

Family Dynamics

SETTING FAMILIES IN MOTION

Learning Outcomes

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. Define *family dynamics* and describe the implications of dynamics.
2. Illustrate the interrelationship between human *lifespan development* and family dynamics.
3. Justify the relevance of studying family dynamics. Explain the scope of the *family sciences* in various professional contexts.
4. Analyze the different ways of defining *family*.
5. Compare and contrast the definitions of *family* and *family households* by the United States Census with how the family is generally defined in the family sciences.
6. Consider the *diverse* expressions of families in terms of form and function.
7. Describe the *characteristics* of a well-functioning family.
8. Explain how and why a family functions as a *system*.
9. Describe the *functions* of the family.
10. Summarize how *theories*, *psychoanalysis*, and *psychodynamics* relate in a familial context.

Setting Families in Motion

Family dynamics concern the highly personal workings within families. These can be expressed in direct and indirect ways, in an overt or a covert manner. Dynamics are about the effects and outcomes of behavior: what it sets in motion. Family dynamics have to do with the inner mechanisms of a family group. Families can have their own language, their unique ways of communicating. Families contain guidelines and expectations.

Family dynamics represent an extra dimension pertaining to the family. It is like a collection of force fields, whose influences wash over us to become noticeable in our daily lives.

The dynamics of families are about the processes that make families the way they are: what makes them tick. Families follow their own rules, while also complying with certain external demands. They are embedded in a larger society and in a culture. They are influenced by their members, but in turn they influence all those individuals claiming that particular family as their own.

Families are also the place to shelter, celebrate, mourn, grow, and renew. The family unit can provide security and a sense of belonging, but if it fails in its tasks, it

leaves individuals stranded. By and large, well functioning families exert their own magic and hold uncountable rewards for those privileged enough to be a part of them.

**“If the family were fruit, it would be an orange, a circle of sections,
Held together but separable—each segment distinct.”**

Letty Cottin Pogrebin (b. 1939),
American journalist and writer, from *Family Politics*

Family Dynamics: Meaning

Dynamics is about *motion*. It is the opposite of being static or still. Most formal definitions include references to “forces” or “changes,” including those properties within a system or process that *initiate change*, that *stimulate growth* and development. The definitions allude to patterns and processes that herald change, allow for growth, and signal activity and movement. Al Ubaidi (2017) offers the following definition and implications:

A family dynamic is the scheme of family members’ relations and interactions including many prerequisite elements (family arrangements, hierarchies, rules, and patterns of family interactions). Each family is unique in its characteristics; having several helpful and unhelpful dynamics. Family dynamics will ultimately influence the way young people view themselves/others and the world. It will also impact their relationships/behaviors and their future wellbeing.

The everyday use of the word *dynamic* calls up lively and vital associations. For instance, if we refer to a *dynamic personality*, it tends to imply someone who radiates life and energy; we can expect somebody who is interesting, enthusiastic, maybe excitable, and possibly a little unpredictable. If music is described as being dynamic, it tells us that it will be the opposite of soothing; it will probably contain volume changes and be upbeat and energizing.

Dynamics represent the forces that can shape interactions within a family; usually a specific dynamic may underlie a series of transactions (Britton, 2016). The word *psychodynamic* contains two components, namely, *psyche*, pertaining to the soul or spirit, or the inner workings of the mind as the meaning has evolved in the context of psychology, as well as the word *dynamic*, implying a vital and changing nature. In its Greek origins, the word *dynamic* implies strong, powerful, and energetic attributes. It could then imply that forces combine, “sometimes smoothly but sometimes in opposition, to create *continual motion* and change” (Forsyth, 2019, p. 18; italics added).

In a psychodynamic context, as it is generally understood, the term *dynamics* can imply a searching for the hidden meaning of the behavior and thus an explanation of the behavior. It is an attempt at explaining the underlying motivation or reason for behavior. It can presume that actions may have a repetitive component, if a similar underlying dynamic persists. Hence, searching for the patterns that might be occurring within individuals and families may facilitate an understanding of the reasons underlying certain behaviors and interactions. The word *psychodynamic* was originally used in a psychoanalytic context, but it has taken on a more general and relaxed meaning (Gabbard, 2017, p. 2). Often, it is replaced with the more abbreviated concept of “dynamics.”

In social contexts such as family systems, *family dynamics* is used to denote those aspects that change or progress, those places where movement and growth

occur. It can imply a sense of transformation or motion. Additionally, as implied by the concept of psychodynamics, investigating family dynamics can be the process of searching for and uncovering the emotional motivations and possible hidden psychological reasons for behavior.

Change is also involved if we consider the bidirectional influence between families and individual family members. Our self-concept is supported by our family; its members are the people close to us, involved in the formation of the complexity of our identity. What we think about ourselves is, in part, the product of the reflection we see in our family's eyes. Our families turn us into the people we become, and we in turn influence and shape our families. It truly is a bidirectional achievement: "We create our families just as we are created by these families" (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014, p. 2).

The title of this book highlights the movement and motivation implied in the term *dynamics: Families in Motion: Dynamics in Diverse Contexts*.

FOCUS POINT

Families are units in constant motion—growing and changing as demands inside and outside the system influence the whole. Family dynamics deal with the inner workings and behavior of the family, the ways culture and society affect it, and how its members influence each other. Family dynamics represent the movement and growth that occurs as family systems adapt and change, both in relation to the larger system around them and to the intimate system within the family itself.

Definition: In social contexts such as family systems, the word *dynamics* is used to denote those aspects that change or progress, those places where movement and growth occur.

