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Introduction

The title of this book, *Advancing Family Theories*, contains a quite intentional double entendre or complex metaphor. On the one hand, this book intends to advance family theory, to push it ahead of where it is today. Part of this project entails explaining where we are today, how we got here, and why the perspectives I propose might move us forward. This means we must look at the history and current practice of family theory. We must gain a good understanding of how and why theory works. The first section of this book deals with these issues.

On the other hand, *Advancing Family Theories* also means placing before you a product I am advancing or promulgating. The second section of this book does exactly that. Two relatively new theories are advanced: rational choice theory and transition theory, both of which deal extensively with families. I regard these two theories as exceptionally promising for family research and understanding. Both theories are relatively underutilized by researchers. Both theories are highly formalized, although in this book I have avoided any reference to their mathematical side. These theories are advanced because I believe they will “travel well” over the cross-cultural and multicultural terrain that family researchers will find themselves traversing in the 21st century.

Finally, *Advancing Family Theories* does not entail certain things. In the third and last section of this book, I examine moral decisions and meta-theory as two elements that are not directly tied to theoretical advancement. In the case of morality and ethics, I argue that we should not expect theories of families to tell us how to act morally or ethically. That is clearly the venue of moral philosophy or religion but not of family theory. Likewise,

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metatheory may assist us with integrating various family theories, but it is not a family theory in itself. The last chapter of this book seeks to clarify what I have and have not achieved.

What Is Family Theory?

White and Klein (2002) begin their book by addressing the question “what is theory?” and I believe it is an obvious place to begin a book of theory. However, it is also important to explain what makes *family theory* different from other social theories. It is important to explain why family theory, as opposed to other sociological and psychological theories of social groups, is necessary and indeed required if family relationships are to be understood and explained.

As White and Klein (2002) point out, there are many different definitions of theory. However, from the outset it is important that this book focuses on scientific theory as opposed to literary theory or religious theory. The goals of scientific theory are clearly different from the goals of other forms of theory. The goals are to explain and predict observable phenomena. Other forms of theory have other goals; for example, literary theory is more concerned with textual interpretation. Certainly scientific theory may borrow methods and insights from these other forms of theory, but in the final analysis the difference in goals distinguishes these forms of theory.

Scientific theory explains and predicts by subsuming a specific instance of a phenomenon under a more general and inclusive statement regarding all phenomena in the same class. Chapters 2 and 3 examine this process. For the present, however, note that theories must be concerned with producing general statements that “cover” many particular instances. Later in this book I discuss this as the “covering law” model of explanation.

Because scientific theories contain general statements that are capable of covering specific instances, it is clear that among these statements must be propositions that take into consideration the context of the phenomenon. After all, most of us have seen pictures of space travelers floating inside their orbiting craft, seemingly free of gravity. That does not mean the theory of gravity is wrong, but simply that there must be a proposition about the decline of the effects of gravity based on mass and distance from an object. Clearly, theories usually have multiple statements of propositions.

These multiple propositions must be linked together in a systematic and coherent fashion. It is tempting to say they should be logically interconnected, but that might be somewhat limiting. There are many and sundry ways to link propositions besides logic. As we shall see, one of the roles of models can

be to formalize and link propositions. Yet there are many types of models, and theory need not be limited to just logic or even to just one of the many types of logic (e.g., Aristotelian, symbolic). So the easiest way to envision how theoretical propositions are linked is to say that they are linked systematically or coherently. The purpose here is to point out that the linkage itself and the coherence of the theory is a topic worthy of consideration.

All of the preceding fails to pinpoint the one critical difference between scientific theories and other forms of theory. That critical difference is that scientific theories can be refuted by empirical evidence. Indeed, most of our theoretical research is concerned with critical tests that would distinguish which of two or more theories would provide a better fit with the data. Other forms of theory (religious or literary) do not demand that theories are empirically testable. This is the *sine qua non* of scientific theory.

