Family Theories
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Learning Outcomes
At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

• Explain the major assumptions of each of the theoretical perspectives.
• Compare and contrast the three major theoretical perspectives.
• Apply theory to issues of the family.

Making Sense of Abstract Theories
Sociological theories are the core and underlying strength of the discipline. They guide researchers in their studies; they also guide practitioners in their intervention strategies. And they will provide you with a basic understanding of how to see the larger social picture in your own personal life. A theory is a set of interrelated concepts used to describe, explain, and predict how society and its parts are related to each other. Let’s use binoculars as a metaphor to illustrate the usefulness of a theory. Binoculars serve to magnify, enlarge, clarify, and expand our view of the thing we are looking at. Unlike binoculars, you can’t see or touch a theory, but it is a framework to help you “see” the world sociologically. Some things you want to look at need 20x80 strength binoculars while you might see other things better with 8x40 or 10x30 lenses. It’s the same with society. Some things need the lens of Conflict Theory, while others need a Structural Functional or Symbolic Interactionist lens. Some social phenomena can be viewed using each of the three frameworks, although each will give you a slightly different view of the topic under investigation.

Theories are sets of interrelated concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to magnify, enlarge, clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviors, and their societies. Without theories, science would be a futile exercise in statistics. In the diagram below you can see the process by which a theory leads sociologists to perform a certain type of study with certain types of questions that can test the assumptions of the theory. Once the study is administered, the findings and generalizations can be considered to see if they support the theory. If they do, similar studies will be performed to repeat and fine-tune the process. If the findings and generalizations do not support the theory, the sociologist rethinks and revisits the assumptions s/he made.

Here’s a real-life scientific example: In the 1960s two researchers named Cumming and Henry studied the processes of aging. They devised a theory on aging that had assumptions built into it. These were, simply put, that all elderly people realize the inevitability of death and begin to systematically disengage from their previous youthful roles while at the same time society prepares to disengage from them.¹ Cumming and Henry tested their theory on a large number of elderly persons. Findings and generalization consistently yielded a “no” in terms of support for this theory. For all intents and purposes this theory was abandoned and is only used in references such as these. Theories have to be supported by research and they also provide a framework for how specific research should be conducted.
Theories can be used to study society--millions of people in a state, country, or even at the world level. When theories are used at this level they are referred to as macro theories, theories which best fit the study of massive numbers of people (typically Conflict and Functional theories). When theories are used to study small groups or individuals, say a couple, family, or team, they are referred to as being micro theories, theories which best fit the study of small groups and their members (typically Symbolic Interactionism). In many cases, any of the three main theories can be applied at either the macro or micro levels. Let’s consider the three major theoretical perspectives one at a time.

**Conflict Theory**
The Conflict Theory is a macro theory designed to study the larger social, global, and societal level of sociological phenomena. This theory was founded by Karl Marx. Marx was a witness to oppression perpetrated by society’s elite members against the masses of poor. He had very little patience for the capitalistic ideals that undergirded these powerful acts of inhumane exploitation of the average person. Later Max Weber further developed this sociological theory and refined it to a more moderate position. Weber studied capitalism further but argued against Marx’s outright rejection of it.

Conflict theory is especially useful in understanding: war, wealth and poverty, the “haves” and the “have-nots,” revolutions, political strife, exploitation, divorce, ghettos discrimination and prejudice, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, slavery, and more conflict-related social phenomena. **Conflict Theory claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict and competition for limited resources.** Marx and Weber, were they alive today, would likely use Conflict Theory to study the unprecedented bail outs by the U.S. government which have proven to be a rich-to-rich wealth transfer or to help guide the explanation of private health care companies benefiting from illness and poverty.

