Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

The Family Ecology Perspective

Issues for Thought: Safety and Risk in the Family Environment

The Family Development Perspective

The Structure–Functional Perspective

The Interactionist Perspective

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When we begin a course on the family, we are eager to have our questions answered:

- “What’s a good family?”
- “How do I make that happen?”
- “Whom should I choose?”
- “What do I need to know to be a good parent?”
- “What’s happening to the family today?”

In Chapter 1 we outlined some trends in family life, changes you may be aware of from observing life around you or through the media. What these changes mean—how to interpret them—is not always easy. There are many visions of the family, and what an observer reads into the data depends partly on his or her perspective.

From politicians we hear about family trends with words such as conservative or liberal attached. But in forming their interpretations, social scientists often use the formal vocabulary of social theory and research methodology to characterize marriage and family patterns.

This chapter invites you to share this way of seeing families. First, we look at some theoretical perspectives that shape our thinking about families. Then we consider the knotty problem of studying a phenomenon as close to our hearts as family life.

The Family Ecology Perspective

The family ecology perspective explores how a family influences and is influenced by the surrounding environment. We use the family ecology perspective throughout this book when we stress that society does not determine family members’ behavior but does present limitations and constraints for families, as well as possibilities and opportunities. Families’ lives and choices are affected by economic, educational, religious, and cultural institutions, for example, and by historical circumstances such as the depression, World War II, and the present threat of terrorism.

Every family is embedded in “a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 3). At the foundation is the natural physical-biological environment—climate, soil, plants, animals, and so forth. The human-built environment develops when nature is altered by human action. As human settlement occurs, for example, roads and houses are built. Agriculture and industrial development affect the natural environment. The social-cultural environment is entirely a human creation and consists of cultural values, cultural products like language and law, and social and economic systems. All parts of the model are interrelated and influence one another (Bubolz and Sontag 1999; and see Figure 2.1).

FIGURE 2.1 The family ecology perspective. The family is embedded in natural physical-biological, human-built, and social-cultural environments.

### Table 2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on the Family

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Current Research</th>
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<tr>
<td>Family Ecology</td>
<td>The ecological context of the family affects family life and children's outcomes.</td>
<td>Natural physical–biological environment; Human-built environment; Social–cultural environment.</td>
<td>Family policy; Neighborhood effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Development</td>
<td>Families experience predictable changes over time.</td>
<td>Family life cycle; Developmental tasks; &quot;On-time&quot; transitions; Role-sequencing</td>
<td>Emerging adulthood; Timing of employment, marriage and parenthood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure–Functional</td>
<td>The family performs essential functions for society.</td>
<td>Social institution; Family structure; Family functions; Extended family; Nuclear family</td>
<td>Cross-cultural and historical comparisons; Critique of contemporary family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactionist</td>
<td>The internal dynamics of a group of interacting individuals construct the family.</td>
<td>Interaction; Self-concept; Identity; Meaning; Roles; Role-taking; Internalization; Role-making</td>
<td>Meaning assigned to domestic work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange Theory</td>
<td>The resources that individuals bring to a relationship or family affect formation, continuation, nature, and power dynamics of a relationship.</td>
<td>Resources; Rewards and costs; Family power and decision making; Exchange balance</td>
<td>Family power; Entry and exit from marriage; Family violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Systems Theory</td>
<td>The family as a whole is more than the sum of its parts.</td>
<td>System; Equilibrium; Boundaries; Family therapy</td>
<td>Family efficacy and crisis management; Family boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Social and economic relations are not equally beneficial to the parties; conflict and exploitation characterize relations of inequality.</td>
<td>Inequality; Power; Class</td>
<td>Effect on families of economic inequality in the U.S.; Racial/ethnic and immigration status variations; Effect on families of the changing global economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td>Gender is central to the analysis of the family; male dominance in society and in the family is oppressive of women.</td>
<td>Male dominance; Power and inequality</td>
<td>Work and family; Family power; Domestic violence; Advocacy of women's issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biosocial</td>
<td>Evolution of the human species has put in place certain biological endowments that shape and limit family choices.</td>
<td>Evolutionary heritage; Genes, hormones, and brain processes; Inclusive fitness</td>
<td>Connections between biological markers and family behavior; Evolutionary heritage explanations for gender differences, sexuality and reproduction, and parenting behavior; Development of research methods that can explore the respective influences of &quot;nature&quot; and &quot;nurture&quot;</td>
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The ecology of families may be analyzed at various levels, from the neighborhood to the global. Increasing globalization, for example, means that job opportunities for American family members are affected by the decisions of multinational corporations. The September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent Afghan and Iraq wars are part of a global conflict that has affected American family life in countless ways.

