Family and marriage: a theoretical perspective

D. M. Ubesekara

Abstract

There are a number of theoretical explanations on various aspects of family life. Five influential explanations are put forward in the paper on the theme family life and marriage. The structural functionalists view the family as an institution with values, norms and activities meant to provide stability for the larger society. Conflict theories see society not as cooperative and stable but as a system of inequality. Symbolic interactionists are greatly concerned with the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction. The social exchange theory is concerned not only with individual behaviours but also with interaction between people involving on exchange of rewards and costs. The family systems theory combines the two social theory, structural functionalism and symbolic interaction to form a psychotherapeutic theories. Each theory focuses attention on one important aspect of family and marriage. The critical areas examined and the conclusions arrived at in this paper would provide a stimulus for future research in this field.

Introduction

Miller (1986) explained that a theory is a set of general principles or concepts used to explain data and to make predictions that may be empirically (experimentally) tested (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998). Theories are also important because they can suggest directions for research, according to the questions they raise. There are a number of theoretical explanations of marriage and the family. Concerning family and marriage "theories have been formulated to explain why people are attracted to one another, why people fall in love, why people select the mates they do, how gender roles develop, how families make decisions, what causes sexual dysfunctions, how to raise children, and what causes divorce and marriage"(De Genova and Rice, 2002, p.18).

Accordingly, five most influential explanations are considered in designing this paper. They are,

- o Structural- functional theory
- o Conflict theory
- o Symbolic interaction theory
- o Exchange theory and
- o Family system theory

These theories are currently the most influential ones which are used by sociologists and psychologists. Having a thorough discussion of these different sociological theories, it is possible to identify how the choice of a theoretical perspective influences the way how data are interpreted and how a different theoretical perspective would lead to different conclusions about the same phenomenon. The following section discusses these theoretical foundations

Structural- functional theory

In structural functionalism, the terms 'structural' and 'functional' need not be used in conjunction, although this is typically done by practitioners. We could study the structures of society without being concerned with their functions (or consequences) for other structures. Similarly, we could examine the functions of a variety of social processes that may not take a structural form. Still, the concern for both elements characterize structural functionalism (Ritzer, 1988).

Just as the human body is made up of different parts that work together for the good of the individual, society is made up of different institutions (family, education, economics, etc.) that work together for the good of society. Functionalists view the family as an institution with values, norms, and activities meant to provide stability for the larger society. Such stability is dependent on families serving various functions for society (Knox and Schacht, 1997). Structural-functionalists explain society as a system. Talcott Parsons classified systems of action as organized into two realms: personality system and social system (Abrahamson, 1981). Structural-functionalism is deeply influenced by biology. It treats as if it were a living organism, like a person, animal, or tree. In fact, the theory sometimes uses the analogy of a tree in describing society. In a tree, there are many substructures or parts, such as the trunk, branches, roots, and leaves. Each structure has a function. The roots gather nutrients and water from the soil; the leaves absorb sunlight, and so on. Society is like a tree insofar as it has different structures that perform functions for its survival. These structures are called "subsystems". The subsystems are the major institutions, such as the family, religion, government, and the economy. Each of these structures has a function in maintaining society, just as the different parts of a tree serve a function in maintaining the tree. Religion for example, gives spiritual support, the government ensures order, and the economy produces goods. The family provides new members for society through procreation and socializes its members so that they fit into the society. In theory, all institutions work in harmony for the good of society and one another (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998). Ritzer who has extracted from, Mark Abrahamson (1978) argued that structural functionalism is not monolithic. He identified three varieties of

structural functionalism. The first is individualistic functionalism, second interpersonal functionalism, and third social functionalism (Ritzer, 1988). Structural-Functional Theory looks at the family as a social institution and asks, how is the family organized, and what functions does it serve in meeting society's needs? When talking about the family structural functionalists usually refer to the nuclear family. From this point of view, the family is considered successful to the extent that it fulfills societal expectations and needs (De Genova and Rice, 2002).

The structural- functionalism approach examines the relationship between the family and the larger society as well as the internal relationships among the family members. When sociologists study how the family is structured, they examine how the parts work together in fulfilling the functions or tasks necessary for the survival of the family. The emphasis is on order, stability, and equilibrium. The family must provide both physical shelter and emotional support to ensure the health and survival of itself and its individual members by encouraging the development of personality and social skills so that they will become valuable members of society (Benokraitis, 1993).

