience such a high level/number of stressors that they reach a point of crisis and immobilization.
- The manner in which families define what is troubling and how they develop meaning from the event they are facing is shaped by culture—their cultural beliefs and values.
- Race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and socioeconomic status can shape the meaning developed about a stressor event.
- Physical illness can result from psychological stress and that can impact family systems.
- Family members differ; some family members are better able to endure stress than others.
- Experiencing a crisis is not necessarily bad. Surviving a crisis can make some people strong again, and it can make some people stronger than they were before the crisis occurred.
- High levels of stress do not equate to trouble for all families. Some families find joy in high-risk behaviors.
- Stress can help keep family systems going; therefore, not all family stress is bad.

The use of any model of family stress necessitates that its assumptions be accepted by the user, because the assumptions establish the foundation for the application of the model. Recently, these particular assumptions were revisited, and this marks yet another shift.

## **A More Recent Shift: A Spin on the Assumptions**

Shardé McNeil Smith (born 1986) studies the impact of racial discrimination on mental health, and Antoinette M. Landor (born 1984) studies the impact of colorism on family functioning. They built upon the aforementioned assumptions—to make explicit the intersecting forms of oppression impacting Black Americans (McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018). They, therefore, modified the CMFS assumptions using, as

**Table 1** Revisioning of assumptions and reasons for change

Revisioning of the assumptions	Reason
Intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and skin tone influence: The stressor event (Factor A); use of, and access to resources (Factor B); perceptions of the stressor event (Factor C); and degree of stress, risk of crisis (Factor X)	Culture, cultural values, and influences of social position factors shape more than family meanings; they shape all aspects of stress processes
Body and mind are linked. Psychological and mundane, extreme, environmental stress lead to physical illness	The role of mundane, extreme, environmental stress must be explicitly recognized
In Black American families, some members internalize the need to be constitutionally stronger in withstanding stress	Being strong (the meaning) has cultural, social, and historical underpinnings for Black American families
Existing in an oppressive society does not impact all Black Americans in the same way	Despite existing within a MEES context, not all Black American families are in distress

their primary lenses, intersectionality and mundane extreme environmental stress (see Table 1).

There is a great deal of heterogeneity among Black families, despite a shared history and culture (Bryant et al., 2010, 2018; Wainwright, 2019). Black families differ in terms of their vulnerabilities to racial oppression and in their abilities to resist oppression. Smith and Landor acknowledge this in their assumptions. Their revised model, titled Sociocultural Family Stress Model, is illustrated in Fig. 3.

This model reflects a melding of MEES, CMFS, and intersectionality perspectives. According to the CMFS, internal and external contexts shape family stress processes. This suggests that the CMFS can be used as a guiding framework for studies emphasizing diversity and multiculturalism (Boss et al., 2017). Although the CMFS focuses on context, it does not explicitly capture factors impinging upon the lives of specific groups, such as Black Americans, Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous people, undocumented families living in the United States, and the LGBTQIA+ community. Although MEES captures a major factor impinging upon the lives of Black Americans and other People of Color, it does not address intersectionality, that is, “how multiple axes of power and oppression occur within and outside families” (McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018, p. 435). The sociocultural model of family stress, at first glance, seems to broaden the scope of the CMFS by highlighting race, class, skin tone, gender and sexuality, but from a diversity lens, it also appears to narrow the scope because it *only* highlights race, class, skin tone, gender, and sexuality.

Indeed, understanding family stress requires an exploration of stressors that are generated as a result of the family’s social locations and identities in society. For that reason, the CMFS is appealing because it is purposefully more general so that it can be applied to diverse groups.

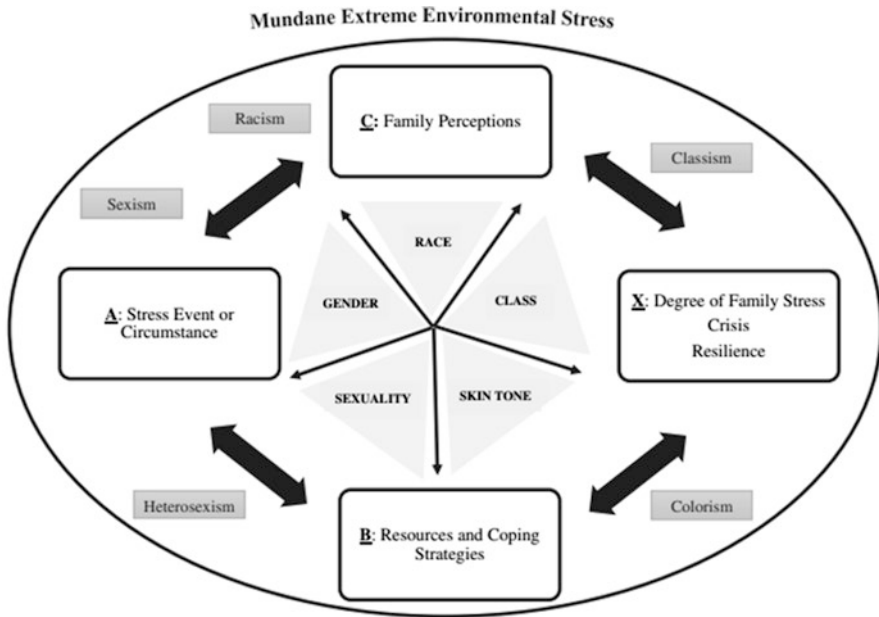


Fig. 3 Sociocultural Family Stress Model (McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018, p. 439)

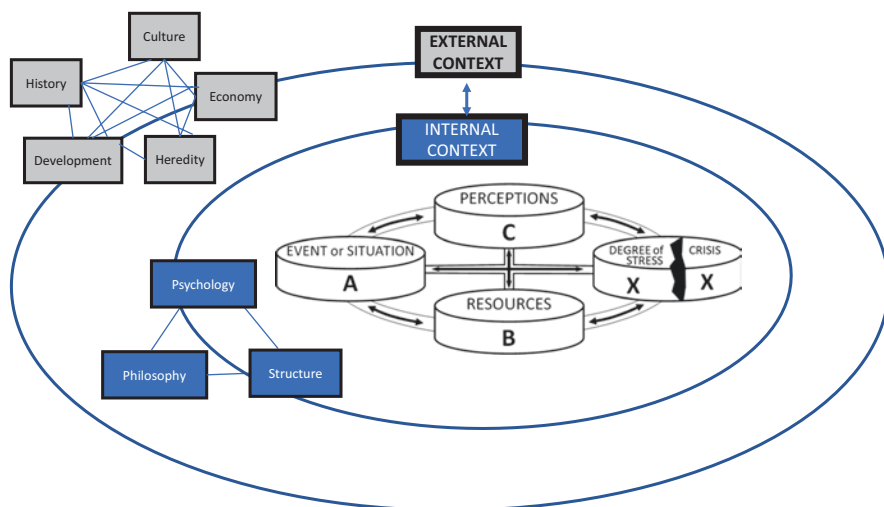
For the very same reason, the MEES is appealing because of its sharpened specificity—emphasizing racial oppression as a ubiquitous factor. The Sociocultural Model of Family Stress is appealing because it more emphatically emphasizes race, class, skin tone, gender, and sexuality. Where do we go from here?

### Future Directions for the Study of Family Stress

We suggest a minor change to the CMFS—clarifying that contextual factors are not intended to stand alone and that they cross over and intersect (see Fig. 4). For example, culture is inherently a part of history and development.

This reimagining helps envision how contexts are embedded. Future work should examine the impact of being embedded in multiple contexts and what happens when the saliency of those various layers shift for an individual (or group) over time or even given the historical context. This reflects context within context, within context, rather than context + context + context. The latter suggests an additive impact of contextual factors. The former is more complex, because each level interacts with, and influences, the adjacent (or proximal) level of context. Perhaps conceptualizing contexts within contexts can facilitate identifying and understanding the multiple layers in which families are embedded—not necessarily how they are intersecting, as this differs from intersectionality. This notion of embeddedness is certainly evident today in light of the multiple challenges families face. A





**Fig. 4** Contextual Model of Family Stress Re-imagined

pandemic, climate change, increases in school shootings, racial terrorism, and social injustice are just a few examples.

**Global Pandemic** The pandemic has highlighted the critical need to examine and understand the effects of environmental stress on the lives of families. The pandemic has also made explicitly apparent the role of social identities—notably, socioeconomic status and race. Some wealthy citizens used their connections and resources as a means of expediting their access to what may be a life-saving vaccine. The virus disproportionately affects Black American, Indigenous, and Latinx populations; these groups experience higher rates of infections and deaths (Fouad et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2020). COVID-19 and its concomitant complications leave Black Americans four times more likely to be hospitalized and three times more likely to die than Whites (Young, 2021). Numerous studies addressing this have already been published. For example, an article published in JAMA titled “COVID-19 and African Americans” (Yancy, 2020) has already been cited over 1000 times according to Google Scholar. Social scientists are needed to highlight the various processes and mechanisms parents, children, and partners are using to cope. What worked? What didn’t work? We know that COVID-19 resulted in negative outcomes such as family and couple conflict, but we need researchers to identify potential positive outcomes. Preliminary studies of the impact of COVID-19 indicate that the pandemic continues to have both positive and negative effects on family and couple relational dynamics (Kalil et al., 2020). While some couples expressed decreased relationship satisfaction, other couples indicated feeling a stronger bond and greater closeness (Williamson, 2020). Job losses and quarantines meant that some partners no longer had to rush off to that second or third job. Instead, they had time to spend with one another—time that they missed sharing

together. What were the characteristics of these couples—before, during, and after COVID-19?

***Climate Change*** Our planet is experiencing climate change. Droughts, extreme temperatures, and hurricanes have led to evacuations, the destruction of homes, floods, water shortages, famine, and sickness. Economically disadvantaged families often struggle to find a safe haven when their towns are evacuated. A growing area of research involves examining links between anxiety and climate change (e.g., Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Taylor, 2020).

***School Shootings*** On December 14, 2012, a gunman wearing combat gear killed 20 children (5–10 years old) at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (Shultz et al., 2013). On September 28, 2016, a 14-year-old targeted a playground at Townville Elementary School in Townville, South Carolina—killing a first grader. Some parents filed lawsuits against the school district and the local sheriff’s office because their children suffered from depression and suicidal ideations as a result of witnessing the shooting (Bohatch, 2018). The extreme form of stress to which these parents are alluding is trauma. On April 1, 2019, an eighth grade student shot a peer at Prescott High School in Prescott, Arkansas (Lou & Walker, 2019). On April 30, 2019, the last day of classes, a gunman killed two people at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Many studies have explored the role of bullying in school shootings, but less is known about how schools’ handling of objectionable behavior may contribute to the risk of violence; suspensions and expulsions often leave youth unsupervised.

***Racial Terrorism and Social Injustice*** Racial terrorism, systemic racism, and social injustice are not new. On May 25, 2020, the callous murder of a Black man, Mr. George Floyd, by a White police officer kneeling on Mr. Floyd’s neck, sparked protests for social justice, nationally and internationally. This murder is an example of racial trauma. A single event can cause trauma and so, too, can cumulative stress. Mr. Floyd’s murder was a single event, but it was preceded by the murders of Trayvon Martin in 2012, Atatiana Jefferson in 2019, and Botham Jean in 2019. Merely months before Mr. Floyd’s murder, Ahmaud Arbery was fatally shot by White men while jogging on February 23, 2020. Breonna Taylor, a Black, decorated emergency medical technician was fatally shot in her apartment by White police in plainclothes on the night of March 13, 2020. These events can lead to cumulative stress and to trauma. Oppressive trauma, defined by Hardy (2019), is “the inescapable by-product of persistent exposure (primary or secondary) to repressive circumstances that emotionally, psychologically and/or physically devastate one’s being and sense of self while simultaneously overwhelming, destroying, or neutralizing one’s strategies for coping” (p. 134). How can the impact of this trauma be mitigated? Through what processes can it be mitigated? How have Black American families emotionally and psychologically endured such trauma? Smith and Landor were right when they explained that we need to consider “the historical, social, and cultural influences of what it means to be ‘strong’ in African American families”

(p. 437, 2018). Work is needed to further our understanding of the ways in which daily and generational experiences of being racially discriminated against, vilified, devalued, and excluded create race-based stress for Black families and other families of Color. More work is needed to uncover the mechanisms by which race-based stress impacts physical, emotional, mental, financial, spiritual, and relational well-being (Awosan & Hardy, 2017; Bryant et al., 2010; Nightingale et al., 2019).

## Concluding Remarks

COVID-19, a seemingly single stressor, has had a ripple effect—triggering stress-like reactions to simply “being.” That was even evident in online articles and blogs posted by the general public. For example, a blog noted:

- I had a mini-breakdown because this quarantine life was really hitting me. I hadn't even thought to do a self-check with myself until I was crying in my girlfriend's arms. It was at that specific moment that I realized, “Damn” this quarantine [is] hitting me hard too. I haven't lost my job, I haven't stopped getting paid, I haven't lost a family or friend due to this virus, and yet in still, I had a mental breakdown (Jay, April 15, 2020 blog).

A colleague recently said, “Everything just feels harder now.” Such feelings are distinctly different from (and tangibly convey more than) stress pileup. As the blogger noted, there were no pileups. For this individual and our colleague, certain contextual components of life (especially compared to the lives of others) remained unchanged—they still had a job; still regularly received pay checks; COVID had not taken the lives of their friends or family members. They, nevertheless, experienced a cloud of stress. The cloud itself is context, but it is a contextual factor impacting all other contextual factors. When COVID-19 collides with other contextual factors (race/ethnicity, old age, economic status), it intensifies the vulnerabilities of those factors.

For the aforementioned individuals quoted here, the pandemic (as context) is shaping every aspect of their lives. The pandemic is the cloud, making everything seem harder. Harkening back to the snapshot provided in the introduction of this chapter, think about the aspect of that snapshot that may serve as the “cloud” for you. For us, the authors of this chapter, (identifying racially as Black), we believe that we are embedded in layer upon layer of context. For us, the first layer of context that is influencing everything (and making everything seem harder) is racial injustice and the senseless deaths of unarmed People of Color. For us, that cloud cannot be lifted. For us, hypervigilance has become a way of life. For us, breathing will be forever labored whenever we think about Mr. George Floyd's 8 minutes and 46 seconds. If you do not know what that time is referring to, take a moment to look it up. Our hope is that the *Contextual Model of Family Stress Re-Imaged* (Fig. 4) will serve as a guide for researchers and clinicians as they strive to identify, conceptualize and understand the ways in which a cloud (context) of stress can impact the multiple contextual (internal and external) layers of the lives of families.

Lastly, notice that throughout the historical overview we provided, dates were mentioned—years the frameworks were introduced, as well as the birth year of those who conceptualized the frameworks. That was done purposefully, to provide context—to help readers think about the historical and economic milieu in which each scholar grew and developed. That milieu is a component of what shapes not only who and what we study but also *HOW* (e.g., the frameworks we choose) we, as researchers, study the *who* and the *what*.

## References

- Adams, B. (1988). Reuben Hill and the state of family sociology. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 19(3), 345–359. Retrieved 16 February 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41601965>
- Agyemang, C., Bhopal, R., & Bruijnzeels, M. (2005). Negro, Black, Black African, African Caribbean, African American or what? Labelling African origin populations in the health arena in the 21st century. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 59(12), 1014–1018.
- Angell, R. C. (1936/1965). *The family encounters the depression*. Scribner.
- Ault, M. K., & Gilder, B. V. (2021). Polygamy in the United States: How marginalized religious communities cope with stigmatizing discourses surrounding plural marriage. In J. A. Reich (Ed.), *The state of families: Law, policy, and the meanings of relationships* (pp. 76–85). Routledge.
- Awosan, C. I., & Hardy, K. V. (2017). Coupling processes and experiences of never married heterosexual black men and women: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 43(3), 463–481.
- Blad, E. (2019, March 5). When measles breaks out, unvaccinated kids send schools scrambling. *Education Week*. Downloaded on 6 September 2019 from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/05/when-measles-breaks-out-unvaccinated-kids-send.html>
- Bohatch, E. (2018, September 25). South Carolina parents sue school district after elementary students witnessed school shooting. *The State*. Downloaded on 4 September 2019 from <https://www.thestate.com/news/state/south-carolina/article218987940.html>
- Boss, P. (1987). Family stress: Perception and context. In M. Sussman & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook on marriage and family* (pp. 695–723). Plenum.
- Boss, P. (1988/2002). *Family stress management*. Sage.
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. Norton.
- Boss, P., Bryant, C. M., & Mancini, J. A. (2017). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Bryant, C. M., Wickrama, K. A. S., Bolland, J., Bryant, B. M., Cutrona, C. E., & Stanik, C. E. (2010). Race matters, even in marriage: Identifying factors linked to marital outcomes for African Americans. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2(3), 157–174.
- Carroll, G. (1998). Mundane extreme environmental stress and African American families: A case for recognizing different realities. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29(2), 271–284.
- Cavan, R. S., & Ranck, K. H. (1938). *The family and the depression; a study of one hundred Chicago families*. University of Chicago Press.
- Christensen, J. (2019, January 17). *Killings of transgender people in the US saw another high year*. Downloaded 28 February 2021 from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/16/health/transgender-deaths-2018/index.html>
- Cioli, A. (2008). Mandatory school vaccinations: The role of tort law. *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 81(3), 129–137.
- Clayton, S., & Karaszia, B. T. (2020). Development and validation of a measure of climate change anxiety. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 69, 101434.

- Conching, A. K. S., & Thayer, Z. (2019). Biological pathways for historical trauma to affect health: A conceptual model focusing on epigenetic modifications. *Social Science & Medicine*, 230, 74–82.
- Dwilson, S. D. (2017, August 13). *Heather Heyer: 5 fast facts you need to know*. Downloaded on 28 February 2021 from <https://heavy.com/news/2017/08/heather-heyer-victim-who-died-charlottesville-rally-car-crash-photos-age-bio/>
- Elder, G. H. (2018). *Children of the great depression*. Routledge.
- Fischer, A., Ziogas, A., & Anton-Culver, H. (2018). Perception matters: Stressful life events increase breast cancer risk. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 110, 46–53.
- Fouad, M. N., Ruffin, J., & Vickers, S. M. (2020). COVID-19 is disproportionately high in African Americans. This will come as no surprise.... *The American Journal of Medicine*, 133(10), e544–e545.
- Hardy, K. V. (2019). Toward a psychology of the oppressed: Understanding the invisible wounds of trauma. In M. McGoldrick & K. Hardy (Eds.), *Re-visioning family therapy: Addressing diversity in clinical practice* (pp. 133–148). Guildford Press.
- Harrington, A. (2019). The forgotten tale of how black psychiatrists helped make ‘sesame street’. *Undark Magazine* (Article originally published on 19 May 2019). Downloaded 3 September 2019 from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/chester-pierce-the-forgotten-tale-of-how-a-black-psychiatrist-helped-make-sesame-street?ref=scroll>
- Heise, K. (1993, August 28). Pioneering sociologist Ruth Cavan. *Chicago Tribune*. Downloaded on 23 August 2019 from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-08-28-9308280010-story.html>
- Hemmings, C., & Evans, A. M. (2018). Identifying and treating race-based trauma in counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 46(1), 20–39.
- Hill, R. (1949/1971). *Families under stress*. Greenwood. (Original work 1949).
- Hill, R. (1958). Generic features of families under stress. *Social Casework*, 39(2–3), 139–150.
- Hill, R. (1964). New knowledges about the family: A review of family research in Europe and America. *Social Compass*, 11(1), 5–22.
- Jay, T. (2020). *Quarantine and Chill*. Downloaded on 12 February 2021 from <https://www.whoistaylorjay.com/blog/quarantine-and-chill>
- Kahn, S. (2020, December 21). Rich people will cut the line for the coronavirus vaccine. *The Washington Post*. Downloaded 8 February 2021 from <https://www.newsday.com/opinion/coronavirus/rich-people-cut-in-line-coronavirus-vaccine-covid-19-health-care-system-opportunities-1.50097354>
- Kalil, A., Mayer, S., & Shah, R. (2020). *Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on family dynamics in economically vulnerable households* (Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper No. 2020–139). University of Chicago.
- Koos, E. (1950). Class differences in family reactions to crisis. *Marriage and Family Living*, 12(3), 77–99.
- Koss, E. (1946). *Families in trouble*. King’s Crown Press.
- Laszloffy, T. A. (2004). Rethinking family development theory: Teaching with the systemic family development (SFD) model. *Family Relations*, 51(3), 206–214.
- Lou, M., & Walker, C. (2019, July 26). There have been 22 school shootings in the US so far this year. *CNN*. Downloaded on 4 September 2019 from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/08/us/school-shootings-us-2019-trnd/index.html>
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1982). Family adaptation to crisis. In H. I. McCubbin, A. Cauble, & J. Patterson (Eds.), *Family stress, coping and social support* (pp. 26–47). Charles C. Thomas.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The family process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. In H. McCubbin, M. Sussman, & J. Patterson (Eds.), *Social stress and the family: Advances and development in family stress theory and research* (pp. 7–37). Haworth Press.
- McKee, C., & Bohannon, K. (2016). Exploring the reasons behind parental refusal of vaccines. *The Journal of Pediatric Pharmacology and Therapeutics*, 21(2), 104–109.

- McNeil Smith, S., & Landor, A. M. (2018). Toward a better understanding of African American families: Development of the sociocultural family stress model. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(2), 434–450.
- NBC News. (2021, March 5). *Capitol Hill staffers still coping with mental trauma after deadly riots*. Downloaded on 7 March 2021 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/now/video/capitol-hill-staffers-still-coping-with-mental-trauma-after-deadly-pro-trump-riots-102190661862>
- Nightingale, M., Awosan, C. I., & Stavrianopoulos, K. (2019). Emotionally focused therapy: A culturally sensitive approach for African American heterosexual couples. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 30(3), 221–244.
- Offit, P. A. (2015). *Deadly choices: How the anti-vaccine movement threatens us all*. Basic Books.
- Pape, J. C., & Binder, E. B. (2016). The role of genetics and epigenetics in the pathogenesis of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychiatric Annals*, 46(9), 510–518.
- Patterson, J. M. (1988). Families experiencing stress: The family adjustment and adaptation response model. *Family Systems Medicine*, 6(2), 202–237.
- PBS News Hour. (2021, March 4). *How to address the surge in anti-Asian hate crimes*. Downloaded 6 March 2021 from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/watch-live-how-to-address-the-surge-of-anti-asian-hate-crimes>
- Peters, M. F., & Massey, G. (1983). Mundane extreme environmental stress in family stress theories: The case of Black families in White America. *Marriage & Family Review*, 6(1–2), 193–218.
- Pierce, C. (1975). The mundane extreme environment and its effect on learning. In S. G. Brainard (Ed.), *Learning disabilities: Issues and recommendations for research*. National Institute of Education.
- Platt, J. (1992). The Social Science Research Council's 1940s restudy of Robert Angell's cases from *The Family Encounters the Depression*. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 28(2), 143–157.
- Raley, B. G. (2017). Polygamy in family court: A resource for judges dealing with an unfamiliar family structure. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 68(4), 5–23.
- Rettig, K. D. (2007). Divorce injustices: Perceptions of formerly wealthy women of the stressors, crises, and traumas. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 12(3), 175–198.
- Selye, H. (1976). Stress without distress. In *Psychopathology of human adaptation* (pp. 137–146). Springer.
- Shultz, J. M., Muschert, G. W., Dingwall, A., & Cohen, A. M. (2013). The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting as tipping point: “This Time Is Different”. *Disaster Health*, 1(2), 65–73.
- Sidahmed, M. (2016, November 14). *FBI reports hate crimes against Muslims surged 67% in 2015*. Downloaded 28 February 2021 from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/14/fbi-anti-muslim-hate-crimes-rise-2015>
- Smith, S. R., & Hamon, R. R. (2012). *Exploring family theories* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Tai, D. B. G., Shah, A., Doubeni, C. A., Sia, I. G., & Wieland, M. L. (2020). The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 72(4), 703–706.
- Taylor, S. (2020). Anxiety disorders, climate change, and the challenges ahead: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 76, 102313.
- Urist, J. (2015, February 5). How schools are dealing with anti-vaccine parents. *The Atlantic*. Downloaded on 6 September 2019 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/02/schools-may-solve-the-anti-vaccine-parenting-deadlock/385208/>
- Wainwright, A. B. (2019). Gender differences in the narrative productions of African American adults. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 28(2), 623–638.
- Williamson, H. C. (2020). Early effects of COVID-19 pandemic on relationship satisfaction and attributions. *Psychological Science*, 31(12), 1479–1487.
- Yancy, C. W. (2020). COVID-19 and African Americans. *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*, 323(19), 1891–1892.
- Young, S. (2021, February 2). *Black vaccine hesitancy rooted in mistrust, doubts*. WebMD Downloaded 8 February 2021 from <https://www.webmd.com/vaccines/covid-19-vaccine/news/20210202/black-vaccine-hesitancy-rooted-in-mistrust-doubts>

# Application: Family Stress Theories and Custodial Grandfamilies



Megan L. Dolbin-MacNab 

In the United States, approximately 2.5 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren, with estimates suggesting that 2.65 million or 4% of all children are living with grandparents or other relatives in “skipped generation homes” with no parents present (Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Across 30 years of research, scholars have often framed custodial grandfamilies as being “at risk” and as experiencing significant stress related to the circumstances that led to the caregiving arrangement, aspects of living within this unique family constellation, and other contextual vulnerabilities. While more recent work has emphasized resilience or bonadaptation within grandfamilies (Hayslip & Smith, 2013; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), scholarly attention continues to focus on stressors and their impact on grandfamily functioning and well-being.

To better understand variation in grandfamily outcomes, which range from bon- to maladaptation, scholars have called for theoretically driven research that examines the processes or mechanisms by which aspects of grandfamilies’ internal and external contexts shape both individual and family outcomes (Hayslip et al., 2017). Also needed is research that goes beyond a narrow focus on grandparents and considers other members of the grandfamily system such as grandchildren, biological parents, and extended family members (Hayslip et al., 2017). Family stress theories (see Bryant and Awosan, chapter “[Conceptualizing Family Stress: A Trend Toward Greater Context](#)”, this volume) are well-positioned to assist researchers in achieving these goals. This chapter lays a foundation for this work by using family stress theories to conceptualize stress in custodial grandfamilies and highlighting instances where family stress theories have been applied within the existing grandfamily

---

M. L. Dolbin-MacNab (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, Virginia Tech,  
Blacksburg, VA, USA

e-mail: [mdolbinm@vt.edu](mailto:mdolbinm@vt.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_7)

literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of implications and future directions for advancing the use of family stress theories in research with custodial grandfamilies.

## **Stress in Custodial Grandfamilies**

Although there is variation in the definition of stress across family stress theories, family stress is generally conceptualized as an event, disruption, or pressure that causes change in the status quo of a family system (Boss, 1987, 2002; Boss et al., 2017). Stressor events vary in terms of source, type, duration, and density (Boss, 2002). The circumstances (e.g., parental abuse/neglect, substance misuse, abandonment, incarceration, death) that result in grandparents raising grandchildren are often difficult and traumatic crises, although there is wide variation in their predictability and duration. For example, grandparents raising grandchildren as a result of parental substance misuse often find the caregiving arrangement to be a long-term commitment, reflecting a culmination of a series of escalating crises, which often end with parental incarceration, abandonment, or an overdose death (Davis et al., 2020). Grandfamilies must respond to these crises and other stressor events. The nature of the response, including the availability of resources and supports, has significant implications for the quality of the family's relationships as well as the health and well-being of individual family members.

Outside of the contributing factors, the actual arrangement of grandparents assuming care of their grandchildren fundamentally disrupts and changes all aspects of the grandfamily system. It requires all grandfamily members to reorganize their roles and relationships to restore equilibrium (Boss, 1987; Boss et al., 2017). For instance, grandparents must adjust to being in a parental (vs. grandparental) role, and grandchildren must adapt to a new living environment, a different primary caregiver, and altered rules and expectations. Furthermore, relationships with biological parents must be renegotiated, as boundaries have shifted and often become ambiguous (Bartram, 1994; Boss, 2002). If the grandchildren's parents are physically or psychologically absent, the grandfamily must also navigate feelings of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2002).

Perhaps as a result of all of these changes, grandfamilies experience numerous stressors (Hayslip et al., 2017). Grandparents report stress related to compromised physical health (e.g., worsening chronic conditions, lack of preventative care), social isolation, family conflict, the time and energy demands of parenting, and managing their grandchildren's behavioral difficulties (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Hayslip et al., 2017; Musil et al., 2010; Whitley & Fuller-Thomson, 2017). The demands associated with responding to these stressor events help explain consistent findings that custodial grandparents experience significant psychological distress, namely, depression and anxiety (e.g., Minkler et al., 1997; Musil et al., 2009). Although fewer studies have examined grandchildren, they appear to experience stress associated with navigating complex relationships with their biological



parents, as well as the generation gap between themselves and their grandparents (Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2009; Dunifon et al., 2016). Even less is known about the experiences of parents, though some studies suggest that certain family dynamics, namely, conflict between the parent and grandparent, interferes with parents' ability to remain connected to or reunify with the grandchildren (Barnard, 2003; Blakey, 2012).

Grandfamilies also experience numerous external or contextual stressors which, when combined with the stressors previously mentioned, can result in an accumulation or pileup of stressor events that can overwhelm the family's ability to cope, reorganize, and restore equilibrium (Boss, 2002; Boss et al., 2017). One external stressor frequently referenced in the literature is economic disadvantage, as approximately 20% of grandfamilies are living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Grandparents may also experience difficulties finding safe, affordable housing (Generations United, 2019). Additionally, as grandfamilies are more common among communities of color (Ellis & Simmons, 2014), they are likely to experience the consequences of systemic marginalization, oppression, and related disparities (Dolbin-MacNab & Few-Demo, 2018). Finally, stress may arise from the many barriers grandparents experience when trying to access support services and from interacting with professionals who hold judgmental or stigmatizing attitudes toward them (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2013; Gibson, 2002).

## Applications of Family Stress Theories to Grandfamilies

In light of the stressors experienced by custodial grandfamilies, it is essential to understand factors that contribute to grandfamily bonadaptation and maladaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). While family stress theories would be valuable in this regard, they have not been widely applied in the grandfamilies literature. One exception is a series of studies utilizing the Family Stress Model (FSM; Conger et al., 2000). In the FSM, economic disadvantage is conceptualized as contributing to psychological distress in parents, which negatively impacts children's adjustment via coercive, unresponsive, or harsh parenting (Barnett, 2008). Marital or partner conflict is also thought to compromise children's adjustment via negative parenting (Barnett, 2008). In the first study utilizing the FSM in the context of grandfamilies, Smith et al. (2008) confirmed that grandmothers' psychological distress (i.e., depression and anxiety) predicted grandchildren's internalizing and externalizing symptoms but that this relationship was mediated by parenting quality (i.e., low nurturance and ineffective discipline). In a related study, using data gathered from both grandmothers and grandchildren, Smith et al. (2008) verified the general assumptions of the FSM while also providing additional detail about how specific parenting practices differentially influenced grandchildren's internalizing versus externalizing behavior problems.

A few studies have adapted the FSM (Conger et al., 2000) to include aspects of family stress theories including meanings/perceptions, resources/capabilities,

demands/stressors, and coping (Boss, 1987, 2002; Boss et al., 2017; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson, 1988). For instance, Smith et al. (2008) adapted the FSM to include resources/capabilities, demands/stressors, and contextual factors by examining the influence of family dysfunction (i.e., boundary ambiguity, anger), social support, and grandmothers' health and education on grandchild adjustment. Results indicated that family dysfunction, social support, and grandmother health were significant predictors of grandchildren's adjustment, though the effects continued to be indirect via grandmothers' psychological distress and parenting. In a follow-up study of grandmother-grandfather dyads, Smith and Hancock (2010) further considered the role of marital distress in predicting grandchildren's behavior problems. Again, the effects were mediated by negative parenting (i.e., ineffective discipline, low warmth). As in the previous study, the demands/stressors of family dysfunction (i.e., boundary ambiguity, anger) and resources/capabilities of social support were found to predict child adjustment via grandparent marital and psychological distress. Finally, Smith and Dolbin-MacNab (2013) integrated meanings/perceptions into the FSM by examining the associations among grandmothers' positive and negative caregiving appraisals, psychological distress and well-being, and dysfunctional parenting, in terms of grandchild difficulties and prosocial behavior. Results supported the FSM but also revealed that caregiving appraisals were important predictors of grandmothers' psychological well-being and, in turn, parenting. Taken together, these studies provide empirical support for family stress theories as a useful means of conceptualizing grandmother and family processes associated with grandchild well-being.

## Implications and Future Directions

Family stress theories hold great potential for responding to calls for more theoretically driven research that examines the processes or mechanisms by which aspects of grandfamilies' internal and external contexts shape both individual and family outcomes (Hayslip et al., 2017). To achieve this goal, future research would benefit from more intentional and comprehensive application of specific family stress theories. More specifically, while concepts associated with family stress theories have been studied in isolation, typically within the context of grandmother well-being or grandchild adjustment, scholars should take a comprehensive approach by applying the theories as a whole and by considering grandfamily-level outcomes. Given the numerous stressors experienced by grandfamilies, and the relevance of contextual factors, the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS; Boss, 1987, 2002; Boss et al., 2017) could usefully guide future research, by facilitating scholars' ability to consider how stress accumulates and how it influences grandfamily adjustment and adaptation over time. In addition to exploring the influence of internal and external contextual factors, which will be discussed, other constructs worthy of investigation could include grandfamily members' perceptions and meaning-making about their family circumstances and caregiving, coping strategies, and resources such as social

support or adequacy of support services. By examining these and other CMFS constructs that are salient to grandfamilies in a comprehensive, contextually informed, and theoretically grounded manner, scholars can gain a better understanding of why some grandfamilies struggle and others are able to thrive. Practically, making these connections is also critical to developing interventions to support grandparents with their caregiving responsibilities and to helping grandfamilies navigate the multiple stressors they experience.

Despite the challenges they face, grandfamilies are resilient (Hayslip & Smith, 2013). As such, research utilizing family stress theories should examine the ways in which grandfamilies are able to adapt successfully in response to stressors and crises. Existing evidence suggests that factors such as grandparent resourcefulness, benefit finding, optimism, and empowerment (Hayslip & Smith, 2013) are worthy of investigation, especially in terms of predicting grandparent adjustment. To advance the grandfamilies literature, these resilience factors should be explored in the context of grandchild and family outcomes, and in relation to other constructs within family stress theories. Identifying factors that promote resilient outcomes is important, as these may be useful targets for intervention.

In utilizing family stress theories to better understand grandfamilies, it is necessary to account for the fact that grandfamilies are highly diverse and that the unique intersections of their various social locations and contextual factors shape how they respond to stress, and how well the family is able to adjust and adapt. For this reason, in accordance with the CMFS (Boss, 1987, 2002; Boss et al., 2017), future research would benefit from intentional exploration of both internal and external contextual factors that may positively or negatively impact the grandfamily's ability to respond effectively to stress. Internal contextual factors worthy of exploration include boundary ambiguity, ambiguous loss, role clarity, caregiving appraisals, and values related to family and the care of children. External contextual factors that could be investigated include economic distress, cultural constructions of grandparenthood and caregiving, public stigma regarding grandfamilies, systemic marginalization and oppression, and societal-level support for grandfamilies (e.g., availability and accessibility of supportive programs and policies). Attention to historical, developmental, and hereditary factors would also help advance the understanding of grandfamilies. Future research should additionally explore how grandfamily adaptation and adjustment may be influenced by the reasons contributing to the caregiving arrangement, and whether certain features of these stressor events (e.g., type or duration) differentially impact the family's experience and outcomes.

## Conclusion

Grandparents raising grandchildren serve as a critical safety net for their families. Nonetheless, grandfamilies experience numerous adversities that may place them at risk for negative individual and family outcomes. Family stress theories, including the CMFS (Boss, 1987, 2002; Boss et al., 2017), have the potential to provide

valuable insights into the factors and processes that shape successful grandfamily adjustment and adaptation and bring a much-needed family focus to the grandfamilies literature. Additionally, application of family stress theories to grandfamilies can assist in refining these theories, especially in terms of their utility for understanding families under significant individual, relational, and contextual stress, and who may be vulnerable to negative outcomes.

## References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. (2020). *Children in the kinship care in the United States (2017–2019)*. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10455-children-in-kinship-care?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/1/any/false/1757/any/20160,20161>
- Barnard, M. (2003). Between a rock and a hard place: The role of relatives in protecting children from the effects of parental drug problems. *Child and Family Social Work*, 8(4), 291–299.
- Barnett, M. A. (2008). Economic disadvantage in complex family systems. Expansion of family stress models. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 11(3), 145–151.
- Bartram, M. H. (1994). Clarifying subsystem boundaries in grandfamilies. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 18, 267–277.
- Blakey, J. M. (2012). The best of both worlds: How kinship care impacts reunification. *Families in Society*, 93(2), 103–110.
- Boss, P. (1987). Family stress: Perception and context. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 695–723). Plenum Press.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Boss, P., Bryant, C. M., & Mancini, J. A. (2017). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Conger, K. J., Rueter, M. A., & Conger, R. D. (2000). The role of economic pressure in the lives of parents and their adolescents: The family stress model. In L. J. Crockett & R. K. Silbereisen (Eds.), *Negotiating adolescence in times of social change* (pp. 201–223). Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, M. T., Warfield, M. E., Boguslaw, J., Roundtree-Swain, D., & Kellogg, G. (2020). Parenting a 6-year old is not what I planned in retirement: Trauma and stress among grandparents due to the opioid crisis. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 63(4), 295–315.
- Dolbin-MacNab, M. L. (2006). Just like raising your own? Grandmothers' perceptions of parenting a second time around. *Family Relations*, 55(5), 564–575.
- Dolbin-MacNab, M. L., & Few-Demo, A. L. (2018). Grandfamilies in the United States: An intersectional analysis. In V. Timonen (Ed.), *Grandparenting practices around the world* (pp. 189–208). Policy Press.
- Dolbin-MacNab, M. L., & Keiley, M. K. (2009). Navigating interdependence: How adolescents raised solely by grandparents experience their family relationships. *Family Relations*, 58(2), 162–175.
- Dolbin-MacNab, M. L., Roberto, K. A., & Finney, J. W. (2013). Formal social support: Promoting resilience in grandparents parenting grandchildren. In B. Hayslip & G. C. Smith (Eds.), *Resilient grandparent caregivers: A strengths-based perspective* (pp. 134–151). Routledge.
- Dunifon, R., Kopko, K., Chase-Lansdale, L., & Wakschlag, L. (2016). Multigenerational relationships in families with custodial grandparents. In M. Harrington Meyer & Y. Abdul-Malak (Eds.), *Grandparenting in the United States* (pp. 133–160). Baywood.
- Ellis, R. R., & Simmons, T. (2014). Coresident grandparents and their grandchildren: 2012. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p20-576.pdf>

- Generations United. (2019). *A place to call home: Building affordable housing for grandfamilies*. Generations United.
- Gibson, P. (2002). Barriers, lessons learned, and helpful hints: Grandmother caregivers talk about service utilization. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 39*(4), 55–74.
- Hayslip, B., Fruhauf, C. A., & Dolbin-MacNab, M. L. (2017). Grandparents raising grandchildren: What have we learned over the past decade? *The Gerontologist, 59*, e15–e163.
- Hayslip, B., & Smith, G. C. (Eds.). (2013). *Resilient grandparent caregivers: A strengths-based perspective*. Routledge.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABC-X model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage and Family Review, 6*(1–2), 7–37.
- Minkler, M., Fuller-Thomson, E., Miller, D., & Driver, D. (1997). Depression in grandparents raising grandchildren: Results of a national longitudinal study. *Archives of Family Medicine, 6*(5), 445–452.
- Musil, C. M., Gordon, N. L., Warner, C. B., Zauszniewski, J. A., Standing, T., & Wykle, M. (2010). Grandmothers and caregiving to grandchildren: Continuity, change, and outcomes over 24 months. *The Gerontologist, 51*(1), 86–100.
- Musil, C. M., Warner, C., Zauszniewski, J., Wykle, M., & Standing, T. (2009). Grandmother caregiving, family stress and strain and depressive symptoms. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 31*(3), 389–408.
- Patterson, J. M. (1988). Families experiencing stress: The family adjustment and adaptation response model. *Family Systems Medicine, 5*(2), 202–237.
- Smith, G. C., & Dolbin-MacNab, M. L. (2013). The role of negative and positive caregiving appraisals in key outcomes for custodial grandmothers and grandchildren. In B. Hayslip & G. C. Smith (Eds.), *Resilient grandparent caregivers: A strengths-based perspective* (pp. 3–24). Routledge.
- Smith, G. C., & Hancock, G. R. (2010). Custodial grandmother-grandfather dyads: Pathways among marital distress, grandparent dysphoria, parenting practice, and grandchild adjustment. *Family Relations, 59*(1), 45–59.
- Smith, G. C., Hayslip, B., Hancock, G. R., Merchant, W., Montoro-Rodriguez, J., & Strieder, R. (2018). The family stress model as it applies to custodial grandfamilies: A cross validation. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*(2), 505–521.
- Smith, G. C., Palmieri, P. A., Hancock, G. R., & Richardson, R. A. (2008). Custodial grandmothers' psychological distress, dysfunctional parenting, and grandchildren's adjustment. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 67*(4), 327–357.
- United States Census Bureau. (2020). *Grandparents*. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=S1002&tid=ACST5Y2019.S1002>
- Whitley, D. M., & Fuller-Thomson, E. (2017). African-American solo grandparents raising grandchildren: A representative profile of their health status. *Journal of Community Health, 42*(2), 312–323.

# Through the Looking Glass: Reexamining Symbolic Interactionism's Past and Forecasting its Future



Kari Adamsons and Michael Carter

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework with origins in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create relationships and a shared social world via language and symbolic gestures. Involving both theoretical propositions and methodological practices, social scientists use the “interactionist” framework to understand joint action and how individuals interpret and define their experiences. Focusing on social processes that occur in small groups and dyadic settings, scholars who work in the interactionist tradition have produced an extensive literature that helps us understand a variety of microlevel social phenomena and the nature of group life. Because of its efficacy in explaining the relationship between individuals and groups, symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for understanding family dynamics.

Herbert Blumer (1937) coined the term “symbolic interactionism” in the 1930s during his tenure at the University of Chicago. Unsatisfied with the prevalent social-scientific paradigms of his era that viewed society as an objective, external force that constrains and shapes individuals (i.e., Talcott Parsons’ *structural functionalism*; Parsons, 1949, 2005 [1951]), Blumer’s interactionist perspective viewed individuals as agentic and central in constructing their social world. Departing from sociological theories that provided “over-socialized” explanations of individuals and groups, Blumer emphasized the agency of individuals. Specifically, he proposed that humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, that the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the

---

K. Adamsons (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [kari.adamsons@uconn.edu](mailto:kari.adamsons@uconn.edu)

M. Carter

Department of Sociology, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_8)

127

social interactions one shares with others, and that such meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by individuals in dealing with things they encounter (Blumer, 1969). These tenets represent the basic orientation of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes how *meaning* and *interpretation* influence joint social action, rather than how social systems impose on actors. As such, symbolic interactionism is not simply a social psychological or sociological framework for understanding the nature of human action; it is a general theory that seeks to explain the reflexive relationship between the individual and society, and the ways in which individuals negotiate and enact roles within families. As a concept and social institution, the family is both a static and dynamic entity. Symbolic interactionism helps untangle this paradox, providing explanations for both the stability and change of family life.

In this chapter, we review symbolic interactionism and discuss how the framework has influenced a large body of empirical studies, particularly in family science. We first discuss the origins and historical development of the perspective, discuss its core assumptions and interrelated concepts, and address its main challenges and limitations. We then survey research that has contributed to family science. Lastly, we discuss future directions of the perspective.

## Precursors to Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has roots in the ideas of the Scottish moralist and American pragmatist philosophers. Emphasizing empiricism and induction rather than the logical and deductive reasoning that characterized much of Enlightenment thought, Scottish moralists such as David Hume, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith believed that any understanding of the human condition must be derived from observing individuals and common experiences in social life (Shott, 1976; Stryker, 1980). For the Scottish moralist philosophers, reason as the prime motivator of human behavior held less relevance than common sense, beliefs, instincts, and habits. Aligned with this view, individuals are not *born* human; humanity rather *derives* from society. Treating society as a matrix from which the human mind acquires intelligence and moral sentiments, the Scottish moralists were among the earliest to conceive society as a central entity of importance in understanding the nature of the individual (Shott, 1976). From this perspective, there can be no conception of the self (or the individual) without considering its attachment to greater society.

Symbolic interactionism also has roots in American pragmatism and the work of John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James (among others). For the pragmatist philosophers, in particular James, biologically deterministic theories that were popular during the nineteenth century were insufficient for understanding human beings, for such models focused on *instinct* while ignoring the significance of *symbols* and *habits* that characterize human life. This focus on symbolic communication—and particularly habitual action—represented a departure from explanations of the individual that were rooted in *biology* to one rooted in *society* (Stryker,

1980). Consciousness and the “self” were central concepts of interest for the pragmatist philosophers, and particularly the manner in which self and society are interrelated.

Sheldon Stryker, originator of what has come to be known as *structural symbolic interactionism* (we discuss this perspective later), cited three reasons why James and the pragmatist philosophers were so influential for the interactionist perspective (Stryker, 1890, pp. 22–23). First, James was among the first to recognize that the self emerges from an *empirical source*. This “source” equates to the sum total of one’s relationships with others, a notion James emphasized when he stated that a “man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind” (James, 1890, p. 294). Second, James noted the *multifaceted nature of the self*—that the self is a product of a complex and “heterogeneously organized” society. Third, James noted that individuals *seek recognition from others* and that an individual’s self-esteem reflects comparisons to others and is a ratio of one’s *success* (an objective representation of others’ recognitions) to one’s *pretensions* (a subjective notion of one’s aspirations). James was one of the first to emphasize how social connections influence self-worth. These ideas, centering on the notion that consciousness and the self develop from interactions with others, greatly influenced social scientists in the twentieth century.

## Foundations of Symbolic Interactionism

Other influential figures in symbolic interactionism include philosophers and sociologists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Charles Horton Cooley, Ralph Linton, George Herbert Mead, Georg Simmel, W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer, and Max Weber. All of these men influenced the development of symbolic interactionism to varying degrees, but much of interactionist thought aligns closely with the work of Cooley, Mead, and Blumer, who developed more intricate and sophisticated theories on the relationship between self and society that together provided the foundation for symbolic interactionism.

Counter to prevailing perspectives of the nineteenth century that posited society to be a reality *sui generis* and an objective, constraining force that exists outside individuals (Durkheim, 1982; Spencer, 2003 [1898]), Charles Horton Cooley (1902) saw society as nothing more than a matrix of individual ideas; thus, society equates to the *imagination* people have of one another. Originally an instructor of political economics, Cooley became the first professor to teach sociology at the University of Michigan. Cooley was particularly concerned with the trends he saw emerging as a result of the industrial revolution, namely, the increase in individualism and the decline in emphasis on family and neighborhood. His desire to reclaim these “traditional” values and his reaction against the push for individualism shaped much of his thinking about the importance of socialization, group membership, and the views of others in the development and enactment of self, as well as maintaining the “moral unity” of society (ASA, 2020).



Two of Cooley's ideas in particular provided a foundation for symbolic interactionism. First, Cooley saw the "self" as a *looking glass self*, a conception of the self as socially constructed and involving three constituents: (1) an individual's *perception* of how they appear to others, (2) an individual's *judgment* of that perception in positive or negative terms, and (3) a subsequent *feeling* of "pride" or "mortification" based on this judgment (Cooley, 1998 [1902]). Second, Cooley emphasized that the *mental* and *subjective* are paramount to social scientists and that a science of society must involve the *interpretation* of individuals' mental states and subjective views. Symbolic interactionism adopted these ideas, with perception, interpretation, and meaning being central to explaining the operation of social processes.

George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher and contemporary of Cooley. Mead provided a more complete and systematic theory for understanding the relationship between the self and society, and his ideas—more than any others—are the underpinnings of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Departing from traditional philosophical notions that conceived consciousness as an innate phenomenon, Mead understood consciousness (or the *mind*) as developing out of the social interactions that individuals experience across their life course. For Mead, there is no a priori consciousness; group life is the essential condition for the emergence of consciousness. Pragmatism, social behaviorism, and evolutionary theory influenced Mead's ideas on the relationship between the individual and society.

Blumer, who coined the term "symbolic interactionism," contributed largely through his summary, formalization, and extension of Mead's ideas. Blumer's perspective begins with Mead's notion that individuals have a *self* that provides "a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world—a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding...conduct" (1969, p. 62). Mead saw the self as a *social* self, arising via interactions with others, and capable of being both the *subject* (the "I") and *object* (the "me") of one's actions. He also noted that human social action takes the form of *symbolic interaction*, a state of communication and social relation in which each actor in a setting interprets one another's behavior and acts toward the other based on such interpretations. Mead's (and Blumer's) ideas on the reflexive relationship between self and others are central in symbolic interactionism. To understand human social (or joint) action, one must consider the manner in which such action is negotiated and interpreted by individuals in the given social setting in which such action takes place. According to Blumer, this interplay among selves, acts, and objects together explains the operation of "society."

It also is important to view Blumer and his ideas in sociohistorical context: his work spanned the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War while at the University of Chicago; he left for the University of California Berkeley after an academic (and politically far more conservative) "rival" took over as chair of his Chicago department; and he was involved with radical politics and anarchists during the 1950s and 1960s (Wiley, 2014). Certainly, the political, personal, and professional intersected with Blumer.

Overall, symbolic interactionism consists of Blumer's reworking and synthesizing of the work of Cooley and Mead (Carter & Fuller, 2015). However, the symbolic

interactionist perspective has evolved into a multiplicity of sub-theories and frameworks. In the 1960s, two primary schools of thought divided symbolic interactionism: the Iowa school (associated with Kuhn, 1964) and the Chicago school (associated with Blumer, 1962, 1969). The Iowa school focused on stable structural influences on individual meaning-making (a top-down approach, known as *role taking*) and quantitative research methods that could empirically test theoretical hypotheses. Conversely, the Chicago school tended to emphasize qualitative methods and the process of meaning-making by individuals as being responsible for the creation of social norms (a bottom-up approach, called *role making*). Although many have called for movement beyond these distinct schools (and movement has occurred), their existence is important to consider when examining the impact and use of symbolic interactionism in family science. Broadly speaking, more family science research has followed the Iowa school's structural and quantitative focus, whereas social psychology and sociology have followed the Chicago school.

A third school of symbolic interactionist thought developed in the mid to late twentieth century, associated primarily with sociologist Sheldon Stryker (1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) and referred to as the Indiana school. Like Kuhn and Blumer, Stryker focused on fleshing out the "frame" of Mead's more abstract symbolic interactionism by developing testable hypotheses and operationalizable constructs that quantitative methods could empirically investigate (Stryker, 2008, p. 17). Also like Kuhn, Stryker emphasized the importance of social structures in leading individuals to create meaning, but Stryker focused specifically on the importance and function of social roles (discussed more below).

Beyond the three schools of symbolic interactionist thought spanning sociology, social psychology, and family science, two variants of symbolic interactionism also have emerged over time: the *structural approach* and the *interactional approach*. Although some aspects of these variants align well with the three schools, it is worth briefly discussing each approach.

The structural approach is most easily aligned with the Indiana school and primarily is associated with the work of Sheldon Stryker (1968, 1980), although others associated with the structural approach include Ivan Nye, Wesley Burr and colleagues, Peter Burke, and Jan Stets. The primary tenet of the structural approach is that much of individuals' lives involve *role taking*. Occupying a social position (often referred to as a *status* or *role*, e.g., "mother") necessitates internalizing a set of stable social norms and expectations for that role (e.g., being a nurturing caregiver), which the individual then uses to make meaning of situations and to guide their behavior within that role. Role expectations, as explained by Goffman's "dramaturgical approach" (1974) are seen as "scripts... passed down to the actors from society, which *precede the individual*" (emphasis in original; White et al., 2019, p. 90). Generally, the structural approach to symbolic interactionism views society as a *patterned* and *stable* entity.

The interactional approach proposes the opposite: that individuals mostly engage in *role making*, and that family or societal patterns develop through interactions between individuals and their contexts (White et al., 2019). Most associated with Ralph Turner and his book *Family Interaction* (1970), the interactional approach

views societies as being constructed by their individual members and as guiding individual behavior only at a very broad level. Thus, the interactional approach views society as *fluid* and in *flux*.

Much like the different schools, these two variants have been highly critical of one another. Structuralists allege that interactionists allocate too much power to individuals and fail to explain how stable social structures exist and influence individuals and families. Interactionists accuse structuralists of failing to give enough agency to individuals and of being unable to account for adaptation and change. However, over time, interactional approaches have ventured into the realm of structuralism, and structuralists have begun to account for the influence of interactions. The work of Peter Burke (particularly his cybernetic model of identity control; 1991, 1997) introduces a dyadic interaction between individuals into the process of role taking. In the 1980s, Turner and colleagues (Turner, 1980; Turner & Colomy, 1987) made more general statements about families and social aggregates rather than particular patterns within individual families or contexts. As such, scholars are recognizing the truth in both perspectives, exploring the ways individuals both internalize *and* construct roles.

These varied approaches mean that symbolic interactionism is more a cluster of (sometimes opposing) frameworks than a singular entity. Although all of its original schools and approaches were housed in sociology departments, over time its usage has evolved in a number of fields (see more on this below) and thus the framework itself has evolved in a number of directions, including within family science. Family science, as an interdisciplinary field with strong roots in sociology and social psychology and with scholars who often utilize a both/and approach to understanding families (e.g., it is both nature and nurture, the individual and their environment), is particularly well-suited to the task of accommodating competing perspectives.

## Core Assumptions and Interrelated Concepts

Though multiple variants of symbolic interactionism exist, the idea of *meaning* is central to all of them. Symbolic interactionists see individuals as active participants who do not merely observe the situations in which they find themselves, but who interpret and use *signs* and *symbols* that are present in such situations to construct meaning (see Table 1 for a list of key constructs and definitions). This notion is captured in Thomas and Thomas's (1928) famous dictum, that "What humans define as real has real consequences" (p. 572), which underscores both the agency of individuals in the meaning-making process and the flexible nature of "reality" within the interactionist tradition. What is "real" to any individual depends on how they interpret a situation, and that interpretation thereafter guides their behavioral response. For example, how a child reacts in response to a gift from their father will depend upon what the gift symbolizes to the child – what it *means*. Is the gift some art supplies that the child really wanted, or a soccer ball because the father wants his child to be involved in sports? Answers to such questions will result in different

**Table 1** Key constructs in symbolic interactionism. Throughout this table, this sample interaction will be used to exemplify the different constructs: An adolescent calls his parents to tell them he is having dinner at a friend's house

Construct	Definition and examples
<p><b>Self</b>  <i>Looking glass self, I, Me, Generalized other</i></p>	<p>An individual's symbolic representation of themselves as someone who acted upon something (<i>I</i>) and which is acted upon (<i>me</i>)</p> <p>Here, the behavior was calling his parents to tell them he is having dinner elsewhere. His "self" would account for both the fact that he made the phone call (the I, someone who acted) and how he thinks others will view and react to his call (the Me, someone who is acted upon)</p> <p>Implicit in the Me are the understandings that both calling and the content of the call will elicit reactions in the parents (the parents could view the phone call as being respectful by letting them know his plans or could view it as disrespectful because he did not ask permission) and with his friend (will the friend view him positively for calling his parents to tell them, or negatively, thinking he shouldn't have to tell them what he's doing)</p> <p>He is aware of both <i>specific others</i> (what his friend will think of him) and his idea of the <i>generalized other</i> (what other people generally think of people who call their parents and who have dinner with friends instead of family)</p>
<p><b>Signs/symbols</b></p>	<p><i>Signs</i> are things that represent or stand for something else, and <i>symbols</i> are words, gestures, or objects that have shared meaning within a culture. In both cases, the shared meaning of the sign or symbol is created through social interactions</p> <p>The behavior of "calling his parents" could signify:          That having dinner together is a typical routine in his family, and so exceptions to this practice require notice          A social norm that, in families, it is considerate to let family members know of changes in plans that could impact their own plans (e.g., when or what to make for dinner)          That he considers himself an adult who can make his own plans without parental permission</p>
<p><b>Meaning</b></p>	<p>The interpretation an individual assigns to a behavior, situation, or interaction based on the signs and symbols that are perceived. <i>Meanings must be shared across individuals in order to have a successful interaction</i></p> <p>Families might differ in expecting that you should call your parents about a change in plans, that family members eat dinner together, or that an adolescent should ask permission rather than simply notifying parents</p> <p>Within a family, these expectations might differ between parents and the adolescent</p> <p>A disconnect in any of these meanings will negatively influence the interaction</p>
<p><b>Socialization</b></p>	<p>The process by which society imbues individuals with the symbols, meanings, and beliefs inherent to that society</p> <p>Over the course of his childhood, the adolescent likely was taught that the family generally eats dinner together and that changes in plans should be communicated to other family members</p>

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

Construct	Definition and examples
<b>Role:</b> <i>Expectations, clarity, strain, overload, taking, making</i>	The places occupied by individuals in the social structure; the self in context Here, the adolescent occupies two roles, perhaps with competing needs: son and friend
<b>Identity</b> <i>Identity verification, self-enhancement, self-verification, salience, commitment, centrality</i>	The self in role; how individuals define themselves as a result of occupying particular social categories He might feel that “good sons” call their parents; therefore, he is a good son for calling his parents Similarly, he might feel that a “good friend” accepts invitations to dinner, and so he is a good friend His parents might feel that a “good son” would choose dinner with family over friends and see his action as a “bad son”

constructions of the meaning of the gift and consequently, different emotional and behavioral responses by the child, which in turn shape future father-child interactions.

For human beings to successfully interact and communicate, symbols must have some degree of *shared meaning* across individuals. A strong focus of Mead’s and others’ work has been how a society socializes its members regarding the systems and patterns of symbolic meanings held by that society. Another focus for symbolic interactionists is how meanings can be constructed and adapted during interactions to fit specific contexts or situations. Words come and go over time, and existing words can evolve in meaning. Dictionaries routinely publish lists of new words that are added to the “official” lexicon, providing one instance of how shared meaning is constructed first through individual interactions and an accumulation of usage, and then brought to a societal level for greater recognition and formalization. Problems arise when someone does not use a word or behavior to communicate the agreed-upon meaning, when meaning is not universally shared, or when the meaning differs across contexts or cultures.

Another key concept in symbolic interactionism is the idea of the *self*. Cooley (1902) first introduced the concept of self through his idea of the “looking glass self,” or how we believe we look to others, as if viewing ourselves in a mirror. Mead expanded the concept of self to include what he termed the *I* (the self as “knower,” or person who does things; subject) and the *me* (the “known” self, or person who was acted on/who was observed doing things; object). It is by viewing ourselves as objects that we can take on the perspectives of important others. Mead then expanded these specific other referents to the *generalized other*, or how we use specific others to form more general beliefs about how “society” would judge us and our behaviors.

This leads to the idea of *roles*, which the different variants of symbolic interactionism have used in numerous ways, perhaps because the term did not originate with the framework. Despite its centrality to the framework, Mead (1934) did little to define the concept of roles, simply putting in a footnote that it meant to “‘put himself in the place of,’ the other individuals implicated with him in given social situations” (p. 141n). Mead understood roles to be the societal expectations

associated with occupying particular social positions or situations. As noted, Stryker and Burke focused largely on these processes of role taking and role making. Stryker (1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) has been concerned primarily with the ways in which society guides the formation of self, or what he terms *identities* (the “self in role”). Burke elaborated upon Stryker’s work to focus on how identities inform behavior, and how behavioral feedback from others, in turn, provides feedback to the person about their identity.

The numerous variants and sub-theories of symbolic interactionism make it challenging to provide an exhaustive discussion of all of its constructs; the constructs and assumptions we describe above represent the core beliefs common to most, if not all, interactionist variants.

## Research Using Symbolic Interactionism

Research in the interactionist tradition has addressed a wide variety of social processes. As many have noted, summarizing work that can be classified as symbolic interactionist in nature is difficult, as any attempt to present an exhaustive summary will at best be partial and selective (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Hall, 2003; Plummer, 1996). This difficulty arises for two reasons: first, because of the sheer number of theoretical and empirical studies that have emerged over the decades, and second, due to the vast array of themes symbolic interactionists have addressed in prior work. Therefore, here we first include studies that are classic symbolic interactionist works and next examine a selection of contemporary studies on family life.

### *Classic Studies in Symbolic Interactionism*

Studies conducted by Rosengren (1961), Glaser and Strauss (1964), Daniels (1972), and Becker (1953) are considered seminal examples of symbolic interactionist research. Rosengren examined the nature of self-meanings in those who are emotionally disturbed. In revealing how external social forces and the perception of others’ views cause self-meanings to change over time, Rosengren provided a blueprint for how to design a research study aimed at measuring symbolic interactionist concepts as well as a method for empirically testing the ideas of George Herbert Mead. Glaser and Strauss’ study of hospital life showed how nurses create a controlled atmosphere of positivity for terminal patients in order to ensure that patients maintain a positive outlook, even when death is imminent. Daniels studied the military (during the height of the Vietnam conflict) and suggested that psychiatric diagnoses of veterans are socially constructed since diagnoses of mental illness are dependent on both patients’ symptoms and doctors’ awareness of the consequences of a specific diagnostic label for the patient. And in one of the oldest studies to use symbolic interactionism, Becker’s marijuana study revealed how “getting high” is a

social rather than physiological phenomenon, and how role behaviors are socialized and acquired through social interactions.

More generally, studies that utilize an interactionist framework have appeared in cultural studies (Becker, 1982), and in literature aligned with feminism (Deegan & Hill, 1987), Marxism (Schwalbe, 1986), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Scott & Lyman, 1968), phenomenology (Schutz, 1962), pragmatism (Plummer, 1996), and even postmodernism (Sandstrom & Fine, 2003). Even a brief review of the literature shows that symbolic interactionism appeals to a wide range of scholarship and philosophical perspectives. Symbolic interactionism commonly informs research on the self, identity, social roles, and the body (Burke & Stets, 2009; MacKinnon, 1994). It also is a popular perspective in literature that addresses social problems (Best, 2003), collective behavior and social movements (McPhail, 1991; Stryker et al., 2000), deviance (Conrad & Schneider, 1980), and emotions (Hochschild, 1979, 2003 [1983]). Also included is research that applies symbolic interactionism to understand the family, which is the next focus of our review.

### *Symbolic Interactionist Studies of the Family*

An extensive literature uses symbolic interactionism as a perspective for understanding the family. Indeed, the family unit was one of the first areas of inquiry for symbolic interactionists, with Stryker (1959, 1968) examining why family members have different levels of commitment to their family roles, and how varying levels of commitment influence role behavior. Stryker's (1980) answer to his now famous question, "Why, on a free afternoon, do some people play golf with friends while others take their children to the zoo?"—that family members choose one role behavior over another depending on their commitment to their role identities—has influenced an entire research program under the label of "identity theory" (Burke & Stets, 2009; Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stets & Serpe, 2016).

While Stryker's work provides an example of early symbolic interactionist work on the family, many credit Ernest Burgess with first applying a symbolic interactionist perspective to the study of families (Stryker, 1964). In 1926, Burgess published "The family as a unity of interacting personalities," proposing an application of symbolic interactionist ideas to family science, which strongly influenced family research in the decades that followed (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Burgess's conceptualization was unique in that he viewed "the family" as existing "not in any legal conception, nor in any formal contract, but in the interaction of its members" (1926, p. 5). He also viewed these interactions as ever dynamic and evolving, such that individuals were mutually influential to and interdependent with one another.

As noted by LaRossa and Reitzes (1993), perhaps the most lasting of Burgess's contributions to symbolic interactionism and family science were the propositions that (1) the family is a social group and its form and structure are influenced by societal structures and institutions and (2) perceptions of self and others motivate behavior and guide individuals' interpretations of the behaviors of others (1926).

Other important figures in the history of symbolic interactionism in family science include Willard Waller (whose studies of dating and divorce were some of the first studies on the role of conflict and power in family interactions; Waller, 1937, 1938) and Reuben Hill, who published a second edition of Waller's book *The Family* (1951) after Waller's death. Hill shifted the focus of the book away from a largely qualitative approach regarding conflict and process to a more quantitative and developmental perspective with a greater focus on family crises and the importance of the ways in which families define difficult situations (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). As he noted, "Not infrequently families with resources adequate to meet the hardships of sickness or job loss crack under stress because they define such hardship as insurmountable" (1951, p. 462).

More contemporary research has used the interactionist perspective to understand a variety of social processes relating to marriage, parenthood, and family structure, with much recent research addressing changing family roles and the challenges that face modern families. For example, studies have used symbolic interactionism to explore stepmothers' construction of a sense of belonging (Murtorinne-Lahtinen & Jokinen, 2020), the identity construction of donor-conceived offspring (Harrigan et al., 2015), and the ways in which women's fertility perceptions predict changes in life satisfaction (Greil et al., 2019). Studies also have explored the diversity of families and how family members negotiate family rituals, rules, and norms (e.g., Glass, 2014). Others have used symbolic interactionism to understand family pathologies, including substance misuse (e.g., Bermudez et al., 2017; Katovich & Rosenthal Vaughan, 2016).

Studies applying symbolic interactionism to families are truly interdisciplinary, extending to such diverse fields as marketing and social work. For example, Parkinson et al. (2016) used symbolic interactionism to understand how the addition of an infant into the family structure affects consumer decision-making and the couple process in jointly negotiating feeding practices (along with influences such as the media). From a social work perspective, Hollingsworth (1999) used an interactionist framework to show how African American families are defined by a unique and distinct cultural heritage as a way to explain why many in the African American community are opposed to transracial adoption.

Despite its origins in sociology, family science has enthusiastically adopted symbolic interactionism as "one of its own" theories, including it as a core family theory from the earliest theory handbooks. Its foci on meaning-making, the importance of significant others in the development of identities, and socialization processes have made family science a natural fit for research in the interactionist tradition. In fact, Cook and Douglas (1998) asserted that "[f]amily relationships provide the most valid context for studying a key hypothesis of symbolic interaction theory (SIT), that how one is perceived by significant others determines one's view of the self" (p. 299). Family scientists have investigated processes and meaning-making among diverse individuals and families, from transnational families to families with members with disabilities to LGBTQ families, as well as those with multiple intersecting identities.



Although symbolic interactionism contains no explicit focus on culture, nor is it a critical theory in the same vein as feminist or critical race theories, its emphasis on the importance of societal construction of roles and individual meaning-making has allowed it to be flexible, and perhaps the most flexible of all of the historical “core” family theories when addressing numerous forms and aspects of family diversity (although its ability to address power differences remains somewhat weak, which we discuss more below). Its implicit assumptions of change and diversity in individuals and societies likely have contributed to its longevity and continued relevance in family science and other fields, where other theories have foundered, been reinvented, or fallen out of fashion. However, it is not without weakness, which we now discuss.

## Critiques and Limitations of Symbolic Interactionism

Although symbolic interactionism has been and continues to be a productive and well-utilized perspective, it is not without limitations, and perhaps its loudest critics historically have come from symbolic interactionist scholars themselves. As noted previously, the different schools of thought tended to compete with one another rather than attempting to integrate their varied perspectives and assumptions, conducting their research separately and rarely, if ever, collaborating. The philosophical battles over qualitative vs. quantitative methods and top-down or bottom-up approaches have been waged on various fronts for years and only recently have attempts at integration been made, particularly with the growth in mixed methods research. However, Stryker recently stated that “[a]ccording to Mead... both persons (humans with minds and selves) and society are created through social process; each is constitutive of the other, and neither has ontological priority. Society emerges out of interaction and shapes self, but self shapes interaction, playing back on society” (2008, p. 17). So, it seems that such a reciprocal view of the relationship between self and society has always existed in symbolic interactionism, with the different schools merely choosing to emphasize one or the other.

Beyond the opposing views of the self and its creation endemic to symbolic interactionism, a number of other critiques have been lobbied. Perhaps the biggest critique of symbolic interactionism has been that it lacks the necessary components to be a formal theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Although it offers a useful lens with which to view family and other social interactions, and although some of its sub-theories have been quite successful in delineating clear propositions (e.g., Burr et al., 1979; Stryker, 1968, 1980), symbolic interactionism itself lacks a set of formal theoretical propositions. The validity of this criticism depends upon how one views the work of Stryker. Many view Stryker as creating a sub-theory, identity theory, within the framework of symbolic interactionism. Others view Stryker’s work as a school of symbolic interactionism in and of itself. Stryker himself argued that Mead’s work “constituted a conceptual/theoretical frame, not a theory per se” (2008, p. 16), and, like Kuhn and Blumer, he set out to provide what he saw as

missing. The dilemma of how to classify identity theory, and the contradictory views contained within symbolic interactionism, raises the question of whether *any* attempt to articulate formal propositions for symbolic interactionism could be other than a sub-theory of the larger framework.

Several additional critiques and limitations of symbolic interactionism likely arise from its historical origins during a time when diversity and systemic inequality remained largely unexamined by the predominantly upper class, White men who were doing the theorizing. First, a lack of consideration has been given to power and structural diversity as well as inequalities that are present within social groups (Adamsons, 2010; Stryker, 2008). Mead's construct of the *generalized other* assumes a relatively monolithic view, which ignores structural differences in the degree of influence certain "others" might have relative to less powerful "others." In families as well as in society overall, the power held by two individuals in an interaction is rarely exactly equal, so this omission is an important deficit. However, some feel that scholars have addressed this limitation. For example, Stryker (1980) discussed the ways in which structural characteristics such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity influence interactions and symbolic interpretations. Therefore, the groundwork appears to have been laid for such consideration. And, as noted above, the mechanisms for accounting for diversity have existed from its earliest days; it has been largely a problem regarding their utilization.

Similar to above, Mead also assumed a singular "self," which fails to account for behaviors such as code-switching that occur within the same individual across differing sociocultural contexts (e.g., individuals belonging to a cultural or ethnic minority speaking and behaving differently when among members of their own group than with members of the majority group). Such a singular self would speak little to the phenomenon of "passing" (seeking to be identified by others as a member of a particular favored group, while, unbeknownst to those others, possessing membership in another, less favored group). For example, civil rights leader Walter Francis White had a multiracial background with predominantly White grandparents. He identified as Black, serving as the head of the NAACP for almost 25 years until his death (1931–1955); however, he often "passed" as White due to having blond hair and blue eyes, at one point even almost joining the KKK, allowing him greater access to investigate lynchings and race riots in the American South. Such instances of multiple and sometimes conflicting selves are difficult to reconcile with a unified sense of self as proposed originally by Mead.

Generally speaking, there is an undercurrent of "normativity" that flows throughout symbolic interactionism, with a relatively unspoken goal of maintenance of social stability and the status quo. However, within symbolic interactionism, historically little to no attention has been paid to whether these social norms and expectations are worth replicating and socializing into new generations, or the ways in which particular groups and individuals are systematically disadvantaged by such continued socialization. Newer theories such as queer theory and critical race theory (see chapters "Queer Theory" and "Critical Race Theory: Historical Roots, Contemporary Use, and Its Contributions to Understanding Latinx Immigrant Families" in this volume) have done a better job of centering such concerns, and it

is encouraging that more recent research using symbolic interactionism has begun exploring the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups (see more below).

Additionally, some accuse symbolic interactionism of committing the “subjective fallacy”—overstating the importance of individuals’ definitions of a situation while failing to account for the existence and importance of objective realities. As noted by Goffman, “Whether you organize a theater or an aircraft factory, you need to find places for cars to park and coats to be checked, and these had better be real places, which, incidentally, had better carry real insurance against theft” (1974, p. 1). LaRossa and Reitzes emphasized further that “definitions of situations can have consequences, but so too can the situations themselves” (1993, p. 155). It is worthwhile, therefore, for symbolic interactionists to realize the limits of subjective perceptions.

Ideally, limitations become the impetus for future theoretical growth. Therefore, we now consider future directions of the perspective. Here we discuss recently emerging trends, emphases, and extensions of symbolic interactionism, focusing on new areas of family life that need addressing. We also examine how symbolic interactionists are employing new methodologies in their studies of the family and discuss the perspective’s future prospects.

## **The Growing Edge: Current and Future Directions of Symbolic Interactionism**

### *Emerging Areas and Fields of Research*

Symbolic interactionism has been a theoretical mainstay in family science and sociology; in recent years, its appeal has been “discovered” in numerous other fields. Here we highlight uses of the framework in other fields, and how these could be useful for family scientists.

**LGBTQ+ Studies** Numerous studies have been conducted in recent years using a symbolic interactionist lens to analyze the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and the views of others toward LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Herrera (2018) utilized both a poststructuralist and a symbolic interactionist lens to analyze the use of #lesbian on Instagram as a way of both creating and affirming a supportive community and also emphasizing the existence of power structures that lead those with minority identities to label themselves. Family scholars using an interactionist lens could draw further upon the experiences of gender and sexual minority individuals and their families, including the ways in which the LGBTQ+ community has “queered” the definition of family to include families of choice, as well as their sometimes conflicted relationships with their biological families of origin.

**Education** In the field of education, research has used an interactionist lens to examine how “nontraditional” members of academic communities construct mean-

ing about their roles. Lewis (2017) conducted an analysis with undergraduate students majoring in the humanities at a university that highly emphasized STEM majors. She introduced the ideas of “voluntary stigma” and “stigma allure” to explain why individuals sometimes choose identities which come with social costs attached in order to be authentic and true to themselves. The ideas of voluntary stigma and stigmatized identities have numerous potential applications in the study of families who are “nontraditional” (e.g., undocumented parents, age-discrepant marriages).

**Nutrition** Work in obesity prevention has begun to recognize the importance of beliefs and the importance of meanings around food and physical activity decisions. Combining the fields of social work and nutrition, Helton et al. (2016) explored the ways in which foster parents strategized to encourage healthy food habits in their foster children. Interestingly, this study was the only one reviewed here that used a mixed methods approach, rather than a strictly qualitative approach, showing the enduring influence of the Chicago school.

**Disability Studies** Finally, the use of symbolic interactionism is becoming more visible in the field of disability studies. In a particularly creative study by Hughes (2016), symbolic interactionism was used as the basis for intervention. Hughes explored the ways that premises and propositions from symbolic interactionism can aid individuals with Asperger’s syndrome in more accurately interpreting the non-verbal signs and symbols communicated by others, by emphasizing the notion of the “Me.” Again, a greater interactionist focus on individuals with disabilities will help family scientists understand the experiences of more diverse families.

### *Untapped Directions*

There are a number of directions that family-focused symbolic interactionist research has not yet followed but that would be of immense value. Perhaps the most influential would be shifting the focus from individual meaning-making back to examining the roles of social structures as guides for individual identity and behavior. As noted above, interactionists have done little to examine structural differences in power, opportunities, oppression, and (dis)advantage, despite it being well-situated to do so. Using an interactionist lens to examine the processes of socializing individuals into White supremacist, misogynist, heterosexist, and other beliefs that contribute to systemic as well as individually enacted discrimination and oppression would be invaluable in providing ways to dismantle and work against such processes and toward emancipation and equality. Family scientists could examine the societal and systemic forces at work in structural racism and the ways these shape individuals’ roles, expectations, and interpretations of situations and interactions, including differences in access to roles (e.g., female vs. male CEOs). In a highly individualistic society such as the USA, it can be easy to misattribute things like

“resilience” or “success” as individual traits or as a result of individual efforts (or a lack thereof) and to ignore the critical influence of social structures on individuals; symbolic interactionism was specifically designed to address such structural influences and constraints.

## *Methods*

Methods used in symbolic interactionist research have included everything from self-report surveys to observations to interviews, even experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Symbolic interactionists have employed ethnographic methods and content analyses to understand meanings of texts and narratives and to understand interaction processes during face-to-face encounters (Carter & Montes Alvarado, 2018). Although interactional and systemic components always have been implicit within symbolic interactionism, early research utilizing the perspective was largely individual in its focus and methods. However, Burke’s (1991, 1997) work on the identity verification process expanded the framework to include an explicitly dyadic perspective, and recent developments in dyadic research methodologies and statistical abilities have expanded the use of dyadic perspectives in symbolic interactionist research. Dyadic research is particularly important when studying families, as it is central to understanding the functioning of couples, the behavior of co-parents, and the nature of parent-child relationships and sibling dynamics, among others.

As noted earlier, much of the work using symbolic interactionism (particularly outside of family science) has been qualitative nature, with the notable exception of work using identity theory. Historically, qualitative research strategies have been associated with the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism and the field of sociology; quantitative methods have been more associated with the Iowa school (the Indiana school has employed both methodologies, though much of its research has been quantitative) and family science. As such, family sociologists could benefit from more quantitative methodologies, and family scientists would be well-served by embracing symbolic interactionism’s qualitative “roots.”

In this chapter, we have discussed the background and development of symbolic interactionism as a framework and how scholars employ the symbolic interactionist perspective to understand families. Symbolic interactionism has stood the test of time and continues to offer much to those interested in studying family dynamics, by helping scholars both conceptualize and empirically observe the myriad social processes at work in family structures. The meaning of “family” will continue to evolve over time, most recently with challenges to the binary nature of gender and related social movements to challenge what should be considered familial. Even as we redefine family and the norms for family life continue to evolve, symbolic interactionism will remain a robust theoretical perspective for understanding families.

## References

- Adamsons, K. (2010). Using identity theory to develop a mid-range model of parental gatekeeping and parenting behavior. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 2(2), 137–148.
- American Sociological Association. (2020). <https://www.asanet.org/charles-h-cooley>
- Becker, H. S. (1953). Becoming a marijuana user. *American Journal of Sociology*, 59, 235–242.
- Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art worlds*. University of California Press.
- Bermudez, J. A., Garcia, L. H., & Castillo, M. M. A. (2017). The level of well-being in families attending al-anon groups and its effect on the attention of their alcohol dependent relatives. *Addiction Medicine & Therapy*, 4(1), 206–207.
- Best, J. (2003). Social problems. In L. T. Reynolds & N. J. Herman-Kinney (Eds.), *Handbook of symbolic interactionism* (pp. 981–996). AltaMira Press.
- Blumer, H. (1937). Social psychology. In E. P. Schmidt (Ed.), *Man and society: A substantive introduction to the social science*. Prentice Hall.
- Blumer, H. (1962). Society as symbolic interaction. In A. Rose (Ed.), *Human behavior and social processes* (pp. 179–192). Houghton-Mifflin.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. UC Press.
- Burgess, E. (1926). The family as a unity of interacting personalities. *The Family*, 7(1), 3–9.
- Burke, P. J. (1991). Identity processes and social stress. *American Sociological Review*, 56(6), 836–849.
- Burke, P. J. (1997). An identity model for network exchange. *American Sociological Review*, 62(1), 134–150.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2009). *Identity theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Burr, W. R., Leigh, G. K., Day, R. D., & Constantine, J. (1979). Symbolic interaction and the family. In W. R. Burr, F. I. Nye, & I. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 2, pp. 42–111). Free Press.
- Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C. (2015). Symbolic interactionism. *Sociopedia.isa*.
- Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C. (2016). Symbols, meaning, and action: The past, present, and future of symbolic interactionism. *Current Sociology Review*, 64(6), 931–961.
- Carter, M. J., & Montes Alvarado, A. (2018). Symbolic interactionism as a methodological framework. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1–19). Springer.
- Conrad, P., & Schneider, J. (1980). *Deviance and medicalization*. Mosby.
- Cook, W. L., & Douglas, E. M. (1998). The looking-glass self in family context: A social relations analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12(3), 299–309.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and social order*. Scribner.
- Cooley, C. H. (1998 [1902]). The social self: The meaning of “I”. In H.-J. Schubert (Ed.), *On self and social organization* (pp. 155–175). University of Chicago Press.
- Daniels, A. K. (1972). The social construction of military psychiatric diagnoses. In J. G. Manis & B. N. Meltzer (Eds.), *Symbolic interaction: A reader in social psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 554–571). Allyn and Bacon.
- Deegan, M. J., & Hill, M. R. (1987). *Women and symbolic interaction*. Allyn and Unwin.
- Durkheim, E. (1982). *The rules of sociological method*. The Free Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Prentice Hall.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1964). Awareness contexts and social interaction. *American Sociological Review*, 29, 669–679.
- Glass, V. (2014). “We are with family”: Black lesbian couples negotiate rituals with extended families. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 10, 79–100.
- Goffman, (1974). *Frame analysis*. Harper & Row.
- Greil, A. L., McQuillan, J., Burch, A. R., Lowry, M. H., Tiemeyer, S. M., & Slauson-Blevins, K. S. (2019). Change in motherhood status and fertility problem identification: Implications for changes in life satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 81, 1162–1173.

- Hall, P. M. (2003). Interactionism, social organization, and social processes: Looking back and moving ahead. *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(1), 33–55.
- Harrigan, M. M., Dieter, S., Leinwohl, J., & Marrin, L. (2015). “It’s just who I am...I have brown hair. I have a mysterious father”: An exploration of donor-conceived offspring’s identity construction. *Journal of Family Communication*, 15(1), 75–93.
- Helton, J. J., Schreiber, J. C., & Fiese, B. (2016). Foster parents’ nutritional strategies and children’s well-being. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 34, 159–169.
- Herrera, A. P. (2018). Theorizing the lesbian hashtag: Identity, community, and the technological imperative to name the sexual self. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 22(3), 313–328.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551–575.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003 [1983]). *The managed heart*. University of California Press.
- Hollingsworth, L. D. (1999). Symbolic interactionism, African American families, and the transracial adoption controversy. *Social Work*, 44(5), 443–453.
- Hughes, P. (2016). Using symbolic interactionism insights as an approach to helping the individual with Asperger’s syndrome to overcome barriers to social inclusion. *Symbolic Interactionism*, 43(1), 60–74.
- James, W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. Holt Rinehart and Winston.
- Katovich, M. A., & Rosenthal Vaughan, S. (2016). Alcoholism and the Simpsons: Connecting symbolic interactionism and pastiche. In G. R. Musolf (Ed.), *The astructural bias charge: Myth or reality?* (Studies in symbolic interaction) (Vol. 46, pp. 189–214). Emerald Group.
- Kuhn, M. H. (1964). Major trends in symbolic interaction theory in the past twenty-five years. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 5(1), 61–68.
- LaRossa, R., & Reitzes, D. C. (1993). Symbolic interactionism and family studies. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 135–166). Plenum Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (2017). Crisis rhetoric, stigma play: The contested status of humanities majors on an elite university campus. *Symbolic Interaction*, 40(3), 378–395.
- MacKinnon, N. J. (1994). *Symbolic interactionism as affect control*. State UNY Press.
- McPhail, C. (1991). *The myth of the madding crowd*. Aldine de Gruyter.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press.
- Murtorinne-Lahtinen, M., & Jokinen, K. (2020). Stepmothers’ constructions and negotiations of belonging. *Journal of Family Studies*, 26, 51–66.
- Parkinson, J., Gallegos, D., & Russell-Bennett, R. (2016). Transforming beyond self: Fluidity of parent identity in family decision-making. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(1), 110–119.
- Parsons, T. (1949). *The structure of social action*. the Free Press.
- Parsons, T. (2005 [1951]). *The social system*. Routledge.
- Plummer, K. (1996). Symbolic interactionism in the twentieth century: The rise of empirical social theory. In B. Turner (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to social theory* (pp. 223–251). Blackwell.
- Rosengren, W. R. (1961). The self in the emotionally disturbed. *American Journal of Sociology*, 66, 454–462.
- Sandstrom, K. L., & Fine, G. A. (2003). Triumphs, emerging voices, and the future. In L. T. Reynolds & N. J. Herman-Kinney (Eds.), *Handbook of symbolic interactionism* (pp. 1041–1057). AltaMira Press.
- Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected papers, Vol. 1: The problem of social reality*. Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schwalbe, M. L. (1986). *The psychosocial consequences of natural and alienated labor*. State University of New York Press.
- Scott, M. B., & Lyman, S. (1968). Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 33(1), 46–62.
- Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (2011). The symbolic interactionist perspective and identity theory. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 225–248). Springer.

- Shott, S. (1976). Society, self, and mind in moral philosophy: The Scottish moralists as precursors of symbolic interactionism. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 12(1), 39–46.
- Spencer, H. (2003 [1898]). *The principles of sociology*. Transaction Publishers.
- Stets, J. E., & Serpe, R. T. (2016). *New directions in identity theory and research*. Oxford University Press.
- Stryker, S. (1959). Symbolic interaction as an approach to family research. *Marriage and Family Living*, 21(2), 111–119.
- Stryker, S. (1964). The interactional and situational approaches. In H. T. Christensen (Ed.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 125–170). Rand McNally.
- Stryker, S. (1968). Identity salience and role performance: The relevance of symbolic interaction theory for family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 30(4), 558–564.
- Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Benjamin Cummings.
- Stryker, S., & Burke, P. J. (2000). The past, present, and future of an identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(4), 284–297.
- Stryker, S., Owens, T. J., & White, R. W. (Eds.). (2000). *Self, identity, and social movements*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The child in America: Behavior problems and programs*. Knopf.
- Turner, R. H. (1970). *Family interaction*. Wiley.
- Turner, R. H. (1980). Strategy for developing an integrated role theory. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 7, 123–139.
- Turner, R. H., & Colomy, P. (1987). Role differentiation: Orienting principles. *Advances in Group Processes*, 5, 1–47.
- Waller, W. (1937). The rating and dating complex. *American Sociological Review*, 2(5), 727–734.
- Waller, W. (1938). The family: A dynamic interpretation. .
- Waller, W. (Revised by R. Hill, 1951). *Family*. Dryden Press.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). *Family theories*. Sage.
- Wiley, N. (2014). Interviewing Herbert Blumer. *Symbolic Interaction*, 37, 300–308.



# Application: Symbolic Interactionism as a Framework for Marital Meaning



Scott Hall

An enduring, popular claim is that unrealistic marital beliefs can harm a marriage. Relationship advice-centered websites abound with such warnings (e.g., *Dealing with Unrealistic*, 2019; Tartakavsky, 2017), and some divorced couples attribute their breakup in part to unrealistic expectations about marriage (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005). Such assertions imply that what we think about marriage fuels our expectations for marriage (or a spouse), which can contribute to marital problems. Indeed, McNulty and Karney (2004) found that higher expectations in marriage were associated with less future satisfaction, especially when spouses communicated more negatively. Conversely, higher expectations seemed to motivate some spouses to behave more positively toward one another, resulting in higher satisfaction. Others have also found unrealistic beliefs to corresponded with more positive marital experiences (e.g., Casad et al., 2015), perhaps creating a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Ultimately, what people believe about marriage seems to inform how people prepare for and maintain a marriage. Thus, marital beliefs are arguably more than dispassionate opinions; they represent meanings that inform intentions and behavior that shape one's marital experience. Such a premise is very much in line with Symbolic Interactionism (SI), particularly as it relates to the concept of meaning. Meaning is shaped through social interaction and in turn influences a person's behavior toward the target of that meaning (Blumer, 1969). SI is a useful framework for analyzing marital beliefs and—as will be illustrated below—has been used in recent years to justify associated scholarship and clinical attention.

---

S. Hall (✉)

Department of Early Childhood, Youth, and Family Studies, Teachers College, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

e-mail: [sshall@bsu.edu](mailto:sshall@bsu.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_9)

147

## Exploring Marital Meaning

The idea that people expect more from marriage than in the past fueled a personal and professional fascination that launched a literature exploration related to beliefs about marriage. Beginning in 2001 I gathered all the scholarly references I could find related to beliefs, attitudes, standards, expectations, expectancies, and myths about marriage. Understanding how such ideas had been conceptualized, measured, and applied toward marriage would prepare me to investigate the nature and etiology of contemporary marital meanings among young adults. The focus was particularly on marriage as an institution, or as a specific type of relationship, not necessarily regarding idiosyncratic beliefs about any specific marital relationship. Beliefs about the institution of marriage include ideas about the core elements that make marriage distinct, what defines its existence and boundaries, and about its general nature. For example, it is common for people to believe that marriage is for life, though some may add nuances to such a belief, such as *as long as it is not abusive or unhappy*. Variation in beliefs about the justification of ending a marriage is an example of subjectivity in marital meaning. This belief about marriage itself likely influences beliefs about one's own marriage, such as if it is worth salvaging given how one feels about the current circumstances.

### *Some Guidance from SI*

A fundamental theoretical tenet of SI is that the meaning that something holds for an individual shapes the individual's behavior toward it (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, what marriage means to someone, as represented by their marital beliefs, would influence behavior related to marriage and subsequent marital processes and outcomes. For example, someone who perceives marriage as requiring a full surrender of identity and feels threatened by such a prospect might avoid marriage. Such a mindset could contribute to an atmosphere conducive to relational tension and dissatisfaction.

In a similar way, the concept of role-taking illustrates the relevance of marital beliefs or meaning for one's behavior. This emphasis aligns with what Adamsons and Carter (chapter "[Symbolic Interactionism](#)", this volume) note as the structural approach within SI. The role of spouse can hold specific scripts that a person, couple, or group believe to be intrinsic to that role. The expectations of that role guide the interpretations of circumstances and what might be deemed as appropriate responses. For example, a spouse might willingly (or begrudgingly) sacrifice personal leisure time because *spouses are supposed to put each other's welfare ahead of their own*. Such a belief or expectation may be less salient for the roles of acquaintance, casual dating partner, or work associate.

## *Continuing the Investigation of Marital Beliefs*

Literature analysis of marital beliefs revealed a general lack of explicit theory focused on beliefs about the institutional nature of marriage. When theory was present, it commonly included elements of social cognitive theories with specific propositions connecting unmet expectations or standards and distress (e.g., Baucom et al., 1996). This connection taps into the larger idea that marital beliefs in the context of interpreting one's experiences are salient for one's marital quality. Another reappearing theoretical notion was tied in with social exchange theory. Expectations related to one's marriage were framed as one's "comparison level"—an internal conception of what one can reasonably expect from a relationship based on what one deserves (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Meeting one's comparison level should lead to higher commitment, satisfaction, and more realistic expectations.

While these applications of theory more directly focus on one's interpersonal relationship and subsequent feelings toward it, beliefs about marriage itself arguably give context to and are reflected in one's expectations. For example, if one believes an ideal marriage should require minimal effort and is distressed by an unmet expectation, one might then conclude that the marriage was a mistake. Regarding the nature of marital belief measures found during the review, researchers typically focused on a specific, narrow aspect of marriage (e.g., gender role beliefs or marital agreement). Such an approach may only capture a limited portion of one's overall fundamental belief system or definition of marriage.

I decided to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the extant literature with this question in mind: What underlying beliefs about what marriage means as an institution are reflected in scholars' descriptions of marriage and measures used to study marital beliefs? The answer would guide my research on how marital beliefs influence behavior related to pre-marital and marital relationship behavior. Five key dimensions of marital meaning are described below (Hall, 2006). These dimensions were not intended to represent every possible belief about marriage, or to be the only way to organize beliefs, but they captured common sentiments that could help guide a more comprehensive analysis of marital beliefs and meaning.

**Special Status of Marriage** This dimension speaks to the relative status or significance of marriage as a particular relationship form. On one end of the dimension, marriage is thought of as the ultimate expression of love and intimacy toward a partner; it is the most fulfilling relationship one can have. Toward the other end, marriage is simply one of many types of equally valuable couple relationships available and might even be harmful, oppressive, and outdated.

**Self-Fulfillment** Marriage is primarily a means for receiving emotional, sexual, and economic security or satisfaction. Conversely, it is a social obligation beyond self-serving motives (e.g., serving one's spouse, bringing up children within a marriage, and staying together despite a lack of self-fulfillment).

**Level of Individualism** This dimension addresses issues of what marriage means for one's sense of self or individuality. People vary in the extent to which they see marriage as requiring a merging (and loss) of individual identities to gain a joint identity.

**Romanticism** This dimension incorporates the extent to which one endorses romantic views about marriage, such as marriage being ideally for soul mates; that marriage is only good when there is complete acceptance of and agreement with one another; that marriage should always be happy, spontaneous, and satisfying; and that it shouldn't require much work to make a successful marriage.

**Hierarchy and Roles** Marriage is a hierarchy of roles that has traditionally been associated with gender. Authority of one spouse over another is built into marriage, though authority could depend on the nature of the specific task. Conversely, marriage is a mutual, egalitarian union characteristic of task sharing and joint decision-making. Though this dimension is the most explicit about gender, beliefs about gender and marital gender roles can also be incorporated into other dimensions, such as romanticism. When considered together, these dimensions can combine in unique ways to reflect diverse profiles of marital meaning.

I later found that people vary in the extent to which they believe marriage is a set, rigidly defined relationship that inherently incorporates certain definitions (Hall, 2012). Some individuals are more open than others to the belief that one's own marriage can be different from perceived social norms, if one so desires. Others think that their beliefs about marriage reflect fixed attributes of marriage that are not conducive to alteration. This dimension mirrors what is referred to in the social judgment literature as "implicit theories" about the fixed versus developing nature of people's attributes such as intelligence (Dweck et al., 1995) and the success forecast of a new romantic relationship (Knee, 1998).

## Further Guidance from SI

SI is rich with concepts that speak to processes involved in meaning formation and fluctuation that are also integral to the application of SI toward marital meaning. Broadly stated, meaning comes from social interaction (Blumer, 1969). One level of such interaction speaks to a negotiation-type interchange in which two or more people create shared meaning as they respond to their shared experience and situations. Such a scene is not difficult to envision between spouses working to determine what it means to be happily married and how they would recognize it. Other levels of interaction that similarly inform such marital meaning would involve observations of familiar marriages (e.g., of parents, friends, neighbors) and of broader social norms, structures, and values. The process of forming and altering marital beliefs thus involves the interface between the individual and proximal and

distal environments. However, the extent to which meaning is constructed from the bottom up versus internalized from the top down has been the subject of substantial disagreement among SI scholars. Nevertheless, consistent with an interactionist perspective within SI, the cumulation of individuals' decisions and attitudes on the micro level ultimately inform spousal scripts on the macro level, suggesting a reciprocal influence between individual and societal perspectives on marriage.

Marital meaning-making processes should also have implications for marriage long before one actually marries. Through anticipatory socialization (Thornton & Nardi, 1975), young people learn about the nature of the roles they expect to acquire. As a potential spouse, one learns about what it means to be a spouse and how to integrate that role into one's identity. Such learning may not always be intentional or perceptible.

In SI terms, marriage varies in "identity salience" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). The more salient a particular identity is to someone, the more likely the person will act consistently with the social expectations of that particular identity role and perceive a situation as an opportunity to act upon that particular identity role. People for whom marriage is especially salient would likely be conscious of how their marital beliefs, dating/courtship practices, future professional and family goals, and getting married potentially interconnect. For spouses, beliefs about spousal roles, marital commitment, and marital happiness should contribute to how they choose to invest in, maintain, and protect a marriage relationship.

## Conceptual Convergence: Marital Paradigm Theory

A more recent iteration of applying SI toward the study of marital beliefs is the emergence of Marital Paradigm Theory (MPT). One's marital belief system can be thought of as a general marital paradigm that shapes behavior largely by influencing one's specific intentions toward a given relationship or context (Willoughby et al., 2015). MPT helped further what was intended with my analysis of marital meaning dimensions (Hall, 2006) by "provid[ing] a roadmap and common language for future scholarship of marital beliefs, values and attitudes" (Willoughby et al., 2015, p. 19).

Taking cues from similar approaches that highlighted the multifaceted nature of marital beliefs (Carroll et al., 2007; Hall, 2006), MPT proposed that one's paradigm contained six interrelated dimensions or categories of beliefs, three of which are about *getting* married. *Marital timing* refers to beliefs about the ideal and expecting timing and pacing of courtship, formal engagement, and marriage. *Marital salience* refers to beliefs about the importance of getting married. *Marital context* refers to beliefs about the individual, relational, and cultural contexts in which marriage should occur (e.g., as a religious ceremony, after lengthy cohabitation, once debts are paid off), including beliefs related to mate selection and marital readiness. One's paradigm also includes three belief categories related to *being* married. *Marital processes* refer to beliefs about what one assumes marital adjustments to be like and

how marriage should function on a daily basis (e.g., work/family balance, housework, and intimacy). *Marital permanence* encompasses beliefs about commitment and under what circumstances marriages should be dissolved. *Marital centrality* encompasses the relative importance one places on one's spousal role and how central the marital relationship is in one's life.

Substantive research has been published in recent years that is grounded in the marital meaning application of SI. A sampling of studies includes those that have focused on marital meanings for African Americans (Curran et al., 2010), reasons for delaying marriage (Muraco & Curran, 2012), family formation attitudes in Korea (Kim & Cheung, 2015), soul mate beliefs and spouse community involvement (Kim & Dew, 2016), intimate partner obligations (Ganong et al., 2016), perceptions of marital boundaries (Cook et al., 2017), materialism and marital satisfaction (LeBaron et al., 2018), optimal age at first marriage (Bartle-Haring et al., 2018), and the remarriage of ex-spouses (Limeira & Féres-Carneiro, 2019).

## **Practical Implications for Marital Beliefs Research**

How one thinks about marriage matters for one's subsequent attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, and such thinking is shaped by observation of and interactions with societal and cultural values and mores. Parents have a significant opportunity to be mindful of how their attitudes and behaviors socialize their children's assumptions and expectations. Parents can be intentional about teaching their children realistic and healthy ideas about marriage, challenging harmful media and cultural relational messages, and helping children see connections among current beliefs and future intentions and decisions. Similarly, youth mentors, family life educators, pre-marital counselors, and couple counselors can target marital beliefs for prevention and intervention efforts related to marital satisfaction and stability. Key windows of influence might include moments of goal setting for older adolescents and emerging adults as they begin to map out their future.

The transition to marriage is a key time in which pre-marital expectations might serve as a comparison to the realities of marriage. When facing the prospect of relationship dissolution, beliefs about marital happiness and commitment can be explored and potentially revised to facilitate helpful evaluation and decision-making. Comparing marital meanings between potential and actual spouses can be fruitful, giving couples a chance to challenge assumptions, but also recognizing that disagreements and unexpected behavior can be rooted in divergent ways of thinking about marriage. The communication process can focus more on understanding and even appreciating each other's marital assumptions, adding to a non-accusatory and defensive interaction. Such a process can facilitate more shared meaning of the marital experience, which should assist the couple with forming and acting upon intentions that bring relationship fulfillment.

## References

- Bartle-Haring, S., Shannon, S., Holowacz, E., Patton, R., & Lotspeich-Younkin, F. (2018). Is there the “sweet spot” for age at marriage and positive marital outcomes? *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(4), 1085–1107.
- Baucom, D. H., Epstein, N., Rankin, L. A., & Burnett, C. K. (1996). Assessing relationship standards: The inventory of specific relationship standards. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 10, 72–88.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice Hall.
- Carroll, J. S., Willoughby, B., Badger, S., Nelson, L. J., Barry, C. M., & Madsen, S. D. (2007). So close, yet so far away: The impact of varying marital horizons on emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22, 219–247.
- Casad, B. J., Salazar, M. M., & Macina, V. (2015). The real versus the ideal: Predicting relationship satisfaction and well-being from endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 39(1), 119–129.
- Cook, J. L., Jones, R. M., & Vaterlaus, J. M. (2017). Drawing the line: An exploratory study of single college student perceptions of marital boundaries in opposite sex relationships. *Marriage & Family Review*, 53(2), 151.
- Curran, M. A., Utley, E. A., & Muraco, J. A. (2010). An exploratory study of the meaning of marriage for African Americans. *Marriage & Family Review*, 46(5), 346–365.
- Dealing with Unrealistic Expectations in Marriage. (2019, February 11). *Lifeway*. <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/dealing-with-unrealistic-expectations-in-marriage>
- Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C.-Y., & Hong, Y.-Y. (1995). Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A world from two perspectives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6(4), 267–285.
- Ganong, L., Jamison, T., & Chapman, A. (2016). Assessing differences in intimate partner obligations based on relationship status, gender, and parental status. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 33(7), 867–891.
- Hall, S. S. (2006). Marital meaning: Exploring young adults’ belief systems about marriage. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37, 1437–1458.
- Hall, S. S. (2012). Implicit theories of the marital institution. *Marriage & Family Review*, 48, 1–19.
- Kim, E. H., & Cheung, A. K. L. (2015). Women’s attitudes toward family formation and life stage transitions: A longitudinal study in Korea. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(5), 1074–1090.
- Kim, Y., & Dew, J. (2016). Marital investments and community involvement: A test of coser’s greedy marriage thesis. *Sociological Perspectives*, 59(4), 743–759.
- Knee, C. R. (1998). Implicit theories of relationships: Assessment and prediction of romantic relationship initiation, coping, and longevity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(2), 360–370.
- LeBaron, A., Kelley, H., & Carroll, J. (2018). Money over marriage: Marriage importance as a mediator between materialism and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 39(2), 337–347.
- Limeira, M. I. C., & Féres-Carneiro, T. (2019). Personal values: The foundation of the relationship in the remarriage with the ex-spouse. *Estudos De Psicologia (Campinas)*, 36, e180106.
- McNulty, J. K., & Karney, B. R. (2004). Positive expectations in the early years of marriage: Should couples expect the best or brace for the worst? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(5), 729–743.
- Muraco, J. A., & Curran, M. A. (2012). Associations between marital meaning and reasons to delay marriage for young adults in romantic relationships. *Marriage & Family Review*, 48(3), 227–247.
- National Fatherhood Initiative. (2005). *With This Ring...: A National survey of Marriage in America*. <http://www.fatherhood.org>.
- Rusbult, C. E., & Buunk, B. P. (1993). Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 175–204.

- Sabatelli, R. M., & Pierce, J. T. (1986). Exploring marital expectations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *3*, 307–321.
- Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. T. (1982). Commitment, identity salience, and role behavior: Theory and research example. In W. Ickes & E. S. Knowles (Eds.), *Personality, roles, and social behavior* (pp. 199–281). Springer-Verlag.
- Tartakavsky, M. (2017, December 14). *3 Unrealistic and detrimental expectations about marriage*. PsychCentral.
- Thornton, R., & Nardi, P. M. (1975). The dynamics of role acquisition. *American Journal of Sociology*, *80*, 870–885.
- Willoughby, B. J., Hall, S. S., & Luczak, H. P. (2015). Marital paradigms: A conceptual framework for marital attitudes, values, and beliefs. *Journal of Family Issues*, *36*, 188–211.



# Ethnographic Methodologies in Family Research



**Katherine MacTavish**

Ethnography is critical to the future health of family sciences. As a method uniquely committed to “getting out” and “getting close,” ethnography offers the kind of proximal access to everyday family life needed to both discover and respond to the critical questions of our time (Emerson et al., 2011; Goffman, 1989). As we simultaneously confront a global pandemic, the rising seas of a climate crisis, social and political unrest, and the persistence of technological advances that unhinge us from place, the questions that concerned family life in the past or even the present are not necessarily those that will occupy the future (Fischer, 2018). Our capacity to respond to these and other issues that define contemporary family life is fundamental if we are to remain vital as a field (Roy, 2012; Walker, 2009).

In this first inclusion of ethnographic methodology in the Sourcebook, I retrace historical origins and contemporary contributions, examine key assumptions, provide a general overview of the method, and consider the future of ethnography in family sciences. This chapter is not a “how to” manual on doing ethnography as many of those already exist (i.e., Daly, 2007; Emerson et al., 2011; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Rather it is intended to (re)open the conversation about the place of ethnography in family sciences.

---

K. MacTavish (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Public Health and Human Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA

e-mail: [kate.mactavish@oregonstate.edu](mailto:kate.mactavish@oregonstate.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_10)

155

## Historical Origins and Contemporary Contribution of Ethnography

The origins of the very proximal approach of ethnography, and by extension ethnography of the family, are entwined with the emergence of social sciences in the United States (Gilgun, 1999, 2012a, b). Key within this history is the approach promoted by the Chicago School of Sociology during the first third of the twentieth century. Robert Park, a major figure in the Chicago School, famously instructed students to “go out and get the seat of your pants dirty” (McKinney, 1966; p. 71 in Kawulich, 2005). Through immersive, up close fieldwork strategies extended over time, researchers sought to capture a deep and intimate understanding of the meaning individuals gave to their daily experiences and to situate those meanings within their social contexts. Many early ethnographers not only spent extended time in the field but also lived in the neighborhoods and communities in which they conducted their research. From the beginning, within the Chicago School, there was a focus on poor and working-class families (Gilgun, 2012b). The works that resulted continue to be among the most valuable early contributions to our thinking about the family (Burgess, 1932 in Gilgun, 2012a, b). Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1919–1920/1927) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, for example, was deemed “the study that did more than any other to demonstrate the value of conceptualizing families as socially constructed realities” (LaRossa, 1988). Frazier’s *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932) and then *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) traced the historic forces shaping the development of the African American family from slavery into the 1930s. Both works were widely recognized at the time for their contributions to our understanding of race relations in the United States (Gilgun, 2012b). These early contributions to family theory and family studies were only possible because of their proximal approach that took researchers into the intimate spaces of family life while at the same time attending to macro-level considerations of context.

Ethnographic work on families persisted into the twentieth century, but it did so in the face of increasingly narrow views on social science (Gilgun, 2012b). Beginning in the 1930s and extending forward, the social sciences took a decidedly quantitative turn away from an emphasis on context-sensitive, deep understandings that flowed from subjective accounts of the researcher’s immersion in the field (Gilgun, 2012b; LaRossa, 1988). Gilgun (2012b) stated that, “surveys and experiments that placed little emphasis on context, meaning, theory development, and researcher reflexivity dominated social science research in general and family research, in particular” (93). LaRossa (1988) attributed this to a push toward greater professionalization in the field of family studies driven by the notion of the time that “no matter the field, no matter the subject, quantification is increasingly becoming the preferred approach” (247). For those who persisted in doing family ethnography, some sought legitimacy through the use of language linked to the positivist sciences as a response to the marginalization of qualitative, and by association, ethnographic work (Daly, 2007). An emerging realization of the colonial legacy of ethnography embodied on the lone (often white, often male) ethnographer studying

the exotic (often brown) “other” ushered in additional concerns about misrepresentation, ethnocentrism, and exploitation that further challenged the foundations of the method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Ethnography focused on families reemerged when women entered the social sciences in increasing numbers in the 1960s and 1970s. Women’s growing presence in the field and the critical paradigm of the feminist movement supported a shift that centered the taken-for-granted, invisible aspects of women’s work in the domestic sphere of family life in ethnographic works. Much of this work employed a critical feminist lens and took an interpretive, post-positivist turn toward the biographic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; McNamara, 2009). Marjorie DeVault’s (1971). *Feeding the Family* revealed the effort and skill behind the unpaid work of shopping, cooking, and serving meals. Ann Oakley’s (1974) text on *The Sociology of Housework* spoke boldly about the relationship between power and housework revealing women’s autonomy over the realm of home as more theoretical than real. Helena Lopata’s four distinct phases over the life course identified in *Occupation: Housewife* (1971) pointed to the inequities of social roles within the 1950s family in US society (Ryan, 1990). Carol Stack’s (1974) classic *All Our Kin* countered emerging notions of the time about a culture of poverty by taking a strength-based approach to show instead how African American families employed adaptive strategies in the face of structural conditions that kept them mired in poverty. This kind of critical feminist lens worked to turn the political arguments of the day on their head, illustrating both *how* inequities emerged and impressing on the reader a sense of *why* social change is needed to address such inequities (Allen, 2000; Walker, 2009).

As the twenty-first century dawned, ethnography moved from the margins into a more central position in many disciplines (Emerson, 2001). Further, within sociology, in particular, ethnographic work focused on emerging issues important to current family life flourished. Joanna Dreby’s *Divided Borders* (2010) and Leah Schmalzbauer’s *Striving and Surviving* (2005) considered the gendered experiences of transnational families. In *Fixing Families*, Jennifer Reich (2005) provided an inside look at how class and race shape family engagement with the child welfare system. In her study of transracial adoption titled *Weaving a Family* (2006), Barbara Rothman detailed the work of *doing* family while mothering children in a racist world. By considering how the tangled web of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality shaped family life, these works and others included intersectional perspectives all too often missing from research in family sciences (Walker, 2009).

Across the last decade, ethnography has continued to bring the pressing issues of everyday family experiences to life to the page in ways other methods fail to do. These include a focus on urgent issues of the day like the politics of immigration status (Dreby, 2015), racial socialization within affluent white families (Hagerman, 2018), parent’s anti-vaccine stance in the face of returning preventable diseases (Reich, 2018), and family adaptation to a new environment of precarity in the world of work (Pugh, 2015). All carry forward a tradition of pairing the proximal methods of in-depth interviews and field observations to provide a deeply grounded understanding of family life situated in social, economic, and political contexts. Further, these works increasingly aim to bring everyday family experiences to life on the

page in ways that move the reader to action (Richardson, 2001). These contemporary ethnographic works then become sites of what Denzin and Lincoln (2018) term “critical conversations” about race, class, gender, globalization, freedom, community, and democracy.

## Overview and Basic Assumptions of Ethnography

Ethnography exists within the wide and varied world of qualitative research approaches employed in family sciences (LaRossa, 2012). An implicit focus on culture is by definition one distinct feature of ethnography as *ethno* refers to culture and *graphy* to writing (Daly, 2007). Understanding meaning from the perspective of participants (e.g., family members) in that cultural setting serves as the primary goal of ethnography (Daly, 2007; Emerson et al., 2011). Gaining that kind of understanding requires immersion in the field (generally home and community settings) over an often-extended period of time (months and even years). Through detailed field notes of observations and interviews, an ethnographer captures not only what people say (attitudes) but also the subtext of how they say it and what they do (actions and behaviors) (Daly, 2007; Pugh, 2015). The construction of field notes is an active process through which the ethnographer recounts observations at a very intimate and even microscopic level (Geertz, 1973; pp. 20–23) thus turning an event of social interaction into an account that can in its written, inscribed form be reconsulted during additional data collection and ongoing analysis (Emerson et al., 2011).

Although it is acknowledged that there is no one way to do ethnography, there is generally agreement around a shared set of assumptions. These assumptions, in many ways, stand in stark contrast to those of other more quantitative methodological approaches (Hammersely, 1990).

One basic assumption in ethnography is that flexibility (versus structure) in the data collection process allows for an openness to discoveries that run counter to the researcher’s assumptions about the social world. This is in contrast to more structured data collection processes that “involve the imposition of the researcher’s assumptions about the social world and consequently reduce the chances of discovering evidence disparate with these assumptions” (Hammersely, 1990; p. 597). Ethnographers may enter the field with a set of questions or theoretical insights and a data collection plan, but these are soon adapted in response to emerging insights about family life. An ethnographer might follow their data, the people, and/or the phenomenon in an effort to seek evidence that runs counter to current assumptions and deepens their understanding (Duneier, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 2011). This kind of flexibility means that by its very nature, family ethnography is a multi-method approach drawing on surveys, focus groups, archival data, and documents to complement the methodological mainstays of observation and in-depth interviews (Gilgun, 2012b). The ethnographer’s task then in managing this data has been likened to that of a bricoleur or quiltmaker and to assemble a whole out of these pieces of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

A second basic assumption is that studying anything, families included, in natural settings, rather than in settings constrained by the researcher, allows ethnographers to make more authentic claims. Studying families ethnographically, thus, demands that the researcher immerse themselves in the natural and often private spaces that families occupy—home, work, school, and community (Descartes, 2007). This immersion requires a commitment to “going out and getting close” in order to “experience events and meaning in ways that approximate members’ experiences” (Emerson et al., 2011; p. 2). Gaining and maintaining access to multiple family members within very private realms requires constant renegotiation (Lareau, 2014). With no structured protocol to rely on, ethnographic insights whether about family experiences with prisons, pandemics, border crossings, or climate change are gained by “subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play into a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation” (Goffman, 1989; p. 125 in Emerson et al., 2011; p. 2). As a method, ethnography relies more heavily on the experiences and instincts of the researcher than do more rigid, standardized methods of data collection and analysis. In this way, the ethnographer is a tool of data collection and analysis (Shensul et al., 1999). Reflexivity, or attention to oneself in the research process, considered integral to contemporary ethnography, allows for the intimate analysis of social position and social difference by juxtaposing the self (researcher) and other (participant) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Holmes, 2013). In family ethnography, insights about family processes and structure come from active reflection on how our own membership in particular families is affecting what we see in the lives of those we study (Allen, 2000).

Third, ethnography also embraces the assumption that talking to people about their beliefs and behaviors *and* observing those behaviors over time provides a means for documenting the complex relationship between attitudes and behaviors. In family ethnography, additional complexity is added when a multitude of perspectives are captured by including a range of family members in the data collection strategies. Relying on “what people say about what they believe and do without *also* observing what they do” is to neglect this complexity, “just as to rely on observation without talking to people to understand their perspectives is to run the risk of misinterpreting behavior” (Hammersely, 1990; p. 597). Pairing participant observation with in-depth interviews overtime is a hallmark of ethnographic field study and stands in contrast to interview-only and observation-only approaches. While in-depth interviews are often termed “ethnographic,” without the observational component, they fail to capture context (Lareau, 2014; Lamonte & Swindler, 2014). The ethnographer is then tasked with navigating the richness and the contradictions that can emerge when what people say stands in contrast with what they do (Burton, 2009).

Fourth, by treating social phenomena as dynamic and malleable, ethnography overcomes the ways in which “quantitative analysis reifies social phenomena by treating them as more defined and distinct than they are, and by neglecting the process by which they develop and change” (Hammersely, 1990; p. 597). The social worlds of families are complex and often messy containing multiple perspectives

and “truths” that are constructed and emerge over time. Ethnographers embrace this messiness and invest in longitudinal perspectives to capture dynamic change over time (Lamonte & Swindler, 2014). Going slow in the full research process, staying long in the field, and even returning later are critical to overcoming the reification of family life as something static, captured in the moment (Dreby, 2014).

Finally, family ethnography also rests on an assumption of the importance of the sociological imagination. Early Chicago sociologists argued that *insight* is the “touchstone” of the scientific method asserting that creativity and imagination are central to the scientific method and to overcoming reductionist approaches (Gilgun, 2012b). Daly (2007) made the case that when we are working to develop an understanding of another family’s experience, we do both science *and* art balancing the acts of being *creative* with being *analytic*, *feeling* with *thinking*, *passion* with *reason*, in an effort to *arouse* as well as *explain* what we are witnessing. That kind of blending of the analytic and the affective works to dissolve public/private barriers and get at the sense of intersubjectivity needed to understand another family’s experiences. Maintaining the openness to discovery that underpins ethnographic contributions hinges on preserving the safety to be visionary that is lost when we value quantitative precision over imagination and depth (Allen, 2000).

## Challenges of Ethnography in Family Research

All methods have their challenges, including family ethnography. The time-consuming nature of ethnography overall is often raised as a major challenge. The general rule of a full year immersed in a study context presents a significant investment well beyond the reach of many scholars. Further, some make the argument that even a year might not be sufficient to capture the dynamic nature of social processes (Lamonte & Swindler, 2014). Extended time in the field, whether a year or two, so rudimentary to forming relationships, developing trust, and “hanging out” with respondents is exponentially compounded by how long it takes to construct detailed field notes, transcribe interviews, craft meaningful research memos, and visit archives to access additional data (Garey et al., 2014).

And then there is the time needed to manage and make sense of complex data, to think through emerging findings in pursuit of theoretical insights, and to produce the kind of “good writing” all done while weaving together additional work and family obligations (Lareau, 2014). That year in the field often grows to two, three, even a decade for full project completion. That kind of long-term investment of time sits at odds with institutional practices in academia where outputs are the only thing recognized and time in preparation or in the collection of data are not honored as productive (Garey et al., 2014). As careers can seem stalled and degrees are delayed, pressure to move more rapidly can short change the process where patience is needed to see the changes, to find the words, to make sense of complexity, and to understand deeply (Black, 2014; DeVault, 2014; Dreby, 2014; Lareau, 2014).

Family ethnography as a method further hinges on family members' willingness to invest time and energy over a substantial period as study participants (Goransson, 2011). Rapport and trust must be negotiated and renegotiated with each family member and within the dynamics of family relationships. Sometimes reluctant family members can throw a pall on field study adding a sense of precarity to an ethnographic project (Lareau, 2014).

Some of the issues arising around time cross over into a second challenge in ethnography linked to the skills and disposition needed for effective field study. The researcher as instrument in the research process aspect of ethnography requires skilled researchers, well prepared to manage the many challenges that arise in planning, conducting, and completing ethnographic work. In describing the skills and disposition needed, Lareau (2014) emphasized the need for a disposition that is comfortable with the ambiguity, uncertainty, and chaos that accompany field study, skills in observing, recording, and building rapport with a range of family members from reluctant children to tired dads, the self-discipline to endure often boring, tedious, and painful hours spent writing field notes, and the "fire in the belly" motivation needed complete a book manuscript sometimes a decade after field work has ended. Skills specific to interviewing children and teens also emerge as critical to family ethnography (Burton & Stack, 2014; Dreby, 2014). Further, ethnography is often lonely work wherein a researcher must develop their own support networks so necessary to persevering through challenges and pushing ideas forward (Burton & Stack, 2014; Lareau, 2014). But where does one pick up these skills and disposition when ethnographic training in graduate programs remains limited and methodological orientations skew toward the statistical? Without sufficient opportunities for the next generation to gain the needed skills and dispositions, we remain limited in our capacity to glean the benefits of the ethnographic study of families.

Objectivity (for lack of a better word) is often raised as an additional challenge of ethnography. The closeness of the researcher to the researched—in this case, to families in close proximity—in field study is said to raise a constant danger around the loss of objectivity and contamination of the situation (Buroway, 1991). The risk of becoming "captured" by the orientation of the "other" and the risk of becoming too close to maintain sufficient analytic distance are consistent concerns yielded against ethnography even as it is recognized that "the nature of our closeness with study participants and how this becomes the basis for understanding is a fundamental part of ethnographic description and understanding" (Van Maneen, 1988 in Black, 2014; p. 31). Most contemporary ethnographers own the notion that it is impossible to observe and write outside of our own historically and culturally situated perspectives, social locations or positions we occupy, or the interpretive predispositions we bring (Black, 2014). Reflexivity throughout the ethnographic process adds rigor and trustworthiness. Evaluating ethnography for the fleshed out, embodied, lived-experience conveyed lends credibility to ethnographic accounts (Richardson, 2001).

## Examples of the Application of Ethnography in Family Sciences

Two now classic ethnographic projects of the twentieth century, Linda Burton's work on *The Three-City Study* and Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* illustrate the application of ethnography to family sciences. Both works align with the basic assumptions, namely, that ethnography happens in a *natural setting*, attends to what people *say* and *do*, is a *flexible* method open to *discovery*, and honors family life as *dynamic* and the importance of *imagination* in family ethnography. Both made considerable theoretical and methodological contributions to family sciences as described below.

### *Unequal Childhoods*

Beginning in the early 1990s, sociologist Annette Lareau and a team of graduate student ethnographers examined differences in the day-to-day life of 88 families from diverse backgrounds—Black, White, middle-class, low-income, and poor with children in the third or fourth grade. Then, between 1993 and 1995, Lareau and team completed intensive ethnographic case studies of 12 families raising children of the same age. In the natural settings of home and school, Lareau attended to what people say and what they do spending considerable time in each family's home, observing children at school, interviewing educators, and interviewing both parents and children. Lareau writes about the challenges (and value) of navigating observation in the very intimate space of a family home where building rapport with multiple people, wiggling through sometimes volatile social dynamics, and navigating around family members who sometimes don't want you there as a daily reality of the unpredictable, sometime chaotic nature of family ethnography (Lareau, 2014).

Lareau described the flexible nature of doing ethnography. She admitted that in the beginning of the study, she was "stumbling along" (Lareau, 2014; p. 267). Despite this being her second ethnographic project, she was still not always clear on what she was doing, was still not quite sure of the focus, and wasn't exactly sure what she would learn. The need to remain flexible and open to discovery continued beyond figuring out how to manage problems that arose in the field through her analysis of the data and development of concepts. She recounts getting "hammered" by her audience after her initial presentation of findings, moving back and forth with the literature, and rethinking and revising her central arguments until they came together in what she termed "logics of child-rearing." By illustrating, with the kind of thick description only available through ethnographic approaches, the contrasts between middle-class logic focused on "concerted cultivation" and the logic of "accomplishment of natural growth" embraced by working class and poor parents, Lareau offered theoretical insights that challenged the monolithic view of what constitutes "best" parenting approaches, that countered the prevailing discourse about



differing values across social classes and “bad” values among poor and working families, and that illustrated the degree to which institutions operate in powerful ways that reinforce inequities by social class. Her candid accounts of following up with families provided a kind of cautionary methodological tale for family scientists as well. Lareau’s work garnered widespread attention with coverage in popular press outlets like *The Atlantic* and the *New York Times* as well as widespread integration into undergraduate and graduate family studies and sociology courses.

### ***Three-City Study***

*Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study* serves as an exemplar for the application of ethnography to family studies. Developed in the wake of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, the Three-City Study was a mixed methods effort to investigate the effects of this policy change on low-income urban families who were raising children (0–4 years) and youth (10–14 years). The study was designed to provide information on children’s development (health and cognitive, behavioral, and emotional development) and information about their primary female caregiver’s labor force behavior, welfare experiences, social service use, family life, and overall health and well-being. In its first wave of data collection in 1999, the study included over 2400 households randomly selected across a sample of neighborhoods in three cities—Chicago, Boston, and San Antonio. An ethnographic component focused on 256 families nested within these same neighborhoods. A team of some 90 ethnographers were employed to conduct in-depth interviews and gather observational data from each family. Families were visited on average once or twice a month over a period of 12–18 months. After that time, additional interview and observational data were collected twice a year through 2003.

The contributions of the Three-City Study to our understanding of families were profound. The rich ethnographic accounts brought families’ lived experiences to the policy discussion and countered existing efforts aimed at promoting marriage among poor women (Burton & Tucker, 2009). Those accounts additionally illuminated the complexity of family life in multi-partner fertility relationships (Burton, 2014) and illuminated how mothers manage to maintain family time in face of temporal shifts in their day (Roy et al., 2004; Tubbs et al., 2005).

Methodologically, the Three-City Study stands as an ethnographic exemplar bringing a whole new world in terms of sample size. The immense amount of data produced required the development of new software to manage. Still, researchers spoke of “drowning in data” as they struggled to deal with a data set with too many riches (Roy, personal communication). Policy briefs, testimony in the hill, and numerous publications expand the impact of this study. The careful archiving of those data also supported a model of secondary ethnographic data analysis discussed later. Analysis of these data also advanced the methodological notion of “structured discovery” (Skinner et al., 2005).

Both Lareau's work and the Three-City Study carry forward enduring themes and basic assumptions of ethnographic family research embodied in Chicago traditions. The two studies illustrate the contributions family ethnography can make, and, as examples, they also illustrate the kinds of challenges encountered in doing family ethnography.

## The Future of Ethnography in Family Sciences

Ethnography has and will continue to bring significant theoretical insights and methodological advances to the field of family sciences, particularly in how it might allow us to take on emerging questions and pressing issues we cannot even today imagine. Realizing the promise of family ethnography will, however, be contingent on some rather significant shifts to our approach to cultivating such research within our field (Roy et al., 2015). Namely, these shifts must work at changing the culture that keeps ethnography peripheral within family sciences.

In spite of a decades-long call to embrace methodological pluralism, the shadows of positivist science linger long in our field (LaRossa, 2012). These shadows show up in the persistent absence of ethnographic work within leading family studies journals (LaRossa et al., 2014). Cultivating more methodologically inclusive publication outlets that value the contributions of ethnography demands that reviewers employ appropriate criteria for evaluating ethnography (Allen, 2000). Richardson (2001) offered a set of five criteria, *substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expresses a reality*, that honor both the scientific and artistic elements of ethnography.

These same shadows also appear in policies in the academy that discourage ethnographic work within family studies. Promotion and tenure criteria and annual reviews that lean heavily on outputs of articles published per year over process discourage ethnographic approaches (Nelson & Hertz, 2014). Such approaches do little to honor the nature of ethnographic work which is deliberately slow and labor intensive from entering the field and moving through years of data collection toward and eventual book length manuscript (Lareau, 2014). Recognizing and honoring the differing pace of ethnography might encourage more use of this methodology. Family ethnographers might also do a better job of carving off publishable pieces like methodological statements along the way. Likewise, a more explicit centering of ethnographic work within undergraduate and graduate learning opportunities might broaden the methodological tent.

Just as the field of family studies would benefit from cultivating more acceptance of ethnography, we might also benefit from encouraging innovation in family ethnography. Lareau and Dreby along with others have shown us the value of longitudinal ethnography. Returning to the field and returning again allows the ethnographer to disrupt the views of family life as static or frozen in time and to expand the horizons of possibility for understanding (Black, 2014; Dreby, 2014). Although somewhat debated, secondary analysis of ethnographic data is another promising

innovation in family studies. Speirs et al. (2015, 2019) provided a useful framework for secondary analysis rooted in their experiences making use of data from the Three-City Study. Others are innovating family ethnography by making use of digital tools like blogs and virtual meeting tools, particularly during the COVID pandemic, to develop and continue ethnographic projects (see Scheibling, chapter “Application: Inside the “Brotherhood of Fatherhood”: Notes on Doing Ethnography in the Dad 2.0 Community”, this volume; Roy, personal communication). While seemingly contradictory to the proximal approach at the heart of ethnography, virtual and digital approaches can be combined with more traditional strategies and can help overcome the challenges of time and distance inherent in ethnography and allow for greater multilocality and polyvocality. Further, one could argue that capturing online as well as offline aspects of family life is essential to capturing authentic, full accounts of process, meaning, and context. Finally, family ethnography of the present and the future promises to move the field of family studies toward a more critical activist stance as ethnographic writing (whether print, film, digital, sonic, or performance) becomes increasingly inventive and aesthetic wedding the scientific with the literary (Fischer, 2018). Writing approaches that impact the reader emotionally and intellectually impart an imperative for social justice action (Richardson, 2001). Beyond these innovations, the moment seems prime for family studies to claim a seat at the table of increasingly interdisciplinary work that weaves together the social and physical sciences. Ethnography can provide a powerful methodological tool for the now and into the future as we seek to understand the new social structures and family life ways emerging, for example, in the wake of a global pandemic and in the face of a climate crisis, social and political unrest, and the persistence of technological advances that alter our connections (Fischer, 2018). If embraced by family sciences, ethnography might just help us close the critical gap Walker (2009) identified, “between daily experience of families and the subject matter that occupies most researchers.”

## References

- Allen, K. (2000). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(1), 4–17.
- Black, T. (2014). From a study to a journey: Holding an ethnographic gaze on urban poverty for two decades. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 23–44). Vanderbilt Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burroway, M. (1991). *Ethnography unbound: Power and resistance in the modern metropolis*. University of California Press.
- Burton, L. M. (2009). Uncovering hidden facts that matter in interpreting individuals’ behaviors: An ethnographic lens. In B. J. Risman (Ed.), *Families as they really are*. Norton Publishers.
- Burton, L. M. (2014). Seeking romance in the crosshairs of multiple-partner fertility: Ethnographic insights on low-income urban and rural mothers. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 654(1), 185–212.

- Burton, L. M., Garrett-Peters, R., & Eaton, S. (2009). "More than good quotations:" how ethnography informs knowledge on adolescent development and context. In R. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *The handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 55–92). Wiley.
- Burton, L. M., & Stack, C. (2014). Breakfast at Elmos. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 174–191). Vanderbilt Press.
- Burton, L. M., & Tucker, M. B. (2009). Romantic unions in an era of uncertainty: A post-Moynihan perspective on African American women and marriage. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 62, 132–148.
- Daly, K. (2007). *Qualitative research in human development and family studies*. Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2018). *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Descartes, L. (2007). Rewards and challenges of using ethnography in family research. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 36(1), 22–39.
- DeVault, M. (1971). *Feeding the family: The social organization of caring as gendered work*. University of Chicago Press.
- DeVault, M. (2014). Time to find words. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 255–265). Vanderbilt Press.
- Dreby, J. (2014). Returns. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 63–84). Vanderbilt Press.
- Dreby, J. (2015). *Everyday illegal: When policies undermine immigrant families*. University of California Press.
- Duneier, M. (2000). *Sidewalk*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Emerson, R. (2001). *Contemporary field research: Perspectives and formulations* (2nd ed.). Waveland Press.
- Emerson, R., Fretz, R., & Shaw, L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.
- Fischer, M. (2018). *Anthropology in the meantime: Experimental ethnography, theory and methods for the twenty-first century*. Duke University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2011). Case study. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Garey, A., Hertz, R., & Nelson, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology*. Vanderbilt Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Gilgun, J. (1999). Methodological pluralism and qualitative family research. In M. B. Sussman, S. K. Steinmetz, & G. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (2nd ed., pp. 219–261). Plenum Press.
- Gilgun, J. (2012a). Enduring themes in qualitative family research. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 4, 80–95.
- Gilgun, J. (2012b). Qualitative family research: Enduring themes and contemporary variations. In G. Peterson & K. Bush (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 91–119). Springer.
- Goffman, E. (1989). On fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18(2), 123–132.
- Goransson, K. (2011). Ethnographic family research: Predicaments and possibilities of doing fieldwork on intergenerational relations on Singapore. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 42(6), 903–918.
- Hagerman, M. A. (2018). *White kids: Growing up with privilege in a racially divided America*. New York University Press.
- Hammersely, M. (1990). What's wrong with ethnography? The myth of theoretical description. *Sociology*, 24, 597–615.
- Harvey, P. F., & Lareau, A. (2020). Studying children using ethnography: Heightened challenges and balancing acts. *Bulletin de Methodologie Sociologique*, 146, 16–36.
- Holmes, S. (2013). Is it worth risking your life?: Ethnography, risk and death on the U.S.-Mexico border. *Social Science & Medicine*, 99, 153–161.

- Humble, A., & Radina, M. E. (2019). *How qualitative data analysis happens: Moving beyond "themes emerged"*. Routledge.
- Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant observation as a data collection strategy. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 6*(2).
- Lamonte, M., & Swindler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology, 2*, 153–171.
- Lareau, A. (2003/2011). *Unequal childhoods: Race, class and family life*. University of California Press.
- Lareau, A. (2014). The days are long but the years fly by. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 266–276). Vanderbilt Press.
- LaRossa, R. (1988). Renewing our faith in qualitative family research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 17*(3), 243–260.
- LaRossa, R. (2012). Thinking about the nature and scope of qualitative research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 74*(4), 678–687.
- LaRossa, R., Goldberg, A., Roy, K., Sharp, E., & Zvonkovic, A. (2014). *Qualitative research commission report*. Qualitative Research, Georgia State University.
- Lofland, & Lofland. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.).
- Lopata, H. (1971). *Occupation: Housewife*. Oxford University Press.
- McNamara, P. (2009). Feminist ethnography: Storytelling that makes a difference. *Qualitative Social Work, 8*(2), 161–177.
- Nelson, M., & Hertz, R. (2014). Introduction: On begin open to disruption. In A. Garey, R. Hertz, & M. Nelson (Eds.), *Open to disruption: Time and craft in the practice of slow sociology* (pp. 1–22). Vanderbilt Press.
- Oakley, A. (1974). *The sociology of housework*. Random House.
- Pugh, A. J. (2015). *The tumbleweed society: Working and caring in an age of insecurity*. Oxford University Press.
- Reich, J. (2005). *Fixing families: Parents, power, and the child welfare system*. Routledge.
- Reich, J. (2018). *Calling the shots: Why parents reject vaccines*. New York University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2001). Evaluating ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 6*(2), 253–255.
- Rothman, B. K. (2006). *Weaving a family: Untangling race and adoption*. Beason Press.
- Roy, K. (2012). In search of a culture: Navigating the dimensions of qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 74*(4), 660–665.
- Roy, K., Zvonkovic, A., Sharp, E., Goldberg, A., & LaRossa, R. (2015). Sampling richness and qualitative integrity: Challenges for research with families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 77*, 244–261.
- Ryan. (1990). Integrating feminist and sociological thought: The life and work of Helena Znaniecki Lopata. *The American Sociologist, 21*(2), 164–178.
- Schmalzbauer, L. (2005). *Striving and surviving: A daily analysis of Honduran translational families*. Routledge.
- Sharp, E., Zvonkovic, A., Humble, A., & Radina, M. E. (2014). Cultivating a family studies 'terrain: A synthesis of qualitative conceptual articles. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 6*, 139–168.
- Shensul, S., Shensul, J., & LeCompte, M. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observation, interviews and questionnaires*. Alta Mira Press.
- Skinner, D., Stephen, M., & Burton, L. (2005). Combining ethnography and GIS technology to examine constructions of developmental opportunities in contexts of poverty and disability. In T. Weisner (Ed.), *Discovering successful pathways in children's development: Mixed methods in the study of childhood and family life* (pp. 223–239). University of Chicago Press.
- Speirs, K., Veseley, C., & Roy, K. (2015). Is stability always a good thing? Low-income mothers' experiences with childcare transitions. *Children and Youth Services Review, 53*, 147–156.
- Stack, C. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. Harper Row.

- Stack, C. (1993). Writing ethnography: Feminist critical practice. *Frontiers*, 13(3), 77–89.
- Thomas, W. I., & Znaniecki, F. (1919). The polish peasant in Europe and America. In *Monograph of an immigrant group, volume 3: Life record of an immigrant*. Badger/Scribner.
- Tubbs, C., Roy, K., & Burton, L. (2005). Family ties: Constructing family time in lowincome families. *Family Processes*, 44, 77–81.
- Walker, A. (2009). A feminist critique of family studies. In *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 18–27). Sage Publications.

# Application: Inside the “Brotherhood of Fatherhood”: Notes on Doing Ethnography in the Dad 2.0 Community



Casey Scheibling

Since the 2000s, digital technologies have helped to expand dialogue between parents, disseminate childcare advice, and construct cultural representations of parenthood (Lupton et al., 2016). Mommy blogs, in particular, have been used to build parenting communities and present diverse commentary about motherhood (Friedman, 2013). Witnessing the success of mommy bloggers and corresponding with the increase of primary caregiving and stay-at-home dads during this time (Kramer et al., 2015), some fathers started blogs to exchange support and contribute their voice to social discourse about fatherhood. In 2012, the “Dad Bloggers” Facebook group was created as a space for open conversation between fathers. In that same year, the first annual “Dad 2.0 Summit” was held in Austin, Texas, where several hundred bloggers gathered to discuss new and enduring issues related to fatherhood with marketers, NGOs, researchers, and other digital “influencers.” This network of dad bloggers has grown exponentially, with now over 1000 members on Facebook and nine summits in the books. To trace the development of this group and examine their shared actions, my research involves doing ethnography inside the Dad 2.0 community.

## What Is Digital Family Ethnography?

The purpose of ethnography is to describe and interpret shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and language of a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To do so, ethnographers must immerse themselves into the lifeworld of group members and understand their culture “from the inside out” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 168).

---

C. Scheibling (✉)

Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, Mississauga, ON, Canada

e-mail: [casey.scheibling@utoronto.ca](mailto:casey.scheibling@utoronto.ca)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_11)

169

As outlined by MacTavish (2021), such an immersion requires flexibility to move back and forth between data collection and analysis, to discover emergent phenomena in natural settings, and to engage in prolonged observation and interaction with those under study. By triangulating multiple data methods—such as participant observation, document analysis, and interviewing—ethnographers are able to greatly enhance their sampling richness, data quality, and analytical rigor (Krefting, 1991; Roy et al., 2015). A major strength of ethnography is in the use of diverse qualitative methods to achieve an intimate familiarity with, and an intricate analysis of, the cultural patterns of a distinct group of people.

With many social groups forming and interacting on the Internet, scholars have developed ethnographic strategies for examining digital cultures (e.g., Bjork-James, 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2015). To align with core assumptions, however, these ethnographies must not be confined to a single online context. Instead, they should explore multi-sited and multimodal activities and forms of connection between mutually elaborative online and offline settings (Hine, 2015). A digital family ethnography, then, involves observing, interpreting, and theorizing the interplay of online and offline meaning-making practices of a family-oriented networked public (e.g., see Bjork-James, 2015; Horst, 2012; Scheibling, 2020b). In our contemporary mediated society, digital family ethnography is important for unpacking cultural family discourse and clarifying how familial norms, beliefs, behaviors, and interactions are developed or reconfigured by groups using media technologies.

## A Digital Family Ethnography of the Dad 2.0 Community

My digital family ethnography of dad bloggers hinged on the triangulation of three data methods. Specifically, I analyzed a purposeful sample of blog posts written by fathers who have attended the Dad 2.0 Summit, I conducted fieldwork at these annual gatherings from 2016 to 2020, and I interviewed a handful of the group leaders. Reading blogs sensitized me to themes and issues to pay attention to at upcoming summits which, in turn, informed the questions I wanted to ask bloggers more about in one-on-one conversations. Three interlinked research questions shaped the examination of these data: *what* meanings for fatherhood do dad bloggers construct online (blog data); *how* are these meanings reinforced, discussed, or altered offline (fieldwork data); and *why* are dad bloggers invested in constructing these meanings (interview data). The answers to these questions helped to sketch a detailed map of the beliefs, behaviors, and goals of the Dad 2.0 Community.

To demonstrate the triangulation of my methods and the interplay of dad bloggers' online and offline practices, I focus on one key discovery from my research. I theorized that a primary "cultural anchor" (Ghaziani & Baldassarri, 2011) that guides dad bloggers' collective action is the goal of *normalizing involved fatherhood* in society (Scheibling, 2020a). Rather than simply praising men who are committed to nurturing their children, normalizing involved fatherhood includes expanding visibility of fathers being capable, caring parents, and raising



expectations for fathers’ participation at home. Dad bloggers performed several normalizing processes both online and in person. First, blog posts offered representations and increased publicity of what involved fatherhood looks like. Second, fieldwork observations at annual gatherings provided insight into how dad bloggers strategize normalizing involved fatherhood in society more broadly. Third, in-depth interviews included answers as to why, according to dad bloggers, involved fatherhood needs to be normalized in the first place.

### *Online Representation and Interaction Through Blogs*

Dad blogs featured a wealth of naturally occurring data about what it means to be an involved father. Men in the Dad 2.0 Community used social media to provide a window into their family life, chronicling daily successes and failures in parenting. At first glance, these posts appeared to simply document family experiences, with blog sites resembling online scrapbooks or photo albums. Yet bloggers also reflected at length about their parental role and why they wanted to represent that role publicly. In other words, many of them linked the individual and social capacities of blogs—how the personal becomes public through blogging.

Brandon, for instance, described this personal–public link in an explanation of how his blogging practices informed his parental practices. He wrote:

By blogging about being a dad, it keeps me involved, and hearing the feedback with other parents makes it even more worth it. That’s not to say that I am just being involved for the blogging aspect. By blogging it gives me a sense of responsibility, and in turn, turns me into a better dad.

Likewise, John positioned blogging as part of the responsibility of “being a good dad.” He clarified, “Hopefully people will see me and other like-minded dads, stop thinking we’re brave, and just regard us as normal.” Here, John acknowledged how social media can normalize involved fatherhood by spreading visibility of men participating in care work.

Other bloggers, like Buzz, extended this initiative by attempting to shift mass media marketing:

The dads in my group admit “we have work to do,” when it comes to changing public perception about what it means to be a dad. When we are excluded from big touchy feely campaigns that define brands, it shows that dads are not yet accepted as emotional centers of the family.

Doyin provided nuance in emphasizing the need to hold up existing positive depictions of fathers in popular culture: “As counterintuitive as it may seem, the only way to normalize ‘good fatherhood’ is to celebrate it when we see it in the media.” Many bloggers followed Doyin’s lead through writing posts about when ad campaigns, television shows, or movies get the representation of fatherhood “right” by displaying men as competent caregivers.

It was often clarified how recognizing and inspiring men to be engaged parents was needed for domestic equality, too. James wrote, “I don’t know how this view of dads changes but I think it starts with us holding fathers to the higher standard we have for mothers, expecting them to meet them.” Similarly, Mike described what success looks like to dad bloggers:

Success is a dad doing his daughter’s hair and getting no applause from anyone but his daughter. Success is a dad taking three days off of work to care for a child and going back to work the next week as though nothing had happened.

Clearly, a chief communal goal was to spread portrayals of nurturing fathers to improve men’s parenting abilities and to elevate social expectations for father involvement.

### *Offline Fieldwork in Group Gatherings*

Normalizing processes to achieve this goal were further exercised at the Dad 2.0 Summit where bloggers meet face to face with marketers, stakeholders, and researchers. This conference provided speeches, panels, and workshops designed to transfer knowledge about the practical skills of parenting and social media “influencing.” Invited guests included delegates from NGOs like Promundo and New America, brand ambassadors from companies like Dove and Lego, and a variety of celebrity fathers. The summit was organized in a way where speeches and panels occurred in hotel conference rooms, but the surrounding halls were arranged as a “marketplace” where guests set up kiosks that bloggers could visit at their leisure.

Importantly, much of the summit content was oriented toward guiding dad bloggers on how to normalize involved fatherhood in the public sphere. In the opening speech of the 2019 event, co-organizer Doug French described the progression of Dad 2.0’s mission—moving away from challenging media stereotyping and toward advocacy for better parental leave policy. This new aim was reinforced by featuring Dove’s “Pledge for Paternity Leave” at the 2019 and 2020 meetings. To pledge, bloggers signed a physical petition and recorded videos explaining why they are advocating the need for paid parental leave. These videos were then posted and shared across thousands of social media accounts using the hashtags, “#PaternityLeavePledge” and “#DadsCare.” This was a central example of dad bloggers mobilizing their “dad-fluence” by transmuted online discourse into offline actions and vice versa.

From observations inside over 20 panel discussions at these gatherings, I noticed additional ways in which dad bloggers strategized the normalization of involved fatherhood. Speakers in these panels were typically professionals (academic, legal, and governmental) who worked with families. The focus of many of these discussions was how to advance gender equality, with speakers presenting insights about the unequal division of domestic labor, the gender pay gap, feminist goals in the #MeToo era, and barriers to paid parental leave and family-friendly workplace

policies. Most bloggers appeared receptive to these sessions as they jotted notes in their pamphlets or laptops and asked, “what can we do to help?” Answers frequently reiterated the personal–public link and social impact of blogging. For example, in 2017, the founder of the City Dads Group ([citydadsgroup.com](http://citydadsgroup.com)) emphasized that dad blogs were the new cultural “fabric of fatherhood” and could help encourage young male readers to “become changemakers in their communities.”

Other attendees connected blogging to even broader structural effects. Filmmaker Ky Dickens reminded bloggers that their “stories are the foundation of activism, and activism affects policies, and policies change our lives,” while councilman Jason Wallace explained that changing media messages is an important prerequisite to legislative changes. Thus, at the summits, dad bloggers received confirmation and motivation that their cultural work could inspire progressive social change. Over the past 8 years, this motivation spurred several activist activities including signing petitions to demand the installation of diaper changing stations in men’s public washrooms, marching to Capitol Hill to protest for the right to paternity leave, and creating their own advocacy group, Dads 4 Change ([dads4change.com](http://dads4change.com)). These were some of dad bloggers’ primary normalizing processes that occurred beyond the blogosphere.

### *Interviews with Digital “Influencer” Dads*

Equipped with an understanding of what bloggers wrote about online and did at the summit, I approached several key informants to learn more about the intentions of the Dad 2.0 Community and to validate my preliminary observations. I asked about what dad bloggers hope to achieve overall and why they are so invested in altering public perceptions of fatherhood. Rick and Jake expressed their desire to reach other men who may be struggling emotionally or practically with new parental responsibilities. Jake told me, “If one guy reads one post and it changes how he parents or changes how he parents in that moment—awesome. [...] I want to encourage dads or men to be more engaged fathers and help them with tools to do it. So that tends to be my focus.” Speaking more about the mission of the wider network, Tim and Gary described trying to reach a point where seeing men who are passionate about caregiving is no longer considered unusual or unmanly. Highlighting both aims and challenges of the Dad 2.0 Community, Tim explained:

I think the messages we share probably about fatherhood and about having this conference are focused more on shifting the ideas of what it means to be a dad without saying “we’re so underprivileged, we need to be thought of the same way as moms.” So, I think the way that the people in charge right now run things is to say that the way that fathers and fatherhood is represented needs to change, but to do that, we need to be changed as fathers. Also understanding that just because 250 dads who think progressively get together doesn’t mean that, you know, 80 million dads outside of that still don’t. It’s been one of the bigger challenges.

Lastly, Gary projected about a time in the future when dad bloggers will no longer be needed because they have achieved their goals. He said:

We're trying to come to a point with parenting, where it's just like, "yeah, now there's change tables in men's washrooms"—great, everyone has them now. So, that's where we're striving to get to [...] to a point where dad blogging is seen as *passé* because everyone started talking about everything and nothing feels like it's so unique.

These goals, of course, stemmed directly from the drive to facilitate and promote involved fatherhood in society.

## Discussion

In this application, I illustrated the strengths of ethnography for examining a family-oriented small group. As I oscillated between document analysis, participant observation, and interviewing over the past 5 years, I unearthed different layers of meaning to (re)guide the research design and analysis. Blog data provided public scripts about the lived realities of fathers and served as the essential fodder for discussions at the Dad 2.0 Summit. Attending these annual gatherings allowed me to discover emergent themes in a natural setting as I built up rapport with group members over time. In reviewing blog findings and fieldwork notes, I conducted interviews to probe more deeply into the salient themes and verify my discoveries with group insiders. Conducting interviews in this way also encouraged respondents to share private thoughts and concerns about the group, which may vary from the group's public discourse in important ways. This prolonged analysis of blogs, sustained contact with informants through fieldwork, and data cross-checking in interviews increased the credibility, confirmability, and overall trustworthiness of the research findings (Krefting, 1991). With the flexibility to triangulate multiple qualitative methods, an ethnographic approach was the best way to maximize analytical depth and authenticity in interpreting the Dad 2.0 group culture.

Ultimately, a digital family ethnography enabled me to piece together how the quest for normalizing involved fatherhood binds dad bloggers together and informs their collective beliefs and behaviors. Using only one type of data and method would have left vital pieces of this puzzle behind, producing a portrait of the Dad 2.0 community that is vague, incomplete, or inaccurate. It is for these reasons that ethnographic research can generate rich, holistic knowledge of culture-sharing groups—including families and family-oriented networked publics. Future digital family ethnographies should explore a myriad of online contexts, including diverse types of parenting blogs and vlogs, message boards dedicated to family wellness or a pressing family issue, and social media networks of family members across the world. As media technologies become increasingly ingrained into our work and family life, ethnographers will be well equipped to examine shared cultural patterns as they play out across online and offline worlds.

## References

- Bjork-James, S. (2015). Feminist ethnography in cyberspace: Imagining families in the cloud. *Sex Roles, 73*(3/4), 113–124.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Friedman, M. (2013). *Mommyblogs and the changing face of motherhood*. University of Toronto Press.
- Ghaziani, A., & Baldassarri, D. (2011). Cultural anchors and the organization of differences: A multi-method analysis of LGBT marches on Washington. *American Sociological Review, 76*(2), 179–206.
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Horst, H. A. (2012). New media technologies in everyday life. In H. A. Horst & D. Miller (Eds.), *Digital anthropology* (pp. 61–79). Routledge.
- Kramer, K. Z., Kelly, E. L., & McCulloch, J. B. (2015). Stay-at-home fathers: Definition and characteristics based on 34 years of CPS data. *Journal of Family Issues, 36*(12), 1651–1673.
- Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 45*(3), 214–222.
- Lupton, D., Pedersen, S., & Thomas, G. M. (2016). Parenting and digital media: From the early web to contemporary digital society. *Sociology Compass, 10*(8), 730–743.
- Roy, K. M., Zvonkovic, A., Goldberg, A., Sharp, E., & LaRossa, R. (2015). Sampling richness and qualitative integrity: Challenges for research with families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 77*(1), 243–260.
- Scheibling, C. (2020a). Doing fatherhood online: Men’s parental identities, experiences, and ideologies on social media. *Symbolic Interaction, 43*(3), 472–492.
- Scheibling, C. (2020b). The culture of fatherhood 2.0: Exploring the “tiny public” of dad bloggers in North America. *Feminist Media Studies, 20*(6), 813–830.

**Part III**  
**Normalism, Post-War Challenges, and**  
**Pluralism**

# Family Development Theory



Todd F. Martin and James M. White

## Family Development Theory

A chapter dedicated to family development theory (FDT) is not without controversy. Over the last several decades, family development theory has moved to a more analytic and multilevel theory, yet both supporters and foes seem to be locked into a simplistic interpretation of the theory that is dated and leave its current value disputed. This is confusing, because FTD's founding metaphor of child development as a progression through invariant stages (e.g., Piaget) applied to the family unit has largely been rejected. Those that say that family development theory is like life course theory are also misdirected since they fail to recognize that life course theory has not identified a process or launched a real theory outside of the established concepts of age, cohort, and period. Our approach takes the reader through the historical evolution of family development theory and highlights the revolutionary point at which the theory emerged from metaphors to analytic models and propositions.

Our approach will be to first contextualize the history of the theory with a special emphasis on the terms of *development* and *family*. The concept of *development* will be redefined away from a biological premise, and the concept of *family* will include a broad arrangement of potential human relations. A summary of our guiding assumptions is followed by key concepts and propositions. We then discuss criticisms of the theory and include a sample of recent research associated with

---

T. F. Martin (✉)  
Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada  
e-mail: [todd.martin@twu.ca](mailto:todd.martin@twu.ca)

J. M. White  
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada  
e-mail: [james.white@ubc.ca](mailto:james.white@ubc.ca)

FDT. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion on the growing edge of the theory by looking at several directions we feel the theory needs to go in order to guide the scientific study of family in the twenty-first century.

### ***A Theoretical Evolution: A Brief History up to 1977***

The history of FDT has been well documented (Martin, 2018; Mattessich & Hill, 1987; Rodgers & White, 1993). Thus, we chose to structure this brief account of the theory's history around the key concepts of *family* and *development* while drawing a distinction between the incremental evolution of the early years of the theory with the revolutionary shift that produced its present form. It is the authors' premise that recent family scholars may benefit from understanding the history of the theory's use of the concepts of *family* and *development* in order to better evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and utility of the theory in its current iteration.

FDT emerged from the attempted integration of various streams of research (life cycle categories of rural sociology, social systems, human development, life span and life course, and stress theory; Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Early champions of the theory saw it as a way to unite these various family research strands (Duvall, 1988). The theory emerged during the middle of the twentieth century amidst a sociohistorical period that highly valued the nuclear family. Historians and social thinkers saw the nuclear family as the natural progression of modernization, as the smaller, more mobile nuclear family was more suited to an industrial urban society (Burgess & Locke, 1945; Goode, 1970; Parsons & Bales', 1955; Zimmerman, 2014). Early researchers and policy makers were concerned with how to make the family successful, and research was guided more by traditional social and cultural values than by positivistic science.

A brief historical exploration of the use of the concepts *family* and *development* provides a helpful hermeneutic to understanding the theory and its use of those terms in their current form. Waller (1938) first described "family life" by focusing on the middle class American in a narrow way that lacked inclusivity and was grounded in a sociohistorical context. In addressing the concept of *development*, Waller speaks of the natural history of the life sciences that allows one to describe the order of events. He cites MacIver's (1937) four stages that a family passes through as support: (1) courtship, (2) the first year of marriage, (3) parenthood, and (4) the empty nest (see Murphy and Staples (1979) for a more detailed overview of early stage models). The biological emphasis on family development continued in the 1940s. Hallowell and Reynolds (1942) argued in their chapter titled "Biological Factors in Family Structure" that human behavior is grounded in human organic nature and referred to their methodological lens as the biological frame of reference. They ask the powerful question (p. 25), "What does the concept of "family" mean when divested of some of its purely human implications and viewed from a biological point of view?" and use this to frame an overview of late nineteenth century competing ideas of the origin of the family. They credit Morgan (1877) with



delineating three evolutionarily influenced stages of the human family. The first period, “promiscuous intercourse,” was followed by an era of “group marriage” described as involving close kin mating. The final stage, “pair marriage,” was described by Morgan as the pinnacle of the family’s evolutionary process.

The biological emphasis of development and, consequently, family development began to be deemphasized later in the decade. Becker and Hill (1942) suggested that family development is not merely a biological process.

When all is said and done, however, family structure is a matter of social organization, marriage is a social institution not a “private affair” of merely *biological* (emphasis ours) or even of “companionship” character, and parenthood involves far more than germ plasm.” (p. v)

Hill reinforced the social influence of the family form when he stated, “All we know is that we are in transition from one fairly well-defined sacred form to another more secular form whose dimensions and duties we barely perceive” (p. 784). FDT, grounded in a biological ontogenetic model of development, began to shift to a nurture rather than nature explanation.

At the National Conference on Family Life in 1948, Evelyn Duvall (human developmentalist) and Reuben Hill (sociologist) co-chaired a committee on the Dynamics of Family Interaction. It was during this conference that the foundations of FDT were created and tension around the concept of development continued. The family life cycle was organized into eight stages. Seven were meant to reflect the stages of the “normal” family: early marriage and expectant families, childbearing family, preschool family, school-age family, family with teenagers, family as launching center, and the aging family. The eighth stage was titled *Families in Crisis* and revolved around Koos’ (1946) profiles of families in trouble.

Family developmental tasks, introduced by Duvall in 1948, were adapted from human developmentalist theorists such as Piaget and Erikson. At the University of Chicago in the summer of 1950, FDT’s central theoretical concept of the *family developmental task* was defined (Duvall, 1967) as “those which must be accomplished by a family in a way that will satisfy (a) biological requirements, (b) cultural imperatives, and (c) personal aspirations and values if the family is to continue to grow as a unit” (p. 45). This definition formed the basis of propositions emerging from FDT. For example, “As long as a family functions well, it is free to live as it will. When basic tasks are not adequately accomplished, society steps in” (Duvall, 1988, p. 131).

Even though the theory has moved away from an adapted human development approach to family change, it continues to be strongly associated with the theory. This historical account of FDT would suggest that Duvall’s work in the 1960s epitomizes the peak influence of an organic, biological model of family development. We suggest it would take another 50 years to move away from that approach.

If the decade of the 1960s was the height of a family development perspective that emphasized biological and psychological influences, then the 1970s was when it began to reconceptualize the concept of family development and receive criticism about the value of “the family life cycle.” Rodgers (1973) redefined key concepts of

the theory, specifically definitions of development and family in order to move the theory forward, especially in the area of creating clear testable propositions. He suggested the definition of a family is influenced by societies' expectations around roles and how the structure of the family changes over the history of the group. Rodgers also separates from Duvall and her approach to the concept of family development task. In contrast to her more biological use, he puts a family developmental task in the context of systems languages, highlighting the concepts of roles, norms, and equilibrium.

A developmental task is a set of norms (role expectations) arising at a particular point in the career of a position in a social system, which, if incorporated by the occupant of the position as a role or part of a role cluster, brings integration and temporary equilibrium in the system ... (p. 51)

Rodger's reframing of FDT's key terms led to a more positivistic definition of family and development that made it easier for researchers to employ in theory testing.

In the 1970s, FDT's theoretical value also was coming under scrutiny. Social change was impacting the middle-class family in rapid and dramatic ways. Biological analogies applied to how the family ought to function were found lacking. In 1977, during the Theory Construction and Research Methodology pre-conference of the National Council on Family Relations, FDT was at a crossroads. Hill and Mattessich presented a first look at their academic chronology of FDT; a paper presented by White proposed a mathematical approach to FDT; and a paper presented by Spanier, Sauer, and Larzelere challenged the tenants of FDT and questioned its value. This nexus of FDT work provided the environment for dramatic change to the theory.

### ***A Theoretical Revolution: A Brief History Since 1977***

Early iterations of FDT evolved incrementally, but after 1977 the change was revolutionary. Another redefinition of the terms *family* and *development*, methodological advancements such as event history analysis, and the theoretical integration of levels of analysis into the propositional portion of the theory all contributed to the revolution. In addition, the concept and importance of family stages was being eclipsed by a focus on transitions between family structural states. The need to conceive of the family in broader terms was not a new idea; both Rodgers (1962) and Christensen (1964) recognized the limitations of a theory that just dealt with middle-class, mid-twentieth century (White, heterosexual, married) Americans. In the 1980s, both Hill (1986) and Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) applied FDT to single-parent families and divorced families, respectively. Hill moved the conversation away from family development stages to family transitions from stage to stage, and Ahrons and Rodgers saw divorce as a family state that a majority of families now went through. This more diverse and inclusive approach put the emphasis on empirical family patterns, rather than viewing single-parent or divorced families as a

family developmental failure with moral overtones. This paved the way for examining and understanding more diverse family events, transitions, and structures without the judgmental baggage. Burr et al. (1988) support this greater objectivity when they state:

The changes that are created by development sometimes mean that people and families become more complex, more differentiated, and more able to cope with their life situation... All developmental changes, however, do not lead to greater ability and complexity (p. 72).

Transitions were defined as patterned change over time from one stage or structure to another, and they suggest that “many transitions are predictable and normal, and they can be anticipated when we think developmentally” (p. 77). They further distinguished between development and non-developmental change in the family by differentiating unexpected changes, such as job loss, from expected or anticipated developmental life course transitions, such as the birth of a child. The focus on development, transitions, and the differences between the types of changes demonstrates a solid grasp of the emerging direction of the theory from invariant stage progression, to change that can be statistically predicted.

Concurrent to Burr, Day, and Bahr, (Klein & Aldous, 1988) reinforced the shift in focus of FDT from stages to transitions between stages and the associated stressors: “*Family development is expected change over the life course of families, while in the case of family stress, the focus is on unanticipated events that encourage change*” (emphasis ours; p.3). Aldous (1990) compared the idea of family change between family development theory and life course theory, highlighting how both are interested in the sequencing of family events. The placement and timing of family events in historical context is the emphasis of life course analysis, whereas FDT has focused on the “transitions linking these events and their subsequent stages” (p. 576).

## ***Methodology***

The definitional changes occurring in the theory were complemented by methodological advancements inside and outside the field. Improvements by Featherman (1985), Featherman and Lerner (1985), Allison (1984), Tuma and Hannan (1984), and Tuma (1976) altered the way family dynamics could be measured, modeled, and analyzed and facilitated the shift to calculating the statistical probability of event transitions.

White (1991) continued to move the theory away from the stage development metaphor put forth by Hill and Duvall and set out to re-envision the theory based on events and transitions between stages. In the process, he redefined the concept of family development based on the work of Featherman (1985): “Family development is a process in which families move from stage to stage and the probability of a transition from one stage (i) to another stage (j) is dependent on the duration of time

in the previous stage (i)” (p. 55). White felt this definition clarified the meaning of the theory and allowed family developmental change to be distinguished from other types of family change, such as random change. Rodgers and White (1993) continued to advance FDT in this new direction, critiquing what they felt was the central flaw in the earlier version of the theory which they illustrate by citing Hill and Mattessich, “Rather, the Hill and Mattessich discussion borrowed heavily from the field of developmental psychology and, as such, entered into a perilous liaison with concepts such as ‘ontogenetic determinism’” (p. 242).

In contrast to the ontological direction of Hill and Mattessich, Rodgers and White emphasized the possibilities and probabilities of family transitions rather than the sequencing of predetermined stages. They did this by applying a Markov model (current state/stage predicts transition into the next state/stage) and semi-Markov model (both current state/stage and duration in current state/stage predicts the transition into the next state/stage) to transition probability between family stages (now viewed as family states) was distinct from the ideas put forth by the originators of the theory, who viewed a specific kind of family development as a necessary pathway for successful families to navigate. (For a more detailed discussion of semi-Markov and Markov assumptions see [https://www.encyclopediaof-math.org/index.php/Semi-Markov\\_process](https://www.encyclopediaof-math.org/index.php/Semi-Markov_process).)

In 2005, White stated that, based on the alterations to FDT he suggested, revolutionary changes, including a new name, also were needed, and he suggested the name “transition theory.” White’s basic premise for transition theory was to take a family development perspective, integrate a life course perspective (as Klein and he did in 2002), add the body of research and methodological advancement on transitions, and incorporate multiple levels of analysis. White’s goal was a more positivistic approach to the study and analysis of family change, one not limited by appeals to ontogenetic, sociohistorical context or teleological influenced morality.

We argue it is possible to retain the name FDT, given that transition theory has seen limited adoption and a new generation of scholars continues to be exposed to FDT in major family theory texts. Even though over 40 years have passed since a revolution in FDT began, much of the narrative around the theory is based on the first 40 years of theory rather than the latter (see Table 1), a trend that we hope to see corrected in future work using FDT.

## Core Assumptions and Interrelated Concepts of Current FDT

By articulating our assumptions about FDT, we seek to provide transparency in the way we approach key concepts, including *family* and *development*. Below we summarize the current key assumptions, propositions, and concepts of FDT.

**Table 1** Before and after the revolution in FDT

Before		After	
Family	Nuclear-anchored in a sociohistorical context	Family	A unit that is intergenerational and contains relations of consanguinity and affinity
Development	Metaphor of stages of child development (Duvall & Hill, 1948)	Development	Process is stage and duration dependent (Featherman, 1985; Rodgers & White, 1993; White, 1991)
Stage	Measured by age of first child (Rodgers, 1973)	Stage/state	Measured by relationship (White et al., 2016)
Propositions	Critique of the scientific value of family life cycle stages (Spanier, Sauer & Larzelere, 1979)	Propositions	Propositions that take into account multiple levels as well as cross levels of analysis
Methodology	A guiding heuristic and developmental metaphors	Methodology	Positivistic, informed by multilevel mathematical models, event history, and sequence analysis
Application	Primarily suited for mid-twentieth century White middle-class families	Application	Sociohistorically and culturally sensitive. Applicable across diverse family types

### *Organic Versus Mechanical Analogy*

Durkheim and other early theorists talked about mechanical and organic analogies for understanding social processes; society either works like a living organism or like a mechanism such as a clock. The organic analogy is dynamic and assumes that societies can best be understood as working like an organism. We believe that the study of family needs to be guided by an organic perspective. Such a perspective shares a group of cognate terms such as birth, evolution, development, growth, decline, aging, and death. The organic perspective tends to be dynamic and incorporate time as a basic construct. When structural and institutional interpretations are used, they should be in the context of adaptation, change, and development.

The assumption here is that the primary unit of analysis (the family) incorporates sub-units (e.g., relationships and individuals) that also have ongoing processes. All the processes within these units are considered theoretically endogenous. The assumption of different units of analysis also entails different theoretical levels of analysis (see Bulcroft & White, 1997); White & Teachman, 2005), as the processes of development are different in a dyad than in an individual. Individual development is part of dyadic development, but the dyad has additional properties and measurements, such as disagreement or bonding. Likewise, a family group has measures and processes, such as forming coalitions, that are not present in the dyad. In general, at higher levels of analysis, all previous lower level measures and processes may be included, but each higher level also introduces its own unique measures and processes.

## *Causal Forces*

From the discussion above, it is clear that internal family or dyadic norms, group structure, and changing capacity and abilities are all endogenous causal forces of development. On the other hand, exogenous causal forces are those forces outside the family, including community, polity, history (age, period, cohort), and social norms. Because norms are socialized and incorporated in individuals as morals, incorporated in dyads as expectations of relationship trajectory, and into families as role expectations and formal norms required of the family, social norms are viewed as particularly important exogenous influences on growth and development.

## *The Process of Development*

A developmental process is defined as a probabilistic dependency where a stage transition is predicted by both the current state and the duration of time spent in the current state. Assumptions include that there are a finite, enumerable set of states or stages, each state is defined as logically independent, and time may be measured as continuous or discrete. It is an assumption of this model that any current state is at most dependent on only the previous state (Markov assumption) and the duration in that previous state (semi-Markov assumption). Note that this process assumes that the unit of analysis (the family, dyad, individual) makes a difference in outcomes.

## *Concepts*

### **Family**

We explore the definition of family in detail in the final section of the paper and define family as a unit that is intergenerational and contains relations of consanguinity (blood relations) and affinity (resulting from marriage). Because families have histories, we must retrospect and prospect from any given family that meets the definition at a specific time. Thus, a family history may include a dating dyad viewed retrospectively and a divorcee viewed prospectively.

### **Development**

Featherman (1985), White (1991), and Rodgers and White (1993) argued for a comprehensive view of development. They argued that a more general approach to defining development could yield a more refined definition of development and a more general model that could be useful for various levels of analysis. White (1991)

proposed a semi-Markov model of development where the stage and the duration of time in that stage condition the probabilities of a transition to another stage over time. For example, if a child is in the sensorimotor stage, Piaget would argue that the invariant next stage would be preoperational. White's (1991) definition instead would state that the probability of moving to the preoperational stage would be higher than for other stages, with the transition depending on (1) the child currently being in the sensorimotor *stage*, and (2) the *duration of time* the child has been in the sensorimotor stage. While claims of biological deterministic stages and causal primacy may be overblown, the model that White (1991) and others such as Featherman (1985) have proposed can incorporate deterministic and nondeterministic hypotheses within the broader semi-Markov model.

## Family Development

The difference between individual and family development is not a matter of a different definition of development so much as a change in the level of analysis (individual vs family). With each level of analysis (individual, dyad, family, community, or population), there are different internal processes and exogenous variables that influence development. For example, an individual may have cognitions or health issues, but these are more difficult concepts to apply to the family unless we disaggregate down to individuals. Dyads may be measured on their ratio of agreements to disagreements, but this is not appropriate within the individual.

## Stage

A stage is a distinct period of time in the life of an individual, dyad, or family unit bounded by transition events. We see the concept of state as synonymous with stage in the present iteration of FDT, where state represents the mathematical equivalent of the sociological concept of stage. Qualitatively distinct means that processes internal to the unit are distinguishable from what was before and what comes after the stage. The cause of change in family stages can be internal or external. Events that might denote a stage for one unit of analysis (e.g., an individual) will not necessarily serve as a staging event for another unit (e.g., the family). While first sexual intercourse might be a transition event for a teen, that same event may not be a transition event for the family. When an event marks a transition from an old stage to a new stage, it is called a *transition event*, but this designation is only for the unit of analysis under consideration. A key aim of the theory is the identification of transition events that demarcate stages for individuals, dyads, and families with observed and predicted probabilities.

Every stage has a *duration*, which is an important variable in predicting a transition event. Almost all stage durations are curvilinear, such that when a transition event (1) first occurs, the probability for a new transition event (2) usually is low. As the duration in a stage increases, more gradual within-stage experience occurs until

reaching an apex in the probabilities for a new transition (2). For example, married couples may have a low probability of a first birth on their wedding day. That probability increases to an apex 2 or 3 years after the wedding date and then falls to very low five or more years after the wedding date. Exogenous interruptions to this curvilinear relationship include war, disease, infertility, work, and changing social norms.

*Structure of the family group* is a key element in identifying family stages. For an individual, physical changes such as physiologic, brain, and endocrine system development may mark stages. For family, a change in family structure means changing relationships and interactions, and new positions may be added and/or subtracted. Structure is one of the major ways to measure family stage as a qualitatively distinct period or duration, but one of the problems with using family structure is that there are many ad hoc ways in which family structure is measured. For example, Schumm (2014) compared findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) data set on the same outcome variable using different measures of family structure. A summary of five contemporary studies measuring “Married Biological Parents” showed the five studies contained N values of 256, 8088, 7727, 9505, and 10,275. Categories measuring single parent and blended families varied even more. Such variation in predictions based on varying conceptions of family structure is problematic because the lack of consistency suggests we have no single valid and reliable measure of what we mean by “family structure.” White et al. (2016) developed a standardized measure for family structure that is sufficiently detailed to be applicable cross-culturally (e.g., sororal families) and inclusive of units such as gay, lesbian, or single parent families. Their project set out to accomplish four goals: (a) increase precision and remove ambiguity in general descriptive terms such as “intact families” and “single parent families,” (b) assist in the development of a basic metric for families based on family structure, (c) assist life course researchers with the identification of possible transition states and hence the a priori (or “expected”) probability of a transition, and (d) assist in theory development of life course theory by providing the a priori transition probabilities for family structures.

The project seeks to address weaknesses in measuring families and to remove the challenges posed by the moral implications of certain family structures being preferred over others. The authors also suggested some measures of diversity and ways of incorporating these structures in event histories. They propose that all family members are related by only one of three types of relations: consanguine lineal (fictive blood or genetic; adult-child), affinal relation (marriage or partnering), or a consanguine collateral (consanguineal-same generation; e.g., cousins, siblings). Although these three forms of relations are usually mutually exclusive because of incest taboos, there is the exception in some cultures for first cousins as preferential mates.



### *Possibility Space*

A possibility space is familiar to most of us as a way to develop a priori statistical expectations. For example, the possibility space for a coin toss is seen as either heads or tails; these two categories exhaust the possibilities for any given throw. Empirically, a coin could land on its edge, but that is not in the a priori possibility space. The possibility space is a priori and theoretical and is the backbone of sampling distributions such as chi-square.

The generation of a possibility space for family structures is relatively straightforward. As noted, each person can only be related to another person in three ways: consanguine collateral (–), consanguine lineal (l), or affinal (=). So, for a three-person group, we have three dyadic relations: P<sub>1</sub> to P<sub>2</sub>, P<sub>1</sub> to P<sub>3</sub>, and P<sub>2</sub> to P<sub>3</sub>. Table 2 represents a family wherein P<sub>1</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> are married and P<sub>3</sub> is their biological child.

### **Indexing of Possibilities**

To index or give a number to family structures (X<sub>i</sub> = “i” is the index number), we propose the construction of a core index from the root matrix of relations (see Table 2). We can then enumerate the set and reconstruct the family structure with persons as index numbers as shown in Table 3. For example, reading the table by rows, the root matrix for a three-person family where father = 1, mother = 2, and child = 3 would be expressed below by the index number **100011000**. The **1** s represent that the mother-father relationship is affinal and the mother-child and father-child relationships are lineal, and the **0** s denote that only one kind of relationship is represented for each person.

Although researchers can add sex or gender if needed, the information in Table 2 would treat gay, lesbian, and heterosexual families as the same basic stage. The important point we can take from the tables is not about this individual type of family, but by listing the number of persons and the types of relations, we can generate all possible forms of two-person, three-person, four-person, or N-person families. This approach allows researchers to remove themselves from their own sociocultural biases and examine the frequency of different family structures and why those differences exist across time and place. Issues such as the nuclear family, same-sex family, reconstructed family, or plural family are no longer studied within a particular social or moral lens, yet understanding religious, political, or economic influences on family structure is not eliminated—it is contextualized. These institutional factors take on more importance when introduced after the data collected are analyzed in a value neutral way.

**Table 2** Three-person group (relations by dyad pairs)

Person pairs		P1- P2	P1-P3	P2-P3
Affinal	=	1	0	0
Lineal	l	0	1	1
Collateral	–	0	0	0

**Table 3** Partial relational matrix for three-person group

$\equiv_{12}$	$\equiv_{23}$	$\equiv_{31}$	$l_{12}$	$l_{23}$	$l_{31}$	$\sim_{12}$	$\sim_{23}$	$\sim_{31}$
1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
(etc.)								

Perhaps one of the strongest points we can take away from the possibility space is the enormous range and diversity of possible family structures. This leads to two observations. First, it is incumbent on researchers to ask, “Why does each nation or culture promote only a few family forms and discourage so many others?” The second observation is that we need some measures of diversity of family structure that will work over time. The number of existent family structures will be less than the number of possible family structures both at any one time and across time. We can develop measures of diversity that would demonstrate how strong an exogenous norm such as the one-child policy in China or pronatalist policies in Sweden are by dividing the existent by possible family structures. Such measures already exist in demography and sociology (e.g., Teachman, 1980).

It is important to understand how this measure of family structure can improve both longitudinal event history analysis and cross-sectional analysis. Imagine a matrix of couples and family structure up to eight persons (or any N persons). Beginning with a couple, we could trace the movement over time of the structures which may eventually lead back to a couple. This tracing through relational structures would give us the trajectory of families over time. Adding and subtracting members from a household adds and subtracts roles that can be assumed and relations that can be developed. The mathematics of such a system are also interesting because there are a number of ways to address whether family structures over time are more diverse in one culture than another. For more on this family structure initiative, see White et al. (2016).

### *Within Stage Development*

Developmental theory uses stages as akin to the stages of development of caterpillar (egg, larvae, pupa or chrysalis, butterfly). However, within each stage are enormous changes as organs and structures develop. Likewise, within each stage of family, individuals and group norms change until there is a change in stage that can be recognized externally. The study of internal changes within a stage examines individuals’ changing capacities and abilities as well as resulting changes in interactions based on changing expectations and organization (see White, 2005, p.131–132). For example, when a child starts crawling, parental expectations change accordingly, such as covering electric outlets and encouraging exploration. These internal changes may be expressed continuously as a variable such as child mobility or as stages such as crawling or walking.

## ***Between Stage Development***

When we examine a family from an external perspective, the unit is not the individual but the group. The group changing structure is the easiest way to discern stages. We do not introduce the concept of domicile or residence here, only structure, but domicile is an additional way to discern stages (e.g., a child leaving for college; they no longer reside in the family home, but they have not “left” the family). Because stages are duration and stage dependent, they are defined as developmental. One or two family stages may consume most of the duration of the lifecycle or family career. For example, for some families being married without children might be a relatively short period compared to the period of time with children.

**Norms** There are many causes of development for the individual, dyad, and family, so to identify a common causal factor for all these various units of analysis is difficult. We would argue, however, that a common thread exists across all these units—social organization. Social organization may include beliefs, values, knowledge, and attitudes, but all of these can only take shape in action as social norms. Following the analysis of (Durkheim, 1949, 1951) and later Black (1962), a norm is a *social rule*, a shared expectation about the way people behave. It is a relationship between three elements: a social position, a rule, and a modality for that action. In most societies, for example, a mother is prescribed to nurture and show affection to her child and prohibited from that affection being sexual in nature (incest). For much of the history of social thought, from Weber’s religious norms for salvation to Parsons’ organization of the social system, norms have been a key ingredient. The analysis of the sources and context of norms is exceedingly complex, because norms cross levels of analysis. A norm may be held at the individual level as a moral sentiment leading to moral action, at the group level as a consensual rule for the group, or at a social system level as a rule for action that is for the greatest good.

One area of FDT focuses on normative family stages. The strong or weak norms about timing of family transition events and stages supply us with four non-independent types of norms: age-graded, stage-graded, sequence, and timing. *Age-graded norms* are for particular age groups, such as the age at which you can drive (formal) or the age at which you have sex (informal). *Stage-graded norms* are relative to particular roles or positions within a stage such as parents or newlyweds. *Sequencing norms* are expectations about the expected sequence that people follow in family life, such as getting married before having a child. Finally, *timing norms* are a conjoint norm formed of age and stage grading. For example, a norm that you finish your education before getting married and get married before having children clearly has components of the age that one is expected to finish formal education and the expected sequence. It is also clear that as one follows expected sequencing, one gets older. This leads to the measures of on/off sequence and on/off age grade expectation for each stage.

## *Deviation and Variation*

The notion of variation from norms entails (a) identifying a norm, (b) identifying the current strength of the norm, and (c) tracing the strength of the norm over time. First, a norm must be shared by a number of people who hold a consistent expectation for behavior. Some of this may be given by formal norms such as laws requiring one to stop at a stop sign. There are evolving norms such as the (non)acceptance of family violence that have changed over the last 50 years. The current strength of a norm is measured by how many people hold the norm (frequency) and how many people would behaviorally sanction someone not following the norm (strength).

Sequencing norms and timing norms change across cohorts and historical periods; however, the causation of these changes is a complex topic. For example, there were economic and social changes in the 1970s that led more couples to cohabit before or instead of marrying. As more couples cohabited, income tax acts, and family law struggled to deal with the complex problems of property and custody disputes, such that non-matrimonial disputes look increasingly similar to marital disputes and are sometimes treated the same in law. This has the consequence of changing the autonomy and free nature that attracted many to cohabitation in earlier decades. The frequency of a behavior can signify a norm, though that is only a first step. The second step is to show that people actually are cognizant of the expectation.

Norms change over time, and there is certainly random variation of social behavior. When the mean value of a measured social norm is stable and the variation is narrow (leptokurtic), we might examine whether the norm has been codified and contains sanctions, such as China's one-child policy in the 1980s. When the distribution is platykurtic, or distributed with greater variation around the mean value, we can discuss social disorganization (Durkheim, 1951). During the 1950s the mean age of marriage and having your first child was very concentrated around a women's early twenties. The distribution would be leptokurtic since the age distribution would have a small variance. Beginning in the 1970s the social expectations or social norms around the age of marriage and having your first child became much less prescriptive, and the distribution of age now would be platykurtic, since the age at marriage and birth would be more varied around the mean age of both events.

It is interesting to examine nonrandom variation around family behavior. If one were to examine the frequencies of cohabitation over time in North America, it would appear as random variation for the first half of the twentieth century, but in the 1970s it emerges as a form of nonrandom variation or systematic deviance. As Durkheim noted, systematic deviance is how social changes come about. In much of the developed world, the expectation now is that people will cohabit before marriage. For some this may have almost moral weight, like the anti-cohabitation sentiments held in previous decades. As we have said, frequency of a behavior alone does not distinguish between expectations and habits. Yet the frequency of behavior is a necessary first step in measuring norms and is even more valuable when tracing longitudinal changes that lead to systematic deviance in behavior and the attribution of change in social patterns.

## ***Family Life Course (Family Career)***

The family life course is composed of all the stages a family has traversed until the parents have died or until the process is truncated (right censored) by the time of observation. Besides family structures, common approaches to stages might include a single person, dating couple, cohabiting couple, engaged couple, married couple, married couple with a child, married couple with two children, married couple with one child launched and one at home, married couple with both children launched, and a widow. There are still other ways to describe stages, such as by role theory (e.g., stepfamily roles, grandparental roles). Transition events also provide another way to identify stages by events such as births, deaths, and divorces. However, the most scientific and accurate way to describe stages is by using family structures as proposed above.

## **Propositions**

For a complete discussion and explanation of derived propositions for FDT, see White et al. (2019). Rather than going into the derivation of propositions, here we highlight two propositions that exemplify and illustrate the complex relationships between families and societal institutions and norms. Individuals, dyads, and family groups are embedded within a loosely articulated set of institutions, where the norms of one institution may often be at odds with those of other institutions (e.g., work and family).

Within the family group, family members create internal family norms. Family disruption is positively related to the degree internal family norms are held and deviate from institutional family norms. (White et al., 2019, p.123)

And

Individuals and families systematically deviate from institutional family norms to adjust their behavior to other social institutional norms such as work and education. (White et al., 2019, p.125)

## ***Example A: Cohabiting Dyads and Institutional Social Norms***

The relationship between the social norms of family and cohabiting dyads has received much scholarly attention from early scholars such as Teachman and Polonko (1990), Schoen (1992), Lichter and Qian (2008), and Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006). Early cohabitators were treated as non-normative, but for balancing longer periods in education with mate selection, this strategy of delaying marriage but coupling was preferred. As such, many societies moved from cohabitation being infrequently adopted by a minority of the population to it being the modal stage

before marriage and therefore becoming normative and adopted by a majority of the population.

Martin (2014) has proposed a more nuanced understanding of institutional impact across levels of analysis illustrated by premarital cohabitation. Using in-group religiosity measures as a predictor of the impact of social norms on premarital cohabitation outcomes, he suggested that when an individual or dyad is more concerned about sanctions from meso-level groups like religious communities, those communities carry more behavioral influence and ultimately impact outcomes more than do macro or population level social norms. This approach helps to see that institutional influences are not homogenous, but may operate at different levels.

### ***Example B: Social Change and Normative Collisions***

Family development is a process that is embedded and knitted into the larger fabric of social change. Social change can include technology, economics, war, and pandemics, as well as changing social norms. A particular subset of normative change deals with shifts in timing and sequencing norms. Such timing norms are contained within each institutional sector, such as when you can legally vote or work. Religion and education also have expectations that are age influenced. These norms and behavioral frequencies supply each actor and groups of actors with expectations. Because actors are organic and time provides an organic timetable for abilities and health, timing and sequencing norms are constrained so as not to be impossible for the ability range (e.g., we do not expect 2-year-olds to complete university nor 90-year-olds to run a sub four-minute mile). There is, however, sufficient variability between the timing and sequencing norms within each institution to provide conflicts with the timing and sequencing norms of other institutions. When different institutions' timing and sequencing are all aimed at one age or period (e.g., expecting 20-year-olds to finish university, start a job, get married, have a child, and buy a house), we might see a resulting overload and strain on individuals, leading to an inability to meet such expectations. It is these "collisions" between the timing and sequencing norms of institutions that provide a stimulus for change within the developmental processes of family as well as within other institutions. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, working women have taken the major load of child care and education at the same time that they are expected to work. This led to increased role strain and conflict as they balance scarce time and schedule conflicts. In light of this, we propose the following: (a) social change is produced when a significant number of people change timing norms and behaviors within a social institution; (b) when norms for timing (age and stage graded, duration, sequencing) change within one institution (e.g., women's greater child care and child education tasks), this prompts other institutions to adjust timing and sequencing norms (e.g., call for flexible schedules and forms of child care); (c) changes in timing and sequencing norms are an ongoing societal process, and the rate of these changes for any given society runs from social stasis to social disorganization; and (d) social

change within the family is identified by the rate of change in family structure as measured by transition matrices over time.

The strength of FDT to address social change is important to the study of the family. It is also important to note that exogenous influences are incorporated into the theory as events and institutional norms (pandemic and work and education). The great strength of this theory is its multileveled perspective on social change.