The family ecology perspective emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period marked by concern about the welfare and stability of families. After losing ground to other theories, the family ecology model resurfaced in the 1960s with the War on Poverty, a program directed toward the elimination of the high levels of poverty that then existed. The family ecology model continues to be prominent in research and in political discussion and debate (Booth and Crouter 2001; Bubolz and Sontag 1993).

Today's family ecologists stress the interdependence of all the world's families—not only with one another but also with our fragile physical–biological environment. In this vein, the Family Energy Project at Michigan State University has studied families' energy usage (Bubolz and Sontag 1993). Although it is crucial, the interaction of families with the physical–biological environment is beyond the scope of this text. Our interest centers on families in their sociocultural environments.
Family ecology theory tells us to look at the environment surrounding the family. What is that environment like in terms of actual risk and perception of risk? The September 11 terrorist attacks, high-profile kidnappings and school killings, and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina certainly inspire worry. However, some social scientists speculate that fear may have outstripped the reality of risk. Historian Peter Stearns argues that Americans have become "anxious parents." Smaller families, which enhance the preciousness and perceived vulnerability of each child; urbanization and its mythic dangers; and increased media portrayal of danger have led to a general "culture of fear" (Glassner 1999) that makes "anxiety about children . . . a central matter in twentieth-century American culture" (Fass 2003a; Stearns 2003).

In his book The Culture of Fear, sociologist Barry Glassner demonizes some common fears. According to Glassner and others, many threats have either declined or have been misrepresented as rising. These include kidnapping by a stranger, teen suicide, day-care abuse of children, teen births, adolescent drug use, in-school violence, and other juvenile violent crime (Glassner 1999; Leinwand 2002; U.S. Federal Interagency Forum 2006, Indicator BEH3). School crime rates declined between 1992 and 2004 ("Serious Violent Crime at School" 2006). Sexual assaults against youth age twelve to seventeen fell 79 percent from 1993 to 2003 (Grimes Against Children Research Center 2005; Koch 2005). Plus, childhood accidents have been reduced by safety protections, such as car seats and bicycle helmets, that previous generations did not have (Moretti 2002).

What about the reality of risk in high-crime areas? Parents often keep their children inside, away from danger, likely a necessary strategy, but one that is problematic in terms of child development (Fox 2000, Marriott 1995). In fact, parents in high-crime areas often try other means before resorting to this kind of restriction. In one study of parenting in Philadelphia, parents turned to keeping children at home only when communal efforts such as group overtures for more police attention failed (Furstenberg et al. 1999). Parents also employ "neighborhood survival tactics" such as setting rules, evaluating peers, checking in via cell phones and pagers, encouraging children to bring friends home, and involving children in activities to keep them off the street and away from questionable peers (Kurz 2002; Letiecq and Kobinsky 2001, 2004).

An exploration of the ecological setting of the family may identify important factors in community support for families. The relationship of work to family life, discussed in Chapter 12, is another ecological focus. So is the impact of incarceration on families, as rates of imprisonment increase. (See "When a Parent Is in Prison" in Chapter 15.) Part of the ecology of the family today is the perception of risk in local or global settings. (See "Issues for Thought: Safety and Risk in the Family Environment." )

Other topics of recent interest to family ecologists are family policy and the effectiveness of neighborhoods.