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Authentic Insight

Family Dynamics: All Work Is Family Work

"How did you do that?" is a common refrain for me in a family therapy session, as I try to understand the interactions families are sharing with me. To me, the question speaks to the core of family dynamics. Family dynamics is about *how* things happen in families, not necessarily why they happen, which separates the focus of family dynamics from the main emphasis in psychology. Family dynamics (from a family systems perspective) emphasizes a sequence of behaviors—what happened first, then what happened, and then what followed. . . .

Family dynamics is the complement to the static or structural component of a family.

When I think of family dynamics, I remember a pair of engineering courses I took at Georgia

Tech. The first course was Statics, describing the ways that forces interact in objects at rest. We practiced understanding the forces inherent in bridges, walls, and other objects that aren't supposed to move. Then, and only then, could we understand the next course: Dynamics, where those objects were moving and the force equations become more complex.

For much of human history, family dynamics were the context of human development, because all work was family work.

Jonathan Davis, PhD, is a professor of human development and family science and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

Lifespan Development and Family Dynamics

Human lifespan development is about how individuals change over the course of their *individual* lives, their journey from conception to death. **Family dynamics** is also about constant change—that of the family within which individual lives are embedded. They are inextricably linked; they complement each other like dancers in a well-choreographed routine. The changes that occur within the family over the lifespan of that family unit are also referred to as **family life course development** (White, Klein, & Todd, 2014).

This book closely references human lifespan development by placing it within the context of family dynamics.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Families hold up the mirror to what happens in a society and in turn they are a reflection of that society's hopes and aspirations. The children of a society may seem voiceless, but their fate typically speaks loudest. What happens to the youngest ones is the report card reflecting the grades we, as a society, can hope to earn in terms of family welfare, public policy, and family life education. Families are central to communities, and to societies. They influence the culture, as well as the larger context within which they are embedded (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019).

Families reflect the values, strengths, and shortcomings of that society. When societies are under attack, that destruction enters the family and affects all the members, all the way down to the youngest and most vulnerable ones. On the other hand, when families thrive, they create productive, rewarding, and nurturing communities.

If we can find the *how* and *why* of these dynamic interactions, it leads us down the path of understanding, explaining, and possibly therapeutically intervening in the course that families take. What adds to the complexity is that participants of any dynamic system are often unaware of the reasons for their actions and sometimes even of the presence of these actions. A mother may be unaware that she is being overcontrolling toward her teenage daughter, yet this dynamic interaction tells us about the relationship and the potential challenges of the relationship. The pattern evolving between them may, in turn, guide us toward a suggested intervention to facilitate more positive outcomes.

Dynamic Interrelationships

The dynamic interplay between various changing factors in a family system is like a chain of domino blocks. Bump over the first one and it exerts a consecutive motion. This rippling that extends ever outward has also been compared to the effects of a pebble hitting water; the ripples extend in ever-growing circles long after the stone penetrated the surface. For a family member caught in the middle, the forces may seem overwhelming.

Dynamic interactions are interrelated. If one person in the system has outbursts of rage or has anger control issues, it will cause the others to walk on eggshells, trying to avoid setting off the ripple effect that occurs when the angry behavior is triggered, even inadvertently. Anticipating, managing, and controlling emotions through appropriate emotional regulation can be addressed with a cognitive behavioral approach (Meichenbaum, 2017).

In short, dynamics are concerned with what makes the system *tick*; what effects these unique workings elicit; and, if we are helping professionals and family scientists, how we can examine these complex interactions so that family members can use the insight and understanding to their own best advantage.

FOCUS POINT

Human lifespan development and family dynamics have an intricate link: both describe constant change. Human lifespan development looks at how individuals grow and change over time from

conception to death. Family dynamics deal with the continuous movement (or dynamics) of the family. Individual lives are embedded in the context of their families.

Why Study Family Dynamics?

Dynamic transitions. Family dynamics as a field of study has the power to highlight the constructive, neutral, or even destructive forces in the lives of families and their members. For professionals working with families, an understanding of family dynamics holds a key toward explaining and understanding certain behaviors, which in turn can be important in guiding families toward optimal outcomes. Family dynamics also addresses the transitions that occur between persons and within the systems in which they are embedded.

The study of family dynamics is rewarded by gaining better insight into the mechanics of a particular family system or of many family systems in general. This perception in turn allows for information concerning what we can expect in typical family life and what constitutes family efficacy (Kao & Caldwell, 2017). It also enhances interventions such as family and related therapy, and it can aid better outcomes for the future, by informing public policy decisions, for example. Undoubtedly there are a host of other applications, but in essence the ethical study of families is to gain understanding and to support optimal outcomes. This can be achieved through a variety of professions in numerous contexts and applications.

Ancestry and identity. Because all of us can claim some family and ancestral background through our genetic makeup, it may be safe to say that no person is an island. The current interest in ancestry and DNA testing speaks to the connections we may seek out with our own past, as it can influence our present identity (Bennett, 2015; Bottero, 2015). Ancestral and family connections can be found somewhere, even if the direct connections were severed. In our histories, biological parents made it possible for our births to occur, despite the variations on the theme of parenthood that are possible.

Family scientists. The helping professionals directly concerned with the family and family well-being are often collectively called **family scientists**. As a group, these professionals can include family life educators, social workers, psychologists, counselors, marriage and family therapists, members of multi-professional medical teams, clergy, and experts providing spiritual counsel (We Are Family Science, n.d.). Indirectly a host of professions can be influenced by the needs and functions of families; architects and town planners focus on housing developments with the needs of families in mind, industrial designers may try to meet the needs of various family members through the design of products, social policy makers try to improve legal outcomes affecting families. Economists and those marketing products also benefit from insight into what families need to support optimal functioning. Legal professionals focusing on family law can become the mouthpiece for legal rights. These mentioned professions represent the tip of the iceberg.