## Main Problems, Questions, and Limitation of FDT

Criticism of FDT is not new. Martin (2018) summarized FDT criticisms into four larger categories. His concerns included academic fragmentation, levels of analysis confusion, methodological limitations, and the moralistic debate about how a family should look as opposed to how it could look. As a theory, FDT was anticipated to unite multiple theoretical perspectives by its early founders, Hill and Duvall. The data support a different conclusion, the fragmentation of theory rather than consolidation. A topical analysis of research titles utilizing Google Scholar found that a search limited between 1988 and 2017 produced 822 hits that included “family development theory” compared to 7600 for the phrase, “life course theory” and 39,800 for the phrase “ecological theory” with the word family included (Martin, 2018). This trend was also demonstrated by Taylor and Bagd (2005) with a similar analysis of journal articles from the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Concerns about the theory’s treatment of the levels of analysis have been raised by some scholars. Marini (1984) argues that norms in general cannot be inferred from behavior, but White (1991, 1998) disagrees and feels that Marini’s argument fails to take into account the various levels of analysis associated with norms. We feel a greater emphasis on structure typologies will aid in better understanding existing family taxonomies (See White et al., 2016). Solutions to the level of analysis issue have been hindered partially by methodologies but more so by the theory’s weakness in connecting the levels of analysis to one another. The propositions listed above demonstrate that the theory can guide researchers in multiple levels of family variables. More family research is based on measures that capture dyadic and other family configurations in contrast to just aggregating individual responses (Peltz et al., 2018; Stokes, 2017). We see this connected to the development issues of (a) a better definition and (b) better understanding of the development that goes on within a stage. Advancement in these two areas is important in seeing the theory address level of analysis issues.

Methodological limitations that were barriers to studying groups of families changing over time in the earlier phase of the theory have begun to be addressed by dramatically increased computational power and statistical advancements such as hierarchical linear modeling and sequence analysis in the form of optimal matching analysis. Large, high-quality longitudinal data sets are now available to be examined using a new iteration of FDT propositions.

Finally, in regard to the moralistic overtones of FDT, as early as 1962 Rodgers identified that a key weakness in FDT was its inability to deal with family structures that were considered non-normative. The debate regarding what is a family or how a family should be is addressed with a positivistic reframing of FDT. We begin by rejecting any specific definition of family and we reject a definition of development applied to the family that relies on ontogenetic or biological stages. The concern about lingering association with a model that pre-/proscribes a type of family or pathway versus one that describes and predicts a stage transition of pathway is dealt with by looking at the family structure initiative illustrated earlier in this paper. This approach seeks to break down family structure to its basic elements, people, and relations. By moving to this level of discussion, social norms and customs are viewed as influencing but not determining family structures. Many family elements that we take for granted, such as kinship structures and moral imperatives, influence the potential structures and can help better understand existing structures that may contain those elements. Although it is clear that some of these concerns are not unique to FDT, the theory must address them in order to be taken seriously in the future.

### *Examples of Research Emerging from the Theory*

A summary of research using FDT found that variations of the theory were much more likely to be used in studying the family than FDT itself. It was found that much of the research citing FDT did so based on traditional pre-revolutionary views of the theory. Even research published in the last 10 years tended to cite the theory to support an author's desire to appeal to a traditional family stage iteration of the theory. Perhaps the most important development in the application of FDT in family research is the use of the theory to explore more diversity and inclusivity among families and family issues (Martin, 2018).

A solid example of recent research employing a modern iteration of FDT is the work by Moen et al. (2015) who use the theory to explore the way marital issues change over time in a Utah sample of Latter-Day-Saints. Their research question is rooted in FDT, and although they highlight the theory's connection to family stages over time, they use the theory to focus on transitions and the normative demands of society that families must adapt to. Two of their three hypotheses are generated directly from a modern version of FDT and focus on change over time in the marital dyad. The emphasis on transition, time, risk factors, roles, and relational outcome measures are all consistent with the direction FDT is headed.



## The Growing Edge: Future Directions of the Theory

FDT must continue to address its weaknesses by improving its scientific approach to studying the family or see its use and influence continue to wane. We feel the future of FDT is tied primarily to definitional and operational improvements in the theoretical concepts of *family* and *development* and secondarily in methodological advancements to support these changes.

### *Family*

The definition and operationalization of family is central to family theories. The work of Schumm (2014) has already been cited to show that, even when researchers use the same data set, the number and types of families identified can vary. We feel that in order to address this problem, family structure must be removed from social and historical norms and customs. White et al. (2016) set out to develop a mathematical model of all potential state spaces when given a set number of dyads and a set number of potential relations between the members of the dyad. The family is defined more objectively as a result of this process.

### *Development*

Martin (2018) identified White's (2005) transition theory as a positive step forward in addressing FDT's theoretical weaknesses. FDT, as proposed in this chapter, incorporates the central premises of White's critiques. It avoids debates about ideal stage sequencing by looking instead at normative patterns. It views culture as influencing family patterns, and as a result, it is culturally sensitive. It deals with the level of analysis issue because it deals with individual life courses as well as macro level demographic patterns. It moves the discussion of family development from a biological/psychological one, to one that sees the probability of transition from one stage to another based on Markov and semi-Markov models. The theory can be used to explore family development at various levels, where scholars determine the level of analysis appropriate for their research questions and, as a result, avoid the problem of ecological fallacies that often plagues family research. And the mathematical exposition regarding the structure of family groups, for example, the ways of ordering 2,3,4,5,6...N person groups so that life course trajectories can be traced and compared, is a major step forward in the theory's maturation.

## ***Additional Advancements***

In addition to redefining key concepts of *family* and *development*, we feel the future direction of the theory will focus on analytical and propositional advancements that are made possible by methodologies well suited to analyze these new questions. The first advancement involves an examination of family development across and within stages that are associated with transitions. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) allows the impact of change in one level of analysis to be examined in relation to change in another level (Sayer and Klute (2005)).

In contrast to cross-level effects, within-stage/state maturation that leads to stage transitions should be explored more, such as a better understanding of the process a couple goes through prior to becoming parents. Perhaps this within family stage maturation is better understood when incorporating individual or dyadic changes, for example, educational attainment or financial decisions such as joint bank accounts. Sequence analysis is an example of new methods well equipped to study variations within an individual's (or families') life course. For example, Optimal Matching Analysis (OMA), a form of sequence analysis, allows for identification of normative patterns of timing as well as frequency of events. Martin (2015) demonstrates the benefits of OMA to dynamic family theories, particularly FDT.

The future direction of FDT is bright if family scholars can embrace a dramatically different version and approach to the theory. Reconceptualizing the key terms of *family* and *development* along with propositional and analytical advancements give these authors hope that FDT still has the ability to positively impact research and practitioners alike.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has covered family development theory, its history, its concepts, and some examples of how its propositions can be used to interpret and extend our understanding of a dynamic world. Within this chapter, we identify problems and provide suggestions to solve them. There can be no doubt that we are critical of FDT theorists attempting to resurrect the simple 1960's version of the theory. We are no less critical of a life course theory that continues to see three concepts (age, period, and cohort) as a theory. We urge them to consider the stochastic assumptions for dynamic modeling such as Markov and semi-Markov processes. For normative theorists, we would argue that roles and relationships need to be carefully tied to levels of analysis and addressed by time, sequencing, and dynamics. Finally, we would recommend that structuralists address the notion of family structure and its measurement in a global context. We believe that this paper and the many cognate papers we cite offer substantial suggestions about how to address these and make progress with the many problems facing family theory.

It is our desire to see FDT grow in use among family scientists in ways that reflect both its founders and long historical roots, while at the same time embracing its maturity as a modern, scientifically informed and guided theory. FDT has been known as a theory unique to family research. Unlike other theories that have been applied to family research or have been adapted for family research, FDT was conceived as a theory about and for families. Assumptions about those families have been re-evaluated over time, but FDT continues to endure as the theory generated, critiqued, and, in our view, improved in order to uniquely study families.

## References

- Ahrons, C. R., & Rodgers, R. H. (1987). *Divorced families: A multidisciplinary developmental view*. WW Norton & Co.
- Aldous, J. (1990). Family development and the life course: Two perspectives on family change. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52(3), 571–583.
- Allison, P. D. (1984). *Event history analysis: Regression for longitudinal event data*. Sage.
- Becker, H. P., & Hill, R. (1942). *Marriage and the Family*. Boston, MA.
- Black, M. (1962). *Models and metaphors: Studies in language and philosophy*.
- Bulcroft, R., & White, J. M. (1997). Family research methods and levels of analysis. *Family Science Review*, 10, 136–153.
- Burgess, E. W., & Locke, H. J. (1945). *The family: From institution to companionship*. American.
- Burr, W. R., Day, R. D., & Bahr, K. S. (1988). *Principles of family: An introduction to family science*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.ca/books?id=-kvyMAAACAAJ>
- Christensen, H. T. (1964). *Handbook of marriage and the family*. Rand McNally.
- Durkheim, E. (1949). *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated from the French by George Simpson. Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (JA Spaulding & G. Simpson, trans.). Free Press. (Original work published 1897).
- Duvall, E. M. (1967). *Family development*. Lippincott.
- Duvall, E. M. (1988). Family development's first forty years. *Family Relations*, 37(2), 127–134.
- Duvall, E. M., & Hill, R. (1948). *Report of the committee on the dynamics of family interaction*. National Conference on Family Life, Washington, D. C.
- Featherman, D. L. (1985). Individual development and aging as a population process. In J. R. Nesselroade & A. Von Eye (Eds.), *Individual development and social change: Explanatory analysis* (pp. 213–241). Academic Press.
- Featherman, D. L., & Lerner, R. M. (1985). Ontogenesis and sociogenesis: Problematics for theory and research about development and socialization across the lifespan. *American Sociological Review*, 659–676.
- Goode, W. J. (1970). *World revolution and family patterns*. Free Press.
- Hallowell, A., & Reynolds, E. (1942). *Biological factors in family structure*. *Marriage, H., Becker, P., & Hill, R., D.C. Heath and Company*.
- Hill, R. (1986). Life cycle stages for types of single parent families: Of family development theory. *Family Relations*, 19–29.
- Klein, D. M., & Aldous, J. (Eds.). (1988). *Social stress and family development*. Guilford.
- Koos, E. L. (1946). *Families in trouble*. King's Crown Press.
- Lichter, D. T., & Qian, Z. (2008). Serial cohabitation and the marital life course. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(4), 861–878.
- Liefbroer, A. C., & Dourleijn, E. (2006). Unmarried cohabitation and union stability: Testing the role of diffusion using data from 16 European countries. *Demography*, 43(2), 203–221.

- MacIver, R. M. (1937). *Society: A Textbook of sociology*. Farrar & Rinehart.
- Marini, M. M. (1984). Age and sequencing norms in the transition to adulthood. *Social Forces*, 63(1), 229–244.
- Martin, T. F. (2014, November). *Advancing family theory through theoretical and methodological advancement*. Paper presented at the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Workshop - Families at the Nexus of Global Change, NCFR, Baltimore.
- Martin, T. F. (2015). Advancing dynamic family theories: Applying optimal matching analysis to family research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7(4), 482–497.
- Martin, T. F. (2018). Family development theory 30 years later. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(1), 49–69.
- Mattessich, P., & Hill, R. (1987). Life cycle and family development. In S. K. Steinmetz & M. B. Sussman (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 437–469). Springer.
- Moen, D., Bradford, K., Lee, T. R., Harris, V. W., & Stewart, J. W. (2015). After the honeymoon: The evolution of problem issues in Utah LDS marriages. *Marriage & Family Review*, 51(5), 396–417.
- Morgan, L. H. (1877). *Ancient society; or, researches in the lines of human progress from savagery, through barbarism to civilization*. H. Holt.
- Murphy, P. E., & Staples, W. A. (1979). A modernized family life cycle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 6(1), 12–22.
- Parsons, T., & Bales, R. (Eds.). (1955). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Free Press.
- Peltz, J. S., Rogge, R. D., & Sturge-Apple, M. L. (2018). Transactions within the family: Coparenting mediates associations between parents' relationship satisfaction and the parent-child relationship. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 32(5), 553.
- Rodgers, R. H. (1962). *Improvements in the construction and analysis of family life cycle categories: Department of Sociology*. Western Michigan University.
- Rodgers, R. H. (1973). *Family interaction and transaction: The developmental approach*. Prentice Hall.
- Rodgers, R. H., & White, J. M. (1993). Family development theory. In W. J. Doherty, P. G. Boss, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods* (pp. 225–257). Springer.
- Sayer, A. G., & Klute, M. M. (2005). Analyzing couples and families. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acocck, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 289–313). Sage.
- Schoen, R. (1992). First unions and the stability of first marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 54(2), 281–284.
- Schumm, W. R. (2014). Challenges in predicting child outcomes from different family structures. *Comprehensive Psychology*, 3, 03–17.
- Spanier, G. B., Sauer, W., & Larzelere, R. (1979). An empirical evaluation of the family life cycle. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41(1), 27–38.
- Stokes, J. E. (2017). Do “his” and “her” marriages influence one another? Contagion in personal assessments of marital quality among older spouses over a four-year span. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 80(2), 204–215.
- Taylor, A. C., & Bagd, A. (Eds.). (2005). *The lack of explicit theory in family research. Sourcebook of family theory & research*. Sage.
- Teachman, J. D. (1980). Analysis of population diversity: Measures of qualitative variation. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 8(3), 341–362.
- Teachman, J. D., & Polonko, K. A. (1990). Cohabitation and marital stability in the United States. *Social Forces*, 69(1), 207–220.
- Tuma, N. B. (1976). Rewards, resources, and the rate of mobility: A nonstationary multivariate stochastic model. *American Sociological Review*, 41(2), 338–360.
- Tuma, N. B., & Hannan, M. (1984). *Social dynamics: Models and methods*. Academic Press.
- Waller, W. (1938). *The family: A dynamic interpretation*. Gordon.
- White, J. M. (1991). *Dynamics of family development: A theoretical perspective*. Guilford Publication.

- White, J. M. (1998). The normative interpretation of life course event histories. *Marriage & Family Review, 27*(3–4), 211–235.
- White, J. M. (2005). *Advancing family theories*. Sage.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Adamsons, K. L. (2019). *Family theories: An introduction* (5th ed.). Sage.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Sayer, E. (2016). *Family structures and measurements for studying families: A project*. Paper presented at the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Workshop: Families and Human Rights: Promise and Vulnerability in the 21st Century, Minneapolis.
- White, J. M., & Teachman, J. D. (2005). Discussion and extension: A comment on the use of multilevel methods in family research. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 307–314). Sage.
- Zimmerman, C. C. (2014). *Family and civilization*. Open Road Media.

# Application: Moving Beyond “Traditional:” Applying MFDT to the Development of Refugee Families



J. Scott Crapo and Kay Bradford

Multidimensional family development theory (MFDT) is a reconceptualization of family development theory (FDT) designed to increase the theory’s adaptability and utility. This is accomplished by deriving its component pieces and reconstructing it from the ground up. The core pieces are taken from the original eight stages of family development (e.g., Duvall, 1957; White, 1991). Rather than assuming the fixed, traditional sequence of development posited by these stages, MFDT recognizes that there are at least four distinct elements of development encapsulated within the stages: *personal* development, *vocational* development, *couple* development, and *generative* development. Disaggregation of these elements allows for separate but interrelated lines of development to emerge. MFDT is organized around the concept of these multiple lines of development. Our two purposes in this chapter are first, to give a general overview of our reconceptualization of FDT, and second, to highlight four developmental dimensions common across the diverse challenges faced by families—here, those in refugee contexts. For more details about the tenants and propositions of MFDT and how it relates to FDT as presented in this sourcebook, see Crapo and Bradford (2021).

## Developmental Space

In MFDT, each line of development (i.e., personal, vocational, couple, and generative) is conceptualized as a dimension within a theoretical developmental space. Development within a dimension is represented by a trajectory. A trajectory is the current direction of development as defined by how developmental history relates to

---

J. S. Crapo (✉) · K. Bradford

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

e-mail: [scott.crapo@usu.edu](mailto:scott.crapo@usu.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_13)

203

future potential and possibility. Specifically, trajectories are shaped by developmental events—things that happen in a person's or family's life that change the probability of the occurrence of future developmental events. Events and trajectories in each dimension form the building blocks of MFDT and are used as one foundation to capture the experiences that shape and direct the development of a family, including refugee families. For example, war trauma can change the trajectory of the *personal* dimension, leading to increased risk of poor psychological functioning (Robertson et al., 2016). Many women who did not have to work in their home countries need to be employed in their new country (Arenliu et al., 2019), an event in the *vocational* dimension which changes the trajectory of development within that dimension. Luster et al. (2008) indicate that when the lost boys of Sudan reconnected with their oversea families, the boys in the United States felt obligated to care for their families abroad, an event in their *generative* dimension.

The dimensions of development do not exist in isolation, however, and have a reciprocal influence on each other. Within each person, the events of one dimension typically influence the trajectory of another dimension. Many Karen refugees, an ethnic group from Burma, noted that taking jobs (an event in the *vocational* dimension) left them with less time to spend with their spouses, and as a result they felt that there was less understanding in the relationship (a change in the trajectory in the *couple* dimension; McCleary, 2017). A possible experience during war would be the death of a partner or spouse (Arenliu et al., 2019). The death would be an event in the *couple* dimension that would influence the *generative* dimension (as there is the loss of the co-parent and potential future children), possibly the *vocational* dimension (to the extent the deceased was a breadwinner), and the *personal* dimension (grief and psychological suffering). Because of this interaction between dimensions, the developmental space within a person is referred to as their multidimensional developmental space.

**Family developmental space** As dimensions of development interact within a person, multidimensional spaces also interact across family members within what is termed the family developmental space. In other words, events and trajectories in one family member can influence the events and trajectories of other family members. In interviews with Somali refugees, Betancourt et al. (2015) found that many Somali professionals had credentials that were not accepted in the United States, an event in the *vocational* dimension that then influenced whole families. The loss of credentials led to lower status (and thus lower paying) jobs and lower incomes were associated with youth attending lower quality schools, thus affecting their development in the *vocational* dimension (see also Arenliu et al., 2019). In some cases, the multiple vulnerabilities associated with poverty (e.g., living in neighborhoods with high levels of gang or illegal drug activity) also influenced the *personal* development of refugee youth (Betancourt et al., 2015).

Any person's four dimensions, and any family's developmental space, can be used to generate research questions and hypotheses related to refugee families and their development. Possible questions include: how does displacement's impact on personal development (e.g., well-being) affect vocational, couple, and generative development? What changes to the trajectory of the personal dimension most

effectively help with vocational, couple, and generative concerns? Which events in the vocational dimension of the parents are most closely associated with successful resettlement? How does this vary by family member?

## Family Developmental Tasks

Every individual within the family has needs born from the intersection of cultural context and ontogenesis and made manifest through their trajectories within each dimension of development. The responsibility of the family as a whole to try and meet all of these needs—as well as balance which needs are met when needs conflict—defines the family developmental task. This can be multifaceted and complex, especially for refugee families. Many refugee families have new needs during and after resettlement. These often include, but are not limited to, learning to work in a new country, new social and gender norms, dealing with trauma, balancing acculturation and cultural heritage, guiding children through unfamiliar cultures, learning new parenting disciplines, and maintaining parent-child roles despite language proficiency differences (Arenliu et al., 2019; Betancourt et al., 2015; McCleary, 2017). Many of these new needs are added to existing needs, such as obtaining basic food and shelter, getting an education, and keeping the family together.

**Alignment/misalignment** Closely related constructs are alignment and misalignment. Similar to the concept of on time or off time transitions (Hill et al., 1970), alignment occurs when events and trajectories across dimensions (within and between family members) facilitate the successful execution of family developmental tasks. For example, Karen refugees and key stakeholders noted that financial stability (a trajectory in the *vocational* dimension) and established effective family communication (trajectories in the *couple* and *generative* dimensions) aligned to allow families to meet the needs of the family even in the midst of crisis (McCleary, 2017). Conversely, misalignment occurs when events and trajectories across dimensions inhibit the successful execution of family developmental tasks. For example, when the lost Sudan boys had the *generative* burden of caring for their families, they took on jobs that interfered with their *vocational* ability to continue to pursue education, creating misalignment between the two developmental dimensions (Luster et al., 2008). In other words, the events in one dimension of development, relative to the other dimension, made it harder for all needs to be met.

In the context of alignment in family developmental tasks, refugee family strengths are those attributes, abilities, and reserves that allow for successful family development, which consists of resolving family developmental tasks, and preparing for future developmental events, potentially including the realization of family members' potential. For example, although many Syrian wives living in Turkey were not used to the new responsibilities thrust upon them, they found great personal strength as a result (Arenliu et al., 2019); in other words, they realized greater potential. Resilience is successful navigation of misalignment to achieve successful family development despite prohibiting factors. For example, despite working hours



creating misalignment between the *vocational* dimension and the *couple* dimension through reduced time together (and thus reduced understanding), many refugee families succeed through an emphasis on listening, respecting each other, and making time for each other (McCleary, 2017).

Family developmental tasks, alignment and misalignment, and the ability to conceptualize strengths and resilience expand the research questions and hypotheses that can be generated concerning the development of refugee families. For example, how do resilient families navigate misalignment of *vocational* and *couple* dimensions? Which needs are the most important to the success of the family as a whole? How do refugee families balance the competing needs of family members and in which developmental dimensions? What attributes of family communication are most important to the needs of children in the family?

## Cultural Considerations

A critical aspect of the development of the refugee family is the influence of culture, particularly the presence of multiple cultures (Arenliu et al., 2019; Betancourt et al., 2015; McCleary, 2017). How much a particular culture influences an individual's dimensions of development is represented by how centered that individual is in the culture. In brief, *centering* can be considered the extent of an individual's acculturation as the mechanism through which culture exerts impact. The more centered one or more individuals are in a culture, the greater the presence of that culture in the family developmental space, and thus the greater force it exerts on family development. The extent to which family members are centered in different cultural contexts can lead to *cultural accordance* (if the cultures influence trajectories in a similar direction) or *discordance* (if the cultures influence trajectories in different directions). For example, Somali refugees shared how some youth adopted drug and gang cultures prevalent in low-income housing neighborhoods in the United States (Betancourt et al., 2015). These Somali youth started to become centered within this new US (sub)culture, and it exerted a strong influence on the trajectories of the youth's developmental spaces (that is, increasing the likelihood of particular events happening; e.g., dropping out of school—in the *vocational* dimension—or taking up drugs—in the *personal* dimension). The parents, however, attempted to maintain the centrality of Somali culture (*generative* dimension). The presence of two opposing cultural contexts within the family developmental space led to cultural discordance between the parents and the youth.

Another example of cultural discordance is the presence of Syrian and Turkish cultural contexts in Syrian refugee families living in Turkey, with the influence of one culture suggesting that the women should not work, and the other encouraging it (Arenliu et al., 2019), or the differing rates of acculturation across generations in Karen refugee families living in the United States (McCleary, 2017). Similar to misalignment, cultural discordance can inhibit the successful execution of family developmental tasks, especially when different cultures emphasize different needs. Conversely, cultural discordance may foster resilience through the ability of a

family to successfully accomplish family tasks despite prohibiting factors. One aspect of this kind of resilience is used across refugee families from differing countries: maintaining a connection with others of a similar culture in the new country (Arenliu et al., 2019; Betancourt et al., 2015; McCleary, 2017).

## Stages

In MFDT, stages are used to help operationalize key aspects of phenomena around particularly salient events, roles, or tasks. Two key elements define a stage: the family developmental task, and the roles distributed to family members across the family developmental space to meet that task. For displaced families, stages related to the process of resettlement and family functioning could be used to help operationalize variables related to an important research topic: the ability of refugee families to maintain strong family relationships, as such relationships are associated with successful adaptation (Nsonwu et al., 2013). The first two years of resettlement find many families dealing with learning a new culture and language and securing the basics of life (employment, housing, etc.; McCleary, 2017). In this time, the refugee families are in a stage defined by the tasks surrounding the immediate needs of the family. Over time, several key changes mark the move into a new stage: role loss (and change), differing cultural contexts in the family, and a new set of needs related to family cohesion (McCleary, 2017). As such, these stages, in combination with events, trajectories, alignment, and other tenants of MFDT, can be used to pose questions about how the family’s development succeeds or struggles regarding family cohesion.

## Future Directions for MFDT

Multidimensional family development theory can be used to study and help a variety of families and family situations, and an exciting future use of MFDT is the application of the theory to the study of this family variety. Three concepts from MFDT may serve as the vehicle to bring MFDT to such a future. The first is the dimensions themselves, as separate dimensions allow researchers and interventionists to more intentionally and systematically examine factors that facilitate, or impede, optimal well-being through development both within discrete dimensions and between dimensions. In other words, separate dimensions can facilitate the study of developmental well-being in both individuals and families. The second concept is developmental alignment and misalignment. In addition to being quantifiable for researchers, and intuitive for interventionists, alignment and misalignment allows for developmental diversity that is not norm-centric, but still has the potential to enhance or hamper well-being (for individuals and families). In a similar vein, the third concept is cultural accordance, which allows for developmental diversity, and is quantifiable for researchers while being intuitive for interventionists. The ideal is

for the above concepts to help MFDT provide a unifying approach to the study of families over time. Through continued dialogue resulting from its adoption by family scholars, the utility and relevance of MFDT will continue to expand.

## Conclusion

MFDT can be used to expand FDT to the study of families and developmental considerations in diverse contexts. By disentangling the previously composite lines of development inherent in the stages of FDT into separate but related dimensions, introducing non-norm-centered considerations of relations between dimensions, and providing mechanisms for direct consideration of plurality of culture, MFDT provides additional flexibility for FDT to accommodate increasingly diverse families living in shifting global contexts. This chapter highlights one example, that of refugee families. As shown, the tenants of MFDT can be applied to refugee families and beyond. Developmental dimensions may be used by researchers and interventionists to operationalize and explore the reciprocal impact of single or multiple dimensions of well-being among individuals, dyads, or whole families.

## References

- Arenliu, A., Bertelsen, N., Saad, R., Abdulaziz, H., & Weine, S. M. (2019). War and displacement stressors and coping mechanisms of Syrian urban refugee families living in Istanbul. *Journal of Family Psychology*.
- Betancourt, T. S., Abdi, S., Ito, B. S., Lilienthal, G. M., Agalab, N., & Ellis, H. (2015). We left one war and came to another: Resource loss, acculturative stress, and caregiver-child relationships in Somali refugee families. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 21, 114.
- Crapo, J. S., & Bradford, K. (2021). Multidimensional family development theory: A reconceptualization of family development. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 13(2), 202-223.
- Duvall, E. M. (1957). *Family development*. Lippincott.
- Hill, R., Foote, N., Aldous, J., Carlson, R., & MacDonald, R. (1970). *Family development in three generations*. Schenkman.
- Luster, T., Qin, D. B., Bates, L., Johnson, D. J., & Rana, M. (2008). The lost boys of Sudan: Ambiguous loss, search for family, and reestablishing relationships with family members. *Family Relations*, 57, 444-456.
- McCleary, J. S. (2017). The impact of resettlement on Karen refugee family relationships: A qualitative exploration. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(4), 1464-1471.
- Nsonwu, M. B., Busch-Armendariz, N., Heffron, L. C., Mahapatra, N., & Fong, R. (2013). Marital and familial strengths and needs: Refugees speak out. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 22, 129-144.
- Robertson, C. L., Savik, K., Mathiason-Moore, M., Mohamed, A., & Hoffman, S. (2016). Modeling psychological functioning in refugees. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 22(3), 225-232.
- White, J. M. (1991). *Dynamics of family development: A theoretical perspective*. Guilford Press.

# Family Systems Theory



Joyce Baptist and Raeann R. Hamon

Family systems theory holds special significance for the field of family science. In fact, a family systems perspective, or seeing the whole as greater than the sum of the individual parts, is “core” to the discipline’s identity (Hamon & Smith, 2014) and much of what makes family science “a unique and unified discipline” (Bortz et al., 2019, p. 544). Consequently, this chapter describes the origins of general systems and family systems theories, outlines the theory’s core assumptions and key concepts, describes three middle-range theories of note, identifies limitations of the theory, and offers suggestions for growth and expansion of systems theory. In order to demonstrate how a theoretical framework can be challenged by collectivist culture, we use empirical exemplars highlighting Asian American family science in an illustration. This endeavor seems timely given that this chapter is written during the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Asian racism is on the rise in the United States.

## Origins of Family Systems Theories

### *General Systems Theory*

Systems theory emerged in the 1920s when Ludwig von Bertalanffy, an Austrian biologist, proposed a *systems* approach in the production and implementation of defense systems in order to optimize efficiency, success, and network interactions.

---

J. Baptist (✉)

Department of Applied Human Sciences, College of Health and Human Sciences, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, USA

e-mail: [jbaptist@k-state.edu](mailto:jbaptist@k-state.edu)

R. R. Hamon

Messiah University, Mechanicsburg, PA, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_14)

209

About 30 years later, other scientists concurred with von Bertalanffy (1968) that the benefits of systems thinking were not confined to any one discipline, but possessed the capacity to unite many disciplines (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993, p. 327). In 1954, von Bertalanffy, along with biomathematician Anatol Rapoport, economist Kenneth Boulding, and physiologist Ralph Gerard founded the Society for General Systems Research. These originators imagined that systems theory could unify the sciences like no other theory before it, perhaps due to its “high level of abstraction” (White, 2013, p. 24) and emphasis on the organized “whole” (von Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 37). In the late 1940s, independent from von Bertalanffy, Norbert Wiener, a philosopher and mathematician, tried to unite mechanists, who saw living organisms functioning like machines, and vitalists who saw little connection between laws governing living and nonliving things. Wiener (1948) contributed the principles of homeostasis and self-regulation through feedback.

### *Family Systems Theory*

Before the 1900s, there were no theories dedicated to analyzing families (White, 2005). White (2013) and Broderick (1993) suggested that the concept of the family system was fundamental to Talcott Parsons’ structural functional theory, the most important paradigm in the field of sociology during the 1940s and 1950s. Parson and Bales (1955) identified a four-role family system to include the instrumental leader, the expressive leader, the instrumental follower and the expressive follower. Despite its effective consideration of roles in families (Broderick, 1971), von Bertalanffy (1968) concluded that structural functional theory’s failure to fully incorporate systems theory was due to its overemphasis on maintenance, equilibrium, and homeostasis and its underplay of “deviant” expressions of family systems. Structural functional theory was more concerned about conformism in defense of the system to the point of neglecting the system’s equally important need for, and capacity to, change.

Systematic theory building about families did not start until about 1950 (Christensen, 1964) when scholars became interested in developing and testing comprehensive frameworks of empirically based propositions about family functioning (Broderick, 1993). In their review of the conceptual frameworks used by family researchers, Hill and Hansen (1960) did *not* note family systems among the five revealed (i.e., institutional, structural-functional, symbolic-interactional, situational, and family development). About a decade later, Broderick (1971) noted that Hill and Hansen’s (1960) typology had not survived and that three new minor conceptual frameworks, balance, game, and social exchange theories, and one major new framework, general systems theory, were now available for use in family analysis. He expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for general systems theory in studying families but observed that it would necessitate types of data collection and methodologies not typically used by most social scientists: full-time systems analysts and the systematic collection of data over extensive periods of time.

In 1979, Wesley Burr, Reuben Hill, Ivan Nye, and Ira Reiss published a two-volume work on family theory with the hope of specifying key concepts and propositions in order to stimulate theoretically oriented research. Broderick and Smith (1979) authored the chapter on general systems theory, paying particular attention to features of a system (e.g., boundaries, units, relationships), hierarchies of rules (including strata, temporal and logical hierarchies, and feedback and control), and some application of systems (e.g., courtship).

Holman and Burr (1980) described growth of theories in the family field during the 1970s as “phenomenal, explosive and amazing” (p. 729). They attributed this productivity to momentum generated by methodological and technological advancements, the collection of considerable amounts of empirical data on family processes, and active involvement of hundreds of scholars. Systems theory was one of three major theoretical perspectives (the others being symbolic interaction and social exchange) having the greatest impact during the period. For instance, Kantor and Lehr (1975) used systems theory to describe and analyze how the parts of the family operate, Satir (1972) applied concepts to practical settings, and Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, 1974) generated new systems conceptualizations in family therapy.

## Family Systems and Family Therapy

Many clinicians were beginning to recognize the value of seeing “patients” as part of family systems during the 1950s, but Murray Bowen’s (1972, 1978) family systems theory provided the “intellectual scaffolding upon which much of mainstream family therapy is built” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013, p. 204). Bowen, a trained psychiatrist, transitioned from seeing the patient as separate from the family to viewing the family as a whole. He was particularly interested in families as multi-generational emotional systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and operationalized eight theoretical concepts to describe the family’s struggle to balance togetherness with individuation. They included: differentiation of the self; emotional triangles; nuclear family emotional system; family projection process; emotional cutoff; multigenerational transmission process; sibling position; and emotional process in society.

It is important to note that as this theory developed and was applied to family research, limited research was conducted with people of color and none specifically with Asian groups. Research with non-U. S. Asian groups (e.g., South Korea) found that unlike in the United States, both differentiation and fusion co-existed within the same cultural context and served to promote family functioning (Erdem & Safi, 2018).

## Core Assumptions of Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory includes several core assumptions. First, the *whole is greater than the sum of the parts*. The family's holistic quality represents the unique entity created by the combination of individual members (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The parts of a system work together to create something new and distinct. A cake analogy is useful in describing a holistic understanding of family systems (Infante et al., 1990; Smith & Hamon, 2022). When different individual ingredients (e.g., flour, sugar, butter, eggs) are combined, they create something totally new. Each ingredient plays a unique part in the quality of the cake as they interact. Seemingly minor elements, like baking soda or bananas, have the potential to affect the whole by impacting the rise and flavor of the cake. In family systems, these new systems-level properties or behaviors emerge as a result of the transactions of the parts and are known as emergent properties rather than purely summative qualities (Broderick, 1993; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Second, *family systems are comprised of interdependent parts* (White et al., 2015). When one part of the system changes, all parts will be affected. Reverberations can be felt throughout the system.

Third, *family systems are self-reflexive and self-regulating*. In fact, systems are cybernetic and utilize feedback to maintain themselves and to achieve goals. While early family systems theorists focused on families' inclinations toward homeostasis or change resistance, contemporary theorists also note adaptive changes made possible as a result of family self-regulation (Broderick, 1993). According to Broderick and Smith (1979), communication in human systems facilitated the family's ability to create meaning, monitor behavior and attain goals, and modify plans and future goal-directed activities based on feedback. Finally, *individual and family behavior must be understood in context*. Family systems have boundaries that demarcate families from their environments, indicating who is in and out of the family system. A family receives input or "energy, matter and information" from its environment returns *output* to the environment (Broderick, 1993, p. 37). This interchange of inputs and outputs generates change for both the family and the environment in which it is nested. In order to test the assumptions of family systems theory and refine its concepts, it is necessary to apply the theory to the unique cultural values of families.

## Family Systems Theory Concepts

Similar to other social systems, families are open, self-regulating systems (Broderick, 1993) that possess rules, assigned and ascribed roles for members, structured power arrangements, communication strategies, and ways for negotiating and problem-solving (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Family rules and ways of operating are influenced by idiosyncrasies of cultural norms and values. When applying the following concepts, it would be important to consider the role that culture plays in shaping minority family systems.

## ***Hierarchy***

Hierarchy represents the arrangement of individuals and systems according to greater power and authority and occurs in two ways. Within family systems, *control hierarchy* is evident when members are organized into layers according to power, with the least powerful at the bottom and most powerful at the top (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Miller (1978) described these arrangements as *echelons*. Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) noted that parental subsystems are typically expected to exert greater authority over offspring subsystems since parents are expected to have more say than their children in families. *Inclusion hierarchy* is represented by the “layering of systems of increasing complexity: subsystems, systems, and suprasystems” (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993, p. 332). *Subsystems* are the smallest units and are embedded in larger suprasystems such that a parental subsystem would be nested within a family system, which is embedded within neighborhood and country suprasystems.

## ***Boundaries***

Boundaries differentiate the family system from external environments or suprasystems. They identify who is part of the family and who is not. Boundaries also exist between family subsystems, like that which exists between the parental and offspring subsystems. The degree of permeability of boundaries affects the flow of energy and information between the two entities. Kantor and Lehr (1975) noted that families engage in “bounding” behavior or activities designed to protect the integrity and maintain the borders around their families. Bounding protects the family’s members, space, possessions, time, lifestyles, and worldviews (Broderick, 1993). At the same time, the survival of families is also dependent upon “bridging” activities or transactions within suprasystems which require crossing family boundaries. Families need to exchange information, goods, and services which require them to interface with other families, workplaces, schools, marketplaces, religious institutions, and government agencies. Thus, families need to defend themselves from external threats (bounding) while transacting with the environment (bridging) to secure resources and other assets necessary for survival (Broderick, 1993; Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

**Family Types** Kantor and Lehr (1975) identified three family types that emerge when families attempt to maintain themselves and achieve their goals: closed, open, and random. Families require more open or permeable systems for their viability; they demand interchanges with their environment (Buckley, 1967; Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Families with open boundaries more freely bridge family territory with the outside community, engaging in beneficial interchanges reached through consensus and reinforce collective closeness while permitting individual freedom. In contrast, closed boundaries permit minimal and highly controlled interface between systems



and maintain rigid adherence to family schedules. Closed systems risk experiencing *entropy*, disorganization, and disorder that results from insufficient input or energy (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). In families with random boundaries, individual members regulate their own space and relate with one another and those exterior to the family on the basis of personal choice, coming and going on their own timelines and schedules.

**Boundary Ambiguity** Pauline Boss (2002) coined the concept of *boundary ambiguity* to describe situations in which families are uncertain as to who is in or out of the family. Boundary ambiguity occurs when there is incongruence between physical presence (actual bodily presence in the home) and psychological presence (cognitive and emotional presence of someone in another's mind) in the family. Two types of boundary ambiguity generally lead to family systems dysfunction. First, with physical absence and psychological presence, families are emotionally preoccupied with the whereabouts and the well-being of the family member such as when immigrants worry about family members left behind in their country of origin. Second, physical presence with psychological absence describes families with a member who struggles with drug or alcohol addiction and is physically available, but emotionally unavailable.

### ***Family Rules***

A family rule is “a spoken or unspoken proscription that operates within the family to guide action” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 129). Family therapist Don Jackson (1965) first observed that married couples engaged in repetitive behavioral patterns. Family rules evolve over time, sometimes generations, and become “calibrated” or etched into the family system. They reveal the family's values, cultural understandings, and commitments. Jackson suggested that families operate using a *redundancy principle*. Since it is impossible to have a rule for every possible scenario, families tend to utilize a few rules over and over again. As cybernetically rule-governed systems, these persistent patterns of behavior or rules inform members about what is expected and permissible during family transactions (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). These rules shape interactive sequences within couple and family systems. They can be *explicit*, clearly articulated and recognized by the family or *implicit*, unstated and outside of conscious awareness. Another family therapist, Virginia Satir (1972), helped families to identify rigidly held, unwritten rules that created tension and hardship within family relationships. By identifying unspoken rules, she helped families to examine its communication patterns and improve family functioning.

## ***Feedback***

Feedback represents a circular process in which some of the family system's output is returned to the system as input in order to adjust or correct the system's functioning and safeguard its viability. There are two possible outcomes depending upon the family's rules of transformation. *Positive feedback* is deviation amplifying and encourages input in an effort to enhance further change. When positive feedback occurs, the family has the opportunity to innovate and make alterations to the way it does things; morphogenesis occurs. For instance, a middle-aged couple has noticed that one of their aging parents calls their house tens of times each day, seems particularly confused at times, and appears more unkempt. Historically, the couple has maintained a close relationship with their parents, but all parties have valued independence and maintained separate lives. However, interactions with the aging parent suggest a need to more closely monitor the parent's needs and safety, make arrangements for home health services and the like.

*Negative feedback* is deviation dampening and attempts to return the family system to its previous way of being and doing things. Negative feedback occurs when the family squelches an attempt to or demand for change; morphostasis is the result. In the case of the couple noted above, should they attempt to continue their more minimal interaction with the aging parent and expect the spouse of the aging parent to manage as they have done for many years, they are suppressing the need to make modifications to their family system (Smith & Hamon, 2022). The basic premise is that negative feedback thwarts change and positive feedback amplifies change.

The need to constantly receive and integrate feedback from the environment especially in terms of changes in policies and the law is integral to the survival of any group that is marginalized and experiences discrimination. Because feedback can lead to more tension and turmoil within the family, it is considered positive feedback when modifications are required on the part of the family in order to regain stability as opposed to negative feedback that helps maintain family stability.

## ***Equilibrium***

Systems attempt to balance change (positive feedback loops) and stability (negative feedback loops); they seek equilibrium. Family systems endeavor to maintain the status quo or a steady state when confronted by internal and external threats to that homeostasis (Olson & McCubbin, 1983). When families detect incongruity between individual and systems goals or behaviors, they might change or resist change in an effort to restore equilibrium. Kantor and Lehr (1975), however, are quick to point out that equilibrium does not look the same for all families; there is not "one homeostatic ideal" (p. 117) for family systems. Instead, because families are diverse in their rules, structure, composition, ethnicity, religious convictions, and economic subcultures, they must maintain or restore their chosen state of equilibrium.

## ***Mutual Influence and Interdependence***

Components of systems are interrelated between themselves and the environment (von Bertalanffy, 1975). Systems members are interdependent with each other and, as such, demonstrate mutual influence (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). When something happens to one member, all the others are affected. This can be illustrated by imagining three or four people on a trampoline. When all jump in unison, they are able to maintain a rhythm as they fly into the air, but as soon as one hesitates or jumps out of sequence, perhaps due to a collision with another, one or more is likely to fall and create a pileup on the trampoline. From a systems perspective, when one component part is nudged, knocked over, or gets out of step, the rest of the members are affected, and the rhythm is disrupted. The notions of mutual influence and interdependence capture how change or stress in one family member is likely to reverberate throughout the family; all will be affected by what happens to one.

## ***Circular Causality Versus Linear Causality***

Adopting a systems theoretical perspective affected how family therapists examined communication exchanges. It became more productive to pay attention to *process* rather than *content* (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). It was no longer necessary to *punctuate* behavior in order to identify the person who started something and to place blame or make judgment (Galvin et al., 2012; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Instead, emphasis is on shared responsibility for what is transpiring so that the process might be altered. Family members are asked to comment on their observations of other members before and after the presenting issue that in turn shifts the focus from an internal state of being to how the family interacts. This non-blaming approach can be liberating for families, allowing them to together focus on identifying their recursive interactions (behaviors, beliefs) that help maintain symptoms within the family. Circular questioning emerged from Milan Associates and is considered the most productive means for interviewing families (Selvini et al., 1980). The method provides families with a systemic view of themselves by highlighting how members' concerns, beliefs, and behaviors are interrelated. When a full circular view of the problem is clear, intervention questions are used to challenge families' recursive interactions.

## **Advancing Systemic Theorizing: Middle-Range Family Theories**

Anderson et al. (2013) observed that “early efforts by family studies scholars to establish a grand theory of family systems with an established set of universal laws and propositions occurred in a time when a modernistic, objective, positivistic

paradigm was dominant” (p. 134) were not very successful. Instead, during the 1970s and 1980s, they noticed “a shift from grand-scale theorizing” theories to the growth of middle-range theories of family systems (p. 125), particularly as family therapists attempted to better understand family functioning and develop intervention strategies on behalf of couples and families.

Three middle-range theories of note included the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson et al., 1979), Beavers Systems Model (Beavers & Hampson, 1993, 2003), and the McMaster Model (Epstein et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2000). Very importantly, these scholars developed conceptual frameworks, created instruments which operationalized and measured key concepts, and collected empirical data which tested their assertions. In short, they operationalized select systems concepts to make them useful for research, therapeutic practice, and family life education. By doing so, they have facilitated the symbiotic relationship between theory, data collection, and further theoretical development.

Anderson et al. (2013) observed that three middle-range theories share many systems theory assumptions. For instance, all models recognize the importance of family in establishing healthy patterns of interaction and managing emotions, the value of adaptation for the family system, the necessity to manage and modify internal and external boundaries, the centrality of effective communication for optimal family functioning, and families as goal-directed and purposive. Very importantly, these middle-range theories also helped to identify families that would benefit from therapeutic intervention and positive change.

### *Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems*

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems by Olson et al. (1979) delineated and measured two domains of marital and family systems rooted in General Systems Theory: cohesion and adaptability (Buckley, 1967; von Bertalanffy, 1968). *Cohesion* represents the emotional bonding between family members as well as the degree of personal autonomy within the family system and is plotted on the horizontal axis. *Adaptability* characterizes the couple or family’s ability “to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress” (Olson et al., 1979, p. 8) and is plotted on the vertical axis. Adaptability requires balancing between morphostasis (i.e., stability) and morphogenesis (i.e., change). The goal of creating the Circumplex Model was to provide a framework for clinicians to employ in assessing system functioning and establishing treatment goals for couples and families. Using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES), therapists are able to place couples and families on the Circumplex Model in one of 16 different family types. Olson et al. (2019) reviewed how 525 studies using FACES have validated the Circumplex Model, with most supporting the central hypothesis that balanced systems are more functional than unbalanced family systems.

### ***The Beavers Systems Model***

The Beavers Systems Model of family functioning (Beavers & Hampson, 2000, 2003) focused on two dimensions: family competence and family style. *Family competence*, located on the horizontal axis, refers to the family's health as depicted by its structure, ability to process information, and flexibility of the system. The model asserts that adaptive families are better equipped to modify their structure and negotiate the changes demanded when confronting stressful circumstances. *Family style* is located on the vertical axis and is curvilinear in nature. Family style captures the family's closeness or separateness and the degree to which satisfaction is viewed as coming from within the family or from the outside world. Diagrammatically the two dimensions create nine possible family groupings based on their location along the competence and style dimensions. The Beavers Interaction Scales and Self-Report Inventory are available to identify high risk families and assess therapeutic interventions (Beavers & Hampson, 2003) and have been empirically reviewed, along with FACES and the McMaster Family Assessment Device (Hamilton & Carr, 2016).

### ***McMaster Model of Family Functioning***

The McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF) proposes that healthy family systems must satisfactorily address three tasks: basic (e.g., provide food, money, transportation, shelter), developmental (e.g., meet individual and family developmental needs), and hazardous (e.g., handle crises like illness, loss of income) (Epstein et al., 2003). In determining the extent to which families are able to successfully manage the three tasks, the MMFF examines six dimensions: problem-solving, communication (e.g., exchange of verbal information), roles (e.g., fulfill family functions), affective responsiveness (e.g., appropriate emotional expressiveness), affective involvement (e.g., amount of interest), and behavior control (e.g., handling various situations). The McMaster Family Assessment Device includes items to measure each of the six subscales, as well as general functioning (Epstein et al., 1983). The flexible style is deemed most optimal and the chaotic style as the most dysfunctional (Epstein et al., 2003).

The three middle-range theories, noted in this chapter, have been instrumental in advancing the development of the theory. Olson et al.'s (1979) Circumplex Model, in particular, has generated hundreds of research and practice-based articles in a variety of international contexts. Family systems theory has been an influential theoretical framework for research on a range of family topics and processes, including family communication, family health and illness, family dynamics and functioning, and the like.

## **Asian American Families: An Illustration**

This section illustrates how Asian American family values such as filial piety, power, conformity, group orientation, loyalty, harmony and face-saving, and influence with family systems concepts such as hierarchy, boundaries, feedback, family rules, equilibrium, mutual influence and interdependence, and circular versus linear causality. These values are more likely to be prominent in first and second generation Asian families than later generations.

### ***Filial Piety***

The Asian American parental subsystem is influenced by family loyalty, derived from the concepts of *familism* and *filial piety*. Both of these cultural concepts obligate obedience to parents, grandparents, and elders and prioritize family over personal needs. More specifically, familism refers to a strong identification with the family, as well as strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members (Ochiai & Hosoya, 2014). Filial piety includes deference to parents and grandparents because of hierarchy and the role obligation to care for aging family members (Yeh & Bedford, 2004). As such, implied family rules mandate deference to those in authority—parents, grandparents, or any elder who has gained power by virtue of their age and seniority—and permit their influence when making major life decisions. A majority of Asian Americans (61% of 3511) surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2012 even believed parents should influence their children’s choice of a spouse. Members of parental or executive subsystems are seen as having the power to make decisions to benefit the family as a whole with minimal input from other family subsystems. Control hierarchy reflects the power differentiation between parental or executive members and offspring subsystems and how subsystems are embedded into larger systems.

### ***Power***

In Asian American families, boundaries between family subsystems tend to be rigid and lack permeability in order to demarcate power differences. Encouraging permeable and clear boundaries to facilitate communication between parent and offspring subsystems is not congruent with Asian American cultures. Informal, direct, and participative communication that promotes equality and shared power is antecedent to observance of hierarchical power and emotional self-control (i.e., to resolve one’s own emotional problems; Kim et al., 2001). Boundaries with external systems can also be rigid in so far as to protect the integrity of the family system.

## *Conformity*

Asian American cultural values are embedded in family rules or norms: maintaining loyalty, harmony, and familism through acts of conformity and filial piety. For instance, focusing on achieving high academic performance is an implicit rule in Asian American families (Kim et al., 2001). High demandingness for academic success and low responsiveness to their children's interests reflect an ethnic parenting style that is unique to Asian families who value hierarchy and conformity (Huang & Gove, 2015). This style of parenting differs from authoritative parenting in that the former has high responsiveness to the child's needs while the latter does not. The ethnic parenting style provides the child with what is needed to achieve high academic success but not necessarily in the child's field of interest. Family rules are governed by values espoused by the culture, many of which may be covert, such as the need to conform to parental expectations.

## *Group-Oriented*

No minority ethnic group in the United States has been spared from suprasystem discrimination which has a profound bearing on family livelihoods and generational trauma. The current surge of hate crimes against Asian Americans fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic is part of the long history of discrimination of people of Asian descent. The first systemic discrimination against Asians was documented during the gold rush years of the 1800s. The 1871 massacre of Chinese immigrants in the streets of Los Angeles was the largest lynching in United States history (Zesch, 2008). The Chinese Exclusion Act from 1882 to 1943 prohibited Chinese from United States citizenships, relegated the community to an enclave known as Chinatown, and restricted immigration to the United States (Lee, 2002). An often forgotten form of discrimination is the detention of West coast residents of Japanese ancestry during World War II for suspicion of espionage that separated many families (Nagata, 1998). It would be years before some of these families were reunited. Racism- and xenophobia-motivated trauma explain the need for ethnic minority families to cleave together for survival, which in turn can appear relationally fused in Bowen's (1972) term. Fusion describes a family that lacks differentiation and flexibility. Part of this cleaving included equipping youth with the skills needed (positive feedback) to survive in a racialized society and being acutely aware of how racism manifests in society and influence laws that can change overtime (James et al., 2018).

## *Loyalty*

Time-honored Asian American traditions and norms that are implied family rules help maintain homeostasis of the family system. Being loyal to family roles (i.e., respecting and maintaining filial roles) was found to be central to the preservation of ethnic culture for Korean and Vietnamese American college students (Saw et al., 2013). These students worried about living up to parental expectations and fulfilling family obligations more so than their White counterparts. Because environmental feedback that attempts to change the homeostasis of the family system may not be tolerated well in Asian American families, behaviors that are unorthodox or go against family rules and expectations can be viewed as threats. Maintaining the integrity and stability of the family means resisting change and new ideas. The need to uphold cultural values that ensure predictability and equilibrium is so ingrained that despite conflictual parent-child relationship and parents' ability to care for themselves, Asian American offspring are committed to their filial role (Pyke, 2000). Filial obligation is a means to reciprocate parental care and the primary way to express love in a culture where open displays of affection is unusual.

## *Harmony*

Mutual influence and interdependence in Asian American family systems are not just a naturally occurring phenomena but are intentional actions undertaken to promote harmony. Families value lasting relationships and persevere to remain united. Support from family members may include communal living among relatives consisting of households of multiple generations, with adult children caring for their aged parents (López et al., 2017). Many Asian groups not only welcome but sometimes expect their adult children to live with parents until marriage. Unless employment requires relocation, not living with parents while single may be construed as having poor family relations. However, not promoting autonomy and self-agency can make younger Asian American generations appear overly dependent and enmeshed with their elders as compared to non-Asian groups (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Rather than construing such close familial relationships as fused and lacking differentiation, Knudson-Martin (1996) argued for a model of differentiation where both togetherness and individuality can co-exist. Such individuals have the capacity to orient to and connect with others as they function from a solid and autonomous self.



## ***Face-Saving***

Circular rather than linear questioning may be a better fit when working with Asian American families that espouse indirect communication patterns. However, circular questioning that requires family members to share their insights about family processes openly opposes the concept of face-saving that is related to a person's honor and reputation. Face-saving is related to protecting one's integrity and status by not bringing attention to self or other that could result in shaming (Oetzel et al., 2003). Circular questioning where families directly communicate their observations of other family members may be counterproductive for Asian American families that frown on causing shame to self and others.

## **Limitations of Family Systems Theory**

Despite the ongoing usage and influence of family systems theory, it is not without shortcomings. A common criticism of the theory is that, due to abstractness, it is difficult to test or measure the many complicated multilevel interactions (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Allen and Henderson (2017) identified three additional weaknesses: the possibility of stereotyping, oversimplification of complex relationships, and minimization of power dynamics within families. In addition, White et al. (2019) suggested that the most problematic issue for family systems theory is that it is “in truth, a ‘model’ or ‘flow chart approach’ rather than a theory” (p. 168). While some progress has been made, particularly in the middle-range theories, the theory has also been criticized for lacking operationalized concepts, as well as testable hypotheses and propositions (Aldous, 1978, 1980). In addition, rather than explaining family phenomena, systems theory tends to be more descriptive. The theory is most interested in understanding how families function, whether that be successful or dysfunctional functioning. The *cause* of problematic or successful functioning is less significant (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005).

Further, family systems theory fails to incorporate nodal historical events that influence how minority race families function in a racially socialized society (James et al., 2018). Historical events of racial discrimination can have important implications on family functioning where concepts such as fusion and enmeshment, which are considered undesirable and unhealthy, become survival techniques. Families that bound together in close-knit communities to provide a sense of belonging and safety may appear enmeshed and fused rather than lauded for their strategy to survive trauma in a racialized society. By continuing to propagate constructs that ignore the experience of Asian American families, family systems theory remains closed to external feedback—an oxymoron considering how feedback loops are one of its integral concepts. Family systems theory risks colonizing collectivist groups that need close in-group relationships to survive in racialized societies.

The feminist critique has highlighted some major limitations of family systems theory. For example, family systems theory does not account for power and control within Asian American families and the influence of the external social context on families (Luepnitz, 1988). Power imbalances within patriarchal Asian American families have implications for the permeability of relational boundaries. Because women have less power and voice, members of parental and executive subsystems may not share equal power or have access to equal financial and social resources. The lack of consideration of the gendered nature of unequal rank and power within the family and the overemphasis on personal accountability make family systems theory concepts insufficient to truly represent Asian American families. The diversity and migration and acculturation patterns across the Asian American diaspora add further complexity that is not captured by family systems theory.

## **The Growing Edge: Future Directions of Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory continues to offer an extremely influential lens in the field of family science. It is a promising theory for use in examining a multitude of family topics, relationships, and subsystems. As the “field’s shared holistic framework” (p. 556), Bortz et al. (2019) also noted family systems theory’s capacity to integrate overlapping conceptual concepts and theories, like attachment theory. Thus, the future of family systems theory is very promising.

A close inspection of family systems theory with possible theoretical refinement is necessary in order to ensure a more complete picture of Asian American families. Particular attention should be given to the applicability of theoretical concepts and assumptions to these diverse families. For instance, some concepts within family systems theory such as Bowen’s (1978) differentiation of self and fusion and Minuchin’s (2012) family structure need to be validated and replicated across Asian American ethnic groups, including immigrant and refugee groups. Similarly, some theoretical assumptions, like the importance of understanding individual and family behavior in context, seem critical in applying to Asian American families, while others might be more troublesome. For example, do “bounding” behaviors and “bridging” activities operate in the same way for Asian American families as they seem to for those part of the dominant culture? Is the assumption that “open” family boundaries are often healthiest for family functioning equally applicable for Asian American families? These are important questions before the theory can be fully extended to Asian American families’ health and illness, communication, parenting, and more. There is a need to further refine these theories in order to reflect intra-ethnic Asian and interracial Asian/non-Asian families, and multigenerational Asian families.

## References

- Aldous, J. (1970). Strategies for developing family theory. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 32, 250–257.
- Aldous, J. (1978). *Family careers: Developmental change in families*. Wiley.
- Allen, K. R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Anderson, S. A., Sabatelli, R. M., & Kosutic, I. (2013). Systemic and ecological qualities of families. In G. W. Peterson & K. R. Bush (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and family* (3rd ed., pp. 121–138). Springer.
- Beavers, R., & Hampson, R. B. (2000). The Beavers systems model of family functioning. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 22, 128–143.
- Beavers, W. R., & Hampson, R. B. (2003). Measuring family competence: The Beavers systems model. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (3rd ed., pp. 549–580). Guilford Press.
- Becvar, D. S., & Becvar, R. J. (2012). *Family therapy: A systemic integration* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Bortz, P., Berrigan, M., VanBergen, A., & Gavazzi, S. M. (2019). Family systems theory thinking as a guide for theory integration: Conceptual overlaps of differentiation, attachment, parenting style, and identity development in families with adolescents. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 11, 544–560.
- Boss, P. (2002). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Bowen, M. (1972). On the differentiation of self. In J. Framo (Ed.), *Family interaction: A dialogue between family researchers and family therapists* (pp. 111–173). Springer.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Aronson.
- Broderick, C., & Smith, J. (1979). The general systems approach to the family. In W. R. Burr, R. Hill, F. I. Nye, & I. L. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 1, pp. 112–129). Free Press.
- Broderick, C. B. (1971). Beyond the five conceptual frameworks: A decade of development in family theory. In C. B. Broderick (Ed.), *A decade of family research and action, 1960–69* (pp. 3–24). National Council on Family Relations.
- Broderick, C. B. (1993). *Understanding family process: Basics of family systems theory*. Sage.
- Buckley, W. (1967). *Sociology and modern systems theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Burr, W. R., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Reiss, I. L. (1979a). *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 1). Free Press.
- Burr, W. R., Hill, R., Nye, F. I., & Reiss, I. L. (1979b). *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. 2). Free Press.
- Christensen, H. (1964). Development of the family field of study. In H. Christensen (Ed.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 3–32). Rand McNally.
- Dilworth-Anderson, P., Burton, L. M., & Klein, D. M. (2005). Contemporary and emerging theories in studying families. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 35–58). Sage Publications.
- Epstein, N., Baldwin, L., Bishop, D., & Keitner, G. (1983). The McMaster family assessment device. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 9, 171–180.
- Epstein, N., Ryan, C. E., Bishop, D. S., Miller, I. W., & Keitner, G. I. (2003). The McMaster model: A view of healthy family functioning. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (3rd ed., pp. 581–607). Guilford Press.
- Erdem, G., & Safi, O. A. (2018). The cultural lens approach to Bowen Family Systems Theory: Contributions of family change theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, 469–483.
- Galvin, K. M., Bylund, C. L., & Brommel, B. J. (2012). *Family communication: Cohesion and change* (8th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Goldenberg, H., & Goldenberg, I. (2013). *Family therapy: An overview* (8th ed.). Brooks/Cole.
- Hamilton, E., & Carr, A. (2016). Systematic review of self-report family assessment measures. *Family Process*, 55(1), 16–30.

- Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. R. (2014). The discipline of family science and the continuing need for innovation. *Family Relations*, *63*, 309–322.
- Hill, R., & Hansen, D. A. (1960). The identification of conceptual frameworks utilized in family study. *Marriage and Family Living*, *22*(4), 299–311.
- Holman, T. B., & Burr, W. R. (1980). Beyond and beyond: The growth of family theories in the 1970s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *42*, 729–741.
- Huang, G. H. C., & Gove, M. (2015). Confucianism, Chinese families, and academic achievement: Exploring how Confucianism and Asian descendant parenting practices influence children's academic achievement. In M. W. Khine (Ed.), *Science education in East Asia* (pp. 41–66). Springer.
- Infante, D. A., Rancer, A. S., & Womack, D. F. (1990). *Building communication theory*. Waveland.
- Jackson, D. D. (1965). Family rules: Marital quid pro quo. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, *12*, 589–594.
- James, A. G., Coard, S. I., Fine, M. A., & Rudy, D. (2018). The central roles of race and racism in reframing family systems theory: A consideration of choice and time. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, *10*(2), 419–433.
- Kantor, D., & Lehr, W. (1975). *Inside the family*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory*. Norton.
- Kim, B. S. K., Yang, P. H., Atkinson, D. R., Wolfe, M. M., & Hong, S. (2001). Cultural value similarities and differences among Asian American ethnic groups. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *7*(4), 343–361.
- Knudson-Martin, C. (1996). Differentiation and self-development in the relationship context. *The Family Journal*, *4*(3), 188–198.
- Kozlowski, S. W., & Klein, K. J. (2000). A multilevel approach to theory and research in organizations: Contextual, temporal, and emergent processes. In K. J. Klein & S. W. Kozlowski (Eds.), *Multilevel theory, research, and methods in organizations: Foundations, extensions, and new directions*. Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, E. (2002). The Chinese exclusion example: Race, immigration, and American gatekeeping, 1882–1924. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, *21*, 36–62.
- López, G., Ruiz, N. G., & Patten, E. (2017). *Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population*. Pew Research Center.
- Luepnitz, D. A. (1988). *The family interpreted: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and family therapy*. Basic Books.
- Miller, I. W., Ryan, C. E., Keitner, G. I., Bishop, D. S., & Epstein, N. B. (2000). The McMaster approach to families: Theory, assessment, treatment and research. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *22*(2), 168–189.
- Miller, J. G. (1978). *Living systems*. McGraw-Hill.
- Minuchin, S. (2012). *Families and family therapy*. Routledge.
- Nagata, D. K. (1998). Intergenerational effects of the Japanese American internment. In *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma* (pp. 125–139). Springer.
- Ochiai, E., & Hosoya, L. A. (2014). *Transformation of the intimate and the public in Asian modernity*. Brill Academic.
- Oetzel, J., Meares, M., Myers, K. K., & Lara, E. (2003). Interpersonal conflict in organization: Explaining conflict styles via face-negotiation theory. *Communication Research Reports*, *20*(2), 106–115.
- Olson, D. H., & McCubbin, H. (1983). *Families: What makes them work?* Sage.
- Olson, D. H., Sprenkle, D., & Russell, C. (1979). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: I. Cohesion and adaptability dimensions, family types and clinical applications. *Family Process*, *18*, 3–28.
- Olson, D. H., Waldvogel, L., & Schlieff, M. (2019). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: An update. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *11*, 199–211.
- Parson, T., & Bales, R. F. (Eds.). (1955). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Free Press.

- Pyke, K. (2000). "The normal American family" as an interpretive structure of family life among grown children of Korean and Vietnamese immigrants. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(1), 240–255.
- Radford, J. (2019). *Key findings about U.S. immigrants*. Pew Research Center.
- Rosenblatt, P. C. (1994). *Metaphors of family systems theory: Toward new constructions*. Guilford Press.
- Satir, V. M. (1972). *Peoplemaking*. Science and Behavior Books.
- Saw, A., Berenbaum, H., & Okazaki, S. (2013). Influences of personal standards and perceived parental expectations on worry for Asian American and White American college students. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 26(2), 187–202.
- Selvini, M. P., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G., & Prata, G. (1980). Hypothesizing—circularity—neutrality: Three guidelines for the conductor of the session. *Family Process*, 19(1), 3–12.
- Smith, S. R., & Hamon, R. R. (2022). *Exploring family theories* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General system theory: Foundations, development, applications*. George Braziller.
- von Bertalanffy, L. (1975). *Perspectives on general system theory: Scientific-philosophical studies*. George Braziller.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *The pragmatics of human communication*. Norton.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change*. Norton.
- Weiner, N. (1948). *Cybernetics or control and communication in the animal and machine*. Wiley.
- Whitchurch, G. G., & Constantine, L. L. (1993). Systems theory. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 325–352). Plenum Press.
- White, J. M. (2005). *Advancing family theories*. Sage.
- White, J. M. (2013). The current status of theorizing about families. In G. W. Peterson & K. R. Bush (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 11–37). Springer.
- White, J. M., Klein, D. M., & Martin, T. F. (2015). *Family theories* (4th ed.). Sage.
- White, J. M., Martin, T. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). *Family theories: An introduction*. Sage.
- Yeh, K. H., & Bedford, O. (2004). Filial belief and parent-child conflict. *International Journal of Psychology*, 39(2), 132–144.
- Zesch, S. (2008). Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The makings of a massacre. *Southern California Quarterly*, 90(2), 109–158.

# Application: Family Systems Theory in the Military Context



J. Kale Monk and Christina M. Marini

Research on military families is credited for being a major catalyst in the development of the field of family science, dating back to the seminal studies of military families by luminaries like Reuben Hill (see Mancini et al., 2018). The 1993 edition of the Sourcebook is rife with examples of how family science was influenced by the military context, either through studies of military families or by prominent theories arising out of wartime periods (Boss et al., 1993). Family Systems Theory (FST) is one framework that credits military contexts with advancing the development of theory and application. Military families offer an important window to understand families as systems because they encounter frequent transitions and stressors that can disrupt homeostasis and affect interconnected family members, which requires adaptation.

Although the majority of military families are resilient and adaptive (Riggs & Riggs, 2011), a significant portion do struggle to readjust to disequilibrium caused by deployment and reintegration. Military service members and veterans are among those considered at greatest risk for a variety of physical and mental health conditions (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most pervasive conditions for Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans (Lew et al., 2009). We therefore focus on symptoms of PTSD as a military-related stressor that families may face in the aftermath of wartime service. We utilize this stressor as a context within which to demonstrate the applicability of FST to understanding the lives of military families. For

---

J. K. Monk

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

e-mail: [monkj@missouri.edu](mailto:monkj@missouri.edu)

C. M. Marini (✉)

Gordon F. Derner School of Psychology, Adelphi University, Garden City, NY, USA

e-mail: [cmarini@adelphi.edu](mailto:cmarini@adelphi.edu)

parsimony, we focus on the marital (or intimate partner) subsystem. Although other family members are important to consider within a family systems perspective, the research on the interpersonal effects of PTSD in the military is predominantly focused on couples. We conclude by describing implications for advancing the use of FST within military family science.

## **Military Families as Systems**

Although all families navigate periods of stress and transition related to occupational events, military service can expose families to periods of planned and persistent separation through deployment. Moreover, the stress of prolonged military-related separations is compounded by unique concerns about psychological distress, significant injury, or even the death of a service member, all of which would disrupt homeostasis (Paley et al., 2013). When a service member is deployed, his or her absence from the family reverberates through the entire family system as members adjust to new roles and patterns of behavior (see Marini et al., 2018). At-home partners likely assume more parenting (e.g., monitoring, discipline) and family financial management (e.g., paying bills) responsibilities, for example, that may have been previously shared with their service member. Although partners typically eagerly await reunion, the reunion period (referred to as reintegration) involves a significant amount of upheaval for some couples as they are tasked with adjusting to yet another disruption to homeostasis. For example, spouses may struggle with relinquishing newly gained responsibilities experienced in a service member's absence. Thus, the experience of even a single deployment encapsulates multiple transitions.

### ***Interdependence Within the Marital/Intimate Partner Subsystem***

Partners may experience a variety of mixed emotions during deployment-induced transitions, including loneliness, mistrust, and resentment, as well as excitement, pride, or relief. Although they may not directly experience the traumas of combat, partners are influenced by service members' experiences and reactions (e.g., Monk, Basinger, & Abendschein, 2020). Upon reunion, for example, typical readjustment stressors can be exacerbated if the service member experienced a traumatic brain injury (TBI) or traumatic stress. Trauma symptoms like hypervigilance, irritability, and angry outbursts can make interactions distressing and impair communication, bonding, and overall relationship quality (e.g., Taft et al., 2011). A partner may feel that their service member is interfering with family functioning due to the anguish created from unmanaged symptoms. Thus, stress can "spillover" from the service member and be transmitted, or adversely affect the partner in a variety of ways. Secondary traumatic stress, for example, may present when a partner

vicariously develops symptoms of PTSD through exposure to knowledge of their service member's traumatizing experiences (Figley, 1995). Similarly, observing a traumatized service member suffer from extreme symptoms can be highly upsetting for partners.

The current literature is primarily focused on how partners are influenced by service members, and there is considerably less information on how partners influence service members (see MacDermid Wadsworth et al., 2013). Partners experience their own stress and might have their own existing traumas from their past; therefore, their distress is also likely to impact service members. For example, a partner's avoidance or numbing is likely to impede marital interactions (see Nelson Goff & Smith, 2005). Stress can also interfere with pro-relationship behaviors and drain positive and self-regulatory responses (e.g., Buck & Neff, 2012). In fact, when partners report higher levels of depressive symptomology prior to deployment, they are more likely to minimize service members' emotions and concerns during deployment (Marini et al., 2019). Further, this minimization has predicted increases in service members' depressive symptomology after deployment. Partners also can bolster or impede service members' mental health treatment. A spouse may disrupt recovery if he or she does not understand the change process and what is needed to cope with symptoms. Partners may purposefully or inadvertently generate feedback loops that permeate throughout the entire family system (see Monk et al., 2016; Nelson Goff & Smith, 2005). For example, partners may be uncertain about how to react to differences in their service members after treatment. This confusion and discomfort on behalf of partners resulting from changes could be interpreted negatively by the service member and lead to them feeling unsupported or stigmatized. This feedback could promote the return to pretreatment functioning as distress symptoms re-emerge, or as service members revert back to relying on old, maladaptive ways of coping (see Baptist, chapter "Family Systems Theory", this volume).

## **Recommendations and Implications for Research and Practice**

The application of FST with military families illuminates several implications and recommendations. First, research and practice intended to advance the well-being of military personnel needs to be systems-oriented. An important component of family systems therapy is the anticipation of responses or reactions in order to prepare family members to counter change-back messages (i.e., feedback; Baptist, chapter "Family Systems Theory", this volume). Incorporating family members provides the opportunity to educate and prepare members of the system to counter disruptions and inhibit maladaptive patterns. Thus, including romantic partners in treatment is a potential way of increasing support and awareness in order to facilitate a new homeostasis (see Monk et al., 2018). Service members and veterans in high quality relationships are more likely to seek mental health treatment (e.g., Meis et al., 2010) and indicate that they would be more willing to seek services if they were family-focused (e.g., Khaylis et al., 2011), thus reinforcing the supportive role that partners and family members can play.



In addition to implications for practice, there are numerous opportunities for FST to advance research on military and veteran families. First, much of the research documenting linkages between military family members is focused on negative consequences of interdependence (e.g., secondary traumatization). Beyond vital studies of social support, the degree to which family members may learn coping strategies to effectively manage their own stress through witnessing service members and veterans adapt and grow from their traumatic experiences remains unknown. Adopting a strengths-based approach is particularly relevant for future research investigating military family systems in order to determine how these families are able to adapt to upheaval or even thrive in the face of adversity.

Second, much of the current research is focused on the period immediately following deployment. Of the studies that do examine long-term implications of combat exposure, most tend to focus exclusively on veterans (e.g., Elder & Clipp, 1989), with little attention given to their spouses, or other family members. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress stemming from wartime experiences, and particularly combat exposure, often have long-term implications for veterans well after they transition out of military service. In fact, Elder and Clipp's (1989) seminal study of World War II and Korean conflict veterans found that veterans who had been exposed to high (as compared to moderate or low) levels of combat experienced painful memories and symptoms of stress nearly 40 years later. Spouses may be particularly affected by veterans' symptoms later in life when social networks tend to be smaller (Cornwell et al., 2008). Spouses may also assume long-term caregiving responsibilities for other co-occurring chronic health conditions, such as veterans' functional limitations. In fact, older adults with a functionally limited spouse have been shown to report higher levels of loneliness (Korporaal et al., 2008) and lower levels of marital quality (Wong & Hsieh, 2017) than those married to a spouse without functional limitations. Whether such associations are compounded by veterans' symptoms of PTSD or TBIs remains largely unknown.

As the post-9/11 cohort of military families advances in age, it is important to follow them over time. For instance, future research may consider the extent to which learned adaptive coping strategies for managing disruptions to homeostasis during wartime service will be advantageous to couples and families as they navigate other periods of stress and transition later in life (e.g., the transition to retirement, caregiving for an aging parent with PTSD). FST and life course perspectives therefore need to be integrated in order to advance our understanding of the long-term implications of wartime service on individuals and families. Research guided by life course theory focuses on linked lives, or the idea that people's social histories and experiences are interconnected with close others (see Monk, Proulx, et al., 2020). This idea is akin to interdependence within FST. However, a life course perspective extends FST by providing insight into the sequence and timing of transitions and stressors—both in terms of timing in the life course, as well as sociohistorical time (see Monk, Proulx, et al., 2020). These transitions can be experienced differently among service members and families in various cohorts or eras given the unique sociohistorical conditions surrounding periods of service (e.g., Vietnam compared to post-9/11 service members). Integrating these important

frameworks can therefore provide added insight into understanding military and veteran family systems across the life course.

Third, in addition to our main focus on interdependence and homeostasis in military couples, other components of FST merit attention. The concepts of boundaries and hierarchical structure are particularly relevant to consider within military family systems. For example, uncertainty and other stressors within the couple relationship can spillover and transmit to children as an interdependent ripple effect within the system. Therefore, appropriate boundaries are essential with the regulation of behavior and the flow of information being an especially unique considerations within military families (e.g., research exploring the role of protective buffering). Indeed, numerous stressors, strains, and transitions within the military context can create the need for flexibility in boundaries and hierarchical roles (e.g., Lester & Flake, 2013; Paley et al., 2013; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). For example, at-home partners might become more reliant on older children to fulfill roles for their service members who are absent during deployment or unable to fulfill roles due to a combat-related injury when they return from deployment (see Lester & Flake, 2013). Based on the idea that families are units made up of interconnected members (i.e., wholeness), changes in boundaries and hierarchical structure, whether adaptive or maladaptive, can alter homeostatic patterns within the system for all family members and warrant consideration.

Finally, there is a need to focus on different military couple and family forms, including single-parent military families, same-sex couple headed military families, and dual-military couples (see Paley et al., 2013). Furthermore, future research in this area should focus on racial and ethnic diversity in military families given there is a dearth of insight into this subject from a family systems lens. Indeed, an intersectional approach to understanding military families becomes increasingly critical as the military becomes increasingly diverse (see Monk, Proulx, et al., 2020), but discrimination remains in this and many other institutions (e.g., Kerrigan, 2012; Philipps, 2019).

## Conclusion

Military families provide an important window to view how systems adapt and change in the context of stress and transition. The unique experiences of military service illustrate the importance of flexibility when there is a change in homeostasis, in addition to considering how these changes impact members within the family unit. Military families are therefore an ideal population to extend our understanding of FST. Moving beyond a snapshot of military families at one point in time, for example, can illustrate how interdependence functions across a lifetime of experiences as service members transition out of military service and continue to age in the context of their social relationships and the larger sociohistorical environment. Thus, by better understanding how military and veteran family members' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions are intertwined in the context of stressful transitions across

the life course, we may, as a field, revisit and refine tenets of the very theories that provide the foundation for what we know about families adapting to change.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Author.
- Boss, P., Doherty, W. J., LaRossa, R., Schumm, W. R., & Steinmetz, S. K. (Eds.). (1993). *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: a contextual approach*. Plenum Press.
- Buck, A. A., & Neff, L. A. (2012). Stress spillover in early marriage: The role of self-regulatory depletion. *Journal of Family Psychology, 26*(5), 698–708.
- Cornwell, B., Laumann, E. O., & Schumm, L. P. (2008). The social connectedness of older adults: A national profile. *American Sociological Review, 73*, 185–203.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Clipp, E. C. (1989). Combat experience and emotional health: Impairment and resilience in later life. *Journal of Personality, 57*, 311–341.
- Figley, C. R. (1995). Compassion fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview. In C. R. Figley (Ed.), *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder* (pp. 1–20). Brunner/Mazel.
- Kerrigan, M. F. (2012). Transgender discrimination in the military: The new Don't Ask, Don't Tell. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 18*(3), 500–518.
- Khaylis, A., Polusny, M. A., Erbes, C. R., Gewirtz, A., & Rath, M. (2011). Posttraumatic stress, family adjustment, and treatment preferences among national guard soldiers deployed to OEF/OIF. *Military Medicine, 176*, 126–131.
- Korporaal, M., Broese van Groenou, M. I., & van Tilburg, T. G. (2008). Effects of own and spousal disability on loneliness among older adults. *Journal of Aging and Health, 20*, 306–325.
- Lester, P., & Flake, L. C. E. (2013). How wartime military service affects children and families. *The Future of Children, 23*, 121–141.
- Lew, H. L., Otis, J. D., Tun, C., Kerns, R. D., Clark, M. E., & Cifu, D. X. (2009). Prevalence of chronic pain, posttraumatic stress disorder, and persistent postconcussive symptoms in OIF/OEF veterans: polytrauma clinical triad. *Journal of Rehabilitation Research & Development, 46*, 697–702.
- MacDermid Wadsworth, S. M., Lester, P., Marini, C., Cozza, S., Sornborger, J., Strouse, T., et al. (2013). Approaching family-focused systems of care for military and veteran families. *Military Behavioral Health, 1*, 31–40.
- Mancini, J. A., O'Neal, C. W., Martin, J. A., & Bowen, G. L. (2018). Community social organization and military families: Theoretical perspectives on transitions, contexts, and resilience. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*, 550–565.
- Marini, C. M., Collins, C. L., & MacDermid Wadsworth, S. M. (2018). Examining multiple rhythms of military and Veteran family life. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*, 516–534.
- Marini, C. M., MacDermid Wadsworth, S., Franks, M. M., Wilson, S. R., Topp, D., & Christ, S. L. (2019). Military spouses' self-and partner-directed minimization in the context of deployment. *Military Behavioral Health, 7*, 245–256.
- Meis, L. A., Barry, R. A., Kehle, S. M., Erbes, C. R., & Polusny, M. A. (2010). Relationship adjustment, PTSD symptoms, and treatment utilization among coupled National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*, 560–567.
- Monk, J. K., Ogolsky, B. G., & Bruner, V. (2016). Veteran couples integrative intensive retreat model: An intervention for military veterans and their relational partners. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 15*, 158–176.
- Monk, J. K., Proulx, C., Marini, C., & Fiori, K. (2020). Advancing research and theory on aging military veterans in a relational context. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 12*, 180–199.

- Monk, J. K., Ruhlmann, L. M., Nelson Goff, B. S., & Ogolsky, B. G. (2018). Brief-systemic programs for promoting mental health and relationship functioning in military couples and families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *10*, 566–586.
- Monk, K., Basinger, E. D., & Abendschein, B. (2020). Relational turbulence and psychological distress in romantic relationships in the military. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *37*(3), 942–964.
- Nelson Goff, B. S., & Smith, D. B. (2005). Systemic traumatic stress: The couple adaptation to traumatic stress model. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *31*, 145–157.
- Paley, B., Lester, P., & Mogil, C. (2013). Family systems and ecological perspectives on the impact of deployment on military families. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *16*, 245–265.
- Philipps, D. (2019, February 27). White supremacy in the U.S. military, explained. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/us/military-white-nationalists-extremists.html>
- Riggs, S. A., & Riggs, D. S. (2011). Risk and resilience in military families experiencing deployment: The role of the family attachment network. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *25*, 675–687.
- Taft, C. T., Watkins, L. E., Stafford, J., Street, A. E., & Monson, C. M. (2011). Posttraumatic stress disorder and intimate relationship problems: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *79*(1), 22–33.
- Wong, J. S., & Hsieh, N. (2017). Functional status, cognition, and social relationships in dyadic perspective. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *74*, 703–714.

# Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory: Its Development, Core Concepts, and Critical Issues



Jonathan R. H. Tudge, Elisa A. Merçon-Vargas, and Ayse Payir

One goal in this chapter is to show how Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory developed over the course of his lifetime, focusing partly not only on the changes that occurred over the three distinct phases of its development (see Rosa & Tudge, 2013) but also on what remained largely the same. Specifically, it is important to recognize that the construct of ecology—the interdependence of individual and context—was central in each phase. This interdependence is relevant to a second goal—showing that Bronfenbrenner's theory fits within what Pepper (1942) termed the contextualist paradigm. Given that Bronfenbrenner has been largely treated as a mechanist by many who “misuse” his theory (Tudge et al., 2009), it is important to make clear the distinction between the two. A third goal is to show how the theory can be used effectively, as well as consider some of the theory's limitations and how it has been built upon.

The first two goals are related; given that Bronfenbrenner was a contextualist, the way he thought about the relations among variables necessarily involved interdependence. However, this way of thinking did not start with Bronfenbrenner. Ideas of individual–context interdependence have been around for more than a century (Tudge et al., 1997) and received philosophical support from Pepper (1942), who outlined the paradigmatic basis for theories that deal with the emergent properties resulting from the relations among interdependent variables. Nonetheless, a

---

Elisa A. Merçon-Vargas and Ayse Payir contributed equally with all other contributors.

---

J. R. H. Tudge (✉) · E. A. Merçon-Vargas  
Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA  
e-mail: [jrtudge@uncg.edu](mailto:jrtudge@uncg.edu)

A. Payir  
Wheelock College of Education and Human Development, Boston University,  
Boston, MA, USA

mechanistic and reductionistic approach—in which each independent variable is treated as though it has a direct and isolated effect on a dependent variable and interactions are treated simply in statistical terms—is still widespread in research on human development and family science. It is now time for those theories—including bioecological theory—that take seriously synergistic interdependence to be applied appropriately in research.

We will therefore describe the different phases in the development of the theory, showing both what links the different phases and distinguishes them. By so doing, we will make clear that bioecological theory fits into what Pepper (1942) termed the contextualist, and not the mechanist, paradigm. It is worth stressing this point, as at least one influential theorist (Overton, 2013, 2015) argues that Bronfenbrenner is a mechanist.

We will then discuss some of the ways Bronfenbrenner's theory has not been well applied, in part because it has been treated as a mechanist theory—one or other level of context influencing individual development—rather than as a contextualist theory, one dealing with interdependence. We will finally return to the issue raised at the outset—that scholars need to base their studies on a theory such as Bronfenbrenner's to be at the cutting edge of research in family science and human development. We will begin, however, with some details about Bronfenbrenner's life as he came to develop his theory.

## The Theory's Origins and Its Historical Development

Based on Bronfenbrenner's own recollections (Bronfenbrenner, 1995), he was first introduced to the ideas involved in ecology in the years following his family's move to the United States, when Urie was aged 6 and not long after the Russian Revolution. He and his father would go on long walks examining how plants and animals adapted to their surroundings. It is perhaps not surprising that his ecological approach had its start in his own "naturalist" roots and developed while he was thinking about the development of children, adolescents, and families in contexts as varied as poverty-stricken areas of the United States and child-care opportunities provided by the "other side" in the cold war—the Soviet Union.

A cornerstone of ecological thinking is that patterns of behavior, or, indeed, development, cannot be explained by focusing only on the individual or on the environment but the interplay of them both. It is this view that was central to Bronfenbrenner's theorizing as he developed and then modified what was first termed "the ecology of human development" before being known as "ecological systems theory" and, in its final form, "bioecological theory." We have written elsewhere about what distinguishes the three different phases in the development of Bronfenbrenner's theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; see also Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). In this chapter, by contrast, we'll focus more on the similarities across the phases.

**Phase 1: The 1960s and 1970s and the Ecology of Human Development** Bronfenbrenner's first paper related to social ecology appeared in 1961. Bronfenbrenner (1961) argued that adolescents' decision-making processes and leadership skills could not be explained simply by reference to their temperament or personality but were mutually influenced by adolescent characteristics such as gender, by the nature of the parent–adolescent relationship, and by the broader context—in this case, the family's social class background.

He expanded on this position in a series of papers in the 1970s, culminating in his first monograph (1979c). In this book, the first definition that he proposed was of the ecology of human development, which:

involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts within which the settings are embedded (1979c, p. 21).

The phrase “progressive, mutual accommodation” of developing individuals and their contexts is critically important to any definition of ecology, and he made it more concrete as follows: “The growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that *reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment* at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content” (1979c, p. 27, italics added).

Despite his ecological emphasis, the 1979 book focused mostly on the different “systems” that constituted context, from the microsystem to the macrosystem. The metaphor that he used when describing these systems also contributed to the notion that the context was most important. As he wrote, “the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979c, p. 3). Visual portrayals of the theory soon appeared in textbooks, each with the individual at the center of a set of concentric rings that were meant to represent each of the different systems. This is a striking image, but not one that serves the theory well, as will shortly become clear.

The attention paid to context in his 1979 monograph can be easily explained. In many of his publications in the 1970s (see Rosa & Tudge, 2013), Bronfenbrenner complained about the narrow focus of contemporary psychology as practiced in the United States. Studies were overwhelmingly conducted in laboratory settings, the idea being to reduce to a minimum any “extraneous” influence of the contexts in which people were raised, lived, studied, worked, or died. Bronfenbrenner (1979b) was deeply concerned about the one-sided nature of contemporary psychology, in which far more was known about developing children than about the environments in which they were developing. The cause, he felt, stemmed from the lack of a theoretical framework appropriate for studying context–individual relations.

His focus on context should not, however, mean that we should ignore the ecological (i.e., interdependent) thinking that was at the core of the theory. For example, the first of the famous propositions that heavily featured in his monograph read as follows: “In ecological research, the properties of the person and of the

environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979c, p. 41).

Some research, of course, did examine children’s development in the home, or school, context. Bronfenbrenner (1979c) pointed out, however, that there were no studies that examined how children’s allegedly stable characteristics altered when children were in different contexts. That is, the way they appeared to be in home was not necessarily the way they appeared in child care or school. The context, in other words, influences what appear to be individual characteristics. More than this, however, the relations between context and individual are always synergistic; that is, the context is always being changed by the individuals within it, while at the same time the context influences the individuals. This is particularly clear when considering relations between a target individual and the other individuals with whom he or she is interacting in any given context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). No one would suggest that parents only influence their children without being themselves influenced (or vice versa), but the “objective” context is also influenced by the people inhabiting it—books are bought and displayed in ways that might entice children, digital tablets are made available to keep children from bothering parents, and so on. In other words, the context is not set in stone and unilaterally determining children’s development—it is also changed by the individuals within.

The family, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979c), needs to be viewed as a system in which each individual influences every other one. Dyadic effects are therefore modified by the presence of a third person, and those dyadic and triadic effects are altered when a fourth person is present. As Bronfenbrenner wrote about a study of parent–infant interaction conducted by Parke (1978), “the presence of the spouse significantly altered the behavior of the other parent, specifically, both father and mother expressed more positive affect (smiling) toward their infant and showed a higher level of exploration when the other parent was also present” (1979c, p. 68). The situation becomes yet more complex when considering other contexts, such as when the child is in school, or when considering the social class background of the parents, or their ethnic/racial or cultural group. The family system needs to be considered in its ecological setting (e.g., the nature of the neighborhood), bearing in mind that families influence their neighborhoods while at the same time being influenced by them.

This systems view is relevant for all aspects of context. There is a danger, particularly when thinking of Bronfenbrenner’s theory as one of concentric rings of contextual influence, of viewing the broader contextual systems (the exosystem and macrosystem) as being separate from the contexts in which developing individuals spend their time. Nothing could be further from reality. For example, this is what he had to say about the exosystem, an “external setting” rather than a microsystem in which the developing individual is situated.

It is necessary to establish a causal sequence involving at least two steps: the first connecting events in the external setting to processes occurring in the developing person’s microsystem and the second linking the microsystem processes to developmental changes in a



person within that setting. The causal sequence may also run in the opposite direction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979c, p. 237).

He made a similar argument regarding the macrosystem (the sociocultural context involving overarching values, beliefs, institutions, etc.). For example, considering social class, he noted that the following questions need to be asked. "First, how do these settings differ in the roles, activities, and relations that they require of persons living in diverse socioeconomic strata? Second, what are the effects of this differential experience on the development of these persons?" (1979c, p. 245). In much the same vein, he wrote that entire societies and subcultures (within-society cultural groups) were relatively homogeneous in terms of those values, beliefs, the types of settings they contain, how those settings are organized, and so on. One must be careful, however, not to view cultures or subcultures as static; cultural values and beliefs are continually undergoing change, sometimes slowly but sometimes far more rapidly, in the face of major political, social, or economic upheaval. Parents' values, beliefs, and practices about how best to raise their children or care for their aging parents will be different in times of steady economic growth or the start of economic depression or in the midst of war.

It might also be tempting to view the different levels of context as having relatively straightforward or solely objective characteristics. Any microsystem, for example, could be analyzed in terms of its physical aspects. However, Bronfenbrenner was clear that a context's phenomenological characteristics were equally, if not more, important, and he wanted to highlight "the importance of the phenomenological field in ecological research" (1979c, p. 29). Environments, therefore, have to be studied as they are perceived by those who live in them. This was made clear in the second definition of his book: "A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations *experienced by the developing person* in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (1979c, p. 22; emphasis added).

As is clear from Bronfenbrenner's work from the 1970s, his theorizing was ecological from the outset. It was not a theory about context or the influence of context on developing individuals (Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). Neither the fact that Bronfenbrenner wrote at some length about the different systems of context nor the fact that his ideas were often represented as concentric rings of context should disguise the theory's ecological essence.

**Phase 2: From 1983 to 1993 and Ecological Systems Theory** During the 1980s, Bronfenbrenner began to expand on his early ideas, although the ecological essence remained the same. He wrote that he had been "pursuing a hidden agenda: that of re-assessing, revising, extending—as well as regretting and even renouncing—some of the conceptions set forth in my 1979 monograph" (1989, p. 187). The main changes are more of emphasis than of substance (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The roles that individuals play in influencing others in their environments, and influencing the environments themselves, had already been noted. But in the 1980s far more attention was given to different types of person characteristics and their effects. The passage of time, both treated as historical time (in the sense of major economic or sociopolitical changes) and as involved in the very processes of development

themselves, also became more explicitly a focus of attention. Quite novel, however, was the description of different models of human development, of which the most important was initially termed the person-process-context model (between 1983 and 1986) and subsequently (in 1988 and 1989) the process-person-context model.

What Bronfenbrenner was aiming for with this “re-assessment” was to bring to scholars’ attention ideas that can be found in his 1979 book, but that had perhaps been ignored in favor of a focus on context. In terms of the role played by individuals in their own development, Bronfenbrenner wrote about two types of “developmentally instigative characteristics” (1989, pp. 218–226). “Personal-stimulus qualities” cause an immediate reaction—for example, how children react when seeing their new teachers for the first time and the perception of each child that teachers have at first sight, based on things such as personal attractiveness, skin color, etc. Of more weight are “developmentally structuring personal attributes,” which are “modes of behavior or belief that reflect an active, selective, structuring orientation toward the environment and/or tend to provoke reactions from the environment” (1989, p. 223). Bronfenbrenner was thinking here of the different ways in which adolescents can deal with their environment—comparing, for example, one who is motivated to learn and persistent with another who has no interest in or enjoyment from learning. But one also has to consider what it is about the learning environment that one finds fascinating and the other finds boring. As Bronfenbrenner noted, “there is always an interplay between the psychological characteristics of the person and of a specific environment; the one cannot be defined without reference to the other” (1989, p. 225).

The processes of development also received more explicit focus, as is clear from the models of development just mentioned. Bronfenbrenner drew explicitly on Kurt Lewin’s formula, namely, that behavior is a function of the interaction of person and environment, making the important substitution of “development” for “behavior” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 190). The process-person-context model, he wrote, “permits variations in developmental processes and outcomes as a *joint* function of the characteristics of the environment and of the person” (p. 197, italics in the original). Bronfenbrenner (1989) used the term “synergism” to describe how these joint functions amplify, for good or ill, developmental outcomes as “the joint operation of two or more forces produces an effect that is greater than the sum of the individual effects” (p. 199).

Bronfenbrenner gave greater prominence in 1989 than he had in the 1970s to cultural and subcultural variations. Drawing on Vygotsky, he wrote that an individual’s options in life depend largely on the sociocultural context and historical time into which that individual is born. The skills that are considered important, notions of competence, and views about the likely future possibilities are all related to one’s macrosystem, whether treated as a culture or subculture. “[T]he repertoire of available belief systems...is defined by the culture or subculture in which one lives...It is from this repertoire that parents, teachers, and other agents of socialization draw when they, consciously or unconsciously, define the goals, risks, and ways of raising the next generation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 228). The macrosystem, in other

words, exerts its influence within the microsystem itself, using the example of one type of developmentally instigative personal characteristic—belief systems, both of the developing individuals of interest and of the others with whom they interact.

Another change in the 1980s' version of his theory was that he paid more explicit attention to time. The formula he adapted from Lewin included subscripts, reading  $D_t = f_{(t-p)}(PE)_{(t-p)}$  (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 190), with the “ $t$ ” representing the time at which the developmental outcome is observed and the “ $t-p$ ” referring to the time period(s) during which the joint forces of person and environment were operating to lead to that particular developmental outcome. Although he had written about “moving macrosystems” in his book, in the 1980s he coined the term “chronosystem” to represent the fact that all the contextual systems, and not simply the individuals developing within them, were developing.

**Phase 3: From 1993 to 2005 and Bioecological Theory** From the mid-1990s, we see three important changes although, as was true of phase 2, Bronfenbrenner seemed to express more forcefully what had from the start made it an ecological theory. Tiring, perhaps, of scholars continuing to ignore the importance of person characteristics in his theory, Bronfenbrenner added the prefix “bio” to the name of the theory. The second change was to include time, formally, into what was henceforth known as the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model.

The third change was more substantive in nature, consisting of two propositions that laid out the crucial role of proximal processes as “the engines of development” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996)<sup>1</sup> and the interlinking influences of person characteristics, context, and time. Proximal processes, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) argued, encompass “particular forms of interaction between organism and environment...that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development” (p. 994). Proposition 1 stated:

Especially in its early phases, but also throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of *time*. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to henceforth as *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996, italics in the original).

Proposition 2 described the ways proximal processes were synergistically influenced by characteristics of the developing person, the context, and by time.

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the *developing person*; of the *environment*—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the *developmental outcomes* under consideration; and the social continuities

---

<sup>1</sup>We are drawing primarily on this 1998 chapter, but their 2006 chapter is identical apart from the addition of pages from Bronfenbrenner (2001), and the same points we will make about the third and final phase of the theory could be drawn from almost any of Bronfenbrenner's writings from 1994 onward (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

and changes occurring over *time* through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996, italics in the original).

Citing Lerner (1982), they stressed that “in the bioecological model, the characteristics of the person function both as an indirect producer and as a product of development” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). They went on to note: “Propositions I and II are theoretically interdependent and subject to empirical test. An operational research design that permits their simultaneous investigation is referred to as a *Process-Person-Context-Time model* (PPCT for short)” (p. 996, italics in the original). Although this model requires their “simultaneous investigation,” for heuristic purposes it helps to discuss the four constructs separately.

As noted in Proposition I, above, proximal processes are the complex reciprocal interactions taking place over time between the developing individuals of interest and the people, objects, and symbols with whom or with which they are engaged. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) provided some examples of the types of interactions they were thinking about—comforting an infant, playing with a child, engaging in athletic activities, acquiring new knowledge, and so on. In other words, they are the types of activities and interactions that people typically engage in, activities and interactions that necessarily vary by aspects of the individuals themselves (e.g., their age), and of the contexts in which they occur. Whereas in many cultures engaging in books might be considered a typical activity, in others more common activities might include learning to hunt for small game or engaging with one’s mother as she collects crops (Tudge, 2008). The proximal processes in which one engages, and how they proceed, have implications for the development of competence or dysfunction—competence and dysfunction necessarily being defined by the cultural group.

Proximal processes are always influenced by characteristics of the persons engaging in them, by the contexts in which they are occurring, and by time. Because these constructs have been widely discussed, in this chapter we have displayed the main features of each in Table 1. Demand person characteristics have to do with first impressions, and are likely to influence how, and the extent to which, proximal processes begin. More time spent with someone, getting to know their resource and force characteristics, might well serve to outweigh those initial demand characteristics and should have greater impact as proximal processes develop.

The contexts in which developing individuals are situated also have powerful effects on proximal processes. This is equally true of the different microsystems (home, child care, school, peer group, etc.) in which children engage in proximal processes as of the broader macrosystem—their race/ethnicity, social class, society, immigration status, and so on—that have a profound influence on the types of activities and interactions that are considered appropriate and likely to lead to competent development.

Time, too, influences proximal processes. This is seen most clearly in terms of “macrotime,” or the historical period in which the developing individuals of interest are situated. Variations in the temporal context, such as raising a family during wartime, or during a depression, or when the economy is booming, or when for the first

**Table 1** The main aspects of the three constructs that influence proximal processes

	Positive	Negative
<i>Person characteristics</i>		
Demand	Skin color, facial appearance, gender, degree of attractiveness, etc., serving to invite interactions with others	Skin color, facial appearance, gender, degree of attractiveness, etc., serving to discourage interactions with others
Resource	Rich experiences, high levels of skill or ability, prior access to developmentally helpful activities and interactions, good physical and/or mental health, etc.	Limited experiences, low levels of skill or ability, limited access to developmentally helpful activities and interactions, physical and/or mental problems, etc.
Force	Motivation, persistence, appropriate availability and responsiveness to others, etc.	Impulsivity, irritability, distractibility, negative responses to others, etc.
<i>Contextual systems</i>		
Microsystem	Any setting in which the developing persons of interest are situated, in which they have face-to-face interactions with other individuals, objects, and symbols. Proximal processes occur here	
Mesosystem	This deals with the linkages between microsystems. Mesosystem analyses are those that consider the relations between or among two or more microsystems in which the developing persons typically spends time	
Exosystem	This is a microsystem for someone other than the developing person of interest but which has an indirect effect on one or more of the developing person's microsystems. A parent's workplace experiences have an influence on her subsequent interactions with her child (the developing person of interest) despite the child not being present at work	
Macrosystem	Any sociocultural group sharing values, beliefs, access to resources, a sense of identity, etc. Macrosystems can be coterminous with an entire society or with racial or ethnic or socioeconomic groups (subcultures) within that society	
<i>Time</i>		
Microtime	The manner in which proximal processes proceed during specific episodes (participants fully engaged, only giving partial attention, etc.)	
Mesotime	The extent to which proximal processes occur (e.g., frequently or infrequently)	
Macrotime	Current social, political, and economic conditions of society, and changes in those conditions	

time females are allowed free access to schooling, have as important influences on proximal processes as do variations in the spatial context (e.g., sociocultural group). Microtime and mesotime, by contrast, focus on the manner in which episodes of proximal processes proceed and how frequently they occur.

## The Contextualist Nature of Bioecological Theory

According to Tudge (2008; Tudge et al., 2016), Bronfenbrenner's theory fits within the contextualist paradigm, first described by Pepper (1942). There is currently some debate about whether Bronfenbrenner's theory can be considered mechanist or contextualist. To understand the terms of this debate, it is helpful to examine Pepper's discussion of the three main paradigms—mechanism, organicism, and contextualism—within which theories of psychology and family relations fit. The distinctions among these three relate to the types of cause that they accept. Pepper, drawing on Aristotle, discussed four types of cause—efficient, material, formal, and final. Efficient causes are those that are said to derive from outside the organism (some change in the environment will have some clear impact on the organism). Material causes are similar, except coming from within the organism, such as some biological or genetic factor being said to cause the organism to be or behave in a certain way. The two causes are similar in that their primary assumption is one can understand causal effects by carefully controlling (experimentally, if possible, and statistically) all but the putative causal factor. Mechanists accept one or both of these two types of cause and are essentially reductionist in their thinking.

Neither organicists nor contextualists accept that there are either efficient or material causes. Instead, they consider formal causes, namely, the synergies, syntheses, or emergent properties stemming from the interaction between one or more variables. This means that not only is development only explicable in terms of complex interactions but also the nature of the interactions is such that one can never break down the resulting synthesis into its constituent parts. Proponents of formal causes are clearly holistic in their thinking.

Final cause is what distinguishes organicists and contextualists. Organicists accept that there is an order and directionality to human development—for example, that one will pass through stages of development in a certain invariable order without regressing from one stage to an earlier one. By contrast, contextualists do not hold that there is any single direction for development—that what counts as competent or appropriate development can only be judged from the perspective of the cultural group within which the person is developing.

We think that there is nothing in the body of Bronfenbrenner's writing to suggest that he is a mechanist; as we made clear from our discussion of his writing in the 1970s, from the outset he took an ecological perspective, focusing on the synergistic interactions between organism and environment. It is important to stress the word "synergistic" here because mechanists, too, have no problem looking for and at interactions among variables. Mechanists, however, do so from a statistical perspective—endeavoring to understand the proportion of variance explained by the moderating effect of one factor on another. The interaction in which both organicists and contextualists are interested is one that does not permit the compartmentalization of variance in this way.

The evidence that Bronfenbrenner accepted the notion of synergistic interaction was provided in the first sections of this chapter; he insisted from the start that all

aspects of the person, environment, and processes taking place “must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979c, p. 41). Similarly, he used the term “synergy” to note that “the joint operation of two or more forces produces an effect that is greater than the sum of the individual effects” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 199). Finally, in the mature phase of the theory’s development, he stressed the fact that developmental outcomes are “the result of the joint, interactive, mutually reinforcing effects of the four principal antecedent components of the [PPCT] model” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996). There is nothing in his writing to suggest that his theory is mechanistic—although that is primarily the way in which it has been portrayed, as one in which layers of context determine how individuals develop. Attempts to use the theory in research have to take seriously its contextualist nature, and the same is true for attempts to expand on the theory.

We have written elsewhere about how Bronfenbrenner’s theory has been used by other scholars (Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). The problem most relevant to this section is that many scholars have treated the theory as though it deals with context’s impact on human development. As Tudge et al. (2016) wrote:

Without taking seriously the synergy that is a defining characteristic of contextualist theories, there is a danger that a theory such as Bronfenbrenner’s can be viewed as mechanistic, dealing with the separate effects on development of either context or of person characteristics (p. 440).

In part, Bronfenbrenner is to blame. He first used the metaphor of the Russian nesting dolls in his 1979 book and was still using it in his final publication (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 814). Metaphors are powerful devices, but in this case the metaphor—dealing only with levels of context surrounding the individual within—has taken on a life of its own, a Frankenstein that has destroyed its maker. The ubiquity of the image, or its simplified version consisting of a series of concentric rings, can easily be realized by entering “Bronfenbrenner” and “theory” into a search engine. It is no less difficult to find it in textbooks of developmental psychology, human development, and family and can also be found in books devoted to theories of human development (e.g., Newman & Newman, 2016) or of the family (e.g., Smith & Hamon, 2017), even when the authors discuss bioecological theory and the PPCT model. Several chapters in the previous version of this Sourcebook (Bengston et al., 2005) also just referred to layers of context when describing the theory.

It is thus not surprising that Bronfenbrenner is viewed as a theorist interested in the impact of context rather than as a contextualist, as Pepper (1942) meant. Some scholars are explicit in stating that Bronfenbrenner treated some part of the context as separate from the individuals who are situated within that context. This is the case, we think, of the work of Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017). They described as “problematic” their view of bioecological theory as one in which culture is “within the macrosystem, as a separate entity of everyday practices and therefore microsystems” (p. 900). They illustrated this problem by citing Bronfenbrenner (1977) and showing concentric rings (p. 902) before proposing to resolve the problem by drawing on Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskian scholars. The result, they claimed, is a

revision of Bronfenbrenner's theory such that proximal processes are treated as cultural practices. As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, Bronfenbrenner had been quite explicit about the links between the macrosystem (culture) and the microsystem as early as 1979. Perhaps the metaphor of the nesting dolls and the image of concentric circles merely served to obscure this fact.

The scholar who has been the most explicit in arguing that Bronfenbrenner treats context and individual as independent factors is Overton (2007, 2013, 2015; Overton & Ennis, 2006; Overton & Lerner, 2012). He claims that relational developmental systems (RDS) is a new paradigm that links organicism and contextualism and that Bronfenbrenner's theory is mechanist. Interestingly, Overton does not quote any of Bronfenbrenner's own writings, but seems to have relied on Mistry's (Mistry et al., 2012; Mistry & Dutta, 2015) interpretation. In a section devoted to "Cartesian-split" reductionist approaches, Overton (2015) wrote: "Mistry and Dutta...argue that in Bronfenbrenner's (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) developmental bioecological model" (p. 215) and then quoted Mistry and Dutta (2015) as follows:

Culture is represented as the outermost layer of context or macro-system. Although this model has conceptually focused on the interplay among the various layers of the context ... empirically, the specific layers have been treated as split-off independent variables that influence behavior and development as efficient causes. Thus culture is conceptualized as a feature of environmental or ecological context that exists independent of the person (p. 370) (quoted in Overton, 2015, p. 25).

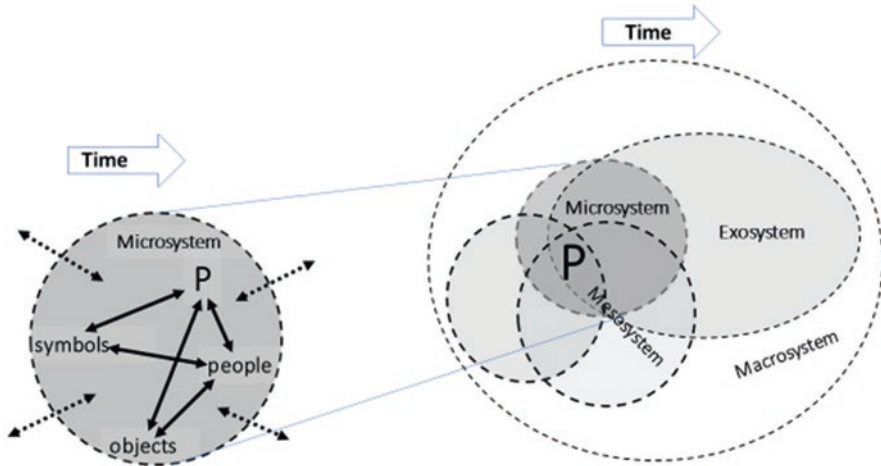
By contrast, given all that Bronfenbrenner wrote about the interdependency of individual and all aspects of context, we see no justification for his being positioned as a mechanist who treated these constructs as independent. As a step toward rectifying this common misunderstanding, we would encourage scholars to consider Fig. 1 as a more appropriate representation of bioecological theory than the traditional "concentric rings" depiction.

## The Theory's Family-Related Issues

Scholars (e.g., Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; White et al., 2019) have argued that Bronfenbrenner's theory is one of the most influential theories in family science. Although Bronfenbrenner is probably better known as a developmental theorist, he wrote extensively about the family (for reviews of these papers, see Tudge, 2017). The family, of course, is one of children's primary microsystems and thus where proximal processes regularly occur. Parents, he said in an interview, are so important because "the engine of human development is the Ping Pong game that goes on between parent and child, the reciprocity, the back and forth that gets more complicated between two people who have a tremendous involvement in each other in terms of affection" (Addison, 1991, p. 18).

Another person, whether parent, grandparent, or sibling, is also important within the family, given that the family is a system in which all members influence all others (Bronfenbrenner, 1991) while simultaneously part of a system involving other





The developing person, with demand, resource, and force characteristics, engaged in proximal processes with other people, symbols, and objects, within a permeable microsystem.

Proximal processes both influence and are influenced simultaneously by characteristics of the people involved, the contexts in which they are situated, and time.

The microsystem is linked with others in the mesosystem, with the exosystem and macrosystem indirectly influencing, and being influenced by, the developing person.

**Fig. 1** Visual Representation of the PPCT Model of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory. (Figure Adapted from Tudge, 2008 by Jonathan Tudge)

contexts. As Bronfenbrenner wrote in a variety of family-related papers, it is impossible to understand what is happening within the family microsystem without attending to the broader contexts in which families are situated. For example, noting that positive parent-child interactions are not always possible, given the stresses under which many families are put, he drew attention to alternatives to the “deficit model” of poor parenting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a, 1984; Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996; Bronfenbrenner & Weiss, 1983).

His “alternative” policy recommendations drew on his knowledge of family policies in a variety of European countries (Bronfenbrenner & Neville, 1994). In particular, he called for modifications in both the workplace (better family-leave policies and flexible working hours for working parents) and school to allow for better integration with the family. He also called for a “curriculum of caring” that would encourage adolescents to gain experience working with both the very young and the elderly (Bronfenbrenner, 1978). But he noted how the prevailing individualist ideology in the United States made such policy recommendations harder to put into effect there than in other countries (1979a; Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996; see also Tudge, 2017).

## Limitations and Modifications of the Theory

**Limitations** One major limitation is that, consistently, Bronfenbrenner wrote about proximal processes as positive, the types of everyday activities and interactions that lead to greater competence. Only once did he raise the issue of proximal processes leading to dysfunction: “If proximal processes are indeed the ‘engines of development,’ what are the differences between those that produce dysfunction vs. competence?” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118). No answer was forthcoming, and Bronfenbrenner ignored the fact that everyday activities and interactions, occurring repeatedly and become progressively more complex, can be of all sorts (for more detail, see Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020).

A second limitation has to do with the very definition of competence, which, from a contextualist perspective, can only be stipulated with reference to a specific cultural group. No doubt because Bronfenbrenner was trying to influence public policy in the United States, he paid little attention in his writings from the mid-1990s onward to within-society cultural variations, let alone cross-cultural variations. This stands in marked contrast to some of his work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where he highlighted such variability. In 1989, he wrote that “any assessment of the cognitive competence of an individual or group must be interpreted in the light of the culture or subculture in which the person was brought up” (1989, p. 209). However, no such language was found from 1994 onward in the final phase of the development of his theory.

Issues relating to culture seem to have been ignored altogether in that final phase. Even when discussing differences among Asian American, African American, European American, and Hispanic American adolescents, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) did so entirely from the perspective of the mesosystem and exosystem rather than from the macrosystem. Significantly, no changes were made in this section in the 2006 version of their chapter. The macrosystem was not entirely ignored, however; Bronfenbrenner and Morris drew on Drillien’s (1964) research to illustrate how problem behaviors at age 4 were impacted as a function of proximal processes (mother–child interactions at age 2), person characteristics (child’s birth weight), and context (social class). However, other cultural (or subcultural) variations were ignored.

**Modifications to the Theory** What do these possible limitations mean for the theory’s development? Rosa and Tudge (2013) argued that there are three clearly distinct phases in its development and that the third and final phase constitutes the theory in its final, developed form. Our view is that scholars should take cultural context more seriously than Bronfenbrenner did in this final phase and that requires either importing his position from the second phase or modifying the theory to incorporate an explicitly cultural perspective, as Tudge (2008) did in what he termed “cultural ecological theory.”

Tudge and his colleagues (Tudge, 2008; Tudge et al., 2006) studied the everyday activities and interactions in which 3-year-olds were engaged in different cultural

communities within the United States and in Brazil, Russia, Estonia, Finland, South Korea, and Kenya. Tudge argued that proximal processes are better thought of as cultural practices (typically occurring everyday activities and interactions), the competence of which can only be judged from the point of view of the sociocultural group being considered. When dealing with a within-society cultural group, those notions of competence may well conflict with those of other cultural groups within the same society, and Bronfenbrenner provided no way in which to judge those different notions of competence.

The everyday activities and interactions in which we engage from the moment of birth are necessarily set within a cultural nexus, which gives meaning to those activities and interactions. What we come to view as appropriate and inappropriate activities or ways of interacting, what is considered normal or abnormal, competent or incompetent, moral or immoral varies by cultural context, whether thinking about culture at the level of society or within-society cultural group. But lest it appear that this is a top-down flow from culture to the individuals within, the individuals are at the same time adapting, modifying, and changing the activities and interactions in which they are engaged. And as a result, over time, a cultural group's values, beliefs, and practices will change, regardless of the extent of contact with other cultural groups. This cultural-ecological position is one that is built on ecological and bioecological foundations but goes beyond Bronfenbrenner in the way in which it deals with issues of culture.

Another approach whose authors state is explicitly built on Bronfenbrenner (or at least the 1989 version of his theory) but incorporates a distinct racial/ethnic perspective is the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer, 1995). Interestingly, Spencer and her co-authors (Spencer, 2006; Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2003; Velez & Spencer, 2018) seem to have ignored the fact that, from the outset, Bronfenbrenner viewed his theory as phenomenological, as we noted earlier in this chapter. Velez and Spencer (2018) continue to view Bronfenbrenner's theory as "a means to describe how multiple levels of context can influence individual development" (p. 79). Nonetheless, Spencer and her colleagues went far beyond anything that Bronfenbrenner had written to consider the specific ways in which youth of color make sense of their surroundings. Their most recent work, combining PVEST with intersectionality theory, allows them to write effectively about the particular vulnerabilities and strengths of youth who experience "complex systems of marginalization" (Velez & Spencer, 2018, p. 85) that stem, in part, from the equally complex systems of power relations in which systems of marginalization are embedded.

## How to Use the Theory

Perhaps it is premature, however, to think about how the theory should be modified, given that there have been so few explicit attempts to test it (Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). Bronfenbrenner himself published extremely little empirical research,

preferring to use others' research to allow him to make his arguments about how the research could or should be used. He also wrote nothing about appropriate methodology for use with the theory, apart from specifying the use of the PPCT model (for discussions of appropriate methodology see Navarro et al., 2022; Rosa & Tudge, 2017; Xia et al., 2020). In order to test and evaluate the theory, hypotheses need to be derived from the PPCT model itself, which, as Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) had noted, requires the simultaneous investigation of proximal processes, person, context, and time.

In brief, proximal processes must be the focus of attention, with the study aiming to assess the extent to which person characteristics and context synergistically influence those proximal processes over time. This requires, at a minimum, variations in one or more person characteristic deemed relevant to the outcome of interest and variations in one or more levels of context that also are relevant to that outcome. It does not matter which type(s) of person characteristic is selected, but to show, for example, that males and females, or individuals who differ by persistence, influence proximal processes in different ways, as the theory states they should, it is obviously insufficient to have only males or only people who are highly persistent. Similarly, in order to show whether the proximal processes vary depending on some microsystem factor (such as home and school) or at the level of macrosystem (such as two or more sociocultural groups), the study needs to include individuals who vary on the relevant person characteristics in both contexts (whether at the microsystem or macrosystem levels). The study should, of course, also be longitudinal, given the developmental nature of the theory.

The most important issue, from our point of view, is that the methods have to allow for the synergistic relations of both person characteristics and context with the proximal processes. As noted earlier, synergistic relations are present when the interaction of two or more variables produce emergent properties that cannot be broken down into either of the interdependent factors. In statistical terms, this means that it makes no sense to try to assess the proportion of the variance explained by any of the variables. The person of interest is already influencing the context while simultaneously being influenced by it. One issue is the treatment of Bronfenbrenner's theory as mechanist rather than contextualist (Tudge et al., 2009, 2016). From a mechanist point of view, there is no problem treating variables as independent of one another—indeed, there has to be independence of the units of analysis, and interactions are dealt with statistically, showing how variability in one factor moderates another factor. Bronfenbrenner's theory fits within contextualism, however, and as such does not accept individual determinants. His theory does not treat interactions as statistical, but rather as the synergistic interdependence of factors.

Xia et al. (2020) described how bioecological theory can be operationalized, using one of two approaches (a "weak" and a "strong" version) that take account of synergy. The simplest—which at least takes seriously the minimum requirements of the PPCT model—involves focusing on proximal processes and including two (or more) levels of a relevant person characteristic, two (or more) relevant contexts, with data collected over time (see also Tudge et al., 2009). The weaker approach to synergistic relations among the different elements of the PPCT model at least allows

researchers to assess the extent to which changes in one variable affects changes in each of the others, such as with using latent growth curve modeling. However, to take into account reciprocal effects among variables (the strong version of synergy), a cross lagged design would be necessary.

Although Bronfenbrenner himself provided no examples, it seems to us that qualitative approaches might be at least as useful as those that are quantitative (see Navarro et al., 2022). Several examples using qualitative methods are the following. Tudge and his colleagues (Tudge, 2008; Tudge et al., 2006) examined how the everyday activities and interactions of young children were mutually influenced by their own person characteristics (in particular their gender and their initiative in starting those activities and interactions or drawing others into them) and by the opportunities afforded to them by the cultural group of which they were a part, influenced by the parents' beliefs about the types of activities they believed appropriate for their children. Tudge et al. (2015) showed how bioecological theory could be used to make sense of adolescents' development of gratitude (see also Tudge et al., 2021). Different macrosystems (cultural groups) provide different types of opportunities for the expression of gratitude, while at the same time individuals of different ages are likely to express different types of gratitude (Freitas et al., *in press*; Mendonça et al., 2018; Merçon-Vargas & Tudge, 2020; Payir et al., 2018). Both context and person characteristics simultaneously influence how children and adolescents are encouraged (or not) to express gratitude on a regular basis (Tudge et al., 2015; 2021). Jaeger (2016) provided the same type of analysis for the study of literacy development, in which she found bioecological theory useful for revealing "how developing readers' individual characteristics transact with both proximal and distal influences to craft their literacy ecology" (p. 164).

These studies are helpful to demonstrate how bioecological theory can be used in different types of studies. What is more important is to show that the theory is on the cutting edge of scholarship dealing with the complexity that is human development. Although this type of thinking regarding synergies or interdependence among individual and contextual factors goes back over a century (Tudge et al., 1997), it has recently received more scholarly attention with the development of Overton and Lerner's Relational Developmental Systems (RDS) approach (e.g., Overton, 2015; Overton & Lerner, 2012). This chapter is a serious attempt to persuade psychologists and family scientists to eschew the type of dichotomizing "Cartesian split" reductionist research that is so common and instead find ways to examine the interdependence of individual–context relations. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory rejects the notion that variables have "split off" independent effects, and although this theory may have its limitations, it deserves to be evaluated appropriately and either discarded, modified, or treated as a good example of a contextualist theory. As we have shown throughout the course of this chapter, there is no excuse for treating it simply as a theory of context. Organismic theories, which we believe RDS qualifies as, and contextualist theories, both of which take seriously the emergent properties that are a hallmark of formal causes, deserve to be taken seriously if our field is to advance.

## References

- Addison, J. T. (1991). Urie Bronfenbrenner. *Human Ecology*, 20(2), 16–19.
- Bengston, V. L., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Sourcebook of family theory and research*. Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1961). Toward a theoretical model for the analysis of parent–child relationships in a social context. In J. C. Glidewell (Ed.), *Parental attitudes and child behavior* (pp. 90–109). Charles C. Thomas.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1978). On making human beings human. *Character*, 2(2), 1–7.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979a). Beyond the deficit model in child and family policy. *Teachers' College Record*, 81(1), 95–104.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979b). Contexts of child rearing: Problems and prospects. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 844–850.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979c). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1984). The changing family in a changing world: America first? *Peabody Journal of Education*, 61(3), 52–70.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Annals of child development* (Vol. 6, pp. 187–249). JAI Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1991). What do families do? *Family Affairs*, 4(1–2), 1–6.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). The bioecological model from a life course perspective: Reflections of a participant observer. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder Jr., & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 599–618). American Psychological Association.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2001). The bioecological theory of human development. In N. J. Smelser & P. B. Baltes (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences* (Vol. 10, pp. 6963–6970). Elsevier.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G. W. (2000). Developmental science in the 21st century: Emerging questions, theoretical models, research designs and empirical findings. *Social Development*, 9(1), 115–125.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., McClelland, P., Wethington, E., Moen, P., & Ceci, S. (1996). *The state of Americans: This generation and the next*. The Free Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (5th ed., pp. 993–1028). John Wiley.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). Wiley.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Neville, P. R. (1994). America's children and families: An international perspective. In S. L. Kagan & B. Weissbourd (Eds.), *Putting families first* (pp. 3–27). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Weiss, H. B. (1983). In E. F. Zigler, S. L. Kagan, & E. Klugman (Eds.), *Children, families, and government: Perspectives on American social policy* (pp. 393–414). Cambridge University Press.
- Bubolz, M. M., & Sontag, M. S. (1993). Human ecology theory. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, L. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 419–448). Plenum.
- Drillien, C. M. (1964). *Growth and development of the prematurely born infant*. Livingston.
- Freitas, L. B. L., Palhares, F., Cao, H., Liang, Y., Zhou, N., Mokrova, I. L., Lee, S., Payir, A., Kiang, L., Mendonça, S. E., Merçon-Vargas, E. A., O'Brien, L., & Tudge, J. R. H. (in press). How WEIRD is the expression of gratitude in the United States? Crosscultural comparisons. *Developmental Psychology*.

- Jaeger, E. L. (2016). Negotiating complexity: A bioecological systems perspective on literacy development. *Human Development, 59*(4), 163–187.
- Lerner, R. M. (1982). Children and adolescents as producers of their own development. *Developmental Review, 2*, 342–370.
- Mendonça, S. E., Merçon-Vargas, E. A., Payir, A., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2018). The development of gratitude in seven societies: Cross-cultural highlights. *Cross-Cultural Research, 52*, 135–150.
- Merçon-Vargas, E. A., Lima, R., Rosa, E., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2020). Processing proximal processes: What Bronfenbrenner meant, what he didn't mean, and what he should have meant. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.
- Merçon-Vargas, E. A., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2020). Children's and adolescents' gratitude expression and its association with their greatest wishes across ethnic groups in the United States. *Current Psychology*.
- Mistry, J., Contreras, M., & Dutta, R. (2012). Culture and child development. In I. B. Weiner (Series Ed.) & R. M. Lerner, M. A. Easterbrooks, & J. Mistry (Vol. Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of psychology, Vol. 6: Developmental psychology* (pp. 265–285). Wiley.
- Mistry, J., & Dutta, R. (2015). Human development and culture: Conceptual and methodological issues. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Theory and method* (Vol. 1, 7th ed., pp. 369–406). Wiley.
- Navarro, J. L., Stephens, C., Rodrigues, B. C., Walker, I. A., Cook, O., O'Toole, L., Hayes, N., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2022). *Bored of the rings: Methodological and analytic approaches to operationalizing Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model in research practice [Manuscript submitted for publication]*. Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- Newman, B. M., & Newman, P. R. (2016). *Theories of human development*. Taylor & Francis.
- Overton, W. F. (2007). A coherent metatheory for developmental systems: Relational organicism-contextualism. *Human Development, 50*, 154–159.
- Overton, W. F. (2013). Relationism and relational developmental systems: A paradigm for developmental science in the post-Cartesian era. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior, 44*, 21–64.
- Overton, W. F. (2015). Process and relational developmental systems. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Theory and method* (Vol. 1, 7th ed., pp. 9–62). Wiley.
- Overton, W. F., & Ennis, M. D. (2006). Cognitive-developmental and behavior-analytic theories: Evolving into complementarity. *Human Development, 49*, 143–172.
- Overton, W. F., & Lerner, R. M. (2012). Relational developmental systems: A paradigm for developmental science in the postgenomic era. *Behavior and Brain Science, 35*(5), 375–376.
- Parke, R. D. (1978). Parent-infant interaction: Progress, paradigms, and problems. In G. P. Sackett (Ed.), *Observing behavior* (Vol. 1, pp. 69–94). University Park Press.
- Payir, A., Liang, Y., Mendonça, S., Mokrova, I., Palhares, F., & Zeytinoglu, S. (2018). Cross-cultural variations in the development of gratitude. In J. R. H. Tudge & L. B. L. Freitas (Eds.), *Developing gratitude in children and adolescents* (pp. 111–134). Cambridge University Press.
- Pepper, S. C. (1942). *World hypotheses: A study in evidence*. University of California Press.
- Rosa, E. M., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2013). Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development: Its evolution from ecology to bioecology. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 5*(6), 243–258.
- Rosa, E. M., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2017). Teoria bioecológica do desenvolvimento humano: Considerações metodológicas [Bioecological theory of human development: Methodological issues]. In A. C. G. Dias & E. M. Rosa (Eds.), *Metodologias de Pesquisa e Intervenção para Crianças, Adolescentes e Jovens [Research and intervention methods with children, adolescents, and youth]* (pp. 17–43). UFES Editora.
- Smith, S. R., & Hamon, R. R. (2017). *Exploring family theories*. Oxford University Press. We have also added three new papers, one of which was published last year, one is "in press," and one of which is currently still under review.
- Spencer, M. B. (1995). Old issues and new theorizing about African American youth: A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory. In R. L. Taylor (Ed.), *Black youth: Perspective on their status in the United States* (pp. 37–70). Praeger.

- Spencer, M. B. (2006). Phenomenology and ecological systems theory: Development of diverse groups. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 829–893) Wiley.
- Spencer, M. B., Dupree, D., & Hartmann, T. (1997). A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST): A self-organization perspective in context. *Development and Psychopathology*, 9, 817–833.
- Swanson, D. P., Spencer, M. B., Harpalani, V., Dupree, D., Noll, E., Ginzburg, S., & Seaton, G. (2003). Psychosocial development in racially and ethnically diverse youth: Conceptual and methodological challenges in the 21st century. *Development and Psychopathology*, 15, 743–771.
- Tudge, J. R. H. (2008). *The everyday lives of young children: Culture, class, and child rearing in diverse societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tudge, J. R. H. (2017). Urie Bronfenbrenner. In H. Montgomery (Ed.), *Oxford bibliographies online: Childhood studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Doucet, F., Odero, D. A., Sperb, T. M., Piccinini, C. A., & Lopes, R. (2006). A window into different cultural worlds: Young children's everyday activities in the United States, Kenya, and Brazil. *Child Development*, 77, 1446–1469.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Freitas, L. B. L., & O'Brien, L. T. (2015). The virtue of gratitude: A developmental and cultural approach. *Human Development*, 58, 281–300.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B. E., & Karnik, R. (2009). The uses and misuses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 1(4), 198–210.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Navarro, J. L., Payir, A., Merçon-Vargas, E. A., Cao, H., Zhou, N., Liang, Y., & Mendonça, S. E. (2021). Using cultural-ecological theory to construct a mid-range theory for the development of gratitude as a virtue. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. Online first.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Payir, A., Merçon-Vargas, E. A., Cao, H., Liang, Y., Li, J., & O'Brien, L. T. (2016). Still misused after all these years? A re-evaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 8, 427–445.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Putnam, S. A., & Valsiner, J. (1997). Culture and cognition in developmental perspective. In B. Cairns, G. H. Elder Jr., & E. J. Costello (Eds.), *Developmental science* (pp. 190–222). Cambridge University Press.
- Velez, G., & Spencer, M. B. (2018). Phenomenology and intersectionality: Using PVEST as a frame for adolescent identity formation amid intersecting ecological systems of inequality. In C. E. Santos & R. B. Toomey (Eds.), *Envisioning the integration of an intersectional lens in developmental science*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 161, 75–90.
- Vélez-Agosto, N. M., Soto-Crespo, J. G., Vizcarrondo-Opppenheimer, M., Vega-Molina, S., & García Coll, C. (2017). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory revision: Moving culture from the macro to the micro. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(5), 900–910.
- White, J. M., Klein, T. F., & Adamsons, K. (2019). *Family theories: An introduction* (5th ed.). Sage Publishers.
- Xia, M., Li, X., & Tudge, J. R. H. (2020). Operationalizing Urie Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time model. *Human Development*, 64(1), 10–20.



# Application: The Role of Epigenetics in Human Development



Hilary A. Rose

In their final chapter together, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested that the effects of epigenetics (a *person* aspect of Bronfenbrenner’s process-person-context-time, or PPCT, model) might account for the transgenerational transmission of behavior and ultimately of development. However, they were admittedly vague on the details: “Little in the pages that follow speaks to the operation of biological systems *within* the organism” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 799). Previously, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci explicitly mentioned epigenetics, arguing that proximal processes “serve as the mechanisms for the actualization of genetic potential” (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p. 580). They did so without elaborating on processes that could account for development in the individual or across generations—an omission later acknowledged by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Other theorists have also invoked epigenetics as an explanation for child development in Waddington-esque terms (e.g., the epigenetic landscape; Waddington, 1957) without giving details about how molecular epigenetics actually works (Carey, 2012; Tronick & Hunter, 2016). A burgeoning interest in molecular epigenetics suggests the time is ripe to explore biological systems that exist within the individual and that interact with proximal processes in the individual’s microsystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This application complements Tudge et al.’s (2022) chapter on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory, briefly exploring epigenetics and transgenerational epigenetic inheritance in the context of child abuse (e.g., McGowan et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2018). An up-to-date review of epigenetics may elaborate on bioecological theory by explaining possible mechanisms behind the transgenerational transmission of behavior.

First, it is important to understand what molecular epigenetics is and how it works. From Greek, “epi” refers to *over* or *upon* (Carey, 2012; Tronick & Hunter,

---

H. A. Rose (✉)

Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada  
e-mail: [hilary.rose@concordia.ca](mailto:hilary.rose@concordia.ca)

2016). Thus, epigenetics refers to a layer of chemicals that is added on top of the genome, or DNA, as a result of experience. At the molecular level, epigenetics refers to chemical modifications (i.e., additions or subtractions) to genetic material that affect how genes are switched on and off, but which do not alter the DNA itself. This process is a normal, expected aspect of development (e.g., the necessary silencing of a female embryo's second X chromosome; Carey, 2012; Meaney, 2010), but adverse or favorable experiences and environments (e.g., malnutrition or adoption) can also affect the expression of genes. It is important to remember that epigenetic modification is *functional*, not *structural* (Carey, 2012; Meaney, 2010): although the genotype does not change as a result of epigenetics, the phenotype, or the way DNA is expressed, does.

In human development, it is epigenetic markers, such as *methyl* groups or *acetyl* groups, which cause genes to turn on and off. In order to contain our DNA within our cells, DNA is compressed and wound like fishing line around a reel. If DNA is wound too tightly, it cannot do what it is supposed to do (Carey, 2012; Meaney, 2010). Epigenetic markers—informed by experience or nurture—attach to DNA and prevent it from unwinding, so the DNA cannot be accessed, and, therefore, it cannot do its job properly (e.g., make proteins). An example of epigenetic modification is either adding a methyl group (i.e., H<sub>3</sub>C) to DNA (called methylation, indicated by *DNAm*) or removing a methyl group (called *demethylation*).

In a recent Harvard/UBC collaboration, increased methylation (i.e., DNAm) was found in the germ cells or sperm of adult men who were abused as children (Roberts et al., 2018). These researchers found that a number of genome regions in participants' sperm were differentially methylated to a significant extent as a function of child abuse and the association between child abuse and adult sperm DNAm was stronger after controlling for participants' current mental health and lifetime history of trauma. In a study involving suicide victims, researchers also found increased methylation in the brain tissue of suicide victims with a history of child abuse as compared to those without a history of child abuse (McGowan et al., 2009). Thus, epigenetics can explain at the molecular level—via methylation—how the effects of child abuse can be carried forward into adulthood.

As an extreme example of child abuse, consider the removal of Indigenous children from their families. For over 150 years, as a result of assimilation policies, Indigenous children in the United States and Canada were forced to attend boarding or residential schools (Rose, 2018) where in many cases they were maltreated (Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015): Neglect took the form of malnourishment, and abuse took the form of physical and sexual abuse. Today, researchers studying health disparities in the descendants of Indigenous people who attended boarding schools as children suggest that epigenetics might account for the trans-generational transmission of the historical trauma experienced by some Indigenous peoples (e.g., Bombay et al., 2011). McQuaid et al. (2017) recently found that having a relative who attended a boarding school increased the odds of attempting suicide and having two generations of relatives attend boarding schools increased the odds of attempting suicide even further.

Using Bronfenbrenner's terminology from the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), child maltreatment (i.e., *process*) leads to a stress response on the

part of the child; this response results in an increase in production of cortisol. Typically, the cortisol receptor gene reacts to this increase in cortisol, decreasing cortisol production. However, in cases of chronic child maltreatment (i.e., *time*), the cortisol receptor gene becomes methylated and cannot effectively dampen cortisol production. In cases of chronic maltreatment, cortisol levels remain high, and the individual (i.e., the *person*) remains chronically stressed and overly sensitive to stressor events in adulthood (i.e., *context*) and ultimately more vulnerable to disease, both physical and mental.

Regarding whether epigenetic markers can be transmitted to *future* generations, scholars have mixed opinions. Although studies involving small mammals, such as mice, have shown transgenerational inheritance (e.g., Carey, 2012), research using humans is not yet conclusive (e.g., Roberts et al., 2018; van Otterdijk & Michels, 2016). A key challenge is that DNAm in mammals is largely erased, or demethylated, at the time of fertilization. Thus, although parents' combined genome is transmitted to offspring, typically their epigenomes are not (Carey, 2012). "It is tempting to speculate that these DNA marks are somehow propagated to the offspring. However, research in human development has not yet provided strong evidence of this possibility" (Roberts et al., 2018, p. 9).

At the same time, certain regions of the genome are resistant to erasure, or demethylation, at the time of fertilization (e.g., Carey, 2012; Tang et al., 2015), so in some instances epigenetic inheritance may be possible. Tang and colleagues have identified "DNA demethylation escapees," or regions that evade demethylation, a finding that could account for epigenetic transfer from one generation to another. These researchers also reported associations between specific DNAm regions of the genome—areas that retained their methylation—and conditions such as obesity, schizophrenia, and multiple sclerosis. This mechanism has not yet been studied in multiple generations (although research about the Dutch famine in the winter of 1944–1945 comes close; Carey, 2012; Veenendaal et al., 2013). As van Otterdijk and Michels (2016) pointed out, evidence for epigenetic inheritance in humans would require longitudinal data from *four* generations of women (because a pregnant woman's female fetus is already developing her own germ line—i.e., the pregnant woman's granddaughter—a *fourth* generation would therefore be required to show epigenetic inheritance) and three generations of men. We simply do not have the data yet.

Stressful experiences early in life can cause epigenetic changes that negatively affect how individuals respond to adversity later in life. At the same time, it is important to remember that "supportive environments and rich learning experiences generate positive epigenetic signatures that activate genetic potential" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010, pp. 1–2). The developing brain is sensitive to whatever environment it is exposed to, whether positive or negative. Although we know a great deal about the negative effects of epigenetics on development, we cannot ignore the potential for positive effects of epigenetics. As Bronfenbrenner himself was concerned about and involved in shaping family policies (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the implications of epigenetics for social policy and program development (Meaney, 2010) would be a fruitful direction for research. After all, epigenetics has been described as the "missing link between nature and nurture" (Carey, 2012, p. 7) and thus can teach us much about human development.

## References

- Bombay, A., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2011). The impact of stressors on second-generation Indian residential survivors. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *48*, 367–391.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. J. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review*, *101*, 568–586.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G. W. (2000). Developmental science in the 21st century: Emerging questions, theoretical models, research designs, and empirical findings. *Social Development*, *9*, 15–25.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In R. Lerner (Ed.), *The handbook of child psychology* (Vol. 1, 5th ed., pp. 993–1028). Wiley.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. Lerner (Ed.), *The handbook of child psychology* (Vol. 1, 6th ed., pp. 793–828). Wiley.
- Carey, N. (2010). *The epigenetics revolution: How modern biology is rewriting our understanding of genetics, disease, and inheritance*. Columbia University Press.
- McGowan, P. O., Sasaki, A., D'Alessio, A. C., Dymov, S., Labonté, B., Szyf, M., ... Meaney, M. J. (2009). Epigenetic regulation of the glucocorticoid receptor in human brain associates with childhood abuse. *Nature Neuroscience*, *12*, 342–348.
- McQuaid, R. J., Bombay, A., McInnis, O. A., Humeny, C., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2017). Suicide ideation and attempts among First Nations peoples living on-reserve in Canada: The intergenerational and cumulative effects of Indian residential schools. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, *62*, 422–430.
- Meaney, M. J. (2010). Epigenetics and the biological definition of gene x environment interactions. *Child Development*, *81*, 41–79.
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). *Early experiences can alter gene expression and affect long-term development: Working paper No. 10*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>
- Roberts, A. L., Gladish, N., Gatev, E., Jones, M. J., Chen, Y., MacIsaac, J., ... Kobar, M. S. (2018). Exposure to childhood abuse is associated with human sperm DNA methylation. *Translational Psychiatry*, *8*(194).
- Rose, H. A. (2018). “I didn’t get to say goodbye... didn’t get to pet my dogs or nothing”: Bioecological theory and the Indian residential school experience in Canada. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *10*, 348–366.
- Tang, W. W. C., Dietmann, S., Irie, N., Leitch, H. g., Floros, V. I., Bradshaw, C. R., ... Surani, M. A. (2015). A unique gene regulatory network resets the human germline epigenome for development. *Cell*, *161*, 1453–1467.
- Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Final report of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Vol. 1, Summary: Honoring the truth, reconciling for the future*. Lorimer.
- Tudge, J. R. H., Payir, A., & Mercon-Vargas, E. A. (2021). Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory: Its development, core constructs, and critical issues. In K. Adamsons, A. Few-Demo, C. Proulx, & K. Roy (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methodologies* (p. xx). Wiley.
- Van Otterdijk, S. D., & Michels, K. B. (2016). Transgenerational epigenetic inheritance in mammals: How good is the evidence? *FASBE J*, *30*(7).
- Veenendaal, M. V. E., Painter, R. C., de Rooij, S. R., Bossuyt, P. M. M., van der Post, J. A. M., Gluckman, P. D., ... Roseboom, T. J. (2013). Transgenerational effects of prenatal exposure to the 1944–45 Dutch famine. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, *120*, 548–554.
- Waddington, C. H. (1957). *The strategy of the genes: A discussion of some aspects of theoretical biology*. Allen & Unwin.

# Social Exchange Theories



Ronald M. Sabatelli

A theory is a bid to explain some observed aspect of the “natural world.” The specific focus of a theory, the aspects of the natural world that it seeks to explain, can be thought of as a theory’s “universe of analyses.” Exchange theory’s universe is the analyses of (1) the experiences of partners within social/dyadic relationships and (2) the patterns of interaction found within dyadic relationships. Social exchange, for example, represents a theoretical bid to describe, explain, and/or predict the wide variances that exist in intimate partners’ experiences of interpersonal attraction, relationship satisfaction, complaints, commitment, and/or trust. It represents a theoretical bid, as well, to account for the differences observed in the patterns of equity, fairness, power, oppression, and stability within marriages and other intimate relationships.

Social exchange is not a single theory. Rather, it consists of several different exchange perspectives that often, but not always, share a set of core assumptions and key concepts. These various exchange perspectives emerged in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The use and development of the framework becomes widespread in the field of family studies starting in the 1970s (Broderick, 1971; Nye, 1979).

## Tracing the Intellectual Roots of Exchange Theory

Tracing the intellectual roots of exchange theory is an “eclectic and uncertain enterprise” (Turner, 1986, p. 215). This is because various exchange perspectives were based on ideas drawn from different fields of study (e.g., economics, anthropology,

---

R. M. Sabatelli (✉)

Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [ronald.sabatelli@uconn.edu](mailto:ronald.sabatelli@uconn.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_18)

conflict sociology, and behavioral psychology) and grounded in very different philosophical traditions (e.g., British individualism vs French collectivism). Grounded in these different intellectual and philosophical perspectives, two general types of exchange theory evolved throughout the 1950s and 1960s—namely, individualistic versions (cf., Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and collectivistic versions (cf., Blau; Levi-Strauss, 1969). What basically differentiates these two exchange perspectives are different assumptions about what motivates social behavior and different visions of the roles that social norms play in regulating dyadic interactions (Ekeh, 1974).

## Individualistic Versus Collectivistic Exchange Perspectives

Homans (1961) used utilitarian economics combined with behavioral psychology as the intellectual foundations for his individualistically oriented version of exchange theory. By assimilating utilitarian economics into his version of the theory, Homans viewed relationships as being “free and competitive marketplaces” within which individuals seek to rationally maximize their benefits and minimize their costs and compared their relationships to their market alternatives. By assimilating behavioral psychology into his version of exchange theory, Homans viewed reinforcement contingencies and the previous history of reinforcement in similar situations as the major determinants of social behavior, and he embraced the assumption that all behavior is motivated by self-interest.

Contemporaries of Homans, influenced by the work of French sociologists and cultural anthropologists, reject the view that relationships are motivated by self-interest and instead view relationships as being structured to represent the collective goals of both partners and society. The development of these collectivistic views of exchange relationships was guided by utilitarian philosophies (not utilitarian economics) and their moral and ethical emphases on promoting social welfare. Levi-Strauss (1969), for example, supported his collectivistic version of exchange by highlighting the observation that people derived benefits from altruistic actions and often willingly participated in unrewarding exchange relationships (e.g., parenthood, caregiving). Blau (1964) used the existence of “rules of exchange,” like the “norm of reciprocity” and “the norm of fairness,” as evidence to support the conclusion that the partners were motivated within exchange relationships by the desire to maximize joint rather than individual profits.

To be clear, the differences between individualistic and collective exchange perspectives revolve around an assumption about motivations that cannot be proved or disproved. Specifically, when people act altruistically, it is impossible to prove or disprove whether self-interest is the primary motivation for this behavior. In recent years, a subset of theorists has set aside this debate by taking the position that the tension between Homans and the more collectively oriented exchange theorists was mitigated when relationships that vary by type and concomitant goals were considered (Clark & Mills, 1993). Simply put, it is perfectly acceptable for a person

who is buying a car to be motivated by self-interest. Communal motivations prevail in those types of relationships that are intended to be enduring and built on foundations of intimacy, trust, and commitment (Arriaga, 2013).

## **The Determinants of Relationship Norms**

The early exchange perspectives disagreed in their views on the role of societal and cultural factors as shapers of exchange patterns, rules, and norms (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). The early exchange theorists observed the tendency for marital and other intimate partnerships to be characterized by fair, just, and proportionate patterns of exchange (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). Collectivistically oriented exchange theorists, like Levi-Strauss (1969), believed that these commonly observed patterns were shaped by cultural norms and functioned for society by stabilizing marital and family relationships. Individualistically oriented exchange theorists discounted the role that culture played in shaping these modal exchange patterns. They argued, instead, that these normative exchange patterns exist in ongoing and intimate relationships because reciprocity and fairness represent the best possible ways for partners to maximize their individual profits (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Each of these competing explanations for the existence of reciprocity and fairness norms in ongoing intimate relationships can be true. That is, there is no way to disprove or prove whether individuals act to meet the needs of their partners because they are influenced by cultural norms and/or motivated by a self-interested desire to maximize personal profits. From a historical perspective, however, this debate about the origin of exchange norms is important because it serves as a foundation for further theoretical discussions of the factors accounting for the variabilities observed in the patterns of interaction and stability within exchange partnerships.

## **Thibaut and Kelley: The Psychology Underlying Behavior**

The early work of Thibaut and Kelley (1959) is noteworthy because of their focus on how symmetrical and asymmetrical distributions of rewards, costs, and alternatives between partners influence how exchange relationships are structured and experienced. In a series of studies, they demonstrate how different exchange patterns can be induced by “experimentally manipulating” partners’ access to rewards, costs, and alternatives. When rewards, costs, and access to alternatives are similar for both partners, each partner’s dependence on the other for benefits and rewards results in reciprocal and fair exchanges becoming established and these relationships remaining stable over time. However, when partners have disparate levels of access to rewards and alternatives, more exploitive and less stable patterns of exchange become established.

The work of Thibaut and Kelley is historically noteworthy because it moves the exchange framework beyond a debate on the origins of exchange norms to a more in-depth analysis of how dyadic factors (i.e., the distributions of resources and alternatives between partners) account for different social exchange patterns of interaction. Their work is significant, as well, because of their focus on how relational dependence, conceived of as the absence of better alternatives, plays a major role in shaping the negotiations between exchange partners.

## **Emerson's Exchange Network Analysis**

From a historical perspective, the work of Richard Emerson (1976) is important because of his expanded emphasis on how the distributions of rewards, costs, and resources between partners are needed to account for complex and emergent relationship dynamics. Emerson's framework draws selectively on the basic concepts used by the early theorists (cf., rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives). However, Emerson's framework goes beyond these earlier works in his emphasis on the concepts of "dependence, power and balance," which he conceives of as being *relational* rather than individual properties. The key questions in Emerson's framework revolved around how the balances in resources and alternatives explain the operation of more complex social patterns—like feelings of commitment and trust, the experience of conflict, and relational patterns of dominance and stability observed within relationships over time. By highlighting the balances of resources and dependence as the key to understanding power processes and emergent relationship dynamics, Emerson compelled relationship researchers to make the "exchange relationship" the theory's unit of analysis (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

To some extent, the works of Thibaut and Kelley and Emerson are thematically similar in that they both focus attention on how the distributions of benefits between partners influence how relationships are structured and experienced. Emerson's contributions, however, are especially noteworthy as he is the first to extend the exchange framework to the understanding of a broad host of complex and evolving relationship experiences, like commitment and trust, that build or undermine relationship stability. He accounts for these emergent experiences and dynamics by shifting the focus of the exchange framework from individual's experiences of attraction and dependence to the balances of attraction and dependence between partners. Emerson's work represents a breakthrough in the development of the exchange framework because he adds to the framework a focus on the interdependence between partners' experiences within their relationships and how these experiences influence ongoing and evolving patterns of interaction. To this end, Emerson's focus on the emergent experiences, structures, and the ongoing interactions between these relationship realms led Turner, in 1986, to claim that Emerson's structural exchange theory represents a conceptual innovation in sociology equal in standing to the works of Marx, Mead, or Durkheim!



## Basic Exchange Concepts: Attraction and Dependence

The exchange framework uses two broad relationship dimensions, an attraction dimension and a dependence dimension, to account for the variances observed in (1) the experiences of partners within social/dyadic relationships and (2) the patterns of interaction found within dyadic relationships. The framework can be used with both individuals and dyads as its unit of analyses. Within the exchange framework, individuals are conceived of as experiencing levels of attraction to and dependence on their relationship partners. Within the exchange framework, dyadic relationships are conceived of as being characterized by unique dyadic attraction/dependence configurations. These attraction/dependence configurations are viewed as accounting for emerging and ongoing experiences and patterns of interaction within and between partners.

### The Attraction Dimension

Individuals are attracted to others when they can obtain positive outcomes (i.e., a high ratio of rewards to costs) from the relationship through the process of exchanging valued resources (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Within the exchange framework, there is a considerable degree of conceptual overlap between the concepts of rewards, costs, and resources. Rewards are very broadly defined as the “pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications the person enjoys” (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p.12). Costs are any negative experiences due to the things the person dislikes (punishments) or rewards foregone that result from being involved in a relationship (Blau, 1964; Nye, 1979). Resources are conceived of as being material or symbolic commodities that can be exchanged within interpersonal relationships and fall into distinct categories like status, money, social approval, and information (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Foa & Foa, 1974).

### *The Valuation of Rewards, Costs, and Resources*

The exchange framework is built around an economic metaphor and assumes that people exchange resources in bids to maximize rewards and minimize costs. This economic metaphor is appealing in that it helps to explain the factors leading to interpersonal attraction simply; attraction is explained by the presence of high levels of rewards and access to resources. Behind this simple metaphor, however, lies a more complex reality in that what constitutes a reward or cost or the values associated with different resources can vary considerably from person to person.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed that individuals’ evaluations of rewards, costs, and resources were mediated through two different types of cognitions—the comparison level (CL) and the comparison level for alternatives (CLalt). Based on developmental and relationship experiences, people develop working models of the

rewards, costs, and resources they think they deserve and can realistically expect from a relationship. Thibaut and Kelley used the term CL to refer to this constellation of expectations. They hypothesized that when the kinds of outcomes available in a relationship tend to match those thought to be important and deserved, satisfaction with and attraction to the relationship would be high.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) defined the CLalt as the lowest level of outcomes a person will accept from a relationship considering available alternatives. As such, the CLalt serves as a context for judging the relative worth and value of the outcomes experienced from any one relationship. In this regard, interpersonal attraction is greatest when salient outcomes are experienced in a way that goes beyond what a person might realistically expect and goes beyond the outcomes that a person believes is available in alternative relationships.

## The Dependence Dimension

Within the exchange framework, dependence is defined as the degree to which people believe that they are subject to or reliant on their partners for relationship outcomes (Emerson, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The degree of dependence experienced is influenced by the benefits available from a specific relationship as compared to the benefits believed to be available in the pool of relationship alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The degree of dependence experienced is further moderated by the internal or external barriers associated with the dissolution of an existing relationship (Levinger, 1982). This is to suggest that feelings of dependence are influenced by a constellation of factors including the rewards available from a relationship, the rewards believed to be available in alternative relationships, and the psychological, material, and economic costs associated with terminating an existing relationship.

The broad point here is that attraction and dependence are concepts that anchor the ways in which a person experiences an exchange relationship. The highest levels of attraction exist when a relationship provides high levels of rewards and resources that fall, in addition, well above the available alternative sources of rewards and resources. Generally speaking, people who experience high levels of attraction to their respective partners are more likely to be highly dependent on their relationships because better alternatives are not likely to exist and, over time, the costs of terminating the relationship are likely to increase (Levinger, 1982).

## The Emergent Structures and Experiences of Exchange Relationships

The heuristic value of the exchange framework is enhanced by the fact that it can be used with individuals and dyads as its units of analyses (Sabatelli et al., 2018). By making dyads the framework's unit of analysis, Emerson calls attention to how

partners' relative and comparative levels of attraction and dependence can be used by exchange theorists to account for a host of emergent relationship experiences and structures. The focus on exchange relationships is compelling because "real relationships" are dynamic, certainly not static—meaning, due to any number of contextual and relationship factors, distributions of rewards, costs, and alternatives within and between partners are likely to change over time (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

What follows is a discussion of how the distributions of attraction and dependence, within and between partners, can be used in the exchange framework to account for variations in how relationships are experienced and structured. Please note that this discussion does not spend a lot of time discussing how concepts like equity, commitment, and power have been conceptualized or operationalized over the years. This section is designed, instead, to demonstrate how the framework can be used to provide insights into the variability observed in the wide range of experiences and patterns of interaction of interest to relationship scholars.

## The Emergent Experiences of Satisfaction

Historically, the individual is largely the unit of analysis in the research focusing on relationship satisfaction (e.g., "Overall, how satisfied are *you* with *your* relationship"). Within the exchange perspective, however, satisfaction can be conceived of as being an emergent relationship experience based on how the levels of attraction and dependence experienced within and between partners shift over time (Sabatelli et al., 2018). For satisfaction to be maintained partners must continually negotiate exchange patterns that result in each partner's expectations being met or exceeded by their respective partner's behaviors. In addition, shifts in the balance of dependence between partners, due, for example, to changes in investments, costs of dissolution, barriers to termination, or a shrinking of the pool of eligible alternatives, all can feedback into the degrees of satisfactions experienced with a relationship (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

The broad point here is that the exchange perspective compels relationship researchers to consider how a "snapshot" of partners' satisfaction with their relationship, at any point in time, is contextually grounded in the relative levels of attraction and dependence experienced by both partners. Furthermore, it is likely that these balances shift over time due to a broad constellation of individual, relationship, and societal factors (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

## The Emergent Experiences of Equity and Fairness

In everyday usage, the terms equity, fairness, and justice are used synonymously. To some extent, at times, relationship researchers have used these terms in overlapping and imprecise ways, thereby undermining the abilities of relationships researchers

to systematically and precisely focus on how these emergent experiences differ (Leventhal, 1980). Irrespective of how these terms have been conceptualized and operationalized, experiences like equity and justice can be thought of as emergent relationship experiences because they are grounded in assessments of the distributions of rewards, resources, and costs *between* partners (That is, partners judge their relationships to be inequitable or unjust when rewards, resources, and costs are disproportionately distributed *between partners* (Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994).

As aspects of the ongoing evaluative landscape of relationships, it is reasonable to assume that ongoing feelings of satisfaction are moderated by the experiences of equity and distributive justice. That is, experiences of justice and equity are likely to contribute to feelings of satisfaction. However, it is possible for equitable and just relationships to be experienced as unrewarding and unsatisfactory when the unpleasantness associated with the relationship is distributed proportionately between partners.

In addition, it is theoretically compelling to consider the ways in which relative levels of dependence factor into how individuals construct their views on what constitutes fair and equitable exchange patterns. When a person considers whether the relationship benefits are equitably distributed, it is obvious that these perceptions require reflections on how benefits compare between partners. Consistent with the exchange framework, it is important to consider, as well, how perceptions of equity, fairness, and justice are further moderated by within and between partner variances in the degrees of dependence on the relationship. The broader point here is that the exchange framework compels relationship researchers to consider how various emergent relationship experiences are distinct and interrelated.

## **The Emergent Experiences of Commitment and Trust**

Commitment has been described as including an attachment bond, a long-term orientation, and the intention to persist, even in the face of adversity (Johnson, 1991). Most perspectives on the development of commitment in ongoing relationships conceptualize two sets of factors, consistent with the exchange framework, as promoting commitment: forces that draw people to a relationship and forces that keep people from leaving (Johnson, 1991; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In these views, heightened levels of attraction and dependence result in individuals feeling highly committed to their partners and relationships.

McDonald (1981), clearly influenced by Emerson's exchange framework, holds to the view that within-individual experiences of attraction and dependence do not sufficiently explain the emergence of commitment in ongoing partnerships. To this end, McDonald proposed that commitment emerges over time, only when individuals experience high levels of attraction to and dependence on their relationships and perceive that their partners are similarly invested in and rewarded by the relationships. In the absence of the perceptions of high and reciprocal degrees of attraction and

dependence, the motivation to work for the continuation of the relationships is tempered.

Relationship researchers conceive of trust, like commitment, as existing on a continuum. Trust involves a set of beliefs, expectations, and attributions about the degree to which partners can be counted on to support one's long-term interests (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kramer & Carnevale, 2008). Trust is important in relationships because it allows individuals to be less calculating and seek longer-term outcomes (Scanzoni, 1979) due to increased confidence and sense of security in the relationship (McDonald, 1981). McDonald (1981) pointed out, similar to his perspectives on commitment, that high levels of trust result only when individuals perceive that their partners share their high levels of attraction to and dependence on the relationship.

Finally, it is instructive to consider the methodological implications of Emerson's and McDonald's understanding of how the experiences of commitment and trust emerge and shift over time. Though commitment and trust are experienced by individuals, insights into the relationship factors contributing to these experiences are limited when respondents are only asked to report on their personal experiences of satisfaction and/or dependence. A more complete understanding of the factors building the experiences of commitment and trust follows from asking respondents about their experiences of attraction and dependence and their assessments of the degrees to which these experiences are shared by their partners.

## **Dominance and Power in Close Relationships**

Resource theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) is an example of an early exchange-based bid to explain the distributions of power, control, and dominance observed within intimate relationships. As an application of exchange theory to the domain of marital power, the basic tenet of resource theory is that the power of each spouse is directly dependent on the relative value of the resources he or she possess. The partners with the greater resources have more power in the relationships because they would lose less if the marriage dissolves (Blood & Wolfe, 1960).

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) accounted for power dynamics in relationships by focusing on the alternatives available to each partner. In their view, partners with the greatest access to alternatives hold the power advantage in their relationships due to their abilities to control the fate of their partners. In other words, within the exchange framework, power dynamics become established within ongoing relationships based on how control over valued resources and access to alternatives are distributed between partners. As such, power does not reside in a person, but power dynamics are certainly influenced by personal attributes like access to valued resources, a large pool of relationship alternatives and/or low financial and intrapsychic costs associated with the loss of an existing partnership. These personal attributes provide a basis for power only when they are asymmetrically distributed between partners (Cook & Emerson, 1978; McDonald, 1981).

## Conflict and Conflict Management

Conflict is an inevitable and, hence, emergent feature of ongoing intimate relationships. Discussions of conflict, in the relationship literature, follow two basic paths—one focuses on the sources of conflict, and the other focuses on how couples manage conflict. The exchange framework provides heuristic and theoretically parsimonious views on each of these issues.

The exchange framework highlights the role that the violations of expectations play in fostering conflict and tensions between partners. Conflict is activated when experiences, particularly involving issues at the core of partners' CL, fail to measure up to expectations (Nye, 1979; Sabatelli, 1984). The very fact that individuals differ with respect to the salience they attribute to different aspects of their relationship makes it hard to predict or generalize about the kinds of issues that will trigger conflict between partners (Nye, 1979).

Conflict is activated, as well, when distributive patterns consistently violate the expectations held by individuals. Here it is important to consider, once again, the fact that asymmetrical exchanges can be tolerated and viewed as fair. That is, while most individuals in a culture have somewhat similar views on what constitutes a fair, equitable, and/or just relationship, considerable variability exists as these culturally supported expectations are refined and shaped by a host of macro and micro level forces (McDonald, 1981).

Conflict management, from within the exchange perspective, involves efforts to reduce the dissonance between the expectations and the behaviors that violate these expectations. That is, conflicts around the violation of expectations typically involve bids on the parts of both partners to alter each other's behaviors and/or expectations (Sabatelli, 1988). In instances where the conflict is due to the violation of equity or fairness norms, conflict management strategies might involve (1) decreasing the costs of the relationship, (2) increasing the benefits derived from the relationship, or (3) decreasing the partner's benefits derived from the relationship (Blau, 1964). The broader point here is that a variety of strategies, some more constructive than others, might be used to restore the subjective experiences of equity and/or fairness.

In sum, the exchange framework's straightforward and theoretically parsimonious views of conflict and conflict management are one of the strengths of the theory. Conflict is a relational construct grounded in the emotions that are evoked when salient expectations are violated. There are wide variations in sources of conflict, in part, because people can differ widely in terms of what they expect from a partner or consider important in relationships.

Furthermore, while there are wide variations in conflict management strategies, all conflict management processes are strategic efforts to create a more acceptable alignment between behaviors and expectations. The wide variations in conflict management strategies that exist are moderated by the different degrees to which partners are symmetrically or asymmetrically rewarded by and dependent on their relationships.

## Relationship Stability

Within the exchange framework, individuals are likely to act to end their relationships when their relationships become less rewarding *and* better alternatives are thought to exist *and* the barriers or costs of the dissolution are perceived to be tolerable (Levinger, 1982; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As such, declines in satisfaction alone are not sufficient to explain instability if alternatives are unacceptable or the costs associated with ending the relationship are judged to be too high.

These exchange-based factors were used by Lewis and Spanier (1982) to describe the variances possible in stable and unstable marriage relationships. Their typology of relationships consisted of four different types of marital-exchange relationships broken down by the experiences of satisfaction and dependence—namely, satisfying/stable relationships, satisfying/unstable relationships, unsatisfying/stable relationships, and unsatisfying/unstable relationships. This typology is relevant because it compels relationship researchers to refrain from treating stability as proxies for relationship satisfaction or success.

Furthermore, the typology presents a compelling theoretical rationale for relationship researchers to attend to partners' experiences of attraction *and* dependence if the goal is to better understand the factors that differentiate stable from unstable partnerships. The 1950s was characterized, for example, by historically low levels of divorce. These rates shifted dramatically throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and demographers (cf., Amato & Irving, 2006; Cherlin, 2016) have suggested that these increases in the rates of divorce were tied to a constellation of factors associated with wives gaining access to alternatives and/or experiencing a lessening of the barriers to and costs associated with divorce—namely, access to contraception and the lowering of fertility rates, increases in access to education, and increases in employment opportunities and economic resources. These findings, in other words, support the conclusion that divorce rates increased because more women in the 1990s who were in unhappy relationships had alternatives and options not available to women in the past.

## Criticisms of the Framework

There are two themes present in the commonly expressed criticisms of exchange theories. One set of criticisms is directed at assumptions associated with individualistically oriented exchange theories. The other set of criticisms is directed at the failure of the framework to “contextualize” how partners' access to resources and experiences of dependence plays an important role in how exchange relationships are negotiated and, ultimately, structured and experienced.

### ***Theme One: Criticisms Related to Motivations***

This thematic set of criticisms is nicely summarized by White and Klein (2002). They called attention to the disconnect between the assumption that individuals are motivated by self-interest and the presence of altruistic behaviors and equitable and fair distribution norms within many intimate partnerships. They discussed how parenthood serves as an example of a type of relationship that is not congruent with the assumption that people are motivated by self-interest and the desire to maximize rewards and minimize costs.

This line of criticisms, in other words, is directed at how the framework's use of the market place metaphor and viewing people as being motivated by self-interest and the maximization of profits is not a good fit with the patterns of exchange observed within marriage and other family relationships. Clearly, these criticisms are directed at philosophical positions taken by individualistically oriented exchange theorists and revolve around assumptions that cannot be validated or invalidated.

It is the case, as well, that this thematic set of criticisms ignores the assumption made by more contemporary exchange theorists, namely, that individualistic and collectivistic motivations exist and are acceptable when the *type of and goals for relationships are considered*. In this regard, family scientists focus on communal relationships populated by partners who share, for the most part, the goals of intimacy and stability. Achieving these goals requires participants to negotiate highly interdependent patterns of exchange (e.g., Arriaga, 2013; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). By highlighting the "interdependence metaphor" instead of the exchange metaphor, these theorists focus attention on how partners within communal relationships, who have intimacy as a goal for their relationships, must strive to balance the levels of attraction to and levels of dependence on the relationship to promote feelings of intimacy and insure the continuation of the relationships over time.

### ***Theme Two: Ignoring the Context of Exchange Relationships***

In *The Future of Marriage* (Bernard, 1972), Jessie Bernard argued that the experiences of marriage were fundamentally different for husbands and wives due to the fact that marriages were more beneficial for men than for women. She concluded that the institution of marriage would survive only if the differences in the benefits distributed to husbands versus wives were restructured. The issues highlighted by Bernard are at the center of a persistent set of criticism directed by feminist scholars at the exchange framework over the past 50 years.

Specifically, the feminist critique of exchange perspectives revolves around its failure to address the ways in which exchange relationships between men and women are influenced by broader cultural, economic, and political conditions (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Feminist theorists challenge the exchange assumption



that women are free to negotiate rewarding and fair exchanges when they enter into the marriage market. As under-resourced partners, women have less power in their marital relationships, in general, and are more dependent on their relationships than their husbands (Scanzoni, 1979). This means that women have less options available to them than men when entering marriages and less options available to them when confronted with inequitable, unsatisfying, and oppressive exchanges.

It is relevant to note that early attempts at integrating the exchange framework into the marital realm focused on cultural factors as a way of explaining why women were satisfied with their husband-dominated marriages. For example, McDonald (1981) built his structural exchange theory around the assumption that cultural value orientations influence husbands' and wives' normative expectations for: (a) how each partner should contribute to the relationship, (b) what each partner deserves to obtain from the relationship, and (c) how positive and negative outcomes should be distributed between partners. For McDonald, the widespread existence of husband-dominated marital exchanges prior to the 1980s is accounted for by the fact that cultural value orientations resulted in both men and women believing that marriage should benefit husbands more than wives *and* that wives should derive benefits from providing their husbands with these benefits.

McDonald's theory is important because he discusses the connections between macro factors and micro relationship dynamics by tying normative marital orientations to historically grounded cultural value orientations. His work, however, does not address the feminist critique of the exchange perspective in that he fails to acknowledge the societally grounded and systemic factors that provide a context for how partners approach their exchange negotiations. The Feminist critique, in other words, remains relevant as long as the exchange framework fails to take into account how contextual factors influence the access that heterosexual married men and women have to valued resources and alternatives to unhappy partnerships.

Furthermore, the contextual blindness that the exchange framework is guilty of is fostered by its failure, over the years, to directly address how factors in addition to gender, like race, class, and sexual orientation, impact the negotiations between these diverse groups of intimate partners. These issues are highlighted in Sabatelli et al.'s (2018) bid to develop a more "ecologically/contextually nuanced" version of the exchange framework. Sabatelli et al. (2018) held the view that different subgroups of intimate partnerships are best understood when partners' relative access to resources and alternatives are contextualized by factors like their sexual orientation, race, class, or immigration status and the historically relevant policies and practices found within the major institutions in the country. That is, their work represents a call for exchange-oriented researchers to more carefully examine how differential access to resources and options creates different exchange realities for different subsets of intimate partnerships.

In sum, the feminist critique of the exchange framework chastises relationship researchers when they fail to pay attention to the ways in which gender influences the resources available to husbands when compared to wives. While this critique remains timely and relevant, it can be argued that the critique does not necessarily discount the usefulness or theoretical strengths of the exchange framework. Instead,

the critique can be framed as a challenge to exchange-based scholars to sharpen and broaden their focus on the contextually relevant factors influencing how different subsets of intimate partners experience interpersonal attraction and relational dependence.

## **The Research Applications of the Exchange Framework**

Theories are held in higher regard when they appear to meet a cluster of criteria. These criteria include the scope, testability, parsimony, and utility/heuristic properties of the theory (Fawcett, 2005). Meeting these criteria, in a more general sense, means that the theory is used by researchers to guide the justifications for and methods employed within their studies. In this regard, the exchange framework serves as an excellent example of a “concept-laden” and “variable-rich” framework that can be used as the theoretical foundation for a broad range of studies on how close relationships are structured and experienced (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

While the exchange framework is used to justify the design of studies on a broad array of personal and intimate relationships, it could be argued the breadth and depth of the theory is underutilized by relationship researchers to guide their studies. In a bid to energize the synergy between the exchange framework and the research on intimate and family relationships, a brief discussion of some of these key issues follows.

### ***Relative Inattention to the Dependence Dimension***

Attraction and dependence are the driving and restraining factors that impact on relationships that are structured and experienced. However, relatively few exchange-oriented researchers make a good-faith bid to examine within and between-partner indicators of dependence as moderators of relationship experiences. Ignoring dependence as a dimension of exchange relationships ignores a constellation of factors that contributes in powerful ways to how relationships are structured and experienced.

This inattention to dependence as a shaper of how relationships are structured and experienced may be exacerbated by the difficulties associated with operationalizing this complex construct. In the extant exchange research where bids are made to explore dependence, partner’s relative income levels or employment status are used as indicators of this construct (e.g., Sayer et al., 2011). It should be clear that these factors only partially capture the full range of factors that influence partners’ views on their relationship alternatives and the barriers to and costs associated with dissolving an existing relationship.

### ***Attention to Various Forms of Dyadic Data***

The exchange framework focuses on dyadic relationships. It follows, as such, that dyadic data are needed to better understand the factors that influence how social relationships are structured and experienced. This bid to encourage relationship researchers to collect and analyze dyadic data is not unique—similar bids have been made, sporadically, over the past three decades (see Proulx et al., 2017). The bid being made here to attend to dyadic data, however, is not based on an affection for more complex statistical modeling. It is grounded, instead, in a compelling theoretical rationale for collecting a different type of information from each member of a dyad.

Specifically, all exchange relationships involve the negotiation of a distribution of resources, rewards, and costs between partners that results in each partner experiencing a level of attraction to and dependence on the relationship. In these negotiations, partners pay attention to their perceptions of their own rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives *and* their perceptions of their partners' experiences of rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives. Clearly, in other words, the call here is for the collection of data that focuses on each partner's experiences within a relationship and data that focuses on each partner's perceptions of the partner's experiences of the relationship.

In other words, and following the lead of Emerson and McDonald, future research grounded in the exchange framework would be energized by paying greater attention to the ways in which relationship negotiations are moderated by the perceptions that individuals have of their respective partners' access to resources and alternatives. The belief that the partner has access to alternatives, for example, changes the approach to exchange negotiations. Concomitantly, the belief that the partner is highly invested in the relationship influences, inevitably, how the relationship is structured and experienced over time. It is rare that these types of dyadic data are used in studies of intimate partners.

### ***Variable-Centered and Person-Centered Approaches to the Study of Exchange Relationships***

The exchange framework serves as an example of a “concept-laden” and “variable-rich” framework that supports “variable-centered” approaches to relationship research (Sabatelli et al., 2018). Variable-centered approaches aim to relate variables to one another to determine the degree of associations between these variables. The assumption of a variable-centered approach is that the *sample is drawn from a single population*; therefore, on average, individuals experience factors similarly. Group differences can be examined, but only for observable groups. For example, variable-centered approaches can allow for detecting differences between males and females.

In the variable-centered studies grounded in the exchange framework, it is hypothesized, for example, that equity leads to increased satisfaction or high levels

of rewards lead to increased experiences of commitment. These variable-centered approaches to the study of intimate dyads assume that the relationship between the observed variables has the same impact on how relationships are structured and experienced across the entire population (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). While the exchange framework clearly implies that the relationship between satisfaction and commitment might be moderated by the degree of dependence on the relationship, which is influenced, in turn, by variables like gender, age, and years married, these variables are typically introduced as covariates. When this is done, insights are gained into the strength of the relationship between experiences of satisfaction and commitment. However, what is lost in the process is the ability to understand the variability that most certainly exists within the population of intimate and married dyads.

The study of the variability and uniqueness existing within and between relationships requires relationship researchers to make a different set of assumptions in the approaches used to the study of exchange relationships. To this end, relationship research that is interested in understanding the variability existing within and between relationships within the population is better accomplished by using person-centered approaches to research (Sabatelli et al., 2018). Rather than focusing on a variable having a specific effect on how the relationships is experienced, as an example, the person-centered focus is on the different ways variables cluster together to describe distinct groups. These distinct groups are not directly observable but are instead latent. That is, person-centered approaches assume that there is not a single population distribution. The assumption, instead, is that there are subgroups within the population made up of individuals who are more like each other than they are to those in other subgroups (Jung & Wickrama, 2008).

Person-centered analyses take several forms, although all have in common: (1) a rejection of the assumption that the entire population is homogeneous with respect to how variables influence each other and (2) a search for categories of individuals characterized by patterns of association among variables that are similar within groups and different between groups (Laursen & Hoff, 2006). To this end, person-centered analyses identify key patterns of values across variables, where the person, viewed holistically, becomes the unit of analysis (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). Theories do not typically lend themselves to thinking about the unique ways in which the person and his or her context have theoretical importance. The exchange framework, with its emphasis on within and between-partner variances in driving and restraining forces does, in fact, make these dyadic realities theoretically important (Sabatelli et al., 2018).

For example, reflecting back to the Lewis and Spanier (1982) typology of married couples, person-centered analyses are needed in order to better understand the differences that exist between the couples who are dissatisfied with their relationships but remain married—and whether and to what degree do factors like gender and indicators of socioeconomic standing operate within and between these groups. The point here being that Lewis and Spanier's application of exchange theory requires more nuanced approaches to the study of dyads, approaches that look at subgroups within the groups of stable and unstable partnerships.

Another example is the extant research on gay and lesbian couples. When gay and lesbian couples are studied using variable-centered approaches, it is assumed that the samples are homogeneous. This assumption is easily challenged, however, as a host of factors, like the cohort of partners, the regions of the country within which they reside, their religious background, can influence access to resources and alternatives. As such, as pointed out by Sabatelli et al. (2018), person-centered approaches would add to the understanding of the variability present within same-sex couples by identifying specific subgroups of individuals who are characterized by particular constellations of factors associated with their relationship exchanges and relationship outcomes. Such studies would provide new insights into the ways in which individual, relationship, and broader contextual factors interact and are related to exchange patterns.

A final note is in order here. Person-centered approaches are not necessarily better than variable-centered approaches to the study of exchange relationships. The approach used to the analyses of data should be, clearly, tied to the goals of the study. The exchange framework easily lends itself to variable-centered studies. The framework, however, when attention is directed at within and between-partner variances in factors promoting levels of attraction and dependence, is compatible with approaches to studies that are person-centered.

## Conclusion

There is a certain simplicity and elegance to the exchange framework when it comes to theorizing about the factors that account for the variability observed within social relationships. The framework is built around a simple metaphor. Relationships are goal directed and continuously evaluated and negotiated. Social exchanges result in patterns of attraction and dependence being established that, in turn, will determine whether the relationship is continued, discontinued, or renegotiated.

The simple metaphor, however, masks the theoretical elegance of the framework when it comes to understanding the many factors that account for the variability observed in how relationships are structured and experienced. Using the full breadth and depth of the framework compels researchers to pay attention to both micro and macro factors that influence the various types of driving and restraining forces experienced by partners within their relationships.

Lastly, the exchange framework is greater than the works of the various theorists who contributed to the development of the framework over the years. It is rather disingenuous to make a bid to deconstruct the unique contribution of each of these scholars. They were all trying to account for the factors contributing to the variability in social relationships, and they were all influenced by their interpretations of similar historical and philosophical readings. Collectively, their works contribute to the development and then the evolution of the exchange framework. What is interesting, in this regard, is to chart how the framework has evolved over the years with the expectation that the framework and its research applications are still evolving.

## References

- Amato, P. R., & Irving, S. (2006). Historical trends in divorce in the United States. In M. A. Fine, J. H. Harvey, M. A. Fine, & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 41–57). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Arriaga, X. B. (2013). *An interdependence theory analysis of close relationships* (Oxford handbook of close relationships). Wiley.
- Bergman, L. R., & Magnusson, D. (1997). A person-oriented approach in research on developmental psychology. *Development and Psychopathology*, *9*(2), 291–319.
- Bernard, J. (1972). *The future of marriage*. Bantam Books.
- Blau, P. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. Wiley.
- Blood, R., & Wolfe, D. M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of married living*. Free Press.
- Broderick, C. (1971). Beyond the five conceptual frameworks: A decade of development in family theory. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *33*, 139–159.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2016). A happy ending to a half-century of family change? *Population and Development Review*, *42*(1), 121–129.
- Clark, M. S., & Mills, J. (1993). The difference between communal and exchange relationships: What it is and is not. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *19*(6), 684–691.
- Cook, K., & Emerson, R. (1978). Power, equity and commitment in exchange networks. *American Sociological Review*, *43*, 721–739.
- Ekeh, P. (1974). *Social exchange: The two traditions*. Harvard University Press.
- Emerson, R. (1976). Social exchange theory. In A. Inkeles, J. Coleman, & N. Smelser (Eds.), *Annual review of sociology* (Vol. 2, pp. 335–362). Annual Reviews.
- Fawcett, J. (2005). Criteria for the evaluation of theory. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, *18*(2), 101–104.
- Foa, U. G., & Foa, E. B. (1974). *Social structures of the mind*. Thomas.
- Holmes, J. G., & Rempel, J. K. (1989). Trust in close relationships. In C. Hendrick (Ed.), *Review of personality and social psychology: Close relationships* (Vol. 10, pp. 187–219). Sage.
- Homans, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Johnson, M. P. (1991). Commitment to personal relationships. In W. H. Jones & D. W. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships* (Vol. 3, pp. 117–143). Jessica Kingsley.
- Jung, T., & Wickrama, K. A. S. (2008). An introduction to latent class growth analysis and growth mixture modeling. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *2*(1), 302–317.
- Kramer, R. M., & Carnevale, P. (2008). Trust and intergroup negotiation. *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Intergroup process*.
- Laursen, B., & Hoff, E. (2006). Person-centered and variable-centered approaches to longitudinal data. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *52*(3), 377–389.
- Leventhal, G. S. (1980). What should be done with equity theory? New approaches to the study of fairness in social relationships. In K. J. Gergen, M. S. Greenberg, & R. H. Willis (Eds.), *Social exchange: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 27–55). Plenum.
- Levinger, G. (1982). A social exchange view on the dissolution of pair relationships. In F. I. New (Ed.), *Family relationships: Rewards and costs* (pp. 97–122). Sage.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The elementary structures of kinship*. Beacon.
- Lewis, R. G., & Spanier, G. (1982). Marital quality, marital stability, and social exchange. In F. I. Nye (Ed.), *Family relationships: Rewards and costs* (pp. 49–66). Sage.
- McDonald, G. W. (1981). Structural exchange and marital interaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *43*, 825–839.
- Mills, J., & Clark, M. S. (1994). Communal and exchange relationships: Controversies and research. In R. Erber & R. Gilmour (Eds.), *Theoretical frameworks for personal relationships* (pp. 29–42). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nye, F. I. (1979). Choice, exchange and the family. In W. Burr, R. Hill, F. I. Nye, & I. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (Vol. II, pp. 1–41). Free Press.
- Nye, F. I., & Berardo, F. M. (1966). *Emerging conceptual frameworks in family analysis*. Macmillan.

- Proulx, C. M., Ermer, A. E., & Kanter, J. B. (2017). Group-based trajectory modeling of marital quality: A critical review. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 9(3), 307–327.
- Rusbult, C. E., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2003). Interdependence, interactions, and relationships. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 351–375.
- Sabatelli, R. M. (1984). The Marital Comparison Level Index: A measure for assessing outcomes relative to expectations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 46(3), 651–662.
- Sabatelli, R. M. (1988). Exploring relationship satisfaction: A social exchange perspective on the interdependence between theory, research, and practice. *Family Relations*, 37, 217–222.
- Sabatelli, R. M., Lee, H., & Ripoll-Nunez. (2018). Placing the social exchange framework in an ecological context. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(1), 32–48.
- Sabatelli, R. M., & Shehan, C. L. (1993). Exchange and resource theories. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 385–411). Plenum Press.
- Sayer, L. C., England, P., Allison, P. D., & Kangas, N. (2011). She left, he left: How employment and satisfaction affect women's and men's decisions to leave marriages. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(6), 1982–2018.
- Scanzoni, J. (1979). Social processes and power in families. In W. Burr, R. Hill, F. I. Nye, & I. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary theories about the family* (pp. 259–316). Free Press.
- Sprecher, S., & Schwartz, P. (1994). Equity and balance in exchange of contributions to close relationships. In M. J. Lerner & G. Mikula (Eds.), *Entitlement and the affectional bond: Justice in close relationships* (pp. 11–42). Plenum Press.
- Thibaut, J., & Kelley, H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Turner, J. (1986). *The structure of sociological theory* (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.
- White, J. M., & Klein, D. M. (2002). The social exchange and choice frameworks. In White & Klein (Eds.), *Family theories* (2nd ed., pp. 32–57). Sage.

# Application: Relational (in) Justice in Context



Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth and Maureen Perry-Jenkins

As Sabatelli points out (this volume), a key criticism of exchange theory is its “contextual blindness,” meaning that the internal dynamics of relationships and the complex meanings of rewards and costs are often studied as if occurring in a vacuum. Feminist theorists, in particular, have criticized exchange scholars’ explanations of how close, heterosexual relationships work, pointing to the lack of attention to how patriarchy and broader power structures seep into the day-to-day interactions of couples. Moreover, our limited focus on binary notions of gender and nuclear family forms has restricted our understanding of how family members often revise and reconstruct relationships to challenge traditional reward and dependency structures in relationships. Our aim in this paper is to provide examples from the field of work and family that consider how key concepts raised by Sabatelli such as costs and rewards, resources and alternatives, dependency, relational justice, and power play out within close relationships. We also consider the ways in which broader systems of power—such as classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and others—shape these relationship processes.

---

S. M. Wadsworth (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Health and Human Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

e-mail: [shelley@purdue.edu](mailto:shelley@purdue.edu)

M. Perry-Jenkins

Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, College of Natural Sciences, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_19)

279



## A Social Exchange Framework at Home

Key concepts in exchange theory include equity, fairness, and relational justice. Equity refers to the distribution of rewards and costs in a relationship: A partner with more rewards than costs is viewed as “overbenefitted,” while one with greater costs and fewer rewards is viewed as “underbenefitted.” Fairness refers to the evaluation of the distribution of these rewards and costs; thus what might look objectively inequitable, the woman does more housework than the man, can be viewed as fair by some partners. This apparent contradiction, which an unequal distribution of rewards and costs can be evaluated as fair, is best understood when we consider the broader social context surrounding these behaviors—this is where power, inequality, and sexism step in. Finally, relational justice refers to how benefits are distributed to partners in relationships and reflects partners’ experiences of equality or equity in a relationship.

Research has long demonstrated that the broader context of social class gives different meanings to behavior within families. Class differentials between spouses in marriages (e.g., middle-class husband and working-class wife, working-class husband and middle class wife) have been shown to influence what wives perceive as “fair” in terms of the division of housework. For example, middle-class wives who performed a higher percentage of housework reported less fairness in the relationship, but for working-class wives married to middle-class husbands, the unequal division of labor was unrelated to their perceptions of fairness (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). So it appears that in relationships where women hold more traditional indices of power (i.e., education, income), they expect greater equality in family work and see it as unfair if they do more. For working-class women who lack these traditional vestiges of power, however, performing more housework is more likely to be perceived as fair. Thus, class inequality gives different meanings to behaviors within a family, behaviors that hold different costs and rewards across social class groups. It is important to note, however, that questions addressing the intersections of race and social class were not explored in this study and future work needs to examine how cultural norms and values shape perceptions of equity.

Sabatelli’s attention to the issue of dependence in relationships is critical to understanding such patterns. He argues that the relationship between satisfaction, fairness, and commitment is moderated by dependence on the relationship. For example, it could be argued that a working-class woman married to a middle-class man is in a more dependent and less powerful position and thus construes rewards and costs differently. An example of this is provided by Jenna, a new mother in our study of the transition to parenthood (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). Jenna had just returned to full time work, 12 weeks after her baby’s birth, and her partner Josh also worked full time. She described how, despite working full-time, she still did the majority of housework and childcare. As she explained, “... I pretty much do all the home stuff. It is my job as the mom, really and plus, he brings home more money. It all works out, it is fair. We need his job.” From the outside looking in, it did not look fair. Both parents worked full time outside of the home, and Jenna provided 40% of

the family income. But Jenna described it as fair, based on cultural norms about what a mother is supposed to do and feeling dependent on Josh's job. For Josh, who we would describe as "overbenefitted" in this scenario, the division of labor was completely unrelated to his perceptions of fairness in the relationship. "I think things are working out just fine on the homefront, she is a good mom." Sabatelli argues that "a good faith bid" to understand relationship dynamics and exchanges requires both within and between-partner understanding of dependence and power.