Structural-functionalism is a theory, used to explain how society works, how families work, and how families relate to the larger society and to their own members. Thus this theory is used in largely in sociology and anthropology, disciplines that focus on the study of society rather than individuals. When structural functionalists study the family, they look at three aspects:

1.   What functions does a family do to serve for society?

2.   What are the functional requirements performed by family members for the family?

3.   What needs does the family provide for its individual members?

Families themselves may also be regarded as systems. In looking at families, structural functionalists examine how the family organizes itself for survival, and what functions the family performs for its members. For the family to survive, its members must perform certain functions, which are traditionally divided along gender lines. Men and women have different tasks: men work outside home to

provide an income, whereas women perform household tasks and child rearing (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

At the macro level, structural functionalists examine what functions are served by society to ensure its own well-being. The family is just one subsystem that functions to maintain society, others being major institutions such as religion, government, and the economy. The family's functions on this level include providing new members for society and socializing these members to fit into society

Conflict theory

Conflict theorists, like functionalists, are oriented towards the study of social structures and institutions. In the main, this theory is little more than a series of contentions that are often the direct opposites of functionalist positions (Ritzer, 1988). Conflict theory holds that life involves discord. Conflict theorists see society not as cooperative and stable, but as a system of inequality in which groups compete for scarce goods and services. Basically society as not cooperative but as divided, with individuals and groups in conflict with each other. Conflict theorists try to identify the competing forces. Thus, there is a continuous tension between the "haves" and the "have-nots". Because power is an important resource, the "have-nots" include children, women, families of color, the elderly, and the poor. Although conflict theory has a long history, it became popular during the late 1960s when African Americans and feminists started challenging structural-functionalism as the dominant explanation of marriage and the family. Rather than seeing change or conflict as bad or dysfunctional, conflict theorists see conflict as natural and inevitable (Benokraitis, 1993).

Conflict theorists view conflict not as good or bad but as a natural and normal part of relationships. They also regard conflict as necessary for change and growth of individuals, marriages, and family (Knox and Schacht, 1997). Sprey indicated Conflict theory is useful in describing and understanding family conflict as members struggle for ascendancy and power. Conflict theory begins by asserting that conflict in families is the normal state of affairs and that family dynamics can be understood by identifying the sources of conflict and the sources of power (DeGenova and

Rice, 2002). Marriage and family relationships are based on love and affection. Conflict theorists would agree that love and affection are important elements in marriages and families, but they believe that conflict and power are also fundamental. Marriages and families are composed of different personalities, ideas, values, tastes, and goals. Each person is not always in harmony with every other person in the family (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

In addition conflict theorists do not believe that conflict is bad; instead, they think it is a natural part of family life. Families differ in the number of underlying conflicts of interest, the degree of underlying hostility, and the nature and extent of the expression of conflict. Conflict can take the form of competing goals, such as husband's wanting to buy a new CD player and wife's wanting to pay off credit cards. Conflict can also occur because of different role expectations: An employed mother wants to divide house work fifty-fifty, but husband insists that household chores are "womens work." Conflict theorists recognize that not all family practices are good for every member of the family. Indeed, some activities that are good for one member are not good for others. For example, a woman who has devoted her life to staying home and taking care of the family may decide seek full-time employment outside home. This may be a good decision for her personally, but her husband and children may not like it. Conflict theorists recognize different goals and values among family members that cause disagreement a family and conflict. Conflict theory provides a lens through which to view these differences (Knox and Schacht, 1997).

