

4: Development of Social Groups

Over the years researchers have found the necessity to develop theories of behavior that are specific to family settings. These theories have been developed by people with a variety of areas of emphasis, from family therapists to gerontologists to child development specialists. In this chapter we will briefly discuss six such theories: Bioecological Model, Family Systems, Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Psychological Perspectives.

Bioecological Systems Theory

One of the key theories we look to help explain influences on individuals and their families is Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory. A basic tenet of this theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is that child and youth development is influenced by many different "contexts," "settings," or "ecologies" (for example, family, peers, schools, communities, sociocultural belief systems, policy regimes, and, of course, the economy).

The model is able to account for multiple face-to-face environments, or settings, within the microsystem of a person (for example, family, school, peers); how relations between settings (mesosystem) can affect what happens within them (for example, interactions between school and family); and how settings within which the individuals have no direct presence (exo- and macrosystem) can affect settings in their microsystems (for example, how parents' experiences at their workplace affect their relationships within the family) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, this model allows the analysis of the lives of people, "living organisms whose biopsychological characteristics, both as a species and as individuals, have as much to do with their development as do the environments in which they live their lives" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 8).

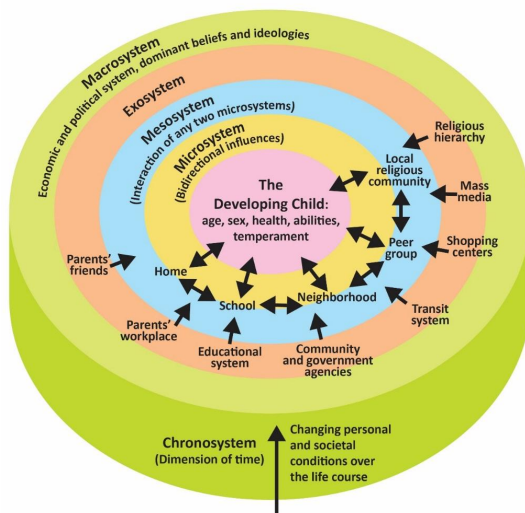


Figure 4.1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.[1]

Microsystem

Microsystems impact a child directly. These are the people with whom the child interacts such as parents, peers, and teachers. The relationship between individuals and those around them need to be considered. For example, to appreciate what is going on with a student in math, the relationship between the student and teacher should be known.

Mesosystem

Mesosystems are interactions between those surrounding the individual. The relationship between parents and schools, for example will indirectly affect the child.

Exosystem

Larger institutions such as the mass media or the healthcare system are referred to as the exosystem. These have an impact on families and peers and schools who operate under policies and regulations found in these institutions.

Macrosystem

We find cultural values and beliefs at the level of macrosystems. These larger ideals and expectations inform institutions that will ultimately impact the individual.

Chronosystem

All of this happens in an historical context referred to as the chronosystem. Cultural values change over time, as do policies of educational institutions or governments in certain political climates. Development occurs at a point in time. [2]

The Bioecological Model by Bronfenbrenner looked at patterns of development across time as well as the interactions between the development of the child and the environment. The implications of the Model include the social and political policies and practices affecting children, families, and parenting. The Bioecological Model as depicted in Figure 7.1 serves as a visual organizer to both summarize and unpack key concepts and themes as they related to individual development, teaching and learning, and educational practices. As teachers and educators strive to become evidence-based practitioners, the goal of learning this Model is to understand the theoretical and research foundations that inform the work in supporting students' well-being, teaching and learning and identify and use other factors/resources such as parents, family, peers, to provide positive influence on students' learning and development. [3]

Check-in Time!

What chronosystem events have impacted your life so far?

Family Systems Theory

When understanding the family, the Family Systems Theory has proven to be very powerful. Family Systems Theory comes under the Functional Theory umbrella and shares the functional approach of considering the dysfunctions and functions of complex groups and organizations. Family Systems Theory claims that the family is understood best by conceptualizing it as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of parts, subsystems and family members. Much like a mechanic would interface with the computer system of a broken down car to diagnose which systems are broken (transmission, electric, fuel, etc.) to repair it, a therapist or researcher would interact with family members to diagnose how and where the systems of the family are working and where they are in need of repair or intervention.

This theory also addresses the issue of boundaries. Boundaries are *distinct emotional, psychological, or physical separateness between individuals, roles, and subsystems in the family*. Boundaries are crucial to healthy family functioning. [4]

Check-in Time!

What is the main role you have in your family system? What boundaries do you have or wish you had?

Functionalism

When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they play a key role in stabilizing society. They also note that family members take on status roles in a marriage or family. The family—and its members—perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Sociologist George Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee 1985). According to Murdock, the family (which for him includes the state of marriage) regulates sexual relations between individuals. He does not deny the existence or impact of premarital or extramarital sex, but states that the family offers a socially legitimate sexual outlet for adults (Lee 1985). This outlet gives way to reproduction, which is a necessary part of ensuring the survival of society.