FOCUS POINT

Family scientists and helping professionals concerned with the well-being of families come from many disciplines. Focusing on families, these professionals have the power to support

optimal outcomes. Being well versed in family dynamics is valuable to those working with individual families or trying to influence public policy decisions.

Defining Families

The extent to which a society commits to supporting individual families as well as parenthood reflects the investment that group is willing to make toward the next generation and toward family resilience. Changing gender roles has meant discussions about equal pay for equal work, parental leave for both parents (not only the mother), free and compulsory schooling for all, support for families who are raising a child with special needs, and more. In short, appropriate public policy can provide the safety net that strengthens families and guides them toward greater resilience. The entire society benefits from these investments, as they strengthen the very fiber that makes up a given society; this support strengthens families and their futures.

Objective and subjective definitions. Families can be defined and described in objective as well as subjective ways.

- *Objective* definitions may focus on blood and marital connections or on the sharing of resources and domiciles.
- *Subjective* definitions may allow for how a person feels about someone being part of the family. For instance, in an amicable divorce, the two spouses may continue to refer to each other as family, especially if children are involved. If the separation was painful with many negative consequences, either partner may deny being a family member of someone with whom they no longer want to associate (Amato, 2014). This also explains why those persons to whom we feel exceptionally close may become “families of choice.”

In the older objective definitions, the focus was on biological ties through kinship or marriage, legal connections, and persons living together in a consistent manner, while probably also supporting each other (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014, p. 4). These same authors comment:

Today, the family may be viewed more broadly as a group of people with a past history, a present reality, and a future expectation of interconnected mutually influencing relationships. Members often, but not necessarily, are bound together by heredity, legal marital ties, adoption, or committed voluntary ties. (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014, p. 4)

Other subjective dimensions of family ties may be represented by who is in contact with whom, who talks to whom, who provides support or help, or who is available as a potential backup (Amato, 2014).

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Jonathan Davis, PhD, LMFT

Census Definitions

One of the purposes of the U.S. Census is to capture population numbers and various demographics at a given point in time; in the United States, that time is typically once per decade. The Census is a mechanism to count or record all the persons in the United States and gain greater insight into selected demographics. These goals influence how units such as families, family groups, and family households are defined. Importantly, the census application of the term *family* can have wider and different applications, affecting how the family is defined in everyday, legal, and other scholarly contexts. As a census term, it is intended to capture the numbers of and related information about groups of people as they typically reside in one dwelling place at the time the information is captured. The intent is to count or record each person only once and to avoid duplication. The current definitions provided by the United States Census Bureau (2019) and applicable to the 2020 Census are as follows:

Family. A family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family.

Family group. A family group is any two or more people (not necessarily including a householder) residing together, and related by birth, marriage, or adoption. A household may be composed of one such group, more than one, or none at all. The count of family groups includes family households, related subfamilies, and unrelated subfamilies.

Family household. A family household is a household maintained by a householder who is in a family . . . and includes any unrelated people . . . who may be residing there. The number of family households is equal to the number of families. The count of family household members differs from the count of family members, however, in that the family household members include all people living in the household, whereas family members include only the householder and his/her relatives.

The geography of housing. The census instructions between 1860 and 1940 showed gradual shifts. The Industrial Revolution caused families to move and reconfigure. World War I fell into that period and had far-reaching effects on family composition in tragic as well as unforeseen ways. There was an emphasis on space, on the geography of housing. In 1860, the important theme was largely who was under the same roof. The example was of the widow looking after herself versus a large group living together with one lead provider. In both instances, they were counted in the Census as one family (Pemberton, 2015).

By 1870, the overriding concern was who shared meals, who sat at the same table. Similarly, the phrase “separation from bed and board” gained popularity as divorce represented social stigma. This variation represents a legal separation, but technically the couple remained married to accommodate religious persuasions.

Location. Interestingly, the 1920 census definition of the family had a different emphasis, namely more on the *location* where a group of people shared living quarters. In the future, this location-based definition of the family would inform our understanding of the family household. At the time, it expanded the definition of the family to include those persons living together in a hotel or institution; for census recording purposes, they were counted as a family. In 1930, the census instructions distinguished between a *household* and *family* and clarified that they were interested in documenting the details of groups of people sharing living arrangements at the given time of the census record. For the purposes of the 1930 Census persons living together need not be related by blood or marriage. What allowed them to be counted as a family unit was the fact that they shared a household in the same living quarters. This distinction between a household and a family became even more pronounced in the 1960 Census in which a household is described as those persons who share sleeping and meal arrangements. These persons could also represent several generations living under the same roof (Pemberton, 2015).

Similarities. The aspects that have remained the same across the decades are that families are defined by who should be included in a household and the manner in which they are related. The shifts in emphasis fluctuated over the years but interestingly seem to have gone almost full circle. The views prior to 1930 are more in line with our current definitions of what comprises a household. In short, then, the current definition focuses on all those persons related to the householder, whether by birth, marriage, or adoption (Pemberton, 2015).

FOCUS POINT

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the census application of the term *family* can have wider and different applications, affecting how the family is defined in everyday, legal, and other scholarly contexts. According to the U.S. Census, the definition of the family has been fairly consistent since 1930: a family consists of members of a household related by blood, marriage, or adoption.