**Family Policy** In a narrow sense, family policy is all the procedures, regulations, attitudes, and goals of government that affect families. More generally, family policy concerns itself with the circumstances in the broader society that affect the family. American families worry about making ends meet; how we will support ourselves, find comfortable housing, educate our children, get affordable health care, finance our old age. Poverty is a real problem for many U.S. families, and research suggests that deep poverty in early childhood affects outcomes for children (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 2002; Wagmiller et al. 2006). Family ecologists might point out that the United States provides fewer services to families than does any other industrialized nation, while Western Europe offers many examples of a successful partnership between government and families in the interests of family support.

**Teaching Tip:** Make a list of recent policies affecting families/children and pass copies of the list out to students and ask them to work in small groups to explain how the Family Ecology approach applies to each policy, and have them identify inclusive versus exclusionary policies.
information on strategies appropriate in dangerous neighborhoods—or safer ones (J. Brody 2003b), a plan for talking with children about protection from salient risks, and a “check it out” attitude toward scary media stories would seem to be a good parental approach.

The government disaster preparedness agency, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), offers a website addressed to children (www.fema.gov/kids) that includes “National Security Emergencies.” FEMA has added a new website program called “Ready Kids” (www.ready.gov/kids). The Department of Defense operates a support program for children (Hagan 2005), and the American Academy of Pediatrics has developed a guide for pediatricians (www.aap.org/terrorism/index.html). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, sponsored by UCLA and Duke University, is another good resource (www.ncsnet.org). Also, child development specialist Judith Myers-Walls has expanded her discussion of “Talking to Children about Terrorism and Armed Conflict” (2002) to include advice on “Children as Victims of Hurricane Katrina” and “Talking with Children When the Talking Gets Tough” (2005a, b, 2007; see References for Myers-Walls’ web addresses).

Police and civilian defense officials work with schoolchildren to enable them to feel confident that they have a course of action to follow in the event of a family or community emergency. The designation of a meeting point for family members is an important part of emergency planning.

**Critical Thinking**

What risks to children do you see in family environments with which you are familiar? How should parents communicate with children about risk in high-risk neighborhoods? In low-risk neighborhoods? Have September 11 and Hurricane Katrina changed things?

The ecology perspective encourages researchers and policy makers to investigate what might be done to create environments that improve families’ quality of life. In recent years the federal government and the states have developed programs to encourage and support marriage, to encourage father involvement in fragile families, to discourage teen sexual activity, and to move single mothers from welfare to work (discussed in Chapter 7).\(^1\)

\(^1\) Space does not permit a comprehensive review of current and proposed family policies and programs and their effectiveness. The book’s companion website provides bibliographic information for review articles on family policy (see Amato 2005; Dion 2005; Duncan and Chase-Lansdale 2004; Offner 2005; Ooms 2005; and Seefeldt and Smock 2004).

Given the social and political diversity of American society, all parents or political actors are unlikely to agree on the best course of action. Not only are Americans not in agreement on the role government should play vis-à-vis families, but they are divided on what “family” means in a policy sense. Some argue that only heterosexual, nuclear families should be encouraged, whereas others believe in supporting a variety of families—single-parent or gay and lesbian families, for example (Bogenschneider 2006; Waite 2001). Indeed, the diversity of family lifestyles in the United States makes it extremely difficult to develop family policies that would satisfy all, or even most, of us.

Then, too, more government help to families would be costly. On the other hand, the estimated costs of
not having family programs might be higher. Disadvantaged children whose adult lives take a bad turn could eventually cost society more in unemployment compensation and incarceration expenses than would preventive investments in support of these children and their families (Eckholm 2007).