The long history of studying close relationships has rested heavily on a gender binary system with male/female being the primary categories. Looking beyond the binary, however, highlights how deconstructing gender generates insights about dependency and power relations. Research on same-sex couples reinforces the idea that social context shapes couples' beliefs and behavior (Goldberg, 2013). Given the lack of social norms regarding the division of labor in lesbian and gay couples, research indicates that both housework and childcare are more equally shared, and perceived as more fair, in these couples. The vestiges of exchange theory still emerge in lesbian couples but in a different way. In lesbian couples experiencing the transition to parenthood, the partner with higher education and income performed less childcare, but the other partner performed more household chores in an effort to equalize labor—something less likely to be seen in heterosexual couples. The couples talked about the value of egalitarianism, which was highly valued in same-sex unions. Moore (2008), in her study of Black lesbian stepfamilies, describes the complexity of power hierarchies in families that still are developed in response to societal scripts. She illustrates how even when parent sex is the same, gendered notions about caregiving and providing seep into constructions of parenting and home caregiving. As she notes, "this work suggests the existence of power differentials—power differentials not centered around income but around other expectations and identities—that are revealed in processes of family formation and interaction" (p.353).

The interaction between gender and context is even more nuanced. In a study that included both same- and different-sex couples, Pollitt et al. (2018) found that husbands and wives who perceived greater power-sharing in their relationships reported higher marital quality. Perceptions of power-sharing differed by gender, however. In couples where one or both partners identified as male, spouses perceived themselves as sharing more power when they conformed more with social norms for gender. In relationships containing only women, relationship dynamics were independent of social norms for gender.

## **Social Exchanges in the Context of Employment**

Switching to the work context, social exchanges take place in workplaces between co-workers, between workers and supervisors, and even between workers and organizations. Here too, equity and fairness are in play, and contextual factors figure prominently in shaping the value of rewards and costs. Many challenges in

work-family relationships arise because workers and employers perceive rewards and costs differently and because too little attention has been given to systematic variations among workers' perceptions of rewards and costs as a function of their class, occupation, or other characteristics—and too much paid to certain kinds of workers (e.g., salaried, middle class, white).

In workplaces, power and access to resources are structured both formally through organizational policies and informally through relationships between and among supervisors and workers. Sabatelli observes that dependence has not received sufficient attention from researchers, and workplaces offer plentiful opportunities to observe dependence in action. Because unequal access to resources is “baked in” to workplaces, where compensation, benefits, and work conditions are highly stratified, skilled workers in high-demand occupations typically are far less dependent on their current employers than other workers because they have many more alternatives. For example, in a nationally representative study in Canada, while workers in general worked more hours when job demands were higher, more educated workers tended to do so only when they were provided more favorable working conditions. Highly educated workers are more likely to be offered such opportunities because they are more easily able than other workers to find jobs elsewhere and thus less dependent on their current employers (Genin et al., 2016). Universities are a good illustration of this pattern, where it is common for faculty to be granted more flexibility than support staff about when and where they do their work.

Familiar differences between high- and low-status workers also have a gender twist. Gerstel and Clawson (2014) systematically interrogated the combination of class and gender dynamics in a study of different types of health care jobs characteristically segregated by gender and status. They examined four occupations: physicians (higher-status men), emergency medical technicians (lower-status men), registered nurses (higher-status women), and nursing assistants (lower-status women). Data revealed that men and women with class advantages (i.e., physicians and nurses) used it to conform to gender norms; thus, physicians worked more hours, and nurses bargained for schedule predictability in order to care for children, while class-disadvantaged workers, who were more dependent on their employers, were forced to “undo” gender (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014, p. 395). Although both EMTs and nursing assistants were class-disadvantaged, the predominantly male EMTs were able to adjust their involvement in overtime and second jobs to respond to their family's need for their involvement with child supervision. The predominantly female nursing assistants, however, who were disadvantaged in terms of both class and gender, faced rigid demands at both home and work. At home, nursing assistants were disproportionately likely to be the sole or primary breadwinner for their families and the primary caregivers for their children. At work, they were denied access to sick leave, vacations, schedule flexibility, and sufficient hours of work, sometimes in violation of federal policies such as FMLA. They reported being sanctioned or fired if they missed work. Their jobs were structured as 24 or 32 hours per week so that they could be asked to work “overtime” without passing the threshold for overtime pay. Workers reported:

Respondent: If you've got diarrhea or vomiting, they still want you to come in. At our meetings, they say a sore throat is not really a sore throat. Lots of times they'll say to come in and do what you can and if you can't stay, we'll let you go home. But lots of times they won't let you go home. The whole idea is to intimidate you so you won't call out.

Question: Have you ever talked to management about that?

Respondent: Others have and lost their jobs.

Another CNA asserts, "Even if you have doctor's notes, emergency room letters, you're terminated. That's it—no ifs, ands, or buts, no explanations." Thus, these workers experienced conditions that reinforced not only class disadvantages but also a gendered division of labor that systematically underbenefitted women. Less skilled workers with fewer attractive alternatives are often the more dependent partner in their relationships with their employers and forced to accept unequal reciprocity. Gerstel and Clawson (2014) emphasized that class advantages vary systematically not just by gender but also by race, observing that almost half of the nursing assistants in their sample were people of color or members of ethnic minority groups.

Working in a female-predominated occupation can be costly. McClintock (2020) found that working in a gender-atypical occupation reduced the likelihood of forming a first union (i.e., marriage or cohabitation) among men but not women regardless of multiple controls including sexual orientation and gender ideology. Thus, men faced romantic penalties for their gender-atypical employment, paying a price not just at work but also in their personal lives.

A hopeful alternative to this gloomy reality comes from recent international research comparing workers in countries that have used different policy strategies to challenge class and gender stratification. Kornrich and Eger (2016) studied household divisions of household labor and perceptions of fairness in 30 European countries as a function of wealth, leave policies, and government benefits provided to families. In countries with more egalitarian policies and benefits, calculations of "fairness" appeared to have shifted, with both men and women becoming more likely to label unequal household divisions of labor as unfair and thus more likely to take or favor actions supporting egalitarianism.

Changes at the macro level can extend all the way down to individual physiology. Maume et al. (2018) also studied European countries to examine the impact of gender inequality on indicators of stress among men and women. Overall, men's and women's stress and sleep problems were tied to their gender-conforming responsibilities—women's to the presence of young children and men's to their employment situations. But in countries with greater gender equality, rates of sleep problems were more than 60% lower than in other countries for *both* men and women. The authors argued that maintaining traditional views of masculinity compromises well-being and the ability to care for oneself and others—and not just for women. As it becomes more common and acceptable for people to identify as diverse in terms of gender expression, such penalties may weaken and promote workplace policies, programs, and practices that acknowledge and accept the full range of gender expression.

## Implications

Social exchange theory provides many useful angles from which to better understand work-family relationships, especially when contextualized to consider the dynamics of class, gender, culture, power, and other factors that shape the meaning of rewards and resources. Choices that are puzzling at first glance become rational when understood through the lenses of dependence and relational justice. Social exchange concepts can fruitfully be used to consider dynamics associated with systemic inequities within both households and workplaces and to deepen understanding of why individuals might believe that unequal arrangements are “fair.” Systematic attention to patterns of “over” or “under” benefit can reveal how and why partners’ and workers’ experiences are so radically different.

Most studies of work and family still adopt a binary view of gender focused on “men’s” and “women’s” experiences, occupations, and representations in government and corporate leadership positions. While much remains to be accomplished regarding equal status for women, the binary focus obscures lessons that can be learned from diverse families with members who are non-binary, LGBTQ, and diverse in other ways. In a seminal article about family diversity, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) highlighted ways in which poorly constructed comparisons of family structures that confounded number of parents, sexual identity, gender expression, and marital status led to questionable or incorrect conclusions. Paying more attention to the diversity of family arrangements will help to deconstruct notions of “male” and “female,” expand gender scripts, and spur transformation of social norms.

Looking ahead, increasing diversity in family configurations offers important research opportunities to deepen our understanding of dynamics related to dependence relational justice within both households and workplaces and will likely reveal even more inequities and ways to challenge them. There are also opportunities for practitioners to develop information and tools to help families make thoughtful decisions about ways to allocate responsibilities for paid and unpaid work that support healthy relationships despite implicit biases or social norms. Yet another exciting frontier is the growing evidence that policy strategies can be effective in shifting the algebra of relational justice—the perceived value of rewards and costs—within households by increasing equity at the level of organizations and nations.

## References

- Biblarz, T. J., & Stacey, J. (2010). How does the gender of parents matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 3–22.
- Genin, E., Haines, V. Y., Pelletier, D., Rousseau, V., & Marchand, A. (2016). Why the long hours? Job demands and social exchange dynamics. *Work*, 55, 539–548.
- Gerstel, N., & Clawson, D. (2014). Class advantage and the gender divide: Flexibility on the job and at home. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120, 395–431.

- Goldberg, A. E. (2013). "Doing" and "Undoing" gender: The meaning and division of housework in same-sex couples. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 5(2), 85–104.
- Kornrich, S., & Eger, M. A. (2016). Family life in context: Men and women's perceptions of fairness and satisfaction across thirty countries. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 23(1), 40–69.
- Maume, D. J., Hewitt, B., & Ruppner, L. (2018). Gender equality and restless sleep among partnered Europeans. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80, 1040–1058.
- McClintock, E. A. (2020). Occupational sex composition and marriage: The romantic cost of gender-atypical jobs. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82, 911–933.
- Moore, M. R. (2008). Gendered power relations among women: A study of household decision making in Black, lesbian stepfamilies. *American Sociological Review*, 73(2), 335–356.
- Perry-Jenkins, M., & Folk, K. (1994). Class, couples, and conflict. Effects of the division of labor on assessments of marriage in dual-earner families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 165–180.
- Pollitt, A. M., Robinson, B. A., & Umberson, D. (2018). Gender conformity, perceptions of shared power, and marital quality in same- and different-sex marriages. *Gender & Society*, 32(1), 109–131.

# The Family Life Course Framework: Perspectives on Interdependent Lives and Inequality



Kevin M. Roy and Richard A. Settersten Jr.

Families are natural spaces within which multiple generations connect and develop interdependencies (Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016). Indeed, a key tenet of the life course approach—and arguably the most important and the most underdeveloped—is that of “linked lives,” which is that an individual’s life affects and is affected by others (e.g., Elder, 1994; Landes & Settersten, 2019; Settersten, 2015). An individual’s life is defined and shaped by family members, friends, and “consociates” (Plath, 1980) in local and global communities who share life choices and chances. Within the field of family science, the family life course framework is unique in its careful attention to the linked lives of family members, both within and across generations over time.

At a broad level, life course researchers across multiple disciplines strive to understand how social change leaves its imprint on human development. Studies in this paradigm situate individual lives—and in this case, family relationships—within the complicated contexts of contemporary and historical social changes. Twenty years into a new century, family relationships face unprecedented challenges in recent human history, including the threat of a global pandemic, the migration of families across national borders, and climate change and natural disasters that leave families homeless. Moreover, long-standing and growing structural inequalities result in starkly different life experiences for families with and without social privileges and economic resources. Family scientists cannot ignore the pervasive impact of national and global inequalities on families.

---

K. M. Roy (✉)

Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland,  
College Park, MD, USA  
e-mail: [kroy@umd.edu](mailto:kroy@umd.edu)

R. A. Settersten Jr.

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Public Health and  
Human Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA

How can the family life course framework, and specifically the concept of linked lives, help us to understand or even challenge these disparities? Nearly 30 years ago in the first edition of *The Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods*, Bengtson and Allen (1993) took a first major step in conceptualizing the family life course framework, rigorously charting the historical emergence of the life course paradigm and advancing a comprehensive framework of concepts to guide family scholarship, especially concepts related to time. In that same edition of the *Sourcebook*, Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, and Johnson (1993) further argued that the life course framework, with its attention to intergenerational relationships and historical context, had the unique potential to understand the diverse and unequal experiences of racial and ethnic minority families over time.

The goal of this chapter is to advance a more specific conceptualization of linked lives within the life course framework by focusing on interdependencies and inequalities in family life. We begin by reviewing the origins of the life course framework and its core concepts and assumptions. We then focus on the concept of linked lives, which we see as a gateway for advancing both life course and family science, but which is in need of greater specificity. We offer five distinct dimensions for analyzing interdependencies in family relationships. We conclude with a consideration of unique contexts that are likely to confront family life course researchers in coming decades, and how an enhanced linked lives framework will result in a deeper and more comprehensive life course framework for family science.

## Historical Development and Core Concepts

Behavioral and social sciences grew significantly in the United States after World War II, as public and private funders collaborated to create new research centers and initiatives. The projects they generated, however, were focused on cross-sectional data and often neglected the influence of the environment on human behavior (Elder & Giele, 2009). By the 1960s, there was growing interest in longitudinal studies and in aging, both of which were central to fostering the life course framework. In the United States, for example, the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) emphasis on the etiology of health and illness reinforced the need to examine the medical and life histories of individuals. Gerontologists also began to recognize aging as a lifelong process of growth and decline (e.g., Baltes et al., 1980). These trends prompted the need to distinguish between the concepts of age, cohort, and period and the possibility that they might be disentangled in empirical research (e.g., Riley, 1973; Rosow, 1978; Ryder, 1965), particularly through cross-sequential research designs (e.g., Schaie, 1965).

These trends also made visible the need to account for age as an organizing dimension of the life course (e.g., Cain, 1964; Riley et al., 1988; for a review of age as a property of individuals and social organization, see Settersten & Godlewski, 2016). In particular, both occupational and family transitions could be studied as "early," "on-time," or "late" relative to age norms (Neugarten et al., 1965). The need



to account for historical time also emerged, exemplified through Elder's (1974) landmark analysis of how the Great Depression altered the structure, functioning, and resources in families, which in turn affected the development of children. Elder's study and the program of research that followed crystallized life course research into a set of paradigmatic principles, which we describe later.

The life course framework leaped forward in the 1970s as researchers from various disciplines confronted major questions that continue to challenge social science: How do individuals change in tandem with a changing world? How do historical events and social changes affect lives, and how do individuals cope, adapt, and remake their worlds in response? How do individuals create social change as they make new choices in family, work, and education—thereby opening new life pathways and prompting institutional responses? The life course framework brought together symbolic interactionist and ecological approaches, turning attention to how society gives social and personal meaning to aging and the life course, and especially to age-related transitions that are socially created, expected, and shared (Hagestad, 1991).

The life course tradition has been informed by two primary traditions in the behavioral and social sciences, one emphasizing human development as a lifelong process (time) and the other emphasizing the ecology of human development (place or space). As such, life course is one of the few theoretical approaches that explicitly treats the experiences of individuals in families as a key life context, set within the larger context of societal change. It offers a window into how families affect individuals, social change affects families, and families mediate the effects of social change on individuals. For each of these angles, it adds persistent emphasis on how these phenomena change over time. Life course studies, therefore, give prominence to multiple social contexts, multiple analytic levels, cross-disciplinary perspectives, and the exploration of continuity and change (Elder, 1998; Hareven, 1977).

In general, a life course framework in family science offers sensitizing concepts that frame relationship and identity change over time. A life course framework is often encapsulated with five “paradigmatic” principles (e.g., Elder et al., 2015). *Lifespan development* recognizes that human development is a lifelong process, not stopping at adulthood, but extending from birth to death. Each phase of life is unique and significant, and each involves gains as well as losses. *Human agency* reflects that individuals play active roles in determining their outcomes, although these decisions are constrained by life circumstances and relationships. The life course must be understood within *historical time and place* (including events, social conditions, and changes marked by birth cohorts). The principle of *timing* identifies how the experiences or consequences of a life event or transition depend on when (the age or life stage) that it occurs. *Linked lives* illustrate that individual lives are deeply entangled with other people; what happens in one life has implications for another, and as such, we organize our lives with and around others.

The emergence of the life course framework, coupled with advances in longitudinal research designs and methods, meant that researchers could better capture person-population processes and the changing interactions between individuals and their social environments. The assumption that often shapes the application of the

life course framework, as well as other theoretical traditions and research methods, is that some family phenomena can be understood only by examining how they result from individuals and their interactions. For more than a century, this assumption has informed the debate over methodological individualism versus methodological holism that continues to haunt much of social science (Udehn, 2002).

With respect to this debate, the life span tradition in developmental psychology differs from the sociological life course tradition (Diewald & Mayer, 2009; Settersten, 2009). That is, the life span tradition leans toward methodological individualism, as it assumes that the unit of analysis is the individual's ontogenetic developmental pathway and that a normative pathway to optimal well-being can be defined, known, and predicted. The life course tradition, in contrast, leans toward methodological holism, as it assumes that the life course is heavily shaped by social forces. Life course theorists see social institutions as central to structuring human lives. For example, work is understood to be a primary domain that organizes the life course, through schools that prepare people for work and government policies that heavily shape employment and retirement trajectories. The practices and policies of institutions reinforce normative pathways (Kohli, 1986; Mayer, 2004), and individuals make decisions and take action within the confines of these structures—what Evans (2002) calls “bounded agency” or Settersten and Gannon (2005) call having “agency within structure.” (For recent theoretical advances in treating “agency” in the life course, see Heckhausen & Buchmann, 2019; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Kohli, 2019; and Landes & Settersten, 2019).

However, global economic restructuring and the rise of contingent work may portend an “end-of-work” society, in which the family, and not work, becomes the organizing institution across the life course (Hagestad, 1992; Kohli, 1986). The “institution” of family exists across the life course, although its structure and functions change as people grow older. The first concise statement on theorizing family experiences over the life course came with Bengtson and Allen's (1993) chapter in the *Sourcebook*. The authors traced a trail of research stretching over 100 years, identifying relevant themes to inform a family life course approach, which included complex temporal and social contexts for development, diachronic assumptions about continuity and change, and emerging heterogeneity and diversity among families and individuals over time.

This last theme pointed to the significance of multiple time clocks in family life, especially through the concepts of generation and cohort. Recent decades have brought greater attention to these matters of time in the life course, including attention to the social processes that lead to the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage over the life of an individual or cohort (e.g., Dannefer, 2018; Laub & Sampson, 2006; O'Rand, 2002). What is less understood is how family relationships, which sit between individual and cohort level analyses, might also contribute to this range of divergent and unequal outcomes over time.

## Linked Lives in Families Over the Life Course

Linked lives is the single concept in the life course framework that has resonated most with family researchers (Marshall & Bengtson, 2011). However, many studies of linked lives leave the concept underspecified. Within families, a status—such as being and having a sibling—may hold the potential for a linkage, but its dimensions remain unexplored if we refer only to the status. Theoretical advances in family life course research require an exploration of interdependencies that make up individual behavioral processes (Bernardi et al., 2019). More broadly, these interdependencies also reflect larger structural inequities in the power or resources of groups as they unfold in diverse contexts (Trask, 2018).

To expand the usefulness of the linked lives concept, with more rigorous application to family relationships, we might examine mechanisms for how, when, and for how long lives are interdependent and with what consequences these interdependencies come. As a way forward, we offer five distinct dimensions for further conceptualizing linked lives. The first three dimensions (configuration, content, and valence) are basic building blocks for family relationships, and the last two capitalize on the uniqueness of the life course framework (environment and time). It is important to note that these dimensions are in reality often interrelated. In particular, the first three relationship dimensions are shaped by time and environments. These dimensions are summarized in Table 1 and discussed below.

### Configuration of Linked Lives

Linked lives within families are defined by the foundational question of *who*: which family members are configured in interdependent relationships. From this foundation, research is often focused on normative dyadic relationships (e.g., parent and child, between spouses) and probes the effects of one family member’s circumstances or behaviors on the well-being and health of the other family member.

What may be missed with a focus on dyadic relationships is the complexity of family configurations, especially as they shift over time. Families are adaptive and creative; individuals hold and create relationships that are flexible and changing. For example, a study of children and their mothers in Black and Brown families

**Table 1** Dimensions of linked lives

Dimension	Definition
Configuration	<i>Who</i> is in a linkage
Content	<i>What</i> transpires or is transferred in linkages
Valence	<i>The quality</i> of a linkage
Environment	<i>Where</i> such linkages are enacted
Time	<i>When</i> linkages are enacted; how their dimensions change over time

may neglect the additional roles that women play as nonbiological “othermothers” in extended kin networks (Burton & Hardaway, 2012). These mothers take on multiple roles in families that both extend the focus on mother-child dyads and on relationships beyond marriage or biological parenting. Researchers can also conceptualize families in an intergenerational framework with an extended network of relationships, such as when adults sit between relations with their children and with their parents, who in turn have developing relationships with grandchildren. Gilligan et al. (2018) utilize a multigenerational approach to understanding how inequalities accrue across generations through mechanisms like student debt or health disparities. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) describe “social convoys”—kin and non-kin relationships that unfold together through time. All of these approaches recognize the limitations of a focus strictly on dyadic family relationships.

Life course researchers must also consider how family configuration—including who is present in a family household—is impacted by social forces and institutional policies. For example, Black families have been forcibly reconfigured over the past 30 years as disproportionate numbers of young Black men are placed into correctional facilities under mass incarceration. After incarceration, as well as through bouts of homelessness, poverty, mental illness, and/or trauma, attempts to reconnect broken relationships become efforts to reconfigure whole families (Padgett et al., 2012; Roy & Lucas, 2006; Ward et al., 2014).

Often, theoretical advances draw from metaphors that define the current historical moment. In the early twenty-first century, society is understood as a rapidly evolving network of local and global relationships, reflecting the ubiquity and spread of information technology around the world. A conceptualization of family relationships as a network, or nexus, with multiple related connections and an emergent pattern of its own, may move us closer to understanding dynamic family configurations over time. As filmmaker Lois Stark (2018, pp. 104, 130) asserts:

Networks are wild with interconnections, reverberations, and possibilities.... They encourage us to think in terms of relationships between multiple moving parts... Networks have many centers, not the single hub of a web, not the central open core of a helix. Networks are resilient—constantly transitioning, learning, and adapting.

Complemented by effective methodologies and analytical techniques, the concept of a family nexus may model the next wave of family life course research.

### ***Content of Linkages***

The nature of a linkage is a connection, but if lives are “linked” over time, *what* is the linkage exactly? Family relationships are based in complex and dynamic exchanges between family members. The life course framework signals the need to examine interdependencies over time as reciprocal, not unidirectional. Families may be linked through co-constructed and shared meanings of family experiences that shift over personal and family time (Daly, 1996). For example, families rely on

long-held beliefs and values that are rooted in cultural contexts or religious traditions. As families mark the births, deaths, and other transitions that envelop family networks, they also create family stories that may be circulated and embellished across generations (Pratt & Fiese, 2004; Roy, 2006). Shared family stories and clear life course role expectations are challenged, however, by changes in longevity, family configuration, or even the duration of certain life transitions (such as emerging adulthood; Arnett et al., 2010; Berlin et al., 2010) that have given rise to linkages with few norms of reciprocity (Roy, 2014).

The content of linkages can provide meaning and opportunity in the lives of family members as well as drain and constrain them. Further, linkages are not only chosen but enforced by structural and institutional actors or policies, such as guardianship, custody, or child support. For example, the social factors that lead to poverty may result in financial disadvantage or health disparities that accumulate in one person's life course, but also accrue collectively in families, as daily strategies to escape poverty may bind family members to each other.

Obligation for physical care, financial security, and emotional well-being may be some of the most basic linkages that are uniquely anchored in family relationships. The landmark study *All Our Kin* (Stack, 1974) powerfully illustrated how poverty challenges the obligations to care for and provide material support in extended kin networks. Over generations, women most often are the "kin-keepers" of family life, managing kin work obligations (Stack & Burton, 1993) for multiple members at once. Within a network of kin and non-kin, Stack's interviews and observations did not reveal the neglect of care, but instead a set of strengths-based interdependencies that were far more complex than the normative ideals of unidirectional care and support provided by biological parents to their children.

Interdependent family relationships are formed and sustained as families struggle with adversity, as well as when families pass along privilege (Letiecq, 2019), both of which contribute to growing divides in income, health, and wealth. The passing of privilege as class status or power takes different forms across the life course and across historical periods, ranging from transferal of family properties, college tuition, down payment for homes, matchmaking, or even courses on financial asset management geared to young children. As shown by Lareau's (2011) ethnography of class in family life, resourced parents cultivated language and skill in their children in order to maintain or ensure their privilege. Similarly, in Hagerman's study (2017), White fathers socialized their children toward progressive anti-racist perspectives yet utilized their own wealth for international travel to "teach children about racism," further widening gaps in opportunities between White and Black youth. In families with limited resources, whatever resources exist may not strengthen intergenerational ties but instead strain them and inhibit reciprocal care. In Katherine Newman's ethnographic study of aging Black adults (2006), the contested dissemination of retirement funds or a family home threatened the bonds between siblings and their parents.

Finally, ascribed statuses also may be shared among family members, linking them across generations and environments. For example, federal policies that determine citizenship based on immigrant or refugee status—and recent policies

that separate migrant parents from children at the border of the United States—discern who does and does not belong in the United States. The legacy of discrimination and fear due to anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, or oppression of sexual minority individuals can bind or divide family members across generations who represent different cohorts with unique views and historical experiences. These traumatic events may appear limited to the lives of individuals, but epigenetic research (Kim et al., 2017) shows that the biosocial consequences of inherited intergenerational trauma are carried “under the skin” of multiple generations. The family life course framework can expand a conceptualization of linked lives beyond individual trauma to include family- and community-level trauma that unfolds over decades. Similarly, resilience and efforts to heal from disparities do not only emerge within a person in a moment, but within families over time, through meaning-making, changes in family configuration, communication patterns, and even emotional management (Walsh, 2006).

### *Valence of Linkages*

Apart from recognition of what “is between” family members, linked lives must address the valence of this content. Through innovative research on ambivalence and ambiguous loss, family life course researchers have stressed the deep and contradictory tone of adult relationships as they develop over time. These complex lifelong family interdependencies cannot be captured as a simple reflection of relationship quality (typically related to individual satisfaction; Fowers et al., 2016). They must address affective quality or feeling tone, which is an understudied aspect of family relationships over the life course (Daly, 2003).

What we refer to as valence refers to the attractiveness of interdependencies, the averseness of independencies, as well as the complex range of emotions that overlay interactions. Family relationships are in part so complex because they are not “chosen” and not necessarily meant to achieve “satisfaction.” They reflect long-term bonds, often our most intimate, with others who see us through every stage of life. The valence of relationships may vary over time, becoming positive or negative, or even ambivalent (when both contrasting qualities are present, as we highlight below). With longer lives, family members now share more years in relationships and one might expect to see more variation in valence. Family members may have interdependencies that are intense and continuous, that are relinquished or become dormant, that become fractured or fragile, or that are reconstructed and reactivated after estrangement, to describe just a few trajectories.

It is important to understand how these first three relationship dimensions of linked lives—configuration, content, and valence—interact or otherwise inform one another. Let us provide an example: Two sisters, 8 years apart in age, represent a configuration, or a dyadic status within a family network. The content of their linked lives is what transpires between them—for example, because their parents are working, the older sister cares for the younger one, feeding her breakfast, doing her

hair, and readying her for school each day. The valence of their relationship, however, is captured in the resentment and anger that the older sister feels in having these obligations and the guilt that the younger sister feels in her sister having to provide this care. Placing this relationship in time and environment, the sisters grew up during World War II, when their middle-class mother and father had to work full time to do their part in the nation's wartime effort. It was only after almost 50 years that the sisters move past lingering bad feelings and establish a new valence based on appreciation and mutual respect.

The ambiguous loss framework (Chap. 37, this volume) may be the most widely recognized application of valence in linked lives in families. Physical presence or absence may directly influence the valence of family relationships, but it also may be defined by a shared psychological presence or absence of family members. For example, the valence of family relationships may change over time when military personnel are deployed around the globe (physical absence but psychological presence) or when older adults experience memory and identity loss due to the onset of Alzheimer's disease (physical presence but psychological absence). In each of these circumstances, a wide range of family relationships undergo shifts in emotional tone and quality.

Valence may vary across cultural contexts as well. In Western cultures that emphasize individualization at an early age, research may focus on the independence in relationships. In contrast, in cultural contexts that emphasize collective relationships and identity, valence may be shaped by overlapping interdependent family members who share a sense of family history and well-being. In Latino family research, the concept of *familismo* illustrates the importance of high-quality family interaction in intricate and dense networks. However, recognition of variation among Latino families has challenged this grounded understanding of interdependencies. As thousands of transnational families in Central America navigate the migration process across borders, fleeing violence but seeking opportunities for family stability, the high-quality closeness in *familismo* is reworked to reflect the realities of mothering and fathering at a distance, with physically or psychologically absent parents (Mahalingam et al., 2009; Roy & Yumiseva, 2021).

The emergence of ambivalence studies also recognizes the critical importance of valence in linked lives among family members. Ambivalence identifies relationships in which individuals hold two different—often contrasting—views of the same family member. Adult children may love and care for their aging parents but may also feel rejection or dismissal at the same time (Connidis, 2015; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998). This complex valence may be the toll of decades of reciprocal obligations and drama between family members. Similarly, research on family estrangement may pose crucial new directions for advancing life course research on linked lives. When family members become estranged, linkages decay, and relationships are fundamentally altered in ways that challenge the sustainability of relationships throughout the family network over time (Blake, 2017).

## *Environments of Linked Lives*

Linkages between family members are shaped in meaningful ways by the social and physical environments in which linkages occur. Family researchers must be sensitized to these spaces and how they change over time. Environments affect expectations about the roles that family members play and how they interact with each other; family members may have control over how these expectations change or in how they must respond and adapt to changing environments. Family life course researchers must recognize that an equivalent interdependent relationship—between two siblings, for example—may develop in starkly different ways if families live in neighborhoods with homeowners, well-financed schools with modern facilities, and thriving businesses, as opposed to with streets that lack grocery stores or banks, families on the move from apartment to apartment, and with scars of gentrification. With the distinction of “haves and have nots” around the world, growing up in the global South more likely means a life course shaped by disruption and movement of large family networks away from climate disasters or violence and toward places in the global North that offer more stability.

Interdependencies are shaped by spaces of daily interaction, perhaps most importantly when family members share households, neighborhoods, and communities (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). Proximity and frequent interaction in daily routines can determine the content of linkages and their valence; while these relationships can be marked by greater closeness and intimacy, they can be more conflictual as well. Separation and divorce prompt changes in living spaces, which in turn set new conditions for interactions. Interdependencies also quietly diverge when families can afford to spend most of their time in privatized spaces, relying on personal purchases for technology, transportation, care, or entertainment, in contrast to those who rely on public spaces with limited shared computer use, public transportation, or communal spaces such as public parks.

Social and physical environments also operate on different clocks, creating “time binds” that make their way into relationships. The tensions that people feel in managing households and workplaces, for example, result because work time is linear and predictable and family time is nonlinear and unpredictable. Also, for more than a century, workplaces were located outside of households as the center of family life, and abrupt changes during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated long-standing social class differences. For families with portable white-collar jobs, education, work, and family life were once again consolidated in the household. Workers in many blue-collar or skilled frontline jobs were required to work in person under the threat of virus, with their children at home alone or with a partner who had to step back from the paid workforce.

Social institutions that manage the life course of families have a physical presence within relationships over time. Policies that regulate children’s mandatory attendance in school until the age of 18 directly shape interaction over time within and between family members, as does access to health care and provision of insurance, facilitating family members’ care provision for each other. Toxic



environments—with unhealthy air/soil conditions or prevalent violence—suggest how disadvantage accumulates over the life course. For disadvantaged families, supportive relationships are often stressed to the breaking point as children churn through poor schools, or as young adults churn from their homes to correctional facilities and back again, often many times over a few years.

Finally, family lives are linked in nonphysical, virtual spaces. With a range of online communications, via text, Zoom or FaceTime chats, or other social media, researchers have just begun to examine how virtual environments affect closeness, intimacy, and sharing in family relationships over time. Intensive parenting styles and parent-child relationships, for example, can be extended for many years when parents and children are a brief daily text away. New technology can create spaces for the construction and maintenance of family ties across multiple generations as well. The availability of genealogical apps for online exploration of archival data has encouraged family members to fill in empty spaces on family trees. In effect, personal family research allows generations of family members to reach back, and to reach out, to identify, locate, and even communicate with other generations across time and space.

### *Time and Linked Lives*

Time is the most central dimension to understanding linked lives in the life course framework. It is an important dimension in its own right, but it also interacts with each of the prior dimensions we have outlined in that they can all be understood *over time*. As we locate people in time, age, cohort, and generation are critical for the study of families: age to represent the position in the life course, cohort to represent the position in history, and generation to represent the position in the extended family. These multiple time clocks provide a window to understand how individual agency and family decisions are shaped by cultural imperatives of race, ethnicity, group membership, and even structural power (Trask, 2018).

Relationships can be understood on different time scales, ranging from daily experiences to whole lives that incorporate the pasts and anticipated futures of the dyad or group. Time sensitizes researchers to the need for a long view of interdependence: how linkages are created, maintained and recreated, or relinquished. Here, the notion of a “social convoy,” described earlier, is especially important—not only in conceptualizing the aging of a constellation of family members but the constellation of both family and nonfamily members in an individual’s social network. As they grow older, relationships that are central to the network at one point may become peripheral at a later point and vice versa. Some relationships may disappear permanently, whether by choice or circumstance; others may reappear and not always be wanted.

Taking a long view of linked lives means understanding their duration and the trajectory of the relationship. Ties are sensitive to developmental (maturation) changes. Here, the ages and life stages of members are a window into their biological,

psychological, and social states, conditioning relationship experiences. The ages and life stages of members affect the expectations and obligations they have of and to one another and the kinds of experiences they must confront. Life stages themselves are also changing. For example, the longer transition to adulthood has brought the need for some parents to support children longer, as they pursue higher education and delay partnering, parenting, and full-time work (Settersten & Ray, 2010). In contrast, many low-income Black and Brown youth do not have the resources for a protracted transition. They must navigate a life course trajectory marked by limited job opportunities, mass incarceration, and early transitions to parenting (Roy & Jones, 2014).

Historical gains in longevity and morbidity are central to understanding how time is differentially experienced in family relationships. For example, women's life expectancy is longer than men's, and women often marry older men, which means that the nature of ties in later life diverges: For women, widowhood is much more common, resulting in the first phase with a spouse and second phase without; men are more likely to die while married (Hagestad & Settersten, 2017).

Increases in longevity also have reconfigured the life course, leaving people in roles and relationships at particular ages that might not have been possible in an earlier era. Later life now lasts many decades, with the first part (often referred to as the "third age") being healthy and engaged, with a later period of physical decline and dependence (often referred to as the "fourth age") (e.g., Baltes, 1997; Laslett, 1991). There is much to learn about how obligation functions in specific family relationships across seven to nine decades and how longevity may engender intergenerational conflict, solidarity, or ambiguity. Family life course researchers can examine how obligations shape complex intergenerational relationships: for example, how grandparents assist their adult children in providing care for their grandchildren and years later how these adult children may feel obligated to return that assistance to care for their aging parents.

Timing, or the age at which events and transitions happen in lives, is another facet of time. Timing is especially important for family scientists in that it undergirds the rhythm of family formation and development: how old people are when (if) they partner and parent. The timing of fertility creates "counterpart transitions," to use Riley, Foner, and Waring's (Riley et al., 1988) phrase, as when the fertility of children turns parents into grandparents and siblings into aunts and uncles. Changes in the timing of fertility across multiple generations affect the distance between generations in family structure: for example, "age-condensed" family forms result from early fertility across generations, "age-gapped" family forms result from delayed fertility across generations, and "truncated" forms result from childlessness (George & Gold, 1991).

Linked lives are also conditioned by the timing of historical events and social changes (e.g., Elder, 1974; Settersten et al., 2021). For example, life rhythms move more quickly or slowly depending on the historical era and opportunities that make it harder or easier to partner or parent. Hard economic times in Great Depression and the Great Recession slowed that pace and changed the interdependence among family generations. There are historical changes in the cultural ideas about when

people should marry, how many children they should have, or how to sequence them and changes in the kinds of relationships that are legally recognized and socially valued, such as LGBTQ+ relationships. Each generation in the family is composed of people from different cohorts, so their worldviews and experiences are also different. Due to the age segregation of social environments today, families are the key forum for making sense of history (Settersten et al., 2020).

Finally, three related facets of time provide insight into our understanding of linked lives: *spacing* (such as the time between partnering and parenting, or the time between children), *density* (such as when partnering and parenting occur alongside other major transitions, like leaving home or finishing school, in a brief period), and *sequencing* (the order of relationship transitions, such as whether cohabitation or marriage come before the arrival of children). For example, with respect to sequencing, children and youth in economically disadvantaged families may need to take on adult roles and responsibilities prematurely (Burton, 2007). With support from older adults, this process of “adultification” may equip children with leadership experience or confidence, but without socialization, a sudden shift in expectations can lead to risky behavior or hypervigilance. In single-parent households and the absence of their fathers, adolescent boys may step up as “men of the house,” caring for their siblings and contributing cash when they can (Roy et al., 2014). This adultification led to a difficult transition to adulthood years later, with accompanying challenges to mental health, academic achievement, and peer relationships.

## Future Challenges to the Study of Interdependence in Families

The further explication of the concept of linked lives equips researchers to better address some of the most pressing matters of family life and social change in contemporary societies. This chapter has explored how variation in linked lives is associated with inequality, but there is a need to unveil the mechanisms of social systems that fuel inequality across the life course. In recent decades, global social changes without parallel in modern history have exacerbated long-standing inequalities or created new inequalities (Dannefer & Huang, 2017). In this final section, we examine the potential of a family life course framework to situate linked lives within sociostructural contexts that reflect these inequalities. These contexts include (1) ongoing demographic shifts in populations around the world; (2) health disparities during a global pandemic; (3) information and communication technologies that alter connectedness and communication within family networks; and (4) family disruption and global displacement due to migration, violence, and climate change.

## *Implications of Demographic Transition for Family Life*

Population researchers have for decades chronicled stages of demographic transition, from the “first” demographic transition of revolutionary declines in mortality, morbidity, and fertility over the last century (resulting in smaller families and longer family relationships) to a “second” transition that added significant postponements of fertility, increased cohabitation, and delayed and more heterogeneous family formation (e.g., Lesthaeghe, 2014). Although these changes have slowed rampant population growth, they have also brought concerns of population stagnation due to a fertility bust. Some regions have experienced dramatic growth, such as sub-Saharan Africa, whereas nations like China, India, and Mexico have slowed considerably, leading to projections of fewer workers, more retirees, and the need to incentivize fertility (Vollset et al., 2020).

As we have noted, decreasing rates of morbidity and fertility will continue to affect the timing of family formation—and counter-transitions in interdependent family relationships. The expansion of these changes around the globe suggests that greater attention to the dimensions of linked lives will be imperative for family life course research. Similarly, coupled with the increasing pursuit of higher education and less direct or stable routes into employment, these demographic shifts will result in longer, more varied—and unequal—transitions to adulthood globally (as noted above; see also Schoon & Silbereisen, 2017; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

## *Family Health in a Post-pandemic World*

Shifts in health will perhaps become the most critical concern of families across the globe in the coming decades. The family life course framework is challenged to understand “under what conditions, for which outcomes, for whom, and through which pathways do family structure, context, and process affect health?” (Carr et al., 2012). In this chapter, the dimensions of configuration, content and valence, timing, and environment of interdependent family relationships each provide insight into these critical questions about family health. They further provide tools to examine heterogeneity that is reflected in increasing health disparities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken fundamental assumptions about the human life course of societies around the world (Settersten et al., 2020). Life course researchers note that the regulation of social life, such as birthdays, graduations, marriages, and funerals, has been disrupted by the pandemic. Pandemic living has intensified family interdependence, combining collapsing households to accommodate multiple members and yet separating other parents and children due to work and school commitments. Concerns remain about the life course impacts of shared trauma across generations in families. Public health and family science seem uniquely positioned to work in discourse to understand the short- and long-term consequences of the pandemic over decades for the health and wellbeing in interdependent family relationships.

The Life Course Health and Development (LCHD) model in public health synthesizes developmental and life course perspectives with biomedical and biopsychosocial views of human health (Halfon & Forrest, 2018). Public health researchers model the time lag between exposures to disease-causing or health-protective agents, such as prenatal or early life exposures, and subsequent health outcomes (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002; Richardson et al., 2012). A family perspective, however, emphasizes how individual health develops within the context of families, communities, and societies over historical and generational time, and how social determinants of health reinforce or produce inequities (Moser-Jones & Roy, 2017). An integrated approach may allow family health researchers to explore how higher morbidities and mortality of disadvantaged populations lead to longer, more expensive caregiving needs—and, in turn, to disruption of key investments in employment and education for family members who carry disproportionate caregiving burdens.

### ***Information and Communication Technologies in Family Networks***

Over the past 25 years, the Internet, social media, and smartphones have brought profound changes to the connectedness and communication of family members. These rapidly developing tools of information technology shape critical transition points in the life course. Consistent use of digital technology during childhood is likely to lead to greater use during the transition to adulthood (Mollborn et al., 2021). Chelsey and Johnson (2014) argue that these technologies have the potential to intensify interdependence within family relationships and to reshape key life events, such as births, marriages, or deaths. Family scientists' next steps are to examine dynamics of relationships that are entwined with network technologies (Hertlein & Twist, 2019). In the coming decades, we expect that information and communication technologies will continue to remake linked lives.

One of the barriers to the progress of a life course framework in family science has been the inability to model systematic, family-level dynamics, beyond dyadic relationships. Information and communication technology draws on the strength of networks that are loosened from limits of time and space. However, technological networks offer alternative resourced life paths, with access to educational opportunities and wealth that are not available to all. Trask (2018) argues, “irrespective of group membership and social location, individuals the world over are exposed to new possibilities of what ‘can be’ and what they may not have access to” (see Beck-Gernsheim, 1998).

## *Family Disruption and Division in a New Millennium*

With its focus on the impact of sociohistorical context and institutional structures, the life course framework is equipped to provide insight into family disruptions. Unprecedented global changes—due to migration, violence, climate change, and other forces—have been reshaping community life over decades and generations. For example, there is much to learn about how climate change has affected family relationships (Jamieson, 2016). Adolescents have played an important role in elevating discourse and action to combat climate change. Their burgeoning climate-related social engagement and political action may challenge the relative lack of commitment in their parents (Stevenson et al., 2019). Dramatic environmental shifts could affect the family formation decisions among younger cohorts (Gerlagh, et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2010).

As communities around the globe are destabilized by natural disasters driven by climate change, or by politicized violence with police or gangs, family migration will become more prevalent and normalized. Relatedly, our conceptualization of the interdependence of family members over time and borders will be challenged. In the United States, a political division is evident in families at conflict over mandated health measures, utilization of public energy grids, and rising discrimination and oppression against women, non-White families, or sexual minority and religious minority families. It follows that the life course institutions that undergird healthy interdependence in family relationships—schools, hospitals and health care, social security, and employment support, to name a few—will also be under threat of disruption if communities opt to dismantle basic supports provided by a public institutional life course.

Citizenship is foundational to the rights and resources conveyed to families over the life course, and its selective allocation marks those who are protected from those who are oppressed within and across national borders. Separation and reunification of family members intensify in destabilized global contexts, leaving families uprooted, not feeling recognized or “at home.” Recent displacement from Syria, Central America, the American Southern states, central Africa, and India—due to war, gang violence, poverty, famine, and floods—has proceeded without entitlements or presence, or citizenship rights. In the words of philosopher Hannah Arendt (1951, p. x) following the diaspora at the end of World War II, families “disappear into the dark background of difference.”

## **Conclusion**

The life course framework in family science is a thriving theoretical framework that provides useful and rigorous tools for understanding the future of family change in the coming decades. It offers insight into an array of dimensions of time—ontogenetic, historical, cohort, and generational—that help frame, study, and even

intervene in families over time. Moreover, the concept of interdependence at the core of family relationships is also at the core of the life course framework through the concept of “linked lives.” In this chapter, we not only summarize the emergence of the family life course framework but also raise critical questions about the new forms and contexts of interdependence among individual lives and how such interdependence informs the expansion or contraction of inequality within families and across cohorts. By dimensionalizing the concept of linked lives—begun here with configuration, content, valence, environment, and time—we hope to provide rigor and offer new tools for research and practice with families in the new millennium.

## References

- Arendt, H. (1973). *The origins of totalitarianism [1951]*. Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich.
- Arnett, J., Kloep, M., Hendry, L., & Tanner, J. (2010). *Debating emerging adulthood: Stage or process?* Oxford University Press.
- Baltes, P. B. (1997). On the incomplete architecture of human ontogeny: Selection, optimization, and compensation as foundation of developmental theory. *American Psychologist*, 52(4), 366–380.
- Baltes, P. B., Reese, H. W., & Lipsitt, L. P. (1980). Life-span developmental psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 31, 65–110.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1998). On the way to a post-familial family: From a community of need to elective affinities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 15, 53–70.
- Bengston, V., & Allen, K. (1993). The life course perspective applied to families over time. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 469–499). Plenum.
- Ben-Shlomo, Y., & Kuh, D. (2002). A life course approach to chronic disease epidemiology: Conceptual models, empirical challenges and interdisciplinary perspectives. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 31, 285–293.
- Berlin, G., Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., & Waters, M. C. (2010). Introducing the issue: Transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 3–18.
- Bernardi, L., Huiink, J., & Settersten, R. (2019). The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 41, 100258.
- Blake, L. (2017). Parents and children who are estranged in adulthood: A review and discussion of the literature. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 9, 521–536.
- Burton, L. (2007). Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model. *Family Relations*, 56, 329–345.
- Burton, L., & Hardaway, C. (2012). Low-income mothers as “othermothers” to their romantic partners’ children: Women’s coparenting in multiple partner fertility relationships. *Family Process*, 51, 343–359.
- Cain, L. D. (1964). Life course and social structure. In R. E. Faris (Ed.), *Handbook of sociology* (pp. 272–309). Rand-McNally.
- Carr, D., Springer, K. W., & Williams, K. (2012). Health and families. In J. Treas, J. Scott, & M. Richards (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to the sociology of families* (pp. 255–276). Wiley.
- Chelsey, N., & Johnson, B. (2014). Information and communication technology use and social connectedness over the life course. *Sociology Compass*, 8(6), 589–602.
- Connidis, I. (2015). Exploring ambivalence in family ties: Progress and prospects. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77, 77–95.

- Daly, K. (1996). *Families and time: Keeping pace in a hurried culture*. Sage.
- Daly, K. (2003). Family theory versus the theories families live by. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 771–784.
- Dannefer, D. (2018). Systemic and reflexive: Foundations of cumulative dis/advantage and life-course processes. *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological and Social Sciences*, 75, 1249–1263.
- Dannefer, D., & Huang, W. (2017). Precarity, inequality, and the problem of agency in the study of the life course. *Innovation in Aging*, 1, 1–10.
- Diewald, M., & Mayer, K. (2009). The sociology of the life course and life span psychology: Integrated paradigm or complementing pathways? *Advances in Life Course Research*, 14, 5–14.
- Dilworth-Anderson, P., Burton, L. M., & Johnson, L. B. (1993). Reframing theories for understanding race, ethnicity, and families. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 627–649). Springer.
- Elder, G. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychological Quarterly*, 57, 4–15.
- Elder, G., Jr., & Giele, J. (2009). *The craft of life course research*. The Guilford Press.
- Elder, G., Jr. (1974). *Children of the great depression: Social change in life experience*. Westview Press.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69, 1–12.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., Shanahan, M. J., & Jennings, J. A. (2015). Human development in time and place. In T. Leventhal & M. Bornstein (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science: Ecological settings and processes in developmental systems* (Vol. 4, 7th ed., pp. 6–54). Wiley.
- Evans, K. (2002). Taking control of their lives? Agency in young adult transitions in England and the New Germany. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5(3), 245–269.
- Fowers, B., Laurenceau, J., Penfield, R., Cohen, L., Lang, S., Owenz, M., & Pasipandoya, E. (2016). Enhancing relationship quality measurement: The development of the relationship flourishing scale. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30, 997–1007.
- George, L. K., & Gold, D. (1991). Life course perspectives on intergenerational and generational connections. In S. Pfeifer & M. Sussman (Eds.), *Families: Intergenerational and generational connections* (pp. 67–88). Hawthorne Press.
- Gerlagh, R., Lupi, V., & Galeotti, M. (2018). *Family planning and climate change* (CESifo working paper No. 7421). Munich Society for Promotion of Economic Research.
- Gilligan, M., Karraker, A., & Jasper, A. (2018). Linked lives and cumulative inequality: A multi-generational family life course framework. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, 111–125.
- Hagerman, M. (2016). White racial socialization: Progressive fathers on raising “antiracist” children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79, 60–74.
- Hagestad, G. (1991). Trends and dilemmas in life course research: An international perspective. In W. Heinz (Ed.), *Theoretical advances in life course research* (pp. 23–57). Deutscher Studien Verlag.
- Hagestad, G. (1992). Assigning rights and duties: Age, duration, and gender in social institutions. In W. Heinz (Ed.), *Theoretical advances in life course research* (Vol. 3). Deutscher Studien Verlag.
- Hagestad, G. O., & Dykstra, P. (2016). Structuration of the life course: Some neglected aspects. In M. J. Shanahan et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (Vol. II, pp. 131–157). Springer Science.
- Hagestad, G. O., & Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2017). Aging: It’s interpersonal! – Reflections from two life course migrants. *The Gerontologist*, 57, 136–144.
- Halfon, N., & Forrest, C. (2018). The emerging theoretical framework of life course health development. In N. Halfon et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of life course health development* (pp. 19–43). Springer Science.
- Hareven, T. (1977). Family time and historical time. *Daedalus*, 106, 57–70.



- Heckhausen, J., & Buchmann, M. (2019). A multi-disciplinary model of life-course canalization and agency. *Advances in Life Course Research, 41*, 100246.
- Hertlein, K., & Twist, M. (2019). *The internet family: Technology in couple and family relationships*. Routledge.
- Hitlin, S., & Johnson, M. K. (2015). Reconceptualizing agency within the life course: The power of looking ahead. *American Journal of Sociology, 120*, 1429–1474.
- Jamieson, L. (2016). Families, relationships, and ‘environment’: (Un)sustainability, climate change, and biodiversity loss. *Families, Relationships, and Societies, 5*, 335–355.
- Jones, M. M., & Roy, K. (2017). Placing health trajectories in family and historical context: A proposed enrichment of the life course health and development model. *Maternal and Child Health Journal, 21*, 1853–1860.
- Kahn, R., & Antonucci, T. (1980). *Convoys over the life course: Attachment, roles, and social support*. In P. B. Baltes & O. Brim (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior* (Vol. 3, pp. 254–283). Academic Press.
- Kim, P., Evans, G., Chen, E., Miller, G., & Seeman, T. (2017). How socioeconomic disadvantages get under the skin and into the brain to influence health-development across the lifespan. In N. Halfon, C. Forrest, R. Lerner, & E. Faustman (Eds.), *Handbook of life course health development* (pp. 463–497). Springer.
- Kohli, M. (1986). Social organization and subjective construction of the life course. In A. Sorensen, F. Weinert, & L. Sherrod (Eds.), *Human development and the life course: Multi-disciplinary perspectives* (pp. 271–292). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kohli, M. (2019). The promises and pitfalls of life-course agency. *Advances in Life Course Research, 41*, 100306.
- Landes, S., & Settersten, R. (2019). The inseparability of human agency and linked lives. *Advances in Life Course Research, 42*.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. University of California Press.
- Laslett, P. (1989). *A fresh map of life: The emergence of the third age*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Laub, J., & Sampson, R. (2006). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Harvard University Press.
- Lesthaeghe, R. (2014). The second demographic transition: A concise overview of its development. *Proceedings of the National Academy (PNAS), 111*(51), 18112–18115.
- Leticq, B. L. (2019). Surfacing family privilege and supremacy in family science: Toward justice for all. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 11*, 398–411.
- Lüscher, K., & Pillemer, K. (1998). Intergenerational ambivalence: A new approach to the study of parent-child relations in later life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60*, 413–425.
- Mahalingam, R., Balan, S., & Molina, K. (2009). Transnational intersectionality: A critical framework for theorizing motherhood. In S. Lloyd & A. Few (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 69–81). Sage.
- Marshall, V., & Bengtson, V. (2011). Theoretical perspectives on the sociology of aging. In R. A. Settersten Jr. & J. Angel (Eds.), *Handbook of sociology and aging* (pp. 17–33). Springer.
- Marsiglio, W., Roy, K., & Fox, G. L. (Eds.). (2005). *Situated fathering: A focus on physical and social spaces*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mayer, K. U. (2004). Whose lives? How history, societies and institutions define and shape life courses. *Research in Human Development, 1*(3), 161–187.
- Mollborn, S., Fomby, P., Goode, J., & Modile, A. (2021). A life course framework for understanding digital technology use in the transition to adulthood. *Advances in Life Course Research, 47*, 100379.
- Neugarten, B. L., Moore, J. W., & Lowe, J. C. (1965). Age norms, age constraints, and adult socialization. *American Journal of Sociology, 70*, 710–717.
- Newman, K. (2006). *A different shade of gray: Midlife and beyond in the inner city*. New Press.
- O’Rand, A. (2002). Cumulative advantage theory in life course research. *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics, 22*, 14–20.

- Padgett, D. K., Smith, B. T., Henwood, B. F., & Tiderington, E. (2012). Life course adversity in the lives of formerly homeless persons with serious mental illness: Context and meaning. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(3), 421–430.
- Plath, D. (1980). Contours of consociation: Lessons from a Japanese narrative. In P. Baltes & O. Brim Jr. (Eds.), *Life span development and behavior* (Vol. 3). Academic Press.
- Pratt, M., & Fiese, B. (2004). *Family stories and the life course: Across time and generations*. Erlbaum.
- Richardson, L. J., Hussey, J. M., & Strutz, K. L. (2012). A life course perspective on maternal and child health. In *Maternal and child health: Programs, problems, and policy in public health* (pp. 65–85). Jones and Bartlett.
- Riley, M. W. (1973). Aging and cohort succession: Interpretations and misinterpretations. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37, 35–49.
- Riley, M. W., Foner, A., & Waring, J. (1988). Sociology of age. In N. Smelser (Ed.), *Handbook of sociology* (pp. 243–290). Sage Publications.
- Rosow, I. (1978). What is a cohort and why? *Human Development*, 21, 65–75.
- Roy, K. (2006). Father stories: A life course examination of paternal identity among low-income African American men. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27, 31–54.
- Roy, K. (2014). Fathering from the long view: Framing personal and social change through life course theory. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 6, 319–335.
- Roy, K., & Jones, N. (2014). Theorizing alternative pathways through adulthood: The experiences of low-income disconnected young men. In K. Roy & N. Jones (Eds.), *Pathways to adulthood for disconnected young men in low-income communities* (New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development) (Vol. 143, pp. 1–9). Jossey-Bass.
- Roy, K., & Lucas, K. (2006). Generativity as second chance: Low-income fathers and transformation of the difficult past. *Research on Human Development*, 3, 139–159.
- Roy, K., Messina, L., Smith, J., & Waters, D. (2014). Growing up as “man of the house”: Adulthood and transition into adulthood for young men in economically disadvantaged families. In K. Roy & N. Jones (Eds.), *Pathways to adulthood for disconnected young men in low-income communities* (New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development) (Vol. 143, pp. 55–72). Jossey-Bass.
- Roy, K., & Yumiseva, M. (2021). Family separation and transnational fathering practices for immigrant Northern Triangle families. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 13, 283.
- Ryder, N. (1965). The cohort as a concept in the study of social change. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 843–861.
- Schaie, K. W. (1965). A general model for the study of developmental problems. *Psychological Bulletin*, 64, 92–107.
- Schoon, I., & Silbereisen, R. K. (2017). *Pathways to adulthood: Educational opportunities, motivation and attainment in times of social change*. UCL IOE Press.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2009). It takes two to tango: The (un)easy dance between life course sociology and life span psychology. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 14, 74–81.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2015). Relationships in time and the life course: The significance of linked lives. *Research in Human Development*, 12(3–4), 217–223.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2018). Nine ways that social relationships matter for the life course. In D. F. Alwin, D. H. Felmlee, & D. A. Kreager (Eds.), *Social networks and the life course: Integrating the development of human lives and social relational networks* (pp. 27–40). Springer.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., Bernardi, L., Härkönen, J., Antonucci, T. C., Dykstra, P. A., Heckhausen, J., Kuh, D., Mayer, K. U., Moen, P., Mortimer, J. T., Mulder, C. H., Smeeding, T. M., van der Lippe, T., Hagestad, G. O., Kohli, M., Levy, R., Schoon, I., & Thomson, E. (2020). Understanding the effects of Covid-19 through a life course lens. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 45, 100360.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., Elder, G. H., Jr., & Pearce, L. D. (2021). *Living on the edge: An American generation's journey through the twentieth century*. University of Chicago Press.

- Settersten, R. A., Jr., & Gannon, L. (2005). Structure, agency, and the space between: On the challenges and contradictions of a blended view of the life course. In R. Levy, P. Ghisletta, J. M. LeGoff, & D. Spini (Eds.), *Towards an interdisciplinary perspective on the life course* (pp. 37–57). Elsevier.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., & Godlewski, B. (2016). Concepts and theories of age and aging. In V. Bengtson & R. A. Settersten Jr. (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (3rd ed., pp. 9–25). Springer Publishing.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., & Ray, B. (2010). What's going on with young people today? The long and twisting path to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 19–41.
- Stack, C. (1975). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community*. Basic Books.
- Stack, C., & Burton, L. (1993). Kinscripts. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 24, 157–170.
- Stark, L. (2018). *The telling image: Shapes of changing times*. Austin, TX.
- Stephenson, J., Newman, K., & Mayhew, S. (2010). Population dynamics and climate change: What are the links? *Journal of Public Health*, 32, 150–156.
- Stevenson, K., Nils Peterson, M., & Bondell, H. (2019). The influence of personal beliefs, friends, and family in building climate change concern among adolescents. *Environmental Education Research*, 25(6), 832–845.
- Trask, B. (2018). Integrating life course, globalization, and the study of racial and ethnic families. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 10, 451–466.
- Udehn, L. (2002). The changing face of methodological individualism. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 479–507.
- Vollset, S. E., Goren, E., Yuan, C., Cao, J., Smith, A., & Hsiao, T. (2020). Fertility, mortality, migration, and population scenarios for 195 countries and territories from 2017 to 2100: A forecasting analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study. *The Lancet*, 396, P1285–P1306.
- Walsh, F. (2006). *Strengthening family resilience* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Ward, R. A., Deane, G., & Spitze, G. (2014). Life-course changes and parent–adult child contact. *Research on Aging*, 36(5), 568–602.

# Application: Life Course Theory: Implications for Sexual Minority Youth Research and Practice



Jessica N. Fish

The life course framework (Roy & Settersten, 2022, this volume) offers unique theoretical perspectives on the health and wellness of sexual minority (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual [LGB]) people and their families. In particular, tenets of life course theory encourage the recognition of both human developmental and socio-historical time, two interrelated constructs that provide unique vantage points for understanding sexual minority people, their health, and their familial relationships. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the utility of the life course framework for advancing empirical and conceptual understandings of understudied populations and processes. Below are three examples that highlight how principles of life course theory advance perspectives of sexual minority population health in the context of human development and family relationships.

## Example #1. Pseudo-developmental Designs

Similar to other areas of scholarship, the application of life course methods and perspectives has lagged in sexual minority population health research. Historically, research that seeks to understand sexual minority people, their relationships, and health in a developmental and familial context has been stymied due to long-standing exclusions of sexual minority people and their families in data collection efforts (Russell et al., 2020; Russell & Fish, 2016). Measures of sexual orientation in family and panel data also have yet to be standardized alongside other health-relevant sociodemographic factors (Russell et al., 2020). Such limitations preclude

---

J. N. Fish (✉)

Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland,  
College Park, MD, USA

e-mail: [jnfish@umd.edu](mailto:jnfish@umd.edu)

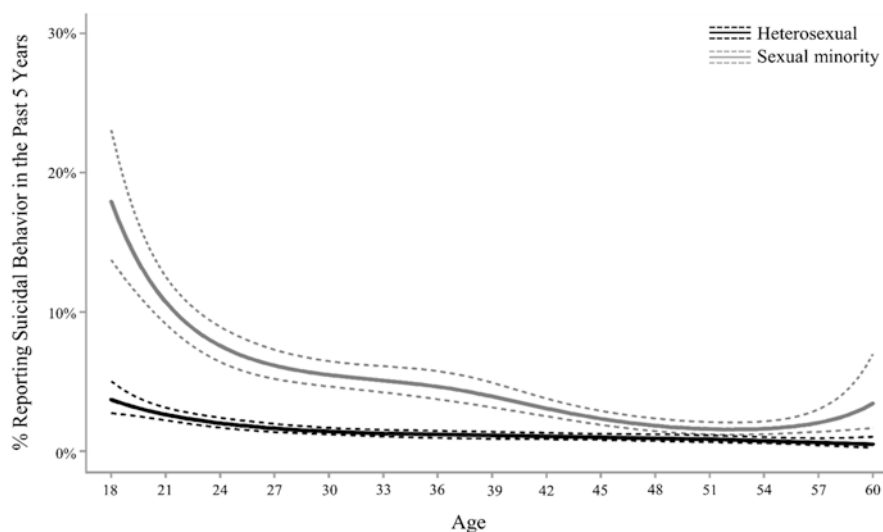
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_21](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_21)

309

the investigation of critical health-related processes and how they alter the life course of sexual minority people. Exceptions to the exclusion of such data (e.g., Add Health; Harris, 2009) have provided valuable insight into the lives and health of sexual minority youth as they transition to adulthood (e.g., Fish & Pasley, 2015; Needham & Austin, 2010; Ueno, 2010). Yet, the continued absence of such data leaves us in the dark about the factors that influence and shape sexual minority people's health and relationships across the life course.

In lieu of adequate panel data, my colleagues and I have opted to use pseudo-developmental designs to help elucidate prevalence of health conditions (e.g., suicidality, alcohol use disorder, major depression) and theorized mechanisms (e.g., anti-LGB victimization, discrimination) across people of varying ages. For example, in Fig. 1 (from Fish et al., 2019), I illustrate results from time-varying effect models in which we estimated the prevalence of a recent suicide attempt in cross-sectional data for each age group from ages 18 to 60. The findings offer unique information on how suicide risk for sexual minority people differs from heterosexual people at different points in the adult life course. For instance, roughly 10–20% of sexual minority young adults aged 18–21 reported a recent suicide attempt, compared to 3–4% of heterosexual young adults. Sexual minorities in their late 40s and early 50s, however, do not statistically differ from their heterosexual peers. Suicidal ideation and behavior peak in adolescence and young adulthood in the general population. The elevated rates of suicidality among sexual minority youth in this sample further suggest a unique cohort effect, whereby a critical period for normative ontogenetic transition (i.e., recognition of one's sexuality and sexual identity) is



**Fig. 1** Estimated age-varying prevalence of recent suicide attempt among heterosexual and sexual minority adults age 18 to 60 from the National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions ( $N = 27,768$ ). (From Fish et al., 2018)

likely complicated by the cultural context in which it occurs (i.e., heteronormative society; see Russell & Fish, 2019). Although this method does not reflect a “purist” life course approach to understanding how earlier experiences shape trajectories of health and wellness over the life course, these designs offer us a window into how risk for health conditions changes across the life course for sexual minority people. More importantly, they highlight critical moments for increased screening and intervention to help eliminate health disparities for this population (Fig. 1).

At the same time, it is important to recognize the timing of lives (Roy & Settersten, 2022, this volume) in this interpretation. Given that these data are cross-sectional, findings likely reflect and conflate both normative developmental and cohort effects in the relationship between discrimination and suicidal behavior. Swift social and political changes for sexual minority people likely influence their exposure to discrimination, their perceptions of discrimination, and the impact of these experiences on mental health (see Hammack et al., 2018). As sexual orientation data collection efforts increase, there will be future opportunities to better untangle age, period, and cohort effects and examine how experiences across the life course shape the health of sexual minority people and their families.

## Example #2. Bidirectional Relationships

Roy and Settersten also discuss the imperative of linked lives in family research. Much like the broader family literature, studies investigating the influence of important others in the lives of sexual minority people have been unidirectional. How does parental rejection influence sexual minority youth mental health? Is peer victimization related to increased rates of suicidality among sexual minority youth? These questions are vital to understanding the social experiences of sexual minority youth, but sexual minority youth also influence their family systems in both positive and negative ways. It is helpful to conceptualize how sexual minority youth and adults prioritize the authenticity of their identity and opt for “elective affinities” that allow for greater individualization of their lives (see Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Roy & Settersten, 2022, this volume). Unfortunately, for sexual minority people, close others and broader society push back in ways that assert heteronormative values and homophobic attitudes, which can lead to short- and long-term consequences for family relationships as well as individual health and wellness. For example, research shows that youth who “come out” (i.e., disclose a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity or same-sex attraction) during adolescence are more susceptible to family and peer victimization (D’Augelli et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2014). Such processes alert us to a bidirectional influence whereby sexual minority youths’ right to authentic recognition of their sexual identity makes them vulnerable to social responses that are rooted in homophobia and heterosexism, thus thwarting pathways towards positive development and health.

In an effort to better understand bidirectional relationships and their association with health-related behaviors over the life course, my colleagues and I tested how

same-sex-attracted youth may be vulnerable to compromised parental relationships, which would subsequently be related to risk for alcohol use disorder later in adulthood. In line with life course perspectives, our findings suggested that youth who reported same-sex attraction, relative to youth who did not, experienced compromised parent-child relationship quality both as young adolescents and a year later and that these fissures in relationship quality were related to alcohol abuse later in adulthood (Fish, Russell, Watson, & Russell, 2020). Our results offer unique perspectives on how sexual minority youth experiences, particularly in families, carry forward into later stages of life and exacerbate poor health and maladaptive coping strategies. Findings suggest that family-related preventive intervention strategies early in the life course could offer important downstream effects on the health and wellness of sexual minority youth as they age.

### **Example #3. Contemporary Perspectives on Sexual Minority Youth Vulnerabilities**

Life course tenets help us theorize how shifting sociohistorical contexts create both possibilities and challenges for sexual minority young people today. Given changing social attitudes towards sexual minority people in the United States, many believe that things are “getting better” for sexual minority young people. However, studies find that sexual-orientation-related disparities persist among contemporary cohorts of youth (Fish et al., 2019; Fish & Baams, 2018; Peter et al., 2017). Life course theory offers a particularly helpful vantage point to understand the persistence of health inequities for contemporary cohorts of sexual minority young people. In two conceptual writings (Russell & Fish, 2016, 2019), my colleague and I describe how normative ontogenetic and changing sociohistorical perspectives on sexual minority people now collide to create new vulnerabilities for sexual minority youth. That is, the shifts in the visibility of LGB people and the social and cultural context around sexuality are likely linked to the decline in the age at which sexual minority people now “come out” to themselves, their families, and their broader social networks. This younger age of coming out, however, now coincides with a developmentally sensitive period for elevated peer victimization – particularly in relation to sexuality and gender expression – and mental health vulnerability. In other words, changing social contexts have altered the timing of public sexual expression, so that it now coincides with a critical developmental period for the impact of peer attitudes and relationships on the health and wellness of young people, consequently altering their well-being across the life course. Therefore, sexual minority young people, despite coming of age at a time of unprecedented acceptance for diverse sexuality, remain vulnerable to the same health-related consequences of previous generations, albeit through new mechanisms. The use of life course theory to frame these multisystemic and dynamic processes helps communicate the urgency for continued research and practice in service of improving the health of sexual minority people and their families.

## Conclusions

This chapter examines a few applications of the life course theory to the methods and conceptualization of health among sexual minority people. In doing so, we offer innovative perspectives on sexual minority youth development, health, and how bidirectional influences between sexual minority young people and the contexts they traverse (e.g., family, school, community) shape health across the life course. Most importantly, these perspectives provide unique perspective for the development and implementation of prevention and intervention strategies that seek to support sexual minority people, and their families, across the life course.

## References

- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1998). On the way to a post-familial family: From a community of need to elective affinities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *15*, 53–70.
- D’Augelli, A. R., Grossman, A. H., & Starks, M. T. (2008). Families of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth: What do parents and siblings know and how do they react? *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *4*(1), 95–115.
- Fish, J. N., & Baams, L. (2018). Trends in alcohol-related disparities between heterosexual and sexual minority youth from 2007 to 2015: Findings from the youth risk behavior survey. *LGBT Health*, *5*(6), 359–367.
- Fish, J. N., & Pasley, K. (2015). Sexual (minority) trajectories, mental health, and alcohol use: A longitudinal study of youth as they transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *44*(8), 1508–1527.
- Fish, J. N., Rice, C. E., Lanza, S. T., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Is young adulthood a critical period for suicidal behavior among sexual minorities? Results from a US national sample. *Prevention Science*, *20*, 353–365.
- Fish, J. N., Russell, B. S., Watson, R. J., & Russell, S. T. (2020). Parent-child relationships and sexual minority youth: Implications for adult alcohol abuse. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *49*(10), 2034–2046. PMID: PMC7487049.
- Fish, J. N., Turner, B., Phillips, G., & Russell, S. T. (2019). Cigarette smoking disparities between sexual minority and heterosexual youth. *Pediatrics*, *143*, e20181671.
- Hammack, P. L., Frost, D. M., Meyer, I. H., & Pletta, D. R. (2018). Gay men’s health and identity: Social change and the life course. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *47*, 59–74.
- Harris, K. M. (2009). *The National Longitudinal Study of adolescent to adult health (add health), waves I & II, 1994–1996; wave III, 2001–2002; wave IV, 2007–2009 [machine-readable data file and documentation]*. Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Needham, B. L., & Austin, E. L. (2010). Sexual orientation, parental support, and health during the transition to young adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *39*(10), 1189–1198.
- Peter, T., Edkins, T., Watson, R., Adjei, J., Homma, Y., & Saewyc, E. (2017). Trends in suicidality among sexual minority and heterosexual students in a Canadian population-based cohort study. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *4*(1), 115–123.
- Roy, K., & Settersten, R. (2022). The family life course framework: Perspectives on interdependent lives and inequalities. In *Sourcebook of family theories and methodologies*. Springer.
- Russell, S. T., Bishop, M. D., Mallory, A. B., & Muraco, J. A. (2020). The use of representative datasets to study LGBT-parent families: Challenges, advantages, and opportunities. In A. E. Goldberg & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBT-parent families* (pp. 491–506). New York.



- Russell, S. T., & Fish, J. N. (2016). Mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 12*, 465–487.
- Russell, S. T., & Fish, J. N. (2019). Sexual minority youth, social change, and health: A developmental collision. *Research in Human Development, 16*(1), 5–20.
- Russell, S. T., Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., & Diaz, R. M. (2014). Being out at school: The implications for school victimization and young adult adjustment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 84*(6), 635–643.
- Ueno, K. (2010). Mental health differences between young adults with and without same-sex contact: A simultaneous examination of underlying mechanisms. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 51*(4), 391–407.

# Grounded Theory Methods



Jennifer L. Hardesty, Kimberly A. Crossman, and Megan L. Haselschwerdt

Grounded theory (GT) is a method for developing substantive theory grounded in data that are systematically collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, 1998b). Although theory construction is highly valued in family science (LaRossa, 2005), this edition of the Sourcebook is the first to feature a chapter focused solely on GT methods. As one of the most widely used (Belgrave & Seide, 2019) and often misunderstood qualitative methods, this chapter offers an opportunity to evaluate and enhance its use in family science research. We focus on GT as a family of methods (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) with a long and rich history, persistent debates and challenges, diverse approaches, and immense potential to contribute to our understanding of families. In this chapter, we discuss the origins, assumptions, and core procedures and concepts of GT methods generally and then demonstrate and evaluate their use in family science. We close with recommendations related to the future of GT methods in family science. For readability, we use “GT” and “GT methods” interchangeably throughout our discussion to refer to methodology/methods.

---

J. L. Hardesty (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA  
e-mail: [hardesty@illinois.edu](mailto:hardesty@illinois.edu)

K. A. Crossman

Liberal Studies Department, College of Education, California State University, Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA, USA

M. L. Haselschwerdt

Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Knoxville, TN, USA

## Historical Origins and Basic Assumptions

GT methods are rooted in the principles of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014; also see Adamsons & Carter in this volume). Symbolic interactionism assumes we live in a social world of learned meaning; the self, the situations we experience, and the society we live in are all continuously negotiated and accomplished through social interaction (Annells, 1996). Symbolic interactionists inquire about meaning, action, and context. They ask, for example, how is meaning made? How do people act upon or within situations? How are meaning and actions linked to social context? These assumptions formed the foundation of GT methods as envisioned originally (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and as practiced today, albeit often implicitly or more generally through language-based frameworks (see LaRossa, 2005). Generally speaking, grounded theorists seek to explain social process or how behavior and meaning are shaped through social interaction in particular social contexts. GT methods are appropriate when the goal is to create substantive, topic-specific theory or move analysis from description toward explicit theoretical statements about social process (Wertz et al., 2011). Their potential for generating new knowledge in the form of explanatory models of family process that are grounded in the perceptions and actions of the families we study contributes to their popularity in family science (LaRossa, 2005). There is much variation, however, in the assumptions and procedures used to conduct GT research across specific traditions.

The diversity and evolution of GT methods are demonstrated in three seminal texts (see Table 1 for list of key people and primary resources) that span the epistemological spectrum from objectivist to constructivist approaches. In 1967, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Although qualitative methods were not new, *The Discovery* exerted immense influence on their rising popularity and in many ways began a “qualitative revolution” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509). Shaped by Glaser’s training in multivariate analyses and Strauss’ strong foundation in symbolic interactionism, they offered a systematic approach to inductive qualitative methods, where, before, analytic procedures were vague if documented at all (LaRossa, 2005). With visible and clear analytic steps, Glaser and Strauss

**Table 1** Primary resources for grounded theory methods

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). <i>The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research</i> . New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transactions
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). <i>Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedure and techniques</i> . Newbury Park, London: Sage
Clarke, A. E. (2005). <i>Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
Charmaz, K. (2006). <i>Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

demonstrated that substantive theory can be produced inductively, the process is replicable, and the products are as valuable as those resulting from quantitative studies. In doing so, they simultaneously challenged the so-called orthodoxy of positivistic research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) that privileged grand theories and theory verification and placed little value on generating new theoretical knowledge.

Groundbreaking for its time, *The Discovery* pushed the boundaries of what constituted knowledge and the role of theorizing in social science research. Viewed through a contemporary lens, *The Discovery* has been criticized for reproducing the orthodoxy it sought to disrupt with its objectivist/positivist undertones (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The title itself reveals underlying ontological assumptions that the social world is knowable and that knowledge is “out there” to be discovered rather than constructed through social interaction. The mantra of “theory emerges from the data” echoes these assumptions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), and Glaser’s quantitative orientation is evident in his treatment of GT as a form of variable analysis (Wertz et al., 2011). Nonetheless, *The Discovery* afforded a level of legitimacy to qualitative research and remains an important foundational text on the origins and practice of GT methods. Familiarity with *The Discovery* (sometimes called classic GT) is critical for making sense of ensuing debates about what constitutes GT research and how to position one’s scholarship.

The major texts since *The Discovery* are repositioned versions of classic GT methods (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In 1990, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin published *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* and attempted to remedy the positivistic leanings of *The Discovery* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Although still assuming an external reality, they acknowledged that empirical renderings (e.g., a grounded theory) are always partial reflections of objective truth. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) GT approach diverges from Glaserian methods in several ways (Heath & Cowley, 2004). While Glaser emphasizes purely inductive methods and warns against practices that divert attention away from the data themselves (e.g., using prior literature, personal experiences, or creative strategies to probe one’s data), Strauss and Corbin (1990) embrace a combination of inductive and deductive techniques aimed at both generating and verifying theoretical concepts (i.e., abduction). Their step-by-step analytic procedures are appealing, especially to novice grounded theorists, but have been criticized as overly prescriptive (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). Glaser (1992) unequivocally argues that Strauss and Corbin’s techniques heighten the risk of importing or forcing ideas onto data rather than allowing concepts and theory to “emerge” from the data during the analytic process. Other points of contention also relate to this issue of emergence versus forcing data. For example, Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed using axial coding, which organizes (or forces, according to Glaser, 1992) data into a linear model of causes, consequences, and conditions as they relate to a core theoretical category (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Controversies aside, Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach to GT methods continues to be widely used. Later editions of their text (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a), published after Strauss’ death in 1996, increasingly espouse constructivist assumptions.

More recently, Charmaz (2006, 2014) repositioned grounded theory by offering a solid social constructivist approach to GT methods, as reflected in the title of her book, *Constructing Grounded Theory*. This approach to GT methods rectifies some of the aforementioned criticisms of earlier GT approaches (e.g., assumptions that there is a truth to be discovered, which is overly prescriptive). Charmaz's approach and foundational assumptions are immensely popular across disciplines because of their interpretive lens that embraces multiple constructed realities (versus a single reality) and acknowledges researchers' co-constructions of reality with their participants (versus an objective discovery of truth). Charmaz (2014) describes participants' meanings and experiences as "constructions of reality" (p. 17), which is particularly well suited for family science given the different lenses through which family members may make meaning of a shared experience or describe a particular process of family interaction. The emphasis on participants and researchers co-constructing reality aligns with the tenets of symbolic interactionism but also feminisms and other critical theories used in family science (e.g., critical race, Allen, 2004; Burton et al., 2010; Few-Demo, 2014; Oswald et al., 2005; also see San Garcia in this volume) that acknowledge researchers' positionalities, perspectives, and influences on the research process.

Another popular aspect of constructivist GT methods is their flexible guidelines or practices (versus positivist prescriptions or rules). For example, though scholars may agree on many core tenets of GT (e.g., inductive logic, comparative analysis, analyzing processes versus themes, using data to develop new conceptual categories), they often disagree on the essentiality of other components (e.g., axial coding) that will be described later in this chapter (Charmaz, 2014). A constructive GT approach permits researchers more flexibility in experimenting with and choosing which analytic tools make most sense for their analyses. For example, see the flexibility in the analytic approach of Nice et al. (2020) compared to the more formulaic approach described by Allen (2008). The flexibility afforded by constructivist GT is freeing but also challenging in its ambiguity.

Some scholars have proposed specific and concrete GT procedures (e.g., natural and dimensional analysis, Schatzman, 1991) or condensed versions of GT to increase their accessibility (e.g., variable analysis, multivariate procedures, LaRossa, 2005). LaRossa (2005) proposed a condensed approach that draws parallels between GT methods and multivariate quantitative analysis, noting that their compatibility may explain the popularity of GTM among family scholars. Other GT scholars, such as Clarke (2005), have aligned themselves with constructivists to further shift GT from its "remaining positivist roots" (p. 558). While Charmaz and constructivist approaches emphasize interpretation, Clarke resituated GT within postmodernism and emphasized *situated* interpretation. A postmodern approach to GT acknowledges and embraces complexities, contradictions, and heterogeneity and focuses on examining the context in which phenomena or meaning making occur. Clarke (2005) introduced situational analysis, which entails using three mapping techniques – situational, social world and arena, and positional mapping – that each serve distinct purposes but foster deeper contextual connections. As illustrated by Khaw's (2012) exemplar of using situational mapping to elucidate elements (e.g.,

individual, emotional, temporal, mothering, theoretical) that influenced women's process of leaving an abusive relationship, situational analysis is a particularly useful tool for family scientists seeking to position theoretical processes within broader family, community, and sociocultural contexts.

As Morse (2009) points out, science and methods change over time to fit our evolving world. These later versions of GT methods, with their focus on multiple realities and situated meanings, are logical developments in an increasingly diverse and complex society (for family science exemplars, see Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Jhang, 2018; Vinjamuri, 2015). Importantly, none of the various approaches abandons the inductive theory-generating essence of classic GT methods, but instead each repositions GT methods with respect to epistemological framing and/or procedural techniques. We agree with Heath and Cowley (2004) that rather than engaging in debates about which method is better or "true," family scientists should be familiar with the historical origins and evolution of GT methods and position their work according to their assumptions and research questions. Most researchers claiming to use GT methods do not identify particular epistemological underpinnings of the version they choose (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). Thus, background knowledge is critical for scholars not only to make sound decisions about their own work but also to effectively evaluate GT scholarship in their substantive areas and in family science more broadly (e.g., as journal editors, grant proposal reviewers, research instructors, and mentors).

Credible qualitative research hinges on being able to cogently defend methodological choice. Thus, in the next section, we briefly discuss what sets GT apart from other qualitative methods and what contributes to mismatches between stated and applied methods. We then provide an overview of GT analytic procedures, highlighting core concepts and important areas of divergence between approaches. Finally, we highlight the core features (e.g., constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation) that cut across GT approaches and give them their greatest potential. Using these core features, we turn our attention to GT research in family science and close with recommendations.

## Overview of GT Methods and Key Concepts

GT methods are appropriate when the goal is to generate midrange explanatory theory of social processes studied in context (Charmaz, 2006). Process, here, is conceptualized as a dynamic, complex series of actions and interactions leading to particular outcomes (Charmaz, 2006). In this section, we articulate key aspects of GT, including an overview of key concepts (e.g., process, code, category, properties, dimensions, etc.) and analytic strategies (e.g., open, focused, theoretical coding, memoing, reflexivity, etc.). Using example studies in family science, we illustrate what differentiates grounded theory analysis from other methods, focusing specifically on descriptive versus theoretical research questions, analyses, and products (e.g., see Birks & Mills, 2011). Based on our own experiences as recipients and

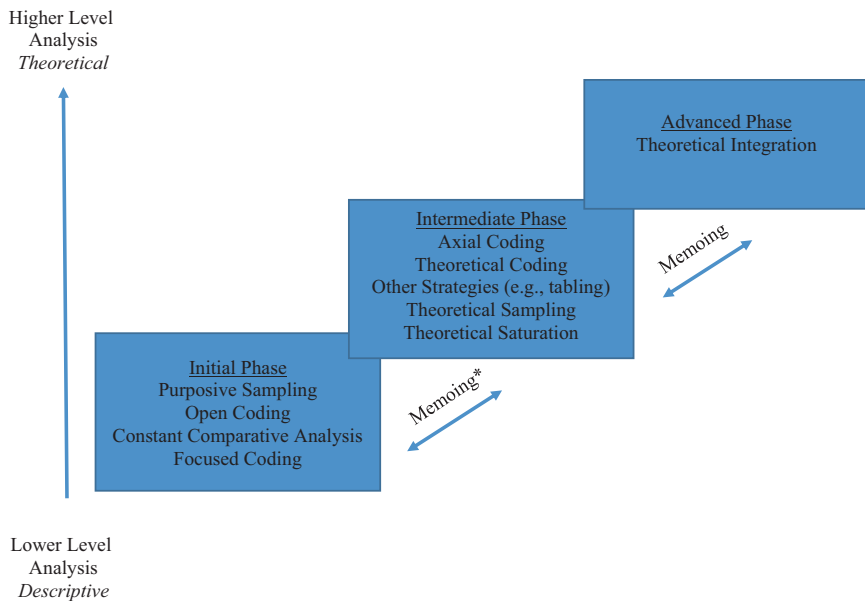
writers of manuscript reviews, we tackle other common areas of confusion and debate, especially those related to what Hood (2007) called the “troublesome trinity” – theoretical saturation, theoretical sampling, and constant comparative analysis for developing theoretical categories – and how concepts and analytic approaches may vary depending on the grounded theory tradition. Importantly, our goal here is not to offer a tutorial on how to conduct a GT study. Readers should consult other excellent resources for this purpose. Instead, our goal is to articulate essential methods, define key concepts, and explicate important differences between GT and other approaches (as well as differences within) in the context of family research. As frequent reviewers of GT studies and members of GT student committees, we continuously encounter confusion around these areas and hope readers can consult this chapter as a useful resource for gaining clarity. Naturally some explanation of the GT process is necessary to explain key methods and concepts, but again we caution readers that other resources (and mentors) are absolutely essential for learning how to conduct credible grounded theory research.

GT research questions are theoretical (how and why) versus descriptive (what). For example, Hardesty and Ganong (2006) asked, “How do divorcing mothers negotiate coparenting (social process) with abusive former partners (context)?” Allen (2008) asked how geographically mobile families make meaning of “home,” and Jhang (2018) asked, “What is the process of being out in one’s family among Taiwanese sexual minorities?” (p. 164). These questions are appropriate for GT methods because they are aimed at uncovering process or dynamic actions/interactions that lead to outcomes. They are consistent with assumptions of symbolic interactionism, which posits that social process is accomplished through social interaction and attends to both meaning and action. In contrast, researchers asking “what” questions, like what vulnerabilities women face in abusive relationships and what influences their decision to stay (Few & Rosen, 2005), lend themselves to descriptive qualitative methods or content analysis. The goal of these methods is to describe, not to theorize or explain, process. In descriptive phenomenology, the goal is to elucidate subjective meaning and the essential (or invariant) characteristics of lived experiences (Wertz et al., 2011). Researchers ask, “What is the essential nature of a certain experience?” And, “How is it experienced in all its richness and complexity (e.g., embodied, spiritual, emotional, temporal)?” For example, Queen et al. (2009) used descriptive phenomenology to describe what it is like to be emotionally abused. Sharp and Ganong (2011) described the lived social world of never-married women who missed the typical timing (ages 28–34) for transition to marriage.

We offer these comparisons because claiming to use a method that is not actually used, or method slurring (Baker et al., 1992), is a persistent problem in qualitative research, including research in family science. That is, researchers may claim to use GT methods when their research question(s), analytic procedures, and/or presented findings do not indicate GT was used. There are several reasons this mismatch may occur. Novice qualitative researchers may not fully understand differences *among* qualitative methods (e.g., GT vs. phenomenology; Baker et al., 1992). Alternatively, researchers may report using GT methods as a way to gain epistemological credibility (see Sandelowski, 2000), believing that GT will be perceived as more rigorous

or sophisticated than other methods (e.g., descriptive qualitative methods). Still yet, the diverse strategies and approaches to using GT may leave researchers unsure what aspects of the method warrant a claim of having used GT. Regardless of reasons or intent, method slurring affects the perceived credibility of qualitative research. To help remedy this problem, we must broaden our understanding of the variety of different qualitative methods, their purposes, and their procedures and judge the rigor of diverse methods based on their intended purposes (Hardesty et al., 2019). As LaRossa (2005) argued, the diverse approaches to GT methods do not mean researchers can choose whatever strategies they wish to use and call their method GT. Instead, key principles must be followed/adhered to, but how strategies or procedures are used can be modified as long as consistent with essential methods of GT.

Across the various approaches to GT, there are essential methods related to sampling and analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011). We organize our discussion of these methods in three phases of GT research, with each phase moving the analysis to a higher level (see Fig. 1). Readers should keep in mind that GT research is not a linear process. Progress through these phases is iterative and dynamic, necessitating back and forth movement across phases as theory is constructed and refined.



\*Memoing facilitates moving back and forth between phases, gradually raising analysis to a higher level

Fig. 1 Phases of grounded theory research



## *Initial Phase*

The initial phase of GT research involves a range of methods for sampling and analysis. *Purposive sampling* is used in the initial phase to identify who/what would be best able to speak about the phenomenon of interest. Sampling is aimed at experiences, not people per se, as the goal is to understand social process rather than to obtain a representative sample in terms of demographics. For example, Zuo (2009) recruited individuals and couples who were married before 1950, some of whom were living with parents and some not, to examine how power relations in Chinese marriages changed over time and across generations. Zuo specifically chose individuals and couples with varying marital arrangements and backgrounds to understand the diversity of experiences related to power and patriarchy in Chinese families. From the beginning, GT researchers collect and analyze data concurrently so that sampling approaches, interview protocols, codebooks, and so on can be revised as needed as part of the emergent nature of the method. For example, Ganong et al. (2011) initially interviewed stepchildren about various aspects of their relationship with their stepparent(s) to understand how stepchild-stepparent relationships develop. After conducting initial interviews, coding transcripts, and refining interview questions, they conducted additional follow-up interviews to “ask for confirmation, clarification, and expansion of ideas garnered from prior interviews about the developmental trajectories of step-relationships” (Ganong et al., 2011, p. 400).

In this phase of GT analysis, researchers use *open coding* to take apart their data and ask “what is happening?” in the data. All GT approaches use open (line-by-line, incident-by-incident) and focused coding with slight variations. For example, both Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2006) emphasize using gerunds or action codes (–ing words) to best capture process, whereas Strauss and Corbin (1990) rely more on topical codes in their examples. Another contrast between the approaches is that Strauss and Corbin offer a number of what they call analytic tools for “opening up” or interrogating data early on. These tools help researchers dig deep into their data, for example, by asking “who, what, when, where, and how?,” by comparing concepts to their use in everyday language, or by using the “flip flop” technique to “think comparatively” and “open up” the analysis (p. 87). Glaser (1992) has been critical of the approach, claiming these activities import ideas into the data rather than allow findings to emerge unbiased. This critique reflects the more objectivist assumptions of Glaser that “truth” or “reality” is there in the data and will reveal itself without bias if analyzed thoroughly enough. In our own practices, we have found Strauss and Corbin’s analytic tools helpful for pushing our thinking about our data. For example, in Haselschwerdt et al. (2011), we used the flip flop technique to probe a concept used by some custody evaluators in our sample – “real domestic violence.” By exploring possible meanings of the opposite (domestic violence that is “not real”), we gained insight into how “real domestic violence,” as used by evaluators in our sample, referred to a perceived, often stereotypical, standard of what counts as domestic violence, against which they compared the validity of violence

allegations in their cases. Probing this concept gave us a nuanced understanding of the concept and what it represented, which we continued to compare and refine as our analysis progressed. However, we also caution researchers to understand that although the intent of these practices is to ask questions of the data and facilitate constant comparison, ultimately the researcher must ensure that any insights gained using these tools remain grounded in the data.

The goal of open coding practices, regardless of specific approach, is to remain close to the data at this stage by *describing* what is happening in the data (e.g., what actions, perceptions) versus *interpreting*. Line-by-line coding is particularly useful in this regard because coding short segments of data that may not even be complete sentences or thoughts helps the researcher describe what is being said and avoid what Charmaz (2006) calls premature “theoretical flights” (p. 51). Tactics like line-by-line coding or asking questions of the data may feel tedious, as researchers may want to jump ahead to the “serious business” of theorizing. But these early stages are critical for getting to know the data and perspectives of the individuals or families themselves, ensuring that theoretical understandings are truly *grounded* in data. Thus, early stages of coding should be done thoroughly and patiently.

As coding proceeds and new data are collected, researchers engage in *constant comparative analysis*, where they move back and forth between previously coded data to new data, refining codes, recoding to capture new codes, etc. This iterative nonlinear process characterizes all approaches to GT and results in multiple rounds of reading and coding data. But according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is the constant comparative method of moving back and forth from analysis to data that is necessary for the development of theory. It is this process of opening up the data, labeling it, and constantly comparing it that gradually moves analysis forward. As Charmaz (2006) emphasizes, grounded theory analysis is an ambiguous process. Because the method itself is emergent, the researcher cannot know in advance exactly where analysis will go. A high tolerance for ambiguity is an absolute necessity and, in our experience, improves with practice.

As analysis progresses, researchers move to *focused coding*, which involves using salient codes to sift through large amounts of data as well as developing categories. Category development involves subsuming similar codes under broader labels or raising particular codes to the level of category. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain that the researcher links incidents of meaningful information to broader categories that encompass multiple related incidents. When conceptualizing categories, a researcher must explicate their properties and dimensions, by way of the data (e.g., “What is the range of experience?” “What are its parameters?”). In our experience, some researchers, especially novice ones, find the language of properties and dimensions challenging and can become bogged down in trying to do it correctly, losing sight of the main goal of analysis. The goal is to develop categories and articulate how they vary within the data. Some may find LaRossa’s (2005) approach easier to understand and implement. He describes two pathways or strategies for developing categories: (1) grouping similar but not identical ideas together and (2) grouping “dissimilar but still allied” (p. 843) ideas together. LaRossa argues that both grouping activities are important; grouping similar ideas most often occurs in

open and focused coding, and grouping dissimilar ideas typically occurs in axial and selective coding. In our experience, LaRossa's description has helped researchers new to GT methods better understand the process and different pathways to producing theoretical categories. That being said, others may find Charmaz's (2006) more fluid approach less cumbersome or rigid. One's approach should align with their goals and phase of analysis. Writing memos can help researchers reflect upon and articulate their analysis process and directions (Charmaz, 2006).

It is important to note that initial coding practices are not necessarily unique to GT. Many qualitative approaches apply open and focused coding to take data apart as analysis begins. Thus, these coding practices in and of themselves do not constitute a GT approach. As Birks and Mills (2011) explain, it is what happens in the following phases (intermediate and advanced) – or where the researcher takes the analysis beyond description – that gives GT its unique and powerful quality. According to Birks and Mills, researchers who erroneously claim to use GT methods often stop after this initial phase of labeling their data and perhaps creating categories rather than moving their analysis to the next two levels that serve to raise the analysis from descriptive to interpretive. Sandelowski (2000) refers to these higher-level phases, which we describe next, as transforming the analysis from data-near (descriptive) to data-far (interpretive or theoretical).

### *Intermediate Phase*

In the intermediate phase, researchers go beyond attaching labels to data and creating categories to beginning to relate categories to one another, theorizing about their relations. How one approaches this phase may vary by tradition. For example, Strauss and Corbin (1990) proposed *axial coding*, which provides a framework for organizing categories in relation to each other. Axial coding involves placing a theoretical category at the center and considering how its properties and dimensions relate to those of other theoretical categories in terms of the conditions under which a phenomenon occurs, the participants' reactions to or interactions with the phenomenon, and the outcomes of this interaction and any intervening condition. They offer questions for identifying conditions, actions, and consequences to help researchers piece together theoretical ideas. The aim here is to audition different categories as the key construct that links all other codes together in a theoretical story (LaRossa, 2005). The goal is to identify a central category that links other categories and codes together to reflect a coherent social process.

Although axial coding can be useful for working with categories and thinking theoretically, particularly for novice grounded theorists to have a structured framework by which to organize their categories, Glaser (1978) argues that this analysis method forces the data into a preconceived theoretical frame and instead offers *theoretical coding* via the "six C's" (p. 74): causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions and via "coding families" that offer the researcher a unit of analysis that is presumably more emergent, rather than

prescribed. Charmaz (2006) explains that the general purpose of axial or theoretical coding is useful for data exploration and can extend analysis, but she reminds researchers that any prescribed frameworks can also “limit your vision” (p. 61) and thus potentially stifle the analysis. For example, assuming there is a single core category at the center of every social process may blind researchers to the multiplicity and complexity of social processes (Charmaz, 2006). Regardless of the approach used, it should fit the data. If axial coding is applied, for example, and does not fit the data well, it should be discarded.

Other intermediate coding strategies, like tabling or mapping one’s data, can help researchers consider and compare theoretical ideas, examine connections, and consider gaps needing to be filled, helping to push analysis along. Compared to initial coding stages, which seek to describe and categorize the data, these intermediate techniques are aimed at explicating relations among codes and categories toward beginning to theorize the data. As categories are developed and refined and linkages are tentatively formed, researchers move from purposive to *theoretical sampling*. In contrast to purposive sampling, where the aim is to sample based on who/what can speak to the phenomenon of interest, theoretical sampling is aimed at filling gaps in or fully explicating the developing theory. For example, Kools (1997) used purposive sampling to recruit youth in foster care from a foster care support group. Further into her analysis, she used theoretical sampling by recruiting additional foster youth with diverse experiences and other informants like social workers and clinicians. These additional perspectives helped to enhance her developing theoretical explanation of how foster care experiences impacted adolescent identity development.

The goal of theoretical sampling is to reach *theoretical saturation*, which refers to saturating the theoretical categories of one’s model with data. In other words, there is enough data to support and fully saturate the properties and dimensions of the theoretical categories and their linkages. Theoretical saturation differs from data or information saturation, when the same information is presented over and over again from multiple data sources (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Data or information saturation may be one step in achieving theoretical saturation, but more is needed. Data analysis and/or collection should continue until meaningful categories are fully understood in terms of their properties and dimensions, no new meaningful categories are identified, and relations or linkages between categories and concepts are no longer formed or modified (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Importantly, the process continues to be iterative, and initial phases are revisited throughout. For example, theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation inform one another. As theory is developed, decisions are made about what constructs need to be saturated and thus what theoretical sampling should target.

A key facilitator of the GT analytic process is *memoing*. Memoing offers a crucial opportunity for researchers to record their thoughts, questions, and processes throughout a GT study. Memos can serve a variety of purposes. Memoing can be procedural, documenting steps taken and future directions for data collection and analysis; reflective, allowing space for the researcher to ask questions of themselves and their positionality in the research process; or theoretical, articulating codes, categories, and their relations to one another and theorizing process (Birks et al.,

2008). In GT, memo writing typically transforms as the analysis unfolds, becoming increasingly complex, analytic, theoretical, and abstract. Memo writing can also serve as an audit trail for analytic decisions and to maintain reflexivity (i.e., remaining aware of what one brings to the analytic process, including personal perspectives, experiences, and biases). For example, coding and other analysis activities can be recorded in procedural memos to document steps, decisions, and changes in direction. Theoretical memos can be written to document the researcher's thoughts about the analysis process, including its challenges and successes, or to develop theoretical ideas and ask questions of the data. Reflexive memos can help researchers process and challenge their own biases and perspectives. Thus, memo writing is a critical strategy for reflecting on and advancing one's analysis.

### *Advanced Phase*

In the third phase, advanced coding, the researcher focuses on *theoretical integration*. This is the highest level of analysis and where a theoretical story of the data is fully explicated and saturated. Returning to intermediate activities is often necessary as gaps in the theoretical story are identified and need to be filled through further coding and analysis, additional theoretical sampling, more memoing, and so on. Again, it is the two higher-level phases (intermediate and advanced) that are often absent in work that claims to use GT methods but relies only on coding and categorizing data. In our experience as instructors and mentors, novice researchers in particular struggle with moving from intermediate to advanced analysis as they grapple with ambiguity inherent in the process and learn how to theorize. In advanced coding, the theoretical story is thoroughly verified against the data, any exceptions are explained or incorporated into the theory with additional analyses as needed, and categories and their relationships are supported with concrete evidence from the data (e.g., quotes).

Each of these key methods and concepts are crucial for ensuring and evaluating the credibility of research using GT methods. Theoretically driven sampling is necessary for fully developing theoretical constructs and their connections; constant comparative analysis ensures that the developing theory remains grounded in data; and working towards theoretical saturation pushes researchers to enunciate and fully flesh out a theoretical model that can be usable and testable. Theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical saturation are considered essential but particularly challenging features of GT. In fact, Hood (2007) calls these the "troublesome trinity" because they are so difficult to employ and thus are less frequently and successfully accomplished in GT studies. The various coding, sampling, and memoing strategies we have reviewed offer a multitude of ways to move back and forth between the data and articulate the developing theory. Although all are key features of GT methods, how researchers implement these strategies should be tied to their own research goals, questions, and how the GT process unfolds in their particular study.

Finally, in addition to implementing essential GT methods, researchers must be transparent in exactly how they did so (or not) in their write-up to allow readers to fully understand the methodological and analytical processes and decisions made. Often, in our experience, it is a lack of detail (e.g., “data were analyzed until saturation was reached”) or a mismatch between the methods described and the resulting product (e.g., claims to use GTM but reports findings as a list of key themes) that raises questions in the peer review process as to whether one’s analysis is trustworthy. Other times, reviewers who evaluate GT studies may raise questions about credibility that are grounded in a quantitative paradigm or qualitative approaches other than GT. For example, reviewers less familiar with differences among qualitative methods may ask how interrater reliability was established or why member checks were not used, assuming these strategies are appropriate for all qualitative methods. Thus, researchers may need to make a case as to why and how their analysis is both rigorous and credible based on the expectations for GT. Consulting with key readings in one’s particular GT approach is essential. For example, if using a constructivist GT approach, Charmaz’s (2006) discussion of credibility, originality, and usefulness will be a key resource to consult for establishing and explaining rigor.

## Applying Grounded Theory Methods to Research with Families

For decades, family scientists have implemented GT methods to examine and theorize family relationships, interactions, and processes across sociocultural contexts. To examine the current scope and state of GT methods in family science research, we conducted a review of qualitative research published between 1990 and 2018 in two National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) journals, *Journal of Marriage and Family* and *Family Relations*. Of the 160 studies that included a qualitative method (58 in *JMF* and 102 in *FR*), 38 (14 in *JMF* and 24 in *FR*) reported a GT approach. More than three-quarters (29 of 38) of the articles were published within the last 10 years (2008–2018), suggesting that studies implementing GT methods are increasingly used and/or increasingly accepted for publication in NCFR journals.

A plethora of theoretical understandings have been developed through GT methods, with many researchers seeking to understand family and relationship processes and to illuminate the experiences and perspectives of understudied, diverse, and vulnerable populations. As Birks and Mills (2011) emphasize, GT methods help to “spark new ideas, initiate change, and reform thinking” (p. 155). Thus, GT is particularly relevant to research questions in an applied interdisciplinary field like family science because GT aims to develop complex understandings of individuals and families, which can help to inform practice, increase awareness and perspective taking, and facilitate social justice and change (Charmaz, 2019).

Our review highlights the diversity of complex topics examined using GT methods. Since 1990, family scientists have employed GT methods to explain individual

and dyad processes, including the identity development of fathers (e.g., Troilo & Coleman, 2012), interethnic couples (Yodanis et al., 2012), and youth (Kools, 1997); the dynamics of intimate couple relationships, such as the changing marital power dynamics of Chinese couples (Zuo, 2009) and youth's sexual decision making (Allen et al., 2008); and parent-child interactions, including the process of disclosing suicide ideation or sexual identity to family or friends (Frey et al., 2018; Jhang, 2018) and the negotiation of coparenting and stepchild-stepparent relationships after divorce (Ganong et al., 2011; Hardesty et al., 2008).

Family scientists have also captured family-level processes and systemic changes impacting families and their surrounding social environments, including finding and managing home for geographically mobile families (Allen, 2008), family processes of socialization across generations and nations (Gofen, 2009; Şenyürekli & Detzner, 2008), systemic family changes through immigration among Mexican immigrant families (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007), transitioning to postdivorce family life (Jamison et al., 2014), promoting LGBT social inclusion (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Oswald & Masciadrelli, 2008), managing secrecy and disclosure of domestic violence (e.g., Haselschwerdt & Hardesty, 2017), and the processes by which negative social constructions of family are created, such as those of working-class families (e.g., Edwards, 2004). The bulk of these studies have led to the development of substantive theories of family, helping to explain phenomena within particular situations or contexts. A variety of GT approaches were employed in these studies, with some producing a grounded theory in full and others involving only some aspects of GT methods. In the next section, we showcase a few exemplars from our review to demonstrate how family scientists have successfully implemented some key features or characteristics of GT methods.

Allen's (2008) GT study of geographically mobile families offers theoretical understandings of the meaning and experience of home, including the strategies by which family members managed the ambivalence of sharing multiple, often temporal spaces – one's "home for now" (p. 90). Theoretical sampling was a key feature of Allen's study, as she sought out couples with varying mobility histories. Interview data were collected and analyzed concurrently using constant comparative analysis, until key theoretical categories and their interconnections were fully fleshed out to explain *how* one's sense of home is created through an interplay of people, time, and place. Allen's (2008) theoretical explanations offer important implications for working with geographically mobile families, such as immigrants and refugees, who need support during times of moving and transition.

Using GT methods, Ganong et al. (2011) interviewed stepchildren in emerging adulthood to examine the development of stepchild-stepparent relationships. They began by recruiting college students and modifying their interviews as theoretical understandings developed through constant comparative analysis and later sought out participants who could bring greater detail and depth to their theoretical explanations. Through successfully tackling the "troublesome trinity," they developed six patterns of stepchild-stepparent relationship development. These theoretical explanations provide useful insights for counselors and other practitioners working to mend or improve stepfamily relationships while also filling gaps in our knowledge

and understanding of step relationships. In our review, Ganong et al.'s (2011) work stood out as a strong exemplar, particularly with regard to their detailed and transparent description of study methods and analysis.

Family scientists have also used aspects of GT methods in combination with other qualitative approaches in innovative ways to tackle complex research questions. In a cross-cultural study crossing five countries, Ungar et al. (2011) examined how youth make culturally meaningful contributions to the resilience of families living in impoverished environments. They used a combination of interviews, photo elicitation, and "day in the life of" videos to collect data from youth who were identified by community members as doing well despite experiences of adversity. Ungar et al.'s team involved the participant youth throughout their study to ensure that their analysis and reporting of findings remained culturally appropriate and accurate according to the youth's perspectives. Although not an exemplar of GT in full, Ungar et al.'s study offers innovative avenues for incorporating aspects of GT methods that best fit with one's research questions and epistemology.

With the increasing interest in and use of GT methods in family scholarship, there remains a need for strong mentorship and training to ensure quality and rigor. In our review of articles published in *JMF* and *FR* between 1990 and 2018, we saw some common challenges and concerns as to whether and how GT methods were employed and described. The "troublesome trinity," or the core features of GT (theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical saturation), were considered or accomplished in only 9 (23.6%) of the 38 family science studies claiming to use GT methods. More than half of the studies (58%) involved purposive but not necessarily theoretical sampling, and less than half (42%) considered theoretical saturation as a means for concluding data collection and analysis. Most researchers (84% of studies) accomplished constant comparative analysis, but the explanation and level of details of how GT methods were used varied greatly across studies. For example, 37% of the studies reviewed were missing important details as to how the study methods and analysis were conducted, leaving gaps and questions for readers that may lead to unwarranted concerns about the trustworthiness or credibility of the work.

It is important to acknowledge that there are often very real challenges or barriers to successfully accomplishing all aspects of GT methods. An important category may be identified too late in the process to return to the field for theoretical sampling. Grant funding may have ended, for example, or a hard to reach sampling pool has been exhausted. Some scholars are reliant on secondary data or use GT methods as part of a larger study with varying research questions and goals, limiting their potential to saturate a full model using the data available. Studies lacking essential components GT methods can still make important contributions, but it is critical for researchers to acknowledge and explain these methodological decisions and how they may limit the study. Although GT methods are appearing more and more in family science journals, reviewers of manuscripts may often lack a nuanced understanding of GT and its many iterations. The onus is on GT researchers to explain their methodological decisions, analytic practices, and significance of their work.



## Reflecting on the Future of Grounded Theory Methods in Family Science

Family scholars' strong interest in theory building will continue in the future, and GT methods are certain to play a central role (Gilgun, 2005; LaRossa, 2005). One of the most critical needs for the next generation of family scholarship, we believe, is advanced training in specific qualitative methods for emerging family scholars. Indeed, theory building and advanced training go hand in hand. Although many, if not most, family science doctoral programs have integrated qualitative methods in some way into their doctoral curriculum, specialized training in specific qualitative approaches is less common (e.g., courses on grounded theory or phenomenology vs. survey style courses). Depth of knowledge in particular methods, how to use them, and how they compare to other qualitative methods will improve the qualitative "literacy" of the family science discipline. Theory is highly valued in family science, and GT methods offer family scholars rigorous and diverse procedures for theorizing family processes in the context of our rapidly changing world. Breadth and depth of knowledge in various types of qualitative methods are increasingly necessary to advance, critically evaluate, and apply family scholarship.

## References

- Allen, K. R. (2004). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(1), 4–17.
- Allen, K. R., Husser, E. K., Stone, D. J., & Jardai, C. E. (2008). Agency and error in young adults' stories of sexual decision making. *Family Relations*, 57(4), 517–529.
- Allen, S. (2008). Finding home: Challenges faced by geographically mobile families. *Family Relations*, 57(1), 84–99.
- Anells, M. (1996). Grounded theory method: Philosophical perspectives, paradigm of inquiry, and postmodernism. *Qualitative Health Research*, 6(3), 379–393.
- Bacallao, M. L., & Smokowski, P. R. (2007). The costs of getting ahead: Mexican family system changes after immigration. *Family Relations*, 56(1), 52–66.
- Baker, C., Wuest, J., & Stern, P. N. (1992). Method slurring: The grounded theory/phenomenology example. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(11), 1355–1360.
- Belgrave, L. L., & Seide, K. (2019). Grounded theory methodology: Principles and practices. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 299–316). Springer.
- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68–75.
- Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2007). Grounded theory in historical perspective: An epistemological account. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 31–57). Sage.
- Burton, L. M., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., & Freeman, E. H. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade's research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 440–459.

- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 509–535). Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). Symbolic interactionism and grounded theory. In *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed., pp. 260–284). Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2019). “With constructivist grounded theory you can’t hide”: Social justice research and critical inquiry in the public sphere. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26(2), 165–176.
- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn*. Sage.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Edwards, M. L. K. (2004). We’re decent people: Constructing and managing family identity in rural working-class communities. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(2), 515–529.
- Few, A. L., & Rosen, K. H. (2005). Victims of chronic dating violence: How women’s vulnerabilities link to their decisions to stay. *Family Relations*, 54(2), 265–279.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 6(2), 169–183.
- Frey, L. M., Fulginiti, A., Lezine, D., & Cerei, J. (2018). The decision-making process for disclosing suicidal ideation and behavior to family and friends. *Family Relations*, 67(3), 414–427.
- Ganong, L. H., Coleman, M., & Jamison, T. (2011). Patterns of stepchild-stepparent relationship development. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73(2), 396–413.
- Gilgun, J. F. (2005). Qualitative research and family psychology. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(1), 40–50.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence versus forcing*. Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Transactions.
- Glass, V. Q., & Few-Demo, A. L. (2013). Complexities of informal social support arrangements for Black lesbian couples. *Family Relations*, 62(5), 714–726.
- Gofen, A. (2009). Family capital: How first-generation higher education students break the intergenerational cycle. *Family Relations*, 58(1), 104–120.
- Hardesty, J. L., & Ganong, L. H. (2006). How women make custody decisions and manage co-parenting with abusive former husbands. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23(4), 543–563.
- Hardesty, J. L., Haselschwerdt, M. L., & Crossman, K. A. (2019). Qualitative research on interpersonal violence: Guidance for early career scholars. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(23–24), 4794–4816.
- Hardesty, J. L., Khaw, L., Chung, G. H., & Martin, J. M. (2008). Coparenting relationships after divorce: Variations by type of marital violence and fathers’ role differentiation. *Family Relations*, 57(4), 479–491.
- Haselschwerdt, M. L., & Hardesty, J. L. (2017). Managing secrecy and disclosure of domestic violence in affluent communities. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 79(2), 556–570.
- Haselschwerdt, M. L., Hardesty, J. L., & Hans, J. D. (2011). Custody evaluators’ beliefs about domestic violence allegations during divorce: Feminist and family violence perspectives. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 26(8), 1694–1719.
- Heath, H., & Cowley, S. (2004). Developing a grounded theory approach: A comparison of Glaser and Strauss. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 41, 141–150.
- Hood, J. C. (2007). Orthodoxy vs. power: The defining traits of grounded theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. Sage.

- Jamison, T. B., Coleman, M., Ganong, L. H., & Feistman, R. E. (2014). Transitioning to post-divorce family life: A grounded theory investigation of resilience in coparenting. *Family Relations, 63*(3), 411–423.
- Jhang, J. (2018). Scaffolding in family relationships: A grounded theory of coming out to family. *Family Relations, 67*(1), 161–175.
- Khaw, L. (2012). Mapping the process: An exemplar of using situational analysis in a grounded theory study. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 4*(2), 138–147.
- Kools, S. M. (1997). Adolescent identity development in foster care. *Family Relations, 46*(3), 263–271.
- LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*(4), 837–857.
- Morse, J. M. (2009). Tussels, tensions, and resolutions. In J. M. Morse, P. Noerager Stern, J. Corbin, B. Bowers, K. Charmaz, & A. E. Clarke (Eds.), *Developing grounded theory: The second generation* (pp. 13–22). Left Coast Press.
- Nice, L., Knudson-Martin, C., Lough, A., Castillo, N., & Doe, K. (2020). Patterns that challenge and sustain mutuality as retired couples negotiate gendered power. *Family Relations, 69*, 195–206.
- Oswald, R., Blume, L., & Marks, S. (2005). Decentering heteronormativity: A proposal for family studies. In V. Bengston, A. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: An interactive approach* (pp. 143–165). Sage.
- Oswald, R. F., & Masciadrelli, B. P. (2008). Generative ritual among nonmetropolitan lesbians and gay men: Promoting social inclusion. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*(4), 1060–1073.
- Queen, J., Nurse, A., Brackley, M. H., & Williams, G. B. (2009). Being emotionally abused: A phenomenological study of adult women's experiences of emotionally abusive intimate partner relationships. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 30*(4), 237–245.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health, 23*, 334–340.
- Schatzman, L. (1991). Dimensional analysis: Notes on an alternative approach to the grounding of theory in qualitative research. In D. R. Maines (Ed.), *Social organization and social process: Essays in honor of Anselm Strauss*. Hawthorne, New York.
- Şenyürekli, A., & Detzner, D. F. (2008). Intergenerational relationships in a transnational context: The case of Turkish families. *Family Relations, 57*(4), 457–467.
- Sharp, E. A., & Ganong, L. (2011). “I’m a loser, I’m not married, let’s just all look at me”: Ever-single women’s perceptions of their social environment. *Journal of Family Issues, 32*(7), 956–980.
- Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. B. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research, 17*, 1372–1380.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedure and techniques*. Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998a). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998b). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (pp. 158–183). Sage.
- Troilo, J., & Coleman, M. (2012). Full-time, part-time full-time, part-time fathers: Father identities following divorce. *Family Relations, 61*(4), 601–614.
- Ungar, M., Theron, L., & Didkowsky, N. (2011). Adolescents’ precocious and developmentally appropriate contributions to their families’ well-being and resilience in five countries. *Family Relations, 60*(2), 231–246.
- Vinjamuri, M. (2015). Reminders of heteronormativity: Gay adoptive fathers navigating uninvited social interactions. *Family Relations, 64*(2), 263–277.

- Wertz, F. J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., et al. (2011). The establishment of methodological traditions. In *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry* (pp. 48–74). Guilford.
- Yodanis, C., Lauer, S., & Ota, R. (2012). Interethnic romantic relationships: Enacting affiliative ethnic identities. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(5), 1021–1037.
- Zuo, J. (2009). Rethinking family patriarchy and women's positions in presocialist China. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(3), 542–557.

# Application: Addressing Sexual Health Disparities Among Black Girls and Women



Natasha Crooks

This chapter will focus on the application of grounded theory methodology (GTM) in research on Black female sexual development and sexually transmitted infections (STI)/HIV risk across the life course. The underpinning theoretical perspective of GTM is symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986; see Adamsons, this volume). Symbolic interactionism focuses on “the process of assigning meaning to actions and in the responses that follow” (O’Brien, 2011, p.24). Symbolic interactionism aids our understanding of processes and meaning through social interaction (Blumer, 1986; Plummer & Young, 2010). This social interaction can be between people undergoing shared experience and its associated actions, behaviors, and norms (Blumer, 1986; Bowers, 1989; Charon, 2009). This theoretical focus aligns with the purpose of better understanding the contexts of sexual experiences for Black girls and women, as well as the processes of sexual behaviors that lead to their STI/HIV risk. Rather than laying a predetermined theoretical framework or model on top of their experiences, researchers use GTM to obtain in-depth understanding of what an experience means to the participants and their voices to be heard, defined, and organized by their own experiences.

GTM is methodologically suited for discovery when little is known about a phenomenon and aides in obtaining an in-depth understanding of what an experience means to participants (Bowers, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). More specifically, in order to understand human behavior, we must focus on social interaction, human thinking, and the perspectives of persons experiencing the phenomenon of interest (Charon, 2009). Symbolic interactionism is used to analyze and identify the meaning of data, which is essential in GTM methodology (i.e., coding and constant comparative analysis) (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). In order to understand the social processes associated with sexual behaviors that lead to STI risk among Black

---

N. Crooks (✉)

University of Illinois Chicago, College of Nursing, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: [ncrooks@uic.edu](mailto:ncrooks@uic.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_23)

335

girls and women, we must understand the sociocultural conditions that influence those processes.

Additionally, GTM is commonly used to inform intervention development and generate new theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), so it is the optimal qualitative methodology to ground research addressing sexual health disparities among Black girls and women through the development of STI/HIV prevention interventions across the life course. In this chapter, I will illustrate how GTM can generate new theory, saturate theory, and build upon existing theory.

## Generation of New Theoretical Models among Black Girls and Women

Black girls and women are disproportionately impacted by sexual health disparities.

The rates of chlamydia among Black girls and women are about five times the rate of white girls and women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). However, risk-related behaviors themselves (i.e., multiple sexual partners, condom, and substance use) do not explain these racial disparities (Adimora & Schoenbach, 2005; Cipres et al., 2017; N. Crooks, Wise, & Frazier, 2020). Sociocultural conditions such as sexual stereotypes, race- and gender-based discrimination, adultification, and heterosexual relationship dynamics may potentially drive disparities among Black female sexuality (N. Crooks, Wise, & Frazier, 2020; Epstein et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2010). However, it is not clear how sociocultural conditions influence the sexual developmental process of Black girls and women.

In my research with Black girls and women, GTM facilitated the development of two theoretical models (Nilsen, 2020), which explain Black female sexual developmental processes. The first theoretical model provides a broader overview of the sociocultural conditions influencing the process of becoming a sexual Black woman (N. Crooks, King, Tluczek, & Sales, 2019). This study was conducted in the Midwestern United States (USA) with Black women aged 19–62, who described three distinct phases of sexual development (*girl*, *grown*, and *woman*) and identified the sociocultural conditions of stereotype messaging and protection that influenced their sexual development (N. Crooks, King, Tluczek, & Sales, 2019). Stereotype messaging that sexualizes Black girls and women emerged from historical, cultural, and societal contexts. Protection served as a major category of influence as Black women described throughout these sexual developmental phases that the level of protection varied. Without protection, stereotype messaging had a greater influence on young girls and women (N. Crooks, King, & Tluczek, 2019).

The second model describes the influence of sociocultural conditions along two sexual pathways of Black female sexual development (*fast* and *cautious*) (N. Crooks, King, et al., 2022). This model provides a more nuanced perspective and directionality of Black female sexuality and behaviors that may place them at risk for STI/HIV. Participants described movement between the sexual pathways based on the

phase of sexual development they were in and level of protection that was present. The uniqueness of this model is that it is grounded in the voices and experiences of Black females, utilizing their language and allowing them to see themselves in it, which makes it easier to translate and apply to various settings (i.e., clinical, school, community, and home) and in various capacities (i.e., sexual and reproductive health, family programming, and counseling). Utilizing GTM techniques such as constant comparison, theoretical sampling, and member checking, I developed two theoretical models that are reflective and representative of Black girls and women's real-life experiences.

## **Study of Black Girls, Sexual Engagement, Sexualization, and Saturation of Theory**

Findings from the first study highlighted the vulnerability of Black girls regarding early sexual engagement and sexualization, due to their early onset of puberty and development of sex characteristics (Fortenberry, 2013; Mendle et al., 2019; Zuckerman, 2001). Therefore, a second study was conducted in the Southeastern United States with Black girls aged 11–18. The purpose of this study was to achieve theoretical saturation of the models, which is the point in data collection when concepts begin to be repeated and further data analysis becomes redundant (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Saturation helped to determine if the categories, conditions, and dimensions and phases of sexual development previously identified by the women in the initial study represented the current perspective of Black girls during the interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). More specifically, these findings expanded and validated the *girl* and *grown* phases of sexual development indicated in the original theoretical model.

Purposive and theoretical sampling techniques were used to intentionally select participants for the purpose of discovering categories, filling in dimensions within categories, identifying conditions, and discovering interrelations among and between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Being theoretically sensitive allowed me to recognize data that validated the *girl* and *grown* phases in the theoretical model and to extract new dimensions to expand the model. This study revealed new dimensions to the *girl* and *grown* phases, including learning lessons, looking grown, and acting grown. These data also led to an expansion of two categories, stereotype messaging (Strong Black Woman, Black girl magic, and colorism) and protection (masking and school as an unprotected space). Findings from this study contributed to a fully saturated theoretical model on Black female sexual development, grounded in the voices and experiences of Black girls and women (N. Crooks, King, et al., 2022) and ready to be tested and used in intervention development and programming to better address sexual health disparities among Black girls and women. These findings filled a gap in the literature as there were no Black female sexual developmental models that exist, and this model provides a life course perspective.

## Secondary Analyses, Expansion, and Linkages to Other Theoretical Frameworks

Building on a developmental approach, I conducted a secondary analysis looking at the role of Strong Black Woman on Black female development and their mental and sexual health implications among Black girls and women (N. Crooks, King, et al., 2022; N. Crooks, Barrie, Singer, & Donenberg, 2022). Utilization of GTM sensitized me to uncover action, meaning, process, identity, and agency related to social justice (Charmaz, 2014). Concepts of power, privilege, equity, and oppression repeatedly emerged, as they were meaningful experiences related to their sexual development. GTM can provide voices and context to the past generational messages and experiences of underrepresented communities (Plummer & Young, 2010). GTM techniques can also demonstrate broader implications of sociocultural conditions, such as stereotypes on health; as findings from this secondary analysis highlight the negative health implications of being a Strong Black Woman, which is rooted in slavery, and generational pressure that places this strength or desire to be “strong” onto Black girls today (Watson-Singleton, 2017; N. Crooks, Barrie, et al. 2022). The theoretical model demonstrates the power of stereotype messages at various levels (e.g., social media, cultural, and historical) and their impact on the health of Black girls and women (N. Crooks, King, & Tluczek, 2019).

GTM has been widely used to build or expand upon existing theory and to create linkages between preexisting theory and current contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Findings from my studies revealed that Black girls and women’s sexual experiences are shaped by their identities of being both Black (race) and women (gender), which aligns with intersectionality theory (Collins, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). I conducted another secondary of analysis of my GTM data and used it to expand intersectionality theory to explicitly situate identities, such as sexuality, within a historical context, and to acknowledge the impact of oppression and historical trauma on Black female sexuality (N. Crooks, Singer, & Tluczek, 2020). Participants described the uniqueness of their identities, specifically how the history of being a Black woman in the United States has influenced their sexual development. These GTM studies highlighted the intersectional experiences and Black perspectives of Black girls and women.

GTM has been used in feminist research to advance women’s health, particularly to reveal issues particular to the lives and experiences of marginalized women (D. L. Crooks, 2001; Keddy et al., 1996; Plummer & Young, 2010). Symbolic interactionism principles, which are integral to a grounded theory approach, can be used to facilitate a deeper understanding of contextual factors and the relationship between women and their environment (Blumer, 1986; D. L. Crooks, 2001). Many participants in my initial study could not describe their sexuality, sexual development, or sexual health without the role of Black men. It was important to examine how sociocultural conditions influence Black heterosexual relationships and STI/HIV risk.



Plummer and Young (2010) emphasize the importance of healthcare researchers to draw on feminist principles to guide GTM to better serve women by unpacking how issues of gender and power impact their health experience. In this secondary GTM analysis, we utilized a Black feminist perspective to situate our findings as they were from the perspectives of Black women. Various conditions influencing the dynamics of Black heterosexual relationships including protecting Black men, silencing Black girls and women, cultural norms and messaging about sexuality, gendered societal expectations, and sexual stereotypes contributed to STI/HIV risk among Black girls and women. Additionally, these findings demonstrated the intersection of how social and systemic structures (i.e., history, incarceration, unemployment) shape the context of Black heterosexual relationships (N. Crooks, Wise, & Frazier, 2020).

## **Application of GTM Research for Instrument and Intervention Development**

Drawing on this theoretical model based on GTM analyses, I will develop a screening tool to identify Black girls at risk for early sexual engagement, sexual trauma, and STI/HIV. The instrument will be used to inform pathways of sexual risk among Black girls and to provide health providers with a new approach and instrument to identify at-risk girls. Using rigorous empirical methods (i.e., instrument development) and qualitative (i.e., cognitive interviewing), quantitative (i.e., structural equation modeling), and multilevel informants (i.e., girls, family caregivers, community organizations, and healthcare providers), the screening tool will be tailored to the phases of sexual development and sexual pathways outlined in the previously developed theoretical models. Healthcare providers will find this tool useful to assess risk (similar to a tobacco or alcohol assessment at doctors' offices) and recommend the appropriate and developmentally sensitive intervention.

Insights from this research serve to broadly protect Black girls and women's sexual development throughout the life course, as it indicates the importance of multilevel interventions across multiple systems (i.e., individuals, families, education, healthcare). These theoretical models will be used to guide intervention research across the Black female sexual developmental trajectory, addressing multiple phases of sexual development as well as sociocultural contexts and conditions that influence their lived experience. It will inform an adaptation of an evidenced-based mother-daughter sexual and reproductive health intervention (Donenberg et al., 2020) to include Black male caregivers and to utilize the theoretical models to target the sociocultural nuances at each developmental phase. This intervention will be innovative as it is developmentally tailored to phases of Black female sexual development (girl, grown, and woman), addresses sociocultural context, and utilizes the screening tool to determine level of sexual risk.

## Conclusion

Grounded theory is critical in addressing the complex nature of familial systems and situating them within a sociocultural context. Attention to sociocultural conditions and context is crucial considering the ever-changing demographics of the United States, addressing health disparities and achieving health equity. GTM-informed analyses shape the perspectives of researchers, policymakers, educators, and health-care professionals, as well as informing research, promoting theory development, and framing interventions and programs. Researchers cannot address health disparities among Black girls and women without understanding their experiences and utilizing methods that serve them. GTM approaches allow researchers to dig deeper into history and generations of trauma to gain a richer understanding of Black girls and women experiences and more effectively target and reach them. Sociocultural context and conditions drive disparities, and GTM, in combination with symbolic interactionism, allows researchers to uncover those details and their impact on health and behavior. This chapter recognizes the flexibility and value of GTM and its contribution to addressing health disparities among vulnerable populations.

## References

- Adimora, A. A., & Schoenbach, V. J. (2005). Social context, sexual networks, and racial disparities in rates of sexually transmitted infections. *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, *191*(Supplement\_1), S115–S122.
- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Univ of California Press.
- Bowers, B. (1989). *Grounded theory: From conceptualization to research process* (pp. 33–58). Innovative Research Methods in Nursing.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2018*. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats18/toc.htm>
- Chamberlain-Salaun, J., Mills, J., & Usher, K. (2013). Linking symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methods in a research design. *SAGE Open*, *3*(3), 2158244013505757–2158244013505757.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Charon, J. M. (2009). *Symbolic interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration* (ninth edition). <http://profiles.wizfolio.com/Anneleis/groups/483/139156/>
- Cipres, D., Rodriguez, A., Alvarez, J., Stern, L., Steinauer, J., & Seidman, D. (2017). Racial/ethnic differences in Young Women’s health-promoting strategies to reduce vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *60*(5), 556–562.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241–1299.
- Crooks, D. L. (2001). The importance of symbolic interaction in grounded theory research on women’s health. *Health Care for Women International*, *22*(1–2), 11–27.
- Crooks, N, Barrie, R., & Singer, R. (2021). *The role of the strong black woman in black female sexual development* [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- Crooks, N, King, B., Sales, J. M., & Donenberg, G. (2021). *Growing up too “Fast”: A Grounded Theory Study of Black girls’ Sexual Development* [Manuscript submitted for publication].

- Crooks, N., Barrie, R., Singer, R., & Donenberg, G. (2022). The role of the strong black woman in black female sexual development.
- Crooks, N., King, B., & Tluczek, A. (2019). *Protecting young black female sexuality* (pp. 1–16). Culture.
- Crooks, N., King, B., Tluczek, A., & Sales, J. M. (2019). The process of becoming a sexual black woman: A grounded theory study. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 51*(1), 17–25.
- Crooks, N., Singer, R., & Tluczek, A. (2020). *Black female sexual development across the life course: Impact of intersectional identities and historical contexts*. Advances in Nursing Science.
- Crooks, N., Wise, A., & Frazier, T. (2020). Addressing sexually transmitted infections in the socio-cultural context of black heterosexual relationships in the United States. *Social Science & Medicine, 263*, 113303.
- Donenberg, G. R., Kendall, A. D., Emerson, E., Fletcher, F. E., Bray, B. C., & McCabe, K. (2020). IMARA: A mother-daughter group randomized controlled trial to reduce sexually transmitted infections in black/African-American adolescents. *PLoS One, 15*(11), e0239650.
- Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*.
- Fortenberry, J. D. (2013). Puberty and adolescent sexuality. *Hormones and Behavior, 64*(2), 280–287.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2009). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Transaction Publishers.
- Keddy, B., Sims, S. L., & Stern, P. N. (1996). Grounded theory as feminist research methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 23*(3), 448–453.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs, 40*(1).
- Mendle, J., Beltz, A. M., Carter, R., & Dorn, L. D. (2019). Understanding puberty and its measurement: Ideas for research in a new generation. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 29*(1), 82–95.
- Nilsen, P. (2020). Making sense of implementation theories, models, and frameworks. In *Implementation science 3.0* (pp. 53–79). Springer.
- O'Brien, J. (2011). *The production of reality: Essays and readings on social interaction (5th edition)*. Pine Forge Press.
- Plummer, M., & Young, L. E. (2010). Grounded theory and feminist inquiry: Revitalizing links to the past. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 32*(3), 305–321.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Townsend, T. G., Thomas, A. J., Neilands, T. B., & Jackson, T. R. (2010). I'm no Jezebel; I am young, gifted, and black: Identity, sexuality, and black girls. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 34*(3), 273–285.
- Watson-Singleton, N. N. (2017). Strong black woman schema and psychological distress: The mediating role of perceived emotional support. *Journal of Black Psychology, 43*(8), 778–788.
- Zuckerman, D. (2001). When little girls become women: Early onset of puberty in girls. *The Ribbon, 6*(1).

# Longitudinal Research



Spencer James and Jeremy Yorgason

Some have argued that “[a]ttention to change over time is the hallmark of studies of human and family development” (Menaghan & Godwin, 1993, p. 260). Scientific studies often stress the recency and relevance of data because historical time looms large for understanding why and how families change, develop, and interact. In this chapter, we introduce why studying time matters, discuss major developments in longitudinal methods, and provide examples of how to match research questions with longitudinal analytic models.

## The Significance of Temporal Ordering

Temporal ordering is crucial because “development,” whether human, relational, social, or otherwise, concerns change over time. Even if a research question simply seeks to explore links between two variables or describe a single phenomenon, things may change tomorrow and again after that. Will our observations persist? For how long? Can they be measured the same way after a month, year, decade, or even a century from now? Researchers since the 1930s (such as Burks et al., 1930; see below) have focused on longitudinal family and child outcomes. But motivations to study time are not rooted in the truism that things change; the consequences of change are what matter to social scientists. If A and B are strongly linked today,

---

**Supplementary Information** The online version of this chapter ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_24](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_24)) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

---

S. James · J. Yorgason (✉)  
School of Family Life, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA  
e-mail: [spencer\\_james@byu.edu](mailto:spencer_james@byu.edu)

what happens if A changes? What about causality (which cannot be established without considering time)?

We argue that two goals, establishing causality and assessing change/development, are the primary reasons why time matters to family researchers. Mill (1882), drawing on Hume (1739), articulates three conditions to establish causality and strengthen developmental claims: temporal ordering ( $x$  must precede  $y$ ), covariance (when  $x$  changes,  $y$  does too), and elimination of alternative explanations. Cross-sectional data may, under rare circumstances, satisfy the latter two conditions, but never the first. If  $x$  and  $y$  were collected simultaneously, we cannot know which came first. Longitudinal research often provides our best view of ordering temporal processes.

## **Major Developments in Longitudinal Family Research Methods and Longitudinal Datasets**

Family scientists' interest in within-individual change has led to a heavy focus over the past half century on panel surveys (Menaghan & Godwin, 1993). Over the past 30 years, panel studies have exploded. Today, many large, often publicly available, datasets contain family information (Some of these are listed in Supplemental Table 1).

### **Analyzing Longitudinal Data**

The increase in longitudinal data availability was accompanied by an increase in longitudinal data analytics. We provide a brief history of the analysis of longitudinal data and trace developments in the field, driven primarily by the advent of modern computing power.

### ***Measurement***

The quality of longitudinal claims is linked to improvements in measurement quality. If used appropriately, advances in measurement can boost confidence in claims made from longitudinal data, especially because longitudinal data is susceptible to temporal variation in measurement error (Menaghan & Godwin, 1993). Because family researchers often use data from multiple family members (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Qian, 2018), the impact of measurement error on parameter estimates is likely to be cumulative rather than subtractive (Bound et al., 2001). Subsequently, researchers employed exploratory factor analyses that more accurately model the underlying construct and its error structure(s) (Menaghan &

Godwin, 1993), leading to a boon of factor analytic approaches to measuring family-related phenomena in the mid-1990s (Asher, 1997; de Vries, 2006; Roosa & Beals, 1990; Sabatelli & Waldron, 1995; Stephens & Sommer, 1996).

Since the late 1990s, the research community has borne witness to an influx of complex models to assess and account for measurement error. These include item response theory (Gordon, 2015), confirmatory factor analysis (Schumacker & Beyerlein, 2000), and various latent measures made possible via structural equation modeling, including for models where the causal effects can flow in multiple directions (Price et al., 2019). These models allow researchers to examine if and how measurement error influences their model.

## *Analysis*

Family scholars have embraced advanced statistical techniques for analyzing longitudinal data. In their landmark book, Singer and Willett (2003) developed a framework for examining, describing, and modeling change. Other books on analyzing longitudinal family data followed, including Kline's (2005) book on structural equation modeling. Nagin (2005) emphasized group-based (sometimes called "person-centered" vs. "variable-centered") analyses that demonstrate how change can be conceptualized and analyzed as a series of trajectories, whether latent class, latent growth, or latent profile analyses, for individuals or dyads. Dyadic data can be analyzed with the common fate growth model or the actor-partner interdependence models (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). Finally, the work of Bengt and Linda Muthén has been critical, both because of their influential papers throughout the statistical and psychological literature but also due to their statistical program, Mplus ([statmodel.com](http://statmodel.com)).

Table 1 displays a sample of the type of statistical models researchers can use to study families across time. While we do not discuss each of these in detail, a large group of tutorials are readily available for researchers to consult on these topics and many others (Barbeau et al., 2019; Byrne, 2012; DeMaris, 1995; Heaton, 1995; Johnson, 1995, 2005; Jung & Wickrama, 2008; Kuiper & Ryan, 2018; Luke, 2004).

## **Connecting Longitudinal Questions with the Appropriate Method**

In this chapter, we cover four statistical techniques commonly employed by family researchers – multilevel models, structural equation models, group-based trajectory models, and survival analysis. We give a brief overview of each method and discuss the types of questions researchers might answer with each one. Throughout, we use the example of how premarital cohabitation is linked to subsequent marital

**Table 1** Sample of longitudinal models that can be applied to family relationships

Type of analysis	Time points required	Most common distribution of outcome variable
Change score analysis <sup>a</sup>	2	Continuous
Repeated measures ANOVA	2	Continuous
Cross-lagged model <sup>b</sup>	2	Continuous
Growth curve <sup>c</sup>	3	Continuous
Mixture models (growth, regressions, finite) <sup>d</sup>	2 (but more strongly preferred)	Categorical/continuous
Survival analysis (e.g., event history, discrete-time, cox) <sup>e</sup>	3	Dichotomous
Fixed vs. random effects <sup>f</sup>	2	Categorical/continuous

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Johnson (2005), <sup>b</sup>Kuiper & Ryan (2018), <sup>c</sup>Luke, (2004), <sup>d</sup>Jung & Wickrama (2008), <sup>e</sup>DeMaris (1995), Heaton (1995), <sup>f</sup>Johnson (1995)

outcomes using CREATE data. The CREATE study is a nationally representative, longitudinal study of 2181 young married couples (James et al., [in press](#)). Our goal is to give readers a conceptual idea of why one might employ a particular method, without discussing the nearly endless available extensions.

## Multilevel/Hierarchical Regression Models

### Overview

Multilevel models, or hierarchical regression models,<sup>1</sup> are one of the most common ways of modeling longitudinal data. Data are collected at different conceptual “levels” (individual, family, school, community, etc.), requiring the use of statistical models that account for variance at each level. Theorizing at multiple levels is crucial to family research because individual family members (one level) belong to families (another level). Because people are “nested” within various contexts (e.g., families, schools), assuming that relationships at one level operate similarly at another level can lead to imprecise estimates and erroneous claims.

Because people, families, and organizations change over time, we also need to view time as a level. Although people’s motivations, values, behaviors, and actions are likely to be linked to and influenced by their prior motivations and behaviors, time itself gives context and shapes these same phenomena. Rather than assuming that everything occurs at the same level, it is preferable to examine how group-level influences (including time) can shape or be linked with an outcome. For instance, the influence of premarital cohabitation may fade over time within an individual

<sup>1</sup>These should not be confused with what some have called hierarchical regression, which is not a type of regression but merely sequentially entering variables into a model.

relationship. Similarly, differences in marital quality that favor non-cohabitators may fade over time as stigma associated with premarital cohabitation fades.

There are, of course, statistical reasons for multilevel models as well. Observations belonging to the same group or person tend to be correlated with each other, violating the independence assumption of linear regression. Thus, using individual-level statistical tools like linear regression to examine group or longitudinal processes is problematic (Snijders & Bosker, 2012).

### *Linking Questions*

Questions about change over time are particularly suitable to multilevel models, as they allow researchers to assess average levels of a given phenomenon over time. Multilevel models also easily accommodate questions about within- (inter) and between- (intra) person change. For instance, researchers may want to model marital quality over time to examine whether changes in marital quality are different for cohabitators and non-cohabitators, consistent with prior research (James & Beattie, 2012). Alternatively, researchers could also examine individual characteristics that predict changes in marital quality over time, such as personality traits.

Additionally, multilevel models allow researchers to examine cross-level interactions, where a variable at one level interacts with a variable at another level. For example, one could ask whether personality characteristics (within individuals) affect marital quality in the same way for cohabitators and non-cohabitators (between individuals).

### *Example: Differences in Marital Commitment between Cohabitators and Non-Cohabitators over Time*

Commitment, key to understanding relationships, changes over time. Marital commitment may be strongest at the outset then wane as challenges arise. Less committed couples may separate, leaving only committed marriages, advancing the erroneous conclusion that commitment increases over time.

We used multilevel models to examine change across four waves of marital commitment between cohabitators and non-cohabitators in our CREATE data. Because the data are dyadic, we fit separate models for partner 1 (female except in male-male marriages ( $n \sim 25$ )) and partner 2 (male except in female-female marriages ( $n \sim 50$ )). We examined how cohabitation was related to initial levels (intercepts) and change (slopes) across time in commitment.

We used Stata's XT suite of commands to estimate the models. We initially estimated the overall pattern for marital commitment across the first four waves of CREATE data, controlling for age, education, sex, income, whether the couple had



children living with them, and race/ethnicity. For both members of the couple, we observed similar patterns of change in marital commitment over time, with initially high levels of commitment at the first wave, followed by a somewhat steep decline at waves 2 and 3 and a subsequent rebound by wave 4. Overall, the pattern resembles a fishhook.

Substantively, we were interested in whether cohabitators have a different pattern than non-cohabitators. To test this possibility, we included a variable for whether the couple cohabited prior to marriage as well as an interaction term with wave. The results are found in Supplemental Table 2 and are graphically displayed in Fig. 1. We found evidence of differences in initial marital commitment between cohabitators and non-cohabitators for both couple members, with cohabitators reporting lower levels of marital commitment at the first wave. The interaction with wave suggested that for partner 1, this initial difference in marital commitment remained constant over time. In contrast, for partner 2 the difference in marital commitment between cohabitators and non-cohabitators shrunk over time. In sum, using multilevel modeling allowed us to explore associations between cohabitation and marital commitment in a longitudinal dataset, while accounting for nonindependence due to repeated measures.

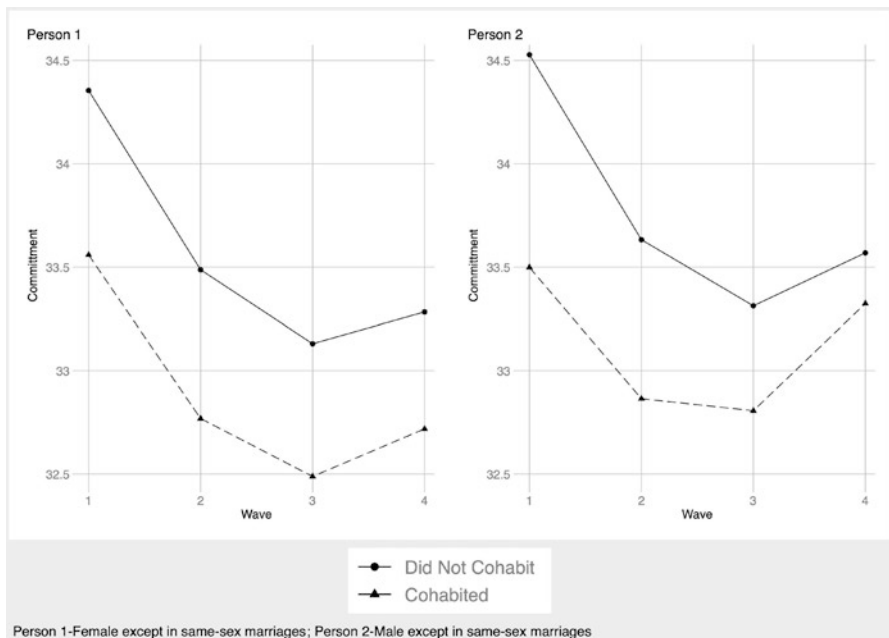


Fig. 1 How marital commitment changes over time between cohabitators and non-cohabitators

## Structural Equation Models

### *Overview*

Structural equation models (SEM) emerged from a desire to model data in ways that better match reality. For instance, we may believe that health matters in marriage (Yorgason & Choi, 2016) and wish to see if cohabitators are more likely than non-cohabitators to experience health problems over time and thus poorer marital quality, consistent with a selection into marriage hypothesis (James & Beattie, 2012). In this example, health is both a dependent variable (cohabitation is linked to health) and an independent variable (health is linked to marital quality). Linear regression allows a variable to be an independent or dependent variable but not both. SEM models allow researchers to model health as both a dependent and independent variable simultaneously. By solving multiple regressions simultaneously, we obtain more efficient and less biased estimates and standard errors.

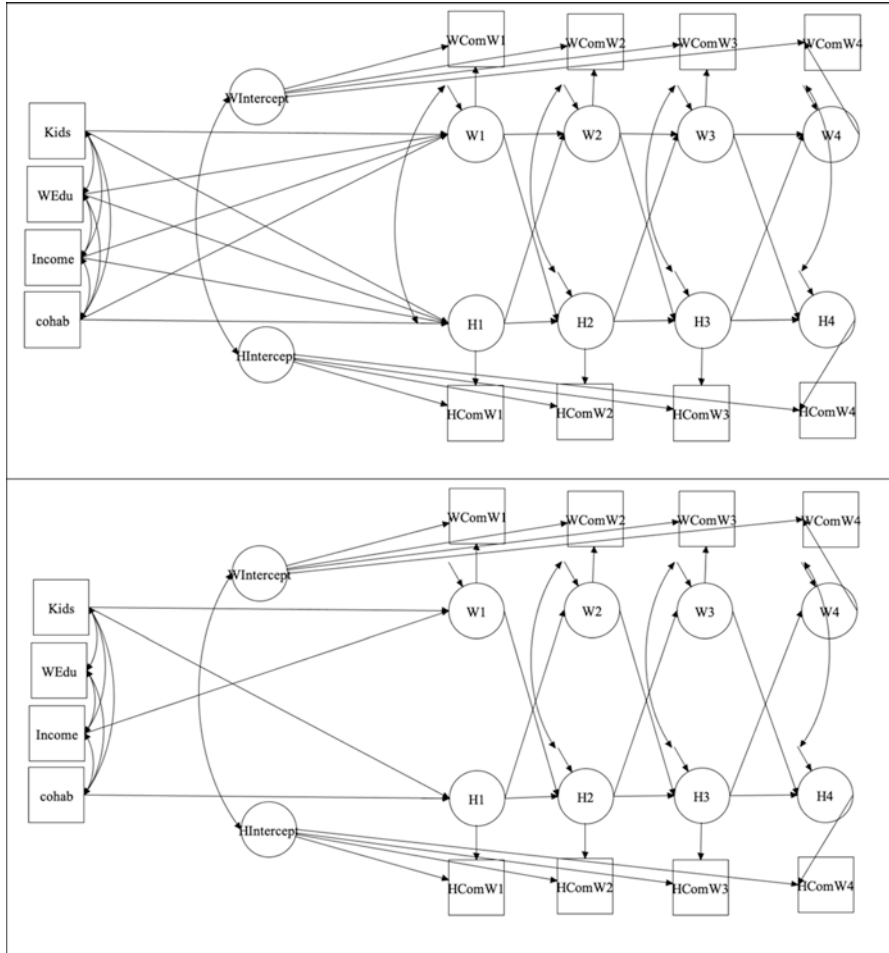
### *Linking Questions*

#### SEM

SEM is uniquely suited for several purposes, such as examining mediation and assessing measurement (Little, 2013). Here we focus on another strength of SEM—examining dyadic data, or data that are measured simultaneously by two people within the same family. Family members' lives are interrelated, and our statistics need to reflect this non-independent reality. SEM provides a simple way of doing this by correlating variables or residuals across family members, or by modeling predictors from one family member in relation to outcomes of the other family member. In this way, we can address important relationship focused questions (e.g., actor-partner interdependence or common fate models)

### *Example: Changes in Commitment Patterns between Cohabitators and Non-cohabitators*

For this example (see Fig. 2), we chose to examine (partner-only) bidirectional change in reports of commitment as predicted by cohabitation, using a dyadic random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM; Hamaker et al., 2015). Because spouses' commitment levels are likely interrelated, the analytical model must be capable of assessing bidirectional effects. SEM is ideal, as it is the only model among our four examples capable of this. Recent work on these models has separated between- and within-person variability by estimating a random intercept. The



**Fig. 2** Random intercept cross-lagged panel model examining within-person connections between husband and wife commitment levels across time, as predicted by cohabitation (full model in top panel, significant paths shown in bottom panel). (Note: *W* wife, *H* husband, *Edu* education, *cohab* cohabitation prior to marriage, *Com* commitment to the marriage)

RI-CLPM approach estimates a unique, random intercept for each construct of interest, which captures between-person or inter-individual characteristics across time (or a person’s average across time). The cross-lagged paths then represent within-person or intra-individual change across time. In this example, we examined the interrelationship of longitudinal commitment between partners using cross-lags of commitment levels and then examined whether premarital cohabitation predicted intra-individual change in commitment levels of both spouses.

As seen in Fig. 2, results from the RI-CLPM suggest that within-person changes in commitment in partner 1 (mostly wives) were significantly positively associated

with changes in partner 2 (mostly husbands) commitment a year later. Similarly, within-person changes in commitment in partner 2 were also associated with changes in partner 1 commitment a year later. These findings confirm bidirectional associations in within-person changes in commitment for partners in young married couples. Random intercepts for partners were significantly correlated ( $r = 0.45$ ), suggesting a moderate level of overlap in between-person variability or overall averages across time of commitment for both partners. Cohabitation prior to marriage was negatively associated with within-person changes in commitment for partner 2 but not partner 1. This finding suggests that when couples cohabited prior to marriage, they also report experiencing less fluctuation in commitment.

## Mixture Models

**Overview** Many statistical models, including most longitudinal multilevel models like latent growth curves, assume that a single trajectory over time can meaningfully capture the experience of most individuals in a given population, despite theories and evidence suggesting this is unlikely to accurately represent reality. Group mixture models, a particular application of finite mixture models, allow researchers to test the assumption of a single group trajectory and instead show subpopulations with distinct trajectories (Jung & Wickrama, 2008). Consequently, mixture models allow researchers to show qualitatively different patterns of change across the distribution. In some instances, mixtures may represent actual groups present in the population. More commonly, however, they represent a statistical estimate of a more complex distribution of trajectories, summarized as parsimoniously as possible (Wickrama et al., 2016).

## Linking Questions

Group mixture models allow researchers to get around the question that often underlies the relationship between theory and empirical findings, namely, which theory is most accurate (or even “true”). Instead, these models allow us to answer questions such as “under what circumstances is this theory most accurate? For whom does it make the best predictions?” Similarly, if researchers believe that the effect of one variable on another might not be homogeneous (i.e., heterogeneous effects), group mixture models can often be helpful. Importantly, this can apply to heterogeneous change patterns (growth trajectory models) or on differing effects of variables on outcomes (regression-based mixture models).

For example, the influence of cohabitation on relationship quality may vary. Cohabitation may, for some, be a considered choice and improve marital quality (i.e., successful trial marriage). Others, reluctant to forgo relationship-specific capital (e.g., children, pets, joint networks), may choose suboptimal marriage partners,

decreasing subsequent relationship quality. Or cohabitation may not matter because cohabitation has largely become a normative part of relationship development. To test this idea, one could employ group-based trajectory models with longitudinal data that examined measures of cohabitators' relationship quality over time.

### ***Example: Differential Effects of Cohabitation on Marital Satisfaction***

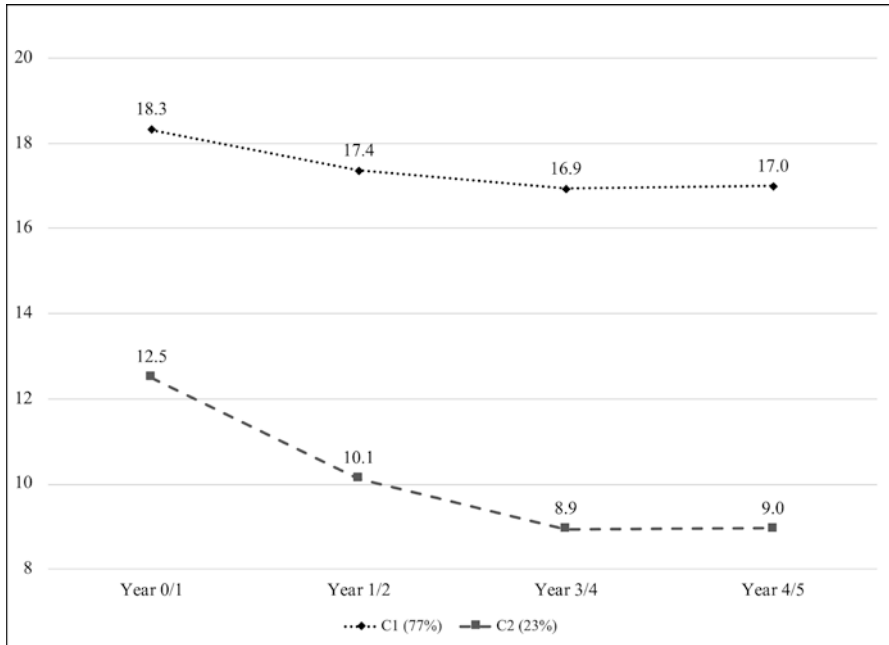
We examine whether there are discernible differences in marital satisfaction<sup>2</sup> trajectories among partner 1 (mostly wives in opposite sex marriages) that cohabited prior to marriage using a latent class growth analysis approach, estimated using Mplus. The top panel of Supplemental Table 3 online shows various model fit indices, used to select the number of retained classes. Substantive interpretability, strongly rooted in theory and conceptualization, should be a primary concern when deciding on the number of classes. We have followed that approach here, aided by the statistical measures Mplus provides.

We decided on a two-class approach for several reasons. The two-class solution is substantively interpretable and in line with our prior theoretical predictions. The two-class solution shows statistical improvement over a model with one class (see the LMR p-values as well as decreases in LL, AIC, BIC, and a BIC relative to the model with 1 less class), yet a three-class model does not. The two-class solution also shows reasonably high, though less than perfect, entropy and has no classes less than 5% of the sample (which can be a sign of a residual class). Finally, the model had no estimation issues, which can be an indicator of suboptimal model fit.

The substantive results are found in the bottom panel of Supplemental Table 3 online and include the intercept as well as the linear and quadratic slopes for each class (C1 and C2, respectively). C1 was the largest class comprising 77% of the sample, and C2 included the remaining 23%. Each class showed a distinct pattern of change in partner 1 relationship satisfaction over time; for ease of interpretation, the predicted change patterns of each group are shown in Fig. 3. Partners 1 in C1, the largest of the two groups, began with relatively high levels of satisfaction that declined at a modest pace that slowed over time, flattening out by the fifth year of marriage. In contrast, the second and smaller class began at much lower levels of satisfaction and experienced a much steeper decline in marital satisfaction compared to C1.

---

<sup>2</sup>We measured marital satisfaction based on a scale consisting of questions asking how satisfying, rewarding, warm and comfortable, and happy the marriage is. Cronbach's alpha values varied between 0.94 and 0.95 across the four waves. The scale varied between 0 and 21, with higher scores indicating higher overall satisfaction. Note that we present weighted results.



**Fig. 3** Marital satisfaction among premarital cohabitators over the first 5 years of marriage, CREATE waves 1–4

Researchers can also include time-varying or time-invariant predictors of class membership<sup>3</sup> in this type of model. We included (see Supplemental Table 3 online) age, education, sex, income, whether the couple had children living with them, and race/ethnicity as predictors of class membership. We found that couples with higher incomes were more likely to be in class 1 and those with children in class 2. Blacks were more likely than whites to be in class 2.

## Survival Analysis

### Overview

Survival analysis is among the least commonly employed longitudinal methods in the family sciences. It merits greater attention because it focuses on *when* events occur, making change an inherent part of the model. To estimate survival models, statisticians reshape the data so each observation period has one observation (often

<sup>3</sup>It is also possible to include distal outcomes or predictors of the individual classes' intercept and slopes.

called “person-years” or “person-months” when each person is observed across a series of years or months). By placing each person-year (or person-month or any other time-based phenomena) on its own row, handling time-varying covariates becomes easier because researchers can match person-years with the corresponding value from the time-varying (or time-invariant) variable. Dropping all time points after the event occurred for an individual person (if the person first cohabited at age 25, all time points at age 26 and beyond would be dropped for that individual) eliminates worries about temporality and reverse causation. Many issues of censoring are no longer relevant, since the question becomes whether one has observed the event in question in that specific time period, which can now be accurately assessed (yes/no).

Using techniques and estimation procedures such as the Kaplan-Meier or life table methods for survivor functions, or proportional hazards (among others; see Lee & Wang, 2003), one can then employ a range of regression models such as binary logistic, probit, or accelerated failure time to develop a statistical model that examines when, why, and how people enter their first cohabiting relationship. Readers seeking to know more are directed to the wide assortment of literature on survival analysis methods, including Cleves et al. (2010) and Allison (2004).

### *Linking Questions*

Imagine one wanted to know more about when people first move in together (whether premaritally or upon marriage). The age at which this occurred would be crucial, but other explanatory factors exist that help us better understand when, why, and how people cohabit for the first time. To explore this, one would collect event history data that recorded when events occurred to a (preferably large and representative) group of individuals (e.g., Bellani & Esping, 2020). Because not everyone chooses to cohabit prior to marriage, these individuals would not have a value for the cohabitation variable (censoring). Then one would collect data on explanatory factors, such as parental marital status, relationship history, education, sexual orientation, etc. Some of these variables would be time-invariant, such as parental divorce status, whereas others, such as income, might change over time (time-varying covariates).

### *Example: Similarity in Attrition Rates between Cohabitators and Non-cohabitators*

In this example, we explored whether cohabitators were more likely than non-cohabitators to drop out of the CREATE sample. We began by creating variables indicating whether either or both members of the couple participated in each wave.

We used these variables to create a “time to failure” variable that measured when a given couple attrited from our sample. We censored observations that remained in the sample throughout the first four waves.

Because survival models focus on event occurrence over time, many programs provide ready-made graphs that display initial and adjusted trends over time. Two of the most common of these are Kaplan-Meier survival and Nelson-Aalen cumulative hazard estimates. Figure 4 shows these for our data, broken down by cohabiting status (note that these graphs are merely the inverse of each other but scaled differently). Overall, the trends suggest that any difference in attrition between cohabitators and non-cohabitators is likely to be minimal. To formally test this, we employ a Cox proportional hazard model, found in Supplemental Table 4 online. Here, we predict time to drop out for *both* members of the couple. The independent variables except cohabitation (a couple-level variable) come from partner 1 (female except in male-male marriages). Confirming prior results, we found no evidence of differences based on cohabitation status, but we did find age and education differences, with younger respondents less likely to drop out, along with couples with more education. We found no differences for sex, income, whether the couple had children living with them, and race/ethnicity.

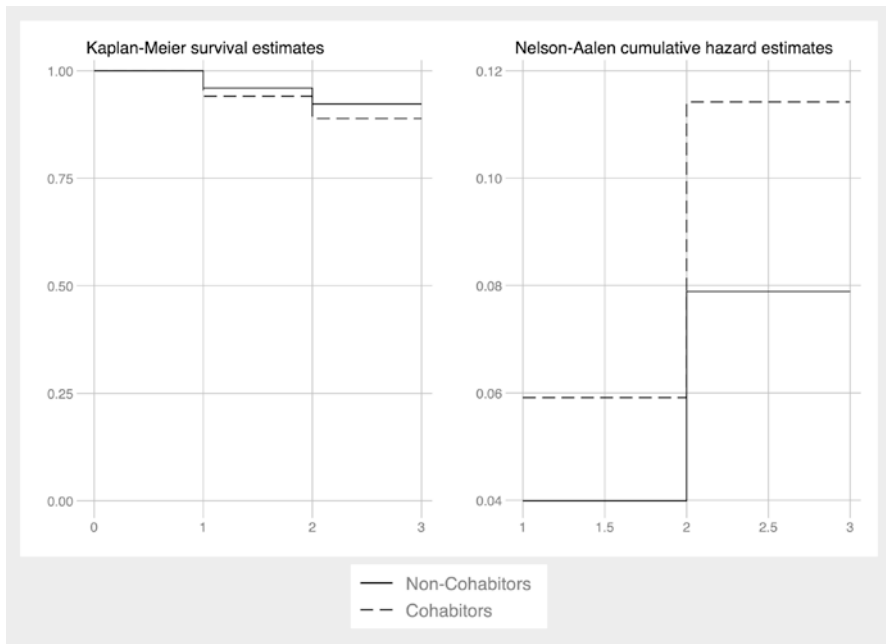


Fig. 4 Survival and hazard estimates of study attrition



## Conclusion

Methods and models flexibly integrate multiple insights about how change over time informs questions about families, now and in the future. The rapid development of longitudinal methods, paired with increases in computing power, allows researchers to do just that. Further, the rise of nationally representative, longitudinal datasets enables researchers to more accurately assess contemporary family patterns.

However, enthusiasm for longitudinal research in the field of family science should be tempered by some important limitations. First, researchers must always ensure their claims match their methods – highest quality claims must always be paired with the highest quality methods. If a sample is not representative, for instance, researchers should refrain from implying that their results apply more broadly than warranted by their sample.

Similarly, findings using less than optimal methods are, in many instances, published first, making it difficult for more accurate (and complex) assessments to find space in the academic literature. While statistical complexity is not superior *ipso facto*, *statistical models that better account for complexity should be given greater weight than other models in the publication process, particularly since replication should be a scientific stanchion.*

## Future Directions

Issues about data collection, measurement and conceptualization, and increasingly sophisticated analyses will hold an even more central place in the future than they do today. If we wish to establish solid scientific claims, longitudinal data are necessary but not sufficient. Longitudinal data often demonstrate that previously unconsidered alternative explanations may be key to understanding the phenomena studied, especially as the magnitude or even direction of effects shift over time. Although families are constantly changing throughout the world, changes seem to be occurring at an increasing pace in recent years. Political and social trends in many high-income countries suggest that society is becoming increasingly split along geographic, religious, socioeconomic, and political lines. As divisive processes play out, methods that are capable of assessing such complex changes will become essential for all family researchers.

## References

- Asher, J. W. (1997). The role of measurement, some statistics, and some factor analysis in family psychology research. *Journal of Family Psychology, 11*(3), 351.
- Barbeau, K., Boileau, K., Sarr, F., & Smith, K. (2019). Path analysis in Mplus: A tutorial using a conceptual model of psychological and behavioral antecedents of bulimic symptoms in young adults. *The Quantitative Methods for Psychology, 15*(1), 38–53.

- Bellani, D., & Esping, A. G. (2020). Gendered time allocation and divorce: A longitudinal analysis of German and American couples. *Family Relations*, 69(1), 207–226.
- Bound, J., Brown, C., & Mathiowetz, N. (2001). *Measurement error in survey data (Vol. 5)*. Elsevier Science.
- Burks, B. S., Jensen, D. W., & Terman, L. M. (1930). *The promise of youth: Follow-up studies of a thousand gifted children*, Vol 3.
- Byrne, B. M. (2012). *Choosing structural equation modeling computer software: Snapshots of LISREL, EQS, AMOS, and Mplus*.
- Cook, W. L., & Kenny, D. A. (2005). The actor-partner interdependence model: A model of bidirectional effects in developmental studies. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(2), 101–109.
- de Vries, J. (2006). *Measurement error in family background variables: The bias in the intergenerational transmission of status, cultural consumption, party preference, and religiosity*. [SI]: Sn [ICS dissertation series 121].
- DeMaris, A. (1995). A tutorial in logistic regression. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 956–968. (internal-pdf://DeMaris – 1995 – a tutorial in logistic regression.pdf).
- Gordon, R. A. (2015). Measuring constructs in family science: How can item response theory improve precision and validity? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(1), 147–176. (internal-pdf://Gordon – 2015 – measuring constructs in family science how can item response theory improve precision and validity.pdf).
- Hamaker, E. L., Kuiper, R. M., & Grasman, R. P. (2015). A critique of the cross-lagged panel model. *Psychological Methods*, 20(1), 102.
- Heaton, T. B. (1995). Modeling family dynamics with event history techniques. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 1078–1090. (internal-pdf://Heaton – 1995 – modeling family dynamics with event history techniques.pdf).
- Hume, D. (1739). *A treatise of human nature*. (internal-pdf://Hume – 1739 – a treatise of human nature.pdf)
- James, S., Yorgason, J. B., Holmes, E., & Busby, D. (in press). Is it still possible to collect nationally representative marriage data in the United States? *Family Relations*.
- James, S. L., & Beattie, B. A. (2012). Reassessing the link between Women's premarital cohabitation and marital quality. *Social Forces*, 91(2), 435–662. 23616690. (internal-pdf://James, Beattie – 2012 – reassessing the link between women's premarital cohabitation and marital quality.pdf).
- Johnson, D. R. (1995). Alternative methods for the quantitative analysis of panel data in family research: Pooled time-series models. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 1065–1077. (internal-pdf://Johnson – 1995 – alternative methods for the quantitative analysis of panel data in family research pooled time-series models.pdf).
- Johnson, D. R. (2005). Two-wave panel analysis: Comparing statistical methods for studying the effects of transitions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 1061–1075. (internal-pdf://Johnson – 2005 – Two-wave panel analysis Comparing statistical methods for studying the effects of transitions.pdf).
- Jung, T., & Wickrama, K. A. S. (2008). An introduction to latent class growth analysis and growth mixture modeling. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(1), 302–317. (internal-pdf://Jung, Wickrama – 2008 – an introduction to latent class growth analysis and growth mixture modeling.pdf).
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2005). Assessing longitudinal change in marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 57, 1091–1108.
- Kline, R. B. (2005). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (2nd ed.). Guilford publications.
- Kuiper, R. M., & Ryan, O. (2018). Drawing conclusions from cross-lagged relationships: Re-considering the role of the time-interval. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 25(5), 809–823.
- Ledermann, T., & Kenny, D. A. (2012). The common fate model for dyadic data: Variations of a theoretically important but underutilized model. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(1), 140.

- Lee, E. T., & Wang, J. W. (2003). *Statistical methods for survival data analysis* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Little, T. D. (2013). *Longitudinal structural equation modeling*. Guilford Press.
- Luke, D. A. (2004). *Multilevel Modeling*. (internal-pdf://Luke – 2004 – Multilevel Modeling.pdf).
- Menaghan, E. G., & Godwin, D. D. (1993). *Longitudinal research methods and family studies*. (internal-pdf://Menaghan, Godwin – 1993 – longitudinal research methods and family studies.pdf).
- Mill, J. S. (1882). *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive*. (internal-pdf://Mill.- 1882 – A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive.pdf).
- Nagin, D. S. (2005). *Group-based modeling of development*.
- Price, L. R., Gonzalez, D. P., & Whittaker, T. A. (2019). Performance of nonrecursive latent variable models under misspecification. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 26(1), 12–23.
- Qian, Y. (2018). Educational assortative mating and income dynamics in couples: A longitudinal dyadic perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80(3), 607–621.
- Roosa, M. W., & Beals, J. (1990). Measurement issues in family assessment: The case of the family environment scale. *Family Process*, 29(2), 191–198.
- Sabatelli, R. M., & Waldron, R. J. (1995). Measurement issues in the assessment of the experiences of parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57(4), 969. (internal-pdf://unknown – 1995 – measurement issues in the assessment of the experiences of parenthood.pdf).
- Schumacker, R. E., & Beyerlein, S. T. (2000). Confirmatory factor analysis with different correlation types and estimation methods. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 7(4), 629–636. (internal-pdf://Schumacker, Beyerlein – 2000 – confirmatory factor analysis with different correlation types and estimation methods.pdf).
- Singer, J. D., & Willett, J. B. (2003). Applied longitudinal data analysis: Modeling change and event occurrence. In *Applied longitudinal data analysis: Modeling change and event occurrence* (p. 1-644).
- Snijders, T. A. B., & Bosker, R. J. (2012). *Multilevel analysis: An introduction to basic and advanced multilevel modeling* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Stephens, G. K., & Sommer, S. M. (1996). The measurement of work to family conflict. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 56(3), 475–486.
- Wickrama, K. A. S., Lee, T. K., O'Neal, C. W., & Lorenz, F. O. (2016). *Higher-order growth curves and mixture modeling with Mplus: A practical guide*. Routledge.
- Yorgason, J. B., & Choi, H. (2016). Health contributions to marital quality: Expected and unexpected links. *Couple relationships in the middle and later years: Their nature, complexity, and role in health and illness*, 177–196.

# Dyadic Data in Family Science



Christine M. Proulx and Brian G. Ogolsky

Inherent in the study of families and family theorizing is an interest in multiple, interdependent members of the family. The notion of dyads (sometimes referred to as “matched pairs”; Wheeler et al., 2018) and the need to examine them is anchored in the field of sociology and early conceptualizations of the dyad as a pair with a history of “patterned mutual interaction” (Becker & Useem, 1942). Theoretical interest in the dyad as an interdependent pair existed well before adequate statistical methods for analyzing matched pairs as the unit of analysis were available. Now, there are multiple options for analyzing dyadic data, including repeated measures ANOVA, the intra-class correlation, structural equation modeling, actor-partner interdependence models, mixture models, and multilevel modeling, among others. In this chapter, we highlight some of these methods and the research questions to which they are best suited, address the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in working with dyadic data, and offer our suggestions for the future of dyadic data analysis and design in family science.

Dyadic data violate one of the most common statistical assumptions, that of independence of observations. Two members of a dyad are likely to be more similar (or dissimilar) to each other than to those to whom they are not related or partnered (i.e., a random other within a dataset). If conventional statistics are used and the individual is treated as the unit of analysis, but the dataset contains matched pairs, assumptions about independence are violated and will lead to biased standard errors and inflated type I error rates (Kenny, 1995). For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on cases in which each individual is a member of only one dyad under study

---

C. M. Proulx

Department of Human Development & Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

B. G. Ogolsky (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Agricultural, Consumer, & Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA  
e-mail: [proulxc@missouri.edu](mailto:proulxc@missouri.edu)

(i.e., the standard design; Kenny et al., 2006); for considerations related to cases where a respondent might be part of more than one dyad or group (e.g., clusters of peers, social networks, one-with-many designs), see Kenny et al. (2006) and Kilduff and Tsai (2003).

## Basic Assumptions of Working with Dyadic Data

The primary assumption in working with dyadic or family data is interdependence, sometimes referred to as reciprocity or mutuality (Thompson & Walker, 1982). In addition to the interdependence among pairs, another basic premise of dyadic data is that the dyad is greater than the sum of its parts (Uphold & Strickland, 1989).

We argue that dyadic data provide two possible methodologies – those that account for the interdependence or mutual influence between individuals who share a relationship, such as a wife and husband (e.g., the APIM), and those that focus on the dyadic relationship itself, such as a marriage, as the unit of analysis. The former group of methodologies would be appropriate when data exist on both members of a dyad but the research question seeks to understand an individual-level variable. This individual-level variable might be a personal characteristic, such as each individual's political beliefs, or an individual perception of a relational characteristic. For example, one might ask whether sisters report greater closeness with their sibling than do their brothers, using a dataset of matched pairs of sisters and brothers. Although both brothers and sisters in this example are reporting on the sibling relationship, the researcher is interested in whether sisters' perceptions differ from their brothers' while accounting for the interdependence between them. Thus, the construct of closeness is measured at the individual level (Wheeler et al., 2018), and each sibling has their own score.

Alternatively, researchers might be interested in whether sister-brother sibling pairs who are close in age spend more time together than do sister-brother pairs who have a large age gap – in this case, both age gap and time spent together are characteristics of the sibling dyad, not either sibling. Thus, each dyad has a single score for age gap and time spent together, and findings can be generalized at the dyadic, not the individual, level. We acknowledge that the distinction between data from members of the dyad and data on the dyadic relationship itself is not always clear cut nor easy to make, but it is important in planning the design of a research study, structuring the dataset, and selecting the analyses that will appropriately address any research questions and hypotheses put forward.

## Overview of Methodology

Early work on the study of dyads within close relationships focused on defining dyadic relationships. Becker and Useem's (1942) seminal work on the sociological analysis of the dyad stressed the importance of dyads having intimate, face-to-face,

enduring interactions of sufficient length to establish patterns of mutual interaction. Subsequent theorists built on and debated this idea. Levinger and Snoek (1972) defined dyads as partners characterized by their mutuality, in which each person's actions, feelings, and beliefs are influenced by the other partner's behaviors, beliefs, and feelings. Huston and Robins (1982) differentiated between a general definition of close relationships and close relationships within the family context. Close relationships in general allow for behavioral interdependence (i.e., one person's overt behavior influences another person's overt behavior) that could evolve in a relatively short amount of time (thus omitting the enduring characteristics argued by Becker and Useem (1942)). They posited that close relationships within a family context also involved psychological interdependence, which includes the mutual influence of feelings and beliefs. Also in 1982, Thompson and Walker distinguished between individuals and relationships by noting that individuals have values, opinions, and needs, whereas relationships have properties such as norms, rules, and power. They asserted that the study of one person's feelings and attitudes about a partner or relationship does not constitute dyadic research. Thompson and Walker (1982) also noted that researchers' interest in studying dyads was driven by several observations, including the finding that partners differ in what they say versus how they behave, and that the views of only one partner might be biased and are insufficient in understanding the relationship between two people.

By the late 1990s, there was less emphasis on how the field ought to define dyads and close relationships and a growing emphasis on what methods existed to analyze dyadic data (e.g., Gonzalez & Griffin, 1997; Kenny et al., 1998; Maguire, 1999). When Kenny and his colleagues (2006) published their landmark book on dyadic data analysis, researchers were hungry for additional methods that would help them answer increasingly complex questions about dyadic attributes such as mutual influence, reciprocity, and (dis)similarity, both cross-sectionally and over time. In response, the field of dyadic design and analysis has grown exponentially.

Below, we offer a brief snapshot of some common methods as well as some newer approaches used to analyze data from dyads that we think are particularly useful for family scientists. Table 1 lists several important terms related to the analysis of dyadic data.

## Research Questions Suitable for Dyadic Methods

One of the primary theories driving work on dyads is interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), although multiple theories covered in this sourcebook lend themselves well to the study of matched pairs (e.g., family systems theory, life course theory, and family stress theory). In addition, many midrange theories are used in the study of dyads, especially married couples (e.g., the vulnerability-stress-adaptation [VSA] model; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Statistical software and programming in the last 20 years has facilitated rapid advancement in modeling techniques for dyadic research. There are also a growing number of public use

**Table 1** Key terms associated with the analysis of dyads

Term	Definition
Between-dyads variable	A variable with the same value for both members of a dyad (e.g., marital duration) but which might differ between dyads
Within-dyads variable	A variable with different values for each member of the dyad, but when averaged is the same across all dyads. An example would be two spouses reporting on the percentage of laundry they complete within their household. Although answers can vary within husband-wife pairs, within each couple the averaged value will be 100%
Mixed variable	A variable in which variation exists within and between dyads. These are some of the most commonly studied variables in family science and include most markers of individual perceptions and assessments
(in) distinguishability	Dyad members are distinguishable if a theoretically and empirically meaningful variable can be used to order the partners (Kenny et al., 2006). Examples include caregiver and care recipient, parent and child, and partners in different-sex relationships. Common indistinguishable dyads include same-sex relationships, twins, and coworkers. Whether dyads are distinguishable can be tested empirically (see Kenny et al., 2006), and we recommend that researchers test this assumption. If dyad members are statistically indistinguishable, the data can be treated as such
Measurement invariance	When data are reciprocal – that is, the same measures are administered to both members of the dyad – one needs to test that the variables assessed have equivalent meaning and measurement across dyad members (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). Tests of measurement invariance are most common when latent variables are used and can be conducted in structural equation models (e.g., Sakaluk et al., 2021)

datasets that have dyad- or family-level data over the lifespan (e.g., the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; Health and Retirement Study; Long-Life Family Study; Midlife in the United States; National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health; PAIRFAM).

In this section we highlight several types of research questions one can ask about dyads, as well as the methods best suited to answer them. Later in the chapter, we highlight two additional recent advances in quantitative dyadic analyses suited specifically to questions about (a) the influence of (dis)similarity between partners and (b) the sequencing of partners' behaviors or interactions as captured by intensive repeated measures designs, such as daily diaries. Reflecting the current state of the field, many of these approaches can accommodate both dyadic data and longitudinal data (i.e., repeated measures). Our list is not exhaustive, and we recommend readers examine other summaries (e.g., Baucom et al., 2017; Gates & Liu, 2016; Kenny et al., 2006; Ledermann & Kenny, 2017; Wheeler et al., 2018).

**Mutual Influence and Reciprocity** One of the most common approaches to understanding interdependence within dyads is the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, 1996). The APIM assumes that members of dyads influence one another's thoughts, feelings, and actions (Kenny et al., 2006). The APIM uses mixed independent and dependent variables to examine both actor (the association between one's own IV and DV) and partner (the association between one's partner's

IV and one's own DV) effects. The APIM is one of the most widely used models for both distinguishable and indistinguishable dyadic data and has numerous extensions (e.g., repeated measures APIM, Kenny et al., 2006; dyadic response surface analysis, Schönbrodt et al., 2018). For example, LeBlanc and Frost (2020) used the APIM to examine the associations between partners' reports of individual- and couple-level stressors and mental health in 100 same-sex couples. Their model, informed by minority stress theory, demonstrated both actor and partner effects between couple-level stressors and mental health, and the researchers used these findings to extend minority stress theory to couple-level experiences of stressors and their impact on each partner's wellbeing.

Another approach to examining mutual influence between partners is the common fate model (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). Similar to the APIM, the goal of common fate models is to identify variance that is shared between partners and variance that is unique to each individual. The two models differ, however, in how they treat these different forms of variance. The APIM adjusts for interdependence between partners and then estimates each individual-level effect. The common fate model estimates couple-level variance above and beyond each of the individual-level effects. For example, Mejia and colleagues (2020) used data from the Health and Retirement Study to estimate common fate models that examine how shared beliefs about aging could be aligned with objective markers of aging (e.g., grip strength). Their results demonstrated that these shared beliefs were co-constructed by the experience of aging together over time.

**Typologies of Dyadic Influence and Behavior** Researchers often want to identify clusters of dyads who follow similar patterns of behavior, interaction, or associations among constructs over time. Doing so involves modeling the dyadic patterns of change and influence and then clustering dyads who are most similar to one another. Growth mixture modeling allows researchers to address these types of questions (Volling et al., 2015). For example, Wickrama et al. (2020) drew on the life course concept of linked lives (Elder & Giele, 2009) and examined the relationship between trajectories of husbands' and wives' marital strength and strain and their health outcomes over 24 years. They used growth mixture modeling to identify four clusters of couples. The couples with the best health outcomes in the last wave of the study were generally in the most optimal marital trajectory cluster (class), characterized by stable and highly favorable marital qualities. Conversely, those with the worst health outcomes were mostly in a class of couples characterized by spouses with divergent patterns of marital qualities over time (i.e., husband improving, wife worsening). Such methods allow researchers to look at patterns of change over time, whether they are concordant for both dyad members, and how they link to individual or dyadic outcomes.

**Conjoint Dialogue and Dyadic Discourse Content in Qualitative Research** Much of the discourse on dyadic data focuses on quantitative data, but the issue of qualitative dyadic data has been given some attention, particularly in family nursing research. Although not as common as interviews with individuals, joint interviews



with both members of the dyad have been used in qualitative inquiry. Qualitative researchers note that such interviews allow for the dyad members to co-create the narrative, offering a fuller and perhaps more trustworthy perspective than either member might do alone (Racher et al., 2000). This is particularly relevant to research questions focused on the dyad, their construction of the narrative, and their interactions while being interviewed. Racher and colleagues used a phenomenological study design and conjoint interviews with 19 rural, frail elderly couples to understand couples' perspectives on their living situations, resources, and supports in later life. Such an approach also allowed the researchers to observe both the verbal and nonverbal communication within the dyad (Chesla, 1995), and the researchers concluded that the synergism or energy generated by the couple was itself a resource for supporting the couple's ability to continue living in their own home (Racher et al., 2000). Caution should be applied, however, if the research question is focused on sensitive topics that one dyad member might not wish to discuss in front of the other (e.g., caregiver burden in front of the care recipient; Allan, 1980).

## Limitations of Dyadic Methods for Family Research

Evidence exists that sampling dyads creates sampling bias (Barton et al., 2020), with dyadic studies mostly sampling highly committed, satisfied relationships that are least likely to dissolve (Park et al., 2021). Whereas dyadic methods fit the complexity of lived family life quite well, they do not account for interdependence with other units within the family (e.g., triadic parent-parent-child interactions). In this way, dyadic designs are likely to oversimplify complex family system interactions (i.e., the influence of others on the dyadic relationship) and more accurately reflect the nature of two-person relationships rather than family-level interactions. A focus on dyads might also overlook the broader extrafamilial array of relationships within which the dyad is nested, ignoring potential influences from those outside the dyad or family. As noted in Table 1, measurement invariance is critical in drawing conclusions from dyadic studies, but the field still has not reached a point where examination and reporting of invariance is standard (Sakaluk et al., 2021).

In addition, the field of family science has thus far paid little attention to potential cultural differences in behavioral expectations and meanings within dyads from a dyadic interaction perspective. This issue might be more salient from a measurement or theoretical perspective and particularly influential in studies relying on group modeling/identification procedures, where nuance is sacrificed for generalizability. For example, in their review of 14 studies that used group-based trajectory modeling to identify clusters of similarly satisfied (or not) couples, Proulx and colleagues (2017) found what they labeled the "honeymoon-as-ceiling effect," which captured the consistent finding among those studies that marital quality rarely increases above its initial value. However, this finding is anchored in studies using majority White, middle-class couples who are childless at the beginning of marriage, and it is reasonable to suspect that alternative patterns might be identified

with populations whose marriages are arranged or delayed or in dyadic romantic relationships other than marriage.

In dyadic research, the most common misapplication is drawing conclusions about the dyad when the unit of analysis is not the dyad (Maguire, 1999). It is possible to have data from two members of a dyad, use those data in the analysis, and draw conclusions about the dyad when, in fact, the research question and analysis is about an individual property (e.g., feelings or beliefs of one partner, rather than properties of the relationship between them). We and others (see Kenny et al., 2006) also believe there is danger in researchers choosing a more complex dyadic analysis than is actually required by the research questions/hypotheses. Relatedly, the lure of using the “latest and greatest” research or analytic methods might dictate a study’s research question or hypothesis, when theory and the existing literature base should be the guides. Although there are many advantages to studying dyads and research questions that cannot be answered without dyadic data, there is still legitimacy in studying individuals, so long as the research question is at the level of the individual and data are independent.

## Future Directions of Methodology

In the last few years, exciting new ways to approach dyadic data have emerged. We highlight two such approaches here.

Dyadic response surface analysis (DRSA) emerged as a method to test dyadic similarity effect hypotheses. Similarity effect hypotheses are focused on the extent of similarity between members of a dyad and whether this level of similarity is related to a third variable (Schönbrodt et al., 2018). This method combines response surface analysis (RSA) with the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006). Most traditional approaches to dyadic similarity have considerable shortcomings. For example, discrepancy scores (calculating the difference between two dyad members’ scores on a measure) do not take into account the raw score values of either member (Schönbrodt et al.) or the ordering of scores across the two partners (e.g., which partner is higher or lower). Thus, if a measure of relationship satisfaction is on a scale of 1–10 and a researcher calculates discrepancy scores, the underlying assumption is that a two-point difference on the high end of the scale (e.g., a husband scoring 9, the wife 7) is conceptually identical to a two-point difference at the low end (e.g., a wife scoring 3 and a husband 1) and will relate equally to the outcome variable (e.g., relationship stability). In this example, both discrepancy scores equal 2, but a two-point difference favoring husbands in the maritally satisfied range of the scale might be conceptually and meaningfully different from a two-point difference favoring wives in the maritally unsatisfied end of the scale. DRSA overcomes this pitfall by visualizing the polynomial regression equation in a three-dimensional plot including each partner’s raw (or standardized) score as well as the range of possible outcome scores (see Schönbrodt et al., 2018 for examples).

