The phone had just rung, and Amy had run to answer as she was sure it was one of her teen girl friends phoning. After a series of “yes” and “no” answers on the phone, she hung up and joined her mother, who was preparing supper in the kitchen. “Who was on the phone, Amy?” her mother asked. “It was some polling company and they wanted to speak to the head of the household. I asked what that meant, and they said it was usually the father. I told them that Dad wasn’t here right now and to phone back.”

Amy then asked her mom why the father is considered the head rather than the mother. Amy’s mom explained that in any organization, whether it be school, business, or whatever, there needs to be a head that directs and coordinates the various tasks that need to be done and the delegation of responsibilities. In the family, that person is the father.

Amy said, “What about single parent moms and their kids—do they have a head of the household?” Amy’s mom quickly responded that the mom would have to take the father’s place, but having a mom and dad in a family is preferable.

Amy then asked, “Well, Mom, if you are not the head, what are you?” Amy’s mom said that the mother was the emotional and expressive glue that held family members together and supplied the emotional bonds, while the fathers supplied organization and resources. She said, “The family has been around for centuries because it functions so well with this division of organization between moms and dads.”

Amy then said, “Does this mean that single parent families don’t function as well?”
Several themes emerge from the conversation between Amy and her mom. These themes point out dimensions of the functional framework that have permeated the way many people think about families. One theme is that the family is like a social organization, and all such organizations function best when there is a hierarchical organizational structure. A second theme is that there is a “best” or “most complete” structure of the family, and that other family forms, such as single-parent families, are incomplete versions of that structure. Finally, there is the theme that the family is a social unit with great longevity precisely because it functions well. The hidden assumption here is that the family functions well in terms of satisfying either the needs of individuals or the needs of society. As we shall see, much of the functionalist framework is oriented toward both.

Although these themes are of interest to many of us, we can also see that other dimensions of this framework might provide some controversy. For example, the assumption that single-parent families are less complete structures than other families is only one expression of what some might call “dysfunctional” families. Such a labeling of family structures needs to be cautious and has provided difficulties for many scholars. At the same time, various policymakers have, in fact, focused on family structure as a key element in social policy. Indeed, some have even proposed that the way to deal with single-parent families is to get them married!

Another theme that emerges is a tacit emphasis on the value and beneficial outcomes associated with conformity to social expectations. The logic of functionalism is that by conforming to the social expectations for family (father and mother expectations), then there will be salutary outcomes for the children and society as a whole. Although many readers might not disagree with this logic, it is nonetheless worthwhile to critically examine such basic assumptions. For example, conformity to existing roles and expectations seldom is tied to social change and adaptation. So, one critical question that arises in regard to this theory is how the functionalist framework addresses and explains social change.

Intellectual Traditions

The functionalist framework is identified by the form of explanation that is used rather than a particular set of substantive ideas. As such, we find functional arguments (or logic) in such areas as biology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and history, as well as family studies. The core element in functionalist logic is that questions about “why” things exist are actually explained by “how” things exist or the thing’s function. For example, we might explain why we have a heart by citing the need for a pump in our circulatory system.
Thus, the heart is explained by the function it performs within a larger system and context. There are actually several different types of explanations that have been associated with functionalism. First is the type of explanation we have mentioned above that explains a structure or event by its function for the larger social system. When this larger system is itself a social structure, we say that this is a “structure-functional” argument. A second way in which functionalism explains things is by producing outcomes that are required by a system. For example, it is often assumed that certain systems and organisms have requisite functions that must be performed if the unit is to survive. For example, respiration in humans is a basic function. So, a functional explanation in this regard is identified by fulfilling “basic needs or requisites” in a system. We shall see this type of explanation in Parsonian functionalism and in Swenson’s neofunctionalism. Finally, there is an explanatory logic known as structuralism, which argues that behavior results from a priori structure (Lévi-Strauss, 1967). For the purposes of this chapter, we will not cover purely structural explanations as a form of functionalism. Thus, the two forms that we cover are structural functionalism and requisite functionalism. These two forms of explanation, although distinct, can be and often are united by saying that a function is required for maintaining a social structure.

The basic ideas of functional explanation have been around for centuries. Every time we ask “how” something works instead of “why” something exists, we are asking for a functional explanation. Indeed, a key to understanding this theory is its concern with how the social world is constructed. In this sense, some scholars (e.g., Turner, 1991) have observed that the intellectual origins of this theory can be traced to Thomas Hobbes’s question “How is social order possible?” Although this may be partly true, it is also possible to trace forms of this thinking all the way back to Greek thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato.

Despite the long history of this tradition, we believe that the clearest progenitor of the 20th-century versions of the functionalist framework in the biological and social sciences is the evolutionary theories (Darwin, 1880) that developed during the middle of the 19th century. Although functionalist thinking preceded Darwin and the evolutionist, evolutionary theory added a dynamic concept that increased the usefulness and generality of functional explanation. Prior to evolutionary theory, functionalist arguments might be in the form of our example above using the heart and circulatory system. With the advent of evolutionary theory, it became plausible to expand functional arguments to explain not only why a set of functions developed but how they might end. This dynamic argument became available through the concepts of adaptation and selection. Now scholars could talk about functions that were adaptive because they survived and dysfunctions were “selected” out of the population. Indeed, this meant that the original “how”
question addressed by functional arguments moved increasingly close to also providing an explanation as to “why” a given structure exists. That is to say that a structure exists because it has been part of a functional system that has successfully adapted to the environment.

Early social theorists such as Spencer (1820–1903) and Durkheim (1858–1917) recognized how organic functionalism might be used to explain various social institutions and behaviors. For example, the family could be seen as supplying various functions such as reproduction to the larger social whole. Indeed, it was Durkheim (Lamanna, 2002) who believed that the parts of the social system had to be understood as functioning for the whole. His particular view of functionalism was oriented toward the overarching social goal of integration and order (Turner, 1991, pp. 40–41), thus returning to the importance of the Hobbesian question. Durkheim’s focus on integration and social order alone were somewhat unappealing, however, for the social scientists discovering the great diversity of cultures and societies. Clearly, all of these societies needed social integration, but they had developed in quite distinct and different ways. Functionalists and functionalism as an explanation had to somehow deal with this variation in societies and cultures if it was to acquire status as a viable social theory.

Although the biological sciences were among the first to adopt functionalist explanations, they were quickly followed by social and cultural anthropologists pursuing explanation of why and how different cultural traditions exist in various social systems. The success of biological evolutionists in explaining species variations by regional adaptations and specific environmental pressures (selection) seemed to hold great promise for anthropologists trying to explain human social variations. Among the leaders of the functionalist framework were two anthropologists who were to have a lasting effect on the logic of functionalism: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). Radcliffe-Brown’s contribution to functionalism was to make it relative to the environment in which the society must adapt. He argued that a structure developed to serve a particular system within the parameters of an environment and its demands. Hence, Radcliffe-Brown moved functionalism to a much broader and more evolutionary perspective where social and cultural variation might be incorporated (Turner, 1991, p. 43). Malinowski (1944) really added the dimension of levels of social systems, and this was to prove to be integral to many of the major theoretical works such as Parsons (see Martindale, 1960, and Turner, 1991).

