Handbook of Family Theories: A Content-Based Approach

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Chapter 1

The Role of Theory in Family Science

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'There is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951, p. 169)

This book focuses on theoretical perspectives that inform research in key topical areas of family science[1]. Along with most scholars, we share a strong belief in the value of theory in the empirical process. Conducting research without theory is analogous to building a new house without a set of blueprints. In fact, we argue that one cannot conduct research without at least an implicit theoretical orientation, just as one cannot build a house without having some type of blueprint, no matter how poorly defined. Builders (and researchers) may think that they can engage in their craft without having an underlying blueprint (or theoretical perspective), but every step in the construction (or empirical) process requires some foundational sense of future direction. The lack of a theoretical perspective is not an option; the choice is the extent to which one uses theory explicitly and deliberately versus implicitly and outside of conscious awareness.

What are theories?

We follow in the tradition of many others (e.g., White & Klein, 1998; Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993) who have described theories as socially constructed explanations of why certain phenomena occur as they do. Definitions of theories often refer to constructs, logical relations among these constructs or statements the theory purports to be truths, and testable hypotheses logically derived from the theory that empirically will either be consistent or inconsistent with the theory. Ideally, theories also specify the relations between and among unobservable constructs and variables that can be observed. In short, good theories

[1] We will use the term *family science* in this book to refer to all research on families. This term includes such subdisciplines as psychology, sociology, family studies, communication, and nursing

specify relations between observables (e.g., a punch, slap, kick) and underlying constructs (e.g., aggression, hostility), as well as relations among the constructs, are internally consistent, useful, explanatory, evidence-based, falsifiable, broadly applicable, and consistent with other accepted theories. All of these features are important aspects of theories in family science, and they serve to explain why or how some (family) phenomenon occurs the way that it does.

For example, consider Rusbult's (1983) investment model, which is an extension of social exchange theory. Her model attempts to explain relationship stability (i.e., whether a relationship continues or discontinues). In her model, rewards, costs, and comparison level predict relationship satisfaction. In turn, relationship satisfaction (positively), investments (positively), and the quality of available alternatives (negatively) predict each individual's level of commitment to the relationship. Finally, level of commitment predicts relationship stability. The model contains a series of key constructs, delineates how the constructs are related to each other, and leads to a wealth of empirically testable hypotheses that have been studied in previous research. However, it is important not to lose sight of the key function of the investment model: to predict which relationships will continue and which will break up. To the extent that it does so (and research suggests that it does so quite well), the model can be said to explain the future course of relationships. Of course, the model needs to (and empirically has in research) predict relationship stability better than pure chance alone (if 70% of relationships remain intact, one could predict which relationships will continue with a 70% success rate merely by predicting that every relationship will continue).

Several points are important to note regarding how *theory* is used in this volume. First, we imposed no restrictions on how our authors could define *theory.* Authors were free to use the term, and similar ones, as they wished with no attempt on our part to ensure that a consensually

agreed upon definition was used in every chapter. We felt that it was more desirable for readers to be exposed to how scholars in family science themselves use terms like *theory* than for us to impose a definition on experienced and successful scholars. Nevertheless, we believe that all authors defined and used theory in a manner consistent with what was depicted earlier—as an explanation of why and how certain phenomena occur as they do.

Second, and related to the definitional freedom given to our authors, we also imposed no constraints on the terms that authors could use as synonyms for *theory*. While some theorists have attempted to delineate distinctions among such terms as conceptual framework, theory, model, perspective, causal models, and so forth, there is no consensus among theorists on the nature of many of these distinctions and, thus, we allowed authors to use these terms in any way that they wished to do so. If there is a somewhat consistent distinction that is used in this book, it is the distinction between a *theory/model* and a *perspective*. A theory or model is designed to explain a particular phenomenon and to make predictions about what might happen in the future. By contrast, a perspective is broader and involves a worldview or lens through which one views families and relationships. For example, social exchange is a theory in the sense that it allows one to explain certain behaviors and to predict how one will act in the future. However, many consider the life course approach to be a perspective in the sense that it is not designed to explain why certain phenomena unfold as they do and it makes no specific predictions about family-related events, but provides a lens through which one can gain perspective on family events.

Finally, although we use the term *theory,* we are actually referring to *deductively-derived theory*. Family scientists use both deductively-derived and inductively-derived theories in their work, but the vast majority of the research reviewed in this volume is based on deductively-derived theories that are typically used to ground quantitative studies. Inductively-derived

theories are frequently generated from qualitative studies and have made extremely important contributions to family science. However, as do all other books on family theories that we are aware of, we focus primarily on theories derived from the deductive process.