DRSA is capable of identifying at which locations of congruence (similarity) and incongruence (dissimilarity) the outcome of interest is highest or lowest. Thus, drawing on the example above, this approach can test whether a two-point difference between husbands and wives on the relatively satisfied end of a relationship satisfaction scale is more, less, or equally related to relationship instability as is a two-point difference on the relatively unsatisfied end of the relationship satisfaction measure. Combining the RSA with the APIM allows researchers to extend their research question to outcomes assessed at the individual level (e.g., each partner's health or depressive symptoms) rather than just relational properties.

Grid-sequence analysis is a group-based modeling procedure that is especially well-suited to intensive repeated measures designs such as experience sampling/daily diary methods (Brinberg et al., 2018). The emphasis with this method is on identifying typologies of temporal dyadic sequences of variables of interest. For example, a researcher might simultaneously assess feelings of strain from family caregivers and their care recipients five times a day for 10 days. Researchers can then map each dyad's reports of strain on a two-dimensional grid (the state space grid) that captures both dyad members' reports at each time of assessment by placing one dyad member on the x-axis (e.g., the care recipient) and one on the y-axis (e.g., the caregiver). This grid uses plot points to visually represent congruence between partners at any given time (e.g., both dyad members reporting low strain upon waking on the fifth day of assessment, located in the lower left portion of the state space grid) and movement across time points (e.g., the caregiver reporting high strain at the next assessment, but the care recipient reporting low strain, resulting in a plot point located in the upper left portion of the grid). By labeling each incremental segment of the grid, researchers can then extract sequences across the 10-day study period that capture the dyads' assessment to assessment congruence and stability.

The five-step process recommended by Brinberg et al. (2018) results in a sequence for each dyad and the ability to cluster dyads who are similar to one another in their sequences. For example, one might find a cluster of caregiver-care recipient dyads who are both consistently experiencing very low strain across all time points. These dyads' grids would have lots of tightly clustered plot points in a small space within the grid, indicating both congruence between reporters and stability for both members. Alternatively, one might also find a cluster of dyads in which the caregiver is experiencing vacillating levels of strain within each day but the care recipient is generally reporting low levels of strain at each assessment, with a few deviations each day before bed. These dyads' plot points would be more scattered across the left side of the grid. Any typologies (groups) identified in the procedure can then be used as independent or dependent variables to examine interdyad differences (Brinberg et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

In this chapter we offered a snapshot of contemporary methods for understanding and assessing dyadic data, as well as a primer on key terminology and concepts. The science of dyadic data analysis is vast, develops quickly, and holds much promise for helping scientists better understand the impact of the interactions that make up our daily lives. Dyadic relationships are foundational to individual health and well-being and to broader family functioning. As family scientists continue to refine existing theories and propose new ones, the study and analysis of dyadic data will be critical to testing resulting propositions.

## References

- Allan, G. (1980). A note on interviewing spouses together. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42(1), 205–210.
- Barton, A. W., Lavner, J. A., Stanley, S. M., Johnson, M. D., & Rhoades, G. K. (2020). “Will you complete this survey too?” differences between individual versus dyadic samples in relationship research. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 34(2), 196–203.
- Baucom, B. R., Leo, K., Adamo, C., Georgiou, P., & Baucom, K. J. (2017). Conceptual and statistical issues in couples observational research: Rationale and methods for design decisions. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31(8), 972–981.
- Becker, H., & Useem, R. H. (1942). Sociological analysis of the dyad. *American Sociological Review*, 7(1), 13–26.
- Brinberg, M., Ram, N., Hülür, G., Brick, T. R., & Gerstorff, D. (2018). Analyzing dyadic data using grid-sequence analysis: Interdyad differences in intradyad dynamics. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 73(1), 5–18.
- Chesla, C. A. (1995). Hermeneutic phenomenology: An approach to understanding families. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 1(1), 63–78.
- Elder, G. H., & Giele, J. Z. (2009). *The craft of life course research*. Guilford Press.
- Gates, K. M., & Liu, S. (2016). Methods for quantifying patterns of dynamic interactions in dyads. *Assessment*, 23(4), 459–471.
- Gonzalez, R., & Griffin, D. (1997). On the statistics of interdependence: Treating dyadic data with respect. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of personal relationships* (2nd ed., pp. 271–302). Wiley.
- Huston, T. L., & Robins, E. (1982). Conceptual and methodological issues in studying close relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 44(4), 901–925.
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, methods, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118(1), 3–34.
- Kenny, D. A. (1995). The effect of nonindependence on significance testing in dyadic research. *Personal Relationships*, 2(1), 67–75.
- Kenny, D. A. (1996). Models of nonindependence in dyadic research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 13(2), 279–294.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Bolger, N. (1998). Data analysis in social psychology. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th Ed., Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. Guilford Press.
- Kilduff, M., & Tsai, W. (2003). *Social networks and organizations*. Sage.

- LeBlanc, A. J., & Frost, D. M. (2020). Couple-level minority stress and mental health among people in same-sex relationships: Extending minority stress theory. *Society and Mental Health, 10*(3), 276–290.
- Ledermann, T., & Kenny, D. A. (2012). The common fate model for dyadic data: Variations of a theoretically important but underutilized model. *Journal of Family Psychology, 26*(1), 140–148.
- Ledermann, T., & Kenny, D. A. (2017). Analyzing dyadic data with multilevel modeling versus structural equation modeling: A tale of two methods. *Journal of Family Psychology, 31*(4), 442–452.
- Levinger, G., & Snoek, J. D. (1972). *Attraction-in-relationship*. General Learning Press.
- Maguire, M. C. (1999). Treating the dyad as the unit of analysis: A primer on three analytic approaches. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 61*(1), 213–223.
- Mejía, S. T., Giasson, H. L., Smith, J., & Gonzalez, R. (2020). Concurrent and enduring associations between married partners' shared beliefs and markers of aging. *Psychology and Aging, 35*(7), 925–936.
- Park, Y., Impett, E. A., & MacDonald, G. (2021). Generalizability of results from dyadic data: Participation of one versus two members of a romantic couple is associated with breakup likelihood. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 47*(2), 232–240.
- Racher, F. E., Kaufert, J. M., & Havens, B. (2000). Conjoint research interviews with frail, elderly couples: Methodological implications. *Journal of Family Nursing, 6*(4), 367–379.
- Sakaluk, J. K., Fisher, A. N., & Kilshaw, R. E. (2021). Dyadic measurement invariance and its importance for replicability in romantic relationship science. *Personal Relationships, 28*(1), 190–226.
- Schönbrodt, F. D., Humberg, S., & Nestler, S. (2018). Testing similarity effects with dyadic response surface analysis. *European Journal of Personality, 32*(6), 627–641.
- Thibaut, J. W., & Kelley, H. H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*. Wiley.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. (1982). The dyad as the unit of analysis: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44*, 889–900.
- Uphold, C., & Strickland, O. (1989). Issues related to the unit of analysis in family nursing research. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 11*(4), 405–417.
- Vandenberg, R. J., & Lance, C. E. (2000). A review and synthesis of the measurement invariance literature: Suggestions, practices, and recommendations for organizational research. *Organizational Research Methods, 3*(1), 4–70.
- Volling, B. L., Oh, W., Gonzalez, R., Kuo, P. X., & Yu, T. (2015). Patterns of marital relationship change across the transition from one child to two. *Couple and Family Psychology, 4*, 177–197.
- Wheeler, L. A., Updegraff, K. A., & Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2018). A dyadic data analytic primer: An illustration with Mexican-origin couples. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology, 6*(4), 276–290.
- Wickrama, K. A., Klopock, E. T., O'Neal, C. W., & Neppi, T. (2020). Patterning of midlife marital trajectories in enduring marriages in a dyadic context: Physical and mental health outcomes in later years. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 37*(5), 1472–1493.

# Application: Dyadic Growth Mixture Modeling



Nathan D. Leonhardt and W. Justin Dyer

Crucial longitudinal and dyadic methodological advancements have been made to the study of families over the years. In this application we highlight methods that take advantage of both innovative longitudinal and dyadic methodologies. Dyadic growth mixture modeling (DGMM) and dyadic latent class growth analysis (DLCGA) can advance our understanding of couple trajectories over time.

Central to statistical analyses is identifying the mean of a sample and examining how individuals deviate from that mean (i.e., variance of the mean). For example, in growth curve modeling, the average starting point (intercept) and average change over time (slope) are identified along with the variance of the intercept and slope(s). An underlying assumption of such models is that the data are best explained by a single mean of the intercept and slope(s) with the variance around the mean capturing all possible variabilities. This assumes the data were drawn from a single population which has a single mean and a single variance for the mean. However, in the past two decades of family research, this assumption has been challenged, and questions have arisen as to whether a single mean for growth parameters (i.e., intercept, slopes, and variances) best explains growth in family data. Instead, it may be that a sample contains a “mixture” of several populations, each with their own growth parameters. If this is the case, rather than estimating a single mean and variance, it would more accurately describe the data by identifying the unique means and variances of each population within the data.

To examine the possibility of multiple populations, each with their own growth parameters, growth mixture modeling was developed (GMM; Muthén & Muthén, 2000). This is a special case of the finite mixture model, a procedure for identifying

---

N. D. Leonhardt (✉)

Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

e-mail: [nathan.leonhardt@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:nathan.leonhardt@mail.utoronto.ca)

W. J. Dyer

Department of Religious Education, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

multiple populations within a sample (McLachlan & Peel, 2000). In growth mixture modeling, multiple populations (classes) are extracted, each with their own growth parameters, reflecting multiple growth trajectories. Predictors of class membership then can be identified to test hypotheses regarding why one class may follow one trajectory, while another class follows a different trajectory.

In the past two decades, growth mixture modeling has become increasingly common, with procedures for estimating these models becoming more accessible and efficient. More recently these models have begun to incorporate dyadic data; with dyadic data, researchers can identify dyadic class trajectories. In the example here, we overview a dyadic GMM model which identifies sexual satisfaction trajectories for wives and husbands and how those trajectories relate to each other. Most research on relationship satisfaction trajectories focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis (see Proulx et al., 2017 for a review), but it is possible to center the couple (Kanter & Proulx, 2019; Volling et al., 2015). Using the couple, rather than the individual, as the center of analysis has advantages. Rather than independently creating classes for both partners and seeing how they overlap, a dyad-centered analysis simultaneously accounts for information from both partners and forms a class that combines their information. An advantage of forming couple-based classes is that it provides a more holistic picture of what is happening with the couple, rather than what may be occurring separately with two individuals in the relationship. We can identify whether a couple class has partners with similar or diverging trajectories. For example, one class might be identified where both partners decline in satisfaction over time, whereas another class may have one partner declining and the other remaining stable.

We recently published one of the few studies (Leonhardt et al., 2021a) using a mixture dyad-centered approach to couple sexual satisfaction. With 336 couples from the Flourishing Families Project (FFP), we established sexual satisfaction trajectories for couples over four waves of data. We briefly address some of the most important decision points to consider when conducting these types of analyses, and we illustrate the points using examples from our study.

## Time Metric

When conducting GMM analyses over time, researchers might choose to use a metric of days, months, or years. For example, if survey data were collected every 3 months for four waves, researchers could use a metric of 0, 3, 6, and 9, with each unit increase being a monthly unit; or because each time point is the same length, they could specify a metric of 0, 1, 2, 3, with each unit increase representing 3 months. The general results would be the same, but slope values would differ because a slope corresponds to a one unit increase in the time unit. The “0” point also can be adjusted based on where the researchers would like the intercept to be. For example, rather than 0, 3, 6, 9, the time metric could be  $-6, -3, 0, 3$  if there was an interesting event that happened at the third point (e.g., measurements during the

first and second trimester of pregnancy, childbirth, and 3 months post-partum). In our data from the FFP, year was the time metric. We drew on the years 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011, meaning the time metric was weighted 0, 2, 3, 4, highlighting the number of years that had passed since the initial timepoint.

## Address Missing Data

When considering marriage across time, data frequently are missing, and researchers must decide how to address such missingness. Some researchers use maximum likelihood to estimate data for participants who completed the survey at some point, while others only use data for those retained until the last time point. A disadvantage of maximum likelihood is that one could estimate values for couples who are no longer together. However, only retaining non-atriving couples bias the sample towards relationships that survived the full length of the study. Either approach can be justified, but there is currently more support for maximum likelihood estimation (see Proulx et al., [2017](#) for more in-depth discussion), which is what we used with our FFP data.

## Shape of Trajectory

Next, a decision must be made about what types of trajectories to test. To test for a linear trajectory, three time points are needed. To test whether a trajectory has a bend or curve, four time points are needed (quadratic term). Adding a quadratic term does not force a quadratic shape but simply allows the researcher to identify a significant bend if one exists. With five time points, researchers can also test a piecewise trajectory by identifying a potential transition point (the knot) that splits the trajectories to before and after that point. Piecewise trajectories are particularly popular for studies dealing with the transition to parenthood, as it can identify the birth as a transition point between the slopes both before and after the childbirth (for more details about this method see Dawson et al., [2021](#); Leonhardt et al., [2021b](#)). In our example, we had four times points with no transition points, so we focused on testing quadratic trajectories.

## Control Variables

Researchers will also need to make decisions about control variables. In the example here, we controlled for participant age and relationship length because they could be potential confounds in distinguishing classes and because we wanted to be confident we were assessing timing effects rather than cohort and period effects



(Forbes et al., 2017; Little, 2013). Controlling for these variables essentially eliminates age and relationship length as determinants of a trajectory. If we did not control for age and relationship length, we could get one trajectory reflecting an average relationship length of 10 years and another with an average of 20 years. This would make it challenging to know if the changes in sexual satisfaction over time are due to the amount of time that elapsed, or getting married at an earlier or later age. By controlling for age and relationship length, trajectories emerge as if everyone in the sample is the same age and had been married for the same amount of time, giving us added confidence the trajectories are revealing how sexual satisfaction is changing over time. However, it is fully reasonable to estimate models where participant age and relationship length are substantive questions. We also used income, education, and race as auxiliary variables to help the analyses better adjust for missingness. As the growth mixture model creates a class solution based upon all the variables in the data, extra information from the auxiliary variables can help provide more accurate estimates of the values for the primary variables of interest (Little, 2013).

## **Dyadic Growth Mixture Modeling or Dyadic Latent Class Growth Analysis**

Yet another consideration in these analyses is what to do with the growth trajectory variances; either a DGMM or a DLCGA may be appropriate based on several conditions. DGMM estimates variances uniquely for both partners within a latent trajectory; DLCGA is when growth trajectory variances within a class are constrained to be the same. On a more practical level, DGMM allows for greater variance within a class, reducing the likelihood of identifying a greater number of classes. Because of the extra parameters being estimated, DGMM is also a more complicated model that may be less likely to converge. When there are problems with non-convergent intercepts, slopes, or quadratic terms, it is permissible to constrain variances as needed to reach model convergence (van de Schoot et al., 2017). In our FFP example, we started to fit models with a DGMM approach, with the assumption of freely varying variances of intercepts, slopes, and quadratic terms (Jung & Wickrama, 2008). However, we encountered non-convergent slopes and quadratic terms, so we constrained the slopes and quadratic term variances to reach model convergence.

## **Fit Indices**

After estimating several class solutions, researchers select the best class solution based on several fit indices as well as theoretical reasoning regarding the practical utility of classes. Lower AIC, BIC, and SABIC values and higher entropy values indicate better fitting models (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996; Nylund et al., 2007).

Additionally, the VLMR and BLRT compare  $n$  vs  $n-1$  classes to estimate comparable model fit, with significant values suggesting that the current class solution is superior to the solution with one fewer class (e.g., significance for a three-class solution suggests the three-class solution is better than the two-class solution). Finally, researchers need to consider whether the size of classes are sufficient to have practical significance. There is no hard and fast rule for this, but a class often would be flagged if it is  $<5\%$  of the sample (though the class's conceptual value should be taken into account before eliminating it; sometimes rarely occurring classes are meaningful).

For our analyses, the five-class solution was better than the four-class solution because it had higher entropy, lower AIC, BIC, and SABIC; and the BLRT showed significantly better fit. A six-class solution was slightly worse than the five-class, mainly due to the increase in the BIC.

## Identify and Label Classes

Once the final class solution is identified, researchers need to examine class features and assign labels. Because the analyses were dyad-centered, our labels included characteristics of both partners. The most common class was *Both High* (43%), with both husbands and wives starting and staying highly satisfied sexually. Another class was *Husband Low/Wife Moderate* (26%): husbands started and remained low in sexual satisfaction; wives started and remained moderate. Another class was *Husband Decrease/Wife Moderate* (13%): husbands started high and decreased in sexual satisfaction; wives started and stayed moderately high. The class *Husband Increase/Wife Moderate* (11%) had husbands who started low and increased; wives started and remained moderately high. The final class was *Husband High/Wife Decrease* (7%): husbands started and remained high in sexual satisfaction; wives started high and decreased. More details about these classes are available in our publication (Leonhardt et al., 2021a).

## Predictors of Class

Once classes are identified, there are a variety of options for testing how the classes differ across variables of interest. One approach is to export class membership into a separate data file where an ANOVA is used to test whether chosen variables differ across classes; however, exporting class membership ignores a benefit of mixture modeling: estimating the error in classification. That is, exporting classes does not account for any ambiguities in class membership for each case. For example, mixture modeling software may account for a couple having a 90% likelihood of being in one class and a 10% likelihood of being in another; exporting classes forces 100% membership in the first class.

A method for predicting class membership that is growing in popularity is the three-step method. This method first estimates the mixture model and then estimates class predictors while incorporating information about the likelihood of class membership. One method to test class predictors is the BCH method (named for Bolck, Croon, & Hageaars, 2004). The BCH method estimates the differences between variables through weighted multiple group analysis, where the groups correspond to latent classes, avoiding shifts in latent class membership of the identified trajectories because the groups of classes are known while still accounting for class probabilities. In our example, we utilized the BCH method to test demographic differences across the dyad-centered classes. The only difference we found was for wives' income ( $\chi^2 = 10.18$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). The *Husband Decrease/Wife Moderate* class ( $M = 2.61$ ) had wives with significantly lower income than the *Husband Increase/Wife Moderate* ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $\chi^2 = 6.94$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), *Husband High/Wife Decrease* ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.62$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ), and *Both High* ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.82$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) classes.

This application illustrates how using dyadic data in a growth mixture model enables us to more holistically explain couple functioning over time. Rather than estimating growth models separately for each spouse, dyadic growth mixture models estimate the variation in how they jointly change over time, providing a far more nuanced longitudinal description of couples.

## References

- Bolck, A., Croon, M. A., & Hageaars, J. A. (2004). Estimating latent structure models with categorical variables: One-step versus three-step estimators. *Political Analysis*, *12*, 3–27.
- Celeux, G., & Soromenho, G. (1996). An entropy criterion for assessing the number of clusters in a mixture model. *Journal of Classification*, *13*, 195–212.
- Dawson, S. J., Leonhardt, N. D., Impett, E. A., & Rosen, N. O. (2021). Associations between postpartum depressive symptoms and couples' sexual function and sexual distress trajectories across the transition to parenthood. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*. Advance online publication.
- Jung, T., & Wickrama, K. A. S. (2008). An introduction to latent class growth analysis and growth mixture modeling. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *2*, 302–317.
- Kanter, J. B., & Proulx, C. M. (2019). Trajectories of willingness to compromise and critical marital conflict behaviors after childbirth. *Journal of Family Issues*, *41*, 808–830.
- Leonhardt, N. D., Rosen, N. O., Dawson, S. J., Kim, J. J., Johnson, M. D., & Impett, E. A. (2021a). Relationship satisfaction and commitment in the transition to parenthood: A couple-centered approach. *Advance online publication*.
- Leonhardt, N. D., Willoughby, B. J., Dyer, W. J., Neppl, T. K., & Lorenz, F. O. (2021b). One line of sexual decline? *Growth mixture modeling for midlife sexual satisfaction*. Advance online publication.
- Little, T. D. (2013). *Longitudinal structural equation modeling*. The Guilford Press.
- McLachlan, G. J., & Peel, D. (2000). *Finite mixture models*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Muthén, B. O., & Muthén, L. K. (2000). Integrating person-centered and variable-centered analyses: Growth mixture modeling with latent trajectory classes. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, *24*(6), 882–891.

- Nylund, K. L., Asparouhov, T., & Muthén, B. O. (2007). Deciding on the number of classes in latent class analysis and growth mixture modeling: A Monte Carlo simulation study. *Structural Equation Modeling, 14*, 535–569.
- Proulx, C. M., Ermer, A. E., & Kanter, J. B. (2017). Group-based trajectory modeling of marital quality: A critical review. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 9*, 307–327.
- van de Schoot, R., Sijbrandij, M., Winter, S. D., Depaoli, S., & Vermunt, J. K. (2017). The GRoLTS-checklist: Guidelines for reporting on latent trajectory studies. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 24*, 451–467.
- Volling, B. L., Oh, W., Gonzalez, R., Kuo, P. X., & Yu, T. (2015). Patterns of marital relationship change across the transition from one child to two. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice, 4*, 177–197.

**Part IV**  
**Social Movements, Critical Theory,**  
**and Contextualism**

# Feminist Theories: Knowledge, Method, and Practice



Katherine R. Allen, Abbie E. Goldberg, and Ana L. Jaramillo-Sierra

In this chapter, we address feminist theorizing in family science as an intellectual *and* a political project, where feminist theorists engage the world through critical intersectional perspectives to know it (knowledge), understand it (method), and change it (practice). Feminist family theories encompass a vast enterprise of intellectual scholarly work, collective engagement, and constant agitation for social change. By its very nature, feminist theorizing is rooted in an activist tradition that offers a fierce and flexible framework which is malleable, critical, contentious, and political. Just as there is no monolithic family structure that all family scientists can claim as the aspirational model or exemplar, there is no unitary feminist theory to which all feminist family scholars adhere. Feminist thinking and practice is infused at every level of society, including the individual, interactional, institutional, and international.

## History and Origins of Feminist Family Theorizing

Feminist theory begins with a challenge to the sex-gender system that is at the heart of how humans live in families and how families interact with cultures and society. Feminist analyses of sexuality, motherhood, marriage, and paid and unpaid labor

---

K. R. Allen (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, Virginia Tech,  
Blacksburg, VA, USA

e-mail: [kallen@vt.edu](mailto:kallen@vt.edu)

A. E. Goldberg

Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

A. L. Jaramillo-Sierra

Department of Psychology, University de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

mark an historical rallying point for feminist family theorizing (Allen et al., 2013; Baber & Allen, 1992; Osmond & Thorne, 1993; Walker & Thompson, 1984). Women are primarily responsible for all of the labor in the home (e.g., childcare, housework, emotion work, kin care), which is typically invisible, unpaid, and unacknowledged, and yet women's lives (both reproductive and productive) are regulated and controlled by patriarchal systems (Allen et al., 2009). Feminist family scholars have both challenged and redirected scholarship on and about families by (a) redefining family composition and structure more inclusively; (b) bringing gender consciousness to family research; (c) modeling intersectionality across many structural levels including the individual, relational, generational, and institutional; and (d) incorporating a rhetoric of change to both inform and transform society (Kaestle, 2016).

These critical components to feminist family theorizing – challenging inequalities, deconstructing the status quo, and empowering marginalized women and families – are found in the history of feminism as a set of ideas and an agenda for social change (Allen, 2016). Because feminism emerged from the embodied experience of oppression, feminist theory and activism are inextricably interrelated (hooks, 2015; Lorde, 1984). Feminist consciousness often begins in the lived experience of gendered violence, sexual exploitation, and workplace sexism, to name a few places where feminism “finds us” and provides the foundation for knowledge (Ahmed, 2017).

Feminists have used the concept of “waves” to link feminist theory and activism. Waves refer to rough (not fixed or rigid) social-historical guidelines as to when ideas rose to prominence (Allen, 2016; De Reus et al., 2005). We use the term waves because it is part of the feminist vernacular where many activists and scholars find common ground, yet we also embrace the alternative concept of “tapestry” to understand the history, emergence, and malleability of feminist thought and action. Lewis and Marine (2015) critiqued the wave metaphor as leading to intergenerational divisions among feminists by freezing history into a static portrayal; instead, they conceptualized feminist movements as a tapestry “with its history reflexively woven into its present” (p. 119). Thus, we use the term waves lightly, and not as fixed periods of time. Next, we highlight the feminist family science tapestry in relation to these waves over the past 50 years.

Overtly feminist ideas were introduced in family science in the late 1960s, where a critical perspective on gender, through the concepts of sex roles and inequality, was presented as a necessary corrective to the monolithic way in which patriarchal family structure and process were presumed to be normative. The introduction of a critical gendered analysis was a radical shift in how families were portrayed in mainstream family science (Ferree, 1990; Osmond, 1987; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Walker & Thompson, 1984). Feminists critiqued the taken-for-granted idea of the family as a unity of interacting personalities, with the role of the father enshrined as breadwinner and head of the household and the role of the mother as homemaker and caretaker (Allen et al., 2009; Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). This era corresponded with the second wave of feminism initiated in the 1960s–1970s (the first wave was associated with securing women's suffrage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Freedman, 2002).

During the second wave, genealogies of feminist thinking were compiled by their intellectual heritage, including radical, liberal, Marxist, or psychoanalytic theory. Yet, these genealogies erased “difference” by using the singular “woman” in descriptive phrases such as “women’s estate” (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Hiding in the singular category of woman was the unnamed assumption that women were “white, Euro-American, class-privileged, and heterosexual” (Osmond & Thorne, p. 606). In the USA, women from diverse racial-ethnic groups (African, Latina, Asian, and Native American women), lesbian women, working-class women, and women who were Jewish or Muslim, among other submerged groups, challenged the status quo of gender as a singular experience (Few, 2007; Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Black feminists, beginning with the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) and Audre Lorde (1984), critiqued single-axis (gender-only) analysis, thereby theorizing multiply marginalized identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability) as an intersectional matrix of domination (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill, 1988; Few-Demo, 2014). Each of these structural systems of oppression – racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, elitism, and classism – are built upon a privileged group’s claim to inherent superiority and “the right to dominance” (Lorde, p. 115).

Inspired by the theoretical contributions of feminists of color, feminist theorizing has transformed to conceptualize social relations through an intersectional lens (Cho et al., 2013; Lorber, 2012). Understanding the interlocking systems of oppression and privilege that force individuals and families to the margins of society has been a major contribution of multiracial/multiethnic feminism (Collins, 1990; Few, 2007) and ushered in the third wave of feminist theorizing, which is traced to the early 1990s (Lorber, 2012). In family science, third wave feminist theorizing expanded beyond the concepts of sex roles and gender relations toward intersectional paradigms (Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo, 2014). This work often incorporated the social sciences and the humanities by including empirical studies, essays, stories, and poems, to both narrate and theorize from Black women’s experiences in the family (Bell-Scott et al., 1991) and in society (Hull et al., 1982), bringing to life how the intersecting oppressions and constraints of racism, sexism, and other systems of domination create hardship and yet also enable members of multiple minority groups to “find a way out of no way.” Given the influence of intersectional theorizing, feminists now examine tensions and intersections across vectors of power, difference, opportunity, and resistance to understand how the individual and collective lives of women, men, and children are mutually constituted by the interlocking forces of patriarchy, globalism, colonialism, and neocapitalism (Bermudez et al., 2016; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Ferguson, 2017; Patil, 2013; Sharp & Weaver, 2015).

Fourth wave feminism, beginning around 2008, reveals a renewed interest in activism, fresh voices, and new technologies and social media, where activists meet, organize, and engage in feminist debate (Magalhaes & Cerqueira, 2015). Social movements, such as #MeToo, Time’s Up, and Black Lives Matter have spread through local, national, and international media. These social movements have intensified broad social activism around women’s and marginalized groups’ rights



and empowerment – which in turn are fueled by oppressive social conditions and grass roots activism – hallmarks of feminist intersectional change. Such discourse and activism are energized and spread by the strategic and innovative use of social media (Potter & Potter, 2020), a twenty-first-century phenomenon that has radically altered the social and political landscape, offering new possibilities for theoretical advancement and critique, recruitment for research studies, and a transnational conservative backlash.

## **Key Concepts of Feminist Family Theorizing**

Feminism as an unruly body of knowledge, method, and practice is constantly evolving in light of new research, global social change, and critical reflection and action (Ahmed, 2017; Allen, 2000, 2016). Key feminist concepts include gender, patriarchy, privilege, power, intersectionality, praxis, and reflexivity.

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

Gender holds a central place in feminist theorizing. Gender is a dynamic stratification system that structures how power and inequality are experienced and institutionalized from the micro to interactional to macro layers of society. Feminists conceptualize the social construction of gender “as a building block of the social order, with gender divisions and roles built into all major social institutions of society, especially work and the family” (Lorber, 2012, p. 210). Gender is both process (doing or performing gender) and structure (institution or regime), and both of these views are complementary and often in conflict. Feminist theorizing challenges the biological and the social construction of a dualistic notion of male and female bodies.

The gender structure is highly resistant to change. In Risman’s (2018) study of 116 millennials (racially, economically, and sexually diverse college students), the traditional gender structure, including “true believers” ( $n = 30$ ) and “straddlers” ( $n = 48$ ), was still appealing to most, with only the smallest group, “rebels” ( $n = 17$ ) rejecting binary gender types. Rebels, mostly gender queer and trans individuals, were the only ones who vigorously sought to undermine essentialist masculine and feminine identities. The gender structure is well established in Millennials’ lives, regardless of race and ethnicity (Risman, 2018). Of course, the gender structure does not operate in the same way across time and place. Many examples highlight the historical and cultural specificity of the gender structure, including indigenous North American two-spirit folk who identify as both masculine and feminine and Native American tribes that embrace a third gender (Herdt, 1996; Two Spirits, 2009).

## *Patriarchy, Privilege, and Power*

Patriarchy – the rule of the father – is a global system of male power that signals how power is regulated and distributed by intersections among social hierarchies. The exposure and critique of patriarchy and the unearned privilege that accompanies it is key to feminist theorizing. Privilege refers to the taken-for-granted legal and informal rights that accrue to more valued members of society simply by being, for example, male, White, wealthy, and/or heterosexual. Patriarchal privilege and power is a ubiquitous, often invisible, but always damaging, force (Ortner, 2014). Feminist family theory critiques the destructive forces of patriarchy and the social inequities that result from the mutually interlocking systems of sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and the like. Feminists identify the subjectivity of power and its differential distribution, both in the families we study and in the knowledge we produce, using intersectional, interdisciplinary, and practical perspectives (Allen et al., 2009).

Feminist theory conceptualizes women’s collective resistance to patriarchy as a revolutionary action that is needed to dismantle this system that seeks to divide and conquer oppressed groups. In her classic speech, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde (1984) explained feminist theorizing needs collective action as a tool for social justice, and must include “those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older” (p. 112). Women’s “need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered” (Lorde, p. 112). Inspired by Lorde’s call to action for women and oppressed people to work through and with their differences, Ahmed (2017) described how being a “feminist killjoy” is a powerful antidote to patriarchal oppression: “When we refuse to be women, in the heteropatriarchal sense as beings for men, we become trouble, we get into trouble. A killjoy is willing to get into trouble” (p. 255). Being willing to get into trouble by refusing to be one of the master’s tools is a feminist survival strategy.

## *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality calls attention to the multiplicative effect of how gender, race, class, sexuality, gender identity, age, nationality, and other systems interlock to create advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014). Intersectionality is an analytic tool that feminist scholars use to examine social inequality, where “people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Originally conceptualized as a corrective to gender or race as unilateral categorical experiences, intersectionality gained

prominence when explaining the interaction among Black women's multiple statuses and experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality has been adopted by scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and activists in numerous fields. Due to the conceptual utility of intersectionality, some feminist scholars may privilege any of the major stratifications, such as gender or race, while still taking an intersectional approach. In a study of Black lesbian families, Moore (2011) explained: "The lens of race does not negate the intersectional experience; rather, it guides these respondents' interpretations of how gender, sexuality, social class, and other axes shape their lives" (p. 5).

Given the ubiquity of intersectional theorizing that is now occurring, Alexander-Floyd (2012) cautioned about the drift away from Black feminist thought that appears in studies in which intersectionality theory is used, but without a critical analysis of race. Black women's experiences, knowledge, and history are in danger of being silenced and rendered invisible when race is not included as central among the axes of identity and structure that are examined. The tension about the appropriate use of intersectionality is a growing edge of feminist debate and concern, demonstrating awareness about the dangers of appropriating (and thus erasing) the voices of marginalized groups as theory evolves and is applied to new contexts (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). As noted below, a similar tension exists in the use of queer theory.

## *Praxis*

Feminist praxis reveals a commitment to social change and the work of translating theory into action. Praxis requires reflection and action upon the world in order to change it (Allen et al., 2009). Feminists have translated their scholarship into "products" that benefit the lives of those they have studied or taught (e.g., making syllabi available online). For example, after conducting interviews with over 50 LGBTQ parents who experienced a reproductive loss (e.g., through miscarriage, stillbirth, and failed adoption), Craven (2019) created a website of resources for individuals and practitioners in LGBTQ communities, including a virtual space for families to share stories of loss and commemorate their loved ones. Feminist family scholars have also translated feminist theory for audiences beyond academia. Sharp and DeCesaro (2015) joined their expertise in feminism and dance to create a transdisciplinary project, *Ordinary Wars*, in which social science data were collected, analyzed, and incorporated into a dance concert performed by professional dancers and actors. This work, performed internationally, depicted "women's routine, ongoing negotiations of their hegemonic feminine and heterosexual identities within heteropatriarchal cultural conditions" (p. 368).

## ***Feminist Reflexivity***

Feminist reflexivity opens the door to learning from our experience of oppression and privilege that results from intersections among gender, race, class, sexuality, and the like, as they operate in the matrix of domination – as an identity, a set of social relations, and an institutional structure (Collins, 1990). A reflexive approach uses the tools of agency and subjectivity to understand the experience of families living on the margins of society (e.g., transgender parent families; families in poverty; undocumented immigrant families). For example, building on the work of Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), Acosta (2018) described the spirit of producing “theory in the flesh” to provide a queerer intersectional family scholarship that gets beyond the experiences of the White middle-class, specifically by centralizing Latinx families. Gabb (2018) integrated mainstream and critical perspectives (e.g., life course, queer, and feminist theories) to historicize social change, rooting her analysis in her own lived experience as an unpartnered lesbian mother.

## **Tensions, Controversies, and Limitations of Feminist Theorizing**

As a politicized and contentious framework, feminist theories generate controversies. Some controversies are long-standing, such as how gender, race, social class, and sexuality have led to divisions in feminist theory, activism, and community, and others have arisen in light of the revolution in mass communication and new social media as well as the emergence of new understandings about the complexity and variation of gender identity and orientation.

## ***Deepening our Understanding of Feminism, Gender, and Intersectionality***

A central tension since second-wave feminism emerged is the critique by intersectional theorists that feminist theory is too focused on gender, thereby ignoring other identities and structural locations and calling for the integration of racial-ethnic feminist and critical race theorizing and practice (Allen & Henderson, 2022; De Reus et al., 2005; Few-Demo, 2014). Feminist family scholars have come a long way in addressing intersectionality, but still acknowledge the need for focused treatment of how gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, and other stratifications shape individual and family experience. Much more attention is needed to how such social locations interact in sometimes unexpected ways.

Recent research on complex families reveal the need to take an expanded view of gender and intersectionality frameworks. For example, members of vulnerable

groups (e.g., sexual minorities) may possess privileges (e.g., significant financial and educational resources) that mitigate their exposure to certain oppressions. White, wealthy gay fathers of children of color may act in ways that reflect their class privilege more than their sexual minority or multiracial family status, such as choosing “top private schools” for their children, without considering the racial diversity or gay-friendliness of those schools (Goldberg, Allen, et al., 2018). White lesbian mothers, in contrast, possess fewer resources, and their socialization as women and sexual minorities suggests why they are especially sensitive to their children of color feeling “mirrored” at school, thus leading them to prioritize racially diverse schools over academic rigor (Goldberg, Allen, et al., 2018). Likewise, White wealthy gay fathers may be likely to pursue leadership positions in their children’s schools, enabling them to influence structural change – although also exposing themselves to multiple forms of marginalization, given that other highly involved parents are typically heterosexual mothers (Goldberg et al., 2017). These examples reveal how gender may function as a master status to shape opportunity and experience that offset other marginalized statuses of race and sexual orientation.

Yet, at the same time that gender and wealth may result in gay fathers having more power than lesbian mothers, gay men are still disadvantaged in relation to patriarchy (Ortner, 2014). Gay fathers may be questioned, scrutinized, and rejected in ways that lesbian mothers are not, due to their status as men (regarded as less competent caregivers and nurturers), and gay (viewed as deviant in their sexual desires and relationships) and gay men specifically fall victim to stereotypes of effeminacy or even pedophilia (Goldberg, 2012). These counter-examples highlight the diverse and complex ways that gender operates to marginalize or empower parents and families – always in intersection with other identities and always in conversation with broader systems of gender and power.

### ***Methodological Challenges of Applying an Intersectional Perspective***

Intersectionality brings several challenges when translating theory to methodology (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Crenshaw’s (1991) view of intersectionality challenged the universality of antidiscrimination law and the antiviolence movement, demonstrating that US law was more oppressive for African-American women than for White women or African-American men. This framing, grounded in a critical race theory about power, privilege, and oppression, radically critiqued the legal system as it “reified and flattened power relationships into unidimensional notions of discrimination” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 791). Over time, however, intersectionality has been in danger of being reduced only to a theory about identity politics, thereby neglecting the other components of intersectional analysis, including structural, political, and representational intersectionality occurring within the intersectional matrix (Few-Demo, 2014).

Another challenge for scholars is how to methodologically approach intersectionality – how to examine the role of power inequalities and identities in individuals and families in different intersecting social locations, particularly in quantitative research (McCall, 2005; Sprague, 2016). It is rare to accomplish a truly intersectional approach: it requires either process-oriented inquires (i.e., emphasizing interaction effects, context, comparative analysis, and dynamics through time) or systems-oriented inquires (i.e., emphasizing larger historical and institutional processes) that consider multiple levels of social interaction (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Among the few process-oriented intersectional studies about families, a strong example is Chiu's (2017) examination of intimate partner violence in cross-border marriages between Mainland Chinese women and Hong Kong Chinese men.

### *Tensions and Possibilities of Queer Theory and Feminism*

Queer theory challenges the presumption of heteronormativity and “queers” the concepts of identity, sexual orientation, and family by examining them as “interdependent binaries to be negotiated through human agency in the face of heteronormative power” (Oswald et al., 2009, p. 45). A queer feminist lens is critical of the continued valorization of heterosexual married parents with biological children as normative and pervasive, untangling the linkages among heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction (Chevette, 2013). Research conducted using a queer feminist lens does not compare same- to different-sex families but examines how heteronormativity, which positions heterosexual identity and relationships as the default sexual orientation, influences variations across families (van Eeden-Moorefield & Benson, 2014). Feminist family scholars have applied queer theory to transformational pedagogy demonstrating how to teach inclusively about LGBTQ-parent families (Few-Demo et al., 2016).

Queer theory owes a special debt to feminist theory, with overlapping yet distinct origins. Queer theory has stronger roots in cultural and linguistic analysis, especially postmodernism and the deconstruction of binaries, and feminist theory has stronger foundations in the materiality of the body, including rape and violence (Richardson et al., 2006). Lesbian standpoint theory is an early point of intersection for feminist and queer theories. Lesbians were excluded from early feminist analyses of “woman” as a singular category and from definitions of homosexuality, where the original Kinsey data that categorized the sexual experience continuum from homosexual to heterosexual was only focused on male homosexuality, excluding female homosexuality and bisexuality (Marinucci, 2016). As queer theory gained prominence in critical studies, deconstructing binary categories can be found in tension with feminist aims for social justice. A consequence of “the radical critique of binary thinking that queer theory offers is that it seems to deny the reality of any categories, including not just categories of gender, such as feminine, but also categories of sex, such as female” (Marinucci, 2016, p. 143). Despite this desire to reject sex and gender binaries, which would render feminism unnecessary, oppressive

contexts still exist (cis White heterosexual men occupy the most privileged identities), rendering feminism still highly relevant. Marinucci argues for strategically naming a “queer feminism” as a reminder that gendered and heteronormative injustice requires social action to change.

Just as the tensions with intersectionality push feminist scholars to engage with the tensions in making gender, race, social class, and the like center stage, so, too, the interplay between queer and feminist theories brings both challenges and possibilities. How do we avoid an antagonistic position of pitting feminist theory, with its historic concern for gender, against queer theory, with its desire to undo gender? We must not deny or homogenize key statuses such as gender or race as systems of inequality (Marinucci, 2016). We must be vigilant to the overt and covert ways that gender, race, disability, sexuality, class, and other statuses intersect to create unique structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal vulnerabilities and continually amplify the voices of marginalized people and redress structural inequalities.

### *Tensions in Intergenerational Feminist Theorizing*

Divides also exist within and across generations of feminist scholars and activists; second-wave and third-wave feminists have clashed in their understanding and approach to patriarchy and sexism (De Reus et al., 2005). Donegan (2018), in discussing the current “intellectual rift” between second (older)- and third (younger)-wave feminists in the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault, observed that feminism contains two distinct understandings of sexism, with different and often incompatible ideas about how it should be “solved.” One approach is individualist and grounded in pragmatism and self-sufficiency. This view places the responsibility on women to navigate and overcome the misogyny they encounter. The other view is social, communal, idealistic, and premised on mutual interest and solidarity and emphasizes shared responsibility: all of us must eliminate sexism so individual women never encounter it in the first place (Donegan, 2018). Such divides may thread throughout feminist theorizing, shaping scholarly perspectives, concepts, and conclusions. Topics such as reproductive justice and wage inequality may be viewed differently from these diverse generational lenses (Lorber, 2012).

### *Grappling with the Postfeminist Claim*

Each feminist era has been accompanied by a “postfeminist” claim, where the benefits of theorizing and activism are incorporated into current practices and thus mute the necessity to keep pushing feminist goals. The postfeminist claim is ironic because feminist theory is uniquely positioned to understand and change patriarchal relations, which are often expressed as sexualized violence all over the globe (e.g.,

the ritual of rape in wartime; the murder of trans women; the prevalence of campus sexual assault; Marinucci, 2016; Ortner, 2014).

Feminist family scholars have long grappled with how to include feminist theory, intersectionality, reflexivity, and praxis in our work (Sollie & Leslie, 1994), as in a recent analysis of not being feminist enough (De Reus, 2015; Lewis, 2015; Sharp & Weaver, 2015). As a family journal editor, Alexis Walker (2009) described how feminist theory is often unnamed in publications, even if it is the guiding focus. Feminism has ambivalent and negative connotations, decried as either *too* intellectual, *too* political, or both, and feminist family scholars still must justify the value of a feminist lens in our teaching and research (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020). Feminist theory may have, in Goffman's words, a "spoiled identity" (Ortner, 2014, p. 533). We have not advanced beyond feminism, and it is still necessary to explicitly acknowledge the feminist origins of our work in publications, teaching, and professional endeavors.

## Empirical Examples of Feminist-Informed Family Research

Feminist theorizing has made strong contributions to family science, including the (a) power dynamics in family relationships, (b) gendered violence in family and public contexts, (c) global and transnational feminist research, and (d) trans normativities. At the same time, each of these areas holds the potential for new contributions yet to be realized.

### *Power in Family Relationships*

Feminist family theorists understand power in family relationships in four key ways (Few-Demo et al., 2014; Jaramillo-Sierra, Kaestle, & Allen, 2016; Knudson-Martin, 2013). First, feminists have theorized the meaning of power using Komter's (1989) definition of power in marriages, which is "the ability to affect consciously or unconsciously the emotions, attitudes, cognitions, or behavior of someone else," a definition that "incorporates both the possibility of changing the other and the possibility of resisting change" (p. 192). Komter's view distances from earlier power definitions focused on observable, behavioral outcomes of decision-making by including both parties in interaction and accounting for larger social contexts.

Second, feminist scholars have demonstrated that power relations in couples cannot be primarily and exclusively understood by the influence of partners' resources. Classical resource theory posited that power in couple relationships can be explained by the resources (e.g., socioeconomic) each partner brings into the relationship (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Feminist family scholars have challenged resource theory by demonstrating that (a) women that bring more economic resources into the family do not necessarily hold more power in marriage (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2005) and



(b) cultural gender norms and gender ideology influence power relations in important ways (e.g., Tichenor, 2005).

Third, feminist scholars have evidenced that gender influences family power dynamics between generations. Jaramillo-Sierra, Kaestle, et al. (2016) examined power relations, anger experience, and anger expression in the relationships between young women and their parents, finding that power relations between daughters and parents differed on the basis of parent gender. These emerging adult daughters conceded more power to fathers than to mothers as they more frequently engaged in mutual relationships with mothers and more frequently accepted hierarchical relationships with fathers. This work extends prior research on gendered power in couple relationships, hierarchical power in parent-child relationships, and research differentiating mother-child and father-child relationships according to sex that previously neglected gendered power dynamics across generations (Walker, 1999).

Fourth, feminist studies about power dynamics have considered the intersections of gender and other power structures on couple relationships. Cowdery et al.'s (2009) work examining gendered power in middle-class, professional African-American couples with young children revealed that solidarity was more salient than division of labor or decision-making processes, and that solidarity was associated with individuals' experiences with racism in the larger social context. In contrast, Moghadam et al. (2009) and Quek and Knudson-Martin (2006) found diversity in how couples in Iran and Singapore experienced gendered power dynamics, revealing that power influences couples in different ways according to larger social processes. African-American middle-class couples, who had experienced racism, united in solidarity against the racism of the broader society, minimizing gendered power struggles within their relationship. Iranian and Singaporean middle-class couples, who had experienced minimal racial or class discrimination, were more diverse in how they navigated the possibility of gender egalitarianism within the couple context, against the broader patriarchal and sexist social context.

## *Gendered Violence*

Feminist activists were fundamental to the public recognition of domestic and sexual violence as a violation of women's rights in the USA and worldwide. Feminists have contributed theoretical and methodological developments to understand different types of gendered violence and to guide prevention and intervention efforts. Feminist theories posit that widespread male dominance explains men's violence over women in intimate and other social relationships (Rozee & Koss, 2001). Feminist theories of domestic and sexual violence differ in their emphasis on structural inequalities, gendered cultural norms, identities, and power inequalities related to class, race, and other stratifications (Anderson, 2005). Theories also differ on the extent to which they accept factors apart from gendered power as associated with domestic and sexual violence.

Johnson's (2008) domestic violence typology, which recognizes both the feminist tenet of male power and control as explaining violence and non-gendered factors for violence, has been noteworthy for feminist (e.g., Haselschwerdt et al., 2019) and traditional family violence research (e.g., Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008). Within feminist scholarship, Johnson's typology has raised some concerns. For example, Anderson (2008) found no differences in negative consequences of partner violence between types, a claim central to Johnson's model. This typology has been further developed and refined to recognize coercive control as having adverse effects even in the absence of violence (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018). Additionally, feminists have critically questioned the role of methodological decisions in the study of domestic violence (Hamby, 2014; Hardesty et al., 2015; Johnson, 2011). They suggest that caution should be made in interpreting differences in findings with regard to both prevalence and gender symmetry in domestic violence, given the variability in types of samples (e.g., community, clinical, prison, nationally representative), instruments (e.g., Revised Conflict Tactics Scale [CTS-2] vs. The Partner Victimization Scale), and methods of analysis (e.g., "count" vs. "frequency" approaches for measurement of coercive control) that have been used in this research.

Recent discussions about sexual assault on college campuses have resulted in a variety of feminist approaches. Hust et al. (2017), using an interactional feminist perspective, examined how the acceptance of gender stereotypes in pop culture influenced the explicit negotiations of sexual encounters and the acceptance of consent among female and male college students. Through a film series, Purcell et al. (2017) promoted discussion and reflexivity among college students regarding gender stereotypes and sexual scripts. Based on queer theory, Purcell et al. presented films that challenged binary divisions of masculinity and femininity and their relations to sexual violence. Critical race theory enabled the authors to pose reflections on how the interaction of gender, race, ethnicity, and class provide obstacles and opportunities to experience, resist, report, and seek help regarding sexual violence.

### ***Feminism, Globalism, and Transnationalism***

Feminist scholarship today is a global phenomenon, through the complex interplay among "transnational dialogues and disagreements, coalitions and networks" (Ferree & Tripp, 2006, p. viii). Feminist movements have increased their interrelations because of the globalized market and the Internet. Nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) defending women's rights globally have also increased significantly in the last two decades, partly because of funding from United Nations and cooperation agencies, particularly since the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women (Ferree & Tripp, 2006).

Global feminism has the challenge to take advantage of global networks and funding, without privileging activism and scholarship from the Northern Hemisphere. This requires global feminists to avoid reproducing colonial patterns of domination

(Mohanty, 2003). Feminist family scholars are challenged to recognize both mainstream feminist theory produced and critiqued in the North (including key concepts such as patriarchy, gender relations, and intersectionality) and, at the same time, to consider local processes and feminist scholarship within each region or nation. Connell (2015) considered both the global and the local by proposing four important ideas in constructing feminist theorizing in the Global South: (a) the role of the state in power relations; (b) power, poverty, and violence as more important than psychological or philosophical identities; (c) the diversity of methodologies; and (d) the significance of the land.

Global feminist scholars have studied massive migration processes and their influence on families, both in home and in host countries. For example, Muruthi et al. (2016) employed transnational feminist theory to study the parenting perspectives of Afro-Caribbean, non-Latina mothers living in the USA. In-depth interviews with five mothers revealed their interest in maintaining Afro-Caribbean values and parenting styles, as well as leveraging educational opportunities and social networks to raise their children in the USA. The findings revealed the tensions of mothering in-between two cultures, within a racist social context that perceives and treats them as no different from African-Americans because of race.

Domestic violence is another issue that has driven much feminist scholarship around the world. Couture-Carron (2017) used an intersectionality framework to guide a qualitative study about the perspectives on dating violence of 11 South Asian Muslim women in Canada, finding that meanings of dating violence are specific to this group according to their social location in Canadian culture and their religious/cultural locations. Behaviors identified as dating violence included exposing the dating relationship to the women's parents and community, and sexual behaviors that are not accepted in non-married couples in South Asian Muslim communities.

Jaramillo-Sierra, Barberena-Arango, et al. (2016) interviewed 18 psychologists and social workers at two government institutions in Colombia regarding their perspectives on domestic violence and gender. *Comisarias de Familia* has the mandate to protect families and children; *Casas de Igualdad de Oportunidades* has the mandate to protect women. Most participants in *Comisarias de Familia* (the largest of these institutions, with presence in all the national territories) do not "see" gender, or they are ambivalent about it in domestic violence cases. Psychologists and social workers from these two agencies have two contradictory mandates that reflect a classical feminist tension: protecting women or protecting the family. From a feminist family theory lens, both women and their families require support, protection, and intervention.

### ***Trans Normativities: Interrogating the Gender Binary***

Feminist perspectives are useful in interrogating and understanding trans normativities, whereby trans people whose gender identities and appearance conform more closely to the gender binary system (male, female) are privileged over those whose

gender identities and appearance deviate from it. Individuals who identify as trans men or trans women, and present in stereotypically masculine or feminine ways, are accepted to a greater degree than trans people whose gender identities and appearance defy the gender binary (i.e., nonbinary identified individuals; trans people who reject biomedical interventions or do not seek to be “read” as female or male; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016). Children (Kuvalanka et al., 2017) and young adults (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & dickey, 2018) who have trans nonbinary gender identities (e.g., genderfluid, gender-queer) often face rejection from families, peers, health providers, and educators, due to the cultural invisibility of nonbinary gender identities and societal intolerance for gender identities or expressions that violate the gender binary.

Viewing as suspicious or invalid any identities that do not conform to “male” or “female” reflects the power of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the gender binary. An explicitly feminist approach can elicit how the privileging of masculinity and men results in the denigration and extreme violence against trans women but also how upholding the gender binary creates more hierarchies of privilege, where “real” trans people are men or women and nonbinary identities are seen as the most improbable and wretched identities of all. Somewhat problematic is that some feminists’ scholarship, pedagogy, and activism rests on the assumption of a gender binary – which, if unquestioned, may prevent them from recognizing the existence of nonbinary genders or the ways in which nonbinary and third gender individuals are fundamentally harmed by patriarchy as well. Awareness that nonbinary or third genders are nothing new (Herdt, 1996; McNabb, 2018) is essential for moving theorizing forward. Feminist scholarship can then begin to further deconstruct how patriarchy underlies and feeds destructive notions of gender, including those that underlie “trans-exclusionary radical feminism” (Hines, 2019), which have been deployed to regulate gender and notions of “real women” and “real men.”

## Conclusion and Future Directions of Feminist Family Theories

In conclusion, we offer a sample of directions for future feminist theorizing, with the caveat that there are innumerable possibilities. One emerging area is trans parent families, which furthers the feminist project of disrupting the default heteronormative family structure enshrined in family science and the public imagination (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). Feminist theorizing holds great promise in relation to transgender (trans) parent families and integrating queer perspectives (Pfeffer, 2017). Trans parents, especially those parents who identify with nonbinary (i.e., not male or female) gender identities, challenge the gender binary at the root of heteropatriarchy. They embody a disaggregation of sex, gender, and reproduction (e.g., people who identify as male or nonbinary get pregnant, carry, give birth to, and nurse children; Karaian, 2013; Riggs, 2013), critically challenging gender normativity and repronormativity. They identify in ways that deviate from “traditional” parenting roles, identities, and labels – “mother” and “father” roles, identities, and

labels – and may explicitly undo gender in their own parenting practices (Riggs, 2013; Ryan, 2009). They may partner with others who are not the “opposite” from them in terms of gender – further complicating male/female role models, motherhood versus fatherhood, and so on – and therefore expose their children to models of parenthood that are not based on a gender binary. They queer (i.e., innovate, revision, transform) parenthood in unique ways, inspiring parents of diverse genders and relational configurations to create parenthood in ways that work for them.

A second area for future feminist theorizing is the division of paid and unpaid work. The continued struggle to balance paid, underpaid, and unpaid caregiving labor, in light of global economic transitions, affects family well-being. Worker benefits are constantly eroded under the new world order of individual incentives, marketization, globalization, and neoliberal economics and politics (Ferguson, 2017). As governments and corporations dismantle worker protections, the burden falls mostly to women to hold families together, a trend in Western democracies and in growing capitalist markets such as China. A resurgence of the Confucian patriarchal tradition along with economic reforms that favor capitalism has increased gender asymmetry as state-sponsored collectivist care settings, including child- and health-care facilities, are dismantled, requiring women to leave the paid labor force and return to unpaid care at home in order to sustain families (Ji et al., 2017). Feminist analyses of paid and unpaid family leave also reveal how men’s work and family experiences perpetuate the patriarchal power structure. Men may be offered paid leave but do not take it because other men have not done so. A patriarchal system that is controlled by men values masculinity over femininity; in turn, when men voice the desire to engage in work considered traditionally feminine, such as infant care, they are punished (e.g., through loss of promotions) implicitly or explicitly, just like women (Karr, 2017). Leaving it up to individual workplaces, men, or families to dismantle the patriarchal structures that underlie gendered leave policies is less fruitful than enacting laws that offer paid leave for a parental caregiver regardless of gender, but ensures that it is taken.

A third area for future feminist theorizing expands on transnational masculinity studies (Louie, 2014). Zhang and Allen (2018) used an intersectionality lens to examine how Chinese men working and studying in the USA experienced masculinity and perceived interracial heterosexual relationships between Asian and White men and women. Chinese men viewed American hegemonic masculinity as rendering them inferior to White men due to hypermasculinity, chaffing at the stereotype that Asian men are weaker or asexual. To interpret the cultural tensions in their East-West views of masculinity, Zhang and Allen incorporated the traditional *wen-wu* framework, where *wen* refers to “genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholar” and *wu* “embodies the power of military strength but also the wisdom to know when and when not to deploy it” (Louie, 2002, p. 14). Ideally, the perfect man attains a harmonious balance between the dual attributes of mind and body, although in practice, the physical nature of the body is slightly less valued. Confronting hypermasculine Western culture by working in the USA, Chinese transnational men felt their masculinity threatened and were aligned in their belief in dominance over women.

Finally, feminist reflexivity will continue to spark new theoretical contributions and transform feminism as knowledge, method, and practice. Grounded in the person's embodied experience of the personal is political, feminist reflexive practice is the soul of feminist theorizing and activism around the world. Its transparency and empowerment are the qualities that often provoke would-be feminist theorists to open the door to seeing critically through a feminist lens (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2015). Long motivated by the need to incorporate the missing voices of women from all walks of life into the academic canon, the reflexive urge underlying feminist theory and feminist movements will continue to hold scholars enthralled and accountable to make our work relevant to those we teach, study, live among, and serve.

## References

- Acosta, K. L. (2018). Queering family scholarship: Theorizing from the borderlands. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, 406–418.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Alexander-Floyd, N. G. (2012). Disappearing acts: Reclaiming intersectionality in the social sciences in a post-black feminist era. *Feminist Formations*, 24, 1–25.
- Allen, K. R. (2000). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 4–17.
- Allen, K. R. (2016). Feminist theory in family studies: History, biography, and critique. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8, 207–224.
- Allen, K. R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Wiley.
- Allen, K. R., & Jaramillo-Sierra, A. L. (2015). Feminist theory and research on family relationships: Pluralism and complexity. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 73, 93–99.
- Allen, K. R., & Lavender-Stott, E. S. (2020). Preparing the educators who teach about families: Engaging family science in the university setting. *Family Relations*, 69, 442–460.
- Allen, K. R., Lloyd, S. A., & Few, A. L. (2009). Reclaiming feminist theory, methods, and practice for family studies. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 3–17). Sage.
- Allen, K. R., Walker, A. J., & McCann, B. R. (2013). Feminism and families. In G. W. Peterson & K. R. Bush (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (3rd ed., pp. 139–158). Springer.
- Anderson, K. L. (2005). Theorizing gender in intimate partner violence research. *Sex Roles*, 52, 853–865.
- Anderson, K. L. (2008). Is partner violence worse in the context of control? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 1157–1168.
- Atkinson, M. P., Greenstein, T. N., & Monahan, M. (2005). For women, breadwinning can be dangerous: Gendered resource theory and wife abuse. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 1137–1148.
- Baber, K. M., & Allen, K. R. (1992). *Women and families: Feminist reconstructions*. Guilford.
- Bell-Scott, P., Guy-Sheftall, B., Royster, J. J., Sims-Wood, J., DeCosta-Willis, M., & Fultz, L. (Eds.). (1991). *Double stitch: Black women write about mothers and daughters*. Beacon Press.
- Bermudez, J. M., Muruthi, B. A., & Jordan, L. S. (2016). Decolonizing research methods for family science: Creating space at the center. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8, 191–206.
- Blood, R. O., Jr., & Wolfe, D. M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of family living*. Free Press Glencoe.

- Chevrette, R. (2013). Outing heteronormativity in interpersonal and family communication: Feminist applications of queer theory “beyond the sexy streets”. *Communication Theory*, 23, 170–190.
- Chiu, T. Y. (2017). Marriage migration as a multifaceted system: The intersectionality of intimate partner violence in cross-border marriages. *Violence Against Women*, 23, 1293–1313.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, 38, 785–810.
- Choo, H. Y., & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28, 129–149.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Unwin Hyman.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.
- Combahee River Collective. (1977). The Combahee River Collective statement. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 264–274). Rutgers University Press.
- Connell, R. (2015). Meeting at the edge of fear: Theory on a world scale. *Feminist Theory*, 16, 49–66.
- Couture-Carron, A. (2017). One size doesn’t fit all: Dating abuse against women from the perspective of south Asian Muslim youth in Canada. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32, 3626–3647.
- Cowdery, R. S., Scarborough, N., Knudson-Martin, C., Seshadri, G., Lewis, M. E., & Mahoney, A. R. (2009). Gendered power in cultural contexts: Part II. Middle class African American heterosexual couples with young children. *Family Process*, 48, 25–39.
- Craven, C. (2019). *Reproductive losses: Challenges to LGBTQ family-making*. Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Crossman, K. A., & Hardesty, J. L. (2018). Placing coercive control at the center: What are the processes of coercive control and what makes control coercive? *Psychology of Violence*, 8, 196–206.
- De Reus, L. A. (2015). In pursuit of feminist accountability: Disempowering “feelings of fraudulence” through praxis and resistance: In pursuit of feminist accountability. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7, 328–332.
- De Reus, L. A., Few, A. L., & Blume, L. B. (2005). Multicultural and critical race feminisms: Theorizing families in the third wave. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 447–468). Sage.
- Dill, B. T. (1988). Our mothers’ grief: Racial ethnic women and the maintenance of families. *Journal of Family History*, 13, 415–431.
- Donegan, M. (May 11, 2018). How #MeToo revealed the central rift within feminism today. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/11/how-metoo-revealed-the-central-rift-within-feminism-social-individualist>.
- Ferguson, K. (2017). Feminist theory today. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 269–286.
- Ferree, M. M. (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 866–884.
- Ferree, M. M. (2010). Filling the glass: Gender perspectives on families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 420–439.
- Ferree, M. M., & Tripp, A. M. (Eds.). (2006). *Global feminism: Transnational women’s activism, organizing, and human rights*. NYU Press.
- Few, A. L. (2007). Integrating black consciousness and critical race feminism into family studies research. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28, 452–473.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6, 169–183.
- Few-Demo, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2020). Gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives on families: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82, 326–345.

- Few-Demo, A. L., Humble, A. M., Curran, M. A., & Lloyd, S. A. (2016). Queer theory, intersectionality, and LGBT-parent families: Transformative critical pedagogy in family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*, 74–94.
- Few-Demo, A. L., Lloyd, S. A., & Allen, K. R. (2014). It's all about power: Integrating feminist family studies and family communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 14*, 85–94.
- Freedman, E. B. (2002). *No turning back: The history of feminism and the future of women*. Ballantine.
- Gabb, J. (2018). Unsettling lesbian motherhood: Critical reflections over a generation (1990-2015). *Sexualities, 21*, 1002–1020.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2012). *Gay dads: Transitions to adoptive fatherhood*. New York University Press.
- Goldberg, A. E., Allen, K. R., Black, K., Frost, R., & Manley, M. (2018). “There is no perfect school...”: The complexity of school decision-making among lesbian and gay adoptive parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 80*, 684–703.
- Goldberg, A. E., Beemyn, G., & Smith, J. Z. (2018). What is needed, what is valued: Trans' students' perspectives on trans-inclusive policies and practices in higher education. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 29*, 27–67.
- Goldberg, A. E., Black, K., Manley, M., & Frost, R. (2017). “We told them that we are both really involved parents”: Sexual minority and heterosexual adoptive parents' engagement in school communities. *Gender & Education, 5*, 614–631.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Kvalanka, K. A. (2018). Navigating identity development and community belonging when “there are only two boxes to check”: An exploratory study of trans nonbinary college students. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 15*, 106–131.
- Goldberg, A. E., Kvalanka, K. A., & Dickey, L. (2018). Transgender graduate students' experiences in higher education: A mixed-methods exploratory study. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*, 38–51.
- Graham-Kevan, N., & Archer, J. (2008). Does controlling behavior predict physical aggression and violence to partners? *Journal of Family Violence, 23*, 539–548.
- Hamby, S. (2014). Intimate partner and sexual violence research: Scientific progress, scientific challenges, and gender. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 15*, 149–158.
- Hardesty, J. L., Crossman, K. A., Haselschwerdt, M. L., Raffaelli, M., Ogolsky, B. G., & Johnson, M. P. (2015). Toward a standard approach to operationalizing coercive control and classifying violence types. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 77*, 833–843.
- Haselschwerdt, M. L., Hlavaty, K., Carlson, C., Schneider, M., Maddox, L., & Skipper, M. (2019). Heterogeneity within domestic violence exposure: Young adults' retrospective experiences. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 34*, 1512–1538.
- Herd, G. H. (Ed.). (1996). *Third sex, third gender: Beyond sexual dimorphism in culture and history*. Zone Books.
- Hines, S. (2019). The feminist frontier: On trans and feminism. *Journal of Gender Studies, 28*, 145–157.
- Hooks, B. (2015). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hull, G. T., Bell Scott, P., & Smith, B. (Eds.). (1982). *But some of us are brave: All the women are white, all the blacks are men: Black women's studies*. Feminist Press.
- Hust, S. J., Rodgers, K. B., & Bayly, B. (2017). Scripting sexual consent: Internalized traditional sexual scripts and sexual consent expectancies among college students. *Family Relations, 66*, 197–210.
- Jaramillo-Sierra, A. L., Barberena-Arango, A., Suárez-Baracaldo, L. C., & González-Viveros, M. C. (2016, June). *Power and control in Colombian professionals explanations of intimate partner violence*. Paper presented at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships Annual Conference. Edinburgh.
- Jaramillo-Sierra, A. L., Kaestle, C. E., & Allen, K. R. (2016). Daughters' anger towards mothers and fathers in emerging adulthood. *Sex Roles, 75*, 28–42.
- Ji, Y., Wu, X., Sun, S., & He, G. (2017). Unequal care, unequal work: Toward a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in post-reform urban China. *Sex Roles, 77*, 765–778.



- Johnson, M. P. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violence resistance, and situational couple violence*. Northeastern University Press.
- Johnson, M. P. (2011). Gender and types of intimate partner violence: A response to an anti-feminist literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 16*, 289–296.
- Kaestle, C. E. (2016). Feminist perspectives advance four challenges to transform family studies. *Sex Roles, 75*, 71–77.
- Karaian, L. (2013). Pregnant men: Repronormativity, critical trans theory and the re(conceive)ing of sex and pregnancy in law. *Social & Legal Studies, 22*, 211–230.
- Karr, J. E. (2017). Where's my dad? A feminist approach to incentivized paternity leave. *Hastings Women's Law Journal, 28*, 225–263.
- Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). Why power matters: Creating a foundation of mutual support in couple relationships. *Family Process, 52*, 5–18.
- Komter, A. (1989). Hidden power in marriage. *Gender & Society, 3*, 187–216.
- Kuvalanka, K., Weiner, J., Munroe, C., Goldberg, A. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). Trans and gender-nonconforming children and their caregivers: Gender presentations, peer relations, and Well-being at baseline. *Journal of Family Psychology, 31*, 889–899.
- Lewis, E. A. (2015). On listening as an integral element of praxis in feminist and womynist research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 7*, 324–327.
- Lewis, R., & Marine, S. (2015). Weaving a tapestry, compassionately: Toward an understand of young women's feminisms. *Feminist Formations, 27*, 118–140.
- Lorber, J. (2012). *Gender inequality: Feminist theories and politics* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.
- Louie, K. (2002). *Theorising Chinese masculinity: Society and gender in China*. Cambridge University Press.
- Louie, K. (2014). Chinese masculinity studies in the twenty-first century: Westernizing, Easternizing and globalizing *wen* and *wu*. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies, 9*, 18–29.
- Magalhaes, S. I., & Cerqueira, C. (2015). Our place in history: Young feminists at the margins. *Feminism & Psychology, 25*, 39–44.
- Marinucci, M. (2016). *Feminism is queer: The intimate connection between queer and feminist theory* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs, 30*, 1771–1800.
- McNabb, C. (2018). *Nonbinary gender identities: History, culture, resources*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Moghadam, S., Knudson-Martin, C., & Mahoney, A. R. (2009). Gendered power in cultural contexts: Part III. Couple relationships in Iran. *Family Process, 48*, 41–54.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Moore, M. R. (2011). *Invisible families: Gay identities, relationships, and motherhood among Black women*. University of California Press.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). (1981). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. Persephone Press.
- Muruthi, B. J., Bermúdez, M., Bush, K. R., McCoy, M., & Stinson, M. A. (2016). Afro-Caribbean mothers in the U.S.: An exploratory study from a transnational feminist perspective. *Women & Therapy, 39*, 413–431.
- Nicolazzo, Z. (2016). 'It's a hard line to walk': Black non-binary trans\* collegians' perspectives on passing, realness, and trans\*-normativity. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*, 1173–1188.
- Ortner, S. B. (2014). Too soon for post-feminism: The ongoing life of patriarchy in neoliberal America. *History and Anthropology, 25*, 530–549.
- Osmond, M. W. (1987). Radical-critical theories. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 103–124). Plenum Press.

- Osmond, M. W., & Thorne, B. (1993). Feminist theories: The social construction of gender in families and society. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 591–623). Plenum.
- Oswald, R., Kuvallanka, K., Blume, L., & Berkowitz, D. (2009). Queering “the family”. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 43–55). Sage.
- Patil, V. (2013). From patriarchy to intersectionality: A transnational feminist assessment of how far we’ve really come. *Signs*, 38, 847–867.
- Pfeffer, C. A. (2017). *Queering families: The postmodern partnerships of cisgender women and transgender men*. Oxford University Press.
- Potter, E. C., & Potter, D. J. (2020). Methods, recruitment, and sampling in research with LGBTQ-parent families. In A. E. Goldberg & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *LGBTQ-parent families: Innovations in research and implications for practice* (2nd ed., pp. 507–533). Springer.
- Purcell, J. B., Oldham, C. R., Weiser, D. A., & Sharp, E. A. (2017). Lights, camera, activism: Using a film series to generate feminist dialogue about campus sexual violence. *Family Relations*, 66, 139–153.
- Quek, K. M., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2006). A push toward equality: Processes among dual-career newlywed couples in collectivist culture. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 56–69.
- Richardson, D., McLaughlin, J., & Casey, M. E. (2006). *Intersections between feminist and queer theory*. Palgrave.
- Riggs, D. W. (2013). Transgender men’s self-representations of bearing children posttransition. In F. J. Green & M. Friedman (Eds.), *Chasing rainbows: Exploring gender fluid parenting practices* (pp. 62–71). Demeter Press.
- Risman, B. J. (2018). *Where the millennials will take us: A new generation wrestles with the gender structure*. Oxford University Press.
- Rozee, P. D., & Koss, M. P. (2001). Rape: A century of resistance. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 295–311.
- Ryan, M. (2009). Beyond Thomas Beatie: Trans men and the new parenthood. In R. Epstein (Ed.), *Who’s your daddy? And other writings on queer parenting* (pp. 139–150). Sumach Press.
- Sharp, E. A., & DeCesaro, G. D. (2015). Modeling innovative methodological practices in a dance/family studies transdisciplinary project. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7, 367–380.
- Sharp, E. A., & Weaver, S. E. (2015). Feeling like feminist frauds: Theorizing feminist accountability in feminist family studies research in a neoliberal, postfeminist context. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7, 299–320.
- Sollie, D. L., & Leslie, L. A. (Eds.). (1994). *Gender, families, and close relationships: Feminist research journeys*. Sage.
- Sprague, J. (2016). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: Bridging differences* (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 845–871.
- Tichenor, V. (2005). Maintaining men’s dominance: Negotiating identity and power when she earns more. *Sex Roles*, 53, 191–205.
- Two Spirits. (2009). Retrieved from [http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits\\_map-html/](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/).
- van Eeden-Moorefield, B., & Benson, K. E. (2014). A conditional process model explaining partnered gay men’s perceived relationship stability. *Family Relations*, 63, 469–481.
- Walker, A. J. (1999). Gender and family relationships. In M. Sussman, S. K. Steinmetz, & G. W. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 439–474). Plenum.
- Walker, A. J. (2009). A feminist critique of family studies. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 18–27). Sage.
- Walker, A. J., & Thompson, L. (1984). Feminism and family studies. *Journal of Family Issues*, 5, 545–570.

Zhang, J., & Allen, K. R. (2018). Constructions of masculinity and the perception of interracial relationships among young male Chinese international students and scholars in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues, 40*, 340–362.

# Application: How a Gender-as-Relational Perspective Has Been Applied in Quantitative Studies of Emotion Work in Romantic Relationships



Amanda M. Pollitt and Melissa A. Curran

In this chapter, we focus on how a gender-as-relational perspective (Fox & Murry, 2000) has been applied in quantitative studies of romantic relationships. Though feminist researchers have discussed the increasing diversity of methods in feminist research (Rutherford, 2011), there are relatively fewer examples of quantitative studies that have explicitly used a gender-as-relational perspective (e.g., Curran et al., 2015; Umberson & Kroeger, 2016). First, we describe the gender-as-relational perspective as it relates to feminist theory and romantic relationships. Second, we describe emotion work as it operates in romantic relationships, how it differs between women and men, and why it is an appropriate construct to study from a gender-as-relational perspective. Third, we describe how dyadic data analysis, specifically actor-partner interdependence models (APIM; Kenny et al., 2016), can be used to study romantic relationship dynamics from a gender-as-relational perspective. Finally, we describe three studies that have applied a gender-as-relational perspective to examining emotion work in romantic relationships, noting their contributions to feminist theory.

---

A. M. Pollitt (✉)

Department of Health Sciences, College of Health and Human Services, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA

e-mail: [Amanda.Pollitt@nau.edu](mailto:Amanda.Pollitt@nau.edu)

M. A. Curran

Family Studies and Human Development, Norton School of Family & Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

## The Gender-as-Relational Perspective

The gender-as-relational perspective applies the tenets of feminist theory to understand how gender shapes power and relational dynamics (Ferree, 1990, 2010; Fox & Murry, 2000; Risman, 2004). Gender is central in society (i.e., a structure, an institution) and is embedded in all social processes in everyday life (Risman, 2004). A key way that gender is constructed is through societal and structural exaggeration of the differences between women and men (Ferree, 1990). On average, there are many more similarities than differences between women and men; however, social power is given to one gender over another in specific contexts when people relate to one another in ways that construct men as dominant and unemotional and women as submissive and nurturing (Ferree, 1990; Fox & Murry, 2000). Thus, feminist family scholars have moved family science toward considering families as places in which gender is salient and can deeply affect power inequalities between women and men (Ferree, 2010; Fox & Murry, 2000; also see Allen, Goldberg, & Jaramillo-Sierra, this volume). Moreover, recent theoretical advances in applying the gender-as-relational perspective to comparisons between different-sex and same-sex relationships (which consist of either two women or two men) have improved our understanding of how gender inequalities manifest in relationships (Umberson & Kroeger, 2016).

## What Is Emotion Work and Why Are We Focusing on It with a Gender-as-Relational Framework?

Emotion work was first introduced by Hochschild in 1979. Emotion work is a form of unpaid labor performed to provide emotional support and enhance significant others' emotional well-being (e.g., offers of encouragement, listening closely to a partner; Erickson, 2005) and is associated with better relationship quality and satisfaction in romantic relationships (Curran et al., 2015; Horne & Johnson, 2019). From a feminist perspective, emotion work falls under Komter's (1989) definition of power because the purpose of emotion work is to influence the emotions of another person. At the same time, emotion work is often gendered, similar to other forms of unpaid work such as household labor or childcare: Women are expected to perform more emotion work than men because women are often assumed to be more nurturing than men (Erickson, 2005; Pfeffer, 2010). Although emotion work has beneficial effects on relationship outcomes and may provide power to the emotion worker, it is still unpaid labor, and so it has the potential to reinforce inequalities between genders when women and men perform emotion work along gendered lines. Thus, the ways in which romantic partners engage in emotion work make it an ideal subject for applying a gender-as-relational perspective.

## **Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs)**

Feminists have extensively theorized romantic relationships as a site in which women and men negotiate gender (Erickson, 2005). Dyadic data analysis, in which researchers have data from both members of romantic couples, allows the examination of how women and men influence each other's outcomes and is an excellent way to study how gender operates in relationships (Kenny et al., 2016). In actor-partner interdependence models (APIMs), actor effects are characterized as how one's behavior impacts one's own outcomes, whereas partner effects are characterized as how one's partner's behaviors impact one's outcomes (Kenny et al., 2016). Researchers include both actor and partner variables (e.g., actor and partner effects of emotion work) as predictors of relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, health) while taking into account interdependence between partners. Women and men in different-sex dyads can be distinguished by gender; thus, researchers can examine the role of gender in how partners affect their own and their partner's outcomes. Next, we provide examples of quantitative studies that have applied a gender-as-relational perspective to studying emotion work in romantic couples using APIMs with dyadic data and their contributions to feminist theory.

### **Quantitative Studies on Emotion Work Using a Gender-as-Relational Perspective**

Curran, McDaniel, Pollitt, and Totenhagen (2015) examined how daily fluctuations in emotion work for both relational partners predicted individuals' relationship quality over 7 days of diary data collection (74 different-sex couples in dating, cohabiting, or married relationships, resulting in 758 person-days of data). The authors examined emotion work in two ways using APIMs: trait (individuals' average levels) and state (individuals' daily fluctuations). Three patterns emerged. First, emotion work predicted relationship quality in this diverse set of couples. Second, gender differences were minimal for what was called "fixed effects" (i.e., coefficients that are estimated to be constant across individuals): Across gender, trait and state emotion work predicted higher average scores on, and positive daily increases in, individuals' own positive relationship quality and lower average ambivalence. Third, gender differences were more robust for what was called "volatility" (i.e., daily fluctuation from individuals' average weekly means). For example, for partner effects, having a partner who reported higher average emotion work predicted lower volatility in love, satisfaction, and closeness for women versus greater volatility in love and commitment for men. From these latter findings, the authors suggested that men whose partners over-perform emotion work might feel that they are receiving more support than they want or need, possibly undermining their masculinity or making them feel like their partner has more power in the relationship. Not only do these results provide evidence of how relationship satisfaction can be enhanced

when both partners perform emotion work, they also show how the gendered ways in which women and men interact with one another can have nuanced impacts on their romantic relationships. Collectively, these findings illustrate the strength of using APIMs to answer layered research questions framed under the gender-as-relational perspective.

Researchers have also used APIMs in a gender-as-relational perspective to consider how other gendered feelings and behaviors interact with gender and emotion work to impact relationships. Horne and Johnson (2019) used two waves of data from a large sample (1932 couples) from the German Family Panel to examine how autonomy, or feelings of being in control, moderated the association between emotion work and relationship satisfaction. The authors found that emotion work, particularly emotion work performed by female partners, predicted both partners' relationship satisfaction 1 year later. Further, they found that male partners' emotion work was linked to female partners' heightened relationship satisfaction, but only when men also reported high levels of autonomy. Said another way, the female partners of more autonomous men who performed greater emotion work themselves reported higher relationship satisfaction. The authors suggest that more autonomous men may be less likely to give in to rigid masculinity norms that might discourage men's performance of emotion work and are perhaps more likely to resist judgment by others that their behaviors are not "manly." By including this moderator of autonomy, the authors contribute to feminist theory by showing that aspects of gendered behavior, in addition to gender itself, can help to further explain the emotion work-relationship satisfaction link.

Finally, from a gender-as-relational perspective, gender inequalities occur when women and men interact with one another in ways that follow socially prescribed gender norms. But what about same-sex relationships, in which both partners are the same gender? One might expect that partners in same-sex relationships interact with each other in similar ways with differential outcomes compared to different-sex couples. In a chapter on gender and health in marriage, Umberson and Kroeger (2016) used an extension of APIMs called the factorial method (for more details on this method, see West et al., 2008) to directly compare differences in the association between emotion work and physical health between same- and different-sex marriages (14 same-sex male couples, 11 same-sex female couples, and 11 different-sex couples) over 7 days of diary data (resulting in 480 person-days of data). The analyses consisted of actor gender, partner gender, and the interaction between actor and partner gender to examine gender differences as follows: (1) women compared to men, (2) people married to women compared to people married to men, and (3) same-sex marriages compared to different-sex marriages. They found that individuals (actors) in same-sex relationships reported better health when they reported greater emotion work; there was no association between actor emotion work and health for different-sex couples. Further, they found that men, regardless of their spouses' gender, and people married to men, regardless of their own gender, reported better health when their spouses reported greater emotion work. In comparison, health was worse among women and those married to women when their spouses reported greater emotion work. Umberson and Kroeger suggested that these

findings might be the result of women feeling more expected to provide emotion work, with detrimental costs to their health. By using the factorial method, relationship dynamics unfolded differently at the intersection between gender and sexual orientation (i.e., depending on one's own gender), the gender of one's spouse, and whether one was in a same- or different-sex marriage. From this study, the authors provide support for the gender-as-relational perspective and that "the way gender is enacted in relationships is contingent on whether men and women are involved with a man or a woman" (p. 211).

## Future Directions

We acknowledge how feminism broadly, and feminist family theory specifically, have moved beyond a gender-as-relational perspective toward intersectionality for understanding gender dynamics, which takes into account other social systems (see Allen et al., this volume; Few-Demo et al., 2016). Additional research is needed in the area of emotion work including work on transgender and nonbinary gender identities (e.g., Pfeffer, 2010), other sexual identities (e.g., bisexuals; Umberson et al., 2015), and research done outside of the United States. In doing so, intersectional, feminist scholars will gain additional knowledge in the understanding of relationship inequalities among marginalized groups in society.

## References

- Curran, M. A., McDaniel, B. T., Pollitt, A. M., & Totenhagen, C. J. (2015). Gender, emotion work, and relationship quality: A daily diary study. *Sex Roles, 73*, 157–173.
- Erickson, R. J. (2005). Why emotion work matters: Sex, gender, and the division of household labor. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 337–351.
- Ferree, M. M. (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 52*, 866–884.
- Ferree, M. M. (2010). Filling the glass: Gender perspectives on families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 72*, 420–439.
- Few-Demo, A., Humble, A., Curran, M. A., & Lloyd, S. (2016). Queer theory, intersectionality, and LGBT-parent families: Transformative critical pedagogy in family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*, 74–94.
- Fox, G. L., & Murry, V. M. (2000). Gender and families: Feminist perspectives and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 1160–1172.
- Hochschild, A. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology, 85*, 551–575.
- Horne, R. M., & Johnson, M. D. (2019). A labor or love? Emotion work in intimate relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36*, 1190–1209.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2016). *Dyadic data analysis*. Guilford.
- Komter, A. (1989). Hidden power in marriage. *Gender & Society, 3*, 187–216.
- Pfeffer, C. A. (2010). "Women's work?" women partners of transgender men doing housework and emotion work. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 165–183.



- Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender and Society, 18*, 429–450.
- Rutherford, A. (2011). From the ground up: Feminist approaches, methods, and critiques. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 35*, 175–179.
- Umberson, D., & Kroeger, R. A. (2016). Gender, marriage, and health for same-sex and different-sex couples: The future keeps arriving. In S. M. McHale, V. King, J. Van Hook, & A. Booth (Eds.), *Gender and couple relationships* (pp. 189–213). Springer International Publishing.
- Umberson, D., Thomeer, M. B., Kroeger, R. A., Lodge, A. C., & Xu, M. (2015). Challenges and opportunities for research on same-sex relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 77*, 96–111.
- West, T. V., Popp, D., & Kenny, D. A. (2008). A guide for the estimation of gender and sexual orientation effects in dyadic data: An actor-partner interdependence model approach. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*, 321–336.

# Critical Race Theory: Historical Roots, Contemporary Use, and its Contributions to Understanding Latinx Immigrant Families



San Juanita García, Ellen Reese, and Mary Romero

Gender and class dynamics have been normalized in the study of families for decades. However, the inclusion of race is much more recent in the field. Frequently, racial oppression or privilege appeared as discussions of class and dominated by various theories of assimilation. More recently, family studies scholars, like many of their colleagues in the social sciences, have embraced critical race theory (CRT), which provides an analytical framework toward understanding how the legacies of historical racism persist, despite policies and laws aimed at eradicating discrimination.

Although CRT focuses on all racial groups and is a framework for studying white supremacy and the reproduction of white privilege among whites (Burton et al., 2010), many scholars have focused on the experiences of African Americans (De Reus et al., 2005; Few, 2007). However, our analysis of empirical research and concrete applications of CRT focuses on Latinx immigrant families to demonstrate the framework's usefulness in explaining the experiences of immigrant families racialized in the migration process in the USA. We illustrate how CRT helps us understand how systemic racism shapes the lives of Latinx immigrant families and challenges the accepted assimilation model, which fails to acknowledge the USA as a racial state.

---

S. J. García (✉)

Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, College of Letters and Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

e-mail: [juanita\\_garcia@ucsb.edu](mailto:juanita_garcia@ucsb.edu)

E. Reese

Department of Sociology, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA

M. Romero

Department of School of Justice and Social Inquiry, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_29](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_29)

Beginning with the history of laws defining whiteness to the history of racially identifying persons eligible for citizenship and to the racialized legislation determining migrant and refugee status eligible for authorized entry into the USA, the fate of immigrant families cannot escape the significance of race. CRT generates insights into the historical, contemporary, and future manifestations of racism in all facets of society ranging from the macro to the micro levels and exposes the oppressive and enduring nature of white supremacy. Our history of nativism and xenophobia continually marks immigrant families as a threat to our economy, culture, and society. Every generation has experienced political attacks in the form of anti-immigrant legislation (i.e., Proposition 187, SB1070, English Only, Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996), vigilante (i.e., 1910–1920 lynching, Minutemen, 2019 El Paso Shooting) and state violence (i.e., Zoot Suit Riots, Operation Gatekeeper, War on Drugs), and the involuntary deportation and separation of families (i.e., Mexican repatriation, Operation Wetback, Trump zero tolerance policy). CRT is constructive in understanding the institutional racism in immigration policies that impact the livelihood of Latinx immigrant families. CRT's framework draws our attention to the events and institutions that are shaped by long-standing racist ideologies, which perpetuate and exacerbate historical practices of separating and excluding low-income families of color embedded in both immigration and welfare policies.

CRT is constructive in understanding the institutional racism in immigration policies that impact the livelihood of Latinx immigrant families. Reviewing research on Latinx immigrant families, this chapter illustrates the power and utility of CRT and its application to family science. These specific applications of CRT not only help readers understand the impact of systemic racism on families but provide the tools to challenge political attacks on Latinx immigrant families. This chapter aims to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological utility of CRT in family science. Lastly, we hope that our discussion stimulates more family scholarship from a CRT perspective, on both Latinx families and other marginalized families. Throughout this chapter, we argue that CRT provides useful methodological and analytical tools to identify systemic racism impacting Latinx immigrant families. Doing so highlights how Latinx families have been criminalized and pathologized historically and contemporaneously. This chapter first provides a brief description of CRT's origins, followed by a description of CRT's core assumptions and epistemological underpinnings. We then provide an overview of how research on families, especially Latinx families, have applied a CRT perspective. This chapter ends by pinpointing emerging research informed by CRT in family studies and suggesting fruitful topics for future research.

## **The Origins and Historical Development of CRT**

CRT emerged in the mid-1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell and critiques of critical legal studies (CLS). CLS challenged legal constructs by asserting that the so-called rational man was not neutral but rather based on the experiences and

knowledge of the privileged, whereby the status quo would remain. Furthermore, CLS scholars rejected the notion of the law being apolitical and uncovered the intellectual and ideological underpinnings maintaining an unjust social order. CRT emerged from the shortcomings of CLS especially its failure to recognize the “role of deep-seated racism in American life” (West, 1995, p. xi). CRT differs from traditional civil rights discourse and markedly distinguishes itself from CLS by rejecting “the prevailing orthodoxy that should be or could be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiii). CRT argues that equality rhetoric conceals the way that racism operates and ignores the institutionalization of racism in the law and its practices.

Along with CLS, feminist legal theory (also known as feminist jurisprudence) challenged the neutral position of the law and demonstrated the way that law historically subordinated women. In addition to disputing the existence of neutral blind practices in the liberal equity position, feminist jurisprudence ensures gender is included, acknowledges the law’s role in maintaining gender subordination, and highlights gender discrimination rather than sameness with men. Critical race feminists broaden feminist jurisprudence to include anti-essentialism, which embraces intersectionality rather than assuming a universal position for women and considers gender, race, sexual orientation, and class (Austin, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Roberts, 1995; Wing, 1997).

While both academic and social movements influenced the birth of CRT, its intellectual origin lies in the work of Derrick Bell (Crenshaw et al., 1995). According to Derrick Bell (1995), CRT “is a body of legal scholarship... a majority of whose members are both existentially people of color and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by the law. Those critical race theorists who are white are usually cognizant of and committed to the overthrow of their own racial privilege” (p. 898).

Today, CRT has found a home among many social scientists researching and teaching race across various disciplines (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014) including sociology (Aguirre Jr, 2000; Brown, 2003, 2008; García, 2017; Gómez, 2013, 2020; Moore, 2007; Romero, 2008a), psychology (Sue, 2010), philosophy (Curry, 2009; Jones, 2009), education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005), political science (Sampaio, 2015), and public health (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). While some scholars (e.g., Burton et al., 2010; De Reus, Few, & Blume, 2011; Few, 2007) have introduced CRT to family science, this chapter offers an updated review and application of CRT and Latinx immigrant families.

A major reason why CRT is not as developed in the field of family science is because most family science research has focused on understanding various and interconnected risks and protective factors that affect families, without understanding the origins of these risks and protective factors (Walsdorf et al., 2020). Other criticisms against using critical race feminism in family science studies relate to difficulties associated with operationalizing CRT and feminist concepts and because of the difficulties in predicting behavioral outcomes within family studies. However, adopting CRT and feminist theories provides an opportunity to address the origins, the root causes, and provides explanatory power that contextualizes individual behaviors that are the focus of traditional family theories (Few, 2007).

Important work by scholars of color engaging in family science have introduced CRT to family science by arguing that critical race feminist theories help researchers in framing and defining what and who constitutes a family (for excellent articles that integrate Black consciousness and critical race feminism, view Few, 2007; Few-Demo, 2014, and for excellent work that integrates Chicana feminist theories with CRT, view Delgado Bernal et al., 2019). Adopting CRT provides a way to center the voices and experiences of participants. It provides ways to empower and validate participants' lived experiences and their role in the research process and co-creation of knowledge (Delgado Bernal et al., 2019; Few, 2007).

Using the metaphor of a spider and web to illustrate the missing piece in family science theorizing and research, Walsdorf et al. (2020) ask: "who or what is the designer?" (p. 64). They argue white supremacy is the culprit and credit, acknowledge, and cite the work of critical race scholars, academics of color, and activists of color, because without this important work, "the White supremacy spider may never have been rendered visible to us" (p. 65). This chapter similarly argues that CRT is an avenue toward finding the spider for family science researchers and offers an updated review and application of CRT and Latinx immigrant families for family scholars.

## CRTs Core Assumptions and Major Tenets

Several tenets are at the core of CRT, and while some scholars emphasize some over others, the common thread that unifies them is the importance of bringing racism and white supremacy to the forefront of their analyses. Scholars guided by CRT tenets show how racism is central to the law and policies operative in the USA, and they unapologetically reject the assumption that racism can be eliminated by encouraging everyone to "just get along" (Crenshaw et al., 1995) or by using color-blind approaches (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). CRT acknowledges that racism defines the structure and the everyday experiences of people influencing their quality of life and life chances.

Therefore, the first major tenet of CRT is that racism is endemic, an ordinary aspect of society, and not an aberration (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Another tenet of CRT acknowledges what Derrick Bell conceptualized as interest convergence theory in which he argued that *Brown v. Board of Education* was passed primarily from the self-interest of whites rather than a desire to help Black people (Bell, 1980). Interest convergence highlights how racial equity is entertained and implemented into policy when it corresponds with the best interests of whites. When these interests converge, whites assure they reap more benefits from these policies than people of color. CRT scholars acknowledge that we live in a racially ordered society based on white supremacy. Consequently, institutional policies represent the interests of the privileged rather than people of color.

Another CRT tenet is that race and racial categories are not biological or genetic but are social and historical constructions. This tenet is evident in the ways in which

racism are categorized and society invents, manipulates, or retires these categories when convenient. Racism is further complicated under the guise of colorblind ideologies promoting objectivity and meritocracy, which serve to camouflage the self-interest, power, and privilege of whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Another development by CRT scholars is that of differential racialization and its consequences. This tenet speaks to the ways in which dominant society racializes people of color differently across time and acknowledges intersectionality or the ways in which social categories and identities are interconnected and mutually reinforce components that are continuously shaped within an oppressive system (Crenshaw, 1989).

Another CRT tenet highlights the unique and important voices from people of color. Thus, experiential knowledge and the wisdom that people of color bring from their very existence is empirically appropriate and methodologically required. This tenet highlights the importance of narratives, storytelling, and counter-narratives as necessary to capture the lived experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT highlights social justice as an essential and necessary outcome. To engage in social justice work, researchers “look to the bottom” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 62) to capture the unique perspective people of color have on race and racism, which is acquired from their historical and contemporary marginalized positions; and therefore, their everyday experiences explain the meaning and consequences of racial subordination.

Finally, CRT acknowledges that people of color bring experiential knowledge or “stories from within” (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014, p. 161) about racial subordination crucial to analyzing and understanding racism, reject colorblindness, and share a commitment to social justice and social change. Overall, these are the guiding tenets for a CRT framework and shape the research questions, design, methods, analysis, and findings. These tenets illustrate how CRT includes a perspective on structural racism that provides an important framework to identify and address family inequities, including legal restrictions for marriage, family reunification, and social benefits, and economic constraints surrounding housing, education, and access to medical care.

## **CRT Epistemological Underpinnings and Methods: Implications for Research on Latinx Families**

Carbado and Roithmayr (2014) argued that “[a] crucial starting point of CRT” is “the idea that knowledge production is contingent on the combined effects of the research, the social and political context in which she is situated, and the inquiries and frameworks she employs” (p. 159). Epistemologically, CRT scholars challenge notions of objectivity in social science by acknowledging positionalities in shaping the research, from the conceptualization stages, data collection, and analysis to the dissemination of findings. This process includes recognizing the political implications of the research findings and assumptions.

A few CRT scholars have advocated unifying social science and CRT (Barnes, 2016). Some of these scholars argue for engaging CRT as a theoretical framework with methodological contributions of social science research, culminating into what is now known as empirical methods and critical race theory (e-CRT). In this section, we highlight the way Latinx families have been portrayed historically to demonstrate the liberating and empowering tools that CRT brings forth in understanding families of color.

Historically, families of color have been depicted in negative and pejorative ways (Few, 2007; Staples & Mirandé, 1980), and their “differences” have been framed as sources of social issues, such as poverty, domestic violence, and juvenile delinquency. These approaches assured Latinx families were viewed from deficit perspectives finding them to be dysfunctional, deviant, and sick (Hernandez, 1970; Montiel, 1970; Peñalosa, 1978). In one of the first critiques of research on Latinx families, Montiel (1970) found that previous research negatively portrayed Chicanx families as “inherently incapable of defining normal behavior and thus automatically labels all Mexican and Mexican American people as sick – only in degree of sickness do they vary” (p. 62). These racist portrayals that dominated the research on Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans motivated researchers, many of which were young newly emerging Puerto Rican and Chicanx scholars, to conduct research on Latinx families. Their research flipped the script, shifting the narrative by portraying Latinx families sympathetically and depicting them as warm, nurturing, and supportive. Yet, these positive views overly compensated and presented romanticized images of the Latinx family (Mirandé, 1977). Moreover, both types of studies primarily used cultural deterministic models to explain family practices and relationships whereby cultural norms are viewed as the culprit to social problems rather than the underlying conditions and social structures, such as economic or political structures, imposed on Latinx families (Romero, 2008a).

CRT scholars in family studies changed the conversation and narrative of these two opposing views of Latinx and Chicanx families by moving away from a cultural deterministic model and examining the nuances of systemic racism and its consequences (Briggs, 2002; Hanna, 2016; Paredes Scribner & Fernandez, 2017; Roxas & Gabriel, 2017; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Instead of designating race, ethnicity, or racial identity as an independent variable in which Latinx are the cause of their problems, the surrounding structural conditions are analyzed. Rather than accepting traditional classifications and categories, CRT researchers interrogate concepts to examine the ideology of white supremacy and political projects maintaining the racial status quo. This was most blatant in the Americanization programs aimed at Mexican Americans (Romero, 2002) and Puerto Ricans, which legitimated cultural racism and distorted indigenous culture (Rodríguez Dominguez, 2005) and continues today in anti-immigrant rhetoric used to deny social services, such as Proposition 187, refusing to provide aide after Hurricane Maria or excluding undocumented immigrants from pandemic-related resources.

While social scientists using CRT have used a wide range of methods, including interviews, *testimonios*, and content analysis, they are consistent in treating race as a social construct, acknowledging their positionality in the research process, and

explicitly using race-conscious methodology that incorporates an intersectional analysis. To date, the most comprehensive discussion of critical race methods, in the social sciences is presented in Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2008) groundbreaking edited book titled, *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology*, which exposes white supremacy in research on race and challenges the methods that social scientists use to examine race, racial stratification, and racism. They share their personal stories to elucidate the concepts of "white logic" and "white methods." "White logic" refers to the "foundation and techniques used in analyzing empirical reality" and the reasoning used by researchers in understanding society (p. 17). White logic consists of the explanations we learn, teach, and use to explain the decisions and research processes we make and claim to be purely objective. Indeed, "white logic" claims that race has nothing to do with the decisions we make as researchers in conceptualizing, designing, conducting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing up our results. "White methods" are the "tools used to manufacture empirical data and analysis to support the racial stratification of society" (p. 18). These methods are viewed again as purely scientific without race affecting any portion of the techniques we adopt.

Most top journals in sociology routinely publish articles by authors who identify the "effect of race," which is suggestive of causality, but as Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) point out, this is highly indicative of the limitations that researchers create in understanding racial dynamics. Therefore, it is imperative that we think through the implications of our research at all stages of the research process. In his reflective statement, Zuberi (2008) writes that: "As a variable, race is not consistently defined as a variable across time and space, and thus comparing race over time is in reality a comparison of the changing social meaning of race" (p. 6). Most studies focus on the "race effect" and argue that a person's race causes disadvantage and discrimination. However, the onus should be placed on the way that society responds to an individual's racial identification (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008.) To avoid these pitfalls and to advance our understanding of race and racism, we must understand and identify "white logic, white methods."

Unlike CRT's beginnings in the law, social scientists are less likely to base their research questions about racial inequality in the legal system, but rather other social institutions. For instance, CRT research in education investigates how systemic racism is reproduced in the curriculum, school culture, and knowledge production (e.g., Chapman, 2013; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). In mental health, researchers might explore how racism shapes stress and mental health (e.g., Brown, 2003, 2008). Like CRT legal scholars, many social scientists are critical of disciplines' research on race and recognize that the "social sciences have actively aided in the development of racial stratification as a scientifically legitimate and socially acceptable concept" (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p.16).

The importance of experiential knowledge in CRT requires data collected on life experiences, which include such methods as narrative inquiry, family histories, storytelling, *cuENTOS*, *testimonios*, biographies, scenarios, and parables. Frustrations have also been expressed by CRT scholars using traditional qualitative methods. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that these methodologies, while focused on



analyzing processes and highlighting the lived experiences of participants, continue to perpetuate deficit perspectives of people of color. In doing so, they argue that such methodologies are not critically sensitive to the importance of framing participants' lived experiences within a broader sociopolitical frame. These frustrations have prompted CRT scholars to develop a critical race methodology (Malagon et al., 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby and colleagues (2019) edited a book titled: *Understanding Critical Race Methods and Methodologies: Lessons from the Field*, whereby they provide an excellent review of various research methods currently being implemented by CRT scholars which focus on the “how” of CRT in the field of education.

In efforts toward developing a critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), one approach is known as critical race-grounded methodology, drawing from multiple disciplines to challenge white supremacy to understand the experiences, conditions, and outcomes of people of color (Malagon et al., 2009). A critical race-grounded methodology “allows CRT scholars to move toward a form of data collection and analysis that builds from the knowledge of Communities of Color to reveal the ways race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression interact to mediate the experiences and realities of those affected by such oppression” (Malagon et al., 2009, p. 264).

An increasing number of social scientists are recognizing their discipline's origin stories are closely tied to European colonization (e.g., see Go, 2016). As Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) acknowledge, the social sciences emerged simultaneously with white supremacy, which rationalized African enslavement and colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The subjects of subordination became the objects of study as the social sciences produced knowledge to justify racial systems of domination. Slave narratives were a crucial source of knowledge from within and from below. The oral tradition to pass on knowledge is evident in Black storytelling (Bell, 1987, 1992) Mexican Americans' *corridos* (Delgado, 1989, 1995), Native American creation stories (Deloria Jr, 1969), and Asian American *pingshu* storytelling (Hong Kingston, 1976). Early scholars of color knew the importance of these accounts in understanding racial subordination and resistance. For many, CRT is a continuation of this scholarly tradition (Zuberi, 2011).

Counter-stories have been used by many CRT scholars to counter majoritarian stories or narratives supporting the dominant representations of racial groups and racial inequality generated from racial privilege and viewed as “natural” (e.g., see Aguirre Jr, 2000; Fuentes, 2013; Osorio, 2018). Counter-storytelling, defined as both a method of telling a story of experiences that have not been told such as those from people on the margins of society and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power (Aguirre Jr, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), is yet another approach toward developing a critical race methodology. Romero (2011) uses the counter-story of the Mexican maid's daughter to debunk the myths of the American dream, particularly equality, opportunity, and social mobility through meritocracy. Juxtaposing her experiences living in a gated community with her mother's white middle-class employers in Los Angeles with her immigrant relatives in Pico Union,

she experiences the ways white privilege protects the children of the employers from facing the same consequences for similar actions.

Recognizing that stories and counter-stories are expressed through pictures as well as words, a number of CRT scholars have begun to go beyond the use of oral research methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Combining photovoice methods and CRT perspectives, family scholars invite research participants to take and share photographs and videos, to identify important aspects of their family lives and histories. Researchers can use participants' photographs or films in various ways; they can analyze their contents as valuable archival records of the past, use the images to better engage with research participants during oral interviews and prompt storytelling, or use them to better document and understand participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Rocha et al., 2016).

More family scholars using a critical lens to study families of color are advocating for the adoption of CRT principles in their research designs and interpretation of findings. In the next section, we highlight the contributions that CRT makes to the social sciences broadly and to the study of families and family policies in particular. To help us to unmask the racist nature of anti-immigrant policies and attacks on Latinx immigrant families and put these urgent events into historical perspective, we also make an extended application of CRT to the conjoined history of USA immigration and welfare policies.

## **CRT and its Contributions to the Study of Families**

Burton and colleagues (2010) found that CRT was especially useful in understanding how institutionalized and systemic patterns of racial dominance, dominant racial ideologies, and stereotypes shape family life, socioeconomic inequalities, interpersonal interactions within families, and the socialization of children. Focusing on the three most commonly studied topics: socioeconomic inequality and mobility, the relationships and interactions among interracial couples, and racial socialization of children, the authors deduced that most of the decade's research on families of color only incorporated some elements of CRT. Similarly, in their review of family studies, De Reus, Few, and Blume (2011) found that explicit reference to CRT was relatively rare. They concluded that both CRT and multicultural feminist theory provide useful insights and called for family scholars to make greater use of these theoretical perspectives.

### ***Critical Race Feminist Scholarship on Families***

Family scholarship that is informed by CRT often builds upon key concepts and ideas from germinal texts written by radical feminists of color. These scholars drew attention to the ways that race, immigration, class, gender, and/or sexuality

interacted and shaped family life among people of color and challenged dominant, negative stereotypes of families of color (e.g., see Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Baca Zinn, 1975; Collins, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Smith, 1983). For example, Few (2007) provided a review of how family researchers used Black feminist theory or a critical race feminist approach to examine the lives of Black women and their families and argued for an integration of Black consciousness and critical race feminist perspectives in family studies. Likewise, scholarship focusing on Latinx families builds upon that foundational scholarship by radical women of color, as well as research by feminist and other Chicanx scholars. This scholarship challenged white scholars' negative and essentialist views that portrayed Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant families as homogenous, pathological, uniformly sexist, marked by deficits, and that failed to adequately address the rich diversity and variation in gender roles found among Latinx families (e.g., see Baca Zinn, 1980; Mirandé, 1977; Segura, 1988, 1989; Williams, 1990; Ybarra, 1982; Zavella, 1987). Even contemporary empirical scholarship on Mexican and Mexican immigrant families continues to problematize racist stereotypes and "home-host" dichotomies that portray Mexican families as less egalitarian than white families in the USA and falsely attribute gender egalitarianism among Mexican Americans to cultural assimilation (Barajas & Ramirez, 2007).

Family scholars that use a critical race feminist perspective provide a nuanced understanding of the types of racist stereotypes and ideologies that racial and ethnic minorities face. For example, Romero (2008b, 2011) shows how anti-immigrant discourses attack Mexican immigrant mothers and their children. Highlighting the Mothers Against Illegal Aliens (MAIA) group composed of US-born mothers, Romero identified how they construct undocumented Mexican immigrant mothers as unfit and undeserving. Romero (2011) demonstrated the underlying and coded messages that groups like MAIA make guising themselves as "pro-family" yet displaying anti-immigrant rhetoric.

### ***CRT and Counter-Narratives about Families of Color***

Scholars using CRT approaches carefully document the ways that racial and ethnic minorities develop counter-narratives about their families to challenge racist discourses and policies. For example, Osorio (2018) combined insights from CRT and LatCrit by analyzing "border stories" from her second-grade Spanish bilingual students, all native Spanish speakers, and told during discussions of children's literature. By "border stories," Osorio referred to accounts of families' experiences with immigration including their feelings about anti-immigrant discourse. Consistent with the tenets of CRT, Osorio found that the stories told by the racially oppressed about their lived experiences – in this case, Latinx children of undocumented immigrants – offered important insights and critiques regarding the everyday impacts and significance of racist policies and discourses. These Latinx children drew attention to, and criticized, the ways that racism shaped the implementation of US

immigration policies, such that immigration officials and police targeted Latinx and Mexican Americans, and how such racist practices led to persistent fears about the potential deportation of their family members. While the children sometimes reproduced racist stereotypes of Latinx immigrants, they more often challenged the dominant, racialized narratives in mainstream media and popular culture that demonize Latinx immigrants and portray all Latinx people as “illegal” immigrants and dangerous criminals. Consistent with the notion that CRT-informed studies should contribute to social justice and the empowerment of people of color, Osorio uses her findings to demonstrate how educators’ use of multicultural literature in classrooms and practical application of CRT can encourage students of color to discuss, learn from, and value their lived experiences, as well as to think critically about racism and anti-immigrant discourses.

### ***CRT and Family Policies: US Immigration and Welfare Policy History***

CRT and critical race feminist theory are also very useful for understanding how the development and impacts of social policies and laws affecting families is shaped by, and reinforces, white supremacy in interaction with other social inequalities. For example, these theories draw attention to how political and economic elites use racist rhetoric, often combined with gendered, nativist, and classist ideologies and stereotypes, to justify restrictive welfare and immigration policies that benefit agricultural growers and other businesses by maintaining an ample supply of cheap labor. Moreover, poor people of color, Latinx and Black mothers, and immigrants of color are scapegoated and blamed for broader economic and fiscal problems. Economic and political elites are able to reinforce hierarchies based on class, race, gender, and immigration status and effectively draw public attention away from, and to feign ignorance about, the structural causes of poverty and inequality (García, 2017; Limbert & Bullock, 2005; Monnat & Bunyon, 2008; Reese, 2005; Romero, 2008a, 2008b).

To illustrate how CRT can be applied in family policy analysis, let us consider government-funded repatriation programs during the Great Depression and how they were racially targeted. Through these programs, federal agents and local welfare agencies forced or cajoled hundreds of thousands of low-income Mexican immigrants, including women and children, and even those who were legal residents and US citizens to leave the country. Consistent with CRT, welfare officials justified these practices by promoting racist stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans; they exaggerated their reliance on welfare and claimed that repatriation would save hundreds of thousands of taxpayers’ dollars, drawing attention away from systemic causes of the economic crisis and keeping Mexican immigrants desperate for work (Balderrama & Rodriquez, 2006; Reese, 2005).

Sixty years later, after people of color had finally gained greater access to welfare, politicians and other groups similarly used racist stereotypes of Black and Latinx welfare mothers and Latinx and Asian immigrants to justify the passage of highly restrictive welfare policies. Through the 1996 federal welfare reform act, Congress expanded workfare programs and greatly restricted low-income families' access to welfare, including barring most legal immigrants from using federal public assistance during their first 5 years in the country. Shortly afterward, Congress passed the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which strengthened enforcement of the US border, expanded the crimes for which immigrants could be deported, and further restricted legal immigration into the USA. Implementation of these twin policies led to a sharp decline in welfare use among immigrants and US-born children in mixed-status immigrant families, most of whom were Latinx (Reese, 2005). Likewise, scholars have used CRT to explain how racialized nativism has shaped the implementation of immigration policies, so that Mexican immigrant families have been disproportionately targeted for deportations (García, 2017; Romero, 2006, 2008a).

This history has set the stage for the mass deportation regime, which has been exacerbated under Trump's administration and increased the separations of immigrant families. Trump has justified mass deportations of immigrants through racist stereotypes that depict undocumented immigrants, especially Latinxs, as criminals, draining taxpayers' money through overreliance on welfare, and as unfit parents. The Trump administration also has expanded the "public charge" provisions of immigration policy that could be used to deny green cards, temporary visas, and legal permanent residency and sometimes even to immigrants on the grounds that they are likely to become primarily dependent on government benefits for their livelihood. To determine if an immigrant is likely to become a "public charge," the policy considers an expanded list of criteria, including immigrants' household income, English language proficiency, and their current or prior use of additional types of public benefits beyond cash assistance and long-term care, including public health benefits, food stamps, and public housing assistance (National Immigrant Law Center, 2018). After "public charge" rhetoric, immigrants' use of public assistance programs sharply declined (Blitzer, 2018). As in the past, such anti-immigrant policies, and the racist rhetoric justifying them, discourage political participation among immigrants of color, reinforce hierarchies of citizenship, and help to maintain an ample supply of low-wage immigrant labor. The application of CRT theory highlights how this targeted rhetoric serves as a diversion, detracting attention away from the structural causes of poverty – such as rising economic inequality, the lack of good-paying jobs, skyrocketing living costs, the lack of employer-provided benefits, and systemic racism and sexism (García et al., 2021; Limbert & Bullock, 2005; Reese, 2005).

## **CRT Moving Forward: Future Directions of CRT and its Contributions to Latinx Families**

Over the last four decades, family reunification has been under attack by conservative politicians, and consequently, immigrant enforcement has increasingly focused on Latina immigrant mothers and their children (Romero, 2008b). Likewise, efforts to restrict Latinx immigrants' access to public services continue into the present moment as seen through the cruel separation of parents from their children at the border to proposed changes in redefining the legal term of "public charge." CRT is crucial in analyzing zero tolerance immigration policies and their impacts on the immigrant families targeted by them, particularly immigrants of color and Latinxs. Drawing insights from CRT, such policies and the rhetoric justifying the separation of immigrant families in the name of "child welfare" appeals to, and perpetuates, racist stereotypes of Latinxs. Applying CRT to this traumatic reality unmask the racist framing and structure of zero tolerance immigration policies that serve both material and psychological purposes and are currently used to justify human rights abuses and the separation of families of color.

Future growth of CRT and LatCrit perspectives on Latinx families is likely to come from research on the traumas associated with actual and potential deportations, especially as they relate to family separations, and how living under a "deportation threat" impacts family life (García, 2018). It is also likely to come from those unmasking and challenging the racist framing of anti-immigration policies that are used to justify human rights abuses and the separation of families. Using a CRT perspective, scholars have also begun to explore how a racialized anti-immigrant climate shapes the everyday lives and dynamics of Latinx families, including mixed-status families (e.g., see Balderas et al., 2016; Osorio, 2018; Romero, 2008b; Schueths & Lawston, 2015), an area of research that is likely to grow given the political fight to save DACA and current demographic trends.

We recognize that most of the literature cited in this chapter, which adopts a CRT approach in understanding Latinx families, overly emphasizes the lives of Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families. We acknowledge that the Mexican American experience is not emblematic of the Latinx experience as a whole, and while there are excellent studies on Central American families (see Abrego, 2014; Menjívar, 2011), there are not enough studies that adopt CRT approaches on understanding Latinx families. We greatly hope that family scholars, whether focusing on Latinxs, immigrants, or on other families of color, continue to further build CRT, bearing in mind that "CRT not only contributes a critical lens to scholarship and research, but an activist paradigm that pushes for social change through legal and social reforms" (Romero & Chin, 2017, p. 36).

Lastly, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) rightly identified practical strengths of CRT because it not only helps expose racism and racist injuries, but CRT provides a space for victims of racism to unite. Indeed, CRT provides a space for people of color and marginalized communities to come together to listen to how arguments against them are created and framed and to learn how to create counter-narratives to

defend themselves. CRT urges researchers to conduct and publish findings about the injurious effects of racism, so that white supremacy can be exposed, while also providing a space for marginalized families to share their stories and connect with others in similar situations, in order to develop strategies to combat white supremacy.

## References

- Abrego, L. J. (2014). *Sacrificing families: Navigating laws, labor, and love across borders*. Stanford University Press.
- Aguirre, A., Jr. (2000). Academic storytelling: A critical race theory story of affirmative action. *Sociological Perspectives*, 43(2), 319–339.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. (Ed.). (1990). *Making face, making soul/hacienda caras: Creative and critical perspectives by feminists of color*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Austin, R. (1995). Sapphire bound! In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 426–437). The New Press.
- Baca Zinn, M. (1975). Political familism: Toward sex role equality in Chicano families. *Aztlan*, 6, 13–25.
- Baca Zinn, M. (1980). Employment and education of Mexican American women: The interplay of modernity and ethnicity in eight families. *Harvard Educational Review*, 50(1), 47–62.
- Balderas, C. N., Delgado-Romero, E. A., & Singh, A. A. (2016). Sin papeles: Latino parent–child conversations about undocumented legal status. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology*, 4(3), 158.
- Balderrama, F., & Rodriguez, R. (2006). *Decade of betrayal: Mexican repatriation in the 1930s*. University of New Mexico Press.
- Barajas, M., & Ramirez, E. (2007). Beyond home–host dichotomies: A comparative examination of gender relations in a transnational community. *Sociological Perspectives*, 50(3), 367–392.
- Barnes, M. L. (2016). Empirical methods and critical race theory: A discourse on possibilities for a hybrid methodology. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 3, 443–476.
- Bell, D. (1980). Brown v. board of education and the interest convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93, 518–533.
- Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial reform*. Basic Books.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well*. Basic Books.
- Bell, D. (1995). Who's afraid of critical race theory. *University of Illinois Law Review*, 4, 893–910.
- Blitzer, J. (2018). Trump's public-charge rule is a one-two punch against immigrants and public assistance. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/trumps-public-charge-rule-is-a-one-two-punch-against-immigrants-and-public-assistance>.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Briggs, L. (2002). La Vida, Moynihan, and other libels: Migration, social science, and the making of the Puerto Rican welfare queen. *Centro Journal*, 14(1), 75–101.
- Brown, T. N. (2003). Critical race theory speaks to the sociology of mental health: Mental health problems produced by racial stratification. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 44(3), 292–301.
- Brown, T. N. (2008). Race, racism, and mental health: Elaboration of critical race theory's contribution to the sociology of mental health. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 11(1), 53–62.
- Burton, L., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., & Hordge Freeman, E. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade's research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 440–459.
- Carbado, D. W., & Roithmayr, D. (2014). Critical race theory meets social science. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 10, 149–167.

- Chapman, T. K. (2013). Origins of and connections to social justice in critical race theory in education. In *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 121–132).
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1995). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 357–383). The New Press.
- Curry, T. J. (2009). Will the real CRT please stand up—the dangers of philosophical contributions to CRT. *Criticism*, 2, 1.
- De Reus, L. A., Few, A. L., & Blume, L. B. (2005). *Multicultural and critical race feminisms: Theorizing families in the third wave, Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 447–468).
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Chapman, T. K., & Schutz, P. A. (2019). *Understanding critical race research methods and methodologies: Lessons from the field*. Routledge.
- Delgado Bernal, D., Pérez Huber, L., & Malagón, M. C. (2019). Bridging theories to name and claim a critical race feminista methodology. In J. T. DeCuir-Gunby, T. K. Chapman, & P. A. Schutz (Eds.), *Understanding critical race research methods and methodologies: Lessons from the field* (pp. 109–121). Routledge.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8), 2411–2441.
- Delgado, R. (1995). *The Rodrigo chronicles: Conversations about race in America*. New York University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Deloria, V., Jr. (1969). Indian humor. *Custer died for your sins: An Indian manifesto*, 146, 67.
- Few, A. L. (2007). Integrating black consciousness and critical race feminism into family studies research. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(4), 452–473.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(2), 169–183.
- Ford, C. L., & Airhihenbuwa, C. O. (2010). Critical race theory, race equity, and public health: Toward antiracism praxis. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(S1), S30–S35.
- Fuentes, E. (2013). Political mothering: Latina and African American mothers in the struggle for educational justice. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 44(3), 304–319.
- García, S. J. (2017). Bridging critical race theory and migration: Moving beyond assimilation theories. *Sociology Compass*, 11(6), 1–10.
- García, S. J. (2018). Anticipatory stressors confronted by undocumented Mexican immigrant women. *Race and Social Problems*, 10(3), 221–234.
- García, S. J., Trummel, T., Cornejo, M., Maldonado, K., Ojeda, A., Flores, H., & Link, B. G. (2021). Immigrant health inequities: Exposing diversions and white supremacy. *Social Sciences*, 10(9), 341.
- Go, J. (2016). *Postcolonial thought and social theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Gómez, L. E. (2013). Introduction: Taking the social construction of race seriously in health disparities research. In *Mapping ‘race’: Critical approaches to health disparities research* (pp. 1–22). Rutgers University Press.
- Gómez, L. E. (2020). *Inventing Latinos: A new story of American racism*. The New Press.
- Hanna, A. V. (2016). *Moving from the shadows – Shedding light on mixed-citizenship status Latino families and emotional Well-being: A mixed methods study*. PhD. Dissertation, School of Social Work, University of Denver.



- Hernandez, D. (1970). *Mexican American challenge to a sacred cow*. University of California, Los Angeles, Mexican Cultural Center.
- Hong Kingston, M. (1976). *The woman warrior*. Alfred Knopf.
- Jones, R. A. (2009). Philosophical methodologies of critical race theory. *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Perspectives*, 1, 17–39.
- Limbert, W. M., & Bullock, H. E. (2005). 'Playing the fool': US welfare policy from a critical race perspective. *Feminism & Psychology*, 15(3), 253–274.
- Malagon, M. C., Huber, L. P., & Velez, V. N. (2009). Our experiences, our methods: Using grounded theory to inform a critical race theory methodology. *Seattle Journal Social Justice*, 8, 253–272.
- Matsuda, M. (1995). Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 63–79). The New Press.
- Menjívar, C. (2011). *Enduring violence: Ladina women's lives in Guatemala*. Univ of California Press.
- Mirandé, A. (1977). The Chicano family: A reanalysis of conflicting views. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 39, 747–756.
- Monnat, S. M., & Bunyon, L. A. (2008). Capitalism and welfare reform: Who really benefits from welfare-to-work policies. *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(1/2), 115–133.
- Montiel, M. (1970). The social science myth of the Mexican American family. *El Grito*, 3(4), 56–63.
- Moore, W. L. (2007). *Reproducing racism: White space, elite law schools, and racial inequality*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). (1983). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (2nd ed.). Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.
- National Immigration Law Center. (2018). *The trump Administration's 'public charge' attack on immigrant families*. National Immigration Law Center. Retrieved from <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Public-Charge-Fact-Sheet-2018.pdf>
- Osorio, S. L. (2018). Border stories: Using critical race and Latino critical theories to understand the experiences of Latino/a children. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 21(1), 92–104.
- Paredes Scribner, S. M., & Fernandez, E. (2017). Organizational politics of parental engagement: The intersections of school reform, anti-immigration, and Latinx parent organizing. *Educational Policy*, 31(6), 895–920.
- Parker, L., & Villalpando, O. (2007). A race(cialized) perspective on education leadership: Critical race theory in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(5), 519–524.
- Peñalosa, F. (1978). Mexican family roles. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 30, 686–689.
- Reese, E. (2005). *Backlash against welfare mothers: Past and present*. University of California Press.
- Roberts, D. E. (1995). Punishing drug addicts who have babies: Women of color, equality, and the right to privacy. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 384–426). The New Press.
- Rocha, J., Alonso, L., Lopez Mares-Tamayo, M. J., & Reyes McGovern, E. (2016). Beyond theoretical sensitivity: The benefits of cultural intuition within qualitative research and Freirean generative themes: Four unique perspectives. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(4), 744–464.
- Rodríguez Dominguez, V. M. (2005). The racialization of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans: 1890s-1930s. *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, 17(1), 71–105.
- Romero, M. (2002). [1992]. *Maid in the U.S.A. tenth anniversary edition*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Romero, M. (2006). Racial profiling and immigration law enforcement: Rounding up of usual suspects in the Latino community. *Critical Sociology*, 32(2-3), 47–73.
- Romero, M. (2008a). Crossing the immigration and race border: A critical race theory approach to immigration studies. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 11(1), 23–37.
- Romero, M. (2008b). The inclusion of citizenship status in intersectionality: What immigration raids tell us about mixed-status families, the state, and assimilation. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 34(2), 131–152.

- Romero, M. (2011). *The maid's daughter, living inside and outside the American dream*. New York University Press.
- Romero, M., & Chin, J. (2017). Critical race theory. In K. O. Korgen (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of sociology* (pp. 30–38). Cambridge University Press.
- Roxas, K., & Gabriel, L. M. (2017). Que luchen por sus intereses (to fight for your interests): Unearthing critical counter-narratives of Spanish-Speaking immigrant parents. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 16*(3), 243–362.
- Sampaio, A. (2015). *Terrorizing Latina/o immigrants: Race, gender, and immigration politics in the age of security*. Temple University Press.
- Schueths, A., & Lawston, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Living together, living apart: Mixed status families and US immigration policy*. University of Washington Press.
- Segura, D. A. (1988). Familism and employment among Chicanas and Mexican immigrant women. In M. B. Melville (Ed.), *Mexicanas at work in the United States, Mexican American studies monograph no. 5* (pp. 24–32). University of Houston.
- Segura, D. A. (1989). The interplay of familism and patriarchy on the employment of Chicana and Mexican immigrant women. In *Renato Rosaldo lecture series monograph no. 5* (pp. 35–53). University of Arizona.
- Smith, B. (1983). *Home girls: A black feminist anthology*. Women of Color Press, Inc..
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 23–44.
- Staples, R., & Mirandé, A. (1980). Racial and cultural variations among American families: A decennial review of the literature on minority families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42*(4), 887–903.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & sons.
- Villenas, S., & Deyhle, D. (1999). Critical race theory and ethnographies challenging the stereotypes: Latino families, schooling, resilience and resistance. *Curriculum Inquiry, 29*(4), 413–445.
- Walsdorf, A. A., Jordan, L. S., McGeorge, C. R., & Caughy, M. O. (2020). White supremacy and the web of family science: Implications of the missing spider. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 12*(1), 64–79.
- West, C. (1995). Foreword. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. xi–xii). New Press.
- Williams, N. (1990). *The Mexican American family: Tradition and change*. Altamira Press.
- Wing, A. K. (1997). *Critical race feminism: A reader*. New York University Press.
- Ybarra, L. (1982). When wives work: The impact on the Chicano family. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 44*(1), 169–178.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69–91.
- Zavella, P. (1987). *Women's work and Chicano families: Cannery workers of the Santa Clara Valley*. Cornell University Press.
- Zuberi, T. (2008). Deracializing social statistics: Problems in the quantification of race. In T. Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology* (pp. 127–134). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Zuberi, T. (2011). Critical race theory of society. *Connecticut Law Review, 43*(5), 1573–1591.
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

# Application: Critical Race Theory as Frame for Health Research with Young Black Fathers Who Survive Violent Injury



William Wical and Joseph Richardson

Critical race theory (CRT) offers a rigorous mode of inquiry that disrupts normative understandings of race and racism by examining the ways in which these complex social phenomena are continuously constructed and remade in American society. Applications of CRT to everyday family life and local institutions underscore the importance of understanding of how white supremacy sustains the domination of people of color and the need for transformative solutions (De Reus, Few, & Blume 2005). Structural racism and racialization are key features of white supremacy which uphold and concretize social marginality. These core concepts of CRT are vital for framing and researching inequality, as they consider how the nexus of social, economic, and political factors disproportionately causes harm to multiply marginalized populations and the ways in which these disparities are characterized as seemingly natural.

Discourses about health, violence, and risk are used to support dominant ideological conceptualizations of race in the United States. In order to contest these narratives, researchers must “center the margins” – a methodological framework and moral imperative to ground research in the experiences, perspectives, and desired outcomes of socially marginalized individuals (Crenshaw et al. 1996; Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Garcia, Reese, & Romero 2021). In this chapter, we draw on this approach and apply a CRT framework to focus on the lived experiences of young Black men who have survived a violent injury. In doing so, their narratives illuminate how attention to white supremacy, structural racism, and racialization is

---

W. Wical (✉)

Department of Anthropology, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

e-mail: [wwical@umd.edu](mailto:wwical@umd.edu)

J. Richardson

Department of African American Studies, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_30](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_30)

vital to challenging conventional theoretical frameworks, disciplinary texts, and discourses of violence. We emphasize the need to support survivors' desires to substantively participate in social and health justice work, including in the production of counter-knowledge about the strategies they use to reduce their chances of repeat violent injury and criminal justice engagement.

## **Structural Racism, Incarceration, and Healthcare Provision**

CRT is a necessary framework for service provision and health research in healthcare institutions, as it shifts analysis to the structural causes of disparity rather than assigning blame to individuals. Structural racism serves as a primary contributing factor to the divergent rates of morbidity, mortality, and decreased well-being for young Black male survivors of violent injury (Bailey et al., 2017; Gilbert et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2021). Their health status is among the lowest in the United States, and they experience housing instability, limited access to quality education, concentrated poverty, negative policing, and the multifarious consequences of mass incarceration (CDC 2021a, 2021b; Hall et al., 2016). Black men are also disproportionately affected by gun violence, as they are 15 times more likely to experience firearm-related times assaults compared to White males (Everytown For Gun Safety, 2020). A focus on disparate rates of incarceration is vital for understanding the health status of hospital-based violence intervention (HVIP) participants, as Richardson et al. (2016) found that a history of previous incarceration was one of the most significant risk factors for repeat violent injury. According to the United States Department of Justice, Maryland, the site of this study, has the highest percentage (72%) of incarcerated Black people in the country (Nellis, 2019).

HVIPs are promising comprehensive service providers for violently injured young Black men. These programs have been shown to reduce repeat injury and criminal justice involvement – both of which are essential to improving the health of survivors (Shibru et al., 2007; Purtle et al., 2013). HVIPs provide mental health services, resources for housing and jobs, conflict resolution and retaliation prevention programming, and other psychosocial services (Cooper et al., 2006; Purtle et al., 2015). However, legacies of harm and exploitation of Black people by medical institutions have resulted in rightful distrust of research and program participation (St. Vil et al., 2018; Washington, 2006). Young Black men who survive violent injury express frustration that HVIP staff are unfamiliar with their lives – including social norms, experiences with structural racism, and Black masculinity (Rich & Grey, 2005; Wical et al., 2020).

## Desistance Strategies, Fatherhood, and Black Masculinity

Russell-Brown (2009) explored the deep ideological connections between race, gender, and criminality in her conceptualization of the “criminalblackman.” She noted that contemporary beliefs of the supposed criminality and violence of Black men have historical roots in slavery and anti-Black racism, in which fear of Black men was supported by cultural notions of Black sexuality and inherent inferiority. Researchers have contested these racialized notions of criminality through their examinations of structural racism and the desistance strategies used by low-income Black men to reduce repeat criminal justice involvement, including personal identity transformation and changes in social roles (Maruna, 2001). Fatherhood has been shown to be an impetus for men to rework their own identities, alter associated meaning of past experiences, and redefine possible futures (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Roy & Lucas, 2006). However, Black fathers often face significant structural barriers which impinge on their ability to financially, physically, and emotionally support their family (Roy, 2005, 2006). Despite these challenges, they routinely express generative feelings for their children, even in contexts of extreme poverty, incarceration, unstable employment histories, and substance abuse (Griffith et al., 2011; Roy & Lucas, 2006).

By drawing on the narratives of young Black fathers who survive violent injury, we contend that fatherhood is profoundly important in their attempts to reduce the likelihood of reinjury or criminal justice involvement. These findings suggest important directions for research on Black families as well as the development and delivery of innovative services to assist in achieving social and health justice. Further, the narratives of these fathers and subsequent changes in HVIP programming to reflect their perspectives demonstrate the ways in which praxis is a critical component of CRT (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

### *Findings from HVIP Study*

This research is informed by the aforementioned basic concepts of CRT and was designed to examine the intersections of the healthcare and criminal justice systems in the lives of low-income young Black men who survive a gunshot wound. The researchers explicitly inquired about the collateral social and health-related consequences of having both a felony record and history of violent injury. Through the use of in-depth qualitative interviewing ( $N = 11$ ) and a focus group with five participants, a representative group of survivors described their psychological and social experiences relating to injury, participation in the HVIP, and future social and health goals. The research team used a grounded theory approach to iteratively develop codes for data analysis to ensure that participants’ perspectives were accurately reflected (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The HVIP in this case study, the Capital Region Violence Intervention Program (CAP-VIP), is associated with the busiest level II trauma center in the state of Maryland. The hospital provides care to approximately 750 victims of violent injury each year – nearly 30% of these patients are treated for gunshot wounds. Approximately 98% of these survivors are male, 82% are Black, and 48% are between the ages of 19 and 30. In a 16-month period, the HVIP saw 116 participants. Of these participants – most often young Black men – 70% were involved in the criminal justice system.

## **Children and Fatherhood as First Thought After Injury**

In order to effectively “center the margins,” survivors must have the opportunity to express their perspectives and have their views incorporated into service provision. At CAP-VIP, survivors repeatedly mentioned that their first thoughts after being injured were about their children and their ability to be engaged fathers. Sonny (age 27), who was reflective and thoughtful during his interview, explained:

At that moment (realizing he'd been shot) is when I started to think about everything...All I could think about at that moment was my daughter. My daughter. On everything, that is all I could repeat to myself to keep [trying to get help]...I will see you tomorrow, we going make it, we going to make it, I am going to be there tomorrow.

Smokey (age 23), who hoped to start his own business to continue supporting his 1-year-old daughter, had similar sentiments and noted how his initial feelings continued after discharge from the hospital. They remained a primary goal for his well-being. He said:

Every day and every night, when I kept looking at my daughter, like, man I gotta be here for you. You can't do it without me. I don't want another man trying to raise you, he might not do it the right way. So, I know if I am here and I know if I do it, you going to be alright.

Although many of the survivors were already significantly involved in the lives of their children prior to injury, they described their injuries as a moment of reflection on their roles as fathers and desire to remain engaged in their child's life. The ability for the HVIP to centralize survivor's identities as fathers in the provision of care was essential in assisting participants with achieving their health goals. Most notably, this occurred through the work of a violence intervention specialist who had a similar experience of first thinking of his sons when he had been injured. His similar experience provided a deeper connection between the violence intervention specialist and survivors by increasing their feeling of being understood and valued in the program. CAP-VIP's innovative mode of service provision explicitly emphasizes the importance of Black fatherhood in its programming and actively supports participants in their fathering goals.

Survivors noted that their role as a father and the desire to be there for their children were influential factors in desisting from behaviors that placed them at risk for reinjury, including retaliation. Tip (age 35), who began working as a licensed

mental health transportation expert after participating in CAP-VIP explained, “My daughter, my last daughter. She changed my life. Me waiting for her to come into this world and me just getting shot at the same time. All that and then losing my mother, man it is time for a change.”

Smokey emphasized the potential costs of not fully reducing high-risk behavior and how this would affect his ability to participate in his child’s life:

You got two females (daughter and significant other) in your life, they really care about you, they really love you. If you go back to the streets, something happens to you, you get locked up, what they going to think? ... So as a man, you gotta lead the way.

Rather than blaming survivors for high-risk behaviors, the HVIP staff recognized the need to address structural issues. This orientation destigmatized survivors’ feelings of wanting to retaliate by acknowledging how historical and contemporary processes of economic disinvestment in Black communities, racial segregation, and discriminatory police practices have all contributed to the structural arrangements that generate social conditions conducive to interpersonal violence. This nonjudgmental approach fostered high levels of connection between program staff and participants, successfully increasing participation and satisfaction.

## **Acknowledging and Addressing Structural Racism in Care Provision**

Despite expressing strong desires to participate in HVIP programming, participants highlighted their hesitations to receiving therapy. Drawing on CRT’s acknowledgment of the centrality of structural and historical racism in influencing health experiences, the HVIP’s main recruitment strategy relied on the knowledge and expertise of the violence intervention specialist, as his shared lived experience of a history of violent injury, growing up in a poor neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and previous involvement in the criminal justice system provided him with credibility to survivors. His willingness to openly discuss mental health and ability to vouch for the HVIP psychotherapist increased survivors’ level of comfort in starting therapy (see Wical et al., 2020). Smokey indicated why this innovative approach is so critical:

When it comes down to therapy, it may be hard when you first start. You might be in your mind like, I can’t tell you this, you ain’t going to understand it, you ain’t going to feel it...but as long as they can understand and cope with you, help you cope with what you going through, whatever the problem is, then you alright.

The psychotherapist employed by the HVIP had years of experience working with Black men who had experienced trauma, allowing him to understand the nuanced ways in which they discussed trauma and provide coping skills to help with traumatic stress symptoms. In his work, he explicitly challenged racialized notions of violence and mental health. Additionally, he was able to draw from his own lived experience as a Black man who has felt the effects of systemic racism. In his

therapeutic work, he was able to shift blame to structural arrangements rather than individual behaviors. For many participants, the HVIP was their first opportunity to receive therapy to improve their mental health in a nonjudgmental way. Slim (age 29), who was a well-liked musician and life-long resident of Washington, D.C., explained how his fathering goals shaped his desire to engage in therapy provided by the HVIP:

I feel like I need to [address mental health issues]. I've been thinking about my daughter, man... like I don't got it all for her, as far as me. Not financially, not nothing like that, just as far as my emotions, my mental, for her. If they say that this (therapy) can help me [with my mental health], then I am all in, you know what I am saying

The violence intervention specialist and psychotherapist were critically important in supporting the health and social goals of survivors. Their acknowledgement of the legacies of historical racism and modes of engagement offer a radically different version of care that is built on mutual respect, love, and trust. Smokey emphasized the importance of the resulting closeness he felt to the violence intervention specialist, "Honestly speaking, [the only people] I trust in my life are Chris (violence intervention specialist) and my baby mother, regardless of what we go through, that's who my trust is going to rely on."

### ***Implications for HVIP Programming***

In alignment with the principles of CRT, acknowledging and addressing structural racism and processes of racialization must be central to the operations and goals of healthcare institutions. The practices of CAP-VIP, including the work of the violence intervention specialist and psychotherapist, demonstrate how empowering and supporting young Black male survivors of violent injury can challenge oppressive social structures and develop counter-narratives of their lives. This orientation emphasizes the importance of innovative strategies to assist survivors which are rooted in their lived experiences, including supporting their fathering efforts. Focusing on achieving health and social goals, the likelihood of reinjury or criminal justice involvement was dramatically reduced, evidenced by the decrease in repeat violent injury rate from almost 30% prior to the development of CAP-VIP to under 1% with the program providing services. Informed by CRT, we contend that amplifying participants' perspectives in informing service provision and knowledge production about their experiences is central to achieving social and health justice for program participants and their families.

### **References**

- Bailey, Z. D., Krieger, N., Agénor, M., Graves, J., & Bassett, M. T. (2017). Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: Evidence and interventions. *The Lancet*, 389, 1453–1463.



- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021a). Fatal injury and violence data. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021b). Injury center. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/index.html>.
- Cooper, C., Eslinger, D. M., & Stolley, P. D. (2006). Hospital-based violence intervention programs work. *The Journal of Trauma: Injury, Infection, and Critical Care*, 61(3), 534–540.
- Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., Thomas, K., & West, C. (1996). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. The New Press.
- De Reus, L. A., Few, A. L., & Blume, L. B. (2005). Multicultural and critical race feminisms: Theorizing families in the third wave. *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, 447–468.
- Ford, C. L., & Airhihenbuwa, C. O. (2010). Critical race theory, race equity, and public health: Toward antiracism praxis. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(S1), S30–S35.
- Gilbert, K. L., Ray, R., Siddiqi, A., Shetty, S., Baker, E. A., Elder, K., & Griffith, D. M. (2016). Visible and invisible trends in black men's health: Pitfalls and promises for addressing racial, ethnic, and gender inequities in health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 37(1), 295–311.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing.
- Griffith, D. M., Gunter, K., & Allen, J. O. (2011). Male gender role strain as a barrier to African American men's physical activity. *Health Education & Behavior*, 38(5), 482–491.
- Hall, A. V., Hall, E. V., & Perry, J. L. (2016). Black and blue: Exploring racial bias and law enforcement in the killings of unarmed black male civilians. *American Psychologist*, 71, 175–186.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Harvard University Press.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. American Psychological Association Books.
- Nellis, A. (2019, January 10). *The color of justice: Racial and ethnic disparity in state prisons*. The Sentencing Project.
- Purtle, J., Dicker, R., Cooper, C., Corbin, T., Greene, M. B., Marks, A., ... Moreland, D. (2013). Hospital-based violence intervention programs save lives and money. *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, 75(2), 331–333.
- Purtle, J., Peters, R., & Brownson, R. C. (2015). A review of policy dissemination and implementation research funded by the National Institutes of Health, 2007–2014. *Implementation Science*, 11(1), 1.
- Rich, J. A., & Grey, C. M. (2005). Pathways to recurrent trauma among young black men: Traumatic stress, substance use, and the “code of the street”. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95, 816–824.
- Richardson, J. B., St. Vil, C., Sharpe, T., Wagner, M., & Cooper, C. (2016). Risk factors for recurrent violent injury among black men. *Journal of Surgical Research*, 204(1), 261–266.
- Richardson, J. B., Wical, W., Kottage, N., & Bullock, C. (2020). Shook ones: Understanding the intersection of nonfatal violent firearm injury, incarceration, and traumatic stress among young black men. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 14(6), 1557988320982181.
- Richardson, J. B., Wical, W., Kottage, N., Galloway, N., & Bullock, C. (2021). Staying out of the way: Perceptions of digital non-emergency medical transportation services, barriers, and access to care among young Black male survivors of firearm violence. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 42(1), 43–58.
- Roy, K. M. (2005). Transitions on the margins of work and family life for low-income African-American fathers. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 26(1), 77–100.
- Roy, K. M. (2006). Father stories: A life course examination of paternal identity among low-income African American men. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(1), 31–54.
- Roy, K. M., & Lucas, K. (2006). Generativity as second chance: Low-income fathers and transformation of the difficult past. *Research in Human Development*, 3(2–3), 139–159.
- Russell-Brown, K. (2009). *The color of crime*. (Vol. 45). NYU Press.

- Everytown For Gun Safety. (2020). Impact of gun violence on black Americans. Everytown For Gun Safety. <https://everytown.org/issues/gun-violence-black-americans/>.
- Shibru, D., Zahnd, E., Becker, M., Bekaert, N., Calhoun, D., & Victorino, G. P. (2007). Benefits of a hospital-based peer intervention program for violently injured youth. *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*, 205(5), 684–689.
- St. Vil, C., Richardson, J., & Cooper, C. (2018). Methodological considerations for research with black male victims of violent injury in an urban trauma unit. *Violence and Victims*, 33, 383–396.
- Washington, H. A. (2006). *Medical apartheid: The dark history of medical experimentation on black Americans from colonial times to the present*. Doubleday Books.
- Wical, W., Richardson, J., & Bullock, C. (2020). A credible messenger: The role of the violence intervention specialist in the lives of young black male survivors of violence. *Violence and Gender*, 7(2), 66–69.

# Intersectionality Theory: A Critical Theory to Push Family Science Forward



April L. Few-Demo, Andrea G. Hunter, and Bertranna A. Muruthi

*Ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether it has any love for justice, or any concept of it.* (Baldwin, 1972, p. 149)

Few-Demo (2014) described intersectionality theory as a framework that compels researchers to be mindful of differential impacts of intersecting oppressions and to raise question of power and burden when considering sampling, analytic, and interpretation strategies; thus, context and power matter. Intersectionality is first and foremost a critical theory; thus, it is an intellectual articulation of the aims of social movements that have critiqued interlocking systems that create and perpetuate inequitable social stratification and inequalities. As intersectionality theory spread across disciplines, it became a methodological paradigm in which the theory drives decisions concerning research design, data analysis, and praxis. Intersectionality also is based on the notion that more than one sociodemographic factor, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and gender, can interact simultaneously within systems of power to impact individual experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Baldwin (1972) advised that we should go to the unprotected “and listen to their testimony” (p. 149). Intersectionality is a theoretical frame that emanates from the unprotected; it directs our attention to the intersection of multiple oppressions that

---

A. L. Few-Demo (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

e-mail: [alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu)

A. G. Hunter

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

B. A. Muruthi

Department of Counseling Psychology and Human Services, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_31](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_31)

433

create a chronic and cumulative disadvantage or condition for minoritized groups and marginalized categories of difference, as well as creates cumulative advantages for others (O’Rand, 1996). Pirtle and Wright (2021) argued that chronic, cumulative disadvantage and historical structural inequities must be examined because these inequities were indoctrinated, reinforced, and reproduced in living institutions, cultures, behaviors, interactions, and ideologies.

In terms of studying diverse families and family processes, an intersectional focus on structural inequities can reveal unequal distributions of preferred resources (e.g., clean water, vaccination centers, access to healthcare, food, housing; e.g., see Burton et al., 2013 for review of inequalities in rural America) as well as appropriate intervention strategies. Thus, intersectionality theory brings to the center of analysis those inequalities and inequities produced within the fluid, variable, and temporal interactive processes that occur between and within multiple social groups, such as families and racial and ethnic groups as they engage institutions as well as the social practices that unfold across an individual’s life courses and the lives of family members (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo, 2014; O’Rand, 1996).

The purpose of this chapter is multifold: (1) to provide a historical review of intersectionality theory to situate it as a critical intellectual tradition rooted in Black feminist standpoint theory; (2) to highlight the conceptual vitality of intersectionality theory for family science, and its methodological challenges and strengths of its application; and (3) to illustrate emergent areas of study for intersectionality theory in family science.

## Sign of the Times

President Barack Obama’s election, as the first biracial and representationally as the first Black American president, was a watershed moment – a ceiling cracked, but no postracial America would follow. His election would be curiously bookended, a little more than decade later, by the rise in racial and ethnic populism and a near racial reckoning as we globally responded to the brutal murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police that was captured on a cell phone by a 17-year-old Black girl, Darnella Frazier. Within these historical bookends, the nation would see, too, the first Black woman, Michelle Obama, to grace the White House as the First Lady; the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement fueled by the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and others by police; the lethal lead poisoning of the economically distressed in Flint, Michigan; an increase of mass shootings in our schools, universities, and public spaces; the legalization of gay marriage and the rescindment of *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell*; the (re)mobilization of activist movements such as the #MeToo movement, #Times Up, and #SayHerName focused on gender-based violence and sexual harassment of women; the rise of hate crimes and brazen demonstrations by alt-right, white supremacist hate groups such as in Charlottesville, Virginia; the surge of violence against and murder of Black trans women; and Central and South American immigrant children and families

being held in US internment facilities and separated at our Southwestern borders indefinitely. The COVID-19 global pandemic also starkly revealed structural racism, sexism, classism, and health inequities across the globe. In the United States, oppressed and marginalized communities, specifically Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and poor people, experienced higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and mortality, compared with white people and the more affluent (Webb et al., 2020). Childish Gambino theorized about oppression and privilege in lyric and in dance, “This is America.” Of course, the swirl of identity politics, movements of social justice, resistance to and naming *again* of unspeakable violence, and the politics of social location have long historical roots. Perhaps, it is a sign of the times that what was once taken for granted is now interrogated and problematized.

This chapter was written by three ethnic minority cisgender women faculty in the United States of America, and we are not dispassionate observers of our times; none of us are, as Patricia Hill Collins (1991) reminds that all social thought reflects the standpoint of its creators. We also have variously grown up in a discipline both before and after intersectionality theory made its way into academic thought, and its broad impact made clear in pedagogy, theory, research, methods, and activism, including translational, colonial, and global considerations (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality, as social thought grounded in lived experience, has also led to new ways of thought and action and has pushed the boundaries of theories that have defined the field of family science.

## **From a Heuristic to Social Theory: History and Tenets of Intersectionality**

Intersectionality theory is a critical, Black feminist tool to study how oppression, in its multiple forms, influences the life trajectories of specific individuals and groups in specific contexts over time (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Oppression, in its multiple and interlocking forms, however, cannot be analytically reduced to discrimination nor intersectional social locations reduced to identity alone. As a methodological paradigm for family scientists, intersectionality theory leads us to examine how the intersections of social location, institutions, culture, and time influence how people develop and behave; how family, life course, and developmental processes may unfold; and how groups are impacted differentially by policies and institutionalized practices (Hancock, 2007). Conducting intersectionality research is not a mere assessment of variation among diverse participant samples or reproduction of research questions that sustain differential outcomes among diverse groups or that justify hegemonic epistemologies or the use of specific research designs. Intersectionality theory brings to the *center* of analysis those inequalities and inequities produced within the fluid, variable, and temporal interactive processes that occur between and within multiple social groups, institutions, and social practices (Collins, 1998a; Few-Demo, 2014).

Intersectionality, as a theoretical and analytical lens, finds its origins in Black feminisms and critical studies and has been articulated in a political manifesto of African American women activists whose interests and experience were not wholly addressed by antiracist and feminist movements (Combahee River Collective, 1980). The *Combahee River Collective Statement*, issued in 1977, read:

[W]e are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of *integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking* (italics ours). The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.

The *Combahee River Collective Statement* was in conversation with other movements of which its authors were a part and in resistance to structural oppressions. Thus, the historical and political contexts of the civil rights movement, pro-Africana movements, and Black nationalists, the second wave of the feminist movement, and the emergence of gay rights, though today framed as “identity politics,” all were liberation movements which sought to tackle political, legal, and cultural forms of discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and exclusion and pushed for human and civil rights. From the Combahee River Collective’s perspective, achieving *social justice* for Black people would lead to the transformative liberation of all people (Dill & Kohlman, 2011).

In Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) landmark article, which opened with a reference to *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull et al., 1982), Crenshaw set a stage for a “theoretical” critique of the “single-axis framework” (i.e., the analysis of race or gender only) that erases and distorts the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience. For Crenshaw, intersectionality was an apt metaphor for what was rendered invisible – sexism and racism, white privilege, white logic, and white methods (see Garcia et al., this volume; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) in public, private, and intellectual spaces. Scholar-activists (Smith, 1995) and scholars (Guy-Sheftall, 1995) as well as writers (Lorde, 1983; Walker, 1983) were working a similar theoretical project throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Intersectionality also paralleled, and was a part of, the emergence of third-wave feminism which, through critique, focused the women’s movement and feminist scholarship on categories of difference (e.g., Hull et al. 1982).

Intersectionality perspectives, beginning with nineteenth-century Black women activists, addressed issues also central in family science including gender ideologies and relations (i.e., illuminating what “separate spheres” meant for Black women, heteropatriarchy, toxic masculinity), gender-based (e.g., intimate partner violence, rape) and race-based violence (e.g., lynching), power, and family life. Indeed, Crenshaw not only focused on anti-discrimination law but also on public discourse on Black female-headed households and a feminist critique of rape and gender role ideologies. Other intersectionality analyses reflected a similar emphasis. Deborah King (1988) spoke of the multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness of Black women in both public and private (family) spheres and discussed the theoretical invisibility of Black women, as well as the now-familiar tripartite: race, gender, and class analysis. Notably, Collins (1991), author of *Black Feminist Thought*, raised questions that were the heart of feminist family science – the social construction of

gender, a sociohistorical analysis of gender relations, and a commitment to gender equality and change (Thompson & Walker, 1995) – offering new layers of intersectional analysis. She tackled public discourse about family values and pathological tropes of Black family functioning, notably detailed in the infamous Moynihan Report (1965). Reflecting on traditional family values ideology, Collins (1998b) described how six dimensions of the traditional family ideal constructed intersections of gender, race, and nation. She examined family “as a gendered system of social organization, race as ideology and practice in the [U. S.], and (diverse) constructions of U.S. national identity (p. 63).”

Although some in family science embraced the feminist project in the early 1990s, early examination of the state of feminist family science was limited primarily to a single-axis analysis – gender (see Allen et al., this edition). For example, in Thompson and Walker’s (1995) review of feminism in family science, there was no mention of intersectionality, nor did they broadly highlight research that used this angle of vision despite the proliferation of Black feminist scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s. In their *Journal of Marriage and the Family* decade-in-review article on feminist perspectives in family research in family science, Fox and Murry (2000) acknowledged Black feminism as one of many feminist traditions and sought to identify four approaches to feminist family science: reflexivity, the centrality of practice, a focus on social processes, and a critical stance toward traditional paradigms and theories. In doing so, they included the work of a handful of ethnic feminist scholars. Importantly, they also recognized the presence of “academic colonialism” (Collins, 1996) in family research. Fox and Murry referred to academic colonialism as being “the potential for the academic research enterprise to exploit rather than to empower those who are the subject of study” (p. 1161). Their proposed remedy was to broaden the base of family research with families of color and for feminist family scholars to embrace another feminist aim, praxis.

In her decade-in-review on the status of how gender was being examined in family research, Ferree (2010) acknowledged the analytical power of intersectionality theory and endeavored to typologize two analytic approaches: *relational intersectionality* and *locational intersectionality*. In the relational intersectionality approach, researchers focus on the politics of location and on how individuals and social groups relate to social practices and social institutions. In locational intersectionality, researchers focus on the process by which unique standpoints of marginalized groups develop through an analysis of how their social identities and the social positioning are shaped by simultaneous oppressions.

Finally, more than 40 years after the Combahee River Collective Statement, in their *Journal of Marriage and Family* decade-in-review article, Few-Demo and Allen (2020) reviewed the status of research on gender relations in family research and proposed that there were actually three strands of critical perspectives being used by family scholars – gender theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality – and they distinguished intellectual and practical aims of each strand from one another. For instance, they identified gender theorists’ contribution to knowledge production as being primarily in the theorization and empirical testing of systemic social stratification and gender inequalities. They also noted that a distinguishing feature of

contemporary feminist scholarship was the examination of gender identity as existing on a continuum and that gender should be conceptualized as performativity. They noted that intersectionality theory's inclusion of critical race theories and its explicit multiple-axis aim to focus on interlocking and interactive systemic structural oppressions distinguished it from second-wave feminism and sociological gender theory.

The validation of intersectionality theory and methods as an intellectual feminist tradition has had an uneven progression in family science. These feminist decade-in-review articles chart the journey of an embrace of critical third-wave feminist scholarship by women scholars of color and by leading feminist family scholars over time. A deeper read of these critical reviews of the study of gender and feminist family science reveals that (1) contemporary feminist family science is beginning to understand what intersectionality is (e.g., intersectionality is not just conducting comparative studies, diversity research, or merely seeking within-group variance); (2) feminist family science is moving toward embracing intersectionality as its own (e.g., intersectional feminism), but it still remains at the margins of mainstream developmental and family theories; and (3) feminist family science is still grappling with how and if intersectionality can be measured.

## Core Ideas and Interrelated Concepts

Crenshaw and Collins have drawn attention, in similar ways, to a framework for understanding different dimensions of intersectionality and oppression, though variously coined over time. Collins (1998a) (and later, Collins & Bilge, 2016) described relational domains – how people relate to one another and to institutional structures – as dimensions of power. These domains addressed interactions at the individual (i.e., interpersonal relations), structural (i.e., social institutions, systems of structured inequality that help to maintain axes of inequality), and cultural (i.e., transmitted meanings and symbolic representations through which social categories and their meanings are constituted) levels. In addition, Collins and Bilge's (2016) work identified the core ideas of intersectionality as involving (a) social inequality, (b) power, (c) relationality, (d) social context, (e) complexity, and (f) social justice. In this chapter, we organize these key ideas under three interrelated main themes: (1) interlocking systems and structures, (2) intersecting situated social identities, and (3) social justice and transformative activism.

### *Interlocking Systems and Structures*

Feminist scholars have conceptualized the dimensions of interlocking systems and structures that impact group (family) process and relationships in varied ways. For example, Crenshaw (1989) identified three types of intersectionality: *structural*



*intersectionality*, *political intersectionality*, and *representational intersectionality*. Structural intersectionality refers to the connectedness of systems and structures in society and how those systems interact with individuals and groups differently (e.g., healthcare system, criminal justice, civil law). It addresses an analysis of the (re) production of institutional practices and policies that maintain dominance and privilege over specific groups by another group. Political intersectionality refers to how some intellectual and activist movements (i.e., feminist and antiracist) have contributed to the marginalization of racial and ethnic minority women (and others) (e.g., white suffragists' and first-wave feminists' refusal to include Black women in demands for the right to vote or the right to have control over one's reproductive health). Years later, Cho et al. (2013) would make a similar observation, arguing that anti-discrimination doctrines and feminist discourses did not necessarily ensure an intersectional critique, an inclusion of all groups' needs, nor lessen the extent of invisibility of minority groups (p. 791). Finally, representational intersectionality requires scholars to attend to the ways in which the cultural representation and metanarratives are strategically used to either (dis)empower, obfuscate, or misrepresent the historical experience of specific groups in media, policy, law, and institutions (e.g., poor families accessing subsidies, immigrant families crossing the border). In each of these iterations of intersectionality, there is the critical analysis of how power operates in specific contexts, who has control of the telling of one's experience and/or discursive narrative, and how power is maintained, exchanged, or lost. Each type of these intersectional analyses proscribes scholars to investigate family life and process in a way that tracks privilege and oppression.

Intersectionality theory gives us a framework to examine the recent interrogation of sustained structural violence and emergent disparities over the past two decades. Intersectionality theory informs us that the disparities which exist and who experiences them is neither random nor uniform, but by design. An intersectional family analysis interrogates how interlocking systems of institutional arrangements (e.g., schools, healthcare, police and criminal justice system, financial system, social policy) and the hierarchical nature of social positioning influence one's access to resources, exposure to risk, or protection. Collins and Bilge (2016) explained the impact of the interlocking nature of relational domains in that "events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor [but are] generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways[,] ... by many axes that work together to influence each other" (p. 2). Thus, this analytical lens requires a movement from thinking of social categories (or social locations)... from either/or to both/and thinking, and from additive models to *interactive models*. Further, Audre Lorde (1983) reminded us that there is "no hierarchy of oppression" (p. 14). The emphasis is on the *interactive and mutually constituted nature of social categories* of oppression and/or privilege and domination and/or subordination.

## ***Intersecting, Situated Social Identities***

Intersecting and situated social identities have not only a “location” but also emphasize that identity is socially constructed and thus is subject to change via affiliation or performance due to interactions with people, policies, and symbols (i.e., how one assigns meaning to flags, signage, literature and art, cultural artifacts). Greenwood (2008) summarized four tenets of intersectionality that draw our attention to social identities. First, social identities are complex, contingent, and temporal, which may lead to possible conflicts between differing identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Second, social identities reflect ideological and symbolic domains, which is indicative of the influence of culture, belief systems, and values (Crenshaw, 1989). Third, social identities are historically situated and subject to shift over time (Crenshaw, 1989). Finally, social identities are influenced by systemic structures of power that impact the choices, privileges, and constraints for specific groups over generations. As we focus on social identity, we view identities as existing within a metaphorical *matrix of domination*, as interlocking systems of domination. This heuristic is emblematic of the relational nature of identities and that groups continually negotiate and trade upon varying sources of privilege and penalty (Collins, 1998b).

Theories of family science are interested in the complexities of life and human experience; however, in these traditional family theories, there is a more muted engagement and, it can be argued, a disengagement with how social systems and the organization of power within society are constitutive of that lived experience. Identity, that which is created, embraced by self and/or others, and discarded, is not a fixed label, affinity, or affiliation. Social identities are embedded in social systems. Social systems and contexts that impact experience, real and perceived opportunities, and the exercise of agency are shaped by multiple axes of social difference or social stratification, which also have defined valences of power, resources, and perceived value. Thus, individuals, or families, who find that they are privileged in one social context may find themselves discriminated against or marginalized in other social contexts.

## ***Social Justice and Transformative Activism***

Collins (2015) wrote that “the complex social inequalities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust” (p. 14) and intersectionality as critical praxis addressed contexts in which inequalities existed. An integrated analysis and practice, as noted by the Collective, intersectionality brings social justice and social inequalities to the forefront (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016b; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). The social justice project disrupts and subverts arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes, as well as supports respect, care, recognition, and empathy (Theoharis, 2007). Individuals and groups are also empowered to use tools to address or change inequitable power relations (Else-Quest, &

Hyde, 2016a; Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). For families, a social justice approach focuses attention on transformations in access to educational and community resources, economic stability and mobility, food security, and physical safety that impact disparities in well-being. Social justice-informed research also can produce equity-minded and critical bodies of knowledge, practices, policies, and research implications to create change. Supporting not only inclusive theories and practices but also social justice work, intersectionality advances the larger political project of justice and freedom for all people (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

### ***Methodological Considerations and Inevitable Tensions in Intersectionality Research***

In the years since intersectionality was introduced as a heuristic, scholars have sought to both use and integrate an intersectionality framework across disciplines and to work out its interpretative and methodological challenges (e.g., see Cole, 2009). It also has been embraced by other disciplines such as psychology, public health, nursing, education, and family communication. This engagement is indicative of this theory's ability to deftly contextualize human motivation, behavior, and attitudes at and between the intrapsychic, interpersonal, cultural, and institution levels simultaneously, thus inviting creative, democratic, and ethical dialogues concerning methodologies and research design. Cho et al. (2013) zeroed in on intersectionality theory's conceptual and methodological appeal, suggesting that intersectionality theory was best understood as an analytical sensibility, a kind of angle of vision. They encouraged intersectionality should traverse multiple disciplines, arguing that scholars should focus not on "what intersectionality *does* [but] rather than what intersectionality *is*" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795).

In this section, we briefly present epistemological considerations that squarely identify intersectionality as a critical paradigm, the existing tensions that arise from conflicts emanating from understandings of intersectionality's pedigree, theoretical frameworks concerning how intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological approach are applied, the analytical complexity of this theory, and examples of creative intersectional methodologies.

### ***Epistemological Considerations of Critical Inquiry***

Intersectionality, as an analytical lens, is situated within critical theories that challenge epistemological and ontological principles of positivism and post-positivism (Hunter, Tarver & Jones, [in press](#)). It is an Afrocentric feminist epistemology that is grounded in a standpoint forged by the material conditions associated with interlocking race, gender, and class oppression and African American cultural traditions

(Collins, 1991). An alternative to post-positivism, knowledge claims are assessed in relational and dialogic terms, that is, with emphasis on concrete experience as a criterion of meanings, *the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, ethic of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability* (Collins, 1991). Afrocentric feminist epistemology privileges the integrated and simultaneous engagement of experience-dialogue-meanings to assess the validity of knowledge claims where scholar and subject are accountable for their own interpretative practices. Thus, methodological-interpretative-theoretical practices are linked, and that the practices used to assess knowledge claims have a defined ethic is acknowledge., but this has raised the question of should intersectionality research be confined to critical inquiry paradigms, that is, is it inherently incompatible with post-positivist approaches (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hunter et al., [in press](#)).

As critical theorists, intersectional scholars actively critique notions of essentialism and discriminatory epistemologies and discourses. Given that intersectionality theory emerged from the intellectual tradition of critical theory (i.e., Black feminist theory), critical theorists have sought to incite transformations in the social order in order to foment knowledge that is historical, structural, and functional in its ability to produce praxis and action (Hunter et al., [in press](#)). Transformation is possible through raising political consciousness (hooks, 1994) and through the process of emancipatory historiography (West, 1982). Transformational progress is determined by evidence and permanency of restitution and emancipation (e.g., policy changes). Critical theory is concerned with empowering people to rise above discriminatory constraints.

We argue that if one uses intersectionality theory in research, this critical lens requires that the researcher understand the role of power within social structure and its effect on individuals being researched. Academia itself is a reflection of the very structure that intersectionality is trying to deconstruct. The “ivory tower” (academia) is a social institution that creates and disseminates knowledge that is taken from the marginalized other, and it is the social institution that articulates the big “T” truths about the marginalized other’s experiences for public consumption; therefore, researchers – no matter their social location – are privileged and the arbiters of “truths.” This privilege can be invisible given the researcher is in the role of receiving the benefits of the research. The researcher must identify privileges and biases and highlight them within the work, regardless of methodology used. In addition, an intersectional framework brings social justice and social inequalities to the forefront (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016b; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). The intention of social justice in research is to disrupt the status quo and to empower the communities (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Social justice-informed research can help family researchers to develop bodies of knowledge, practices, policies, and research implications that are informed by inclusive theories and practices (Gordon da Cruz, 2017).

## *Tensions Concerning Appropriation and Erasure*

As intersectionality has made its way into the paradigmatic and theoretical lexicon of social and behavioral sciences (including family science), a question that is raised is how one deploys its perspective methodologically. That is, what does it mean “to do” intersectionality research or to conduct an intersectional analysis (be it through statistical or interpretative analysis) (Cole, 2009; McCall, 2005)? In 2014, Few-Demo proclaimed that intersectionality theory and intersectional analysis were the future of *mainstream family science*. However, she feared that in the beginning of family science’s embrace of intersectionality that “most family scholars will describe their method as intersectional, provide justification for controlling categorical variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class), and either fail to acknowledge or ignore the feminist and critical race theoretical origins of their methodological choice (p. 169).” A fear of critical and intellectual appropriation was articulated, but also an invitation to *work the methodological puzzle* to predict behavior, needs, and resources for diverse groups in diverse contexts.

It is worth noting that this fear of appropriation, cited by other scholars (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Bilge, 2013), is deeply tied into the notion that the intellectual pedigree of intersectionality may be co-opted by those who may or may not be invested in the uplift of racial and ethnic women, their families, and communities and the “new mothers” of intersectionality may replace the contributions of Black feminists (see Bilge, 2013; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). The methodological risks of the infusion of an intersectionality into family scholarship, and other disciplines, are multifold: (1) complexity flight, (2) reductionisms to social identity, (3) the invisibility of power, (4) data analytic or methodological nonequivalence with an intersectional or critical social inquiry, and (5) the invocation of intersectionality without actually doing it (e.g., Few-Demo & Allen, 2020).

## *Analytical Complexity of Intersectionality*

An ongoing critique of intersectionality theory is the complexity of its methodological application. McCall (2005) focused on quantitative methodology and intersectionality as a methodological paradigm. She identified three main analytical approaches to “the study of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations” that are based on “how [researchers chose . . . to] use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life” (pp. 1772–1173). These three analytical approaches involved *anticategorical*, *intracategorical*, and *intercategorical complexity*. An anticategorical approach questions the validity of using social categories because labels for people and groups are often imposed rather than self-ascribed. In an intracategorical analysis, one examines how a single social group is situated within a specific social setting and how specific symbolic representations influence the construction, privileges, and constraints within this specific group.

Scholars who use an *intercategorical approach* are interested in “the nature of relationships among social groups” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785) and how oppression and power changes personal or group opportunity over time. This analytical approach requires multigroup-level analysis and is comparative in its emphasis. McCall also noted that intersectional research may consist of one or more of these approaches.

Cole (2009), in her critique of psychological research, posited that (a) most studies do not examine more than one social category at a time; (b) if more than one category is used, we “remove” the effects of the additional category in the interest of parsimony or simplicity; and (c) attention is not paid to how the meanings (and experiences) within a given social category depend on others. To bring an intersectional approach, she believed that psychologists needed to be challenged to consider the meanings of social categories and their relationship to one another and how they impact outcomes of interest; and this necessarily requires an interrogation of inequality and social hierarchies (power and privilege) embedded in these categories and their implications for people’s lives. Throughout the research process, Cole suggested that three questions must be asked: Who is in the social category (i.e., attending to variation)? What role does inequality play (i.e., attending to power)? And where are the similarities among social categories (i.e., attending to commonalities among diverse populations)? We believe that these questions should be asked by family scholars in their research endeavors.

Finally, Cho et al. (2013) also noted what has been the remarkable adaptability of intersectional analysis across disciplines, subjects, and categories of difference, and transnational and other borderlands even as concerns have been raised about the standpoint epistemology (i.e., of Black women) at its genesis. Black feminist thought is the assertion and rearticulation of everyday knowledge and wisdoms that emanate from a defined collective human experience; yet, it has lessons and a theoretical relevance that extends beyond that experience. This intellectual tradition, both its epistemology and recurrent themes of identity (i.e., self-definition, self-valuation), culture, and interlocking oppression, suggests the use of interpretative tools to the study and theorizing about families, family relations, and family as context; and intersectionality is one of these tools. This can inform our angle of vision in multiple ways: (a) as specific sites of interrogation (i.e., research questions); (b) as an embedded “backstage” that informs all aspects of a research project including the measures, methodologies, and interpretative practices used; and (c) as explicit components of the theoretical framework or the models developed and tested.

## Future of Creative Critical, Intersectional Research

Scholars argue that an intersectionality framework can be used methodologically as long as researchers can position themselves as a critical researcher (e.g., Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) and position intersectionality as a critical theory (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016a). For this section, we present creative ways in which researchers have

embraced the gestalt of intersectionality theory with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies.

### *Quantitative Methodologies*

A critical quantitative intersectional approach typically is utilized by scholars seeking to apply quantitative methods where the impact of race and racism and social justice as an end goal are central foci. These approaches typically integrate critical race theory into quantitative designs and have several names – QuantCrit (Gillborn et al., 2017), QuanCrit (López et al., 2018), and CritQuant (Sullivan et al., 2010). Gillborn et al. (2017) outlined four principles that are shared by these approaches: (1) numbers are not neutral, (2) categories are neither “natural” nor given, (3) data cannot “speak for itself,” and (4) numbers are used for the purpose of social justice.

*Critical quantitative intersectionality* (CQI) shares similar foundations of QuantCrit, considering marginality, social justice, and oppressions. Covarrubias and Vélez (2013) used the term *critical race quantitative intersectionality* (CRQI) as a methodological approach “to account for the material impact of race and racism at its intersection with other forms of subordination ... in hopes of achieving social justice for [people] of color, their families, and their communities” (p. 276). According to Jang (2018), it is important to be mindful that critical race theory may overlook “the core premises of intersectionality (e.g., multiplicity, simultaneity, power relations, and social contexts)” in its analysis due to its primary focus on race and racism (p. 1274).” Jang argued that CQI better explained how multiple oppressions operated in creating unique experiences of people with multiple marginalized social categorizations.

Collins (2008) argued that employing a critical perspective in quantitative methods could enhance and stand a better chance of discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing experiences of marginalized subgroups within larger minority groups. Gkiouleka et al. (2018) posited that while using a critical intersectionality lens, quantitative designs will focus on group membership and how political, social, and institutional power structures impact these groups. When formulating a quantitative question, it is important to not make it additive in nature. Dealing with aspects of identity makes this difficult because you are assuming that the more marginalized identities you have, the more oppressed the research participant. There is also the assumption that oppression can be ranked.

Else-Quest and Hyde (2016b) proposed that intersectional work could be done quantitatively using between- and within-group designs with two or more groups of subjects each being tested by a different testing factor simultaneously. In a within-group design, the same group of subjects serves in more than one treatment. This design allows for an intersectional approach to a phenomenon by specifying an intersectional location (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016b, p. 323). Else-Quest and Hyde (2016b) also proposed that categories should be seen as a stimulus variable, which affects the way that others respond to the individual, and not a person variable that

is based on the characteristic of a person. López et al. (2017) used a within-group design for their study on street race, which refers to how one believes other “Americans” perceive their race at the level of the street (p. 2). López et al. (2017) found that Latinx men who identified their street race as Arab reported very good or excellent physical health opposed to those reporting a white street race. Women who were perceived as having a Mexican street race reported significantly worse mental health outcomes. An intersectionality lens helped researchers to detangle the complex identity of Latinx men’s perceptions of their race in a context where being seen as white may be a way to increase feelings of belongingness. Similarly, women whose perceptions of a Mexican street race was a reflection of intersecting oppressions faced by racialized stereotyping within their community. Using race as a stimulus variable gave researchers a more complex understanding of how race impacted the social determinants of health.

### *Qualitative Methodologies*

According to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021), “intersectionality as a methodological tool in qualitative inquiry pursuits also serves as a conceptual device for the consideration and interpretation for how social forces construct theory and praxis and how theory and praxis construct political economic forces and body politics” (p. 5). Scholars often associate intersectionality with qualitative research because these methods align with complex and dynamic understandings of socially constructed dimensions of difference and context (Misra et al., 2021). Qualitative methodologies have long been preferred in intersectional research due to the notion that intersectional work, at its core, has an inability to be generalizable to the whole population because intersectionality represents the unique aspects of an individual’s or group’s experience that cannot be replicated (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999).

Qualitative methodologies that complement intersectionality’s epistemology include participatory action research, ethnography, and phenomenology. With participatory action research methodologies, a researcher seeks to produce knowledge collaboratively with members of the communities who are being investigated. Ethnography allows researchers to uncover the social processes that generate complex inequalities while highlighting the contingent and unstable nature of inequality categories (e.g., see Misra et al., 2021). Finally, phenomenology permits the researcher to explore the meaning-making processes of a particular phenomenon and its impact on lived experiences.

### *Mixed Methods: Causation and Context*

Mixed-methods approaches reveal the complexity of identity in two major ways. First, it fosters an understanding of how to conceptualize a single dimension of identity from multiple perspectives (Harper, 2011). Second, mixed-methods designs



reveal change, development, and nuance to the seemingly static and simplistic (Harper, 2011). A mixed-methods approach allows researchers to take advantage of the representativeness and generalizability of quantitative findings and the rich, contextual nature of a qualitative approach (Harper, 2011). Quantitative methods can be used to identify populations in our society that suffer from inequality, while in turn, qualitative work can help to shine light on the voices and experiences of individuals within that group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Although mixed methods are a relatively new research design, they are increasingly being used to gain holistic understandings, from diverse perspectives, of complex phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

## **The Growing Edge: Transnational and Digital Spaces**

As previously mentioned, intersectionality theory is traversing multiple disciplines while maintaining its core connection to community. We highlight three extensions of how intersectionality theory is being applied within academia and beyond – transnational intersectionality theory, challenging invisibility within Black communities, and hashtag activism.

### ***Transnational Intersectionality***

Transnational intersectionality refers to the maintaining of multiple social identities that link a society of settlement to that of origin (Glick Schiller et al., 1995). Transnationalism is the process of staying physically and/or emotionally connected to the country of origin after migration to the United States (Falicov, 2007). Some scholars have proposed a dynamic conceptualization of intersectionality when examining the experiences of immigrants in the United States (Muruthi et al., 2016; Muruthi et al., 2021). For example, Muruthi et al. (2016) have called for a conceptualization of intersectionality that accounts for the often conflicting and/or overlapping identities affiliated with a host country and the country of origin.

Transnational intersectionality is the intersection of identity and meaning ascribed to those identities across geographical borders. For example, Gangamma and Shipman (2018) offered the example of a Christian refugee from Iraq whose religion made him a part of a majority in the United States and simultaneously a minority in Iraq. In addition, they reflected upon this duality by writing “...while he may be considered “Iraqi” in the United States and occupy a subordinate position of marginalization due to nationality, he may be considered ‘American’ by his family back in Iraq and perceived as being in a socially upward class” (p. 211). Transnational intersectionality calls for researchers to analyze this negotiation process of an individual or group experiencing these structural differences on a continual basis as they travel across borders.

## ***Challenging Invisibility within Black Communities***

Intersectionality also is also a critique of the monolithic vernacular – “the Black community.” Black immigrants in the United States may feel invisible within their communities because they share similar characteristics and often live in close proximity to African Americans, making them difficult to differentiate from African Americans. For instance, children of Black immigrants are especially affected by this phenomenon of invisibility because they lack certain characteristics, such as accents, that clearly distinguish them from their African American counterparts. Many scholars have noted that this invisibility leads to marginalization of the Black immigrant communities in the United States (Thomas et al., 2008; Waters, 2008). While this phenomenon is rarely empirically tested, it is an essential consideration when working with this population. Testing for this phenomenon empirically would help to better highlight the heterogeneous nature of experiences of communities from the African diaspora. It would also help, generally, to provide more *ethnically* sensitive and culturally competent interventions for Black immigrants. A transnational analytic lens begs the question of how inequality differentially affects population subsets as well as how researchers also can capture homogeneity as heterogeneity of experiences are explored.

## ***Intersectionality and Hashtag Activism***

Hashtag activism is a global phenomenon and a quickfire means to communicate and educate about oppressions experienced and solutions informed by activists, community leaders, and science (Mendes et al., 2019). For example, Tarana Burke raised attention to issues of sexual assault and was the first to found the “Me Too” movement. The #MeToo movement, however, has received criticism for both initially ignoring the role that Burke played in founding the movement and in failing to recognize the unique forms of harassment and the heightened vulnerability to harassment that women of color frequently face in the workplace (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). In another example, on Instagram, the hashtag #InternationalFeminism and close derivatives have been accessed over 300,000 times. However, it is important to note the presence of many voices that denounce the depoliticized, decontextualized heralding of intersectional feminism, which is sometimes divorced from Black feminist roots (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

As we watch an evolution in the forms of activism, there continues to be a replication and a maintenance of the revolutionary movements of our past leaders. We are reminded of fists in the air, the Black Power salute, by two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, during the playing of the US national anthem at the Olympics in 1968. Today, we watch Raven Saunders, who identifies as Black and queer, raise her arms over her head in an “X,” during her medal

ceremony. She was quoted in the media as saying that the X stood for *the intersection of where all people who are oppressed meet*.

## **Conclusion**

Intersectionality theory outlines a pathway to unravel the interactions of identity and macrosystemic structures and the resulting allocation, (re)production, and maintenance of power. As one reflects upon the utility of intersectionality theory and the foci of its social inquiry, one recognizes that intersectionality theory assumes that agency exists within historically and community-defined social spaces for different folk and groups. The analytic power of intersectionality theory is to integrate human development and context, and agency is only recently being tapped by family scholars.

This theory has led to critical conversations about its challenges and limitations as well as its application within hegemonies of the academy. Some family scholars have critiqued intersectionality theory as having the same limitations as feminist theory. Allen and Henderson (2017) summarized the limitations into essentially two threads: (1) the debate about whether critical theories are theories or ideologies and (2) the relative difficulty in evaluating descriptive and explanatory theoretical frameworks parsimoniously. Our observation is that in order to use intersectionality theory, one must attend to systemic oppressions such as racism and within-group variation. It is our hope that it is not forgotten that the liberatory roots of this critical theory are inextricably tied the intellectual tradition of Black feminist scholarship (and the hopes of Black women) and that its analytic lens not be diluted as comparative studies nor dismissed as mere ideology. The Combahee River Collective saw it as their task to proselytize an integrated analysis and practice that acknowledged the major systems of interlocking oppression and how these systems created “the condition of our lives.” For us as family scholars, it begs us to theoretically integrate and answer specific questions about these interlocking systems. What are their mechanisms? What are the conditions in which inequities and disparities are created? How are the lives of individuals, families, and communities shaped and transformed by systems?

## **References**

- Alexander-Floyd, N. G. (2012). Disappearing acts: Reclaiming intersectionality in the social sciences in a post-black feminist era. *Feminist Formations, 24*, 1–25.
- Allen, K. R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Baldwin, J. (1972). *No name in the street*. Dial Press.
- Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review, 10*, 405–424.

- Burton, L. M., Lichter, D. T., Baker, R. S., & Eason, J. M. (2013). Inequality, family processes, and health in the “new” rural America. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57, 1128–1151.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, 38, 786–810.
- Choo, H. Y., & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28, 129–149.
- Cole, E. R. (2009). Intersectionality and research in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 64(3), 170–180.
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1996). What’s in a name: Womanism, black feminism, and beyond. *Black Scholar*, 26(1), 9–17.
- Collins, P. H. (1998a). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1998b). It’s all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. *Hypatia*, 13(3), 62–82.
- Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality’s definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), 1–20.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.
- Combahee River Collective. (1980). The Combahee River collective statement, 1977. In B. Smith (Ed.), *Home girls: A Black feminist anthology* (pp. 264–274). Rutgers University Press.
- Covarrubias, A., & Velez, V. (2013). Critical race quantitative intersectionality: An anti-racist research paradigm that refuses to “Let the numbers speak For themselves”. In *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (pp. 290–306). Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, pp. 139–167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1993). Demarginalizing the interaction of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics. In D. Weisberg (Ed.), *Feminist legal theory: Foundations* (pp. 383–411). Temple University Press.
- Creswell, J., & Plano Clark, V. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage.
- Cuadraz, G. H., & Uttal, L. (1999). Intersectionality and in-depth interviews: Methodological strategies for analyzing race, class, and gender. *Race, Gender and Class*, 6(3), 156–186.
- De Reus, L., Few, A. L., & Blume, L. B. (2005). Multicultural and critical race feminisms: Theorizing families in the third wave. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 447–468). Sage.
- Dill, B. T., & Kohlman, M. H. (2011). Intersectionality: A transformative paradigm in feminist theory and social justice. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 154–174). Sage.
- Else-Quest, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2016a). Intersectionality in quantitative psychological research: I. Theoretical and epistemological issues. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(2), 155–170.
- Else-Quest, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2016b). Intersectionality in quantitative psychological research: II. Methods and techniques. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(3), 319–336.
- Esposito, J., & Evans-Winters, V. (2021). *Introduction to intersectional qualitative research*. Sage.
- Falicov, C. J. (2007). Working with transnational immigrants: Expanding meanings of family, community, and culture. *Family Process*, 46(2), 157–171.
- Fassinger, R., & Morrow, S. L. (2013). Toward best practices in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed- method research: A social justice perspective. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, 5(2), 69–83.
- Ferree, M. M. (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52(4), 866–884.
- Ferree, M. M. (2010). Filling the glass: Gender perspectives on families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 72, 420–439.

- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 6, 169–183.
- Few-Demo, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2020). Gender, feminist, and intersectional perspectives on families: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82, 326–345.
- Fox, G. L., & Murry, V. M. B. (2000). Gender and families: Feminist perspectives and family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1160–1172.
- Gangamma, R., & Shipman, D. (2018). Transnational intersectionality in family therapy with resettled refugees. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 44(2), 206–219.
- Gillborn, D., Warmington, P., & Demack, S. (2017). QuantCrit: Education, policy, ‘big data’ and principles for a critical race theory of statistics. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2), 158–179.
- Gkiouleka, A., Huijts, T., Beckfield, J., & Bamba, C. (2018). Understanding the micro and macro politics of health: Inequalities, intersectionality & institutions – A research agenda. *Social Science & Medicine*, 200, 92–98.
- Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L., & Blanc Szanton, C. (1995). From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68(1), 48–63.
- Gordon da Cruz, C. (2017). Critical community-engaged scholarship: Communities and universities striving for racial justice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(3), 363–384.
- Greenwood, R. M. (2008). Intersectional political consciousness: Appreciation for intragroup differences and solidarity in diverse groups. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32, 36–47.
- Guy-Sheftall, B. (Ed.). (1995). *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. The New Press.
- Hancock, A. M. (2007). When multiplication doesn’t equal quick addition. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5, 63–79.
- Harper, C. (2011). Identity, intersectionality, and mixed-methods approaches. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2011(151), 103–115.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Hull, A. G., Bell-Scott, P., & Smith, B. (1982). *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women’s studies*. Feminist Press.
- Hunter, A. G., & Johnson, D. J. (2012). A certain kind of vision: Revealing structure, process, and meanings in African American families. In J. Jackson, C. H. Caldwell, & S. Sellers (Eds.), *Social science research in black populations*. University of Michigan Press.
- Hunter, A.G. Jones, J. & Tarver, S. (in press). Dismantling the master’s house: Epistemological tensions and possibility for transformative approaches to race, families and social justice in family science. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.
- Jang, S. T. (2018). The implications of intersectionality on southeast Asian female students’ educational outcomes in the United States: A critical quantitative intersectionality analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(6), 1268–1306.
- King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(1), 42–72.
- Lloyd, S. A., Few, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of feminist family studies*. Sage.
- López, N., Erwin, C., Binder, M., & Chavez, M. J. (2018). Making the invisible visible: Advancing quantitative methods in higher education using critical race theory and intersectionality. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(2), 180–207.
- López, N., Vargas, E., Juarez, M., Cacari-Stone, L., & Bettez, S. (2017). What’s your “STREET RACE”? Leveraging multidimensional measures of race and intersectionality for examining physical and mental health status among Latinxs. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(1), 49–66.
- Lorde, A. (1983). There is no hierarchy of oppressions. *International Books for Children Bulletin*, 14.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30, 1771–1800.
- Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2019). *Digital feminist activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford University Press.

- Misra, J., Curington, C. V., & Green, V. M. (2021). Methods of intersectional research. *Sociological Spectrum, 41*(1), 9–28.
- Moynihan, R. (1965, March). *The negro family: The case for national action*. Office for Planning and Research. United States Department of Labor.
- Muruthi, B., Bermúdez, J. M., Bush, K. R., McCoy, M., & Stinson, M. A. (2016). Afro-Caribbean mothers in the U.S.: An exploratory study from a transnational feminist perspective. *Women & Therapy, 39*(3–4), 413–431.
- Muruthi, B. A., Janes, E., Chou, J., Richardson, S., West, J. M., & Chevalier, M. (2021). “First thing when I walk through the door, I am a Black woman”: Pilot study examining Afro-Caribbean women’s racial and ethnic identity. *Journal of Systemic Therapies, 40*(1), 75–91.
- O’Rand, A. M. (1996). The precious and the precocious: Understanding cumulative disadvantage and cumulative advantage over the life course. *The Gerontologist, 36*(2), 230–238.
- Onwuachi-Willig, A. (2018). What about #UsToo?: The invisibility of race in the #MeToo movement. *Yale Law Journal Forum, 105*, 104–120. Retrieved from [https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/331](https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/331).
- Pirtle, W. N., & Wright, T. (2021). Structural gendered racism revealed in pandemic times: Intersectional approaches to understanding race and gender health inequities in covid-19. *Gender & Society, 35*(2), 168–179.
- Smith, B. (Ed.). (1983). *Home girls: A black feminist anthology*. Rutgers University Press.
- Sullivan, E., Larke, P., & Webb-Hasan, G. (2010). Using critical policy and critical race theory to examine Texas’ school disciplinary policies. *Race, Gender & Class, 17*(1–2), 72–87.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43*(2), 221–258.
- Thomas, L., Clarke, T., & Krolczak, A. (2008). Implementation of peer support demonstration project for HIV+ Caribbean immigrants: A descriptive paper. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 6*(4), 526–544.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1995). The place of feminism in family studies. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 57*, 847–865.
- Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mother’s gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Waters, M. C. (2008). *Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American realities*. Harvard University Press.
- Webb, H. M., Nápoles, A. M., & Pérez-Stable, E. J. (2020). COVID-19 and racial/ethnic disparities. *JAMA, 323*, 2466–2467.
- West, C. (1982). *Prophecy deliverance! An afro-American revolutionary Christianity*. Westminster Press.
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Litchfield.