Parsons’s System and Action Theory

Much of the scholarly world principally identifies functionalism with the enormous body of theoretical work produced by Talcott Parsons
(1902–1979). Parsons pursued his early studies in both Great Britain and Germany. He was clearly influenced by the classical theorists in sociological theory, such as Weber and Durkheim (see Parsons, 1937). This influence was both substantive and methodological. Substantively, Parsons was concerned with incorporating individual meaning (Weber) with the need for social systems to maintain order (Durkheim). Methodologically, Parsons believed in the desirability and possibility of a “grand theory” of social systems that would be encompassing and explanatory. Most of Parsons’s work was produced while he was at Harvard University’s Social Relations department from 1927 until his death. During this time, Parsons’s work became the most widely read and accepted theoretical framework in the social sciences, and later the most criticized. There is no doubt whatsoever that Parsons’s work has had a profound, deep, and continuing influence on the thinking of contemporary social scientists. It is also interesting that Parsons produced numerous essays and one book (Family, Socialization and Interactional Process, with Robert Bales) on the family. Although one could argue that many of the classical grand theorists paid scant attention to the family, Parsons would not be counted among these.

Parsons’s perspective on the family is best understood within the architecture of his larger theory of social systems. Parsons divided up the social world into three systems. The cultural system is composed of shared symbols and meanings. The social system is composed of organized social groups and institutions. Finally, the personality system is composed of the species generic types of personalities. For Parsons, much of the personality system was drawn from Freudian psychoanalysis. The great bulk of Parsons’s thinking was devoted to the social system. His work on family, however, also encompassed the socialization processes needed for the social system and the ways in which the integration of adult individuals into the group or social system maintained the institutional social system (see Parsons & Bales, 1955; Turner, 1991, p. 61).

Parsons (1937, 1951) argued that every social system needed to achieve a state of order or system equilibrium. Subsystems such as institutions functioned to assist in achieving this system order. He posited four “functional imperatives” that all systems require: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (or maintenance of morale and motivation). This system of functions is commonly referred to by the acronym A-G-I-L. Every system must have subsystems that function for the adaptation of the system. Every system must satisfy the goals of the system and must integrate its members. Finally, every system must ensure that motivation for action (latency) remains above a certain level.

Parsons’s major work on the family resides in his essays in the Parsons and Bales (1955) book on the family. Parsons suggests
that the basic and irreducible functions of the family are two: the primary socialization of children so that they can truly become members of the society into which they have been born; second, the stabilization of the adult personalities of the population of the society. (pp. 16–17)

Parsons’s view was that these two functions were intimately related because a child could be socialized into a society only if the society was institutionalized and organized into expected role structures and adults received stability from such role structures. Although Parsons (1954) had previously argued that industrialization and urbanization had caused the erosion of extended kinship for the American family, he nonetheless is emphatic that the family is still a strong and stable institution capable of performing these two basic functions.

In terms of understanding Parsons’s view of the family, we could start from either the socialization of the child or the stabilization of adults into institutional role structures. According to Parsons and Bales (1955),

the structure of the nuclear family can be treated as a consequence of differentiation on two axes, that of hierarchy or power and that of instrumental vs. expressive function. . . . It follows that as this aspect of its differentiation is concerned the family contains four fundamental types of status-role. (p. 45)

These two role dimensions, power and task affect, led Parsons to conclude that the basic institutional role structure of the family is as follows:

Table 2.1 Basic Role Structure of the Nuclear Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK ORIENTATION</th>
<th>POWER</th>
<th>INSTRUMENTAL</th>
<th>EXPRESSIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUPERIOR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumental superior</td>
<td>Expressive superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father (husband)</td>
<td>Mother (wife)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFERIOR</td>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumental inferior</td>
<td>Expressive inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Son (brother)</td>
<td>Daughter (sister)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is obvious from Table 2.1 that the basic role structure is what many of us would see as the “normal” nuclear family. Parsons makes some tacit assumptions in regard to the family role structure, such as the attribution of task orientation to specific genders. Females are seen as more expressive and males as more instrumental. Parsons explains that an instrumental orientation “concerns relations of the system to its situation outside the system, to meeting the adaptive conditions of its maintenance of equilibrium, and ‘instrumentally’ establishing the desired relations to external goal objects” (p. 47). On the other hand, expressiveness “concerns the ‘internal’ affairs of the system, maintenance of integrative relations between the members, and regulation of the patterns and tension levels of its component units” (p. 47). Later, Parsons further elaborates these roles by stating that the father is the technical expert and executive, whereas the mother is the expressive charismatic leader and cultural expert (see pp. 50–51).

Understanding Parsons’s view of the role structure of the family is necessary for moving to a discussion of socialization. Parsons sees the first stage of child socialization as being “mother-child identity” (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 49). The separation of this identity and the extension of the child into other binary family relations (fa-so, fa-da, br-si) are essential elements in socialization. Indeed, the process of socialization is aimed at producing a social actor. An actor is always tied to a system of relationships with others. So, Parsons argues that through

the process of socialization ego comes to be he who in relation to alter does so and so under given conditions. There is no other meaningful answer to the question what ego is, if ego as personality is conceived to be a system of action. (p. 57, emphasis in original)

Thus, the institutional structure of family roles provides sets of binary relations for the child to define him or herself within the context of well-defined others. As a result, the child acquires competence at social interaction (roles) within the family and then extends those competencies to school and work.

Parsons details the processes of identity and separation using Freudian psychoanalytic theory. He discusses object-relations, oral dependency, and the Oedipus complex as components of child socialization. For example, in the first relationship, mother-child, Parsons argues that the child has only one internalized object, and that the child is principally passive in regard to this single role relationship. The next stage, however, is marked by the move from dependency to greater autonomy in this relationship and, hence, personality differentiation. It must be said that these are the processes by
which Parsons sees internal learning and transference of information taking place. Even if we were to reject his Freudian description of these processes, which many of today’s scholars might advocate, the structural notion of the family roles and the acquisition of role competence would still remain as an independent set of propositions.

Merton’s Empirical Middle Range

Parsons’s “grand theory” encompassing the cultural, social, and personality systems and the articulation of these systems with one another provided a sweeping and abstract perspective on the social system. Robert Merton, a colleague of Parsons at Harvard, argued that the social sciences were not yet ready for such sweeping theory but still had a tremendous amount of work to do gathering data and summarizing research findings with more modest theory. He envisioned these more modest theories as “middle range” theories that were more abstract than “minor working hypotheses” but more limited in scope than “the all inclusive speculations comprising a master conceptual scheme” (Merton, 1957, p. 6).

Merton’s argument was echoed by many scholars of the day. Indeed, many scholars began to doubt the viability of the grand theory project. At the same time, social scientists in the 1950s witnessed a marked increase in the quantity and quality of empirical data analysis. A new empiricism was emerging. Advances in measurement and statistical analysis were complemented by the advent of computers. At the same time, a host of critics emerged to demonstrate that, at least in regard to kinship and the family, Parsons had made untenable assumptions regarding historical details (e.g., Greenfield, 1961). The end point of this criticism was to cast doubt on the entire Parsonian project of grand theory.

Merton (1957) supplied several examples of middle range theories, such as reference group theory and theories of social anomie (normlessness). Furthermore, these theories had direct applications to areas such as juvenile delinquency and deviance that were much more concrete than many of Parsons’s formulations. Even though Merton discussed both inductive and deductive theory-building processes, his notion of inductive theory building, using empirical uniformities to develop theoretical generalizations, found an obliging audience among social scientists.