Conflict Theory assumes that those who “have” perpetually try to increase their wealth at the expense and suffering of those who “have-not.” It is a power struggle which is most often won by the wealthy elite and lost by the common person of common means. Those who “have” are those who possess power. **Power is the ability to get what one wants even in the presence of opposition.** When power is institutionalized, we call it authority. **Authority is institutionalized, legitimate power.** By institutionalized we mean making something (for example a concept, a social role, particular values and norms, or modes of behavior) become embedded within an organization, social system, or society as an established custom or norm within that system.²

By far the “haves,” in Marx’s terms, the bourgeoisie or wealthy elite are the royal, political, and corporate leaders, have the most power. The bourgeoisie are the Goliaths in society who often bully their wishes into outcomes. The “have-nots” or Marx’s proletariat are the common working class, lower class, and poor members of society. According to Marx (see diagram below) the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat cannot both have it their way and in order to offset the wealth and power of the Bourgeoisie the proletariat often rise up and revolt against their oppressors (The French, Bolshevik, United States, Mexican, and other revolutions are examples).
Marx and Weber realized that societies have different social classes and a similar pattern of relatively few rich persons in comparison to the majority who are poor. The rich call the shots. Look below at the photographic montage in Figure 1 of homes in one U.S. neighborhood which were run down, poor, trashy, and worth very little. They were on the west side of a gully and frustrated many who lived on the east side who were forced to drive through these slums to reach their own mansions.

The Conflict Theory has been repeatedly tested against scientifically derived data and it repeatedly proves to have a wide application among many different levels of sociological study. That is not to say that all sociological phenomena are conflict-based. But, most Conflict theorists would argue that more often than not Conflict assumptions do apply.

Figure 1. Photo Montage of Haves and Have Nots in a U.S. Neighborhood.3

**Structural Functionalism Theory**

*The Functionalist Theory* claims that society is in a state of balance and kept that way through the function of society’s component parts. Society can be studied the same way the human body can be studied: by analyzing what specific systems are working or not working, diagnosing problems, and devising solutions to restore balance. Socialization, religious involvement, friendship, health care, economic recovery, peace, justice and injustice, population growth or decline, community, romantic relationships, marriage and divorce, and normal and abnormal family experiences are just a few of the evidences of functional processes in our society.

Functionalists would agree with Conflict Theorists that things break down in society and that unfair treatment of others is common. These break downs are called *dysfunctions, which are breakdowns or disruptions in society and its parts that threaten social stability.* Enron’s collapse, the ruination of 14,000 employees’ retirement funds, the loss of millions in shareholder investments, and the serious doubt it left in the mind of U.S. investors about the stock market’s credibility and reliability which lasted for nearly a decade are examples of dysfunctions in the economic sector of the economy. Functionalists also look at two
types of functions, manifest and latent functions. **Manifest functions are the apparent and intended functions of institutions in society** while **latent functions are the less apparent, unintended, and often unrecognized functions in social institutions and processes.**

Back to Enron, the government’s manifest function includes regulation of investment rules and laws in the stock market to ensure credibility and reliability. After the Enron collapse, every company offering stocks for trade underwent a government supervised audit of its accounting processes in order to restore the public trust. For the most part balance was restored in the stock market (to a certain degree at least). There are still many imbalances in the investment, mortgage, and banking sectors which have to be readjusted; but, that’s the point-society readjusts and eventually recovers.

Does the government also provide latent or accidental functions to society? Yes. Take for example U.S. military bases. Of all the currently open U.S. military bases, all are economic boons for the local communities surrounding them. All provide jobs, taxes, tourism, retail, and government contract monies that would otherwise go somewhere else. When the discussion about closing military bases comes up in Washington DC, Senators and members of Congress go to work trying to keep their community’s bases open.

As you can already tell, Functionalism is more positive and optimistic than Conflict Theory. Functionalists realize that just like the body, societies get “sick” or dysfunction. By studying society’s parts and processes, Functionalists can better understand how society remains stable or adjust to destabilizing forces when unwanted change is threatened. According to this theory most societies find that healthy balance and maintain it; if they don’t then they collapse as many have in the history of the world. **Equilibrium is the state of balance maintained by social processes that help society adjust and compensate for forces that might tilt it onto a path of destruction.** Thinking back to the Conflict example of the gully separating extremely wealthy and poor neighborhoods, look at the Habitat for Humanity picture in Figure 2. Functional Theorists would say that component parts of society respond to dysfunctions in ways that help to resolve problems. In this house the foundation was dug, poured, and dried within a week. From the foundation to this point was three working days. This house is now finished and lived in, thanks mostly to the Habitat non-profit process and the work of many volunteers. Lots of homeless people are a dysfunction for society; think about what would happen if half of society was homeless for example. So another part of society, the normative organization of Habitat for Humanity, steps in and makes adjustments; they buy lots, get donations and volunteers and build homes helping to bring society back into equilibrium.