# Application: Reimagining Intersectional Family Science: Reflections on URM Families, Wealth, and Health



Ruth Enid Zambrana

Family as a social construct has historically been applied systematically across all racial and ethnic groups. Family theory and family sciences as traditional disciplinary spaces have unilaterally used the perceived “normal” characteristics of middle-class white families as comparable benchmarks for the study of all families. Such Eurocentric family normative processes have persistently distorted the strengths and struggles of historically and traditionally underrepresented minority (hereinafter referred to as URM) African American, Mexican American, Native American, and Puerto Rican groups regardless of socioeconomic status (Thornton, 2005). These four groups share involuntary historical incorporation into the United States (via slavery, colonialization, or land acquisition) which shaped and continues to configure avenues of economic and social opportunity throughout the life course and across generations. This historical social status has contributed to repeated hardships and a legacy of exclusionary practices and policies driven by institutional and social inequalities. Stereotypic tropes (lazy, fertility machines, over-sexualized, criminal) have been used to malign the struggles of low-income and working-class URM families while simultaneously ignoring the challenges that many URM professional middle-class families experience.

The use of white middle-class families as the “gold standard” against which URM populations are compared has produced a significant body of deficit-based knowledge that maligns family processes and developmental benchmarks and elides the poignant impact of structural racism on family development and processes (Burton et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2019). Although traditional family studies have included a focus on gender and women’s labor, the frameworks were characterized by using normative middle-class expectations and conditions with implicit

---

R. E. Zambrana (✉)

Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, College of Arts and Humanities, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

e-mail: [rzambran@umd.edu](mailto:rzambran@umd.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_32](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_32)

453

assumptions of equality and access to opportunities. Deconstructing the Eurocentric family lens requires acknowledgement of structural racism (Urban Institute, 2020) and policies that have denied URM families equal access to the social and economic opportunity structure. The unique burden borne by African Americans and historic Mexican American and Puerto Rican groups in the USA is attributed to structural racism. The omission of these structural and historical forces associated with healthy family development has been consistently challenged for decades by racial/ethnic, nontraditional, or revisionist scholars (Zinn, 1989, 1990; Zinn & Dill, 1994; Zambrana, 1995, 2011). Acknowledging structural racism allows for the discovery of “creativity, resourcefulness, or resilience” among URM families who confront inequitable environments (Few-Demo, 2014 p. 174).

In providing an alternative approach, the intersectional framework presents a set of arguments to reframe social, political, and economic factors that impact families and health among economically disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups; and it offers a more comprehensive lens of “knowing and seeing” by predominantly URM scholars (e.g. Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Collins, 2015, 2019). I use intersectionality as a framework that is embedded in a deep understanding of history, implicit assumptions, interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, and mixed methodologies based on the achievements of pioneering thinkers of the scientific community (see Few-Demo, 2014).

This commentary describes selected results of a study on the intersections of work, family, wealth, and health among URM academic professionals. The ideas for this study were prompted by observations of severe underrepresentation in research extensive universities and premature chronic conditions and mortality among early career URM faculty. In a mixed-methods study of URM faculty, 576 surveys were completed, and 60 in-depth individual and group interviews were conducted (Zambrana, 2018). In scouring the family science, public health, and sociological bodies of knowledge, limited studies were available on distinct URM highly educated professional groups.

The application of an intersectional lens in this study sought to make visible thorny “power” inequity concerns among URM faculty situated in higher education by a deep examination of institutional racism (lack of supports and exclusion), work stressors, family and work balance, difficulties in white spaces, life course access to opportunity, and the cumulative impact of these experiences on family strain and health and mental well-being. As a framework intersectionality was informed by the explicit knowing that race/ethnic families cannot be studied without accounting for the role of structural racism and power relations as antecedents of racial and economic stratification, discrimination in daily experiences, practices and policy, intergenerational economic mobility, and the life course impact of these factors on family processes. The life course lens, integral to intersectional theorizing, represents an integrated continuum of exposures, experiences, and interactions from birth to old age, rather than a series of discrete steps or life stages, that are associated with economic, social, and health /mental health outcomes.

I embarked on the study with five explicit theorizing analytic anchoring assumptions: historical incorporation has shaped the lived experiences of four distinct



oppressed groups; history, power, race, ethnicity, class, and gender matter as co-constituted identities; quality of educational pathways during the life course matters in access/participation in higher education systems; stereotypic representations of merit vs. “affirmative action babies” and intellectual inferiority vs. superiority are prevalent and harmful to URM subjects; and institutional policies and practices are laden with implicit negative assumptions that have disadvantaged URM faculty in all spheres of life. Drawing on prior knowledge, the study lens was inclusive of the broader definitions of the family that are often necessary in the study of URM families to account for kinship and extended family networks, jointly with the impact of limited available wealth and assets. All too often investigators assume equality of economic stability and equal benefits among professionals regardless of race and ethnicity, despite clearly demonstrable differences to the contrary (e.g., white median household wealth is ten times higher than Black households and eight times higher than Latino households; Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2017).

The overall purpose of the study was to assess the effects of work stress on physical and mental symptomology of URM faculty. Four major areas were explored in-depth: mentoring experiences, perceived discrimination, work-family integration, and physical and mental well-being. To have theory inform the methods and strengthen the interpretation of the data (Few-Demo, 2014), care must be taken to define rigorous sample criteria of individuals who share similar co-constituted social statuses and to include narratives that represent the voices, struggles, successes, and experiences of the (dis)advantaged individuals not often proffered in traditional research approaches. The sample population was defined using specific racial and ethnic identifiers as opposed to large aggregates of people of color. The study measured SES factors to capture the economic picture. Participant data were collected on parental race and ethnic identifiers and education data, home ownership and assets and worth, family- and work-specific demands, and life events. The information on parental education, background, and assets is important as proxy indicators of access to social capital and economic “health,” life course, and intergenerational impacts. Although many middle- and upper middle-class families provide supports to their children throughout the life course, prior data suggest that URM families of origin are less likely than non-URM families to help their offspring due to the wealth gap, less savings, and fewer retirement funds. Additionally, URM groups are more likely to experience an adverse family life event such as death, losing a job, and interactions with the court and penal system than majority culture groups of similar socioeconomic status (See Burton et al. p. 175).

To obtain a richer narrative understanding of the nexus of family and work responsibilities and to interpret survey data, 60 in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted to illustrate personal stories and experiences. The intent was to employ a life course perspective focused on the intersections of family of origin socioeconomic status, available economic resources, and the racialized systems that shape family opportunity structures, life chances, and upward mobility. To illuminate professional family and work role strains, questions addressed work and family demands, management strategies for work and family, and institutional supports to increase capacity to cope with multiple demands. The data illustrate

significant and novel associations among findings. The application of demographic indicators to capture a sample representative of historic groups (multilayered intersectional identity) provided a unique opportunity to examine their lived experiences. The data allowed for a thick description of institutional expectations and cogent stressors for these academics. Their stories show a pattern of high institutional expectations to engage in an overload of diversity service work because of their race/ethnic identity, economic concerns and difficult encounters with colleagues, inadequate mentorship, few institutional supports, frequent experiences of race/ethnic-based discrimination from superiors, and exclusion from research opportunities central to tenure and promotion processes.

Key family-work findings included associations between high levels of family strain and excessive academic labor (often referred to as Black/Brown taxation), multiple forms of institutional discrimination, as well as family of origin obligations that depleted their energy. Participants reported high levels of stress in managing academic and family demands due to obligations to extended family; additional stressors as a result of caretaking, family illness, and loss; and common requests to help extended family members rather than receive financial support. Respondents reported experiencing an ongoing stressful push and pull between fulfilling obligations to family and responding to excessive work demands. These push and pull effects were perceived as “something had to give,” “the oxymoron of balance,” and “sacrifice.” Although respondents reported that they loved their work and had overcome multiple barriers to achieve an academic position, they felt deeply “torn” by two major stressors at work, excessive academic labor, and discrimination that contributed to profound personal and family strain. These daily stressors exacted an extraordinary cost of emotional depletion, or what has been referred to as emotional battle fatigue. This emotional depletion hindered their ability to engage in career development activities and was perceived as placing family interpersonal processes at risk. Approximately half of the sample was dissatisfied with their family/work/life balance but fearful of using work-family policies (Castañeda et al., 2015). These multiple race-/ethnic-related work and family stressors with limited supports adversely impacted their health/mental well-being, with significant number of respondents reporting feelings of sadness, loneliness, depression, and anxiety and a myriad of physical symptoms including poor sleeping patterns, headaches, and stomachaches, among others (Zambrana et al., 2020).

Three main findings inform an intersectional analysis of how experiences of racism may influence health in URM families: (1) stratification serves to maintain discrimination in social spaces; (2) life course effects result in adverse health conditions, despite increasingly better opportunities or social advantages; and (3) chronicity and magnitude of discrimination (e.g., life events, micro-aggressions, reduced opportunities via exclusion and social isolation) contribute to stress that negatively affects health. Respondents experienced chronic daily stress of discrimination, and their race/ethnic identity demanded excess academic labor, more difficult interactions with white colleagues, and oftentimes a sense of “being the only one,” contributing to high levels of work, personal, and family strain. Prior empirical data show that highly educated URM professionals do not reap the same economic, health,

family and/or have access to the same institutional investments and social networks as majority culture and non-URM high status groups (Williams et al., 2019). This study confirms how racism, health, stress, and intergenerational wealth gaps deeply impact individual and family processes (Flynn et al., 2017; Shapiro, 2004, 2017). Adverse health/mental well-being among these respondents often affected their career success, employment retention, economic stability, and family growth and functioning.

This study of URM families begged for transparent and theoretically grounded intersectional inquiry that accounts for history, power relations, and structural racism. The intentional measurement of the intersectional identity of the respondents captured the unique characteristics and experiences of each of the groups and the specific ways in which each group perceived their presence in academic spaces and treatment (e.g., discrimination and fear of using family leave policies) and its impact on their family roles and processes. As a theoretical and methodological paradigm, intersectionality can inform and reimagine new ways to critically examine family processes and social inequalities, discrimination, privilege and oppression, and within-group complexity, but only if social justice and empowerment do not “become obsolete goals” (Few-Demo, 2014, p.180). Collins (2019) asserts that the unique characteristics of intersectionality are that it is characterized by “relationality as a key construct (race, gender, and class)” and that praxis and social justice values are integral to “intersectionality in the making.”

By including structural racism and life course theorizing in a scientific path of intersectional discovery and resistance, the field of family science can shed light on macrostructural forces and praxis (policy). These approaches make visible the racialized systems that impede URM professional accomplishments, upward social mobility, optimal health/mental well-being, and increased access to wealth and assets to improve family processes. Despite resistance, new theoretical, bold, and imaginative thinking that challenges white supremacist thought is essential to open new intellectual spaces that move beyond traditional theories and engage in critical theorizing and radical praxis.

## References

- Brown, K. S., Kijakazi, K., Runes, C., & Turner, M. A. (2019). *Confronting structural racism in research and policy analysis*. Urban Institute.
- Burton, L. M., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., & Hordge Freeman, E. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade’s research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 440–459.
- Castañeda, M., Zambrana, R. E., Marsh, K., Vega, W., Becerra, R., & Pérez, D. J. (2015). Role of institutional climate on underrepresented faculty perceptions and decision making in the use of work-family policies. *Family Relations*, 64(5), 711–725.
- Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality’s definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1–20.
- Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Duke University Press.

- Dill, B. T., & Zambrana, R. E. (Eds.). (2009). *Emerging intersections: Race, class, and gender in theory, policy, and practice*. Rutgers University Press.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(2), 169–183.
- Flynn, A., Warren, D. T., Wong, F. J., & Holmberg, S. R. (2017). *The hidden rules of race: Barriers to an inclusive economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kochhar, R., & Cilluffo, A. (2017). *How U.S. wealth inequality has changed since great recession*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved 25 Aug 2020, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/>
- Shapiro, T. M. (2004). *The hidden cost of being African-American: How wealth perpetuates inequality*. Oxford University Press.
- Shapiro, T. M. (2017). *Toxic inequality: How America’s wealth gap destroys mobility, deepens the racial divide, & threatens our future*. Basic Books.
- Thornton, A. (2013). *Reading history sideways: The fallacy and enduring impact of the developmental paradigm on family life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Urban Institute. (2020). *Structural racism in America*. Retrieved 29 June 2021, from [www.urban.org/features/structural-racism-america](http://www.urban.org/features/structural-racism-america)
- Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved 25 August 2020, from [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/)
- Williams, D. R., Lawrence, J. A., & Davis, B. A. (2019). Racism and health: Evidence and needed research. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 40, 105–125.
- Zambrana, R. E. (Ed.). (1995). *Understanding Latino families: Scholarship, policy and practice*. Sage.
- Zambrana, R. E. (2011). *Latinos in American society: Families and communities in transition*. Cornell University Press.
- Zambrana, R. E. (2018). *Toxic ivory towers: The consequences of work stress on underrepresented minority faculty*. Rutgers University Press.
- Zambrana, R. E., Valdez, R. B., Pittman, C. T., Bartko, T., Weber, L., & Parra-Medina, D. (2020). Workplace stress and discrimination effects on the physical and depressive symptoms of underrepresented minority faculty. *Stress and Health*, 37(1), 175–185.
- Zinn, M. B. (1989). Family, race, and poverty in the eighties. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(4), 856–874.
- Zinn, M. B. (1990). Family, feminism, and race in America. *Gender & Society*, 4(1), 68–82.
- Zinn, M. B., & Dill, B. T. (Eds.). (1994). *Women of color in US society*. Temple University.

# Queer Theory



Jenifer McGuire

Fundamentally, queer theory is defined by the use of the word “queer” as a noun, an adjective, and a verb. Something or someone is queer if they are not-normative (adj.); quare adds the nuance of uncontainable, excessive, or overflowing to non-normativity (Johnson, 2001). A person may use the identity label queer (noun) to indicate a way of being different, often but not exclusively in the realm of sexuality and gender. Finally, queering, the verb, is used to deconstruct that which is normative or the concept of normativity altogether.

Queer theory is queer. It has a developmental trajectory that distinguishes it from many other family theories in that it was developed over time, out of community, with many contributing forces. The essence of queer family theory, its history, and influence shifts depending upon the specific vantage from which it is viewed and one’s intentions in using it. The development of queer *family* theory cannot be claimed by any single tradition or force, rather the components of the theory developed over time, in multiple contexts, and were articulated and consolidated in hindsight by family scholars. Inside and outside the field of Family Science, queer theory has been specified and modified to intersect with a variety of specific identities (e.g., trans, quare, or queer-crip theory). Queer theory rejects positivist notions that a theory should inform specific hypotheses, but at the same time informs thousands of empirical studies that through their very existence challenge binaries of sexuality, gender and family, or otherwise disrupt heteronormative and cisnormative social norms (Bible, Bermea, van Eeden-Moorefield, Benson, & Few-Demo, 2017; Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Fish & Russell, 2018; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018).

This chapter starts with a description of the concept of “queering,” which is the underlying mechanism for how queer theory is done (Nash, 2010), with full recognition that analysis broadens when ethnicity and race are considered (i.e., as

---

J. McGuire (✉)

Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development,  
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA  
e-mail: [jmcguire@umn.edu](mailto:jmcguire@umn.edu)

described by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) as “theories of the flesh” and by E. Patrick Johnson (2001) as *quare theory*. Queer as an umbrella identity label is both valued for its inclusivity and challenged for its tendency to homogenize across identities and ignore racialized identities and contexts (Fish & Russell, 2018; Johnson, 2001). Queering is a central approach to methodology in queer theory (Fish & Russell, 2018), and was the primary focus of a special issue in 2016 of *Women’s Studies Quarterly* that revealed multiple critical tactics for queering or further queering existing research (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016). Queering fundamentally relies on using a queer theoretical lens to see things in a nonconventional way. Implicit in its definition is an allowance for complexity where there had been simplicity (Oswald, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005). Queering processes will challenge normativity and privilege (Fish & Russell, 2018), especially when they are combined with an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo, Humble, Curran, & Lloyd, 2016) or conceptualized from within a racialized lens (Johnson, 2016). Queer theory engages queering to examine how people actively construct gender, sexuality, and family, interrogates binary ways of thinking, and challenges power structures that uphold systems of oppression against those viewed as nonnormative.

Queer theory rests upon several basic assumptions. First, the epistemological assumptions of queer theory argue that how something is perceived is contingent upon the view from which it is observed (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Second, the epistemology implies a perspective that how you know is as important as what you know, insisting on recognition of unfixed categories over time and complex boundaries across groups. The desire for methodological attunement to the often complex research focus has given preference over time to the work and scholars who are comfortable with ambiguity, interpretation, person centered approaches, etc. (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016). Third, disrupted binaries are considered an advantage (not a liability) in development and contexts, as well as in research. Fourth, disrupted binaries across a wide range of social categories will intersect in diverse and complex ways (Few-Demo, 2014). For example, intersections among queerness and various social categories have yielded a number of spawn theories that are distinctly situated within a certain category such as queer crip theory (Kafer, 2013; Kondakov, 2018), quare theory (Johnson, 2001, 2016), and transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Finally, the exploration of the socially constructed nature of our realities and belief systems exists in tension with decades of queer scholarship that consistently reinforces a broad array of individual level differences in things like sexual orientation and gender identity.

Queer theory emerged concurrently in academic settings and in social, political, and artistic communities as a way to build on feminist theories and movements. Queer theory was a response to a focus on socially constructed power differentials at times to the exclusion of diverse, nonbinary ways of being, doing, and knowing. For all of queer theory’s focus on perspective taking, disrupting binaries, and transgressive approaches to knowledge production, it initially fell short in accounting for the lived experience of many people who simply existed in queer bodies and experienced the social consequences of being different, but had no intent to overtly

perform gender or transgress social norms. In fact, early queer theory, and queer research, often upheld gender binaries and norms, and heteronormative or homonormative relationship expectations about marriage, divorce, and child-rearing. Over time studies of same-sex families, child conception, adoption, and rearing have moved forward understanding of family structures and processes in ways that disrupt longstanding binaries of gender family and sexuality, and describes the complex boundaries across groups and over time for many families (see Goldberg, 2019, Goldberg & Romero, 2018; and Goldberg & Allen, 2013 for notable examples).

Transgender theory is emerging as a distinct theoretical framework, embedded in concepts of queer theory, and also incorporating ontological, physical aspects of sex, gender, and gender expression. To date, its primary distinction exists in emphasizing the importance of physical embodiment in gender and sexual identity (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory builds on feminism and queer theory, but also diverges in its recognition and integration of what was termed by Julia Serrano (2007, 2013) in her books, *Whipping Girl* and *Excluded*, as “subconscious sex.” One’s subconscious sex both attends to the “born this way” experience of many queer and trans persons (Serano, 2007), while also acknowledging the empowering nature of claiming performative aspects of gender expression, and acknowledging the socially constructed meanings placed on gender, gender roles, and gender expression (Butler, 1990). Transgender theory begins to bridge the gap between interpretations of gender as performative and socially constructed on the one hand, and converging bodies of evidence both from personal narratives and biological studies that suggest some elements of queerness, gender expression and identity may have internal, ontological origins.

## Origins and Historical Development of Queer Theory

Queer theory cannot be attributed to a single intellectual origin, scholar or tradition. Many contributing forces for this theory have become clear mostly in hindsight. For example, major cultural antecedents of modern queer theory, such as covert homoerotic references in nineteenth-century literature, are crystallized only when viewed through a retrospective lens and they can only be seen by those who are willing to see them. Today’s queer theory is a dynamic system working to integrate late twentieth-century feminism (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978; Sedgwick, 1990), which is often attributed as the origins of queer theory in academic settings, with decolonizing efforts of indigenous and culturally diverse groups (Enos, 2018), new medical understandings about gendered bodies and cognitions (Sánchez & Pankey, 2017), early twentieth-century intellectual studies of sexuality (Stryker, 2008), and troves of complementary cultural, artistic, and political products. Looking retrospectively, from this twenty-first-century vantage, it is possible to see the many contributing forces over the past century and a half that have ultimately converged to generate the current iteration of modern queer theory.

At its heart, queer theory development always had an element of activism because of the historic oppression of LGBTQ persons; thus, it is inherently political. Queer deviance obtained western political visibility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, Germany sponsored the Institute for Sexual Research, led by Magnus Hirschfeld who promoted rights of people who were sexually different. The Institute for Sexual Research was a bastion of progressive thought in sexuality and gender studies, and a hub for intellectuals and activists from queer and trans society. In 1933, under the Nazis, the institute was closed and its renowned library was burned. Thereafter, any sort of sexual deviant was marked with a pink triangle by the Nazis, a symbol retained to this day as a symbol of gay pride and liberation (Stryker, 2008).

Later feminisms and gender studies of the 1990s created a structure for the convergence of contemporary queer and trans theories as they apply to families. Queer theory did not originate within the field of family science; it was born from feminist (women's studies) and gender studies spaces, deriving from poststructuralism in particular. The concepts began to crystalize in the 1970s and 1980s (Foucault, 1978; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Anzaldúa, 1987; Butler, 1988) and the academic use of the term, queer theory, was coined by a group of scholars and writers around 1990 (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). Disparate accounts exist documenting the origins of the term "queer theory," lending further credence to the notion that this theory, unlike most other theories, and certainly family science theories, does not belong exclusively to scholars or to the academy. Queer theory was grounded in queer political and artistic communities, with later articulation and publication of major tenets in scholarly domains (see Rosenberg, 2008, for a detailed history of queer theory).

Coalescing and antecedent theoretical and empirical work deepened and broadened queer theory and how it contributed to Family Science. Integration of decolonizing trends within feminisms were evident in the 1990s; however, they were not recognized or named as critical elements of modern queer theory until later. For example, around 1990, a Pan-Indian collaboration formed and named the concept of *two-spirit*, which is an umbrella term that encompasses specific language used across many tribal communities to describe people from indigenous communities who identify embodiment of two genders residing within one person (see Enos, 2018, for a description). These concepts and tribe-specific language predate recorded history. A broad collaboration of American Indians adopted the word two-spirit (in English) as an umbrella term that represents a broad range of people indigenous to the Americas, defined not only in sexual and gender variation, but also spiritual variation, and social roles that expect positioning oneself to support those who come before and after. Many tribes and indigenous languages had retained this knowledge and culture from before American colonial times, and others had not (see also, <https://rainbowresourcecentre.org/files/16-08-Two-Spirit.pdf> for more context and history). The action of creating a name for this shared social role and internal identity supports queer and transgender theoretical development regarding the view of identity as both internal and socially constructed (Nagoshi, 2012). Having a label also allows for hypothesis testing based on criteria (i.e., one can test if they are two-spirit by assessing whether they have both the internal identity and the social role).



In terms of the timing of queer theory development, late twentieth-century shifts in research that incorporate empirical studies of LGB persons, some with explicit feminist perspectives and others not, and decolonizing movements that reclaim the distinct language and social roles for indigenous persons, are concurrent with third wave feminism. However, during that time, discussions of queer theory and feminism did not significantly incorporate decolonizing forces or include reference to the Pan Indian collaboration that had named Two-Spirit in a way that brought together many tribal lineages and ancient traditions under a common umbrella.

### *Emergent Queer Family Scholarship*

The 1990s were a time when research focused on queer persons began to shift from a focus on HIV transmission among men who have sex with men to a broader range of identities, sexualities, and family practices. Certain disciplines and areas of study have always been more receptive to queer-oriented research and theoretical development such as sociology, gender studies, arts, and humanities. Since the 1990s, family research has seen a considerable growth in queer scholarship, specifically that focused on sexual minority youth well-being, same-sex parenting and divorce, transgender youth, and chosen families. Charlotte Patterson (1992) published a seminal review of studies of children of lesbian and gay parents that defined the parameters of necessary future research, explained the importance of such research to the legal field, and proposed theoretical and research directions that defined same-sex parenting research for at least the next decade. She published empirical work as well, including a between-group comparison study with a sample derived from donor insemination bank recruitment that established irrefutably that children reared in same-sex households developed quite similarly to those in mixed-sex households (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). These studies of children of same-sex parents living openly stimulated challenges to many prominent Family Science, Psychology, Sociology, and legal theories about the proposed roles of men and women in families. Patterson's body of work had a profound impact on alerting the legal landscape for same-sex families, providing support for policies that recognized same-sex unions, and allowed for LGBTQ adoption. Much of the early research had to accommodate positivist, heteronormative expectations in order to be accepted by a broader scientific audience, and thus useful as a means to promote rights. Patterson's work was followed in 1995 by a review of major family journals, their numbers of publications attending to LGB content, and the perspectives they used to publish such research (Allen & Demo, 1995). A subsequent analysis of diversity among same-sex family structures and forms provided a clear list of assumptions common to existing research on LGB families, and a call to action to move research away from positivist between group comparisons to postpositivist approaches that could examine how LGB families function despite the limitations of social context (Demo & Allen, 1996). Over time, fewer studies have needed to compare LGBTQ groups to heterosexual groups as a means to assuring "normalcy"

within the LGBTQ community or to be as stringently tied to heteronormative research paradigms for survival. Nevertheless, those initial positivist empirical studies of queer families prompted and created an opening by which the nature of queer theory for families could be first integrated into a coherent framework of queering families.

Concurrent to the development of positivist empirical work on queer families, feminist theoretical work was developed and empirically supported with queer families (e.g., Allen & Demo, 1995; Demo & Allen, 1996). Katherine Allen's (1995, 2001, 2007) deeply personal approach to analyses and research on same sex family systems was a sharp contrast to the approach of Charlotte Patterson (1992), a developmental psychologist; nevertheless, both scholars are in hindsight, critical architects for building queer family theory as well as queer empirical support for family science. Allen situates her research, analyses and discussion with perspective on her own positionality, providing an authentic and credible reading of the data and issues before her.

### *Queer Theory in Family Sciences and Theories*

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, queer theory has garnered more formal inclusion and interpretation in the context of major family theories. It was first included in the 2005 edition of the *Sourcebook for Family Theories* (Oswald et al., 2005) and was a primary focus in the *Handbook of Feminist Family Studies* (Lloyd, Few, & Allen, 2009). With the formal placement of queer theory alongside more traditional family theories, queer theory was given credibility as a “real” theory, worthy of informing family research and contributing to ongoing theory development in family science. Queer theory is distinct among family theories in that it not only centers previously marginalized positions (or populations) and identifies costs inherent in the systems of marginalization, but it also seeks to identify the potential developmental and familial advantages associated with occupying marginalized social locations. Centering marginalized positions provides a queer methodological strategy to redefine the parameters of family, sexuality, and gender. Such an approach was also articulated by early trans and nonbinary activists and authors who described the recentering of gender, and the movement away from binary conceptualizations of gender or sexuality (e.g., Bornstein, 1994, 1998; Feinberg, 1998).

Queer theory in developmental research shares a similar story. Queer youth have been a central focus of research, with their developmental well-being viewed from a lens of existing in a marginalized context (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2018). Work on queer and trans youth has called into question decades of known developmental science, redefining processes of development such as how does gender develop, when is sexual orientation known, and what is the role of parents in sexual and gender well-being (Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016).

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have been a period of rapid expansion for queer and transgender theory in family science. The essential

concepts described in Oswald et al.'s (2005) chapter of disrupting the binaries of gender, sexuality, and family by in essence “doing” gender, sexuality, and family (as a verb) laid the foundation for a broad range of theoretical writing and empirical research in human development and family science.

### ***An Extension of Queer Theory: Transgender (Transfamily) Theory***

Transgender theory developed to account for more internal sense of felt gender identity (Serano, 2007, 2013; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Serrano labels the internal sense of felt gender identity as subconscious sex – the sex that existed all along but may not have been labelled at birth, or even been acknowledged by the person who owned that sex until much later in life. In turn, transfamily theory examined the ways in which family systems must adapt to acknowledge the doing of gender (McGuire, Kivalanka, Catalpa, & Toomey, 2016), including the gender roles of parents (Bos, 2010; Chan et al., 1998; Bos, Van Balen, & Van Den Boom, 2007; Patterson, 1992) and parenting for the gender identity of youth (Kivalanka, Leslie, & Radina, 2014; Kivalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014), as well as gender transitions in couples (Pfeffer, 2008). In this way, transgender theory grapples with one of the predominant tensions between queer theory and feminism, which has to do with the innate versus socially constructed nature of sexuality, gender, and family.

Recently, a model updating Oswald's original concepts to incorporate intersectionality and overlay temporal as well as historical components was published (Allen & Mendez, 2018). In this important theoretical piece, Allen and Mendez (2018) explored the concept of hegemony as it applies to heteronormativity (See also Oswald et al., 2005, and Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985 for further explanation of heteronormativity and hegemony respectively) and intersecting identities (including race, ethnicity, ability, class and nationality). Each of the intersecting identities is the site of hegemony related to what is perceived as normal or powerful, and these intersecting forces can move people closer to or further away from deviance or normal. For example, over time, cisgender lesbians who are white, educated, and partnered have moved closer and closer to the “normative” side of both sexuality and family binaries.

### **Contemporary and Future Queer Family Research**

If the central contribution of the Oswald et al. (2005) chapter was to outline the disruption of binaries by doing gender, sexuality, and family, then the primary growth in the field of family science since that time has been to begin to define how that disruption is accomplished by orienting positionality within a complex set of social systems. Furthermore, our understanding of gender, sexuality, and family has

begun to be seen as more than a potential set of binaries to disrupt, and rather a set of interrelated multidimensional systems among themselves.

Contemporary approaches to queer studies engage a systemic perspective as a mechanism for disrupting binaries. Acosta (2018) delineated queerer, intersectional family scholarship as a form of differentiation rooted in ethnic identity processes. Acosta described the ways that Latinx people with “sexually nonconforming” relationships (author’s language, p. 410) integrated families of choice and families of origin, in contrast to prevailing research in queer family science, which generally has found preference for families of choice, or at least delineated boundaries between families of origin and families of choice. This integration was not only a contextually-based, point of resilience for the rich support it provided, but also a point of significant stress for the time, compromise, and energy it took. Likewise, Mignon Moore’s (2011) study of African-American queer families disrupts prevailing lines of research regarding white ways of being a queer family. Finally, research and theory describing the role of Two-Spirit tribal community members has made clear the intersection of community, sexuality, and gender. The gender and sometimes sexuality role of holding both masculine and feminine positionalities is integrated within the social role of providing mentoring, social position in society, and, in some cases, taking a role as a healer (Enos, 2018). In each of these examples, the way of disrupting the binary is defined by the ethnic identity context – a departure from early iterations of queer theory and queer family theory.

Current research on queer and trans populations is dominated by a *minority stress perspective* – a framework which complements queer theoretical approaches by focusing on the systems around which one is marginalized and the processes and outcomes of marginalization (Meyer, 2003). Queer-, trans-, and queer youth-focused minority stress perspectives (Kwon, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015) do not stem directly from queer theory perspectives per se; rather, the two overarching perspectives (queer theory and minority stress) tend to coexist in family, youth, relationship, and other forms of contextual research, each stimulating the other’s development. Minority stress attends very little to the processes of “queering” that defines queer theory, yet focuses more on stigma, prejudice, and discrimination and their links to mental health outcomes reflecting the medical background of that theory (Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015). Minority stress can be smoothly integrated with queer theory as a way to overlay a systems perspective that accounts for the many aspects of well-being that are simply outside of the control of a queer or trans person, such as harassment, discrimination, or unemployment.

An area where research on minority stress has benefitted by, and stimulated further extensions of queer theory, is in the arena of multifaceted sexual and gender identity. For example, minority stress research promotes the exploration of factors that might be associated with more or less enacted and felt stigma. A queer theory perspective promotes the disruption of binaries around identity and social context, suggesting that elements of a multifaceted identity or context may be influenced differently by stressors; a resulting line of research has found that there are distinct stressors, and potential risk factors across various aspects of sexual and gender identity. For example, youth who identify as “mostly heterosexual” report an enhanced

profile of experienced stressors (Austin, Roberts, Corliss, & Molnar, 2008), as well as an extended developmental timeline of identity consolidation (Calzo, Masyn, Austin, Jun, & Corliss, 2016).

Current work focuses broadly on the intersection of gender and sexuality, and is beginning to recenter some concepts around race and/or ability. In the realm of family, parent-child processes as socializers of gender are called into question by the central epistemological debate of gender as essential versus socially constructed that queer theory raises (e.g., Sánchez & Pankey, 2017). Family acceptance and gender stability are also fundamental elements of the human condition that are called into question by queer theory (e.g., Robinson, 2018). Through emerging research, it has become clear that each construct of sexuality, gender, and family is neither binary nor even on a single spectrum. Each is its own multidimensional complex construct. For example, gender includes the construct of gender dysphoria, genderqueer identity, gender expression, gender identity, and change in gender over time. Sexuality can include attraction, behavior, identity, sexual functioning, and satisfaction (among other things). Family can be defined through family of origin, family of choice, the integration of those two, family reproductive approaches, boundary ambiguity, and family acceptance and rejection of sexuality and gender. Contemporary queer research has begun to delineate and study many dimensions of sexuality, gender, and family from a perspective that rejects binary conceptualizations of how those constructs are defined or measured.

Finally, contemporary research has viewed queer processes through a lens of resilience, a potential developmental advantage when there is a non-normative trajectory (e.g., Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). The capacity of a queer approach is to push the field and expose new concepts (e.g., nonbinary language; viewing gender as fluid; societal responsibility to protect against family rejection; creating gender-neutral bathrooms). Understanding that queerness can provide developmental opportunities allows us to theoretically consider new solutions to old problems, and to see the important role that the adaptability of queering provides.

### *Some Challenges Toward Further Growth*

This is an incredibly dynamic time for queer theory, with much growth and opportunity, but also significant challenges. Legal limitations placed on same-sex relationships have ended, more entities are funding research focused on LGBTQ populations as a health disparity group, and cultural norms opposed to bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity have become more prevalent. At the same time, transgender people are facing increasing legislative backlash every year, with anti-transgender rights initiatives on ballots in almost every state. With the exhausting push and pull of progress and backlash, this is a very important time for growth in theory and research that supports understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity.

There are some major limitations to queer theory, and varying degrees of response to these limitations in current work. First, queerness is often inadvertently assumed to mean only about same sex, or even “gay” with little or no attention paid to the “queering” concept (Oswald et al., 2005) and how it can be applied in many domains. In this way, queer theory runs the risk of falling to the same demise as many theories of not being seen as broadly applicable enough to be necessary. Early manifestations of queer theory focused on problematizing heteronormativity and binary gender (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) with critical analyses, identity politics, and activism as primary tools. Over time, more and more empirical work has emerged, which has not only served to articulate initial dimensions of “queer methods” (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016), a primary reaction raised as a response to the Oswald et al. (2005) chapter, but also has broadened the scope and utility of queer theory considerably.

Second, positionality as a premise suggests that changes to an environment would have dramatic impact on persons. The challenge of this assumption is twofold as changing the environment is fairly difficult, creating a problem of testability for the theory, and secondly, cultural, psychological, and medical studies of childhood gender diversity mandate recognition of relatively immutable characteristics of gender identity and expression for some people (Burke, Manzouri, & Savic, 2017; Gülğöz, DeMeules, Gelman, & Olson, 2019; Olson et al., 2016; Peper, Burke, & Wierenga, 2020). Queer and especially transgender theories reignite a major tension of early feminism regarding the socially constructed nature of gender in society juxtaposed to the expression of gender and sexuality within a specific individual, which many queer and trans persons view as something that emanates ontologically, that is essentially from within themselves (see Serano, 2007, 2013). For the most part, the debate is centered on the subjective experience of the person rather than biological or genetic tests of features of development. For instance, some experience gender identity development as emanating from within themselves and others as something they work hard to cultivate. Ongoing research will need to further explore the intersection of ontological gender and sexual identity with socially constructed gender and sex role expectations. Some of this research exists in examining how contexts accommodate nonconformity, or how contexts are built to dismantle expectations of gender role conformity. A next phase of research will be to examine how queering contexts may influence trajectories of development not only for sex and gender minority persons, but also across a full range of sexuality, family, and gender expressions. Political and social pushback against queering contexts and social institutions (e.g., fully inclusive bathroom design) has historically been, and is currently, quite fierce. Documenting the advantages of a queer inclusive environment for everyone may be the only research-based way to confront ongoing challenges to the validity and full inclusion of queer and trans people in society. The positionality, specifically with regard to views of gender identity development, sets up a clear risk of winners and losers when dissecting this perspective. When power is enacted to limit inclusion based on binary or static notions of sex and gender, people with diverse identities lose safety, family, and belonging, whereas people with power uphold longstanding structures of influence that privilege those with

majority identities, conformity to social norms, resources, and willingness to use aggressive tactics.

If gender, gender identity, and gender expression are viewed as socially constructed, we can challenge the social systems that oppress women and limit women's power. Socially constructed gender gives us space to explore, transgress, and change over time. At the same time, socially constructed gender leaves the door open to exploit that social construction to harm freedom of expression, based on the idea that gender identity is a choice that can be cultivated, explored, or changed. A wide body of evidence is developing to suggest that for some people, transgender expression and identity reflects innate, measureable physiological differences and (Peper et al., 2020) is established at an early age (Kupalanka, Leslie, & Radina, 2014; Kupalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014; Olson et al., 2016). Others have a far more fluid experience of gender development over time (Ehrensaft, 2011, 2016; see also McGuire & Morrow, 2020). The recognition of some essentialist components of gender, especially within certain groups, has laid the groundwork for people with trans and gender nonbinary identities to advocate for their rights to be recognized and medically supported. The incorporation of a more ontological (i.e., "born this way") element of gender identity forms the foundation of the evolving transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Terrell, 2012).

Third, queer theory itself was positioned and normed in ways that influenced its development. As such, the theory itself became centered on adult, largely white and intellectualized, homonormative ways of being, and has had to push itself to move away from that trap. Although representation by queer women of color was present from the earliest developments in queer theory (e.g., Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), queer theory continues to be criticized for failing to specifically attend to issues of race or even class. One response to non-racialized queer theory, quare theory, stems from gender studies and incorporates race or ethnicity as a major component of the position of centering, acknowledging that for people of color, queerness cannot be delineated from racialized experiences and systems (Johnson, 2001, 2016; Johnson & Henderson, 2005). E. Patrick Johnson (2001) first described quare theory and continues to refine it (Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Johnson, 2016). Quare theory was first described by its situatedness in racialized identities, linked to struggles against oppression, and in the context of sexual and gender identities that always intersect with racialized ones (Johnson, 2001). Quare theory has developed to more fully describe the performance-based aspects of oral history, honing in on the particulars of language use as a symbol of identity and digging more deeply into the nuances of positionality in research (Johnson, 2016).

A complementary approach has been to use a framework of intersectionality (see Few Demo, Hunter, and Muruthi, this volume) alongside queer theory as a mechanism to ensure that social categories such as race or social class do not become muted in the presence of a queering process, rather they are seen as a platform for altering the very nature of queering. Queer theory and intersectionality coexist nicely in research because they take complementary approaches to examining marginalization. Where queer theory focuses on dismantling binaries, intersectionality provides a framework for methods and analyses that will account for multiple

coexisting identities, and how each is situated in contexts, and answers to social power structures. Intersectionality demands attention to how people negotiate multiple identities, and reconcile relationships between multiple social groups with and explicit focus on race and/or ethnicity as the site of at least one identity (Few-Demo et al., 2016). Every social category that is a site of potential binary disruption (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, family membership, ability) can intersect with other social categories in a variety of ways, and an intersectionality approach would situate race and power dynamics with race as the primary organizing feature of analyses.

A more extensive discussion of the theoretical framework of Intersectionality is reserved for that chapter (this volume); however, to fully explore queer theory, concepts of intersecting and overlapping identities must be explored (Few-Demo, 2014). In queer theory, social categories can focus on the specifics of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, as well as age, and how the intersections of those competing identities can influence minority stress, opportunity, and cultural understanding (e.g., viewing the relationship between sexual orientation or gender identity as dynamic) (Nagoshi et al., 2012). People have multiple social identities that may conflict and are each subject to distinct and intersecting systems of power. An individual's overall social location will vary according to the vantage from which it is viewed – necessitating more intentional intersectional approaches to queering methods (Fish & Russell, 2018). Race is particularly relevant in its overlap to queer theory because race has historically been minimized in studies utilizing queer theory (see Acosta, 2008, 2018; and, Johnson, 2001, 2016 for notable exceptions to this trend). Race, and the power differentials within and between groups, is a central feature of an intersectionality framework, creating space for significant future opportunity (Few-Demo, 2014).

## **Final Reflections on Future Directions**

The most powerful direction I see for queer theory in Family Science relates to the development of research methods to apply queering concepts to the ways that we study families. Not all, or even most, queer research or research on queer, trans, or gender diverse persons comes from a queer theoretical perspective. In fact, much of the research on queer populations is positivist and lacks perspective on the vantage and advantage of queer studies, theories of positionality and power, and distinct notions of variability that queer theory informs (van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018). Much research on queer and transgender populations has had to distance itself from queer theory in order to be accepted in mainstream journals, to be funded by government or large foundations, and to be viewed as legitimate or scientific enough to influence policy. Some examples of this type of research include studies documenting whether children of same-sex parents were more likely to have same-sex relations, studies comparing the psychological functioning of trans kids to cisgender kids, and evaluation studies of heteronormative condom education as a means to eliminate HIV transmission.



New approaches to theory building and research methods have begun to challenge the hegemonic nature of normativity as a paradigm. Whether it is possible to orient research and theory on process or the “doing” part of family remains to be fully explored in research. Some notable efforts have begun to explore this approach. For example, a long-term study of families with open adoption (Goldberg, 2019) explored many processes families encountered in intimate detail (e.g., loss before adoption, the role of the birth father, experiences with social media) and revealed the power of Goldberg’s distinct vantage (studying diverse families, over many years, with detailed interviews) to reveal powerful truths. The incremental work of documenting or orienting on process (rather than normative values) allows for research findings that are available for theory building and queering other theories. In another example from family acceptance research, if a person’s gender identity is not acknowledged, or they experience uncertainty about their own placement in the family, they are physically acknowledged, but psychologically deemed invisible (not acknowledged). Using the language and concepts of ambiguous loss (physically present but psychologically absent) allows for a queering of that theory (McGuire, Catalpa, Lacey, & Kivalanka, 2016).

Conversely, theorists have begun to bring other theories into queer theory to create a more representative and testable model of queer theory (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Allen and Mendez’s (2018) description of hegemonic heteronormativity provides a conceptual model for testing hypotheses about why some queer identified people move through the world with more privilege than others. Another queer informed approach includes developing measurement that orients and norms items not on the population at large, but specifically on people most influenced by the concepts being measured changes the nature of sensitivity and specificity in measurement. For instance, my own research team has developed measures of genderqueer identity normed across transgender binary, transgender nonbinary, and cisgender LGB subsamples (McGuire, Beek, Catalpa, & Steensma, 2019). In this work, we find that there are multiple components of genderqueer identities, including nonbinary expression, as well as more internally held social and political beliefs, and experiences of fluidity. Each of these subscales varies across different subgroups within the LGBTQ community, suggesting that even within the concepts of genderqueer identity, there are multiple domains and dimensions at play. The distinctions among subscales, and subgroups, would not be possible without using a queer methodological approach.

Finally, we are just now entering a period of history where it is truly possible to understand the links between physical aspects of the body, neurological components of the mind, cognitions, and psychological markers of identity, and how those related to one another. Person-centered approaches that are able to orient on the linkages among those distinct factors within a person provide another opportunity

to queer methodology and illuminate things that would not be visible from a different vantage. Whether it is through our conceptual models, the instruments we are able to develop and use, the procedures of data collection we employ, or how we choose to analyze the data we collect, queer theory will always create opportunities to explore novel phenomena and provide distinct perspectives.

## References

- Acosta, K. L. (2008). Lesbians in the borderlands: Shifting identities and imagined communities. *Gender & Society, 22*(5), 639–659.
- Acosta, K. L. (2018). Queering family scholarship: Theorizing from the borderlands. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(2), 406–418.
- Allen, K. R. (1995). Opening the classroom closet: Sexual orientation and self-disclosure. *Family Relations, 44*(2), 136.
- Allen, K. R. (2001). Feminist visions for transforming families. *Journal of Family Issues, 22*(6), 791–809.
- Allen, K. R. (2007). Ambiguous Loss after lesbian couples with children break up: A case for same-gender divorce\*. *Family Relations, 56*(2), 175–183.
- Allen, K. R., & Demo, D. H. (1995). The families of lesbians and gay men: A new frontier in family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57*(1), 111.
- Allen, S. H., & Mendez, S. N. (2018). Hegemonic heteronormativity: Toward a new era of queer family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(1), 70–86.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (4th ed.). Aunt Lute.
- Austin, S. B., Roberts, A. L., Corliss, H. L., & Molnar, B. E. (2008). Sexual violence victimization history and sexual risk indicators in a community-based urban cohort of “mostly heterosexual” and heterosexual young women. *American Journal of Public Health, 98*(6), 1015–1020.
- Bible, J., Bermea, A., van Eeden-Moorefield, B., Benson, K. E., & Few-Demo, A. L. (2017). A content analysis of the first decade of the journal of GLBT family studies. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 14*(4), 337–355.
- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us*. Routledge.
- Bornstein, K. (1998). *My gender workbook: how to become a real man, a real woman, the real you, or something else entirely*. In New York. Routledge.
- Bos, H. H. M. W. (2010). Planned gay father families in kinship arrangements. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy (ANZJFT), 31*(4), 356–371.
- Bos, H. M. W., Van Balen, F., & Van Den Boom, D. C. (2007). Child adjustment and parenting in planned lesbian-parent families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*(1), 38–48.
- Brim, M., & Ghaziani, A. (2016). Introduction: Queer methods. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 44*(3/4), 14–27.
- Burke, S. M., Manzouri, A. H., & Savic, I. (2017). Structural connections in the brain in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation. *Scientific Reports, 7*(1).
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal, 40*(4), 519.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Calzo, J. P., Masyn, K. E., Austin, S. B., Jun, H.-J., & Corliss, H. L. (2016). Developmental latent patterns of identification as mostly heterosexual versus lesbian, gay, or bisexual. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 27*(1), 246–253.
- Carrigan, T., Connell, B., & Lee, J. (1985). Toward a new sociology of masculinity. *Theory and Society, 14*(5), 551–604.

- Chan, R. W., Raboy, B., & Patterson, C. J. (1998). Psychosocial adjustment among children conceived via donor insemination by lesbian and heterosexual mothers. *Child Development, 69*(2), 443–457.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics*. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.
- Demo, D. H., & Allen, K. R. (1996). Diversity within lesbian and gay families: Challenges and implications for family theory and research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 13*(3), 415–434.
- Ehrensaft, D. (2011). *Gender born, gender made: raising healthy gender-nonconforming children*. Experiment.
- Ehrensaft, D. (2016). *The gender creative child: Pathways for nurturing and supporting children who live outside gender boxes*. The Experiment.
- Enos, T. (2018, September 13). *8 Things you should know about Two-Spirit people*. *Indian Country Today: Digital Indigenous News*.
- Feinberg, L. (1998). *Trans Liberation: Beyond pink or blue*. Beacon Press.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 6*(2), 169–183.
- Few-Demo, A. L., Humble, Á. M., Curran, M. A., & Lloyd, S. A. (2016). Queer Theory, Intersectionality, and LGBT-parent families: Transformative critical pedagogy in family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*(1), 74–94.
- Fish, J. N., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Queering methodologies to understand queer families. *Family Relations, 67*(1), 12–25.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality (1st American Edition ed)*. Pantheon Books.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2019). *Open adoption and diverse families: complex relationships in the digital age*. Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Allen, K. R. (Eds.). (2013). *LGBT-parent families: Innovations in research and implications for practice*. Springer.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Romero, A. P. (Eds.). (2018). *LGBTQ divorce and relationship dissolution: psychological and legal perspectives and implications for practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Gülgöz, S., DeMeules, M., Gelman, S. A., & Olson, K. R. (2019). Gender essentialism in transgender and cisgender children. *PLOS ONE, 14*(11), e0224321.
- Johnson, E. P. (2001). “Quare” studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 21*(1), 1–25.
- Johnson, E. P. (2016). Put a little honey in my sweet tea: Oral history as quare performance. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 44*(3/4), 51–67.
- Johnson, E. P., & Henderson, M. (2005). *Black queer studies: a critical anthology*. Duke University Press.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Indiana University Press.
- Kondakov, A. (2018). Crip kinship: A political strategy of people who were deemed contagious by the shirtless Putin. *Feminist Formations, 30*(1), 71–90.
- Kuvalanka, K. A., Leslie, L. A., & Radina, R. (2014). Coping with sexual stigma: Emerging adults with lesbian parents reflect on the impact of heterosexism and homophobia during their adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 29*(2), 241–270.
- Kuvalanka, K. A., Weiner, J. L., & Mahan, D. (2014). Child, family, and community transformations: Findings from interviews with mothers of transgender girls. *Journal of GLBT family studies, 10*(4), 354–379.
- Kwon, P. (2013). Resilience in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 17*(4), 371–383.
- Lloyd, S. A., Few, A. L., & Allen, K. R. (2009). *Handbook of feminist family studies*. Sage.

- McGuire, J. K., Beek, T. F., Catalpa, J. M., & Steensma, T. D. (2019). The genderqueer identity (GQI) scale: Measurement and validation of four distinct subscales with trans and LGBTQ clinical and community samples in two countries. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2-3), 289–304.
- McGuire, J. K., Catalpa, J. M., Lacey, V., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2016). Ambiguous loss as a framework for interpreting gender transitions in families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(3), 373–385.
- McGuire, J. K., Kuvalanka, K. A., Catalpa, J. M., & Toomey, R. B. (2016). Transfamily theory: How the presence of trans\* family members informs gender development in families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(1), 60–73.
- McGuire, J. K., & Morrow, Q. J. (2020). Pathways of gender development. In M. Forcier, G. Van Schalkwyk, & J. L. Turban (Eds.), *Pediatric gender identity: Gender-affirming care for transgender & gender diverse youth* (pp. 33–46). Springer International Publishing.
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(5), 674–697.
- Moore, M. R. (2011). *Invisible families: Gay identities, relationships, and motherhood among black women*. University of California Press.
- Moraga, C. E., & Anzaldúa, G. (1981). *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color* (2nd ed.). Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Nagoshi, J. L., & Brzuzu, S. I. (2010). Transgender theory: Embodying research and practice. *Affilia*, 25(4), 431–443.
- Nagoshi, J. L., Brzuzu, S. I., & Terrell, H. K. (2012). Deconstructing the complex perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation among transgender individuals. *Feminism & Psychology*, 22(4), 405–422.
- Nash, C. J. (2010). In K. Browne (Ed.), *Queer methods and methodologies: Intersecting queer theories and social science research* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics*, 137(3), e20153223.
- Oswald, R. F., Acock, A. C., Allen, K. R., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. M. (2005). Decentering heteronormativity: A model for family studies. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 143–165). SAGE Publications.
- Patterson, C. J. (1992). Children of lesbian and gay parents. *Child Development*, 63(5), 1025–1042.
- Peper, J. S., Burke, S. M., & Wierenga, L. M. (2020). Sex differences and brain development during puberty and adolescence. *Handbook of clinical neurology*, 175, 25–54.
- Pfeffer, C. A. (2008). Bodies in relation-bodies in transition: Lesbian partners of trans men and body image. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(4), 325–345.
- Rich, A. (1993). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. In H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader*. Routledge.
- Robinson, B. A. (2018). Conditional families and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth homelessness: Gender, sexuality, family instability, and rejection. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80(2), 383–396.
- Rosenberg, T. (2008). Locally queer. A note on the feminist genealogy of queer theory. *Graduate journal of social science*, 5(2), 5–18.
- Sánchez, F. J., & Pankey, T. (2017). Essentialist views on sexual orientation and gender identity. In K. A. DeBord, A. R. Fisher, K. J. Bieschke, & R. M. Perez (Eds.), *Handbook of sexual orientation and gender diversity in counseling and psychotherapy*. (1 ed., pp. 51-74). American Psychological Association.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Singh, A. A., Meng, S. E., & Hansen, A. W. (2014). “I am my own gender”: Resilience strategies of trans youth. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 92(2), 208–218.
- Stryker, S. (2008). Transgender history, homonormativity, and disciplinarity. *Radical History Review*, 2008(100), 145–157.

- Testa, R. J., Habarth, J., Peta, J., Balsam, K., & Bockting, W. (2015). Development of the gender minority stress and resilience measure. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 2*(1), 65–77.
- Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Coping with sexual orientation–related minority stress. *Journal of Homosexuality, 65*(4), 484–500.
- van Eeden-Moorefield, B. (2018). Introduction to the special issue: Intersectional variations in the experiences of queer families. *Family Relations, 67*(1), 7–11.

# Application: Queering Family Science: Applications of Queer Theory for Family Research and Practice



Samuel H. Allen

Critics of queer theory perpetually question whether or not the theory is “applicable enough” (See McGuire, p. 14), a critique which has casted doubt upon its necessity within family science. Indeed, family scholars have underscored queer theory’s struggle to be “widely relevant” within the field (Oswald et al., 2009, p. 50). In light of the aforementioned critique, this supplement to McGuire’s chapter is of particular importance to showcase the full extent of queer theory’s applicability and its resulting relevance to *all* family scholars, regardless of the populations they study. Accordingly, the goal for this addendum is simple: to debunk the aforementioned critique of queer theory by illuminating its utility across common avenues of praxis within family science. Many family scholars believe that central to the process of theorizing families is demonstrating how said theories can be used in practice to “help real families cope with real problems” (Goldner, 1993, p. 623). This application chapter intends to demonstrate how queer theory can be utilized for that very purpose.

One persistent misconception about queer theory, which has also been used to justify claims of its irrelevance, is that queer *theory* is only used for the study of queer *people*. Admittedly, the association between queer theory and queer people is not entirely misconstrued: queer people were central to the theory’s intellectual development and its emancipatory orientation (Turner, 2000). Moreover, as queer theory has gradually developed within family science since its introduction to the field over a decade ago, its use has largely been limited to family scholars studying queer-identified populations (though, as McGuire points out in this chapter, the opposite trend was true historically for reasons she identifies therein). To aid in highlighting queer theory’s applicability, substantiating its relevance, and showcasing its palatability to family scholars beyond merely those who conduct research

---

S. H. Allen (✉)

The Family Institute, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

e-mail: [sallen@family-institute.org](mailto:sallen@family-institute.org)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_34](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_34)

477

with queer people, each of the following application examples includes populations who are *not* queer-identified. For the examples included below, I address two assumptions of queer theory. First, the pervasive ontological categories of gender, sexuality, and family—which are assumed to be binary, fixed, and innate—are problematic, and need to be challenged and disrupted (Oswald et al., 2005). Instead, these and all other social phenomena are constructed and reconstructed via social interactions. McGuire asserts that socially constructed binaries and their respective categories are meant to be deconstructed, in other words, considered beyond their historically binary and/or categorical conceptualizations. Doing so not only challenges the problematic assumptions on which these ways of thinking are based but also seeks to dismantle the inequitable distribution of power across a given binary or a series of categories. A second core assumption is that identities are intersectional and encompass multiple social locations and interlocking systems of power and oppression (i.e., McGuire’s “orienting positionality within a complex set of social systems” on p. 11). Such intersectional identities must be taken into account when studying families—as Allen and Mendez (2018) asserted, “to consider a queer family, or any family, only in terms of sexuality, gender, and family...is to inadequately consider it” (p. 76).

## Applying Queer Theory to Family Research and Policy

### *Family Research*

Queer theory represents a uniquely useful framework from which family research can be conceptualized and executed. Unquestionably, the theory aligns itself more effortlessly with qualitative research methods rather than quantitative ones (see, for example, Kivalanka et al., 2018). Qualitative family research seeks to understand the meanings people construct about their lives, and how they do so; qualitative research specifically with minority populations, including with queer families, is often concerned with “understanding and deconstructing intersectional systems of power and privilege” (Fish & Russell, 2018, p. 17). These very broad but established and widespread qualitative endeavors not only reflect, but embrace, the aforementioned core assumptions of queer theory. Indeed, family scholars have noted that empirical queer research is more likely to utilize qualitative over quantitative research methods (Goldberg, 2010; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2018).

The very assumptions of queer theory that cooperate so readily with qualitative inquiries post obvious limitations when applying them to quantitative family research—what Fish and Russell (2018) called the “epistemological and methodological tensions” between queer theory and “mainstream (dominant, positivistic, empirical) methods” (p. 14). Namely, how can quantitative data be analyzed, let alone gathered and stored, if categories are evolving, are different for every person, and can change “depending upon your specific vantage” (See McGuire, p. 14)?

Further, how can research participants' identities, which are inherently intersectional, be captured and measured when traditional survey methods are largely unable to fully account for such intersectional experiences (Bowleg, 2012; McCall, 2005)? Despite these apparent epistemological incongruencies, the use of queer theory in family science need not be relegated only to qualitative research (see Acosta, 2018; Grzanka, 2016). Queer theory is both suitable for quantitative projects and has the distinct potential to stimulate the use of novel methodologies within the field (Fish & Russell, 2018; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019).

Consider, for example, a family researcher who studies dual-income, heterosexual, cisgender couples (DIHCCs) in which the female partner out-earns the male partner. The researcher has a particular interest in these couples' family-level variables (e.g., relationship quality, dyadic adjustment, and hours spent performing paid and unpaid labor, respectively). For a particular research study, they elect to perform a latent class analysis (LCA) of the aforementioned family-level variables to obtain a richer understanding of the family dynamics among such dual-income partners. They ask the following question of their data: *do latent classes, characterized by relationship quality, dyadic adjustment, and hours spent doing paid and unpaid labor, exist among DIHCCs in which the female partner out-earns the male partner?*

In contrast to traditional quantitative methods, which are variable-centered, LCA is a person-centered approach that attempts to identify latent classes of people who share a similar pattern of experiences (see Collins & Lanza, 2010). It is particularly useful in its ability to reveal latent subgroups within samples that otherwise appear—or are assumed to be—homogeneous. In this hypothetical study, by intentionally allowing latent classes of family-level variables to emerge, the researcher is forgoing assumed categories and instead allowing the categories to be constructed from the respondents' perspectives. This methodological characteristic mirrors queer theory's assumption that categories and binaries should be disrupted and instead be allowed to be (re-)constructed from the vantage point of the person of interest. Furthermore, LCA, like other mixture modeling techniques, is advantageous in its ability to “measure intersectionality by modeling profiles that characterize multidimensional, interdependent, and mutually constructed identities” (Fish & Russell, 2018, p. 19). In so doing, the researcher is embracing the second core assumption of queer theory that assumes identities to be intersectional and encompass myriad social identities. Accordingly, queer theory would not only be a suitable framework for the aforementioned research study, but one that is well suited to account for the study's epistemology, methodology, and empirical inquiry.

## ***Family Policy***

In addition to its utility for family research, queer theory offers distinct implications for policy work related to families. It is well established that families are greatly impacted by policies and, as such, family scholars continue to play an important role in family policymaking. Extant family theories have been used to inform,



critique, and promote certain family policies (Ooms, 2019); however, queer theory has not been utilized in the same manner. In truth, queer theory has the unique potential not only to inform family policy, but to enhance it.

A perennial challenge in family policy discourse is defining what, exactly, a family *is*: what constitutes, or is considered to be, a “family?” This dilemma persists at every level of policymaking, from within the chambers of the United States Congress, to individual states’ governments, to local municipalities and communities. Queer theory can be useful in helping policy makers answer this eternal and omnipresent conundrum. Below, I highlight queer theory’s utility by applying to a recent state bill that has since become state law. Specifically, I draw attention to the theory’s assertion that binaries and categories, which are assumed to be fixed, are, in fact, fluid and should be deconstructed.

In 2018, the then-Governor Jerry Brown of California signed Assembly Bill 2274 (A.B. 2274), which altered the status of pets in cases of marital separation or dissolution (Division of Property Act, 2018). Previously, pets of married couples in California were considered property of their owners, to be divided among the disputing parties during a divorce or separation in the same way all other chattel—furniture, vehicles, other inanimate possessions—would be divided. However, as of January 1, 2019, when A.B. 2274 was codified into California state law, pets of divorcing couples are now treated by the courts more akin to how those couples’ children would be: judges can, for example, delegate shared custody agreements for pet animals, and, in particularly contentious divorce proceedings, mandate temporary, third-party caretakers for pets until a final determination of legal custody between the divorcing partners is made. Of note, since 2019, similar legislation has been passed or is currently pending in six other states (Chan, 2020).

The case of A.B. 2274, and of analogous legislation in other states, is a prime example of how queer theory can help further expand traditional understandings of “family.” When California lawmakers codified pets within the state’s legal definition of a family, they *queered* the concept of a family: they deconstructed and reconstructed a new understanding of the same term. Distinct from other theoretical perspectives, queer theory affords family policy makers the unique ability to challenge extant categorical understandings of families—such as pets involved in divorce cases in California—recognizing that families, and how we define them, are not fixed or finite. Within the movement advocating for political equality of queer families specifically, one notable example of expanding the federal definition of “family” over the past decade was the successful legalization of marriage between same-sex couples.

In addition to expanding legal definitions of family, queer theory can likewise be used to challenge seemingly immutable definitions of myriad other social categories (i.e., contesting categories; Turner, 2000). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, state and city governments enacted emergency orders that differentiated “essential businesses” from “nonessential businesses.” In some states, “essential businesses” were legislated to include those that sold firearms; in others, such retail venues were omitted from the same classification (e.g., Chamberlin, 2020). Similarly, how policymakers have expanded (or not) the legal definitions of other

social categories—namely, sexuality and gender—has been a particularly salient battleground for those advocating on behalf of LGBTQ people. Queer theory possesses the unique ability to highlight disparities and inequities between families in which all members are heterosexual and/or cisgender and those with members who are not. Central to queer theory’s utility is its critique of how systems of power—that is, policies—privilege and legitimize only certain sexualities and genders, rendering other ones “less than” under the law. In this way, queer theory can highlight the politically unequal treatment of certain families by problematizing the way in which only certain genders and sexualities are afforded political legitimacy (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Oswald et al., 2005). This might include, for example, policies that allow only heterosexual couples to adopt children, or presidential executive orders that prohibit transgender persons from serving in the U.S. military, or current legislation that permits only cisgender athletes from competing in organized sports (e.g., Medley, 2021). In sum, the ability to expand and contract legal definitions of constructed binaries and/or categories, including, but not limited to, sexuality, gender, and family, is queer theory’s most useful tool to family professionals in future decades of family policymaking.

### *The Future of Queer Theory in Family Research and Practice*

Taken together, the future of queer theory within family science is encouraging. Though formally introduced into the field only 15 years ago—in the previous edition of this Sourcebook, no less—the theory has already made a nascent but indelible mark on the study of queer families (Oswald, 2019). It is reasonable to expect that the theory will continue to be used in this way, and with these populations, in the coming decade of family scholarship. However, what makes the fate of queer theory in family science so propitious exists in its untapped potential—in its potential to stimulate more (quantitative) family research and to generate more equitable family policymaking with *all* populations of interest. Undoubtedly, doing so will enable queer theory to achieve its true emancipatory potential.

## References

- Acosta, K. L. (2018). Queering family scholarship: Theorizing from the borderlands. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(2), 406–418.
- Allen, S. H., & Mendez, S. N. (2018). Hegemonic heteronormativity: Toward a new era of queer family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*(1), 70–86.
- Bowleg, L. (2012). The problem with the phrase women and minorities: Intersectionality—An important theoretical framework for public health. *American Journal of Public Health, 102*(7), 1267–1273.
- Chamberlin, V. (2020, April). *Maryland lawmakers spar over keeping gun stores open as ‘Essential Businesses.’* NPR Washington: American University Radio. Retrieved from: <https://wamu.com>.

- [org/story/20/04/04/maryland-lawmakers-spar-over-keeping-gun-stores-open-as-essential-businesses-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/maryland-lawmakers-spar-over-keeping-gun-stores-open-as-essential-businesses-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/)
- Chan, M. (2020, January). Pets are part of our families. Now they're part of our divorces, too. *TIME Magazine*. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/5763775/pet-custody-divorce-laws-dogs/>
- Collins, L. M., & Lanza, S. T. (2010). *Latent class and latent transition analysis*. Wiley & Sons.
- Division of Community Property: Pet Animals Act, A.B. 2274 (2017–2018), Chapter 820 (California 2018). Bill Text - AB-2274 Division of community property: pet animals.
- Fish, J. N., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Queering methodologies to understand queer families. *Family Relations*, 67(1), 12–25.
- Ghaziani, A., & Brim, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Imagining queer methods*. NYU Press.
- Giammattei, S. V. (2015). Beyond the binary: Trans-negotiations in couple and family therapy. *Family Process*, 54(3), 418–434.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2010). Studying complex families in context. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 72(1), 29–34.
- Goldner, V. (1993). Feminist theories. In P. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 623–626). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Grzanka, P. R. (2016). Queer survey research and the ontological dimensions of heterosexism. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 44(3), 131–149.
- Kuvalanka, K. A., Allen, S. H., Munroe, C., Goldberg, A. E., & Weiner, J. L. (2018). The experiences of sexual minority mothers with trans\* children. *Family Relations*, 67(1), 70–87.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771–1800.
- Medley, S. (2021). *(Mis)Interpreting Title IX: How opponents of transgender equality are twisting the meaning of sex discrimination in school sports*. New York University Review of Law & Social Change. Retrieved from: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3815100>
- Ooms, T. (2019). The evolution of family policy: Lessons learned, challenges, and hopes for the future. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 11(1), 18–38.
- Oswald, R., Blume, L., & Marks, S. (2005). Decentering heteronormativity: A proposal for family studies. In V. Bengtson, A. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: An interactive approach* (pp. 143–165). Sage.
- Oswald, R. F. (2019). *Why feminism matters*. Special session address at the 82nd Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations, Fort Worth.
- Oswald, R. F., Kuvalanka, K. A., Blume, L., & Berkowitz, D. (2009). Queering “the family”. In K. R. Allen, A. L. Few, & S. A. Lloyd (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 43–55). Sage.
- Turner, W. B. (2000). *A genealogy of queer theory*. Temple University Press.
- van Eeden-Moorefield, B., Few-Demo, A. L., Benson, K., Bible, J., & Lummer, S. (2018). A content analysis of LGBT research in top family journals 2000–2015. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(5), 1374–1395.

# Family-Centered Participatory Action Research: *With, by, and for* Families



Bethany L. Letiecq, Colleen K. Vesely, and Rachael D. Goodman

## Introduction

Critical scholars, especially Indigenous, feminist, and critical race scholars, have long recognized that research has been and can be used as a mechanism of societal oppression, marginalization, and injustice (Casadevall & Fang, 2015; Few-Demo, 2014; Saini, 2019; Smith, 2012). Perhaps the best-known and most cited example of scientific racism and injustice is the Tuskegee study of untreated syphilis in Black men, where researchers withheld available penicillin treatment to study the progression of the disease, resulting in unnecessary suffering and death (Jones, 1981). The inherent biases and betrayals in this and other studies conducted *on* marginalized, vulnerable, or colonized people rather than *with* them (e.g., Rodriguez & Garcia, 2013; Skloot, 2010) have resulted in community mistrust of “outsider” researchers and skepticism about research more generally (Smith, 2012; Wallerstein et al., 2018). As a prophylactic against scientific harm, it is now increasingly common that research about marginalized peoples be conducted by and/or with marginalized peoples for their direct benefit (Darroch & Giles, 2014). Such research is often referred to as participatory action research or PAR.

---

B. L. Letiecq (✉)

Research Methods, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA  
e-mail: [bletiegq@gmu.edu](mailto:bletiegq@gmu.edu)

C. K. Vesely

Human Development and Family Science and Early Childhood Education, College of Education and Human Development, GMU, Fairfax, VA, USA

R. D. Goodman

Counseling and Development Program, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_35)

PAR is a multidisciplinary and multimethod “family of approaches” to research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. xxii). PAR differs from the more traditional applied research paradigm where outsider researchers direct all aspects of a research program. Indeed, PAR exemplifies a participant-driven research partnership between researchers and participants to share power with and amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized in science and society (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Importantly, PAR does not refer to a specific research method per se, but utilizes any number of methods (e.g., interviews, surveys, focus groups, photovoice, mapping) carried out in close consultation with and often directed by the participants themselves (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). PAR should be an empowering and liberating process through which participants increase control over their lives via research and action (Wallerstein et al., 2018). PAR action steps can be informed by and/or lead to new research and should be guided by participants to address pressing issues and injustices that manifest in people’s everyday lives (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

There are numerous writings on PAR across multiple disciplines, yet, family science has been rather silent on PAR. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss and encourage the uptake of family-centered PAR approaches conducted with, by, and for families to produce new knowledge about family life and advance justice among minoritized, marginalized, and oppressed family systems. We begin with a discussion of the core principles of PAR and its historical origins in general and within family science. Next, we review critical family scholarship—including discourses on intersectional power and privilege in family science that, we argue, should undergird future family-centered PAR efforts (Few-Demo, 2014; Letiecq, 2019; Wallerstein et al., 2018). We then describe implementation strategies used by PAR scholars, highlighting the work of those conducting participatory research and taking action in partnership with families. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations and challenges of PAR and the future of family-centered PAR in family science.

At the outset of this chapter, we recognize that there exist many PAR derivatives that have spun off across different disciplines with different historical orientations. For example, in the health arena, PAR scholars conduct community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR is a PAR approach (sometimes denoted as CBPAR to include “action” in the name) that focuses on community-driven research and action to eliminate health disparities and increase health equity (Israel et al., 2005; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Youth-led PAR (Y-PAR) is an approach to inquiry that engages young people in identifying problems relevant to their lives and advocating for change (Ozer & Piatt, 2018; Pech et al., 2019). Tribal participatory research (TPR) focuses on participatory inquiry with and for members of tribal nations (Fisher & Ball, 2002; Letiecq & Bailey, 2004). And the list goes on. For clarity throughout the chapter, we use the term PAR to encompass all of these. Consistent across approaches is a core set of principles that guide PAR scholarship and action.

## The Core Principles of PAR

One of the central tenets of PAR is the idea that expertise lies in everyday experience and should not be conceptualized as outside of the reach of ordinary people (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1982). PAR not only includes but prioritizes the experiential knowledge(s) of those often seen as nonexperts or subjects of traditional or more positivist approaches to research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Essentializing the voice and knowings of “the other” is critical in PAR processes. As Stringer (2014) states: “Though academic theories may provide interesting interpretations of events, they are likely to distort and misinterpret the situation if they take precedence over stakeholder theories in practice” (p. 39). Thus, PAR scholars work in partnership with participants as colearners to understand and document lived experiences through a process of inquiry that “emerges over time, in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). In this way, PAR results in new participant-made knowledge and new abilities to cocreate that knowledge (Paradiso de Sayu & Chanmugam, 2015).

To actualize PAR principles and generate everyday expertise, PAR practitioners<sup>1</sup> should engage in approaches designed to be ethical, nonexploitive, highly participatory, inclusive, collaborative, transparent, democratic, dialogical, and action-oriented (Israel et al., 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stringer, 2014; Wallerstein et al., 2018). PAR researchers embrace reciprocity with community participants, while pursuing social change collectively through a process of grassroots organizing and shifting power relations (Maiter et al., 2008). PAR practitioners work together to intentionally reposition the university researcher not as the director of the project, but as a facilitator (Lind, 2008) or coresearcher, equal in power with all other participant coresearchers in a research collective (Fine et al., 2004). While challenging, this realignment is important to ensure coparticipation, democratic processes, and accountability to the whole.

PAR scholars understand “that people—especially those who have experienced historic oppression—hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations of research” (Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 458). Because PAR requires democratic decision-making and intentional power-sharing, university researchers and community member practitioners work in partnership throughout the research process to: develop research questions, create interview protocols, select and adapt measures, design and implement the data collection procedures, and analyze and disseminate data (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 2005). Stemming from the work of Indigenous or tribal PAR practitioners, it is increasingly common for communities to institute research review boards where

---

<sup>1</sup>We use the term “practitioner” to mean any individual engaged in PAR to include university researchers, community-based professionals, or individuals generally. We use the term “researcher” or “scholar” interchangeably to refer to university researchers working in partnership with individuals and families to generate new knowledge collectively.

communities not only maintain control over research processes, but also over data and how it is disseminated (Darroch & Giles, 2014; Henderson et al., 2017). Throughout PAR processes, critical action as an “organic form of intervention” also should take place *while* studying phenomena to produce tangible outcomes that are desired by and of direct benefit to the people (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 2005, p. 224).

## Historical Origins of PAR Approaches: Northern and Southern Traditions

The emergence of research that is participatory and focused on participant-driven action for social change reflects what Kuhn (1962) might call a revolution in the social scientific community or a paradigm shift. Beginning in the 1940s, social scientists across disciplines and around the world began to critique and reject positivist science and “the well-known academic insistence on values-neutrality and aloofness in investigation” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 27). And while the origins of PAR are many, with no one individual or nation laying claim to its founding (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), Wallerstein and Duran (2018) discuss two salient historical traditions: the Northern and the Southern. Many recognize American social psychologist Kurt Lewin for the advancement of PAR in the Northern tradition, emerging in the United States in the 1940s (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Levin, 1999; Lind, 2008; Winter, 1998). At the time, Lewin challenged dominant positivist paradigms tied to the scientific method (Levin, 1999), and adopted an inquiry process involving reconnaissance, planning, and action that he called action research (Winter, 1998). Lewin sought practical solutions to real-world issues, including racism, oppression, and intergroup conflict (Lind, 2008).

The Southern tradition of PAR gained prominence in the 1970s, fomented by Paulo Freire, whose writings transformed the research relationship from doing research on people to engaging with them as coequals in inquiry (Freire, 1970, 1982). Freire’s liberation ideology posited that people who are poor, marginalized, and oppressed have the power within themselves to transform their circumstances through critical consciousness raising and action, including “bottom-up” or grassroots organizing efforts (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

The growth of PAR in both the Northern and Southern traditions continued in earnest in the 1970s, as critical social scientists questioned and rejected notions of objective science and also called for moral responsibility-taking in research, teaching, and action with clear political and social justice implications (Fals Borda, 2001). Critical scholars in sociology, anthropology, education, and theology (among others) began to embrace research approaches and methodologies that *were* values-based; that engaged with people in collaborative relationships; that actively grappled with the intersections of race, class, gender, and other social-made tools of oppression; and that sought to shift the balance of power through advocacy and

activism to achieve social change and the liberation of the oppressed (e.g., Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). This early PAR work, clearly inspired by civil rights movements led by Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, sought to privilege “ordinary people’s knowledge” (Lind, 2008, p. 223) and empower the marginalized to carry out change-focused inquiry (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Importantly, as critical social scientists questioned their role in research and the role of research in perpetuating status quo inequalities and injustices, they likewise began to reject “the academic tradition of using—and often exploiting—research and fieldwork mainly for career advancement” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 29). Finding academic institutions unwelcoming of these critiques, many early PAR scholars left academia for more progressive institutions that were taking the lead on participatory inquiry (Fals Borda, 2001). As Wallerstein and Duran (2018) note, this included the International Participatory Research Network with centers in India, Tanzania, and Latin America; the Collaborative Action Research Group in Australia; and the Highlander Research and Education Center in the United States. Today, it is often difficult to discern if PAR approaches are specifically influenced by the Northern-Lewinian tradition (e.g., problem-solving, utilitarian) or the Southern-Freirian tradition (e.g., emancipatory, grassroots organizing) or exist somewhere along a continuum between the two (Wallerstein & Duran, 2018). Trickett and Espino (2004) have called for researchers to more transparently locate their roots, assumptions, praxis, and desired outcomes.

## **The Seeds of Family-Centered PAR in Family Science: From Critical Scholarship to Action**

In family science, critical Black scholars and white scholars of Black family life are among those who can be credited for laying the foundation for what we are calling *family-centered PAR*—or participatory action research with, by, and for families (Bell, 2001). In the 1960s, Billingsley (1968) wrote *Black Families in White America* to expose the absence of social science research on Black family life, to call for more complete studies of Black families across socioeconomic contexts, and to counter the infamous Moynihan Report with its distorted portrayals of Black families as unstable, pathological, and deviant. Just a few years later, Ladner (1973) brought together sociologists and psychologists—the majority of whom were African American—to share their essays on “a critically radical way of thinking about social science research...that was proactive for liberating Black inner-city communities from the oppressive elements of racism, classism and poverty” (Bell, 2001, p. 49). Ladner sought to expose biases in mainstream sociology and called for new theories and research methods that drew upon the experiences and histories of African-American families.



Also emergent in the 1970s was the work of Stack (1974), a white anthropologist who developed new approaches and methods in her study of poor Black families that would serve to guide future white “outsider” scholars conducting research with families of color. Of the Black political and community activists she met during her study, Stack (1974) wrote: “such persons may in the future decide whether a research study of their community may be conducted and by whom” (p. x). Community members and Stack alike were cognizant of the long history-to-present day use and manipulation of research findings to negatively portray, oppress, and harm those studied (Bell, 2001). And while the 1980s ushered in a significant backlash politically, economically, and socially against civil rights era gains, family scholars (especially feminist and critical race scholars) continued to develop their critiques of science, offering new theoretical frameworks inclusive of, for example, race, racism, prejudice, and discrimination in human development and family life (e.g., Collins, 1991, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; García Coll et al., 1996; Hill, 1993).

Today, critical family scholarship continues to evolve, providing salient conceptual foundations for an emergent family-centered PAR agenda. Such critiques conceptualize how intersectional power, privilege, and oppression manifest in individual and family experiences, center Black, Indigenous, other people of color, and queer family experiences (e.g., Allen & Mendez, 2018; James et al., 2018; Oswald et al., 2009; Sanchez et al., 2019), and call into question positivistic family scholarship devoid of discourses on structural inequality and family-based discrimination (e.g., Allen, 2000; Bermúdez et al., 2016; Burton et al., 2010; Few-Demo, 2014). Yet, as Letiecq et al. (2019) and Walsdorf et al. (2020) posit, years of conducting research on marginalized families rather than with and for them has resulted in the perpetuation of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and family privilege in family science.

The term family privilege refers to the benefits, often invisible and unacknowledged, of belonging to family systems believed to be superior in society, such as the Standard North American Family (SNAF; Letiecq, 2019; Smith, 1993). SNAF characterizations feature white, married, heterosexual, middle-class, Christian, home-owning couples rearing biological children and espousing traditional gender roles (Smith, 1993). Since its founding, many a family scientist has promoted SNAF as best ideology (e.g., Burgess, 1970; Parsons & Bales, 1955) and perpetuated deficit perspectives with regard to non-SNAF families (e.g., Black, LGBTQ, poor, single-parent-headed, divorced, step-parent-headed, cohabitating, immigrant, Indigenous; Fremstad et al., 2019). Even in the modern era, comparisons of non-SNAFs to SNAFs often fail to account for the complex histories, lived experiences, and purposeful marginalization of non-SNAFs through structural mechanisms (e.g., laws and policies) that foment family-based inequalities (Letiecq, 2019; Walsdorf et al., 2020). This kind of SNAF fundamentalism in family science ignores the profound harms of white supremacy, heteronormativity, and pro-SNAF laws and policies on the health, safety, and welfare of non-SNAF families. SNAF fundamentalists likewise ignore how the economic, social, and health interests of SNAF families have been advanced over others’ interests on the basis of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Fremstad et al., 2019; Oswald et al., 2009).

We assert that PAR with, by, and for families—especially those minoritized and marginalized—holds the promise of redressing and repairing histories of SNAF bias, systematic and structural oppression, and family privilege through participatory research *and action*. Indeed, we argue that family-centered PAR approaches are fundamental to the advancement of a justice-based, reparative, and inclusive family science. And while family-centered PAR is nascent, there are a number of PAR practitioners who are leading the way. For example, family scientists focused on family health matters have utilized family-centered PAR approaches in their studies of obesity and diabetes (e.g., Berge et al., 2009; Jurkowski et al., 2013), asthma (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010), family violence and its prevention (Goodman et al., 2016), parental depression (Leticq et al., 2014, 2019), and family therapy (Mendenhall & Doherty, 2005; Piercy & Thomas, 1998). Likewise, family scholars working in partnership with diverse families across cultures and contexts have been drawn to PAR approaches. Examples include participatory inquiry with immigrant and refugee families (Cox, 2017; Goodman et al., 2018; Quandt et al., 2013; Vesely et al., 2017, 2019), stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 2005), rural families (de la Torre et al., 2013), Native American families (Belone et al., 2017; Henderson et al., 2017), and African-American families (Henderson, 2005). Across these studies, family-centered PAR scholars utilize a variety of implementation strategies, and often ground their approaches in researcher reflexivity and cultural humility.

## **Implementation of PAR *with, by, and for Families*: A Roadmap**

### ***Researcher Reflexivity and Cultural Humility***

PAR is a fundamentally different approach to conducting research. Whereas traditional applied research is grounded in notions of objectivity and neutrality, PAR is relational and personal. In PAR, researchers strive to *blur the lines* of who is expert and who is subject as they join with communities who invite them in (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Thus, as *entrée* into PAR, it is critical that researchers develop a reflexive practice and situate themselves vis-à-vis research participants (i.e., their coresearchers) to identify issues of identity, intersectional power, and privilege—including family privilege (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014; Leticq, 2019). In her theorizing about intersectionality and domination, Collins (1991) posited that the social constructions of identities based on race, class, and gender (among others) form interlocking patterns of privilege, oppression, and marginalization. Depending on the context, people can possess varying amounts of earned and unearned privilege and power, and also experience disadvantages. An individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or both (Collins, 1991). In order to uphold PAR principles related to power-sharing, family-centered PAR scholars must work to intentionally surface their intersectional race, class, gender and family privileges, their blind spots, and their implicit or unconscious biases

about diverse families as they forge partnerships with others, including those families purposefully marginalized by an unjust and unequal society (Letiecq, 2019).

As part of our reflexive efforts, we (the authors) practice cultural humility, which requires those from majority cultures, who hold unearned privileges related to their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and family configuration and who have greater access to resources and power, to prioritize other ways of knowing (Sanchez et al., 2019; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Cultural humility is different from cultural competence. The latter suggests the possibility of fully understanding or competently knowing someone who is different or “the other” (DeAngelis, 2015). Cultural humility focuses on reflexive *self*-evaluation to actively surface and redress where possible power imbalances in order to develop authentic, mutually beneficial relationships across cultures and peoples (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

To illustrate our reflexive practice, we note that all three authors are white, cis-gender women with diverse family histories and family configurations who have spent the bulk of our academic careers working across cultures and socioeconomic contexts as “outsiders” (Letiecq & Bailey, 2004; Minkler, 2004). Elsewhere, we have each written about how we situate ourselves in our work and employ critical consciousness to raise awareness of our implicit biases and privileges (e.g., Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Vesely et al., 2017, 2019). To actively engage in reflexive practice, we dialogue with our “selves,” with each other, with critical colleagues in the academy from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, and with participants as colearners and coresearchers (Pollner, 1991). We work to trust and follow the guidance of participant coresearchers. We are committed to cocreating knowledge that reflects diverse family voices and experiences, rather than our interpretations of these, and taking collective action that benefits the families we serve. Such relational work is fundamental to actualizing PAR, especially in partnership with families who persist and resist in a white majority, SNAF-centric, hegemonic society (Letiecq, 2019).

### ***Beyond Reflexivity: Conducting Participatory Research, Taking Action***

There is no one right way to conduct PAR. Family-centered PAR practitioners can use multiple strategies and methods as they work to operationalize the core principles of PAR with families (Israel et al., 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stringer, 2014; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Planful PAR implementation should be developed iteratively in partnership with participants as colearners and coproducers of knowledge and action. However, we offer the following four-pronged approach to illustrate common PAR implementation strategies, including (1) establishing an advisory board; (2) establishing strategic partnerships with governmental and nongovernmental organizations; (3) collaborating with advisory board members on research

processes; and (4) taking collective action (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012). As we describe these strategies, we provide examples from our work and the work of other family-centered PAR practitioners.

**Establish an advisory board** Perhaps, the most important step in using a family-centered PAR approach, which distinguishes it from more traditional applied research with families, is establishing an advisory board made up of family members with whom you wish to partner and serve (e.g., a study of single parents should be led by single parents; Pinto et al., 2013). The board should also be comprised of key stakeholders including community organization partners, with university researchers positioned as board facilitators, not directors. This advisory board becomes the hub of decision-making over the development of research questions, data collection methods, sampling strategies, analyses, data dissemination, and participatory action. Critical in the formation and maintenance of these boards is the building of trust between board members and university researchers, which is an on-going and time-intensive endeavor, particularly as projects are carried out across cultures with different orientations, worldviews, languages, and ways of knowing (Christopher et al., 2008; Pinto et al., 2013). Advisory boards should establish formal agreements with university researchers, develop their own mission and vision, and formalize their structure (e.g., develop by-laws; Wallerstein et al., 2018). These boards may need financial and other resources (e.g., transportation, childcare) to be sustaining and it is incumbent upon university researchers to work collaboratively to decrease barriers to family engagement in PAR. As Christopher et al. (2008) note, “every interaction between academic and community partners is an exercise in cultural competence and cultural humility” (p. 1403). Work by Henderson et al. (2017) to develop the Cultural Variant CBPR model provides a good example of the primacy of advisory boards when working with older adult Hurricane Katrina survivors and Alaska Native grandparents.

Family-centered PAR should be driven by advisory boards, whose members enlist the help of university researchers in generating new knowledge and taking actions on behalf of families (Wallerstein et al., 2018). As Letiecq and Schmalzbauer (2012) note, their research partnership formed in 2007 when members of a Mexican immigrant community contacted them for help in mitigating anti-immigrant policies and practices occurring at local schools and other community agencies serving immigrant families. Together, the university researchers and immigrant family members formed an advisory board called *Salud y Comunidad: Latinos en Montana* (*Health and Community: Latinos in Montana*) and worked collaboratively to conduct a series of family-centered PAR projects to benefit immigrant family health and well-being in a new immigrant settlement (Letiecq et al., 2014). Over 7 years, *Salud* advisors and university researchers met at least monthly, learned from each other, and discussed what kinds of research methods and recruitment strategies would be most appropriate and, importantly, do no harm as they engaged with and disseminated findings about immigrant families. Advisory board members were compensated for their time; each received a gift card at the end of each meeting. Early on, *Salud y Comunidad* established a private Facebook group (which

continues today with over 1600 members) to communicate with immigrants across Montana, sharing information about resources and alerting people about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids. Over time, *Salud* also implemented a series of organic interventions, including Know Your Rights and other legal clinics, health fairs, and educational programming in support of immigrant family health and justice (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012).

If a community is not yet organized to direct PAR, researchers can facilitate advisory board development via strategic outreach efforts. Across multiple PAR projects, we (the authors) have turned to trusted community agency staffers (often “front-line” workers) and educators to identify potential advisory board members—individuals who are committed to family well-being, trusted by others, and often serve as natural leaders or healers within their communities (Goodman et al., 2018). Often, board establishment starts with an initial meeting called by trusted community agency staffers who invite university researchers and potential board members to attend. Indeed, this is how our advisory board called *Amigas de la Comunidad* (*Friends of the Community*) was formed.

In 2014, our research team received funding from a local foundation to engage in a PAR project with immigrant families with young children. To build *Amigas de la Comunidad*, an advisory board made up of immigrant Latina mothers mainly from Central America and currently residing in Northern Virginia, we first met with family and community engagement professionals linked to local preschools and the public school system. These professionals, all women who were bilingual in Spanish and English and who had been working in close connection with immigrant families for several years, agreed to a partnership and introduced us to 10 Latina mothers who were part of an already established women’s leadership group. During the earliest phases of *Amigas*, the professionals coled our first few advisory meetings, as we all worked to build trusted relationships, form a board, and establish a research and action agenda. Importantly, prior to accepting the grant funding, we negotiated with our funders to allow the advisory board to determine our research foci. Initial *Amigas* advisory board meetings focused on identifying the concerns of local immigrant families (e.g., treatment by service providers; concerns about housing, employment, education, safety, family health, child well-being). We also discussed the structure of the board, member roles and responsibilities, decision-making models, and distribution of power (Wallerstein et al., 2018).

Consonant with family-centered PAR approaches generally (Berge et al., 2009; Cox, 2017; Garwick & Seppelt, 2010; Henderson et al., 2017; Jurkowski et al., 2013; Pinto et al., 2013), university researchers often lead advisory board discussions about research methods, while the board has the final say on research-to-action processes. This principle is exemplified by the work of Jurkowski et al. (2013) in partnership with low-income parents focused on childhood obesity prevention. The researchers worked purposefully throughout their family-centered PAR project to ensure that the advisory board was comprised of a majority of parents who were empowered to make decisions across both research and action steps. This deference or shifting power to reveal community priorities and expertise can confront academics’ research training in which researchers are expected to be the

experts in their field and develop research topics derived from gaps in the extant literature. To build a successful PAR project, researchers must work to suspend this judgment of expertise, and to work with humility to expand notions of expert, knowledge, and truth (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). For family-centered PAR work, PAR practitioners must likewise work to challenge SNAF-as-best ideology, family privilege, and bias (Letiecq, 2019). Building trusting, collaborative relationships between board members and university researchers, as well as developing researchers' willingness to work differently in research endeavors (i.e., as collaborator or coresearcher rather than research director), demands soft skills, reflexivity, and critically conscious methodological practices (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010; Henderson et al., 2017; Jurkowski et al., 2013). As Henderson et al.' (2017) note, working in an iterative process with advisory board members can take time, patience, flexibility, and conflict resolution skills, but empowered and functional advisory boards are critical to redress the historical and sociopolitical traumas and scientific biases experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized and marginalized families.

**Establish partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** A second key component of family-centered PAR approaches is the establishment of strategic partnerships with governmental agency officials, NGOs, lawyers, educators, service providers, and health-care workers (among others) who are in positions of power and make decisions on behalf of and provide direct services to families. Berge et al. (2009) and Jurkowski et al. (2013) both highlight the salience of these strategic connections with community agencies and providers in their family-centered PAR approaches. For example, Berge et al. (2009) developed the Citizen Health Care Model, which taps into health professionals' "funds of knowledge" about families and recognizes professionals as "citizens [too], not just providers" (Berge et al., 2009, p. 478). In their PAR project, Jurkowski et al. (2013) turned to a local Head Start center to build a strategic partnership with a trusted, existing community organization serving low-income parents and young children. Such partnerships can support and help sustain advisory boards, provide critical resources (e.g., childcare supports, space for meetings, in-kind supports), and assist with participant recruitment and data dissemination (Garwick & Seppelt, 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2018).

Critical goals of family-centered PAR partnerships might include aligning research aims and family-based services and policies with the actual needs, interests, and worldviews of minoritized and marginalized families (Avila et al., 2018). Another goal might include leveraging resources across university and organizational partners to expand the reach of or innovate service delivery systems to better serve or empower marginalized families (Berge et al., 2009; Wallerstein et al., 2018). These strategic partnerships should work to "shift the burden of resilience" from those individuals and families on the margins to the systems themselves (Vesely et al., 2017, p. 94). In other words, systems built by and for the benefit of the majority culture (i.e., colonizers) must work to realign themselves to be inclusive of those families who have been historically and presently minoritized and

marginalized (i.e., the colonized; Bermúdez et al., 2016). To be successful, advisory boards must be empowered to guide these critical change efforts.

In our family-centered PAR work with *Amigas de la Comunidad*, research findings suggested that Latinx immigrant families with young children needed support navigating preschool and public school registration systems because they faced significant barriers, including limited knowledge of educational systems in the United States, transportation, limited ability to read/understand forms written in English, and fear of deportation. In partnership with *Amigas* board members, university researchers, preschool and public school registrars, and health-care providers organized a community-based school registration drive (an organic intervention). *Amigas* recruited local immigrant families with preschool- and school-aged children who had yet to be enrolled in school. *Amigas* (along with bilingual student volunteers) then assisted families in translating and filling out forms, communicating with school officials, getting mandatory health screenings, and registering children for school. As is typical when serving families, we made sure we had childcare, food, supplies, and child activities available while we worked more directly with parents. We observed that the families who came to the event had children with significant health and educational needs for whom obtaining services was particularly critical. Because *Amigas* built trusted relationships with providers and local immigrant families, we were able to connect families to these local resources. Because of the success of the *Amigas*-driven action, school registrars continue to offer community-based registration drives to meet immigrant families where they are.

**Collaborate on all phases of the research process** In family-centered PAR, family members vis-à-vis advisory boards should be involved in all aspects of the research process including developing research questions, designing the project, developing and/or adapting measures, recruiting participants, collecting data, analyzing data, and disseminating findings (Christopher et al., 2008; Israel et al., 2005; Wallerstein et al., 2018). This level of collaboration is time-intensive as university researchers and family advisors share knowledge about research methodologies and hone approaches and skills across cultures and contexts (Henderson et al., 2017). And as Stoecker (2009) notes, few researchers actually achieve full participant involvement in all aspects of PAR, offering instead limited participation in, for example, data collection alone. Recognizing this continuum of engagement is important. PAR practitioners suggest that the level of collaboration and in what form should be noted in all dissemination activities to capture how “participatory” action research truly is (Stoecker, 2009).

In Montana, *Salud y Comunidad* worked intensively to study depressive symptomatology and correlates of mental health among Mexican immigrants (Letiecq et al., 2014). Advisory board members and university researchers developed an interviewer-assisted survey protocol and then conducted cognitive interviews to ensure the questions made sense, were culturally appropriate, and were understandable, especially among those with low levels of educational attainment and low literacy levels. This work can be challenging for researchers who wish to use measures

that are well known in the field or are recognized by funding agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health [NIH]) as standard protocols. If the community finds that such measures are not useful to them or not valid for use within their communities (or in the case of *Salud y Comunidad*, instruments offered too many response options), the research team must trust the advisory board members to guide measurement implementation. Such methodological issues can hold significant impacts for researchers in a publish or perish environment, if, for example, adapted measures are viewed by peer-reviewers as too limited for publication in top-tier journals or for future funding (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012).

Beyond measurement considerations, data analysis is an essential yet often overlooked aspect of PAR (Hallett et al., 2016). However, family-centered PAR exemplars exist. For instance, in their Alaskan Native grandparent PAR, Henderson et al. (2017) described working closely with tribal authorities, councils, and committees throughout data coding and manuscript preparation to ensure accurate interpretation and presentation of findings. In another study, Berge et al. (2009) iteratively presented their data analysis to community stakeholders to check the accuracy of their interpretations and make adjustments as necessary. This analytical feedback loop was critical as Berge and colleagues sought to ensure their findings were attuned, aligned, and responsive to family needs.

In our work with *Amigas de la Comunidad*, we developed a community coding process informed by principles of open, axial, and selective coding (Vesely et al., 2019). We worked to tailor the implementation of these waves of formal coding to ensure the advisory board's meaningful engagement. These coding sessions with *Amigas* consisted of reading interview transcripts aloud in English and Spanish as a collective and then engaging in lengthy discussions about emergent meanings and themes. Board members were compensated for their time, and we shared meals together while coding. While this level of PAR engagement is not always feasible (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Stoecker, 2009), participatory analysis can enhance critical insights into coresearchers' ways of knowing and produce more authentic, culturally specific family-based knowledge (Hallett et al., 2016; Vesely et al., 2019).

**Implement participant-guided actions** Although action is included here as the final step in PAR approaches with families, responding to immediate needs of participant families can often be the first step in a family-centered PAR partnership, reflecting balance between research and action (Henderson et al., 2017; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Taking action early in partnership with families—*walking the talk* and putting resources on the table *before* making any asks—can be a meaningful first step in building solidarity and trust (Stoecker, 2009). For instance, the *Salud y Comunidad* project in partnership with Mexican immigrant families began in earnest when advisory board families and university researchers organized a Know Your Rights training with an immigration attorney at a local Catholic church that offered Spanish mass once a month. This initial effort demonstrated university and community partner commitments to advisory-board-guided actions that served families and advanced justice (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012).



In their Hurricane Katrina project, Henderson et al. (2017) also took immediate action to support families by creating important checklist tools for disaster preparedness and other measures particularly geared toward older adult family members. In our work early on in Virginia, *Amigas de la Comunidad* partnered with United We Dream (an immigrant advocacy organization) to host several educational forums about immigrant rights, detention, family separation, and deportation planning (Vesely et al., 2017). As PAR practitioners note, such early action-taking steps can be helpful in establishing relationships with both advisory board members and other strategic community partners (e.g., agency officials, NGOs) and provide opportunities for engagement that participants can build upon to generate research questions, for example, about the effectiveness of outreach efforts. By taking actions early and often, family-centered PAR practitioners can build trust, learn about each other, test commitments, and reveal collective capacities to organize and reach in to communities that have been historically and systematically marginalized (Berge et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2017; Jurkowski et al., 2013; Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012).

Participant-directed actions or organic interventions should occur throughout family-centered PAR engagement and at multiple ecological levels—at the individual and familial levels to macrostructural levels (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). For example, while *Amigas de la Comunidad* often worked at a local level to promote immigrant family rights and navigation within public schools and healthcare, the Montana-based *Salud y Comunidad* project, over time, turned their focus statewide, working closely with immigration attorneys and human rights organizations to curb anti-immigrant policies and laws (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012). Indeed, *Salud* in conjunction with the Montana Immigrant Justice Alliance succeeded, through legal actions in the courts, in blocking legislation from taking effect that would have denied certain state services to “illegal aliens,” including crime victim services, infant health screenings, and the ability to attend public universities (Letiecq & Anderson, 2017). For true structural change and the advancement of equality and justice for all families, family-centered PAR practitioners must continue to foment collective critical consciousness raising and critical action taking (Freire, 1970) and translate research not only to practice but also to policy change (Letiecq & Anderson, 2017).

## Challenges and Limitations of PAR Approaches

Since its emergence, PAR has become an established and valued approach (Wallerstein et al., 2018). However, it is not without its challenges and limitations, which have been extensively discussed in the extant literature (e.g., Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Trickett & Espino, 2004; Wallerstein et al., 2018). Common issues that challenge PAR implementation include finding the time and resources to conduct the project, establishing advisory boards, balancing research and action agendas, and ensuring PAR work is participant-led (Letiecq

& Schmalzbauer, 2012). PAR approaches also have been critiqued for methodological limitations and for lacking generalizability and replicability. PAR practitioners have been challenged to refine practices and build more scientific rigor, cultural responsiveness, and sustainability into participant-driven approaches (Wallerstein et al., 2018).

As noted by Reason and Bradbury (2008) among others (Christopher et al., 2008; Hallett et al., 2016; Minkler, 2004; Paradiso de Sayu & Chanmugam, 2015; Stoecker, 2009), it can be challenging for university researchers to engage participants in all aspects of research processes, including data analyses and dissemination. The time-intensive nature of PAR is real and limits what coresearchers can achieve collectively (Henderson et al., 2017). Another challenge inherent in PAR is the continual negotiation of power/privilege and also risk/safety (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012). Because PAR practitioners seek to engage marginalized communities and redress social injustice, the nature of the work reflects intersectional power and privilege where the privileged (i.e., university researchers) are working with those who often have much less privilege (e.g., on the basis of citizenship, race, class, language). Because power imbalances are unlikely to be eliminated, practitioners must continually reflect on, negotiate, and minimize power imbalances throughout PAR processes. Privilege is connected to appraisals of risk and being able to live in relative safety without threats to oneself or one's family—even when taking actions for social change (Letiecq, 2019). In our family-centered PAR work, we are keenly aware that parents who are undocumented immigrants, targets of racial profiling, deportation, and family separation, or vulnerable in other ways to structural racism and injustice, have to negotiate risk and safety in ways that those of us with privilege and power may be unaware (Vesely et al., 2017). Given that family-centered PAR scholars often wish to partner with marginalized families, we have to be conscious of and address how our work may reproduce inequalities and/or render individuals, families, and communities vulnerable to harms (Avila et al., 2018). For PAR practitioners who are likewise vulnerable to structural inequalities and injustices (e.g., researchers of color, undocumented practitioners), they will also be negotiating their own intersectional power, risk, and safety.

Negotiations of power and privilege also occur within the academy, where institutional barriers to conducting PAR approaches continue to persist (Fals Borda, 2001; Wallerstein et al., 2018). One institutional challenge that often arises in PAR work stems from university researcher commitments to “share the purse” (i.e., grant funding) equally with participant coresearchers. One way to address such fiscal power imbalances is to facilitate advisory board-directed budgetary decision-making. However, sharing the purse can be difficult because of university fiduciary constraints, researcher responsibility for expenditures, and limited funds to achieve both research and action ends (Letiecq & Schmalzbauer, 2012). In our family-centered PAR efforts with immigrant families, we were further challenged by the context of illegality and the shifting legal and policy landscape confronting PAR participants (Vesely et al., 2017). For example, *Amigas* proposed to hire local community members to work on research and action endeavors, yet we were limited in who we could bring on board via the university given employment and immigration

laws. When considering grant-funding opportunities, we were likewise fearful that participation in federal grants could render participant families vulnerable to anti-immigrant actions by the government.

Another institutional challenge to conducting PAR is the limited ways in which research of impact and consequence is defined in the academy. Academic standards or evaluative criteria do not always fit with the principles and processes of PAR. Within promotion and tenure guidelines, for example, research impact is often defined by the number of peer-reviewed publications in top-tier journals, journal impact factors, and how often those publications are then cited by others publishing in other journals. Also, the amount and type of funding garnered by researchers is often used as an evaluation metric. These definitions and metrics do not always align with the time-intensive, iterative, and participant-driven nature of PAR. Indeed, family-centered PAR impacts may look very different from academic impacts and hold more value among participant families.

### **Future Directions of Family-Centered PAR *with, by and for Families***

Despite the very real PAR challenges, limitations, and institutional barriers, the future of family-centered PAR in family science is bright. As Wallerstein et al. (2018) note, a significant body of PAR literature now exists demonstrating the utility and rigor of this approach for promoting equity and justice among minoritized and marginalized people. Indeed, funded research involving Indigenous people in the United States and Canada frequently require the adoption of PAR approaches (Darroch & Giles, 2014). And some universities are responding to the long-awaited PAR paradigm shift by investing in PAR, community-engaged research (CEnR; Wallerstein et al., 2018), and community-based service learning programs, and showcasing this work as emblematic of university commitments to the public good (Monk et al., 2019). Federal and private funders, such as NIH, the William T. Grant Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (among others), have grown their PAR portfolios and are funding extensive new initiatives, some of which push for innovation and changes to academic culture. PAR and CEnR publications and resources continue to grow, suggesting participatory inquiry for social change is here to stay. This new reality suggests that universities should work in earnest to ensure faculty who participate in PAR are evaluated in ways that promote rather than hinder their professional and PAR advancement.

Family-centered PAR is nascent and emergent. Throughout this chapter, we have highlighted a few, but certainly not all of the family scientists who are engaging in family-centered PAR (e.g., Berge et al., 2009; Cox, 2017; Crosbie-Burnett et al., 2005; de la Torre et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2017; Jurkowski et al., 2013; Mendenhall & Doherty, 2005; Piercy & Thomas, 1998; Vesely et al., 2017). Future family-centered PAR efforts should continue to identify the familial and societal

harms to health and well-being and the injustices perpetuated by a SNAF-centric society that has unduly advantaged white, heteronormative, married families over all others. PAR scholars might also work in partnership with families to identify the mechanisms used by privileged families to maintain their advantage and power across systems including education and finance (Letiecq, 2019).

As critical family scholarship and calls for reparative, justice-based action grow (e.g., Allen & Mendez, 2018; Few-Demo, 2014; James et al., 2018; Letiecq, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2019; Walsdorf et al., 2020), it is our hope that family-centered PAR likewise continues to grow. As family scholars reflexively sit in their privilege and intersectional power, many may be inspired to seek new approaches to family science that center minoritized and marginalized families, their lived experiences, their strengths and persistence to overcome, their efforts to resist oppression, and their calls for structural change, equality, and liberation. Rather than gazing upon families, family-centered PAR scholars must partner with them to cocreate new knowledge and actualize family equality and justice for all.

## References

- Allen, K. R. (2000). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62(1), 4–17.
- Allen, S. H., & Mendez, S. N. (2018). Hegemonic heteronormativity: Toward a new era of queer family theory. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10(1), 70–86.
- Avila, M., Sanchez-Youngman, S., Muhammad, M., Silva, A., & Domingo de Garcia, P. (2018). South valley partners for environmental justice. In N. Wallerstein, B. Durran, J. Oetzel, & M. Minkler (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed., pp. 123–135). Jossey-Bass.
- Bell, E. E. (2001). Infusing race into the US discourse on action research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 49–59). Sage.
- Belone, L., Orosco, A., Damon, E., Smith-McNeal, W., Rae, R., Sherpa, M. L., Myers, O. B., Omeh, A. O., & Wallerstein, N. (2017). The piloting of a culturally centered American Indian family prevention program: A CBPR partnership between Mescalero Apache and the University of New Mexico. *Public Health Reviews*, 38(30), 1–13.
- Berge, J. M., Mendenhall, T. J., & Doherty, W. J. (2009). Using community-based participatory research (CBPR) to target health disparities in families. *Family Relations*, 58(4), 475–488.
- Bermúdez, J. M., Muruthi, B. A., & Jordan, L. S. (2016). Decolonizing research methods for family science: Creating space at the center. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(2), 192–206.
- Billingsley, A. (1968). *Black families in white America*. Simon & Schuster.
- Burgess, J. K. (1970). The single-parent family: A social and sociological problem. *The Family Coordinator*, 19(2), 137–144.
- Burton, L. M., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., & Freeman, E. H. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade's research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 440–459.
- Casadevall, A., & Fang, F. C. (2015). (A)Historical science. *Infection and Immunity*, 83(12), 4460–4464.
- Christopher, S., Watts, V., McCormick, A. K. H. G., & Young, S. (2008). Building and maintaining trust in a community-based participatory research partnership. *American Journal of Public Health*, 98(8), 1398–1406.

- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). Intersections of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for black family studies. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29(1), 27–36.
- Cornwall, A., & Jewkes, R. (1995). What is participatory research? *Social Science and Medicine*, 41(12), 1667–1676.
- Cox, R. B. (2017). Promoting resilience with the ¡Juntos Se Puede! program: An example of translational research for Latino families in a new settlement area. *Family Relations*, 66(4), 712–728.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Crosbie-Burnett, M., Lewis, E. A., Sullivan, S., Podolsky, J., Mantilla de Souza, R., & Mitrani, S. M. (2005). Advancing theory through research: The case of extrusion in stepfamilies. In V. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 213–230). Sage.
- Darroch, F., & Giles, A. (2014). Decolonizing health research: Community-based participatory research and postcolonial feminist theory. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 15(3), 22–36.
- de la Torre, A., Sadeghi, B., Green, R. D., Kaiser, L. L., Flores, Y. G., Jackson, C. F., Shaikh, U., Whent, L., & Schaefer, S. (2013). Niños Sanos, Familia Sana: Mexican immigrant study protocol for a multifaceted CBPR intervention to combat childhood obesity in two rural California towns. *BMC Public Health*, 13(1033), 1–12.
- DeAngelis, T. (2015, March). In search of cultural competence. *American Psychological Association's Monitor on Psychology*, 46(3), 64.
- Fals Borda, O. (2001). Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 27–27). Sage.
- Fals Borda, O., & Rahman, M. A. (1991). *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action-research*. Apex Press.
- Few-Demo, A. L. (2014). Intersectionality as the “new” critical approach in feminist family studies: Evolving racial/ethnic feminisms and critical race theories. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 6(2), 169–183.
- Fine, M., Torre, M. E., Boudin, K., Bowen, I., Clark, J., Hylton, D., & Upegui, D. (2004). Participatory action research: From within and beyond prison bars. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.), *Working method: Research and social justice* (pp. 95–120). Routledge.
- Fisher, P. A., & Ball, T. J. (2002). The Indian Wellness Project: An application of the tribal participatory research model. *Prevention Science*, 3(3), 235–240.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1982). Creating alternative research methods: Learning to do it by doing it. In B. Hall, A. Gillette, & R. Tandon (Eds.), *Creating knowledge: A monopoly? Participatory research in development* (pp. 29–37). Society for Participatory Research in Asia.
- Fremstad, S., Glynn, S.J., & Williams, A. (2019). *The case against marriage fundamentalism: Embracing family justice for all*. : Family Story. Retrieved May 20, 2019 from [https://familystoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Case-Against-Marriage-Fundamentalism\\_Family-Story-Report\\_040419.pdf](https://familystoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Case-Against-Marriage-Fundamentalism_Family-Story-Report_040419.pdf)
- García Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., Pipes McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67(5), 1891–1914.
- Garwick, A. W., & Seppelt, A. M. (2010). Developing a family-centered participatory action research project. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 16(3), 269–281.
- Goodman, L. A., Fauci, J. E., Sullivan, C. M., DiGiovanni, C. D., & Wilson, J. M. (2016). Domestic violence survivors’ empowerment and mental health: Exploring the role of the alliance with advocates. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 86(3), 286–296.

- Goodman, R. D., Letiecq, B. L., Vesely, C. K., Marquez, M., & Leyva, K. (2018). Community practice with immigrants and refugees. In A. Hilado & M. Lundy (Eds.), *Reorienting transnational practice with immigrants and refugees: Theory, practice and culture* (pp. 204–225). Sage.
- Hallett, J., Held, S., McCormick, A., Simonds, V., Real Bird, S., Martin, C., ... Trottier, C. (2016). What touched your heart? Collaborative story analysis emerging from an Apsaalooke cultural context. *Qualitative Health Research, 27*, 1–11.
- Henderson, T. L. (2005). Empirical reality and vision: Studying people of color. In V. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory and research* (pp. 194–195). Sage.
- Henderson, T. L., Shigeto, A., Ponzetti, J. J., Edwards, A., & B., Stanley, J., & Story, C. (2017). A cultural variant approach to community-based participatory research: New ideas for family professionals. *Family Relations, 66*(4), 629–643.
- Hill, R. B. (1993). *Research on the African American family: A holistic perspective*. William Monroe Trotter Institute.
- Israel, B., Eng, E., Schulz, A., & Parker, E. (2005). *Methods in community-based participatory research for health*. Jossey-Bass.
- James, A., Coard, S. I., Fine, M., & Rudy, D. (2018). The central roles of race and racism in reframing family systems theory: A consideration of choice and time. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 10*(2), 419–433.
- Jones, J. H. (1981). *Bad blood: The Tuskegee syphilis experiment*. The Free Press.
- Jurkowski, J. M., Greenmills, L. L., Lawson, H. A., Bovenski, M. C., Quartimon, R., & Davison, K. K. (2013). Engaging low-income parents in childhood obesity prevention from start to finish: A case study. *Journal of Community Health, 38*(1), 1–11.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191–216). Sage.
- Kuhn, T. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ladner, J. A. (1973). *The death of white sociology*. Random House.
- Letiecq, B. (2019). Family privilege and supremacy in family science: Toward justice for all. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 11*(3), 398–411.
- Letiecq, B., & Anderson, E. (2017). From education to advocacy and activism: Alternative roles for translating family science to policy. *Family Relations, 66*(4), 729–740.
- Letiecq, B., & Schmalzbauer, L. (2012). Community-based participatory research with Mexican migrants in a new rural destination: A good fit? *Action Research Journal, 10*(3), 244–259.
- Letiecq, B. L., & Bailey, S. J. (2004). Evaluating from the outside: Conducting cross-cultural evaluation research on an American Indian reservation. *Evaluation Review, 28*(4), 342–357.
- Letiecq, B. L., Grzywacz, J. G., Gray, K. M., & Eudave, Y. M. (2014). Depression among Mexican men on the migration frontier: The role of family separation and other structural and situational stressors. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health, 16*, 193–200.
- Letiecq, B. L., Mehta, S., Vesely, C. K., Marquez, M., Goodman, R. D., & Moron, L. (2019). Central American immigrant mothers' mental health in the context of illegality: Structural stress, parental concern, and trauma. *Journal of Family and Community Health, 42*(4), 271–282.
- Levin, M. (1999). Action research paradigms. In D. J. Greenwood (Ed.), *Action research: From practice to writing in an international action research development program* (pp. 25–38). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Lind, C. (2008). Knowledge development with adolescents in a PAR process. *Educational Action Research, 16*(2), 221–233.
- Maiter, S., Simich, L., Jacobson, N., & Wise, J. (2008). Reciprocity: An ethic for community-based participatory action research. *Action Research, 63*(3), 305–325.
- Mendenhall, T. J., & Doherty, W. J. (2005). Action research methods in family therapy. In F. Piercy & D. Sprenkle (Eds.), *Research methods in family therapy* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Minkler, M. (2004). Ethical challenges for the “outside” researcher in community-based participatory research. *Health Education and Behavior, 31*(6), 684–697.

- Monk, J. K., Benson, J., & Bordere, T. (2019). Public scholarship: A tool to strengthen relationships between extension, campus and community. *Journal of Extension*, 57, 3TOT1.
- Oswald, R. F., Kuvalanka, K. A., Blume, L., & Berkowitz, D. (2009). Queering “the family”. In S. A. Lloyd, A. L. Few, & K. R. Allen (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist family studies* (pp. 43–55). Sage.
- Ozer, E. J., & Piatt, A. A. (2018). Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR). In N. Wallerstein, B. Durran, J. Oetzel, & M. Minkler (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed., pp. 95–106). Jossey-Bass.
- Paradiso de Sayu, R., & Chanmugam, A. (2015). Perceptions of empowerment within and across partnerships in community-based participatory research: A dyadic interview analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(1), 105–116.
- Parsons, T., & Bales, R. F. (Eds.). (1955). *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Free Press.
- Pech, A. S., Valencia, B. G., & Romero, A. J. (2019). Reflections from novice youth participatory action researchers: Emphasis on critical gender perspectives. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 48(2), 302–322.
- Piercy, F. P., & Thomas, V. (1998). Participatory evaluation research: An introduction for family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 24(2), 165–176.
- Pinto, R. M., Spector, A. Y., Rahman, R., & Gastolomendo, J. D. (2013). Research advisory board members’ contributions and expectations in the USA. *Health Promotion International*, 30(2), 328–338.
- Pollner, M. (1991). Left of ethnomethodology: The rise and decline of radical reflexivity. *American Sociological Review*, 56(3), 370–380.
- Quandt, S. A., Grzywacz, J. G., Talton, J. W., Trejo, G., Tapia, J., D’Agostino, R. B., Mirabelli, M. C., & Arcury, T. A. (2013). Evaluating the effectiveness of a lay health promoter-led community-based participatory pesticide safety intervention with farmworker families. *Health Promotion and Practice*, 14(3), 425–432.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). *Handbook of action research: Concise paperback edition*. Sage.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Rodriguez, M. A., & Garcia, R. (2013). First, do no harm: The US sexually transmitted disease experiments in Guatemala. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(12), 2122–2126.
- Saini, A. (2019). Superior: The return of race science. .
- Sanchez, R., Letiecq, B., & Ginsberg, M. (2019). An integrated model of family strengths and resilience: Theorizing at the intersection of indigenous and western paradigms. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 4(11), 561–575.
- Skloot, R. (2010). *The immortal life of Henrietta lacks*. Broadway Books.
- Smith, D. E. (1993). The standard North American family: SNAF as an ideological code. *Journal of Family Issues*, 14(1), 50–65.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. Harper & Row.
- Stoecker, R. (2009). Are we talking the walk of community-based research? *Action Research*, 7(4), 385–404.
- Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Tervalon, M., & Murray-García, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*, 9(2), 117–125.
- Torre, M. E., & Fine, M. (2006). Intimate details: Participatory action research in prison. *Action Research*, 4(3), 253–269.
- Trickett, E. J., & Espino, S. L. R. (2004). Collaboration and social inquiry: Multiple meanings of a construct and its role in creating useful and valid knowledge. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 34(1–2), 5–18.

- Vesely, C., Letiecq, B., & Goodman, R. (2017). Immigrant family resilience in context: Using a community-based approach to build a new conceptual model. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 9(1), 93–110.
- Vesely, C. K., Letiecq, B. L., Goodman, R. D., Marquez, M., Alves, L., Lazo, W., & Martinez, M. (2019). “What does this mean to you?” Partnering with Amigas de la Comunidad to analyze the housing conditions of undocumented Latina immigrants. In A. Humble & E. Radina (Eds.), *How qualitative data analysis happens: Moving beyond “themes emerged”*. Taylor & Francis.
- Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B. (2018). Theoretical, historical, and practice roots of CBPR. In N. Wallerstein, B. Durran, J. Oetzel, & M. Minkler (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed., pp. 17–29). Jossey-Bass.
- Wallerstein, N., Duran, B., Oetzel, J., & Minkler, M. (2018). *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Walsdorf, A. A., Jordan, L. S., McGeorge, C. R., & Caughy, M. O. (2020). White supremacy and the web of family science: Implications of the missing spider. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 12(1), 64–79.
- Winter, R. (1998). Finding a voice – Thinking with others: A conception of action research. *Educational Action Research*, 6(1), 53–68.



# Application: Photovoice: An Application of PAR



Abigail J. Rolbiecki and Jacquelyn J. Benson

Over the last several decades, family scholars and other researchers have utilized community-based participatory action research (CBPR) to assess the needs of individuals and communities. Photovoice (PV) is one of the many CBPR approaches used to understand and prevent complex health issues. PV is designed to gather information, foster understanding of participants' experiences with particular health issues, and stimulate social action regarding the unmet needs of marginalized and oppressed individuals and communities (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). At the core of Photovoice is participatory action research (PAR), as the method is based on the premise that people are the experts of their own lives. When empowered to do so, participants of PV can use the method to communicate a lived experience with health or justice issues in a way that stimulates critical, social action (Wang & Burris, 1997).

## Theoretical Foundation of Photovoice

Photovoice is informed by theories of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973), feminist theory (Maguire, 1987), and principles of documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997). These theoretical underpinnings suggest that individuals are experts in their own lives (Freire, 1973; Wang & Burris, 1997). When given the opportunity to identify and reflect on issues that affect them, they are better able to play active roles in their community and/or their healthcare.

---

A. J. Rolbiecki (✉)  
Family and Community Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Missouri,  
Columbia, MO, USA  
e-mail: [rolbieckia@health.missouri.edu](mailto:rolbieckia@health.missouri.edu)

J. J. Benson  
Division of Palliative Medicine, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA

The original PV project sought to explore the daily realities and lived experiences of women living in China, uncovering political and social constructs that contribute to systemic oppression and marginalization of women in their community (Liebenberg, 2018). Documentary photography sheds light on the notion that individuals can communicate their lived experience with a health issue via visual imagery, and that we can all learn from these experiences through bearing witness to the images and the stories participants tell about them (Stryker & Johnstone, 1940). Wang and Burris (1994) utilized the principles of documentary photography in their early work, by entrusting cameras in the hands of their participants to capture images that revealed their daily realities, which empowered participants to then use these visual representations of their experiences as a means for advocacy and social action (Liebenberg, 2018).

Photovoice and photo-elicitation are distinctly different research methodologies that are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, which can lead to confusion about the role and purpose of PV. The Photovoice method is a research strategy that engages researchers and community members in the exploration of an unmet need or health issue, with an end goal of stimulating social action. Photo-elicitation involves the use of photos to elicit new perspectives or ideas (Gomez, 2020) and has been used as a health intervention (Rolbiecki et al., 2018) and a qualitative interview technique (Church & Quilter, 2021; Oliffe & Botorff, 2007).

## Goals and Typical Elements of Photovoice

There are three main goals of Photovoice: (1) to capture and reflect community strengths and concerns from the perspective of community members themselves; (2) to promote critical dialogue of the needs of the participants and community via group discussion of the photos; and (3) to create social action (Wang & Burris, 1997). Social action could be in the form of new programs and policies, raised awareness of health issues (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016), shared understandings of community and stakeholder experiences, or productive working relationships between community members and stakeholders (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Sutton-Brown, 2014). Even though the method is regarded as flexible and is widely used across many disciplines, a common goal of creating social action regarding the unmet health needs of a population remains (Liebenberg, 2018).

In PV, participants are given cameras and asked to photograph images that best represent their experiences. They then meet together as a group to critically discuss the photos, and the meeting is facilitated by a researcher using the SHOWeD methodology – asking the group to reflect on the pictures via the questions (Wang & Burris, 1997): (a) What do you **See** here? (b) What is really **H**appening here? (c) How does this relate to **O**ur lives? (d) **W**hy does this situation, concern, or strength **e**xist? (e) What do we **D**o about it? A process of participatory analysis then occurs, wherein participants and researchers play an equal role in analyzing and discussing the photos to identify key themes. This active engagement of participants in each

phase of the PV process, including analysis, emphasizes that they are valuable members of the research team and, thus, their input is important (Wang & Burris, 1997). According to Wang and Burris (1997), there are three ways to engage in participatory analysis: (1) mutually agreeing on photographs to analyze, (2) contextualizing the photos (i.e., what stories do the photos tell?), and (3) codifying the data, wherein participants and investigators identify potential themes.

Once participants and researchers have mutually agreed upon themes coming from the data, a discussion about how to present these data in a way that meets the original goals and intentions of the project should occur. For example, participants may decide to display photos in an exhibit. The exhibit plays a critical role in validating the stories and voices of participants, and not exhibiting the photos can be viewed as silencing participants (Delgado, 2015). Participants may choose to invite key stakeholders to come and bear witness to the stories as a way to stimulate critical dialogue about the meaning of the photos. In its simplest explanation, to bear witness means to show that something exists, or is true (Cody, 2001). In the context of Photovoice methods, to bear witness to one's experience with the health issue via their photo-stories is to validate, or assure that their stories are heard, and understood.

## Photovoice in Action

The PV methodology was first used by Wang and Burris (1994) as a tool to empower women who lived in the rural Yunnan Province of China to inform policies and programs that affect them and their community. Since then, there have been many modern adaptations of PV by researchers and community activists across many settings and with various populations, and the outcomes vary depending on project goals and community needs. Despite the growing popularity of the PV method, however, there is concern for methodological rigor, as the flexible and “user-friendly” nature of the method creates opportunity for misuse (Liebenberg, 2018).

Photovoice methods have been used to address a variety of social justice and public health concerns (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), including health literacy (Ardiles et al., 2019), experiences of disenfranchisement of women who are living with HIV/AIDS (Teti et al., 2013, 2015), and HIV/AIDS stigma (Teti et al., 2016). The first author used PV as a tool for exploring the experiences of sexual assault survivors who sought justice within university and community justice systems (Rolbiecki et al., 2016). This study emphasized the therapeutic nature of PV, and was foundational to her idea that PV and photo-elicitation methods can facilitate posttraumatic growth (Rolbiecki et al., 2016) and meaning-making (Rolbiecki et al., 2018) among those who have experienced adverse life events like trauma, caregiving, or the death of a family member.

## Photovoice and Families

### *Honoring Family Diversity Through Visibility*

PV methods also can be used to help promote inclusivity in families and educate the public about diversity in family life (Garcia et al., 2013). In this way, families serve as participants in the PV project and become the focal point for social action. For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parent families experience considerable stigma and discrimination in society despite the fact that ample research demonstrates these families function quite well, and children raised by LGB parents experience few or no differences from heterosexual families on psychosocial or educational outcomes (Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014). PV could be used to amplify the voices of these families by revealing the stigmatic challenges LGB families face when interacting in various social contexts, illuminating their resilience, and revealing the diversity of experience that exists within their families.

### *Challenges or Ethical Concerns with Families*

Some PV researchers have pointed out a number of challenges and potential ethical concerns that may arise when using PV methods with multiple family members. Logistically, recruiting family dyads or larger family units to participate in a PV project may be difficult due to family members' conflicting schedules or a member's reluctance to take part in the project. If the number of family members in each participating family unit varies, or if a family member is unable or unwilling to attend all phases of the project, the group dynamics may shift such that a real or perceived power imbalance manifests within the group (Garcia et al., 2013). Moreover, families are comprised of multiple generations, so younger members of the family may find it difficult to verbalize their thoughts and feelings alongside older family members, especially if their point of view is at odds with the older family member. Facilitators will need to be flexible with the PV method (e.g., allowing for separate discussions or smaller group work) and be diligent about ensuring communication is balanced, giving all family members opportunities to vocalize their perceptions and experiences (Garcia et al., 2013).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that bringing multiple family members together to discuss sensitive topics may generate conflict or bring forward relationship problems, which not only presents challenges for the facilitator but raises ethical dilemmas that have been posed about visual methods in general, including concerns about family members' safety via personal disclosures of family trauma, problematic misinterpretations of photos by other family members, or potential burden of representation. Providing validation while also preventing the group from shifting into a therapy session would be an important skillset of any facilitator working on a PV project. Moreover, facilitators need to have a plan if mediation is needed

and information regarding therapeutic resources that can be shared with all participating family members. Although PV as intervention has been successfully used in therapeutic settings by mental health professionals (Christensen, 2018; Mizock et al., 2014; Werremeyer et al., 2020), PV as intervention with family units is a new frontier requiring further investigation.

## Conclusion

Photovoice is increasingly lauded as a relatively new visual research methodology designed to create social action by the nature of its reliance on participant inclusion throughout the process, empowerment through voice, meaning making, and engaging key stakeholders. Most of the published research utilizing PV methods includes individuals as participants and health policy change as the desired outcome. However, recent applications of this method suggest PV has great potential as a therapeutic intervention in mental health (Buchan, 2020) and as a strategy for collecting and analyzing family-level data (Yi & Zebrack, 2010). Although PV methods can introduce unique challenges in data collection and analysis and raise specific ethical concerns, we believe these challenges can be tempered with proper training and by committing to ongoing and evolving evaluation of ethics vis-à-vis PV procedures and outcomes.

## References

- Ardiles, P., Casteleijn, M., Black, C., & Sørensen, K. (2019). Using Photovoice as a participatory approach to promote youth health literacy. In *International handbook of health literacy* (Vol. 247). The Policy Press.
- Buchan, C. A. (2020). Therapeutic benefits and limitations of participatory photography for adults with mental health problems: A systematic search and literature review. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 27(5), 657–668.
- Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health Education & Behavior*, 37(3), 424–451.
- Church, S., & Quilter, J. (2021). Consideration of methodological issues when using photo-elicitation in qualitative research. *Nurse Researcher*, 29(2), 25.
- Christensen, M. C. (2018). Using photovoice to treat trauma resulting from gender-based violence. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(6), 701–714.
- Cody, W. K. (2001). The ethics of bearing witness in healthcare: A beginning exploration. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 14(4), 288–296.
- Delgado, M. (2015). *Urban youth and photovoice: Visual ethnography in action*. Oxford University Press.
- Evans-Agnew, R. A., & Rosemberg, M.-A. S. (2016). Questioning photovoice research: Whose voice? *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(8), 1019–1030.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness* (Vol. 1). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Garcia, C. M., Aguilera-Guzman, R. M., Lindgren, S., Gutierrez, R., Raniolo, B., Genis, T., ... & Clausen, L. (2013). Intergenerational photovoice projects: Optimizing this mechanism

- for influencing health promotion policies and strengthening relationships. *Health Promotion Practice*, 14(5), 695–705.
- Goldberg, A. E., Gartrell, N. K., & Gates, G. J. (2014). *Research report on LGB-parent families*.
- Gomez, R. (2020). Photostories. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* (1), 47–63. Retrieved from 49.
- Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking critically about photovoice: Achieving empowerment and social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), 1609406918757631.
- Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing participatory research: A feminist approach*. Center for International Education, School of Education, Univ. of Mass.
- Mizock, L., Russinova, Z., & Shani, R. (2014). New roads paved on losses: Photovoice perspectives about recovery from mental illness. *Qualitative health research*, 24(11), 1481–1491.
- Oliffe, J. L., & Bottofff, J. L. (2007). Further than the eye can see? Photo elicitation and research with men. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(6), 850–858.
- Rolbiecki, A., Anderson, K., Teti, M., & Albright, D. L. (2016). “Waiting for the cold to end”: Using photovoice as a narrative intervention for survivors of sexual assault. *Traumatology*, 22(4), 242.
- Rolbiecki, A., Crenshaw, B., Teti, M., Ordway, J., LeMaster, J. W., & Mehr, D. R. (2018). *Exploring lived experiences of chronic pain through photo-elicitation and social networking*. Parker Oliver, D. A., Washington, K., Benson, J., Demiris, G., & Smith, J. (2018). Caregiver speaks: A pilot intervention. Palliative & Supportive Care, Manuscript Submitted for Publication.
- Stryker, R. E., & Johnstone, P. H. (1940). Documentary photographs. In *The cultural approach to history* (pp. 324–330). Columbia University Press.
- Sutton-Brown, C. A. (2014). Photovoice: A methodological guide. *Photography and Culture*, 7(2), 169–185.
- Teti, M., French, B., Bonney, L., & Lightfoot, M. (2015). “I created something new with something that had died”: Photo-narratives of positive transformation among women with HIV. *AIDS and Behavior*, 19(7), 1275–1287.
- Teti, M., Pichon, L., Kabel, A., Farnan, R., & Binson, D. (2013). Taking pictures to take control: Photovoice as a tool to facilitate empowerment among poor and racial/ethnic minority women with HIV. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in Aids Care*, 24(6), 539–553.
- Teti, M., Rolbiecki, A., Zhang, N., Hampton, D., & Binson, D. (2016). Photo-stories of stigma among gay-identified men with HIV in small-town America: A qualitative exploration of voiced and visual accounts and intervention implications. *Arts & Health*, 8(1), 50–64.
- Teti, M. (2019). The murky ethics of visual qualitative methods: Picturing a clear path forward. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1609406919884810.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. *Health Education Quarterly*, 21(2), 171–186.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387.
- Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women’s health. *Journal of Women’s Health*, 8(2), 185–192.
- Werremeyer, A., Skoy, E., Burns, W., & Bach-Gorman, A. (2020). Photovoice as an intervention for college students living with mental illness: A pilot study. *The Mental Health Clinician*, 10, 237–243.
- Yi, J., & Zebrack, B. (2010). Self-portraits of families with young adult cancer survivors: Using photovoice. *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*, 28, 219–243.

**Part V**  
**Family Theories and Health,  
Interdisciplinarity, and Translational  
Family Science Theories**

# Ambiguous Loss: Contemporary Applications and Theoretical Extensions



Tai J. Mendenhall and Pauline Boss

Our efforts in family science and family therapy to articulate and understand ambiguous loss began in the 1970s when Pauline Boss, as a graduate student, endeavored to understand “psychologically absent” fathers in intact families (for summary narratives of this work, see Boss, 2000, 2016). Efforts during her early career followed in research targeting family experiences with mismatched psychological and physical presence (or absence)—first with families of veterans who were declared missing-in-action during the Vietnam War (Boss, 1977; 1980) and then with families of veterans living with dementia (Boss et al., 1988; Caron et al., 1999). Following extensive community work with families who lost their loved ones after the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York City (Boss, 2003, 2004), Boss expanded her ambiguous loss framework to inform guidelines in family and group interventions (Boss, 2006). At the same time, she shared contemporary understandings about ambiguous loss—and ways to cope with it—with lay readers through nonacademic texts (e.g., Boss, 2000, 2011). Throughout this time, Boss has (re) confirmed how therapy for losses that are ambiguous must be founded on a family stress theory and/or model—instead of a medical model(s) that presumes definitive solutions are possible (Boss, 1987; Boss et al., 2017).

The past 40+ years have seen a continuous advance of scholarship related to a myriad of ambiguous loss situations and foci—outlined below—across exploratory, theoretical, and clinical applications (Boss, 1977, 1987, 1993; Boss et al., 2017; Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Dahl & Boss, 2005, 2020). In this account, we highlight key components and themes in this collective—worldwide, now—effort.

---

T. J. Mendenhall (✉)

University of Minnesota, Department of Family Social Science, Couple and Family Therapy Program, Saint Paul, MN, USA  
e-mail: [mend0009@umn.edu](mailto:mend0009@umn.edu)

P. Boss

Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, Saint Paul, MN, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_37](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_37)

513



## Contemporary Understanding of Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss does not fit straightforward notions of loss or bereavement (e.g., when a loved one dies and we mourn them). Put simply, it is a loss that remains unclear, and because it is unclear, it remains unresolved. The confusion and paucity of facts that accompany ambiguous loss lead to painful experiences of ambivalence and mixed emotions about the lost persons. Such experiences can, and usually do, adversely affect the health and well-being of individuals, couples, and families (Boss, 2000, 2006, 2016; Boss et al., 2017).

### *Types of Ambiguous Loss*

Two types of ambiguous loss have been articulated in the literature. The first is *physical ambiguous loss*—wherein families have a loved one who is physically absent, but kept psychologically present because it is not clear whether the person is alive or dead. Losses of this nature are illustrated through disappearances caused by natural disasters like tsunamis, hurricanes, and flooding (e.g., Boss & Ishii, 2015; Falk, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2018) or human-caused disasters like kidnapping, forced migration, or terrorist attacks (e.g., Boss et al., 2003; Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer, 2018; Luster et al., 2009). Many call this experience “leaving without good-bye” (Boss, 2007, p. 105). It is an extraordinarily painful loss for families and loved ones. Decisions about whether to hold on to hope that the person is still alive, or to conclude that they are dead, can carry on for years—even across generations. They can tear families apart as opinions, wants, and dispositions vary (at best) or clash (at worst). Questions about how to have a funeral for a loved one without a body to bury or cremate, how to “do” holidays and rituals now, and how to talk about a missing person with others (present tense? past tense?) extend suffering and present never-ending challenges for families to manage.

In a *psychological ambiguous loss*, a loved one is physically present, but psychologically absent. Losses like this—characterized as “goodbye without leaving” (Boss, 2007, p. 105)—are manifest through circumstances in which a family member is affected by dementia, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse/addiction, or serious and persistent mental illness (Boss, 2011; Collins & Kennedy, 2008; Landau & Hissett, 2008; Perera & McGuire, 2018; Riley, 2016; Riverbank House, 2017; Wiens & Daniluk, 2017). It, too, can be agonizing for family members when they look into an aging parent’s eyes, for example, but sense that their parent is not “really” there anymore. They also may feel this when trying to engage with loved ones in the throes of alcoholism, recalling how things used to be before drinking “took them away.”

### ***Why Is Ambiguous Loss So Painful?***

Both of these types of losses (stressors) lead to a perceptual construct called *boundary ambiguity*. Ambiguity means obscurity (lack of clarity) about a situation that remains unsubstantiated. This is typified by not knowing who is in or out of one's family system and/or maintaining incongruence between one's own and other family members' perceptions about family membership (Boss, 2019; Dahl & Boss, 2020). Family members of a missing person, for example, long for some confirmation—even of death—so that they can be free from the pain of not knowing if a loved one is deceased. A man married to a woman missing in either body or mind may wonder if he is still married, especially if the situation goes on for years. How does the left-behind spouse, if and when they decide it is time to find a new partner, traverse inevitable family conflicts like those from children who perceive their parents as still married?

Boundary ambiguity almost invariably leads to experiences of *ambivalence*. Ambivalence is defined by contradiction, indecision, or conflicted emotions. Bearers are of two minds (e.g., simultaneously loving and hating a person). They wish that "it" was over (e.g., wishing a terminally ill parent was dead), and feel guilty about such wishes (and hope that parent lives). Struggling with ambivalence tends to immobilize individuals, couples, and families in processes of decision-making (e.g., whether to have a funeral or remarry, as described previously) and grieving, alongside a myriad of other multisystemic and intergenerational stressors.

### ***Adverse Outcomes Associated with Ambiguous Loss***

Adverse outcomes have long been recognized to affect those who experience ambiguous loss across biological, psychological, social, and spiritual continua. Individually, these outcomes include issues such as insomnia, headaches, compromised immune system functioning, chemical dependency, depression, and anxiety (Boss & Couden, 2002; Boss et al., 1990; Caron et al., 1999; Sobel & Cowan, 2003). These in turn affect couple and family functioning: interpersonal conflict, relational dissolution, and divorce (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Boss, 2019; Huebner et al., 2017). Social isolation exacerbates such relational symptoms, while also functioning as a potential cause (Boss & Carnes, 2012; Boss & Dahl, 2014). The cyclical processes found with ambiguity and ambivalence can also lead to crises of faith; for example, if God is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful, how could this situation happen (Baldwin, 2018)? Due to its myriad of biopsychosocial/spiritual sequelae, ambiguous loss is considered by sufferers and clinical professionals as the most stressful kind of loss (Boss, 2016; Boss et al., 2017).

## Recent Applications of Ambiguous Loss in Empirical Literature

Contemporary applications of ambiguous loss theory are described below, with attention to both research methods and content areas.

### *Advancing Research Methods*

Research methods employed to enhance understanding(s) of ambiguous loss have evolved considerably over time (Boss, 1977; Dahl & Boss, 2020). Sophistication has grown in synchrony with scholars' increased precision in distinguishing ambiguity (i.e., lack of clarity) from ambivalence (i.e., conflicting emotions), and in differentiating ambiguous loss as a stressor event or situation from boundary ambiguity as the perception of an ambiguous loss per se (Boss, 2007, 2016; Boss et al., 1990, 2017).

Decisions about whether and how to employ qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods in research about ambiguous loss should be matched with the focus of the inquiry; Boss et al. (2017) summarized these methods and listed articles produced by researchers engaged in these respective pursuits. Numerous studies have been effectively advanced through phenomenology, grounded theory, thematic and/or content analysis, narrative inquiry, and feminist approaches. At the community level, talking circles, ethnographic observations, and community-based participatory research remain relatively uncharted avenues of study. These efforts can (and should) be conducted longitudinally, too, so as to better grasp how personal and interpersonal perceptions and coping processes change over time and place. Said efforts should also engage groups across diverse cultures, ethnicities, ages, religious/faith denominations, sexual orientations, gender identities, and social locations. Knowledge cumulatively gained through such work will generate new insights, research questions, and hypotheses to better inform individuals, partners, family members, community leaders (and communities), clinicians, and educators in their own and others' journeys.

On the other hand, boundary ambiguity is especially suited for quantitative inquiry, as it is easier to operationalize through roles (Boss, 2016; Boss et al., 2017). Scales targeting this phenomenon were developed several years ago (Boss et al., 1990) and have been further developed, employed, and disseminated. Connections between key foci have been identified, for example, between boundary ambiguity in parents of children with acute or chronic health problems and psychological distress (Berge & Holm, 2007; Mu et al., 1997). However, more research is needed to identify pathways between boundary ambiguity and role losses and transitions.

Mixed methods inquiry (i.e., using both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same investigation) is also important. As qualitative analyses advance understanding(s) of the rich, personal, and lived-experiences of ambiguous loss,

quantitative analyses will advance generalizability. Similarly, qualitative inquiry can build grounded theory to better inform researchers and clinicians about nuanced effects of ambiguous loss, which can in turn uncover new questions for quantitative inquiry regarding clinical effectiveness (e.g., through pre-/post-evaluations of depression or tolerance for ambiguity). Coordinating multiple methods to understand both negative effects and resilience improves our capacity to support those living with ambiguous loss (e.g., Bentley et al., 2015; King et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2020).

### *Advancing Content Knowledge*

Research on ambiguous loss has grown substantially since Boss first coined the term in the 1970s. The following represent some of the areas that scholars are either advancing or expanding ambiguous loss.

**Dementia** Current estimates suggest that there are 50 million people worldwide (and untold numbers of family members providing care for them); these numbers are projected to double by 2050 (American Association for Retired Persons, 2015; Pollard & Scommenga, 2014). Scholars are now integrating the theory of ambiguous loss into grief models which have traditionally focused on the certainty of death, not the ambiguity of dementia (Boss & Kaplan, 2004; Blandin & Pepin, 2017; Chan et al., 2014; Fuchs, 2018; Harris, 2020; Roos, 2017). Both linear and cyclical processes are being used to study this unique type of loss *and* grief, and these efforts are proving especially informative to systems-trained clinicians (e.g., family therapists) in the facilitation of therapy and group/community engagement (Dahl & Boss, 2020).

**Traumatic brain injury** Traumatic brain injury (TBI) can trigger a variety of the same symptoms that persons living with dementia manifest (e.g., cognitive impairment, memory loss, communication difficulties, personality changes). However, the onset of these symptoms can be immediate (versus gradual), and their duration can last decades longer because TBIs can occur at any age. Long-term consequences on family members and loved ones (e.g., caregiver burden, social isolation, marital dissolution) echo those recognized in the dementia literature, and are well documented (Zaksh et al., 2019). Targeting ambiguous loss, clinicians are now pairing general guidelines advanced by Boss (2006) and Boss et al. (2017) with specific guidelines pertaining to brain injury (Kreutzer et al., 2016). Calls to include friendship and other social systems that patients and families inhabit are being made (Bodley-Scott & Riley, 2015), together with work to better explain individual differences—and even positive experiences—that accompany TBI sequelae (Gill et al., 2011; Kitter & Sharman, 2015; Tam et al., 2016; Wiart et al., 2016).

**Immigration and migration** Human migration has always involved family separations. However, unlike in wartime or natural disasters, the trauma of separating children from their parents in the manners that recently have happened at the United States' border results in a myriad of deleterious consequences for youth, spanning biological (e.g., neuropsychiatric deficits in brain development, structure, function, and connectivity; physical or sexual abuse), psychological (e.g., acute stress and posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, suicide ideation), cognitive (e.g., academic deficits), behavioral (e.g., poor self-regulation, regressive behaviors, aggression), and social (e.g., attachment issues, peer conflict) realms (Amnesty International, 2020; Lu et al., 2020; MacLean et al., 2019; Skelton, 2018; Teicher, 2018; Wood, 2018). Family and child researchers must educate policy makers by documenting and disseminating what we know about the immediate- and long-term effects of separating children from their parents in immigration detention centers. This is an urgent human rights issue that family scientists and practitioners are only beginning to address. Promising initial efforts are developing culturally sensitive and contextually situated assessments and interventions across family and group formats, including youth and parents of all genders (Bond, 2019; Lovato, 2019).

Intentional and volitional immigration and migration also leads to ambiguous loss (Boss, 2019; Dahl & Boss, 2020). For example, in transnational families where one family member leaves to earn money in another country for a family left behind, the resultant separation can be painful. Ambiguous losses for the person in a new country regarding the family who remain back home (and vice versa) are not well understood. Ambiguous loss(es) for one's country of origin (i.e., for all that is familiar) are similarly unclear (Gitterman & Knight, 2019). Research targeting these foci could better inform efforts to support families who are navigating these experiences.

**Companion animals** Professional and lay organizations are increasingly recognizing the need to better understand how human/animal bonds are affected by ambiguous loss. Companion animals (e.g., cats, dogs) are often loved, regarded, and treated like family members by those who "own" them. Pets, then, represent members of our *psychological family*—that is, beloved others who are chosen, not necessarily related biologically (Blair & Pukall, 2015; Cohen, 2002). To be separated from one's pet without knowing if it is alive or dead, then, is an unclear loss similar to that of a missing human family member. And while some of these separations can occur in the same ways that they do between human family members (e.g., dispersion and displacement in a natural disaster), human/animal ambiguous losses frequently occur because human support structures (e.g., family assistance centers, evacuation shelters) do not allow animals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). This puts people in a situation of having to separate from an animal who is in their care. The ambiguous loss then can be perceived as one's own fault, because they "caused" the loss when they agreed to leave their pet behind.

Decisions about whether or how to memorialize a lost pet and when or how to replace it echo those of humans deciding whether or how to memorialize a human loved one's loss and to remarry. However, because many regard human/animal

relationships as inferior to human/human relationships, persons who lose a pet often find less support than if the loss had been of a human family member (Reisbig et al., 2017). More research is needed in this area of ambiguous loss to determine the impact of losing pets.

**Transgender youth** As the ways gender is conceptualized evolve, conventional Western binaries of “male” and “female” are changing. These developments represent considerable cultural shifts, insofar as gender is a deeply felt and value-laden construct that shapes our personal identities as men, women, fathers, mothers, sisters, etc. and guides our lives and behaviors (e.g., clothes, courtship behaviors, household roles). When a person experiences their gender as different than the one assigned to them at birth, publicly transitioning to and/or living their personal gender identity can have considerable effects on family members and loved ones (Golden & Oransky, 2019; Klein & Golub, 2016; Wirtz et al., 2020).

Researchers are only beginning to explore these complex dynamics of ambiguous loss. Wahlig (2015) recognized the losses for parents of their transgender child (regardless of age) as two-fold. First, the child is physically present, but not psychologically present in the gender they once were. At the same time, the child’s physical presence as one gender has changed, while their psychological presence in relation to the family has not. McGuire et al. (2016) also recognized that the child in this situation experiences complex combinations of ambiguous losses. For example, they may be physically present for family members in some ways (e.g., living together) but absent in other ways (e.g., excluded from church, funerals, or family celebrations). Psychologically, they may also experience simultaneous presence (“You are a part of this family, so we love you.”) and absence (“We will not accept your change in gender.”). More scholarship to inform psychoeducational, supportive, and clinical engagement with transgender persons and their families is urgently needed (Norwood, 2013).

**Other emerging areas of scholarship** Other areas that are being explored via ambiguous loss include infertility (e.g., Kim & Wilson, 2018; McBain & Reeves, 2019), artificial insemination (e.g., Andrew, 2017; Burns, 2005), adoption (e.g., Horstman et al., 2016), foster care (e.g., Mitchell, 2016), military deployments (e.g., Boss, 2017; Huebner et al., 2017; Kelly & Paul, 2018), hoarding (Luu & Woody, 2017; Sampson et al., 2012), and the opioid crisis (e.g., Mechling et al., 2018). We predict that these and other areas of research will continue to grow. As they do, more contemporary studies can guide professionals with evidence-based therapy and interventions for individuals and families experiencing ambiguous loss, which we turn to next.

## Clinical Applications of Ambiguous Loss

Conversations about any clinically relevant theory should directly inform the ways in which practitioners engage with those who are suffering. For those who are living with ambiguous loss, family and community (multifamily) interventions are generally more effective in advancing support and building resilience than conventional 1:1 therapy (Boss et al., 2003; Mendenhall et al., 2018). Reasons for this relate to the need to connect with other persons who share a similar lived-experience, which accesses interpersonal and intergenerational processes for finding meanings and new hope within and across multiple families.

As conversations transpire, they generally include narratives about suffering, resilience, survival, hope, and social connections. Key to building resilience is the simultaneous holding of opposing ideas—called *dialectical thinking* (Boss, 2006, 2011, 2016; Boss et al., 2017). Such both/and narratives—like “He’s probably dead, and maybe not” or “She’s here, and gone in the ways that she used to be”—are illustrative of this. They are key to how ambiguous loss theory is tangibly integrated and advanced into clinical and practice models. Early on, such exchanges are best led by professionally trained family therapists. Later on, they can be led by paraprofessionals or local lay leaders who have been trained. In areas with limited access to professionals, lay leaders are especially important. The International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC), for example, train their psychologists and social workers to train field workers (called “accompaniers”) to help calm and empower those living with ambiguous loss (Hollander, 2016; ICRC, 2013; Robins, 2013).

### *Guidelines for Application: Building Resilience to Live with Ambiguous Loss*

Guidelines for living with ambiguous loss emerged from more than 40 years of research and clinical engagement with families of loved ones who are missing as a consequence of human-caused or natural disasters (Boss, 2018; Boss & Ishii, 2015; Mendenhall & Berge, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2018) and those with loved ones who are living with dementia (Boss, 2019; Boss et al., 1988; Boss et al., 1990; Caron et al., Boss, Mortimer et al., 1992). Applications and refinements of this work have evolved across both Western and Eastern cultures (Dahl & Boss, 2020; Robins, 2010, 2014) and are now integrated into both professional and paraprofessional training, appearing in manualized interventions through numerous sources. Said guidelines include, in a nonlinear way:

**Finding meaning** When much-needed answers are unavailable, meaning must be socially constructed in order to ease stress and suffering. The best way to do this is to recognize that the culprit is the ambiguity, not an individual deficiency. Boss (2016) recommends that we start these conversations by saying: “What you are

experiencing is an ambiguous loss. It's one of the most stressful kinds of loss because there is no possibility of resolution. The problem is the ambiguity, not you" (p. 130). This helps people understand that their struggles are not their doing or fault. Labeling the problem as outside of oneself fosters a collective a sense of empowerment to cope with, manage, adjust to, and live with ambiguity surrounding loss, instead of struggling fruitlessly to "get-over" it or find closure (Boss & Yeats, 2014; Knight & Gitterman, 2018).

**Adjusting mastery** Mastery is a disposition in which persons maintain a can-do attitude about solving problems in a world that they can influence and control. Such beliefs and values work against people who are coping with situations that have no answers or solutions. With ambiguous loss, we recommend that persons with high mastery orientations, who tend to reside in Western cultures, lower their expectations in the pursuit of answers. In conventionally Eastern cultures, the opposite may be true, as more mastery may be needed.

Instead of focusing on East and West in stereotypical ways, however, we propose a different dichotomy—that with more privileged people (accustomed to having things go their way), less empowerment and mastery are needed and with disenfranchised people, more is needed. For people without power to shape their lives, we recommend interventions that empower more action. Robins (2010), for example, found that women with missing husbands experiencing ambiguous loss in Eastern cultures did better when they gathered together and made deliberate decisions publicly to believe that their husbands had died. This "conscious mastery of ambiguity" (p. 263) helped them to transition out of a socially awkward status of being neither a wife nor a widow. As a result of this research, the title of this guideline was changed to "*adjusting* mastery" (it was formerly called "tempering mastery").

**Reconstructing identity** Struggles with what or who one "is" are predictable when coping with ambiguous loss. Aforementioned questions like "Am I still married, or am I now a widow(er)?" are typical. In therapy, support is given—about unresolved grief, performing new tasks and roles, and/or other (inter)personal foci—until the client is ready to share their story. In multiple family meetings, peers listen to and share their stories, grappling with questions about who they are now and what roles they must learn. In the company of others, they facilitate changes in each other's narrative and sense of self by functioning as a "looking glass" (Boss, 2000, p. 103) to one another.

**Normalizing ambivalence** Normalizing ambivalence helps individuals to wrestle with questions like: *Should I wait or move forward? Should I take on roles that the person held or wait for him to come back?* It is important to hear this normalizing of ambivalence, to understand why, and to recognize that the craziness of the situation comes from the external context of unanswered questions. Normalizing one's ambivalence is essential toward building resilience, and to minimizing and managing ambivalences within ongoing ambiguity (Dahl & Boss, 2020).



**Revising attachment** As people ambiguously lose loved ones, they can feel abandoned (Boss, 2006, 2019). Reconnecting is not possible by nature of the situation, nor is normative grieving, because the loss has no assurance of finality. Revising attachment bonds with ambiguously lost family members is facilitated by therapeutic or peer discussions that identify and name the ambiguous loss as the stressor event, and through using dialectic narratives to normalize coping processes, whereby relationships are modified rather than closed off. A transformation in attachment is acknowledged with honoring and remembering, rather than waiting for a return of or end to the lost person. In dialectic terms, we both remember the missing person and move forward with our lives without them.

**Finding new hope** Processing together how closure is neither possible nor necessary paradoxically engenders new meanings and hope (Boss, 2006; Dahl & Boss, 2020). Imagining new hopes and dreams takes time and is best achieved with others who share similar struggles. Often, new hope is found through helping others to manage ambiguous losses of their own or to ease their suffering. For example, a daughter whose father is missing created supportive communities for other children whose parents are missing (Mendenhall & Berge, 2010). A mother whose son was kidnapped launched a website that transformed the speed and manner that data about missing children are shared worldwide (Bailey, 2017; Rogers, 2007). In a myriad of ways, people find that it helps to help others, so that the loss that they have experienced (and continue to experience) was not in vain. Here, there is the possibility of new hope.

## Theoretical Extensions of Ambiguous Loss

Theories guide our understandings of individual, relational, and social phenomena and, in turn, the manners in which we construct interventions to advance understanding, improve learning and/or coping, and ease suffering (Boss et al., 1993; Forte, 2014). When we evaluate these understandings and interventions, this knowledge circles back to inform our efforts in refining and improving our theories (Bengtson et al., 2005; Gladding, 2019). This reciprocal process is essential; we are always advancing our comprehension of complex human processes, and we are never done with the work. The following is a discussion of where we are going and should go in our efforts to advance ambiguous loss theory.

First, theorists, researchers, clinicians, and educators must better consider and understand their own tolerances for ambiguity. Doing this is important for the evolution of ambiguous loss theory across both broad (general) and specific (personal) grounds. Efforts in research (especially qualitative inquiry) and therapy (especially contemporary approaches) are increasingly cognizant of how self-of-the-researcher and self-of-the-therapist influence our inherent biases, lenses, blind-spots, reactivity, and professional conduct (Cheon & Murphy, 2007; Primeau, 2003; Shufutinsky, 2020). As theorists and educators join these efforts, we—as producers of knowledge

and understanding, or as persons offering and facilitating compassionate and safe spaces for interpersonal connections that promote coping, healing, and growth—will be better equipped to advance positive outcomes. Doing this will require that we look inward, challenge our tendencies to think in binary ways, evaluate the ambiguities of loss in our own relationships, and consciously internalize our own cultures, religions/faiths, genders, and life experiences. The ways that ambiguous loss is experienced by the recipients of our care (informed by our theorizing and evaluated by our scholarship) intersect with our own experiences are almost wholly neglected so far in extant literature (Boss, 2006; Dahl & Boss, 2020).

Building upon this, we must continue to test the theory and broaden its applications to include even more about what helps a broad diversity of people (i.e., not only what blocks them). To prevent pathologizing those who do not fit current models of healthy coping, we need studies about ambiguous loss that include multiple ways to be resilient. For example, the manners in which we support a family whose structure is more traditional (wherein hierarchal power—often gendered—is firm and systemic flexibility vis-à-vis change is relatively rigid) will look different than the ways that we engage with one whose hierarchal power is flexible, and whose systemic dexterity is malleable. Better understanding that these processes must circle back to ambiguous loss theory, better articulating how ambiguous loss impacts different families differently and how these differences necessitate different interventions are needed. In addition, we call for a better understanding of the aforementioned lenses that guide us (e.g., how do our own dispositions about gender, hierarchal power, and systemic flexibility help or impede appropriate assessments or effective interventions with the families with whom we engage?).

Another challenge in ambiguous loss relates to potential changes in permanency of loss. Some types of ambiguous loss, by definition, end in death (e.g., when a loved one with a terminal illness like Alzheimer's disease dies, when a kidnapped child or missing soldier is found and confirmed deceased). This poses the questions of what happens to individuals and families after ambiguous loss shifts to a certain loss, and what happens when a disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) suddenly becomes a legitimate one that the community recognizes. To our knowledge, no research has been done on individuals or families who have experienced this transition of loss types.

We propose that people can and do live without closure from both ambiguous and clear losses, but how this is done undoubtedly varies (e.g., across cultures and religions; Boss, 2010). As our understandings regarding these phenomena evolve, the theory of ambiguous loss also will evolve. Therapeutic guidelines founded on the notion that the ambiguous nature of loss never ends must expand toward making sense of when ambiguity dissolves. Individual and relational experiences of loss that are clear from the outset are patently different than loss that is forever ambiguous, but how is a loss that was once ambiguous and is now clear similar or different? How do understandable feelings of relief that painful ambiguity is now over intersect with new and unambiguous feelings of loss (i.e., that hope for the lost loved one's return is now gone)? Relatedly, we must continue to challenge the term "closure" to find out what it really means to families who experience such transitions

from ambiguous loss to certainties of verified death. Families tend to abhor the term closure, but the public continues to use it.

Finally, we must work more purposefully in collaboration with—and across—other disciplines. This call is consistent with contemporary understandings about how collaborative and integrated health-care approaches outperform private practice models and/or single-discipline interventions for a variety of clinical presentations (Hunter et al., 2017; Lloyd & Newland, 2021; Mendenhall et al., 2018). We all—psychology, family therapy, social work, medicine, and others—bring unique contributions to the work that we do, and we all work better together than in isolation. For example, we should begin working more closely with colleagues in neuroscience to understand unique brain patterns that affect the ways that we think, feel, and change (Bassett & Sporns, 2017; Davidson & Begley, 2013). Increased tolerance for ambiguity is needed to live with ambiguous loss, but we do not know the neuroscience of how to enhance that process. We also encourage collaboration with experts in theology, religious studies, and chaplaincy (Baldwin, 2018; Oman, 2013) to study the ways that deeply personal or communally shared values and beliefs impact the ability to live with ambiguous loss. Finally, we are encouraged that collaborations between human rights and transitional justice (e.g., Hollander, 2016; ICRC, 2013) are advancing the theory of ambiguous loss worldwide.

## Conclusion

Theory development processes are like a Möbius strip (Florez & Mukherjee, 2020); they never end. Ambiguous loss theory has come a long way over the past 50 years. Early understandings and applications have evolved considerably and new understandings and applications are still developing across a myriad of foci. What researchers are finding—again and again—is that ambiguous loss leads to feelings of ambivalence, helplessness, identity confusion, insecure attachment, and hopelessness. Therapy-informed interventions have proven effective toward building resilience to live well, despite unresolved grief and pain. Many people are able to harness and grow in their resiliency to eventually reframe their original story to one that is less blaming and more life-affirming. While human connection is essential in this process, so too is being able to hold the paradox—for the physically missing, they are both gone and still here; for the psychologically missing, they are both still here and gone. Indeed, many either learn or already know how to hold the opposing ideas of absence and presence, of what they have lost and what they still have, and of what they know and may never know. What *we* have learned is that with ambiguous loss, suffering and well-being can coexist.

## References

- American Association for Retired Persons. (2015). *Research Report: Caregiving in the U.S.* Retrieved from
- Amnesty International. (2020). *Fleeing for our lives: Center American migrant crisis*. Author.
- Andrew, H. (2017). 'Phantom fathers' and 'test-tube babies': Debates on marriage, infertility, and artificial insemination in the British media, c. 1957-1960. In G. Davis & T. Loughran (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of infertility in history* (pp. 221–239). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bailey, D. (2017). A life of grief: An exploration of disenfranchised grief in sex offender significant others. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43, 641–667.
- Baldwin, J. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive theology: Thinking theologically in the era of trauma*. Cascade Books.
- Bassett, D., & Sporns, O. (2017). Network neuroscience. *Nature Neuroscience*, 20, 353–364.
- Bengtson, V., Acocck, A., Allen, K., Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Klein, D. (2005). *Sourcebook of family theory and research*. Sage.
- Bentley, G., Zvonkovic, A., McCarty, M., & Springer, N. (2015). Down syndrome and fathering: An exploration of ambiguous loss. *Fathering*, 13, 1–17.
- Berge, J., & Holm, K. (2007). Boundary ambiguity in parents with chronically ill children: Integrating theory and research. *Family Relations*, 56, 123–134.
- Betz, G., & Thorngren, J. (2006). Ambiguous loss and the family grieving process. *The Family Journal*, 14, 359–365.
- Blair, K., & Pukall, C. (2015). Family matters, but sometimes chosen family matters more: Perceived social network influence in the dating decisions of same- and mixed-sex couples. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 24, 257–270.
- Blandin, K., & Pepin, R. (2017). Dementia grief: A theoretical model of a unique grief experience. *Dementia*, 16, 67–78.
- Bodley-Scott, S., & Riley, B. (2015). How partners experience personality change after traumatic brain injury – Its impact on their emotions and their relationship. *Brain Impairment*, 16, 205–220.
- Bond, S. (2019). The essential role of the father: Fostering a father-inclusive practice approach with immigrant and refugee families. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 22, 101–123.
- Boss, P. (1977). A clarification of the concept of psychological father presence in families experiencing ambiguity of boundary. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 39(1), 141–151.
- Boss, P. (1980). The relationship of psychological father presence, wife's personal qualities, and wife/family dysfunction in families of missing fathers. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 42(3), 541–549.
- Boss, P. (1987). Family stress. In M. Sussman & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 695–723). Plenum.
- Boss, P. (1993). The reconstruction of family life with Alzheimer's disease: Generating theory to lower family stress from ambiguous loss. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 163–166). Springer.
- Boss, P. (2000). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press.
- Boss, P. (2003). Primacy of perception in family stress theory and measurement. In P. Boss & C. Mulligan (Eds.), *Family stress: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 158–165). Springer, New York, NY.
- Boss, P. (2004). Ambiguous loss research, theory, and practice: Reflections after 9/11. *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 66, 551–566.
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. Norton.
- Boss, P. (2007). Ambiguous loss theory: Challenges for scholars and practitioners. *Family Relations*, 56, 105–111.
- Boss, P. (2010). The trauma and complicated grief of ambiguous loss. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59(2), 137–145.

- Boss, P. (2011). *Loving someone who has dementia: How to find hope while coping with stress and grief*. Jossey-Bass.
- Boss, P. (2012). The ambiguous loss of dementia: A relational view of complicated grief in caregivers. In M. O'Reilly-Landry (Ed.), *A psychodynamic understanding of modern medicine: Placing the person at the center of care* (pp. 183–193). Radcliffe.
- Boss, P. (2016). The context and process of theory development: The story of ambiguous loss. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8, 269–286.
- Boss, P. (2017). Families of the missing: Psychosocial effects and therapeutic approaches. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 99, 519–534.
- Boss, P. (2018, November 9). *Global challenges: How families manage the stress of ambiguous loss*. Presentation at the annual conference of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), San Diego. Retrieved from
- Boss, P. (2019). Building resilience: The example of ambiguous loss. In B. Huppertz (Ed.), *Approaches to psychic trauma: Theory and practice* (pp. 91–108). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boss, P., Beaulieu, L., Wieling, E., Turner, W., & LaCruz, S. (2003). Healing loss, ambiguity, and trauma: A community-based intervention with families of union workers missing after the 9/11 attack in New York City. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29, 455–467.
- Boss, P., Bryant, C., & Mancini, J. (2017). *Family stress management: A contextual approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Boss, P., & Carnes, D. (2012). The myth of closure. *Family Process*, 51, 456–469.
- Boss, P., Caron, W., & Horbal, J. (1988). Alzheimer's disease and ambiguous loss. In C. S. Chilman, E. W. Nunnally, & F. M. Cox (Eds.), *Families in trouble series, Vol. 2. Chronic illness and disability* (pp. 123–140). Sage.
- Boss, P., Caron, W., Horbal, J., & Mortimer, J. (1990). Predictors of depression in caregivers of dementia patients: Boundary ambiguity and mastery. *Family Process*, 29(3), 245–254.
- Boss, P., & Couden, B. (2002). Ambiguous loss from chronic physical illness: Clinical interventions with individuals, couples, and families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58, 1351–1360.
- Boss, P., & Dahl, C. M. (2014). Family therapy for the unresolved grief of ambiguous loss. In D. W. Kissane & F. Parnes (Eds.), *Bereavement care for families* (pp. 171–182). Routledge.
- Boss, P., Doherty, W., LaRossa, R., Schumm, W., & Steinmetz, S. (Eds.). (1993). *Sourcebook of family theory and methods: A contextual approach*. Springer.
- Boss, P., & Greenberg, J. (1984). Family boundary ambiguity: A new variable in family stress theory. *Family Process*, 23, 535–546.
- Boss, P., Greenberg, J., & Pearce-McCall, D. (1990). *Measurement of boundary ambiguity in families*. (Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 593-1990; Item No. Ad-SB 3763). University of Minnesota.
- Boss, P., & Ishii, C. (2015). Trauma and ambiguous loss: The lingering presence of the physically absent. In K. Cherry (Ed.), *Traumatic stress and long-term recovery* (pp. 271–289). Springer.
- Boss, P., & Kaplan, L. (2004). Ambiguous loss and ambivalence when a parent has dementia. In K. Pillemer & K. Luescher (Eds.), *Intergenerational ambivalences: New perspectives on parent-child relations in later life* (pp. 207–224). Elsevier.
- Boss, P., & Yeats, J. (2014). Ambiguous loss: A complicated type of grief when loved ones disappear. *Bereavement Care*, 33, 63–69.
- Burns, L. (2005). Psychological changes in infertility patients. In A. Rosen & J. Rosen (Eds.), *Frozen dreams: Psychodynamic dimensions of infertility and assisted reproduction* (pp. 3–32). Analytic Press.
- Caron, W., Boss, P., & Mortimer, J. (1999). Family boundary ambiguity predicts Alzheimer's outcomes. *Psychiatry*, 62(4), 347–356.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). *Pets in evacuation centers*.
- Chan, D., Livingston, G., Jones, L., & Sampson, E. (2013). Grief reactions in dementia carers: A systemic review. *Geriatric Psychiatry*, 28, 1–17.
- Chan, T., Courtenay, K., Kalsy, S., Eady, N., Janicki, M. P., Wilkinson, H., et al. (2014). *Intellectual disability and dementia: Research into practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Cheon, H., & Murphy, M. (2007). The self-of-the-therapist awakened: Postmodern approaches to the use of self in marriage and family therapy. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 19*, 1–16.
- Cohen, S. (2002). Can pets function as family members? *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 24*, 621–638.
- Collins, R., & Kennedy, M. (2008). Serving families who have served: Providing family therapy and support in interdisciplinary polytrauma rehabilitation. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 64*(8), 993–1003.
- Dahl, C., & Boss, P. (2005). The use of phenomenology for family therapy research. In D. Sprenkle & F. Piercy (Eds.), *Research methods in family therapy* (2nd ed., pp. 63–84). Guilford.
- Dahl, C., & Boss, P. (2020). Theory-based guidelines for therapy with individuals, families, and communities. In M. Rastogi & R. Singh (Eds.), *Handbook of systemic family therapy* (pp. 127–151). Wiley.
- Davidson, R. J., & Begley, S. (2013). *The emotional life of your brain: How its unique patterns affect the way you think, feel, and live—and how you can change them*. Hudson Street. Penguin Group, Inc. New York, NY.
- Doka, K. J. (Ed.). (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.
- Falk, M. (2010). Recovery and Buddhist practices in the aftermath of the tsunami in southern Thailand. *Religion, 40*, 96–103.
- Florez, R., & Mukherjee, A. (2020). Classroom experiences in introducing students to conjectures, exploration and visual proofs using experiments on the Mobius Strip. *Primus, 30*, 50–66.
- Forte, J. (2014). *An introduction to using theory in social work practice*. Routledge.
- Fuchs, T. (2018). Presence in absence: The ambiguous phenomenology of grief. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 17*, 43–63.
- Gill, C., Sander, A., Robins, N., Mazzei, D., & Struchen, M. (2011). Exploring experiences of intimacy from the viewpoint of individuals with traumatic brain injury and their partners. *Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation, 26*, 56–68.
- Gitterman, A., & Knight, C. (2019). Non-death loss: Grieving for the loss of familiar place and for precious time and associate opportunities. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 47*, 147–155.
- Gladding, S. (2019). *Family therapy: History, theory, and practice* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Golden, R., & Oransky, M. (2019). An intersectional approach to therapy with transgender adolescents and their families. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 48*, 2011–2025.
- Harris, D. (Ed.). (2020). *Non-death loss and grief: Context and clinical implications*. Routledge.
- Hollander, T. (2016). Ambiguous loss and complicated grief: Understanding the grief of parents of the disappeared in northern Uganda. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*(3), 294–307.
- Horstman, H., Colaner, C., & Rittenour, C. (2016). Contributing factors of adult adoptees' identity work and self-esteem: Family communication patterns and adoption-specific communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*, 263–276.
- Huebner, A., Mancini, J., Wilcox, R., Grass, S., & Grass, G. (2017). Parental deployment and youth in military families: Exploring uncertainty and ambiguous loss. *Family Relations, 56*, 112–122.
- Hunter, C., Goodie, J., Oordt, M., & Dobmeyer, A. (2017). *Integrated behavioral health in primary care: Step-by-step guidance for assessment and intervention* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association.
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (ICRC). (2013). *Accompanying families of the missing: A practical handbook*. Author.
- Kajtazi-Testa, J., & Hewer, C. (2018). Ambiguous loss and incomplete abduction narratives in Kosovo. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 23*, 333–345.
- Kelly, D., & Paul, M. (2018). Veterans-by-proxy: A conceptual framework of ambiguous loss among children of combat veterans. *Journal of Family Social Work, 21*, 255–270.
- Kim, L., & Wilson, E. (2018). Finding a way through: Integrating spirituality and sociocultural meaning in the face of infertility and perinatal loss. In E. Wilson & L. Nice (Eds.), *Socially just religious and spiritual interventions: Ethical uses of therapeutic power* (pp. 87–97). Springer, Cham.

- King, L., Osofsky, J., Osofsky, H., Weems, C., Hansel, T., & Fassnacht. (2015). Perceptions of trauma and loss among children and adolescents exposed to disaster: A mixed methods study. *Current Psychology, 34*, 524–536.
- Kitter, B., & Sharman, R. (2015). Caregivers' support needs and factors promoting resiliency after brain injury. *Brain Injury, 29*, 1082–1093.
- Klein, A., & Golub, S. (2016). Family rejection as a predictor of suicide attempts and substance misuse among transgender and gender nonconforming adults. *LGBT Health, 3*, 193–199.
- Knight, C., & Gitterman, A. (2018). Ambiguous loss and its disenfranchisement: The need for social work intervention. *Families in Society, 100*, 164–173.
- Kreutzer, J., Mills, A., & Marwitz, J. (2016). Ambiguous loss and emotional recovery after traumatic brain injury. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*, 386–397.
- Landau, J., & Hissett, J. (2008). Mild traumatic brain injury: Impact on identity and ambiguous loss in the family. *Families, Systems, & Health, 26*(1), 69–85.
- Lloyd, M., & Newland, J. (2021). Collaborative treatment with primary care. In E. Yearwood, G. Pearson, & J. Newland (Eds.), *Child and adolescent behavioral health: A resource for advanced practice psychiatric and primary care practitioners in nursing* (2nd ed., pp. 472–482). Wiley.
- Lovato, K. (2019). Forced separations: A qualitative examination of how Latino/a adolescents cope with parental deportation. *Children and Youth Services Review, 98*, 42–50.
- Lu, Y., He, Q., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2020). Diverse experience of immigrant children: How do separation and reunification share their development? *Child Development, 91*, e146–e163.
- Luster, T., Qin, D., Bates, L., Johnson, D., & Rana, M. (2009). The lost boys of Sudan: Coping with ambiguous loss and separation from parents. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 79*, 203–211.
- Luu, M., & Woody, S. (2017). Hoarding: Features, assessment, and intervention strategies. In M. Day, G. McCarthy, & J. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Self-neglect in older adults: A global, evidence-based resource for nurses and other health care providers* (pp. 41–55). Springer.
- MacLean, S., Agyeman, P., Walther, J., Singer, E., Baranowski, K., & Katz, C. (2019). Mental health of children held at a United States immigration detention center. *Social Science & Medicine, 230*, 303–308.
- McBain, T., & Reeves, P. (2019). Women's experience of infertility and disenfranchised grief. *The Family Journal, 27*, 156–166.
- McGuire, J., Catalpa, J., Lacey, V., & Kvalanka, K. (2016). Ambiguous loss as a framework for interpreting gender transitions in families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*, 373–385.
- Mechling, B., Ahern, N., & Palumbo, R. (2018). Applying ambiguous loss theory to children of parents with an opioid use disorder. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 31*, 53–60.
- Mendenhall, T., & Berge, J. (2010). Family therapists in trauma-response teams: Bringing systems thinking into interdisciplinary fieldwork. *Journal of Family Therapy, 32*, 40–54.
- Mendenhall, T., Bundt, J., & Yumbul, C. (2018). Medical family therapy in disaster-preparedness and trauma-response teams. In T. Mendenhall, A. Lamson, J. Hodgson, & M. Baird (Eds.), *Clinical methods in medical family therapy* (pp. 431–461). Springer.
- Mitchell, M. (2016). The family dance: Ambiguous loss, meaning making, and the psychological family in foster care. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*, 360–372.
- Mu, P. F., Tomlinson, P., Huckabay, L. M., & Heims, M. L. (1997). Parental experience and meaning construction during a pediatric health crisis. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 19*(5), 608–636.
- Norwood, K. (2013). Grieving gender: Trans-identities, transition, and ambiguous loss. *Communication Monographs, 80*, 24–45.
- Oman, D. (2013). Defining religion and spirituality. In R. Paloutzian & C. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (2nd ed., pp. 23–47). Guilford.
- Perera, K., & McGuire, A. (2018). *Hopeful voyager: Navigating your way through the ambiguous losses of mental health*. Vivid Publishing.

- Pollard, K., & Scommenga, P. (2014). Just how many baby boomers are there? *Population Reference Bureau*.
- Primeau, L. (2003). Reflections on self in qualitative research: Stories of family. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 57, 9–16.
- Reisbig, A., Hafen, M., Drake, A., Girard, D., & Breunig, Z. (2017). Companion animal death: A qualitative analysis of relationship quality, loss, and coping. *Journal of Death and Dying*, 75, 124–150.
- Riley, G. (2016). The partner's experience of traumatic brain injury and its recovery. *Concussion*, 1, 1–5.
- Riley, G., Keeble, H., Yasmin, N., & Hagger, B. (2020). Relationship continuity and person-centred care: An exploratory mixed-methods investigation of spousal partners' responses to the challenging care needs of those with acquired brain injury. *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation*, 30, 1169–1189.
- Riverbank House. (2017). *Waiting between: When a son or daughter struggles with addiction*. Author.
- Robins, S. (2010). Ambiguous loss in a non-Western context: Families of the disappeared in post-conflict Nepal. *Family Relations*, 59, 253–268.
- Robins, S. (2013). *Families of the missing: A test for contemporary approaches to transitional justice*. Routledge Glasshouse.
- Robins, S. (2014). Constructing meaning from disappearance: Local memorialisation of the missing in Nepal. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)*, 8(1), 104–118.
- Rogers, L. (2007). *Sex offender registry laws: From Jacob Wetterling to Adam Walsh*. U.S. Department of Justice.
- Roos, S. (2017). *Chronic sorrow: A living loss* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Sampson, J., Yeats, J., & Harris, S. (2012). An evaluation of an ambiguous loss based psychoeducational support group for family members of persons who hoard: A pilot study. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 34, 566–581.
- Shufutinsky, A. (2020). Employing use of self for transparency, rigor, trustworthiness, and credibility in qualitative organizational research methods. *Organization Development Review*, 52, 50–58.
- Skelton, A. (2018). Separation of children from parents in situations of migrancy: Avoidable trauma. *South Africa Journal of Psychology*, 49, 3–6.
- Sobel, S., & Cowan, C. (2003). Ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief: The impact of DNA predictive testing on the family as a system. *Family Process*, 42, 47–47.
- Tam, S., McKay, A., Sloan, S., & Ponsford, J. (2016). The experience of challenging behaviours following severe TBI: A family perspective. *Brain Injury*, 29, 813–821.
- Teicher, M. (2018). Childhood trauma and the enduring consequences of forcibly separating children from parents at the United States border. *BMC Medicine*, 16, 146–148.
- Wahlig, J. (2015). Losing the child they thought they had: Therapeutic suggestions for an ambiguous loss perspective with parents of a transgender child. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 11, 305–326.
- Wiert, L., Luaute, J., Stefan, A., Plantier, D., & Hamonet, J. (2016). Non-pharmacological treatments for psychological and behavioural disorders following traumatic brain injury (TBI). A systematic literature review and expert opinion leading to recommendations. *Annals of Rehabilitation Medicine*, 59, 31–41.
- Wiens, S., & Daniluk, J. (2017). Loss and change: The challenges of mothering an adult child with schizophrenia. *International Journal of Healthcare*, 3(1), 26–33.
- Wirtz, A., Poteat, T., Malik, M., & Glass, N. (2020). Gender-based violence against transgender people in the United States: A call for research and programming. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(2), 227–241.
- Wood, L. (2018). Impact of punitive immigration policies, parent-child separation and child detention on the mental health and development of children. *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2, 1–6.
- Zaksh, Y., Yehene, E., Elyashiv, M., & Altman, A. (2019). Partially dead, partially separated: Establishing the mechanism between ambiguous loss and grief reaction among caregivers of patients with prolonged disorders of consciousness. *Clinical Rehabilitation*, 33, 345–356.



# Family Communication



Dawn O. Braithwaite and Elizabeth A. Suter

Each chapter in this volume reveals aspects of family as a cornerstone of human experience, highlighting the profound influence and contested nature of family across time, geography, and cultures (Baxter, 2014; Floyd et al., 2006). Families have undergone transformational changes, necessitating a greater appreciation of and reliance on communication to enact and navigate family life. Few social commentaries would fail to recognize the central role of family communication and often blame “poor” communication, communication “breakdowns,” or a perceived “lack” of communication for family stresses and problems. The importance of studying communication in families is underscored across disciplines and among professionals serving the needs of families. Scholars and practitioners focusing on family communication represent interdisciplinary interests, including family studies, human development, psychology, and sociology. In this chapter, we introduce family scholarship transpiring in the broader communication studies discipline. While communication is ubiquitous in the family experience, family communication is not represented by a singular theory. Thus, we center our focus on family communication as a field of study within the communication discipline (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014).

The field of family communication is experiencing an invitational moment, and we hope to encourage others to become part of the invigorating and expanding conversations occurring in our field. A family communication perspective stems from a view that family systems and the enactment of family processes and patterns are

---

D. O. Braithwaite (✉)

Interpersonal & Family Communication, Communication Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, USA

e-mail: [dbraithwaite@unl.edu](mailto:dbraithwaite@unl.edu)

E. A. Suter

Department of Communication Studies, College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_38](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_38)

531

constituted in interaction and talked into (and out of) being as families form, negotiate, legitimize, change, and dissipate via interaction (e.g., Baxter, 2004, 2014). Critical scholars augment this approach by centering issues of power, ideology, and the private family's interrelationships with public institutions, structures, policies, and discourses (Suter, 2016). A family communication perspective takes an inclusive stance on what it means to be a family; including not just families formed by blood or law, but also through communicatively negotiated bonds of affection, interdependence, and long-term commitment (Braithwaite, Suter, & Floyd, 2018; Galvin, 2006).

While it is not possible to cover the breadth of the field in a single chapter, our goal is to provide (a) a brief introduction to the development of the field, (b) a discussion of core assumptions and three approaches to the study of family communication (effectual, constitutive, and critical), (c) an introduction to three key theories that have been used to guide family communication research (family communication patterns, communication privacy management, and relational dialectics), and (d) an exploration of future directions for the field.

## Origins and Historical Development of the Family Communication Field

The communication discipline is deeply rooted in both humanities and social science (Braithwaite, Suter, & Floyd, 2018) and remains dedicated to very practical goals of understanding and improving relationships. The Family Communication Division of the National Communication Association began in 1989 and the *Journal of Family Communication* started in 2001. In 2006, Braithwaite and Baxter published *Engaging Theories in Family Communication*, which featured 20 theories, with about half developed by communication scholars. Braithwaite, Suter, and Floyd (2018) updated the volume to 29 theories, over half from the field. Other important collections (e.g., Turner & West, 2014; Vangelisti, 2022) reflect the expansion of topics and interdisciplinary contributions. Scholars from the field have contributed examinations of understudied family forms and featured the central role of communication in legitimizing and negotiating these families (see Baxter, 2014; Floyd & Morman, 2014).

While most family communication scholarship began in quantitative social science, one hallmark has been an openness to, and strength in, qualitative (interpretive) scholarship and, more recently, critical scholarship (Braithwaite, Suter, & Floyd, 2018; Sotirin & Ellingson, 2018). In original and updated analyses, Baxter & Braithwaite (2006) and Braithwaite, Suter, and Floyd (2018) examined 777 family communication studies from 1990 to 2015, with the most recent coding of 59.8% of the studies as postpositivist, 27.2% as interpretive, and 12.9% as critical. Their findings are similar to a broader interdisciplinary meta-analysis by Stamp and Shue (2013).

## Core Assumptions and Interrelated Concepts of the Family Communication Field

Within the boundaries of a single chapter, we aim to provide a snapshot of core assumptions and concepts undergirding family communication. When scholars and laypersons consider communication, they often think about message transmission, in particular, message exchange, clarity, and/or effectiveness, looking at how communication might be lacking, break down, or fail (Galvin et al., 2019). In our minds, this constitutes an incomplete view. Baxter (2014) argued it is easy to “take communication for granted as either the outward representation of internal individual states and traits (cognitions and motivations, for example) or as a more or less neutral vessel through which social forces such as roles or social positions) are manifested” (p. 36). There are certainly times when transmission-oriented views of communication help us address particular situations, for example, the message clarity of informing an adolescent about their curfew. However, viewing family communication from a transmission-oriented frame is limiting. Therefore, scholars center communication processes and patterns that both create and reflect family relationships, with families shaped and defined through interaction patterns, to understand how families create their social realities and personal identities in interaction within the sociocultural contexts in which they reside (Braithwaite, Foster, & Bergen, 2018).