Once children are born, the family plays a vital role in training them for adult life. As the primary agent of socialization and enculturation, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, in some families, parents teach their children manners and civility believing a well-mannered child reflects a well-mannered parent.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involve work outside of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the family which provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff 1978).



Figure 4.2: - What might this little girl be learning about the role of her mother?[5]

According to functionalists, the differentiation of the roles on the basis of sex ensures that families are well balanced and coordinated. When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate in order to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home in order for the family to maintain balance and function.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists are quick to point out that U.S. families have been defined as private entities, the consequence of which has been to leave family matters to only those within the family. Many people in the United States are resistant to government intervention in the family: parents do not want the government to tell them how to raise their children or to become involved in domestic issues. Conflict theory highlights the role of power in family life and contends that the family is often not a haven but rather an arena where power struggles can occur. This exercise of power often entails the performance of family status roles. Conflict theorists may study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or they may examine more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest.

The first study of marital power was performed in 1960. Researchers found that the person with the most access to value resources held the most power. As money is one of the most valuable resources, men who worked in paid labor outside of the home held more power than women who worked inside the home (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Even today, with more fluid family roles, conflict theorists find disputes over the division of household labor to be a common source of marital discord. Household labor offers no wages and, therefore, no power. Studies indicate that when men do more housework, women experience more satisfaction in their marriages, reducing the incidence of conflict (Coltrane 2000). In general, conflict theorists tend to study areas of marriage and life that involve inequalities or discrepancies in power and authority, as they are reflective of the larger social structure.

Check-in Time!

How does the division of chores impact or not impact your household?

Symbolic Interactionism

Interactionists view the world in terms of symbols and the meanings assigned to them (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The family itself is a symbol. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Interactionists stress that family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings.

Consider the meaning of other elements of family: in the past, “parent” was a symbol of a biological and emotional connection to a child. With more parent-child relationships developing through adoption, remarriage, or change in guardianship, the word “parent” today is less likely to be associated with a biological connection than with whoever is socially recognized as having the responsibility for a child’s upbringing. Similarly, the terms “mother” and “father” are no longer rigidly associated with the meanings of caregiver and breadwinner. These meanings are more free-flowing through changing family roles.

Interactionists also recognize how the family status roles of each member are socially constructed, playing an important part in how people perceive and interpret social behavior. Interactionists view the family as a group of role players or “actors” that come together to act out their parts in an effort to construct a family. These roles are up for interpretation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a “good father,” for example, was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children. Today, for some, a “good father” is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children’s emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth—in some ways, a much more daunting task.^[6]

Psychological Perspectives

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was one of the most influential modern scientists to put forth a theory about how people develop a sense of self. He believed that personality and sexual development were closely linked, and he divided the maturation process into psychosexual stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. He posited that people's self development is closely linked to early stages of development, like breastfeeding, toilet training, and sexual awareness (Freud 1905).

According to Freud, failure to properly engage in or disengage from a specific stage results in emotional and psychological consequences throughout adulthood. He linked this closely to the mother-child bond. An adult with an oral fixation may indulge in overeating or binge drinking. An anal fixation may produce a “neat freak” (hence the term “anal retentive”), while a person stuck in the phallic stage may be promiscuous or emotionally immature. Although no solid empirical evidence supports Freud's theory, his ideas continue to contribute to the work of scholars in a variety of disciplines.

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1902–1994) created a theory of personality development based, in part, on the work of Freud. However, Erikson believed the personality continued to change over time and was never truly finished. His theory includes eight stages of development, beginning with birth and ending with death. According to Erikson, people move through these stages throughout their lives. In contrast to Freud's focus on psychosexual stages and basic human urges, Erikson's view of self development gave credit to more social aspects, like the way we negotiate between our own base desires and what is socially accepted (Erikson 1982). His theory also helps us understand that rather than just focusing on the child's development, all members of the family are going through stages.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was a psychologist who specialized in child development, focusing specifically on the role of social interactions in their development. He recognized that the development of self evolved through a negotiation between the world as it exists in one's mind and the world that exists as it is experienced socially (Piaget 1954).^[7]

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) is best known for being an educational psychologist with a sociocultural theory. This theory suggests that social interaction leads to continuous step-by-step changes in children's thought and behavior that can vary greatly from culture to culture (Woolfolk, 1998). Basically, Vygotsky's theory suggests that development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of their world.



Figure 4.3: This mother explaining how pedals work to her daughter who is learning to ride a bike is a great example of Vygotsky's theory in action.^[8]

All four of these thinkers have contributed to our modern understanding of self-development.

Check-in Time!

Of the four theorists reviewed above (Freud, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky) which theorist's ideas about development most closely match your own beliefs about how people develop and why?

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[3] [Educational Learning Theories](#) by Molly Y. Zhou and David Brow is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA](#) (pg. 60-66)

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[6] [Sociology - Reading: Theoretical Perspectives on Marriage and Family](#) by Lumen Learning is licensed under CC BY 4.0

[7] [Introduction to Sociology – 5.1: Theories of Development](#) by OpenStax is licensed under CC BY 3.0

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