**Symbolic Interactionism Theory**

**Symbolic Interactionism** claims that society is composed of ever-present interactions among individuals who share symbols and their meanings. This is a very useful theory for understanding other people, improving communication, and in understanding cross-cultural relations. Values, communication, witch-hunting, crisis management, fear from crime, fads, love, evil and sin, what’s hot and what’s not, alien abduction beliefs, “who I am,”
litigation, mate selection, arbitration, dating joys and woes, and both personal and national meanings and definitions can all be better understood using Symbolic Interactionism.

Once you realize that individuals are, by their social natures, very symbolic with one another, then you begin to understand how to persuade your friends and family, how to understand others’ points of view, and how to resolve misunderstandings. This theory is interested in meanings. Think about these three words, LOVE, LUST, and LARD. Each letter is a symbol. When combined in a specific order, each word can be defined. Because we memorize words and their meanings we know that there is a striking difference between LOVE and LUST. We also know that LARD has nothing to do with either of the other two terms. Contrast these word pairs hate versus hope, help versus hurt, advise versus abuse, and connect versus corrupt. These words, like many others carry immense meaning and when juxtaposed sound like the beginning of philosophical ideas.

Figure 2. Photo of a Habitat for Humanity Home.4

Symbolic Interactionism makes it possible for you to be a college student. It makes it so you understand your professors’ expectations and know how to step up to them. Our daily interactions are filled with symbols and an ongoing process of interactions with other people based on the meanings of these symbols. Have you ever had anyone you've greeted actually answer your question of “How are you?” Most of us never have. It’s a greeting, not a question in the U.S. culture and a Symbolic Interactionist would be interested in how it changed from a question to a greeting.

Symbolic Interactionism helps you to know what the expectations of your roles are and if you perceive yourself as doing a good job or not in meeting those expectations. The Thomas Theorem is often called the “definition of the situation.” It says that if people perceive or define something as being real, then it becomes real in its consequences. An example of this is a woman who was diagnosed as HIV positive. She made her funeral plans, made sure her children would be cared for then prepared to die. Two-years later she was retested. It turned out her first test results were a false positive, yet she acted as though she had AIDS and was certainly going to die soon from it. She changed how she saw her remaining days. In a hypothetical case, a famous athlete (you pick the sport) defines
himself as invincible and too famous to be held legally accountable for his criminal behavior. He is subsequently found guilty for a crime. A hypothetical politician (you pick the party and level of governance) believes that his/her constituents will tolerate anything and so he/she engages in morally undesirable behavior. The point is that when we define our situation as being real, we act as though it is real (regardless of the objective facts in the matter).

One of the major realizations that comes with Symbolic Interactionism is that you begin to understand the other people in your life and come to know that they are neither right nor wrong, just of a different point of view. They define social symbols with varying meanings. To understand the other person’s symbols and meanings is to approach a common ground. Listen to this statement by Rosa Parks (1913-2005), “All I was doing was trying to get home from work.” In 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on the bus to a White person, it proved to be a spark for the Civil Rights Movement that involved the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and many other notable leaders. It was Rosa Parks’ simple and honest statement that made her act of defiance so meaningful. The lion’s share of the nation was collectively tired and sick of the mistreatment of Blacks. Many Whites joined the protests while others quietly sympathized. After all that was written in the history books about it, a simple yet symbolic gesture by Rosa Parks started the healing process for the United States. Table 1 provides a quick reference for comparing the three major sociological perspectives.

Theories Developed for Understanding the Family
Over the years researchers have found the necessity to develop theories of behavior that are specific to family settings. These theories have been developed by people with a variety of areas of emphasis, from family therapists to gerontologists to child development specialists. In this chapter we will briefly discuss six such theories: Family Systems, Family Developmental, Life Course, Social Exchange, Ecological, and Feminist.

Family Systems Theory
When understanding the family, the Family Systems Theory has proven to be very powerful. Family Systems Theory claims that the family is understood best by conceptualizing it as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of parts, subsystems and family members. Much like a mechanic would interface with the computer system of a broken down car to diagnose which systems are broken (transmission, electric, fuel, etc.) to repair it, a therapist or researcher would interact with family members to diagnose how and where the systems of the family are in need of repair or intervention. Family Systems Theory comes under the Functional Theory umbrella and shares the functional approach of considering the dysfunctions and functions of complex groups and organizations. To fully understand what is meant by systems and subsystems look at Figure 3 which depicts Juan and Maria’s extended family system.