From this perspective, we focus on *communication as a transactional process*, which has four implications for understanding communication in family life (see Galvin et al., 2019). First, family communication is always an ongoing process that we stop, quite artificially, to understand and study; in this way, communication both affects and reflects constant change. Second, family communication always occurs within complex and dynamic cultural and social contexts that frame each interaction and relationship. Third, family communication involves the negotiation of shared meanings between interactants within and without the family, as the family creates and coordinates its social reality. Fourth, from a transactional perspective, families negotiate meanings on both content and relational levels, which stresses the importance of both the information shared, but more importantly, how family members meta-communicate concerning how meanings are to be interpreted and understood. The relationship level usually involves a greater reliance on nonverbal cues that help family members interpret behavior within the context of a particular relationship and provides different verbal and nonverbal clues about how messages should be interpreted and understood. For example, for her communication narrative sense-making theory, Koenig Kellas (2018) demonstrated that in studies of family storytelling, it is not just the content of family stories that are important, but that families share meanings and engage in sense-making by attending to such cues as hesitations, turn-taking, and tone of voice (or lack of these qualities). She highlighted how storytelling “can affect, reflect, foster, and/or inhibit connection, sense-making, and coping” (p. 62).

When we conceptualize communication as the symbolic, transactional process of creating and sharing meanings, it becomes the primary way families develop, create, maintain, and alter identity (Baxter, 2014; Braithwaite, Foster, & Bergen, 2018). Families are created and recreated in interaction, highlighting the centrality of interaction in defining family as, for example, “networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time, bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family” (Galvin et al., 2019, p. 8).

Historically, family communication scholars worked primarily within two key perspectives on communication, what Baxter (2014) labeled effectual and constitutive approaches. In recent years, a third key critical approach emerged (Suter, 2016). We discuss each approach and how they inform family communication scholarship: (a) the effectual approach: communication patterns and processes that affect family outcomes, (b) the constitutive approach: communication as constituting family relationships, and (c) the critical approach: integrating issues of power, bidirectionality of public and private spheres, reflexivity, and praxis.

**Effectual approach: Communication patterns and processes that affect family outcomes** Family communication scholars operating in this first meta-theoretical frame emphasize the “effects of communication in shaping the world as we know it” (Baxter, 2014, p. 37), focusing on communication processes and patterns that sculpt and influence family experiences. These scholars align with a scientific, post-positivist project to examine functions of communication and different aspects of family functioning, with the goal of producing generalizable explanations from testable hypotheses (Baxter, 2014).

While there are a wealth of effectual theories in the field, we mention three examples and detail family communication patterns theory later in this chapter. First, Knobloch et al. (2018) developed and tested relational turbulence theory to explain and predict how relational parties think, feel, and interact at points of relational transition and change, to increase understanding of events that precipitate change and emotional reactivity that results in perceptions of turbulence. Relational turbulence reflects both global assessment of the relationship at the points of change and resulting negative relational outcomes in the family. One line of research concerns how families experience and respond to relational turbulence following military deployment of a marital partner, as they face challenges coordinating everyday tasks, such as negotiating chores or handling disagreements (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Knobloch et al. (2018) focused on how family members’ experience and communication post-deployment can reduce or perpetuate turbulence. Second, Floyd developed affection exchange theory (AET), a social science theory focused on understanding how and why humans communicate affection, taking a bioevolutionary approach to understand motivations and goals of affectionate communication expressed through verbal communication and direct and indirect nonverbal communication (Floyd & Morman, 1998). Floyd and colleagues have studied which family relationships are more affectionate and the physical and mental health

benefits of affectionate communication. For example, persons who express affection experience greater self-esteem, relational satisfaction, and positive outcomes on a variety of health measures (Floyd et al., 2005; Floyd et al., 2014). Third, a number of scholars employ communication accommodation theory (CAT), focusing on communication enactments that maintain and alter relational and family identity, in particular, how relational parties adjust their communication to either converge or diverge from one another and study motivations and outcomes of linguistic and nonverbal adjustments, especially those in intergroup families (Soliz & Giles, 2014). For example, Colaner et al. (2014) studied how members of interfaith families engaged with accommodative and nonaccommodative communication, detailing how interfaith families engaged accommodative communication that demonstrated support and respect for differences that, in turn, enabled family members to transcend differences.

**Constitutive approach: Communication as constituting family relationships** Beginning in the 1990s (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999) and gaining considerable traction by the mid-2000s (Galvin, 2006), a second meta-theoretical frame emerged: the constitutive approach. Scholars operating from a constitutive lens attend to communication processes and patterns that both create and reflect family relationships. These scholars focus on family as created and defined through interaction and seek to understand how families create social realities and personal identities in interactions.

Family communication scholars taking a constitutive approach are often grounded in social constructionism, viewing communication as fundamental to the co-constitution of social realities, including family relationships (Foster & Bochner, 2008). Scholars adopting a social constructionist lens on family center social practices that “use talk to make things happen: by naming things, we give them substance” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006, p. 230). The fact that social construction is *social* means that it does not happen within individuals, but family relationships and identity are cocreated, embraced, and resisted between people in interaction (Baxter, 2014). Foster and Bochner (2008) stressed that “to root one’s work in social construction is to plant one’s feet squarely in the world of interactive communication” (p. 86). Scholars embracing the constitutive approach often align with interpretive (qualitative) methods, and we will highlight theories that spring from the interpretive perspective later in the chapter.

Scholars working from a constitutive approach also served as vanguards for the field’s turn toward the study of the communicative practices of postmodern families, or what Kathleen Galvin (2006) conceptualized as discourse dependent families. Galvin (2006) explained that “traditional” families have cultural models to guide roles and relationships within the family and externally. In contrast, families that are evotypical (postmodern, nontraditional) may lack biogenetic and/or legal ties, may or may not coreside (e.g., voluntary kin, polyamorous, stepfamilies, and adoptive families), and may visually rupture the idealized two-parent, same-race, same-nation, normative heterosexual family form. Families headed by two mothers or two fathers, stepfamilies, or multiethnic families are “discourse dependent” (Galvin,

2006) and especially reliant on interaction to create, legitimize, and alter their family form. For instance, Braithwaite et al. (2008) studied how some stepchildren must develop new ways to interact and navigate being caught in the middle between their parents, what one described as feeling like “a bone between two dogs” (p. 41). Scharp (2017) enlightened the discourses of deconstruction of adult children who were estranged from parents. In reality, all families are discourse dependent and cocreated in interaction; however, evotypical families encapsulate this perspective as they do not have dominant cultural models to guide their behaviors and others’ reaction(s) to them. Galvin (2006) described communication strategies that evotypical families engage internally (naming, discussing, narrating, ritualizing) and externally (labeling, explaining, legitimizing, defending) to explain and legitimize their family. For example, Bergen (2010) examined the contested identity of commuting wives whose choices were challenged in ways that husbands in long-distance relationships were not, hearing messages such as, “What does your husband do for meals?” or “How do you get two houses cleaned?” (p. 44). Bergen described discursive strategies women used to account for their marital relationship. As we discuss, many scholars working within the constitutive framework highlight the extra communicative labor required to validate nontraditional family relationships, giving rise to the field’s critical consciousness (Suter, 2018).

There are a number of theories representing a constitutive perspective in the field. We mention two here as examples, addressing communication privacy management theory later in this chapter. First, Patrice Buzzanell (2010, 2018) developed her communication theory of resilience to explain how human resilience “is constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people’s abilities to create new normalcies” (p. 9). She situates the process in interaction and draws on resources that are both discursive and material. For example, Lucas and Buzzanell (2012) studied how parents and children in a mining and industrial community who experienced the 1980s economic downturn communicated about finances and careers. They explored both how these messages created resilience in the present moment, as the family coped with immediate financial implications, and how they created intergenerational resilience that carried through to children’s career expectations and adult experiences. Second, Waldron and Kelley (2018) developed negotiated morality theory to understand how families interact, producing and reproducing values. They studied parental memorable moral messages adult children recall via stories, proverbs that children carried into adult life. Waldron and Kelley (Waldron & Kelley, 2013) created a community curriculum from the theory, *The Forgiveness Tree*, which they have used with inner city children and with jail inmates to help individuals explore the healing and resilience-producing role forgiveness may play.

**Critical Approaches: Integrating issues of power into family communication scholarship** Early calls for attention to power and ideology in the field (Lannamann, 1991) went largely unheeded for nearly two decades. In 2006, Braithwaite and Baxter called for opening the door to those undertaking critical scholarship in family communication. That same year, Galvin (2006) published her typology of

discourse-dependent families' internal and external boundary practices. Scholars championing external boundary management addressed neglected interrelationships among discursive power, family communication, and ideological cultural discourses of the US family. Centering identity-sanctioning, external interactions of discourse-dependent families, this research was foundational to the area's critical turn (Suter, 2018). Suter and colleagues' line of research on transracial, internationally adoptive families' struggles with biologically normative, racist, and nationalistic remarks exemplifies the transition from external boundary management to the critical paradigm (for a review, see Suter, 2014).

In 2016, a watershed moment transpired. The *Journal of Family Communication* published a special issue devoted to critical research. The issue showcased five highly selective critical family communication empirical studies and an editorial (Faulkner, 2016) spotlighting critical methods ranging from arts-based to critical discourse analysis. In the issue's introduction, Suter (2016) outlined four commitments for critical family communication (CFC): (a) centering issues of power, (b) bidirectionality between private interpersonal/familial relations and public spheres, (c) envisioning research as a means to critique/resist/transform the status quo in service of social-justice ends, and (d) embodiments of author reflexivity. In 2018, Suter integrated interpersonal communication, updating the acronym to CIFC. Suter did not position critical perspectives as superior to other approaches (e.g., effectual, constitutive). Congruent with other family scholars within and outside communication, she endorsed the value of differing research perspectives and multiparadigmatic empirical examinations (Few-Demo et al., 2014). Arguing that by their nature, critical approaches are plural, fluid, and unfinalizable, Suter (2016) positioned CIFC as one possible heuristic to expedite the area's critical turn. Others include Moore's (2017) agenda for Foucault's poststructuralism and the six politics proposed by Moore and Manning (2019).

Indexing her view of the family as a sociopolitical institution and her feminist commitments to praxis, Suter (2016) argued contemporary times necessitate family communication research oriented toward social-justice ends. To help envision this type of research, the 2016 special issue featured Medved's (2016) study on the promise of stay-at-home fathers' (SAHFs) hegemonically transgressive discursive/performative actions for transformations at private (e.g., spurring other men to fully utilize paternal work benefits) and public levels (a new US politics of care inclusive of federally funded parental leave and greater funding for high-quality/low-cost childcare). Medved reflexively acknowledged the influences of feminism on her reading of SAHFs (de)gendering of parental earning/caring roles as means to (re) position men and women as interchangeable at-home caregivers.

While critical family communication remains in the early stages of development, we discuss two promising theories: critical narrative and critical feminist family communication. Later in the essay, we provide details on relational dialectics theory and champion intersectionality as a future direction for the field. First, Langellier and Peterson's (2018) narrative performance theory examined family storytelling as a narrative formation organized by discursive rules performed in specific historical,

cultural, and material contexts. The theory imbued storytelling with both the capacity to reproduce power relations and the possibility to alter, thwart, or rupture inequitable power relations at the individual, familial, and sociocultural levels. For instance, Willer, Krebs, et al. (2020) studied how, within the context of an annual, ritualized baby loss remembrance walk, bereaved families' narratives (re)storied baby loss as worthy of attention, grief, or celebration.

Second, Sotirin and Ellingson's (2018) critical feminist family communication theory conceptualized the resistance and radical potential of alternative family forms. For instance, Isgro's (2015b) feminist family disability study unveiled mothers as powerful advocates for family-centered/people-first language, policy, and practice reform in the contexts of healthcare and education for children with Down's syndrome.

## Key Research, Theories, Questions, and Limitations of the Family Communication Field

While it is impossible to summarize the theories of a field in a single essay, we have drawn in brief mentions of different family communication theories that highlight the breadth of what the field has to offer. To follow, we introduce the top three theories in family communication between 2004 and 2015 that were employed in 100 studies (Braithwaite, Suter, & Floyd, 2018). These leading theories happen to represent the three paradigmatic approaches outlined above and we believe they hold promise to make contributions beyond our field: (a) family communication patterns, (b) communication privacy management, and (c) relational dialectics.

**Family Communication Patterns Theory** This theory is a cognitive-based social science communication theory focused on parent-child interaction. McLeod and Chaffee (1972) originally developed the theory to understand family members' different family orientations toward information processing around media use. They developed a family communication patterns (FCP) instrument and posited that children would be guided by either a socio-orientation (relying largely on parents to interpret mediated messages) or a concept-orientation based on content (developing their own interpretations of messages). Fitzpatrick (1987) adapted the instrument to examine family communication patterns more broadly and over the years she and colleagues recognized that "although social reality resides in the cognitions of individual family members, the behavioral strategies of socio-orientation and concept-orientation directly affect their communication behaviors" (Koerner et al., 2018, p. 144). Following a series of investigations (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994), Fitzpatrick and colleagues focused on two orientations toward communication, conversation and conformity, developing this framework as a comprehensive general theory of family communication behaviors and outcomes, which they labeled family communication patterns theory (FCP).



Families relying on conformity orientations tend toward homogeneity in attitudes and beliefs from authority figures, most often parents, and value interdependence within a traditional family structure with lessened need for communication. Families relying on conversation orientations value family interaction, placing a greater value on interdependence and relationships inside and outside of the family. FCP has been an important theory for scholars seeking a schema to understand the centrality of family communication patterns for how family members understand, interpret, and develop expectations for family interaction (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Koerner et al., 2018). Scholars using FCP have developed a typology of four family types. First, pluralistic families are high in conversation orientation and low in conformity. Parents encourage interaction with and by children on a wide variety of topics. Second, consensual families are high in both conversation orientation and conformity, with a tension between agreement with authority and open dialogue. Third, protective families are low in conversation orientation and high on conformity and privilege obedience to parental authority. Fourth, laissez-faire families are low on both conversation orientation and conformity, functioning and communicating in largely disconnected ways (Koerner et al., 2018).

FCP has helped scholars explain and predict a variety of communication behaviors and outcomes, for example, conflict, satisfaction, affection, deception, and health outcomes such as cognitive flexibility (Koesten et al., 2009), negotiating healthy behaviors (Baxter et al., 2005), family conflict strategies (Koerner & Cvancara, 2002), and effects of outcomes such as depression and self-esteem (Hamon & Schrodtt, 2012). Scholars have expanded FCP beyond parent-child relationships, for example, sibling relationships in adulthood (Schrodtt & Phillips, 2016) discovering positive relational benefits for siblings reflecting conversation orientation, increased self-disclosure, relational closeness, and satisfaction. Expanding FCP theory and new and expanded measures (e.g., Kranstuber Horstman et al., 2018) have broadened our understanding of conformity orientation and family member outcomes.

**Communication Privacy Management Theory** Building off earlier research on self-disclosure that took an individual, sender-oriented perspective, Petronio (2002) developed communication privacy management (CPM) theory as a relational, rules-based management system based around the concept of privacy and ownership of information. The theory was built around a dialectic of revealing and concealing, making others co-owners of information. Both interpretive and effects scholars have used CPM to understand patterns of revealing and concealing in family systems and how family members interact and cocreate privacy rules and expectations and navigate disruptions to rules and expectations that occur.

Researchers have applied CPM widely to describe privacy management in dyads, families, and organizations, but have applied CPM most often to family communication. Families develop implicit and explicit privacy rules based on core and catalyst criteria (Petronio, 2018). Core criteria (gender, culture, personal motivations, race and ethnicity, context, and an assessment of risk-benefit analysis for revealing and concealing) result in rules that are often stable over time. Catalyst criteria are

dynamic and change in response to situations as they develop and lead families to reassess and recalibrate earlier rules (Petronio, 2018). Petronio (2002, 2010) theorized about the development of privacy orientations and perceived and preferred permeability (high, medium, and low) of private information within and between family members. For example, Morr Serewicz and Canary (2008) studied privacy orientations and rules of newly wed couples and parents-in-law, who may or may not share privacy orientations, examining how positive and negative disclosures affected relational quality and adjustments of privacy rules. Kranstuber Horstman et al. (2017) learned how adult adoptees revealed adoption status with their social network. They discovered how adoptees create their own privacy rules based on contextual and motivational criteria in ways that enhanced relational closeness, reduced differences with others, and helped educate others about the adoption experience.

Families interact and coordinate dyadic and collective privacy boundaries, negotiating rules, quite often through trial and error, and establishing rules for co-ownership and rights and responsibilities of revealing private information (Petronio, 2002, 2018). For example, Thorson (2015) explored privacy dilemmas and recalibrations for adults who discovered marital infidelity of a parent. Privacy rules may also change over time and circumstances, for example, when families must alter privacy expectations and rules for social media use (Child & Petronio, 2015).

While families may seamlessly negotiate privacy boundaries, at times boundary coordination fails, and the family experiences dyadic or system-level boundary turbulence (Petronio, 2002), which may range “from minor disruptions to a full collapse” (Petronio, 2018, p. 93). For example, Brockhage and Phillips (2016) studied boundary turbulences between emerging adult siblings who moved out of the family home and had to renegotiate privacy rule expectations. Boundary turbulence may occur when rules are violated intentionally or unintentionally, given misunderstanding, errors in judgment, or changed preferences. Boundary turbulence presents inherent challenges and, at times, opportunities for confidants as informational co-owners, either willing or reluctant Petronio (2018).

**Relational Dialectics Theory** Adopting core concepts from Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) dialogism (Holquist, 1990), Baxter and Montgomery (1996) envisioned a dialogic theory of relating—relational dialectics theory (RDT). Baxter (2004, 2006) cultivated the theory, publishing an updated version (RDT 2.0) in 2011. Baxter and colleagues situated RDT 2.0 as most congruent with the critical project (Baxter & Norwood, 2015).

Central aspects of RDT 2.0 include its discursive approach to power, the utterance chain, the power struggles of dominant and marginalized discourses, and continuum of discursive interplay. Baxter (2011) defines power as “the discursive capacity to define social reality” (p. 124). Discourses (theoretically synonymous with ideologies) are construed as unequal; meanings are (re)made through the power struggles of discourses competing against one another to define social reality. The utterance chain envisions these discursive power struggles. In any given

utterance, already-spoken discourses and anticipated responses interpenetrate in both local family interactions and at the sociocultural level wherein the family resides.

Contrapuntal analysis, RDT 2.0's companionate methodology (Baxter, 2011), offers scholars a critical discourse analytic method to study the interpenetrating power relations among micro- and macro-level discourses. Discursive competition, the centripetal-centrifugal struggle, manifests along a continuum. Monologue, the domination of one discourse to the extent it silences alternatives, sits on the far left. Imagine adoptive parents' discourse of the adoptive family as the child's only real family silencing the adoptee's view of their birth family also as their real family. The adoptive parents might center the adoptive family as the child's only real family through dialogically contractive discursive practices, for instance, disqualifying the birth mother as an authentic mother because of her relinquishment of the child. On the far right lies the most dialogically expansive form of communication, the aesthetic moment, a fleeting, consummate moment of wholeness. Envision an alternate situation in which the adoptive family honors the adoptee's view of both her birth and adoptive families as real family. The adoptive parents might include the birth mother in their annual Mother's Day celebration. This ritualized event allows an integration of competing discourses of real family (i.e., as limited to biogenetic ties; as expansive with the possibilities of family construction via constitutive kinning). In turn, this ritual cultivates fertile soil for an aesthetic moment for the adopted child.

Since its inception in 1996, relational dialectics theory has remained an influential theory, last ranked as the field's third most frequently cited (Braithwaite, Suter, & Floyd, 2018). To date, RDT 2.0-based research has interrogated the reproduction, resistance, and rupture of the discursive status quo. Researchers have centered family processes (e.g., estrangement, coming out, sex/gender transitioning), and familial forms/identities (e.g., lesbian and gay families, polyamorous relations, foster family relations) that deviate from normative cultural discourses of the family. For instance, Van Gilder and Ault (2018) investigated the subversive discursive deconstruction of family in the context of US Christianity. The authors focused on the decentering discursive practices of a 2000-person community in Centennial Park, Arizona, the Work of Jesus Christ, whose religious practices incorporate polygynous plural marriage (i.e., one man with multiple wives). Scholarship also addresses practical implications of this work, providing suggestions, for instance, of how discursive interplay can promote resiliency to ambiguous loss and positive relational outcomes for trans-identified persons and their families (Norwood, 2013). Moreover, the revised theory's promise of broadening the scholarly agenda of family communication theories is being realized; the theory continues to gain traction within other areas of the communication discipline (e.g., health) as well as outside. For example, in the field of education, Kozleski (2016) combined use of contrapuntal analysis and intersectionality exposed discriminatory assumptions underlying data categorization of students in US public education systems that repattern disproportionate representations of Black, Latina, and Native American students in special education and discipline referrals.

## The Growing Edge: Future Directions of the Family Communication Field

Increasing intra- and interdisciplinary conceptual fertilization offers one promising future direction for family communication scholars. First, as represented above, intersectionality represents a prime example. Whereas intersectionality figures prominently in other fields within the communication discipline (e.g., critical cultural studies) and in neighboring disciplines (e.g., family studies), intersectionality awaits theoretical and methodological uptake within family communication. We believe scholars can use intersectionality as a theory, method, and as a paradigmatic commitment to help shift family communication scholarship toward a more nuanced and holistic conversation about family that considers identities and power (Suter & Norwood, 2017). Suter (2018) bespeaks its potential for addressing interrelationships between communicative patterns and processes and aspects of social identities (e.g., race, gender, class), power, and familial historical, social, and political contexts. Braithwaite et al.'s (2018) inclusion of a chapter on intersectionality in their volume (Few-Demo et al., 2018) underscores the field's value of intersectional perspectives. They stress the importance of continuing to attract scholars from underrepresented groups and perspectives. Scholars engaging intersectionality raise important theoretical questions for the field, for example, considering how different family communication theories coming from an effects perspective on communication (e.g., relational turbulence theory or affection exchange theory) interrelate with salient aspects of identity, issues of power, and culture (c.f., Suter, 2018). We see answers arising from Abdi (2014) and Abdi and Van Gilder's (2016) intersectional analyses of first-generation, queer, Iranian-American women's struggles with identity-delegitimizing messages. Davis' (2015) work on communicative patterning in Black female friendship circles and Minniear and Soliz's (2019) examination of familial racial identity messaging to Black children also provide useful departure points.

Moreover, intersectionality offers a methodological paradigm, namely intra- and intercategorical approaches, amenable to both postpositive and qualitative/interpretive family communication research (Few-Demo et al., 2014). For postpositive researchers, an intersectional perspective can begin with (re)consideration of sampling techniques. Scholars might consider social positions relevant to their research topic and endeavor to include and/or center understudied or marginalized populations, using nonprobability sampling techniques, such as purposive sampling, to maximize diversity among relevant social positions. Analytically, an intersectional perspective could include statistical examination of both between- and within-group differences, which may shed light on how varying social positions interact with one another and with larger power structures (Few-Demo et al., 2014). Researchers might use statistical analysis techniques to analyze similarities and differences between and within subgroups. Researchers might also relate findings to cultural institutions, structures, and policies.

Second, family communication scholars working in an effects perspective continue to push the boundaries of the field and we have mentioned several rich and promising developing theories and lines of research in this essay, for example, relational turbulence theory (Knobloch et al., 2018) and communication narrative sense making theory (Koenig Kellas, 2018). Of special note are continued efforts at investigating how different family communication patterns and behaviors cultivate, sustain, and/or alter family identity, in particular exploring the interplay between social identity, family functioning, and well-being (e.g., Soliz & Colaner, 2018). Important work is being done and theorizing is progressing regarding the role of social media in family communication and family privacy management (see Child & Petronio, 2015). A number of researchers are determining the proportion of variance in family communication traits and behavioral tendencies that is accounted for by genetic and environmental factors, and continue to develop theories. Scholars are increasingly relying on dyadic, triadic, and other kinds of multiple-participant data along with more advanced statistical methods for analyzing models that incorporate multiple family members' perspectives.

Third, embodied, qualitative research methods present an additional promising future direction for family communication. Embodied methods incorporate sensory-based ways of knowing into scholars' theorizing and knowledge production in the field (Ellingson, 2017), as evidenced, for instance, in Willer, Droser et al.'s (2018) use of arts-based methods to analyze children's baby loss remembrance drawings to widen understandings in the family. Embodied methods provide entry into and voice for less salacious and traumatic aspects of familial intimacy. Autoethnography, for example, has been used to broach issues such as conditional acceptance and sanctioning of family members' expressions of atypical gendered identities. Indigenous methodologies help evoke expressions of silenced topics, as evidenced in Castaneda's (2021) use of testimonies to address the silencing of familial child sexual abuse in Latinx communities. Arts-based, personal narrative, and autoethnographic methods help envision a culture of care for faculty negotiating academe with a chronically ill child (Isgro, 2015a).

Developing undertheorized links between discourse and materiality provides yet a fourth promising direction for family communication. For instance, Allen (2018) advocates a discursive approach grounded in the material world to guide integration of texts and objects into theorizing and empiricism about discourse. Integrating tenets of CIFIC (Suter & Norwood, 2017) and RDT 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) with materiality, Bishop and Medved (2020) illustrated how NYC mixed-status, Latinx, immigrant families navigate both discursive tensions and material forces of residence and economics. The status of the children ranged from temporary protection from deportation (e.g., DACA or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) to birthright citizenship to sharing their parents undocumented status. Residence refers to undocumented immigrants' inability to escape possible detention or removal of their body from US soil. *Economics* refers to earning power constraints of undocumented family members. Medved and Bishop unveil discursive and relational tension in family communication around material conditions, for instance, relational management of

documented and undocumented siblings when their economic options differ given disparities in US citizenship.

While it is impossible to elucidate the breadth and depth of a field in one chapter, we hope this introduction to family communication serves to chronicle the development and growth of the field and opens the doors to scholars and practitioners across disciplines. As we highlight perspectives and theoretical lenses on family communication, we welcome and encourage interdisciplinary connections and contributions to positively influence twenty-first-century families.

**Acknowledgements** The authors are grateful to Kory Floyd of the University of Arizona and Paul Schrodtt of Texas Christian University for their insights on future developments in the field.

## References

- Abdi, S. (2014). Staying I(ra)n: Narrating queer identity from within the Persian closet. *Liminalities*, 10, 1–20. Retrieved from:
- Abdi, S., & Van Gilder, B. (2016). Cultural (in)visibility and identity dissonance: Queer Iranian-American women and their negotiation of existence. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 9, 69–86.
- Allen, J. (2018). What’s the big “D”? Contemporary approaches to discourse in interpersonal and family communication scholarship. *Communication theory*, 1–21. Advance online publication.
- Baxter, L., & Montgomery, B. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.
- Baxter, L. A. (2004). Relationships as dialogues. *Personal Relationships*, 11, 1–22.
- Baxter, L. A. (2006). Communication as dialogue. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John, & T. Striplhas (Eds.), *Communication as . . . : Perspectives on theory* (pp. 101–109). Sage.
- Baxter, L. A. (2011). *Voicing relationships: A dialogic perspective*. Sage.
- Baxter, L. A. (2014). Theorizing the communicative construction of “family”: The three R’s. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking “family” communicatively* (pp. 33–50). Peter Lang.
- Baxter, L. A., & Braithwaite, D. O. (Eds.). (2006). *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives*. Sage.
- Baxter, L. A., Bylund, C. L., Imes, R. S., & Scheive, D. M. (2005). Family communication environments and rule-based social control of adolescents’ healthy lifestyle choices. *Journal of Family Communication*, 5, 209–227.
- Baxter, L. A., & Norwood, K. M. (2015). Relational dialectics theory: Navigating meaning from competing discourses. In D. O. Braithwaite & P. Schrodtt (Eds.), *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 279–291). Sage.
- Bergen, K. M. (2010). Negotiating a “questionable” identity: Commuter wives and social networks. *Southern Communication Journal*, 75, 35–56.
- Bishop, S. C., & Medved, C. E. (2020). Relational tensions, narrative, and materiality: Intergenerational communication in families with undocumented immigrant parents. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 48, 227–247.
- Braithwaite, D. O., & Baxter, L. A. (2006). *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 197–212). Sage.
- Braithwaite, D. O., Foster, E. A., & Bergen, K. M. (2018). Social construction theory: Communication co-creating families. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 267–278). Routledge.
- Braithwaite, D. O., Suter, E. A., & Floyd, K. (2018). *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives*. Routledge.

- Braithwaite, D. O., Toller, P., Daas, K., Durham, W., & Jones, A. (2008). Centered, but not caught in the middle: Stepchildren's perceptions of contradictions of communication of co-parents. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 36*, 33–55.
- Brockhage, K., & Phillips, K. E. (2016). (re)negotiating our relationship: How contradictions emerge in sibling privacy boundaries. *Southern Communication Journal, 81*, 79–91.
- Buzzanell, P. (2010). Resilience: Talking, resisting, and imagining new normalcies into place. *Journal of Communication, 10*, 1–14.
- Buzzanell, P. M. (2018). Communication theory of resilience: Enacting adaptive-transformative processes when families experience loss and disruption. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 98–109). Routledge.
- Castaneda, N. (2017). *En boca cerrada no entran moscas. Flies don't enter closed mouths: A grounded theory study of Latinas' testimonios of child sexual abuse disclosure*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from
- Castaneda, N. (2021). *Journal of Family Communication, 21*(1), 3–16.
- Child, J. T., & Petronio, S. (2015). Privacy management matters in digital family communication. In C. J. Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in the age of digital and social media* (pp. 32–54). Peter Lang.
- Colaner, C. W., Soliz, J., & Nelson, L. R. (2014). Communicatively managing religious identity difference in parent-child relationships: The role of accommodative and nonaccommodative communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 14*, 310–327.
- Davis, S. M. (2015). The “Strong Black Woman Collective”: A developing theoretical framework for understanding collective communication practices of Black women. *Women's Studies in Communication, 38*, 20–35.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2017). *Embodiment in qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Faulkner, S. L. (2016). TEN (The promise of arts-based, ethnographic, and narrative research in critical family communication research and praxis). *Journal of Family Communication, 16*, 9–15.
- Few-Demo, A. L., Lloyd, S. A., & Allen, K. R. (2014). It's all about power: Integrating feminist family studies and family communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 14*, 85–94.
- Few-Demo, A. L., Moore, J., & Abdi, S. (2018). Intersectionality: (Re)Considering family communication from within the margins. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 175–186). Routledge.
- Fitzpatrick, M. A. (1987). Marital interaction. In C. Berger & S. Chaffee (Eds.), *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 564–618). Sage.
- Fitzpatrick, M. A., & Ritchie, D. (1994). Communication schemata within the family: Multiple perspectives on family interaction. *Human Communication Research, 20*, 275–301.
- Floyd, K., Hess, J. A., Miczo, L. A., Halone, K. K., Mikkelson, A. C., & Tusing, K. J. (2005). Human affection exchange: VIII. Further evidence of the benefits of expressed affection. *Communication Quarterly, 53*, 285–303.
- Floyd, K., Mikkelson, A. C., & Judd, J. (2006). Defining the family through relationships. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 21–42). Sage.
- Floyd, K., & Morman, M. T. (1998). The measurement of affectionate communication. *Communication Quarterly, 46*, 144–162.
- Floyd, K., & Morman, M. T. (Eds.). (2014). *Widening the family circle: New research on family communication* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Floyd, K., Pauley, P. M., Hesse, C., Veksler, A. E., Eden, J., & Mikkelson, A. C. (2014). Affectionate communication is associated with immunologic and cardiologic health markers. In J. M. Honeycutt, C. Sawyer, & S. Keaton (Eds.), *The influence of communication on physiology and health status* (pp. 115–130). Peter Lang.
- Foster, E., & Bochner, A. (2008). Social constructionist perspectives in communication research. In J. Gubrium & J. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 85–106). Guilford.

- Galvin, K. M. (2006). Diversity's impact on defining the family. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 3–19). Sage.
- Galvin, K. M., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2014). Theory and research from the field of family communication: Discourses that constitute and reflect families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6, 97–111.
- Galvin, K. M., Braithwaite, D. O., Schrodt, P., & Bylund, C. (2019). *Family communication: Cohesion and change* (10th ed.). Routledge.
- Hamon, J. D., & Schrodt, P. (2012). Do parenting styles moderate the association between family conformity orientation and young adults' mental well-being? *Journal of Family Communication*, 12, 151–166.
- Holquist, M. (1990). *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world*. Routledge.
- Isgro, K. (2015a). Envisioning a different journey: Negotiating academe with a chronically ill child. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 6, 155–163. Retrieved from
- Isgro, K. (2015b). From a caretaker's perspective: Mothers of children with down syndrome as advocates. *Women & Language*, 38, 63–82.
- Knobloch, L. K., Solomon, D. H., Theiss, J. A., & McLaren, R. M. (2018). Relational turbulence theory: Understanding family communication during times of change. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 255–266). Routledge.
- Knobloch, L. K., & Theiss, J. A. (2012). Experiences of U.S. military couples during the post-deployment transition: Applying the relational turbulence model. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29, 423–450.
- Koenig Kellas, J. (2018). Communicated narrative sense-making theory: Linking storytelling and Well-being. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 62–74). Routledge.
- Koerner, A. F., & Cvancara, K. E. (2002). The influence of conformity orientation on communication patterns in family conversations. *Journal of Family Communication*, 2, 133–152.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of family communication. *Communication Theory*, 12, 70–91.
- Koerner, A. F., Schrodt, P., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2018). Family communication patterns theory: A grand theory of family communication. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 142–153). Routledge.
- Koesten, J., Schrodt, P., & Ford, D. J. (2009). Cognitive flexibility as a mediator of family communication environments and young adults' well-being. *Health Communication*, 24, 82–94.
- Kozleski, E. B. (2016). Reifying categories: Measurement in search of understanding. In D. Connor, B. Ferri, & S. Annamma (Eds.), *DisCrit: Disability studies and critical race theory in education* (pp. 101–116). Teachers College.
- Kranstuber Horstman, H., Butauski, M., Johnsen, L. J., & Colaner, C. W. (2017). The communication privacy management of adopted individuals in their social networks: Disclosure decisions in light of the discourse of biological normativity. *Communication Studies*, 68, 296–313.
- Kranstuber Horstman, H., Schrodt, P., Warner, B., Koerner, A., Maliski, R., Hays, A., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Expanding the conceptual and empirical boundaries of family communication patterns: The development and validation of an Expanded Conformity Orientation Scale. *Communication Monographs*, 85, 157–180.
- Langellier, K. M., & Peterson, E. E. (2018). Narrative performance theory: Making stories, doing family. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 210–220). Routledge.
- Lannamann, J. W. (1991). Interpersonal communication research as ideological practice. *Communication Theory*, 1, 179–203.



- Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2006). Social theories: Social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. In D. O. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 229–242). Sage.
- Lucas, K., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2012). Memorable messages of hard times: Constructing short- and long-term resiliencies through family communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 12*, 189–208.
- McLeod, J. M., & Chaffee, S. H. (1972). The social construction of reality. In J. Tedeschi (Ed.), *The social influence processes* (pp. 50–59). Aldine-Atherton.
- Medved, C. E. (2016). Stay-at-home fathering as a feminist opportunity: Perpetuating, resisting and transforming gender relations of caring and earning. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*, 18–36.
- Medved, C. E., & Bishop, S. (2018, November). *Relational tensions, competing meta-narratives, and materiality: Communication in mixed-status immigrant families*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Minnear, M., & Soliz, J. (2019). Family communication and messages about race and identity in black families in the United States, *Journal of Family Communication*, Advance online publication.
- Moore, J. (2017). Where is the critical empirical interpersonal communication research? A road-map for future inquiry into discourse and power. *Communication Theory, 27*, 1–20.
- Moore, J., & Manning, J. (2019). What counts as critical interpersonal and family communication research? A review of an emerging field of inquiry. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 43*, 40–57.
- Morr Serewicz, M. C., & Canary, D. J. (2008). Assessments of disclosure from the in-laws: Links among disclosure topics, family privacy orientations, and relational quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 25*, 333–357.
- Norwood, K. M. (2013). Meaning matters: Framing trans identity in the context of family relationships. *Journal of GLBT Studies, 9*, 152–178.
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. State University of New York Press.
- Petronio, S. (2010). Communication privacy management theory: What do we know about family privacy regulation? *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 2*, 175–196.
- Petronio, S. (2018). Communication privacy management theory: Understanding families. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication* (2nd ed., pp. 87–97). Routledge.
- Sahlstein Parcell, E., & Baker, B. (2018). Relational dialectics theory: A new approach for military and veteran-connected family research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*. Advance online publication.
- Scharp, K. M. (2017). “You’re not welcome here:” A grounded theory of family distancing. *Communication Research, 46*, 427–455.
- Schrodt, P., & Phillips, K. E. (2016). Self-disclosure and relational uncertainty as mediators of family communication patterns and relational outcomes in sibling relationships. *Communication Monographs, 83*, 486–504.
- Soliz, J., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Communication accommodation theory and communication theory of identity: Theories of communication and identity. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 75–86). Routledge.
- Soliz, J., & Giles, H. (2014). Relational and identity processes in communication: A contextual and meta-analytical review of Communication Accommodation Theory. In E. Cohen (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 38, pp. 108–143). Sage.
- Sotirin, P. J., & Ellingson, L. L. (2018). Critical feminist family communication theory: Gender, power and praxis. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 110–121). Routledge.

- Stamp, G. H., & Shue, C. H. (2013). Twenty years of communication research published in communication journals: A review of the perspectives, theories, concepts, and contexts. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (2nd ed., pp. 11–29). Routledge.
- Suter, E. A. (2014). The adopted family. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking “family” communicatively* (pp. 137–155). Peter Lang.
- Suter, E. A. (2016). Introduction: Critical approaches to family communication research: Representation, critique, and praxis. *Journal of Family Communication*, 16, 1–8.
- Suter, E. A. (2018). The promise of contrapuntal and intersectional methods for advancing critical interpersonal and family communication research. *Communication Monographs*, 85, 123–139.
- Suter, E. A., & Norwood, K. (2017). Critical theorizing in family communication studies: (Re) Reading relational dialectics theory. *Communication Theory*, 27, 290–308.
- Thorson, A. R. (2015). Investigating adult children’s experiences with privacy turbulence following the discovery of parental infidelity. *Journal of Family Communication*, 15, 41–57.
- Turner, L. H., & West, R. (Eds.). (2014). *The SAGE handbook of family communication*. Sage.
- Van Gilder, B. J., & Ault, M. K. (2018). Disrupting dominant discourses of the idealized nuclear family: A study of plural families in Centennial Park, Arizona. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 41, 77–96.
- Vangelisti, A. L. (Ed.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of family communication* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Waldron, V. R., & Kelley, D. K. (2018). Negotiated morality theory: How family communication shapes our values. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 233–253). Routledge.
- Waldron, V. R., & Kelley, D. L. (Producers). (2013, December 5). *The forgiveness tree project* [YouTube video]. Retrieved from
- Whitchurch, G. G., & Dickson, F. C. (1999). Family communication. In M. B. Sussman, S. K. Steinmetz, & G. W. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (2nd ed., pp. 687–704). Springer.
- Willer, E. K., Droser, V. A., Hoyt, K. D., Hunnicutt, J., Krebs, E., Johnson, J. A., & Castaneda, N. (2018). A visual narrative analysis of children’s baby loss remembrance drawings. *Journal of Family Communication*, 18,
- Willer, E. K., Krebs, E., Castaneda, N., Hoyt, K. D., Droser, V. A., Johnson, J. A., & Hunnicutt, J. (2020). Our babies [’] count [er story]: A narrative ethnography of a baby loss remembrance walk ritual. *Communication Monographs*, 87, 179–199.

# Application: Family Communication: Adoptive Family Communication



Haley Kranstuber Horstman and Colleen Warner Colaner

The adoptive family is dynamic and ever-changing. Approximately 4% of US American children are adopted (Krieder & Lofquist, 2014), and that number is growing with more approval of same-sex relationships, higher rates of infertility, increased adoption acceptance, and dramatic family shifts due to the opioid crisis and COVID-19 pandemic. Relatives or stepparents adopt slightly more than half of these children; the other half are adopted through international adoption, foster-to-adopt, or private domestic adoption. Open adoptions have skyrocketed since the 1990s such that now about 95% of adoptions involve some level of contact between adoptive and birth parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Trends point to a future with fewer closed domestic adoptions and international adoptions and more foster-to-adopt and transracial domestic adoptions.

Although public opinion toward adoption is becoming more favorable, there is still considerable stigmatization of this non-biological family form. Adoptive families – particularly those who are “visibly adopted” such as through transracial and international adoption – report enduring intrusive, discriminatory, inappropriate, and hurtful remarks and questions about their adoption status (Ballard, 2013; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Many of these messages are rooted in the discourse of biological normativity (DBN), or the cultural understanding of family as biologically related (Suter et al., 2014). This widely accepted DBN creates a situation wherein adoptive families are highly discourse dependent (Galvin, 2006). A discourse dependence approach to family communication recognizes that all families rely on communication to create and maintain their family bonds, but those that are developed outside the expected biological and/or legal bonds have a greater dependence on discourse.

---

H. K. Horstman (✉) · C. W. Colaner  
Department of Communication, College of Arts and Science, University of Missouri,  
Columbia, MO, USA  
e-mail: [horstmanh@missouri.edu](mailto:horstmanh@missouri.edu)

In this chapter, we explore the research on family communication in adoptive families using the discourse dependence approach as a framework. We discuss internal boundary management processes, external boundary management processes, and border work strategies in adoptive families with respect to differing adoptive family structures. We highlight research on prominent theories in family communication – family communication patterns (FCP) theory, communication privacy management theory (CPM), relational dialectics theory (RDT), and communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theory. Throughout the chapter, we consider the intersectionality of adoptive family members’ race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status.

## Internal Boundary Management Processes

In her foundational work on discourse dependency, Galvin (2006) detailed internal and external boundary management processes that families employ when discursively creating and maintaining their family relationships. Internal boundary management processes involve family members’ communication within the family unit, including processes of *naming*, *discussing*, *narrating*, and *ritualizing*. In what follows, we briefly explain the current research in each of these four processes, with special attention to those highlighting FCP theory and CNSM theory.

Family communication scholarship on *naming* in adoptive families has demonstrated the complexity surrounding naming a child and determining address terms for various family members. Naming practices often reflect the cultural positioning and socioeconomic status of the parent (Galvin, 2006). When assigning the child’s name in international and transracial adoptions, parents must choose how, if at all, they want to honor the child’s home culture or the child’s given name (Galvin, 2006; Nelson & Colaner, 2018). Further, families with open adoption employ a wide variety of birth parent address terms, which signifies the ambiguity of birth family members as family in-group (e.g., calling birth mom a form of “mother” such as “mama”) or out-group (e.g., calling birth mom by her first name; Horstman et al., 2018). As a whole, adoptive families’ naming practices affect and reflect their conceptualization of relatedness and group membership between adoptive and birth families.

In adoptive families, *discussion* serves as a foundation for making sense of the adoption circumstances and creating a family identity around them. Most of the research surrounding discussing in adoptive families centers on adoption communication openness (ACO) or FCP theory. Research on ACO, or “the content, quality, and overall ease of adoption-related communication” (Galvin & Colaner, 2013, p. 200), demonstrates the value of child-led adoption-related conversations that occur “early and often” in the child’s life (Wrobel et al., 2003). Frequent and open conversations about the child’s adoption should replace the “one big adoption talk” to normalize the adoption and help the child cope with any trauma or loss associated with the adoption (Colaner & Horstman, 2022; Wrobel et al., 2003).

Another avenue for exploring discussion in adoptive families is through FCP (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Researchers have tested the assumption that conversation orientation (i.e., the degree to which families communicate in open and unrestrained interactions about a variety of topics) and conformity orientation (i.e., the degree to which families' communication stresses homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs) serves as a foundation for adoption-related communication and family functioning. Together with literature in FCP (see Schrodt et al., 2008), findings suggest that stronger conversation orientation supports and encourages healthy identity development and family functioning in adoptive families (Horstman et al., 2016).

Given the complex and often difficult circumstances surrounding adoption, family communication researchers are often curious about how family members *narrate* their experiences to make sense of and cope with them. As a discourse dependent strategy, narrating involves creating with and telling stories to the adopted child, adoptive parents, and/or birth parents about the adoption (Galvin & Colaner, 2013). Telling stories about the adoption helps parents and children make sense of their experiences, supports their identity development, and socializes children toward values surrounding race, gender, and culture. Specifically, adoption entrance narratives – or stories about how the child was born, placed for adoption, and brought into the adoptive family – are foundational for a child's narrative identity and well-being (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). As a whole, narrating the adoption helps children process their complex emotions, relationships, and circumstances.

The last internal boundary management strategy, *ritualizing*, centers on creating, maintaining, and celebrating adoptive family identity and birth family connections (Galvin, 2006). Adoptive families create rituals around the anniversary of the child's adoption (e.g., "Gotcha Day") or birth (e.g., sending a letter to birth parents every year). Families with open adoptions may create agreements surrounding ritualistic contact between the birth family and adopted child (Colaner & Scharp, 2016). Rituals promote a sense of belongingness and family unity among these complex family ties (Colaner et al., 2019).

## External Boundary Management Processes

Whereas internal boundary management highlights communication within the family, external boundary management processes focus on adoption-related communication with those outside the family. External processes include labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending.

Adoptive family members *label* adoptive and birth family members for those outside the adoptive family network. Labeling is similar to the internal process of naming yet occurs in interactions outside of the family unit, such as introducing a birth family member to an outsider or referencing adoptive siblings simply as "brothers" or "sisters" (Galvin, 2006). Addressing the birth parent also could be considered labeling if the adoptive family viewed the birth parent as external to the family unit. Some families attempt to honor the birthparents' unique place in their

family through the use of family-like address terms, such as “aunt” or “family friend.”

Adoptive families also *explain* their family relationships to family outsiders. Whereas discussing occurs internally when family members communicate about the adoption within the family unit, explaining occurs externally when adoptive families talk to non-family members about the child’s adoption. Adoptive families engage in explaining in response to questions, comments, and curiosities about the child’s adopted status in order to “mak[e] a labeled family relationship understandable, giv[e] reasons for it, or [to] elaborat[e] on how it works” (Galvin, 2006, p. 10). As gatekeepers of children’s adoption information (Hays et al., 2016), adoptive parents formulate decision-making criteria for disclosing adoption-related information in order to establish boundaries and protect their child’s privacy (Suter & Ballard, 2009).

Adoptive families also engage in *legitimizing* in response to challenges concerning adoptive ties (Galvin, 2006). Legitimizing relies on government sanction to endorse the legality of the relationships. For example, adoptive parents may demonstrate their family’s legitimacy by invoking their court-appointed parent rights or proving that their name is listed as the parent on the child’s revised birth certificate. Legitimizing constitutes an increase in intensity from explaining, in that legitimizing occurs as a response to an intrusive or inappropriate question.

Finally, adoptive families engage in *defending* when they experience hostility, hurtful remarks, or microaggressions about the child’s adoption from strangers or social network members. Families with visibly different and transracial adoptions are particularly vulnerable to offensive, hurtful, or racist questions and comments (Ballard, 2013; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). These comments are often grounded in biological normativity, family privilege, and white supremacy (Suter et al., 2014). Defending occurs when parents laugh off comments, ignore remarks, change the topic, or end the conversation (Suter, 2008).

## Border Work Strategies

Internal and external discourse dependence strategies help researchers understand the communication processes that adoptive families use to create and maintain their family relationships. In reality, however, internal and external strategies overlap as families interact within the family as well as with non-family members. There is ambiguity concerning family in- and outgroups, such as when adoptive families consider birth parents to be quasi-family members who are not quite in the inner circle of the family unit but closely adjacent (Nelson & Colaner, 2018). Border work strategies acknowledge this overlap and ambiguity, breaking down the binary of internal and external boundaries (Suter, 2014). Telling the story of the adoption to friends and community members (e.g., teachers, counselors, doctors) aligns with the internal strategy of narrating, but occurs outside of the family border. Transracial adoptive families often include individuals outside of the family unit but within

their child's racial identity group to support their child's racial identity development (Nelson & Colaner, 2018). These families use internal discourse dependency strategies with non-family members, such as attending rituals that celebrate the child's cultural heritage and discussing the child's adoption with family outsiders.

*Connecting* is a new border work strategy wherein family members communicate within and beyond the family boundary to construct their conceptualization of "family" and the birth family relationship (Horstman et al., 2018). Connecting strategies occur in families formed through open adoption as they manage ongoing relationships with members of the birth family. *Constant communicator* families connect with birth families daily, primarily through social media. However, *controlled communicator* families engage in infrequent and fairly formal communication, often mediated through the adoption agency.

In conclusion, although legal rulings create adoptive families, adoption relationships are sustained through communication (Colaner & Horstman, 2022). Discourse dependence practices allow all families to maintain their relationships; for adoptive families, these practices take on increased importance. Internal, external, and border work strategies shape family membership, identity, and solidarity and create the foundation for understanding adoptive family dynamics.

## References

- Ballard, R. L. (2013). Narrative burden: A qualitative investigation of transnational, transracial adoptee identity. *Qualitative Communication Research, 2*(3), 229–254.
- Colaner, C. W., & Horstman, H. K. (2021). Adoptive families. In A. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of family communication* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Colaner, C. W., Horstman, H. K., & Butauski, M. (2019). Sustaining and draining?: Adoptive mothers' enactment of rituals in open adoption relationships. In A. M. Alford & M. Miller-Day (Eds.), *Constructing motherhood and daughterhood across the lifespan* (pp. 111–127). Peter Lang.
- Colaner, C. W., & Scharp, K. M. (2016). Maintaining open adoption relationships: Practitioner insights on adoptive parents' regulation of adoption kinship networks. *Communication Studies, 67*(3), 359–378.
- Docan-Morgan, S. (2010). Korean adoptees' retrospective reports of intrusive interactions: Exploring boundary management in adoptive families. *Journal of Family Communication, 10*(3), 137–157.
- Galvin, K. M. (2006). Diversity's impact on defining the family. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 3–19). Sage.
- Galvin, K. M., & Colaner, C. W. (2013). Created through law and language: Communicative complexities of adoptive families. In K. Floyd & M. T. Morman (Eds.), *Widening the family circle* (2nd ed., pp. 191–209). Sage.
- Hays, A. H., Horstman, H. K., Colaner, C. W., & Nelson, L. R. (2016). "She chose us to be your parents": Exploring the content and process of adoption entrance narratives told in families formed through open adoption. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships, 33*(7), 917–937.
- Horstman, H. K., Colaner, C. W., Nelson, L. R., Bish, A., & Hays, A. (2018). Communicatively constructing birth family relationships in open adoptive families: Naming, connecting, and relational functioning. *Journal of Family Communication, 18*(2), 138–152.

- Horstman, H. K., Colaner, C. W., & Rittenour, C. E. (2016). Contributing factors of adult adoptees' identity work and self-esteem: Family communication patterns and adoption-specific communication. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*(3), 263–276.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2006). Toward a theory of family communication. *Communication Theory, 12*(1), 70–91.
- Krieder, R. M., & Lofquist, D. A. (2014). *Adopted children and stepchildren: 2010 – Population characteristics: U.S. Census Bureau.*
- Krusiewicz, E. S., & Wood, J. T. (2001). 'He was our child from the moment we walked in that room': Entrance stories of adoptive parents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*(6), 785–803.
- Nelson, L. R., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Becoming a transracial family: Communicatively negotiating divergent identities in families formed through transracial adoption. *Journal of Family Communication, 18*(1), 51–67.
- Schrodt, P., Witt, P. L., & Messersmith, A. S. (2008). A meta-analytical review of family communication patterns and their associations with information processing, behavioral, and psychosocial outcomes. *Communication Monographs, 75*(3), 248–269.
- Siegel, D. H., & Smith, S. L. (2012). *Openness in adoption: From secrecy and stigma to knowledge and connections.*
- Suter, E. A. (2008). Discursive negotiation of family identity: A study of U.S. families with adopted children from China. *Journal of Family Communication, 8*(2), 126–147.
- Suter, E. A. (2014). The adopted family. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "family" communicatively* (pp. 137–155). Peter Lang.
- Suter, E. A., & Ballard, R. L. (2009). "How much did you pay for her?": Decision-making criteria underlying adoptive parents' responses to inappropriate remarks. *Journal of Family Communication, 9*(2), 107–125.
- Suter, E. A., Baxter, L. A., Seurer, L. M., & Thomas, L. J. (2014). Discursive constructions of the meaning of "family" in online narratives of foster adoptive parents. *Communication Monographs, 81*(1), 59–78.
- Wrobel, G. M., Kohler, J. K., Grotevant, H. D., & McRoy, R. G. (2003). The Family Adoption Communication (FAC) model: Identifying pathways of adoption-related communication. *Adoption Quarterly, 7*(2), 53–84.



# Understanding Developmental Attachment Theory in the Context of Family Diversity



Caitlin M. Lombardi, Mindy E. Scott, and Dana Thomson

In the field of child development, attachment theory is one of the most visible and empirically grounded conceptual frameworks. This chapter explores key tenets of attachment theory in an applied context to give its theoretical underpinnings concrete meaning for understanding caregiver-child attachments across racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse individuals and families, as well as diverse family and nonrelative relationships. Attachment theory is of particular interest for contemporary families given the dynamic and complex nature of the relationships that children form with caregivers both inside and outside the family, and across the lifespan.

“Complex” families are often understood to mean anything other than two biological parents and their biological children. However, complexity can also be defined based on biological ties, legality, coresidence, marriage, living arrangements, fertility, and parenting practices (Carlson & Meyer, 2014). Conceptually, family complexity can also reflect differential caregiver-child attachments across discrete categories of family relationships (e.g., mothers versus fathers, biological versus adoptive parents). In this chapter, we call attention to broad topics of relevance to diverse families and complex family relationships including methodological considerations, gaps in attachment theory, the value of integrating attachment theory with other family theories, and emerging questions and future directions. We start by providing an overview of attachment theory and current major areas of focus, including how attachment-based programs and policies can promote resilience, or positive adaptation in the context of stress or adversity.

---

C. Lombardi

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

M. Scott (✉) · D. Thomson

Child Trends, Bethesda, MD, USA

e-mail: [msscott@childtrends.org](mailto:msscott@childtrends.org)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_40](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_40)

555

## An Overview of Attachment Theory

Attachment is defined as proximity seeking to another preferred individual (Bowlby, 1982). Accordingly, during the first year, the primary goal of an infant is to establish an attachment bond with a primary caretaker who operates as a secure base for the infant to develop emotional communication and self-regulation skills. Attachment was described by Bowlby as a biological and evolutionary construct (1982), and was advanced by Ainsworth, who linked attachment with caregiving (1978). Attachment theory is one of the most widely studied topics of parenting, caregiving, and children's early relationships with their proximal caregivers. It has developed into decades of longitudinal studies and meta-analytic reviews finding that quality of initial relationships is one of the earliest and most predictive aspects of children's later development (Fearon et al., 2010; Grossmann et al., 2005), and of emotional attachments during adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Since its origination, attachment theory has shifted multiple disciplines in the social and biological sciences to considering individuals as operating within the context of relationships and human development as the process of building upon prior experiences, organized in new ways (Sroufe, 2016; Stiles, 2008).

Attachment theory was first advanced by Bowlby (1982), who described infants as developing a "secure base" with a proximal trusted caregiver in their first year of life. Bowlby emphasized that attachment relationships are built upon the emotional qualities of the relationships, rather than based upon survival. Two types of attachment relationships were defined by Bowlby: (1) Secure attachment, which develops upon the expectation that the child's emotional signals will be responded to, and (2) Insecure attachment, which develops from sporadic and unpredictable responses to the child's emotions. Based upon repeated daily experiences with an attachment figure, he theorized that infants develop an "internal working model" (IWM) of relationships. Secure attachment provides a model of emotional regulation, whereby children learn emotional responses that achieve a goal and those that are not socially acceptable through feedback from their attachment relationships (Cassidy, 1994; Thompson, 1994). Upon the formation of a secure attachment relationship, an infant is able to achieve a balance between attachment and exploration (Bowlby, 1982). With the acquisition of an IWM of secure attachment, and thereby trust in the caregiver's emotional and physical availability, a child is able to devote more cognitive resources to exploration, thereby stimulating development in multiple domains (Grossmann et al., 2008). Conversely, a child with an insecure IWM is assumed to develop negative expectations of the caregiver's availability and responsiveness and less cognitive resources are available for cognitively stimulating developmental exploration and experiences (Bowlby, 1982).

Through a series of empirical studies in the 1960s, Mary Ainsworth connected attachment theory to parenting and advanced the measurement of attachment through the development of the Strange Situation (SS) procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In brief, the procedure is a 20-minute assessment in which a child remains in a lab room with toys. A parent and stranger alternatively leave and the child's response to

the parent and stranger returning is rated in 15 second intervals on scales of 1–7 in terms of (1) proximity and contact seeking, (2) contact maintaining, (3) avoidance of proximity and contact, and (4) resistance to contact and comforting. Further, the child's behaviors in exploring the room/materials, searching for the mother, and emotional reactions (i.e., crying, smiling) are noted. The responses and behaviors classify the child as (1) secure (distressed when mother is gone, happy when mother returns, and avoidant of stranger when alone while being friendly when mother is present), (2) insecure/ambivalent (distressed when mother leaves, resistant to mother when she returns, and avoidant of the stranger), and (3) insecure/avoidant (no distress when mother leaves, no interest in mother when she returns, and is friendly with the stranger). Later, a fourth category was proposed by Main and Solomon (1986) of insecure/disorganized, which is characterized by inconsistent behaviors that do not fit into the patterns of the other three types.

Though the SS procedure made notable strides in the assessment of attachment and remains a cornerstone of attachment research, questions have been raised with regard to its validity with fathers and other caregivers (Paquette & Bigras, 2010; van IJzendoorn, 1995), as well as within diverse families and cultures (Brown et al., 2008; Rothbaum et al., 2000; Thompson, 2020; Van IJzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Several other measures have been developed. One other prominent scale is the Risky Situation (RS; Paquette & Bigras, 2010). It is similar to the SS; however, the child is presented with social and physical risks (a stranger and set of stairs), while the parent follows a script in which they can comfort the child, but otherwise do not interact nor encourage the child to explore. The child's behavior is coded as underactivated relationships, characterized by little child exploration, activated relationships, shown by the child confidently exploring within limits set by the parent, and overactivated relationships, in which the child is reckless and does not obey parental limits.

Further work has led to the assessment of attachment among adults through the Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview, in which adults report retrospectively on attachment-related experiences during childhood (George et al., 1985; Roisman et al., 2004). Adults are classified as secure/autonomous, dismissing, and preoccupied attachment. Numerous additional assessments have been developed to measure attachment between infancy and adulthood using doll play procedures and interviews. For example, the Child Attachment Interview (CAI) was developed to measure attachment in middle childhood and adolescence through a semistructured interview, in which children are asked to describe their relationships with their primary caregivers (Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008; Venta et al., 2014).

Over the last two decades, the investigation of attachment theory has been further developed through a biological perspective. The study of the neurobiology of attachment has focused on identifying brain structures, neural circuits, neurotransmitter systems, and neuropeptides involved in attachment (Coan, 2008; Vrticka & Vuilleumier, 2012), examining differences in brain responses to social and emotional stimuli (Coan et al., 2006; Vrticka & Vuilleumier, 2012), and understanding of the neurobiology of infant-caregiver interactions and parenting (Parsons et al., 2010; Schore, 2005). Much of the early work in this area has been conducted with

animals and has found that differential levels of maternal attachment-promoting behaviors, such as licking and grooming and arched-back nursing positions, contribute to variations in the calibration and regulation of their infant's stress response system (see, e.g., Kaffman & Meaney, 2007). In contrast, when infant rat pups are separated from their mothers, the pups exhibit changes in multiple physiological and behavioral systems, such as those controlling heart rate, body temperature, food intake, and exploration (see Polan & Hofer, 2008, for a review of this research). This body of work highlights the involvement of physiological processes – rather than *solely* the cognitive processes described above – in the development of attachment.

Broadly, attachment theory is considered a mechanism through which to understand individual differences in development. Secure attachment provides children an emotional base, and this secure emotional base allows children to explore their environment in ways that promote development across domains. For example, secure attachment has been found to indirectly promote the development of executive functioning skills (Bernier et al., 2012, 2020), prosocial skills (Bernier et al., 2020), emotional regulation skills (Cassidy, 1994; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fearon et al., 2010; Viddal et al., 2017), and academic abilities (Bernier et al., 2020). Early attachment is considered to be most impactful on early neurological structures and developmental processes, thereby initiating future developmental cascades (Glaser, 2000; Gunnar et al., 2006; Kraemer, 1992).

More recently, attachment has been conceptualized as a measure of resilience, providing a positive adaptation to stress over the life course (Darling Rasmussen et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2005). In this context, there has been considerable interest in designing programs and policies to promote secure caregiver-child attachment relationships as a means of improving the life trajectories of children who have experienced trauma and adversity, maltreatment, or disruptions in care, and who may be at risk of developing or maintaining insecure attachment. Given the critical role of a stable, trusted caregiver in the development of a child's attachment orientation, many programs designed to support attachment security – and, ultimately, resilient trajectories – have focused on caregiver mental representations and behavior as key intervention targets (van Ijzendoorn, 1995). Attachment-based theory has thus been incorporated into existing home visiting and parent education programs, as well as public service programs and policies, and there is some evidence that a number of intervention programs designed to support healthy caregiver-child relationships among children at risk for attachment challenges are effective at improving caregiver sensitivity and, in some cases, child attachment security, as well as improved behavioral, emotion regulation, and cognitive skills on the part of the child, and improved self-efficacy and mental health on the part of the caregiver (see Berlin, 2005, for a review of attachment-based interventions).

However, it is important to recognize that the links between attachment security and development are indirect and probabilistic, rather than direct or causal, and operate as one important initial organizing component, among many developmental processes (Fraleay et al., 2013; Sroufe, 2005, 2016). When determining the precursors of secure attachment, there is a genetic component, found across age groups (Bokhorst et al., 2003; Fearon et al., 2014; Roisman & Fraley, 2008). However,

initial hypotheses of intergenerational transmission of attachment are only weakly documented (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). In addition to genetics (see Mills-Koonce & Towe-Goodman, chapter “A Biopsychosocial Model of Family Process”, this volume), evidence suggests unique environmental influences that build upon the characteristics and behaviors of the child and attachment figure and the developing joint interaction between the two (Bokhorst et al., 2003; Fearon et al., 2014; Fraley et al., 2013; Roisman & Fraley, 2008; Schore, 2005).

Although this chapter focuses on attachment during childhood, attachment theory was extended empirically to adult romantic relationships in the late 1980s to provide a theoretical framework for understanding adult couple relationship dynamics (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Adult attachment theory posits that the attachment system remains active over the entire life span, with adults forming emotional attachments to a variety of close relationship partners including friends and romantic partners. These attachment figures in adulthood serve the main functions of an attachment system – protection, secure base, and safe haven (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013). Although change is possible from secure to insecure attachment and from insecure to secure, attachment styles are generally stable from childhood to adulthood (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, some studies find the stability of attachment to be in the short term, with more mixed results when examining stability from infancy through adolescence and into adulthood (Fearon & Roisman, 2017; McConnell & Moss, 2011). The strength of findings on the continuity of attachment also varies based on how attachment is measured, with stronger evidence based on direct observations of the quality of early caregiving environments versus self-reported measures (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). More research is needed on the processes involved in maintaining or changing the quality of attachment relationships, especially changes from insecure to secure attachment. External factors during childhood that influence the quality of caregiving (e.g., child maltreatment, parental loss) have an influence in predicting continuity or discontinuity in attachment over time, but age- and developmentally specific factors may also matter. For example, personal (e.g., coping skills) and environmental factors (e.g., environmental stress) that are present during adulthood work together to sustain or modify attachment relationships (McConnell & Moss, 2011). As individuals invest in different types of relationships across the lifespan, their interactions with relationship partners can also change how they approach each unique relationship (Chopik et al., 2019). Similar to the consideration that children can form different attachment relationships with multiple caregivers, adult attachment relationships may also vary depending on the specific relationship (Fraley, 2007).

Importantly, attachment styles during adulthood influence parenting expectations and parenting behaviors, so that attachment is transmitted from one generation to the next (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2019). Research based on both self-reports and the more traditional Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) assessment is fairly consistent in demonstrating that parents' attachment security in adulthood is associated with more positive parenting characteristics and outcomes and insecure attachment styles are associated with more negative parenting

characteristics and outcomes. However, there is variability in these associations based on parents' diverse life circumstances and parents' and children's sociodemographic characteristics. Further, the mechanisms through which parents' adult attachment styles shape children's attachment require additional research (Jones et al., 2015). For a deeper exploration of adult attachment theory, see Cummings and Warmuth (2019), Hazan and Shaver (1987), Mikulincer and Shaver (2012), and Simpson and Karantzas (2019).

## Attachment Theory Among Diverse Families

It is important to acknowledge that attachment was conceptualized and tested within primarily White and middle- to upper-income families in the United States. The core concepts and current measures are reflective of these limited populations. From its inception, efforts have been made to test the application of attachment theory in other populations (i.e., Ainsworth, 1967). Still, important concerns have been raised about the generalizability and applicability of attachment theory to samples from other countries and non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) individuals and families (Brown et al., 2008; Rothbaum et al., 2000). These concerns mirror a larger movement in developmental science toward examining bias in the existing theories, methods, and empirical findings. For attachment theory, the efforts at establishing generalizability have primarily been etic, defined as the application of existing concepts and measures from WEIRD samples on non-WEIRD populations (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Research from this work has identified differences in the prevalence of patterns of attachment styles between different populations (e.g., Ainsworth, 1967; van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008), raising questions about the universality of the core attachment hypotheses (Rothbaum et al., 2000).

There has been less evidence of an emic approach, in which the theory is studied within different cultures with the expectation that different concepts, constructs, measures, and findings may emerge (van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). For example, emic approaches have been used to measure positive parenting practices among low-income Black families in the United States (McWayne et al., 2017). Cultural assumptions combined with differences in child rearing, family structure, and cultural values raise questions about the accuracy of etic approaches in examining cross-cultural differences in attachment (Brown et al., 2008; Rothbaum et al., 2000). Conversely, emic approaches can be time-intensive and result in less generalizable findings (Rothbaum et al., 2000; Thompson, 2020). Therefore, there are challenges in determining the extent to which attachment theory can be applied universally, how to measure it, and how its implications for children's short- and long-term development vary across contexts and cultures.

Several themes from recent scholarship guide future research on attachment. First, there is an effort to focus on the discrete measure of sensitivity rather than on broader measures that include warmth and physical behaviors, given that

correlations between discrete measures are likely to vary across contexts and specific behavioral indicators of sensitivity may be culture-specific (Dawson et al., 2018; Fourment et al., 2020; Lima Ribeiro et al., 2020; Rahma et al., 2018). Ainsworth's Maternal Sensitivity Scale is one example of a sensitivity measure that is well suited to research in diverse contexts, in part because it does not focus on specific behaviors that may be context dependent (Ainsworth et al., 1974). This scale (9 = high, 1 = low) measures maternal receptiveness and responsiveness to child behaviors in a variety of settings (feeding, play, teaching). In relation to the reliability of measures in varying contexts, there is a recognition of the need to include local members of the community on the research team to consider the data collection procedures and application of the measure (Thompson, 2020). Further, the use of video recordings has been encouraged to allow for more opportunity to consider the application of the measure to the context and establish interrater reliability (Dawson et al., 2018; Fourment et al., 2020; Lima Ribeiro et al., 2020; Thompson, 2020). Finally, while there has been an historical theme of the cross-cultural study of attachment (Ainsworth, 1967) and continued attention to best practices in culturally informed attachment research (Thompson, 2020), there remains a lack of research on non-WEIRD populations and, within the United States, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) individuals and families, particularly research that incorporates culturally sensitive practices.

In addition to questions about the generalizability of the theory, there has been a lack of attention to the structural inequalities influencing individuals and the contexts that form the basis for attachment relationships. We draw upon García Coll et al.' (1996) *Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children* to consider the influence of social position variables (race, social class, ethnicity, and gender), racism, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and segregation on individuals' capacities to form secure attachment relationships, as well as on the promoting and inhibiting environments where attachment relationships form. Specifically, parents and children with higher levels of stress, more health problems, and less resources, due to the effects of structural inequalities, have reduced opportunities to form secure attachments and more factors that might promote nonsecure attachments (Murray et al., 2018). As an example, there are well-established racial disparities in pregnancy and birth outcomes between Black and non-Black mothers and children that are attributed to the physical consequences of social inequality in the United States (Geronimus, 1996; Wilkinson et al., 2021). These poorer health outcomes, such as increased risk of preterm delivery and low birthweight, put parents and infants at an immediate disadvantage in forming early secure attachments. Structural inequities have also made the process of forming secure attachments more difficult for some populations, through discriminatory and inadequate policies and practices. For instance, discriminatory practices in health-care and employment settings, gaps in access to unpaid and paid parental leave, and notable disparities in the criminal justice system creating disadvantages to families in income, housing, time to bond with children, and two parents in the household to share responsibilities (Beck et al., 2020; Shonkoff et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2021). Combined, structural inequalities between families create vast differences in

opportunities to form secure attachment relationships. At the same time, there may be adaptive processes within diverse families that are not captured within existing attachment measures (Murray et al., 2018). In particular, support from other adult family members (kinship support) and community members (collective socialization) may serve important roles within children's attachment relationships (Murray et al., 2018).

## **Attachment Theory in the Context of Family Complexity and Multiple Caregivers**

Although attachment theory has had a focus on the mother as the primary attachment figure, children can and do form attachments to multiple caregivers, both within and outside the family. For families with young children, the family context typically involves parents (traditionally examined as mothers and fathers, but this also includes same-sex parents), grandparents, and other relatives, with each member experiencing the family from a unique developmental and historical vantage point (Demo & Cox, 2000). Trends in marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing have led to children being raised against a backdrop of increasingly diverse and, for many, constantly evolving family forms (Pew Research Center, 2015). These diverse family types have implications for child development and well-being, with attachment theory playing a central role in helping to explain these processes. Within the family, attachment theory has been applied to understanding child development based on relationships with fathers versus mothers, in single-parent families, stepfamilies, adoptive and foster families, and with same-gender parents (Misca & Smith, 2014). Children's attachment relationships differ across attachment figures, and these relationships can be largely independent in terms of quality, and with different antecedents (Howes & Spieker, 2008). A key question then is whether and how children form different attachments depending on the family member. For non-family caregivers, a key question is whether and how secure attachments form outside the family, which can then serve to protect against potential maltreatment and neglect within families.

**Father-child attachment relationships** It remains unclear whether it is best to think of a single type of parental caregiving system or of distinct maternal versus paternal caregiving systems (Cassidy et al., 2013). Bowlby's conceptualization of attachment theory refers to "attachment figures" rather than mothers due to a belief that although biological mothers typically serve as principal attachment figures, other caregivers can also serve this role. Fathers play an important role in child development that has been found to be unique and complementary to the role that mothers play (Bretherton, 2010; Cabrera et al., 2018; Jeynes, 2016; Sarkadi et al., 2008). In a 2010 review of fathers in attachment theory and research, Bretherton describes the evolution of four phases in father attachment research including initial explorations of whether fathers serve as attachment figures (Phase 1), fathers' place



in an attachment hierarchy (Phase 2), the comparative quality of infants' attachment to fathers and mothers and the intergenerational transmission of relationship qualities from fathers versus mothers (Phase 3), and a fourth phase of research that was beginning to explore differences in developmental outcomes of father and mother attachment, whether different assessments are needed to study father versus mother attachment, and how to apply a broader family perspective when studying attachment.

Several more recent reviews of empirical studies on the role of fathers find that paternal warmth and play sensitivity have both been linked positively to father-infant attachment (Palkovitz, 2019). While fathers and mothers can both serve as important attachment figures, the pathways to secure attachment relationships may be different. There are both biobehavioral as well as neurochemical mechanisms that have been explored to explain different parenting responses and interactions between fathers and mothers. For example, the concept of paternal synchrony, which focuses on face-to-face interactions between fathers and children during alert, nondistressed times, aligns more closely with fathers' role as an interactive partner in exploration with their child, which is reflected in fathers engaging in more stimulating play activities than mothers (Palm, 2014). Limitations of the SS procedure are also present when assessing father-child attachment (Paquette & Bigras, 2010), providing further support for the RS procedure, which may better capture this exploration component of father-child attachment. Additional literature suggests that father-child attachment relationships may be more influenced by outside factors than mother-child attachments, including child-, father-, and family-level factors, which can include fathers' coparenting relationships with mothers, and the nature of mother-child attachment relationships (Fagan, 2020; Palm, 2014). However, research on father-attachment in different family structures remains limited (Cabrera & Volling, 2019).

**Foster/adoptive parent-child attachment relationships** For adoptive/foster parents, an important question is whether secure attachments can form after the initial developmental period of attachment formation that occurs around 6–8 months of age. The potentially negative relationship experiences children face prior to placement in foster care or adoption can change their attachment behaviors so that the process of forming attachments with caregivers may be different than those observed for biological mother-child attachment, although secure attachments are still possible (Howes & Spieker, 2008). Having a secure base in terms of the availability, sensitivity, acceptance, and cooperation of caregivers is important for foster children's resiliency (Miranda et al., 2019). Several different child, caregiver, and contextual factors contribute to the quality of attachment between foster children and their foster parents. A 2020 literature review found that foster parents' characteristics tend to matter more than child characteristics or the type of foster care placement when it comes to developing a secure attachment. Specifically, a positive, sensitive parenting style was positively related to children's secure attachment (West et al., 2020).

**Caregiver-child attachment in different family structures** The implications of family structure and increasing family complexity for child development and well-being have been the focus of considerable discussion, with research generally hypothesizing that children develop most positively when they live in positive and stable environments (Misca & Smith, 2014). Although the focus of much research is on the advantages of living with two biological parents, the family environment likely matters more than the number of parents, so that positive and stable parenting benefits children, whether they live with two parents (biological or nonbiological), a single parent, or foster parents. The associations between family structure and attachment can be complex and warrant an understanding of the mechanisms through which family structure and family structure changes affect child development. For example, family transitions such as divorce may result in discontinuities in attachment security to the extent that mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors are affected negatively. Specifically, if conflict is present in parents' relationships with each other and the ways they communicate, and due to other contextual events that often accompany family change, such as moving households, separation from one parent, and economic stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

For children living in single-parent families, step-families, or other diverse family types, caregiver-child attachments are threatened when there is heightened stress, a change in family roles, or ongoing family conflict (Magnuson & Berger, 2009). However, these negative consequences can be mitigated if the transition reduces conflict between family members, and if parents are able to maintain positive and cooperative coparenting relationships after separation (Waters & McIntosh, 2011). Further, children with more secure attachments may be better equipped to navigate family change during stressful times (Crespo, 2012).

**Attachments with nonparental caregivers outside of the family** The largest focus of attachment theory literature that focuses on nonparental caregivers is on the role of childcare providers. Some studies describe these as sequential attachment relationships that occur after children form attachment relationships (secure or insecure) with parents. They find that while children can form multiple internal working models of attachment, the developmental context and relationship histories associated with new attachment figures may result in different developmental processes (Howes & Spieker, 2008).

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of parental decision making about childcare and children's secure attachment relationships with nonparental care providers found that childcare provider attachments can form fairly independently from mother-child attachments, but depend on a range of factors, including the type of provider (friend, family, and neighbor care versus formal care) and type of childcare setting (home versus center-based), individual versus group-related sensitivity, child age and gender, childcare history (length of time spent with provider), quality and consistency of care across providers, and family socioeconomic background (Ahnert et al., 2006; Susman-Stillman & Banghart, 2011). Additional research examines the role of childcare providers in fostering secure attachment among

children in maltreating families where parent-child attachment relationships may be compromised. For example, some research has shown that enrollment in childcare allows children to form attachment relationships with childcare providers that help to comfort them in times of distress (Eckstein-Madry et al., 2020).

## Emerging Questions and Critiques of Attachment Theory

As the study of attachment has deepened in the understanding of mechanisms and broadened in scope, several areas of study have been the focus of criticism and emerging questions. First, more longitudinal data across the life course is needed to understand the enduring influences of attachment in early childhood, particularly long-term longitudinal data that span infancy into adulthood. In terms of adult attachment, further research is needed to help identify a consistent set of predictors of adult attachment styles, with a focus on the relative influence of childhood versus adult experiences and relationships (Fraley & Roisman, 2019).

Second, further research on brain development and genetics is needed to continue to disaggregate the influence of genetics versus environments, identify critical periods of brain development, examine the interplay of genetic and environmental influences over development, and understand how neuroscience innovations can inform attachment interventions. Third, while there is evidence of continuous dimensions of attachment, categorical dimensions (i.e., the measures resulting from the SS procedure) continue to dominate research (Fearon & Roisman, 2017; Fraley et al., 2013; Fraley & Spieker, 2003), suggesting the need for further research on continuous measures of attachment.

Fourth, caregivers provide other important contributions beyond the emotional interaction, such as cognitive stimulation, scaffolding, modeling, and supporting behavior; these are found to correlate with attachment but also have distinct links with development (Sroufe et al., 2005; Sroufe, 2016). Attachment security does not fully describe parenting quality, and therefore, there is a need to understand the unique contributions of attachment in relation to other aspects of parenting quality, such as sensitivity, scaffolding, mind-mindedness, and autonomy support (Bernier et al., 2012; Jaffee et al., 2001; Landry et al., 2006). There is also an understanding that child characteristics influence attachments, but a lack of research examining how this operates over time. For example, we need to know more about how attachment combines with other developmental influences, such as child characteristics, other qualities of caregiving, and environment features (Sroufe, 2016). We also refer back to the broader critiques and future needs of conducting attachment research within diverse cultures and families, considering the structural inequities that influence parents and children, and adaptive processes that are not captured within existing attachment measures.

This is particularly important for understanding the application of attachment theory to practice. Further research is needed not only to better understand the impact of attachment-based interventions on caregiver and child outcomes, but also

to disentangle the precise mechanisms that are driving such outcomes. For example, some research suggests that interventions that focus on caregiver sensitivity may be more effective than broader interventions that also target internal working models (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2005.) In addition, there is a critical need to better understand potential moderators of the effects of intervention programs, including program intensity and duration; diverse cultural contexts; high risk for attachment challenges; fathers, nonbiological and nonrelative caregivers; quality of caregiver and therapist relationship; and genetic and temperamental differences among children. Finally, we need to examine the efficacy of interventions to support attachment among older children and adolescents, as well as longitudinal research to further explore whether interventions designed to reduce the risk of insecure attachment lead to a reduction in later problems.

Finally, the field of attachment was built upon the study of child-mother emotional relationships. Since the origination of attachment theory, the field of developmental science has evolved to recognize the importance of other proximal relationships and, simultaneously, complex families have increasingly become a normative developmental context. Across studies, a key recommendation is that caregiver-child relationships need to be examined within a larger system of dynamic attachment relationships, including children's relationships with multiple family and non-family caregivers as well as parents'/caregivers' close adult relationships. It is also important to consider that these dyadic attachment relationships are not formed in a vacuum (Crespo, 2012). As noted above, a lack of attention has been given to the broader contexts in which attachments form, and therefore the indirect structural and institutional influences on attachment; instead, responsibility for attachment relationships is placed squarely at the feet of parents, and particularly mothers and, therefore, mothers are individually blamed when attachment goes "wrong." Ecological and family systems theories, in particular, provide a foundation for understanding the structures, roles, communicating patterns, boundaries, and power relations in the family and externally that may positively or negatively affect attachment (Rothbaum et al., 2002). Other chapters in this volume (see Tudge, chapter "Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory: Its Development, Core Concepts, and Critical Issues", this volume; Baptist & Hammon, chapter "Family Systems Theory", this volume) examine these theories in much more depth, but some key takeaways for this chapter reflect the opportunity to integrate theories moving forward for a more holistic understanding of child development.

Drawing from ecological theory, micro- and mesosystems are salient for understanding child adjustment in diverse family structures because they consider the immediate environment and the interrelation of contexts related to the child. Attachment relationships, like all other aspects of development, do not exist in isolation from their context. There are many personal (e.g., caregiver depression) and interpersonal (e.g., domestic violence) factors that may make it more difficult for a caregiver to respond to their child in a sensitive and emotionally responsive way that supports secure attachment (Brazeau et al., 2018). In addition, a host of environmental factors, such as chaotic living conditions and chronic life stressors, may interfere with the developing attachment relationship, particularly among families

who face multiple personal and environmental challenges (McEwen & McEwen, 2017). Ecological theories further point to the role of external factors that shape family relationships, life experiences, and environmental conditions. For example, the macrosystem consists of the most distal and broadest types of social influences such as cultural values, structural inequality, or social/legal systems.

In light of the many positive outcomes associated with secure attachment, there has been considerable interest in designing programs and policies to promote secure caregiver-child attachment relationships as a means of improving the life trajectories of children who have experienced trauma and adversity, maltreatment or disruptions in care, and may be at risk of developing or maintaining insecure attachment. Attachment-based theory has thus been incorporated into existing home visiting and parent education programs, as well as public service programs and policies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, attachment theory has made major contributions to family theories by focusing on the importance of close relationships to developmental processes and family functioning. More longitudinal data across the life course with measures of the potential personal and environmental variables that serve as mechanisms for (dis)continuity in attachment over time, understandings of brain development and genetics, novel approaches to measurement, and awareness of culture, diversity, and structural inequality offer opportunities to unearth the indirect and direct influences of attachment on human development. In the context of changes in demographics and understanding of family complexity, attachment theory is being pushed further to evolve in its definitions and measurement. These evolutions have implications for the application of attachment theory to programs and policies, as well as efforts to understand the mediators, moderators, outcomes, and generalizability of effects. With future data collection and interdisciplinary contributions, attachment theory offers family science the opportunity to conceptualize caregiver-child relationships as a pivotal driver of differences in individual development and family functioning.

## References

- Agishtein, P., & Brumbaugh, C. (2013). Cultural variation in adult attachment: The impact of ethnicity, collectivism, and country of origin. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, 7(4), 384.
- Ahnert, L., Pinquart, M., & Lamb, M. E. (2006). Security of children's relationships with nonparental care providers: A meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 77(3), 664–679.
- Ainsworth, M. S. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda*. Johns Hopkins Press.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Bell, S. M., & Stayton, D. J. (1974). Infant-mother attachment and social development. In M. P. Richards (Ed.), *The introduction of the child into a social world* (pp. 99–135). Cambridge University Press.

- Ainsworth, M. D., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Erlbaum.
- Beck, A. F., Edwards, E. M., Horbar, J. D., Howell, E. A., McCormick, M. C., & Pursley, D. M. (2020). The color of health: How racism, segregation, and inequality affect the health and well-being of preterm infants and their families. *Pediatric Research*, *87*(2), 227–234.
- Berlin, L. J. (2005). Interventions to enhance early attachments: The state of the field today. In L. J. Berlin, Y. Ziv, L. Amaya-Jackson, & M. T. Greenberg (Eds.), *Duke series in child development and public policy. Enhancing early attachments: Theory, research, intervention, and policy* (pp. 3–33). Guilford Press.
- Bernier, A., Beauchamp, M. H., & Cimon-Paquet, C. (2020). From early relationships to preacademic knowledge: A sociocognitive developmental cascade to school readiness. *Child Development*, *91*(1), e134–e145.
- Bernier, A., Carlson, S. M., Deschênes, M., & Matte-Gagné, C. (2012). Social factors in the development of early executive functioning: A closer look at the caregiving environment. *Developmental Science*, *15*, 12–24.
- Bokhorst, C. L., Bakermans-kranenburg, M. J., Pasco Fearon, R. M., Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Fonagy, P., & Schuengel, C. (2003). The importance of shared environment in mother–infant attachment security: A behavioral genetic study. *Child Development*, *74*(6), 1769–1782.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss* (Vol. 1: Attachment, 2nd ed.). Basic Books.
- Bretherton, I. (2010). Fathers in attachment theory and research: A review. *Early Child Development and Care*, *180*(1–2), 9–23.
- Brown, D., Rodgers, Y. H., & Kapadia, K. (2008). Multicultural considerations for the application of attachment theory. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, *62*(4), 353–363.
- Brazeau, N., Reisz, S., Jacobvitz, D., & George, C. (2018). Understanding the connection between attachment trauma and maternal self-efficacy in depressed mothers. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *39*(1), 30–43.
- Cabrera, N. J., & Volling, B. L. (2019). Moving research on fathering and children’s development forward: Priorities and recommendations for the future. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *84*, 107–117.
- Cabrera, N. J., Volling, B. L., & Barr, R. (2018). Fathers are parents, too! Widening the lens on parenting for children’s development. *Child Development Perspectives*, *12*, 152–157.
- Carlson, M. J., & Meyer, D. R. (2014). Family complexity: Setting the context. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *654*(1), 6–11.
- Cassidy, J. (1994). Emotion regulation: Influences of attachment relationships. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *59*, 228–249.
- Cassidy, J., Jones, J. D., & Shaver, P. R. (2013). Contributions of attachment theory and research: A framework for future research, translation, and policy. *Development and Psychopathology*, *25*(4 Pt 2), 1415–1434.
- Chopik, W. J., Edelstein, R. S., & Grimm, K. J. (2019). Longitudinal changes in attachment orientation over a 59-year period. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *116*(4), 598–611.
- Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. *Psychological Science*, *17*(12), 1032–1039.
- Coan, J. A. (2008). Toward a neuroscience of attachment. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 241–265). Guilford Press.
- Crespo, C. (2012). Families as contexts for attachment: Reflections on theory, research, and the role of family rituals. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *4*, 290–298.
- Cummings, E. M., & Warmuth, K. A. (2019). Parenting and attachment. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting, volume 5: Practical issues in parenting* (pp. 374–400). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Darling Rasmussen, P., Storebø, O. J., Løkkeholt, T., Voss, L. G., Shmueli-Goetz, Y., Bojesen, A. B., Simonsen, E., & Bilenberg, N. (2019). Attachment as a core feature of resilience: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Reports*, *122*(4), 1259–1296.

Dawson, N., Bain, K., & Mesman, J. (2018). Comparing two measures of maternal sensitivity: Goodness of fit with a South African cultural context. *Attachment & Human Development*, 1–9.

Demo, D. H., & Cox, M. J. (2000). Families with young children: A review of research in the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 876–895.

Eckstein-Madry, T., Piskernik, B., & Ahnert, L. (2020). Attachment and stress regulation in socio-economically disadvantaged children: Can public child care compensate? *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 1–12.

Eisenberg, N., Cumberland, A., & Spinrad, T. L. (1998). Parental socialization of emotion. *Psychological Inquiry*, 9, 241–273.

Fagan, J. (2020). Broadening the scope of father-child attachment research to include the family context. *Attachment & Human Development*, 22(1), 139–142.

Fearon, R. P., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Lapsley, A.-M., & Roisman, G. I. (2010). The significance of insecure attachment and disorganization in the development of children’s externalizing behavior: A meta-analytic study. *Child Development*, 81(2), 435–456.

Fearon, R. P., & Roisman, G. I. (2017). Attachment theory: Progress and future directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 15, 131–136.

Fearon, P., Shmueli-Goetz, Y., Viding, E., Fonagy, P., & Plomin, R. (2014). Genetic and environmental influences on adolescent attachment. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(9), 1033–1041.

Fourment, K., Nóbrega, M., Conde, G., Del Prado, J. N., & Mesman, J. (2020). Maternal sensitivity in rural Andean and Amazonian Peru. *Attachment & Human Development*, 1–16.

Fraley, R. C. (2007). A connectionist approach to the organization and continuity of working models of attachment. *Journal of Personality*, 75, 1157–1180.

Fraley, R. C., & Roisman, G. I. (2019). The development of adult attachment styles: Four lessons. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25, 26–30.

Fraley, R. C., Roisman, G. I., Booth-LaForce, C., Owen, M. T., & Holland, A. S. (2013). Interpersonal and genetic origins of adult attachment styles: A longitudinal study from infancy to early adulthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104, 817–838.

Fraley, R. C., & Spieker, S. J. (2003). Are infant attachment patterns continuously or categorically distributed? A taxometric analysis of strange situation behavior. *Developmental Psychology*, 39(3), 387–404.

García Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67, 1891–1914.

George, C., Kaplan, N., & Main, M. (1985). The Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview. Unpublished protocol, .

Geronimus, A. T. (1996). Black/white differences in the relationship of maternal age to birth-weight: A population-based test of the weathering hypothesis. *Social Science & Medicine*, 42(4), 589–597.

Glaser, D. (2000). Child abuse and neglect and the brain: A review. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41(1), 97–116.

Grossmann, K. E., Grossmann, K., & Waters, E. (2005). *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: The major longitudinal studies*. Guilford Press.

Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., Kindler, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2008). A wider view of attachment and exploration: The influence of mothers and fathers on the development of psychological security from infancy to young adulthood. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 857–879). Guilford Press.

Gunnar, M. R., Fisher, P. A., & the Early Experience Stress and Prevention Science Network. (2006). Bringing basic research on early experience and stress neurobiology to bear on preventive interventions for neglected and maltreated children. *Development and Psychopathology*, 18(3), 651–677.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511–524.

- Howes, C., & Spieker, S. (2008). Attachment relationships in the context of multiple caregivers. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 317–332). The Guilford Press.
- Jaffee, S., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E., Belsky, J., & Silva, P. (2001). Why are children born to teen mothers at risk for adverse outcomes in young adulthood? Results from a 20-year longitudinal study. *Development and Psychopathology, 13*(2), 377–397.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2016). Meta-analysis on the roles of fathers in parenting: Are they unique? *Marriage & Family Review, 52*, 665–688.
- Jones, J. D., Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (2015). Adult attachment style and parenting. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and research: New directions and emerging themes* (pp. 234–260). The Guilford Press.
- Kaffman, A., & Meaney, M. J. (2007). Neurodevelopmental sequelae of postnatal maternal care in rodents: Clinical and research implications of molecular insights. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 48*(3–4), 224–244.
- Kraemer, G. (1992). A psychobiological theory of attachment. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 15*(3), 493–541.
- Landry, S. H., Smith, K. E., & Swank, P. R. (2006). Responsive parenting: Establishing early foundations for social, communication, and independent problem-solving skills. *Developmental Psychology, 42*(4), 627–642.
- Lima Ribeiro, A. C., Seidl-de-Moura, M. L., Fernandes Mendes, D. M. L., & Mesman, J. (2020). Maternal sensitivity in interactions with their 2-month-old infants in Rio de Janeiro-Brazil. *Attachment & Human Development, 1*–11.
- Main, M., & Solomon, J. (1986). Discovery of a new, insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern. In T. B. Brazelton & M. Yogman (Eds.), *Affective development in infancy*. Ablex.
- Magnuson, K., & Berger, L. M. (2009). Family structure states and transitions: Associations with children's wellbeing during middle childhood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 71*(3), 575–591.
- McConnell, M., & Moss, E. (2011). Attachment across the life span: Factors that contribute to stability and change. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 11*, 60–77.
- McEwen, C. A., & McEwen, B. S. (2017). Social structure, adversity, toxic stress, and intergenerational poverty: An early childhood model. *Annual Review of Sociology, 43*, 445–472.
- McWayne, C. M., Mattis, J. S., Green Wright, L. E., Limlingan, M. C., & Harris, E. (2017). An emic, mixed-methods approach to defining and measuring positive parenting among low-income Black families. *Early Education and Development, 28*(2), 182–206.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. The Guilford Press.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2012). Attachment theory expanded: A behavioral systems approach to personality. In K. Deaux & M. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of personality and social psychology* (pp. 467–492). Oxford University.
- Miranda, M., Molla, E., & Tadros, E. (2019). Implications of foster care on attachment: A literature review. *The Family Journal, 27*(4), 394–403.
- Misca, G., & Smith, J. (2014). Mothers, fathers, families and child development. In A. Abela & J. Walker (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in family studies: Global perspectives on partnerships, parenting and support in a changing world* (pp. 151–165). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Murray, V. M., Butler-Barnes, S. T., Mayo-Gamble, T. L., & Inmiss-Thompson, M. N. (2018). Excavating new constructs for family stress theories in the context of everyday life experiences of Black American families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 10*, 384–405.
- Palkovitz, R. (2019). Expanding our focus from father involvement to father-child relationship quality. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 11*, 576–591.
- Palm, G. (2014). Attachment theory and fathers: Moving from “being there” to “being with”. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 6*, 282–297.
- Paquette, D., & Bigras, M. (2010). The risky situation: A procedure for assessing the father-child activation relationship. *Early Child Development and Care, 180*(1–2), 33–50.



- Parsons, C. E., Young, K. S., Murray, L., Stein, A., & Kringelbach, M. L. (2010). The functional neuroanatomy of the evolving parent–infant relationship. *Progress in Neurobiology*, *91*(3), 220–241.
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *Parenting in America: Outlook, worries, aspirations are strongly linked to financial situation*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/>
- Polan, H. J., & Hofer, M. A. (2008). Psychobiological origins of infant attachment and its role in development. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 158–172). The Guilford Press.
- Rahma, A. K., Prevoo, M. J., Alink, L. R., & Mesman, J. (2018). Predictors of sensitive parenting in urban slums in Indonesia. *Attachment & Human Development*, 1–9.
- Roisman, G. I., & Fraley, R. C. (2008). A behavior-genetic study of parenting quality, infant attachment security, and their covariation in a nationally representative sample. *Developmental Psychology*, *44*(3), 831–839.
- Roisman, G. I., Tsai, J. L., & Chiang, K. H. S. (2004). The emotional integration of childhood experience: Physiological, facial expressive, and self-reported emotional response during the adult attachment interview. *Developmental Psychology*, *40*(5), 776.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K., & Morelli, G. (2000). Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 1093–1104.
- Rothbaum, F., Rosen, K., Ujiie, T., & Uchida, N. (2002). Family systems theory, attachment theory, and culture. *Family Process*, *41*, 328–350.
- Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica*, *97*(2), 153–158.
- Schore, A. N. (2005). Attachment, affect regulation, and the developing right brain: Linking developmental neuroscience to pediatrics. *Pediatrics in Review*, *26*(6), 204–217.
- Shonkoff, J. P., Slopen, N., & Williams, D. R. (2021). Early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the impacts of racism on the foundations of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *42*, 115–134.
- Shmueli-Goetz, Y., Target, M., Fonagy, P., & Datta, A. (2008). The Child Attachment Interview: A psychometric study of reliability and discriminant validity. *Developmental Psychology*, *44*(4), 939–956.
- Simpson, J. A., & Karantzas, G. C. (2019). Attachment in adulthood: A dynamic field with a rich past and a bright future. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *25*, 177–181.
- Sroufe, L. A. (2005). Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood. *Attachment & Human Development*, *7*, 349–367.
- Sroufe, L. A. (2016). The place of attachment in development. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (3rd ed., pp. 997–1011). Guilford Press.
- Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). Placing early attachment experiences in developmental context. In K. E. Grossman, K. Grossman, & E. Waters (Eds.), *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: The major longitudinal studies* (pp. 48–70). Guilford Press.
- Stiles, J. (2008). *Fundamentals of brain development*. Harvard University Press.
- Susman-Stillman, A. R., & Banghart, P. (2011). Quality in family, friend, and neighbor childcare settings. *Child Care & Early Education Research Connections*.
- Thompson, R. (1994). Emotion regulation: A theme in search of definition. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *59*(2/3), 25–52.
- Thompson, R. A. (2020). Eyes to see and ears to hear: Sensitivity in research on attachment and culture. *Attachment & Human Development*, 1–9.
- Van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (1995). Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*(3), 387–403.

- van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2019). Bridges across intergenerational transmission of attachment gap. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25, 31–36.
- Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Juffer, F. (2005). Why less is more: From the Dodo Bird Verdict to evidence-based interventions on sensitivity and early attachments. In L. J. Berlin, Y. Ziv, L. Amaya-Jackson, & M. T. Greenberg (Eds.), *Duke series in child development and public policy. Enhancing early attachments: Theory, research, intervention, and policy* (pp. 297–312). Guilford Press.
- Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Sagi-Schwartz, A. (2008). Cross-cultural patterns of attachment: Universal and contextual dimensions. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 880–905). The Guilford Press.
- Venta, A., Shmueli-Goetz, Y., & Sharp, C. (2014). Assessing attachment in adolescence: A psychometric study of the Child Attachment Interview. *Psychological Assessment*, 26, 238–255.
- Viddal, K. R., Berg-Nielsen, T. S., Belsky, J., & Wichstrøm, L. (2017). Change in attachment predicts change in emotion regulation particularly among 5-HTTLPR short-allele homozygotes. *Developmental Psychology*, 53, 1316–1329.
- Vrticka, P., & Vuilleumier, P. (2012). Neuroscience of human social interactions and adult attachment style. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6, 212.
- Waters, E., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Are we asking the right questions about attachment? *Family Court Review*, 49, 4741–4482.
- West, D., Vanderfaeillie, J., Van Hove, L., Gypen, L., & Van Holen, F. (2020). Attachment in family foster care: Literature review of associated characteristics. *Developmental Child Welfare*, 2(2), 132–150.
- Wilkinson, A., Laurore, J., Maxfield, E., Gross, E., Daily, S. & Keating, K. (2021). *State of babies yearbook 2021: Racism create inequities in maternal and child health, even before birth*.
- Wright, M. O., Masten, A. S., & Narayan, A. J. (2005). Resilience processes in development. In S. Goldstein & R. B. Brooks (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children* (pp. 15–37). Springer.

# Application: Advancing Loneliness Research Within an Attachment Framework



Alex Molaver

Loneliness is a broad concept which is closely related to relationship satisfaction, as it refers to distress about and motivation to rectify dissatisfaction with one's relationships (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). This can include both dissatisfaction with an ongoing relationship and dissatisfaction with not having a relationship/enough relationships (DiTommaso et al., 2004; Lehmann et al., 2015). Attachment theory has been influential to the study of loneliness since Weiss (1973) first used the theory to differentiate loneliness into personal intimacy issues (analogous to separation distress) and group integration issues (identifying, fitting in, and being involved with a group). Later, Shaver and Hazan (1987) advocated for the study of adult romantic love and loneliness from the perspective of attachment, caregiving, and sexual behavioral systems. Cassidy and Berlin (1999) also advocated for the study of children's social loneliness from the perspective of attachment. As such, both loneliness and attachment have been studied across types of relationships and stages of the lifespan, and loneliness research would benefit from greater integration of attachment theory.

Loneliness has been differentiated by the type of relationship one feels is inadequate: romantic, family, or social (e.g., friends, people, others) (DiTommaso et al., 2004; Schmidt & Sermat, 1983). Family and social loneliness have been further divided into intimacy with a particular family member or friend, versus broader feelings of integration into the family or a social group (Ribeiro et al., 2019; Schmidt & Sermat, 1983). Romantic loneliness has no group integration analog, but it has been divided into being single and lonely due to a lack of a relationship, or being currently partnered yet lonely due to a poor quality relationship (DiTommaso et al., 2004; Sha'ked, 2015). Finally, a positive or negative attitude about being alone has

---

A. Molaver (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [alex.molaver@uconn.edu](mailto:alex.molaver@uconn.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_41](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_41)

573

been added as an aspect of social loneliness (Houghton et al., 2014). Unfortunately, studies of the different aspects and types of loneliness have been fragmented and disconnected both operationally and conceptually. Closely applicable to many aspects of loneliness, attachment would be a useful theory to help integrate and advance loneliness research.

## Measurement Gaps in Loneliness Research

Distinctions between experiencing romantic loneliness as a single person or while romantically partnered have been researched only recently, with important measurement implications. For example, two newer constructs related to romantic loneliness are fear of being single (Spielmann et al., 2013) and satisfaction with relationship status (whether single or partnered; Lehmann et al., 2015), and their associations with loneliness are moderated by one's partner status. For single adults, satisfaction with being single decreases as fear of being single increases, but for those currently in a romantic relationship – where the quality of the current relationship influences views of being single as an alternative – fear of being single and satisfaction with being in a relationship are unrelated (Adamczyk et al., 2021).

These studies highlight important differences in loneliness across single and partnered individuals, which relates to the attachment construct of avoidance of intimacy (how much an individual avoids relationships). Unfortunately, the most commonly used measure of romantic loneliness – the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults short version (SELSA-S; DiTommaso et al., 2004) – uses the same questions to assess romantic loneliness for both single and currently partnered people. Different questions depending on relationship status would tease apart differences in how romantic loneliness is experienced by single versus partnered individuals, and attachment theory could inform whether an individual's avoidance of intimacy influences either their distress with or motivation to change (or leave) their relationships.

Studies of social and family loneliness and their subdivisions generally, and distinctions between romantic, social, and family loneliness, have been hampered by the fact that loneliness types and divisions have been included in some research and left out of others. This is similar to the debate about whether attachment is a generalized style or relationally specific. The most commonly used measure of general loneliness, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980), does the least to differentiate the construct into any types and subtypes. First, it is labeled as a measure of general loneliness, but operationally, it is a measure of social loneliness. Second, it is described as unidimensional, but studies have identified two underlying factors (personal intimacy and social group integration), and potentially a third factor reflecting a method effect for positively worded items (Dussault et al., 2009). Just as attachment research is benefitting from exploration of relationally specific versus generalizable aspects of attachment, loneliness research would benefit from greater nuance.

Although the SELSA-S (DiTommaso et al., 2004) assesses romantic, social, and family loneliness, it does not divide them into subcomponents. And although the UCLA Loneliness Scale is sometimes considered a measure of loneliness subtypes, it actually leaves out romantic and family loneliness. Other scales that have explicitly subdivided loneliness have done so only by age. The Perth A-Loneliness Scale for adolescents (PALs; Houghton et al., 2014), for example, assesses social loneliness in terms of personal intimacy, group integration, and positive or negative attitude about being alone, and family loneliness is divided into personal intimacy and group integration, but the scale is only for adolescents and not adults (Ribeiro et al., 2019).

These gaps in loneliness measures can be traced to different interpretations of what Weiss (1973) originally meant when he applied attachment theory to loneliness for the first time: some have interpreted his emotional and social loneliness types to mean personal intimacy versus group integration (Cacioppo et al., 2015), and others have interpreted it to mean romantic or family relationships versus other social relationships (DiTommaso et al., 2004). In reality, both are aspects of loneliness in the form of types and subtypes and should be measured as such.

## Content Gaps in Loneliness Research

Attachment theory also could be applied to address content gaps in loneliness research. So far, romantic loneliness has been underresearched in relation to attachment, as have related constructs such as satisfaction with relationship status and fear of being single, but attachment systems are useful perspectives to apply (Shaver & Hazan, 1987). For example, attachment anxiety increases following a breakup for those who were not the ones to initiate it (Spielmann et al., 2016), but the association between attachment anxiety and longing for an ex-partner is reduced if they believe they could easily find a new partner (Spielmann et al., 2009). “Longing for an ex-partner” could be romantic loneliness, but it has not been researched via an attachment lens. Attachment anxiety also increases willingness to settle for a less satisfying romantic relationship (Spielmann et al., 2013) and fear of being single mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and infidelity (Sakman et al., 2021). Interestingly, for adults with higher attachment avoidance, they experience lower sexual nostalgia when single, but higher sexual nostalgia for a past partner when they have a current partner (Muisse et al., 2020). Too, avoidant adults are more insensitive and distant romantic caregivers, and attachment anxious adults are more prone to a self-oriented, compulsive overdoing of romantic caregiving (Guzmán-González et al., 2020). Thus, such processes would benefit from examinations using an attachment lens.

Social loneliness and attachment have been somewhat studied, but also could be advanced by an attachment lens (Cassidy & Berlin, 1999). For example, attachment insecurity has been identified as an issue for attachment bonds with close, intimate friends; negatively biased cognition when socializing; and subjectively

experiencing both being in a relationship and being alone as feeling more negative (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014, for a review). The loneliness dimension of social group integration is perhaps the least related to attachment, because it is more of a social anxiety issue, rather than separation anxiety (Cacioppo et al., 2015). However, this may also fit with a consideration of the exploratory and sociable behavioral systems within attachment theory (Cassidy & Berlin, 1999). Whipple et al. (2011), for example, showed that parental attachment anxiety uniquely predicts inhibition of their offspring's autonomous exploration of the environment, whereas parental attachment avoidance uniquely predicts parental insensitivity to distress. Further investigating loneliness from this perspective could help guide a more consistent use of measures that include all aspects of social loneliness.

Family loneliness has been understudied from an attachment perspective, but existing findings warrant further attention. For example, Bernardon et al. (2011) found that college students with a fearful avoidant attachment style were the only group (versus preoccupied and dismissing avoidant) that did not have significantly more family loneliness than the secure attachment group, although all insecure attachment groups had more romantic and social loneliness than secure participants. Higher perceived social support also was associated with less romantic loneliness for secure students, but less family loneliness for insecurely attached students – perhaps alluding to different levels of involvement with family members versus peers in college. Similarly, Bernardon et al. also found that use of instrumental coping was associated with less social loneliness for the securely attached students and less family loneliness for insecurely attached students. Finally, in a sample of boys with ADHD, Hurt et al. (2007) found that higher paternal warmth was associated with higher peer acceptance and higher paternal power assertion was associated with lower peer acceptance, but only for children with low family loneliness. Investigations of family loneliness at different ages from an attachment perspective can guide more consistent measurement and better explain findings.

Finally, attachment theory could advance research on the connections between types of loneliness, such as between romantic and family loneliness. For example, attachment anxiety and avoidance appear to affect caregiving behaviors both as romantic partners and as parents, in similar attachment system hyperactivating or deactivating ways, which promote dissatisfaction and loneliness via attachment anxiety, intrusive romantic caregiving, and inhibition of offspring's autonomous exploration (Guzmán-González et al., 2020; Whipple et al., 2011). For example, the association between intrusive romantic caregiving and a recipient's romantic loneliness could be compared to the effect of intrusive parental caregiving on a recipient's family loneliness, based on the underlying attachment issues they have in common.

Loneliness as a construct is both broad and complex; adding in associations between the loneliness of multiple family members (e.g., parent and offspring loneliness) adds further complexity. However, attachment theory is similarly broad and complex, and it is closely applicable to many aspects of loneliness (Cassidy & Berlin, 1999; Shaver & Hazan, 1987). Attachment theory could inspire research in the understudied areas of romantic and family loneliness. It also could organize existing findings about social loneliness by framing it as both a loneliness type and

something that has multiple dimensions influenced by attachment security. As such, attachment theory would be a valuable lens for loneliness researchers to employ.

## References

- Adamczyk, K., Trepanowski, R., Celejewska, A., Kosińska, J., Mamot, A., Palczewska, M., & Rodziejczak, K. (2021). The Polish adaptation and further validation of the Fear of Being Single Scale (FBSS). *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues*, 40(5), 2499–2509.
- Bernardon, S., Babb, K. A., Hakim-Larson, J., & Gragg, M. (2011). Loneliness, attachment, and the perception and use of social support in university students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences Du Comportement*, 43(1), 40–51.
- Cacioppo, S., Grippo, A. J., London, S., Goossens, L., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2015). Loneliness: Clinical import and interventions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 238–249.
- Cassidy, J., & Berlin, L. J. (1999). Understanding the origins of childhood loneliness: Contributions of attachment theory. In K. J. Rotenberg & S. Hymel (Eds.), *Loneliness in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 34–55). Cambridge University Press.
- DiTommaso, E., Brannen, C., & Best, L. A. (2004). Measurement and validity characteristics of the short version of the Social an Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 64(1), 99–119.
- Dussault, M., Fernet, C., Austin, S., & Leroux, M. (2009). Revisiting the factorial validity of the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: A test of competing models in a sample of teachers. *Psychological Reports*, 105(3, Pt 1), 849–856.
- Guzmán-González, M., Calderón, C., Murray, C., & Henríquez, D. (2020). Evidence for a bifactor structure of the Caregiving Questionnaire with individuals involved in different and same-sex couple relationships. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(24), 9306.
- Heinrich, L. M., & Gullone, E. (2006). The clinical significance of loneliness: A literature review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26(6), 695–718.
- Houghton, S., Hattie, J., Wood, L., Carroll, A., Martin, K., & Tan, C. (2014). Conceptualising loneliness in adolescents: Development and validation of a self-report instrument. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 45(5), 604–616.
- Hurt, E. A., Hoza, B., & Pelham, W. E., Jr. (2007). Parenting, family loneliness, and peer functioning in boys with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 35(4), 543–555.
- Lehmann, V., Tuinman, M. A., Braeken, J., Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M., Sanderman, R., & Hagedoorn, M. (2015). Satisfaction with relationship status: Development of a new scale and the role in predicting well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 16(1), 169–184.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2014). An attachment perspective on loneliness. In R. J. Coplan & J. C. Bowker (Eds.), *The handbook of solitude: Psychological perspectives on social isolation, social withdrawal, and being alone* (pp. 34–50). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Muise, A., Kim, J. J., Debrot, A., Impett, E. A., & MacDonald, G. (2020). Sexual nostalgia as a response to unmet sexual and relational needs: The role of attachment avoidance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 46(11), 1538–1552.
- Ribeiro, O., Santos, A. J., Freitas, M., Rosado, A., & Rubin, K. H. (2019). Loneliness in adolescence: Confirmatory factor analysis of the Relational Provisions Loneliness Questionnaire (RPLQ) in a Portuguese sample. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 43(5), 457–465.

- Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Cutrona, C. E. (1980). The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and discriminant validity evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(3), 472–480.
- Sakman, E., Urganci, B., & Sevi, B. (2021). Your cheating heart is just afraid of ending up alone: Fear of being single mediates the relationship between attachment anxiety and infidelity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 168.
- Schmidt, N., & Sermat, V. (1983). Measuring loneliness in different relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1038–1047.
- Sha'ked, A. (2015). Addressing loneliness in romantic relationships. In A. Sha'ked & A. Rokach (Eds.), *Addressing loneliness: Coping, prevention and clinical interventions* (pp. 135–154). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Shaver, P., & Hazan, C. (1987). Being lonely, falling in love: Perspectives from attachment theory. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 2(2, Pt 2), 105–124.
- Spielmann, S. S., MacDonald, G., Joel, S., & Impett, E. A. (2016). Longing for ex-partners out of fear of being single. *Journal of Personality*, 84(6), 799–808.
- Spielmann, S. S., MacDonald, G., Maxwell, J. A., Joel, S., Peragine, D., Muise, A., & Impett, E. A. (2013). Settling for less out of fear of being single. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105(6), 1049–1073.
- Spielmann, S. S., MacDonald, G., & Wilson, A. E. (2009). On the rebound: Focusing on someone new helps anxiously attached individuals let go of ex-partners. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(10), 1382–1394.
- Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. MIT Press.
- Whipple, N., Bernier, A., & Mageau, G. A. (2011). A dimensional approach to maternal attachment state of mind: Relations to maternal sensitivity and maternal autonomy support. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(2), 396–403.



# Promoting the General Welfare: Family Science and Family Policy



Anne F. Farrell and Melissa A. Kull

## Introduction

The United States Constitution has been the backbone of American democracy for more than 230 years. The framers, aiming to *promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity*, created a policymaking framework that has withstood certain challenge. Globally, family has served as a fundamental social unit over the generations, well before the founding of the United States. Whereas family is enshrined in the American public consciousness as *the* core social institution, not once does the word *family* appear in the Constitution or its 27 Amendments. The Constitution is concerned with individual rights and autonomy (Dolgin, 2002). It does not define family, is silent on its composition, and provides no guidance on its treatment as a legal or social entity. Until the mid-twentieth century, interpretations of the Constitution applied a Reconstructionist-era view that barred women and minorities from consideration in all facets of American life (Ginsburg, 1977). The Constitution makes no mention of children nor does it bestow what Elrod (2005) terms *positive rights*, government's obligation to address the basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), education, and health of citizens.

The form of the Constitution and the processes of lawmaking at federal, state, and local levels have implications with respect to family policymaking: it is inevitably piecemeal and tied to a range of influences, some overtly political. The dire circumstances of the Great Depression and the social change movements since the second half of the twentieth century created substantial changes in federal legislation and case law, with notable impact on families. As we write this, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act, 2020) is poised to impact on childcare, health, public assistance, housing, and other aspects of American family

---

A. F. Farrell (✉) · M. A. Kull  
Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA  
e-mail: [afarrell@chapinhall.org](mailto:afarrell@chapinhall.org); [mkull@chapinhall.org](mailto:mkull@chapinhall.org)

life. Has the field of family science progressed to a state where scholars can effectively contribute evidence to policymaking? How can family scientists study the effects of policies such that research evidence informs future legislative efforts? The answers lie in an understanding of the discipline within the current political context and the capacity of family science to bring forth capable scholars who produce evidence that accurately “describe(s) human behavior and social conditions, including their causes and consequences, and, when policies are implemented to change those behaviors and conditions, to assess the consequences” (Prewitt et al., 2012, p. 12).

## Defining Family Policy

Family science has as primary goals “the discovery, verification, and application of knowledge about the family” (National Council on Family Relations [NCFR] Task Force on the Development of the Family Science Discipline, 1988, p. 48). Family science is inherently translational (Hamon & Smith, 2017), meaning that family scholars design studies and apply research findings to inform programs and policies to improve well-being. If family science aims to improve the lives of children, youth, and families across the lifespan, how do we optimize our role in policies that govern family life and affect outcomes? Family policy is not a theory per se; yet, like many theories, its founding influences emerged across contemporary academic disciplines, with a few key actors playing vital roles in shaping its frameworks (Feldman, 1979; McDonald & Nye, 1979; Zimmerman, 1979). At the 1969 NCFR conference, a group of students and young professionals established a workgroup that evolved into the Family Policy Section. Yet, in defining family policy, we can point to no single event that triggered a paradigm shift, spawning new questions and novel forms of inquiry to address them.

Family policy is integrative. Bogenschneider et al. (2000) points out that family policy was conceived in the 1970s and came of age in the 1990s. As Grzywacz and Middlemess (2017) note, “even a casual review of departmental overviews or mission statements for [in family science] reveals a clear and cogent commitment to making a positive difference in human lives” (p. 547). Despite the relatively recent emergence of family science as a distinct discipline, social and political scientists have historically viewed the family as the nucleus of civilization, often casting it as the predominant unit for the intergenerational transmission of culture. Few would argue its central importance in our histories and futures; and yet, its form has changed significantly in recent decades. In relating trends on family, Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) described evolving views on family matters such as the roles of men and women; the nature, formation, and dissolution of intimate unions; and patterns and practices in childbearing and childrearing. They underscored the extent to which laws, rituals, and practices are influenced through social and religious norms. In 2015, the US Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2014), striking down state laws banning it; this culminating act reflected changing cultural norms and state trends toward relaxing religious and

social prohibitions. This decision redefined family in the United States. We discuss it below.

Today, it is difficult to imagine federal law that does not affect family; perhaps, all policy is family policy. Examining just one decade, Bogenschneider et al. (2000) identified 18 pieces of federal family policy, including laws addressing child support, family and medical leave, taxation, childcare, child welfare, education, domestic violence, debt collection, adoption, marriage, disability, and the social safety net, among others. Even as other types of legislation (e.g., civil rights, housing, tax, corporate laws) might be viewed apart from family, their enactment exerts effects on individual and family development across time. For instance, tax law relates to work, marriage, investment, homeownership, savings, and more and has differential effects on various subgroups (Bradley, 2018). The structure and processes of the US juvenile justice system are influenced by prevailing public views of human nature, development, and the meaning of childhood (Myers & Farrell, 2008). To varying extent, developmental theory and evidence have informed systems reforms, by virtue of informing policy and case law.

Policies have cross-sector effects. For instance, families who experience racial segregation in housing experience disparate outcomes in education (Hanselman & Fiel, 2017) and health (Forrester et al., 2018). A robust literature on the social drivers of well-being and opportunity shows that socioeconomic and environmental conditions explain 45–50% of health outcomes (Bonnie et al., 2019; Kuznetsova, 2012; McGinnis et al., 2002). Chronic adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are unevenly distributed across communities and subgroups; for example, they are disproportionately high in minority communities and exert powerful influence on development (Balistreri & Alvira-Hammond, 2016; Browman et al., 2019; McDonnell & Valentino, 2016).

Because of the interdisciplinary and translational perspectives of family science, its scholars are well positioned to conduct theoretically grounded, hypothesis-driven scholarship that accounts for multilevel effects and enables an understanding of the nested nature of children in families and other settings, such as schools and neighborhoods. Family science, social policy analysis, and evaluation of practice have advanced in recent decades, in part due to advances in statistics and computing (e.g., multilevel modeling, machine learning), as well as the thoughtful engagement of qualitative researchers and through participatory research (Bailey et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2017). Like calls for mixed and participatory research models (Stickl Haugen & Chouinard, 2019), contemporary policy analysts reject purely positivist approaches that purport to be value-neutral and assert the necessity for public participation (Li, 2019). Nonetheless, as we examine existing laws and programs, we observe a disconnect between family science and family policy. Scholars appear ambivalent and are seen as uninformed about opportunities to shape policy. This highlights the need for further explication of family theories that motivate rigorous research to inform policy. Policy expertise prepares the family scholar to conduct and interpret findings in actionable ways and implies commitment both to Elrod's positive rights (2005) and tenets of science.

As family scientists, we view family policy through ecological, systems, and life-course lenses. We recognize that policy emanates from multiple sources, including legislative initiatives, social activism, case law, community practices and innovations, research evidence, and extreme events (e.g., the pandemic) that shape the national discourse (Samuels, 2017). Despite decades of family research and policy-relevant scholarship, there is no consensus on how scholars should inform policies and how families (and family science) are considered in policy research. In this chapter, we explore these phenomena by (1) situating family policy within multidisciplinary family theory; (2) emphasizing the value of theoretically grounded research evidence for policymaking; (3) presenting examples from US policy; and (4) making recommendations to enhance research and dissemination to inform policies and programs, to the betterment of family well-being.

## Evidence-Based Policymaking

We live in an era of accountability. Policymakers and public systems leaders may be required to consider the evidentiary support for interventions before allowing reimbursement or funding (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act; Family First Prevention Services Act [FFPSA]). Wulczyn et al. (2015) define research evidence as obtained with a specific purpose and in line with social science methodologies. Thus, research evidence emerges through systematic investigation of a topic using a broad range of methods or analyses designed to develop generalizable knowledge (Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 2018; DuMont, 2016).

We consider implementation and evaluation research as critical to the production of evidence and note that they, too, occur in economic, historical, and political context. Whereas randomized designs are the “gold standard” by which scientists evaluate impact, effect sizes do not inform policymakers on whether and how interventions can be replicated in new contexts or whether prior outcomes are reproducible. They inform understanding of average effects and do not always have the power to reveal differing effects on subgroups, let alone why those effects occur or how to adjust for them. Likewise, situational properties can drive effectiveness or threaten scaling (List et al., 2019; Saldana et al., 2020). Even as it may not constitute formal theory, a theory of change reflects causal assumptions underpinning a program design. When implementation is effective, evaluation is a test of theoretical ideas about how interventions work (Moore et al., 2015). Measuring variation across culture, geography, community, and other factors enables evaluators to adapt programs, supporting sustainability by adjusting practices that might undermine intervention fidelity (Saldana et al., 2020).

In response to the growing consensus that evidence is indispensable in the policymaking process, President Obama signed into law a bill to establish the Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking (H.R. 1831, 2016). The goals for this commission included (1) making federal data more accessible and useful for analysis and research; (2) moving beyond legal and logistical barriers to link

datasets; (3) examining opportunities to build infrastructure to support a data-clearing house; (4) promoting rigorous research designs and relevant outcome measures; and (5) protecting privacy and security of individual data. To support this initiative, a group of think tanks formed the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative (The Brookings Institution, 2016). The Collaborative developed toolkits and drafted policy briefs to promote the use of actionable evidence in policymaking.

Public policy is influenced by myriad factors, including public opinion, economic conditions, new scientific discoveries, technological change, lobbying, advocacy, interest groups, and (sometimes) science. Scholars communicate a clear desire for policymakers to consider research evidence in the process of crafting law and designing programs intended to benefit families. Yet, the theoretical frameworks that undergird family science research are often omitted from conversations about the nature of actionable research evidence. This raises important questions: To what extent do theories reflect our fundamental orientation to families and family life? Is theory embedded fundamentally in research that affects policy and practice? Do we need to be more explicit about how values and findings might be understood, considering the frameworks that motivate research? How do the values of science interact with personal ones to shape the content and form of our inquiry, and how we communicate findings? Policy questions force us to examine our own theories about the nature of problems and the ways to address them. The questions we ask (and don't) reflect our orientations, values, and biases.

Despite the expansion of evidence-based policymaking, barriers remain. Bogenschneider et al. (2000) posed four reasons why policymakers encounter challenges incorporating research evidence into their policymaking. The first refers to the inherently political process of policymaking. Lawmakers bring their own value orientations and the desires of their constituents to policymaking and may adhere even when they conflict with research evidence (a phenomenon is not restricted to policymakers). The second reason reflects the idea that social science knowledge is limited, and complex social problems such as poverty cannot be easily solved using insights gleaned from research. The third reason is that there is a lack of clarity regarding government's role in leveraging systems to alleviate social problems. Fourth, there is a communication gap between researchers and policymakers who do not share common goals, expectations, or language for discussion (the "two community" problem). As a result, researchers may not communicate their findings to policymakers in accessible ways and researchers may find that taking the time to communicate this information is not rewarded professionally.

Likewise, there are epistemological differences. Researchers may find themselves arguing data to individuals who might be more convinced by anecdote. On the "supply side" are researchers who fail to focus on or articulate policy-relevant questions and findings and on the "demand side" are decision makers who face enormous time pressures and do not take time to consider how research evidence can inform policy solutions. Both sides may view each other as driven by ideology and personal gain.

Other challenges exist. We live in an increasingly diverse world. Chouinard and Cram (2019) pointed out that evidence-based accountability movement draws

largely on methods and literatures that are positivist, impartial, and objective; yet, these methods rarely enable rich, nuanced examination of context, or engage communities as research partners. Integrative research methods can advance the understanding of how sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and contextual factors interact with *race, class, gender, age, and other “isms”* (Henderson et al., 2017, p. 629). Beyond the application of mixed methods and participatory research models, informing policy requires effective and efficient synthesis of research. A structured evidence review that examines the impact of complex situations and interventions on various demographic subgroups requires a large, well-developed empirical base. Unfortunately, quantitative methods can omit important nuance that informs the application of research to the betterment of diverse American families and lawmakers are often drawn to narratives over numbers.

Three approaches to bridging the “two community problem” include translational research, brokering, and interaction (National Research Council, 2012). Translation involves making the results of research accessible to lay audiences and applicable in practice. One example of translation is the development of evidence-based registries, such as the Title IV-E Clearinghouse, which contains evidence-based programs for approved use under FFPSA. In brokering, the conversations between scholars and policymakers are mediated by a third entity. Brokers synthesize, summarize, translate, and disseminate research findings in accessible terms. Brokers include communications staff at academic institutions. Brokering is seen as central role in intermediary organizations such as think tanks. Direct communication between researchers and decision makers requires of scholars a translational skill set, policy vernacular, and a capacity to engage effectively with policymakers.

## Connecting Family Policies to Theory and Evidence

Families are often implicated either directly or indirectly in federal policy. Here, we return to policy (re)definitions of family and provide four examples of federal policies and practices that relate to family research: gay marriage, disability policy, housing, and family separations at the US border. These are but a small set of examples; we draw these as illustrations from an enormous pool that affects family life. Interestingly, each illustrates how policy can be informed by science and may also defy scientific evidence.

**Marriage policy** In 1996, President Clinton signed H.R. 3396, called the *Defense of Marriage Act* (DOMA; H.R. 3396, 1996). DOMA permitted states to choose not to recognize the marriages of legally wed (in other jurisdictions) same-sex couples and to prevent gay and lesbian couples from receiving federal benefits that different-sex couples were entitled to, such as social security survivor’s benefits and joint tax return filing, among others. Though this law never uses the word “family,” its intention to define marriage, relationships, and families was clear.

In the wake of DOMA, family scholars explored the legal and intrafamilial dynamics of same-sex couples. Legal scholars highlighted the complex dilemmas of same-sex couples, who became ineligible for over 1000 government tangible benefits, as well as a host of intangibles, such as social acceptance (Oswald & Kuvalanka, 2008). How marriage (and by default, family) is defined has undeniable implications for children; this question is particularly pressing for the more than two million children who were estimated to have a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parent and for around 200,000 children being raised by same-sex couples (Gates, 2015). A recent study found that about 60% of cohabiting same-sex couples are married (Inc, 2017), and the relationship and marriage dynamics for same-sex couples are very similar to different-sex couples in that same-sex couples break up and divorce at comparable rates (Gates, 2015). In the succeeding era of greater acceptance (and legal endorsement), more people are coming out in their youth and locating same-sex partners with whom to raise a family. When the US Supreme Court struck down DOMA, family policy became better aligned with the evidence: a large body of scholarship found that married couples have on average more stability and less conflict than other family structures and there is “no compelling evidence that being raised by same-sex parents is harmful to children” (Patterson & Goldberg, 2016). Safety and stability are the building blocks of optimal human development.

Professional organizations speak publicly to political issues as values-based statements, evidence-based statements, or both. Optimally, family scientists strive for the latter, acknowledge when the evidence base is incomplete (and how), and bound their statements accordingly. At the same time, a field that declares itself as oriented around family well-being may be called on to inform decisions when the evidence is incomplete. Policymakers have little patience for “more research is needed” statements, so how does a family scholar walk the line?

**Disability policy** American disability policy and practice were shaped substantially by the efforts of advocates (including family) and self-advocates who proposed both values and a civil rights orientations to, among other laws, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and its subsequent reauthorizations. IDEA was the successor to *Brown v. the Board of Education* because it draws from the same fundamental notion that separate is unequal. The IDEA mandated the presence of families at planning meetings for their young children with disabilities and further required evaluators and interventionists to engage a “family-centered” orientation (i.e., strength-oriented partnerships, natural settings, functional orientation). Federal policy was adopted in part due to empirical evidence that early intervention “works” (basic research) and very much by an ecological systems orientation that acknowledges the family as a young child’s single most important influence (Guralnick, 2011).

The idea of family partnership in service decision-making was a new one that pushed the practice community past its experiential base as “expert” (Dunst et al., 1991; LeMay et al., 2019). It further forced the research community to interrogate empirically what it means to be “family centered” and how one learns, adopts, and

maintains that stance to positively engage families, to the putative benefit of children (Bruder, 2000; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Edwards et al., 2018; Farrell, 2009). Rather than being driven by a body of evidence demonstrating that it produced superior outcomes, family centeredness as a mandated practice emerged from a values base and advocacy movement that recognized the ecology of child development. We do not always have the luxury of waiting for evidence to inform policies, programs, and interventions. There are times when policy is “ahead” of science, and in those cases, family theory can be supportive logic in the discourse.

**Housing policy and practice** In the case of housing as a platform for families in the child welfare system, an array of pathways brought new family support practices into policy (Samuels, 2017). Local and state projects came to the attention of federal agencies who then sponsored a demonstration of housing assistance as an intervention for families in the child welfare system. Ultimately, a federal demonstration funded five sites to conduct randomized trials. Despite operating with shared components (e.g., housing vouchers and services), and similar inclusion/targeting criteria, the five sites met with varying success (Cunningham et al., 2015). Some produced superior outcomes to child welfare “business as usual” at lower cost. The diverse effects highlight the reality that the jurisdictional history, state policy, implementation context, and other contextual factors influence outcomes.

As we write this, the *CARES Act* and the *American Rescue Plan Act* enable new interventions to shore up communities deeply affected by the 2020–2021 pandemic. One option urged by federal government is cash transfers to young adults experiencing adversity, including youth with experience in the child welfare system, housing instability, and homelessness. Despite a robust international evidence base, US policymakers are reluctant to use cash transfers or basic income approaches. Yet, confronting the expiration of evictions moratoria, a new press for nonpaternalistic interventions, and the need for decisive action (and spending), jurisdictions are scrambling to design and deploy these approaches. Without evaluation of implementation and outcomes, it becomes easy for proponents to claim success and detractors to pronounce failure.

Perhaps both examples remind us that we should not treat single trials as fully determinative of an intervention’s potential. Evaluation research is critical, even as advocating for it may seem self-serving on the part of researchers. The argument for evaluation can be made from a scientific standpoint but perhaps is articulated as supporting the effective use of public resources. Without evaluation, we cannot state with confidence what works and what does not work and for whom a particular intervention is effective (or not). Research evidence can directly inform policymaking, particularly when cost studies are embedded into research.

**Family separation policy** What happens when policies appear inconsistent with family theories or evidence? A recent example is the US policy of family separation at the southern border. The timeline on the family separation policy began with a pilot program in El Paso, TX (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020). In 2018, the Department of Justice (DOJ) implemented a zero tolerance policy, specifying that



any migrants who crossed the border without permission, including asylum seekers, would be criminally prosecuted. Under this policy, children were transferred from DOJ custody to the Department of Health and Human Services, where they were either placed in Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters or placed in state custody through the child welfare system (foster care). By 2019, the US government detained over 70,000 migrant children (Sherman et al., 2019). In March 2021, immigration authorities encountered nearly 150,000 unaccompanied minors near the US–Mexico border (National Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). This crisis sits at the nexus of immigration policy, foreign relations, and human rights, but it is not often framed as a family policy issue, even as the debate draws from developmental and family science.

In this case, policy aligned with family theory and science would have emphasized the importance of migrant families remaining together during legal proceedings. Family systems theory acknowledges that families are an emotional unit and separation causes distress. Parental support during stress and uncertainty is critical to mitigating the impact of stress and building resilience; separation from a trusted adult during a significant transition (e.g., migration) may induce what is referred to as toxic stress – extreme, chronic, or extended activation of the stress response, without the buffering presence of a supportive adult (Shonkoff et al., 2012). A policy permitting migrant families to remain together through the adjudication process would be better aligned with family theories and with ample interdisciplinary evidence on the effects of stress on the developing brain.

## Recommendations for Researchers

The Family Policy (FP) Section of NCFR devotes itself to promoting effective social action for individuals and families by monitoring pressing policy issues, evaluating the potential impacts of new policies, working for effective change, and creating strategies to educate and raise awareness resulting in improved quality of life for individuals, families, and society. We hope we have provided a sufficiently diverse sample as to be instructive on how research can both impact policy and how policy can stimulate research. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elucidate the myriad ways that theory and research from family science and related fields can inform family policy.

Family scientists are well positioned to influence family policy when armed with rigorous, theoretically grounded research that can be translated into action by scholars who relay a coherent narrative, one that embeds theory (or theory of change) with an accessible “story” of the research. Even as scholars may be preoccupied with “discovery” over application (Brownson et al., 2013), policymakers are accountable to constituents who care *only* about applications that change their life circumstances for the better. As such, we assert that scholars concerned with family well-being might feel compelled to consider multiple forms of dissemination and

engagement with policymakers as critical ways to affect population outcomes. Below, we provide some specific recommendations for family science researchers. These recommendations are drawn from the academic and grey literature and from our personal experience as translational researchers working at the intersections of research, policy, and system change in the areas of child welfare, youth homelessness, and community capacity.

1. *Embed translational competency development in family science education and training.* Addressing the training of family scientists, Sabatelli (2017) asserted that the family science “brand” should be organized around making translational expertise a core training goal and ensuring that students obtain direct socialization on messaging. He recommended that training be framed around two themes: a) coursework that balances the production of scholarship with a focus on the translation to policy and practice, and b) “learning laboratories” with related health and social service programs, with the explicit goal of advancing collaborative practice and promoting interdisciplinary, translational scholarship with impact.

As a discipline, family science recently experienced something of an identity crisis, prompting some scholars to entreat family science leaders “to be able to articulate its distinctiveness as a discipline” (Hamon & Smith, 2014, p. 309). As family science “laments the underappreciation of the broader scientific community and policymakers” (Grzywacz & Middlemess, 2017, p. 547), family policy remains a critical avenue to raise the profile of family science. Family science training that aspires to produce policy relevant scholarship or even the translation and application of scholarship to practice (e.g., clinical training programs) requires coursework in policy review and analysis and the corresponding sets of competencies that this affords. In recognition of this need, several professional and scientific organizations have begun offering policy training for researchers (Scott et al., 2019).

2. *Become translational communicators who craft work beyond academic papers.* Bogenschneider et al. (2000) successfully engaged stakeholders around topics of interest to both family scholars and policymakers through Family Impact Seminars (FIS; Bogenschneider et al., 2000; Ooms, 1990), a series of lectures that researchers hosted to highlight the role of the research in policy-relevant social issues. Evaluation of FIS revealed that the characteristics of these seminars that facilitated involvement from policy staffers included hosting the seminars near government offices, scheduling the seminars early in the morning, providing breakfast, and distributing a short briefing report. Policy staffers who participated found them to be useful and insightful. Letiecq and Anderson (2017) described numerous approaches for translating family science to policy and counted among them FIS, participatory action research, and deliberative policy analysis.

Using an innovative randomized design, the Research to Policy Collaborative (RPC) at Penn State tested the effects of various levels of scholar support and policymaker interaction (Crowley et al., 2021). The RPC prepared scholars to

interact directly with Congressional staff, supporting the translation and sharing of research evidence around specific legislative priorities. Congressional offices who met with scholars were 23% more likely to introduce bills that cited research evidence. The RPC improved policymaker perceptions of the usefulness and value of scientific evidence. Participating offices were more likely to agree that research use promotes “understanding how to think about issues” and that scientific evidence “should be used as a basis for making policy decisions.”

FIS, RPC, and similar efforts are valuable ways to engage legislative staff, and other mechanisms can also help to develop connections between researchers and policymakers. Nonacademic avenues for dissemination, such as research briefs, highly accessible overviews of study findings, and white papers, facilitate the translation and adoption of research evidence. Ensuring that written products are understandable to nonresearch audiences can be challenging for researchers, but accessible communications are more likely to influence policymaking. Brownson et al. (2013) highlighted a set of system changes and processes that can help researchers translate evidence: shift resources toward dissemination; develop tools to measure dissemination effectiveness; involve stakeholders as cointerpreters, advisors, and collaborators; and develop models for dissemination activities.

3. *Distinguish advocacy, lobbying, and education.* A recent NCFR report (Crosswhite, 2015) distinguished advocacy from lobbying. It advised that among 501(c)(3) tax exempt nonprofit organizations, advocacy cannot be a “substantial part of its activities.” Sharing research results and applying them by way of rigorous policy analysis is neither advocacy nor lobbying if it does not embed a rigid preference for a specific policy option. Letiecq and Anderson (2017) discussed that the reality that scholarship and public engagement are subject to bias and exhort researchers to engage with reflexivity and reflection, recognizing that the even positivist research approaches leave room for bias.

Cairney and Oliver (2018) discussed the “continuous anxiety” among researchers looking to achieve policy impact. They and Samuels (2017) observed that the policy advice offered by scholars is often too general and not nested in an understanding of policy and policymaking. This is akin to conducting research that does not account for the current state of the literature and fails to account for theory in design. The result may be a vague (and safe) set of “shoulds” in the form of recommendations. Samuels cited 11 pieces of federal legislation implicated in the story of housing as a platform for intervention for families in the child welfare system. If family science is to have impact, then it behooves scholars to invest in policy review and analysis and to discuss the consequences of policy change. This approach informs policy and does not cross into advocacy. Lacking the time to stay fully apprised of legislative developments, family scientists can partner with brokers who can serve as dual informants for scholars and policymakers.

4. *Acknowledge that political ideologies impact how lawmakers consider families and policymaking that affects families.* Again, a barrier to evidence-based policy is the political nature of the policymaking process (Bogenschneider et al., 2000).

The common approach to drafting and passing laws often means that political stances and constituent values drive this process, sometimes reducing the role of science and evidence. When engaging lawmakers, researchers need to consider how lawmakers view the role of the family in policies their offices have drafted and supported. It may be possible to connect with lawmakers by appealing to the shared interest and care for family issues. Lawmakers balance multiple priorities, including fiscal considerations, so it may be useful to frame research, evaluation, and cost analyses as investments that ensure the efficient and effective deployment of public resources. One example of research embedded in policy that can be used as a basis for future programs is the Families First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), which provides funding for evidence-based interventions for families in the child welfare system.

5. *Confront the historical legacies of policy effects on marginalized communities that can inform theoretical frameworks and can provide a lens for understanding the heterogeneous effects of future policies across subgroups.* We are writing this chapter at a time when the national political discourse is highly conflicted and represents polarized views of many facets of American life that relate fundamentally to family policy. We cited examples of policies that were (and are) deleterious to various marginalized groups, including individuals living in poverty who are disproportionately from linguistic, racial, and ethnic minority groups. The term *intersectionality* has come to refer not only to the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, and gender but also to the extent to which they can create overlapping, interactive, and additive systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Oxford Languages, n.d.). Intersectionality refers as well to research design and analytic approaches tool that feminist and antiracist scholars use to interrogate concepts of identity and oppression (Nash, 2008; See also Few-Demo, Hunter, and Muruthi's chapter). From a research standpoint, it necessitates understanding effects of discrimination and privilege, as well as human rights violations that occur in response to an individual's identities (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). Letiecq and Anderson (2017) noted that methods that amplify the voices of previously excluded and ignored groups are an important function of family science, and they warn against dismissing lived experience as a source of data.

Policy research can operate from an intersectional perspective without being political. That is, there is ample evidence that subgroups of the population experience disparate outcomes. These disproportionalities have fiscal implications (i.e., wage, health, education, social safety net) and human costs in the form of exposure and response to trauma, among others. Research designs and approaches to analysis that consider the effects of policies on particular subgroups are not only a given in translational science, but they also illuminate critical social and policy processes whose identification may spawn positive changes.

Trauma-informed care is a useful example of social policymaking that integrates an equity perspective (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). They noted that the prevalence of trauma is unequally distributed in the population due to structural inequalities. Consequently, individuals living in poverty, particularly in low-

income communities with high concentrations of people of color, experience high rates of trauma, both historical and current. An understanding of structural inequity can result in more attuned research and it needs to lead as well to larger, integrative policy discussions. We know much about the extent of disparities but much less about how to effectively deconstruct the social and family policies and practices that drive them.

6. *Ground research in theory and translate findings into policy-relevant logic.* As we have underscored throughout this chapter, theories help family scholars organize and make sense of how families function. By anchoring research studies in theory, researchers contribute to a coherent body of science and learn to anticipate certain outcomes. Presenting findings to policymakers embedded in a theoretical framework and bolstered by evidence can inform the significance and potential impact of a proposed policy or program. Policymakers benefit from understanding how theory-driven research can align with policy mechanisms in legislation.
7. *Account for the policy context in which research is conducted.* Family science examines the characteristics and inner workings of families and acknowledges and examines the broader ecologies in which families are situated. In doing so, it is critical that family scholarship stays connected to policy contexts and definitions that inform both research and practice. Studies drawing on complex survey data can reveal important differences in policy impacts across geographic regions. The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study data (FFCWS) has been leveraged to address questions such as differences in child care quality across cities (Rigby et al., 2007). The FFCWS is a longitudinal sample of fairly low-income families across 10 large US metropolitan areas selected in part due to policy characteristics (Reichman et al., 2001). As of 2021, the FFCWS datasets have supported more than 10 collaborative studies and resulted in nearly 1000 published studies (FFCWS, 2021). Another example is the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Study, which assesses family spending patterns across all 50 states annually and has linked welfare reform to changes in family spending patterns (Kaushal et al., 2007). Studies drawing on complex survey data underscore the importance of appropriate statistical model specifications; when a study does not focus on specific policy differences, it is still critical to recognize and account for those differences by statistically controlling for the variation in the outcome of interest attributable to policy.

## Conclusion

Family policy captures a broad range of policies focused on child and family well-being. As a discipline, family science has long sought to illuminate the connections between family members and the social factors that influence their individual and collective agency and well-being. Of these social factors, family policy is a significant contributor to family functioning. Family scholars draw from a range of

theoretical models to organize their thinking about how policies impact families. In this chapter, we highlighted three widely adopted frameworks in family science and explicated the bidirectional relationships among theory, evidence, and policy.

It is challenging for researchers and advocates alike to embed family scholarship into policymaking. One barrier that has received little attention is the absence of theory in researcher's communications about their findings to policymakers. By presenting scholarship in ways that are inaccessible and sometimes lack both a theoretical framework and a translational orientation, findings are harder to digest and more complicated to incorporate into policies and programs. This chapter acknowledges these challenges, as well as others, at the intersection of theory, research, and policymaking; we offer seven strategies to improve the relevance of family science training and impact. We elevate the importance of evaluation research in informing policy. We suggest pathways around identified challenges and envision researchers working both directly with policymakers and indirectly through brokers to develop policies that are aligned with science and reflect theories and frameworks for understanding how policies impact families.

## References

- Bailey, J., Steeves, V., Burkell, J., Shade, L. R., Ruparelia, R., & Regan, P. (2019). Getting at equality: Research methods informed by the lessons of intersectionality. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18*, 1–13.
- Balistreri, K. S., & Alvira-Hammond, M. (2016). Adverse childhood experiences, family functioning and adolescent health and emotional well-being. *Public Health, 132*, 72–78.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 22*(3), 309–328.
- Bogensneider, K., Olson, J. R., Linney, K. D., & Mills, J. (2000). Connecting research and policymaking: Implications for theory and practice from the family impact seminars. *Family Relations, 49*(3), 327–339.
- Bonnie, R. J., Backes, E. P., Alegria, M., Diaz, A., & Brindis, C. D. (2019). Fulfilling the promise of adolescence: Realizing opportunity for all youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 65*(4), 440–442.
- Bowen, E. A., & Murshid, N. S. (2016). Trauma-informed social policy: A conceptual framework for policy analysis and advocacy. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(2), 223–229.
- Bradley, S. L. (2018). Tax and inequality in the United States. *Sociology Compass, 12*(2), e12559.
- Browman, A. S., Destin, M., Kearney, M. S., & Levine, P. B. (2019). How economic inequality shapes mobility expectations and behaviour in disadvantaged youth. *Nature Human Behaviour, 3*(3), 214–220.
- Brownson, R. C., Jacobs, J. A., Tabak, R. G., Hoehner, C. M., & Stamatakis, K. A. (2013). Designing for dissemination among public health researchers: Findings from a national survey in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(9), 1693–1699.
- Bruder, M. B. (2000). Family-centered early intervention: Clarifying our values for the new millennium. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 20*(2), 105–115.
- Cairney, P., & Oliver, K. (2018). How should academics engage in policymaking to achieve impact? *Political Studies Review*.
- Chouinard, J. A., & Cram, F. (2019). *Culturally responsive approaches to evaluation: Empirical implications for theory and practice*. Sage Publications.
- Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, 15 U.S.C. § 90001 (2020).

- Crosswhite, J. (2015, March). Family science report: *Policy advocacy or policy education—How to impact family policy*. Retrieved from
- Crowley, D. M., Scott, J. T., Long, E. C., Green, L., Israel, A., Supplee, L., Jordan, E., Oliver, K., Guillot-Wright, S., Gay, B., Storage, R., Torres-Mackie, N., Murphy, Y., Donnay, S., Reardanz, J., Smith, R., McGuire, K., Baker, E., Antonopoulos, A., ... Giray, C. (2021). Lawmakers' use of scientific evidence can be improved. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *118*(9), e2012955118.
- Cunningham, M., Pergamit, M., Baum, A., & Luna, J. (2015). *Helping families involved in the child welfare system achieve housing stability*. The Urban Institute.
- Dempsey, I., & Keen, D. (2008). A review of processes and outcomes in family-centered services for children with a disability. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, *28*(1), 42–53.
- Dolgin, J. L. (2002). Constitution as family arbiter: A moral in the mess. *The Columbia Law Review*, *102*, 337–407.
- DuMont, K. (2016, December). *Studying ways to improve the use of research evidence: Presenting a strong rationale in your application*. Retrieved from
- Dunst, C. J., Johanson, C., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. (1991). Family-oriented early intervention policies and practices: Family-centered or not? *Exceptional Children*, *58*(2), 115–126.
- Edwards, A. G., Brebner, C. M., McCormack, P. F., & MacDougall, C. J. (2018). From 'parent' to 'expert': How parents of children with autism spectrum disorder make decisions about which intervention approaches to access. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *48*(6), 2122–2138.
- Elrod, L. D. (2005). Family law and human rights: The United States perspective. *International Law Forum*, *7*, 167–177.
- Farrell, A. F. (2009). Validating family-centeredness in early intervention evaluation reports. *Infants and Young Children*, *22*(4), 238–252.
- Feldman, H. (1979). Why we need a family policy. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *41*(3), 453–455.
- FFCWS. (2021). *Fragile Families Publication Search*. Retrieved on May 1, 2021
- Forrester, S. N., Gallo, J. J., Whitfield, K. E., & Thorpe, R. J. (2018). A framework of minority stress: From physiological manifestations to cognitive outcomes. *The Gerontologist*, *59*(6), 1017–1023.
- Gates, G. J. (2015). Marriage and family: LGBT individuals and same-sex couples. *The Future of Children*, *25*(2), 67–87.
- Ginsburg, R. B. (1977). Sex equality and the constitution. *Tulsa Law Review*, *52*, 451.
- Grzywacz, J. G., & Middlemess, W. (2017). Looking backward, around, and forward: Family science has always been translational science. *Family Relations*, *66*(4), 547–549.
- Guralnick, M. J. (2011). Why early intervention works: A systems perspective. *Infants and Young Children*, *24*(1), 6–28.
- H.R. 1831, U.S. House of Representatives (U.S., 2016). Retrieved from
- H.R. 3396, U.S. House of Representatives (U.S., 1996). *Defense of marriage act*. Retrieved from
- Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. R. (2014). The discipline of family science and the continuing need for innovation. *Family Relations*, *63*(3), 309–322.
- Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. R. (2017). Family science as translational science: A history of the discipline. *Family Relations*, *66*(4), 550–567.
- Hanselman, P., & Fiel, J. E. (2017). School opportunity hoarding? Racial segregation and access to high growth schools. *Social Forces*, *95*(3), 1077–1104.
- Henderson, T. L., Shigeto, A., Ponzetti, J. J., Jr., Edwards, A. B., Stanley, J., & Story, C. (2017). A cultural-variant approach to community-based participatory research: New ideas for family professionals. *Family Relations*, *66*(4), 629–643.
- Inc, G. (2017, June 22). In U.S., 10.2% of LGBT adults now married to same-sex spouse. Retrieved from
- Kaushal, N., Gao, Q., & Waldfogel, J. (2007). Welfare reform and family expenditures: How are single mothers adapting to the new welfare and work regime? *Social Service Review*, *81*(3), 369–396.

- Kuznetsova, D. (2012). *Healthy places: Councils leading on public health*. New Local Government Network.
- LeMay, M. S., Rieske, R. D., & Johnston, S. (2019). Interdisciplinary teams and autism spectrum disorder. In *Handbook of interdisciplinary treatments for autism Spectrum disorder* (pp. 1–8). Springer.
- Leticq, B. L., & Anderson, E. A. (2017). From education to advocacy and activism: Alternative approaches for translating family science to policy. *Family Relations*, 66(4), 729–740.
- Li, Y. (2019). Deliberative policy analysis: Towards a methodological orientation. *Policy Studies*, 40(5), 437–455.
- List, J. A., Suskind, D., & Al-Ubaydli, O. (2019). *The science of using science: Towards an understanding of the threats to scaling experiments*. Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper (2019-73). University of Chicago.
- McDonald, G. W., & Nye, F. I. (1979). Editors' concluding comments. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41(3), 663–664. Volume 41 number 3.
- McDonnell, C. G., & Valentino, K. (2016). Intergenerational effects of childhood trauma: Evaluating pathways among maternal ACEs, perinatal depressive symptoms, and infant outcomes. *Child Maltreatment*, 21(4), 317–326.
- McGinnis, J. M., Williams-Russo, P., & Knickman, J. R. (2002). The case for more active policy attention to health promotion. *Health Affairs*, 21(2), 78–93.
- Moore, G. F., Audrey, S., Barker, M., Bond, L., Bonell, C., Hardeman, W., ... Baird, J. (2015). Process evaluation of complex interventions: Medical Research Council guidance. *British Medical Journal*, 350, h1258.
- Myers, D. M., & Farrell, A. F. (2008). Reclaiming lost opportunities: Applying public health models in juvenile justice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1159–1177.
- Nash, J. C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, 89(1), 1–15.
- National Council on Family Relations Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline. (1988). What is family science? *Family Science Review*, 1(2), 87–101.
- National Council on Foreign Relations. (2021, December). *U.S. detention of child migrants*. Accessed from.
- National Research Council. (2012). *Using science as evidence in public policy*. The National Academies Press.
- Obergefell v. Hodges, October 2014. Retrieved from
- Ooms, T. (1990). Families and government: Implementing a family perspective in public policy. *Social Thought*, 16(2), 61–78.
- Oswald, R. F., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2008). Same-sex couples: Legal complexities. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(8), 1051–1066.
- Oxford Languages. (n.d.). Intersectionality. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Patterson, C. J., & Goldberg, A. E. (2016). Lesbian and gay parents and children. National Council on Family Relations Policy Brief (Volume 1, Issue 1). Accessed from
- Prewitt, K., Schwandt, T., & Straff, M. (2012). *Using science as evidence in public policy*. National Academies Press.
- Protection of Human Subjects in Research. 45 C.F.R. § 46.102 (2018).
- Reichman, N. E., Teitler, J. O., Garfinkel, I., & McLanahan, S. S. (2001). Fragile Families: Sample and design. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23(4–5), 303–326.
- Rigby, E., Ryan, R. M., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2007). Child care quality in different state policy contexts. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 26(4), 887–908.
- Sabatelli, R. M. (2017). Training translational scholars within family science programs. *Family Relations*, 66(4), 766–772.
- Saldana, L., Bennett, I., Powers, D., Vredevoogd, M., Grover, T., Schaper, H., & Campbell, M. (2020). Scaling implementation of collaborative care for depression: Adaptation of the stages of implementation completion (SIC). *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 47(2), 188–196.
- Samuels, B. (2017). Pathways to housing policy: Translating research to policy to achieve impact on well-being. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60(1–2), 9–16.



- Scott, J. T., Larson, J. C., Buckingham, S. L., Maton, K. I., & Crowley, D. M. (2019). Bridging the research–policy divide: Pathways to engagement and skill development. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 89(4), 434.
- Sherman, C., Mendoza, M., & Burke, G. (2019, November). *The U.S. held a record number of migrant children in custody in 2019*. Associated Press.
- Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M. I., Earls, M. F., McGuinn, L., Pascoe, J., & Wood, D. L. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232–e246.
- Southern Poverty Law Center (2020, June). *Family separation under the Trump administration – a timeline*. Retrieved from
- Stickl Haugen, J., & Chouinard, J. A. (2019). Transparent, translucent, opaque: Exploring the dimensions of power in culturally responsive evaluation contexts. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 40(3), 376–394.
- The Brookings Institution. (2016, September 13). *Evidence-based policymaking collaborative*. Retrieved from
- Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(4), 1009–1037.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.) *About IDEA*. Retrieved from
- Wulczyn, F., Alpert, L., Monahan-Price, K., Huhr, S., Palinkas, L. A., & Pineseault, L. (2015). Research evidence use in the child welfare system. *Child Welfare*, 94(2), 141–165.
- Zimmerman, S. L. (1979). Policy, social policy, and family policy: Concepts, concerns, and analytic tools. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41(3), 487–495.

# Application: Mass Incarceration and Families



Joyce A. Arditti

Over the past 20 years, a burgeoning transdisciplinary literature has developed examining the implications of mass incarceration for families and children. This literature was slow to advance and has moved from being a “fringe area of research within the social sciences” (Wildeman et al., 2018, p. 4) to a body of evidence of central concern to criminologists, psychologists, demographers, sociologists, and family scientists. This shift from “fringe” to center is largely due to the extremity of incarceration rates in the United States and the large swaths of the population that are currently involved in the criminal justice system. The United States locks up more people than any other nation with upward of 2.3 million people confined in state and federal prisons, local jails, and other forms of detention (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017). Whereas incarceration used to be reserved for the most serious and violent offenders, today’s prisoner is likely to be poor, undereducated, nonviolent, a person of color, and a parent (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

Mass incarceration, and parental incarceration in particular, is a lever to perpetuate not only social and economic inequality, but family inequality – that is the ability freely and optimally “do family.” Clearly, this is the case for an incarcerated parent who is severely constrained from making any investments in and contributions to their families during carceral confinement. But these constraints extend beyond incarcerated persons to their family members. The Family Inequality Framework (FIF; Arditti, 2018) is an empirically derived theoretical model that summarizes how family and child inequality can stem from parental incarceration. The FIF specifies material hardship, family instability, and parenting challenges as primary pathways of family inequality and disparities in children’s developmental trajectories. I briefly

---

J. A. Arditti (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

e-mail: [arditti@vt.edu](mailto:arditti@vt.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_43](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_43)

597

touch on these pathways of inequality to pinpoint key areas of policy concern and make the case for a policy agenda aimed at social and family justice.

## Pathways of Family Inequality

**Material hardship** Family inequality is clearly evident in terms of how imprisonment intensifies material hardship for any children associated with the incarcerated (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014), hampers status attainment and social mobility (Shaw, 2016), and connects with intergenerational cycles of criminal justice involvement (Foster & Hagan, 2015). Mechanisms of risk include social exclusion as well the real costs of incarceration. The imprisonment of a parent prohibits any direct economic contributions from incarcerated parents to their children. Despite histories of poverty and underemployment, more than half of incarcerated parents reported that they were the primary source of financial support for children they coresided with prior to confinement (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Family members often take responsibility for legal fees, fines, and other debt incurred by the incarcerated parent, as well as expenses associated with prison visits and phone calls and commissary (deVuono-powell et al., 2015). These costs create monetary and emotional strain for children's nonincarcerated caregivers (Geller et al., 2011). Recent evidence suggests the disadvantages associated with parental incarceration may be more keenly felt by families of color: homelessness, housing instability, and food insecurity stemming from parental incarceration are concentrated among Black youth (Cox & Wallace, 2013; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

**Family instability and parenting challenges** Family inequality is also visible with regard to how mass incarceration erodes intimate relationships and parenting. Incarcerated parents who parented their children prior to confinement will find their efforts severely curtailed. This scenario is especially problematic for incarcerated mothers who are likely to be primary caregivers of their children prior to imprisonment (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Paternal incarceration in particular has been demonstrated to trigger relationship dissolution (Lopoo & Western, 2005), frequent changes in mothers' romantic relationships (Arditti, 2018), caregiver mental health risks (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010), and parenting stress (Turney & Wildeman, 2014). While the research on parental incarceration does suggest heterogeneity with regard to how parenting processes are impacted within families, quality, stable parenting is a key buffer against material hardship (Gershoff et al., 2007), and therefore a particularly important pathway of influence for families and children of the incarcerated.

## A Social and Family Justice Agenda to Address Family Inequality

Thinking about mass incarceration as a specific form of family inequality translates into a holistic policy agenda that advances social justice and involves explicit attention to the needs of families impacted by incarceration. Such an agenda is a hallmark of a “family perspective” on mass incarceration (Arditti, 2012), which goes beyond considerations for public safety and crime reduction, to include criteria such as child health, youth development, and family stability.

Therefore, a family perspective equates with policy initiatives that lessen incarceration, fight discrimination within the criminal justice system, reverse practices that disenfranchise individuals with felony records, and a legislative agenda broadly focused on antipoverty efforts aimed at supporting parents and children. Wacquant (2017) argues that the remarkable expansion of incarceration in the United States reflects the penalization of poverty and the “downsizing” of public aid. Therefore, “welfare and criminal justice are two modalities of public policy toward the poor” (p. 87). A comprehensive package of policy reforms aimed at reducing prison populations, enfranchisement of formerly incarcerated persons, and addressing poverty would go a long way in reducing social and family inequalities that pertain to criminal justice involvement.

**Reducing prison populations** A first priority in policy reform would be narrowing who goes to prison and systematic approaches to “decarceration.” Decarcerating – or releasing as many people as possible from their current confinement – is particularly urgent given the public health threat of COVID-19 transmission in prisons and jails (Akiyama et al., 2020). The imminent danger posed by COVID-19 has equated with the suspension of family visiting in jails and prisons across the country. The absence of in-person contact further compromises fragile family ties that are not only critical in maintaining family bonds, but also seem to facilitate the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons after they are released from carceral settings (Cochran & Mears, 2013). Apart from decarceration efforts aimed at responding to the urgency surrounding COVID-19, drug policy reform is essential in resisting overcriminalization and lessening racial disparities in criminal justice (Tonry & Melewski, 2008) and family disruption (Hagan & Coleman, 2001). Therefore, decarceration – by releasing those who are least likely to perpetuate additional crimes as well as by suspending the arrest and sentencing of low-level offenders – is a critical policy priority that needs to be enacted in conjunction with family and community health initiatives.

**Enfranchisement** Postincarceration policies aimed at eliminating invisible punishments for the incarcerated after release are needed to ensure civic participation and access to public assistance programs such as TANF, SNAP, educational loans, housing subsidies, and various professional licenses that have historically barred persons convicted of a felony offense. The cumulative impact of these punishments

exacerbates formerly incarcerated persons' risk of unsuccessful reentry and recidivism – particularly in the context of re-entry in resource-deficient communities (Hall et al., 2016). This scenario is costly for society and harmful for communities and families. Enfranchisement is evident with regard to policy reform aimed at reinstating the vote for ex-prisoners. Such efforts have picked up momentum at the state level with 23 states amending their felony disenfranchisement laws to expand voter eligibility since 1997 (McLeod, 2018). Voting is a form of civic inclusion that seems to connect with lower recidivism and family stability (Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010). Promising shifts are also occurring at the state level to enfranchise ex-prisoners so that they can receive food stamps and other forms of public assistance (Mauer, 2015).

**Antipoverty efforts and children's best interests** A family inequality framework highlights the importance of healthy family relationships as a source of resilience, even in conjunction with adversity. While the research on parental incarceration is starting to document family strengths among families impacted by incarceration, healthy relationships are less likely to flourish in the face of the socioeconomic disadvantage, disenfranchisement, and stigma that seems to characterize parental incarceration (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). Indeed, socioeconomic disadvantage is an important context that undermines parenting and child outcomes (Conger et al., 2010). Therefore, policy promoting the interests of incarcerated persons and their families and children requires considerable antipoverty investments in vulnerable communities and locales that are most affected by mass incarceration. Stable levels of family income along with safety-net assets (e.g., Medicaid, unemployment insurance) are essential for buffering income shocks associated with criminal justice involvement and promoting family stability (Adams et al., 2016). Social and family justice advocacy focused on safe and affordable housing, reliable employment, and childcare all represent antipoverty efforts that stand to benefit families of the incarcerated. For example, Noyes et al. (2018) emphasize early childhood and place-based interventions to address the needs of children affected by incarceration as such efforts and investments are universal and nonstigmatizing.

Advocacy and efforts can also be specifically targeted at children of the incarcerated with an eye toward ensuring children's rights to stable and loving care within the context of parental imprisonment. There are several groups that seek to promote the best interests of children and families affected by parental incarceration including Penal Reform International, The Osborne Association, and Friends Outside. Common threads for these groups involve applying human rights standards to protect children during parental arrest and incarceration, facilitating contact between incarcerated parents and their children, and ensuring families' access to educational, housing, and child- and health-care systems.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a family perspective situates mass incarceration as *family policy* and a source of family inequality. Therefore, a set of far-reaching reforms are necessary to reverse its effects and support a more level-playing field for the nations' children and families. Large numbers of children and families interface with the criminal justice system and although the outcomes associated with the imprisonment of a parent or family member may be varied, more often than not, imprisonment intensifies material hardship and undermines the quality and stability of parent-child relationships. These negative effects contribute to family inequality among justice involved persons and their families. Exemplar reforms that could promote social and family justice include lessening the number of incarcerated persons, eliminating postincarceration policies that disenfranchise formerly incarcerated persons, and antipoverty efforts aimed at families and communities that are particularly hard-hit by mass incarceration strategies and policies.

## References

- Aaron, L., & Dallaire, D. (2010). Parental incarceration and multiple risk experiences: Effects on family processes and children's delinquency. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 39*, 1471–1484.
- Adams, G., Bogle, M., Isaacs, J., Sandstrom, H., Dubay, L., Gelatt, J., & Katz, M. (2016). *Stabilizing Children's lives: Insights for research and action*. Urban Institute.
- Akiyama, M., Spaulding, A., & Rich, J. (2020). Flattening the curve for incarcerated populations—Covid-19 in jails and prisons. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 382*, 2075–2077.
- Allen, S., Flaherty, C., & Ely, G. (2010). Throwaway moms: Maternal incarceration and the criminalization of female poverty. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 25*(2), 160–172.
- Arditti, J. A. (2012). *Parental incarceration and the family: Psychological and social effects of imprisonment on children, parents, and care-givers*. NYU Press.
- Arditti, J. A. (2018). Parental incarceration and family inequality in the United States. In R. Condry & P. Schaarf-Smith (Eds.), *Prison, punishment and the family: Towards a new sociology of punishment* (pp. 41–57). Oxford University Press.
- Carson, A. (2018). *Prisoners in 2016*. Washington.
- Clear, T. (2008). The effects of high imprisonment rates on communities. *Crime and Justice, 37*, 97–132.
- Clear, T., & Austin, J. (2009). Reducing mass incarceration: Implications of the iron law of prison populations. *Harvard Law and Policy Review, 3*, 307–324.
- Cochran, J., & Mears, D. (2013). Social isolation and inmate behavior: A conceptual framework for theorizing prison visitation and guiding and assessing research. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 41*, 252–261.
- Conger, R. D., Conger, K. J., & Martin, M. J. (2010). Socioeconomic status, family processes, and individual development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 72*(3), 685–704.
- Cox, R., & Wallace, S. (2013). The impact of incarceration on food insecurity among households with children. *Andrew Young School of Policy Studies Research Paper Series No. 13-05*.
- deVuono-powell, S., Schweidler, C., Walters, A., & Zohrabi, A. (2015). *Who pays? The true cost of incarceration on families*. Ella Baker Center, Forward Together, Research Action Design.

- Foster, H., & Hagan, J. (2015). Punishment regimes and the multilevel effects of parental incarceration: Intergenerational, intersectional, and interinstitutional models of social inequality and systemic exclusion. *Annual Review of Sociology, 41*, 135–158.
- Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., & Western, B. (2011). Paternal incarceration and support for children in fragile families. *Demography, 48*, 25–47.
- Gershoff, E., Aber, J., Raver, C., & Lennon, M. (2007). Income is not enough: Incorporating material hardship into models of income associations with parenting and child development. *Child Development, 78*, 70–95.
- Glaze, L. E., & Maruschak, L. M. (2010). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (rev. ed.). U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>
- Hagan, J., & Coleman, J. (2001). Returning captives of the American war on drugs: Issues of community and family reentry. *Crime and Delinquency, 47*(3), 352–367.
- Hall, T., Wooten, N., & Lundgren, L. (2016). Postincarceration policies and prisoner reentry: Implications for policies and programs aimed at reducing recidivism and poverty. *Journal of Poverty, 20*(1), 56–72.
- Kondo, M., Andreyeva, E., South, E., MacDonald, J., & Branas, C. (2018). Neighborhood interventions to reduce violence. *Annual Review of Public Health, 39*, 253–271.
- Lopoo, L., & Western, B. (2005). Incarceration and the formation and stability of marital unions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 67*, 721–734.
- Mauer, M. (2015). Changing the knowledge base and public perception of long-term prisoners. *Criminology & Public Policy, 14*(2), 351–353.
- McLeod, M. (2018, October). *Expanding the vote: Two decades of felony disenfranchisement reforms*. The Sentencing Project.
- Noyes, J. L., Paul, J. C., & Berger, L. M. (2018). Should we be intervening solely (or even mostly) on the basis of parental incarceration? In C. Wildeman, A. R. Haskins, & J. Poehlmann-Tynan (Eds.), *APA Bronfenbrenner series on the ecology of human development. When parents are incarcerated: Interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children* (pp. 173–193). American Psychological Association.
- Pew Center on States. (2010). *Prison count 2010: State population declines for the first time in 38 years*. The Pew Charitable Trust.
- Shaw, M. (2016). The racial implications of the effects of parental incarceration on intergenerational mobility. *Sociology Compass, 10*(12), 1102–1109.
- Tonry, M., & Melewski, M. (2008). The malign effects of drug and crime control policies on black Americans. *Crime and Justice, 37*(1), 1–44.
- Turney, K., & Goodsell, R. (2018). Parental incarceration and children's wellbeing. *Future of Children, 28*, 147–164.
- Turney, K., & Wildeman, C. (2014). Redefining relationships: Explaining the countervailing consequences of paternal incarceration for parenting. *American Sociological Review, 78*, 949–979.
- Uggen, C., & Inderbitzin, M. (2010). The price and the promise of citizenship: Extending the vote to non-incarcerated felons. In N. Frost, J. Freilich, & T. Clear (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in criminal justice policy: Policy proposals from the American Society of Criminology Conference* (pp. 61–68). Cengage/Wadsworth.
- Wacquant, L. (2017). Practice and symbolic power in Bourdieu: The view from Berkeley. *Journal of Classical Sociology, 17*(1), 55–69.
- Wagner, P., & Rabuy, B. (2017). *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2017*. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/03/14/wholepie2017press/>
- Wakefield, S., & Wildeman, C. (2014). *Children of the prison boom: Mass incarceration and the future of American inequality*. Oxford University Press.
- Wildeman, C. J., Haskins, A. R., & Poehlmann-Tynan, J. (2018). *APA Bronfenbrenner series on the ecology of human development. When parents are incarcerated when parents are incarcerated: Interdisciplinary research and interventions to support children*. American Psychological Association.

# A Biopsychosocial Model of Family Process



W. Roger Mills-Koonce and Nissa Towe-Goodman

Since the publishing of *Emerging Biosocial Perspectives on the Family* (by Kay Michael Troost and Erik Filsinger in the 1993 iteration of this volume), a proliferation of empirical studies on the biological underpinnings of human relationships and family functioning has tested and revised established theories as well as led to new models and theories to be tested. This explosion of research has been fueled by two key factors. The first is the advances in data collection and analysis that allow for direct examination of previously hidden structures and processes, such as the full human genome and its epigenetic activities. Not only do these methodologies now exist, but many are accessible with respect to cost and transportability. The second factor accelerating biological research in family science is that many family scholars now embrace biosocial theories of family form and function and are either themselves well-trained in these methodologies or collaborate with experts who are. This is particularly important because for decades biosocial research was dominated by biopsychology, medicine, and neurophysiology. However, those research programs often lack the theoretical foundations for studying individuals as embedded in families and rarely, if ever, do they apply these techniques directly to complex family systems. Arguably, a goal for family scientists in the twenty-first century is to do just that – integrate new and accessible biological methods and models into the study of family form and function. To better bridge these worlds, we must consider the history of biosocial theories guiding family studies and consider new approaches – such as the biopsychosocial model – to better reflect contemporary findings and guide future research and theory.

---

W. Roger Mills-Koonce (✉)

Human Development & Family Studies Undergraduate Program, Applied Developmental Science & Special Education Doctoral Program, School of Education, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA  
e-mail: [Mills-Koonce@unc.edu](mailto:Mills-Koonce@unc.edu)

N. Towe-Goodman

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA



Before beginning that process, revisiting the 12 core assumptions of a biosocial perspective on family (as provided by Troost and Filsinger, 1993) provides a road-map for examining recent empirical findings as well as theoretical and methodological advances in this field of study. These assumptions once provided an organizing framework for synthesizing research on biosocial studies of the family – now they provide useful benchmarks for identifying domain-specific points of continuity and change. Most of these assumptions still hold today and continue to guide theoretical and empirical research. The first three of Troost and Filsinger's assumptions frame the integration of evolutionary theory and family science: *humans have an evolutionary origin; the family has played an important role in human evolution, and the evolutionary origin of humans has an influence upon families today*. These provide arguments for a biosocial model of family form and function, whereas the next two assumptions (still holding today) provide the mechanism for bridging evolutionary theory and family science. The first is that *adaptations in physiology or conduct vary by environment*. This can be expanded by incorporating both phylogenetic (evolutionary) and ontogenetic (lifespan development) perspectives on the notion of adaptation. Whereas evolution selects for traits within a population to promote species-wide survival (i.e., adaptation over generations), individual development results in changes within a single generation to promote individual survival (i.e., adaptation of the individual). This leads to the next assumption, that *proximate biology has an influence on the family and the family has an influence on the proximate biology and the health of its members*. The idea of bidirectional effects is common today, but this specific idea has broader implications as it situates family at the intersection of phylogenetic and ontogenetic processes. The genes promoted by natural selection affect how the individual relates to others, including how they form relationships and families. In turn, those relationships affect the health, well-being, and the survival and reproduction success of the individual. The bidirectional relationship between an individual's proximate biology and the individual's family is therefore not only about the ontogeny of the individual but also the phylogeny of the species.

The final two assumptions still holding today provide the rationale for studying the family from an evolutionary perspective. The first is that *a biosocial approach takes an intermediate position between those who emphasize the similarities between humans and other animals and those who emphasize the differences*. This assumption allows researchers to use comparative models of physiology and behavior (based on the study of distinct but related species, such as nonhuman primates) as viable data sources for drawing inferences about the current human condition and its evolutionary origins. For example, Harlowe's research using rhesus monkeys provided key insights on how early parent–offspring relationships are sustained by emotional bonds rather than being solely driven by the provision of food and sustenance – a finding with direct relevance to modern attachment theory for human beings. The argument for comparative studies (between species) is further bolstered by the second assumption, that *extant features of human biology can be used to reveal aspects of our adaptation in the past*, particularly when comparing current human biology to that of near and distant ancestral species.

Collectively, these seven assumptions still hold today and frame the argument for why and how researchers can study family form and function from a biosocial perspective. However, the final five of Troost and Filsinger's (1993) assumptions are useful because they illustrate the benefits of extending the original biosocial model to a contemporary biopsychosocial model of family form and function. To this end, two original assumptions highlight the conceptual limitations of a purely biosocial framework – *biosocial influences are both biological and social in character*, and *the biosocial domain is concerned with three factors: the biological, biosocial, and social*. As discussed later in this chapter, the interface of biological and social forces on family functioning often occurs at the psychological level of family members (either in the form of cognitions or behaviors). This necessitates not only a psychological component to the overall framework but also a developmental perspective since phenotypic cognitions and behaviors emerge developmentally through ongoing interactions between genotype and environment.

The application of a developmental perspective to emergent family form and function also facilitates a reconceptualization of another assumption, that *human biological and biosocial variables do not determine human conduct but pose limitations and constraints as well as possibilities and opportunities for families*. Probabilistic epigenesis theory, although typically applied to individual development, can also be applied to the family as an organismic system that adapts to the changing interactions between biology and environment (including relationships, contexts, and cultures). These adaptations in family form and function can be unique and unpredictable from a phylogenetic perspective but nevertheless function well from an ontogenetic perspective. For example, the formal recognition of same-sex relationships through legalized marriage may be challenging to explain from a biosocial perspective focused on reproductive fitness but is more easily understood from a biopsychosocial perspective that incorporates the human psychological need for emotional connectedness and stability.

Another assumption that requires consideration due to recent advances in both theory and in the study of epigenetic change across the lifespan is that *adaptation is assumed to have taken place over a vast period of time*. This assumption goes on to state that *hundreds to thousands of generations to reach Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium in adaptive evolutionary biology are vastly different than, for example, human ecology. Conjectures about biological adaptation in the span of one generation or over the course of the twentieth century or the computer age are dubious assertions*. Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium refers to the principle that the genetic variation in a population is inter-generationally constant if mating is random and there are no disturbing factors such as mutations or new natural selection pressures. This is generally true – the minimal rates of change (at the population level) from generation to generation in nonrandom mating, mutation and natural selection result in very slow rate of evolutionary change. However, as discussed later, recent epigenetic findings provide evidence of functional and structural change to the genotype that develops within a single generation and, in some cases, is passed on to offspring. Regarding family influence on genotype and genotype influence on family, this mechanism

provides an alternative to natural selection and one that may operate on a shorter timetable.

Finally, the last assumption proposed by Troost and Filsinger (1993) was that *proximate, distal, and ultimate levels of interpretation can be approached separately; ideally they will be integrated*. This was prescribed at a time when a biosocial model for family science was accepted but not a dominant discipline within the field. However, the expansion of theory, innovation in research methodology, and the proliferation of biopsychosocial empiricism related to family form and function make the *integration* proposed by Troost and Filsinger not just ideal but necessary to sustain the field's scientific growth and application. To provide a foundation for achieving that goal, this chapter provides a brief history of biosocial theories and promotes the adoption of a biopsychosocial model of family form and function; highlights findings from the past decade on this topic; and acknowledges the strengths and limitations of this approach.

## **A Brief History of Biosocial Theories on Family Form and Function**

When considering a biopsychosocial model of family form and function, it is easy to become lost in the rapidly growing number of studies examining genetic, hormonal, and neurological correlates of family processes – or, as is more often the case, correlates of individual functioning within the family context. However, prior to technological advances allowing researchers access to neural networks and epigenetic changes in the genome, evolutionary biologists and family scientists were already considering biology and its many roles in human behavior, human relationships, and the interconnected relationships that define families. Since this history already has been reviewed and synthesized in detail (e.g., Geary & Flinn, 2001), here we provide a brief overview of these theories and propositions beginning with the modern synthesis of evolutionary biology and moving chronologically forward to contemporary biopsychosocial models of family form and function.

### ***Origins of the Modern Synthesis of Evolutionary Theory***

Prior to the nineteenth century, scholars offered numerous accounts for the origin of speciation and the inheritance of traits from one generation to the next. However, the independent emergence of Mendelian genetics and Darwin's (1859) *On the Origin of Species* (detailing his theory of natural selection) gave rise to the first unified theory of evolution, dubbed the *modern synthesis* by Huxley in 1942. Integrating the mechanism of natural selection with the insight of allelic inheritance provided the foundation for understanding how adaptation to environmental demands across

generations simultaneously supports the canalization of specific phenotypes as well as the maintenance of genetic variability (each of which is critical for population survival). The central premise of the modern synthesis is that the prevalence of bodily form and behavioral functioning within a species is determined by the rate at which the genes responsible for such form and function are passed on to the next generation.

From this perspective, human behaviors are manifestations of genes propagated over millions of years due to their high likelihood of creating a next generation of offspring that survives to an age of sexual reproduction, which then creates a next generation and so forth. However, when the genetic predisposition in question is family form and function, the outcome of natural selection must include individuals' predilections for establishing relationships that maximize children's chances for survival, reproduction, and formation of their own relationships. Two types of family relationships illustrate this point. The first is the relationship between mother and offspring that is necessary for the altricial human child to survive the prepubertal stages of development. The second is the parental pair bond that provides support and resources to increase offspring survival and reproduction rates. To the degree that natural selection favored genes for successful propagation across generations, some of these genes provided the biological foundations for the creation and maintenance of familial relationships.

### ***The Baldwin Effect, Inclusive Fitness, and Sociobiological Theory***

Although elegant in explanatory power accounting for both specialization and variability in phenotypes across generations, the modern evolutionary synthesis struggles to explain the complexities of family dynamics and the form, function, and definitions of family that are not coupled directly to reproductive success. In part, these struggles emerge from a reliance on a genetically determinant model of individual behavior that does not reflect development and learning, which Baldwin addressed in 1896 by proposing that an organism's ability to learn new behaviors directly affects its successful reproduction. Although controversial at the time, the Baldwin effect (as it has come to be known) has been accepted as part of the modern synthesis and introduced mechanisms by which organisms may learn and interact with their environment – including, but not explicitly stated – within the contexts of family relationships.

The intersection of evolutionary processes and family relationships was (again) indirectly proposed by W. D. Hamilton in 1964 with the concept of inclusive fitness, which broadly defined the success of a gene or trait as the number of offspring "equivalents" – meaning next-generation individuals with similar genotypes based on kinship – that successfully survive and reproduce. This expanded the existing modern synthesis by emphasizing that familial relationships across generations

(e.g., the children of one's siblings and cousins) are of evolutionary value in addition to one's biological offspring. A decade later, E. O. Wilson (1975) would expand and incorporate these concepts into the new discipline of sociobiology (which would later be subsumed in the broad discipline of evolutionary psychology).

Although controversial from its conception to modern times, a significant contribution of sociobiological theory is its argument that selection pressures have resulted in complex social behaviors and social systems (such as families) that are created and recreated within and across generations. To this end, David Geary (an evolutionary psychologist) and Mark Flinn (a biological anthropologist) have posited an evolutionary model describing human parenting, family formation, and prolonged childhood development as "coevolutionary aspects ... explained by a single selective force – social competition through coalition formation" (2001, pp. 49–50). As described by Geary and Flinn, this connects the emergence of family form and function to evolutionary biology and is convincing with its explanatory power and extensive anthropological evidence. However, from a biopsychosocial perspective, it does not fully account for the entwinement of individual biology and larger social forces acting on family processes.

### ***Biocultural Evolution and Cultural Neuroscience***

It is easy to recognize the "bottom-up" nature of these nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories as they attempt explanations of the complex biopsychosocial phenomena of *family*. Most are genetically deterministic and, as such, fail to adequately incorporate higher-order influences on family studies. These higher-order (or emergent) phenomena include psychological characteristics of individuals within families (emerging from complex interactions between the genotype and environment across development) and cultural characteristics of society (emerging from a shared collective history and values) that define and guide family form and function. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model of individual development highlights the embedment of an individual in a nested system of relationships, institutions, cultures, and time. One only needs to shift the focal point of analysis from *individual* to *family* to appreciate how higher-order systems exert top-down effects on family form and function.

The scientific study of biocultural evolution focuses on the interplay of biological and cultural factors over time. Along with biocultural anthropology and human behavioral ecology, it seeks to understand the relationships between culture and human biology as well as their joint influence on development, family form, and functional processes (e.g., mate acquisition, reproduction, parental care, alloparenting). Recent studies of cultural neuroscience document cultural variation in the neurological processes related to cognitions, social behaviors, and emotion (Chiao et al., 2010; Domínguez Duque et al., 2010) that support family relationships and structure. Considering natural selection processes that influence genetic transmission of generations tend to be unique within populations that are geographically

isolated from one another, and that cultural practices and beliefs similarly emerge within geographically isolated populations, it is not surprising that there are genotypic differences in individuals across geographic regions and across populations defined by unique cultural practices and beliefs. Therefore, it is imperative that biological models of family form and function also take into account cultural influences on the family as well as the reverse.

### ***Limitations of Biosocial Theories on Family Form and Function***

Traditional biosocial theories for understanding family processes rely primarily on the assumption that the biological drive to procreate and pass one's genotype to subsequent generations is the organizing principle around which family relationships and systems evolved over time. However, with a primary focus on reproductive fitness the explanatory focus is largely limited to phylogenetic explanations of species-typical characteristics while failing to provide an ontogenetic account for the variation in family form and function observed across populations, contexts, cultures, and historical events. For example, sociobiological theory can make postulations about the role of pair bonding to increase reproductive fitness for the species, but what does it offer regarding explanations for romantic couples who choose life-long partnerships without children? Or single persons or couples who choose to adopt children instead of having biological children to propagate their genotype to future generations?

On the opposite end of the spectrum, biocultural evolutionary theories offer unique insights into the coupling of biological and cultural forces that influence family form and function. As Uchiyama et al. (2020) note, cultural dynamics alter the interactions between genes and environments by shaping the norms of behavior within the population, and thus can accelerate adaptation at the cultural level compared to genetic evolution. For example, sex- and gender-based phenotypes of sexual attractiveness and cultural beliefs in pair bonds may co-align or diverge over evolutionary time, resulting in more common or less common romantic pairings outside of heterosexual unions. In more tolerant cultures, there will be more romantic unions outside of the heterosexual norm as compared to less tolerant cultures. Thus, whereas the sexual identity of the individual may be biologically driven and stable from one generation to the next, the rapid emergence of family structures characterized by same-sex couples is a biocultural phenomenon with broad implications for definitions of family form and studies of family function.

Despite these challenges and limitations, each of the seminal biosocial theories and models reviewed above offers insight into how humans evolved to create (and recreate across generations) what we broadly refer to as *family*. It is clear that the modern synthesis of evolution is a powerful framework for understanding individual evolution across generations, including the selection of traits fostering the emergence of biosocial relationships and kinship practices that are addressed in more detail through the lens of sociobiological theory. It is also clear that biosocial

relationships underlying family, kinship, and community formation create shared experiences across generations that culminate in cultural values and beliefs that, in turn, exert a reciprocal influence on family form and function.

Given this, we propose that the adoption of a biopsychosocial model accounts for the interconnections among biology, psychology, and socio-environmental factors and provides a framework for situating the family system at the interface of endogenous and exogenous forces. The strength of this model is that it allows for natural selection and cultural forces to canalize specific-typical family forms and functions over time while simultaneously allowing for individual differences across families to create novel variation at individual, relational, and family system levels of analysis. Next, we describe the origins and theoretical foundations of the biopsychosocial model and highlight some of the research supporting this model as a potential unifying theory for understanding family form and function within and across generations.

## **The Biopsychosocial Model: Origins and Applications Relevant to Family Science**

As proposed by George Engel in 1977, the biopsychosocial model is an interdisciplinary synthesis incorporating exogenous influences on form and function reflected in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) with endogenous influences reflected in psychobiological models. The bioecological model is a developmental theory that stresses the embedded nature of the person characteristics (the *psycho* in the biopsychosocial model) within the nested hierarchy of contexts (the *social* of the biopsychosocial model), the interactions between the person and context (proximal processes, such as family relationships), and time (operating within and across generations). We begin by considering three aspects of person characteristics defined within the bioecological system theory: demand characteristics refer to physical or manifest qualities (e.g., age or gender); *resource characteristics* refer to cognitive and emotional qualities (e.g., empathy); and *force characteristics* that refer to psychological disposition (e.g., personality). With respect to form, each of these individual characteristics develops from the interactions between biology and environment. With respect to function, each of these characteristics influences how individuals perceive and interact with their environments and with how the environment perceives and interacts with them.