The theoretic task, and the orientation of empirical research toward theory, first begins when the bearing of such uniformities on a set of interrelated propositions is tentatively established. (Merton, 1957, p. 95)
Goode’s Conjugal Family

William Goode (1963) was among the theorists affected by both Parsons and Merton. Goode’s work expanded Parsons’s notion that the American family was losing its extended kinship as a result of the effects of industrialization and urbanization. Goode extended this argument by noting that as children became an economic liability as societies moved from agrarian to industrial economies, the married couple would increasingly be the focus of family life. This movement was further in evidence in modern societies by the rise of romantic love and voluntary mate selection, and the overwhelming emphasis on marriage rather than children. Thus, as family functions changed, the structure of the family changed. Goode’s extension provided a middle range theory of family change that remains popular. This theory has been variously termed convergence theory, modernization theory, and social development theory.

Swenson’s Neofunctional Theory of the Family

Although much of functional thinking lay dormant during the decade of the 1970s, the 1980s began to see a resurgence of interest in functionalism. Jeffrey Alexander (1985) was one of those who helped to create the perception that functional explanations had acquired new life in the form of neofunctionalism. There is some debate as to how well the moniker of “functionalism” actually fits this movement. For example, Turner (1991) observes that the notion that functions are to have consequences for system needs is lacking in these statements.

But notions of system needs and requisites are what make functional analysis unique and distinctive; if one simply removes them from analysis, then the approach is no longer functional. Thus, to some extent, neofunctionalism is nonfunctionalism. (p. 93)

Neofunctionalists seemed largely unperturbed by such criticisms. In the area of family studies, Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993) resurrected the functionalist paradigm. Their approach was to outline the many areas in which functionalism had made significant contributions to our thinking about families and larger social systems. They did not directly confront critiques of functionalist thinking as tautological and circular, nor did they resurrect debates over the logic of functionalism and functional alternatives. Rather, in their overview, Kingsbury and Scanzoni attempted to reacquaint family scholars with the rich potential for functionalist approaches to the family.
The success of this reawakening is most obvious in the recent work by Don Swenson (2004). Swenson attempts to unite the diverse family theoretical frameworks, as found in the work of White and Klein (2002), through the unifying lens of functionalism. Although Swenson uses Parsons’s body of work as his major source for functionalism, there are some major omissions of what some scholars might regard as critical elements of Parsonian thinking. For example, there is virtually no discussion of Parsons’s functional imperatives and the A-G-I-L categories. On the other hand, Swenson does not shy away from the notion that families provide functions both for the social system and for individual needs. However, these needs are only partially discussed in Parsonian terms. Swenson adds to the functionalist view of the family the 50 years of empirical research and middle range theory development that have taken place since Parsons first elaborated his functional theory of the family. In addition to the traditional Parsonian role structure of the family, we also find that Swenson has incorporated middle range theories such as attachment theory to enhance the explanatory value of the functional argument. There is little doubt that Swenson would not fit the Turner (1991) accusation of being a “nonfunctionalist” because he clearly deals with functional explanations within the family and between the family and larger systems. Currently, there is no doubt that Swenson provides the clearest statement and application of neofunctionalist explanations available to family scholars and researchers.

Focus and Scope Assumptions

The social system must be considered a basic scope assumption. The broad notion of functional explanation can be understood only in relation to being a functional part of a social system. For example, the family can be seen as stabilizing adult personalities and socializing the young. Both of these outcomes are only functional insofar as they contribute to the well-being of the entire social system and its maintenance. For example, if we were to say that Group X functioned to enhance memory for Group Y, this outcome could be judged only by the usefulness of this outcome for maintaining the overall system. In some cases, we might see salutary functions for having Y’s memory extinguished rather than enhanced. It is also important to note that when we say that Group X satisfies individual needs for belonging, we then must further justify this by saying why satisfying this need is functional for the social system. In the end, functional explanations must refer to the social system.

The social system has several levels: biological (personality), social structural, and cultural. The idea of subsystems immediately complicates functional analysis. Clearly, we could talk about something that functions
for useful biological or personality outcomes but might be more dysfunctional for the cultural or structural system. For example, the family might well serve functions such as nurturance and maintenance for individuals, but these might be somewhat contradictory to the need for individuals to “individuate” and become self-sustaining and independent. Indeed, the notion of these three systems allows for the conceptualization of complexity and some problems of malfunction, dysfunction, latent functions, and so on that might not be so functional for other system levels.

Equilibrium is the notion that the subsystems must articulate with one another so as to maintain the social system at some equilibrium range. The model often used by Parsons was the idea of a thermostat, but we believe a more biological notion, such as the fact that human body temperature can vary within an equilibrium range, but if it becomes too cold (hypothermic) or too hot (hyperthermic), death of the organism is the result. Equilibrium is a basic assumption about the nature of the social system. It should be noted that this is largely for what Martindale (1960) has termed the organic analogy. There is actually scant evidence that actual societies have particular variables that must be kept within a certain range. However, there is the logical argument that any society that does not reproduce its membership will vanish and any society that does not attend to the biological sustenance of its members will vanish. This logical argument fails to incorporate the range for those variables. For instance, when we witness a society practicing racial or ethnic cleansing of its membership, such practices seem to fly in the face of assumptions about functions such as replacement of members and the maintenance of equilibrium.

The equilibrium assumption also supplants and conceals any identification of social system goals. It is sufficient to say that a group like the family functions to stabilize adult personalities and socialize the young. These outcomes in turn function to maintain the equilibrium of the social system. What is seldom considered is whether the social system has any higher-order goals than simply maintaining equilibrium. Indeed, the absence of evolutionary theory or even teleological theory might be seen to reduce equilibrium to a simple conservatism. On the other hand, neofunctionalists such as Alexander (1985, p. 10) have argued that the dynamic between the personality, cultural, and social systems provides continuous and dynamic change (Pittman, 1993, p. 218).

Concepts

Action

Action is certainly a basic concept for functionalism. Action is usually delineated from behavior that is habitual or simply an autonomic response. Rather,
action is intentional. Action involves systems of motivation and systems of orientation. It is behavior that is motivated and intended by the actor. In this sense, functionalism is, at its roots, a theory of purposeful action. At the same time, functionalism allows for the interpretation of habitualized and routinized behaviors as anachronisms that served functions at a previous time.

Although some forms of functionalist thinking stress the concept of action more than others, this stress is largely determined by whether interest is mainly focused on the social system rather than the psychological or cultural system. In effect, then, the emphasis on action is more sociological and group oriented than it is oriented toward the individual as a psychological system or the culture as a symbolic system. As such, the concept of action is especially important for social actors related to the family.

The concept of action is not simply relegated to the individual level of analysis but is also an important concept for groups such as the family (Parsons & Bales, 1955) and even corporate groups (Merton, 1968).

Function

Function is one of the most basic concepts. A social group, individual actor, or institutional actor can act so as to satisfy a need. The need might be a need of the individual or a need of the social system. So, for example, the family satisfies the needs of individual members (food, shelter, etc.) and, hence, functions for their maintenance, while at the same time fulfilling very different needs for the social system, such as replacement of members. It should be pointed out that a function is not a thing or entity. To say something “functions” to satisfy a need is to infer a particular relation and process. A function is a relation and not a thing in itself.

Parsons and Bales (1955) argued that every society had four functional prerequisites that the society or social system had to provide in order for the society or social system to exist: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (or maintenance of morale and motivation). Every social system needs to provide for system adaptation. Without adaptation, any perturbation can move the system from a state of equilibrium to a state of disequilibrium. Every system needs to have means of goal attainment for the group. Every system needs to integrate members into a functional unit. Finally, every system must maintain the motivation of its members.

