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Family Systems and the Couple Relationship

Healthy Marriage, Relationships and Families: Interventions, Research and Policy Course

Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships and Families Project.

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Project Mission: To develop curricula and provide training for students and professionals that enhance their ability to facilitate healthy marriages, relationships and families in the child welfare population, with the end goal of promoting and improving the well-being of children.

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Course Objectives Covered:

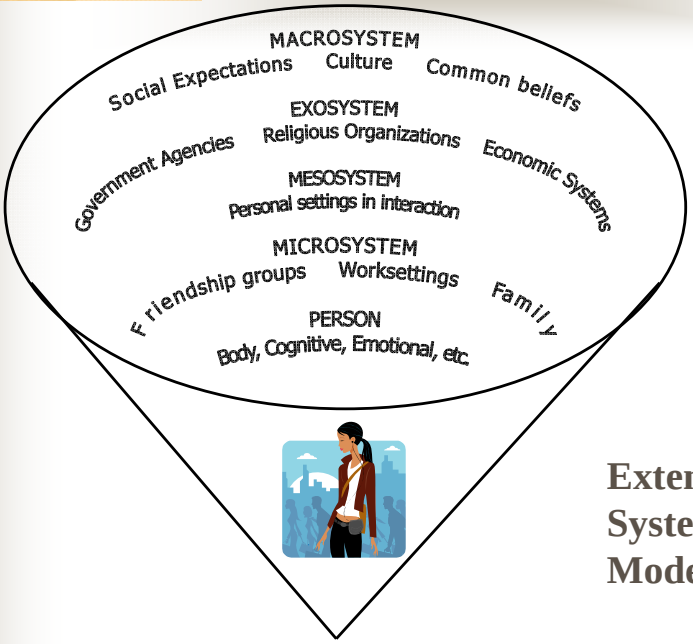
- **D**emonstrate an understanding of family system theories and child and family developmental theories and be able to critique and synthesize these theories for use in formulating interventions and/or approaches that will promote child welfare through healthy marriages, relationships and families.
- **L**earn and apply assessment tools, skills, and practices appropriate to the target population for couples, children and families as a whole in order to discern challenges and supports to family health, well-being and formation.

Systems Theory

- A theory designed to understand whole systems, including socio-ecological systems. There are multiple levels in a system that are linked in interdependent and interacting ways.
- Adapted from the natural sciences. General Systems Theory was first articulated by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1960's.

What is a System

- System is a set of units and the interrelationship between those units.
  - Ex: In a nuclear family, some of the units would be:
    - Husband and wife
    - Child 1 and Child 2
    - Wife and children
    - Husband and children



Extending Systems Model

Extending Systems Model Definitions

(Adapted from Homan, M.S. (1999) *Promoting community change: Making it happen in the real world.* (2nd ed.) Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.)

- Macrosystem: This layer may be considered the outermost layer in a person's environment comprised of cultural values, customs and laws. The effects of larger principles have a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all other layers.
- Exosystem: This layer defines the larger social system in which the individual does not function directly. The structures and processes in this layer impact the individual's development/behavior by interacting with the microsystem.
- Mesosystem: This layer provides the connection between the structures of the individual's microsystem. Ex: the connection between a child's teacher and his parents.
- Microsystems: This layer is the immediate environment surrounding the individual.

Important Perspective

- Offers a way of conceptualizing the relationship between people and environments, and encourages a balanced approach to both domains of practice. Emphasis is on the "goodness of fit" between the client and their environment.
- Workers can focus on how family, community, social, economic and political factors affect the client's situation.
- The influence of an immediate and extended family system on an individual's behavior, relationships and choices is very powerful. The Family Systems Perspective should be considered and utilized when
  - Assessing a client, and when
  - Designing therapeutic treatment plans, and psycho-educational and other programs.

Five Principles of Systems Theory

- All systems seek goal attainment and balance.
- All systems have boundaries.
- All systems are made up of subsystems.
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- All systems create feedback.

Key Assumptions of Systems Theory

- Individuals function as a part of many systems – they are affected by these systems and affect the systems.
- Because systems are in dynamic interchange, a change in one part of the system will have consequences for other systems. There is dynamic interaction between the levels of systems.
- Problems arise because of a misfit between individuals and the systems of which they are a part. Emphasis is on external interactions and not internal functioning.
- The role of the social worker is to enhance the fit between the individual and the systems affecting them.

