Chapter 1: The Family as a System

Chapter Overview: Focusing on family patterns of interaction requires a basic understanding of what is meant by the term "family." This chapter will define the concept of family, and provide an overview of the central assumptions and core concepts that are basic to an understanding of families when considered as a system. Within a family-systems framework, families are defined as complex structures consisting of an interdependent group of individuals who (1) have a shared sense of history; (2) share emotional ties to one another; and (3) devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual family members and the group as a whole. Implicit in the use of the system metaphor to define families is the premise that they are structurally complex. Families are comprised of multiple subsystems, have common purposes and tasks that must be fulfilled, and must devise strategies for the execution of these tasks. Within this systems perspective, the assessment of family functioning revolves around a theoretical consideration of the common tasks that a family must fulfill and the effectiveness of the strategies devised for executing these tasks.

Key Terms

Adaptability: The capacity of the system to change its rules and strategies in response to situational or developmental stress

Boundaries: The concept used to delineate one system or subsystem from other systems or subsystems, or from the surrounding environment.

Covert rules: Rules that are implicit rather than openly stated but are nonetheless understood by all family members.

Family: An interdependent group of individuals who have a shared sense of history, experience some degree of emotional bonding, and devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual members and the group as a whole.

Family themes: Those elements of the family experience that become organizing principles for family life, including both conscious and unconscious elements as well as intellectual (attitudes, beliefs, values) and emotional aspects.

First-order tasks: The tasks that are common to all families regardless of their particular composition, socioeconomic status, and cultural, ethnic or racial heritage. Examples of first order tasks include the formation of family themes, the regulation of boundaries, and the management of the household.

Interdependence: The idea that individuals and subsystems that compose the whole system are mutually dependent and mutually influenced by one another

Metarules: Rules about rules.

Morphogenesis: Those processes operating within systems that foster systemic growth and development.

Morphostasis: Those processes operating within systems that resist changes in existing strategies.

Openness: The ease with which members and information cross the boundary from one system or subsystem to another.

Organizational complexity: The organizational structure whereby family systems are comprised of various smaller units or subsystems that together comprise the larger family system

Overt rules: Explicit and openly stated rules.

Rules: Recurring patterns of interaction that define the limits of acceptable and appropriate behavior in the family.

Second-order tasks: The responsibility that all families have for adapting their strategies and rules in response to stress, information, and change.

Strategies: The specific policies and procedures the family adopts to accomplish its tasks. Also the unique patterns of interaction that each family establishes to execute its basic tasks.

Stress: Information transmitted to the system about whether established interactional patterns require alteration.

Structure: Both the family's composition and its organization. Composition refers to the family's membership, that is, the persons who make up the family. Organization is the collection of interdependent relationships and subsystems that operate by established rules of interaction.

Wholeness: The idea that systems must be understood in their entirety, which is distinctly different than the simple sum of the contributions of the individual parts.

Test Questions

1.1 Which of the following statements is NOT true?
    a. Today the typical family is composed of a working father, a homemaker mother, and their biological children.
    b. Less than ¼ of all U.S. households are comprised of married parents and their biological children.
    c. Today, approximately one out of every four children in the U.S. is living in a single-parent family.
    d. Currently, divorce has replaced death as the most common endpoint for a marriage.

    Answer: A   *Page Ref.*: 4

1.2 _____ refers to both the family's composition and its organization.
    a. Wholeness
    b. Interdependence
    c. Structure
    d. Function

    Answer: C   *Page Ref.*: 6

1.3 The term _____ refers to the people in the family.
    a. structure
    b. wholeness
    c. composition
    d. interdependence

    Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 6

1.4 _____ refers to the fact that family systems are comprised of smaller subsystems.
    a. Organizational Complexity
    b. Structure
    c. Wholeness
    d. Interdependence

    Answer" A   *Page Ref:* 8

1.5 The husband/wife relationship and the parent/child relationship are examples of
    a. family functions
    b. family hierarchies
    c. family subsystems
    d. family themes

    Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 8

1.6 _____ is a term used to refer to the idea that a family is more than the simple sum of its members.
   a. Adaptability
   b. Interdependence
   c. Wholeness
   d. Internal boundaries

   Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 8

1.7 The family system property of _____ is reflected in the assertion that a "change in one part of the family system reverberates throughout the rest of the system."
   a. wholeness
   b. organizational Complexity
   c. adaptability
   d. interdependence

   Answer: D   *Page Ref:* 9

1.8 The fact that "Mom makes all the decisions in spite of the fact that Dad maintains that he makes all of the decisions" is an example of
   a. a metarule
   b. a family function
   c. a family theme
   d. a family hierarchy

   Answer: A   *Page Ref:* 10

1.9 _____ refer(s) to the recurring patterns of interaction that define the limits of acceptable and appropriate behavior in the family.
   a. Family functions
   b. Rules
   c. Family themes
   d. Adaptability

   Answer: B   *Page Ref:* 10

1.10 A(n) _____ rule is one that all family members know but one that is not openly stated or expressed.
   a. meta
   b. overt
   c. covert
   d. dysfunctional

   Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 10

1.11 _____ is the term used to refer to the specific methods and procedures used within a family to accomplish its tasks
    a. Strategies
    b. Themes
    c. Adaptability
    d. Meta-rule

    Answer: A   *Page Ref:* 10

1.12 _____ refer(s) to the family system's capacity to change its rules and strategies in response to situational or developmental stress.
    a. Covert Rules
    b. Metarules
    c. Strategies
    d. Adaptability

    Answer: D   *Page Ref.*: 12

1.13 _____ refer(s) to those elements of the family experience that become organizing principles for family life.
    a. Covert Rules
    b. Boundary Patterns
    c. Family Themes
    d. Organizational Complexity

    Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 12

1.14 Which of the following is NOT an example of an identity task?
    a. constructing family themes
    b. gender socialization
    c. regulating autonomy
    d. establishing a satisfactory congruence of images

    Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 12-13

1.15 The formation of family themes and the regulation of boundaries are examples of
    a. second-order tasks.
    b. family goals
    c. first-order tasks
    d. family adaptations

    Answer: C   *Page Ref:* 12