The idea of societies having universal functions and the family serving many of these universal functions was popular not only among students of Parsons but also among anthropologists such as Murdock (1965). Indeed, it was tempting to argue as Parsons and Bales (1955) did that families served both latency and integration functions. It was also tempting to return to the “defunctionalization” hypothesis of the 1930s put forth by
Ogburn and Nimkoff (1955) and others to explain social disorganization. This idea was that as the family lost its functions (education of children, economic cooperation, etc.) to technology and professionalization (teachers, social workers, etc.), the family would be weakened as a social organization and more prone to social disorganization (divorce and family breakdown). Thus, as functions were reduced, the survival of the structure became questionable. The connections between functions and structure were seen to be interdependent.

Merton (1957) introduced the notions of manifest and latent functions. A manifest function is one that is intended, and a latent function is one that is unintended. Any single action might have both types of functions. For example, a society that wants and trains a literate and technologically adept population might achieve that as a manifest function, whereas the latent function would be the difficulty of maintaining a dictatorship or manipulating information. Another example is that many immigrant parents in North America expend tremendous efforts to give their children a Western-style education, only to find that the children now reject many of the cultural traditions the parents had hoped to pass on to their children.

Another part of the concept of function is that of functional alternatives developed from anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and later developed by Merton (1957). The idea of a functional alternative is that there are many possible ways in which a need might be met. Thus, for any given function, there is also a range of functional alternatives. For example, the family might be seen to meet the function of reproduction; however, a social system could also meet this function (reproduction of members) by means of immigration or even test tube babies or cloning.

Structure

Structure refers to an abstract morphological component of an empirical entity. So, a group might have a structure or several structures. Indeed, the structure of a group or a molecule is inferred from behavior and action. It also might be empirically sensible, such as viewing the structure of a one-cell paramecium or amoeba through a microscope. At the most simple level, the structure of a group (or social system) might be viewed as the individual physical members of the group. Such a perspective, however, counts only the membership and not the structure. The structure of a group refers to not only the entities but also the links between them that organize particular patterns of behavior or communication. For example, Parsons saw the principal structure of the family as being defined by the structure and complementariness of the social roles played by family members (e.g., father, mother, son, daughter, etc.).
System

This perspective on social structure moves us to a discussion of system properties. The big difference between a structure and a system is that the system is treated as a whole; that is, something that has some degree of completeness by itself. Thus, we can talk about the role structure of the family (group) within the social system. The social system is larger and more encompassing than any group because it includes the institutional norms that regulate behaviors in the entire system in addition to subsystems such as the family. It was exactly this “system” aspect that permeated much of Parsons’s writing. As we have previously discussed, Parsons (1937, 1951) divided the area of human behavior into three major systems: the personality system, the social system, and the cultural system. There are interactions between these three systems, and the family is especially implicated in the interactions between the personality and social systems (socialization and stabilization of adult personalities) and the personality and cultural systems (values) in addition to the social and cultural systems (kinship and incest taboo).

Norm

The idea of social norms, both formal and informal, preceded Parsons’s work (Lamanna, 2002). Parsons, however, posited that norms were responsible for social control and order on one hand, and stable and expected interactions for individual actors on the other hand. Of course, these two perspectives are more like opposite sides of the same coin because the normative order presents the individual with stable relationships.

Norms are the social rules that regulate our behavior with each other as well as with cultural objects. Although Parsons allowed for some degree of variation in conformity to social norms, he was also very clear that excessive deviance could lead to complete social breakdown. For instance, Turner (1991) summarizes this position by stating that Parsons viewed actors’ interactions as follows:

They come to develop agreements and sustain patterns of interaction, which become "institutionalized." Such institutionalized patterns can be, in Parsons’ view, conceptualized as a social system. . . . The normative organization of status-roles becomes Parsons’ key to this conceptualization. (p. 57)

This conceptualization of the social system as composed of normatively defined roles is widely accepted among most functionalists (e.g., Merton, 1957). It is a view that sees individuals as more or less transient “incumbents” in a role structure that has much greater longevity than individuals. It is also
a view that roles are composed of the norms or rules that give content to any status or position. In this sense, roles incorporate both the norms and social structure. Parsons viewed the family as the central socializing agency through which individuals learned the rules and statuses in a given social system.

Values

Whereas norms control the actor's behavior, values give motive to the actor's behavior. As such, values are the expression of culture interacting with the individual. Turner (1991) explains that "cultural values and other patterns can become internalized in the personality system and hence affect that system's need structure, which in turn determines an actor's willingness to enact roles in the systems" (p. 58). Thus, the individual is socialized to value certain ideas, attitudes, and things, and these, in turn, become motives to follow the norms and perform the roles in the social system. A somewhat crass example is that the value placed on money (as an end rather than a means) would lead actors to perform roles in a social system when they are remunerated for the performance. Of course, in reality, the hierarchical nature of values, the adequacy of socialization, and the available opportunities within the social system all act to constrain the individual's behavior.

Parsons (1951) argued that both values and norms could be described by what he termed *pattern variables*. He argues that five polar dimensions describe the nature of norms and values: affectivity–affective neutrality, diffuseness–specificity, universalism–particularism, achievement–ascription, and finally self–collectivity. Although these five dimensions were largely treated as "either/or"-type categories, there is no reason that each could not be conceptualized as a continuous distribution of scale values (scalar). The usefulness of these categories beyond description remains somewhat unclear, although they might be used to describe cultural value orientations (Turner, 1991, p. 59).

Propositions

As we have seen, functionalism is somewhat diverse. It ranges from anthropological functionalism through Parsonian functionalism to Merton's logical functionalism and middle range theories. It is clear, however, that the version of functionalism that has paid the most attention to the family is found in the work of Parsons and Bales (1955). Thus, the propositions we cite are mainly from the work of Parsons and as such often make reference to other aspects of Parsons's "grand theory." We endeavor to discuss these broader aspects as we review each proposition.
A social system can exist only when its functional prerequisites are met.

The four functional prerequisites are adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (morale). Although a social system must fulfill all of these four, it is also very clear that not all social subsystems provide all four components. In Parsons and Bales’s (1955) discussion of the family, it is clear that the family functions to satisfy two of these prerequisites while making some contribution directly and indirectly to the others.

The family functions to stabilize adult personalities and socialize children.

Parsons largely sees the family as performing two functions for the social system. The first function is the socialization of children. This socialization passes on culture to the child mainly in terms of mores and values that will interact with the child’s personality and social norms that will provide the basis for the child’s social integration into the social system. The second function is to stabilize the adult personalities by providing means of tension reduction (biological) and values and morale (cultural system). Parsons and Bales (1955, p. 19) note that this “stabilization” function is largely moored within the conjugal unit of the family. They clearly see family as a healthy environment for diverse personalities.

The family is not a microcosm of the social system but a specialized and differentiated subsystem with specific roles and normative content. (Parsons & Bales, 1955, pp. 19–39)

Parsons and Bales (1955) view the family as having less complexity than the broader social system, but at the same time, it is specialized in ways that other units in the social system lack. Probably the most notable component of this specialization is founded on the way in which the family is socially integrated with biological systems such as kinship and descent, birth and nurturing socialization, and adult personalities and sex. Indeed, the social roles as captured in Table 2.1 are unique to the social subsystem of the family.