Family Systems Theory

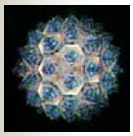
Is an extension of general Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory

- The Family is a whole systemic unit composed of individuals and subsystems.
- Families are systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none can be understood in isolation from the system.
  - The individual is seen as one part of the family system whole and is best understood by assessing the interactions between family members.

What does it mean to say a family is a system?

- To understand this better consider the example of a kaleidoscope.



  - When you turn the instrument, all the pieces settle into a new arrangement.

- Change to one part of the family system will affect all the rest of the parts of the system. The system as a whole can be the focus of therapy.

Key Elements

- The family operates as a system. Each member's activities, both behavioral and psychological (thought processes and emotions), take place with reference to other family members and the family system.

Key Elements

- The Family has identifiable boundaries (some people are in and some people are out), roles, rules, and expectations.
  - Family roles – what is expected of each member
    - Typical – husband, wife, son, daughter, etc.
    - Others – the mediator, the clown, the responsible one, etc.
  - Family rules – are rules about how the family operates, often unspoken.
    - Ex: How decisions are made, expression of anger, sharing of confidences or affection, etc.

Self-Reflection on Family

- Take a few minutes to think about your family and its boundaries, rules, roles and expectations. This exercise is one of self-reflection and will not be shared with others in the class. Jot down some of your thoughts for the questions on your handout.

Questions are:

When family members are angry at each other, do they express this and how or do they keep it to themselves?

How affectionate or emotional are family members expected or <u>allowed</u> to be with each other?

How do decisions get made in the family? How is the final decision made?

Are there limits on "how much" or in what ways kids can argue with their parents?

How much are family members "allowed" to talk to people outside the family about family problems?

Key Elements continued

- Many interaction patterns and rules have been passed down from generation to generation (intergeneration transmission) and influence the behavior of individuals.
- The system depends on certain patterns of interaction to be maintained.
  - There is a pull from the system NOT to CHANGE – but to continue functioning as things have always been. This is known as *homeostasis* or a system's *equilibrium*. This is true EVEN is the change might seem to be a desirable one.

Key Elements continued.

- Problems become entrenched in the family system (e.g., marital discord, infidelity, alcoholism)
- When change occurs, the whole system is affected and becomes unbalanced.
- The system must accommodate change or maintain status quo and resist (easiest path).
- The family system is part of several larger systems. These also exert strong influence on the shape of the family.

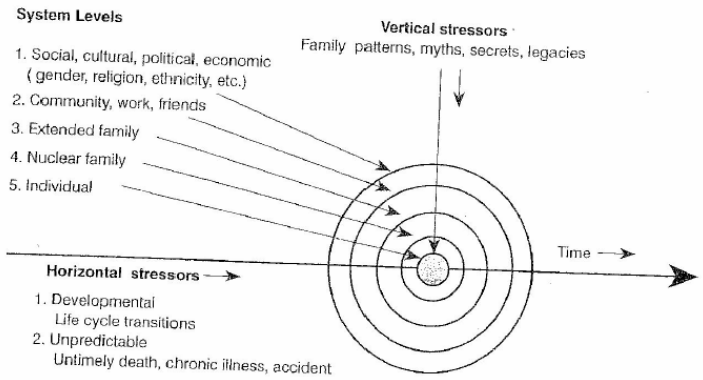


Figure 2.1

Horizontal and vertical stressors.

From *The Changing Family Life Cycle* (2nd ed., p. 9) by Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, 1988. Copyright Allen & Bacon. Reprinted by permission.

Key Element continued

- The developmental life cycle of families, one example
  - Stage 1: Leaving Home
  - Stage 2: Marry & Become a Couple
  - Stage 3: Having children
  - Stage 4: Adolescent Children (caring for parents)
  - Stage 5: Children leave home (empty nest)
  - Stage 6: Cared for by adult children – facing death.

Examples of Couple Patterns:

- Distancer-Pursuer Dyad: one person who seeks closeness while his/her partner wants more space or independence and pulls back.
- Circular Causality – as the distancer & pursuer act out their roles within the relationship, a cycle can develop.
  - The pursuer pushes for closeness – distancer pulls back – pursuer feels abandoned and tries harder – the distancer feels smothered and pulls away more, and so on and so forth….

