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What Is a Theory?

Generally speaking, theories are abstract and general ideas that are subject to rules of organization (see Box 1.1). These qualities may be why the study of theory is often difficult for students. All of us are more likely to be interested in concrete experiences, our own or those of others. Theories are not the facts or data of experience, but they are connected to those facts or data.

One complication in linking ideas and data is that the very same data can be organized in different ways. As a result, different theories can be used to make sense of the same set of facts. For example, how are we to interpret the fact of a relatively high divorce rate? One answer might be that the family as an institution is being threatened, perhaps even disappearing. A different answer is that divorce weeds out less viable marriages, thereby preserving the family institution. To evaluate the merits of the two arguments, one must see what other relevant facts are operating and how the entire argument is organized into statements at a more abstract level.

One useful way to understand theoretical arguments is to examine their basic components. We start with the idea that a theory is a systematic collection of concepts and relations. This is consistent with all four of the quotes in Box 1.1. Because there is an endless variety of ways to organize ideas, we will limit ourselves to the requirements for a *scientific* theory. Such theories contain systematically related propositions that are empirically testable (Rudner, 1966). Thus, there are several components that we need to discuss in further detail: (a) concepts, (b) relations between concepts, (c) propositions, (d) relations between propositions, and (e) connections between propositions and the empirical world of observation. Before we look at each of these components, we must distinguish between ideas and data.

Box 1.1 What Is a Theory?

"A scientific theory might be likened to a complex spatial network: Its terms are represented by the knots, while the threads connecting the latter correspond, in part, to the definitions and, in part, to the fundamental and derivative hypotheses included in the theory. The whole system floats, as it were, above the plane of observation and is anchored to it by rules of interpretation. These might be viewed as strings which are not part of the network but link certain points of the latter with specific places in the plane of observation. By virtue of those interpretive connections, the network can function as a scientific theory: From certain observational data, we may ascend, via an interpretive string, to some point in the theoretical network, thence proceed, via definitions and hypotheses, to other points, from which another interpretive string permits a descent to the plane of observation." (Hempel, 1952, p. 36)

"A theory is nothing—it is not a theory—unless it is an explanation. One may define properties and categories, and one still has no theory. One may state that there are relations between the properties, and one still has no theory. One may state that a change in one property will produce a definite change in another property, and one still has no theory. Not until one has properties, and propositions stating the relations between them, and the propositions form a deductive system—not until one has all three does one have a theory. Most of our arguments about theory would fall to the ground, if we first asked whether we had a theory to argue about." (Homans, 1964, p. 812)

"Deductive theory can be described briefly as an attempt to increase human understanding by providing explanations of why certain things occur. It provides this explanation by having a set of propositions and then deducing that, if these propositions are true, and if certain other conditions are met, certain specific and observable events occur. The more specific events are then 'explained' by the more general propositions that have been used as premises in deducing that the specific events occur. The explanation is only as valid as the propositions and logic that are used in the deduction, but one of the goals of science is to gradually eliminate invalid propositions and increase the number of useful, valid ones." (Burr, 1973, p. 3)

"Theorizing is the process of systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a particular phenomenon. A theory is the set of interconnected ideas that emerge from this process." (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993, p. 20)

Ideas and Data

Science is fundamentally concerned with ideas, data, and relationships between them. Theory exists in the realm of ideas. Research takes place in the realm of data. A science advances to the extent that its theories and its studies (i.e., its empirical research) are productive and mutually reinforcing. For knowledge to be scientific, scientists must explain empirical observations by ideas or theory. Theories explain by treating particular facts or observations as examples of general principles or processes. For example, there may be certain conditions, such as first intercourse, that encourages dating couples to become more serious and less casual about their relationship. This would constitute a hypothesis or testable conceptual proposition if data have not yet been examined in this regard. If, however, we have a great deal of data suggesting that first intercourse has a specific effect on couples' "probability of marriage," then that generalization is what we often regard as a scientific fact.

The linkages between ideas and data can be organized in different ways. If research produces empirical generalizations, the data might *inductively* lead to the development of a new theory, or the data might be interpreted in terms of an existing theory. When the process goes from data to ideas, we think of it as being *inductive*. Sometimes, a researcher starts with an existing theory, derives expectations about the data (i.e., hypotheses), and then makes observations to see how well the data fit. When the process goes from ideas to data, we think of it as being *deductive*. Theoretical ideas in science are developed both inductively and deductively. In either case, the ideas and the data must fit together in a meaningful way for the theory to be judged adequate.

We caution against too rigid a distinction between ideas and data. Sometimes, ideas can themselves be data. If the dating persons in our example have ideas or beliefs about what might propel their relationship to marriage, these ideas might be measured and become part of the data. The ideas that people have may be beliefs, attitudes, or preferences. These ideas might even be theories or explanations that people have about such things as why couples have children at certain times in a marriage. Thus, the ideas held by the people we study are often part of our data. Even more important is the fact that our measures and observations are founded on theories about the world and how we can know and measure the world. So in many ways, scientific data are constructed from ideas. We will have more to say on this point shortly.

This book is mostly about theoretical ideas that supply plausible explanations about families. Over the years, family scholars have offered many such explanatory ideas. We cannot call attention to or restate every single such idea. Instead, we focus on the clusters of ideas, or frameworks, that seem to be the most significant and popular now

at the beginning of the 21st century. New theories about the family will be developed in the future. Some will build on one or more of the currently existing theories, but others may have features that cannot now be anticipated.

The question “From whom or where do theories and propositions originate?” is important because it leads to a basic distinction regarding theory. This distinction is between the “context of discovery” and the “context of justification” (Kaplan, 1964). The answer to the question about the origins of theory is simple: Theories and propositions can come from anyone and anywhere. We might find a possible theory in the writings of ancient scribes, a newspaper cartoon, or the observational work of a research scientist. There should not be any restrictions on the creative insight that might lead to fruitful theory building. This is the “context of discovery,” and creative insight and thought are its hallmarks. Grounding in the research literature and an understanding of logic might be helpful, but they are not necessary conditions for the development of theory. As a corollary, it follows that we should not judge the usefulness or fruitfulness of a theory by its origin. For example, if there are two proposed theories to explain “adolescent bed-wetting,” one from an esteemed research scientist in the area and the other from your grandmother; we cannot decide on which is better based on the status of the originator. Indeed, it is a hallmark of the context of discovery in science that we do not judge theoretical propositions by whether they originate with a political leader, a grandmother, or a respected scientist.

The context of justification, on the other hand, is the context in which theoretical propositions are put to the test. Here, we see if the theory is justified in its claims. In science, this is a twofold process. The first criterion applied is *logical coherence*. We ask, “Is this set of theoretical propositions logically consistent with itself, and then is it logically consistent with other well established theories in the area?” The second criterion is the *empirical adequacy* of the theory. At this point, we ask, “Do the deductions from the theory fit with our empirical measures of phenomenon?” It is this step that many people identify with “science.” However, during the evolution of a discipline or area of study, it is obvious that the production of ideas (context of discovery) must precede the testing of those ideas (context of justification). Therefore, it is not unusual to find multiple approaches and both qualitative and quantitative research strategies in areas that are still developing basic theory.