Why are theories important to the research endeavor?

Theories provide guidance to investigators throughout the empirical endeavor, from selecting a research topic, to carefully reviewing the relevant literature(s), to formulating hypotheses and/or questions, to designing the study and choosing measures, to choosing one's sample, to analyzing and interpreting results, and to drawing implications for future research and for practice. It is clearly as important for scholars to have expertise in the use of theory as it is to have sophisticated methodological and statistical skills. Indeed, without theory even the most sophisticated methods can be counter-productive as "conceptual clarification [theory] is a pre-requisite for efficient experimentation [data collection]" (Heider, 1958, p. 4). In short, "good theory construction, with its attendant methods, has the resources to provide the types of conceptual analyses (better theoretical analyses) that really matter to science (Bennett & Hacker, 2003, p. 565).

In what ways do theories influence steps in the research process? The first point to note is that no decisions regarding methodology are objective and mechanical in the sense that they are independent of the researcher's underlying values, world view, conceptual lens and (implicit or explicit) theory.. Even something as apparently simple as choosing a measure of a particular construct is based on theoretical assumptions. For example, depression is a construct relevant to many family scholars, such as in work related to how parental depression affects parenting and how depression affects couple dynamics. However, some measures of depression are more focused on cognitive symptoms (e.g., the Beck Depression Inventory), whereas others emphasize

somatic symptoms (e.g., Zung Depression Scale). Some people may score higher on one type of depression scale than another, depending on the nature of their symptoms. The choice of whether one prefers to measure primarily (but not exclusively) cognitive symptoms or primarily (but not exclusively) somatic symptoms should be based on the particular theoretical underpinnings of one's study. If one's theoretical perspective is based on the notion that depressed parents become less *physically* available to their children, then one may prefer a more somatic-based measure. However, if one considers the *modeling of depressive thinking* as the key mechanism by which parental depression affects children, one may decide to use a measure such as the Beck Depression Inventory. We argue that all of the various decisions made in the research endeavor, however seemingly minor they may seem to be, are affected by theoretical thinking. Even such choices as which sample to gather data from and how to recruit participants should be based on underlying theory.

We recognize that empirical studies as they typically unfold are not always based on careful theoretical thinking at each and every step. However, even if a particular choice is not made with a carefully thought out theoretical rationale, one should at least make sure that one's choice is not *inconsistent* with one's theoretical approach. For example, some data analysis decisions seem quite clear cut and may not require much thought (e.g., comparing the means of 2 groups with a *t-test*), but at the very least such decisions should not be inconsistent with one's theoretical perspective. However, many data analytic decisions do need to be based on theoretical considerations, such as deciding to use growth curve modeling because one has one has hypothesized that parental depression affects *later* parental availability. As an obvious example of a decision that would be inconsistent with underlying theory, if one's theory is that parental depression, through the mechanism of depressed parents being unavailable to school-age

children who are still quite dependent on their parents, negatively affects children's well-being, one should not gather a sample of high school juniors and seniors. Thus, researchers need to review all of their methodological choices not only with an eye toward what seems most feasible and logical, but also with an eye towards ensuring that decisions are, at minimum, not inconsistent with one's theoretical perspective.

Approaches to Teaching about Theories

The traditional approach to teaching about theories has been labeled by Klein (personal communication) as the "theory of the week" approach. With this approach, theories are learned one after the other, often from textbooks that devote single chapters to each of the theories covered. Whereas the "theory of the week" approach can provide a useful description of the various theories and how they have been used, it does not provide a clear sense of how theory is an integral part of the study of specific family-related topics. In other words, the traditional approach to presenting and teaching about theories, in general, and family theories, in particular, often leaves readers with a good sense of the tenets, strengths, and weaknesses of the various theories, but, importantly, not a good sense of the direct linkages between theory and research.

In this volume, we use a second and far less commonly used strategy—a content-based approach. We organize the book around content areas and show how theories have been used to further our knowledge in a variety of family related areas. The rationale behind this approach is that readers will gain more insight into how theory is used in family science by organizing the presentation according to topics within family science, as opposed to devoting one theory to each chapter. Different content areas in family studies have different traditions with respect to how theories have grounded empirical research. Thus, to convey a rich and nuanced sense of how theory underlies specific family-related domains, we organize the book around the most

important domains in the field. We carefully selected what we consider to be the topics that have received the most research attention in the last 10-15 years in family science, with guidance from tables of contents from the 2000 and 2010 decade-in-review issues of *Journal of Marriage and Family,* from colleagues, and from our ongoing exposure to the family science literature(s).