Parsons sees the specialization and demands of these roles as intensifying because of the increasing isolation of the nuclear family in modern societies. He argues that in primitive societies, kinship serves many important functions, but as societies industrialize and modernize, these functions are performed by other forms of social organization.

The process by which non-kinship units become of prime importance in a social structure, inevitably entails “loss of function” on the part of some or even all of the kinship units. (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 9)
The proposition above is commonly known as the “isolated nuclear family” hypothesis, and it has received a great deal of attention from anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, and historians in addition to family scholars. Parsons’s perspective is that in domestic and agrarian economies, family members were an economic asset. Large families supplied male laborers for plowing and harvesting and female laborers for food preparation, storage, and clothes making. Elderly family members were functional for taking care of young children. Older children had economic value in terms of the many chores (feeding animals, etc.) that they could perform. Thus, in these societies, extended kinship was quite functional. Industrialization and modernization, however, demand increased education, with the result that children become economic liabilities in terms of both losing their labor and the expense of prolonged schooling. Because the family is no longer place-based but job-based, families must be geographically and socially mobile. They must be prepared to move to where the jobs are. As a result, the elderly are no longer needed to take care of children because the children are in school, and the elderly are more problematic in regard to geographic mobility. The end result is that families are smaller in size and lack residential kin.

*The isolation of the nuclear family “focuses the responsibility of the mother role more sharply on the one adult woman.”* (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 23)

Parsons acknowledges that both conjugal roles are intensifying and that the added strain especially on conjugal roles is indicated by high divorce rates. He suggests, however, that this is an “adjustment” to the added intensity of these roles rather than the demise of the family. He does note that the *professionalization* of the mother role by nursing, psychologists, social workers, teachers and, indeed, family life educators, not only serves to strip the role of functions but to lessen the functionality of the family (Parsons & Bales, 1955, pp. 23–25).

The mother-child relationship is essential for socialization of the child into the social system. Parsons relies largely on a psychoanalytic approach (object relations) to discuss this process (Parsons & Bales, 1955, p. 54). He notes that in order for the child to become a competent social actor in the social system, the child must develop an identity that is defined in relation to others. He states that “by learning in the process of socialization ego comes to be he who in relation to alter does so and so under given condition” (p. 56). The developing child begins in a state of dependency, beginning with oral dependency.

*As children develop their dependency can be assessed on three dimensions: frustration, attachment, and power.* (p. 61)
Although Parsons develops more detailed propositions concerning each of these dimensions (see Chapter 2 in Parsons & Bales, 1955), this single proposition allows us to summarize the process. In the oral dependency stage, a child’s satisfaction of oral impulses is dependent on the mother. As the child matures, frustration regarding the fulfillment of these urges is reduced as the child becomes attached to the mother and more certain of the need gratification (power). For example, crying moves from a biological base of hunger to a power base of wanting attention and feeding. The process is basically one where through reciprocal interaction, the child is defined. As the child matures, frustration and attachment are gradually reduced while power increases to the stage of autonomy over oral needs (self-feeding). In general, this is the process of development throughout the socialization process.

Parsons's vision of the family entails the complex weaving of elements from the personality system, social system, and cultural system. The family's major function is to produce individuals who carry cultural values and norms that allow them to integrate into the social system as actors. The second aspect of this is that adult individuals require the continued stabilization of personalities in terms of reducing tensions (sexual and otherwise) and integrating roles (complementarity). Parsons's perspective on the family is extraordinary for its breadth and detail. Not only does he deal with the family in relation to modernity but also the details of child ego formation. Although Parsons’s work has been extensively criticized, there can be no doubt that it has influenced generations of family scholars.

Variations

Even before Parsons’s death in 1979, functionalism had fallen into a quagmire of controversy. This was due in no small part to Merton’s (1957) argument that the time was not right for the social sciences to develop grand theory; rather, resources should be directed toward theories of the middle range. Certainly in the family theory, we see the consequence of this in the division of the two volumes of Contemporary Theories About the Family (Burr et al., 1979), where the first volume is aimed at middle range empirical theories and the second volume is aimed at grand deductive theories. After Parsons’s death, his theories about modernization and its effects on families continued to be popular but often without reference to Parsons. This school of thought constitutes one particularly healthy variant of functionalist thinking. The second variant comes from the reawakening of functionalism mainly through the work of Jeffrey Alexander (1985). Alexander has clearly argued that scholars can revise Parsons’s thoughts so as to circumvent the theoretical
and empirical problems. He argued that this revised version is “neofunctionalism.” Although Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993) discussed the broad outlines of such a revision, it wasn’t until the work by Swenson (2004) that a real neofunctionalist view of the family became clearly articulated. It is this neofunctionalist view of the family that provides the second contemporary variant of functionalism.

Convergence Theory and Social Development

Although Parsons offered one of the clearest formulations of convergence theory (Parsons & Bales, 1955), his exposition was aimed at the American family and its historical evolution. Parsons suggested that modernization in the form of industrialization and urbanization put pressure on families by increased role specificity and the “defunctionalizing” of large areas of family activity, especially in regard to extended kinship. Parsons’s argument was not entirely original and had been prefaced by others, such as the defunctionalization argument of Ogburn and Nimkoff (1955). Although Parsons clearly intended his analysis to be aimed at the American family, it also seemed that he was characterizing a ubiquitous process common to all development. It is, however, somewhat unclear how far Parsons was willing to push his hypotheses in regard to Third World development.

Goode (1963) removed any ambiguities regarding the ubiquity of the process. Goode assumed that modernization was a relatively uniform process regardless of national or cultural contexts. This process would have similar outcomes for families. Goode especially highlighted the Parsonian idea of increased specialization of conjugal roles and tied that to the outcomes of modernization: notably smaller family size due to children being an economic liability, and increased longevity as health increases and mortality declines. As a result of these forces, the conjugal unit becomes increasingly important and the family (parenting and kinship) declines in importance. Later in his life, Goode (1993) noted that anomalies existed contrary to the expectations of convergence, but by that time, the general idea of convergence had very strong roots in American academic thinking.

Decades of empirical studies such as Kumagai’s (1984) study showing convergence in family event timing between the United States, Canada, and Japan supported the broad outlines of Goode’s argument. During the 1990s, the convergence argument was extended to areas such as globalization (Ritzer, 1993) and history (Fukuyama, 1992). These academic voices argued that convergence is not just in terms of family; it also broadly affects the convergence of social and cultural institutions throughout the world. Another important source of support for convergence theory came from demographers,
who argued that demographic transitions were largely uniform. So-called
demographic transition theory argues that modernization is uniformly
accompanied by declining fertility balanced with increased longevity. More
recently, demographers have argued that a second demographic transition is
under way as indicated by women in the labor force and below replacement
fertility. Both of these demographic perspectives assume the ubiquity of
effects for modernization, thus supporting convergence theory.