Symbolic interaction theory

Symbolic interactionists' primary concern is the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction. Here it is useful to employ G. H. Mead's differentiation between covert and overt behaviour. Cover behaviour is the thinking process, involving symbols and meanings. Overt behaviour is the actual behaviour performed by an actor. Some over behavior dose not involve covert behavior (habitual behavior or mindless responses to external stimuli). However, most human action involves both kinds. Covert behavior is of greatest concern to symbolic

interactionists (Ritzer, 1988). Symbolic interaction is a micro theory. It looks at subjective, interpersonal meanings and everyday interpretations of behavior. Interaction is the mutual and reciprocal influencing of our behavior and attitudes. "An interaction is a reciprocal act. Interactions are the everyday words and actions that take place between people. For an interaction to occur there must be at least two people who both act and respond to each other. Such interactions are conducted through symbols, words or gestures that stand for something else. When we interact with people, we do more than simply react to them. We interpret or define their symbols" (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

In the 1920s Ernest Burgess (1926) defined the family as a "unity of interacting personalities" (Cited in Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998). Marriages and families represent symbolic words in which the various members give meaning to each other's behavior (Knox and Schacht, 1997). It focuses attention on the way that family members interact through symbols: words, gestures, rules, and roles. People are socialized to understand the meaning of various symbols and to use them to communicate message, feelings, intentions, and actions. Family members interact through symbols, and together they develop roles (such as father, husband, mother, wife, or daughter) and assign roles to others in the family, who "play" the assigned role (DeGenova and Rice, 2002). Each family member has one or more roles: wife, father, child, or sibling, for example. Symbolic interaction looks at how people modify or adept their various roles according to others expectations, to the situation, and to their own needs. If you are male, for example, your interaction with your wife will be different from your interaction with your daughter, and you will act differently as a husband compared to when you are teaching a class of students or standing a board of trustees. In other words, the social roles of family members affect how they interact (Benokraitis, 1993). Marriages and families consist of individuals who interact with one another over a period of time. Over time, our interactions and relationships define the nature of our family i.e. loving family, a dysfunctional family, a conflict- ridden family, an emotionally distant family, a high- achieving family. "In marital and family relationships, our interactions are partly structured by our social roles. (A social role is an established pattern of behavior that exists independently of a person, such as the role of wife or husband existing independently of any particular husband or wife.) Each member in a

marriage or family has one more roles- such as husband, wife, mother, father, child, or sibling. These social roles help give us cues as to how we are supposed to act. they help create a 'marriage,' 'family,' or other intimate relationship. When we marry, for example, these roles help us 'become' wives and husbands; when we have children, they help us 'become' mothers and fathers" (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

Social exchange theory

The major figure in development of exchange theory is George Homans. Homans's major work, *Social behavior: 1st elementary forms (1961),* presented the birth of exchange theory as an important perspective in sociology. Homans' basic view was that the heart of sociology lies in the study of individual behaviour and interaction. His main interest was in the reinforcement patterns, the history of rewards and costs that lead people to do what they do. Basically, Homans argued that people continue to do what they have found to be rewarding in the past. Conversely, they cease doing what has proved to be costly in the past. To understand behaviour, we need to understand an individual's history of rewards and costs (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). As its name suggests, exchange theory is concerned not only with individual behaviour but also with interaction between people involving an exchange of rewards and costs. (Ritzer,1988). According to exchange theory we measure our actions and relationships on a cost-benefit basis. People maximize their rewards and minimize costs by employing their resources to gain the most favorable outcome. An outcome is basically figured by the equation 'Reward – Cost = Outcome' (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998). People seek different things in relationships. For example, people marry for many different reasons: love and companionship, sex, procreation, status, prestige, power, and financial security. People are usually satisfied with relationships that at least partially fulfil their expectations while they do not want to exceed the price they expected to pay (DeGenova and Rice, 2002).

Homns (1958) and Blau (1964) point out that each interaction between spouses, parents, and children can be understood in term of each individual seeking the most "benefits" at the least "costs" so as to have the highest "profit" and avoid a "loss" (Knox and Schacht, 1997). Social exchange theorists argue that most

decisions are based on cost-reward considerations. People weigh the costs against the benefits and choose relationships in which the benefits outweigh the costs. For example, marriages lead to divorce or separation when one of the partners (and sometimes both) feels that he or she is not getting anything out of the relationship or that the person would be better off being single or that he or she is not happy. On the other hand, many people stay in unhappy marriages for various reasons. They may feel it is better than being alone, or they do not want to hurt the kids, or "it could be worse" (Benokraitis, 1993). Some researchers suggest that people are most happy when they get what they feel they deserve in a relationship. Oddly enough, both partners feel uneasy in an inequitable relationship. When partners recognize that they are in an inequitable relationship, they generally feel uncomfortable, angry, or distressed. They try to restore equity in one of three ways:

1. They attempt to restore actual equity in the relationship.

2. They attempt to restore psychological equity by trying to convince themselves and others that an obviously inequitable relationship is actually equitable.

