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Family systems theory

1. Basic assumptions

- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts: A family is much more than a collection of individuals who live together and are related to each other.
- The locus of pathology is not within the person but is a system dysfunction: the locus of pathology, or the location of the problem, is not within the person. Rather than saying that an individual has a disease, we say that the system of which he/she is a part is dysfunctional.
- Circular causality guides behavior: Circular causality is the idea that with human social interaction there are a number of forces moving in many directions simultaneously.
- Rules are discovered in retrospect: The repetitive patterns of interaction are identified, and these are the rules that a family lives by. Positive change is made in a family by helping them to change their dysfunctional rules.
- Rules result from the redundancy principle: Some rules are dysfunctional, but once established, they tend to remain. This is because humans have an automatic tendency to maintain a balance or equilibrium in their lives; this is called homeostasis.
- Feedback loop guide behavior: When a family member begins to move outside the accepted limits of family behavior, the others will engage in feedback loops to get that member back in line.
- Pathological communication causes relationship problems: Pathological communication is the term that refers to the various kinds of unclear and confusing ways of relating, which can cause problems in a relationship. One of the most prominent concepts in systems work is the double bind. It is a special form of contradictory communication.
- All family members take on roles: The fact that we all tend to play out certain roles is part of the redundancy principle. In addition to being a parent, child, or student, there are common psychological roles that family members take on. Refusing to play one's role can upset the family equilibrium and result in negative feedback.
- Family types are based on the rigidity of family boundaries: Open families are

basically democratic, and the rights of individuals are protected and interactions with outsiders are permitted. There is also consensus and flexibility, and family members are bound together by love and respect. The second type is the random family. Here there are almost no boundaries. The members are seen as disengaged; that is, they have very little to do with each other. The final type is the closed family. In this one, family members are enmeshed or overly involved in each others' lives. Individual identities are not allowed, and family boundaries close off much of the outside world.

2. Concepts

- **System:** A system is essentially any set of objects that relate to each other in a way that creates a new superentity. It is a boundary-maintained unit composed of interrelated and interdependent parts. The family is a social system.
- **Boundaries:** The limits of the system are its boundaries. A family maintains its boundaries by filtering out any external elements that seem hostile to the goals and policies of the family while at the same time incorporating those that are seen as beneficial. It then becomes possible to classify families on a continuum from open to closed, depending on how permeable or flexible the boundaries are.
- **Elements:** The various individual members of the system are called elements. The terms "units" and "objects" have also been used to describe the people who live in a family system.
- **Family rules:** Each family has unspoken guidelines for how it deals with input and change, which govern the behaviors of its members.
- **Feedback:** Feedback refers to the response a family member makes to the behavior of another person. It may be positive in that it encourages more of the stimulus or input from the other or negative in that it discourages change. There are continuous "feedback loops" as each member speaks to, and impacts upon, the behaviors of the others.
- **Equilibrium:** There is a tendency for a system to seek a balance in the variety of its behaviors and its rules. This natural inclination to maintain the status quo and therefore avoid change is usually referred to as homeostasis, which means the system has equilibrium.
- **Disengagement:** When family members are insufficiently involved in each other's lives due to rigid boundaries, they are considered to be disengaged. This is a characteristic of what is called a random family.
- **Enmeshment:** When boundaries are blurred and family members are overinvolved in each other's lives, they are considered to be enmeshed. This is the characteristic of a closed family, and it often results in psychosomatic symptoms due to the lack of personal autonomy.

- **Mutuality:** Mutuality is found in open families in which all are accepted and loved, even with differences of opinion.

Family developmental theory

1. Basic assumptions

- Families undergo stages of development just like individuals. Family developmental theory focuses on the developmental stages of the family as well as the individual. Transitions from one stage to the next are usually related to changes in individual development.
- There are tasks associated with each stage of development. Tasks are defined on the basis of normative expectations. Each stage is delineated by a set of tasks that must be accomplished to prepare adequately for the next stage of development. Failure to complete a task does not necessarily preclude moving to the next stage of development but may limit a family's optimal functioning at the next level.
- Development is reciprocal. The individual development of each family member influences other family members, as well as the overall development of the family. The family's development influences the critical periods of individual development as well. Because there is reciprocity in the interaction of the family and individual development, it is necessary to consider them in concert.
- Families must be viewed in multiple levels of analysis. Family developmental theory requires that family life be considered in the multiple contexts of the society, the family, and the individual. The social context influences both the processes within the family and the developmental issues of each individual within the family.
- Family should be viewed over time. Family developmental theory takes as its core assumption that families are not static but change over time. This "change over time" is the primary focus of the theory. How and when families change, what they accomplish at different points of time, and why they change can be known only if one studies families over time.

2. Concepts

- **Normative events:** Family developmental theories focus on the things that happen more normatively, such as marriages, childbirth, developmental and educational milestones, and the passage of time.
- **Stages:** Probably the most unique aspect of family developmental theory is its focus on the stages of the family life cycle.
- **Tasks:** The concept of tasks in family developmental theory is derived from a similar concept of tasks in individual developmental theory.
- **Timing:** The life course perspective theorists introduced the concept of different

qualities of time into family developmental theory. Ontogenetic time refers to the time one recognizes as one grows and changes through one's own lifetime. Generational time refers to how one's time is experienced within one's social group. Historical time refers to how time is experienced in the social context or greater historical period.

- **Change:** Family developmental theory proposes that family relationships are not static but rather change over time. Catalysts for change can be either internal or external. The nature of this interaction is reciprocal – that is, the organism both elicits and responds to stimuli in its environment.
- **Transitions:** Transitions are the process(es) that form a bridge between the different states when something changes. In family developmental theory, transitions are the shifts in roles and identities encountered with changes in developmental stages. Ease of transition is dependent on the resolution of the stages beforehand, or the degree to which the stage is perceived to be a crisis. As families shift from one stage to the next, their roles, behaviors, and tasks are reallocated in accordance with their new stage. Some families move easily from one stage to the next and some do not. Depending upon how prepared they are for the new stage, families will respond to the change as either a crisis or as an opportunity.

3. Family life cycle

Stage-Sensitive Family Developmental Tasks Through the Family Life Cycle		
Stages	Positions in the family	Tasks
1. Married couple	Wife Husband	Establishing a mutually satisfying marriage Adjusting to pregnancy and the promise of parenthood Fitting into the kin network
2. Childbearing	Wife-mother Husband-father Infant daughter or son or both	Having adjusting to, and encouraging the development of infants Establishing a satisfying home for both parents and infant(s)
3. Preschool-age	Wife-mother Husband-father Daughter-sister Son-brother	Adapting to the critical needs and interests of preschool children in stimulating, growth-promoting ways Coping with energy depletion and lack of privacy as parents

4. School-age	Wife-mother Husband-father Daughter-sister Son-brother	Fitting into the community of school-age families in constructive ways Encouraging children's educational achievement
5. Teenage	Wife-mother Husband-father Daughter-sister Son-brother	Balancing freedom with responsibility as teenagers mature and emancipate themselves Establishing postparental interests and careers as growing parents
6. Launching center	Wife-mother-grandmother Husband-father-grandfather Daughter-sister-aunt Son-brother-uncle	Releasing young adults into work, college, marriage, and so on with appropriate rituals and assistance Maintaining a supportive home base
7. Middle-aged parents	Wife-mother-grandmother Husband-father-grandfather	Refocusing on the marriage relationship Maintaining kin ties with older and younger generations
8. Aging family members	Widow or widower Wife-mother-grandmother Husband-father-grandfather	Coping with bereavement and living alone Closing the family home or adapting it to aging Adjusting to retirement