There is little doubt that the convergence perspective has dominated and
permeated the perspectives of family scholars and demographers over the
past 50 years. This fact, however, should not conceal the contrary argu-
ments and data that have arisen during this duration of time. Certainly,
a host of historians and sociologists took issue with Parsons’s initial “ iso-
lated nuclear family” hypothesis. For example, Greenfield (1961) presented
historical data that showed that agrarian families in the United States and
the European progenitors of these families were probably never extended
families. As such, there was no transition. More recently, this point has
been extended by historians such as Coontz in her book *The Way We
in his book on clashing civilizations. The underpinnings of demographic
theories have been both questioned and critiqued by Thornton (2005), who
has accused demographers and family scholars of “reading history side-
ways.” One of the most recent and profound challenges to the convergence
perspective comes from Therborn’s (2004) in-depth analysis in his book *Between Sex and Power*. Although no one can be unimpressed by the data
and breadth of Goode’s *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963),
Therborn’s (2004) work is impressive because it revisits the data and
includes societies and cultures that are not just among the most powerful
or populated. Unlike convergence theory, Therborn identifies five major
family systems and two lesser types that are composed of religious and cul-
tural values. Therborn’s analysis then examines three different elements of
convergence: the decline of patriarchy, changing patterns of marriage, and
fertility patterns. It is only in the decline of patriarchy that there is some-
thing akin to convergence, and that is complicated by interaction with
forms of marriage and fertility. In some ways, Therborn takes seriously the
cultural differences that Goode (1993) saw as anomalies.

Convergence theory continues to be a vital and driving force in many
academic areas, such as demography. It should be pointed out that the chal-
enges to the convergence perspective are increasing. It should also be noted
that the convergence perspective has far exceeded what can be found within
Parsons’s writings. On the other hand, there is little doubt that Goode’s
work extended Parsons’s in ways that were completely consistent. The fact
that significant challenges have arisen and continue to arise to this single cause (modernization) type of approach, isolated from the complexities of sex and power, must lead us to some caution in regard to the future viability of convergence theory.

Swenson’s Neofunctionalism and the Family

Swenson’s (2004) book *A Neo-Functionalist Synthesis of Theories in Family Sociology* is the first major neofunctionalist theory applied to the family. Certainly, this work was encouraged and preceded by the more general statement by Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993). Swenson, however, is much more ambitious in his project. Like Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993), Swenson supplies a useful summary of “traditional” functionalist school of thought. He provides considerable depth to our understanding of Parsons’s perspective on the family by cross-referencing the statements in Parsons and Bales (1955) with the modifications and additions in other, later works. Even more ambitiously, Swenson attempts to demonstrate that the major extant theoretical frameworks can be reduced or explained as components and variants of functionalist thinking. Although some scholars might see this as an impossible task, others would point out that much of our theoretical thinking since the heyday of functionalism (1950s) owes an incredible debt to the concepts and ways of thinking in that era. Certainly, our family theories were all influenced to various degrees by Parsonian functionalism. Thus, Swenson’s ambition might not be so grandiose or as impossible as some might assume.

Swenson (2004) reintroduces Parsons to a generation of family scholars not previously exposed to much functionalism. It is not the reintroduction of Parsons’s ideas that we highlight here so much as the slant that Swenson brings to these ideas that moves the framework from functionalism to neofunctionalism. Swenson is well aware that he is extending and updating much of the previous thought; however, he does so with a careful eye to remaining consistent with the earlier statements. Thus, there are few, if any, bold statements contradicting Parsons. There is, however, some considerable change in emphasis, especially in regard to mother-child attachment.

Swenson (2004) produces several theoretical propositions that help us identify the direction and emphasis of his work (see pp. 58–60). He agrees with Parsons that the basic functions of the family are the socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities (p. 58). He is much less focused on the conjugal unit’s provision of stability to adults than on the roles required of parents for socialization of children. He argues that the parental roles (expressive and instrumental) and parental task coordination
(leadership coalition) are necessary for the child’s secure attachment and socialization. Indeed, “to the extent the child senses security, she or he will be motivated to learn and conform to societal values. Further, to the extent that a child is secure, he or she will mature and engage in pro-social behaviour” (p. 61). He further argues that families become dysfunctional when poor parenting produces poor socialization outcomes. In families where there is negative parenting, children are more likely to have insecure attachments to the parents, which in turn results in negative behavioral and learning outcomes (p. 61). Furthermore, Swenson argues that theory construction must include family structures (single parent, step, intact nuclear, etc.) as well as the relationships internal to the family. The foregoing arguments make this a necessity if Swenson is correct that parenting style is partially established by the complementary roles (instrumental and expressive) and the adult leadership coalition. Finally, he asserts that the family is constructed of cultural values and morality that have significant influences on family relationships. This last point explicitly recognizes the role of morals and values in the family in a much more direct way than Parsons did.

The changes that Swenson brings to his neofunctionalism are not subtle. Although Swenson views his discussion of attachment theory (especially pp. 211–239) as more or less an extension of Parsons, Swenson neofunctionalism replaces much of Parsons’s “Freudian psychoanalytic” approach with the more empirically based attachment theory. This refocusing of the theory of socialization certainly removes one of the major problems (his dependency on Freud) in Parsons’s theory of socialization. There is little doubt that attachment theory affords Swenson’s perspective both the ontogenetic viewpoint and the basis for attributing positive and negative parenting based on the outcome of secure attachment of the child. This is a great improvement over the Parsonian perspective.

The improvements that Swenson (2004) makes obviate some criticisms, but a very significant problem remains. In Swenson’s neofunctionalism, deviance and nonconformity are ultimately caused by poor parenting in less than optimal family structures. The outcome is that children in these situations are antisocial and have poor learning performance. Although this is somewhat different from Parsons’s “regression back to a state of dependency that was not satisfied” (p. 45), it nonetheless slips into the same terrain by assuming that deviance and nonconformity are explained by pathology. Indeed, the dream that both functionalism and neofunctionalism have had is a world in which change (which always begins with deviance and nonconformity) is seen as pathological and negative. Even Swenson would have us believe that child problems can be remedied by having
wonderful, intact marriages where the roles are complementary and where children are securely attached and their behavior is prosocial.

The problem, of course, is that the world is beset by social change, and not all of change is pathology. Of course, the traditional functionalist escape from this criticism is to cite the interactions of the social and cultural systems. Parsons noted that changes external to the family that removed functions from the family (e.g., education, child care, economic cooperation, etc.) opened opportunities for alternative forms of family to develop. But cohabitation in Parsons’s day would have been seen as deviant and as such could have been described as coming from those individuals with unresolved dependencies, and for Swenson as coming from those with less secure attachments.

There are several aspects to Swenson’s work that promise to make it a landmark study in neofunctionalist family theory. First, Swenson lays out the theoretical terrain in a clear and approachable manner. Second, he conscientiously revises the theory of socialization so that it fits well with the previous components of Parsons while dropping most of the Freudian intellectual baggage. Swenson provides some significant tests of propositions regarding parenting, family structure, and child outcomes using a large secondary data set. Finally, he audaciously requires that we discuss cultural values and morals that we use to socialize and conduct our behavior as parents, thus extending neofunctionalism into interventionist activities by family life educators and others. The extent that Swenson’s neofunctionalism is embraced by family scholars is yet to be determined, but to ignore this thoughtful and intellectually rich perspective would be a huge mistake.