Table 1. Comparing the Three Major Sociological Theories.

<p>| 6 | Family Theories |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Conflict</strong></th>
<th><strong>Structural Functionalism</strong></th>
<th><strong>Symbolic Interactionism</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Macro</em></td>
<td><em>Macro</em></td>
<td><em>Micro</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequality lies at the core of society which leads to conflict</td>
<td>Uses biological model (society is like a living organism)</td>
<td>Society is an ongoing process of many social interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources are limited</td>
<td>Society has interrelated parts</td>
<td>Interactions based on symbolic context in which they occur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power is not evenly distributed</td>
<td>What are functions or dysfunctions of parts</td>
<td>Subjective perceptions are critical to how symbols are interpreted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition is inevitable (winners &amp; losers)</td>
<td>Society finds balance and is stable</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiations based on influence, threats, promises, and consensus</td>
<td>Equilibrium</td>
<td>Meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats and coercion</td>
<td>Society adjusts to maintain balance</td>
<td>Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any resource can be used as tool of power or exploitation</td>
<td>How are parts integrated</td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War is natural</td>
<td>Manifest functions</td>
<td>Reality shaping in self and with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haves and have nots</td>
<td>Latent functions and dysfunctions</td>
<td>Social construction of reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileges are protected by haves</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thomas Theorem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order is challenged by have nots</td>
<td></td>
<td>Definition of situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3. Juan and Maria’s Extended Family System.**

![Figure 3. Juan and Maria’s Extended Family System.](image-url)

Juan and Maria are a middle-aged couple. Juan is a professor who lives with his parents, his wife’s widowed mother, his two children Anna and José, Anna’s husband Alma and the 3-month old triplets Anna just delivered. Notice that Maria’s father has passed away, so he
has an X over his place in this diagram. Because Juan is financially established, he can support the large extended family. This represents a 4-generation complex family system. There are three couples living within this home, Juan and Maria, Grandpa and Grandma, and Alma and Anna. But there are various levels of strain felt by each couple.

Today multi-generational family systems are becoming more common, but are typically three generations where the married adult child and his or her spouse and children move back home. Juan and Maria raised their two children Anna and José with tremendous support from grandparents. Maria’s mother was a college graduate and has been a big help to José who is a sophomore in college and a basketball team member. Juan’s mother and father are the oldest family members and are becoming more dependent. Juan’s mother requires some daily care from Maria.

In fact, Maria has the most individual strain of any family member in this family system. Juan and Maria have each felt a strain on their marriage because of the strains that come from each subsystem and family member who depends upon them. They both have in-laws in the house, they both contribute to the care needs of the elderly family members, and they both try to support their son’s basketball games and tournaments. But perhaps most stressful is that there are three brand new babies in the house (see Figure 4).

Those new babies have strained the entire family system, but extreme strain lands on Maria because Alma is a second year medical student and spends long hours in class and training. Anna is extremely overwhelmed by bottle-feedings, diapers, and other hands-on baby care demands. So, Maria is supporting both her daughter and three grandsons, but it’s overwhelming.

Maria is the Matriarch of this family system. She simultaneously belongs to the following subsystems, Daughter-Mother; Daughter-in-law-Father & Mother-in-law; Spousal; Mother-Son; Mother-Daughter; Mother-in-law-Son-in-law; and Grandmother-grandchildren. A large number of subsystems in one’s life does not automatically imply strain or stress. By looking at the family as a complex system with inter-locking and interdependent subsystems, solutions can be found among the members of the system and subsystems. This brings up the issue of boundaries. **Boundaries are distinct emotional, psychological, or physical separateness between individuals, roles, and subsystems in the family.** Boundaries are crucial to healthy family functioning.