Only via this content-based approach can readers obtain a thorough and clear understanding of how empirical research in particular family-related areas depends on the use of family theories. For example, most family-related content areas make use of multiple theories and this multifaceted use of theory will be conveyed in each chapter of this book, unlike the picture one obtains in more traditional books that present one and only one theory per chapter. A related benefit of the content-based approach is that readers are exposed to a much greater number of theories than are commonly included in books that cover one theory per chapter. As described below, readers of this book will learn about numerous theories, whereas more traditional books tend to cover at most 15 theories because there are typically 15 weeks in a typical university semester.

Thus, readers of this volume should realize three interrelated goals: 1) acquire a good working understanding of a number of theories relevant to family science, 2) see how leading scholars in the field make use of these theories in their empirical efforts; and 3) acquire a cutting edge understanding of the key findings and issues in important family-related content areas.

We know of only one other book that has attempted to use the content-based approach to covering family theories (Bengston, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005). Bengston et al.'s Sourcebook was ground-breaking in its use of the content-based approach, its inclusion of authors representing numerous different theoretical and methodological orientations, and its attention to the implications that theories have for methodological decisions. However,

compared to the Sourcebook, the present volume is more current (the Sourcebook was published 7 years ago), has a more consistent organizational structure across chapters, is considerably shorter and more amendable to coverage in a semester-long graduate seminar, is more focused on how theory has extended our knowledge base in particular content areas in family science (as opposed to addressing some methodological issues in detail), and has more reader-accessible material. Its accessibility stems from its greater organizational consistency across chapters and its strict and consistent devotion to theory throughout each chapter.

Design of the Book

To meet these goals, we asked authors with high levels of expertise and strong reputations in particular areas to write a theory-based chapter on their content area. These authors were asked to address in their chapter a common set of questions and issues pertaining to the use of theory in the relevant area. The core set of questions included the following:

1. Introduction to the content area
2. Brief review of key topics/issues/findings in this content area
3. Theories that have been used to study these topics in this content area, including a brief description of each theory, focusing primarily on those aspects of the theory that have been used to study this aspect of the content area
4. Limitations of how theory has been used in this content area
5. Suggestions for better use of theory in this content area and/or new theoretical advances
6. Conclusions about future theoretical developments in this content area

Readers will find that most authors very carefully followed the proposed outline, whereas a few felt that their particular content areas required some deviation from the core outline. Even

in these cases, however, authors did their best to address the key points in the outline and to adhere to the spirit of the organizational structure.

Family Science Content Areas Covered

The book includes 6 broad content areas: *parenting and parent-child relationships* (5 chapters), *romantic relationships* (3 chapters), *conflict and aggression in families* (4 chapters), *structural variations and transitions in families* (3 chapters), *demographic variations in families* (4 chapters), and *families and extrafamilial institutions* (4 chapters).

The *Parenting and Parent-Child Relations* chapters address parenting and parent-child relationships across the lifespan. Tamis-Lamonda, Smith Leavell, and Eckhardt address theoretical underpinnings of research on parenting *infants and young children,* Lattimore and Manning review theory and research in the area of parenting *adolescents,* and Birditt and Fingerman cover parent-child and intergenerational relationships in *adulthood*. Two particularly salient issues in parenting have been extensively studied by researchers and are included in this section: relationships between grandparents and grandchildren (Bates & Taylor, Chapter 5), who increasingly find themselves living together, and fathering (Chapter 6 authored by Lamb). These excellent chapters show that numerous theoretical perspectives have been used to help us understand how parents and children relate to and mutually influence each other.

The section on *Romantic Relationships: Dating, Cohabiting, and Marital* addresses theoretical perspectives on a variety of types of romantic relationships. In Chapter 7, Cohan reviews theory and research on cohabitation in heterosexual relationships, while Diamond and Allen cover cohabitation in gay and lesbian relationships in Chapter 8. The final chapter (Chapter 9) in this section, authored by Baucom and Atkins, focuses on marriage in general and polarization in marriage, in particular. Most of the material in Baucom and Atkins' chapter is

based on research conducted on heterosexual married couples. With the increasing prevalence of gay and lesbian marriages, hopefully this research in the future will expand to consider marriage in both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

The *Conflict and Aggression in Families* section includes chapters on a wide variety of types of conflict and aggression in romantic relationships and families. Saxbe, Rodriguez, and Margolin (Chapter 10) explore conflict in families, Heyman and Foran examine intimate partner violence in Chapter 11, and Slep reviews the area of child abuse in Chapter 12. Chapter 13, authored by Grych, Lynn, and Oxtoby, focuses on perhaps the most widely studied area on the consequences of conflict and aggression—the effects of marital conflict on children.