**Empirical Applications**

Theories should help us explain and understand our world. Perhaps the strongest critical light to illuminate a family theory is how well its propositions function to explain aspects of family behavior. The two empirical examples to follow both provide for such a critical assessment. They also demonstrate how useful theories are to us when launching empirical research. The first question we examine is the degree to which family structure explains and predicts child outcomes. This is, of course, a critical question for functionalism because a basic premise is that family structure makes a difference. The second question is in regard to changing marital roles. Parsons, among others, proposed that marital roles that are significantly differentiated are more stable. We examine the role of fathers and division of labor in the household in relation to the differentiation hypothesis.
Family Structure and Child Outcomes

One of the most obvious functional propositions is that family structure makes a difference for predicting child outcomes. The theory posits that intact nuclear families have the requisite role structures to provide the most stable and nurturing environment for children. For decades, researchers have included “family structure” as an important variable regarding almost any aspect of family behavior, including child outcomes. This perspective on complete versus incomplete family role relationships permeated the study of the family so that it was not surprising to find scholars discussing families without the father-husband role as an example of families who are “deficit in structure” (Rodgers, 1973, p. 196) or demographers suggesting that alternative structures are “incomplete institutions” (Cherlin, 1978).

Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) review five different theoretical models that provide distinct interpretations of the concept of family structure. They are the family structure model (functionalism), household economic model, evolutionary model, parental fitness model, and the marital conflict model. It is the test of the family structure model that is of immediate interest in regard to functionalism. Biblarz and Gottainer argue that if the actual structure is an active causal agent, then regardless of how a family gets to that structure (divorce or widowhood), the structure alone should have a discernible effect. “The family structure model would therefore predict no differences in outcomes between children from widowed single-mother families and those from divorced single-mother families because the two share the same basic structure” (p. 534).

Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) use pooled cross-sectional data from the General Social Survey (GSS) from 1972–1987 to examine their hypotheses. They examine a number of dependent outcome variables, such as completing high school, attending college, and finishing college, as well as general psychological well-being. The results of their data analyses suggest that children from single-mother families created by divorce differ significantly from intact, two-biological-parent families on every outcome. These children had significantly poorer outcomes. On the other hand, Biblarz and Gottainer report that “children from widowed single-mother homes are not significantly different than those from two-biological-parent families on any of these dimensions, with the exception of having slightly lower odds of completing high school” (p. 537). The conclusion is that structure alone makes no difference. In this study, it was the events that led to the structure, such as divorce or parental death, that are efficacious in terms of child outcomes.

Another recent study in this area has the intriguing title of “Does Family Structure Matter?” (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Lansford
et al. examined five different family structures for effects of family relationships, child well-being, and grades. The five structure types were adoptive, two-parent biological, single-mother biological, stepfather, and stepmother. Lansford and her colleagues used 799 cases from Wave 2 of the 1992–1994 National Survey of Families and Households. A simple univariate analysis of variance showed no effects of family structures on grades, spousal relationship, or child’s sibling relationships. However, there were differences on 12 of the 19 outcome measures for mothers’ reports. Once family processes were considered, these relationships changed. Indeed, Lansford et al. summarize their finding by stating, “We found the most support for the perspective suggesting that processes occurring in all types of families are more important than family structure in predicting well-being and relationship outcomes” (p. 850).

Other researchers have echoed the results of these studies. For example White, Marshall, and Wood (2006) examined the effects for family structure on school engagement and social engagement and reported that once parenting processes were included, there was no effect for family structure on either outcome variable. Carlson and Corcoran (2001) examined several detailed measures of child outcomes, including the Peabody Individual Achievement Test and Achenbach’s Behavior Problems Checklist. They report that “once income is controlled, the family structure effects primarily disappear for both behavioural and cognitive outcomes. . . . Family income itself strongly predicts most cognitive and behavioural outcomes” (p. 790). Thus, the prevailing conclusion seems to be that when family structure is important as a variable, it is when income has not been controlled. Furthermore, the findings of Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) suggest that there is no actual effect tied to the structure, but that effects on child outcomes are more likely related to the events that precipitated the structure, such as divorce or widowhood.

Role Differentiation and Division of Labor

The impact of convergence theory or modernization theory on thinking in the social sciences has been far reaching. On the surface, it appears quite reasonable that similar processes such as urbanization and industrialization should be expected to result in similar outcomes regardless of culture or society. Certainly, Parsons and Bales (1955) and Goode (1963) have cogently argued this point. Even though some anomalies and inconsistencies have been noted by Goode (1993), the theory is maintained and similar arguments have been expressed in several other academic areas, including history (Fukuyama, 1992) and globalization (Ritzer, 1993).
One particular hypothesis that has been derived from convergence theory is in regard to the specialization of gender roles and fertility choices. Parsons was the first to develop the idea that contemporary families contained intensified gendered division of labor. Later theorists, such as Oppenheimer (1997), have argued that women trade their prowess in domestic spheres for support from males. Like Parsons, Becker and others argue that such a division of labor produces joint dependency. Joint dependency is viewed as stabilizing the marriage and family. Several of these authors have proposed that women’s employment is related to higher divorce and to lowered fertility (Cooke, 2004). Becker (1981) formalizes this proposition as “Divorce is more likely when the wife’s wage rate is high relative to that of her husband” (p. 119).

Cooke (2004) notes that although many studies find limited support for the connection between divorce and women’s employment (see Oppenheimer, 1997), some researchers, such as South, Trent, and Yang (2001), have forcefully argued the hypothesis. Likewise, the evidence regarding the connection between fertility and women’s employment is also disputed.

Cooke (2004) approaches the topic in a somewhat different manner. She argues that we have tried to account for fertility based on the external division of labor while ignoring the internal division of labor as a contributor. As a consequence of this argument, she hypothesizes that fertility may be tied to fathers’ participation in child care and household maintenance. She controls for the amount of female labor force time and wages so that we can isolate the covariance of fathers’ domestic labor and fertility. The results of Cooke’s analysis of a sample of German marriages with one child present shows that male assistance with domestic labor is linked to the probability of a second child. The somewhat confusing finding is that male sole-breadwinner families are also more likely to have a second birth. Likewise, the higher levels of female wages are related to a higher probability for second births. Thus, Cooke’s results seem to support the position that male domestic labor supports a second birth while also supporting that women’s higher wages may provide for the purchase of domestic support and hence encourage a second birth. Interestingly, neither male domestic participation nor female wages are related to divorce in this sample.

Cooke’s (2004) findings support the functionalist argument for the concept of “functional alternatives.” Clearly, when women are working long hours, some assistance with domestic work is required if the family is to continue to function. What Cooke’s research points out is that this functional need may be fulfilled in several ways. One way is for the male to undertake a greater role in domestic labor. Another way is for the woman’s wage to allow her to replace her lost domestic labor by purchasing substitute child
care and domestic services. Both of these routes are related to satisfying the social function for continued fertility in these families.

**Implications for Intervention**

Both functionalism and the more modern neofunctionalism have argued that the relationship between the structure of the family and the ability of the family to serve the functions of society (reproduction and socialization of the young) is a central tenet of this theoretical framework. It is not surprising, then, that functionalists have argued that the natural place for intervention is in regard to the encouragement of intact families and assistance to single-parent families.

It is more interesting that the theory does not especially guide interventions regarding the best ways to achieve these goals. For example, it could be argued that mandatory universal day care that would remove the function from families and place the responsibility of this function with the government might be the best strategy in an era marked by high divorce and low family stability. On the other hand, the Marriage Project and other such projects might aim to encourage married couples to stay together despite the evidence that staying together in high-conflict relationships might be as bad as, or worse than, divorce (Amato, 2001). In the end, it is the very idea of functional alternatives that simultaneously provides this theory with both breadth and ambivalence about the causation.