**Neighborhood and Community** Although family policy is primarily pursued at the national or state level, social scientists have become interested in the local ecology of families; their neighborhoods and relationships within the community (Scanzoni 2001a). Neighborhoods are especially important for the well-being and development of teenagers, who spend much time outside the home (Kurz 2002).

It’s been assumed that in the past there were neighborhoods where there were many children and parents considered the neighborhood safe enough so that children could be allowed simply to “go out to play.” Nowadays most neighborhoods, even in small towns, have many fewer children, also there are fewer neighbors home during the day to keep a watchful eye on children. . . . And parents are almost universally concerned about the safety of their children with strangers who come into the neighborhood. (Maccoby 1998)

Social scientists have examined both inner-city and suburban neighborhoods. Children in poor neighborhoods are at great risk of negative social, educational, economic, and health outcomes (Mather and Rivers 2006). Other neighborhood risk factors for these outcomes as well as violence are high crime rates, low educational attainment by adults, and a higher percentage of female-headed households (Knoester and Haynie 2005; Shumow, Vandell, and Posner 1999).

Glen Elder and his colleagues (Elder et al. 1995) studied low-income inner-city parents. The researchers found less collective support available to African American parents and fewer programs available for their children, even compared to low-income white parents in inner-city settings. “Parents who live in neighborhoods where social cohesion is low and poverty is high must make sizeable investments of personal energy and ingenuity to ensure a protective community for their children” (Elder et al. 1995, p. 782, citing Walker and Furstemberg 1994). Elder and his colleagues noted that those African American parents who successfully involved themselves in the community had a strong sense of efficacy. But the challenge was considerable, because poor mothers typically have more hours of work, less flexibility, more night jobs, and little money for household help compared to professional working mothers, and so have less time available for active parenting and community involvement (Kurz 2002).

Surprisingly—given the reputation of suburbs as lacking the sense of community of traditional urban neighborhoods—researchers have found some close-knit neighborhoods in suburban areas that perform the thought-to-be-lost function of “bringing up kids together” (Bould 2003). Typically, these are racially homogeneous neighborhoods, with stay-at-home moms who bonded when children were small and who continue to have a level of trust that permits families to monitor and discipline each other’s children. Bould wonders the trade-off this seems to require in terms of women’s role choices and neighborhood diversity.

Recently concern has arisen about the possible social isolation of Americans at all social levels. Research indicates that the number of people with whom Americans discuss “important matters” has declined, especially among educated middle-class individuals (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 2006). The authors speculate that American involvement in community and neighborhood has declined due to longer working hours, the movement of women into the labor force, commuting patterns, more heterogeneous neighborhoods, and the tendency to rely on technological tools for interpersonal contact. At the same time, Americans are now more likely to have a close confidant of another race, suggesting that interracial bridges among people are increasing (Hulbert 2006).

There are a number of ways to think about neighborhood and community cohesion, and research on this topic has barely begun. One sociologist argues that Americans have simply changed the form of their community engagement, less dependent on the neighborhood and more likely to involve professional associations, volunteer work in advocacy and service organizations, and participation in self-help groups as well as religious organizations (Wuthnow 2002, Chapter 2).

**How Useful Is the Family Ecology Perspective?** From the preceding examples, we can see that the family ecology perspective sensitizes us to issues that may not be addressed in other theories. It turns our attention to what may be done about social problems that affect the family, whether through neighbors and citizens coming together or through strategies of formal policy development and lobbying for change.

A weakness of the family ecology perspective is that it is so broad and inclusive that virtually nothing is left out. More and more, however, social scientists are exploring family ecology in concrete settings. They are also going beyond the former focus of family ecological theory on poverty and disadvantage to look at the eco-

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**Clicker/Discussion Tip:** Ask how many students feel that they experienced community cohesion when they were growing up (e.g. neighborhood gatherings, neighborhood organizations, parents watching out for other children in the neighborhood, etc.). Use this to facilitate discussion about diversity of neighborhoods/communities and how community cohesion can be present in all types of areas (e.g. suburban, rural, urban etc).
logical settings of more privileged families. Examining the kinds of economic and social advantages enjoyed by the middle and upper levels of society may provide insight into the conditions that would enable all families to succeed. Moreover, there are sometimes elements in an upper-socioeconomic-level environment—excessive achievement pressure or the isolation of children from busy, achievement-oriented parents—that are problematic (Luthar 2003). In any case, pointing to the ecology of family life challenges the notion that family satisfaction and success are due solely to individual effort (S. Marks 2001).

