Family Systems Theory

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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.

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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 Weiner, 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. Weiner (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 multigenerational 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 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.

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