SCHEDULE I. - Free Inhabitants in District No. 2 in the County of Fayette
of Kentucky enumerated by me, on the 7th day of Aug^r 1850. Jno. M. Moore

1	2	3	4			7	8	9	10			12
			Age	Sex	Color				Value of Real Estate	Married within year	Foreign born	
		Nancy Wheatley	59	F				Maryland				
		Walter S. Wheatley	17	M		Printer		Kentucky				
408	427	John McCracken	71	M		Farmer	8,000	Ireland				
		Emily McCracken	54	F				Ireland				
		Frederic Myers	35	M		Gardener		Germany				
407	430	C. M. Harland	46	M		None		Massachusetts				
		S. J. Moore	29	M		None		Maryland				
411	431	Augustus Meade	26	M		Baker		Germany				
		Charles Ranz	25	M		Baker		Germany				
		James Hanna	40	M		None		Ireland				
411	432	Henry Clay	73	M		Statesman	50,000	Virginia				

This image from the 1850 Census reveals diversity concerning countries of origin. Families have been consistently defined by persons included in a household and by the manner in which they are related. The last entry shown here, referring to Henry Clay, is of interest, as he was an eminent statesman and the size of his property was significant.

Source: United States Census Bureau, 2018.

Finally, here is a definition of the family by Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2014), which is relevant to family scientists and which differs from the typical census definitions:

[Families are . . .] networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family. (p. 8)

Diverse Families

Diversity. Families display diversity in form and in function. In post-traditional societies, persons can join families through various avenues, most importantly by having relationships with someone already in a family. Families through marriage, adoption, by choice: a number of diverse alternatives lead to membership (Garbarino, 2017). As families have evolved and changed in form and function, there is more flexibility concerning what denotes a family and who can claim membership. In older literature and books focusing on the sociocultural history of families, these units were typically defined by focusing on the conjugal and nuclear aspects of the family (Akamatsu, Crowther, Hobfoll, & Stephens, 1992/2016; Hareven, 1999).

History provides no support for the notion that all families are created equal in any specific time and place. Rather, history highlights the social construction of family forms and the privileges that particular kinds of families confer. (Coontz, 2000, p. 286)

Flexible configurations. In the United States, the traditional nuclear family has been in flux. Families no longer necessarily consist of a father and mother and their offspring. Households could be headed by single parents, same sex parents, or

grandparents, who can step in to fulfill intergenerational parenting roles. Families can shape themselves into as many guises as are comfortable and desirable for the participants. Additionally, we can have a **family of choice**; for instance, in domestic unions we may treat a certain group of very close friends as if they were family, and, for all practical reasons, they may take on the function of traditional family members. Geographic location, bloodlines, marital status: all these things that were important identifiers of traditional families have morphed to allow for more flexible configurations. Two developments that have contributed considerably to this flexibility and that have far-reaching effects are shifting and evolving gender roles and same sex marital unions and related partnership rights.

Family responsibilities. Defining families by their responsibilities may also bring concerns, as not all families meet the same expectations in terms of roles and responsibilities. Single parents may raise their children in a family environment, but this may exclude the other biological parent. Families can be blended, and children can be welcomed through fostering as well as adoption. Some families adopt grown up members so that they can legally express their sense of familial responsibility, and because with legal adoptions come legal rights and responsibilities.

Location. Families do not all live in one place, even though they describe themselves as a family. The breadwinner spouse may be traveling many days of the year; the college-aged kids may have left the home for a distant campus. Some couples choose to be in long-distance relationships with the hope of a reunion when the economics and the logistics of their partnership allow this. In more recent times, the variations for marriage partnerships have expanded.

The concept of family is imbued with symbolic meaning and lived experiences. And whatever its form, families provide the earliest types of nurturance, protection, and socialization for its members. Families provide the initial foundation for entering into community and societal relations, and they reflect meanings, trends, and conflicts in specific cultures. (Trask, 2010, p. 22)

Partnerships and commitments. According to the Pew Research Center (2015) concerning social and demographic trends, cohabiting parents and single parents are frequently occurring family forms (see also Geiger & Livingston, 2019). When various configurations collaborate to parent children, some of the parties involved may be coparenting. The family may go through transitions and change its composition during various stages of the family lifespan.

Divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have added considerable diversity to family forms. Even in those families headed by two parents, a number of changes are apparent. In many of these families, both parents work outside the home, and children are participating in a variety of caretaking options. According to the Pew Research Center, almost a third of children under the age of 18 are living in single-parent households, while one in five children live with single moms (Livingston, 2018, April). These living arrangements can add a variety of stressors in that the lead parent does not have easily accessible backup. This, in turn, can make caregiving responsibilities very challenging, occasionally leading to burnout and despair for the parent in charge. If grandparents are available, they may absorb some of these stresses. In some circumstances, partnership insecurity and partnership interruptions can contribute to the dynamics of the family as experienced by the children in that household. With the feminization of poverty, single mothers are

more likely to suffer financial hardship as opposed to their male counterparts (Abercrombie & Hastings, 2016).

Children. The research on families also indicates that the current norm of children per family unit is smaller, and this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as “shrinking family size.” Having fewer children can be attributed to women’s increased educational attainment and related labor force participation. The age of entering marriage has also increased with partners being older at the time of their first marriages (United States Census, 2017). Researchers have found that parents are often older and in possession of more education by the time they welcome their first child. Mothers, in particular, have greater access to higher education than in previous decades, and this is especially so in westernized countries.

Vocation. The better educated the mother is, the more likely she has a vocational skill set that is desirable and will beckon her into the labor force. Mothers have become lead breadwinners, and fathers, in turn, have been open to the prospect of being the lead parent or the more accessible parent when it comes to rearing children. As women’s roles have changed, men’s roles have also changed. In post-millennial relationships, greater sharing of all tasks is occurring, be they related to paid work or to the home (Lewis & Sussman, 1986). The financial realities of dual-income parents are distinct. When both parents are gainfully employed, the median income for the family tends to be almost double that of families with a single breadwinner.