The Family Development Perspective

Whereas family ecology analyzes family and society as interdependent parts of a whole, the family development perspective emphasizes the family itself as the unit of analysis. The concept of the family life cycle is central here, based on the idea that the family changes in predictable ways over time.

The Family Life Cycle

Typical stages of family life are marked by (1) the addition or subtraction of family members (through birth, death, and leaving home), (2) the various stages that the children go through, and (3) changes in the family's connections with other social institutions (retirement from work, for example, or a child's entry into school). These stages of family development are termed the family life cycle. Ideally, they succeed one another in an orderly progression and have their requisite developmental tasks, challenges that must be mastered in one stage for a successful transition to the next. "On-time" transitions are thought most likely to be successful for role performance (Hogan and Astone 1986). Role sequencing, the order in which major transitions to adult roles take place, is also theorized to be important. The normative order hypothesis proposes that the work-marriage-parenthood sequence is best for mental health and happiness (Jackson 2004).

Various versions of the stages of the family life cycle have been offered, but there is some convergence on a six- to eight-stage model (Aldous 1996; Duvall and Miller 1985; Rodgers and White 1993). The family begins with marriage and the establishment of an independent

The term family life cycle is misleading in some ways, because the word cycle implies circular repetition, while a family's lifetime experience is linear. It proceeds from the formation of the particular family to the end of the family through dissolution or death. Alternative terms are family career (Aldous 1996) or family life course, which connects the family to the multidisciplinary study of life course development. We have chosen to retain the original and commonly used term family life cycle.

Teaching Tip: Find some pictures of individuals/families in various social contexts (e.g. a family having a barbeque in a neighborhood with other neighbors, or a parent and child huddled in a doorway in an urban area) and ask the students to interpret the picture(s) from the Family Ecology perspective.
residence for the couple. The newly established couple stage comes to an end when the arrival of the first baby thrusts the couple into the families of preschoolers stage. Entry of the oldest child into school brings about further changes in family life, as families of primary school children need to coordinate schedules with the school and parents are faced with the task of helping their children meet the school’s expectations. Families with adolescents may be dealing with more complex problems such as sexual activity or drug and alcohol abuse. Children become increasingly expensive during this stage, and anticipated college costs add to parents’ financial pressures.

Families in the middle years help their offspring to enter the adult world of employment and begin their own family formation. Later, these parents return to a couple focus with (if they are fortunate!) the time and money to pursue leisure activities. Still later, aging families must adjust to retirement and perhaps health crises or debilitating chronic illness. The death of a spouse marks the end of the family life cycle (Aldous 1996).

The family development perspective emerged and prospered from the 1930s through the 1950s—an era in which the taken-for-granted family was nuclear: two monogamous heterosexual parents and their children. Accordingly, the model assumed that family life follows certain conventional patterns: Couples marry, and marriage precedes parenthood; families are nuclear and reside independently from other relatives; all families have children; fathers are employed and mothers are not; parents remain together for a lifetime. Today—and, in fact, in the past as well—many of us do not proceed so predictably along these well-marked paths.

Critics have noted the white, middle-class bias of the family life cycle. Moreover, due to economic, ethnic, and cultural differences, two families in the same life cycle stage may be very different from each other. For these reasons, the family development perspective in its traditional form is less popular now than it once was.