**Family Developmental Theory**

*Family Developmental Theory* dates back to the 1930s and has been influenced by sociologists, demographers, and family and consumer scientists, as well as others. It is used to explain patterns of change, the dynamic nature of families, and how change occurs within the family life cycle. Family Developmental Theory was originally focused on stages of the family life cycle. According to Evelyn Duvall the stages are as follows. Stage 1: Married Couples without Children. Stage 2: Childbearing Families which starts at the birth of the first child and continues until the oldest child is 2½ years old. Stage 3: Families with Pre-School Children where the oldest child is 2 – 6 years old. Stage 4: Families with Schoolchildren where the oldest child is 6-13 years old. Stage 5: Families with Teenagers
where the oldest child is 13-20 years old. Stage 6: Families as Launching Centers. This starts when the first child leaves home and continues until the last child leaves home. Stage 7: Middle-Age Parents which continues until retirement. Stage 8: Aging Families which continues until the death of one spouse.6

Figure 4. Extended Family System Strain on Maria.

Theorists found over time that many families did not fit this model. For example many children who had launched had returned to the family home, often with children of their own. Newer models of this theory focused more on the roles and relationships within the family. The theory still focuses on developmental tasks which are the growth responsibilities that arise at certain stages in the life of the family. To be successful, family members need to adapt to changing needs and demands and to attend to tasks that are necessary to ensure family survival.

The major assumptions of this theory include the importance of individual development but stress that the development of the group of interacting individuals is most important. Developmental processes are inevitable and important in understanding families. Growth from one stage to another is going to happen. Families and individuals change over a period of time--they progress through a series of similar developmental stages and face similar transition points and developmental tasks.

To understand the family we must consider the challenges they face in each stage, how well they resolve them, and how well they transition to the next stage. The success or difficulty of achieving the developmental tasks in each stage leads to readiness for the next stage. The major criticism of this theory is its lack of ability to account for different family forms, and gender, ethnic, and cultural differences. It isn't culturally relevant or sensitive to other life style choices (e.g., childless families).7

**THE LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE**
The life course perspective is prominent within the fields of family sociology and aging. It is a lens with which to view the age-related transitions that are socially created and are recognized and shared by members of a society. It aids in our understanding of change among individuals and populations over time by looking at the interrelation between individual biography and historical social structures. The life course perspective is a theoretical framework that focuses on the timing of events that occur in an individual’s lifetime. A life course view of marriage is an ongoing career that occurs within the context of other life course events. The essential elements of the life course perspective include five themes: 1.) multiple time clocks, 2.) social context of development, 3.) dynamic view of process and change, 4.) heterogeneity in structures and processes, and 5.) a multidisciplinary view.

The first element is a focus on multiple time clocks or events that impact the individual. These multiple time clocks include ontogenetic, or individual, time which is comprised of personal events, generational time which consists of family transitions or events, and historical time which refers to social events. It is crucial to recognize the importance of the interactions of these time frames, since for instance historical events will impact individual’s life trajectories, such as the events of war or economic depression. Changes over historical time, such as the advent of no-fault divorce interact with generational time to increase the number of children whose parents divorce, which in turn interacts with individual time and may bring about a personal choice to divorce.

Second, the social context of development is also a focus of this perspective. One’s location within the broader social structure, the social creation of meanings, cultural context and change, and the interplay of macro- and micro-levels of development play an important role in the life course perspective.

Third, the life course perspective has a dynamic view of process and change. It focuses on the dialectic of continuity and change in human development. Age, period, and cohort effects are linked by their interaction with one another link microlevel and macrolevel phenomena. This perspective allows the researcher to disentangle the effects of age, period, and cohort to obtain a more accurate picture of family dynamics. Age effects are an artifact of maturation of individuals while period effects influence the life courses of individuals across birth cohorts. Cohort effects cause a differentiation in life patterns of consecutive birth cohorts.

The fourth theme of the life course perspective looks at heterogeneity in structures and processes. It acknowledges diversity across the range of patterns—increasing diversity over time with age at the cohort and individual level, and diversity over time with social change.

The fifth theme emphasizes the utility of multidisciplinary perspectives on development. Development is biological, psychological, and social and all of these perspectives must be considered when studying human development.

The life course perspective is not merely a variation of developmental theories since the latter emphasizes a normative sequence of stages in one’s life. The life course perspective
acknowledges the variance in the possible sequence of events, as well as, the omission of some events, such as not having children. This perspective also acknowledges the effect of social and historical events on the individual's life course (e.g., war). Life course scholars also are aware of the intra-cohort differences that are influenced by these social and historical events. The life course perspective views marriage as the uniting of two separate life histories which have been influenced by social events of the past and will be influenced by social events of the future.  

**SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY**

Social exchange theorists focusing on marital quality and stability have posited that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of mate selection and of remaining in a marriage. We look to this theory to explain why an individual might remain in a dissatisfied marriage. Barriers to change and attractiveness of alternatives are the main elements of social exchange theory when used to guide the investigation of divorce.  

There are several terms which are central to social exchange theory that must be defined prior to a discussion of the theory. **Outcomes** are those **rewards or costs which are received or incurred by actors from each other in an exchange relationship**. Outcomes can be positive (rewards) or negative (costs) and social exchange theory makes no assumption about whether an individual will view a particular outcome as positive or negative (e.g., some individuals view divorce as positive while others view it as a negative outcome). The theory only assumes that behavior is consistent with what individuals value in their lives. Rewards may be physical, social, or psychological. Costs can be viewed as negative or as forgone rewards. **Resources** are **possessions or behavioral capabilities (human capital) which have value to others and to oneself** (e.g., a husband’s job and income have value to his wife). When one resource outweighs another resource then it may become a barrier (e.g., the wife’s income may be a resource that enables her to leave the marriage, but her husband’s income may be so great that it may be a barrier to leaving since she won’t be able to enjoy the life to which she has become accustomed without his income). **Barriers** are **the costs of making a choice**. Several studies find when barriers are many and alternatives are few individuals may remain in dissatisfied marriages.  

**Alternatives** are **the variety of possible exchange relations available to individuals**. An individual’s alternatives are those opportunities which produce outcomes which have value to the individual. These outcomes may be exchange relationships with other individuals. In the study of divorce, alternatives are to remain married or to divorce. There are costs and rewards associated with alternatives (e.g., the psychological cost of staying in a poor quality marriage, the cost of paying bills on one income associated with divorce) and social exchange theory implies that individuals attempt to weigh rewards and costs when making decisions about alternatives.  

Individuals are dependent on each other in an exchange relationship and the outcomes which are valued by the individuals are contingent on the exchanges made with the other. Exchanges can be one-sided (asymmetrical) or reciprocal. An individual may give to another without receiving anything in return or may receive without giving. Individuals tend to influence each other by considering their partner’s previous choices when making
their own choices. Not only is a memory of past costs and rewards used in determining present exchanges, a forecast of future costs and rewards is considered also.\textsuperscript{19} When an exchange relationship is imbalanced, the individual who is less dependent will have the most power, or the power advantage.\textsuperscript{20} For instance, a woman who has no college education and lacks a stable job that provides her with a good income is more dependent on her husband, who earns the household income, than he is on her.

Exchange relations take place over time. They are not single transactions. For social exchange relationships to form and be ongoing, the value of the exchange to each of the individuals in the relationship must be greater than the perceived value of the potential alternatives. For example, as long as the value of the marital relationship is perceived to be greater than the perceived value of divorce, the individuals will remain in the marital relationship. However, in some cases individuals will remain in antagonistic relationships because the alternatives are perceived as even less desirable than the marital relationship (e.g., women in unsatisfying relationships with no education, no personal income, and many children to support) or because there is threat of punishment from the spouse (e.g., women in abusive relationships whose spouses threaten harm to them or their children if they leave). Social exchange theory acknowledges individuals do not always act rationally, but assumes those departures from rational behavior will follow predictable patterns.\textsuperscript{21} This theory assumes that humans act rationally when deciding on an exchange; however, this is not always true.\textsuperscript{22}

**Ecological Theory**

The major assumptions of Ecological Theory are that humans are interdependent with the environment; the whole system and its parts are interdependent and operate in relation to each other; a change in any part of the system affects the system as a whole and also the other parts of the system; all humans are interdependent with the resources of the world; the family is the foremost setting in which development occurs; the family interacts with more than one environment; interactions are regulated by the laws of nature and human-derived rules. Figure 5 shows the model with its systems. It is depicted as concentric circles with the person of interest in the center. Each larger circle is a system that is less directly connected to the individual in the center although it does have some influence over the person.