In a summary report on some of the major demographic trends shaping the United States and the world, several pertain to families (Geiger & Livingston, 2019):

- Millennials are currently the largest segment of the adult population in the United States and outnumber the baby boomers.
- The changing American family means that children per household are becoming fewer with almost a third of childless adults stating that they are unlikely to have offspring. The trend for being older when a first child is born is continuing. The number of stay-at-home parents today is similar to what it was 25 years ago, namely close to 1:5 (Livingston, 2018, September).
- The immigrant share of the U.S. population is the highest in over a century, accompanied by cultural diversity.

Contemporary families. Plurality in family forms means that there is great variety, influenced by numerous factors including culture, geographical location, and environmental resources, to mention a few. In short, then, to quote family scientist Bahira Sherif Trask (2010),

Around the globe, virtually, every Western and non-Western society identifies some form of family as part of its basic foundation. Cross-culturally, members of contemporary families are engaged with each other in various forms of material, economic, emotional, and ideational exchange. (p. 21)

When families function well, they are impressive, with almost magical qualities and capabilities. They nurture and sustain us; they are the core of humankind.

Characteristics of Families

A number of important characteristics and functions of families are summed up by Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2014, pp. 3–4). Loosely, these consist of the following:

- *Unique and individual.* There is no one way of seeing the family and no one way of being a family. Families are unique and individual, just like the family members who make up that particular family.
- *Reflect culture.* Because families are unique, they form their own identities, rules, rituals, ways of communicating, family culture, and more. Families also reflect the greater culture within which they are embedded.
- *Shared values.* Because the family functions as a unit, it creates its own family culture and shared worldviews. Importantly, families tend to share values. It is one of the parenting functions within the family context to impart those values, guidelines, and ethics to the children in that family.
- *Intergenerational and bidirectional.* Families can consist of several generations that exert bidirectional influences.
- *Investment.* Families invest in their unit and in the individuals within that unit by spending time, allocating resources, and displaying loyalty.
- *Developmental challenges.* Families respond to developmental challenges, which also prevent them from becoming static.
- *Individuality and identity.* Families can find very individual ways of communicating, and this process is bidirectional in that the communication contributes to the identity of the family. In turn, that family identity rubs off on the family members.
- *Communication.* Communication serves to construct as well as reflect family relationships (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014, p. 3). Because family members spend so much time with each other, they use and understand communication shortcuts and idiosyncrasies that may elude an outsider.
- *Ever changing and vital.* Families are an ever-changing work of art, vital to society.

FOCUS POINT

Families can be defined in several ways. As society and social policies shift, so does the definition of the family. Traditionally, families have been identified by bloodline and marital connections. The forms and functions of families have morphed to include more flexible configurations, including intimate and personalized definitions. Defining families by their responsibilities may

bring concerns, as not all families meet the same expectations in terms of roles and responsibilities. Divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have added considerable diversity to family forms. Plurality in family forms means that there is great variety, influenced by numerous factors including culture, geographical location, and environmental resources, to mention a few.

GLOBAL GLIMPSE

THE FATHER OF A NATION: NELSON MANDELA

Interrelated dynamic forces. Consider the childhood and upbringing of the world leader and Nobel recipient Nelson Mandela (1918–2013). So many factors in his early childhood were influential during his formative years, including his cultural context and the nature of his immediate and extended family structure. As a person, he was grounded, unpretentious, and humble. This was his philosophy concerning leadership:

It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership. (Kruse, 2012)

His social context influenced the person he became. When Mandela reminisced about his early years in the hills of Qunu in the Transkei, he described a childhood close to nature, with opportunities to explore and build skills:

We lived in a less grand style in Qunu, but it was in that village near Umtata that I spent some of the happiest years of my boyhood. . . . It was in the fields that I learned how to knock birds out of the sky with a slingshot, to gather wild honey and fruits and edible roots, to drink warm, sweet milk straight from the udder of a cow, to swim in the cold, clear streams, and to catch fish with twine and sharpened bits of wire. (Mandela, 1994, pp. 7–9)

His family represented the customs of a close-knit rural community. He mentioned his family of origin



When Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) reminisced about his own childhood in the hills of Qunu in the Transkei, he mentioned the role of the extended family; his cousins were as close to him as siblings.

Source: Kishyr Ramdial via Flickr, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic.

and the role of the extended family, which had duties like immediate family. For instance, his cousins were as close to him as siblings. In his autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) he describes this family arrangement, which may be hard to replicate in present times:

My mother presided over three huts at Qunu which, as I remember, were always filled with babies and children of my relations. In fact, I hardly recall any occasion as a child when I was alone. In African culture, the sons and daughters of one's aunts and uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins. (Mandela, 1994, p. 8)

Nelson Mandela left an enormous legacy, and he is credited for the peaceful transition in South Africa. His upbringing provided him with a deep understanding of his people, who lovingly called him the father of a nation.

The Family as a System

Families function as if they have their own identity, and in many ways they do. Families are characterized by unique ways of doing things. They can have their own secret codes, their own expectations, their own way of communicating; and

the family members usually know these rules and expectations. Families do not demand an entrance fee to join them; there is no qualification, no hidden password. Typically, we enter a family rather serendipitously; we are born or welcomed into a family and the commitment is supposed to be for life.

Interrelatedness. When a family functions as a system, the members of that system influence and feel for each other. If one family member faces difficulties, the others may react in support and sympathize. If a child faces serious illness and requires extended treatments, the rest of the family is affected by that situation, and effects extend to the marital relationship of the parents and how the siblings interact, for example. Who plays what role can be part of the unwritten dynamic of that family system. In short, when we think of individual family members, we have to include the various circles of influence within which each person is embedded in the context of a family system.

