

Family Systems Theory

This theory emerged from General Systems Theory by scholars who found it had many applications to families and other social systems. Any system is defined as *a bounded set of interrelated elements exhibiting coherent behavior as a trait*. (Constantine, 1986). Another definition is *an assemblage of objects related to each other by some regular interaction or interdependence* (Webster). Families are considered systems because they are made up of interrelated elements or objectives, they exhibit coherent behaviors, they have regular interactions, and they are interdependent on one another.

The Components of Family Systems Theory are as follows:

Family Systems...

- have interrelated elements and structure. The elements of a system are the members of the family. Each element has characteristics; there are relationships between the elements; the relationships function in an interdependent manner. All of these create a structure, or the sum total of the interrelationships among the elements, including membership in a system and the boundary between the system and its environment.
- interact in patterns. There are predictable patterns of interaction that emerge in a family system. These repetitive cycles help maintain the family's equilibrium and provide clues to the elements about how they should function.
- have boundaries and can be viewed on a continuum from open to closed. Every system has ways of including and excluding elements so that the line between those within the system and those outside of the system is clear to all. If a family is permeable and vague boundaries it is considered "open." Open boundary systems allows elements and situations outside the family to influence it. It may even welcome external influences. Closed boundary systems isolate its members from the environment and seems isolated and self-contained. No family system is completely closed or completely open.
- function by the Composition Law: the Whole is More than the Sum of Its Parts. Every family system, even though it is made up of individual elements, results in an organic whole. Overall family images and themes are reflected in this wholistic quality. Unique behaviors may be ascribed to the entire system that do not appropriately describe individual elements.
- use messages and rules to shape members. Messages and rules are relationships agreements which prescribe and limit a family members' behavior over time. They are repetitive and redundant. They are rarely, if ever, explicit or written down. They give power; they induce guilt; they control or limit behaviors; and they perpetuate themselves and reproduce. Most messages and rules can be stated

in one or a few words. For example, *More is good*, *Be responsible*, and *Be Perfect* are all examples of messages/rules.

- have subsystems. Every family systems contains a number of small groups usually made up of 2-3 people. The relationships between these people are known as subsystems, coalitions, or alliances. Each subsystem has its own rules, boundaries, and unique characteristics. Membership in subsystems can change over time.