Example of Overfunctioner-Underfunctioner Dyad

- One member is very responsible & planful. The other is less responsible, more fun-loving and spontaneous.
  - Imagine this couple dealing with finances.
- The overfunctioner sees the other as irresponsible & immature, the underfunctioner tends to see the other as controlling & rigid.
- The more the overfunctioner over functions, the more the underfunctioner (in reaction) will tend to under function, and vice versa.
- And the cycle begins. Once the cycle starts, each person's behavior contributes to the others.

Good Clue to a Circular Pattern

- Do the partners tend to respond in predictable ways to each other?
- Do their responses become more and more extreme and entrenched over time?
- ***What circular patterns have you seen in families and couples at your placements?***

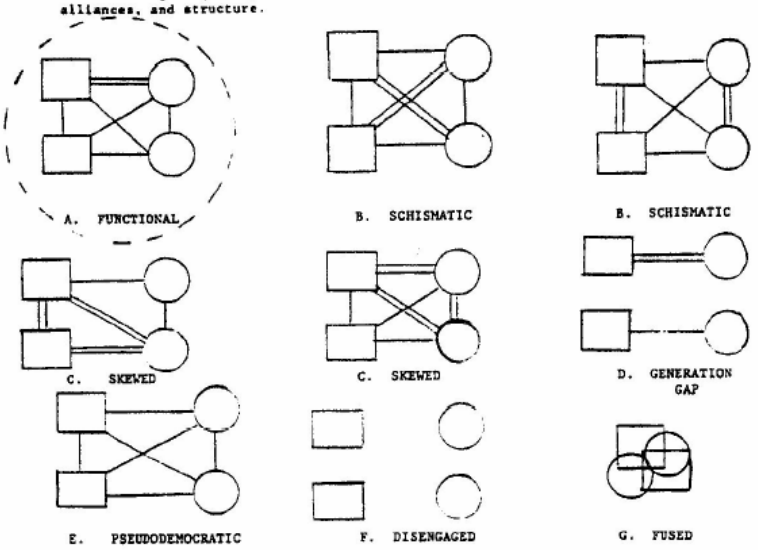
Concepts of Systems Theory

- ***Organization*** – the notion that units of a system related to each other in some fashion, and that the system is structured by those relationships.
- ***Wholeness*** – combining units or elements produces an entity greater than the sum of its parts.
- ***Boundaries*** – delineations between units/parts of a system or between systems.
- ***Open System*** – has permeable boundaries that permit interaction between component parts, and is thus likely to function in an orderly manner.
- ***Closed System*** – had impermeable boundaries, operating without interactions from outside of the system, and thus is prone to disorder.
- ***Homeostasis*** – the self-maintenance of a system in balance of equilibrium.
- ***Adaptation –*** Despite resistance to change each family system constantly adapts to maintain itself in response to its members and environment

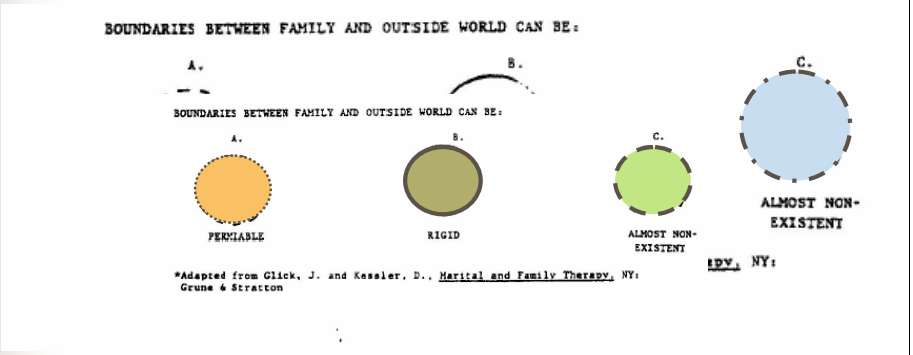
Dynamics that Maintain Homeostasis:

- ***Roles*** – expected behavior patterns, socially defined, that accompany a social position, as in a family.
- ***Rules*** – an established guide or regulation for action, conduct, method or arrangement.
- ***Alliances*** – a primary relationship, union or connection with another person in the family.
- ***Triangles*** – describes the dynamic equilibrium of a 3 person system.
- ***Values*** – principles or standards, qualities considered worthwhile.