Intergenerational composition. The beauty of families is that they are intergenerational, and typically there is great solidarity among members. Different age groups are represented, belonging to various lifespan stages. The young can learn from the older members, who in turn can be inspired by their more youthful counterparts. There is a constant give and take, which enriches the entire system.

Solidarity. A family can be defined by the bonds between its members, and these are diverse, ranging from the conventional to the unconventional. Members depend on each other; they are interdependent. Families are also described by what their function is intended to be. Traditionally, family members are loyal to each other and provide the ideal place to have and to raise offspring (Hareven, 1999). A family provides the commitment and the protection that is necessary for this lifelong commitment. It is the shelter of choice for all the lifespan changes members anticipate, a place that accommodates the frailties of the young, the old, and the infirm. It is also the venue that celebrates lifespan passages and provides the cultural rituals to do so. In these many ways, the family can impart resilience to its members (Walsh, 2016).

Family lifespan. The family as a unit or a system can follow its own predictable stages in family life. If the family is seen as an independently functioning unit whose members are interdependent, then it follows that the family can progress through predictable stages and may be confronted with challenges faced by families everywhere. There is a universality about families, even though each unit is unique. The lifespan stages of a family can denote the typical challenges faced by families at certain points in their development. For instance, a young family may be wrapped up in the demands of childcare for very young children, while the lead breadwinners of that family are also trying to establish careers and their own home base. A family in its midlife may have to deal with launching teenagers, while worrying about the health and care of elderly parents.

One of the prime roles of the well-functioning family is to nurture its members, sheltering them within the structure of that particular family unit. This protection and care will, in turn, give the members resilience to deal with obstacles. The family of origin will also provide us with an example of how we would like our own families to look, or what we would *not* like to perpetuate in our own homes.

“It has been a long road for us . . . to reach an understanding of just this phenomenon—the sense of the whole, the family system.”

Augustus Napier (b. 1938), family therapist,
from *The Family Crucible*

FOCUS POINT

A well-functioning family nurtures and shelters its members. When a family functions as a system, the members of that system influence and feel for each other; there is interrelatedness. The family has numerous unique characteristics that contribute to its identity. It functions as an

independent system characterized by diversity in form and function. Membership is intergenerational. Members display solidarity and interdependence. Numerous interacting factors influence family dynamics.

Authentic Insight

The Gravity of Family Interactions

I grew up in rural Arkansas and, as a child, I had a conversation with the father of one of my friends. Ray was a plumber. I was fascinated by his work. All the pipes and tubes and blowtorches! One day, I said to Ray, “You have to be really smart to be a plumber.” I will have to paraphrase Ray’s response. “You don’t have to be that smart,” he said and went on to tell me that you mostly just have to know that waste products run downhill.

As metaphors go, this is not a bad one to represent a key aspect of family psychology, one that is so often present in the work of counselors and therapists and that has informed my work as a child and adolescent psychologist. In families, toxic material can flow from parents, who are at a higher level, down to the children, who are at a lower level.

Adults tower above children literally and figuratively. They have power over their children, a power that is too often abused, up to and including being a kind of child abuse. We should also be mindful that children often naturally blame themselves for things that go wrong in their families. For example, children are prone to blame themselves for their parents’ divorces. Children tend to

idealize their parents. So I have learned that children often employ this logic: *My mother is good. My father is good. Something is terribly wrong here, so it must be my fault. If I had only been a better boy or girl, this would not be happening.* This sad scenario is often made worse by parents who fail to take responsibility for putting their differences aside to work constructively together to take care of their children’s emotional needs. Many serious marital battles and many divorces are fought on the backs of children. Few things weigh heavier on the hearts of children.

Parents have a duty—often neglected—to avoid allowing adult problems to flow down to their children. This requires self-care and the courage to confront our own behavior and to get the help we need as adults. I will not claim this is easy, only that the failure to protect our children from our individual difficulties, or our marital difficulties, can be destructive to the health and well-being of children. It can be as destructive as anything I have encountered in my work.

Dale Wisely, PhD, is a clinical psychologist specializing in children and adults. He has been in practice for over three decades.

Functions of the Family

Families have various roles. They provide support and create a network that can sustain the members and function as a stable emotional and economic unit. A family also has many work-related roles. In a sense, a family is like a company and its investors. The investors in that company are the family members. If they participate and pool their resources that family becomes stronger and more resilient. We can be individual investors, just as we are individual family members. But when we function as a family unit, we need also to bear the interests of the family at heart.



The family may go through transitions and changes in its composition during various stages of the family lifespan.

Source: © iStock.com/kate_sept2004.

Because families consist of humans and because humans are temperamental, changing, and sometimes erratic beings, families cannot be perfect. Families face their own challenges, but if a family can maintain appropriate cohesiveness and stability to support constructive outcomes for individual members, as well as for the family as a whole, then it is well on its way to fulfilling its task as a family successfully.

Rights of the child. Families have very special obligations toward their youngest and most vulnerable members, the children. According to the United Nations' **Declaration of the Rights of the Child**, which was ratified in 1959, children have numerous rights that should be respected and enforced by nations universally. In practice, this ideal has had superficial buy-in, but the harsh and unsavory reality is that children continue to be victimized and exploited by adults, despite the best intentions expressed in such a declaration. Among some of the rights of the child are the following (United Nations General Assembly, 1989):

- *Belonging.* The child has the right to belong to and to identify with a family and to be nurtured by parents or by persons who will best care for the child entrusted to them.
- *Meeting needs.* Children have the right to have their basic needs for food, shelter, and safety met. Additionally, they have a right to education, to form their own opinions, to freedom of religious choice, and to speak their native language.
- *Child's play.* Children have the right to play and must not be forced into child labor, sexual activity, or warfare.
- *Peace and tolerance.* Ultimately, we as the adults should teach the next generation about peace and tolerance.