The preceding discussion simply lays out what most definitions of scientific theory include as aspects of a definition. Scientific theories are defined by the following:

1. A set of general propositions
2. Scope and boundary statements about the relevant contexts
3. Systematic relations between the propositions that provide intellectual coherence
4. At least some deductions or formulations of the theory can be empirically tested (have the potential to be refuted)

Although this is a minimalist version of a definition of scientific theory, it nonetheless captures the essential elements. Even this minimalist characterization of scientific theory could be interpreted by some to mean that any group of ideas that is called a scientific theory must have each element. This would be totally incorrect, as we shall see later in this book. These essential elements may not always be present in every group of ideas because theories evolve from initial ideas to full-blown deductive theories. There are various stages along the way, and we should not treat the development of theory as a mechanistic “paint by numbers” sort of enterprise. The only element that is absolutely required is that ideas are subject to being empirically refuted. This topic will, of course, receive much more attention later in the book.

Each theory concerns a particular type of phenomenon. The particular phenomenon that we want to explain and understand may require particular types of concepts and may place constraints on the scope of the theory. Nowhere is this more true than in regard to family theory.

Family theory is, of course, concerned with families. This concern provides all family theory with similar scope and boundary assumptions. Furthermore,

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understanding these assumptions explains why theory about families, rather than theories about generic social groups, is required to explain family relationships. White and Klein (2002) point out four dimensions of families that make them different from other social groups. Families last longer than most social groups. Families have intergenerational relationships unlike other social groups. Families contain two types of social relationships (affinal and consanguineal), whereas most social groups are only based on affinity. Finally, families are part of a larger type of social organization: kinship (pp. 19–21).

These differences are not just differences in quantity or degree from the types of relationships found in other social groups. These differences are so profound as to constitute the need for family theory apart from theories about social groups such as work groups and friendship groups. Indeed, those that would attempt to reduce the study of family to the same concepts and propositions used for theories about friendship or work groups would end up missing the point. As we shall see in Chapter 6, Coleman (1990) attempted to reduce the explanation of family behavior to the same processes that govern other social groups but ended up seeing that this would be impossible. Too many important aspects of the phenomena captured in “family” would be submerged and ignored by such reductionism.

The family is both a biological unit and a social unit, a unit that has a connection with history and a connection with the future. It is a social group where emotions such as loyalty, love, devotion, commitment, and sharing are not only finely expressed but even expected. Seldom do work or friendship groups trace those that preceded them in role or position, yet most families are not only aware of progenitors but consider this as their lineage and heritage.

Unlike other types of social groups, family history is important in understanding behavior. Family relationships are not only present and immediate, as in the home, but some are distant and nonimmediate, as with kin. Family membership is not voluntary in family of orientation (origin) but in many cultures is somewhat more voluntaristic for family of procreation. The recruitment of new family members is totally unlike the recruitment of new members in friendship groups or new members in work groups. All of these differences warrant developing a theory about this form of group that is extremely different from the theory for other social groups.

Theory or Theories?

This book takes an implicit position in regard to whether or not there is the possibility of one unified theory or a diversity of theories. The implicit answer is indicated in the book’s title, *Advancing Family Theories*. It is probably

wise to make this position more explicit from the start. I do not envision that one encompassing theory about families can, should, or will emerge. Certainly such a unified theory does not emerge in this book, nor is such a unified theory necessarily desirable.

The reason for this position is that I believe the easiest theory to develop in the social sciences is at the macroscopic level. At the macrolevel, classes and categories are easier to construct, and because we deal with aggregations of individuals, the statistical analyses provide more robust findings. For example, dealing with the business cycle or voting behavior or even the survival of organizations, although complex, is not concerned with elements like love and affection. When we move to a relatively small social group such as the family or an even smaller group such as the marital dyad, we find that we move increasingly toward the necessity of incorporating individual and group processes. Categories and classes may seem inadequate to capture the richness and emotion in the relationships. Indeed, only idiographic research may seem up to the task.

I do believe a science of social groups and relationships is possible, which means general nomothetic statements are possible. I see the problems facing the scientific study of the family as not dissimilar to the problems facing the wildlife biologist studying wolf packs. Certainly terrain and context change dramatically from the arctic to the plains. Yet elements of wolf pack social organization and leadership can be understood across these contexts. Likewise, I believe we have generated family theories that truly assist us with understanding families across cultural environments.

