

Systems Theory

Systems theory is the sociological theory that attempts to explain how groups of individuals interact as a system, a set of different parts that work together and influence one another in a relatively stable way over time. Family systems theory applies to the examination of family processes. A basic concept is that family systems have a complex organization. This means that although the organization is not a simple sequential one, it is not chaotic (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

A basic principle of systems theory is feedback, a process by which the system informs its members how to interact to maintain the stability of the system. Because feedback implies give and take, the individuals within the family system influence one another in a reciprocal way, making it difficult to trace the origins of influence or to describe the organization of the family. Family systems have special characteristics. They maintain a relatively stable size because members can be added to families only by birth, adoption, or cohabitation or marriage, and can leave only by death. However, some family systems theorists argue that individuals continue to exert an influence on the behaviour of others after they have left the family household, just as they do after divorce (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The larger family system contains subsystems:

- the family-unit subsystem of those members sharing a household
- the interpersonal subsystems between individuals, such as husband-wife or mother-son
- the personal subsystem comprised of interaction between the individual as self and as a member of the family

The restricted yet continuous membership, the multi-generational extent, and the hierarchy of subsystems contribute to the complexity of family systems.

Family systems develop strategies for achieving the goals and functions of individuals and of the family, and for interacting with the external society.

Strategies are defined as patterns of interaction that are repeated; one could call them *meaningful habits* (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Strategies require the collaboration of all members to continue. Therefore, all members share responsibility for the patterns of behaviour. For example, people who continually argue about chores share responsibility for this habit. Family systems adapt when a change in one person's behaviour causes the behaviour of others to evolve, resulting in new strategies. For example, when a wife and mother returns to work after having a child, new strategies for doing housework will evolve as her husband and children take on some of the chores. Unlike functionalism,

Family Studies

Systems Theory

Systems theory is the sociological theory that attempts to explain how groups of individuals interact as a system, a set of different parts that work together and influence one another in a relatively stable way over time. Family systems theory applies to the examination of family processes. A basic concept is that family systems have a complex organization. This means that although the organization is not a simple sequential one, it is not chaotic (Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

A basic principle of systems theory is feedback, a process by which the system informs its members how to interact to maintain the stability of the system. Because feedback implies give and take, the individuals within the family system influence one another in a reciprocal way, making it difficult to trace the origins of influence or to describe the organization of the family. Family systems have special characteristics. They maintain a relatively stable size because members can be added to families only by birth, adoption, or cohabitation or marriage, and can leave only by death. However, some family systems theorists argue that individuals continue to exert an influence on the behaviour of others after they have left the family household, just as they do after divorce (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The larger family system contains subsystems:

- the family-unit subsystem of those members sharing a household
- the interpersonal subsystems between individuals, such as husband-wife or mother-son
- the personal subsystem comprised of interaction between the individual as self and as a member of the family

The restricted yet continuous membership, the multi-generational extent, and the hierarchy of subsystems contribute to the complexity of family systems.

Family systems develop strategies for achieving the goals and functions of individuals and of the family, and for interacting with the external society.

Strategies are defined as patterns of interaction that are repeated; one could call them *meaningful habits* (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Strategies require the collaboration of all members to continue. Therefore, all members share responsibility for the patterns of behaviour. For example, people who continually argue about chores share responsibility for this habit. Family systems adapt when a change in one person's behaviour causes the behaviour of others to evolve, resulting in new strategies. For example, when a wife and mother returns to work after having a child, new strategies for doing housework will evolve as her husband and children take on some of the chores. Unlike functionalism,

Family Studies

Cooley's Looking-Glass Theory

"I am not what I think I am. I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am."

— Charles Cooley

which explains the actions of individuals in groups, systems theory explains the behaviour of individuals as inseparable from the group. A limitation of systems theory is that it can be difficult to determine how others within the family are influencing an individual's behaviour.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a psychological theory that attempts to explain how individuals choose how they will act based on their perceptions of themselves and of others. People experience their social world, and then define and interpret their experiences to give them meaning. It is the perceptions, or the meanings that people give to their experience of the world, that matter, not the social facts. For example, if someone puts a hand on your shoulder, you will interpret the gesture and determine what it means before you respond. Only after the mental process of "giving meaning" do people act. Mental processes are not visible; only the actions that follow them are. Therefore, symbolic interactionists attempt to understand the point of view of the actor to explain the action.

Symbolic interactionism is based on three basic concepts:

1. An individual develops a self that has two parts: the "me" that consists of objective qualities (tall, male, student) and the "I" that is the subjective awareness of self (good student, shy, lonely). According to psychologist Charles Cooley, the "I" is based on how feedback from other people is interpreted.
2. People must also "take the attitude of the other" to be able to anticipate what the other person will do and decide how they should respond. This is what George Mead, a philosopher and psychologist, believed. This role-taking is the basis for human interaction.
3. People are able to interact effectively only if they can communicate using a common language; that is, shared symbols, Mead argued. Language is the means by which individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences of self and others in order to interact in relationships.

A popular application of symbolic interactionism was used by John Gray in his book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992). He explained that men and women have problems in their relationships because they give different meanings to actions and words. Therefore, by acting in ways that reflect their own interpretation of the other sex, they behave in ways that are confusing to the other sex. He generalizes that since men and women do not