A child-friendly version of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can be accessed online (<https://www.unicef.org/rightsite/files/uncrcchildfriendlylanguage.pdf>).

Here are some of the rights of the child as explained to children by that document:

- All adults should do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should

think about how their decisions will affect children.

- Your family has the responsibility to help you learn to exercise your rights, and to ensure that your rights are protected.
- You have the right to live with your parent(s), unless it is bad for you. You

have the right to live with a family who cares for you.

- You have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met. You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.
- Your education should help you use and develop your talents and abilities.

It should also help you learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.

- No one is allowed to punish you in a cruel or harmful way.
- You have the right to know your rights! Adults should know about these rights and help you learn about them, too.

FOCUS POINT

Families have various roles. They exist to provide support and create a network that can sustain family members and function as a stable emotional and economic unit. Healthy families

display a number of interacting and related characteristics that support both the individual family member as well as the family group comprised of multiple members.

SPOTLIGHT ON THEORIES

Introduction: Theories, Psychoanalysis, and Family Dynamics

Information and knowledge about the family and human psychological dimensions can be contextualized into a framework to guide our understanding. Generally, this is what we understand by a **theory** as it pertains to the family. Theories help us create a system that contributes to putting various pieces of information about families into a greater context. A well-structured theory facilitates our understanding and explanation of the dynamics occurring within families. Theories can enhance our insight by incorporating what has been observed in previous research on families, and this, in turn, can guide interventions and approaches to family therapy. Theories are the products of their time, of social and cultural contexts as well as of existing knowledge and research. In this manner, they can reflect as well as guide some of the leading and most prevalent thinking of the day.

Our knowledge base is extended by combining various insights, research outcomes, hypotheses, and general thinking about a specific field

such as family therapy. Theories are not static, and they change in response to the research culture and findings of the day. Theories do not exist in watertight compartments. There is interdisciplinary influence, as scholars and family scientists explore all the contexts in which families function. Families are the inspiration but not the end goal. Theories can be combined, and they can change over time. For instance, what Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, or Murray Bowen thought at the beginning of their professional journeys was not necessarily the same as what they thought when they exited their careers. As they worked with individuals and families, their thinking matured and was influenced by their life's work.

There is no single theory that best connects the dots of our knowledge and our questions concerning the dynamics of families. Instead, if we have access to various theories, we have the option of a number of explanations. Different theories allow us to look at the subject matter from different angles.

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Some of the theories will catch the light in just such a way that they enhance our insight concerning a given topic. In turn, that insight can guide our practice and our interventions with families.

More recent theories are often built on the insights of earlier theories. In combination, theories form a virtual staircase leading toward greater understanding and explanations of family-related concerns. Our current perspectives on families, especially on the dynamics within families, have been influenced by the thoughts and skills of numerous family-related professionals.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the time was ripe for the field of psychology to emerge. We tend to associate Freud (1856–1939) with the early beginnings of **psychotherapy**. He had definitely been subjected to numerous influences, which converged at this time. Freud was also surrounded by a group of colleagues who probably inspired, elaborated, and strengthened some of the brainwaves that culminated in his psychoanalytic theory. In reality, Freud's psychoanalytic theory did not emerge from "out of nowhere," although Freud was not shy of claiming it as his own—sometimes taking some liberties with the intellectual property of his colleagues. However that may be, there is still an ongoing place to acknowledge the relevance of the psychoanalytic and related psychodynamic approaches (Whitebook, 2017).

Psychoanalysis, as a term, is generally used to describe so-called *talk-therapy*, in which the therapeutic process is facilitated by increased insight and, importantly, based on the theoretical concepts of the psychoanalytic movement. In essence that meant attributing much of the behavior to especially unconscious motives. As a treatment model, it is labor intensive and takes months if not years; this path is often too arduous in our fast-paced society that demands instant gratification when at all feasible. **Psychodynamics** refers to the attempted explanation of how and why the psyche does what it does; it tries to provide the *why* for the behavior. In its context within psychoanalysis, psychodynamics considers the conscious as well as unconscious forces that can motivate and determine behavior. Psychodynamics as used in its Freudian psychoanalytic context seeks to explain the dynamics of behavior according to psychoanalytic principles.

In many therapeutic approaches, one of the central ideas concerns holding up the proverbial mirror for clients to see themselves. In a more classical psychotherapeutic approach, the

thought was to make that which is unconscious (and hence not "known" to the individual) more conscious (Perry, 2016). In this way, one reveals the motivations and emotional forces that lead to specific behaviors. The aim is to bring this unconscious material into the field of consciousness, where it can be explored and examined. Sigmund Freud was on to something important when he presumed that we can reveal our unconscious through our dreams, the jokes we make, the slips of the tongue, and even by our free associations (Berger, 2018). Perry (2016) describes this phenomenon of revealing the unconscious in relation to the defense mechanisms we adopt:

Sigmund Freud chose simple words to describe the function of each defense [mechanism] identified, noting that they kept uncomfortable things out of awareness, while keeping them symbolically on one's mind.