This book will assist you in estimating the current status of theoretical ideas about families. In the remainder of this chapter, we cover the main ingredients that go into any scientific theory and then

suggest what makes theories about the family unique among scientific theories. The next seven chapters separately cover the principal theoretical frameworks that are important in family science today. Finally, in the concluding chapter, we compare the major frameworks and look forward to the future of theory in family science.

Scientific Theory

PHILOSOPHIES OF SCIENCE

The term *philosophy* can refer both to the values and way of thinking of a person and to an academic discipline. Both meanings are important in understanding the emergence and growth of family studies, but for the moment we focus on the importance and relevance of academic philosophy, especially the academic philosophy of science, for scientific theories.

The methods of philosophy are logic and other forms of discursive reasoning. Philosophers do not use the empirical methods of science to establish the credibility of their ideas. Some philosophers, known as philosophers of science, examine the principles by which scientists work through reconstructing the logic of scientific processes. Whereas sociologists of science systematically study the behaviors and thoughts of scientists and the social organization of the sciences, philosophers of science explore what science should or could be like in terms of abstract ideas. There are several ways in which this philosophical study is important.

The discipline of philosophy was historically prior to the scientific disciplines. The ancient Greek philosophers, among others, had many creative ideas about human affairs and the workings of the natural world. It was out of the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries that the modern sciences in the Western world were born. During this period, it was common for individual scholars to be both philosopher and scientist at the same time or to easily shift back and forth between the two. It has only been during the 19th and 20th centuries that the various scientific disciplines have branched into special fields to which a person could devote an entire career.

The historical legacy of philosophy as a precedent to the sciences has meant that philosophy, as a formal discipline, has influenced all sciences. Many of the influences have been indirect. The so-called physical sciences, such as physics and chemistry, emerged first. Between 1850 and 1900, the philosophical principles embedded in these earlier sciences spilled over into the biological sciences, such as botany and zoology, and the social sciences, such as psychology and

sociology. During the 20th century, as family science emerged as a subspecialty within several of the social sciences, the philosophical underpinnings continued to operate. Now, near the start of the 21st century, we are able to think of family science as a distinct field with an interdisciplinary character or even as a unique discipline in its own right.

In philosophy as in other academic disciplines, new ideas are constantly being proposed and debated. A particular philosophy of science may be popular at a given moment, but later it may be challenged and some other philosophy may take its place at or near the top of the heap. Scientists, including family scientists, frequently turn to the literature produced by philosophers to see what the current issues are. When scientists need to justify the basic principles guiding their search for answers to important questions, they sometimes seek guidance from philosophers of science or from other philosophers.

It is now often asserted that there are different, if not rival, philosophies of science. This is apparent in professional philosophy itself and, more important for this book, among family scientists as well. The philosophies we adopt influence the way we conduct our scientific practice, including the theories we create and our attitudes toward the theories of others. We sketch below a few of the central philosophical views that may help to distinguish family theorists and other family scholars from one another.

Key elements of three philosophies of science appear in Box 1.2. We have called these *positivistic*, *interpretive*, and *critical* philosophies of science (e.g., Neuman, 1994). We do not claim that these are the only three alternatives in family science. Indeed, we discuss other alternatives, such as feminism and postmodernism, in subsequent chapters. At this juncture, we present Box 1.2 to illustrate the nature of philosophical assertions. To further illuminate the issues involved, we focus now on truth claims and values.

A group of philosophers working in Vienna in the early part of the 20th century argued that knowledge claims are either true or false and that the job of scientists is to verify the true claims. Another philosopher, Sir Karl Popper, disputed this view. Popper (1959) argued that knowledge claims could be shown to be false but that there is no way to prove them to be true. Popper's position has become influential among not only philosophers but also practicing social scientists. Whether or not family scholars have read Popper, his ideas have indirectly influenced family theorizing, helping to usher in what is sometimes called a postpositive era in the philosophy of family science (Thomas & Wilcox, 1987).

Box 1.2 Three Philosophies of Science, Applied to Family Studies

POSITIVISTIC View of Knowledge. There are objective truths, processes, or realities to be discovered about families.

Values: Family science can and should be value neutral if not value free.

Criteria for Evaluating Family Theories: Good theories should be rationally constructed (e.g., internally consistent, simple, coherent, clear, explicit, general, abstract). Good theories also should be empirically relevant (e.g., testable, fit well with data).

Goals: Explanation and prediction.

Scholarly Style: Analytical, causal, deductive or inductive, deterministic or probabilistic, factual, logical, materialistic, mathematical, mechanistic, observant, planful, precise, quantitative, structural, etc.

INTERPRETIVE View of Knowledge. Truth is subjective, and all knowledge about families is created by interpreting actors engaged in conversations with one another.

Values: Family science is value relevant, and family scientists should become aware of and open about their own values.

Criteria for Evaluating Family Theories: Good theories should have literary qualities (e.g., elegance, imagination, narrative power). Good theories also should be based on data grounded in the experiences of family members.

Goal: Understanding.

Scholarly Style: Artistic, evocative, existential, hermeneutic, humanistic, intuitive, metaphorical, phenomenological, postmodern, processual, self-reflective, sensitive, speculative, spontaneous, symbolic, etc.

CRITICAL View of Knowledge. Truth is imposed by those with the power to shape knowledge.

Values: Family theories are value laden. All values should be exposed and challenged to create opportunities for change.

Box 1.2 (continued)

Criteria for Evaluating Family Theories: Good theories contextualize phenomena and allow for pluralism. Good theories also are emancipatory, prescribe changes, display the theorist's ethical stance, and fit well with the theorist's personal experiences.

Goals: Emancipation or empowerment of oppressed people and social groups.

Scholarly Style: Constructivistic, dialectical, feminist, liberal or radical, macroscopic, pluralistic, postmodern, processual, relativistic, etc.

A central difference between positivism and other philosophies of science is their perspective on values. It should be obvious that no human behavior is valueless in an absolute sense. Indeed, all of the philosophical arguments we are considering are themselves evaluative. To say that science should be without values is to value "valuelessness." To value something is simply to hold and to express a conception of a desirable state of affairs.

One of the key reasons that science emerged historically as a way of thinking and working that is somewhat different from the arts, religion, and politics was concern about the distortions in knowledge along with considerable human suffering that seems to result when reasonableness, fairness, and facts are devalued. Science is not without its faults, just as no individual human being or social organization is faultless. The "value neutrality" sometimes advocated by scientific positivists is similar in at least some ways to value tolerance or respect for value diversity. But this is a matter of degree, and the value-relevant and value-laden positions push further the ideals of tolerance and diversity, sometimes to the extreme point of complete relativism.