Meanwhile, family development theorists continue to see the model as useful (Mattessich and Hill 1987, p. 445). Despite growing diversity and broader time frames, there is still a sense in our society of a right time to have a child or retire. The family development perspective has been used effectively as a research framework. One interesting, though small, study (twenty families) examined ties to kin and friends over the life cycle by looking at families’ photo albums. Families were very closed during the preschool years, reaching out more to friends and kin when the children entered school. Kin ties became especially important later in the family life cycle (Gardner 1990).

Emerging Adulthood. A current area of research and theory is the transition to adulthood. This is the period between adolescence and adulthood that precedes the family life cycle as defined earlier. Emerging adulthood can be viewed as a stage in individual development that affects entry into the family life cycle per se.

Scholars have become aware of the historical contingency of the family life cycle (Shanahan 2000). In different historical periods and for different generations, “normal” timing of the family life cycle has varied. In the post–World War II era, marriage and parenthood typically occurred at a much younger age than today. “There used to be a societal expectation that people in their early twenties would have finished their schooling, set up a household, gotten married, and started their careers. … But now that’s the exception rather than the norm” (sociologist Frank Furstenberg Jr. in Lewin 2003; and Furstenberg et al. 2004). The transition to adulthood has become elongated and now is completed much later. The primary reason for this change is that it takes longer to earn enough to support a family. A bachelor’s degree or beyond is essential for professional and managerial positions. Moreover, wages and job stability are not what they used to be, even for the middle class. For those with less than a college education, the kinds of jobs that used to provide access to a solid standard of family living are not so available or well-paid as they were thirty or forty years earlier. The kinds of government educational and housing programs that enabled the World War II generation to marry young no longer exist. (Changes in the American economy are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.)

Parents are called upon to subsidize young adults’ education, housing, and career establishment, rendering independence from parents—a previous marker of adulthood—a much later occurrence. That can also mean a lengthy period of self-development:

Among the most privileged young adults—those who receive ample support from their parents—this is a time of unparalleled freedom from family responsibilities and an opportunity for self-exploration and development. For the less advantaged, early adulthood is a time of struggle to gain the skills and credentials required for a job that can support the family they wish to start (or perhaps have already started), and a struggle to feel in control of their lives (Furstenberg et al. 2004, p. 34).

Furstenberg and his colleagues conducted interviews with five hundred young adults in various parts of the United States. They found marriage and parenthood no longer the marks of adulthood they used to be. Vast majorities of their respondents did identify some other
traditional markers of adult status: completing one's education, achieving financial independence, obtaining full-time work, gaining the ability to support a family, and leaving one's parents' home (Furstenberg et al. 2004, Figure 1).

Other, more psychosocial indicators of adulthood were reported to psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2004) in his interviews with over three hundred individuals age twenty to twenty-nine. The three criteria for adulthood noted by his respondents were: “accept responsibility for yourself; make independent decisions; and become financially independent” (p. 15). Attainment of these adult qualities was seen to be the outcome of a period of identity exploration, instability (of residence, work, and relationships), self-focus, feeling “in-between,” and sensing widening possibilities. Arnett did not characterize “self-focus” as a bad thing, but rather an inevitable feature of a stage in which there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others” (p. 13).

The concept of emerging adulthood conveys this sense of ongoing change and development, “a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life’s possibilities is greater for more people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (Arnett 2000, p. 469). By age thirty, “a new web of commitments and obligations is well established for most people” (Arnett 2004, p. 12).

Researchers (and journalists) who have interviewed parents and adult children note that the “generation gap,” which might have made financial dependency and close living annoying to one or both generations, seems to have vanished. According to sociologist Barbara Risman, parents and adolescents or emerging adults today have more in common in lifestyle and values than did baby boomers and their depression/World War II–era parents (in Jayson 2006a).

Ironically, as the arrival at adulthood has been postponed for many and seems to provide a new freedom of choice, new pressures have arisen for the early birds. Having a baby in one’s twenties, for example, may be seen as “out of step,” a risky life course move (Jong-Fast 2003). This does suggest the utility of the life course perspective. The notion that doing something “on time”—or not—makes a difference suggests that, in fact, there are culturally defined family life cycle expectations.