The following diagrams provide a visual example of family coalitions, alliances, and structure.



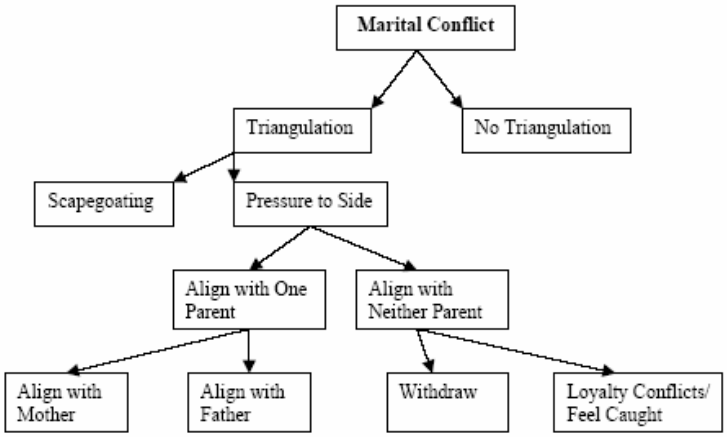
Adapted from Glick, J. and Kessler, D., Marital and Family Therapy, NY:Grune and Stratton



Adapted from Glick, J. and Kessler, D., Marital and Family Therapy, NY:Grune and Stratton

(Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001)

Hierarchy of Family Systems Concepts
The Impact of Interparental Conflict



Important Family Strengths

- Members trust, respect and enjoy each other.
- Members listen to and respect each other's opinions, even when they disagree.
- The family has clear and reasonable rules that govern behavior and interactions.
- Each member's ideas, preferences and needs are considered before making a decision that would affect the family.

Family Strengths continued.

- The family has traditions, rituals and stories that provide a sense of history, belonging and identity.
- Family members share what they have and make personal sacrifices in order to help each other; members stick together and support each other in times of adversity.
- Conflicts are acknowledged and resolved.

The Family Systems approach suggests

that sometimes our behavior may have AS MUCH TO DO with the "systems" (groups) of which we are a part – and the patterns that get established within these systems – as it may have to do with the personality of each person within the system.

Family Systems Perspective

The overall family well being is dependent on an efficient family structure for maintaining a harmonious balance, a give and take, between the needs of the individuals and the needs of the family.

Class activity: David C. Brown Case Study

Principles of Systems Practice

- Worker is in partnership with the client(s).
- The worker facilitates change but is not an expert about the system.
- Change must be sustained.
- Work is non-judgmental.
- Holism and recognition of social connection.

The worker aims to enhance the fit between the individual and their environment. This is done by developing, maintaining or strengthening supportive interventions and reducing, challenging and replacing stressful systems.

Stages of Work

- Stage 1: Systemic Analysis
  - Recognizing/identifying multiple systems.
    - Mapping
  - Recognizing multiple levels of systems
    - Micro, Meso and Macro
  - Each of these systems is interacting with, and reliant on, each other.

Stage 2: Intervention/Work Phase

- Intervention should be targeted at the system (s) that will offer the most potential and the most leverage for change.
- Social Workers should:
  - Think strategically about the possibilities and limitations for change in the different systems affecting the client's environment.
  - Have an understanding of the possibilities for intervention in each system.

Summary

- ***Intervention focus***: Systems
- ***Change achieved by***: Facilitating Systems Change.
- ***Relationship between worker and client***: Systems analyst and change agent, facilitator.
- ***Participation and partnership:*** Worker and client work together.
- ***Measure of change:*** Enhanced integration of individual and systems, better "fit".
  - Caveat: Systems do not always change in a linear way therefore outcomes are not always predictable or desirable.
- ***Process of intervention:*** Multi-dimensional and open-ended.
- ***Involvement of broader community in change?*** Yes – enhancing individual and community "fit".

Required Reading

- Kazak, A.E., Simms, S. and Rourke, M.T. (2002). Family systems practice in pediatric psychology. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 27(2), 133-143.

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