Writing several decades ago about science as a vocation, sociologist Max Weber made some interesting comments:

Today one usually speaks of science as free of presuppositions. Is there such a thing? All scientific work presupposes that the rules of logic and method are valid. Science further presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is worth being known. In this, obviously, are contained all our problems. For this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means. It can only be interpreted with reference to its ultimate meaning, which we must reject or accept according to our ultimate position toward life. (quoted in Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 143)

More recently, Christensen (1964) provided an analysis of the value issue in family science. His assessment was quite Weberian.

Christensen advocated neither the rejection nor espousal of non-scientific values by theorists and other scientists. Rather, he advocated the identification and separation of nonscientific values from scientific values. This may continue to be the most common view among family scientists, but it is not the only view. According to the critical philosophy in Box 1.2, for example, scientific facts are inseparable from the values that scientists have about their subject matter.

What we have just said about values applies as well to ideologies. The notion of ideology has three major meanings: (a) a set of beliefs; (b) the systematic study of a set of beliefs, their nature, and their origin; and (c) visionary speculation, often about ideals and with an action agenda for achieving the ideals. There is no question that systems of belief about families can be part of a family theory or that carefully studying those beliefs might improve a family theory. There is also no doubt that beliefs about family science can affect family theories. Even visionary speculation has creative potential for theories. Our caution is only that ideologies among family scholars that are philosophical or political may be usefully connected with a particular family theory, but they are not within or constitutive of the theory itself. So if a scientific theory argues that X causes Y, the truth of this does not depend on whether we like or dislike X or Y. The theory may suggest how to change Y if the direction of change is consistent with our values and ideology, but scientific theory should be equally useful for someone with exactly the opposite values and ideology.

To summarize, philosophical ideas establish principles that help frame the ways that family theories and other aspects of scholarship are created and used. Philosophical ideas are themselves foundations for scholarship, but they cannot be scientifically proven true or false. In many ways, scholars either consciously or unconsciously adopt a particular philosophical stance in regard to research by the way they do their research. Those who attempt not to use their research as a vehicle for their own values, the values of their religion, or their political values would be clearly identified as “positivist.” Although those holding interpretive and critical philosophies have criticized this perspective, the positivist approach remains the hallmark of scientific work and scholarly accountability. Indeed, the public expects family scientists to present their research findings independent from their religious and political beliefs. In science it is expected that any research finding can be replicated by other researchers regardless of whether they have the same or different political and religious beliefs. This is as close as we may be able to get to scientific “objectivity.”

PARTS OF A THEORY

All scientific theories use the same basic building blocks. These building blocks are concepts, relations, and propositions. The section below discusses each of these central ideas.

Concepts are abstractions. A concept is not the thing but stands for the abstract class of things, ideas, or entities. Concepts are essential to theories because they enable us to organize experience. We do not invent a new concept every time we refer to a unique event. For example, we do not need a new term for marriage or a new meaning for the event called marriage every time a wedding takes place. Instead, we think of getting married in a more abstract way. We say that all weddings have certain defining properties. If we want to distinguish different kinds of weddings, we might establish categories. We could distinguish elopements from formal weddings and church weddings from civil wedding ceremonies. The categories remain abstractions, however, in that they all refer to occasions of a particular type, not to specific instances of weddings.

Social actors construct concepts for the purpose of communicating meaning, whether the social actors are family members or family scientists. So all concepts are “constructs.” However, we do not whimsically invent concepts but rely on the common stock of terms and definitions that already exist in common usage. Sometimes we alter meanings or the words used for important ideas. Even dictionaries do not change whimsically, but they do evolve.

In science, however, the more explicit the definition for a concept, the better we can determine when it applies and when it does not apply. A scientific concept can mean only what a community of interacting scientists agrees that it means. Although scientists sometimes argue about the “proper” meaning of concepts, a theory tends to gain a footing in the scientific community once scholars settle on meanings for the time being. Many concepts in scientific theories refer to states of affairs with fairly stable properties. For example, we cannot have a coherent theory about the distribution of housework responsibilities if the meaning of *housework* changes every time we use this word.

Many but not all concepts can correspond to a set of empirical measures. A *variable* is any measure that can have two or more values such as yes or no, strongly agree to strongly disagree, or even a range of values such as the Centigrade scale of temperature. For example, we may measure housework by hours of work within the house or by a specified set of tasks such as doing laundry, toilet cleaning, and so on. Variables that might measure housework could be the hours a person spent doing the work, the economic value of the work, and so on.

Relations play the role of verbs in a theory. To relate concepts to each other, we need connecting relations asserting how the concepts are related. All relations have properties (symmetry, reflexivity, and transitivity). So for example, we could use the same concepts but with different relations, and the truth of the statement will change completely.

John is a relative of George.
George is a relative of Bill.

Therefore

John is a relative of Bill.

Or

John is the father of George.
George is the father of Bill.

Therefore

John is the father of Bill.

In these two cases, one relation is transitive (is a relative of), and the other is not transitive (is the father of). This simple difference in the properties of relations makes all the difference in the validity of the final statement. Relations can often be formalized in simple terms such as *greater than* or *less than*, and definitions are signified by identity or equals. As we shall see shortly, this fact provides a key link between theory and research.

Propositions exist when a concept is linked in a meaningful way by a relation to another concept. So we could say that among dual-earner couples, *the social class status of the husband is positively related to the amount of housework he performs*. This would be a theoretical proposition. The first concept is *social class status of the husband*. The second concept is the *amount of housework*. The relation in this proposition says that the greater a husband's social class status (relative to other husbands), the greater the husband's amount of housework. This relation can be mathematically expressed (modeled) as a function:

$$\text{Amount of housework} = f(\text{Social class status}).$$

As we shall see shortly, our first approximation of this functional relation (f) between a husband's social class status and amount of housework is usually a straight line with either a positive or negative slope. When a proposition asserts covariation between variables, the relation between concepts includes a sign (positive or negative), indicating that increases either occur together or go in opposite directions. When a relation asserts causal influence, the relation also makes clear which variable (independent) is influencing which other variable (dependent).

DEFINING THEORY

Earlier in this chapter, we defined a scientific theory as "a set of systematically related propositions that are empirically testable" (Rudner, 1966). Now that we have the building blocks in place we can discuss the meaning and implications of this definition in greater detail.

Systematically related propositions. A theory usually comprises several propositions. Indeed, one proposition alone would not constitute a theory but would simply be a conceptual "hypothesis." Not only must a theory have at least two propositions, but these two propositions must be systematically linked by relations. The way we link one theoretical proposition to another is by logical form. Although there are many mathematical and logical systems at our disposal, we will use simple syllogisms to show what we mean by form and relations. Note that the mini theory below is used only for an example of logical form and should not be regarded as empirically adequate.

Imagine that we have two propositions, but they may at first appear unrelated. For example, from a set of propositions about the intergenerational transmission of social class, we find the following:

The greater the family of orientation's value on education, the greater the son's social class status.