The section on *Transitions in Families* addresses common changes that families make over their life course. Chapter 14, written by Shannon, Baumwell, and Tamis LeMonda, reviews the literature on the transition to parenthood with a particular emphasis on how contextual factors influence this important period of change. Demo and Buehler, in Chapter 15, cover divorce and relationship dissolution and Taylor, Robila, and Fisackerly address how theories have been used to help us understand remarriages and stepfamilies in Chapter 16.

The next section, *Demographic Variations in Families,* examines how theory has been used to help us understand a variety of demographic (broadly defined) variations in families. Wood, in Chapter 17, discusses theoretical underpinnings of research on gender, whereas Chuang and Moreno review theory and research on immigrant families. Donnellan, Martin, Conger, and Conger cover the topic of economic distress and poverty in families in Chapter 19, certainly a salient topic in the present economic climate. The final chapter in this section (Chapter 20), authored by Dykstra and Cooney, addresses a growing segment of the population (the elderly) that is often underrepresented in family science.

The final section of this volume deals with the interface between families and institutions. Perry-Jenkins and MacDermid, in Chapter 21, review the important area of work and families, Fiese and Hammons examine families and health care in Chapter 22, and families and the military is covered by Bowen, Martin, and Mancini in Chapter 23. The volume concludes with Chapter 24, written by Regalio, Manzini, and Scabini, which focuses on individuation and differentiation in families from a cross-cultural and global perspective. We encouraged all of our authors to consider international research to the extent that it was available, and they did, but the focus is even more strongly cross-cultural in Regalio et al.'s chapter.

Theory Usage in Family Science

As the reader will readily observe as he or she progresses through this volume, an impressively large number of theories have been used and, or might be used, to study families. Among many others, the following theories and/or perspectives are described and applied in this volume: social learning, family systems, social exchange, attachment, life course, life span, behavioral, social cognitive, cognitive behavioral, ecological, symbolic interactionism, identity, feminist, stress and resiliency, conflict structure, social capital, evolutionary, conflict, relationship enhancement, attribution theory, parenting, minority stress, gender-role, interpersonal process model of intimacy, investment, commitment, coercion, polarization, vulnerability-stress-adaptation, cascade model of marital dissolution, and demand withdraw. Some of these theories are grand in scale (i.e., they attempt to explain a wide array of phenomena, such as family systems theory), whereas others are somewhat more narrow in scope (e.g., middle-range theories, such as the interpersonal process model of intimacy). As an aid for the reader, we place the name of each theory in italics the first time it is mentioned in each chapter.

To what extent is the use of so many different theories and perspectives helpful in family studies? We believe that the use of so many theories is both helpful and detrimental. It is helpful because diversity in theories (and methods) often leads to more creative, innovative, and rich solutions to research questions. Especially in the social sciences, it is quite likely the case that there are multiple causal explanations of why phenomena occur as they do. Thus, no single theoretical perspective is likely to be able to address the range of possible causes of family-related phenomena. If the multiple theories are not only consistent with each other, but are also complementary and even synergistic, our knowledge base is likely to benefit all that much more.

By contrast, having so many theories is detrimental because the lack of a singular, unifying perspective makes it more difficult to integrate findings across studies. Despite the benefits of multiple theoretical perspectives being brought to bear on research questions, there is some benefit to having some uniformity in theoretical perspectives. For example, it is easier to aggregate across studies when researchers employ similar definitions of key constructs and, thus, use the same or similar measures. The use of so many theories is analogous to the proliferation of different computer hardware and software products. The computing world is probably a better place with both PCs and Macs and with different software programs attempting to perform similar tasks; however, for some purposes, it is more efficient if there is compatibility and convention across different types of computer and software programs. As an example of a construct that has been defined in multiple ways, *relationship stability* has been defined both in terms of whether or not the relationship continues over time and, by different scholars, as the extent to which each partner has thoughts of ending the relationship. To their credit, many of the authors in this volume have developed integrative theoretical models of their own to bring greater clarity and integration to their topic.

Intended Audiences

This book is intended for scholars, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates who are interested in how family theories are and have been applied to the study of families. Its primary audience includes those who want to extend their knowledge of, or have a good resource on family theories, but there is also a very relevant secondary audience—individuals who are interested in particular family-related content areas and who want current reviews of how different theoretical perspectives have been used by prominent researchers. Such readers are spread across multiple disciplines, including, but not limited to, psychology, sociology, communication studies, nursing, and family studies.

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