Next, contexts are hierarchically organized into microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. The *microsystem* is the environment in which direct interactions occur with the individual, such as the family. The *mesosystem* refers to interactions between two or more microsystems, such as the linkages between family and school. The *exosystem* refers to linkages between settings that are not directly linked to the individual, but have indirect effects on development, such as program policies regarding the structure and availability of childcare centers. Finally, the

*macrosystem* refers to the most distant level of influence on the individual, such as the political and economic systems of the individual's society.

How individuals interact with the multiple contexts of their social world is referred to as *proximal processes*, defined as the "complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism, and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993, p. 317). Of particular importance for family research, the magnitude of influence for proximal processes is theorized to increase among people with strong emotional relationships and is most effective when these interactions are enduring, such as parent-child or intimate partner relationships. Additionally, proximal processes are hypothesized to actualize genetic potential, transforming genotypic characteristics into phenotypes that improve developmental functioning.

Finally, it is critical to recognize the role of *time*. For example, the biopsychosocial relationships that constitute family are determined by the intensity, duration, and consistency of interactions (proximal processes) over days, weeks, and years within a generation. Likewise, the cultural definitions of form and function may take on new meanings across generations to reflect new experiences and historical events that shape beliefs and expectations across historical time.

While the bioecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the intertwining of psychological and social factors influencing individuals and families, it lacks specificity with respect to the role of biological influence. The field of psychobiology, more specifically Gottlieb's theory of probabilistic epigenesis (Gottlieb, 1998; Gottlieb & Lickliter, 2007), provides the missing framework for understanding not only how the individual is embedded in social contexts, but how within the individual embedded biological systems (e.g., genes, central and peripheral nervous systems) interact with each other and with the environment via proximal processes described in the bioecological model.

The biopsychosocial model, as a synthesis of bioecological and psychobiological perspectives, is a theory of individual development and not specifically intended to describe family form and function. However, the application of the biopsychosocial model to family science can be viewed in two ways. The first takes a contextualist perspective that focuses on the coupling of family members within family relationships. Viewing individuals as bound within the proximal processes of family relationships means that the biopsychosocial model must apply comparably to family relationships as it does to family members, and any consideration of the role of biology or culture must account for (and apply equally to) both family member and family relationship.

The second application of the biopsychosocial model to family science involves an organismic perspective on the family system. According to family systems theory, families are characterized by a hierarchical structure of persons and relationships, wholeness and order, and adaptive self-organization (Cox & Paley, 2003). These family systems principles are comparable to the psychobiological principles that characterize individual persons. Parallel to this argument, from a bioecological perspective the family system (as part of the mesosystem) is embedded within an exosystem and macrosystem and can interact via proximal processes with other



aspects of the mesosystem. Taken together, it is possible to view the family system as an emergent organismic phenomenon that can reside directly as the focus of the biopsychosocial model.

The choice of whether to focus on family relationships or family systems is dependent on the nature of the research question, but the biopsychosocial model should apply similarly to both perspectives. Although the idea of reciprocal influences among biological, psychological, and social factors is consistent with general biosocial perspectives on the family (e.g., Bugental et al., 2003; D'Onofrio et al., 2013), the complexity of examining these synergistic effects across time and contexts is difficult and is rarely applied effectively (Tudge et al., 2016). A biopsychosocial model may be particularly useful for organizing novel hypotheses and rigorously testing them across multiple levels of analyses. The following sections highlight existing biopsychosocial research on family processes by focusing on two main topics: (1) gene–environment interaction and (2) immune functioning. This research demonstrates the gradual progress in matching methods, analytic techniques, and research designs to the foundational tenets of a biopsychosocial model on family processes, although much work remains to be done.

### *Genetic and Environmental Interaction*

Genetically informed approaches to the study of family processes draw from behavioral and molecular genetics, and more recently, the field of epigenetics. Behavioral genetic research helped establish the influence of genetics on processes within the family, using study designs (e.g., family, adoption, and twin designs) that permit researchers to examine the relative contribution of genes and environment on behavior. This research identified modest but pervasive genetic contributions to multiple aspects of family functioning, including behaviors such as parental warmth, discipline practices, family conflict, and marital quality (Kendler & Baker, 2007). Interactions between genetic and social influences suggest that the genetic heritability of specific traits is modified by parenting and family functioning (Dick et al., 2007; Kendler et al., 2004). There is consensus that genetic factors play a role in all family processes (D'Onofrio et al., 2013), but the mechanisms underlying these linkages are still under investigation.

Building on this foundation, molecular genetic research focuses on the assessment of genotypes (in comparison to behavioral genetics, which measures inferred genetic heritability) and their relationship with behaviors or traits. Two approaches dominate this research: *genome-wide approaches (GWAS)*, which explore genetic variants across the genome and how these variations relate to outcomes or traits; and *candidate gene approaches*, which examine specific genes hypothesized to be related to a set of traits. With respect to family processes, such research suggests direct links between specific genetic variants and parenting (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2008), marital quality (e.g., Walum et al., 2012),

and child behavior (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2002). This research also suggests genetic variants moderate relationships between parenting processes and child outcomes (Belsky & van IJzendoorn, 2017) as well as links between the interparental relationship and the parent–child relationship (Sturge-Apple et al., 2012). However, consistent with a bioecological approach, understanding the dynamic interplay between genetic potential and the environment requires more than discovery and description of interaction effects; flexible adaptation to a changing environment requires the capacity for continuous communication between the genome and its context.

The field of epigenetics has begun to address the challenge of understanding this dynamic interplay. *Epigenetics* refers to “chromosome bound, heritable changes in gene expression that are not dependent on changes to the DNA sequence” (Deans & Maggert, 2015, p. 892). This perspective provides both a plausible biological pathway through which family processes have lasting effects on an individual’s development, as well as a mechanism through which the effects of environmental experiences could be passed down to the next generation (Brody et al., 2016). In response to environmental conditions, epigenetic mechanisms (e.g., histone modifications and DNA methylation) alter genetic expression, resulting in physiological and behavioral changes that can be relatively stable within or even across generations. Although issues around timing of environmental effects are still under investigation, evidence suggests the likelihood of environmental conditions altering genetic expression is greatest early in development (Naumova et al., 2018).

The growth of epigenetic family research provides some insight into the complex interplay between genes and social environments (Meaney, 2010). Emerging evidence suggests that parenting has lasting effects on the epigenome, with implications for children’s long-term adjustment. The majority of this work has focused on genetic alterations resulting from exposure to adverse parenting environments, such as differences in epigenetic markers for adult victims of abuse (for a review, see Gershon & High, 2015). Similarly, research suggests perceived parental rejection and harsh parenting are linked with methylation patterns, epigenetic aging, and psychosocial adjustment (Brody et al., 2016; Naumova et al., 2018). Although the majority of human research has focused on epigenetic changes related to affective processes, animal models suggest learning, memory, and other cognitive processes are also epigenetically modulated, within and even between generations (Grigorenko et al., 2016).

Epigenetic research into family processes is still in its infancy but offers tremendous potential for insight into the dynamic interplay between genetics, family environments, physiology, and behavior in shaping development within and across generations. Taken as a whole, the remarkable advances of the postgenomic era have highlighted the importance of genetic influences on interactions within the family, and family influences on genetic potential (Beach et al., 2018; Meaney, 2010).

## *Immune Functioning and Family Processes*

Related to research on the HPA axis, family processes are interconnected with immune functioning. High levels of cortisol are linked with immunosuppression, and animal models suggest prolonged stress may decrease receptor sensitivity to glucocorticoids (such as cortisol), resulting in a reduced anti-inflammatory response and increased susceptibility to disease (McEwen & Stellar, 1993; Sheridan et al., 2000). Additionally, there is some indication that chronic stress influences the genetic expression of signaling related to the inflammatory response (Miller & Chen, 2006; Miller et al., 2009).

With strong theoretical linkages between family stressors and immune functioning, current research focuses on linking specific social stressors within the family and immune outcomes, and the mechanisms conveying risk. Evidence suggests that hostile and negative marital conflict is linked with less adaptive immunological responses (particularly for women), with long-term implications for couples' health and mortality (e.g., Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). With respect to children's immune functioning, exposure to repeated family stressors such as aggressive family conflict, parental psychopathology, and parental disengagement is linked with impaired immune functioning and illness (Byrne et al., 2017; Caserta et al., 2008; Repetti et al., 2011). In turn, having a child with a chronic illness (e.g., asthma) may heighten parenting stress and strain marital relationships or roles within the workplace (Cousino & Hazen, 2013; Major, 2003). Although untested, chronic inflammation in childhood may negatively feedback into the parent-child relationship; inflammation is linked with increased negative mood and social withdrawal (Eisenberger et al., 2010), behaviors that may heighten parenting stress (Coplan et al., 2003). As such, just as there are within-person bidirectional effects between immune functioning and psychological state (Farzi et al., 2015), it is possible that there are reciprocal effects between immune functioning and psychological states that cascade between family members.

As reported by Fagundes et al. (2012) in their biopsychosocial review of the literature on resilience and immune functioning in older adults, the provision of support and caregiving itself can have negative health consequences for caregivers. Receiving (or even knowing one can receive) social support is associated with better immune functioning across the lifespan (Taylor, 2011); however, it is more challenging for older adults to maintain strong social relationships due to losing contact with social networks following retirement as well as increasing mobility issues with age that limit their access to social activities (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). The result of these limitations is a greater reliance on family for social support, and while the care and support from family relationships is associated with lower rates of morbidity and mortality for older adults (Uchino et al., 1996), it can increase the stress experienced by the caregivers (Fagundes et al., 2012). Furthermore, these experiences can compromise the immune functioning of the caregiver. Multiple studies of family caregivers of older adults with dementia report that caregivers have greater inflammatory levels than matched controls (Lutgendorf et al., 1999;

von Känel et al., 2006), accelerated age-related increases in inflammation that persisted for years following the death of the family member under their care (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003). Similar results are found for mothers providing care for their chronically sick child (Epel et al., 2004). As compared to mothers raising healthy children, these mothers had shorter telomere length – a biological marker in DNA that reflects cellular aging. Longer duration of caregiving for the sick child was negatively associated with telomere length to the degree that mothers with the greatest caregiving stress levels were observed to have 9–17 years of greater cellular aging compared to mothers with low caregiving stress (Epel et al., 2004). These findings highlight the challenges of understanding the interconnectedness of health outcomes across family members due to potential bidirectional effects within family members and cascading effects across family members.

## **Accepting the Challenges Posed by the Biopsychosocial Model**

In this chapter, we offer a modified version of a biosocial theory on family studies – a biopsychosocial model that allows for (1) evolutionary influences on individual traits supporting the emergence of family relationships and kinship networks, (2) psychobiological influences on the developing phenotypes of family members that influence family relationships as well as biosocial influences on the broader family system, and (3) contextual and cultural influences on individuals, relationships, and family form and function. Although the breadth of this approach offers many strengths with respect to specific hypothesis testing across levels and time, it also serves as a challenge for those family scholars seeking a precise articulation of cause and effect. From a systems perspective, it is not only the interconnectedness of factors across levels (i.e., across genes, neurobiology, beliefs and behavior, relationships, contexts, and/or culture) but also that these relationships are often reciprocal and thus bidirectional in nature, with the strength and proportionality of effect varying over time. Notably, within the bioecological systems framework (and applicable to the biopsychosocial model as well), “the goal is to try to understand the joint, synergistic effects of several relevant influencing factors” (Tudge et al., 2016, p. 431). This raises the question of whether it is pointless to attempt to parse the relative influences of any one variable on another, and whether it is even possible to consider the complexities of the numerous reciprocal relationships influencing any given phenomenon.

An alternative perspective is that current data collection and analysis methodologies are more sophisticated than ever before and, when coupled with theory-driven hypothesis testing, there is the potential to address causal inference by asking new questions and revisiting old questions from new perspectives and with new tools. Technological innovations allow testing interactions between endogenous and exogenous factors previously only theorized in the family literature, such as neurogenomics, epigenetic changes in DNA functioning, and even the microbiome as part of the gut–brain axis. Similarly, statistical innovations are finding their way to

application in family studies to support causal inferences using quasi-experimental designs such as sibling studies and propensity score matching, as well as other approaches such as fixed effect modeling, placebo regression, and inverse-probability-weighted estimation of marginal structural models (Gangl, 2010). Together, these advances can facilitate the study of specific family-based phenomenon from a truly systems perspective, and in so doing contribute to the incremental construction of a fully fledged biopsychosocial model of emergent family form and functioning.

One example of this is the study of health within the family system. In documenting the significant proliferation of research on family relationships and health in their decade review of this literature, Umberson and Thomeer (2020) identify several factors contributing to these advances, including (1) that contemporary approaches consider multiple levels of analysis to demonstrate how family processes activate psychological, physiological, behavioral, and social influences on health across the lifespan; and (2) that reciprocity and contagion effects directly and indirectly cause family members to influence each other's health. These two factors align well with a biopsychosocial model of family health, as evidenced from our prior discussion of caregiving, social support, and immune functioning of care receivers and caregivers. The application of this model addresses the context of family relationships (the *social*), within which there are feelings of support and care by one member and feelings of stress and burden by the other (the *psychological*), which culminate in disparate health outcomes (the *biological*). This unpacking of effects appears mechanistic with unidirectional and causal attributions that can be supported with sophisticated methodological tools. However, the biopsychosocial model is also inherently a systems approach that can be applied to individuals as well as organismic and self-organizing systems, such as the family (Cox & Paley, 2003). From this perspective, the two disparate associations between caregiving and individual health described above are not independent of one another and they do not exist in a vacuum in and of themselves. Instead, they are two parts of a larger whole – an emergent phenomenon within the family encompassing shared values and practices with respect to caregiving and health. To this end, Esterling and colleagues (1994) report that social support *of the caregiver* can reduce the negative immune consequences associated with their caregiving for a sick or elderly relative. The shared value of caregiving for those in need of support within the family allows the burden (and health consequences) of caregiving to be spread across the family system to support the one in need while attenuating the cost for any one family member.

Viewing these interconnections across family members and across levels of analysis reveals that these findings can be more than a simple list of directional effects. When viewed through a biopsychosocial lens, they represent a wholeness and order that emerges from shared values, reciprocal and cascading effects across persons, and bidirectional effects between psychobiological factors within a given family member. They represent an evolutionary sociobiological drive to care for children as well as extended kin networks and the cultural values of collectivist shared burden within the family system. Practically speaking, they offer critical insight into

points of intervention for promoting individual and family-wide health – in this case, family-wide support for those needing care and for those providing care. The same biopsychosocial principles can be applied to other specific domains of family health analyses, such as the well-being of families affected by military deployment and reunification with veteran family members suffering with PTSD and other mental and physical health issues (Cozza, 2011; Paley et al., 2013) or the effects of epigenetic changes in stress regulatory genes in pregnant Latina women due to experiences of racial discrimination (Santos et al., 2018). Each of these phenomena, as all phenomena occurring within families, is embedded in social relationships and subject to reciprocal exogenous and endogenous forces. As such, the biopsychosocial model offers one of the most comprehensive approaches for deriving and testing theory-based hypotheses and situating subsequent findings within broader family and developmental theories.

## References

- Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2008). Oxytocin receptor (OXTR) and serotonin transporter (5-HTT) genes associated with observed parenting. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 3(2), 128–134.
- Beach, S. R., Lei, M. K., Brody, G. H., & Philibert, R. A. (2018). Prevention of early substance use mediates, and variation at SLC6A4 moderates, SAAF intervention effects on OXTR methylation. *Prevention Science*, 19(1), 90–100.
- Belsky, J., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2017). Genetic differential susceptibility to the effects of parenting. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 15, 125–130.
- Brody, G. H., Miller, G. E., Yu, T., Beach, S. R., & Chen, E. (2016). Supportive family environments ameliorate the link between racial discrimination and epigenetic aging: A replication across two longitudinal cohorts. *Psychological Science*, 27(4), 530–541.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Sage.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). Contexts of child rearing: Problems and prospects. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 844–850.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. J. (1993). Heredity, environment, and the question “How?”: A first approximation. In R. Plomin & G. E. McClearn (Eds.), *Nature, nurture & psychology* (pp. 313–324). *American Psychological Association*.
- Bugental, D. B., Olster, D. H., & Martorell, G. A. (2003). A developmental neuroscience perspective on the dynamics of parenting. In L. Kuczynski (Ed.), *Handbook of dynamics in parent-child relations* (pp. 25–48). Sage.
- Byrne, M. L., Badcock, P. B., Simmons, J. G., Whittle, S., Pettitt, A., Olsson, C. A., Mundy, L. K., Patton, G. C., & Allen, N. B. (2017). Self-reported parenting style is associated with children’s inflammation and immune activation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31(3), 374.
- Caserta, M. T., O’Connor, T. G., Wyman, P. A., Wang, H., Moynihan, J., Cross, W., Tu, X., & Jin, X. (2008). The associations between psychosocial stress and the frequency of illness, and innate and adaptive immune function in children. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, 22(6), 933–940.
- Charles, S. T., & Carstensen, L. L. (2010). Social and emotional aging. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61, 383–409.
- Chiao, J. Y., Harada, T., Komeda, H., Li, Z., Mano, Y., Saito, D., Parrish, T. B., Sadato, N., & Iidaka, T. (2010). Dynamic cultural influences on neural representations of the self. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 22(1), 1–11.

- Coplan, R. J., Bowker, A., & Cooper, S. M. (2003). Parenting daily hassles, child temperament, and social adjustment in preschool. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 18*(3), 376–395.
- Cousino, M. K., & Hazen, R. A. (2013). Parenting stress among caregivers of children with chronic illness: A systematic review. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 38*(8), 809–828.
- Cox, M. J., & Paley, B. (2003). Understanding families as systems. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 12*(5), 193–196.
- Cozza, S. J. (2011). Children of military service members: Raising national awareness of the family health consequences of combat deployment. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 165*(11), 1044–1046.
- D’Onofrio, B. M., Lahey, B. B., Turkheimer, E., & Lichtenstein, P. (2013). Critical need for family-based, quasi-experimental designs in integrating genetic and social science research. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(SUPPL.1), S46–S55.
- Darwin, C. (1859). *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*. John Murray.
- Deans, C., & Maggert, K. A. (2015). What do you mean, “epigenetic”? *Genetics, 199*(4), 887–896.
- Dick, D. M., Viken, R., Purcell, S., Kaprio, J., Pulkkinen, L., & Rose, R. J. (2007). Parental monitoring moderates the importance of genetic and environmental influences on adolescent smoking. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 116*(1), 213.
- Domínguez Duque, J. F., Turner, R., Lewis, E. D., & Egan, G. (2010). Neuroanthropology: A humanistic science for the study of the culture–brain nexus. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 5*(2–3), 138–147.
- Eisenberger, N. I., Inagaki, T. K., Mashal, N. M., & Irwin, M. R. (2010). Inflammation and social experience: An inflammatory challenge induces feelings of social disconnection in addition to depressed mood. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity, 24*(4), 558–563.
- Epel, E. S., Blackburn, E. H., Lin, J., Dhabhar, F. S., Adler, N. E., Morrow, J. D., et al. (2004). Accelerated telomere shortening in response to life stress. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 101*(49), 17312–17315.
- Fagundes, C. P., Gillie, B. L., Derry, H. M., Bennett, J. M., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. (2012). Resilience and immune function in older adults. *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics, 32*(1), 29–47.
- Farzi, A., Reichmann, F., & Holzer, P. (2015). The homeostatic role of neuropeptide Y in immune function and its impact on mood and behaviour. *Acta Physiologica, 213*(3), 603–627.
- Gangl, M. (2010). Causal inference in sociological research. *Annual Review of Sociology, 36*, 21–47.
- Geary, D. C., & Flinn, M. V. (2001). Evolution of human parental behavior and the human family. *Parenting, 1*(1–2), 5–61.
- Gershon, N. B., & High, P. C. (2015, December). Epigenetics and child abuse: Modern-day darwinism—The miraculous ability of the human genome to adapt, and then adapt again. *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part C: Seminars in Medical Genetics, 169*(4), 353–360.
- Gottlieb, G. (1998). Normally occurring environmental and behavioral influences on gene activity: From central dogma to probabilistic epigenesis. *Psychological Review, 105*(4), 792–802.
- Gottlieb, G., & Lickliter, R. (2007). Probabilistic epigenesis. *Developmental Science, 10*(1), 1–11.
- Grigorenko, E. L., Kornilov, S. A., & Naumova, O. Y. (2016). Epigenetic regulation of cognition: A circumscribed review of the field. *Development and Psychopathology, 28*(4pt2), 1285–1304.
- Kendler, K. S., Aggen, S. H., Prescott, C. A., Jacobson, K. C., & Neale, M. C. (2004). Level of family dysfunction and genetic influences on smoking in women. *Psychological Medicine, 34*(7), 1263.
- Kendler, K. S., & Baker, J. H. (2007). Genetic influences on measures of the environment: A systematic review. *Psychological Medicine, 37*(5), 615.
- Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., Preacher, K. J., MacCallum, R. C., Atkinson, C., Malarkey, W. B., & Glaser, R. (2003). Chronic stress and age-related increases in the proinflammatory cytokine IL-6. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 100*(15), 9090–9095.

- Lutgendorf, S. K., Garand, L., Buckwalter, K. C., Reimer, T. T., Hong, S. Y., & Lubaroff, D. M. (1999). Life stress, mood disturbance, and elevated interleukin-6 in healthy older women. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series A, Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 54(9), M434–M439.
- Major, D. A. (2003). Utilizing role theory to help employed parents cope with children's chronic illness. *Health Education Research*, 18(1), 45–57.
- McEwen, B. S., & Stellar, E. (1993). Stress and the individual: Mechanisms leading to disease. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 153(18), 2093–2101.
- Meaney, M. J. (2010). Epigenetics and the biological definition of gene-environment interactions. *Child Development*, 81(1), 41–79.
- Miller, G., Rohleder, N., & Cole, S. W. (2009). Chronic interpersonal stress predicts activation of pro- and anti-inflammatory signaling pathways six months later. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 71(1), 57.
- Miller, G. E., & Chen, E. (2006). Life stress and diminished expression of genes encoding glucocorticoid receptor and  $\beta$ 2-adrenergic receptor in children with asthma. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 103(14), 5496–5501.
- Naumova, O. Y., Dozier, M., Dobrynin, P. V., Grigorev, K., Wallin, A., Jeltova, I., Lee, M., Raefski, A., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2018). Developmental dynamics of the epigenome: A longitudinal study of three toddlers. *Neurotoxicology and Teratology*, 66, 125–131.
- Paley, B., Lester, P., & Mogil, C. (2013). Family systems and ecological perspectives on the impact of deployment on military families. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 16(3), 245–265.
- Repetti, R. L., Robles, T. F., & Reynolds, B. (2011). Allostatic processes in the family. *Development and Psychopathology*, 23(3), 921–938.
- Robles, T. F., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. (2003). The physiology of marriage: Pathways to health. *Physiology & Behavior*, 79(3), 409–416.
- Santos, H. P., Jr., Nephew, B. C., Bhattacharya, A., Tan, X., Smith, L., Alyamani, R. A. S., Martin, E. M., Perreira, K., Fry, R. C., & Murgatroyd, C. (2018). Discrimination exposure and DNA methylation of stress-related genes in Latina mothers. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 98, 131–138.
- Schmidt, L. A., Fox, N. A., Rubin, K. H., Hu, S., & Hamer, D. H. (2002). Molecular genetics of shyness and aggression in preschoolers. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 33(2), 227–238.
- Sheridan, J. F., Stark, J. L., Avitsur, R., & Padgett, D. A. (2000). Social disruption, immunity, and susceptibility to viral infection: Role of glucocorticoid insensitivity and NGF. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 917(1), 894–905.
- Sturge-Apple, M. L., Cicchetti, D., Davies, P. T., & Suor, J. H. (2012). Differential susceptibility in spillover between interparental conflict and maternal parenting practices: Evidence for OXTR and 5-HTT genes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(3), 431.
- Taylor, S. E. (2011). Social support: A review. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 189–214). Oxford University Press.
- Troost, K. M., & Filsinger, E. (1993). Emerging biosocial perspectives on the family. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 677–710).
- Tudge, J. R. H., Payir, A., Merçon-Vargas, E., Cao, H., Liang, Y., Li, J., & O'Brien, L. (2016). Still misused after all these years? A reevaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(4), 427–445.
- Uchino, B. N., Cacioppo, J. T., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. (1996). The relationship between social support and physiological processes: A review with emphasis on underlying mechanisms and implications for health. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(3), 488–531.
- Uchiyama, R., Spicer, R., & Muthukrishna, M. (2020). Cultural evolution and genetic heritability. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 21, 1–147.
- Umberson, D., & Thomeer, M. B. (2020). Family matters: Research on family ties and health, 2010 to 2020. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 404–419.



- von Känel, R., Dimsdale, J. E., Mills, P. J., Ancoli-Israel, S., Patterson, T. L., Mausbach, B. T., et al. (2006). Effect of Alzheimer caregiving stress and age on frailty markers interleukin-6, C-reactive protein, and D-dimer. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series A, Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, *61*(9), 963–969.
- Walum, H., Lichtenstein, P., Neiderhiser, J. M., Reiss, D., Ganiban, J. M., Spotts, E. L., ... & Westberg, L. (2012). Variation in the oxytocin receptor gene is associated with pair-bonding and social behavior. *Biological Psychiatry*, *71*(5), 419–426.
- Wilson, E. O. (1975). *Sociobiology: The new synthesis*. Harvard University Press.

# Application: Childrearing and the Health of Working-Age Parents



Reed DeAngelis

Most research on family stress processes has focused exclusively on how distressed family environments undermine the well-being of children (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Much less is known about how chronic childrearing stressors affect the health of working-age parents. Sociological research on work–family conflict has highlighted work as a “greedy institution” that encroaches upon family life (Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Schieman et al., 2006). Recent decades have also witnessed a parallel shift in parenting norms toward more intensive and “hands-on” childrearing practices. Parents are now expected to be childrearing experts who can remain attuned to their child’s every want and need, devoting maximum time and energy toward securing their child’s best life outcomes (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996).

According to sociological theories of inter-role conflict and stress, working parents may struggle to meet these conflicting demands and suffer increased distress and poor health as a result (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Marks, 1977). Still, there are serious conceptual and methodological challenges that come with gauging parenting-related distress among younger parents. Perhaps the most difficult task is choosing relevant measures of distress and poor health. Indeed, because working-age parents are still relatively young, most of this population will not exhibit observable signs of declining health, such as diagnosable illnesses.

To further complicate matters, parents can engage in any number of coping strategies that moderate the effects of childrearing stressors. A central tenet of biopsychosocial theories of health is that a person’s subjective experiences of life circumstances can condition the health effects of stressors (Borrell-Carrio, 2004). In the current context, parents can exercise agency to effectively cope with childrearing demands, and ultimately ward off health complications associated with having to manage work and parenting roles (e.g., Lazarus & Launier, 1978).

---

R. DeAngelis (✉)

Department of Sociology, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

e-mail: [reedd@live.unc.edu](mailto:reedd@live.unc.edu)

This brief report applies a biopsychosocial lens to parental health. First, I demonstrate the importance of using biomarker data to reveal latent stress processes among working-age parents. My analyses compare associations between childrearing and two health-relevant measures: (1) physician-diagnosed chronic illnesses and (2) cellular aging via telomere length. Telomeres are protective endcaps on chromosomes that help to preserve chromosomal stability during cell division (mitosis). Telomeres naturally shorten in length by shedding DNA base pairs through each round of mitosis. Over time, however, chromosomes can lose too much telomeric DNA and become unstable. The process of telomere shedding eventually destabilizes chromosomes to the point where cell integrity can no longer be maintained, resulting in cellular senescence or death.

Several decades of experimental and observational research have established that chronic exposure to psychosocial stressors can accelerate telomere shortening via processes of inflammation and methylation. Shorter telomere length, in turn, is a consistent predictor of subsequent morbidity and mortality (Blackburn, 2000; Blackburn & Epel, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Because working-age parents may be too young to experience chronic illnesses from childrearing, shortened telomeres could be a relevant indicator of physiological distress for this population. Indeed, studies have found that parents with underage children in the home tend to exhibit shorter telomeres relative to their childless peers (DeAngelis et al., 2020; Epel et al., 2004).

I also consider two coping behaviors that could moderate the health effects of childrearing stressors: private prayer and smoking. Perceived relations with God have been shown to promote emotional catharsis and a vicarious sense of agency (Krause, 2005; Sharp, 2010), especially within the context of coping with chronic psychosocial stressors (DeAngelis, 2018; DeAngelis & Ellison, 2017, 2018). Similar studies have also shown that engaging in regular contemplative practices, such as mindfulness meditation, can slow rates of cellular aging (Epel et al., 2009). Smoking, on the other hand, tends to promote poor health and accelerated aging (Astuti et al., 2017). I therefore expect private prayer to attenuate, and smoking to amplify, the associations between childrearing and poor health outcomes among working-age parents.

## Data

Data come from the Nashville Stress and Health Study (NSAHS), a cross-sectional probability survey of Black and White working-age adults who lived in Davidson County, Tennessee, between 2011 and 2014 ( $n = 1252$ ). Data were collected using multistage, stratified cluster sampling with census block groups as the sampling units. The total sample was stratified by race and gender to ensure equal representation of Black and White women and men. Fifty-nine percent of contacted persons agreed to participate in the study. All analyses are weighted for the probability of selection during the household screening phase, and for nonresponse during the

interview phase. Poststratification weights are incorporated into the final design weight to permit generalizability to the county's population of Black and White adults.

The average survey interview lasted 3 hours. Interviews were computer-assisted and conducted in the respondent's home or on the Vanderbilt campus. Trained interviewers were matched to respondents based on race. The morning following the survey interview, clinicians visited the respondent's home to collect intravenous blood samples for gauging biological aging through leukocyte cell tissue. Respondents received \$50 each for participating in the survey and biomarker phases of the interview. Less than 2% of respondents refused to provide biomarker data (for more information on NSAHS data collection, see Turner et al., 2017).

## Measures

**Chronic Illnesses** Respondents were presented with a checklist of 26 potential illnesses and were asked to report whether they have experienced each illness, and, if so, whether the illness was diagnosed by a physician within the last 12 months. Illnesses included recurring pneumonia, tuberculosis, diabetes, hypertension, ulcers, kidney problems, stroke, and high cholesterol, among others. Respondents were counted as having a chronic illness if they reported receiving a physician diagnosis more than a year ago. The weighted average for the number of chronic illnesses is 3.88, with a range of 0–17 and standard deviation of 3.14.

**Leukocyte Telomere Length** Cellular aging was measured via leukocyte telomere length (LTL) captured from white blood cells. Average LTL was measured as the ratio of telomeric DNA (T) to a single-copy sequence (T/S ratio) via the monochrome multiplex quantitative polymerase chain reaction (MMQ-PCR) method, with albumin as the single-copy reference sequence (Cawthon, 2009). LTL values reflect the average of two separate measurements that obtained R-squared values of 0.94 across independent samples. LTL scores are continuous, normally distributed, and reflect relative scores among the NSAHS sample rather than absolute counts of DNA base pairs. LTL is coded such that higher scores indicate longer telomeres or less biological aging (for more information, see Hill et al., 2016).

**Childrearing** The main predictor of my analysis was childrearing, measured as a single indicator of the number of children in the home. Respondents were first asked whether they had any children. Those who answered affirmatively were then asked to report the number of children living with them at the time of the interview. The weighted average for the number of children in the home is 0.79, with a range of 0–8 and standard deviation of 1.08.

**Coping** Two separate coping behaviors are considered. The first coping behavior is smoking (1 = current smoker, 0 = does not smoke). The second coping behavior is

private prayer (1 = prays several times daily, 0 = does not). Among the weighted NSAHS sample, 25% currently smoke and 35% pray several times daily.

**Covariates** Analyses included covariates for age (in years), gender (1 = female, 0 = male), race (1 = Black, 0 = White), and education (in years). The average age of respondents is 44, with a range of 22–69 and standard deviation of 11.72. The average respondent also has 14.49 years of education, and the sample is evenly split among Black and White women and men.

## Results

Two separate models regress chronic illnesses and LTL on the number of children in the home, coping behaviors, covariates, and interactions between coping behaviors and children. The first model tests an interaction between number of children and smoking. The second model tests an interaction between children and daily prayer. Ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression techniques with probability weights and robust standard errors clustered by block group were used.

Main findings are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 and Fig. 1. Table 1 shows the number of children in the home is associated with both fewer chronic illnesses and shorter telomeres. For example, holding covariates at their means, each additional child in the home is associated with a 0.355-unit decrease in the number of chronic illnesses in Model 1 ( $b = -0.355$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Private prayer and smoking do not moderate associations between the number of children in the home and chronic illnesses, which is indicated by the nonsignificant interaction terms across models.

When considering telomere length as the outcome, both private prayer and smoking moderate associations with the number of children. Table 2 reports average marginal associations between the number of children and LTL, conditional on coping behaviors. Holding covariates at their respective means, each additional child in the home is associated with a 0.039-unit decrease in LTL for parents who smoke ( $b = -0.039$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Given that a one-year increase in age is associated with a 0.006-unit decrease in LTL (not shown), this is equivalent to a 6.5-year gap in cellular aging for each additional child. For parents who do not smoke, however, the number of children in the home is only marginally associated with LTL ( $b = -0.012$ ;  $p < 0.10$ ).

Similar disparities are found between parents who do and do not pray regularly. For parents who do not pray regularly, each additional child in the home is associated with a 0.033-unit decrease in LTL after holding covariates at their respective means ( $b = -0.033$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). This is equivalent to a 5.5-year aging gap for each additional child. For parents who pray several times a day, however, the number of children in the home is not associated with LTL ( $b = 0.002$ ;  $p > 0.10$ ). These patterns can be visually confirmed in Fig. 1.

**Table 1** Robust linear regression estimates of chronic illnesses and telomere length: NSAHS ( $n = 1108$ )

	Chronic illnesses						Telomere length					
	(1)			(2)			(1)			(2)		
Number of children in home	-0.355	(0.102)	**	-0.371	(0.131)	**	-0.012	(0.007)		-0.033	(0.008)	***
Smoking	0.443	(0.254)					-0.040	(0.017)	*			
Private prayer				0.138	(0.244)					-0.002	(0.014)	
Children × smoking	0.335	(0.260)					-0.027	(0.013)	*			
Children × prayer				0.186	(0.206)					0.035	(0.012)	**
Intercept	1.501	(0.962)		2.010	(0.976)	*	0.903	(0.055)	***	0.860	(0.054)	***
R-squared	0.202			0.199			0.127			0.126		

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are reported with robust standard errors in parentheses. Estimates adjust for probability weighting, clustering by block group, and covariates (not shown). Estimates exclude respondents with missing telomere data ( $n = 144$ ). NSAHS = Nashville Stress and Health Study (2011–2014).

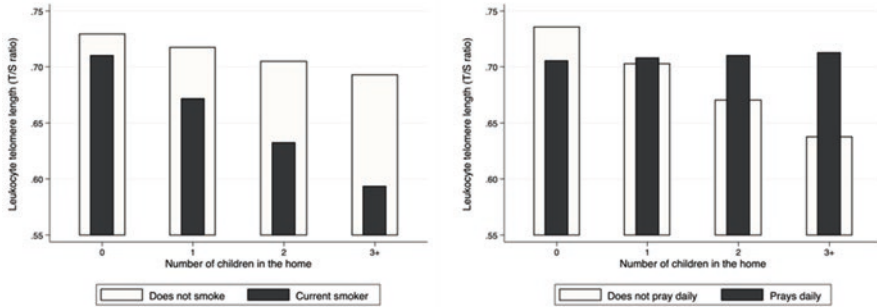
\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed)

**Table 2** Average marginal associations between number of children in the home and LTL, conditional on coping behaviors: NSAHS ( $n = 1108$ )

	<i>b</i>	(s.e.)	<i>p</i>
<i>Model 1</i>			
Number of children in home @			
Does not smoke	-0.012	(0.007)	
Current smoker	-0.039	(0.011)	**
<i>Model 2</i>			
Number of children in home @			
Prays daily	0.002	(0.009)	
Does not pray daily	-0.033	(0.008)	***

Notes: Unstandardized linear regression coefficients (*b*) are reported with robust standard errors (s.e.) clustered by block group in parentheses. Respondent’s age, gender, race, and education are held at their respective means. LTL = leukocyte telomere length. NSAHS = Nashville Stress and Health Study (2011–2014). Estimates exclude respondents with missing telomere data ( $n = 144$ )

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed)



**Fig. 1** Number of children in the home and leukocyte telomere length by coping behaviors

## Discussion

This chapter highlights the utility of biopsychosocial theories and methods for the study of family processes. I demonstrate, first, that the health implications of childrearing for working-age parents are dependent upon the outcome under consideration. On the one hand, I find that parents with more children in the home tend to report fewer physician-diagnosed illnesses than their peers with fewer or no children in the home. This finding would seem to suggest that active childrearing promotes better health. On the other hand, parents with more children also exhibit shorter telomeres, a marker of accelerated aging. This latter finding suggests that childrearing is a source of physiological distress and increased morbidity and mortality risk.

Both findings are consistent with prior research. For instance, studies have shown that healthier persons tend to have more children (Kim & Hicks, 2016). It might be the case, then, that NSAHs respondents with more children were already healthier to begin with (i.e., health selection effect). However, other studies have also revealed associations between active childrearing and shorter telomeres (DeAngelis et al., 2020; Epel et al., 2004). Taken together, these findings indicate that while working-age parents may start off healthy, conflicting demands from work and parenting roles can gradually erode physiological systems.

Another key finding from this chapter is that parental coping behaviors moderate the association between childrearing and cellular aging. To be specific, children in the home are not associated with telomere length for parents who avoid smoking and engage in private prayer throughout the day. These findings indicate that parents can exercise agency to effectively cope with the demands of childrearing, ultimately slowing cellular aging processes.

This chapter has broader implications for the use of biopsychosocial theories and methods in future studies of families. From a methodological standpoint, my analyses demonstrate the benefits of using biomarker data to quantify subclinical effects of stressors among working-age parents (see also DeAngelis, 2021). Biomarkers can provide critical information about the well-being of vulnerable populations,

who may be unaware of the degree to which their bodies are undergoing accelerated aging and stress processes (DeAngelis, 2020).

Population scientists should continue to engage with biological data moving forward. As Massey (2015) points out, biologists may be well-versed in molecular mechanics, “but they do not necessarily understand the social structures and processes that give rise to the environmental context in which these biological processes play out” (p. 130). This chapter provides one example of how sociological theorizing can augment biological data to reveal population disparities, particularly within the domain of family stress processes.

## References

- Astuti, Y., Wardhana, A., Watkins, J., & Wulaningsih, W. (2017). Cigarette smoking and telomere length: A systematic review of 84 studies and meta-analysis. *Environmental Research, 158*, 480–489.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands- resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 22*(3), 309–328.
- Blackburn, E. H. (2000). Telomere states and cell fates. *Nature, 408*(6808), 53–56.
- Blackburn, E. H., & Epel, E. (2017). *The telomere effect: A revolutionary approach to living younger, healthier, longer*. Hachette.
- Borrell-Carrio, F. (2004). The biopsychosocial model 25 years later: Principles, practice, and scientific inquiry. *The Annals of Family Medicine, 2*(6), 576–582.
- Cawthon, R. M. (2009). Telomere length measurement by a novel monochrome multiplex quantitative PCR method. *Nucleic Acids Research, 37*(3), e21–e21.
- DeAngelis, R. T. (2018). Goal-striving stress and self-concept: The moderating role of perceived divine control. *Society & Mental Health, 8*(2), 141–156.
- DeAngelis, R. T. (2020). Striving while black: Race and the psychophysiology of goal pursuit. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 61*(1), 24–42.
- DeAngelis, R. T. (2021). Moving on up? Neighborhood status and racism-related distress among Black Americans. *Social Forces*.
- DeAngelis, R. T., & Ellison, C. G. (2017). Kept in his care: The role of perceived divine control in positive reappraisal coping. *Religions, 8*(8), 133.
- DeAngelis, R. T., & Ellison, C. G. (2018). Aspiration strain and mental health: The education-contingent role of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 57*(2), 341–364.
- DeAngelis, R. T., Taylor, J., & Friedman, K. L. (2020). Parental status and biological functioning: Findings from the Nashville Stress and Health Study. *Population Research and Policy Review, 39*, 365–373.
- Epel, E., Daubenmier, J., Moskowitz, J. T., Folkman, S., & Blackburn, E. (2009). Can meditation slow rate of cellular aging? Cognitive stress, mindfulness, and telomeres. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1172*(1), 34–53.
- Epel, E. S., Blackburn, E. H., Lin, J., Dhabhar, F. S., Adler, N. E., Morrow, J. D., & Cawthon, R. M. (2004). Accelerated telomere shortening in response to life stress. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 101*(49), 17312–17315.
- Faircloth, C. (2014). Intensive parenting and the expansion of parenting. In *Parenting culture studies* (pp. 25–50). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Glavin, P., & Schieman, S. (2012). Work–family role blurring and work–family conflict: The moderating influence of job resources and job demands. *Work and Occupations, 39*(1), 71–98.
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.



- Hill, T. D., Ellison, C. G., Burdette, A. M., Taylor, J., & Friedman, K. L. (2016). Dimensions of religious involvement and leukocyte telomere length. *Social Science & Medicine*, *163*, 168–175.
- Kim, J., & Hicks, J. A. (2016). Happiness begets children? Evidence for a bi-directional link between well-being and number of children. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *11*(1), 62–69.
- Krause, N. (2005). God-mediated control and psychological well-being in late life. *Research on Aging*, *27*(2), 136–164.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Launier, R. (1978). Stress-related transactions between person and environment. In *Perspectives in interactional psychology* (pp. 287–327). Springer.
- Marks, S. R. (1977). Multiple roles and role strain: Some notes on human energy, time, and commitment. *American Sociological Review*, *42*(6), 921.
- Masarik, A. S., & Conger, R. D. (2017). Stress and child development: A review of the family stress model. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *13*, 85–90.
- Massey, D. S. (2015). Brave new world of biosocial science. *Criminology*, *53*(1), 127–131.
- Schieman, S., Whitestone, Y. K., & Gundy, K. V. (2006). The nature of work and the stress of higher status. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *47*(3), 242–257.
- Sharp, S. (2010). How does prayer help manage emotions? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *73*(4), 417–437.
- Turner, R. J., Brown, T. N., & Hale, W. B. (2017). Race, socioeconomic position, and physical health: A descriptive analysis. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *58*(1), 23–36.
- Wang, Q., Zhan, Y., Pedersen, N. L., Fang, F., & Hägg, S. (2018). Telomere length and all-cause mortality: A meta-analysis. *Ageing Research Reviews*, *48*, 11–20.

# Stress-Related Biomarkers Methods in Family Research



Deadric T. Williams, Bridget J. Goosby, and Jacob E. Cheadle

Acceptance of biosocial models to assess human health, behavior, and well-being has grown rapidly in the social sciences. Though used most prominently to assess health outcomes throughout the life course, biological markers of pre-disease indicators and associated psychosocial outcomes can also help to enrich our understanding of processes that unfold among family members and processes that distinguish families from one another (Booth et al., 2000; D’Onofrio & Lahey, 2010; Ha & Granger, 2016). In this chapter, we discuss a specific subset of biomarkers relevant to stress-related health and behavioral outcomes of interest for family researchers. Two key terms are used regularly in this chapter. First, the concept *biosocial* is defined as the general extent to which biological phenomena converge with social contact and interaction to shape human development and outcomes over the life course (Harris & McDade, 2018). Second, *biological markers* (*biomarkers* hereafter) are defined as objective “markers of (ab)normal biological states resulting from underlying (patho)physiological processes” (Halpern et al., 2014; Harris & McDade, 2018; Piazza et al., 2010) and related psychological and behavioral outcomes.

This chapter focuses on biosocial methods in the context of family research. We organize the chapter as follows: first, we present the historical origins of the methodology with an emphasis on family science. Second, we highlight the basic assumptions of the methodology as it relates to theoretical perspectives that undergird family research. Third, we provide a general overview of the methodology to

---

D. T. Williams (✉)

Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Knoxville, TN, USA

e-mail: [dwill196@utk.edu](mailto:dwill196@utk.edu)

B. J. Goosby · J. E. Cheadle

Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_46](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_46)

629

address the concepts and techniques germane to stress biomarkers. Fourth, we focus on the specific questions biosocial methods can address based on family theories. Fifth, we provide two broad examples to highlight the role of biospecimen and ambulatory approaches to family relationships with a specific emphasis on social context (e.g., poverty) and dyadic functioning (e.g., physiological synchronicity). Sixth, we underscore the limitations of biomarker methods, including the need to collect data from underrepresented minorities. Finally, we discuss future directions of biomarker methods in family research by calling attention to the use of biosensors, and how these technologies could work in tandem with stress biomarkers.

## Historical Origins of the Methodology

Since Hans Selye's (1956) seminal experimental research with rats uncovered links between stress and physical morbidity, an extensive literature linking stress and health in human populations has developed. According to Harris and Schorpp (2018), growth in the utilization of biological models resulted from three key trends: first, the push for multi- and interdisciplinary research to understand complex social problems; second, theoretical and conceptual interest in how social stratification shapes human biology; and finally, health research leveraging rapid technological developments in survey field methods and biological data collection and assay methods (Harris & Schorpp, 2018).

These trends have also been influenced by family scholars. Booth et al. (2000) offered a primer on human biological systems for family scientists. Their review provided examples for how researchers could incorporate biological processes from behavioral endocrinology, behavior genetics, and evolutionary psychology into research. Their work emphasized the role of biology in family processes such as parenthood, child and adolescent development, parent-child relationships, courtship and mate selection, and marital quality and stability. The review led to an explosion of family research integrating biosocial models. In 2010, another review by D'Onofrio and Lahey highlighted the role of genetics and social neuroscience in family research. Furthermore, the use of new data collection approaches (e.g., ambulatory, intensive longitudinal, experience sampling; Repetti et al., 2015) has coalesced to influence an emerging line of research on biosocial models of families. Taken together, these reviews demonstrate both the growth of biosocial models in family research and the collaborative, interdisciplinary nature of these efforts.

## Basic Assumptions of the Methodology

For the purpose of this chapter, we focus on biosocial processes as they relate to markers of stress reactivity and their associated health and behavioral outcomes. Though there is an extensive literature in the area of genetics in family and

stratification research, a discussion of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. This section describes key terms such as *HPA axis* and *inflammation* that will be used throughout the remainder of the chapter to discuss the various systemic markers that we believe can be integrated into family research.

The consequences of disease risk and stress-related behavioral outcomes are not limited to individuals. For example, individuals' stress-related health outcomes are embedded within families, whose members are linked to one another over the life course, mutually shaping each other's risk for illness via the demands, stressors, social interactions, and other family processes that have consequences for each family member's outcomes (Ha & Granger, 2016; Timmons et al., 2015). Within this context, we discuss the possibilities of applying these concepts and methods to family research with focus on the specific subset of biological markers defined below.

### ***HPA Axis: Metabolic Function, Health Behavior, and Measurement***

The hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical axis, hereafter called the *HPA axis*, is a central mediator for stress-related disease outcomes such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. The primary function of the HPA axis is to regulate metabolic and immune function and mood (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). In response to stress, the body triggers the “fight or flight response,” and in response, the HPA axis elevates the circulation of certain hormones, including the stress hormone *cortisol*. Cortisol is broadly implicated in metabolic function (e.g., circulating blood glucose, fat storage, insulin response), immune response (e.g., increased inflammation for wound healing), mood (Black, 2003), and health behaviors such as sleep (Irwin, 2015).

Cortisol is the most common biomarker used to assess stress reactivity of the HPA axis. Cortisol levels function on a circadian cycle (24 h) and on a diurnal scale (12 h). Patterns of secretion increase shortly after awakening [cortisol awakening response (CAR)] in healthy individuals, with peak levels by late morning which then decline over the course of the day (Buckley & Schatzberg, 2005). Chronic stress exposure, however, is associated with higher basal cortisol rates, flatter diurnal slopes, lower morning or waking cortisol values, and higher afternoon and evening levels, which are associated with cardiovascular disease risk, poor mental health, and daytime fatigue (Adam, 2006; Goosby et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2007). Cortisol measurement in the context of families holds promise as it can allow for assessing variation both within individuals and across family members sharing home environments.

## ***Sympathetic Nervous System***

The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) works in tandem with the HPA axis and is also a key pathway linked to stress reactivity and chronic disease risk. The SNS regulates cardiovascular function, including blood pressure, heart rate, and cardiovascular reactivity. In the presence of chronic stress, ongoing sympathetic upregulation of the cardiovascular response leads to elevated blood pressure, vasoconstriction of veins and arteries, and increased heart rate. The HPA axis moderates energy metabolism in response to stress, whereas the SNS is responsible for circulation of oxygenated blood for stress-related energy expenditures (Sapolsky, 2004). As with the HPA axis, chronic activation of the SNS can be harmful. The harm arises through increased risk of hypertension (chronically high blood pressure), arterial scarring and stiffening, and other markers of cardiovascular disease (Wallace et al., 2007). For this chapter, we focus on alpha-amylase ( $\alpha$ -amylase) as an indicator of the SNS.

***Alpha-Amylase*** Alpha-amylase ( $\alpha$ -amylase) is a biomarker indicator of SNS arousal that is collected via saliva.  $\alpha$ -Amylase is responsive to both physical and psychological stress and is considered a marker for autonomic nervous system dysregulation (Nater & Rohleder, 2009). Moreover, it can be used as a dynamic measure of SNS activation similar to how cortisol is employed (Adam et al., 2011). Although  $\alpha$ -amylase is similar to cortisol in that both can be extracted from saliva, there are two important differences between them that are worth noting: (a) there are differences in the timing of stress responsivity whereby SNS is quicker and HPA axis is slower, and (b) cortisol is released from the adrenal gland whereas  $\alpha$ -amylase is an enzyme released by the salivary gland directly into the mouth (Granger et al., 2006, 2007; Ha & Granger, 2016). Previous research shows that SNS reactivity increases  $\alpha$ -amylase after a stressor (Ali & Pruessner, 2012).

## ***Immune Function Measurement (Inflammation)***

Immune function is also a key pathway linking stress to chronic conditions including atherosclerosis, insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, and other metabolic conditions (Black, 2003). Immune function is generally measured by social scientists using inflammatory markers such as *C-reactive protein* (CRP), a cell-mediated protein produced in the liver, and *proinflammatory cytokines* including interleukin-6 (IL-6) and fibrinogen, a protein synthesized by cytokines (Harris & Schorpp, 2018; McEwen, 2002). The body's inflammatory function is an initial reaction to a foreign intrusion or injury but is also linked to acute and chronic psychological stress exposure (Black, 2003; Lockwood et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2013). For example, chronically upregulated SNS arousal and subsequent increases in cardiovascular activity can cause an immune system cascade because of chronic arterial stress and damage to endothelial cells on the surface interior of the arteries (Ross, 1999). Social stressors such as racial discrimination are associated with elevated proinflammatory

cytokines among African American youth transitioning into adulthood (Brody et al., 2015). Moreover, psychosocial stressors such as social isolation that are linked to mortality are mediated by elevated inflammatory markers (Yang et al., 2013). There is also evidence that these markers are responsive on short timescales (within 24 h; La Fratta et al., 2018) after experiencing a stressor, which suggest that they may lend themselves to dynamic prospective family process studies.

### ***Allostatic Load***

A key concept in the model of physiological stress is that of *allostasis*, or physiological response to external and internal input for the body's optimal biological functioning (Sterling, 2012). Exposure to stressful social conditions and interactions can increase the adaptive stress response. Though beneficial and protective in moments of acute stress, chronic upregulation increases risk for morbidity across several physiologic systems linked to chronic diseases and psychopathology (McEwen, 1998, 2003). This process, commonly referred to as *allostatic load*, is associated with morbidity in general (Seeman et al., 2010) and appears to distinguish broader health disparity trends across populations (Seeman et al., 2008). In practice, allostatic load measures seek to capture an array of biological markers linked to metabolic, cardiovascular, and immune function to better represent the systemic toll of stress on different biological systems. Commonly used indicators include blood glucose, body mass, waist circumference, cholesterol, inflammation, autonomic nervous system (including sympathetic and parasympathetic), and HPA activation markers (see Geronimus et al., 2006; Gruenewald et al., 2012; Gustafsson et al., 2014; Harris & Schorpp, 2018; Upchurch et al., 2015).

### **Overview of Methodology**

Tremendous scientific progress has been made in the noninvasive collection of biomarkers in the field, which creates exciting opportunities for biological data collection in family studies. Biomarkers can be collected via venous blood draws and urine (Sakhi et al., 2015), saliva (Nunes et al., 2015), blood spots (Fischer et al., 2019; McDade et al., 2007), and wearable devices (Timmons et al., 2017; Trull & Ebner-Priemer, 2013). These advances have led to a rapid growth in collections in natural settings (Timmons et al., 2017). These data collection methods require special attention to protocols for handling, assaying, data cleaning, and variable construction. Moreover, depending on the assumptions of different markers, specific measurement strategies may be required.

Biomarker collection methods and analytic models incorporating markers in family studies are largely dependent on the types of research questions asked and temporal scaling required when conducting any form of prospective study. For

example, if one were to conduct a study assessing the relationship between parent reports of economic insecurity and couple's allostatic load (AL) levels, an array of biomarkers as discussed in the prior section may be collected over time to create an index of allostatic load trajectories. Clinical cutoffs for morbidity are used to create dichotomous items equating high risk (=1) and summed to create an AL marker where higher scores indicated higher wear and tear that can then be utilized as a variable in statistical models.

Other biomarkers can be leveraged for more dynamic models of intraindividual and intrafamily dynamics such as cortisol and alpha-amylase collected via saliva. For example, because of cortisol's diurnal rhythm, salivary markers to assess stress reactivity over the course of the day require multiple within-day data points to assess patterns of heightened physiological stress reactivity. For example, to assess the association between levels of family conflict and stress reactivity among family members, at least three samples per day (with more being optimal) are required – at first waking, 30 min after waking, and before bedtime over several days, coupled with daily diaries completed by participants. The biomarker samples would be used to calculate an area under the curve score for each day to identify the steepness of the diurnal curve within people (steeper curves with steady declines to bedtime are ideal), which then could be related both to other family members and to survey responses about stress and other factors (e.g., conflict in the home).

Biomarkers from bloodspots, a minimally invasive form of data collection, can also be employed in family science. When measuring markers that are relatively stable over longer time horizons such as CRP to measure immune function, blood spots provide an easier collection protocol relative to the collection of stress hormones via saliva, which require immediate freezing. Furthermore, CRP and other inflammatory markers are more stable within persons over time, but they are relative to stress hormones and sensitive to across person variation. While CRP is the most common immune marker collected via blood spots, additional inflammatory markers are also available that measure overall immune function in the body (La Fratta et al., 2018; Razavi et al., 2016). These inflammatory markers are associated with outcomes of interest to family researchers, including depression, anger, and anxiety (La Fratta et al., 2018; Valkanova et al., 2013).

## Summary of Main Questions the Methodology Can Address

There is a long history of family scholarship that focuses on the role of stressors within families (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Wethington, 2000). Many family scientists begin with the general idea that families are systems in which individuals are interdependent with one another (Cox & Paley, 1997). Each family member possesses roles (e.g., parent, child, etc.) that carry specific expectations (e.g., caregiver, etc.) and that contribute to the equilibrium (or disequilibrium) of the overall familial system (Cox & Paley, 1997; O'Brien, 2005). Consequently, stressful conditions can

reverberate throughout the family system by adversely affecting the well-being of each individual family member.

Given that this chapter highlights stress biomarkers, we focus on studies that pose questions associated with family processes and physiological stress reactivity. For instance, research studies using biomarkers in the context of families have focused on three broad questions. First, can external (e.g., poverty) or internal (e.g., parenting behaviors) stressors impact children's health at pre-disease levels via biomarkers? Broadly, these studies demonstrate that chronic stressors (e.g., economic insecurity, family conflict, etc.) adversely impact physiological systems (Hagan et al., 2014; Kuhlman et al., 2016; Saxbe et al., 2014; Zalewski et al., 2012).

Second, do stress biomarkers function as a pathway through which family contextual factors influence the risk for children's subsequent adjustment? Although the first question focuses on stress biomarkers as outcomes, the second presents stress biomarkers as a mediating mechanism. The key feature of these studies highlights the link between adverse familial processes and children's adjustment and behavioral outcomes. The concern from these studies, however, is that considerable heterogeneity exists among children – that is, not all children react negatively to adverse conditions (Martin et al., 2014; Zalewski et al., 2012).

Last, are biological systems between family members synchronous or asynchronous? These studies focus on the explicit interdependence of familial relationships (e.g., child–parent, intimate partners). This line of research has grown substantially over the last 20 years. As such, studies on the covariation of biological markers vary across familial processes using different research designs (e.g., lab-based studies, ambulatory studies; Timmons et al., 2015). For instance, some studies show that parental behavior is associated with their own and their child's cortisol activity (Ha & Granger, 2016). Moreover, studies also demonstrate romantic partners experience physiological attunement (Timmons et al., 2015).

## **Examples of Application of the Methodology to Research with Families**

We provide two broad examples to illustrate the state of stress biomarkers applied to family research. First, we address the association between families' social context (e.g., poverty status) and children's physiological response. To illustrate social context using biospecimen methods, we pay attention to the data collection protocol (e.g., time intervals) and specific biomarkers (e.g., cortisol and alpha-amylase) to illustrate the variability in research designs. Second, we highlight intergenerational and intragenerational familial processes. Researchers refer to this line of inquiry as physiological synchronicity, attunement, concordance, or coregulation (for reviews, see Palumbo et al., 2017; Timmons et al., 2015). For these examples, we focus on studies that include dynamic assessments of biospecimen data collection.



### ***Families' Social Context and Biomarker Methods***

Several studies show that adverse conditions (e.g., poverty, hostile parenting, child abuse and neglect) are detrimental to children's stress response systems (for reviews, see Dowd et al., 2009; Ha & Granger, 2016). Poverty represents a social context whereby families lack adequate economic resources, which places children and families at risk for deleterious psychological, behavioral, and physiological outcomes (Dowd et al., 2009).

Hill-Sutherland and colleagues' (2015) study of 206 low-income and high-income families (mothers and children) provides a novel example of the link between poverty and children's stress biomarkers. Children provided saliva samples at 12, 18, 24, 30, and 36 months of age to consider the developmental trajectory of children's physiological systems. The researchers assayed for both cortisol and  $\alpha$ -amylase to evaluate the relative response from two separate biological systems. The study assessed the extent to which poverty was associated with stability and change in both markers, and whether changes in cortisol and  $\alpha$ -amylase operated as a mediator between poverty and children's internal and external behavioral problems at 36 months.

The results from Hill-Sutherland et al.'s (2015) study revealed several important findings. First, growth curve analyses indicated a nonlinear change in children's physiological stress responses whereby  $\alpha$ -amylase increased with age and cortisol decreased with age. Second, children living in poverty displayed lower initial levels of  $\alpha$ -amylase (e.g., sample collected at 12 months) but not cortisol. Third, only initial levels of  $\alpha$ -amylase were associated with higher levels of internalizing problems; initial levels and change in  $\alpha$ -amylase were associated with higher levels of externalizing behavioral problems at 36 months. Last,  $\alpha$ -amylase and cortisol did not mediate the link between poverty and children's behavioral outcomes. The authors conclude that the association between poverty and initial levels of  $\alpha$ -amylase but not changes in  $\alpha$ -amylase may reflect a muted stress response system when challenges are ongoing. Taken together, this study provides an exemplar for understanding social context and stress biomarkers in families.

### ***Familial Dyads, Synchronicity, and Biomarker Methods***

Scholars are using ambulatory methods to address the theoretically informed idea of physiological synchronicity among familial dyads. Ambulatory assessment is a broad term that captures data collected in naturalistic settings (Timmons et al., 2017; Trull & Ebner-Priemer, 2013). Early research examined physiological attunement among dyads using lab-based designs, but lab studies may create an artificial environment that cannot capture the challenges in individuals' actual environments (Timmons et al., 2017). The extent to which individuals within families are

physiologically linked has received growing interest, and ambulatory assessments have aided research endeavors among family scholars.

Papp et al. (2013) examined cortisol synchrony among 45 parents with adolescents. The biospecimen protocol for this study included collecting saliva seven times a day over 2 days. The purpose of the study was to understand the link between spousal connectedness (spousal presence, loneliness, and being alone) on cortisol levels of wives and husbands. Using dyadic hierarchical linear modeling, the findings demonstrated that, for husbands, their cortisol levels were higher when they reported feeling lonelier and cortisol levels were lower when they were in the presence of their spouse. For wives, their cortisol levels were higher when they felt alone. These findings also revealed that wife–husband cortisol synchronicity was stronger for husbands who spend more time with their spouse across the study period. Taken together, this study supports the idea of physiological synchronicity among spouses, and physical closeness may be the leading mechanism that accounts for the association.

Family scholars are also examining the physiological synchronicity among couple dyads using multiple biomarker measures. For example, in a study of 40 heterosexual couples, Doerr et al. (2018) examined the covariation of fatigue and stress biomarkers (e.g.,  $\alpha$ -amylase and cortisol) among couples in everyday life. This study included ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to collect information about fatigue and stress four times a day for five consecutive days. Saliva samples were collected during the same time, and both cortisol and  $\alpha$ -amylase were assayed. The findings revealed that (a) diurnal cortisol covaried for both partners and (b) variations in  $\alpha$ -amylase for mothers varied based on upon partner's levels but not vice versa. Similar to previous research, these findings highlight how stress physiological biomarkers become synchronized between intimate partners.

We highlight these two studies for several reasons. First, they demonstrate that collecting multiple saliva samples over time is vital in understanding stress response systems. Given that cortisol has a diurnal rhythm, time becomes critical for a meaningful understanding of proximal stress response in natural settings. Second, studies are increasingly using multiple biomarkers in a single study to capture a “multiple system measurement approach.” This allows researchers to be sensitive to the complexity of the human stress response system. Last, collecting multiple biomarker measures from multiple respondents within the same family requires analytical techniques that account for this complexity (e.g., nonindependence). Family scholars interested in biomarker research using dyads must either become acquainted with dyadic data analyses or form multidisciplinary research teams. Although understanding and addressing physiological synchronicity in familial dyads is complex, a growing number of studies indicate that scholars are willing to take on that complexity to move family science forward in novel ways.

## Limitations of Methodology for Family Research

While the broader integration of biomarkers in family research is promising, it is important to note the drawbacks, challenges, and important factors to consider when engaging these methods. First, when including biological markers, one must be cognizant of possible confounding of biologically based variables that need to be included on surveys to minimize bias. For example, when measuring inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein, surveys must at a minimum include measures of medications such as anti-inflammatories (i.e., analgesics), which can reduce inflammation. Information on recent infections and illness such as colds, which can dramatically increase inflammatory measures, should also be included. The need to include these measures has a cost in that it increases participant burden while requiring additional room on surveys, potentially limiting space for other aspects of research.

A second important challenge in utilizing these markers is understanding the temporal dynamics of the related biological process of these markers and their implication for study design. For example, cortisol and alpha-amylase are markers that function on a diurnal (12 h) pattern of secretion and are differentially responsive to certain forms of stress. Alpha-amylase is an enzyme that is more responsive to chronic stress exposure, leading to higher average and flatter curves (Nater et al., 2005), while cortisol is responsive to both acute and chronic stressors by increasing secretion levels and flattening the diurnal curve to reflect higher stress reactivity (Adam, 2006). To capture participant-specific trends and deviations from those trends, it is recommended that multiple samples of saliva are collected over the course of the day as closely as possible to a fixed schedule, and these data should coincide with careful stressor measurement (Adam & Kumari, 2009). A key challenge with this form of collection is that participants do not always report sample collection timing accurately, which can introduce another source of measurement error for markers with important temporal dimensions.

Finally, family scholarship using stress biomarkers suffers from a dearth of data collected from underrepresented minorities. Calls for studying more diverse populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ populations, and religious minorities, are critical to better understanding variations across family processes. Studying these populations is particularly important as social contexts such as discrimination have been shown to affect stress physiology (Goosby et al., 2018). Moreover, given the context of structural inequality, families may develop adaptive strategies to deal with external stressors. As such, family research would greatly benefit from understanding the biosocial pathways linked to such outcomes. However, given the history of oppression and exploitation among some marginalized groups, collecting biomarker data may require additional efforts to develop trust in the community. Due to this legacy of exploitation and distrust, researchers should carefully consider the ethical implications of biomarker studies and how to reach populations to create a more inclusive body of family research (Bussey-Jones et al., 2010; Goosby et al., 2018).

## Future Directions of Methodology

The opportunities for biological measurements have increased in recent years, and as new technologies come to the marketplace the barriers will likely continue to decrease and the range of opportunities will likely diversify. There are numerous promising trends of relevance to biomarker researchers and new opportunities to expand the nature and types of systems utilized in family research. We point to the increasing array of potential biomarkers that can be collected through saliva, blood spots, and venipuncture. For example, uric acid may be a useful biomarker that has been validated in saliva samples for monitoring metabolic syndrome (Riis et al., 2018). For longer-term health trends, we anticipate a movement toward more panels with a diverse array of biomarkers, which has long been established as critical to accurately measuring allostatic load (McEwen, 2000). Salivary cytokine panels are now available, for example, and more generally there are efforts to use bioinformatics for discovery of novel biomarkers, validation, identification of therapeutic targets, and development of multiassay composites for targeted processes (e.g., biological markers of aging; Justice et al., 2018).

Time is an important feature of biomarker research. While development of panels for outcomes such as biological aging or allostasis might focus on multiple predictive biological systems and slower overall patterns of change, family research – particularly studies on shorter timescales and using more intensive designs – will benefit from multiple technological advances. For example, wearable cutaneous sweat patches for continuous cortisol monitoring (Anastasova et al., 2017) are being developed, along with patches for additional SNS and HPA-axis analytes (Marques et al., 2010). These efforts coincide with the diversification and minimization of wearable sensors, which capture a variety of biosignals on the body. These sensors, which utilize a variety of different principles (e.g., electro-physiology), can be used to capture signals of relevance to family scholars. For example, Empatica and Moodmetric make watches and ring devices to capture SNS arousal via electrodermal activity. The traditional Holter monitor, which has long been used to study cardiac patients, has been miniaturized and designed for long-term wear via use of fabric electrode holsters and wearable patches. Research-grade devices typically provide access to both the raw ECG signal and R-R intervals so that different facets of emotional life and stress can be characterized at precise timescales throughout the day and over extended periods of time (Kim et al., 2018).

Heart rate features can also be obtained from volumetric variations in blood circulation from optical photoplethysmogram (PPG) sensors worn on the surface of the skin, usually the wrist. Though widely used, we are less enthusiastic about this technology currently due to the increased risk of motion artifacts and its sensitivity to green light absorption by darker skin (Piazena et al., 2017), particularly in common consumer grade hardware. Another challenge to the wearable-related area is the poor documentation and lack of validation information typically available. In general, it can be difficult to determine which devices are reliable and whether that reliability extends across population subgroups since it appears that homogenous

White samples comprise most “validation” studies, when such information is even available.

Device usage in family research also comes with additional considerations involving the way devices impact participants. Many devices, particularly consumer-grade devices, utilize smartphone applications. This approach can provide a convenient data management model that is virtually transparent when implemented properly, but which can also affect smartphone battery life and possibly data plans. These latter issues might be particularly important among disadvantaged populations, but family researchers should also be aware that these processes could impact families who rely on their smartphones for communication and coordination. Recently, multidisciplinary teams are developing novel research protocols for multimodal data collection efforts, especially for scholars who study couple dyads (Timmons et al., 2017). We view the future of biomarker methods in family research as promising, with an emphasis on family diversity and paying attention to families in everyday life.

## References

- Adam, E. K. (2006). Transactions among adolescent trait and state emotion and diurnal and momentary cortisol activity in naturalistic settings. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *31*(5), 664–679.
- Adam, E. K., Hoyt, L. T., & Granger, D. A. (2011). Diurnal alpha amylase patterns in adolescents: Associations with puberty and momentary mood states. *Biological Psychology*, *88*(2–3), 170–173.
- Adam, E. K., & Kumari, M. (2009). Assessing salivary cortisol in large-scale, epidemiological research. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *34*(10), 1423–1436.
- Ali, N., & Pruessner, J. C. (2012). The salivary alpha amylase over cortisol ratio as a marker to assess dysregulations of the stress systems. *Physiology & Behavior*, *106*(1), 65–72.
- Anastasova, S., Crewther, B., Bembnowicz, P., Curto, V., Ip, H. M., Rosa, B., & Yang, G.-Z. (2017). A wearable multisensing patch for continuous sweat monitoring. *Biosensors and Bioelectronics*, *93*, 139–145.
- Berger, M., & Sarnyai, Z. (2015). “More than skin deep”: Stress neurobiology and mental health consequences of racial discrimination. *Stress*, *18*(1), 1–10.
- Black, P. H. (2003). The inflammatory response is an integral part of the stress response: Implications for atherosclerosis, insulin resistance, type II diabetes and metabolic syndrome X. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*, *17*(5), 350–364.
- Booth, A., Carver, K., & Granger, D. A. (2000). Biosocial perspectives on the family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*(4), 1018–1034.
- Brody, G. H., Yu, T., Miller, G. E., & Chen, E. (2015). Discrimination, racial identity, and cytokine levels among African-American adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *56*(5), 496–501.
- Buckley, T. M., & Schatzberg, A. F. (2005). On the interactions of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and sleep: Normal HPA axis activity and circadian rhythm, exemplary sleep disorders. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, *90*(5), 3106–3114.
- Bussey-Jones, J., Garrett, J., Henderson, G., Moloney, M., Blumenthal, C., & Corbie-Smith, G. (2010). The role of race and trust in tissue/blood donation for genetic research. *Genetics in Medicine*, *12*(2), 116.
- Cox, M. J., & Paley, B. (1997). Families as systems. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *48*(1), 243–267.
- D’Onofrio, B. M., & Lahey, B. B. (2010). Biosocial influences on the family: A decade review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *72*(3), 762–782.

- Doerr, J. M., Nater, U. M., Ehlert, U., & Ditzen, B. (2018). Co-variation of fatigue and psychobiological stress in couples' everyday life. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *92*, 135–141.
- Dowd, J. B., Simanek, A. M., & Aiello, A. E. (2009). Socio-economic status, cortisol and allostatic load: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, *38*(5), 1297–1309.
- Fischer, S., Obrist, R., & Ehlert, U. (2019). How and when to use dried blood spots in psychoneuroendocrinological research. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *108*, 190–196.
- Geronimus, A. T., Hicken, M., Keene, D., & Bound, J. (2006). "Weathering" and age patterns of allostatic load scores among blacks and whites in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, *96*, 826–833.
- Goosby, B. J., Cheadle, J. E., & Mitchell, C. (2018). Stress-related biosocial mechanisms of discrimination and African American health inequities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *44*, 319–340.
- Goosby, B. J., Straley, E., & Cheadle, J. E. (2017). Discrimination, sleep, and stress reactivity: Pathways to African American-white cardiometabolic risk inequities. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 1–18.
- Granger, D. A., Kivlighan, K. T., Blair, C., El-Sheikh, M., Mize, J., Lisonbee, J. A., Buckhalt, J. A., Stroud, L. R., Handwerger, K., & Schwartz, E. B. (2006). Integrating the measurement of salivary  $\alpha$ -amylase into studies of child health, development, and social relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *23*(2), 267–290.
- Granger, D. A., Kivlighan, K. T., El-Sheikh, M., Gordis, E. B., & Stroud, L. R. (2007). Salivary  $\alpha$ -amylase in biobehavioral research: Recent developments and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1098*(1), 122–144.
- Gruenewald, T. L., Karlamangla, A. S., Hu, P., Stein-Merkin, S., & Crandall, C. (2012). History of socioeconomic disadvantage and allostatic load in later life. *Social Science & Medicine*, *74*(1), 75–83.
- Gustafsson, P. E., Miguel, S. S., Janlert, U., Theorell, T., Westerlund, H., & Hammarström, A. (2014). Life-course accumulation of neighborhood disadvantage and allostatic load: Empirical integration of three social determinants of health frameworks. *American Journal of Public Health*, *104*(5), 904–910.
- Ha, T., & Granger, D. A. (2016). Family relations, stress, and vulnerability: Biobehavioral implications for prevention and practice. *Family Relations*, *65*(1), 9–23.
- Hagan, M. J., Roubinov, D. S., Purdom Marreiro, C. L., & Luecken, L. J. (2014). Childhood interparental conflict and HPA axis activity in young adulthood: Examining nonlinear relations. *Developmental Psychobiology*, *56*(4), 871–880.
- Halpern, C., Harris, K. M., & Whitsel, E. (2014). Studying family transitions from a systems perspective: The role of biomarkers. In S. McHale, P. R. Amato, & A. Booth (Eds.), *Emerging methods in family research* (pp. 127–144). Springer.
- Harris, K. M., & McDade, T. W. (2018). The biosocial approach to human development, behavior, and health across the life course. *Russell Sage Journal of the Social Sciences*, *4*(4), 1–26.
- Harris, K. M., & Schorpp, K. M. (2018). Integrating biomarkers in social stratification and health research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *44*, 361–386.
- Hill-Soderlund, A. L., Holochwost, S. J., Willoughby, M. T., Granger, D. A., Gariépy, J.-L., Mills-Koonce, W. R., & Cox, M. J. (2015). The developmental course of salivary alpha-amylase and cortisol from 12 to 36 months: Relations with early poverty and later behavior problems. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *52*, 311–323.
- Irwin, M. R. (2015). Why sleep is important for health: A psychoneuroimmunology perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *66*, 143–172.
- Justice, J. N., Ferrucci, L., Newman, A. B., Aroda, V. R., Bahnson, J. L., Divers, J., Espeland, M. A., Marcovina, S., Pollak, M. N., Kritchevsky, S. B., Barzilay, N., & Kuchel, G. A. (2018). A framework for selection of blood-based biomarkers for geroscience-guided clinical trials: Report from the TAME biomarkers workgroup. *Geroscience*, *40*(5–6), 419–436.
- Kim, H.-G., Cheon, E.-J., Bai, D.-S., Lee, Y. H., & Koo, B.-H. (2018). Stress and heart rate variability: A meta-analysis and review of the literature. *Psychiatry Investigation*, *15*(3), 235.

- Kuhlman, K. R., Repetti, R. L., Reynolds, B. M., & Robles, T. F. (2016). Change in parent-child conflict and the HPA-axis: Where should we be looking and for how long? *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *68*, 74–81.
- La Fratta, I., Tatangelo, R., Campagna, G., Rizzuto, A., Franceschelli, S., Ferrone, A., Patruno, A., Speranza, L., De Lutiis, M. A., Felaco, M., & Felaco, M. (2018). The plasmatic and salivary levels of IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-18 and IL-6 are associated to emotional difference during stress in young male. *Scientific Reports*, *8*(1), 3031.
- Lockwood, K. G., Marsland, A. L., Matthews, K. A., & Gianaros, P. J. (2018). Perceived discrimination and cardiovascular health disparities: A multisystem review and health neuroscience perspective. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1428*, 170–207.
- Marques, A. H., Silverman, M. N., & Sternberg, E. M. (2010). Evaluation of stress systems by applying noninvasive methodologies: Measurements of neuroimmune biomarkers in the sweat, heart rate variability and salivary cortisol. *Neuroimmunomodulation*, *17*(3), 205–208.
- Martin, C. G., Kim, H. K., Bruce, J., & Fisher, P. A. (2014). Child diurnal cortisol rhythms, parenting quality, and externalizing behaviors in preadolescence. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *40*, 170–180.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage & Family Review*, *6*(1–2), 7–37.
- McDade, T. W., Williams, S., & Snodgrass, J. J. (2007). What a drop can do: Dried blood spots as a minimally invasive method for integrating biomarkers into population-based research. *Demography*, *44*(4), 899–925.
- McEwen, B. S. (2000). Allostasis and allostatic load: Implications for neuropsychopharmacology. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, *22*(2), 108–124.
- McEwen, B. S., & Gianaros, P. J. (2010). Central role of the brain in stress and adaptation: Links to socioeconomic status, health, and disease. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1186*, 190–222.
- McEwen, B. S. (1998). Stress, adaptation, and disease: Allostasis and allostatic load. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *840*, 33–44.
- McEwen, B. S. (2002). Sex, stress and the hippocampus: Allostasis, allostatic load and the aging process. *Neurobiology of Aging*, *23*(5), 921–939.
- McEwen, B. S. (2003). Interacting mediators of allostasis and allostatic load: Towards an understanding of resilience in aging. *Metabolism*, *52*, 10–16.
- Miller, G. E., Chen, E., & Zhou, E. S. (2007). If it goes up, must it come down? Chronic stress and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis in humans. *Psychological Bulletin*, *133*(1), 25–45.
- Nater, U. M., & Rohleder, N. (2009). Salivary alpha-amylase as a non-invasive biomarker for the sympathetic nervous system: Current state of research. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *34*, 486–496.
- Nater, U. M., Rohleder, N., Gaab, J., Berger, S., Jud, A., Kirschbaum, C., & Ehlert, U. (2005). Human salivary alpha-amylase reactivity in a psychosocial stress paradigm. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, *55*(3), 333–342.
- Nunes, S., Alessandro, L., Mussavira, S., & Sukumaran Bindhu, O. (2015). Clinical and diagnostic utility of saliva as a non-invasive diagnostic fluid: A systematic review. *Biochemia Medica*, *25*(2), 177–192.
- O'Brien, M. (2005). Studying individual and family development: Linking theory and research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*(4), 880–890.
- Palumbo, R. V., Marraccini, M. E., Weyandt, L. L., Wilder-Smith, O., McGee, H. A., Liu, S., & Goodwin, M. S. (2017). Interpersonal autonomic physiology: A systematic review of the literature. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *21*(2), 99–141.
- Papp, L. M., Pendry, P., Simon, C. D., & Adam, E. K. (2013). Spouses' cortisol associations and moderators: Testing physiological synchrony and connectedness in everyday life. *Family Process*, *52*(2), 284–298.
- Pendry, P., & Adam, E. K. (2007). Associations between parents' marital functioning, maternal parenting quality, maternal emotion and child cortisol levels. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *31*(3), 218–231.

- Piazena, H., Meffert, H., & Uebelhack, R. (2017). Spectral remittance and transmittance of visible and infrared-a radiation in human skin—Comparison between in vivo measurements and model calculations. *Photochemistry and Photobiology*, *93*(6), 1449–1461.
- Piazza, J., Almeida, D., Dmitrieva, N., & Klein, L. (2010). Frontiers in the use of biomarkers of health in research on stress and aging. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *65*(5), 513–525.
- Razavi, M., Anderson, N. L., Yip, R., Pope, M. E., & Pearson, T. W. (2016). Multiplexed longitudinal measurement of protein biomarkers in DBS using an automated SISCAPA workflow. *Bioanalysis*, *8*(15), 1597–1609.
- Repetti, R. L., Reynolds, B. M., & Sears, M. S. (2015). Families under the microscope: Repeated sampling of perceptions, experiences, biology, and behavior. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *77*(1), 126–146.
- Riis, J. L., Bryce, C. I., Matin, M. J., Stebbins, J. L., Kornienko, O., van Huisstede, L., & Granger, D. A. (2018). The validity, stability, and utility of measuring uric acid in saliva. *Biomarkers in Medicine*, *12*(6), 583–596.
- Ross, R. (1999). Atherosclerosis—An inflammatory disease. *New England Journal of Medicine*, *340*(2), 115–126.
- Sakhi, A. K., Bastani, N. E., Ellingjord-Dale, M., Gundersen, T. E., Blomhoff, R., & Ursin, G. (2015). Feasibility of self-sampled dried blood spot and saliva samples sent by mail in a population-based study. *BMC Cancer*, *15*(1), 265.
- Sapolsky, R. M. (2004). *Why zebras don't get ulcers: The acclaimed guide to stress, stress-related diseases, and coping—now revised and updated*. Holt paperbacks.
- Saxbe, D. E., Margolin, G., Spies Shapiro, L., Ramos, M., Rodriguez, A., & Iturralde, E. (2014). Relative influences: Patterns of HPA axis concordance during triadic family interaction. *Health Psychology*, *33*(3), 273.
- Seeman, T., Merkin, S. S., Crimmins, E., Koretz, B., Charette, S., & Karlamangla, A. (2008). Education, income and ethnic differences in cumulative biological risk profiles in a national sample of US adults: NHANES III (1988-1994). *Social Science & Medicine*, *66*.
- Seeman, T., Epel, E., Gruenewald, T., Karlamangla, A., & McEwen, B. S. (2010). Socio-economic differentials in peripheral biology: Cumulative allostatic load. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1186*(1), 223–239.
- Selye, H. (1956). *The stress of life*. New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
- Sterling, P. (2012). Allostasis: A model of predictive regulation. *Physiology & Behavior*, *106*(1), 5–15.
- Timmons, A. C., Baucom, B. R., Han, S. C., Perrone, L., Chaspari, T., Narayanan, S. S., & Margolin, G. (2017). New frontiers in ambulatory assessment: Big data methods for capturing couples' emotions, vocalizations, and physiology in daily life. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *8*(5), 552–563.
- Timmons, A. C., Margolin, G., & Saxbe, D. E. (2015). Physiological linkage in couples and its implications for individual and interpersonal functioning: A literature review. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *29*(5), 720.
- Trull, T. J., & Ebner-Priemer, U. (2013). Ambulatory assessment. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, *9*, 151–176.
- Upchurch, D. M., Stein, J., Greendale, G. A., Chyu, L., & Tseng, C. (2015). A longitudinal investigation of race, socioeconomic status, and psychosocial mediators of allostatic load in midlife women: Findings from the study of Women's health across the nation. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, *77*(4), 402–412.
- Valkanova, V., Ebmeier, K. P., & Allan, C. L. (2013). CRP, IL-6 and depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *150*(3), 736–744.
- Wallace, S. M. L., McEnery, C. M., Ma 'ki-Peta 'ja', K. M., Booth, A. D., Crockcroft, J. R., & Wilkinson, I. B. (2007). Isolated systolic hypertension is characterized by increased aortic stiffness and endothelial dysfunction. *Hypertension*, *50*, 228–233.



- Wethington, E. (2000). Contagion of stress. In *Advances in group processes* (pp. 229–253). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Yang, Y. C., McClintock, M. K., Kozloski, M., & Li, T. (2013). Social isolation and adult mortality: The role of chronic inflammation and sex differences. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 54*, 183–203.
- Zalewski, M., Lengua, L. J., Kiff, C. J., & Fisher, P. A. (2012). Understanding the relation of low income to HPA-axis functioning in preschool children: Cumulative family risk and parenting as pathways to disruptions in cortisol. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development, 43*(6), 924–942.

# Application: Salivary Biomarkers of Stress: Research Application in Dementia Family Caregiving



Yin Liu and Courtney A. Polenick

Family caregivers (CG) for persons living with dementia (PLWD) experience high levels of daily stress that typically sustains over years (Zarit et al., 2014). The daily stress of caregiving can be both care- and noncare -related and is associated with heightened health risks for caregivers, including poor sleep health (McCurry et al., 2015), poor physical health (Liu et al., 2017a), depression and anxiety (Liu et al., 2017c), and mortality (Schulz & Beach, 1999). Community-based caregiving respite programs such as adult day services (ADS) are an alternative to long-term institutionalization that aims to provide continuity of care in the community for older adults with mental health problems including dementia (Zarit et al., 1999). As a caregiving intervention, ADS use can reduce up to 40% of care-related stressor exposures for caregivers (Zarit et al., 2011).

Using ADS on a daily basis can also benefit caregivers' stress regulation in both the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), as indicated in the levels of salivary cortisol and alpha-amylase (sAA). Both hormones of cortisol and sAA respond to chronic stressor exposures; depending on the specific nature of stressors, the cortisol and sAA levels can be either hyper or hypo (Miller et al., 2007; Rohleder et al., 2009; Rohleder & Nater, 2009). Among many key regulatory functions, cortisol plays an important role in the central nervous system for emotion and in the immune system for regulating inflammatory responses and lymphocytes activity. sAA parallels increases in SNS-induced release of norepinephrine and has been related to increased health problems such as fatigue and frequency of illness among children (Granger et al., 2007), and

---

Y. Liu (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

e-mail: [yin.liu@usu.edu](mailto:yin.liu@usu.edu)

C. A. Polenick

Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_47](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_47)

645

increasing functional limitations among dementia caregivers who had a care transition and used less caregiving respite (Liu et al., 2017a).

In this chapter, we illustrate two research examples in the context of daily caregiving for a PLWD. The first example presents how daily dementia caregiving and ADS use affect diurnal trajectories of salivary cortisol and sAA; the second presents how daily cortisol total output may mediate the association between caregiver sleep and mood in the context of ADS use.

## Participants and Procedure

Participants were 173 family caregivers ( $M_{\text{age}} 61.97$ ,  $SD = 10.66$ ; 87% were female; 70% were married; 73% were White; 58% were adult children; 38% were spouses) from the *Daily Stress and Health* (DaSH) study (Zarit et al., 2014). By observing CG and PLWD over 8 days, the study approximates a removed treatment and reversal design, in which an intervention (ADS use) is introduced and then removed. Comparison of observations made on treatment and nontreatment days provides a valid comparison of the effects of treatment (Shadish et al., 2002). To be eligible, caregivers had to be (a) providing primary care to a PLWD that lived in the same household and (b) using ADS programs at least 2 days a week and (c) the PLWD had a physician's diagnosis of dementia. Caregivers had the initial face-to-face interview at their home; they were then followed up via evening phone calls with eight consecutive days of interviews on their daily experiences and well-being. They also provided five saliva samples each day at specified time points using salivettes by chewing on a cotton swab for 2 min.

Caregivers were instructed to (a) record their saliva collection times, (b) avoid taking samples within 30 min of eating, drinking, brushing teeth, using tobacco or caffeinated products, (c) refrigerate saliva samples until the end of the 8 days, and (d) record medications taken over the past 48 h, tobacco smoking status, and, for women, information on their menstrual cycles. Salivettes were then couriered to the lab at the Pennsylvania State University at the end of the 8-day saliva collection period, where they were frozen at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$  until assayed. We did not include any salivary samples in the analysis if participants were awake for less than 12 h or greater than 20 h, woke up after 12:00 pm, had missing values for collection times or dates, or had too little saliva in the sample to be assayed.

## Measures

**Saliva Samples** On each diary study day, participants provided five saliva samples: upon waking, 30 min after getting out of bed, before lunch, late afternoon, and before bed. They recorded the exact sample collection time, which was confirmed during the evening interview. Details regarding assays were described in prior pub-

lications (Liu et al., 2017b, 2018). The analysis was done using the original cortisol and sAA values without transformation. We calculated salivary cortisol daily total output based on the existing formula for area under the curve with respect to ground (AUCg; Pruessner et al., 2003), which considers both sensitivity (difference between single measurements within days) and intensity (distance of measures from ground). Compared with other indicators of HPA axis functioning, cortisol AUCg is assumed to be an adequate measure for total hormonal output (Fekedulegn et al., 2007).

**ADS Use** In each daily diary interview, caregivers indicated whether they had used ADS that day, where ADS use and nonuse were coded as 1 and 0 for that day, respectively.

**Daily Anxious and Depressive Mood** Daily anxious and depressive mood were measured using an inventory of emotions adapted from the Non-Specific Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002). During each evening's phone interview, caregivers were asked how frequently (1 = *none of the day* to 5 = *all day*) they felt each of the 24 items over the past day. The full scale assessed four affective domains: anxiety (three items,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ), anger (four items,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ), depression (four items,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ), and positive affect (nine items,  $\alpha = 0.92$ ). We dropped four items because of low factor loadings. We coded the scores so that higher values suggest higher levels of daily NA, PA, and anxious and depressive mood.

**Daily Sleep** Caregivers reported daily bedtime and wake time each day, and we calculated the daily total time in bed as the difference between CG-reported wake time and bedtime based on the sleep diary. Caregiver sleep quality was assessed each day by a previously validated item (McCrae et al., 2016) "*Rate the quality of your sleep last night*" on a 5-point scale (1 = *poor* to 5 = *excellent*). Caregivers also reported on nighttime sleep problems of the PLWD based on two items: "*Did your relative have trouble falling asleep last night?*", and "*Did your relative wake you up during the night*" (1 = *yes*; 0 = *no*); items were summed so that higher scores reflected more nighttime sleep problems of PLWD.

**Daily Stressors** Two types of daily stressors were assessed: care-related stressors and noncare stressors. Care-related stressors reflect the PLWD's daily behavior problems and were measured using the 19-item Daily Record of Behavior (DRB) ( $\alpha = 0.78$ , see Femia et al., 2007 for detailed psychometric properties). Noncare stressors were measured using the eight-item ( $\alpha = 0.59$ ) Daily Inventory of Stressful Events (DISE; Almeida et al., 2002). In order to separate care-related from noncare stressors, caregivers were specifically instructed to report events they found stressful other than those encountered when assisting their relative.

## **Diurnal Trajectories of Cortisol and sAA for Caregivers Using ADS: Main Findings**

We fit a four-part linear spline model to the raw cortisol and sAA samples (modeling details described in prior publications; Liu et al., 2017b, 2018). To summarize the main findings, the daily ADS effect was primarily in the morning; more specifically, on ADS days, caregivers had a steeper cortisol awakening response (CAR) slope and a steeper morning decline, which indicates greater physiological capacity to manage daily stress. The daily ADS effect remained significant after controlling for covariates at both the daily level (i.e., across days; e.g., care-related and noncare stressors) and the person level (i.e., between individuals; e.g., caregiver age and gender). On non-ADS days, however, caregivers tended to have a flatter cortisol diurnal pattern, which indicates less adaptive physiological function. Daily ADS use did not have any effect on the other two declining slopes starting from before lunch and thereafter; it is possible that the five-sample cortisol assessment within a day design may be less ideal to capture the time-dependent association between stressors and cortisol as daily stressor exposures were self-reported at the end of the day.

Daily ADS use did not have an effect on diurnal sAA regulation. However, controlling for daily ADS use, greater ADS use over the 8 days was associated with a more prominent rise in sAA between 30 min after waking and before lunch, and a more prominent decline in sAA between before lunch and in late afternoon. This suggests that caregivers with more frequent total ADS use had more adaptive daily patterns of sAA. By contrast, fewer ADS days were associated with a more flattened sAA diurnal rhythm, which reflects poorer physiological responses to daily stress. Additionally, greater care-related stressors were associated with lower sAA levels in the late afternoon across days. Care-related stressor exposures had significant within- and between-person associations with sAA diurnal slopes. At the within-person level, more daily care-related stressors were associated with less rise in sAA levels between 30 min after waking and before lunch; they were also associated with increasing sAA levels between late afternoon and before bed; at the between-person level, more average care-related stressors were associated with increasing sAA levels between late afternoon and before bed.

## **Daily Cortisol Mediates Caregiver Sleep and Anxious Mood on High-Stress (i.e., Non-ADS) Days: Main Findings**

To examine how daily cortisol mediates caregiver sleep and anxious mood on high-stress (i.e., non-ADS) days, we fit a 1-1-1 multilevel structural equation model (MSEM) with random intercepts and fixed slopes (Preacher et al., 2010), with all key variables measured across days and at the within-person level (i.e., level 1) of the model. We tested the mediation at both the within- (i.e., daily or level 1) and

between-person (level 2) levels simultaneously for the direct effect of sleep on anxious and depressive mood through cortisol AUC, while controlling for the main effects of average noncare stressors during the day and caregiver age and gender at the between-person level. Due to model complexity, each model tested one sleep characteristic (i.e., caregiver sleep quality and total time in bed, and PLWD nighttime problems) as the key predictor, and examined anxious and depressive mood as separate outcomes, through the indirect effect of cortisol AUC on ADS versus non-ADS days.

We found that on high-stress (i.e., non-ADS) days when caregivers had longer time in bed than usual the night before, they reported less anxious mood on the following evening; the direct association was statistically mediated through lower cortisol AUC during the day. This suggests that longer than one's typical sleep duration may reduce feelings of anxiety on days when caregivers do not use ADS and have greater exposure to care-related stressors. We did not find any other significant effects regarding daily depressive mood or other sleep characteristics.

## Conclusion

Assessing both salivary cortisol and sAA is important in understanding the dynamic biopsychosocial mechanisms across the HPA axis and the SNS, through which daily caregiving experiences may impact proximal and long-term health and well-being among dementia caregivers (Almeida et al., 2011). The two example studies reveal moderating effects of daily and cumulative ADS use on the diurnal trajectories of cortisol and sAA among caregivers, as well as the varying effect of daily ADS use on the association between caregiver sleep and daily anxious mood. The findings indicate that regular ADS use may improve caregivers' physiological responses to daily stress. However, a recent national study suggests that the probability of using ADS is much lower among African American caregivers and caregivers with lower levels of education (Parker & Fabius, 2020), which indicates that ADS may be less accessible for some caregivers. When caregivers are unable to use ADS, interventions to increase their sleep duration and/or the use of other types of respite (e.g., asking a relative or friend to stay with the PLWD) may mitigate the adverse consequences of daily stress on their emotional well-being. Such interventions have the potential to benefit caregivers' own health and may ultimately help them manage daily care-related demands and provide essential care and support throughout the course of dementia caregiving.

**Acknowledgments** This study was supported by the National Institute on Aging of the National Institutes of Health (grant number R01 AG031758, *Daily Stress and Health of Family Caregivers*, awarded to the principle investigator Dr. Steven H. Zarit). Dr. Courtney A. Polenick was supported by the National Institute on Aging of the National Institutes of Health (grant number K01 AG059829).

## References

- Almeida, D. M., Piazza, J. R., Stawski, R. S., & Klein, L. C. (2011). The speedometer of life: Stress, health and aging. In K. W. Schaie & S. L. Willis (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of aging* (7th ed.). Academic Press.
- Almeida, D. M., Wethington, E., & Kessler, R. C. (2002). The daily inventory of stressful events: An interview-based approach for measuring daily stressors. *Assessment*, 9(1), 41–55.
- Fekedulegn, D. B., Andrew, M. E., Burchfiel, C. M., Violanti, J. M., Hartley, T. A., Charles, L. E., & Miller, D. B. (2007). Area under the curve and other summary indicators of repeated waking cortisol measurements. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 69(7).
- Femia, E. E., Zarit, S. H., Stephens, M. A. P., & Greene, R. (2007). Impact of adult day services on behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia. *The Gerontologist*, 47(6), 775–788.
- Granger, D. A., Kivlighan, K. T., El-Sheikh, M., Gordis, E. B., & Stroud, L. R. (2007). Salivary  $\alpha$ -amylase in biobehavioral research: Recent developments and applications. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1098(1), 122–144.
- Kessler, R. C., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S. L. T., Walters, E. E., & Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32(6), 959–976.
- Liu, S., Li, C., Shi, Z., Wang, X., Zhou, Y., Liu, S., Liu, J., Yu, T., & Ji, Y. (2017a). Caregiver burden and prevalence of depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances in Alzheimer's disease caregivers in China. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 26(9–10), 1291–1300.
- Liu, Y., Almeida, D. M., Rovine, M. J., & Zarit, S. H. (2017b). Care transitions and adult day services moderate the longitudinal links between stress biomarkers and family caregivers' functional health. *Gerontology*, 63(6), 538–549.
- Liu, Y., Almeida, D. M., Rovine, M. J., & Zarit, S. H. (2018). Modeling cortisol daily rhythms of family caregivers of individuals with dementia: Daily stressors and adult day services use. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 73(3), 457–467.
- Liu, Y., Granger, D. A., Kim, K., Klein, L. C., Almeida, D. M., & Zarit, S. H. (2017c). Diurnal salivary alpha-amylase dynamics among dementia family caregivers. *Health Psychology*, 36(2), 160–168.
- McCrae, C. S., Dzierzewski, J. M., McNamara, J. P. H., Vathauer, K. E., Roth, A. J., & Rowe, M. A. (2016). Changes in sleep predict changes in affect in older caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's dementia: A multilevel model approach. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 71(3), 458–462.
- McCurry, S. M., Song, Y., & Martin, J. L. (2015). Sleep in caregivers: What we know and what we need to learn. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 28(6), 497–503.
- Miller, G. E., Chen, E., & Zhou, E. S. (2007). If it goes up, must it come down? Chronic stress and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis in humans. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 25–45.
- Parker, L. J., & Fabius, C. D. (2020). Racial differences in respite use among black and white caregivers for people living with dementia. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 32(10), 1667–1675.
- Preacher, K. J., Zyphur, M. J., & Zhang, Z. (2010). A general multilevel SEM framework for assessing multilevel mediation. *Psychological Methods*, 15(3), 209–233.
- Pruessner, J. C., Kirschbaum, C., Meinlschmid, G., & Hellhammer, D. H. (2003). Two formulas for computation of the area under the curve represent measures of total hormone concentration versus time-dependent change. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 28(7), 916–931.
- Rohleder, N., Marin, T. J., Ma, R., & Miller, G. E. (2009). Biologic cost of caring for a cancer patient: Dysregulation of pro- and anti-inflammatory signaling pathways. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, 27(18), 2909–2915.
- Rohleder, N., & Nater, U. M. (2009). Determinants of salivary  $\alpha$ -amylase in humans and methodological considerations. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 34(4), 469–485.

- Schulz, R., & Beach, S. R. (1999). Caregiving as a risk factor for mortality: The caregiver health effects study. *JAMA*, *282*(23), 2215–2219.
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference* (2nd ed.). Houghton Mifflin.
- Zarit, S. H., Gaugler, J. E., & Jarrott, S. E. (1999). Useful services for families: Research findings and directions. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, *14*(3), 165–178.
- Zarit, S. H., Kim, K., Femia, E. E., Almeida, D. M., & Klein, L. C. (2014). The effects of adult day services on family caregivers' daily stress, affect, and health: Outcomes from the daily stress and health (DaSH) study. *The Gerontologist*, *54*(4), 570–579.
- Zarit, S. H., Kim, K., Femia, E. E., Almeida, D. M., Savla, J., & Molenaar, P. C. M. (2011). Effects of adult day care on daily stress of caregivers: A within-person approach. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *66*(5), 538–546.



# Mixed-Methods Approaches



J. Jill Suitor and Megan Gilligan

Combining quantitative and qualitative data has been common in the study of families and the communities in which they live for nearly a century, beginning with Lynd and Lynd's classic study of Middletown (1929) and Warner and colleagues' study of Yankee City (Warner & Lunt, 1941) in the 1920s and 1930s. However, it is only in the past few decades that this approach gained sufficient momentum to be identified as a specific methodological approach with its own title. Even in those more recent decades, many studies of families that combined quantitative and qualitative data were not identified as "mixed methods" (cf. Carr, 2005; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Fowlkes, 1980; Newman, 2013; Suitor et al., 2018; Umberson, 1995).

Thus, despite the large number of studies of families that employed what are now called "mixed methods," it is not surprising that this is the first edition of the *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies* to include a chapter on this approach. Our purpose in this chapter is to provide an overview of mixed-methods research, particularly as it has been applied to the study of families. We begin by outlining the history of mixed methods in the social sciences more generally, focusing on the conceptual underpinnings of this methodological approach. We then turn to providing descriptions and several detailed examples of applications from the family literature to highlight the multitude of ways in which mixed-methods research can be conducted, and the considerable benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches over using either approach alone. Finally, we discuss the

---

J. J. Suitor (✉)

Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts, Purdue University,  
West Lafayette, IN, USA  
e-mail: [jsuitor@purdue.edu](mailto:jsuitor@purdue.edu)

M. Gilligan

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Human Sciences, Iowa  
State University, Ames, IA, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_48](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_48)

653

challenges of applying mixed-methods research to the study of families and speculate about the future of this approach in family research.

## Conceptualization and History of Mixed Methods

### *Conceptualizing Mixed Methods*

Scholars credit Campbell and Fiske (1959) as the first methodologists to advocate for the use of multiple methods as part of the process of assessing validity. In this classic article, their focus was on the ways in which using multiple methods—which they referred to as “multiple operationalism”—could be used to test the validity of particular measures of constructs by triangulation or using multiple sources of data to confirm convergence or corroboration of patterns. In some cases, examples they provided triangulated different measures to collect data on a construct from the same individuals; in others, they used different measures to collect data from multiple sources (e.g., self-assessment of a trait versus peers’ assessment of the individual on the same trait). Although Campbell and Fiske’s underlying conceptualization of using multiple methods is consistent with contemporary conceptualizations of “mixed methods,” the motivation for their advocacy was based on an exclusively quantitative approach to social science.

Across the following 25 years, several influential papers expanded Campbell and Fiske’s argument, each with a strong emphasis on the role of triangulation as a means to increase confidence in support of propositions in social science. In some cases, scholars endorsed using multiple measures within the same studies (cf. Denzin, 1970; Webb et al., 1966), whereas in others triangulation was expanded to the collection of data using different measures as well as using data collected by multiple researchers or applying different theoretical approaches (Denzin, 1970).

One of the most consequential developments from this intellectual discourse was an increasing focus on the implementation and potential benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative data. Denzin (1970) is often cited as the leader of this movement when he proposed that triangulating within a single paradigm—either quantitative or qualitative—would limit scholars’ ability to understand complex social processes. He suggested that no single method or theory could adequately describe or explain any social process or phenomenon, but that applying multiple approaches would expand both the types of information that could be collected and broaden the perspectives that could be used to interpret that information. Other prominent scholars were advocating combining quantitative and qualitative prior to or almost simultaneously with Denzin’s call for this approach, citing similar benefits (Jick, 1979; Cook & Reichardt, 1979; Sieber, 1973).

In a personal correspondence with David Morgan, a leading expert on mixed-methods research, regarding the emergence of mixed methods in the social and behavioral sciences, he emphasized the role that the increasing legitimacy of

qualitative methods played in the acceptance of mixed methods beyond the initial interest in multiple quantitative approaches to triangulate. According to Morgan, “Mixed methods was not likely to attain legitimacy in a field until there was sufficient respect for qualitative research. Part of accepting qualitative on its own terms meant giving way on concepts of research quality being limited to traditional quantitative conceptions of reliability and validity.” He cited Lincoln and Guba (1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2005, 1994) as instrumental in developing qualitative alternatives to the traditional quantitative concepts, thus giving qualitative researchers a new and unique set of approaches to “rigor.” This perspective proposed moving from a uniformly positivist to a more social constructionist approach to social and behavioral sciences, thus helping to set the stage for a movement toward integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the same study.

Common threads were made from the 1980s through the 2000s regarding the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative methods (cf. Collins et al., 2006; Dzurec & Abraham, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Greene et al., 1989; Morgan, 2007). In particular, scholars proposed that this approach would reduce bias stemming from using one specific data source, provide richer data to elaborate findings than based on either data source alone, discover and explain paradoxical and contradictory findings, and increase confidence in conclusions through corroboration and confirmation.

Another common thread was developing a consistent set of terms and definitions. This process began with Campbell and Fiske’s introduction of the term “multiple operationalism” (1959, p. 101) and continued across the past half-century, focusing on conceptual and operational dimensions of defining this approach. Across this period, numerous terms to describe what is now most often referred to as “mixed-method research” appeared in the literature, including “blended research” (Thomas, 2003), “integrative research” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), “mixed research” (Johnson, 2006, “multimethod research” (cf. Hunter & Brewer, 2003; Morse, 2003), and “triangulated studies” (cf. Sandelowski, 2003). However, the use of the term “mixed-methods research” has gained increasing prominence across the past 15 years.

There can be considerable differences when such “mixing” takes place. Recent discussions have compared “exploratory sequential” (qualitative to quantitative) and “explanatory sequential” (quantitative to qualitative) designs. Because both emphasize the role of quantitative methods, mixed-methods scholars have called for more attention to “qualitatively driven mixed methods” (cf. Hesse-Biber, 2010; and special issue of *Qualitative Health Research*, June, 2015). One consequence of this debate has been an increased emphasis on “convergent designs” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), sometimes referred to as “fully integrated mixed-methods research designs” in which quantitative and qualitative approaches are applied interactively throughout data collection and analysis (Creamer, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). As we illustrate below, although methods of data collection in these three types of designs (exploratory sequential, explanatory sequential, and convergent) are mutually exclusive, the way in which the data are analyzed are not.

## *Growth of Mixed-Methods Research in the Twenty-First Century*

While scholars have continued to debate definitions and paradigmatic boundaries, approaches in which qualitative and quantitative data are combined have grown by geometric proportions. In the past 5 years alone, numerous works have become available, including handbooks devoted exclusively to conceptualizing and conducting mixed-methods research, volumes on the application to specific fields of study, textbooks, and books published in the distinguished Sage series on methodology (cf. Burch & Heinrich, 2016; Collins et al., 2010; Creamer, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2017; Flick, 2018; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Morgan, 2013; Peltó, 2017; Watkins & Gioia, 2015).

Another indication of the increase in mixed-methods research is the founding of two new journals since 2000. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (2007) is devoted specifically to the use of this approach; *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* (2009), while not devoted exclusively to mixed methods, includes this approach as one of its major foci.

Even more impressive is the growth in journal articles in which some form of mixed methods was employed. A search using the Social Science Citation Index revealed that in 2000 approximately 200 articles using mixed-method designs were published, more than quadrupling to approximately 1000 in 2010, and more than 3500 in 2018. We used SSCI and Google Scholar to create a database of nearly 300 articles that used mixed methods to study families between the years 2000 and 2018 using the search term “mixed method” in journals considered to be in the area of “family studies.” We found fewer than ten articles and chapters published per year using mixed methods from 2000 until 2014, but by 2018 the number grew to more than 60. Further, these figures likely underestimate the number of studies that applied mixed-method designs because many articles that apply these methods are not identified as such in the title, abstract, or text.

Although we must speculate on this point, we suggest that the later adoption of mixed-methods research in the study of families may be explained, in part, by the distinction drawn between qualitative and quantitative approaches in the two disciplines in which most family scientists have traditionally been trained—psychology and sociology—both of which have a stronger emphasis on quantitative methods. Thus, until recently, most family scientists were not presented with combining these approaches as an alternative during their graduate training. Further, applying mixed-method approaches increases both the financial and temporal costs of research, making it more difficult to execute such designs without the funding that is more readily available to research focused on health or educational outcomes.

## **Utilization of Mixed Methods in Studies of Families**

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) provide 15 typologies of mixed-method designs from a variety of disciplines. Their typology has developed into the three-category system that we introduced above, which has been adopted as the standard for the

field: (a) explanatory sequential (quantitative followed by qualitative components); (b) exploratory sequential (qualitative followed by quantitative components); or (c) convergent (quantitative and qualitative data gathered and analyzed together). We applied this classification system to the 283 published works on families that we identified through the SSCI/Google search. Approximately 40% met the criteria for explanatory designs; a second 40% met the criteria for a convergent design; and approximately 20% met the criteria for an exploratory design.

Our purpose in this section is to provide a description of each of these three approaches to mixed-methods research. In the section that follows, we discuss in detail two examples from family research of each approach, describing the designs employed, the researchers' rationales for applying these approaches, and the benefits accrued by using mixed-methods over single-method designs.

**Explanatory Sequential Designs** Most explanatory sequential studies involved beginning with the collection of data from a large number of respondents individually via telephone or in-person interviews or mailed questionnaires, followed by selecting a subsample of those individuals for participation in in-depth interviews; in some cases, subsamples of the original samples were asked to participate in focus groups rather than in-depth interviews. In other cases, a separate sample of respondents was recruited for the qualitative component. Also within this grouping were studies in which quantitative data were drawn from archival records (e.g., deidentified medical records, data from the Census Bureau or state or agency records). Finally, in several cases, quantitative data were collected pre and post interventions, with in-depth interviews conducted as a fourth step to collect qualitative data to assess participants' feelings about their experiences as intervention participants. In some cases, these interviews were conducted immediately after the completion of the final stage of the intervention, but in others the qualitative data were collected at later points to allow the participants to make a longer-range appraisal of their experiences.

**Exploratory Sequential Designs** Exploratory sequential designs began with the collection of qualitative data through in-depth interviews or focus groups, which was generally followed by a larger data collection effort to generate quantitative data that rarely involved participation of individuals who participated in the qualitative component. For example, in some cases, the quantitative component relied on deidentified data collected by public or private agencies that were used to help interpret the experiences of individuals who had shared their stories in the qualitative component of the study. Thus, in contrast with *explanatory* designs, there was seldom overlap between the sources of data for the qualitative and quantitative component in exploratory designs.

**Convergent Designs** Convergent designs involve collecting data from the same individuals at the same point of data collection—typically through surveys in which respondents reply to open-ended items asking them to explain and contextualize their responses to accompanying closed-ended items. These designs generally

include open-ended questions inviting participants to share thoughts, feelings, or experiences that they felt had not been captured by the interview.

Convergent designs provide unique opportunities over other mixed-method designs. First, respondents can provide their own explanations and interpretations for their closed-ended responses. Second, respondents can provide further details about the context of the behaviors or feelings they have just reported. Third, this approach provides interviewers with the opportunity to probe for such explanations and contextual material when it is not spontaneously offered by the respondents. Finally, in a convergent design, the same respondents are both reporting and reflecting on their own feelings or actions, and there is no lag between the closed-ended and open-ended responses that might introduce recall bias. Thus, this approach provides an advantage over explanatory designs in which either a smaller subsample of the quantitative sample is asked to discuss in greater detail feelings or events that they reported on at an earlier point, or data from a completely different sample of respondents are used to try to explain the quantitative findings.

## **Highlighting Applications of Mixed-Methods Designs to Family Science**

In this section, we provide examples of how mixed methods have been applied to the study of family issues. We present six mixed-methods family studies—two from each major design category—explanatory sequential, exploratory sequential, and convergent. We corresponded with the authors of each project, asking them to share their thoughts about their choice of a mixed-method design. We used their responses to inform our discussion of their work and, in some cases, to provide direct quotations (with permission) regarding their perspectives and experiences.

### ***Explanatory Sequential Designs***

***Families and Faith Across Generations*** Our first explanatory sequential example is drawn from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG), a project that Vern Bengtson began half a century ago at the University of Southern California (Silverstein & Bengtson, n.d.). The focus of the study is on family solidarity across time and includes four generations of family members, from great-grandparents to great-grandchildren. The original project involved collecting data from 2044 respondents nested within 358 families in which members of three generations participated—grandparents (G1), their midlife adult children (G2), and their teenage or young adult children (G3). Between 1985 and 2005, several more waves of data were collected from the original participants; in 1991, great-grandchildren were integrated into the study. For several decades, the LSOG was a single-method

quantitative study using mail-out/mail-back questionnaires. In 1989, Merrill Silverstein moved to USC, beginning a collaboration that continued until Vern Bengtson passed away in 2019. In the early 2000s, Bengtson introduced the idea of collecting qualitative as well as quantitative data from members of the panel who would participate in the 2005 wave, to more deeply understand intergenerational transmission of religion. As Bengtson and colleagues explained in *Families and Faith* (2013), quantitative surveys shed light on participants' religious orientation and practices, and the extent to which those beliefs and practices were shared by others in the family. However, survey data could "provide only limited understanding of *how* and *why* intergenerational relationships are maintained or not maintained over time" (2013, p. 214).

Given their focus, Bengtson and Silverstein selected family members to reflect the range of family characteristics and religious backgrounds, rather than drawing a random sample from the pool of 2005 questionnaire respondents. Between 2005 and 2009, in-depth interviews using a combination of open and closed-ended items were conducted with 156 individuals nested within 25 LSOG families.

We draw our examples from *Families and Faith*, which Bengtson published with Norella Putney and Susan Harris (2013), and a chapter that Bengtson and Silverstein published in a 2018 volume. These two pieces illustrate the very different ways in which mixed-methods research from the same study can be presented. In the 2019 chapter, they began with analyses of the quantitative data collected in the 1971, 1988, and 2005 surveys using Latent Markov Modeling and logistic regression modeling to explore patterns of religious intensity and classify families on religious intensity across generations to assess whether affectional solidarity between grandchildren and grandparents predicted patterns of decline in religious intensity across generations.

They then used qualitative data from individual family members to create case studies of families that illustrated the processes of intergenerational transmission of religious practices and beliefs typical in the three categories of family lineages shown by the quantitative data—those in which there was religious stability across the generations, those in which there was a decline, and those in which religious practices and beliefs were strengthened across generations. They drew from the data collected from multiple members of the family to provide a rich picture of the roles that grandparents played in the religious socialization of the youngest generation, from the perspectives of both grandparents and grandchildren.

The 2013 monograph provided the opportunity for much more extensive use of the qualitative data collected in 2005; further, as Bengtson and colleagues explained in the methodological appendix, the presentation of quantitative data was "intentionally descriptive" (2013, p. 218) to allow the findings to be accessible to a wide range of readers. Throughout the book, they used an integrative analysis, moving back and forth between the quantitative and qualitative data to describe changes in religious beliefs and practices across the generations, and how these patterns were shaped by both socioemotional factors, such as the quality of the relationships among family members, and sociodemographic factors, such as divorce and inter-faith marriage.

Thus, the LSOG provides an example of not only a sequential explanatory design, but how a single-method project can be developed into a mixed-methods study, using multiple approaches to present mixed-methods analyses.

***Fathers and Their Adult Sons*** Our second example of an explanatory sequential design is Deborah Carr's (2005) study of fathers' social comparisons to their sons. For the quantitative component of the study, Carr used data collected from more than 500 men in their early 50s who participated in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) in 1992 and had at least one employed adult son. Further, to meet criteria for inclusion, one of their employed sons must have been randomly selected as the adult child about whom the father would discuss parent-child relationships. (For more details about the criteria that defined the analytic sample, see Carr, 2005.) In 1998, the Principal Investigators of the WLS received additional funding to conduct in-person interviews from a subset of the original pool of respondents. Forty-six members of this subsample were fathers who had reported on their relationships with their sons.

For the data analyses included in the 2005 article, Carr presented a multinomial logistic regression analysis of the factors that predicted fathers' favorable and unfavorable comparisons between themselves and their adult sons. These analyses demonstrated that fathers who reported themselves as having a better work life than their sons were more likely to be those who married later, became divorced when their sons were children or adolescents, and had other children from more recent marriages. Carr then turned to qualitative data collected during personal interviews with the subset of 46 fathers to explore their interpretations regarding differences between their lives and those of their sons, particularly regarding work and their relationships with their own children. The qualitative data identified generational differences in work and family experiences that led fathers to consider themselves as having accomplished more or less than their offspring.

In the article, Carr explained that she chose this approach because it was through studying the fathers' statements that she could better understand how their responses to closed-ended questions regarding comparisons were shaped by their interpretation of differences in their own lives and those of their sons. She further elaborated on this point in our correspondence—"Qualitative data are essential to providing added nuance and complexity, and fleshing out seemingly counterintuitive findings that emerge in more coarse quantitative data."

### ***Exploratory Sequential Designs***

As noted above, exploratory sequential designs are the least commonly employed type of mixed-methods research. However, we suggest that this design has been underutilized, given its potential to allow scholars to finely tune the conceptualization of their research questions and the development of measures through the qualitative component before conducting the quantitative component of the study. We



provide two examples that illustrate how the qualitative component of the studies guided the development of the subsequent quantitative component.

### **Perceptions of Adoptive and Biological Parents**

Our first exploratory sequential mixed-methods example is drawn from Charlene Maill and Karen March's study of attitudes regarding adoptive and biological parenting (Miall & March, 2003, 2005). Maill and March originally designed a study in which they planned to apply a classic explanatory sequential approach. However, the Canadian agency from which they sought funding requested that they reverse the order of data collection and analysis and instead conduct an exploratory sequential study (Miall & March, 2005). Thus, they began their data collection by conducting 1–2 h semi-structured interviews with 41 men and 41 women who were selected using random sampling from the directories of two Canadian cities.

One of their purposes in using this type of sequential design was to assess whether respondents would be willing to express their feelings about adoption, and whether these feelings could be captured by closed-ended items, prior to developing a survey in which a much larger and more representative sample of respondents would be asked the same closed-ended items. Later in the same year, Maill and March conducted the quantitative component of the study, in which they drew a random sample of adults from across Canada, resulting in the completion of 706 brief telephone interviews during which participants responded to closed-ended items. Most of these items had been included in the qualitative component of the study, but some were developed from themes that emerged from the earlier interviews.

Miall and March used this combination of quantitative and qualitative data to address multiple research questions about how beliefs and attitudes regarding parenting and adoption are shaped by gender of the respondent as well as the adoptive and birth parents, and type of adoption. The way they combined these two types of data illustrates the substantial flexibility inherent in analyses of mixed-methods data, regardless of the order in which the qualitative and quantitative components were conducted.

Whereas Miall and March drew from the knowledge they gained from the qualitative component when designing their large-scale survey, when analyzing the data, they often used the qualitative data to explain the patterns revealed by the quantitative analyses. For example, the analyses of the quantitative data documented that most men and women believed that motherhood and fatherhood were very important roles—in fact, the respondents were almost equally likely to describe parenthood as important for women and men (Miall & March, 2003). These findings might be interpreted as suggesting that most adults believe that parenthood plays a similar role in the lives of men and women. However, Miall and March's analyses of the qualitative data revealed that motherhood, in particular, was perceived very differently by men and women. Although the majority of both men and women who participated in this phase of the project reported believing that motherhood was

more “instinctive” rather than learned, men tended to emphasize the biological nature of mothering in their responses, whereas women emphasized the behaviors involved in mothering and the role of mothering in women’s sense of self-worth (Miall & March, 2003, 2005).

In reflecting on their decision to use a mixed-method design, Miall and March highlighted ways in which this approach had been invaluable in providing greater meaning to the quantitative findings. As Miall explained, “The use of this mixed-method demonstrated the complexity of human behavior in ways that neither approach could achieve ... The use of a qualitative and quantitative design produced a much richer data set that extended beyond an ethnography documenting meaning with a limited sample, or a survey design with a claim to generalizability but little data on meanings informing choices.”

### **Visitation Orders and Court Orders among Fragile Families**

Our second exploratory sequential mixed-methods example is drawn from Maureen Waller and Allison Emory’s study of why some unmarried mothers and fathers attempted to establish legal visitation agreements after they and their partners separated, whereas others did not (Waller & Emory, 2018). This study had an unusually complex design involving focus groups, in-depth interviews, and analysis of quantitative data from a large-scale survey of several thousand respondents. In 2012, they conducted focus groups with 40 unmarried mothers and fathers recruited through nonprofit agencies that served low-income families in upstate New York. They stratified their four focus groups by whether the parents had visitation or custody orders or no legal agreements in place. Using these data, they identified patterns of coparenting types and parent time arrangements by parental and contextual characteristics, and developed a framework to explain how coparenting types and parent time arrangements were related.

Next, in 2014 and 2015, they collected additional information regarding factors that shaped parents’ pursuit of visitation orders by conducting in-depth interviews with 30 unmarried mothers and fathers who were present in family court to open or modify child support orders. These participants were recruited by approaching parents waiting for their cases to be called, and interviewed by Waller in a private room immediately after their hearings.

To test the hypotheses they developed based upon the qualitative data, they analyzed quantitative data from the first 5 years of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (<https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>), a multi-wave survey of mothers and fathers of nearly 5000 children in 20 large cities in the United States begun in the late 1990s. Waller and Emory restricted their analytic sample to those cases in which the mothers had participated in the first four waves of the survey, had been unmarried at the time of their child’s birth, and had lived apart from the father when the child was 3 and 5. Their outcome of interest was whether mothers had

secured legal support orders, and if so, whether those orders had specified visits with the father.

They began with the qualitative data, finding that parents who had disengaged from one another and those who were cooperative coparents tended not to seek legal child visitation arrangements, but arrived at that outcome for very different reasons. For disengaged parents, such arrangements were deemed either unnecessary because the fathers were not involved or could bring the potential risk of increased scrutiny from a legal system that was not trusted. In contrast, parents who had sought legal agreements had generally done so in the face of high conflict regarding custody and/or visitation that could not be ignored or resolved by the parents themselves.

Based on these findings, Waller and Emory developed a set of hypotheses focused on the parents' relationship with one another as the primary factor explaining the conditions under which parents sought legal agreements from the courts. They tested these hypotheses using the quantitative data drawn from the Fragile Families study, applying sequential logistic regressions that explored the role of parents' disengagement, cooperation, or conflict in predicting whether parents sought court orders. The quantitative component confirmed Waller and Emory's interpretation that parents' relationships with one another shaped decisions regarding whether to seek legal child support and visitation arrangements, while shedding light on the distinction between the effects of conflict on seeking child support orders compared to child visitation orders. In a complementary manner, the qualitative data helped to illustrate how distrust of the legal system played a role in disengaged parents' decisions not to seek such legal actions.

Waller explained in our correspondence that their project was motivated by the need for empirical data regarding the processes by which parents do or do not decide to seek formal legal arrangements regarding child visitation orders—an important policy question that has received little attention in the scientific literature. Their choice of design was because, “This seemed like an ideal opportunity to develop hypotheses grounded in qualitative data which could be tested in larger survey of low-income, unmarried men and women who are the focus of these proposals.”

## **Convergent Designs**

### ***Counted Out: Americans' Definitions of Family***

Our convergent mixed-methods design example is drawn from Brian Powell and his colleagues' project, Constructing Family Survey, that led to their research monograph, *Counted Out: Same-Sex Relations and Americans' Definitions of Family* (2010). Unlike most of the studies highlighted in this chapter, this project was not originally conceived as a mixed-method study. Powell explained that they had intended to analyze only quantitative survey data from the 1500 respondents with

whom they planned to conduct telephone interviews. However, their focus changed when they began pretesting. As Powell described, “Even on the first night of pretests, we realized how important the open-ended responses [were], along with the unsolicited comments when respondents answered the closed-ended questions . . . It was only from listening to the open-ended and unsolicited comments that we also realized that respondents’ understandings of concepts were not necessarily ours.”

The data were collected in 2003 and 2006 as part of the Sociological Research Practicum, an annual survey of Indiana and US adults conducted by the Department of Sociology at Indiana University under the direction of Powell. Respondents were presented with a set of closed-ended items asking whether they considered that particular living arrangements “count as a family” (Powell et al., 2010, p. 222), followed by an open-ended question asking participants to discuss what determined whether they considered particular living arrangements as “a family.” Respondents were then asked sets of closed followed by open-ended questions, including items regarding their attitudes about legal rights of adults in various living arrangements, maternal and paternal responsibilities, causes of children’s behaviors and traits, and gay marriage and adoption.

They began their analysis using latent class statistical techniques to identify three latent classes that they proposed indicated the conditions under which American adults defined particular living arrangements as “a family”: exclusionists (most likely to conceive families as heterosexual adults, especially when living with children), moderates (those placing the greatest emphasis on the presence of children), and inclusionists (those who conceived all living arrangements presented to them as families). After presenting descriptive quantitative analyses on these classes, they moved to integrative analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data that they maintained throughout the rest of the book. Within each chapter, Powell and colleagues presented quantitative findings followed by using respondents’ own voices to explain the patterns revealed by the quantitative data. The qualitative data not only shed light on the meaning that participants attributed to their responses to the closed-ended questions, but also led respondents to reflect on those answers and identify inconsistencies between their answers and their beliefs. As Powell noted, “I am convinced that if we didn’t have a large number of respondents and the core closed-ended questions, we wouldn’t have been able to make firm conclusions about the patterns. But without the open-ended questions and the unsolicited responses, we would have missed out on what turned out to be some of the most important insights from the project.”

### ***Race, Conflict, and Psychological Well-Being During Caregiving***

Our next convergent mixed-methods design is drawn from the second wave of Within-Family Differences Study, a three-wave panel project focused on patterns and consequences of parent–adult child relations, led by J. Jill Suito, Megan

Gilligan, and Karl Pillemer. Time 1 design involved drawing a probability sample of 566 mothers 65–75 years of age in the Boston Metropolitan area who had at least two living adult children in 2001. Time 2 data were collected from 420 mothers (86% of those still living) in 2007–2008. Mothers were interviewed in person for between 1 and 2 h about their relationships with each of their offspring. Throughout the interviews, closed-ended questions were followed by open-ended questions asking mothers to elaborate on their relationships and their experiences when provided care by their offspring.

At T1 and T2, mothers were asked for contact information for their adult children, resulting in the completion of interviews with 773 offspring nested within 300 families at T1 and 833 offspring nested within 277 families at T2. One-hour telephone interviews were completed, with the adult children, focusing on their relationships with their mothers and their experiences as caregivers. Consistent with the mothers' interviews, closed-ended items were followed by open-ended questions.

For the present example, we focus on an analysis of race differences in the effects of mother–child conflict during caregiving on adult children's depressive symptoms using the T2 subsample of 213 White and 66 Black adult children caring for their mothers (Suitor et al., 2018). We began by using the quantitative data to test our hypotheses that Black adult children caring for their mothers would report less conflict with their mothers than would their White counterparts, and that the association between depressive symptoms and conflict would be stronger among Black than White caregivers. After taking into consideration relevant controls for family size and demographic characteristics, we found no notable differences in conflict by race. However, multilevel regression analysis revealed that although there was no association between conflict and depressive symptoms among White caregivers, there was a strong association among Black caregivers—a difference that was statistically significant.

Next, we turned to the qualitative data to shed light on why conflict with mothers regarding caregiving had a greater impact on the well-being of Black than White adult children. Analyses revealed consistent differences in how White and Black children discussed the conflict they experienced with their mothers. In particular, Black caregivers' conflict with mothers resulted from their inability to meet all of their mothers' needs, leading the offspring to feel concerned, sad, and, in some cases, guilty. In contrast, White children's conflict stemmed from their mothers' resistance to unwanted assistance, which the children saw as interfering, and from mothers' requests for support that the children considered excessive, evoking their irritation and frustration.

We considered the value added by the mixed-method approach to be twofold. First, the qualitative data confirmed our expectation that differences by race in effects of conflict on caregivers' well-being could be accounted for by a stronger sense of familism and filial piety found in Black compared to White families. The qualitative data also showed us not only a greater sense of familism among Black adult children, but also less respect among White children for their mothers' preferences regarding their care. Thus, these analyses revealed a more marked distinction

between the two groups of caregivers than was not evident from the quantitative analysis alone.

Taken together, these six examples provide a rich and detailed picture of the ways in which scholars can apply different designs across a variety of research questions. Because we have focused on the methodological dimensions, we have not highlighted the salient role that theory played in each of these projects. One of the strengths that mixed methods can bring to empirical research is the opportunity to move back and forth between data and theory. In fact, each of these projects could be used as examples of applications of Wallace's "Wheel of Science" (1971) in which theory, development of hypotheses, observations, and empirical generalizations interact with one another across the research process. Such approaches are especially well-suited to studying families because they provide unique insights, explaining processes and illuminating complex patterns that could not be revealed by either quantitative or qualitative approaches alone.

## **The Future of Mixed-Methods Research**

The studies we presented highlight some of the ways in which combining qualitative and quantitative data extends the opportunity to shed light on the profoundly complex patterns and processes that we address as family scholars. Nevertheless, the designs of most studies of families are single-method. This raises the question of why mixed-methods approaches are not more commonly applied. We suggest that there are two explanations for this, both of which will play an important role in the future of mixed-methods research on the family.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities of Collecting Mixed-Methods Data***

The most compelling explanation for the fact that relatively few studies have taken this approach is that conducting mixed-methods research is costly in terms of both money and time. For example, the quantitative component of the studies we highlighted in this chapter involved collecting data on a large number of respondents, which required substantial funds. This might initially seem quite discouraging to readers, especially given the increasing difficulty in securing external funding in recent years. However, we argue that this would be the wrong takeaway from this set of studies. The availability of a growing number of excellent public use data sets that address family issues has increased opportunities for conducting both explanatory and exploratory sequential mixed-methods studies with little funds necessary to conduct the quantitative component of the study.

Waller and Emory's (2018) study of parental visitation orders discussed above provides an excellent example of how public use data can provide the quantitative source for an exploratory mixed-method study. Similarly, Umberson's (1995, 2003) classic study of bereavement following parental death provides a model for conducting an explanatory mixed-methods study. In this research, she began with publicly available quantitative data (American's Changing Lives) and subsequently recruiting a much smaller sample of adults who had recently lost a parent from whom she collected qualitative data.

Taken together, these two studies should provide encouragement for scholars who would like to undertake mixed-methods research yet feel that the funding required for the quantitative component may be out of reach. We believe that the future of mixed methods may well lie in scholars' creative use of public use data sets that include items on family issues, such as the Family Exchanges Study, Family Life Project, Fragile Families Study, Family Transitions Project, Health and Retirement Survey, Longitudinal Study of Generations, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), Welfare Children and Families Three City Study, Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, and the Within-Family Differences Study.

We also propose that exploratory sequential designs will play an increasingly recognized role in the future of mixed-methods research in which the same investigator(s) design and conduct both the quantitative and qualitative components. First, we suggest that exploratory designs can be highly valuable to scholars who are attempting to break new ground in an area of inquiry that has been studied primarily or exclusively using quantitative methods or in which there is a relatively small body of existing work. We make this argument because the qualitative component will allow the researcher to collect information on the processes underlying the patterns found in previous studies by talking to individuals about their experiences and the meanings that they have given to these experiences. This information enables the researcher to look at the topic from the perspective of "insiders" in these contexts, consider new research questions, and develop measures to study those questions in a way that extends existing knowledge. Thus, exploratory sequential designs have conceptual and methodological advantages over explanatory and convergent designs, in which the quantitative component must be developed without the insight that could be gained by conducting interviews or focus groups with individuals who have "lived" experiences.

It is important to note that we are not suggesting that conducting the qualitative component of mixed-methods designs is cost-free. In fact, this is the component that is likely to require the most investment of time in mixed-methods studies. In large-scale convergent mixed-methods studies, such as Powell and colleagues' study that produced *Counted Out* (Powell et al., 2010) and the Within Family Differences Study (Suitor et al., 2018), the financial costs of preparing the data, including transcribing and coding, may well outstrip those to collect the data.

In explanatory and exploratory sequential designs, the qualitative component almost always involves a much smaller number of cases than in convergent designs. Thus, the researcher may be able to complete the data collection, preparation, and

analysis without external funding. However, both collecting and analyzing the qualitative data are demanding and time-consuming, often requiring several months to a year or more. Although such investment is considerable, it provides the researcher with insight regarding the topic that is difficult to match by having others conduct these phases of the qualitative component.

### ***The Challenging Task of Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Components***

Up to this point in our discussion of challenges, we have focused on the collection of mixed-methods data. However, perhaps the most challenging dimension of conducting mixed-methods research is integrating the qualitative and quantitative findings in a way that takes full advantage of this approach. To quote Morgan on this point, "... you must not only use each separate method effectively but also integrate them effectively. Simply having more results or different kinds of results does not inherently improve your work; in addition, you must bring those results together in a way that demonstrates the value of your additional effort. Hence, research projects that use multiple methods are not automatically preferable to studies that use just one method" (2013, pp. 3–4).

To meet this challenge, the researcher needs to be proficient at the collection, preparation, and analysis of *both* qualitative and quantitative data. In the examples we provided in this chapter, almost all of the authors had conducted both qualitative and quantitative research prior to conducting the mixed-methods work we highlighted. However, in the case of Bengtson and Silverstein's research on the intergenerational transmission of religious practices and beliefs, Silverstein's previous research had been exclusively quantitative. Thus, an alternative to a single researcher filling both of these roles is to bring together teams in which members complement rather than overlap in their methodological expertise. However, the application of mixed methods involves conceptualizing the qualitative and quantitative components as being integrally linked. We suggest that some overlap among team members in proficiency, recognition, and appreciation of both approaches increases the likelihood of success. Thus, team-building to apply mixed methods is as much an art as building successful teams of interdisciplinary scholars (cf. Curry et al., 2012).

Finally, in correspondence, Karen March made particularly insightful comments on conceptual challenges faced by scholars conducting mixed-methods research. "Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies is not always as easy as it may appear ... each approach stems from a different paradigm (i.e. positivist versus interpretive), possesses distinct assessment standards (e.g. reliability versus transferability) and different outcome goals (i.e. facts versus sympathetic understanding)." She shared that such dissimilarities led her and Charlene Miall to be especially attentive to these issues when conducting analyses. She also noted that working as a team made them more confident that their findings and interpretations were "true



to the data from which [they] emerged.” The authors of this chapter, who have collaborated for 15 years on mixed-methods analyses, heartily agree on this point.

### ***Changing the Climate Toward Mixed-Methods Research***

Another important factor affecting the future of mixed-methods research is increasing awareness among journal editors and reviewers of what the goals and advantages are of this conceptual and methodological approach. When we mentioned to colleagues whom we consider “mixed-methods scholars” that we were writing this chapter, most responded was that they loved mixed-methods designs and applied them when collecting data. However, they also said that they had found it necessary to “divide” most of their work into single-method papers to ensure publication after futile attempts to publish mixed-methods manuscripts. Few scholars in any subfield within the study of family issues self-identify as experts in mixed-methods. Thus, mixed-methods manuscripts are rarely sent to reviewers who are familiar with this approach, and instead are reviewed by single-methods experts who do not appreciate the “other side” of the study.

Removing this obstacle to publishing mixed-methods work requires a concerted effort from scholars who use mixed-methods designs, as well as review manuscripts for family journals, and sit on the editorial boards or serve in other editorial roles on those journals. In particular, reviewers and editorial board members can identify themselves as scholars using mixed-methods approaches, and in doing so, increase the pool of reviewers available to evaluate work using this method.

### **Conclusion**

Our first goal in this chapter was to present a history of the conceptual underpinnings of contemporary application of mixed-methods research and describe the state of the application of mixed methods within the study of the family across the past two decades. Our second was to provide a window into how these methods have been applied by showing, in detail, how several highly successful mixed-methods projects have been conducted, including reflections from the authors about their research. Our final goal was to make suggestions about the ways mixed methods might be applied more broadly in the field, calling attention to some of the challenges of using these methods, while also suggesting possible strategies to reduce these challenges. We hope that, taken together, this chapter both informs readers about the past and current state of mixed methods in family research and spurs their interest in applying these methods in their own future research.

## References

- Bengtson, V. L., Putney, N. M., & Harris, S. (2013). *Families and faith: How religion is passed down across generations*. Oxford University Press.
- Bengtson, V. L., & Silverstein, M. (2018). *How grandparents influence the religiosity of their grandchildren: A mixed-methods study of three-generation families in the United States. Grandparenting practices around the world: Reshaping family* (pp. 211–231). Policy Press.
- Burch, P., & Heinrich, C. J. (2016). *Mixed methods for policy research and program evaluation*. SAGE Publications.
- Campbell, D. T., & Fiske, D. W. (1959). Convergent and discriminant validation by the multitrait-multimethod matrix. *Psychological Bulletin*, *56*(2), 81–105.
- Carr, D. (2005). The psychological consequences of midlife men's social comparisons with their young adult sons. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*(1), 240–250.
- Cherlin, A. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1986). Grandparents and family crisis. *Generations*, *10*(4), 26–28.
- Collins, K. M., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Jiao, Q. G. (2006). Prevalence of mixed-methods sampling designs in social science research. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, *19*(2), 83–101.
- Collins, K. M. T., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Jiao, Q. G. (Eds.). (2010). *Toward a broader understanding of stress and coping: Mixed methods approaches*. Information Age Publishing.
- Cook, T. D., & Reichardt, C. S. (1979). *Qualitative and quantitative methods in evaluation research*. SAGE Publications.
- Creamer, E. G. (2018). Enlarging the conceptualization of mixed method approaches to grounded theory with intervention science. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(7), 919–934.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2010). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Curry, L. A., O' Cathain, A., Clark, V. L. P., Aroni, R., Fetters, M., & Berg, D. (2012). The role of group dynamics in mixed methods health sciences research teams. *Journal of mixed methods research*, *6*(1), 5–20.
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., & Schutz, P. A. (2017). *Mixed methods proposal: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The research act in sociology: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. Butterworths.
- Dominquez, S., & Hollstein, B. (2014). *Mixed methods social networks research: Design and applications*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dzurec, L. C., & Abraham, I. L. (1993). The nature of inquiry: Linking quantitative and qualitative research. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *16*(1), 73–79.
- Flick, U. (2018). *Doing triangulation and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Fowlkes, M. R. (1980). *Behind every successful man: Wives of medicine and academe*. Columbia University.
- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *11*(3), 255–274.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of qualitative research*, *2*(163–194), 105.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191–215). Sage.
- Hesse-Biber, S. (2010). Qualitative approaches to mixed methods practice. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(6), 455–468.

- Hunter, A., & Brewer, J. (2003). Multimethod research in sociology. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 577–594). SAGE Publications.
- Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(4), 602–611.
- Johnson, R. B. (Ed.). (2006). Special issue: New directions in mixed methods research. *Research in the Schools*, 13(1), 1–99.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26.
- Johnson, R. B., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Turner, L. A. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(2), 112–133.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Lynd, R. S., & Lynd, H. M. (1929). *Middletown: A study in modern American culture*. Harcourt Brace and Company.
- Mertens, D. M., & McLaughlin, J. A. (2004). *Research and evaluation methods in special education*. SAGE Publication.
- Miall, C. E., & March, K. (2003). A comparison of biological and adoptive mothers and fathers. *Adoption Quarterly*, 6(4), 7–39.
- Miall, C. E., & March, K. (2005). Community attitudes toward birth fathers' motives for adoption placement and single parenting. *Family Relations*, 54(4), 535–546.
- Morgan, D. L. (1998). Practical strategies for combining qualitative and quantitative methods: Applications to health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 8(3), 362–376.
- Morgan, D. L. (2007). Paradigms lost and pragmatism regained: Methodological implications of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 48–76.
- Morgan, D. L. (2013). *Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods: A pragmatic approach*. SAGE Publications.
- Morse, J. M. (2003). Principles of mixed methods and multimethod research design. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 189–208). SAGE Publications.
- Morse, J. M., & Niehaus, L. (2009). *Mixed method design: Principles and procedures*. Left Coast Press.
- Newman, K. S. (1988). *Falling from grace: Downward mobility in the age of affluence*. University of California Press.
- Newman, K. S. (2013). *The accordion family: Boomerang kids, anxious parents, and the private toll of global competition*. Beacon Press.
- Padgett, D. K. (2012). *Qualitative and mixed methods in public health*. SAGE Publications.
- Pelto, P. J. (2017). *Mixed methods in ethnographic research: Historical perspectives*. Routledge.
- Powell, B., Blozendahl, C., Geist, C., & Steelman, L. C. (2010). *Counted out: Same-sex relations and Americans' definitions of family*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rossman, G. B., & Wilson, B. L. (1985). Numbers and words: Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single large-scale evaluation study. *Evaluation Review*, 9(5), 627–643.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 23(4), 334–340.
- Sandelowski, M. (2003). Tables or tableaux? The challenges of writing and reading mixed methods studies. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 321–350). SAGE Publications.
- Sieber, S. D. (1973). The integration of fieldwork and survey methods. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1335–1359.
- Silverstein, M., & Bengtson, V. L. Longitudinal Study of Generations. (n.d.). 1971, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2005 [California]. *Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor]*, 2016-07-06.

- Steckler, A. B., McLeroy, K., Goodman, R. M., & Bird, S. T. (1992). Toward integrating qualitative and quantitative methods: An introduction. *Health Education Quarterly*, *19*, 1–8.
- Sutor, J. J., Gilligan, M., Rurka, M., Peng, S., Con, G., & Pillemer, K. (2018). Conflict and mothers and siblings during caregiving: Differential costs for black and white adult children? *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, *73*, e86–e97.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Teddlie, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of mixed methods research: Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social and behavioral sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Thomas, M. R. (2003). *Blending qualitative and quantitative research methods in theses and dissertations*. Corwin Press.
- Umberson, D. (1995). Marriage as support or strain? Marital quality following the death of a parent. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *57*(3), 709–723.
- Umberson, D. (2003). *Death of a parent: Transition to a new adult identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Waller, M. R., & Emory, A. D. (2018). Visitation orders, family courts, and fragile families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *80*(3), 653–670.
- Warner, W. L., & Lunt, P. S. (1941). *The social life of a modern community: Yankee City series, volume one*. Yale University Press.
- Watkins, D. C., & Gioia, D. (2015). *Mixed methods research: Pocket guide to social work research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Webb, E. J., Campbell, D. T., Schwartz, R. D., & Sechrest, L. (1966). *Unobtrusive measures: Nonreactive research in the social sciences*. Rand McNally College Publishing Company.

# Application: Survey Driven Narrative Construction



Karina Shreffler and Julia McQuillan

Although mixed-methods research typically refers to any methodology that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in a single study (e.g., Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), the true underlying objective of applying mixed-methods techniques is to draw upon the strengths of both approaches in order to address issues that require innovative techniques (Fetters et al., 2013). In this application, we highlight a recent and innovative mixed-methods application of qualitative analysis techniques to survey data, which holds considerable promise for future family science research, particularly on groups that are hard to study using conventional methods. We suggest that more valuable insights are possible through reimagining ways to incorporate qualitative comments provided in surveys that contain mostly fixed response survey questions.

## Defining Survey-Driven Narrative Construction

Large, national, random sample surveys often contain members of small, atypical groups that are theoretically interesting (e.g., sexual minority couples, nonparents by choice, and stay at home fathers) but have too few cases for conventional statistical analyses (Cheng & Powell, 2005). We describe an alternative approach to such data called “survey-driven narrative construction” (SDNC) (Kazyak et al., 2016).

---

K. Shreffler (✉)

Fran and Earl Ziegler College of Nursing, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center,  
Oklahoma City, OK, USA

e-mail: [karina-shreffler@ouhsc.edu](mailto:karina-shreffler@ouhsc.edu)

J. McQuillan

Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln,  
Lincoln, NE, USA

SDNC involves converting structured answers and open-ended responses for each survey respondent into narratives that are then analyzed as if they were transcriptions of a conversation. In this approach, analysts create each survey participant's story by treating the survey questions and answers as a conversation (Houtkoop-Steenstra & Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000). For surveys that allow participant comments or open-ended responses to some questions, the data can contain more information than using only fixed-answer responses (Rich et al., 2013). Once responses to survey questions are summarized into a narrative describing each participant's story, the narratives can be analyzed for themes similar to conventional qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Since the development of survey research, researchers have included open-ended questions in their studies, but these questions tend to be underutilized in analysis (Singer & Couper, 2017). Singer and Couper (2017) called for more inclusion and analysis of open-ended questions in survey research. Elliott (2005, 2008, 2011) has drawn attention to the narratives that are implicit in survey research and encouraged researchers to take more advantage of this potential. We believe the SDNC approach answers this call and has proven useful in our own research on childbearing attitudes and desires when we had questions that we could not answer using traditional quantitative methods.

## Development of a New Mixed-Method Approach

When we attempted to analyze the responses of 43 sexual minority women who were part of a nationally representative study of 4796 women of ages 25–45 and their partners, we ran into several quantitative methodological challenges due to the small sample size of the focal group of interest. During the process of considering how to move forward with analyzing the data, Nicholas Park, a research team member and graduate student, started to “read” the survey responses and open-ended comments across the data in SPSS. As an experienced quantitative survey researcher, coauthor McQuillan at first reacted that this was the “wrong” thing to do. Yet, upon reflection and discussion, we realized that we could glean much more from the data by going back and forth between crosstabulations comparing the 43 women in the subgroup to the other 4752 women and looking at each participant's answers in more depth among the 43. We realized that it was much easier to “read” the survey questions and answers by using the feature in the data that gave the value labels rather than the quantitative values, and we decided to turn the responses and comments into each person's “story.”

The three primarily qualitative researchers (Kazyak et al. 2016) on our research team led the process of converting the fixed and open-ended responses into each person's and each couple's stories, and then we each coded them for themes. This process, more fully described in Kazyak et al. (2016), provided several new insights about the limitations in the survey itself for understanding the fertility experiences of sexual minority women (i.e., heteronormative biases) as well as insights into the

spectrum of fertility perspectives and desires among sexual minority women. Since our initial publication using this method in 2016, we have been working on similar projects using the same data set and additional subgroups of interest that are too small to study using traditional quantitative techniques. For example, we have applied the method to better understand reproductive desires, behaviors, and psychosocial outcomes among Black women with infertility, women who received ART to achieve pregnancy, women without children who had undergone sterilization (Shreffler et al., 2020), women without children due to childhood cancers, and women with nonreproductive fertility barriers (Andersen, 2017).

## Application of the SDNC Methodology

We know of a handful of studies that explicitly or implicitly use SDNC for topics relevant to family scholars. Members of the research team that helped to create the National Survey of Fertility Barriers (NSFB) have coauthored two studies and supervised one master's thesis using SDNC to answer questions with the NSFB data. Kazyak et al. (2016) provided insights about fertility intentions among approximately 40 sexual minority women who participated in a large, national, random sample of women of reproductive age in the United States (NSFB); utilizing SDNC revealed that there is great variation in attitudes toward motherhood among sexual minority women. SDNC also provided a method for discovering that some questions in the survey had built in biases that altered the meaning of questions for subgroups that do not fit normative assumptions. For example, a series of questions about the importance of motherhood assumed that "having" and "raising" children are interchangeable ways of measuring the importance of parenthood. Yet analyses revealed that for sexual minority women, it is possible to not want to "have" a child but instead to only want to "raise" a child.

Also using the NSFB, for her Master's Thesis in Sociology, Andersen (2017) explored the meaning of nonreproductive biological barriers to wanted children among approximately 30 women who did not meet criteria for infertility. People who cannot have or raise children because of nonreproductive health barriers tend to identify by their illness (e.g., paraplegic, cancer survivor, diabetic, etc.) not by their fertility status; therefore, it would have been hard for Andersen to recruit women to answer her research question. From a reproductive health perspective, this atypical "group" is interesting because they are functionally equivalent to people with reproductive health barriers (i.e., they have a biomedical barrier to having a child) but do not share an infertile identity. SDNC revealed that many of the women focused more on the challenges of living with their own or their partner's illness than on the fact that they could not have a desired child.

Shreffler et al. (2020) also used SDNC with the NSFB to learn about the social and behavioral reasons for and consequences of sterilization among women without children. Nulliparous women who have surgical sterilization are more varied than it might seem because some choose sterilization for contraception, whereas others are

sterilized for noncontraceptive health reasons. The reasons for sterilization surgery, however, are not always aligned with childbearing desires or regrets; some women who had sterilizing surgeries for noncontraceptive reasons did not wish they could have given birth, and other women who opted for sterilization for contraception reported that the surgery prevented them from having wanted children (Shreffler et al., 2020). SDNC provided a way to characterize the similarities and differences among women who again share similar values on certain variables (i.e., sterilized, no children) but do not share a social label (some had voluntary surgery and others had sterilizing surgeries due to noncontraceptive reasons) or feelings about their status (some reported wishing they could have children and others were happy to remain childless/childfree).

In addition to the NSFB, we expect that many primarily fixed-response surveys provide opportunities for participants to offer comments or to answer a few questions in their own words. For example, Rich et al. (2013) analyzed primarily the open-ended responses in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. They constructed participant narratives and identified themes regarding women's experience of drought in agricultural communities and connections to menopause. Making use of narratives, Rich and colleagues were able to uncover themes that would not have been apparent had they looked only at the quantitative data. It is possible that researchers may have to pursue access to restricted data for public use data sets if the open-ended responses are not included in public use data sets.

## Contribution and Future Directions of SDNC

Survey-driven narrative construction so far has been particularly useful when standard qualitative recruiting methods are vulnerable to biased samples. For example, asking sexual minority women to participate in interview about motherhood attitudes could attract mostly those who really want children or are relieved to not have them (Kazyak et al., 2016) and might be less appealing to women who are unsure about having children. Similarly, asking women without children who have been sterilized to do interviews about their sterilization or childbearing desires could attract the most happy or most frustrated, and could miss some of the nuance of those who felt pressured to have sterilization surgery (Shreffler et al., 2020). The method has also proven useful for in-depth analysis of small subgroups in broader populations in which people meet the criteria for but do not necessarily self-identify as (e.g., people with nonreproductive fertility barriers; Andersen, 2017). Finally, the SDNC method has allowed research team members to take advantage of rich closed- and open-ended data provided in large, national data sets to examine unique groups or experiences that would be difficult or costly to find or study otherwise.

Although narratives constructed using SDNC cannot be as rich as those created using traditional qualitative methods, they are still quite useful. Rather than forgo analysis of groups too small for statistical analysis, SDNC provides a way to extract information from large random sample survey data and provides the potential to



reveal patterns in the data that would likely be missed in conventional approaches to working with quantitative data. SDNC can also be used to compensate for certain weaknesses of recruitment strategies typically used in qualitative studies. Most qualitative studies rely on nonprobability samples of volunteers, leaving the researcher unsure about the applicability of their findings to people who would not self-identify or volunteer for a study on a particular topic. This problem may be exacerbated when groups of interest are particularly hard to recruit because there is no established social label for the group or the label is stigmatized (e.g., infertile).

In summary, we believe that the SDNC is an innovative mixed-methods approach that allows family researchers to study small groups of interest using existing data collected as part of larger survey research projects. We encourage other family scholars to heed Elliott's (2005, 2008, 2011) advice to take full advantage of the potential within survey data for narrative information.

## References

- Andersen, J. A. (2017). *Not infertile, can't have children: Non-reproductive health barriers to a wanted child* (MA Thesis). Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologydiss/47/>
- Cheng, S., & Powell, B. (2005). Small samples, big challenges: Studying atypical family forms. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(4), 926–935.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Elliott, J. (2008). The narrative potential of the British birth cohort studies. *Qualitative Research*, 8(3), 411–421.
- Elliott, J. (2011). Exploring the narrative potential of cohort data and event history analysis. In J. Mason & A. Dale (Eds.), *Understanding social research: Thinking creatively about method* (pp. 210–224). Sage Publications.
- Fetters, M. D., Curry, L. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). Achieving integration in mixed methods designs—principles and practices. *Health Services Research*, 48(6pt2), 2134–2156.
- Houtkoop-Steenstra, H., & Houtkoop-Steenstra, J. P. (2000). *Interaction and the standardized survey interview: The living questionnaire*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kazyak, E., Park, N., McQuillan, J., & Greil, A. L. (2016). Attitudes toward motherhood among sexual minority women in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(13), 1771–1796.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5–23.
- Rich, J. L., Choienta, C., & Loxton, D. (2013). Quality, rigour and usefulness of free-text comments collected by a large population based longitudinal study – ALSWH. *PLoS One* B, 7, e68832.
- Shreffler, K. M., Tiemeyer, S., McQuillan, J., & Greil, A. L. (2020). Exploring experiences with sterilization among nulliparous women. *Women's Reproductive Health*, 7(1), 36–48.
- Singer, E., & Couper, M. P. (2017). Some methodological uses of responses to open questions and other verbatim comments in quantitative surveys. *Methods, Data, Analyses: A Journal for Quantitative Methods and Survey Methodology*, 11(2), 115–134.

# Evaluation in Family Science: Developing an Equitable and Relevant Evidence Base for Family-Serving Programs



Amy Lewin, Ghaffar Ali Hurtado Chocque, and Beth Russell

This is the first edition of the Sourcebook to include a chapter on program evaluation. Although program evaluation has traditionally been more of a focus in public health and education than in family science, it is time to critically examine and expand the role it can play in strengthening and disseminating interventions for families. There is an urgent need for ongoing innovation and intervention development to more meaningfully address the depth and breadth of challenges that children and families face today (Center for the Developing Child, 2016). Family science can and should benefit from, and contribute to, current dialogues and emerging paradigms in program evaluation that are intended to innovate, optimize service delivery, and improve well-being for all families. The increasing demand by funders, administrators, and policymakers for accountability in family-focused programming, and a growing responsibility for effectively addressing users' needs, has elevated the importance of evaluation for family-serving programs. The need for innovation to improve both effectiveness and utility in family-focused interventions should compel family scientists to more intentionally focus our scholarship on understanding and advancing program evaluation methods and discourse.

In recent decades, there has been growing interest from funders and service providers to use “evidence-based” interventions in order to make optimal use of scarce resources and increase the likelihood of achieving intended outcomes for families. The term “evidence-based” has grown out of the fields of medicine and education, and it refers to any intervention or practice that has been proven, through

---

A. Lewin (✉) · G. A. H. Chocque  
Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland,  
College Park, MD, USA  
e-mail: [alewin@umd.edu](mailto:alewin@umd.edu)

B. Russell  
Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and  
Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

traditionally rigorous research methods such as randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies, to meet its intended outcomes. However, the field of program evaluation or evaluation science is now grappling with fundamental questions regarding what constitutes this evidence, and whose voices should or could be part of developing the evidence base. Methodologically, researchers and practitioners across disciplines continue to struggle with balancing traditional views of scientific rigor, which require methods such as randomization and repeated data collection over a long period, with programmatic priorities and need for evaluations that are more feasible to implement, produce findings more quickly, and are more useful for program development. Increasingly, program evaluation scholars (e.g., Fetterman, 2005; Green, 2006; Green & Glasgow, 2006; Patton, 1997) are calling for innovation in evaluation methods in order to reconceptualize rigor and allow for more pragmatic and meaningful ways to understand program effects. Family scientists who develop, study, and implement family-focused interventions across a range of contexts, and who come from a tradition of advocating for social justice and inclusion, are uniquely poised to be active participants in these conversations. The desire to find innovative ways to help all families thrive obligates family scientists to contribute to the ongoing evolution of more equitable and useful evaluation methods.

This chapter will critically examine some of these important issues in family-focused program evaluation. It begins with an overview of the historical context of program evaluation, describes limitations of traditional methods in meeting current programmatic needs, reviews some emerging evaluation paradigms that attempt to address these limitations, and finally offers recommendations regarding how family science can work to move forward efforts to establish a relevant and inclusive evidence base of feasible and effective programs for all families.

## **Program Evaluation: A Brief Overview of History and Context**

Evaluation research is a type of study conducted to answer questions about whether and why a program has impacts on those who participate. In general, it includes both summative investigations of program outcomes, and formative or process inquiries meant to improve service delivery (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Evaluation should exist in all phases of a program, from concept development to needs assessment and program design, identifying measurable goals and selecting valid measures, analysis, and results dissemination that will inform future program development. The field of program evaluation strives to employ conventional standards of rigorous scientific investigation including experimental design, standardized instruments, quantitative data collection and analysis, and, as noted by Jacobs (2003), “a dignified professional distance between the evaluator and the clients or subjects” (p. 62).

As professionals, program evaluators arise from diverse disciplines (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014), often from public health or social science backgrounds. Many bring skills from participatory evaluation, implementation evaluation, outcome evaluation, meta-analytic evaluation, and other disciplines to the applied work of documenting what family-focused human service programs do, and the impacts that result. Most, particularly those within the academy, strive to use the traditional methods developed for use in laboratory-based natural sciences (e.g., comparative, controlled paradigms using valid and reliable tools), often to produce peer-reviewed publications that constitute the evidence base for work in a given field.

Evaluations of community-based family-serving programs often must tackle complex interventions in rapidly evolving political contexts, with the less controllable realities of service delivery and family participation. In addition, programs need timely feedback from results to improve programming and respond to municipal or federal funding cycles. This confluence of sometimes competing evaluation priorities – using methodologies that would be considered rigorous in order to contribute to a traditional evidence base, versus producing results that are timely, minimally burdensome, and useful for program improvement – creates an enduring balancing act that evaluation practitioners have negotiated for decades.

The first piece of legislation in President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program passed into law in 1964. Public Law 88-452, the Economic Opportunity Act, was designed to "mobilize the human and financial resources of the Nation to combat poverty" (US Government Publishing Office, 2019). As noted by Jacobs (2003), resulting federal spending on social programming increased, and "Congress insisted that administrative agencies establish mechanisms for scrutinizing these newly created programs in education, employment training, crime prevention, and the like; there were high hopes for what these evaluations would yield" (p.63). To meet this new demand, social scientists brought to bear their academic conventions for scientific rigor through the scientific method (Suchman, 1967), and the use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs became the ideal of rigorous science (Worthen, 1990). However, Jacobs (2003) posits many of these evaluators had little "applied" experience, and the complexity of social programs outstripped their analytic and creative capacities, as well as the evaluation budgets of public agencies.

The decades from the 1960s through the 1990s saw many important developments in the expansion and elaboration of program evaluation methods. Dissatisfaction with the feasibility of traditional quantitative methods led to an increasing interest in, and acceptance of, qualitative methods, and ongoing debates about the relative value of each as an epistemological paradigm (Worthen, 1990). In his publication, *Evaluative research*, Suchman (1967) framed evaluation practice as a balance between needed rigor and constraints on the practicality of implementation of such rigor. Notably, he described the distinction between theory failure versus implementation failure: when an intervention is found to not be effective, it is essential to ask whether this lack of effects was due to a faulty theory of change versus a program that has not been operating as planned (therefore making assessment of any change irrelevant). Efforts to understand early educational evaluations that failed to produce expected results also highlighted the need to understand the

“black box,” or the actual processes of intervention implementation. For example, the first year of the national Head Start Program – announced by then President Johnson as a key program to fund education and health services to offset the impacts of poverty in childhood – would serve over 530,000 children across 11,000 child-care centers. At the time, educators had tools to evaluate educational impacts through standardized tests that were of little use assessing the needs and achievements of children whose development lagged behind their more advantaged age-mates (Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000). Such a standardized approach omitted important differences between communities and ultimately yielded null results but could not describe the implementation of a given intervention, and thus whether outcomes were attributable to participation at all (Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000). These flawed efforts to capture programmatic impacts during Johnson’s War on Poverty underscored the important role of process evaluation, or a descriptive evaluation of program implementation, rather than just outcome evaluations in understanding program effects or lack thereof.

It was also in the 1960s that Cronbach first criticized existing evaluations for their lack of relevance and called for evaluations that can be used to guide intervention development, a call that was given little attention at the time but was revived many years later as the disconnect between academic evaluation research and program practices became increasingly evident (Cronbach, 1963; Madaus & Stufflebeam, 2000). While many program evaluations – particularly those funded by the federal government – continue to be dominated by traditional research methods, researchers have recognized the disconnect between intervention research and community-based practice. Evaluators have taken up Cronbach’s (1978, 1980) call to design studies and to produce findings that can be more pragmatically useful to those implementing interventions (Dearing et al., 2018), urging the field to address felt needs within the communities they partner with through careful implementation fidelity, and articulate actionable recommendations that scaffold incremental improvement to reach program goals.

Recognition of the disconnect between academic research and the ability of intervention to “translate” or make meaningful programmatic use of research findings is reflected in the term “translational research.” This term, which is commonly described as taking medical research “from the bench to the bedside,” was widely used following a 2003 series of roundtable discussions by the Institute of Medicine, which were convened to address the gap between discovery and implementation (Fort et al., 2017). These meetings led to the creation of the Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) program by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2006 and an increasing priority on generating more practice-based knowledge in medicine (Tunis et al., 2003).

At the same time, social scientists, particularly in public health and education, were creating and promoting new participatory approaches to evaluation that are inclusive of, and often directed by, members of the communities that programs are intended to serve. Community-based participatory research (CBPR), and other models that have followed from this approach (and are described in the Emerging Paradigms section below), reconfigure the relationship between the researcher and

the researched, and empower those delivering and receiving interventions to be active partners in their evaluation, thus creating more pragmatically useful and feasible studies from conceptualization through dissemination (Wallerstein et al., 2018). Taken together, these shifts have stimulated advances and innovation in the science and methods of evaluation over the past 40–50 years and fueled debates that persist today about the value of traditional scientific methods for understanding program impacts.

Program evaluation experts today have generally recharacterized program evaluation as distinct from intervention research, with a revised goal of optimizing program development rather than simply confirming or disconfirming a program’s effectiveness (Harris, 2017). However, evaluators continue to face the obligation of honing the rigor used to document and describe the nuanced experiences of program participants within their ecological contexts (e.g., Suchman, 1967; Cochran, 1988), and the role of program services in facilitating improvements in their well-being. The products of an evaluation must serve the needs of all stakeholders, from the peer-reviewed currency that drives academia and documents the development of a rigorous evidence base, to the policy briefs, press releases, and brief internal snapshots that communicate program success to the community stakeholders in real time and serve as formative inputs for program improvement.

Family science brings important tools to meet these challenges. Our long history of expertise in contextual models for human behavior positions us to make significant contributions to the field’s progress in equitably studying and describing the diversity in human experience, and the contexts in which change occurs. Our expertise in relationships can bring a much-needed centering of the importance of collaborations, with intervention partners and with families, to the work of program evaluation.

## **A Critical Analysis of Traditional Evaluation Models**

Traditional research methods and conceptualizations of rigor have grown out of academia, reflecting all of the power and privilege within that system, and requiring contexts that have a similar level of privilege, capacity, and autonomy. The medical model of intervention, also a driver of research methods, presumes a consistent and universal response, with a clear and direct cause and effect (Victoria, 2004). Both academic and medical research lend themselves easily to measurement with a randomized controlled trial (RCT). Because it provides the greatest protection against threats to internal validity, an RCT is the research design that can most clearly establish a causal relationship between an intervention and an indicator of an intended effect. The desire to establish such causal conclusions in an attempt to provide evidence of a program’s value led to a general consensus that the RCT is the “gold standard” for evaluating programs. However, the contexts in which family-serving programs operate may not conform to the same structures and assumptions as basic research or medical settings. Programs for families typically operate in less

controlled community-based settings, and real-world implementation leads to greater variability in participation, need, and response than is seen in highly controlled trials. Reliance on traditional and inflexible conceptualizations of scientific rigor that value the RCT as the epitome of evaluation methods has constrained our knowledge of how to best serve families in need. It also has led to a number of inter-related limitations in the existing evidence base for family-focused interventions.

### *Feasibility*

RCTs and even longitudinal quasi-experimental designs are simply not feasible to implement for many family-focused programs. Such studies require substantial sample sizes, a long period of time, and control or comparison groups (Riley et al., 2013). Many community-based intervention programs do not have the time, infrastructure, or financial resources to field complex, long-term, controlled efficacy trials. Many practitioners also have significant ethical concerns about randomization (Gopichandran et al., 2016). Service providers often feel that it is ethically unacceptable to randomize people in need of help to a control condition in which they receive less service, have to wait an extended period to receive service, are not permitted to choose the services they receive, or do not receive any services at all.

### *Innovation*

Directly related to the issue of feasibility is the question of what counts as evidence when determining the value of an intervention. If the evidence base includes only interventions that are “proven” with RCTs, then potentially valuable, community-derived, locally responsive interventions are not being included in the evidence base. Such interventions are typically situated in organizations for which RCTs are not feasible. Smaller, less-resourced, community-based organizations are also the places where more marginalized families typically receive services. The evidence base is therefore biased toward more privileged populations who have the capacity to be included in RCT studies. More marginalized families may be less comfortable meeting the methodological requirements of RCTs (not choosing intervention status, responding to multiple rounds of data collection over an extended period of time, etc.). Such demands may explain the high levels of attrition commonly seen in RCTs with less socioeconomically resourced populations (Flores et al., 2017), a threat to both the internal and external validity of such research. Minoritized, economically impoverished, and under-resourced families, without the same degree of privilege as researchers, are typically described by those researchers as “hard to reach.” Akin to victim blaming, this stance implies that the limitations lie with the potential participants for not being accessible to the researchers, rather than with the researchers for not creating methods, programs, and research protocols that are accessible to all people equitably.

## ***Inclusion***

Experimental and quasi-experimental studies, in which quantitative data from surveys are analyzed and interpreted using tests of statistical significance, may not be the most meaningful way to measure outcomes. Finding statistically significant differences between aggregated treatment and control groups tells us only whether changes over time are different for one group versus the other; it answers the overall question of “did it work?” It does not provide more nuanced and programmatically useful information about how and why a program worked, for whom, and under what conditions. Some analytic methods such as moderation and subgroup analyses shed light on these questions. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, program participants, and the staff who serve them on a daily basis, bring an important expertise to the understanding of how and to what degree a program works. When researchers who are not members of the community being served design the studies, select the outcomes and associated measures, and interpret the findings, the expertise of families and service providers is not elevated to an equal level of importance in the process. Community-based participatory research and other forms of community-engaged research have increased the research community’s awareness and valuing of shared expertise. However, many participatory research models and methods are inconsistent with the demands and structure of RCTs for the feasibility reasons described above.

Similarly, existing validated measures of outcome variables may not adequately capture the kinds of subtle behavioral or psychological changes that many family-serving programs aim to achieve. Such measures are often validated on a specific population and are not necessarily valid when used with a group that differs developmentally, culturally, linguistically, or geographically. The result of this poor fit in measurement can mean a reliance on tools developed for a specific study outside accepted psychometric practice (e.g., single-item measures or a lack of convergent validity testing).

## ***Fidelity***

RCTs typically use manualized interventions, for which implementation must be standardized and uniform. Deviations from the protocol are considered to be threats to fidelity, the extent to which implementation adheres to the standardized protocol, and therefore to the rigor of the research. Such emphasis on fidelity to uniform implementation is not only reflective of real-world implementation, and is also not responsive to the varying needs of participants (Allen et al., 2018). There are numerous costs to this firm adherence to fidelity, including compromises to innovation, participant engagement, cultural relevance, inclusion of participants who may not meet specific requirements, and ultimately implementation quality. If a program is not responsive in real time (in either structure or content) to clients’ needs, then



those clients may not participate, or may not benefit from their participation. Protocols developed for more homogenous and resourced groups may not be well-suited to meet the needs of less-resourced clients. Some program evaluation scholars have more recently addressed this concern by advocating for the value of systematic intervention adaptation as a complement to, rather than a contradiction to, fidelity (Baumann et al., 2018).

### *Internal Versus External Validity*

RCTs are considered to be the most rigorous study design because they offer the most internal validity (defined as the strongest probability of determining a causal relationship between an intervention and an outcome). However, numerous researchers have argued in recent years that our evidence base has an imbalance, and that external validity has been sacrificed in pursuit of internal validity (Green & Nasser, 2018). In an effort to prove the efficacy of interventions, studies have implemented interventions under highly structured, controlled conditions that often differ in substantial and important ways from how interventions are implemented in real-world contexts. This lack of concern for external validity in evaluations is a significant reason for the lack of widespread dissemination and adoption of many evidence-based programs (Green & Glasgow, 2006). Many interventions found to be evidence-based do not produce similar results when implemented in a less-controlled context (Battaglia & Glasgow, 2018), and practitioners tend to be skeptical of the relevance and value of the evidence generated by these evaluations (Green & Nasser, 2018).

Related to the concept of internal validity is minimizing the risk of type I errors or the false conclusion that a program has effects (significant differences between intervention and control groups). Efforts to reduce type I errors necessitate high degrees of control to reduce potential confounders, and therefore use strategies such as highly standardized measures and implementation procedures, and aggregated data across randomized groups of participants. However, these strategies often increase the likelihood of type II errors or missing actual effects that do exist (Jacobs, 2003). Additionally, small effects might be clinically meaningful in family-serving programs because they alter developmental trajectories or relationship dynamics, but these effects might not be detected due to inadequate statistical power. Such type II errors may be particularly damaging to programs as they may lead to elimination of funding, inhibition of innovation, or, in some cases, well-publicized skepticism of highly regarded programs (e.g., Head Start; Gordon, 1979).

The limits of prioritizing internal validity and the related reduction in type I errors have been seen in several large-scale evaluations of family-focused interventions in recent decades. For example, randomized controlled trials of federally funded responsible fatherhood programs found modest or no effects on key outcomes (e.g., co-parenting, fathers' earnings, and fathers' social emotional well-being) when examining aggregated data across four study sites, and concluded that

such programs did not improve these outcomes in participating fathers. However, disaggregating by site began to reveal differences in some outcomes (Avellar, et al., 2018). Additionally, qualitative studies of responsible fatherhood program participants found that fathers perceived significant benefits to participation that were not captured adequately by the large aggregated trials (Anderson et al., 2002).

In response to these limitations, a rich array of alternative program evaluation methods has been developed in recent decades. Each of these alternative methods is intended to increase the inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives in the design and implementation of the evaluation, to increase understanding of implementation context as a necessary component of understanding effectiveness, and to increase feasibility and real-world applicability of program evaluations, with the ultimate goal of optimizing intervention and improving dissemination of high-quality programming across settings (Minkler et al., 2018; Patton, 1997).

RCTs will always have an important place in the evaluation toolbox used by family scientists. No other method provides the statistical precision and causal conclusiveness of an intervention's effectiveness provided by a well-designed and implemented RCT. However, many family-focused community-based programs have neither the developmental maturity nor the resources needed for an RCT evaluation. A growing group of program evaluation scholars (e.g., Peek et al., 2014; Battaglia & Glasgow, 2018; Center on the Developing Child, 2016) are now calling for a paradigm shift in which a range of high-quality evaluation encompasses both intervention development/optimization (through the use of alternative methods described below) and verification (through RCT and quasi-experimental studies). Newer and more expansive methods of evaluation conceptualize the process less as an external, objective inquiry, and more as a collaboration in which evaluators partner with program implementers and other stakeholders (including families) in a context of shared and mutually valued expertise and input.

## **Emerging Paradigms and New Methods for Program Evaluation**

### ***Qualitative Methods in Program Evaluation***

Many evaluators continually seek methods that promote the utility of program evaluations to a broad range of stakeholders without sacrificing the rigor of the sample-specific results or the generalizability thereof. Qualitative methods like ethnographic observation, interviews, and focus groups – particularly when paired with quantitative methods – are important tools evaluators can employ to add nuanced texture and vitally important information about how and why interventions “work” (Louie, 2016). These methods are designed to capture stakeholder voices, providing more information about the specific experiences of those involved at all levels of family-focused services. Take, for example, an evaluation that finds one portion of an

intervention sample scored significantly better on a given assessment. Rigorous qualitative approaches are essential in helping explain *why* that group differed. Incorporating narrative voices of participants and/or program staff minimizes speculation and bias in the interpretation of quantitative impacts and null results. Louie (2016) provides a powerful example of the value of qualitative data to provide explanation and understanding of unexpected quantitative results. She describes a housing voucher program intended to move families out of high-poverty neighborhoods in order to improve youth outcomes. When the program did not produce the intended effects, policymakers assumed it was because families chose not to move to lesser-known communities. However, extensive qualitative data revealed numerous structural and logistical barriers, unanticipated by program developers, which prevented families from taking advantage of the voucher program. Such narrative opportunities to expand on program experiences and implementation, beyond the constrained formats of quantitative assessments, create opportunities to better understand the context and meaning of participants' outcomes.

A substantive view of evaluation that connects program components (i.e., sample characteristics and program goals), activities, and outcomes is enhanced by qualitative opportunities to investigate conceptual, contextual, and practical issues inherent in family-focused intervention programs (House & Howe, 1999) and the meaning of each to those served by them. The most frequent uses of qualitative procedures in program evaluation are the feasibility and acceptability input gained during the needs assessment and approach development phases of an intervention. However, use of qualitative data for documentation and description of implementation context, variability in program effects across participants, and interpretation of findings also provides critically important information for dissemination and scaling-up an intervention, as well as adding to understanding the "how" of an intervention's effectiveness.

Focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and felt-needs assessments are all examples of common qualitative methods used to design family-focused intervention programs tailored to a given context. Similar methods can be incorporated in mid- and postintervention assessments to add depth to descriptions of anticipated and unanticipated outcomes. Indeed, conveying the texture and inherent complexity in family life, and the contexts in which it occurs, is arguably one of the strongest assets these methods offer the field of evaluation. As stated by Greene et al. (2001),

Our work is conducted in natural settings, where history and context matter, where human behavior traces complex patterns of influence and relationship, where what is meaningful to those in the setting is both phenomenological and structural, arising from both lived experiences and the societal institutions that frame and shape those experiences. Engaging this complexity requires not a privileging of just one way of knowing and valuing, but rather a marshalling of all of our ways of understanding in a framework that honors diversity and respects difference. (p. 25)

In the field of evaluation research, tension is often noted between the agile qualitative approaches that capture the nuances in context-dependent experiences of family-focused services and the standardized procedures of quantitative approaches (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). This tension, however, is a false dichotomy (Bailey et al.,

1999) that does not account for the systematic structure of rigorous qualitative methods, nor the adaptive practices of some quantitative methods. Qualitative methods have deepened our sense of epistemological issues of subjectivity, credibility, and authenticity, and the impact of researcher biases (Shek et al., 2005). The last several decades have seen persistent calls to attend to the considerations that help qualitative researchers maximize this critical, rhetorical potential and contribute sound information to the evidence base, refereed or otherwise (Bailey et al., 1999).

### *Participatory Methods in Evaluation*

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) (see Letiecq et al, this volume) is an approach to research that equitably engages community practitioners, participants, and researchers throughout the research/evaluation process (Israel, 2005). The overarching idea of CBPR (or, more broadly, participatory action research) is that research and evaluation data are more valid when community and practitioner perspectives are included and centered throughout the research process (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; Wallerstein & Duran 2008). This assumption lends itself particularly well to the goals and practice of program evaluation. The increasing influence of CBPR on community-engaged research practices, as well as increasing recognition of the limitations of traditional methods as described above, has given rise to the subfield of participatory evaluation (Wiggins et al., 2018). Consistent with many of the principles set out in this chapter, participatory evaluation explicitly acknowledges subjectivity and context, rather than trying to control them. This approach works to shift power for design, decision-making, interpretation, and dissemination from “objective” external evaluators to the communities and clients affected by programs (Wiggins et al., 2018).

Four general participatory approaches that exemplify these principles are briefly described below. These four approaches have considerable overlap in their adherence to participatory principles and emphasis on community empowerment and community-generated knowledge; however, each framework has a slightly different emphasis. Taken together, they concretize the principles of participatory evaluation and offer guidance for evaluators seeking to strengthen family-serving programs by making respectful use of the knowledge that less empowered families have to offer to their programs and communities.

**Theory-of-Action Evaluation** Within the theory-of-action framework, “theory” represents the assumptions or “model of the world” which renders it possible that enacting an action strategy would lead to intended outcomes. The theory-of-action approach to evaluation serves to tie evaluation to the intentions of those who espouse, design, and implement programs rather than treating evaluative judgments as wholly independent of, or bound by, such intentions (Schön, 1997). This approach requires evaluators, designers, and practitioners to engage in collaborative inquiry that includes constructing, implementing, and interpreting the consequences of

enacting a theory-of-action. While findings from a theory-based evaluation are meant to be generalized beyond the setting and situation, theory-of-action evaluation findings can be generalized only situationally and therefore have more of a utilization function.

**Utilization-Focused Evaluation** Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) is based on the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use. It focuses on how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience to the evaluation process. The focus in UFE is on the intended use by the intended users (Patton, 1997). The fundamental premise of UFE is consistent with several key principles of participatory evaluation: commitment to intended use by intended users as a driving force, careful and thoughtful stakeholder analysis to inform identification of primary intended users, evaluations that are designed and adapted situationally, intended users actively involved in making significant decisions about the evaluation, and evaluators training users. Utilization-focused evaluation requires time to elicit the active engagement of intended users. Work in a task force or committee can enable a strong working relationship between the evaluation and intended users (Patton, 1997).

**Transformative Participatory Evaluation** Participatory evaluation was built on the conventional stakeholder model and advocates joint ownership and control of technical evaluation decision-making, as well as a more penetrating role for stakeholders. However, the collaboration between evaluators and stakeholders may vary in the intensity of stakeholder involvement and participation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Transformative participatory evaluation focuses on reallocating power in the production of knowledge and promoting social change. Transformative participatory evaluation has its foundation in principles of emancipation and social justice and seeks to empower members of community groups who are either less powerful than or otherwise oppressed by dominating groups (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Growing out of participatory action research first conducted in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, this approach to evaluation invokes participatory principles to democratize social change by using evaluation processes and products to transform power relations and to promote social action and change. This approach legitimizes knowledge generated by, and residing in, the community, and uses popular education as a way of increasing community empowerment, and ultimately community health (Wiggins et al., 2018).

**Empowerment Evaluation** Empowerment evaluation (EE) is rooted in community psychology, action research, and anthropology, focusing on people, organizations, and communities working to establish control over their affairs (Fetterman, 2005). The goal of EE is to achieve program success by providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program. At its foundation is the idea of self-determination. Fetterman (2005) describes professional evaluators as coaches or facilitators who teach their clients to conduct their own evaluations and build clients' capacity to be self-sufficient

evaluators. He argues that evaluation is political, social, cultural, and economic in nature. EE provides an opportunity to challenge authority makers by providing data about operations from the ground up via “grass roots” and provides a voice for disenfranchised people.

### ***Rapid Cycle Iterative Methods in Evaluation***

The emergence of a more participatory paradigm for program evaluation research has also spawned discussion of how collaboration between researchers and program implementers should ideally be an iterative process of assessing and revising program implementation. Born out of processes from other fields, such as Quality Improvement in medicine and Research and Development in technology, newer methods integrate program development/improvement and program evaluation, rather than conceptualizing them as separate and sequential. One such example is rapid cycle evaluation, also described as “micro-trials” (Hargreaves, 2014; Center for the Developing Child, 2016; Johnson et al., 2015). Numerous researchers and practitioners, including an evaluation working group convened by the Department of Health and Human Services, have pointed out that traditional trials take years to conduct, and results are often not available to practitioners, policymakers, and other decision-makers until after a program has ended (Hargreaves, 2014; Riley et al., 2013). This timing is a significant barrier to program improvement and dissemination. There is a growing interest in the use of rapid cycle iterative evaluations, akin to pilot testing, in which an intervention is implemented and evaluated with a small number of families for a short duration, ideally in multiple sites across different contexts or serving different groups of families. Findings regarding feasibility and effectiveness are continuously monitored and analyzed, and shared in collaborative dialogue with program implementers, who are able to use the results to make real-time adjustments in the program’s theory of change, and implementation strategies.

This rapid cycle process has several advantages: because it entails close collaboration between researchers and practitioners, it can be used to optimize program implementation; because it embraces variability in implementation, it enables greater understanding of which strategies work best for whom and under what circumstances; and because it is agile, requiring less time and therefore less funding, it fosters discovery, innovation, and opportunities for dissemination (Center for the Developing Child, 2016; Riley et al., 2013; Battaglia & Glasgow, 2018). Proponents argue that rapid cycle trials can be implemented with scientific rigor and are a valuable first step in the development of evidence and the confirmation or revision of programs’ theories of change. With transparency, rapid cycle trials can serve as the basis for replication in a more controlled and larger-scale trial, but provide important, meaningful, and relevant data that can be used by practitioners and policymakers without the need to wait for the final conclusive results from an RCT. This method can incorporate participatory approaches and can therefore empower families to be significant shapers of program development.

## Conclusion

Discussions around the issues raised in this chapter have not previously been prominent in family science scholarship. But family scientists who develop, study, and implement family-focused interventions have an opportunity and an obligation to participate in moving evaluation methods forward using our expertise in relationships and social justice to expand evaluation science in ways that make it more inclusive and useful. Family scientists can question and challenge the assumption that greater rigor is obtained through greater methodological control and explicitly address the inherent biases in all evaluations. Doing so will only improve programs that serve families across a range of contexts and better meet the complexity of their needs. In order to meet the call to improve family-focused program evaluation, we offer several recommendations.

First, we need to more explicitly address the importance of relationships between evaluators and providers. The critical role of relationship-building has been undervalued at times, likely because it requires a very heavy investment of time and effort, before any concrete products are created. The current climate of grant funding, publication demands, and tenure clocks does not allow the time and space necessary for such an investment. Instead, all too often, partnerships between programs and evaluators are driven by temporary funding opportunities and are therefore quickly created, without the depth of trust, understanding, and mutual appreciation of expertise that comes from long-term partnership.

As evaluators (particularly those in academia) face demands to obtain the next grant, or publish peer-reviewed papers, they may be tempted to form collaborations that serve those ends but ultimately leave programs without useful answers or products. Such hastily created projects, in which outside researchers judge the value of a program, are vulnerable to resentment, misunderstanding, and eventual disintegration, all of which are counterproductive to the values and objectives described in this chapter. Instead, we argue that significant upfront investment in relationship-building, which supersedes specific funding opportunities or publishable papers and co-creates evaluation agendas, offers critically important payoffs in productivity, participation, and relevance/utility.

Much has been written about the gap between evidence generated by research and the interventions that are actually offered by programs (Green, 2006; Green & Glasgow, 2006; Glasgow 2013). But interventions will only be taken up by programs if their evaluations answer questions and provide information that feels relevant and useful to practitioners. Researchers must value the knowledge generated by the lived experiences of program participants and providers in order to create such meaningful evaluations. As family scientists, we can apply our expertise in relationships, and our long-standing tradition of service provision to families, to this underdeveloped aspect of program evaluation. Relationship-building with service providers, advocates, and clients is at the heart of successful participatory evaluation and the development of relevant and usable programmatic research. As a field, we must advocate for the value of this investment, and the creation of an

infrastructure to support it, in order to build a meaningful, inclusive, and effective evidence base of family-focused programs.

Second, we must attend to the overarching purpose of evaluation: How do we capture progress? We acknowledge that change is nuanced and multidimensional as gains can be observed at the single study or sample level up through forward advancement in the field at the industry level. Ultimately, the implementation of any evaluation method should be driven by a desire to communicate the impact of our work, to improve program implementation to reach outcomes that all stakeholders can derive value from. At its best, evaluation should also be theory-building, with the intention not just of confirming or disconfirming effectiveness, but also of better understanding how best to meet the needs of diverse groups of families.