If we combine this with our previously discussed proposition, we get a mini theory with two related propositions. Furthermore, we can deduce a third, new and interesting proposition from these two.

The greater the family of orientation's value on education, the greater the son's social class status.

The greater the husband's social class status, the greater the amount of housework performed.

Therefore, the greater the family of orientation's value on education, the greater the amount of housework performed by the son (husband) in his family of procreation.

Now the above mini theory is in the form of a syllogism. These deductive arguments are constructed so that if the first two propositions (called premises) are true, then the deduction, called the conclusion, is necessarily logically true (although not necessarily empirically true). Much more important is that if the conclusion is false, then we know that at least one or both of the premises are also false. These properties hold only if the correct form is followed. In regard to syllogisms, the correct form is that the middle term *B* (below) must appear at the end of the first premise and at the beginning of the second premise. This is called the rule of distributed middle.

$$\begin{array}{l} A \rightarrow B \\ B \rightarrow C \\ \hline A \rightarrow C \end{array}$$

Regardless of whether these ideas are in the correct form, what we want to know is if our theory as a whole is accurate. In logic, if we showed that our conclusion is true, that would not mean that the two premises are also true. Indeed, when we make such an assertion, it is called the “fallacy of affirming the consequent.” In reality, we have to work backward. What we try to do is to disprove our conclusion. If we show that our conclusion is false, then we also know that at least one of the premises is false. We get much greater intellectual power out of using this reverse logic (*modus tollens*). This is one of the major theoretical reasons we use the null hypothesis in testing our theories.

Empirically testable. For a set of propositions to qualify as a scientific theory rather than religious or literary or political, it must be capable of being empirically tested. That does not mean that all our scientific theories have been empirically tested but that a theory that is incapable of being empirically tested is *not* a scientific theory. Now we turn to the question “What does it mean to say that a theory is capable of being empirically tested?”

The proposition in the conclusion of our mini theory used above can be used as an example. It states that the degree to which the

husband's family of orientation values education is related to the amount of housework the husband will perform in dual-career couples. This concluding proposition will now become our research focus. When we decide to research a particular proposition, it becomes the "conceptual hypothesis" in addition to being the deduced conclusion of a theoretical argument.

The first thing we must do to research this "conceptual hypothesis" is to find ways to measure its components as variables. That means that we must find or develop measures for the first concept, husband's family of orientation's value on education, and the second concept, amount of housework performed. Finally, we must not forget that we must find a way to demonstrate (or operationalize) the relation between these concepts. We might operationalize or measure the family of orientation's value on education by asking the husband several questions about his perception of his mother and father's values about education and how much financial assistance they offered for his education. Both of these measures would have problems of validity and reliability because of faulty recall, halo effects, and so on. We might measure amount of housework by either the number of hours spent on various household tasks or the economic value of tasks performed by the husband. Both of these measures would have problems. Which tasks should we list? Would the husband inflate his estimate of the time spent? If we had the husband list the tasks and then assigned the economic value at the cost of a plumber for plumbing jobs, a babysitter for child care, and so on, would we find that this correlates poorly with the measure of amount of time spent on household chores? Indeed, there are always problems and questions regarding how accurately our empirical operationalizations measure our concepts in our conceptual hypothesis.

The last component of our conceptual hypothesis to be operationalized is the relation. As we indicated previously, we hypothesize that amount of housework is a function of family's values on education. What is this function? In most social research, the first functional form that we test is that of a straight line. You may recall the slope-intercept formula for a straight line ($y = b[x] + a$). Indeed, this simple mathematical model is the basis for much of our analysis of relations in the social sciences. The formulae for a straight line is a *mathematical model* and it has a corresponding *statistical model* expressed in the formula ($Y = a + b[X] + e$). Basically, the application of the statistical formula in the analysis of the data allows us to examine the linear relation between amount of housework (y) and the family's value on education (x). The strength and direction (positive or negative) of that relation will be given by the regression (correlation) coefficient (b).

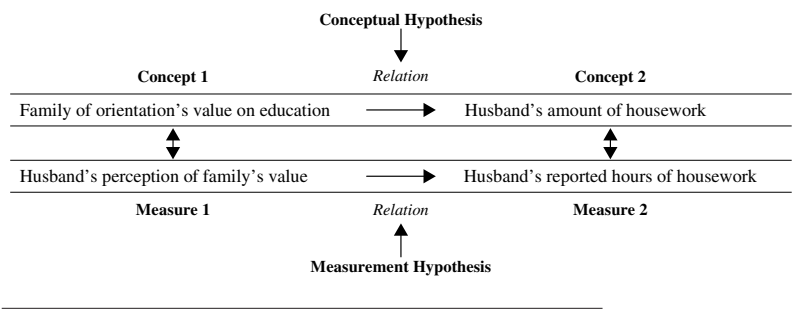


Figure 1.1 Conceptual and Measurement Hypotheses

Once all of the measures are in place, we have in effect two hypotheses. Our theoretical proposition represents the *conceptual hypothesis*, and our measures and the relation between them represents the *measurement hypothesis*. The architecture of the empirical test of a theory is portrayed in Figure 1.1.

Finally, if we were to conduct our study on husbands in dual-career couples, we would have to control for several variables that might account for the relationship, such as number of children, maid service, wife's level of housework, and income level. After we analyze the results, we might find that there is no relationship between the variables we measured. If we can satisfy our critical colleagues that we have valid and reliable measures of the concepts and relations in the conceptual hypothesis, then we could conclude that the theoretical proposition is false. Because this is a deductive system (syllogism), we would also know that at least one of our premises is also wrong. As a result, it would be time either to recast and modify the theory significantly or even to discard it completely.

On the other hand, what if our results are supportive of the conceptual hypothesis? If we can satisfy our colleagues regarding the validity and reliability of our measures and procedures, then we might want to say that the theory is true. However, as we said previously, this would be committing the fallacy of affirming the consequent. If the proposition seems to hold, it does not mean that the other propositions (premises) are true because it is logically possible to deduce the conclusion from several other sets of premises. We can never determine which possible set of premises might be true. As a result, science and theory achieve a great deal by disproving hypotheses and theoretical propositions rather than ever proving anything. All our scientific knowledge is tentatively held until we disprove it. Scientist are not true believers, but skeptics.

FUNCTIONS OF THEORY

Scientific theories serve many purposes. Here, we emphasize how they contribute to understanding. It is widely recognized, however, that knowledge for its own sake is not the only worthwhile goal in life. We all want to do something with our knowledge. In our preceding example, if we had some confidence in our theory about housework, a young woman searching for a helpful mate might want to examine the educational values of the family of orientation of prospective spouses. More seriously, for those in one of the helping professions, theories about the family may provide knowledge to improve their services as therapists, program evaluators, or social policy advisers. For those who are political activists, agitators for modest or revolutionary causes or the reduction of major social problems, or even staunch defenders of the world as it is or once was, theoretical knowledge about families can be put to fruitful use. Without meaning to diminish the importance of any of these practical uses of theories, we concentrate here on the ways in which theories contribute to the immediate goals of science.