The Utility of the Family Development Perspective

The family development perspective has been made more useful by modifications that recognize racial/ethnic and other family variations such as child-free unions, single parenthood, divorce and remarriage, adoption, gay/lesbian families, and working couples (Allen and Wilcox, 2000; Brodzinsky, Smith, and Brodzinski 1998, Chapter 3; Carter and McGoldrick 1999; K. Downs, Coleman, and Ganong 2000; T. Johnson and Colucci 1999; Rodgers and White 1993; S. Slater 1995).

Family development researchers have shown a willingness to explore assumptions rather than taking them for granted. One such study, of “Early,” “On-time,” and “Late” fathers, found, contrary to expectation, that late fathers were highly involved in caregiving and very positive about parenthood compared to the On-time or Early fathers (Cooney et al. 1993).

Research on the sequencing of work, spouse, and parent roles did find the normative order of education, employment, marriage, and parenthood to be generally best for mental health. Yet contrary to that expectation, African Americans whose parenthood preceded marriage were less depressed than those who married before parenthood (P. Jackson 2004).

Defining the family life cycle in terms of children and child-rearing stages, carefully distinguishing those areas of family life that are logically related to these stages, examining diverse settings, and exploring the assumptions of the theory are ways in which family scientists tinkering with the family development perspective to match it to the empirical reality of today’s families.

The Structure–Functional Perspective

In the structure–functional perspective, the family is seen as a social institution that forms essential functions for society. Institutions are patterned and predictable ways of thinking and behaving—beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms—that are organized around vital aspects of group life and serve essential social functions; that is, they meet the needs of members and enable the society to survive. What those functions are depends on the society and how it is organized. Likewise, family structure, or the form of the family, varies according to the society in which it is embedded.

In preindustrial or traditional societies, the family structure was an extended one, involving whole kinship groups. The extended family of parents, children, grandparents, and other relatives performed most societal functions, including economic production (the family farm, for example), protection of family members, vocational training, and maintenance of social order.

In industrial or modern societies, the typical family structure is more often the nuclear family (husband, wife, children). It has lost many functions formerly performed by the traditional extended family (W. Goode 1963). Economic production now takes place primarily

**Clicker/Discussion Tip:** Ask if students can apply the traditional conceptualization of the Family Development Perspective to their family of origin (i.e., did they grow up in a traditional family where their parents got married, had children, and never divorced?)—OR—do they expect to be able to apply it to their future family of procreation?

**Teaching Tip:** Ask students to get into small groups and think of two examples of families (e.g., from sitcoms, movies, books, other media etc) that illustrate the Family Development Perspective.
in factories, shops, and corporations, not the home. Police and fire departments, the military, juvenile authorities, and mental health services provide protection and maintain social order. Schools, technical institutes, and universities educate and train the upcoming generation. The extended family does continue to play a supportive role in many cases.

Nevertheless, in contemporary society, the family remains principally accountable for at least three important family functions: to raise children responsibly, to provide economic support, and to give emotional security.

**Family Function 1: To Raise Children Responsibly** If a society is to persist beyond one generation, it is necessary that adults not only bear children but also feed, clothe, and shelter them during their long years of dependency. Furthermore, a society needs new members who are properly trained in the ways of the culture and who will be dependable members of the group. All this requires that children be responsibly raised. Virtually every society places this essential task on the shoulders of families.

A related family function has traditionally been to control its members' sexual activity. Although there are several reasons for the social control of sexual activity, the most important one is to ensure that reproduction takes place under circumstances that guarantee the responsible care and socialization of children. The universally approved locus of reproduction remains the married-couple family. Still, in the United States today, the child-rearing function is often performed by divorced or never-married parents and sometimes by grandparents.