3. They decide to end the relationship (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

Society regards marriage as a permanent commitment. Because marriages are expected to endure, exchanges take on a long –term character. Instead of being calculated on a day-to-day basis, outcomes are judged over time.

Family systems theory

Family system theory combines two sociological theories, structural- functionalism and symbolic interaction, to form a psychotherapeutic theory. Mark Kassop (1987) notes that family systems theory creates a bridge between sociology and family therapy (cited in: Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998). Systems theory examines individuals and groups as they interact with the family environment or with lager social groups. As the boundaries of the family change- through birth, death, or

entry into labor force, for example- the focus of the analysis shifts from lower levels to higher levels- from individuals to groups to organizations to societies (Benokraitis, 1993).

A system is an integrated set of parts that function together for some purpose. A family is a system in which its various members function to maintain the unit.

From a systems perspective, family members are viewed as influencing each other in reciprocal fashion. Just as children influence the marriage of their parents, the marriage to which the children are constantly exposed will influence the children. Family systems theory also suggests that families exhibit a tendency to maintain a steady state (Knox and Schacht, 1997). Family members do not live in isolation; rather, what one does affects all the others. A person with deep-seated fear and anxieties and emotional instability, for example, may upset everyone else in the family. People may be interdependent in terms of not only money, shelter, and food but also live affection, companionship, socialization, and other nontangible needs (DeGenova and Rice, 2002).

Family systems theory views the family as a structure of related parts or sub systems. Each part carries out certain functions. These parts include the spousal subsystem, the parent/child subsystem, (husband and wife relating to each other as parents), and the personal subsystem (the individual and his or her relationships). One of the important tasks of these subsystems is maintaining their boundaries .Knowing how one subsystem relates to others can be an important way of understanding the relationships within a particular family. For example, chronic conflict in the husband- wife subsystem may have a negative effect on children in the family. To help the children, a therapist has to assist the spouses in dealing with their conflict (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998, DeGenova and Rice, 2002).

As in symbolic interaction, interaction is important in system theory. A family system consists of more than simply its members. It also consists of the pattern of interactions of family members: their communication, roles, beliefs, and rules. Marriage is more than a husband and wife; it is also their pattern of interactions. The structure of marriage is determined by how the spouses act in relation to each other over time. Each partner influences, and in turn is influenced by, the

partner. And each interaction is determined in part by the previous interactions. This emphasis on the pattern of interactions with the family is a distinctive feature of the systems approach (Strong, DeVault and Sayad, 1998).

Conclusion

Marriage is a topic of great interest to social scientists for it is fundamental to the formation of the family, arguably the central institution of society. It is within the family that socialization and, especially before expansion of formal schooling, most education take place (Caldwel, 1999). The institute of marriage helps the human beings to satisfy their emotional, cultural and economic needs. It makes the beginning of the first human society-the family (Karunanayake, 2000).

The paper endeavored to review some of the previous studies through documenting five theories related to family and marriage and it can be summarized that, the structural- functionalism approach examines the relationship between the family and the larger society as well as the internal relationships among the family members and conflict theorists recognize different goals and values among family members that cause disagreement or conflict in a family. According to the symbolic interactonists, marriages and families represent symbolic words in which the various members give meaning to each other's behaviour. It focuses attention on the way that family members interact through symbols: words, gestures, rules, and roles. Exchange theory reveals that, we measure our actions and relationships on a cost-benefit basis. People maximize their rewards and minimize costs by employing their resources to gain the most favorable outcome. Family systems theory views the family as a structure of related parts or sub systems. Each part carries out certain functions. These parts include the spousal subsystem, the parent/child subsystem, (husband and wife relating to each other as parents), and the personal subsystem (the individual and his or her relationships).

Accordingly, this paper identified the critical areas, which have to be considered in studying family and marriage life in particular and also it has contributed to derive future studies in family and marriage.

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