1. *Accumulation.* Theories assist in the accumulation and organization of research findings. Much of the pursuit of knowledge involves the collection and analysis of empirical facts, filtered through the lenses of researchers. A body of empirical knowledge, however, is just a pile of findings. Theories tell us how to select and arrange research findings into meaningful groupings. If no existing theory is available for this purpose, new theories can be constructed from findings through a process of tentative generalization.

2. *Precision.* Theories articulate ideas in more carefully specified ways than everyday language allows. Thinking theoretically forces one to clarify what concepts and relations really mean and what they include and exclude. This precision facilitates communication, so long as the communicators are trained in the language of science.

3. *Guidance.* Theories direct researchers to develop and test measurement hypotheses (i.e., empirical statements about what the data are expected to look like). Because theoretical ideas entail abstract, plausible, and tentative arguments, they must be checked against the empirical evidence for confidence in them to grow. Theories point to new kinds of relevant evidence for which findings do not currently exist. It is relatively easy to find or create evidence in support of a theory that one likes, however. Theories, therefore, also promote a critical spirit of inquiry. Efforts are made to refute theories, not just to support them. If a field contains two or more theories that yield

incompatible hypotheses, it may be possible to design a study or a series of studies that help to decide which theory is better.

4. *Connectedness.* Theories demonstrate how ideas are connected to each other and to other theories. Theories are systematic sets of ideas. The parts of a theory fit together in a coherent way. Knowing what the parts are and how they fit together helps to distinguish one theory from other theories. This also helps us to see what two or more theories share or how they could be connected or combined by bringing together elements of each.

5. *Interpretation.* Theories help to make sense of how the phenomena they cover operate. There are at least two aspects of sensibleness in interpretation. One is essentially descriptive: A theory should enable a good description of the subject matter with which it is concerned. This does not necessarily mean that the theory must fit our intuitive judgments of the way things work. In fact, a theory may challenge many intuitions or commonsense views of the world. Rather, to enable us to describe a subject, a theory provides a plausible picture of structures or processes that we can accept as reasonable given the assumptions in the theory. The other feature of interpretation is that theories evoke or promote stories about the way things work. If we can visualize concrete or even general scenarios of how things work, the theory is providing an interpretation.

6. *Prediction.* Theories point to what will or can happen in the future. If a theory helps us understand what has happened in the past or is happening now, this is of course desirable. To continue to be useful, however, a theory must contain propositions equally applicable to future events and experiences. This does not mean that any theory accurately foretells the future, only that it should make some relevant propositions regarding future outcomes. If we know what a theory predicts, this can contribute to the guidance function mentioned earlier. If a theory predicts something that is subject to human intervention and alteration, future actions may invalidate the theory. Normally, however, a theory is expected to hold up in the future to the extent that its predictions are confirmed. Even if predictions are not confirmed, the theory may be basically correct, and only the conditions under which it works may require revision.

7. *Explanation.* Theories provide answers to “why” and “how” questions. As the quotes in Box 1.1 from Burr (1973) and Homans (1964)

suggest, explanation is often considered the single most important function of a theory. Because explanation is so central to the functioning of theories and because it has a variety of different meanings, we need to address this topic in more detail. Without theories, we cannot determine why and how things happen the way they do. In our everyday lives, we may be satisfied by saying that one specific event, say, a divorce between two friends, happened because of one or more other events that took place before the divorce. Such reasoning captures some of what goes into a scientific explanation, but it overlooks the most important aspect. Scientific theories explain by relying on deductive arguments. Specific events and the connections between them must be derived from more general statements for us to say that the events and the connections between them have been explained.

Explanation is provided by a general statement (sometimes called a “covering law”) that includes (or covers) the specific instance we want to explain. So for example, if you drop this book and it falls to the floor, we could ask you to explain why it fell. You would simply cite the law of gravity as explaining why the book fell. This is to say that the particular phenomenon is part of a generally understood pattern we call “gravity.” Now this is not to say that in reality our understanding of gravity is simple; indeed, it involves complex theories of electromagnetism, mass, space, and time. But the “law” derived from these complex theories covers the specific phenomenon of the falling book. Thus, to explain why someone got divorced (a particular instance) would be to provide the general theoretical propositions (covering laws) explaining divorce.

It is crucial to remember that although functions or goals like those we have listed represent ideals, this is no guarantee that a particular theory will fulfill such ideals. In fact, we can use the seven listed functions as standards against which to measure the performance of a theory at any stage of its development. A theory may perform well in some respects but less well in others. Determining such facts helps us decide where our energies need to be directed to improve the theories that we have or invent better ones.

Family Theory

Ideas about human families can come from many sources, including scientific disciplines concerned with the study of entities that are not families, as well as personal experiences with our own families. No potential source should be dismissed, although we should be aware that those sources selected likely will affect key features of the theory

that emerges. Most of the family theories that exist today draw on ideas from external sources. Family theories are not insulated sets of ideas, and family theorists do not merely talk to each other about family ideas.

For a theory to be about families, there must be at least one family concept in the theory. We cannot decide what a family concept is, however, unless we first decide what a family is. Let us, therefore, begin by thinking of a family as a social group. We need to identify the distinguishing features of this group. Following are some of the major ways that families differ from such groups as associations of coworkers and networks of close friends.

1. *Families last for a considerably longer period of time than do most other social groups.*

Of course, some relationships in families are not enduring. Marriages can be broken by divorce or death fairly soon after they are formed. Yet we normally think of our own families as lasting throughout our lifetimes. We actually are born into a family that already exists. Our parents remain parents even after we become adults. We add members to the family when we marry and become parents. Our siblings remain siblings throughout our lifetimes. Although it is possible for coworkers and close friends to maintain relationships for long periods of time, families are the only groups that virtually require lifetime membership, even though some members are added and subtracted along the way. Belonging to a family is involuntary in the sense that we do not choose which parents are going to give birth to us. Other groups tend to be much more voluntary, in that we have some choice about joining them in the first place.

2. *Families are intergenerational.*

Through the act of giving birth, families include people who are related as parents and children. If elders live long enough, we have ties to grandparents, and maybe even to great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. At some point, we ordinarily have living members of both older and younger generations, and we may eventually become grandparents or great-grandparents ourselves. Other kinds of groups may include people with fairly large age differences, but families are the only groups that virtually guarantee this.

The fact that the human infant at birth is a helpless creature and cannot approach self-sufficiency for almost 20 years means that the intergenerational bond is particularly crucial to human survival. Every

child needs some sort of caretaker and caregiver, whether it is a biological parent, an adoptive or foster parent, or somebody else who takes the responsibility for providing nurturance during the early years of life. It is no accident that our image of family includes an intergenerational component.