We argue that an array of innovative methods, both those described in this chapter as well as those yet to be developed, are needed to most fully and meaningfully answer questions about how best to serve families. Such innovation requires collaboration and inclusion of multiple perspectives: not only of families and service providers, but also of researchers across disciplines. We see growing recognition on multiple fronts of the value of these kinds of collaborations, including the transdisciplinary Team Science literature (see Blume & Fine, this volume; also, see Committee on the Science of Team Science, et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). The growing field of implementation science has provided thoughtful dialogue and innovative research about relevance, adaptation, scalability, and dissemination of programs (Brownson et al., 2018). Discourse about the need for “practice-based evidence” rather than just “evidence-based practice” (Green, 2006; Green et al., 2009) has given rise to practice-based research networks in which groups of researchers and community members develop research agendas, implement evaluations, and interpret and disseminate findings (Westfall et al., 2006; Schindler et al., 2017). One such example is the Washington Innovation Cluster, a group of community-based service providers and parents who bring experience-based knowledge, interdisciplinary researchers from multiple institutions who bring methodological and empirical knowledge, and state-level policymakers who bring a mechanism for systemic change, all working toward a shared goal of improving outcomes for young children facing adversity. This network has worked together over many years to co-create programming, pilot test an array of diverse approaches, and use rapid cycle methods for continuous improvement and evaluation. Multiple coordinated project teams use low-cost, low-risk methods to innovate and create a portfolio of interventions that can be tailored to meet families’ distinct needs (Schindler et al., 2017). Family scientists, who come from a field that is inherently interdisciplinary, can serve as prominent models of such inclusive collaborations.

Finally, the methods described above will only be adopted by scholars in the field if funders are willing to support these methods, editors are willing to make space for the resulting products in the refereed literature, and academic institutions are willing to value these forms of science. Practitioners have long contended with the limited utility of peer-reviewed scholarship products to the range of stakeholders investing in program evaluations, including the populations on whom those products focused. Peer-reviewed papers published in academic journals continue to hold



a prized position of favor among academic scholars and their institutions of employment, but practitioners and policymakers often find them inaccessible due to their heavy use of academic jargon and their location behind paywalls. Further, the peer-review process often requires months and sometimes years before publication, often long after the consequences of any program-specific decisions (Shadish et al., 1991; Smith, 2006).

In order to move programming innovation forward, academic institutions will need to develop a commitment to supporting partnerships between researchers and applied practitioners to solve important and pressing problems. Such a commitment must be made tangible through revised metrics for academic success that consider the time investment for creating and maintaining community partnerships, and the value of disseminating evaluation findings outside of the peer-reviewed literature, in forums that are more accessible to those outside of academia. Journal editors and reviewers must publish studies using a wider array of methodologies, without devaluing them as less rigorous or lacking internal validity. Studies that do not produce evidence of intended program effects should also be published widely as they are critically important opportunities to explore limitations in methodologies and lessons about ways in which program theories and services may not be well-matched to participants' needs.

The current system of developing an evidence base through traditional academic methods, metrics, and timelines is stifling innovation in programming. What constitutes "evidence-based programs," for both journals and funders, should be expanded to include the locally developed innovative program that builds on theory and closely related findings to tailor its approach to a novel audience or to new outcomes. The resulting family program may be theoretically grounded and built on a reliable base of valid, related evidence, although it has not yet contributed to the traditional evidence base. This absence from the literature may preclude the fledgling program from receiving funding, thus suppressing further program development, innovation, adaptation, and agility.

However, family science should not wait for editors and funders to call for long-term partnerships, or broader, more inclusive visions of evidence and evaluation rigor. Family science is positioned to be on the forefront of such progress in evaluation as our field considers the diversity of lived experiences through advanced, context-focused methods. We are steeped in traditions that recognize the importance of creating knowledge for improving lives, rather than simply for the sake of new knowledge. Family science is perhaps among the few social sciences that can bring a canon of interdisciplinary expertise to bear to promote the inclusion of a wide range of human experience in our intervention efforts. Our field has an unwavering commitment to understanding and improving the well-being of families. By harnessing all that family science has to offer, we can lead the evolution of program evaluation research to be more inclusive, more meaningful, and ultimately more effective in solving problems and lifting up all families.

## References

- Allen, J. D., Shelton, R. C., Emmons, K. M., & Linnan, L. A. (2018). Fidelity and its relationship to implementation effectiveness, adaptation, and dissemination. In R. C. Brownson, G. A. Colditz, & E. K. Proctor (Eds.), *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, E. A., Kohler, J. K., & Letiecq, B. L. (2002). Low-income fathers and “responsible fatherhood” programs: A qualitative investigation of participants’ experiences. *Family Relations*, *51*, 148–155.
- Avellar, S., Covington, R., Moore, Q., Patnaik, A., & Wu, A. (2018). *Parents and children together: Effects of four responsible fatherhood programs for low-income fathers (OPRE Report No. 2018-50)*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Azzi-Lessing, L. (2011). Home visitation programs: Critical issues and future directions. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *26*, 387–398.
- Bailey, C., White, C., & Pain, R. (1999). Evaluating qualitative research: Dealing with the tension between ‘science’ and ‘creativity’. *Area*, *31*, 169–183.
- Battaglia, C., & Glasgow, R. E. (2018). Pragmatic dissemination and implementation research models, methods and measures and their relevance for nursing research. *Nursing Outlook*, *66*, 430–445.
- Baumann, A. A., Cabassa, L. J., & Stirman, S. W. (2018). Adaptation in dissemination and implementation science. In R. C. Brownson, G. A. Colditz, & E. K. Proctor (Eds.), *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Baxter, J., & Eyles, J. (1997). Evaluating qualitative research in social geography: Establishing ‘rigour’ in interview analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *22*, 505–525.
- Brownson, R. C., Colditz, G. A., & Proctor, E. K. (Eds.). (2018). *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, D. T. (1984). Can we be scientific in applied social science? In R. F. Conner, D. G. Altman, & C. Jackson (Eds.), *Evaluation studies review annual* (pp. 26–48). Sage Publications.
- Castro, F. G., Barrera, M., Jr., & Martinez, C. R., Jr. (2004). The cultural adaptation of prevention interventions: Resolving tensions between fidelity and fit. *Prevention Science*, *5*(1), 41–45.
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). *From best practices to breakthrough impacts: A science-based approach to building a more promising future for young children and families*. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Children’s Bureau (2019). *Child welfare information gateway: Evidence-based practice*. Available: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/practice-improvement/evidence/>
- Cochran, M. (1988). Between cause and effect: The ecology of program impacts. In A. R. Pence (Ed.), *Ecological research with children and families: From concepts to methodology* (pp. 143–169). Teachers College Press.
- Committee on the Science of Team Science; Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences; Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education; National Research Council. (2015). In N. J. Cooke & M. L. Hilton (Eds.), *Enhancing the effectiveness of team science*. National Academies Press.
- Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (1998). Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, *80*, 5–23.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1963). Course improvement through evaluation. *Teachers College Record*, *64*(8), 672–683.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1978). *Designing educational evaluations*. Josey Bass Publishers.
- Cronbach, L. J., et al. (1980). *Toward reform of program evaluation*. Josey-Bass Publishers.

- Dearing, J. W., Kee, K. F., & Peng, T. (2018). Historical roots of dissemination and implementation science. In R. C. Brownson, G. A. Colditz, & E. K. Proctor (Eds.), *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Fetterman, D. M. (2005). *Empowerment evaluation principles in practice*. The Guilford Press.
- Flores, G., Portillo, A., Lin, H., Walker, C., Fierro, M., Henry, M., & Massey, K. (2017). A successful approach to minimizing attrition in racial/ethnic minority, low-income populations. *Contemporary Clinical Trials Communications*, 5, 168–174.
- Fort, D. G., Herr, T. M., Shaw, P. L., Gutzman, K. E., & Starren, J. B. (2017). Mapping the evolving definitions of translational research. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 1(1), 60–66.
- Glasgow, R. E. (2013). What does it mean to be pragmatic? Pragmatic methods, measures, and models to facilitate research translation. *Health Education & Behavior*, 40, 257–265.
- Gopichandran, V., Luyckx, V. A., Biller-Andorno, N., Fairchild, A., Singh, J., Tran, N., ... Vahedi, M. (2016). Developing the ethics of implementation research in health. *Implementation Science*, 11(1), 161.
- Gordon, E. W. (1979). Evaluation during the early years of Head Start. In E. Zigler & J. Valentine (Eds.), *Project Head Start: A legacy of the war on poverty* (pp. 399–404). Free Press.
- Green, L. W. (2006). Public health asks of systems science: to advance our evidence-based practice, can you help us get more practice-based evidence? *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(3), 406–409.
- Green, L. W., & Glasgow, R. E. (2006). Evaluating the relevance, generalization, and applicability of research: issues in external validation and translation methodology. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 29(1), 126–153.
- Green, L. W., Glasgow, R. E., Atkins, D., & Stange, K. (2009). Making evidence from research more relevant, useful, and actionable in policy, program planning, and practice: slips “twixt cup and lip”. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 37(6), S187–S191.
- Green, L. W., & Nasser, M. (2018). Furthering dissemination and implementation research: The need for more attention to external validity. In R. C. Brownson, G. A. Colditz, & E. K. Proctor (Eds.), *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Greene, J. C., Benjamin, L., & Goodyear, L. (2001). The merits of mixing methods in evaluation. *Evaluation*, 7(1), 25–44.
- Hargreaves, M. B. (2014). *Rapid evaluation approaches for complex initiatives*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Harris, M. J. (2017). *Evaluating public and community health programs*. John Wiley & Sons.
- House, E. R., & Howe, K. R. (1999). *Values in evaluation and social research*. Sage Publications.
- Howards, K. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2009). The role of home-visiting programs in preventing child abuse and neglect. *The Future of Children*, 19, 119–146.
- Israel, B. A., Eng, E., Schulz, A., & Parker, E. A. (2005). Introduction to methods for CBPR for health. *Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*, 3–26.
- Jacobs, F. H. (2003). Child and family program evaluation: Learning to enjoy complexity. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(2), 62–75.
- Johnson, K., Gustafson, D., Ewigman, B., et al. (2015). *Using rapid-cycle research to reach goals: Awareness, assessment, adaptation, acceleration*. AHRQ Publication No. 15-0036. Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.
- King, J. A. (1998). Making sense of participatory evaluation practice. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 80, 57–67.
- Louie, V. (2016). Identifying responses to inequality: the potential of qualitative and mixed methods research. *William T. Grant Foundation*.
- Madaus, G. F., & Stufflebeam, D. L. (2000). Program evaluation: A historical overview. In D. L. Stufflebeam, G. F. Madaus, & T. Kellaghan (Eds.), *Evaluation models. Evaluation in education and human services* (Vol. 49). Kluwer Academic Publishers. 10.1007/0-306-47559-6\_1.
- Minkler, M., Salvatore, A. L., & Chang, C. (2018). Participatory approaches for study design and analysis in dissemination and implementation research. In R. C. Brownson, G. A. Colditz, & E. K. Proctor (Eds.), *Dissemination and implementation research in health* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Patton, M. Q. (1997). Utilization-focused evaluation: Process and premise. In *Utilization-focused evaluation: The new century text* (3rd ed., pp. 371–385). Sage Publications.

Peek, C. J., Glasgow, R. E., Stange, K. C., Klesges, L. M., Purcell, E. P., & Kessler, R. S. (2014). The 5 R's: An emerging bold standard for conducting relevant research in a changing world. *Annals of Family Medicine, 12*(5), 447–455.

Riley, W. T., Glasgow, R. E., Etheredge, L., & Abernethy, A. P. (2013). Rapid, responsive, relevant (R3) research: A call for a rapid learning health research enterprise. *Clinical and Translational Medicine, 2*(1).

Schindler, H. S., Fisher, P. A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2017). From innovation to impact at scale: Lessons learned from a cluster of research–community partnerships. *Child Development, 88*(5), 1435–1446.

Schön, D. (1997). Notes for a theory-of-action approach to evaluation. *Harvard Project on Schooling & Children Evaluation Task Force*.

Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Leviton, L. C. (1991). *Foundations of program evaluation: Theories of practice*. Sage Publications.

Shek, D. T., Tang, V. M., & Han, X. Y. (2005). Evaluations of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in the Social Work literature (1990–2003): Evidence that constitutes a wake-up call. *Research in Social Work Practice, 15*, 180–194.

Smith, R. (2006). Peer review: A flawed process at the heart of science and journals. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 99*(4), 178–182.

Stufflebeam, D. L., & Coryn, C. L. S. (2014). *Evaluation theory, methods, and applications* (2nd ed.). Wiley Publications.

Suchman, E. A. (1967). *Evaluative research: principles and practice in public service and social action programs*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Tunis, S. R., Stryer, D. B., & Clancy, C. M. (2003). Practical clinical trials: Increasing the value of clinical research for decision making in clinical and health policy. *JAMA, 290*(12), 1624–1632.

US Government Publishing Office. (2019). *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*. Available: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg508.pdf>

Victora, C. G., Habicht, J. P., & Bryce, J. (2004). Evidence-based public health: Moving beyond randomized trials. *American Journal of Public Health, 94*, 400–405.

Vogel, A. L., Stipelman, B. A., Hall, K. L., Nebeling, L., Stokols, D., & Spruijt-Metz, D. (2014). Pioneering the transdisciplinary team science approach: lessons learned from National Cancer Institute grantees. *Journal of Translational Medicine & Epidemiology, 2*(2), 1027.

Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B. (2008). The theoretical, historical, and practice roots of CBPR. *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes, 2*, 25–46.

Wallerstein, N., Duran, B., Oetzel, J., & Minkler, M. (2018). On community-based participatory research. In N. Wallerstein, B. Duran, J. Oetzel, & M. Minkler (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity*. Josey-Bass Publishers.

Weiss, C. H. (2002). What to do until the random assigner come. In F. Mosteller & R. Boruch (Eds.), *Evidence matters: Randomized trials in education research* (pp. 198–224). Brookings Institution.

Westfall, J. M., VanVorst, R. F., Main, D. S., & Herbert, C. (2006). Community-based participatory research in practice-based research networks. *The Annals of Family Medicine, 4*(1), 8–14.

Wiggins, N., Parajon, L. C., Coombe, C. M., Duldulao, A. A., Garcia, L. R., & Wang, P. (2018). Participatory evaluation as a process of empowerment. In N. Wallerstein, B. Duran, J. Oetzel, & M. Minkler (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity*. Josey-Bass Publishers.

Worthen, B. (1990). Program evaluation. In H. Walberg & G. Haertel (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of educational evaluation* (pp. 42–47). Pergamon Press.

# Application: Evaluation of the *ELEVATE* Program



Ted G. Futris and Evin Winkelman Richardson

Couple relationship education (CRE) aims to equip couples with information and skills that will help them develop and maintain a satisfying, healthy, and stable relationship. The development and implementation of CRE curricula and programs have flourished over the past five decades as the evidence base for these programs has evolved (for a review, see Ponzetti Jr, 2015). Decades of research evaluating CRE programs have helped to establish a strong foundation for best practices and evidence of the effectiveness of these educational interventions, albeit many gaps still remain in understanding who benefits most from CRE and the mechanisms of change (Stanley et al., 2020). Since 2006, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has funded a range of couple-focused intervention services as well as the evaluation of these programs, and funding has shifted from a focus on formative evaluation (e.g., implementation studies) to summative investigations of program impact (i.e., RCT) and outcomes (Hawkins, 2019). Below, we describe the development and evaluation of a CRE program supported by this initiative, *ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level* (Futris, et al., 2014a).

## Development of *ELEVATE*

Despite the growing number of CRE programs available, there still only exist a limited number of evidence-based CRE curricula readily designed for community-based implementation (for exceptions, see Ponzetti Jr, 2015). *ELEVATE* was developed to offer professionals (who ranged in experience providing CRE) a research-based, low-cost curriculum they could easily learn and implement with

---

T. G. Futris (✉) · E. W. Richardson  
Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA  
e-mail: [tfutris@uga.edu](mailto:tfutris@uga.edu)

diverse adult couples. The *ELEVATE* curriculum emerged from two multiyear initiatives of the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network, a working group of researchers and practitioners in the Cooperative Extension System ([www.nermen.org](http://www.nermen.org)).

The first initiative, launched in 2002, aimed to create a research-informed framework focused on couple functioning that could inform the development and evaluation of CRE interventions. An extensive review of the literature was followed by several meetings to deduce and thematically code conceptually distinguishable, modifiable predictors of couple relationship quality (for a detailed overview of the process, see Goddard & Schramm, 2015). A comprehensive range of attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors associated with healthy couple functioning were condensed to seven core skills/practices that are summarized in the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model* (NERMEM; Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013): *Self-Care* (efforts to promote individual health and well-being), *Choose* (attitudes and efforts related to intentionality and prioritizing the relationship), *Know* (attitudes and efforts that promote intimate knowledge between partners), *Care* (attitudes and behaviors that promote other-oriented positivity), *Share* (attitudes and behaviors that promote a sense of couple solidarity and “we-ness”), *Manage* (attitudes and skills for managing stress and conflict), and *Connect* (attitudes and efforts to embed the couple relationship in support networks).

The NERMEM was then used to guide the development of a CRE toolkit and training for child welfare professionals, the *Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training* (HRMET; Schramm et al., 2013). Funded by a five-year (2008–2013) cooperative agreement from the Children, Youth and Families Children’s Bureau, the team developed a 6.5-hour training curriculum to help child welfare professionals (a) understand the seven core skills/practices outlined in the NERMEM and (b) how to utilize over 60 activity worksheets and tip sheets to support their clients in developing the core skills. From 2010 to 2013, Extension specialists across five states delivered 52 trainings to 1375 child welfare professionals. A rigorous program evaluation then followed these professionals across six months. Results indicated that professionals felt more efficacious in providing CRE to clients and, in turn, were more likely to apply the information and new tools with clients over time (Futris, et al., 2014 b; Schramm et al., 2019). Findings from quantitative and qualitative evaluation studies helped us to understand what facilitated and hindered child welfare professionals from utilizing the information and tools with clients and which skills/practices they found most relevant and helpful to their clients (see Futris & Schramm, 2015). Informed by the findings of the program evaluation, the training curriculum and activity worksheets were then adapted, in collaboration with colleagues at Auburn University, to create *ELEVATE: Taking Your Relationship to the Next Level* (Futris, et al., 2014a).

*ELEVATE* is an eight-module, scripted CRE curriculum that utilizes brief informational sessions, videos, activities, skills practices, and reflective exercises to target both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that influence healthy couple functioning (Kanter & Schramm, 2018). The 8- to 12-hour program was designed to serve a broad audience, regardless of circumstances (e.g., marital or parenting

status, life stage, economic situation), and includes an introductory module and one module focused on each of the seven core skills/practices described in the NERMEM. *ELEVATE* employs both a cognitive behavioral model of change approach and a principle-based approach (see Vennum et al., 2019) that focuses on communication and conflict management skills and also emphasizes the importance of relationship maintenance behaviors (Ogolsky et al., 2017); couple attributes, values, and expectations (Fawcett et al., 2013); positive sentiment override and processes that lay the foundation for friendship and love (Gottman & Gottman, 2017); and self-regulation and self-change goals that will promote the relationship (Halford, 2011). More so, *ELEVATE* is unique in that it supports individual health and well-being (Wiley & Bowers, 2015) by providing couples with practical skills to regulate stress, including mindfulness (McGill & Adler-Baeder, 2019).

## Evaluation of *ELEVATE*

With funding from ACF, our team at the University of Georgia, along with our colleague Dr. Francesca Adler Baeder and her team at Auburn University, evaluated both the impact and outcomes of participation in *ELEVATE* on couples. Because evaluation of CRE programs has mostly focused on global indicators of relationship quality, and the availability of tested multidimensional measures of couple relationship skills outcomes was limited, our first goal was to establish a valid and reliable measure that researchers and practitioners could easily use to assess couple changes in the seven core skills. Using data collected from a sample of ethnically and economically diverse adults from Alabama ( $n = 1587$ ) and Georgia ( $n = 863$ ) who participated in *ELEVATE*, we tested and validated the 32-item Couple Relationship Skills Inventory (CRSI; Adler-Baeder et al., 2022). In addition to using the global CRSI score to assess overall couple functioning, the seven subscale scores can also be used to test whether *ELEVATE*, as well as other CRE programs, is more or less effective in influencing change in particular couple skills. Future research on the CRSI will examine the dyadic validity of the measure as well as the stability of the factor structure within samples over time.

Next, *ELEVATE* was tested in both states with community-based samples that were diverse in age (18 and older), race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and marital and parenting status. For example, in Georgia, a descriptive evaluation study of 560 couples in the child welfare system showed that *ELEVATE* participants reported significant improvements 6 weeks post-programming across all seven indicators of the CRSI, as well as in mental health (i.e., depression, parenting stress, financial distress) and couple and coparenting relationship quality (DeMeester et al., 2021). In a quasi-experimental design study that used propensity scores to statistically control for differences between program participants ( $n = 184$ ) and a comparison group of individuals who did not participate in *ELEVATE* ( $n = 116$ ), the Auburn team found sustained improvements across 6 months in couple relationship skills (i.e., intimate knowledge of partner, social connections, and conflict management

subscales of the CRSI) and couple relationship quality among *ELEVATE* participants (McGill, Adler-Baeder, & Garneau-Rosner, 2021). A randomized-control trial impact study (McGill, Adler-Baeder, & Gregson, 2021) had similar findings: compared to participants in a no-program control group who reported no significant change, *ELEVATE* participants reported improvements in their use of positive couple relationship skills (i.e., CRSI) at 2-month follow-up as well as mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression) and couple satisfaction at 2-month, 6-month, and 12-month follow-ups. Too, positive changes in couple relationship functioning were directly linked to improvements in mental health for both men and women 6 months post-programming (Cooper et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

In this brief summary, we have illustrated the rigorous process involved in developing and evaluating the evidence-based CRE program, *ELEVATE*. Both the curriculum and the evaluation of the program were grounded in the NERMEN, an empirically informed framework that defined both the core skills/practices taught to couples and the outcomes assessed. Lessons learned from the HRMET professional training evaluation guided the design of the *ELEVATE* curriculum, as well as the model for how facilitators were trained. Initial program evaluation studies of *ELEVATE* have demonstrated promising outcomes and impact. Moving forward, future evaluation efforts will examine moderators of patterns and levels of program effects (e.g., couple characteristics, program delivery and dosage, facilitator effects; Hawkins et al., 2012) in order to further refine curriculum content and delivery.

## References

- Adler-Baeder, F., Futris, T.G., McGill, J., Richardson, E.W., & Yildirim, E. D. (in press). Validating the couple relationship skills inventory. *Family Relations*.
- Cooper, E., Adler-Baeder, F., & McGill, J. (2021). Individual mental health and couple functioning following couple relationship education participation: Exploring prospective cross-lagged influences among changes. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. Advanced online publication.
- DeMeester, K., Futris, T. G., Richardson, E. W., Simmons, B., & Thompson, J. (2021). *Descriptive evaluation of elevate and together we can in Georgia*. Office of Family Assistance, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Fawcett, E. B., Fawcett, D., Hawkins, A. J., & Yorgason, J. B. (2013). Measuring virtues in marital education programs and marital therapy. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 35(3), 516–529.
- Futris, T. G., Adler-Baeder, F., Ketrings, S., Smith, T., et al. (2014a). *ELEVATE: Taking your relationship to the next level*. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Publication No. HDFS-E-161. Available at <http://www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php>



- Futris, T. G., Schramm, D., Lee, T. K., Thurston, W. D., & Barton, A. W. (2014b). Training child welfare professionals to support healthy couple relationships: Examining the link to training transfer. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 8(5), 560–583.
- Futris, T. G., & Schramm, D. G. (2015). Program development from start-to-finish: A case study of the healthy relationship and marriage education training project. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 53(3). Available at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2015june/a4.php>.
- Goddard, H. W., & Schramm, D. G. (2015). Developing a model for relationship and marriage education: Efforts and lessons from the US Cooperative Extension. In *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education* (pp. 130–142). Routledge.
- Gottman, J., & Gottman, J. (2017). The natural principles of love. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 9(1), 7–26.
- Halford, W. K. (2011). *Marriage and relationship education: What works and how to provide it*. Guilford Press.
- Hawkins, A. J. (2019). *Are federally supported relationship education programs for lower-income individuals and couples working?* American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/arefederally-supported-relationship-educationprograms-for-lower-income-individuals-andcouples-working-a-review-of-evaluationresearch>
- Hawkins, A. J., Stanley, S. M., Blanchard, V. L., & Albright, M. (2012). Exploring programmatic moderators of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs: A meta-analytic study. *Behavior Therapy*, 43(1), 77–87.
- Kanter, J. B., & Schramm, D. G. (2018). Brief interventions for couples: An integrative review. *Family Relations*, 67(2), 211–226.
- McGill, J., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2019). Exploring the link between mindfulness and relationship quality: Direct and indirect pathways. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 46, 523–540.
- McGill, J., Adler-Baeder, F., & Garneau-Rosner, C. (2021). An evaluation of the ELEVATE program for couples: Considering vulnerabilities and relationship length. *Family Relations*, 70, 327–351.
- McGill, J., Adler-Baeder, F., & Gregson, K. (2021). *Impact evaluation of ELEVATE and couples connecting mindfully in Alabama: Final impact report for Auburn University*. Office of Family Assistance, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Ogolsky, B. G., Monk, J. K., Rice, T. M., Theisen, J. C., & Maniotes, C. R. (2017). Relationship maintenance: A review of research on romantic relationships. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 9(3), 275–306.
- Ponzetti, J. J., Jr. (Ed.). (2015). *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education*. Routledge.
- Schramm, D., Futris, T. G., Warznik, K., & Allen, K. (Eds) (2013). *Healthy relationship and marriage education training curriculum*. Available at <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/nermen/hrmet>.
- Schramm, D. G., Galovan, A., Futris, T. G., & Kanter, J. (2019). Use it or lose it? Predicting learning transfer of relationship education among child welfare professionals. *Family Relations*, 68, 5–21.
- Stanley, S. M., Carlson, R. G., Rhoades, G. K., Markman, H. J., Ritchie, L. L., & Hawkins, A. J. (2020). Best practices in relationship education focused on intimate relationships. *Family Relations*, 69, 497–519.
- Vennum, A., Kanter, J., & Baptist, J. (2019). Relationship maintenance in couple therapy and relationship education. In B. G. Ogolsky & J. K. Monk (Eds.), *Relationship maintenance: Theory, process, and context* (pp. 339–368). Cambridge University Press.
- Wiley, A., & Bowers, J. (2015). A health model for relationship and marriage education. In *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education* (pp. 99–114). Routledge.

# Translation and Prevention in Family Science



Steven M. Kogan and Allen W. Barton

## Introduction

In contemporary culture, prevention efforts are ubiquitous. As a society, we are bombarded with messages and opportunities to participate in activities that will improve our lives and minimize the chances we will suffer a wide range of negative consequences, including problems with mental or physical health, family interactions, and finances. *Prevention science* is the application of scientific methods “to prevent or moderate major human dysfunctions” (Coie et al., 1993, pg. 1013). Whereas historically prevention has been concerned with physical health and disease and, more recently, with mental disorders, prevention scientists recognize that the targets of prevention are broad and include many problems that affect personal, familial, and societal well-being. Moreover, most theorists agree that positive development and wellness promotion are consonant with the prevention science framework using similar conceptualizations and methods (O’Connell et al., 2009). The kinds of investigations that qualify as “prevention research” are extensive, ranging from epidemiological studies that characterize how often, when, and for whom a health problem occurs; prospective cohort studies designed to illuminate normal development or the etiology of social and behavioral problems; social or behavioral experiments investigating mechanisms of behavior change; qualitative pilot tests of new interventions; randomized prevention trials; and investigations of how innovations are adopted within provider systems.

---

S. M. Kogan (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

e-mail: [smkogan@uga.edu](mailto:smkogan@uga.edu)

A. W. Barton

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environment Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_52](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_52)

705

Prevention science mirrors the diversity of interests and methods that family scientists employ, as well as their substantive expertise. Indeed, it can be argued that family science, with its interdisciplinary nature, commitment to ecological/developmental approaches to human problems, and expertise in clinical and intervention arenas, is a highly relevant home for prevention science (Grzywacz & Allen, 2017). Of particular salience for family scientists is the prominence of close relationships in understanding the emergence of human dysfunctions and wellness. Compared with approaches that focus solely on individual psychology or physiological functioning, family or relationship-focused approaches address foundational interpersonal processes that have the potential to transform individual well-being. Evidence for the importance and efficacy of targeting family processes in prevention efforts is mounting; thus, family scientists are in a unique position to contribute to prevention efforts (Van Ryzin & Fosco, 2016).

In this chapter, we first present the foundations of prevention science, describing its origins and key constructs. We then focus on “Type 1” translational research: the process of using basic research to develop and test the efficacy of an intervention. Next, we discuss “Type 2” translational research, the process of taking an evidence-based intervention or practice and disseminating it for widespread impact. Finally, we describe new directions that prevention scientists at the cutting edge of the field are exploring.

## Foundations of Prevention Science

### *Origins*

The goal of preventing a problem before it occurs has roots deep in human history (Israelashvili & Romano, 2016), and several authors have provided detailed descriptions of the history of prevention in various fields (e.g., Bukoski, 2015; Israelashvili & Romano, 2016; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994; Ponzetti, 2016; Romano, 2015). Modern approaches to prevention can be traced to systematic public health efforts to prevent disease in industrialized societies in the nineteenth century (Bukoski, 2015). Social and behavioral approaches to prevention emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Romano, 2015), focusing on issues such as sexual risk-taking behavior and community mental health. In each case, reformers sought to prevent widespread social problems through advocacy, education, lifestyle changes, and psychological intervention (Israelashvili & Romano, 2016). Despite this long history, prevention science as a scientific discipline is in its relative infancy, with many seminal publications on the topic written in the late twentieth century (Coie et al., 1993; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). These writings provided the framework for systematic, scientific study of the prevention of social and public health issues. During this time, the Society for Prevention Research (SPR) and its flagship journal *Prevention Science* were established. The National Institutes of Health now has funded scientific infrastructure systems focused on the

advancement of prevention science (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2012), and graduate programs are now offering specializations in prevention science at the master's and doctoral levels (Society for Prevention Research, 2018).

## ***Epidemiology and Prevention Science***

Although a focus on prevention has emerged in multiple disciplines, epidemiological theory and practice provide a foundation for modern prevention science (Cordova et al., 2014). Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and determinants of health in time and space, and the goal of epidemiological practice is to prevent, reduce, survey, and control health problems (Susser & Stein, 2009). Central to epidemiological research is the observation that everyone does not have an equal chance of acquiring a particular health condition, or mental health or social problem. Surveillance studies in epidemiology track the rates of disease in a population. Typically, these studies are descriptive, providing prevalence and incidence information on a disease and its distribution across sociodemographic categories such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and race/ethnicity. These data inform prevention scientists regarding how widespread a problem is, whereas incidence rates address the chances that someone will develop a particular problem. In conjunction with sociodemographic information, epidemiological studies provide critical information for understanding who is at risk for a particular problem and where and when prevention is needed.

Surveillance efforts are complemented by epidemiological studies that take a more granular focus, documenting the *risk* and *protective* factors that are associated with the distribution of disease or the occurrence of a problem. Risk factors are variables associated with a high probability of onset, greater severity, and longer duration of a specific problem. Protective factors, in contrast, refer to conditions that improve people's resistance to risk factors and disorder. The systematic study of risk and protective processes associated with an outcome provides the foundation for prevention by facilitating the screening of a population for signs of vulnerability. Malleable risk and protective processes, those that can be changed through intervention, provide targets for prevention programs that can disrupt processes or situations that give rise to human or social dysfunction. Prevention scientists differentiate traditional epidemiological practice, which tends to be cross-sectional in design, from *etiologic* research that integrates epidemiology with concepts advanced by life-course developmental and developmental psychopathology perspectives (McLaughlin, 2014). These frameworks sensitize prevention researchers to the importance of the timing of risk exposure; the potential for different factors to affect problem onset, escalation, and offset; the ways in which normative transitions can affect vulnerability to a problem; and the potential for continuity and discontinuity in problem trajectories.

## ***Levels of Prevention***

Gordon (1983) proposed a threefold classification for prevention programs that is widely recognized by prevention scientists today, based on the risk status of the targeted population and the costs and benefits of delivering the intervention. *Universal prevention* includes strategies that can be offered to all members of a population without any screening for risk status. They tend to be the least cost intensive to deliver at the individual level and target many people. For example, middle schools often provide programming to prevent substance use or bullying to all students in the school (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). The scope of universal interventions tends to be modest, representing a small investment in terms of overall cost and time required per individual, but, compounded over the large numbers of people who may benefit from it, the population health impact can be substantial if the intervention is effective (Catalano et al., 2012).

*Selective prevention* refers to strategies that are targeted to subpopulations identified as being at elevated risk for a problem. Selective interventions are usually more customized and target specific profiles of risk. Given the at-risk nature of the target population, selective programs are often more intensive than universal programs in terms of the time and resources required for delivery. For example, in response to the recognition of the pervasive and broad risks to development incurred by childhood poverty, the Head Start program was initiated to promote educational outcomes specifically among socioeconomically disadvantaged children (Zigler & Valentine, 1979).

*Indicated prevention* includes strategies that are targeted to individuals who are identified as being at heightened vulnerability for a problem based on some individual assessment or screening, but who are currently largely asymptomatic. An example would be a family reported to Child Welfare Services for potential abuse but for whom no finding was made. The family, however, is deemed at risk due to other factors such as parental mental health, family dysfunction, or extensive youth needs. In many cases, families such as these are referred to receive home-based parent training or other services designed to stabilize households.

## ***The Prevention Research Cycle and Translational Research***

In a highly influential report (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994) and subsequent follow-up (O'Connell et al., 2009), the Institute of Medicine (IOM) defined the prevention research cycle. This cycle outlines a sequence of steps necessary for a program to achieve public health impact and includes processes associated with the development of effective prevention programs as well as dissemination and adoption by communities. The prevention research cycle is an example of a *translational science* model. *Translation* refers broadly to the process of applying basic behavioral, social, and biomedical research evidence to inform the development of

interventions and their widespread adoption in society. The overarching goal is to take scientific discoveries and use them to make measurable changes in the well-being of a group or of society in general (Sussman et al., 2006). Translational science is commonly divided into “Type 1” (the translation of basic science findings into an effective intervention or treatment) and “Type 2” (the dissemination or diffusion of an intervention into widespread practice), which we turn our attention to next.

## **Type 1 Translational Research**

Type 1 translational research is concerned with taking information from basic science (sometimes referred to as Type 0 research in stage models) and developing an efficacious intervention. Informed by the IOM model, here we provide a six-step model for intervention development and testing.

### ***Step 1: Problem Identification and Scope***

Prevention scientists begin with a clear definition of the problem followed by becoming thoroughly acquainted with existing research on the epidemiology of the problem; that is, what is its scope and its patterning across time, space, and people? If investigations of the epidemiology of a problem have not occurred, it may be argued that an adequate rationale for developing an intervention may not exist. Using information on the scope, course, and costs of the problem, an epidemiological rationale for targeting the problem and a specific population is established.

For example, underage drinking is highly prevalent in the United States; however, alcohol abuse is rare prior to adolescence. The transition to middle school is a sensitive developmental window during which youth may begin experimenting with alcohol. Moreover, the onset of drinking in middle school (early-onset use) has powerful prognostic significance for subsequent maladjustment and continued alcohol use throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Guttmanova et al., 2011). In contrast, if the onset of drinking is delayed until later in adolescence or young adulthood, risk is minimized. This supports the development of universal interventions for preadolescent youth with the goal of delaying alcohol use onset in the population. Other data suggest that some groups, such as children of alcoholics, those who underachieve in school, experience family disruption, or go through puberty early are at elevated risk for early-onset alcohol use (Hawkins et al., 1992). Selective preventive intervention may use risk factor information to provide a relatively larger dose of intervention for these youth. For young adolescents who demonstrate particularly high risk for alcohol use, prevention programs would be structured to provide a more intensive experience designed to forestall continued risk.

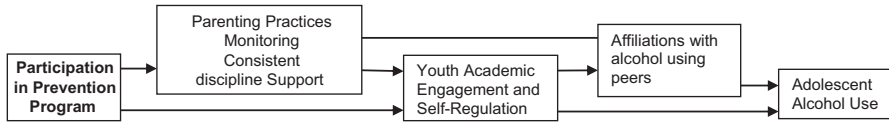
## ***Step 2: Reviewing the Literature and Creating a Causative Model of the Problem***

The second step in intervention development involves reviewing the literature on risk and protective processes associated with the targeted problem. Ideal sources utilize longitudinal cohort designs or prospective designs, particularly those that use modern methods to understand growth and change, to provide information on factors associated with onset, escalation, and offset of a problem or targeted outcome. In addition, important information on risk and protective mechanisms may be gleaned from laboratory-based methods in social psychology, communication studies, or past trials with intervention programs. Consideration of risk and protective factors should include (a) multiple levels of the relevant ecological frame and (b) ways in which they change over time to provide a holistic picture of problem emergence, escalation, and offset. Developmental studies may provide models of heterogeneous causes for a single problem, a process known as equifinality. Alternatively, similar risk factors may result in distinct outcomes (multifinality). Understanding diverse pathways to the emergence of a problem is critical to creating tailored prevention efforts.

The goal of a literature review is to formulate a *causative model* of the problem or outcome to be affected. A causative model focuses on specific empirical outcomes and predictors and their relationships; it may be informed by more abstract theoretical frameworks. A causative model is based on data regarding *malleable* and *causal* risk and protective factors that forecast a specified outcome. Malleable factors are those that can change or be changed via intervention. Causal factors are those that, when changed through intervention, can be expected to result in change in the targeted outcome. Multiple malleable and causal risk and protective factors may be associated with change in a particular outcome. Those with robust effects in terms of consistency and magnitude are the most desirable targets for an intervention.

Using adolescent alcohol use as an example, the incidence of alcohol use is higher in boys than girls. Although an important consideration for targeting and shaping a preventive intervention, biological sex is not a malleable factor for an intervention to target. Family financial distress also is associated with early-onset alcohol use and, in some contexts, may be malleable (e.g., through employment counseling or coaching, financial management intervention). Little evidence, however, suggests that manipulating income level results in reduced risk for early-onset alcohol use. Strong evidence exists, however, that parenting practices such as consistent discipline, parental monitoring, and emotional support are malleable and, when they are enhanced, result in a reduced incidence of alcohol use (Donovan & Molina, 2011). Parenting practices then fulfill the criteria for a malleable causal factor that could constitute a target for change in an intervention program.

Figure 1 presents a causative model specifying the links between program participation and changes in targeted parenting practices. Per developmental theory and empirical research on the etiology of adolescent alcohol use, changing



**Fig. 1** Example of a causative model

parenting behavior may affect alcohol use through proximal intrapersonal mediators such as self-regulation and academic engagement, which in turn affect alcohol use by reducing youths’ affiliations with peers who drink alcohol. Parental monitoring also directly influences peer affiliations. This kind of model provides a blueprint for the goals and targeted processes in an intervention program to prevent alcohol use.

### ***Step 3: Program Modeling***

A causative model specifies *what* should change. A program model addresses *how* to change these processes (Chen, 2005). Per Mrazek and Haggarty (1994), the program model includes (a) the general format and activity or activities that are provided to the targeted population, at a planned frequency, and for a set amount of time; (b) the psychological, biobehavioral, educational, organization, or social technologies and procedures to be used to effect change; and (c) the setting in which the intervention takes place. The program model should be developed in light of available evidence, as well as interactions with stakeholders using interviews and focus groups to determine the desirability of different formats (Rohrbaugh, 2014). Empirical data on the characteristics of a successful intervention program (Nation et al., 2003) suggest the importance of targeting multiple risk and protective processes at different ecological levels and utilizing varied teaching methods that include interactive instruction and hands-on experiences that target skill development.

A program model also includes specifying the behavior change theories from which specific intervention strategies and tactics are developed. A myriad of theories regarding ways to foster behavior change have been discussed in health promotion (Davis et al., 2015) and clinical (Kaslow et al., 1999) literatures. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1998) is a particularly useful behavior change theory because it clearly specifies how and why individuals change their behavior and provides specific concepts that include concrete strategies for promoting behavior change. Using our alcohol prevention example, to achieve change in parental monitoring, social cognitive theory suggests that we would create activities that provide opportunities for parents to observe models of monitoring behavior, social support for implementing monitoring behavior, and opportunities for parents to practice parental monitoring.



### ***Step 4: Program Development***

The development of a detailed prevention curriculum is a work-intensive, iterative team effort that typically includes researchers, stakeholders, and experienced interventionists (Rohrbaugh, 2014). Developers typically use some form of *intervention mapping* protocol (Bartholomew et al., 2001) to organize specific goals and objectives and relate them to individual activities. Intervention mapping underscores the importance of specific, concrete behavioral objectives linked to the causative model. The team then selects theory-based or empirically supported intervention methods and practical applications that they expect will change targeted behaviors. These are refined into specific activities and program components. During program development, pilot testing new components is essential for evaluating the activities' acceptability and refining their implementation. As the curriculum is built, how to conduct each activity should be documented in a detailed curriculum manual. Concurrently with the development of the manual, program developers should begin creating measures to assess intervention fidelity. Fidelity has two components, adherence and competence (Carroll et al., 2007). Adherence addresses the extent to which the components of a program were implemented. Competence refers to the quality of the implementation. Common aspects of competence address an implementer's ability to be engaging, clear, and influential.

As disparate goals and activities mature into a systematic, coherent curriculum, the program as a whole should be pilot tested to generate evidence of its feasibility and acceptability. Pilot studies are typically designed pragmatically and gather survey and qualitative data that can inform revisions to the curriculum content and its delivery (Bowen et al., 2009). The next step is to conduct a pilot randomized control trial. Pilot trials are small-sample experiments using random assignment of participants to an intervention group or a control group. They may lack sufficient power to make causal conclusions, but are useful in establishing a program's potential and can be used to refine measures and protocols for use in a large-scale study. Randomized pilot trial methods have been discussed at length by Lancaster et al. (2004); useful examples in the literature include pilot studies of programs that address underage drinking (Gilder et al., 2017) and obesity (Stice et al., 2015).

### ***Step 5: Efficacy Testing in Randomized Prevention Trials***

The steps of program development outlined thus far specify systematic and theory-based methods that rely heavily on empirical findings. Regardless of the level of care and specificity utilized in creating a program, however, without an adequately powered randomized prevention trial, a program's potential to affect the targeted outcome is categorically unknown. The reader is referred to Brown et al.'s seminal paper (1999), which outlined the foundational concepts and design elements of a prevention trial, but the core elements are the use of randomization and the presence

of control group. Without both of these elements, firm determinations of causality can rarely be made, although quasi-experimental designs, which represent a less rigorous standard of evidence, approximate causal processes by including a control group but no randomization and controlling statistically for differences that might be created by self-selection into groups (Shadish et al., 2002). Designs without randomization or control groups are called *observational*. We refer to interventions that are based on reviews of evidence and/or observational data on effectiveness but that lack evaluation in a randomized prevention trial as *evidence informed*. Conversely, interventions based on one or more randomized controlled trials are called *evidence-based*.

Randomized prevention trials play two roles in prevention science. First, they provide evidence that a program can cause a change in an outcome. Second, they provide an experimental test of developmental theory (Cicchetti & Toth, 1992). Well-designed intervention programs are built on developmental, etiological models specifying the mediating and moderating processes that affect the emergence of a problem such as presented in Fig. 1. Thus, they constitute an ideal way to test developmental theory. For example, children cannot be assigned randomly to families who are more or less likely to use consistent discipline to assess its effect on adolescent alcohol use. It is possible, however, to design an intervention to experimentally induce changes in consistent discipline and assess its effects on alcohol use and mediators like self-regulation downstream. In this case, if a randomized prevention trial shows that (a) the intervention reduced risk for onset or escalation in alcohol use, (b) the intervention increased consistent discipline and self-regulation, and (c) experimentally induced changes in consistent discipline predicted changes in self-regulation, which in turn predicted reductions in alcohol use, we have experimental evidence for developmental theory regarding the etiology of alcohol use.

### ***Step 6: Effectiveness Trials in Real-World Settings***

A well-designed randomized prevention trial maximizes internal validity. That is, we can trust that, within the tightly controlled circumstances of the trial, causality has been documented. Such experiments, however, suffer in terms of external validity, the extent to which we can generalize the findings to other situations (Shadish et al., 2002). Essentially, a trial proves that a program “can” work in ideal and tightly controlled circumstances (i.e., the program is *efficacious*); whether or not it will work in the real-world settings for which it is designed (i.e., its *effectiveness*) remains an open question. Thus, the IOM specifies the need for implementing trials in a variety of populations and settings. In many cases, well-designed, efficacious programs do not realize benefits when offered by implementer teams other than the original developers. Often fidelity is an issue when implementers change the intervention to suit their own immediate needs or interests or those of the participants. Additional details related to the challenges of providing impactful research in the

“real world” are discussed in the “Type 2 Translational Research” section that follows.

## Type 2 Translational Research

A primary goal of prevention science is to achieve *population*-level effects that target important social and public health concerns. Type 2 translational research, per the IOM model (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994), involves studies that promote an intervention’s dissemination and public health impact. When the IOM model was conceived, however, it was assumed that if an efficacious program could be developed with evidence that its use was generalizable in real-world contexts (effectiveness), that providers would promptly seek to use the new program (Wandersman et al., 2008). In practice, encouraging the widespread implementation of evidence-based programs and practices has proven to be a significant challenge. In fact, *implementation science*, an emerging discipline focused on Type 2 translational questions and methods, has become a rapidly growing field of inquiry. Implementation science is defined as “the study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence based practices into routine practice, and, hence, to improve the quality and effectiveness of health services” (Bauer et al., 2015). The challenge of widespread implementation of a program involves consideration of dissemination and diffusion processes. *Dissemination* refers to a program developer’s activities intended to encourage the use of the program by agencies or organizations who serve a clientele who could benefit from the program. *Diffusion*, in contrast, refers to a process of uptake wherein a program becomes embedded in a provider system. Below, we describe some general principles of dissemination and diffusion before turning our attention to economic analyses.

### *Dissemination*

Dissemination involves “the dispersal of research-based practices, programs, and interventions that target negative outcomes” (Pas & Bradshaw, 2015, p 528). Dissemination can occur from at least three perspectives (Thigpen et al., 2012): producer-push, user-pull, and exchange models; the models focus on who is active in the process. In a push model, the program developers seek to inform potential adopters of the benefits of using their program and may create partnerships with provider systems to implement a specific program. In contrast, a user-pull model is driven by the consumer of information and can include practitioners, agency administrators, or affected individuals or their families. These individuals seek information or guidance from the best research literature to address pressing problems. User-pull systems have been put in place that present information on research- or evidence-based practices. For example, Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development

(<https://www.blueprintsprograms.org>; Mihalic & Irwin, 2003) catalogues programs for adolescents, providing detailed information on the interventions and rating their supporting evidence. In exchange models of dissemination, both researchers and practitioners are engaged in sharing knowledge bidirectionally with the practitioners. This facilitates the identification of relevant opportunities for research and the use of research findings to build intervention implementation capacity. For example, the Communities that Care intervention (Hawkins et al., 2009) is designed not to promote the use of a specific intervention, but to encourage communities to adopt evidence-based interventions that meet their needs and support the process of adoption and use of evidence in a sustainable manner.

In each of these dissemination models, developers must create attractive, feasible prevention packages that include a detailed curriculum manual, protocols for effective implementation (with fidelity protocols), and a system of training and technical assistance for an adopting agency. A predominant challenge is for developers to create a system of training and support protocols that encourage implementation with fidelity. In real-world settings, interventionists will often adapt or change programs in ways that compromise their effectiveness (Rohrbach et al., 2006). In general, the greater the fidelity with which an intervention is implemented, the better the chances of impact (Dusenbury et al., 2003).

## *Diffusion*

A focus on the dissemination of research-based practices tends to privilege the perspective of researchers. The challenge is to encourage research-based practices in organizations to improve their ability to meet the needs of their client populations. Why, then, do so few organizations and provider systems routinely use evidence-based interventions practices? Insight into this challenge may be drawn from taking the perspective of the organization and considering a novel, empirically based intervention as an “innovation” (Rogers, 2002) to be adopted. Organizations, like individuals, cannot simply change their behavior on command. There are complex systems involved and the adoption of a program or any new behavior requires considerable understanding of the multilevel processes that organize behavior in these systems. How an innovation comes to be considered, adopted, implemented, institutionalized, and sustained in a provider system is the focus of diffusion research.

Implementation scientists have developed multiple stage models to guide research and practice on how organizations adopt evidence-based interventions and practices (Fishbein, 2016; Wandersman et al., 2008), including specific recommendations for family-centered programs (Spath et al., 2007). We focus briefly on the EPIS framework (Aarons et al., 2011), which has been especially influential for encouraging implementation in the public sector service system. The model outlines four phases of the implementation process: exploration, adoption/preparation, implementation, and sustainment. Each phase considers contextual factors at two

levels. The *outer context* of an organization represents larger, external factors that can either support or slow implementation, such as policies, funding, and mandates at the federal, state, county, or local levels, and organizational relationships. The *inner context* represents that which happens within the community or organization that is implementing an evidence-based practice, such as staffing, policies and procedures, and organizational culture and climate. In the following paragraphs, we summarize the focus of each stage.

**Exploration** The exploration phase involves awareness in the provider system of either an issue that needs attention or the existence of an improved approach to an organizational challenge. Members of the provider systems consider trying out something new. Prior to implementation of a new practice, however, organizations must consider how different interventions or practices fit with the implementing system's existing characteristics (Aarons et al., 2011). Is the new program consonant with organizational policies and funding mandates? Will the providers welcome a new intervention or consider it a burden? Is the new intervention consonant with the organization's culture and climate? Does the provider system have the resources and infrastructure to implement the program?

**Adoption/Preparation** Once an evidence-based program is deemed a reasonable fit, organizations must then put into place the collaborations, policies, funding, supports, and processes needed to implement a novel practice. In this phase, adaptations to the service system, service delivery organizations, and the intervention itself are considered and prepared. The decision to adopt often is conceptualized as a one-time event, but organizations may experiment with an innovation, sometimes intermittently, prior to broader implementation (Aarons et al., 2011). Adoption factors are wide ranging, including budgets for prevention services and organizational factors such as organizational climate, structure, and readiness for change.

**Implementation** The implementation phase refers to the active use of a program in the context and the support processes that are developed both within a host delivery system and its affiliates to recruit, train, monitor, and supervise intervention agents to deliver the intervention with adherence and competence and, if necessary, to adapt systematically to the local context. It is almost inevitable that adopting organizations will attempt some adaptation of the program. Ideally evidence-based programs specify what components of an intervention are "core" to achieving effects, and what aspects of the program may be modified for local circumstances.

**Sustainment** Once implemented, attention is required to embed the intervention into the delivery system to support long-term implementation. In an ideal situation, the program becomes *institutionalized*, that is, part of the everyday processes of the organization. The final phase refers to how host delivery systems and organizations maintain or extend the supports and the intervention, especially after any initial funding has ended (Landsverk et al., 2017).

## *Economic Analyses*

Community-based organizations, school systems, health departments, and other agencies that deliver prevention services need information on the costs and benefits of evidence-based interventions to help them make decisions regarding the allocation of scarce public health resources. Economic evaluations are critical for policy-makers at local, state, and national levels; potential program providers in social service agencies; and families in need of prevention services; all of whom require programs that maximize benefits given limited resources. Increasingly, governmental funding sources require, in addition to efficacy data, economic evaluations of programs to justify allocation of resources to providers (Pentz et al., 2006), and they also may guide effective selection from among competing programs. An SPR task force recently published guidelines on standards of evidence for conducting and reporting economic evaluations in prevention science, providing further instruction for prevention scientists working in this area (Crowley et al., 2018). Economic evaluations address the following key questions:

- How much does a program truly cost to implement in different systems across time?
- What interventions should be used to maximize benefits of interest?
- What is the proper mix of programs to provide to a population?
- What is the optimal way to allocate scarce resources across a population?

Three primary economic analyses are of particular importance to prevention researchers: programmatic cost analysis, benefit–cost analysis, and cost-effectiveness analysis. Programmatic cost analysis involves assessment of the economic costs of delivering an intervention and helps intervention providers to determine whether they have the resources to deliver a specific intervention in their communities. Benefit–cost analysis involves measuring both the costs *and* the benefits of an intervention in dollar terms; it is useful to macro-level policymakers who must compare strategies impacting different health and nonhealth outcomes because the summary measure, in dollars, is objective and comparable across programs. For example, benefit–cost analysis is useful in comparing the economic impact of a drug abuse prevention program compared with a community crime prevention program. Cost-effectiveness analysis is used to evaluate costs relative to impacts on program outcomes for strategies that target the same outcomes and is most helpful to local policymakers. For example, cost-effectiveness analysis is useful in comparing the economic efficiency of two different drug abuse prevention programs.

An important decision in conducting economic analyses is the perspective from which they are to be performed. The *societal* perspective includes all costs and all benefits regardless of who pays the costs and who experiences the benefits. This perspective is recommended for economic evaluations of interventions funded with societal resources (Haddix et al., 2003). The *provider* perspective includes only the value of those resources that providers use to deliver the intervention, such as personnel, facilities, supplies, and any other resources needed before and during

program implementation. The *participant* perspective includes all costs incurred and benefits realized by participants as a result of the intervention. Participant costs might include travel expenses, child care expenses, lost wages, and interrupted leisure time.

Examples of economic analyses are becoming increasingly available for EBIs. For example, examination of the costs to provide the Incredible Years Toddler Parenting Program (Charles et al., 2013) from a social perspective yielded an estimate of £3305 (~\$5188) per child for initial setup (including training of providers), which then fell to £752 (\$1180) per child attending a group with eight families in future implementations. Spoth and colleagues (Spoth et al., 2002) evaluated two family-based substance use prevention programs. Using cost-effectiveness analysis, they found that one program cost \$12,459 and the other cost \$20,439 to avert one case of alcohol dependence. A benefit–cost analysis indicated that one intervention yielded a return of \$9.60 and the other yielded \$5.85 per dollar invested. Such calculations allow providers and policymakers to choose wisely how to spend limited resources.

## New Directions in Prevention Science

### *Adaptive Prevention*

Historically, research-based interventions aimed at prevention and treatment have been *fixed*, that is, the nature and amount of program content is intended to be delivered equally to all participants. In recent years, growing attention has been given to creating *adaptive* interventions that tailor program delivery to participants' needs. An adaptive intervention assigns different dosages of certain program components across individuals, or within individuals across time (Collins et al., 2004). In other words, certain treatment components are delivered to all; others are delivered to only a select subset of participants. Dosage and content vary in response to characteristics of the individual or family. Adaptive interventions are similar to traditional fixed-design intervention in that they use developmental evidence and behavior change theory to influence mechanisms of change. Adaptive programs diverge in their need to develop design components that specify what, when, and for whom adaptive content is delivered. Adaptive interventions confer several advantages over fixed designs including reducing negative effects that may occur when a treatment component is not appropriate for a specific individual, providing more efficient interventions, increased compliance by participants, and enhanced potency of an intervention (Collins et al., 2004). Indeed, the development of adaptive intervention aligns with growing foci in many areas of prevention science, including multilayered systems of prevention services, cost-effectiveness, and scalability.

The Fast Track program is an example of an early adaptive intervention informed by family science (<http://fasttrackproject.org/>). Fast Track is a multicomponent program intended to prevent conduct problems in young children. It was designed with

a core intervention component for all participants that included parent training and child social skill training. A variety of additional components are delivered selectively based on characteristics of the child or family, including home-based counseling visits, academic tutoring, child group counseling, and family group counseling. Decisions regarding provision of additional services were made on the basis of child reading ability from school records and parent functioning as assessed by prevention staff. Since the use of this early example, adaptive interventions have grown increasingly common, with new programs focused on outcomes such as improving speech in children with autism (Kasari et al., 2014), reducing externalizing behavior in young children whose mothers are diagnosed with ADHD (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2016), and improving mood in adolescents diagnosed with depression (Gunlicks-Stoessel et al., 2016).

## *Technology*

In recent years, advances in digital communications have enabled the development of technology-based interventions that increase the reach and cost-effectiveness of preventive interventions. Broadly speaking, technology-based interventions include telehealth programmings and behavioral intervention technologies (BITs). Telehealth involves services that leverage videoconferencing media platforms to facilitate real-time interactions for the provision of programming that is traditionally delivered in person. In contrast, BITs involve the application of one or more digital communications media (e.g., website, app, text message) to provide an intervention to an individual, family, or group without formal, in-person or virtual interaction with a provider (Doss et al., 2017). Telehealth interventions hold great promise to transform the accessibility and scope of real-time mental health care with a provider by overcoming traditional geographic barriers and treating families in their natural settings. However, telehealth interventions for couples and families are not without limitations. Most notably, telehealth does not increase the overall number of individuals, couples, and families who can be treated at a given time. As such, BITs that rely largely on self-administration and/or asynchronous communications with providers are better equipped than telehealth interventions to reach large numbers of individuals, couples, and families.

The development of BITs has facilitated the development of highly tailored and adaptive interventions that can provide intervention content based on individuals' changing needs. These are called Just-In-Time Adaptive Interventions (Nahum-Shani et al., 2015). Prevention programming with BITs reduces or eliminates many logistical barriers that participants in traditional in-person prevention programs experience, such as finding time to attend, transportation and childcare needs, and concerns about confidentiality while participating in group programs. Digital platforms are also highly scalable; that is, they facilitate cost-effective implementation to a wide range of individuals in a population. As a result, BITs can overcome many of the factors currently limiting prevention programming reach.



Although the field is still in its relative infancy, results to date support the short-term efficacy of BITs for outcomes such as tobacco cessation, diabetes treatment compliance, and anxiety prevention in adult populations (Oldenburg et al., 2015; Schueller et al., 2013). The application of BITs in other populations of interest to prevention scientists (e.g., youth) is quite limited. Existing BITs for youth concentrate primarily on mental health outcomes, with program content focused predominantly on the youth with little attention to the family context (Mohr et al., 2014). In our view, the development of BITs designed to intervene in the larger family context represents a prime opportunity for family scientists to contribute to prevention science.

### ***Prevention Science and Family Science: Summary and Conclusion***

Prevention science encompasses a multidisciplinary set of theories and methods designed to prevent or reduce personal and family-related problems. Prevention science as a discipline and integrative paradigm is rooted in the *translational* model of science, focused on translating basic scientific discovery into interventions that are then disseminated or diffused to populations in need. Prevention science has unique significance for family science researchers and practitioners, given the importance of family as a developmental context. Developmental approaches to epidemiology overlap considerably with developmental psychopathology and ecodevelopmental (Bacio et al., 2015) perspectives and are considered essential for a valid representation of how problems emerge in a population, and targeting family systems in interventions has proven uniquely effective. Ecological perspectives that acknowledge the multiple contexts of influence on problem behavior also inform the development of effective interventions across the life course. This translational paradigm has been instantiated in the cooperative extension system, the applied partner for many in our discipline. Finally, systems theories that acknowledge the complex dynamics of adopting an innovation constitute an essential component of prevention science. Drawing on a thoroughly interdisciplinary focus and a history of translational research, family science is a uniquely salient home for prevention science efforts (Grzywacz & Allen, 2017). Evidence for the importance and efficacy of targeting family processes in prevention efforts is mounting, and thus, family scientists are in a unique position to contribute to prevention efforts (Van Ryzin & Fosco, 2016).

### **References**

- Aarons, G. A. (2004). Mental health provider attitudes toward adoption of evidence-based practice: The Evidence-Based Practice Attitude Scale (EBPAS). *Mental Health Services Research*, 6, 61–74.

- Aarons, G. A., Hurlburt, M., & Horwitz, S. M. (2011). Advancing a conceptual model of evidence-based practice implementation in public service sectors. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 38*, 4–23.
- Bacio, G. A., Estrada, Y., Huang, S., Martínez, M., Sardinas, K., & Prado, G. (2015). Ecodevelopmental predictors of early initiation of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among Hispanic adolescents. *Journal of School Psychology, 53*, 195–208.
- Bandura, A. (1998). Health promotion from the perspective of social cognitive theory. *Psychology & Health, 13*, 623–649.
- Bartholomew, L. K., Parcel, G. S., Kok, G., & Gottlieb, N. H. (2001). *Intervention mapping: Designing theory- and evidence-based health promotion programs*. Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Bauer, M. S., Damschroder, L., Hagedorn, H., Smith, J., & Kilbourne, A. M. (2015). An introduction to implementation science for the non-specialist. *BMC Psychology, 3*, 32.
- Bogenschneider, K., Wu, M. Y., Raffaelli, M., & Tsay, J. C. (1998). Parent influences on adolescent peer orientation and substance use: The interface of parenting practices and values. *Child Development, 69*, 1672–1688.
- Bowen, D. J., Kreuter, M., Spring, B., Cofta-Woerpel, L., Linnan, L., Weiner, D., et al. (2009). How we design feasibility studies. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 36*(5), 452–457.
- Brown, C. H., Kellam, S. G., Kaupert, S., Muthén, B. O., Wang, W., Muthén, L. K., . . . Valente, T. W. (2012). Partnerships for the design, conduct, and analysis of effectiveness, and implementation research: Experiences of the prevention science and methodology group. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 39*, 301–316.
- Brown, C. H., & Liao, J. (1999). Principles for designing randomized preventive trials in mental health: An emerging developmental epidemiology paradigm. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 27*, 673–710.
- Bukoski, W. (2015). A history of drug abuse prevention science. In L. M. Scheier (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent drug use prevention: Research, intervention strategies, and practice* (pp. 31–48). American Psychological Association.
- Carroll, C., Patterson, M., Wood, S., Booth, A., Rick, J., & Balain, S. (2007). A conceptual framework for implementation fidelity. *Implementation Science, 2*, 40.
- Catalano, R. F., Fagan, A. A., Gavin, L. E., Greenberg, M. T., Irwin, C. E., Ross, D. A., & Shek, D. T. L. (2012). Worldwide application of prevention science in adolescent health. *The Lancet, 379*, 1653–1664.
- Charles, J. M., Edwards, R. T., Bywater, T., & Hutchings, J. (2013). Micro-costing in public health economics: Steps towards a standardized framework, using the incredible years toddler parenting program as a worked example. *Prevention Science, 14*, 377–389.
- Chen, H. T. (2005). *Practical program evaluation: Assessing and improving planning, implementation, and effectiveness*. Sage.
- Chronis-Tuscano, A., Wang, C. H., Strickland, J., Almirall, D., & Stein, M. A. (2016). Personalized treatment of mothers with ADHD and their young at-risk children: A SMART pilot. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 45*, 510–521.
- Cicchetti, D., & Toth, S. L. (1992). The role of developmental theory in prevention and intervention. *Development and Psychopathology, 4*, 489–493.
- Coie, J. D., Watt, N. F., West, S. G., Hawkins, J. D., Asarnow, J. R., Markman, H. J., . . . Long, B. (1993). The science of prevention: A conceptual framework and some directions for a national research program. *American Psychologist, 48*, 1013.
- Collins, L. M., Murphy, S. A., & Bierman, K. L. (2004). A conceptual framework for adaptive preventive interventions. *Prevention Science, 5*, 185–196.
- Cordova, D., Estrada, Y., Malcolm, S., Huang, S., Brown, C. H., Pantin, H., & Prado, G. (2014). *Prevention science: An epidemiological approach* (In defining prevention science) (pp. 1–23). Springer.
- Crowley, D. M., Dodge, K. A., Barnett, W. S., Corso, P., Duffy, S., Graham, P., . . . Plotnick, R. (2018). Standards of evidence for conducting and reporting economic evaluations in prevention science. *Prevention Science, 19*, 366–390.

- Davis, R., Campbell, R., Hildon, Z., Hobbs, L., & Michie, S. (2015). Theories of behaviour and behaviour change across the social and behavioural sciences: A scoping review. *Health Psychology Review*, 9, 323–344.
- Donovan, J. E., & Molina, B. S. G. (2011). Childhood risk factors for early-onset drinking. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72, 741–751.
- Doss, B. D., Feinberg, L. K., Rothman, K., Roddy, M. K., & Comer, J. S. (2017). Using technology to enhance and expand interventions for couples and families: Conceptual and methodological considerations. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31, 983–993.
- Dusenbury, L., Brannigan, R., Falco, M., & Hansen, W. B. (2003). A review of research on fidelity of implementation: Implications for drug abuse prevention in school settings. *Health Education Research*, 18(2), 237–256.
- Fishbein, D. H. (2016). The full translational spectrum of prevention science. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 6, 1–4.
- Gilder, D. A., Geisler, J. R., Luna, J. A., Calac, D., Monti, P. M., Spillane, N. S., . . . Ehlers, C. L. (2017). A pilot randomized trial of motivational interviewing compared to psychoeducation for reducing and preventing underage drinking in American Indian adolescents. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 82, 74–81.
- Gordon, R. S., Jr. (1983). An operational classification of disease prevention. *Public Health Reports*, 98(2), 107.
- Grzywacz, J. G., & Allen, J. W. (2017). Adapting the ideas of translational science for translational family science. *Family Relations*, 66, 568–583.
- Gunlicks-Stoessel, M., Mufson, L., Westervelt, A., Almirall, D., & Murphy, S. (2016). A pilot SMART for developing an adaptive treatment strategy for adolescent depression. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 45, 480–494.
- Guttmanova, K., Bailey, J. A., Hill, K. G., Lee, J. O., Hawkins, J. D., Woods, M. L., & Catalano, R. F. (2011). Sensitive periods for adolescent alcohol use initiation: Predicting the lifetime occurrence and chronicity of alcohol problems in adulthood. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(2), 221–231.
- Haddix, A., Teutsch, S., & Corso, P. S. (Eds.). (2003). *Prevention effectiveness: A guide to decision analysis and economic evaluation*. Oxford University Press.
- Hajizadeh, N., Stevens, E. R., Applegate, M., Huang, K.-Y., Kamboukos, D., Braithwaite, R. S., & Brotman, L. M. (2017). Potential return on investment of a family-centered early childhood intervention: A cost-effectiveness analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 17(1), 796.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 64–105.
- Hawkins, J. D., Oesterle, S., Brown, E. C., Arthur, M. W., Abbott, R. D., Fagan, A. A., & Catalano, R. F. (2009). Results of a type 2 translational research trial to prevent adolescent drug use and delinquency: A test of communities that care. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 163(9), 789–798.
- Israelashvili, M., & Romano, J. L. (2016). The emergence of prevention science. In M. Israelashvili & J. L. Romano (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of international prevention science* (pp. 2–18). Cambridge University Press.
- Kasari, C., Kaiser, A., Goods, K., Niefert, J., Mathy, P., Landa, R., . . . Almirall, D. (2014). Communication interventions for minimally verbal children with autism: A sequential multiple assignment randomized trial. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 53, 635–646.
- Kaslow, N. J., Kaslow, F. W., & Farber, E. W. (1999). Theories and techniques of marital and family therapy. In M. B. Sussman, S. K. Steinmetz, & G. W. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 767–792). Springer.
- Kellam, S. G., & Rebok, G. W. (1992). Building developmental and etiological theory through epidemiologically based preventive intervention trials. In J. McCord & R. E. Tremblay (Eds.), *Preventing antisocial behavior: Interventions from birth through adolescence* (pp. 162–195). Guilford.
- Lancaster, G. A., Dodd, S., & Williamson, P. R. (2004). Design and analysis of pilot studies: Recommendations for good practice. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 10, 307–312.

- Landsverk, J., Brown, C. H., Chamberlain, P., Palinkas, L., Ogihara, M., Czaja, S., et al. (2012). Design and analysis in dissemination and implementation research. *Dissemination and Implementation Research in Health: Translating Science to Practice*, 2, 201–228.
- Landsverk, J., Brown, C. H., Smith, J. D., Chamberlain, P., Curran, G. M., Palinkas, L., ... S. M. (2017). Design and analysis in dissemination and implementation research. In *Dissemination and Implementation Research in Health: Translating Science to Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 201–228). Oxford University Press.
- McLaughlin, K. A. (2014). Developmental epidemiology. In M. Lewis & K. D. Rudolph (Eds.), *Handbook of developmental psychopathology* (pp. 87–107). Springer.
- Michie, S., & Prestwich, A. (2010). Are interventions theory-based? Development of a theory coding scheme. *Health Psychology*, 29, 1–8.
- Mihalic, S. F., & Irwin, K. (2003). Blueprints for Violence Prevention: From research to real-world settings—Factors influencing the successful replication of Model Programs. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 1, 307–329.
- Mohr, D. C., Burns, M. N., Schueller, S. M., Clarke, G., & Klinkman, M. (2013). Behavioral intervention technologies: Evidence, review and recommendations for future research in mental health. *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 35, 332–338.
- Mohr, D. C., Schueller, S. M., Montague, E., Burns, M. N., & Rashidi, P. (2014). The behavioral intervention technology model: An integrated conceptual and technological framework for eHealth and mHealth interventions. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 16(6), e146.
- Mrazek, P., & Haggerty, R. (Eds.). (1994). *Reducing risks for mental disorders: Frontiers for preventative intervention research*. National Academy Press.
- Nahum-Shani, I., Hekler, E. B., & Spruijt-Metz, D. (2015). Building health behavior models to guide the development of just-in-time adaptive interventions: A pragmatic framework. *Health Psychology*, 34, 1209–1219.
- Nation, M., Crusto, C., Wandersman, A., Kumpfer, K. L., Seybolt, D., Morrissey-Kane, E., & Davino, K. (2003). What works in prevention: Principles of effective prevention programs. *American Psychologist*, 58, 449–456.
- O’Connell, M. E., Boat, T., & Warner, K. E. (2009). *Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: Progress and possibilities*. National Academy Press.
- Oldenburg, B., Taylor, C. B., O’Neil, A., Cocker, F., & Cameron, L. D. (2015). Using new technologies to improve the prevention and management of chronic conditions in populations. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 36, 483–505.
- Palinkas, L. A., Um, M. Y., Jeong, C. H., Chor, K. H. B., Olin, S., Horwitz, S. M., & Hoagwood, K. E. (2017). Adoption of innovative and evidence-based practices for children and adolescents in state-supported mental health clinics: A qualitative study. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 15, 27.
- Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2015). Dissemination of evidence-based prevention programs: The broad picture. In L. M. Scheier (Ed.), *Handbook of adolescent drug use prevention* (pp. 527–540). American Psychological Association.
- Pentz, M. A., Jasuja, G. K., Rohrbach, L. A., Sussman, S., & Bardo, M. T. (2006). Translation in tobacco and drug abuse prevention research. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 29, 246–271.
- Ponzetti, J. J. J. (2016). The evolution of relationships and marriage education. In J. Ponzetti Jr. (Ed.), *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education* (pp. 3–16). Taylor and Francis.
- Rogers, E. M. (2002). Diffusion of preventive innovations. *Addictive Behaviors*, 27(6), 989–993.
- Rohrbach, L. A., Grana, R., Sussman, S., & Valente, T. W. (2006). Type II translation: Transporting prevention interventions from research to real-world settings. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 29(3), 302–333.
- Rohrbaugh, L. A. (2014). Design of prevention interventions. In Z. Sloboda (Ed.), *Defining prevention science* (pp. 275–290). Springer.
- Romano, J. L. (2015). *Prevention psychology: Enhancing personal and social well-being*. American Psychological Association.
- Schueller, S. M., Muñoz, R. F., & Mohr, D. C. (2013). Realizing the potential of behavioral intervention technologies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 478–483.

- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Smokowski, P. R., & Kopasz, K. H. (2005). Bullying in school: An overview of types, effects, family characteristics, and intervention strategies. *Children & Schools, 27*(2), 101–110.
- Society for Prevention Research. (2018). *Washington D.C. Training*. Retrieved from <http://www.preventionresearch.org/conferences/training/>
- Spoth, R., Clair, S., Greenberg, M., Redmond, C., & Shin, C. (2007). Toward dissemination of evidence-based family interventions: Maintenance of community-based partnership recruitment results and associated factors. *Journal of Family Psychology, 21*, 137–146.
- Spoth, R. L., Guyll, M., & Day, S. X. (2002). Universal family-focused interventions in alcohol-use disorder prevention: Cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses of two interventions. *Journal Studies of Alcohol, 63*, 219–228.
- Stice, E., Yokum, S., Burger, K., Rohde, P., Shaw, H., & Gau, J. M. (2015). A pilot randomized trial of a cognitive reappraisal obesity prevention program. *Physiological Behavior, 138*, 124–132.
- Stuart, E. A., Perry, D. F., Le, H.-N., & Ialongo, N. S. (2008). Estimating intervention effects of prevention programs: Accounting for noncompliance. *Prevention Science, 9*, 288–298.
- Susser, M., & Stein, Z. (2009). *Eras in epidemiology: The evolution of ideas*. Oxford University Press.
- Sussman, S., Valente, T. W., Rohrbach, L. A., Skara, S., & Ann Pentz, M. (2006). Translation in the health professions: Converting science into action. *Evaluation & the Health Professions, 29*(1), 7–32.
- Thigpen, S., Puddy, R. W., Singer, H. H., & Hall, D. M. (2012). Moving knowledge into action: Developing the rapid synthesis and translation process within the interactive systems framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 50*(3–4), 285–294.
- Van Ryzin, M. J., & Fosco, G. M. (2016). Family-based approaches to prevention: The state of the field. In M. J. Van Ryzin, K. L. Kumpfer, G. M. Fosco, & M. T. Greenberg (Eds.), *Family-based prevention programs for children and adolescents: Theory, research, and large-scale dissemination* (pp. 1–20). Psychology Press.
- Varra, A. A., Hayes, S. C., Roget, N., & Fisher, G. (2008). A randomized control trial examining the effect of acceptance and commitment training on clinician willingness to use evidence-based pharmacotherapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*, 449.
- Wandersman, A., Duffy, J., Flaspohler, P., Noonan, R., Lubell, K., Stillman, L., . . . Saul, J. (2008). Bridging the gap between prevention research and practice: The interactive systems framework for dissemination and implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 41*, 171–181.
- Zigler, E., & Valentine, J. (1979). *Project head start: A legacy of the war on poverty*. National Head Start Association.

# Application: Teaching Prevention and Translation in Family Science



Kim M. Gans

Family science applies knowledge about healthy family functioning to help prevent problems *before* they occur, and the findings of family science research are meant to be translational – applied in practice to help strengthen families (National Council on Family Relations, n.d.). Thus, teaching and training in prevention and translation is crucial for family science scholars. Chapter 52 (Kogan & Barton, this volume) outlines key aspects and directions of prevention science; the current chapter will build upon this to discuss key prevention and translation skills that family science scholars need and what teaching strategies are appropriate for imparting these skills. These skills include intervention mapping (particularly behavior change techniques and creating logic models), community engagement, and science communication to the public.

It is important for students to learn prevention and translation terminology, but active learning is critical for learning to apply course content, that is, learning “how to think” (Heiss et al., 2012). Active learning approaches include collaborative learning, where two or more students work together capitalizing on each other’s skills and resources; inquiry-based learning – active problem-based learning where students identify research issues and questions to develop knowledge or solutions (Guil-an, 2019); and experiential learning, whereby students acquire and apply knowledge and skills in a relevant setting that involves a direct encounter with the subject being studied rather than just hearing or reading about others’ experiences (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). Such pedagogical approaches are fundamental for teaching students applied prevention science skills like intervention mapping, community engagement, and science communication.

---

K. M. Gans (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [kim.gans@uconn.edu](mailto:kim.gans@uconn.edu)

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_53](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_53)

725

## Intervention Mapping

As mentioned in Chap. 52, intervention mapping (IM) is an iterative planning approach and protocol that serves as a blueprint for designing, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating a prevention intervention/program based on a foundation of theoretical, empirical, and practical information (Eldredge et al., 2016). IM takes an ecological and community participatory approach to assessing and intervening in health and social problems, with each of the six steps of IM integrating theory, evidence and community input, and building upon the prior steps (Eldredge et al., 2016). Entire semester or year-long courses on IM are offered at universities including some in family science curricula. Students work collaboratively in class groups on the steps of IM for a chosen health or social problem to practice applying the steps with feedback from the professor. During the semester, they also create their own preventive intervention working through each of the IM steps as assignments and culminating in a presentation at the end of the semester on their entire IM plan. Such a course provides an invaluable applied experience for students that enables them to create prevention interventions in the future. However, not all family science programs can include an entire IM course.

In a more general prevention/translation course, there can be a focus on just some of the steps of IM, including needs assessment/problem analysis, choosing determinants and intervention methods/strategies, creating logic models, and program evaluation. As in the above example, students work collaboratively in groups of two or more for several weeks to learn and practice these steps and then create their own prevention project as a culminating assignment. Two key IM steps that should be taught (but often are not) are choosing theory-based intervention strategies and creating causal/logic models.

After students analyze the health/social problem, its related behaviors and environmental conditions, and their associated determinants (predisposing, enabling, and reinforcing factors) for the at-risk population(s), the next step is to decide which of the determinants are important and changeable for the target population(s) and should therefore be a focus of the future intervention. Determinants are next linked to theoretical methods and then to practical applications that would be part of the intervention. A *theoretical method* (also called a behavior change technique) is a general process for influencing changes in the determinants (Eldredge et al., 2016). A *practical strategy* is the application of the method in a way that fits with the target population and the context in which the intervention is delivered (Eldredge et al., 2016). The same method can be translated into multiple applications, depending on the population and context. For example, for a drug prevention intervention with adolescents, a determinant may be to increase adolescents' self-efficacy to resist social pressure to use drugs. To achieve this objective, one evidence-based theoretical method could be modeling, and a practical application for modeling in a school setting could be a step-by-step video demonstration by adolescents of how to resist peer pressure in common situations. Lists of effective theoretical methods are available for students to reference (Eldredge et al., 2016; Kok et al., 2016; Michie et al.,

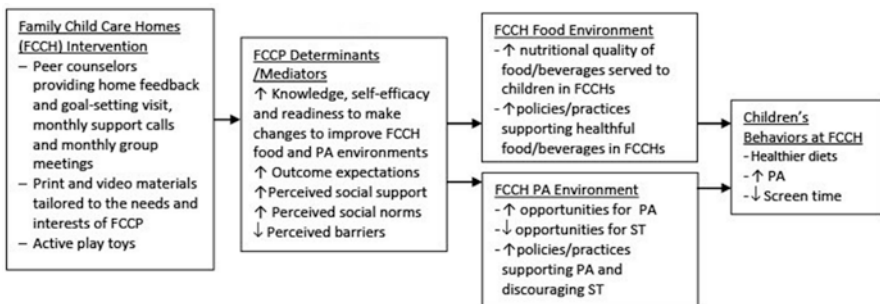
2014), and students gain intervention design skills by using these resources to produce a list of methods and practical applications that they would include in their own intervention. Journals that publish intervention studies increasingly want a delineation of which theoretical methods were used (Michie et al., 2013); thus, this is an important skill for students to develop.

The next step for students is creating a logic model of change (or intervention logic model), which presents a picture of how the program is supposed to work. Such models make a concise visual statement about what intervention activities will bring about change in what outcomes, logically linking activities and effects (Chapel & Milstein, 2019; see Fig. 1 for an example). Students critique different types of logic models, develop draft logic models in small groups with feedback from the instructor and other students, and then create logic models for their own programs. Being able to create a logic model is an important skill as most agencies funding intervention studies require such a model as part of the grant application.

## Community Engagement

Another important experiential skill is for students to engage with community stakeholders and/or prevention programs in real-life contexts. The national movement to more rapidly translate science to practice has brought greater emphasis to collaboration between researchers and communities and the need to incorporate community engagement into research and teaching (Leshner et al., 2013; see also Chap. 52, on CBPAR).

Such connections can be accomplished several ways. The first and most intensive is service-based learning, which uses student real-world experience to develop skills for community prevention/intervention, create connections between academic study and community agencies, and foster values for addressing public concerns and promoting social change (Gray et al., 2017). As a pedagogic methodology, service



**Fig. 1** Intervention logic model. [Logic model from Healthy Start/Comienzos Sanos nutrition and physical activity (PA) intervention in family childcare homes (FCCH) with family childcare providers (FCCP) (Risica et al., 2019)]



learning creates a cycle of action and reflection where students apply classroom learning to community issues, and then reflect on their experiences (Cashman & Seifer, 2008).

As part of a service-learning course, students spend a minimum number of hours at a specific community partner site across the semester. For example, community sites that have participated in one exemplar family life education (FLE) service-learning course at the University of Connecticut include poverty remediation services, Department of Children and Families, YWCA, and city Department of Public Health offices, among many others. Students create a portfolio including time logs and journal entries and write several reflection papers. Through experiential learning and reflection, students make links between on-site experiences and class topics and document how their thinking about FLE work in an applied setting changes over time.

As not all prevention courses are able to handle full-scale service learning, another option is an intervention visit assignment. For this assignment, students choose a prevention intervention study or program and set up an in-person or virtual visit with the investigator or a staff person to ask questions about the intervention design and strategies, implementation, evaluation, results, and lessons learned; they also personally reflect on the program. Such an assignment allows students to connect with community stakeholders and a real intervention, understand real-life implementation, and reflect on this experience, rather than just reading about an intervention.

## Science Communication to the Public

Another crucial skill for prevention/translation is communicating science to lay audiences, which is increasingly recognized as a responsibility of scientists (Brownell et al., 2013). The rapid evolution of the internet and social media and the widespread availability of mobile devices offers scientists increased opportunities to communicate directly with the general public (Peters et al., 2014); however, scientists usually receive no explicit training in such communication (Brownell et al., 2013). Developing skills to communicate science to the general public requires practice and careful attention to language, including translating scientific jargon into everyday language and making science-related information engaging and relevant (Brownell et al., 2013).

Strategies to enable students to gain these skills include assignments to create a translational product for a lay audience, such as writing newspaper or magazine articles, having a course blog, creating a video or podcast, or creating an educational brochure or infographic. Other options include presentations to science classes at a local high school or community group. Products could include storytelling, as stories help laypeople to understand, process, and recall science-related information (Dahlstrom, 2014). For example, the SUCCESS framework has been established for creating short-format science videos that are Simple, Unexpected, Concrete,

Credible, Emotional, Science Storytelling (Finkler & León, 2019), and numerous resources exist to help students learn how to communicate science to the public (National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Practice Development, 2008). Students then can share their translational products in class or another forum in a “show and tell” session, and peer feedback or direct feedback from laypersons can be used to refine translational products. Such assignments lay the foundation for students to learn how to communicate effectively with nonscientist audiences.

## Conclusion

Active pedagogical approaches such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and experiential learning are vital for teaching family science scholars applied skills such as intervention mapping, community engagement, and science communication to the public. These important skills prepare students to critique, choose, collaborate, design, evaluate, and disseminate prevention programs that can improve the well-being of individuals and families.

## References

- Brownell, S. E., Price, J. V., & Steinman, L. (2013). Science communication to the general public: Why we need to teach undergraduate and graduate students this skill as part of their formal scientific training. *Journal of Undergraduate Neuroscience Education, 12*(1), 12. Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience.
- Cashman, S. B., & Seifer, S. D. (2008). Service-learning. An integral part of undergraduate public health. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 35*(3), 273–278.
- Chapel, T., & Milstein, B. (2019). *Chapter 2. Other models for promoting community health and development | section 1. Developing a logic model or theory of change | main section | community tool box*. Community tool box.
- Dahlstrom, M. F. (2014). Using narratives and storytelling to communicate science with nonexpert audiences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 111*(Supplement 4), 13614–13620.
- Eldredge, K. L. B., Markham, C., & Ruiter, R. (2016). *Planning health promotion programs: an intervention mapping approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Finkler, W., & León, B. (2019). The power of storytelling and video: A visual rhetoric for science communication. *Journal of Science Communication, 18*(5), A02.
- Gray, V. B., Galvan, C., & Donlin, A. (2017). The integration of service-learning research into a community nutrition course. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 45*(3), 257–271.
- Guil-an, A. (2019). 5 pedagogical approaches in teaching. (Vol. 2019, pp. 1–5).
- Heiss, C. J., Goldberg, L. R., Weddig, J., & Brady, H. (2012). Service-learning in dietetics courses: A benefit to the community and an opportunity for students to gain dietetics-related experience. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 112*(10), 1524.
- Kok, G., Gottlieb, N. H., Peters, G. J. Y., Mullen, P. D., Parcel, G. S., Ruiter, R. A. C., Fernández, M. E., Markham, C., & Bartholomew, L. K. (2016). A taxonomy of behaviour change methods: an Intervention Mapping approach. *Health Psychology Review, 10*(3), 297–312.

- Leshner, A. I., Terry, S. F., Schultz, A. M., & Liverman, C. T. (2013). The CTSA program at NIH: Opportunities for advancing clinical and translational research. In *The CTSA program at NIH: Opportunities for advancing clinical and translational research*. National Academies Press.
- Michie, S., Atkins, L., & West, R. (2014). *The behaviour change wheel: A guide to designing interventions*. Silverback Publishing. <http://www.behaviourchangewheel.com/>
- Michie, S., Richardson, M., Johnston, M., Abraham, C., Francis, J., Hardeman, W., Eccles, M. P., Cane, J., & Wood, C. E. (2013). The behavior change technique taxonomy (v1) of 93 hierarchically clustered techniques: Building an international consensus for the reporting of behavior change interventions. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 46*(1), 81–95.
- National Academies of Sciences, E. and M. (2017). Communicating science effectively: A research agenda. In *Communicating science effectively: A research agenda*. National Academies Press.
- Peters, H. P., Dunwoody, S., Allgaier, J., Lo, Y., & Brossard, D. (2014). Public communication of science 2.0. *EMBO Reports, 15*(7), 749–753.
- Practice Development, I. (2008). *SAM suitability assessment of materials for evaluation of health-related information for adults*.
- Risica, P. M., Tovar, A., Palomo, V., Dionne, L., Mena, N., Magid, K., Ward, D. S., & Gans, K. M. (2019). Improving nutrition and physical activity environments of family child care homes: The rationale, design and study protocol of the ‘Healthy Start/Comienzos Sanos’ cluster randomized trial. *BMC Public Health, 19*(1), 419.

**Part VI**  
**The Future of Family Science**

# Transdisciplinary Family Science



Libby Balter Blume and Mark A. Fine

This *Sourcebook* chapter challenges the emergent view of family science as a unified discipline. Although the chapter by Settles, Doneker, and Willis (this volume) accurately acknowledges that the study of families historically has engaged the work of family scholars from a broad array of theoretical and methodological perspectives, we define and apply a *transdisciplinary* perspective that could potentially constitute a transformative approach to family science. In this chapter, we review recent interdisciplinary family scholarship and propose how family theory and research can become more transdisciplinary moving forward. We build on Blume's, 2014 editorial, "Making Connections: Toward a Transdisciplinary Family Science," published in the *Journal of Family Theory & Review* to move the discussion beyond a recurring debate about what constitutes "family science" (e.g., Gavazzi et al., 2014) or "famology" (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Ganong et al., 2012), with the primary goal of transcending "disciplinary pluralism" (Kellert, 2009). As suggested by Reis (2006), "Future scientific breakthroughs are likely to occur at the boundary between the disciplines" (p. 258).

We first discuss the scholarship on what is commonly called disciplinarity—and its discontents. Multidisciplinary work juxtaposes the contributions of two or more fields but does not necessarily strive for their integration; interdisciplinary efforts may create newly integrated knowledge but leave the original disciplines unchanged; and transdisciplinary approaches unify and synthesize disparate disciplines into something novel (Blume, 2014). In the second section, a critical review of interdisciplinary family literature explores several key questions: What type of discipline is

---

L. B. Blume (✉)

Psychology, Architecture, and Community Development, University of Detroit Mercy,  
Detroit, MI, USA

e-mail: [blumelb@udmercy.edu](mailto:blumelb@udmercy.edu)

M. A. Fine

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Health and Human  
Sciences, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

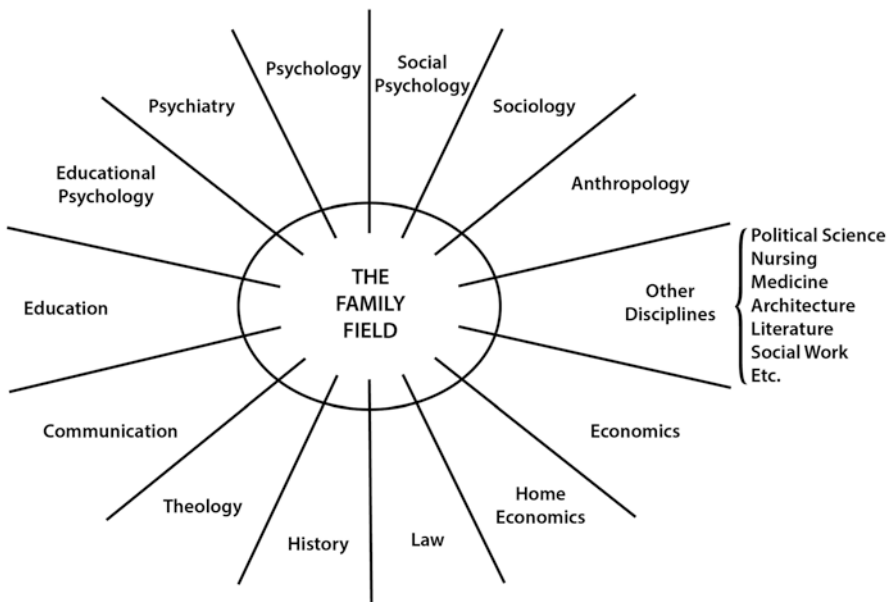
K. Adamsons et al. (eds.), *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methodologies*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9\\_54](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92002-9_54)

733

family science? When are multiple disciplinary perspectives needed? Why is a transdisciplinary approach more desirable? In the last section, several key challenges will be addressed: How to pose questions that simultaneously address families from multiple perspectives; how to go about understanding “borrowed” knowledge; how to identify family professionals who theorize, research, and practice with others from diverse disciplines; and how to overcome differences in disciplinary language and culture.

### Disciplinary and Its Discontents

The disciplinary identity of the family field has been a topic of discussion for decades (for historical overviews, see Hareven, 1971; Jewson & Walters, 1988; Rubin & Settles, 2012; Smart, 2009). In a 1982 address to the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), then president Wes Burr identified the multiple disciplines that study families (see Fig. 1); however, he also claimed that a unique body of theory, research, practice, and pedagogy constituted a new discipline that he termed *famology* (Burr & Leigh, 1983), a name that was (and still is) widely rejected by virtually all undergraduate and graduate family programs given that most have identified themselves as either family studies or family science units (Hans, 2014). In 1984, NCFR formed a task force on the field’s status and published its



**Fig. 1** The relationships between the family field and other disciplines. (Note. From Burr and Leigh (1983, p. 468). Reprinted with permission from the National Council on Family Relations)

recommendation to adopt the name *family science* in the inaugural volume of the *Family Science Review* (NCFR Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline, 1987; 1988). Since then, arguments for establishing an enduring disciplinary identity are manifest in conference sessions, journal articles, and editorials that have vigorously debated the future of the family discipline (e.g., Allen, 2000; Fine, 2004; Gavazzi et al., 2014; Ganong et al., 2012; Hamon & Smith, 2014; Lebow, 2017; McAdoo, 1996; Vincenti, 2005).

Because family science has a multidisciplinary genealogy, arguments for its unique disciplinary identity may seem to contradict the robust trend toward greater interdisciplinarity in the social and behavioral sciences (Calhoun & Rhoten, 2010; Christakis, 2013; Frodeman, 2017; Heady & Szoltysek, 2017). However, we do not regard having multidisciplinary roots as inconsistent with having or developing a clear and well-established disciplinary identity. Psychology, for example, has deep roots in philosophy, biology, and psychiatry, just to name a few, but most would not question its status as an identifiable discipline. We believe that family science has achieved a similarly well-situated disciplinary identity.

There are multiple examples of interdisciplinary areas of study that have formed disciplinary identities. For example, emergent fields that promote increasing theory and research integration—including cognitive science, behavioral health care, community development, and area studies (e.g., urban studies, ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, disability studies, legal and policy studies)—are overtly interdisciplinary (Perkins & Schensul, 2016). Given today's university, state, and federal funding priorities for interdisciplinary translational research (see Grzywacz & Allen, 2017; Lazarsfeld, 1998; Moore et al., 2018), collaborative research, joint faculty appointments, and doctoral training with other fields are highly desirable (Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, 2004; McDaniels & Skogsberg, 2017; National Academies Committee on Research Regulations, 2015). Many human development and family science (HDFS) departments have joint programs with departments in colleges of education that provide students with an integrated approach to understanding, studying, and working with young children in classroom and in other settings. According to Calhoun (2017), "Distinctions among social science disciplines are historically forged and to some extent intellectually arbitrary" (p. 1). For example, HDFS can be located in a variety of schools and colleges, such as Health and Human Sciences, Human Environmental Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Education, and so forth. Thus, the widely varying homes where human development is taught, studied, and applied illustrate that there is an arbitrariness regarding its appropriate or typical intellectual roots. While we agree with Calhoun (2017) that it would be an error to eliminate the traditional social sciences (Fine, 2004), we also firmly believe that the future impact of the family field lies in identifying our strengths as a *transdiscipline*.

To take the next step, as we discuss further below, we believe that the family field needs to embrace a newly forming *transdisciplinary* identity for family science. In this regard, Grzywacz and Allen (2017) recently acknowledged that navigating family science's relationships with other disciplines "can help the field move forward in broader academic, care delivery, and policy arenas" (p. 568) beyond what Campbell

(1969) referred to as *disciplinary ethnocentrism*, or a tendency to privilege one's own theory and methods over those of other disciplines. This important critique is consistent with Bourdieu's (1975) influential sociology of science: "... it is clearly seen that different representations of science correspond to different positions in the scientific field, and that these representations are *ideological strategies* and *epistemological positions* whereby agents occupying a particular position in the field aim to justify their own position and the strategies they use ..." (p. 40, italics in original). Indeed, in a comprehensive history of academic disciplines, Abbott (1988) concluded that "professions both create their work and are created by it" (p. 316).

### ***Multidisciplinarity***

The multidisciplinary study of families comprises a collective body of literature on a research topic or issue that may reflect important contributions by more than one discipline, as Fig. 1 illustrates. In *multidisciplinary* projects, the juxtaposition of disciplines has the potential to generate extensive but not well-integrated knowledge, with the separate disciplines retaining their identities, as in symposia or edited collections by contributors from diverse perspectives addressing a shared topic of interest. For example, intimate partner violence might be examined by family scientists, communication scholars, social workers, and/or cultural anthropologists; healthy aging theorized by human developmentalists, gerontologists, health professionals, and/or medical family therapists; or stepfamilies studied by sociologists, social psychologists, child development specialists, communication researchers, family scholars, and/or clinical counselors.

The defining feature of multidisciplinary work is that scholars from each discipline engage in work that is consistent with their training, that basically stays within the "comfort zones" of the researchers' disciplinary roots, and that, with some minor exceptions, involves scholars engaging in "parallel play" with respect to their work with colleagues from other disciplines. For example, in the human sciences, biologists may theorize at the level of the molecule, cell, or organ, whereas family and social scientists theorize at the level of the individual, group, or society (Medicus, 2005), resulting in complementary but nonoverlapping findings. In this regard, a recent editorial in the *Journal of Comparative Social Science* illustrated how the phrase *family system* has been used separately by both family historians and family sociologists to explore "a growing interest in the connections between family systems, property, political and economic organization, on one side, and differential growth and human development, on the other" (Heady & Szoltysek, 2017, p. 81). Such parallel uses of the same term represent the hallmark of a multidisciplinary approach.



## ***Interdisciplinarity***

*Interdisciplinarity* concerns the *collaborative* investigation of a particular research question, or the transfer of methods from one discipline to another, as when new treatments are found for cancer patients by transferring knowledge from nuclear physics to medicine. According to Graff (2015), the key aspect of interdisciplinarity is gaining knowledge by addressing questions “in new and different ways” (p. 5). The first typology to classify differing forms of interdisciplinarity as either theoretical or methodological was created in 1972 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Klein, 2010). Today, most taxonomies still distinguish interdisciplinarity as a process in which either borrowed theories or methods result in novel approaches. In theoretical interdisciplinarity, differing theoretical perspectives are integrated to help design the research study. For example, Fine et al. (1997) studied how stepfathers’ constructions of their stepfather roles were related to various dimensions of their individual, marital, and family well-being. Their work was interdisciplinary in that they used symbolic interactionism (typically considered a sociological theory) to examine how stepfathers constructed their roles, Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory (a social psychological theory) to explore how differing role constructions were related to well-being, and Lamborn et al.’s (1991) parenting model (a developmental theory) to delineate the dimensions of stepparenting that were examined. They did not create a new conceptual model, but used elements of these three different models to design the study.

Methodological interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, involves the adoption of methods common to one discipline by another—for example, discourse analysis from communication studies to conduct family therapy research (Robins, 2016) or geographic information systems (GIS) analysis to inform family interaction in the neighborhood context (Noah, 2015). While such projects are fruitful in addressing family-level problems, the focus is on collaboration (either by interprofessional teams or by an individual scholar working across two or more disciplines) rather than dismantling disciplinary boundaries per se or creating hybrid specializations (see Klein, 2010, 2017), such as family science. We believe that although interdisciplinarity is desirable overall, family science scholars need to remain open to collaborations that “frame research questions and practices—not disciplines” (Klein, 2010, p. 25).

## ***Transdisciplinarity***

Transdisciplinary scholars have the goal of going beyond disciplinary boundaries by addressing complex issues situated at the intersection of the disciplines, commonly referred to as “wicked problems” in transdisciplinary theory (McGregor, 2014), such as children’s separation from their parents during immigration proceedings or the effects on families of war, famine, natural disasters, pandemics, or

economic disparities (e.g., Ganong et al., 2014). In the 1990s, the First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity adopted a formal charter (for a copy, see Nicolescu, 1994) stating 15 axiomatic principles that overlap with and extend the prior definitions of theoretical and methodological interdisciplinarity. By the early 2000s, proceedings of several international conferences on joint problem solving among science, technology, and society had been published, and quantum physicist Nicolescu had proposed the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of transdisciplinary approaches to integrating scientific knowledge in his *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (Augsburg, 2014): “The term *transdisciplinary* ... was coined to give expression to a need that was perceived—especially in the area of education—to celebrate the transgression of disciplinary boundaries, an act that far surpassed the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches” (Nicolescu, 2002, p. 1).

In this non-dualistic view, multiple ontological realities are organized into three levels—subject, object, and a “middle agent,” which refers to one who integrates contradictory worldviews (Nicolescu, 2014). By reconciling seemingly oppositional viewpoints, transdisciplinary scholars not only can transgress the arbitrary boundaries separating discipline-based inquiry (McGregor, 2014) but also can provide opportunities for the potential integration of differing knowledge systems, also referred to as *transepistemology* (Schweizer-Ries & Perkins, 2012). For example, family researchers Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) proposed an emergent dialogical model of how religion can simultaneously both help and harm families by exposing hidden dualisms that are embedded in family spiritual and religious experiences, thereby going beyond the epistemological boundaries of either a theological or a social science perspective.

After an extensive review of the evaluation literature on transdisciplinary research models, Klein (2008) concluded that “new epistemic communities must be constructed and new cultures of evidence produced” (p. S116). Transdisciplinary scholars refer to such a process of theoretical integration across disciplinary perspectives as *integral* metatheory (McGregor, 2009; also see Volckmann, 2014). Metatheoretical approaches may emerge out of theory building that integrates, synthesizes, or constructively analyzes other theories and methods; are used to systematically review and critique other theories; and include new conceptual lenses (Edwards, 2014). For example, medical family therapy is a transdisciplinary approach that combines family therapy and family medicine to adopt “a biopsychosocial view of the patient, including health and disease processes related to the interplay among mind, physiology, and biology and the environment” (Garris & Weber, 2018, p. 6). Similarly, marriage and family therapy (MFT) educators affiliated with HDFFS, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, and sociology recommend incorporating a medical sociology lens into MFT training and research (Heafner & Mauldin, 2018). Although meta-theoretical approaches have been characterized in family science as *theoretical pluralism* (Klein & Jurich, 1993), instead of employing many individual theories, integral metatheorists attempt to synthesize theoretical perspectives using a new conceptual lens.

Although synthesis of theories or methods is not always possible or even useful, transdisciplinary scholars are always looking for opportunities to synergistically

integrate their methodological and theoretical orientations in ways that transcend the disciplinary origins of their training and result in products that make greater contributions than would be possible without such a transdisciplinary openness. For example, transdisciplinary discourse in the twenty-first century increasingly has been open to intersubjective, participatory, and subjective approaches—from ethnographic, narrative, and action research to self-reflection, autoethnography, and personal history (Augsburg, 2014).

## Transdisciplinary Family Science

Synthesizing theories and methods and applying new conceptual lenses to cross-disciplinary knowledge involves exploration of the theoretical frameworks that have provided direction to research in particular areas of study. For example, Fine and Fincham (2013) adopted a content-based approach for the *Handbook of Family Theories* in which contributors were asked how family theories were used by researchers in six broad content areas, such as parenting and parent–child relations or structural variations and transitions in families. As they examined the theoretical underpinnings of their respective content areas, the contributors created a range of transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary approaches.

Another meta-theoretical approach to exploring transdisciplinary integration utilized critical commentaries to explore connections among paired disciplinary articles from human development, biopsychology, sociology, political science, law, philosophy, communication studies, and literature for a special issue of the *Journal of Family Theory & Review* (Blume, 2014). For example, psychologist Michael Bamberg (2014) used narrative practice theory to suggest the transdisciplinary potential of a small-story approach in two family science articles, one by communication scholars who theorized that families are constituted by social discourse (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014) and one by a literature scholar who employed literary criticism to theorize the social construction of marriages in fiction (Harrison, 2014).

In preparation for writing this *Sourcebook* chapter, we conducted two reviews of empirical family scholarship in journals that represent three distinct cultures in family scholarship—NCFR, the American Psychological Association (APA), and the International Association of Relationship Research (IARR)—to examine the extent to which family science currently is conducted in a single disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and/or transdisciplinary manner. First, we examined authors' disciplinary affiliations for all articles published from 2015 to 2018 in five journals: *Family Relations*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, and *Personal Relationships*. Second, we conducted a preliminary search for relevant articles published in those journals during the same three-year period using the search terms “multidisciplinary” OR “interdisciplinary” AND “family” (interestingly, there is no designated search term for transdisciplinary in PsycINFO). Because relatively few empirical projects might be considered transdisciplinary, we also conducted an expanded

search in Google Scholar of 25 family journals<sup>1</sup> for articles that included the term *transdisciplinary* in the body of the paper and found 17 articles published in the past three years.

For several reasons, it was often difficult to determine the extent to which the authors made contributions by themselves and then came together (i.e., interdisciplinary) or whether the authors worked in ways that extended themselves beyond their disciplinary comfort levels and created new and novel approaches to answering research questions (i.e., transdisciplinary): (a) the department within which a scholar works is not necessarily isomorphic with the discipline in which she or he was trained; (b) departments are identified by a variety of different names and some authors are identified by their affiliation with centers or institutes rather than departments; (c) journal articles may provide the departmental affiliation of only the first author; and (d) little information tends to be provided in journal articles on the specific contributions made by each author.

With these caveats in mind, several clear trends emerged from our review of the last three volumes of the five family journals. First, as one might expect, the majority of articles in all five journals were unidisciplinary, authored by either single authors or groups of authors from what appear to be the same disciplinary departments. Second, a minority of articles were authored by scholars from more than one disciplinary affiliation, such as articles written collaboratively by scholars housed in HDFS departments and those affiliated with psychology departments. In such cases, it was difficult (without exploring each author's graduate training history) to tell whether these projects were jointly conducted by psychologists (single discipline) or by scholars from different disciplines (e.g., psychology and sociology). In other articles in which there were different disciplinary affiliations among the authors, there was often a single author from a different discipline who seemed to perform a task unique to her or his disciplinary background. For example, an article by Baucom, Leo, Adamo, Georgiou, and Baucom (2017) identifies four authors from a psychology department and a single author from an electrical engineering department at another university who contributed a particular observational methodology to measure human behavior. This project appears interdisciplinary rather than transdisciplinary because the electrical engineer made a distinct and focused contribution that stemmed from his discipline. Very few articles appeared to potentially broach transdisciplinary work (two examples were Azar et al., 2017 and Denes et al., 2017).

---

<sup>1</sup>*Child and Family Social Work; Communication, Work and Family; Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal; Family Court Review; Family Science Review; The Family Journal; Family Process; Family Relations; International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family; Journal of Child and Family Social Work; Journal of Child and Family Studies; Journal of Family Communication; Journal of Family and Economic Issues; Journal of Family Issues; Journal of Family Nursing; Journal of Family Psychology; Journal of Family Social Work; Journal of Family Studies; Journal of Family Theory & Review; Journal of Marital and Family Therapy; Journal of GLBT Family Studies; Journal of Interdisciplinary Family Studies; Journal of Marriage and Family; and Juvenile and Family Court Journal.*

Only one article was explicitly transdisciplinary. Sharp and DeCesaro (2015) conducted what they termed a transdisciplinary feminist collaboration between a family scholar and a choreographer-dancer. Unlike other collaborations between performance-based humanities scholars and social scientists, this effort was transdisciplinary in that there was a collaborative attempt on both scholars' parts to extend themselves beyond the very different methodological worlds in which they were trained. In this project, the choreographer-dancer created a dance performance based on her own reading of the qualitative interview transcripts on women's relationships gathered by the family scholar. The transdisciplinary team engaged in a reflective and deliberative process, including writing memos together, raising questions about each other's work stemming from differences in disciplinary training approaches and world views, and jointly writing the article from their work together. The collaborators' description of their method clearly places their creative process within a transdisciplinary realm.

Overall, most family science work we reviewed seems either unidisciplinary or multidisciplinary. Based on author affiliations and descriptions of theory and method, interdisciplinary work remains relatively rare. Because family researchers have rarely engaged in transdisciplinary collaborations, the family field is poised to take the next step toward a more transdisciplinary approach to family science.

## Challenges and Recommendations

The goal of this section is to challenge family scholars to "undiscipline" knowledge by integrating both theories and methods from multiple disciplines when focusing on problems that require approaches beyond traditional disciplinary practices (Graff, 2015). For some kinds of research questions, family scientists may use multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or even unidisciplinary approaches. However, for particularly complex and multifaceted (i.e., "wicked") problems, we hope that family scholars who have been trained in family science theory and methods will be on the lookout for the types of research questions and problems that necessitate transdisciplinary initiatives and efforts. Recent trends in federal and foundation funding of research in the natural and social sciences increase the imperative for addressing the current interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary zeitgeists (Christakis, 2013; Ganong et al., 2014; Gavazzi et al., 2014).

At the same time, it is important to note that our encouragement of transdisciplinary scholarship does not mean that we are recommending the establishment of a new discipline. Rather, we think that transdisciplinary work is best situated within an environment in which family scientists extend themselves to work in novel ways with researchers from other disciplines that extend and enrich family theory and methods, such as geographic information systems (GIS) from geography to map family mobility, or video diaries from visual ethnography to interpret family experience. In other words, our vision of transdisciplinary scholarship calls for a new, thoughtful, and deliberate effort to keep an eye out for research questions that could

fruitfully benefit from bringing together students and scholars from multiple disciplines who work together in transdisciplinary ways. As a result, new professionals more often may begin their family science careers with transdisciplinary skill sets (described below) as they reflexively think about and seek out opportunities to engage in transdisciplinary work. From this perspective, promotion and tenure systems that reward publication primarily in discipline-specific journals would need to re-envision siloed academic departments and graduate programs (Keck et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2018; Perkins & Schensul, 2016).

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education also has suggested that the “complexity of the world requires us to have a better understanding of the relationships and connections between all fields that intersect and overlap” (Gregorian, 2004, p. B12). As examples, transdisciplinary studies programs may cross departmental and college boundaries to offer such campus-wide courses as Data Analytical Tools, Technologies, and Applications Across Disciplines (Claremont Graduate University), or dual degrees such as a Doctor of Medicine and a Ph.D. in any discipline (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). More recently, the National Academies Committee on Research Regulations (2015) has recommended the sharing of knowledge among disciplines by creating transdisciplinary research: “Provide incentives and remove barriers so that concepts and tools developed *within* disciplines cooperate to produce novel concepts and ideas *across* disciplines” (p. 6, italics in original). For example, Texas Tech University encourages sustainable partnerships and collaborative research through institutional support for transdisciplinary research and outreach activities, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Obesity Prevention Program uses a transdisciplinary approach to integrate nutrition, physical activity, public health science, family science, human development, economics, and interdisciplinary public health practice (see Table 1 for a list of online resources).

Because family scientists typically “represent a variety of academic disciplines and professional positions, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, marriage and family therapy, social work, theology, child development, health, and more” (NCFR, 2019, para. 3), we have long resisted being consolidated with more traditional social science departments, such as sociology or psychology. However, rather than specific specializations such as family science or family resource management, the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) has advocated for interprofessional “communities of practice” (McGregor, 2009). An example of this model is the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, which emphasizes collaboration among diverse scholars and stakeholders to tackle complex social issues such as family violence, homelessness, incarceration, and economic inequality (Moore et al., 2018). In order to achieve conceptual integration, however, theoretical and methodological approaches from different disciplines need to be combined. Toward this end, four recommendations for increasing the transdisciplinarity of family science are presented in the following sections.

**Table 1** Internet resources

Addressing Grand Challenges through Transdisciplinary Research	<a href="https://research.umn.edu/inquiry/post/addressing-grand-challenges-through-transdisciplinary-research">https://research.umn.edu/inquiry/post/addressing-grand-challenges-through-transdisciplinary-research</a>
Benefits of Transdisciplinary PhD Programs	<a href="https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2018/03/benefits-transdisciplinary-phd-programs/">https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2018/03/benefits-transdisciplinary-phd-programs/</a>
Charter of Transdisciplinarity	<a href="http://www.inters.org/Freitas-Morin-Nicolescu-Transdisciplinarity">http://www.inters.org/Freitas-Morin-Nicolescu-Transdisciplinarity</a>
Illinois Transdisciplinary Obesity Prevention Program	<a href="http://i-topp.fshn.illinois.edu/about.html">http://i-topp.fshn.illinois.edu/about.html</a>
INSciTS – International Network for the Science of Team Science	<a href="https://www.inscits.org/about-us">https://www.inscits.org/about-us</a>
Leading Transdisciplinary Projects (USDA)	<a href="https://nifa.usda.gov/leading-transdisciplinary-projects">https://nifa.usda.gov/leading-transdisciplinary-projects</a>
Network for Transdisciplinary Research	<a href="http://www.transdisciplinarity.ch/en/td-net/Ueber-td-net.html">http://www.transdisciplinarity.ch/en/td-net/Ueber-td-net.html</a>
Transdisciplinary Research in Principles of Data Science (NSF)	<a href="https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=505347">https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=505347</a>
Transdisciplinary Research Academy	<a href="http://www.depts.ttu.edu/vpr/transdisciplinary/">http://www.depts.ttu.edu/vpr/transdisciplinary/</a>
Transdisciplinary Studies	<a href="http://gradschool.unc.edu/policies/faculty-staff/program-development/transdisciplinary.html">http://gradschool.unc.edu/policies/faculty-staff/program-development/transdisciplinary.html</a>
Why Transdisciplinary Studies?	<a href="https://www.cgu.edu/why-cgu/transdisciplinary-studies/">https://www.cgu.edu/why-cgu/transdisciplinary-studies/</a>
Tool Kit for the Transdisciplinary Team Approach	<a href="https://www.cdd.unm.edu/ecln/FIT/pdfs/TTA%20ToolKit.pdf">https://www.cdd.unm.edu/ecln/FIT/pdfs/TTA%20ToolKit.pdf</a>

### *Asking Transdisciplinary Questions*

First, becoming transdisciplinary involves recognizing that a research question might best be answered using multiple frameworks rather than the theories or methods of a single discipline. Asking transdisciplinary questions is most successful when “a diverse collection of (often contradictory) people, ideas, and consciousness [come] to a new space and place where transdisciplinary knowledge can be created ...” (McGregor & Donnelly, 2014, p. 164). As previously discussed, this requires “stretching to create new frameworks, questions, methods of inquiry, at multiple levels . . . [that] build on but go beyond interdisciplinary work” (Moore et al., 2018). For example, Sprey (2013) suggested expanding the range of questioning in family science to include concepts from such fields as physics and mathematics (e.g., chaos theory, nonlinearity) to guide investigations of marriages and families. Several prerequisites are needed to engage in the transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge, namely (a) inclusion of stakeholders from both practice and research; (b) collaboration on processes and methods; (c) integration of knowledge and expertise; (d) usability of transformative outcomes; and (e) reflexivity on diverse values, priorities, and worldviews (Polk, 2015).

Feminist family scientists have referred to such emergent knowledge as “border work” in which the integration of questions from the humanities and social science traditions leads to novel syntheses (Hill Collins, 2012), such as the theoretical juxtaposition of queer and critical feminist theories to interrogate heteronormativity in Latinx lived experience at the borders of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Acosta, 2018) or the previously described methodological approach of the kinesthetic analysis of qualitative data to illustrate the iterative nature of transdisciplinary work (Sharp & DeCesaro, 2015). Such examples require family scholars to understand relevant ideas, approaches, theories, concepts, methods, and comparisons from diverse disciplines (e.g., women’s studies) or humanities fields (e.g., dance) (Graff, 2016)—a type of appropriation that Kellert (2009) has referred to as “borrowed” knowledge.

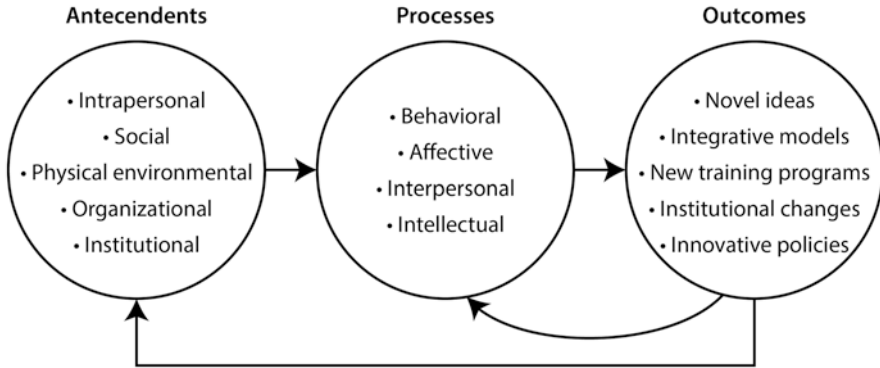
### *Understanding “Borrowed” Knowledge*

Second, to understand knowledge from another discipline requires not only juxtaposing theories and methods from differing disciplines that address similar topics or problems, but also engaging in the conceptual dialogue necessary to achieve intellectual integration. In this regard, Kellert (2009) has proposed three stages to borrowing knowledge. In the first stage, inquiries are based on the objects of scientific study (e.g., families). In the second stage, researchers ask questions from multiple disciplinary perspectives (e.g., psychology, sociology, biology, economics, history). In the last stage, transdisciplinary scholars ask metatheoretical or metamethodological questions with the assumption that asking such “meta” questions is essential to synthesize disparate knowledges.

In this view, disciplinary theories and methods must be explicitly exchanged and new transdisciplinary concepts then can be created through the fusion of disciplinary and nondisciplinary contributions from differing perspectives (McGregor, 2014). For example, humanities scholars have described recent attempts to synthesize borrowed knowledge that are equally relevant to family science: (a) expanding methods and approaches; (b) erasing boundaries between the humanities and social sciences; (c) unifying strategies from differing contexts; (d) crossing the borders of disciplinary expertise; and (e) developing transdisciplinary and entrepreneurial approaches (Klein & Frodeman, 2017).

Figure 2 illustrates an antecedent–process–outcome model of “team science” that has been used to describe such transdisciplinary partnerships. “The antecedent and process variables specified in the model, in turn, influence several near-term, mid-term, and long-term outcomes of scientific collaboration including the development of new conceptual frameworks, research publications, training programs, and translational innovations over the course of the initiative” (2010, p. 476). As an example, a transdisciplinary study of divorce by jurists and social scientists in Switzerland resulted in both immediate changes in courtroom procedures (e.g., child testimony), ongoing research (e.g., parent and child interview protocols), and





**Fig. 2** Conceptual model of transdisciplinary scientific collaboration. (Note. Published in the Stokols et al., p. 205, Copyright *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2005). Reprinted with permission from Elsevier Inc.)

in later changes to national family policy (e.g., relevant articles of the Swiss Civil Code) (Simoni et al., 2008).

### *Identifying Transdisciplinary Theory, Research, and Practice*

Third, transdisciplinary work involves the identification and selection of appropriate and relevant ideas, approaches, theories, concepts, methods, and comparisons from a variety of different fields or disciplines (Klein, 2006, 2008; Lazarsfeld, 1998). One of the best ways to identify other scholars who are working on family-related topics is to conduct a keyword search of scholarly journals and databases from diverse disciplines—the arts and humanities, nursing and medicine, biology and health, psychology and sociology, communication and mass media, business and economics, ethnic and gender/sexuality studies, philosophy and religion, literature and education, history and political science, geography and anthropology, urban planning and community development, and so on (Chakraborti et al., 2016). Reading in a diversity of disciplines encourages patterns of transdisciplinary interaction, such as (a) using concepts from another field; (b) solving existing problems with new methods; (c) elaborating a theoretical model with concepts from outside one’s own training; (d) extending a theoretical framework to new domains; and (e) developing an integrative new theory (Bechtel, 1986).

In the field of community development, for example, transdisciplinary translational science is a priority that echoes the promise of transdisciplinarity in family scholarship (see Graham et al., 2016). Community engagement models have been extensively explored by participatory action researchers in family science with similar opportunities for transdisciplinarity (e.g., Vesely et al., 2017). By focusing on complex problems, such as quality of life, health, and social inequities, applied

community science also strives for transdisciplinary collaboration among psychologists, political scientists, economists, public health researchers, biologists and ecologists, anthropologists, geographers, urban and regional planners, legal/policy analysts, design researchers, and historians (see Perkins & Schensul, 2016). According to community development theory, processes that can sustain collaborations across disciplines comprise a “transdisciplinary action research cycle” that translates research findings into policies, although their potential benefits may not be evident for some years (Stokols, 2006).

### *Navigating Transdisciplinary Cultures*

Fourth, transdisciplinary collaborations are highly labor intensive and conflicts may result from participants’ different world views, interpersonal styles, and departmental cultures (Stokols, 2006). Collaborative team members must make sense of each other’s disciplinary histories (ontology) and knowledge systems (epistemology) to make the complex connections that may lead to hybrid methodologies, a process termed *transleadership*. This intersubjective process requires that transdisciplinary scholars and practitioners be willing to acknowledge tensions that may result from differing levels of power and influence among varied academic fields (McGregor & Donnelly, 2014), such as between the arts and humanities and the natural and social sciences, or between research and practice. According to Augsburg (2014), transdisciplinary scholars need to be intellectual risk takers who have the capacity to suspend their own points of view and be willing to abandon their home discipline. Abbott (2001) refers to this as the *chaos of disciplines*: “Economists are doing sociology and calling it family economics” (p. 121).

To become truly transdisciplinary requires paying attention to the theoretical and methodological cultures that exist between and within disciplines. In this regard, communication researchers who observed interdisciplinary university-level seminars found that “talking across disciplines is as difficult as talking to someone from another culture” (Strober, 2010, p. 4). Similarly, when Moore et al. (2018) surveyed early career faculty in social work, most assistant professors reported that transdisciplinary research is important but that they needed more training on how to navigate tensions on cross-disciplinary research teams. “The problem is even more complex when it comes to countries which have not developed empirical methods of social research but which have their own traditions of social analysis” (Lazarsfeld, 1998, p. 350). For example, discussing complicated grief following the political disappearance of family members, Robins (2016) theorized that the cultural discourse surrounding ambiguous loss is an important component of community-based approaches to family therapy, as seen in the social practice of Hollander (2016) with families of those who “were disappeared” in Northern Uganda. In recent decades, this type of transdisciplinary research has been referred to as *exogenous interdisciplinarity* because issues originate in the community rather than the academy (Klein, 2012). “Transdisciplinary research is needed when knowledge about a societally

relevant problem field is uncertain, when the concrete nature of problems is disputed, and when there is a great deal at stake for those concerned by problems and involved in dealing with them” (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008, p. 34).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have advocated for a transdisciplinary approach to family scholarship. Although some family scholars may claim that family science is already transdisciplinary by virtue of its multidisciplinary genealogy, the published research we reviewed in family science reveals a dearth of the truly transdisciplinary approaches discussed in the chapter. As previously noted, we agree with the coeditors of the *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research* (Wiesmann et al., 2008) that because the “ontological and epistemic foundations of participating disciplines are strongly value-loaded [...] an initial stumbling block is the misconception of transdisciplinarity as an additional or new discipline [...] or at best a promising meta-discipline” (pp. 435–440). In our opinion, the goal of transdisciplinarity is *not* the same as the long-standing integration of disciplines that now constitutes family science because the hallmark of transdisciplinary research is an attempt by scholars with *differing* disciplinary backgrounds to together tackle thorny problems that cannot be addressed fully by one discipline alone. Because family scholars are themselves specialists who have built a strong scientific community, we envision the application of transdisciplinary theories and methods as a viable way to address the complex issues facing contemporary families. Transdisciplinarity has unlimited potential to integrate disciplinary paradigms, focus on complex real-world problems, and transcend the boundaries among theory, research, and practice in family science.

In advocating for more transdisciplinary efforts, we also are mindful that not all family-related research questions require this approach—nor do we think naively that transdisciplinarity is easy. Rather, transdisciplinary work is difficult, time-consuming, requires extending oneself into new and difficult research methods and theories, necessitates finding collaborators from unfamiliar disciplines, and calls for a substantial amount of creativity. For family science to truly embrace *transdisciplinarity* may require that both students and faculty “cross-train”—in much the same ways as athletes—in such areas as literary theory, visual ethnography, or place-making from disciplines that historically have *not* been involved in family theory construction or research methodologies like the humanities, arts, and architecture. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, we strongly believe that the potential benefits outweigh the difficulties because some solutions to “wicked” problems cannot be found without a transdisciplinary approach to doing family science.

## References

- Abbott, A. (1988). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. University of Chicago Press.
- Abbott, A. (2001). *Chaos of disciplines*. University of Chicago Press.
- Acosta, K. L. (2018). Queering family scholarship: Theorizing from the borderlands. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *10*, 406–418.
- Allen, K. A. (2000). A conscious and inclusive family studies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 4–17.
- Augsburg, T. (2014). Becoming transdisciplinary: The emergence of the transdisciplinary individual. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *70*(3–4), 233–247.
- Azar, S. T., McGuier, D. J., Miller, E. A., Hernandez-Mekonnen, R., & Johnson, D. R. (2017). Child neglect and maternal cross-relational social cognitive and neurocognitive disturbances. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *31*, 8–18.
- Bamberg, M. (2014). Narrative practices versus capital-D discourses: Ways of investigating family. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *6*, 132–136.
- Baucom, B. R. W., Leo, K., Adamo, C., Georgiou, P., & Baucom, K. (2018). Conceptual and statistical issues in couples observational research: Rationale and methods for design decisions. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *31*, 972–982.
- Bechtel, W. (1986). The nature of scientific integration. In W. Bechtel (Ed.), *Integrating scientific disciplines* (pp. 3–52). Martinus Nijhoff.
- Blume, L. B. (2014). Making connections: Toward a transdisciplinary family science. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *6*, 1–4.
- Bourdieu, P. (1975). The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason. *Social Science Information*, *14*(6), 19–47.
- Burr, W. R., & Leigh, G. K. (1983). Famology: A new discipline. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *45*, 467–480.
- Calhoun, C. (2017). Integrating the social sciences: Area studies, qualitative methods, and problem-oriented research. In R. Frodeman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. x–x). Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun, C., & Rhoten, D. (2010). Integrating the social sciences: Theoretical knowledge, methodological tools, and practical applications. In R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein, & C. Mitcham (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 103–118). Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, D. T. (1969). Ethnocentrism of disciplines and the fish-scale model of omniscience. In M. Sherif & C. W. Sherif (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary relationships in the social sciences* (pp. 328–348). Aldine.
- Chakraborti, A., Raina, D., & Sharma, K. (2016). Can an interdisciplinary field contribute to one of the parent disciplines from which it emerged? *European Physical Journal Special Topics*, *225*, 3127–3135.
- Christakis, N. A. (2013, July 21). Let's shake up the social sciences. *New York Times*, p. SR12.
- Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research of the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Engineering. (2004). *Facilitating interdisciplinary research*. National Academies Press.
- Denes, A., Afifi, T. D., & Granger, D. A. (2017). Physiology and pillow talk: Relations between testosterone and communication post sex. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *34*, 281–304.
- Dollahite, D. C., Marks, L. D., & Dalton, H. (2018). Why religion helps and harms families: A conceptual model of a system of dualities at the nexus of faith and family life. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *10*, 219–241.
- Edwards, M. G. (2014). Misunderstanding metatheorizing. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, *31*, 720–744.
- Fine, M. A. (2004). Outgoing editor's note. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *21*, 715–717.

- Fine, M. A., & Fincham, F. D. (2013). *Handbook of family theories: A content-based approach*. Routledge.
- Fine, M. A., Ganong, L. G., & Coleman, M. (1997). The relation between role constructions and adjustment among stepfathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, 18, 503–525.
- Frodeman, R. (2017). The future of interdisciplinarity: An introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. In *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (2nd ed., pp. x–x). Oxford University Press.
- Galvin, K. M., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2014). Theory and research from the communication field: Discourses that constitute and reflect families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6, 97–111.
- Ganong, L., Zvonkovic, A. M., Sabatelli, R. M., Day, R., Wilson, S. M., Murry, V. M., & Gavazzi, S. M. (2012, October 31). “Famology” (dead), “family science” (life support): How is “family studies” doing? Symposium presented at the annual conference of the National Council on Family Relations, Phoenix, AZ.
- Garris, B. R., & Weber, A. J. (2018). Relationships influence health: Family theory in health-care research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 10, online before print.
- Gavazzi, S. M., Wilson, S. M., Ganong, L., & Zvonkovic, A. (2014). Furthering the conversation on the future of the discipline of family science: Comments on the articles by Hamon & Smith and Hans. *Family Relations*, 63, 333–342.
- Graff, H. J. (2015). *Undisciplining knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the twentieth century*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Graff, H. J. (2016). The “problem” of interdisciplinarity in theory, practice, and history. *Social Science History*, 40, 775–803.
- Graham, P. W., Kim, M. M., Clinton-Sherrod, A. M., Yaros, A., Richmond, A. N., Jackson, M., & Corbie-Smith, G. (2016). What is the role of culture, diversity, and community engagement in transdisciplinary translational science? *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 6(1), 115–124.
- Gregorian, V. (2004, June 4). Colleges must reconstruct the unity of knowledge. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. B12–14, I9–10, 12–14.
- Grzywacz, J. G., & Allen, J. W. (2017). Adapting the ideas of translational science for translational family science. *Family Relations*, 66, 568–583.
- Hamon, R., & Smith, S. R. (2014). The discipline of family science and the continuing need for innovation. *Family Relations*, 63, 309–322.
- Hans, J. D. (2014). Wither famology? Department name trends across four decades. *Family Relations*, 63, 323–332.
- Hareven, T. K. (1971). The history of the family as an interdisciplinary field. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2, 399–414.
- Harrison, M. (2014). Reading the marriage plot. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6, 112–131.
- Heady, P., & Szoltysek, M. (2017). Editors’ introduction: Murdock and Goody revisited. *Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 51, 79–91.
- Heafner, J., & Mauldin, L. (2018). Expanding systems thinking: Incorporating tools from medical sociology into MFT education and research. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94, 319–340.
- Hill Collins, P. (2012). Sociology of knowledge. In *On intellectual activism*. Temple University Press.
- Hirsch Hadorn, G., Hoffmann-Riem, H., Biber-Klemm, S., Grossenbacher-Mansuy, W., Joye, D., Pohl, C., Wiesmann, U., & Zemp, E. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of transdisciplinary research*. Springer Verlag.
- Hollander, T. (2016). Ambiguous loss and complicated grief: Understanding the grief of parents of the disappeared in Northern Uganda. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8, 294–307.
- Jewson, R., & Walters, J. (1988). *The National Council on Family Relations: A fifty year history, 1937–1987*. National Council on Family Relations.
- Keck, A.-S., Sloane, S., Liechty, J. M., Fiese, B. H., & Donovan, S. M. (2018). Transdisciplinary Ph.D. programmes produce more high-impact publications and foster increased collaborations. Retrieved from

- Kellert, S. H. (2009). *Borrowed knowledge: Chaos theory and the challenge of learning across disciplines*. University of Chicago Press.
- Klein, D. M., & Jurich, J. A. (1993). Metatheory and family studies. In P. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 31–67). Plenum.
- Klein, J. T. (2008). Evaluation of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research: A literature review. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *35*, S116–S123.
- Klein, J. T. (2010). A taxonomy of interdisciplinarity. In R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein, & C. Mitcham (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 15–30). Oxford University Press.
- Klein, J. T. (2012). Research integration: A comparative knowledge base. In A. F. Repko, W. H. Newell, & R. Szostak (Eds.), *Case studies in interdisciplinary research* (pp. 283–298). Sage.
- Klein, J. T., & Frodeman, R. (2017). Interdisciplining humanities: A historical overview. In *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (2nd ed., pp. x–x). Oxford University Press.
- Lamborn, S. D., Mounts, N. S., Steinberg, L., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Patterns of competence and adjustment among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families. *Child Development*, *62*, 1049–1065.
- Lazarsfeld, P. (1998). A note on empirical social research and interdisciplinary relationships. *International Social Science Journal*, *50*, 349–352.
- Lebow, J. L. (2017). Editorial: The multidisciplinary world of couple and family therapy and family science. *Family Process*, *56*, 795–798.
- McAdoo, H. P. (1996). The challenge of diversity for the field of family studies. *Family Science Review*, *9*, 69–96.
- McDaniels, M., & Skogsberg, E. (2017). The scholars we need: Preparing transdisciplinary professionals by leveraging the scholarship of practice. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *178*, 71–83.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2009). Integral metatheory: Beyond specializations, theoretical pluralism, and conventional metatheory. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *38*, 142–157.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2014). Transdisciplinarity and conceptual change. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *70*(3–4), 200–232.
- McGregor, S. L. T., & Donnelly, G. (2014). Transleadership for transdisciplinary initiatives. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *70*(3–4), 164–185.
- Medicus, G. (2005). Mapping transdisciplinarity in human sciences. In J. W. Lee (Ed.), *Focus on gender identity* (pp. xx–xx). Nova Science Publishers.
- Moore, M., Martinson, M. L., Nurius, P. S., & Kemp, S. P. (2018). Transdisciplinarity in research: Perspectives of early career faculty. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *28*, 254–264.
- National Academies Committee on Research Regulations. (2015). Building a 21<sup>st</sup> century research enterprise: Roles of the research university. Retrieved from
- National Council on Family Relations. (2019). *What is family science?* Retrieved from
- National Council on Family Relations Task Force #5 on the Development of the Family Discipline. (1988). What is family science? *Family Science Review*, *1*, 87–101. Retrieved from
- National Council on Family Relations Task Force on the Development of a Family Discipline. (1987). A recommendation about the identity of the family discipline. *Family Science Review*, *1*, 48–52. Retrieved from
- Network for Transdisciplinary Research. (2018). *About td-net*. Retrieved from
- Nicolescu, B. (1994). *The charter of transdisciplinarity*. Retrieved from
- Nicolescu, B. (2002). *Manifesto of transdisciplinarity*, trans. Karen-Claire Voss. State University of New York Press.
- Nicolescu, B. (2014). Methodology of transdisciplinarity. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *70*(3–4), 186–199.
- Noah, A. J. (2015). Putting families into place: Using neighborhood-effects research and activity spaces to understand families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *7*, 452–467.

- Perkins, D. D., & Schensul, J. J. (2016). Interdisciplinary contributions to community psychology and transdisciplinary promise. In M. A. Bond, C. B. Keys, & I. Serrano-García (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 189–209). American Psychological Association.
- Polk, M. (2015). Transdisciplinary research framework for societal problem-solving. *Futures*, *65*, 110–122.
- Reis, H. T. (2006). The relationship context of social psychology. In P. A. M. Van Lange (Ed.), *Bridging social psychology: Benefits of transdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 253–259). Erlbaum.
- Robins, S. (2016). Discursive approaches to ambiguous loss: Theorizing community-based therapy after enforced disappearance. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *8*, 308–323.
- Rubin, R. H., & Settles, B. H. (2012). Groves conference on marriage & family: History and impact on family science. In L. B. Blume (Series Ed.), *Groves Monographs on Marriage & Family*, Vol. 2. Michigan Publishing. Retrieved from
- Schweizer-Ries, P., & Perkins, D. D. (2012). Sustainability science: Transdisciplinarity, transepiSTEMology, and action research. *Umweltpsychologie (Environmental Psychology)*, *16*, 6–11.
- Sharp, E., & DeCesaro, G. D. (2015). Modeling innovative methodological practices in a dance/family studies transdisciplinary project. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *7*, 367–380.
- Simoni, H., Perrig-Chiello, P., & Büchler, A. (2008). Children and divorce: Investigating current legal practices and their impact on family transitions. In G. Hirsch Hadorn et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of transdisciplinary research* (pp. 265–274). Springer Verlag.
- Smart, L. S. (2009). Family science: The emergence of a new discipline, 1982–2007. *Family Science Review*, *14*, 118–128. Retrieved from
- Sprey, J. (2013). Extending the range of questioning in family studies through ideas from the exact sciences. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *5*, 51–61.
- Stokols, D. (2006). Toward a science of transdisciplinary action research. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *38*, 79–93.
- Stokols, D., Hall, K. L., Moser, R. P., Feng, A., Misra, S., & Taylor, B. K. (2010). Cross-disciplinary team science initiatives: Research, training, and translation. In R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein, & C. Mitcham (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 471–495). Oxford University Press.
- Stokols, D., Harvey, R., Gress, J., Fuqua, J., & Phillips, K. (2005). In vivo studies of transdisciplinary scientific collaboration: Lessons learned and implications for active living research. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *28*(2S2), 202–213.
- Strober, M. H. (2010). *Interdisciplinary conversations: Challenging habits of thought*. Stanford University Press.
- Vesely, C. K., Letiecq, B. L., & Goodman, R. D. (2017). Immigrant family resilience in context: Using a community-based approach to build a new conceptual model. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *9*, 93–110.
- Vincenti, V. B. (2005). Family and consumer sciences university faculty perceptions of interdisciplinary work. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *34*, 81–104.
- Volckmann, R. (2014). Generativity, transdisciplinarity, and integral leadership. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *70*(3–4), 248–265.
- Wiesmann, U., Biber-Klemm, S., Grossenbacher-Mansuy, W., Hirsch Hadorn, G., Hoffman-Riem, H., Joye, D., Pohl, C., & Zemp, E. (2008). Enhancing transdisciplinary research: A synthesis in fifteen propositions. In G. Hirsch Hadorn et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of transdisciplinary research* (pp. 433–442). Springer Verlag.

# Future Directions for Family Theories and Methodologies



Kari Adamsons, April L. Few-Demo, Christine M. Proulx, and Kevin Roy

Stepping back and viewing the process of creating this *Sourcebook*, we are able to see both how far we have come in developing theories and methodologies about families – and how far we have left to go as well. As we write this final chapter, we find ourselves in an unprecedented time. We hear that word on a near-daily basis: in texts with friends, in news media, and in political statements. Perhaps for the first time in our own lives, we feel that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted in 1963 at the March on Washington, “tomorrow is today ... we are confronted with the fierce urgency of now...in this unfolding conundrum of life and history.” In the span of just a few years, as we have moved through the development of this *Sourcebook*, so much has changed in our personal lives and in our global communities. As an editorial team and as family scientists, we are struck by the challenge of considering what to bring with us as we move into the coming decades, and what to leave behind as historical artifacts.

We finish this volume in the midst of a global pandemic that has slowed, if not shut down, the pace of life in almost every community in the world. In the United States, it has introduced public debate about personal and communal responsibility,

---

K. Adamsons (✉)

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

e-mail: [kari.adamsons@uconn.edu](mailto:kari.adamsons@uconn.edu)

A. L. Few-Demo

Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

C. M. Proulx

Department of Human Development & Family Science, College of Education and Human Development, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA

K. Roy

Department of Family Science, School of Public Health, University of Maryland, College Park, College Park, MD, USA



mask wearing, and vaccine uptake. We have entered into complex and urgent new stages of a racial reckoning that is both uniquely American, but also profoundly impactful in all global societies. Such a reckoning reflects the political and social cleavages that continue to deepen between not only individuals, but families. These cleavages have eroded community consensus about what is fact and what is fiction, about the basic value of public health and civic responsibility, and about the value of science to inform and benefit families.

There has been a rapid succession of watershed moments in recent years: the first Black President, the Trump presidency, the Biden presidency, and the first Black and Asian woman as Vice President; the insurrection at the Capitol; the murder of George Floyd and countless women, men, children, and trans people of color under police brutality and negligence; the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements; the transformation and mainstreaming of White supremacy; critical examination of toxic masculinity and heteronormativity; the separation of immigrant children from their parents and behind border walls; the boom and bust economy of the Great Recession and pandemic lockdown; the politicization of mask wearing and vaccinations; continuing gun violence in schools and workplaces; the legalization of same-sex marriage; and political attempts to rescind and/or limit women's reproductive control, human rights protections for queer individuals and families, and voting rights. These moments have pushed families together and apart; they have led to dramatic increases in inequality in the United States and around the world, in both wealth and health. We need to understand how and why in order to promote family well-being in our work.

This time is more “about family” than perhaps any other historical moment in the past century. We may spend every hour of every day in the same household with children and other relatives, while at the same time being separated from other family members without the chance to touch or care for them. The pandemic experience is, by definition, a family experience. Families around the world were forced to retreat into households where they would manage both work and school or to put themselves at risk for virus exposure in places of work and leave children to manage on their own. Marital conflicts are common, as are growth and shared moments. Birth rates have dropped, and domestic violence, substance misuse, and drug overdose rates have increased. How can we capture what has happened to families, to relationships, with this level of disruption in the life course? And how can we use those answers to find a way forward?

At the same time that we ponder all that has changed, the complex challenges that have always faced the discipline of family science have not dissipated. When we consider the impact of the pandemic on families, we remain conflicted, at the most basic level, to even define family. Family emerges from a sentimental notion of hearth and home, and also from a legacy of survival and brutality. Family (in the United States) is interwoven with a claim to freely express religious freedom and cultural beliefs and practices, and also a lack of tolerance for others who do not worship or look as “most” families do. Family is inherently about indigeneity and migration, about choice and coercion, about blood and chosen relationships. It is defined by government agencies that separate families by law, that allow both

partners in a married same-sex couple to be considered parents to their child in one state but not another, and that allocate political power through checked boxes and voting booths in districts that are frequently gerrymandered in ways that minimize minoritized voices. Families are created by state-level policies that vary tremendously across the United States, granting access to welfare funds and health insurance and restricting access to family planning and adoption.

Our field, too, is impacted by policies and politics. We currently live in a time when teaching from this book, which includes critical race theory, may jeopardize state funding or individual employment. The politicization of particular topics extends to federal granting agencies, where funding priorities shape what research can afford to be conducted and what questions can be asked. The disparities in the types of research that are considered “fundable” and “priority” are real and deep. They echo and widen the gaps between those who are told that they matter, and those who are left behind – in research, in resources, and in opportunities.

Higher education also still remains a privilege, particularly at the level of graduate education and research-oriented degrees. Vast disparities exist in the numbers of Black and Brown students who are able to attend or graduate from colleges and graduate schools relative to White students, and these gaps widen further up the academic chain – few Black and Brown scholars seek academic or research-oriented positions, even fewer are granted tenure, and it is rare that they reach full professor and/or administrative positions of leadership. Institutional racism and a myopic view of what constitutes and is valued as scholarship both contribute to the underrepresentation of faculty of color in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) across the country. For instance, Cornel West, one of the most influential social critics and American philosophers of the twentieth century, and Nikole Hannah-Jones, a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, both were recently denied tenure by prestigious American universities; unfortunately, they are neither the first, nor likely the last. Hence, it is not always the choice of people of color to not pursue careers in academia and administration in higher education. There are institutional barriers in place to reproduce and reward homogeneity rather than difference.

It is equally problematic to expect the few faculty of color to take responsibility for diversity-related courses, committees, and conversations, or to assume that their research expertise and interests must somehow hinge on their identity (which identities may well be externally imposed or assumed, rather than internally held). Moreover, faculty of color (and students) are often subjected to cyberbullying and harassment because of the topics that they teach and/or their engagement in scholar activism and social justice-oriented activities. At times, these same faculty have had to navigate these firestorms without visible institutional support. On the other hand, it is disingenuous of departments to offer classes on the importance of understanding family diversity, only to have an entirely homogeneous faculty teaching the courses. In both our scholarly communities and in our research, we must embrace diverse identities and ideas, an intersectional and pluralistic perspective – diversity of gender, sexuality, ability status, age, and many other aspects of individuals’ identities, in order to foment an environment of inclusive excellence.

To best understand and help families, and indeed, to remain relevant as a field, we need a dynamic approach. We have made some progress, but not enough, with issues of diversity and equity in our field, our research, and our practice. We need to push our old theories to grow and change, and sometimes we should move on from them. A critical evaluation of long-established family theories, akin to Kuhn's theoretical revolution, has yet to happen. Instead, we have moved incrementally, tweaking a construct here, adding a proposition there, adding much but discarding little. With advances in statistical techniques that make meta-analyses relatively straightforward, it is time to apply such techniques to our theories. Which theoretical propositions, by and large, have empirical support? Which propositions (or theories) have been consistently unsupported and, therefore, should be revised or removed? In the current volume, we made a decision to remove two theories from the Sourcebook – Structural Functionalism and Conflict Theory. However, the need for additional revisiting and revision of our theoretical repertoire remains.

Although families and society are confronting dramatic challenges, theorizing in family science has, to a large extent, continued to follow the same path it always has. Over the past 40 years, we have seen a proliferation of critical theories that challenge and trouble the heteronormative approaches proposed predominantly by cisgender White male scholars. These critical theories provide a much-needed expansion of our perspectives and greater awareness of our biases. However, in the 1993 Sourcebook, and in other theoretical venues more recently (e.g., White, Klein, & Martin, 2015), concerns have been raised about such critical and action-based theories. Some have asserted that they are merely ideologies and not theories at all. Concerns were raised that, if science and theory became emancipatory, how could we differentiate between critical social science and politics? Others warned that an emphasis on values, constructivist views, and praxis might cause family science to lose its objectivity and accountability.

Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) argued that this type of questioning and the reduction of critical intellectual traditions and knowledge generated by minority scholars as being merely “ideological” are explicit examples of intentional gate-keeping and that such inquiries uphold White logic and gendered notions of objectivity. According to Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, White logic refers to

“... a context in which White supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts,” and extends “eternal objectivity to the views of elite Whites and condemns the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity; it is the anchor of Western imagination, which grants centrality to the knowledge, history, science and culture of elite White men and classifies ‘others’ as people without knowledge, history, or science, as people with folklore ....” (p. 17)

It also is important to acknowledge that the idea of “objectivity” itself historically has been considered a male characteristic. Thus, these racialized and gendered “warnings,” “concerns,” and omissions in mainstream theory textbooks and sourcebooks serve a purpose in preserving (1) which knowledge, truths, and scientific methods are deemed valuable and legitimate; (2) what defines normative development and family processes; and (3) whose research will be rewarded and supported within the scientific community. They serve a further purpose in replicating and

perpetuating the exclusion of “other” approaches to theorizing, rather than pushing an inclusive social science forward. Conversely, critical theories push social scientists to acknowledge and wrestle with the fact that traditional ways of approaching theories and theorizing have been an oppressive and incomplete process.

We need critical theories to stretch our perspectives, and we need methodologies that capture both the breadth and depth, the universality and the uniqueness, of family experiences. Critical theories play an important role not only in our thinking about families, but also in the questions we should be asking ourselves about *why* we think the way we do about families. Much like the debates of Nature vs. Nurture and Qualitative vs. Quantitative, the question of what makes a “real” theory seems to be resolving in a similar fashion by realizing that we achieve the most when we include multiple approaches. Whether research should be critical, emancipatory, or simple hypothesis testing depends not on the greater inherent validity of one definition or approach versus another, but on which is better suited to the questions being asked and the purpose of a specific research project. As a discipline, family science is both about doing good science and also using good science to make good policy and engage in good practice. This tension has existed since the early 1900s. Our theories and methodologies are the entry points to all of these realms. Our theories must not only make conceptual sense, but they must evolve in a very practical way, to match the changing times and circumstances in which families live. Science is cumulative, and it is through an accumulation of diverse approaches that we will achieve robust discursive discourses that push family science forward.

And as we achieve understanding, we must be moved to action. We must not only analyze the systems and institutions that influence families and sustain inequalities, but use our work to dismantle and rebuild them in ways that promote equity. Our voices must not be heard just by fellow academics in an intellectual exercise, but by policymakers and practitioners who create the laws and programs that impact families. And our voices should join *with* families in advocating for their needs and amplifying their truths, rather than advocating merely for what we have decided is “best” for them.

We must focus our vigilance on the prevention of privileging certain theories and methodologies over others in terms of their perceived validity. Historically and repeatedly our communities of scholars have privileged particular research methodologies, certain programs of research, and selected types of individuals, relationships, and families. In so doing, we have contributed to the inequities and disparities experienced by families. Recent antiracism activism has helped highlight the importance of not just including, but centering the critical voices in our field.

As coeditors, we believed that it was necessary for us to do our part in creating a Sourcebook that doesn’t merely “include” or tolerate critical theories and diverse ways of doing, knowing, and theorizing, but that in fact celebrates and centers them and moves them forward. To us, centering and moving them forward means rolling up our sleeves and figuring out how to integrate them into our daily work. This is not a question of “either/or” (as in, “do I use Symbolic Interactionism or Queer Theory to frame this research study?”) but of both/and (“How can I incorporate the critical perspectives of Critical Race Theory into my work using Symbolic Interactionism?”)

How might Queer Theory change the way I view key constructs or propositions in Symbolic Interactionism?"). Although such explicit linkages are beyond the scope of a single volume, it is our hope that the chapters in this volume serve as a springboard for creative integration and new uses of perhaps previously unfamiliar theoretical perspectives.

In closing, we turn to another perpetual concern of our field: family science as a multidisciplinary field, rather than a unified approach. For example, in Boss et al. 1993, the Sourcebook editors worried that

a multidisciplinary approach promotes mindless eclecticism and lack of rigorous analysis. Traditional family studies had clearer standards for evaluating theory and methodology. In a more fluid, shifting social science paradigm, an "anything goes" approach can threaten the scholarly integrity of the field. (p. 18)

To some extent, we share the concerns of the previous editors. Family science increasingly draws from and appeals to a diverse array of academic fields, from public health and nursing to political science and social work, as well as to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. This diversification has not been without consequences for the identity and composition of the field. Family science departments continue to find themselves housed in a variety of academic colleges and schools, selecting a diverse array of departmental names, and welcoming constituent members from far more diverse fields than the psychology and sociology (and of course, family science) departments in which most of the family science faculty of previous decades were trained. Family theories and methodologies also continue to primarily be borrowed from other fields, rather than created through the hard and intentional work of transdisciplinary theorizing (Blume & Fine, this volume). Family science, thus far, has settled for simply getting a seat at various theoretical and methodological tables, but has not taken the step of setting our own table and truly claiming the unique strengths of our disciplinary space.

It is crucial that, individually and collectively, scholars continue to embrace and foster the diversity present in our field, work to intentionally develop and maintain a sense of interdisciplinarity, and engage in transdisciplinary work. We must be a field of family scholars, not just a collection of scholars who study families. However, we caution that the goal of family science is to better understand, and therefore best serve, families. This can only be accomplished by being inclusive rather than exclusive, by broadening our vision rather than narrowing it, and by not allowing our quest to define our disciplinary identity to lead us to ignore our multi- and interdisciplinary roots and future collaborations.

What happens in the real world informs our theorizing, or should. Else, we risk irrelevance. "Our very survival," King said in his 1964 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change." The world, and families, continue to change in radical ways, and they likely always will. We believe that an equally radical transformation in the ways we think about and study families has begun. It is time for family science to fully embrace the progress and promise that these social and scientific revolutions hold.

## Reference

- Boss, P., Doherty, W. J., LaRossa, R., Schumm, W. R., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1993). *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods: A Contextual Approach*. Springer.
- White, J. M., Klein, D. M., & Martin, T. F. (2015). Family theories: An introduction. In T. Sage Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.), (2008) *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

# Index

## A

- Actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), 362, 363, 365, 366, 403
- Adaptability, 217
- Adaptation, 75
- Adoptions
  - adoption communication openness (ACO), 550
  - child's narrative identity and well-being, 551
  - discourse of biological normativity (DBN), 549
  - domestic adoptions and international adoptions, 549
  - internal boundary management processes, 550, 551
  - sense of belongingness and family unity, 551
- African American, 103
- African American families, 12
- Afrocentric feminist epistemology, 442
- Agricultural Experiment Stations, 46
- Ambiguous loss
  - ambivalence and mixed emotions, 514
  - boundary ambiguity, 515, 516
  - companion animals, 518
  - confusion and paucity of facts, 514
  - dementia, 517
  - in family and group interventions, 513
  - guidelines for application, 520
  - immigration and migration, 518
  - mastery, 521
  - mixed methods inquiry, 516
  - new hopes and dreams, 522
  - normalizing ambivalence, 521
  - physical ambiguous loss, 514
  - psychological ambiguous loss, 514
  - qualitative inquiry, 517
  - reconstructing identity, 521
  - research methods, 516
  - revising attachment, 522
  - theoretical extensions of, 522–524
  - transgender youth, 519
  - traumatic brain injury (TBI), 517
- American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS), 742
- American Home Economics Association, 47
- American Rescue Plan Act*, 586
- American Women's Education Association, 44
- Anti-Asian racism, 209
- Anti-Black racism, 427
- Attachment theory, 573, 575, 576
  - adult attachment theory, 559
  - caregiver-child attachment, 564
  - cross-cultural study of, 561
  - defined, 556
  - designing programs and policies, 558
  - father-child attachment relationships, 562, 563
  - foster/adoptive parent-child attachment relationships, 563
  - intergenerational transmission, 559
  - internal working model, 556
  - with nonparental caregivers, 564
  - secure attachment, 556
  - strange situation (SS) procedure, 556

**B**

- Balanced families, 68
  - Bioecological theory, 236, 255, 610
    - process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, 255
    - proximal processes, 255
  - Biological markers, 629, 633, 635, 638
    - allostasis, 633
    - alpha-amylase ( $\alpha$ -amylase), 632
    - ambulatory methods, 636
    - biological aging, 639
    - cortisol, 631, 634, 637, 645
    - C-reactive protein (CRP), 634
    - daily stressors, 647
    - diary study, 646
    - hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical (HPA) axis, 631, 645
    - immune function, 632
    - inflammatory markers, 632, 634, 638
    - leukocyte telomere length (LTL), 624
    - sAA samples, 648, 649
    - saliva samples, 646
    - salivary cortisol, 649
    - Stress-related biomarkers methods
    - sympathetic nervous system (SNS), 632, 645
    - telomeres, 622–624, 626
  - Biopsychosocial model of family process
    - biocultural evolution, 608
    - biopsychosocial mechanisms, 649
    - cellular aging, 622
    - challenge, 615
    - chronic illnesses, 624
    - coping behaviors, 623
    - cultural neuroscience, 608
    - demand characteristics, 610
    - exosystem, 610
    - family processes, 614
    - family stressors, 614
    - force characteristics, 610
    - genetic and environmental interaction, 612
    - immune functioning, 614
    - intervention, 617
    - leukocyte telomere length (LTL), 623
    - macrosystem, 611
    - mesosystem, 610
    - microsystem, 610
    - proximal processes, 611
    - psychosocial stressors, 622
    - resource characteristics, 610
    - sociobiological theory, 608
    - technological innovations, 615
  - Biosocial methods, 629
  - Biosocial theories, 603, 609
    - adaptation, 604
    - Baldwin effect, 607
    - biocultural evolutionary theories, 608, 609
    - core assumptions, 604
    - cultural neuroscience, 608
    - ontogenetic, 604
    - phylogenetic, 604
    - probabilistic epigenesis theory, 605
    - sociobiological theory, 608
  - Black American, 103
  - Black fathers, 427
  - Black feminism, 437
  - Black feminist perspective, 339
  - Black girls and women
    - GTM
      - black girls and women
      - instrument and intervention development, 339
      - linkages between preexisting theory and current contexts, 338
    - STI/HIV risk, 335
  - Black lesbian stepfamilies, 281
  - Black masculinity, 427
  - Black sexuality, 427
  - Black women activists, 436
  - Blumer, Herbert, 127
  - Boss, Pauline, 106
  - Boundary ambiguity, 214, 515, 516
  - Bowlby, John, 556
  - Bronfenbrenner's theory, 235, 236, 238, 244–246, 249, 250
    - limitations, 248
    - modifications, 249
  - Burgess, Ernest, 12, 136
  - Burke, Peter, 132
- C**
- Candidate gene approaches, 612
  - Caregiver-child attachment, 564
  - CARES Act*, 586
  - Cascades, 86
  - C Factor, 102, 106
  - Child welfare system, 589
  - Christensen, Harold, 5
  - Chronic disruption, 86
  - Chronic illnesses, 623, 625
  - Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, 217
  - Close relationships, 267, 279, 281
  - Cognitive-based social science communication theory, 538



- Cognitive flexibility, 539  
 Cohabitation, 346  
 Cohesion, 217  
 Combahee River Collective Statement, 437  
 Committee of Family Organizations (COFO), 55  
 Communication privacy management (CPM) theory, 539  
 Community-based participatory research (CBPR), 505, 682, 689  
 Community engagement, 728  
 Conflict, 268  
 Conflict theory, 10  
 Conjunctural action theory, 11  
 Constant communicator families, 553  
 Constant comparative analysis, 323, 326, 328, 329  
*Constructing Grounded Theory*, 318  
 Content-forward approach, 7  
 Contextual blindness, 279  
 Contextualism, 244, 250  
 Contextualist, 244, 245  
 Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS), 106, 107, 112, 122  
     developmental context, 108  
     fundamental assumptions, 109  
     historical context, 108  
 Contextual theory, 24  
 Control hierarchy, 213  
 Controlled communicator families, 553  
 Control system, 76  
 Cooley, Charles Horton, 129  
 Cooperative extension, 42, 45, 46  
 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, 579  
 Counter-storytelling, 414  
 Couple relationship education, 699  
 COVID-19 pandemic, 16, 480, 753  
 Critical family communication (CFC), 537  
 Critical quantitative intersectionality (CQI), 445  
 Critical race theory (CRT), 386, 391, 407  
     academic and social movements, 409  
     children and fatherhood as first thought after injury, 428  
     core assumptions, 410  
     core concepts, 425  
     counter-storytelling, 414  
     experiential knowledge, 413  
     family policy analysis, 417  
     family scholarship, 415  
     family science, 409  
     fatherhood, 427  
     feminist legal theory, 409  
     future growth, 419  
     healthcare provision, 426  
     history of laws, 408  
     HVIP, 426, 430  
     incarceration, 426  
     institutional racism, 408  
     Latinx immigrant families, 407  
     Latinx immigrants, 419  
     mass deportation regime, 418  
     negative and pejorative ways, 412  
     oral research methods, 415  
     racial and ethnic minorities, 416  
     social scientists, 412  
     structural racism, 426  
     tenet, 410, 411  
     white logic claims, 413  
 Critical realism, 25  
 Critical theory, 15  
 Custodial grandfamilies, 119  
     family stress theories, applications of, 122  
     stress in, 120
- D**  
 Delayed disruption, 86  
 Dementia, 517  
 Density, 299  
 Dialectical thinking, 520  
 Differential impact, 86  
 Digital family ethnography, 169  
     offline fieldwork, 172  
 Disability policy, 585, 586  
 Digital technologies, 169  
 Disciplinarity  
     disciplinary ethnocentrism, 736  
 Discourse analysis, 737  
 Discourse-dependent strategy, 551  
 Discourse of biological normativity (DBN), 549  
*The Discovery*, 317  
 Distal ecosystems, 80  
 Documentary photography, 506  
 Domestic science, 45, 47  
 Domestic violence, 391, 392  
 Dyadic data in family science, 142, 273  
     definition, 361  
     dyadic qualitative research, 363  
     future directions of, 365  
     incongruence (dissimilarity), 366  
     methodologies, 360  
     mutual influence and reciprocity, 362  
     research questions, 361  
     similarity, 366  
     terminology, 362

- Dyadic growth mixture modeling, 369, 372  
 final class solution, 373  
 fit indices, 372  
 predictors, 373–374
- Dyadic latent class growth analysis (DLCGA), 369, 372
- Dyadic response surface analysis (DSRA), 365, 366
- Dynamic approach, 3, 8–11
- E**
- Echelons, 213
- Ecosystems, 80
- Emerging Biosocial Perspectives on the Family, 603
- Emotion system, 76
- Emotion work, 402, 404, 405
- Emotional attachments, 556
- Empirical generalization, 24
- Empiricism, 29
- Empowerment evaluation (EE), 690
- Epigenetics, 255, 613  
 acetyl groups, 256  
 demethylation, 256, 257  
 genome, 256, 257  
 historical trauma, 256  
 indigenous peoples, 256  
 methylation, 256  
 methyl groups, 256  
 molecular epigenetics, 255  
 transgenerational inheritance, 257
- Epistemology, 26  
 induction, 26  
 standpoint epistemology, 28
- Equity, 259, 265, 266, 280
- Ethnography  
 Chicago School of Sociology, 156  
 culture, 158  
 future aspects, 164  
 proximal approach, 156  
 Three-City Study, 163
- Ethnography in family research  
 challenges, 161
- Evidence-based interventions, 679
- Evidence-based policymaking, 582, 583
- Explanatory theory, 22  
 abstract theory, 22  
 contextual theory, 23  
 midrange theories Contextual theory  
 theoretical framework, 22
- Explicit abstract theory, 23
- Exploratory sequential mixed-methods research  
 exploratory sequential, 657
- F**
- Fairness, 259–261, 265, 266, 268, 280, 281, 283
- Falsificationism, 30
- Families First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), 590
- Families, in unprecedented time  
 cyberbullying and harassment, 755  
 indigeneity and migration, 754
- Familism, 94
- Family adaptive systems (FAS), 75, 76, 80, 81, 83, 84, 86, 88
- Family-centered PAR, 487, 489
- Family communication  
 affection exchange theory (AET), 534  
 attitudes and beliefs, 539  
 communication accommodation theory (CAT), 535  
 communication privacy management (CPM) theory, 538, 539  
 concept-orientation, 538  
 conformity orientations, 539  
 constitutive approach, 534–536  
 critical approaches, 537  
 effectual approach, 534  
 embodied methods, 543  
 family communication patterns (FCP), 538  
 family processes and patterns, 531  
 origins and historical development of, 532, 534  
 pluralistic families, 539  
 qualitative research methods, 543  
 relational dialectics theory, 540, 541  
 relational turbulence, 534  
 social realities and personal identities, 533  
 socio-orientation, 538
- The Family Communication Division of the National Communication Association, 532
- Family complexity, 555
- Family configuration, 284
- Family development theory (FDT), 10, 179  
 concept of stage  
 duration, 187  
 transition event, 187  
 defining family and development, 197  
 developmental process, 186  
 family structure, 188  
 future aspects, 197  
 history of, 180  
 methodological limitations, 195  
 norms, 191  
 age-graded norms, 191  
 sequencing norms, 191  
 social rule, 191

- stage-graded norms, 191
  - timing norms, 191
- possibility space, 189
- stages, 187, 188, 190
- transition theory, 184
- Family-focused community-based programs, 687
- Family functioning, 68, 69, 71, 74, 75, 81, 82, 86
- Family Impact Seminars, 588
- Family inequality framework, 597
  - advocacy and efforts, 600
  - enfranchisement, 599
  - material hardship, 598
  - parental incarceration, 600
  - parenting challenges, 598
  - reducing prison populations, 599
  - social justice, 599
- Family life course framework, 288, 289, 454, 457
  - age-condensed family forms, 298
  - age-gapped family forms, 298
  - ambivalence, 295
  - bidirectional relationships, 311, 312
  - cohort, 288–290, 297
  - family configuration, 291, 294
  - family disruptions, 302
  - generation, 287, 290, 292, 293, 297
  - identity, 289, 295
  - inequality, 299
  - interdependence in families
    - of demographic transition for family life, 300
  - interdependencies, 287, 288, 291–294, 296
  - intergenerational relationships, 288, 293, 298
- Life Course Health Development theory, 301
- linked lives, 287
  - dimensions, 291
  - time and, 297
- linked lives, 291
- maturations, 297
- timing, 298
- timing of lives, 298, 300
- Family life education (FLE) program, 56
- Family life educators, 56
- Family policy, 588, 590
  - cultural norms and state trends, 580
  - disability policy, 585, 586
  - family separation policy, 586
  - housing policy and practice, 586
  - individual and family development, 581
  - intergenerational transmission of culture, 580
  - marriage policy, 584, 585
- Family resilience model (FRM), 69–72, 80, 96
- Family resilience processes, 69
- Family resilience theory, 93
  - acute stressors, 83
  - adaptation, 75, 95
  - chronic stressors, 83, 84
  - community resources, 93
  - cumulative risks, 75
  - developmental timing of risk, 72
  - ecosystems, 80
  - family functioning, 84
  - family resilience, 74
  - family resilience model (FRM), 80, 93
  - family strengths, 71
  - historical trauma, 85
  - 1960s to 1983
    - family development, 67
    - family stress theory, 67
  - poverty, 84
  - protection, 74
  - relational and resilience theory of ethnic family systems, 85
  - resilience, 74
  - resources, 95
  - risk, 71
  - salutogenesis, 71
  - shared family meanings, 71
  - social stress, 87
  - structural oppression, 85
  - symbolic reciprocity, 95
  - systemic trauma, 87
  - turning points, 86
  - vulnerabilities, 75
- Family science, 6, 41, 57, 59, 580, 588, 683, 758
  - African American women, 13
  - logical positivism, 29
  - Lyceum Movement, 43
  - nineteenth-century foundations of, 42, 43
  - philosophical contributions, 33
  - Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities, 53
- Family Science Association (FSA), 54, 57
- The Family Science Review*, 57
- Family separation policy, 586
- Family stress, 100
  - CMFS, 106, 107
  - fundamental assumptions, 109
  - Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress Model, 103, 106

- Family Stress Model (FSM), 121
- Family stress system, 79
- Family stress theories, 65–67, 119
- ABC-X Model, 66, 103, 106
  - ABC-X Model of Family Stress, 102
  - applications of, 122
  - childrearing stressors, 621
  - chronic illnesses, 622
  - climate change, 113
  - Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS), 106
  - developmental context, 108
  - Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model, 103
  - historical context, 108
  - Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress Model, 103, 105
  - oppressive trauma, 113
  - pandemic, 112
  - racial terrorism, 113
  - school shootings, 113
  - sociocultural family stress model, 111
  - strain, 100
  - working parents, 621
- Family-structural debate, 82
- Family style, 218
- Family systems theory
- boundaries
    - boundary ambiguity, 214
    - family types, 213
  - circular causality vs. linear causality, 216
  - core assumptions, 212
  - equilibrium, 215
  - family rule, 214
  - family therapy, 211
  - feedback, 215
  - future directions of, 223
  - hierarchy, 213
  - homeostasis, 215, 221
  - interdependencies, 216
  - McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF), 218
  - middle-range theories, 217
    - Beavers Systems Model, 218
    - Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, 217
  - multigenerational emotional systems, 211
  - mutual influence, 216
  - structural functional theory, 210, 211
- Family theories and methodologies
- dynamic approach, 9, 11
  - history of, 5–7
  - methods and, 5
  - Sourcebook, 11
    - normalism, post-war challenges and pluralism, 14
- Famology, 56
- Father-child attachment relationships, 562, 563
- Feminist reflexivity, 395
- Feminist theory, 270, 271
- feminist reflexivity, 385
  - first wave, 380
  - fourth wave, 381
  - gender, 385
  - intersectionality, 383–385
  - methodological challenges intersectional perspective, 386
  - patriarchy, 383
  - postfeminist, 388
  - postfeminist claim, 389
  - praxis, 384
  - privilege, 383
  - privilege and power, 383
  - queer feminism, 388
  - queer theory, 387
  - second wave, 381
  - second-wave feminism, 385
  - social construction of gender, 382
  - tensions in intergenerational feminist theorizing, 388
  - theory and origin, 379, 382
  - third wave, 381
- Feminist-informed family research
- domestic violence, 392
  - feminism, 391
  - future directions, 394, 395
  - gendered violence, 390, 391
  - globalism, 392
  - power in family relationships, 389, 390
  - trans normativities, 392
- Filial piety, 219
- Floyd, George, 754
- Focused coding, 323
- Force characteristics, 610
- Foster/adoptive parent-child attachment relationships, 563
- Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, 591, 662
- Freud, Sigmund, 12
- G**
- Gay fathers, 386
- Gender, 281–284, 385
- social construction, 382
- Gender-as-relational perspective, 401–405
- Gender binary, 281, 393, 394
- Gendered violence, 390
- Gender expression, 284
- General systems theory, 209
- Genome-wide approaches (GWAS), 612

- Geographic information systems (GIS), 737, 741  
 Gerontologists, 288  
 Global feminism, 391  
 Grounded theory (GT)  
   advanced phase, 326, 327  
   axial coding, 324  
   constant comparative analysis, 319, 320, 326  
   Corbin, Juliet, 317  
   Glaser, Barney, 316  
   initial phase  
     constant comparative analysis, 323  
     focused coding, 323  
     open coding, 322  
   intermediate phase  
     axial coding, 324  
     memoing, 325  
     theoretical saturation, 325  
   memoing, 325  
   primary resources for, 316  
   reflexive memos, 326  
   situational analysis, 318  
   social constructivist approach, 318  
   Strauss, Anselm, 317  
   symbolic interactionism, 316  
   theoretical sampling, 326  
   theoretical versus descriptive research questions, 320  
 Grounded theory methodology (GTM)  
   symbolic interactionism, 335  
 Groves Conference on Marriage and Family, 42, 47  
 Growth mixture modeling, 363
- H**  
*Handbook of Feminist Family Studies*, 57  
*Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, 55  
 Health disparities, 340  
 Heredity, 109  
 Hill, Reuben, 13, 102  
 Historical time and place, 289  
 Historically Black College and University (HBCU), 45  
 Home economics, 41, 42, 46, 48, 50, 51  
 Homeostasis, 210, 212  
 Hospital-based violence intervention (HVIP), 426–430  
 Human agency, 289  
 Hypothesis, 24
- I**  
 Identities, 135, 151  
 Incarceration, 426, 427
- Inclusion hierarchy, 213  
 Incommensurability, 32  
 Indicated prevention, 708  
 Individual life, 303  
 Inductive and deductive techniques, 317  
 Institutional racism, 755  
 Integrative research methods, 584  
 Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDDs), 93–95  
 Interactional approach, 131  
 Interdisciplinarity, 16, 737  
   methodological interdisciplinarity, 737  
 Intergenerational trauma, 294  
 Internal boundary management processes, 550  
 Internal family strengths, 82  
 Intersectionality, 110, 383–387, 389, 392, 394, 454, 542, 590  
 Intersectionality theory, 15, 433  
   analytical complexity, 443  
   anticategorical approach, 443  
   intercategorical approach, 444  
   intracategorical analysis, 443  
   appropriation and erasure, 443  
   Black community, 448  
   Black feminist tool, 435  
   Black women activists, 436  
   core ideas of, 438  
   epistemological considerations, 441  
   hashtag activism, 448  
   inequalities and inequities, 434  
   integrated analysis and practice, 440  
   interlocking systems and structures, 438–439  
   methodological challenges, 441  
   mixed-methods, 446  
   qualitative methodologies, 446  
   quantitative methodologies, 445  
   situated social identities, 440  
   social justice approach, 441  
   theoretical and analytical lens, 436  
   transnational intersectionality, 447  
 Intervention mapping (IM), 712, 726
- J**  
*Journal of Family Theory and Review (JFTR)*, 8, 54
- K**  
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., 104  
 Kin-keepers, 293  
 Kuhn, Thomas, 756

**L**

- Land Grant systems, 45, 46
- Lesbian couples, 281
- LGBTQ, 284, 309
- Life Course Health Development theory, 11
- Life course theory, 16
- Lifespan development, 289
- Linked lives, 289
- Logical empiricism, 30
- Logical positivism, 29
- Loneliness, 576
  - attachment theory, 573
  - family and social loneliness, 573
  - measurement gaps in, 574
  - romantic loneliness, 573, 575
  - social loneliness, 575
- Longitudinal family research, 344
  - analysis, 345
  - finite mixture models, 351
  - group mixture models, 351
  - longitudinal data
    - measurement, 345
  - measurement, 344
  - mixture models, 351–353
  - multilevel/hierarchical regression models
    - group-level influences, 346
  - nonindependence, 348
  - random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) approach, 350
  - structural equation models, 349
  - survival analysis, 353
  - temporal ordering, 343
  - time invariant, 354
  - time-varying, 354
  - within- (inter) and between- (intra) person change, 347
- Looking glass self, 130
- Lyceum Movement, 43

**M**

- Macrosystem, 239, 611
- Maintenance system, 78
- Marital centrality, 152
- Marital context, 151
- Marital meaning
  - symbolic interactionism,
    - application of, 147
  - marital beliefs, investigation of, 149, 150
- Marital Paradigm Theory (MPT), 151
- Marital permanence, 152
- Marital processes, 151
- Marital salience, 151

- Massey, Grace Carroll, 103
- Mastery, 521
- Mead, George Herbert, 130, 134, 135
- Meaning, 132
- Mechanisms, 235, 244–246, 250
- Mesosystem, 610
- Metatheorizing, 21
  - descriptive statements, 24
- Methylation, 256
- #MeToo movement, 388, 754
- Microsystem, 610
- Military families, 228
  - implications and recommendations, 229
  - interdependence and homeostasis, 231
- Marital/Intimate Partner Subsystem, 228–229
  - negative consequences of interdependence, 230
- Mixed-methods, 673
  - survey-driven narrative construction (SDNC), 673
- Mixed methods inquiry
  - convergent designs, 655
  - triangulation, 654
- Mixed-methods research
  - conceptualization, 654
  - convergent designs, 657
  - explanatory sequential designs, 657
    - families and faith, 659
  - explanatory sequential studies, 657
  - exploratory sequential designs, 657
  - fixed and open-ended responses, 674
- Multidimensional family development theory (MFDFT), 203
  - alignment and misalignment, 205
  - cultural considerations, 206
  - family developmental tasks, 205
  - stages, 207
- Multidisciplinarity, 736, 758
- Multilevel modeling, 348
- Multiple operationalism, 655

**N**

- Narrative description, 24
- National Conference on Family Life, 48
- National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), 42, 48, 53–57, 734
  - NCFR Black caucus, 55
- National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model, 700
- National Institutes of Health's (NIH), 288
- Negative feedback, 215
- The Negro Family in Chicago*, 156

*The Negro Family in the United States*, 156  
Normal science, 35

## O

Objectivity, 756  
Ontology, 25  
Open coding, 322  
*Ordinary Wars*, 384  
Organicists, 244, 246

## P

Parsons, Talcott, 13  
Participatory action research (PAR), 483, 484  
  advisory board, 491  
  Black political and community  
    activists, 488  
  Black scholars, 487  
  CBPR, 484  
  central tenets, 485  
  challenges and limitations, 496, 497  
  collaboration, 494  
  cultural humility, 489–490  
  democratic decision-making, 485  
  family-centered PAR, 484, 489  
  family privilege, 488  
  intentional power-sharing, 485  
  nongovernmental organizations  
    (NGOs), 493  
  Northern and Southern traditions, 486, 487  
  participant-driven research partnership, 484  
  participant-guided actions, 495  
  researcher reflexivity, 489–490  
  SNAF, 488  
  TPR, 484  
  youth-led PAR, 484  
Participatory research models, 581  
Patriarchal privilege, 383  
Perception, 130  
Person-centered approaches, 274, 275  
Person characteristics, 239, 241–243, 245,  
  248, 250, 251  
Peters, Marie F., 103  
Photo-elicitation, 506  
Photovoice (PV), 505  
  challenges and ethical concerns, 508  
  SHOWeD methodology, 506  
Physical ambiguous loss, 514  
Pierce, Chester, 103  
Plessy v. Ferguson, 45  
Pluralism, 14  
*The Polish Peasant in Europe and  
  America*, 156

Positive feedback, 215  
Power in family relationships, 389  
Predominantly white institutions  
  (PWIs), 755  
Prevention  
  indicated prevention, 708  
  physical health and diseases, 705  
  selective prevention, 708  
  technology-based interventions, 719  
  universal prevention, 708  
Prevention science, 705  
  adaptive interventions, 718  
  adoption/preparation, 716  
  benefit–cost analysis, 717  
  causative model, 710  
  cost-effectiveness analysis, 717  
  diffusion, 714, 715  
  dissemination, 714  
  economic analyses, 717, 718  
  epidemiology, 707  
  exploration phase, 716  
  implementation phase, 716  
  implementation science, 714  
  intervention mapping, 726  
  Just-In-Time Adaptive Interventions, 719  
  logic model, 727  
  multifinality, 710  
  prevention research cycle, 708  
  privilege, 715  
  program effectiveness, 713  
  program efficacy, 713  
  program model, 711  
  programmatic cost analysis, 717  
  randomized prevention trials, 713  
  risk and protective factors, 707  
  Society for Prevention Research  
    (SPR), 706  
  sustainment, 716  
  teaching and training, 725  
    community engagement, 727  
    science communication, 728  
    service learning, 727–728  
  teaching and training, in family  
    science  
    community engagement, 728  
  technology-based interventions, 719  
  telehealth interventions, 719  
  translational, 725  
  translational science, 708  
  type 1 translational research, 709  
  type 2 translational research, 714  
Process-focused strategies, 88  
Process-person-context-time (PPCT) model,  
  241, 245, 250

- Program evaluation  
 empowerment evaluation (EE), 690  
 experimental and quasi-experimental studies, 685  
 intervention research, 683  
 participatory methods in, 689  
 qualitative methods in, 687  
 rapid cycle iterative methods in, 691  
 rigor, 681  
 theory-of-action framework, 689  
 traditional research methods  
 fidelity, 685  
 inclusion, 685  
 transformative participatory evaluation, 690
- Protection, 74
- Proximal ecosystems, 80
- Proximal processes, 241–243, 246, 248–250, 611
- Pseudo-developmental designs, 310
- Psychological ambiguous loss, 514
- Purposive sampling, 322
- Q**
- Quasi-experimental design study, 701
- Queer theory, 15, 387, 388, 459  
 contemporary approaches, 466  
 contemporary research, 467  
 epistemological assumptions, 460  
 family policy, 479–481  
 family scholarship, 463, 464  
 family sciences and theories, 464  
 future aspects, 481  
 gender expression, 469  
 gender identity, 469  
 intersectionality, 470  
 LGBTQ persons, 462  
 limitations, 468  
 minority stress, 466  
 misconception, 477  
 notable efforts, 471  
 origin and historical development, 461  
 psychological markers of identity, 471  
 qualitative inquiries, 478  
 queer political and artistic communities, 462  
 social, political and artistic communities, 460  
 testable model, 471  
 traditional quantitative methods, 479  
 transgender theory, 461, 465  
 umbrella identity label, 460
- Queering processes, 460
- R**
- Racial-ethnic feminist, 385
- Racial segregation, 581
- Random intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) approach, 349
- Randomized controlled trial, 683
- Realism, 25
- Recovery, 86
- Redundancy principle, 214
- Regenerative families, 68
- Relational developmental systems (RDS), 11, 246
- Relational dialectics theory, 540, 541
- Relationship satisfaction, 573
- Research to Policy Collaborative (RPC), 588
- Resilience, 86  
 caregivers, 95, 96
- Resilience outcomes, 69
- Resilient families, 68
- Resource characteristics, 610
- Resource-focused strategies, 88
- Resource theory, 267
- Rhythmic families, 68
- Risk, 73
- Risk-focused strategies, 88
- Rituals, 551
- Role making, 131
- Role taking, 131, 148
- Romantic relationships, 401–404
- S**
- Same-sex couples, 281, 585
- Same-sex relationships, 402, 404
- Saturation, 319, 337
- Science of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), 54
- Selective prevention, 708
- Self, 129, 130
- Self-reflexive, 212
- Self-regulation, 212
- Sequencing, 299
- Sexual and reproductive health, 337
- Sexual identity, 284
- Sexually transmitted infections (STI)/HIV, 335, 336, 338, 339
- Sexual orientation, 311
- Sexual stereotypes, 336, 339
- Shared meaning, 134
- Signs, 132
- Skepticism, 25
- Smoking, 625
- SNAF model, 14
- Social cognitive theory, 149
- Social exchange theory, 14



- attraction dimension, 263
  - conflict and conflict management, 268
  - criticisms of framework, 269
  - dependence dimension, 263, 264
  - emergent experiences
    - of commitment and trust, 266, 267
  - Emerson's exchange network analysis, 262
  - of employment, 281
  - equity, 280
  - exchange framework
    - dyadic data, 273
    - variable-centered and person-centered approaches, 273, 274
  - implications, 284
  - individualistic versus collectivistic
    - exchange perspectives, 261
  - intellectual roots, 259, 260
  - relationship norms, 261
  - relationship stability, 269
  - social class, 280
  - Social inequality, 561
  - Social injustice, 113, 114
  - Social isolation, 515
  - Social justice, 54, 55
  - Social media, 172
  - Social norms, 281, 284
  - Society for General Systems Research, 210
  - The Sociology of Housework*, 157
  - Sourcebook, 5–8, 10, 11, 17
    - normalism, post-War challenges and pluralism, 14
    - social movements, critical theory and contextualism, 15
  - The Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods*, 288
  - Sourcebook on Theory and Research*, 57
  - Spacing, 299
  - Steeling effects, 86
  - Stereotype messaging, 337
  - Stress
    - in custodial grandfamilies, 120
  - Stress-related biomarkers methods
    - ecological momentary assessment (EMA), 637
    - historical origins, 630
    - limitations for family research, 638
    - synchronicity, 637
  - Striving and Surviving*, 157
  - Structural approach, 131
  - Structural exchange theory, 271
  - Structural functional theory, 210
  - Structural functionalism, 10, 14, 52
  - Structural inequalities, 561
  - Structural racism, 425–427, 430, 454, 457
  - Structural symbolic interactionism, 129
  - Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 31
  - Stryker, Sheldon, 129, 131
  - Subjective fallacy, 140
  - Survey-driven narrative construction (SDNC), 675
    - contribution, 676
  - Symbolic interaction, 130
  - Symbolic interactionism, 316, 318, 320, 335, 338, 340, 737
    - American pragmatism, 128
    - critiques, 138, 139
    - disability studies, 141
    - dramaturgical approach, 131
    - education, 140, 141
    - generalized other, 139
    - "I", 130
    - identity theory, 136
    - Indiana school, 131
    - interactional approach, 131
    - interpretation, 128
    - LGBTQ+ studies, 140
    - "me", 130
    - meaning, 128
    - methods, 142
    - nutrition, 141
    - origins and historical development, 127
    - research using, 135
      - classic studies, 135
    - roles, 134
    - self, 134
    - self as object, 134
    - social self, 130
  - Symbolic interactionism, application of, 147
    - marital beliefs, investigation of, 149
      - hierarchy and roles, 150
      - individualism level, 150
      - marriage, special status of, 149
      - romanticism, 150
      - self-fulfillment, 149
    - marital paradigm theory, 151
  - Symbols, 132
  - Synergy, 245, 250, 251
  - Systems theory, 210, 211
- T**
- Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities, 55
  - Theoretical coding, 324
  - Theoretical integration, 326
  - Theoretical pluralism, 738
  - Theoretical sampling, 325
  - Theoretical saturation, 325

Theorizing, 21  
 abduction, 27  
 deduction, 26  
 induction, 26  
 Theory Construction and Methodology  
   Workshop (TCRM), 53  
 Theory-forward approach, 6  
 #TimesUp movement, 754  
 Timing, 289  
 Trait-process-outcome debate, 81  
 Transdisciplinarity, 737–739, 741, 743, 758  
   chaos of disciplines, 746  
   integral metatheory, 738  
   intellectual integration, 744  
   team science, 744  
 Transepistemology, 738  
 Trans-exclusionary radical feminism, 393  
 Transformative participatory evaluation, 690  
 Transition theory, 11  
 Translation, 584  
 Translational research, 682  
 Transleadership, 746  
 Trans normativities, 393  
 Transracial adoptive families, 552  
 Trauma-informed care, 590  
 Traumatic brain injury (TBI), 517  
 Tribal participatory research (TPR), 484  
 Trump, Donald, 418  
 Tuskegee study, 483

**U**

Underrepresented minority (URM) families, 453  
   Black/Brown taxation, 456  
   emotional depletion, 456  
   extended family networks, 455  
   physical and mental symptomology, 455  
 Universal prevention, 708  
 US juvenile justice system, 581  
 Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE), 690

**V**

Variable-centered approaches, 273, 274  
 Violent injury, 425, 426  
 Vulnerabilities, 75  
 Vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model, 361

**W**

*wen-wu* framework, 394  
 White logic, 413  
 Within-Family Differences Study, 664  
 Women's Education movements, 44  
 Women's life expectancy, 298  
 Women's rights, 44, 50, 55

**X**

X Factor, 103