There are whole areas concerning our motivations for behavior that we do not examine, as we do not really know why we do certain things. Freud (1936/1992) hypothesized that we keep certain material out of our consciousness because it might be too threatening; it might upset the applecart if we looked it straight in the face. It might elicit anxiety. For that reason, it was thought that we disguise some of our actions: we use **defense mechanisms** (Cramer, 2015). In that way we could dress up the wolf in sheep's clothing: we could make the scary material less anxiety provoking by making it look a little different, by disguising it. Defense mechanisms were thought to help us manage anxiety; by distorting the world in various ways, we could make reality more palatable. From the point of view of **neuroscience**, we may achieve a similar outcome, namely, dealing with anxiety, through **emotional regulation** (also known as the self-regulation of emotions). The implication is that there may be an interface between psychodynamics and the findings of contemporary neuroscience (Rice & Hoffman, 2014).

In more recent contexts, the word *dynamics* stands in for the more formal *psychodynamics*. This is of particular relevance to the field of dynamics as it pertains to the family. Dropping the prefix also tends to drop the Freudian and psychoanalytic connotations. So the word *dynamics* can be used more loosely and can refer to a wider range of theoretical reference points.

In a Nutshell

- The way we view and think about families undergoes a morphing process in sync with greater cultural and societal developments. This developmental process becomes visible in theories about families and their dynamics, which can be described as the many reasons and explanations for what makes families do the things they do.
 - Theories help us create a system that contributes to putting various pieces of information into a greater context.
- A well-structured theory pertaining to families facilitates our understanding and explanation of the dynamics occurring within the family context.
- In more recent contexts, the word *dynamics* stands in for the more formal *psychodynamics*. Dropping the prefix also tends to drop the Freudian and psychoanalytic connotations, so the term can be used more loosely and can refer to a wider range of theoretical reference points.

FOCUS POINT

Theories are the products of time, social and cultural contexts, and existing knowledge and research. Psychoanalysis describes insight-based interventions referencing the theoretical concepts of the psychoanalytic movement.

Psychodynamics refers to how and why the psyche influences behavior. Within psychoanalysis and related psychodynamic approaches, conscious as well as subconscious forces are thought to motivate and determine behavior.

CHAPTER FOCUS POINTS

Family Dynamics: Meaning

- Families are units in constant motion, growing and changing as demands inside and outside the system influence the whole.
- Family dynamics deal with the inner workings and behavior of the family, the ways culture and society affect it, and how its members influence each other.
- Family dynamics represent the movement and growth that occurs as family systems adapt and change, both in relation to the larger system around them and to the intimate system within the family itself.
- *Definition:* In social contexts such as family systems, the word *dynamics* is used to denote

those aspects that change or progress, those places where movement and growth occur.

- The word *psychodynamics* can mean the process of searching for and uncovering the emotional motivations and possible psychological reasons for behavior. Psychodynamics can imply the emotional motivations and psychological reasons for behavior.

Lifespan Development and Family Dynamics

- Human lifespan development and family dynamics have an intricate link: both describe constant change. Human lifespan development

looks at how individuals grow and change over time from conception to death.

- Family dynamics deal with the continuous movement (or dynamics) of the family. Individual lives are embedded in the context of their families.

Why Study Family Dynamics?

- Family scientists and helping professionals concerned with the well-being of families come from many disciplines. Focusing on families, these professionals have the power to support optimal outcomes.
- Being well versed in family dynamics is valuable to those working with individual families or trying to influence public policy decisions.

Defining Families

- Families can be defined in several ways. As society and social policies shift, so does the definition of the family.
- Traditionally, families have been identified by bloodlines and marital connections.
- The form and function of families has morphed to include more flexible configurations, including intimate and personalized definitions.

Census Definitions

- One of the purposes of the U.S. Census is to capture population numbers and various demographics at a given point in time. It is a mechanism to count or record persons and gain greater insight into selected demographics.
- These goals influence how units such as families, family groups, and family households are defined.
- Importantly, the census application of the term *family* can have wider and different applications, affecting how the family is defined in everyday, legal, and other scholarly contexts.
- According to the U.S. Census, the definition of the family has been fairly consistent since 1930: a family consists of members of a household related by blood, marriage, or adoption.

Diverse Families

- Defining families by their responsibilities may bring concerns, as not all families meet the same expectations in terms of roles and responsibilities.
- Divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have added considerable diversity to family forms.
- Plurality in family forms means that there is great variety influenced by numerous factors, including culture, geographical location, and environmental resources, to mention a few.

The Family as a System

- When a family functions as a system, the members of that system influence and feel for each other; there is interrelatedness.
- A well-functioning family nurtures and shelters its members. The family has numerous unique characteristics that contribute to its identity, including the following:
 - It functions as an independent system.
 - It is diverse in form and function.
 - It has diverse membership.
 - It has intergenerational members.
 - Its members display solidarity and interdependence.

Family dynamics are influenced by numerous interacting factors.

Functions of the Family

- Healthy families display a number of interacting and related characteristics that support both the individual family member as well as the family group comprised of multiple members.
- Families have various roles. They exist to provide support and create a network that can sustain family members and function as a stable emotional and economic unit.
- Healthy families display a number of interacting and related characteristics that support both the individual family members as well as the family group comprised of multiple members.

Spotlight on Theories: Introduction—Theories, Psychoanalysis, and Family Dynamics

- Theories help us create a system that contributes to putting various pieces of information into a greater context. A well-structured theory pertaining to families facilitates our understanding and explanation of the dynamics occurring within the family context.
- Theories are the products of time, social and cultural contexts, and existing knowledge and research. Psychoanalysis describes insight-based interventions and references the theoretical concepts of the psychoanalytic movement.
- Psychodynamics refers to how and why the psyche influences behavior. Within psychoanalysis and related psychodynamic approaches, conscious as well as subconscious forces are thought to motivate and determine behavior.
- In more recent contexts, the word *dynamics* (as opposed to *psychodynamics*) can be used more loosely and can refer to a wider range of theoretical reference points.

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