3. Families contain both biological and affinal (e.g., legal, common law) relationships between members.

It is the biological act of birth that creates the fundamental family tie. This act also means that we share at least some inherited characteristics or proclivities with family members that are directly or indirectly related to us by birth. At least until humans perfect the cloning of adults, and perhaps even then, the process of becoming a person will be based to some degree on biology. Families are in the business of producing and sustaining persons and personhood. Even though work groups or friendship groups may sometimes contain biologically related members, such groups tend to have other purposes.

There is also a social side to this process of creating persons. No society leaves the biological act of birth or the rearing of children to chance. Personhood is achieved through a process of socialization. That socialization is subject to secular and religious rules about how the process should be carried out. Pursuant to these rules, family members have rights and obligations, which tend to be codified in both laws and informal agreements.

Aside from adoption, the major legal provision about families concerns marriage. We may not think of a marriage in itself as constituting a family, but we recognize marital relationships as part of families. Some families are conjugal, in that they contain one or more marriages. It might even be argued that if humans didn't have families they wouldn't need marriages, although families may often function well without marriage. In any case, marriage itself involves rights and obligations under the law, and it also creates family ties in law. Some of our family members join and leave the group either because of our own marriages and divorces or because of the marriages and divorces of other family members.

Other kinds of groups are subject to regulation by laws (e.g., contracts) and informal agreements, of course. Such regulations may exclude as well as include people in work and friendship groups, and they govern proper conduct within such groups. What such groups do not have, however, are relationships anything quite like, for example, cousins or aunts and nephews, which arise because our mother's sister is married.

4. The biological (and affinal) aspect of families links them to a larger kinship organization.

It follows from what we already have said that families are not just small groups of closely related individuals who live together or interact on a frequent basis. Families extend outward to include anybody sufficiently related to us by blood, marriage, or adoption. This kinship group may have the identifiable boundaries of a clan, or it may be loosely organized and diffuse. Everybody stops counting distant relatives as family members at some point along the periphery. Nevertheless, the ties of kinship create the potential for lineages and collateral (i.e., within generation) family relationships that can become quite extensive. Through kinship, families are tied to history, tradition, and multiple generations of group members. In some societies, these kinship groups are major features of the social, cultural, political, and economic landscape. Work and friendship groups tend to be much more temporally and spatially encapsulated.

To answer the questions in Box 1.3, we likely will find ourselves asking other questions. Do we visualize the people listed in each example as all being part of one family, or do they belong to two or more different families? Are the listed persons the only ones in the family or could there also be others (i.e., is this a whole family or just part of one)? Should we think of these persons as members of an actual family, or are they a family in either a symbolic sense or in the way they function in their relationships? Are we thinking of how common or uncommon a grouping is in a particular society, either in frequency or in what is expected as normal, natural, and acceptable by law or custom? And are both affinal and consanguineal relationships identified as family relationships?

We could discuss additional arguments about the distinctive features of families as groups. For example, we could draw attention to certain qualities of social interaction that are commonly found in families but not elsewhere. One of these is that family members supposedly care about one another as whole persons (cf. Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989). Whichever criteria are considered, however, the distinctiveness of family groups tends to be only a matter of degree. Nonfamily groups, such as networks of friends or coworkers, usually have some family properties but fewer of these properties or in less obvious amounts.

It also is worth noting that we can conceptualize the family not only as a concrete group or social organization but also as a social institution. As an institution, family includes all of the beliefs and practices of and about all of the families in a particular society or

Box 1.3 Which of These Is a Family?

A husband and wife and their offspring.

A single woman and her three young children.

A 52-year-old woman and her adoptive mother.

A man, his daughter, and the daughter's son.

An 84-year-old widow and her dog, Fido.

A man and all of his ancestors back to Adam and Eve.

The 1979 World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates (theme song: "We Are Family").

Three adult sisters living together.

Two lesbians in an intimate relationship and their children from a previous marriage of one woman and a previous relationship of the other woman with a male friend.

Two children, their divorced parents, the current spouses of their divorced parents, and the children from previous marriages of their stepparents.

A child, his stepfather, and the stepfather's wife subsequent to his divorce from the child's mother.

Two adult male cousins living together.

A 77-year-old man and his lifelong best friend.

A childless husband and wife who live 1,000 miles apart.

A widow and her former husband's grandfather's sister's granddaughter.

A divorced man, his girlfriend, and her child.

Both sets of parents of a deceased married couple.

A married couple, one son and his wife, and the latter couple's children, all living together.

Six adults and their 12 young children, all living together in a communal fashion.

geopolitical context. It also includes the ways in which different families are connected to each other and to other social institutions. For example, in most modern and well-developed societies, families tend to have a private character, each one walled or fenced off from

other families and from public view much of the time. There also are expected and experienced linkages between families and schools, families and the workplace, families and governments, families and the mass media, and so on. Because members of families often share economic resources and collaborate in both productive labor and the consumption of resources, it is also useful to consider families as being involved in a society's system of social stratification. Thus, some families have more wealth, power, and status than do other families.

With an idea of the meaning of family, we can begin to envision what counts as a family concept. Some of these concepts describe the composition, or size and configuration, of family membership. Some describe the structures and processes of interaction that take place between family members. Some describe the ways that families relate to their environments. Some will describe the whole family as a group, the family as an institution, or the nature of the ties between two or more members within the family group.

We believe that for a theory about human relationships to be a family theory, one or more ideas (concepts or variables) about families must be included in the theory. The family idea may appear in either or both of two places: (a) as part of the explanation (e.g., parental discipline helps explain juvenile delinquency), (b) as the phenomenon to be explained (e.g., the state of the economy in a country helps explain the divorce rate in that country), or (c) both (e.g., marital communication styles help explain marital satisfaction).

Thus, we can distinguish two general kinds of family theories, those that are "about the family" or explaining how families work (b and c above) and those that consider family ideas to be useful explanations (a and c above). Of course, a wide variety of ideas, some familial and some not, may be needed in combination to adequately explain family life (e.g., marital affection plus the economy influence the odds of divorcing). Likewise, the forces that help explain family life may also help to explain other things (e.g., the state of the economy may influence stock prices as well as the divorce rate). When assessing the family theories of others, or when creating one yourself, it helps to locate where the family ideas are or at least where you think they belong.

A Brief History of Theory in Family Studies

Each theory in family science has its own historical legacy, as we discuss further in subsequent chapters. Our focus here is on major themes and examples of how family theory has been important to scholarship throughout history. We refer to several useful accounts of this history and recommend them for greater depth of coverage.

Adams and Steinmetz (1993) surveyed contributions of the classics, which encompass ideas up to the 20th century. Early philosophers were often interested in prescribing ways of living according to their own values. Adams and Steinmetz called attention to this infusion of ideology, and they noted that it sometimes was accompanied by efforts to describe families in more dispassionate ways. Only scattered references to family life *per se* are contained in the classical works, with little resemblance to the kind of scientific explanation we have now come to expect of scholarship.