Although I believe a nomothetic approach is warranted, I would also argue that the family, marriage, mate selection, and other family relationships are inherently more complex and symbolic. As a result, I believe family theorists initially attempt to understand smaller phenomena and then expand that understanding in an attempt to explain more of family behavior. So, for example, exchange theory may work relatively well when examining voluntaristic mate selection, but as we try to extend it to long-term marriages we may find it less useful. Likewise, several theories, such as feminist theories, use one concept or process in an attempt to explain all family phenomena. The result is that although these single-concept theories are appealingly simple, they fail to assist in explaining a great deal of phenomena; for instance, happy nonegalitarian marriages.

The result of our theorizing to date is to have evolved theory groups or frameworks (see White & Klein, 2002) that largely reflect the limited focus from which they began. In the third section of this book, I discuss using metatheory to help integrate and understand the strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks so that we might better design more complete theories.

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For the moment, however, one of the great strengths of family theory is that it is family *theories*. Other areas of the social sciences should be envious of this theoretical richness.

So What?

One of the questions that plague theorists is the “so what?” question. The “so what?” question simply asks, “Why do we need to bother with theory?” Many empiricists believe the data speak for themselves. Even more to the point, some empiricists fear theory, in that they worry that claims will be made that exceed the data and hence present a false impression and grandiose claims to the public. For example, if we know that the birth rate for a country is dropping and that it is below replacement level, why do we need a theory about fertility or a theory about population change? The answer to such questions is far from obvious.

We live in a time where we have tremendous amounts of information available to us. In the empirical sciences, every journal issue contains data and findings that would have represented the output for entire years not more than a couple of decades ago. The challenge this wealth of information provides is the task of turning information into knowledge. To transform this welter of facts and findings into knowledge, it must be integrated so that it forms an internally coherent perspective that can make sense of our world. The only way I can envisage the coherent integration of so much information is by using theories.

Imagine that our data and information is similar to a teenager’s closet where clothes are scattered all over the floor of the closet. The rod and hangers above provide a way to hang up the clothes, but they also provide a way to organize the clothes. Blouses on one side, pants, skirts, and so on. Now we can access the clothes we need far more readily, and we know where new skirts or blouses go. Theories are like organizing principles that allow us to not only store and access information but also to recall and understand. Without theory we lack organization of information. Without theory we cannot plan for the future. With an organized closet we know what is clean and available and can see options to combine outfits. Likewise, theories allow us to see information in a particular way and to combine that information with other information to understand our world.

Of course, theories perform many other functions for us besides organizing data and observations. For example, theories explain, interpret, and predict findings. Theories help us accumulate information and guide the direction

our research may take. Despite all these varied functions, many researchers and members of the public still ask, “So what?” I can only respond that without theory our world would be a world of sensation and confusion “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5).

The current status of family theory is somewhat in question (Daly, 2003; Doherty, 1999; Knapp, 1997; Sprey, 1999; Vargus, 1999; White & Mason, 1999a, 1999b). For example, Vargus (1999) offers the following picture of the situation:

Marriage and family theorists seem, when considered in relation to classical theory, to be those leading a “wander in the wilderness”—a wilderness rooted in biological categories and no concern for individual processes that transcend those categories. Further, the practitioners are wandering with them, without a Moses. (p. 202)

Vargus’s concern is further amplified by Doherty (1999) when he identifies the postmodernist challenges to the idea of “family as a phenomenon” and the critiques of positivist family science (p. 209). And for therapists, Hawley and Geske (2000) report that their

findings raise questions about the role of theory in family therapy research. It may be that researchers need to take a closer look at what purpose theory serves, since a number of studies in this analysis either did not appear to incorporate theory or use it in a way that would be considered traditional “theory” building. Many clinicians today operate from a postpositivist orientation that highlights the uniqueness of each client and they may fail to see the relevance of research that uses theory in a positivist paradigm to evaluate similarities across families instead of focusing on the particular characteristics of each family. (pp. 21–22)

These appraisals raise questions about the degree to which scholars share the view that our major goal is the production of knowledge about the family. As a corollary, there is also a lack of consensus about how our subject matter, our theories, and our research methods are constituted. It is the aim of this book to address these challenges.

Finally, in the concluding chapter of this book I argue that theories are tools we need to assist our understanding and planning. In that same vein, this book aims to assist in organizing the “closet” of theory so that students and scholars of the family can more successfully have access to these marvelous tools.