**Family Function 2: To Provide Economic Support** A second family function involves providing economic support. For much of history, the family was primarily an economic unit rather than an emotional one (Shorter 1975; L. Stone 1980). Although the modern family is no longer a self-sufficient economic unit, virtually every family engages in activities aimed at providing for such practical needs as food, clothing, and shelter.

Family economic functions now consist of earning a living outside the home, pooling resources, and making consumption decisions together. In assisting one another economically, family members create some sense of material security. For example, spouses and partners offer each other a kind of unemployment insurance. And family members care for one another in additional practical ways, such as nursing and transportation during illness.

**Family Function 3: To Give Emotional Security** Although historically the family was a pragmatic institution involving material maintenance, in today's world, the family has grown more important as a source of emotional security (Coontz 2005b). This is not to say that families can solve all our longings for affection, companionship, and intimacy. (Sometimes, in fact, the family situation itself is a source of stress, as we'll discuss in Chapters 14 and 15.) But families and committed intimate relationships typically offer important emotional support to adults and children. Family may mean having a place where you may be yourself, even sometimes your worst self, and still belong.
The Utility of the Structure–Functional Perspective. The structure–functional perspective calls attention to cross-cultural variations in family structure and functions. It points to the essential role the family plays in different societies and how that may change over time.

As it dominated family sociology in the United States during the 1950s, however, the structure–functional perspective emphasized the heterosexual nuclear family as the only “normal” or “functional” family structure. Furthermore, the structure–functional perspective argued the functionality of specialized gender roles: the instrumental husband–father, who supports the family economically and wields authority inside and outside the family, and the expressive wife–mother–homemaker, whose main function is to enhance emotional relations at home and socialize young children (Parsons and Bales 1955). These views fit nicely into a post–World War II society, characterized by an expanding economy in which a man’s wage could support a family. But they no longer match family reality.

The structure–functional perspective has been criticized for giving us an image of smoothly working families characterized by shared values, overlooking gender inequality and power issues, spousal or parent–child conflict, and even family violence. The perspective has been further criticized because it generally fails to recognize that what is functional for one group or category of people may not be so for others. Finally, structure–functionalism does not take into consideration racial/ethnic or class variation in family structures. Nonetheless, virtually all social scientists assume the one basic premise underlying structure–functionalism: that families are an important social institution performing essential social functions.

The Interactionist Perspective

As the name implies, the interactionist perspective focuses on interaction, the face-to-face encounters and relationships of individuals who act in awareness of one another. This point of view explores the back-and-forth talk, gestures, and actions that go on in families. Members respond verbally or nonverbally to what other members say and do. These interchanges take on a reality of their own; they construct or create a family. Put another way, something called “family” emerges from the relationships and interactions among family members. Unlike structure–functionalism, which posits a standard family form, the interactionist perspective refuses to identify a standard family structure. The family is not a stock social unit but the creation of its participants as they spontaneously relate to one another.

Originating in the work of Charles Horton Cooley (1902, 1909) and George Herbert Mead (1934), the interactionist perspective was an important theoretical orientation in sociology during the 1920s and 1930s, when family studies was establishing itself as a legitimate social science. The orientation remains a popular and fruitful one.

A major concept in the interactionist perspective is the self-concept (the basic feelings people have about themselves, their abilities and characteristics, and their worth) and the related concept of identity (a sense of uniqueness and inner sameness). The self is developed initially in a family setting. Parents especially, and siblings and other relatives are the most influential or significant figures in a young child’s life, together with

Teaching Tip: Discuss specific examples of how the Structure–Functional Perspective has contributed to the understanding of cross-cultural variations in family structure and functions (e.g., Lee, 1982; Stephens, 1963; or more recent studies).

Teaching Tip: Pass out copies of a family assessment instrument based on the Structure–Functional Perspective (e.g., the Family APGAR, Smilkstein, 1978; the Family Assessment Device (FAD); or Epstein et al., 1983) and discuss how these effectively capture the family based on the Structure–Functional Perspective, either as a class or in small groups.