The **microsystem** is the immediate social settings which an individual is involved in. There is focus on face-to-face interactions. Family, school, work, church, and peer groups are typically within the microsystem. The **mesosystem** links two microsystems together, direct or indirectly. For example, a 10-year old child is at the center of the model so his family is one of his microsystems and his classroom at school is another microsystem; the interaction is these two is one of his mesosystems. An example of this interaction is a parent-teacher conference.\textsuperscript{23}

Figure 5. Parts of the Human Ecological Theory Model.\textsuperscript{24}
The **exosystem** are settings in which the person does not actively participate but in which significant decisions are made affecting other individuals who do interact directly with the person. Examples of a child’s exosystem would be neighborhood/community structures or parents work environment. The **macrosystem** is the “blueprints” for defining and organizing the institutional life of the society, including overarching patterns of culture, politics, economy, etc. The **chronosystem** encompasses change or consistency over time in the characteristics of the person and the environment in which the person lives (e.g., changes in family structure, SES, place of residence and community, society, cultural, and historical changes).²⁵

An example of how we might view a child of divorce with the Ecological Theory would be that his family configuration has changed (microsystem); one parent doesn’t come to parent-teacher conferences anymore (mesosystem); his mom has to get a full time job and work more hours and be away from him for more hours per day (exosystem); society’s views of divorce may make it easy or difficult for him to deal with the divorce (macrosystem); and his SES may have declined, his family structure has changed, his place of residence may have changed. An Ecological Theorist would start his research by investigating these areas of the child’s life.

**Feminist Family Theory**

Feminist theory is a theoretical perspective that is couched primarily in Conflict Theory assumptions, but has added the dimension of sex or gender to the study of society. Feminist theorists focus on the inequality of power between men and women in society and in family life. The feminist perspective is about choice and about equally valuing the choices individuals make.²⁶ Feminist theories are a group of theories which focus on four important themes: recognition of women’s oppression; an examination of what contributes to the maintenance of that oppression; a commitment to ending the unjust subordination; a futuristic vision of equality.²⁷

Women’s subordination appears in works of Plato, who believed that men were more virtuous by nature, and others who believed men had more intellectual and reasoning capabilities. Following the industrial revolution, the women’s movement emerged in the
19th century. Elizabeth Cady Stanton established the National Organization of Women (NOW). Susan B. Anthony was chosen to represent the **Suffragists** (*women who worked for the vote for women*) because of her less radical views. By the 1880s there was widespread support for obtaining the vote. Many believed women deserved the vote due to their maternal virtues while others believed women and men were equal in endowments. Women won the right to vote in 1920. In the 1960s there was a resurgence of the feminist movement which grew from the movement for the rights of African Americans. This wave of the feminist movement focused on equal pay for equal work, dissatisfaction and depression among American housewives, and power as central to the social construction of gender.28

The major assumptions of feminist theories are that women are oppressed; a focus on the centrality, normality, and importance of women’s experience; gender is socially constructed; the analyses of gender should include the larger socio-cultural context; and the term “family” supports women’s oppression because it contains class, cultural, and heterosexual biases.29

Liberal feminists believe gender should not be a barrier since men and women are endowed with the same rational and spiritual capacities. They are committed to social and legal reforms that will create equal opportunities for women, ending sex discrimination, and challenging sex stereotyping.30 Social feminists believe women are oppressed by capitalism. Their focus is on redefining capitalism in relation to women’s work. Radical feminist theories insist the oppression of women is fundamental. Radical feminists believe the current patriarchal system must be eliminated. Attention is directed towards issues of the body such as men’s control over women’s sexuality and reproduction, and men’s use of rape and violence to violate women.31

The strengths of feminist theories are that they can be applied to a broad range of issues and they provide valuable critique of other theories and perspectives that lack a focus on gender and power. These theories are limited in that research and practice are often emotionally charged and there can be an overemphasis on gender and power.32
16 Levenger. (1976); Thibaut & Kelly. (1959); White & Booth. (1991)
18 Lewis & Spanier. (1979); Molm & Cook. (1995)
19 Lewis & Spanier. (1979)
22 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Social%20Exchange%20Theory.htm
23 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Human%20Ecological%20Theory.htm
25 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Human%20Ecological%20Theory.htm
26 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Feminist%20Family%20Theory.htm
27 Avis, 1986
28 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Feminist%20Family%20Theory.htm
29 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Feminist%20Family%20Theory.htm
30 Osmond & Thorne, 1993
31 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Feminist%20Family%20Theory.htm
32 http://hhd.csun.edu/hillwilliams/542/Feminist%20Family%20Theory.htm