Much of the early work centered on attempts to find the origins of marriage as an institution and to trace its evolution as societies moved toward a more modern form (Adams & Steinmetz, 1993, pp. 76–78). Some scholars searched for the ultimate purposes of marriage or the family. Some saw progress or at least the adaptation of family life to changing social circumstances. Some lamented the declining importance of the family, especially as industrialization and urbanization gripped the Western world in the 19th century. Adams and Steinmetz (1993, p. 86) conclude that the closest these social philosophers came to a real theory was a model of parental socialization that resulted in positive outcomes for children and the meeting of needs for both generations when parents became elderly. For the most part, however, and whether obvious or subtle, ideology in the classics, Adams and Steinmetz (1993) found, is seldom totally absent, although its presence makes a theory neither right nor wrong (p. 93).

Howard (1981) examined the history of U.S. family sociology from 1865 to 1940. He also noted the early emphasis on evolutionary thinking, as well as the interest of “moral reformers” in doing something about the problems families seemed to be facing because of the industrial revolution. Howard considered the period between 1890 and 1920 a progressive era. Even as moral reformers and charity workers expanded their initiatives, the idea that families could adapt to changing environments became popular. An emphasis on the psychosocial interior of family life took hold, and educational programs to foster the socialization of children seemed promising. If families were sometimes struggling and disorganized, it was because they were caught between two conflicting value systems, one emphasizing traditional images of the family and the other based on the requirements of the modern democratic and capitalistic state.

The years 1920 to 1940 constitute the latest period Howard described in detail. In these years, the key theme in family scholarship shifted from ecology to interaction among family members, with the goal of personal adjustment. In 1924, the American Sociological Society (now the American Sociological Association) established its

Family Section, and at about the same time, Ernest Groves developed the first systematic college course in family life education at Boston University. Howard also noted as a counter-theme during this period a renewed emphasis on the institutional level of analysis, with studies of families in a community context and attention to cultural diversity on a broader scale. In a chapter published with Howard's book, van Leeuwen (1981) noted that European family scholars remain more interested in the institutional, or macroscopic and historical, levels. On both continents, however, the norm developed that family scholars should refrain from moral and political evaluations as they increasingly relied on empirical data collected through fieldwork (van Leeuwen, 1981, p. 133).

Reflecting on much of the same body of work mentioned above, Christensen (1964) concluded that systematic theory building in the family field did not begin until about 1950. Concepts and rough orientations were taking shape in the first half of the century, along with a growing industry of empirical research, but without formalized explanations meeting the requirements of propositional theory. Although not highlighted in any of these historical accounts, an upswing in scholarly interest about families within many academic disciplines appeared before 1950, with contributions by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, home economists, and social workers, among others. Yet Christensen's designation of 1950 as a turning point seems to be basically correct. An inspection of the *International Bibliography of Research in Marriage and the Family, 1900–1964* (Aldous & Hill, 1967) shows that of almost 4,000 entries before 1950, only 7 contain theory or a cognate term in their titles. Of the 12,000 entries for the 1950–1964 period, 93 entries contain such terms. By comparison, for the 2-year period from 1991 to 1993, 264 of 7,600 entries in a subsequent inventory (Touliatos, 1994) pertain to family theory. Interestingly, the largest proportion of theoretical works before and during the 1950s dealt with courtship and mate selection. This was the first topic to receive systematic and cumulative theoretical treatment.

Aside from the increasing attention to family theory in the scholarship of the field since 1950, the last half of the century can be subdivided into three stages, each with its own set of themes.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: 1950–1966

The single most prominent theme in family theorizing during the 1950s and early 1960s was an emphasis on identifying conceptual frameworks. This emphasis is evidenced by a series of works devoted to the topic (Christensen, 1964; Hill, 1951; Hill & Hansen, 1960;

Nye & Berardo, 1966/1981). The number and character of the particular frameworks varied, but the basic idea remained the same. As research on family life accumulated, most analysts attempted to give explanations for their findings. The explanations often were narrowly focused, and it was difficult to see how various studies fit together. The attempt to identify frameworks was a search for underlying principles that might help in the construction of general theories for the field. It was not claimed that such theories already existed, nor was it often assumed that a single integrated theory would be practical. Rather, the idea was that by comparing the currently fragmented works with respect to the concepts and assumptions they used, scholars might be able to work toward the building of family theories in a more coordinated way.

Christensen (1964) captured the spirit of this period well in the closing remarks of his introductory essay in the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*:

As has been said several times, there is urgent need for better theory. Critics of family research have described it as being amateurish, trivial, scattered, often sterile, and sometimes moralistic. . . . There is still need for correcting what Goode (1959, p. 186) spoke of as a hornet's nest of conceptual and terminological problems. There is still need to isolate and then integrate, insofar as seems feasible, the theoretical frameworks which can guide the discipline. And there is still need to find and then specify the relationships among empirical generalizations in order to constitute true theory. (pp. 29–30)

FORMAL THEORY CONSTRUCTION: 1967–1979

A change in tone characterized the next several years of work on family theory. Following Hill's (1966) address after receiving the first Burgess Award for a career of scholarly achievement in the family field, attention turned toward methods of deductively and inductively creating theories, using a clearly delineated propositional format. Many examples of this type of work emerged. Nye and his colleagues presented a propositional theory of family stability (Nye, White, & Frideres, 1969), followed by a propositional theory of age at marriage (Bartz & Nye, 1970). Goode and his colleagues published a massive volume listing hundreds of propositions relevant to scores of family topics (Goode, Hopkins, & McClure, 1971).

The most important works of this period, however, were those spearheaded by Burr (Burr, 1973; Burr, Hill, Nye, & Reiss, 1979, Vols. 1 & 2). In his 1973 volume, Burr applied the principles of deductive, propositional theory building provided by philosophers

and sociologists to 11 topical areas of research. In the first volume of Burr, Hill, et al. (1979), Burr and his colleagues applied the same procedure to twice as many areas, involving experts in those areas as chapter authors. In Volume 2, Burr, Hill, et al. (1979) focused on five general theories that were not substantively limited. The editors noted that the second volume was not comprehensive in its coverage of general theories, and they acknowledged difficulties in linking the two volumes. Inductively integrating materials from the first volume proved difficult because of the lack of semantic equivalence across domains, the complexity of models in the first volume, and the lack of a way to bridge macro- and microlevel propositions (Burr, Hill, et al., 1979, Vol. 2, pp. xii–xiv).

Organizational developments within the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR) also were important during this period. In his Burgess address, Hill (1966) had called for the creation of a Theory Section to parallel the existing Research Section. Although his initiative was defeated, by the late 1960s NCFR had created the joint Research and Theory Section that continues today. Hill did not relent in his effort to give visibility to theorizing as a major professional activity, however. With the help of Nye and others, he created the Workshop on Theory Construction, which began with meetings at the NCFR annual conference site just before the regular NCFR conference. The workshop served as a training ground for both students and more advanced family scholars, allowing them to nurture and demonstrate their talents in theory building. In 1975, the name of the workshop was expanded to Theory Construction and Research Methodology. This workshop also survives today. In its first 24 years, more than 560 papers were presented, and more than 730 participants appeared on its programs. It is interesting that both the section and the workshop evolved to combine theoretical and research interests. This symbolizes the extent to which family scholars see the two enterprises as fundamentally connected.