**Critiques and Discussion**

Since the 1950s, there has been a host of criticisms of functionalism. One of the central criticisms has been that the logic of functional explanations is tautological or circular. For example, if we ask why a certain structure exists in the body (e.g., appendix), we answer that it is because it serves a function for the maintenance of the body. Even when we find that the appendix does not serve any identifiable function, we nonetheless subscribe to the belief that a structure wouldn’t exist if it didn’t serve a function at some previous time. The problem, however, is the almost metaphysical or religious belief in purpose and design that lies behind such circularity. If we insist on making these metaphysical assumptions explicit, then the theory is quickly reduced to a naive set of beliefs about organic existence, such as that organisms do not evolve nonfunctional parts. This, of course, would then fly in the face of evolutionary theory and the fact that organisms routinely evolve poor functions or are dysfunctional and hence are selected out.
of the gene pool (natural selection). Functionalism is not evolutionary theory and lacks the biology and genetic theory that accompany evolutionary theory.

Related to the criticism above is the criticism that this theory has no place for causation. It should be clear that something can serve a function without being considered a cause. For example, the heart serves as a pump in the circulatory system but is not the cause of the circulatory system or even circulation. The strength of the functionalist perspective is that it looks at the many elements that must function to produce circulation. The problem is that if we try to move the language of function to the language of causation, we find a disjunction. For example, if billiard ball “A” hits billiard ball “B” with sufficient force to overcome the inertia of billiard ball “B,” we say that billiard ball “A” caused “B” to move. Note that we couldn’t say that billiard ball “A” functioned for billiard ball “B,” nor that “B” functioned for “A.” Clearly, the language of function and the language of causation are very different.

A closely related criticism is that the central concept of this theory, function, is a vague and often ambiguous concept. It has many meanings, and arguments often shift subtly from one meaning to some other meaning. Most notable among these is the criticism that functional language can become mixed with moral imperatives. Functionalism has been accused of having a distinctly conservative political interpretation of social systems. For example, Pittman (1993) points out that some scholars have accused functionalism of being inherently a bastion of political conservatism. For example, he offers the functionalist argument from the position paper tabled by the Working Group on the Family appointed by President Ronald Reagan (Pittman, 1993, p. 220). This group argued that European socialists had instituted day care, national health systems, school food programs, and other such programs with the rationale of saving the family from undue burden and stress. The report goes on to argue that these measures only increased taxes and forced stay-at-home mothers to return to the labor force, all in the name of the “family.” Pittman points out that these “conservative” arguments simply reversed the causal order. In other words, first came the mothers returning to the labor force and the stresses of multiple roles, followed by the passage of legislation to mitigate these effects such as day care and health care programs. Pittman states that “the presumed moralism allegedly undergirding functionalism with a conservative, consensus-based, status quo bias, is almost certainly the product of the period of theory development (1940s and 1950s) rather than inherent to the theory itself” (p. 221). Although Pittman is certainly correct about the conservatism of the historic period in which the theory developed, the problem
remains that family functions to maintain stable parameters (equilibrium) in social systems, and this could be seen as a conservative statement by assuming that equilibrium is a goal of the system. This can become a moral perspective rather than a scientific perspective.

A long-standing criticism of functionalism has been that it fails to deal with social change and social dynamics as anything other than disruptions to social equilibrium and system maintenance. There seems very little room for viewing social change as an important function in the long-term development and evolution of a social system. This may be the case in part because so much of functionalism is rooted in a current description of functions. The alternative of viewing functions in terms of a desired state or utopian ideology would lead the theory into even more trouble and would cause it to be teleological. Thus, there may not be many options open for functionalists to address this criticism.

When we focus on how functionalism deals with individual actors, we find some further ambiguity in regard to the terms intentionality and functionality. When we assume that actors are purposeful, we must assume that the actors are acting intentionally. Despite the seamless connection that functionalism assumes, it is not the case that intentional action is identical to a functional action. Only sometimes would a person’s action function so as to enhance or preserve his or her biological or social system. On the other hand, much of our behavior, even ill-advised behavior, is nonetheless intentional. The problem is further complicated by the concepts of latent functions, where actions may have unintended consequences. Indeed, there is a severe disjuncture between the ideas of function and intention. The importance of this is that functionalism may not be equated with action systems.

The notions of functional alternatives along with latent and manifest functions add even greater ambiguity to this framework. For example, if a function can be unintended and latent, doesn’t that also imply that such latent functions are haphazard or even accidental? If this were possible, then the very logic of functional explanation becomes illogical. We could no longer make the assumption that the appendix must have had some function because we now allow for functions to occur haphazardly and accidentally. As a result, the appendix might just be an accident or mistake. But if some functions are intended but the consequences were not and other functions were not intended but the consequences are deemed salutary, what, then, is the logic of functionalism? Furthermore, if there are an indeterminate number of ways, some unforeseen (latent), that a need could be functionally fulfilled, then what is the logic of functionalism? Indeed, this would make functionalism so indeterminate as to be a useless way for science to approach explanation.
Conclusion

Functionalism is not dead, but it is perhaps more moribund than some of its advocates would care to believe. Functionalism has enjoyed greater criticism than any other single social science theory. It has been regaled with criticisms from philosophy of science, moral philosophy, and feminists, as well as family scholars. This is not to say that neofunctionalism is not possible because we will undoubtedly see the emergence of patterns of thought that resemble those of previous functionalists such as Parsons. Thoughtful neofunctionalist arguments such as those posited by Swenson (2004) may well sidestep some of these criticisms by rooting the theory in more biologically based theories such as attachment theory. But for most neofunctional arguments, the problems will be twofold. The first problem is that the critiques are so well understood by so many scholars that any functional arguments provide an immediate target for devastating and well-established critiques. The second problem is that the area of family scholarship is endowed with a host of alternative theoretical perspectives that provide something similar to functional arguments but situate these arguments in such different intellectual terrain that many of the critiques are no longer accurate.

Many of the theoretical frameworks in this book contain elements that may be traced either directly or indirectly to functionalism. For example, family development and life course theories are heavily dependent on the idea of actors and norms, systems theory of the family views a system as a series of functions so that feedback functions to adjust the system, and ecological (evolutionary) frameworks view adaptations as functional for survival of an organism within a specific environment. Yet each of these frameworks is somewhat more cautious in its claims about functions, and each tends to use the term in a more restricted sense, removing some of the criticisms about ambiguity and contradictions. So, even if functionalism is moribund but not yet dead, the offspring of these ideas are thriving in the newer garb of other theories about the family.

Food for Thought

1. Imagine that billiard ball “A” strikes billiard ball “B,” causing it to move. How would you describe such causality in the language of functionalism? Does a functional description make sense to you?

2. Imagine Bill and Isabelle are getting a divorce because of incompatibility. Is the divorce functional and the marriage dysfunctional, or is the marriage functional and the divorce dysfunctional? How do you decide?
3. Can one decide what is functional without having a theory of goals or a theory of motivation?

4. If dysfunction brings about change in a social system and function brings about maintenance of a social system, which is morally and ethically good in an unjust and corrupt social system? Can you think of some examples?

5. If the function of marriage is to control and supply sexual gratification to the participants, can you envision other ways of achieving this or functional alternatives to marriage such as cohabitation? How would you decide whether marriage or cohabitation is more functional in a social system?

Suggested Readings


A wonderful resource for empirical applications of all the theories in this book.


This is one of the most recent and comprehensive applications of the neofunctionalist approach to the family.


This book supplies a different and antithetical view to the traditional functionalist approach to the globalization of the family.