PLURALISM: 1980 TO THE PRESENT

It is always difficult to gain perspective on developments in a field when they are still swirling and the next major turning point is unforeseen. Lacking the distance afforded by time to reflect backward, we tend to see the present as chaotic or transitional. Of course, this perception also may mean that our tendency to periodize the past is an oversimplification, and all moments of intellectual history (and even family history) are fuzzier and more complex than they appear in retrospect. Nevertheless, the publication of the two edited volumes

by Burr and colleagues (Burr, Hill, et al., 1979) seems to represent the high-water mark, if not the culmination, of the theory construction movement.

The pluralism of the most recent decades has several possible interpretations. It can be seen as a continuation of the quantitative growth of contributions by scholarly participants in family theory and research. It can also be taken to be a furthering of fragmented and specialized interests. Or it can be viewed as a new respect and tolerance for diverse philosophies, theories and theory-building methods, and research strategies.

Doherty et al. (1993) provide a cogent summary of nine main trends, although they gave these developments somewhat more recent origins than we would. We excerpt their list from a more detailed discussion:

1. The impact of feminist and ethnic minority theories and perspectives
2. The realization that family forms have changed dramatically
3. The trend toward greater professional (multidisciplinary) inclusiveness
4. The trend toward more theoretical and methodological diversity
5. The trend toward more concern with language and meaning
6. The movement toward more constructivist and contextual approaches
7. An increased concern with ethics, values, and religion
8. A breakdown of the dichotomy between the private and public spheres of family life and between family social science and family interventions
9. Greater recognition by family scholars of the contextual limits of family theory and research knowledge (pp. 15–17)

To be sure, Doherty et al. (1993) see challenges posed by, and potential problems with, these emergent developments, but their basic posture is laudatory and optimistic. Nonetheless, any idealistic hope on the part of some leaders in the field that we would eventually converge around one grand theoretical scheme to explain everything about families has now been completely dashed and discarded. What we see is the continuing proliferation of theories, the eclectic combination of elements from different theories, and variations and transformations within existing theories. It is as common now, if not more common than ever before, for theorizing to be narrowly focused on

particular topics and issues. Countless mini theories, middle-range theories, and models of mostly causal processes, all closely linked to Hempel's (1952) plane of observation, characterize the literature, particularly in professional journals and in the proceedings of conferences and workshops.

The other main trend in recent years has been a vigorous questioning of the philosophical foundations in the field (cf. Osmond, 1987; Thomas & Wilcox, 1987). The result has been a turn toward interpretive and critical philosophies (see Box 1.2) and away from at least some elements of the positivistic philosophy. It is important to remember, however, that the entire scholarly community does not move in unison in any one direction. Some theorists attempt to blend and integrate, whereas others find one philosophy or even one theory compelling and the others inadequate. The current scene is a curious and shifting mixture of consensus and conflict over theories and theory-building methods.

In light of the current situation, a precaution is in order as we prepare to explore in some detail seven of the currently important theoretical frameworks in the family sciences. Our own map of the alternatives is not the only possible one, nor is it necessarily complete and otherwise adequate. In 1950, only the symbolic interactional perspective, among the theories we cover, would likely have been widely recognized. Until the mid-1960s, three other perspectives that we do not cover as distinctive were commonly identified (structure-functional, institutional, and situational). By this time, the developmental perspective had gained recognition, but several others were either widely rejected or absorbed into other points of view. When Nye and Berardo (1966/1981) attempted to comprehensively cover conceptual frameworks at the end of this period, they even added six more, each roughly representing an academic discipline (i.e., anthropology, psychoanalysis, social psychology, economics, legal studies, and Western Christian studies). When Broderick (1971) reviewed the theoretical developments of the 1960s, he saw several new possibilities. Of these, the exchange and systems perspectives have continued to thrive, and they are represented in our following chapters. By the end of the 1970s, a similar review by Holman and Burr (1980) added conflict, behavioral, ecological, and phenomenological perspectives as being of at least secondary importance. Of these, we give major attention only to the conflict and ecological perspectives. When Nye and Berardo (1966/1981) reissued their 1966 book, they added exchange, systems, and conflict theories in their introduction, as well as "social individualism" and "transactional analysis," neither of which seem to have progressed thereafter. Finally, the most recent

comprehensive treatment includes more than a dozen chapters on distinct theoretical perspectives (Boss et al., 1993), with the notable addition of feminist theory.

In a study (Klein, 1994) of more than 100 family scholars, the participants were asked to rate 11 alternative theories as to how favorably disposed they were toward them. Of those we emphasize in this book, their ranking, in descending order was as follows: symbolic interactional, developmental and systems (tied for second place), exchange, conflict, and ecological. In general, however, the participants indicated dislike for very few, and most were favorably disposed toward several. Furthermore, the scholars nominated dozens of others that they liked, although the nominations seldom coincided. We conclude from this pattern of findings that no single scheme focused on only a small number of general theoretical perspectives would be universally accepted.

A fruitful typology of theories is only partially in the eye of the beholder. Some threads seem to be common to the various alternative classifications, and some reflect historical changes in the field regarding the popularity and promise of the alternatives. Nevertheless, each mapping of the territory is at least somewhat dependent on the purposes and viewpoint of the author. In our case, we aim for relative simplicity to meet the needs of readers. We capitalize on the existing complexity mainly by covering some of the varying and more recent emphases within the broader traditions. We use an organizational concept throughout this book: that of "theoretical framework." What we mean by theoretical framework is that there exists in each scientific field a core of theoretical assumptions and propositions. We do not simply refer to these as theories, because although they are theories, they also are sufficiently general to have given rise to a number of theoretical variants. In this one sense, these theoretical frameworks are like families, with the core theory providing sufficient richness for the development of offspring. After exploring these various frameworks, we return in chapter 9 to the problem of fitting the theories into a coherent overall picture.

Suggested Readings

Adams, B., & Steinmetz, S. (1993). Family theory and methods in the classics. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 71–94). New York: Plenum.

This is an excellent historical overview of the development and evolution of family theory.

What Is a Theory?

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Beutler, I., Burr, W., Bahr, K., & Herrin, D. (1989). The family realm: Understanding its uniqueness. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 805–816.

This is a bold attempt to identify the distinguishing characteristics of families. The commentaries by scholars that follow on pp. 816–829 indicate the controversy surrounding the proposals of Beutler and his colleagues.

Burr, W. (1973). *Theory construction and the sociology of the family*. New York: John Wiley.

This book, despite its age, remains an excellent introduction to theory construction and philosophy of science. The first chapter is outstanding.

Thomas, D. L., & Wilcox, J. E. (1987). The rise of family theory: A historical and critical analysis. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 81–102). New York: Plenum.

This provides a solid historical picture from the perspective that the field is moving to a less positivistic approach.