2

STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM THEORY

Ralph and Alice have been married for about 20 years. Ralph feels that they have a good thing going. He works in construction and is able to provide well for his family. He was able to offer Alice this sense of security when they got married. He is also handy around the house, fixing things as they break or wear out and keeping the place looking nice.

Alice is attractive and a good sexual partner. Rather than working outside the home, she has kept the house clean and prepared meals, and focused her time on the rearing of their four beautiful children. The kids have always appreciated her help with schoolwork and her ability to attend and support their various activities. They have been representative of the traditional, nuclear Western family.

Recently, Alice has grown restless and less satisfied. She would like to get a part-time job in order to have some spending money that she could control. And she would like Ralph to spend more time talking with her instead of working on some project in the garage. Ralph feels that things are just fine the way they are—why do they have to change?

But things are changing. With the children growing up and moving out, the family structure is reverting back to that of a couple. Alice has more free time than she had in the past and would like to focus on some of her own interests. Ralph can see the point in using some of his salary to hire someone to make home repairs—in order to give him more time to watch sports on TV, not to use it for womanly things like shopping and talking about feelings!

Ralph wants both of them to do what he feels they are supposed to do: He works as the provider, and she takes care of him. Alice feels that it makes more sense for both of them to provide and nurture.

HISTORY

Functional theory, as it is often called, is based on the "organic analogy." This is the idea, developed by early social philosophers such as Comte and Durkheim, that society is like the human body. As the body is made up of various parts, such as the

organs, muscles, and tissues, that need to work together for it to be healthy, society is also composed of many parts that must function together to work properly. Each part needs to be in a state of *equilibrium*, or balance. Just as the human body has evolved over time, so has society. Comte introduced "positivism"—the view that social science should be based on empirical observations—into social thought. He also focused on terms that later became popular in functional theory, like solidarity and consensus, which refer to the interconnectedness of social life and the source of its unity. Durkheim was also concerned with how social systems are integrated and hold themselves together (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1993).

The writings of social anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1952) were pivotal in establishing a field of comparative sociology, with structural functionalism as its most important tool. His essay on understanding the role of the mother's brother in certain societies helped to supplant social Darwinism with the new and, at the time, relatively sophisticated framework of structural functionalism.

The leading thinker of functionalism in America was Talcott Parsons (1951), who believed that behavior was driven by our efforts to conform to the moral code of society. The purpose of such codes is to constrain human behavior in ways that promote the common good. The purpose of an organism is to survive. In order for a society to survive, the subsystems (the family and other institutions) must function in ways that promote the maintenance of society as a whole. This is similar to how a person's organs must function in interrelated ways to maintain good health.

For Parsons (1951), the key to societal survival was the shared norms and values held by its individual members. Deviation from those norms leads to disorganization, which threatens the survival of the system. Because the family is the key system in society, according to his view, divorce, teen rebellion, non-marital sex, and single parenthood all threatened the structure and/or the functions of the family and therefore needed to be avoided.

By the 1950s, functionalism had become the dominant paradigm in sociology, and it had a tremendous impact on family studies. For example, family research since the 1930s had adopted the organic model, with its many studies on marital quality and adjustment. Family stability was assumed to be critical to childhood outcomes, and because marital satisfaction was central to that stability, it was seen as one of the most important research questions in the field. Furthermore, the existence of any social structure, such as the family, was explained by the functions it carries out for the greater society (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1993).

The social upheaval of the 1960s led many to criticize functionalism for its inability to deal with change. Parsons (1951) did not see deviant behavior as contributing to positive change, whereas others, such as Merton (1957), recognized the role of conflict in maintaining equilibrium or leading to a new relationship status. Other writers (Goode 1969) strove to raise the level of theoretical rigor in the discipline. Parsons ignored these ideas, feeling that change always came from the outside (such as industrialization leading to the preeminence of the nuclear family) and that children only learned culturally approved values in the family. He also called on Freudian ideas to support his claim that there were biologically driven roles (instrumental and expressive) that men and women should fulfill within the ideal structure of the nuclear family.

As a result, structural functionalism fell into disfavor with scientists after the 1970s. Holman and Burr (1980) declared it to be a "peripheral" theory with very little to

contribute to contemporary thinking. Nevertheless, its organic model and the concept of the family needing to stay in balance are important assumptions in more modern family theories, such as stress and systems theories (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1993).

In addition, the case has been made (White, Marshall, and Wood 2002) that a considerable amount of present-day family research uses family structure without explicitly recognizing it as a key variable. They concluded, using Canadian data on childhood outcomes, that parenting processes are more important than family structure. There are contemporary scholars, such as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) and Popenoe (1996), who argued that the intact nuclear family is still an important component in healthy child rearing.

Perhaps more important is the fact that family structure continues to play a role in political decision making. White, Marshall, and Wood (2002) indicated that politicians, in making decisions about single parents and welfare, for instance, often overestimate the importance of family structure in creating their policies.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

One common criticism of structural functionalism is that it never reached the long-term popularity and usage it could have because its terms, beliefs, and basic assumptions were never fully developed into what we would consider a formalized "theory" (Lane 1994). For this reason, listing the basic assumptions of this theory is difficult, as it depends on which author's work you reference. Therefore, we will discuss only the two basic assumptions that all who use this framework would agree are the central components of the theory itself.

The function of families is to procreate and socialize children. Structural functionalism is basically a theory of social survival. Its key idea is that families perform the critical functions of procreation and socialization of children so that they will fit into the overall society. Theorists ask themselves what is needed for a society to maintain itself and then which institutions or subgroups within that society are providing for those needs. They conclude that the intact nuclear family of husband, wife, and their children is the ideal structure. This is the configuration of individuals in the modern world that works best in meeting the needs of its members, as well as those of the larger society. That is, it functions best, according to this theory.

All systems have functions. Theoretical work has focused principally on the functions carried out by the family and what these functions accomplish. Although other functions are mentioned, the procreation and socialization of children are central. The main function of any social system, including the family, is simply to maintain its basic structure.

Parsons (1951) concluded that the best way to do this was for husbands and wives to play certain roles. Males need to be *instrumental*, which means that they are the ones who provide for the family. Because of this, their abilities should be focused on meeting the physical needs of family members in terms of food, shelter, education, and income. In contrast, females are to be *expressive*, meaning that they should meet the emotional needs of family members by being nurturing and smoothing out problems in relationships. According to this theory, the biological imperatives of motherhood predispose women for this "indoor" work, whereas the greater physical strength of

men leads them naturally to the provider role (Winton 1995). These are the roles that Ralph and Alice have been playing throughout their married lives, as indicated in the vignette at the beginning of the chapter.

Parsons (1951) expanded on this notion of instrumental and expressive roles with regard to the functioning of societies and the values and norms that they hold. He believed that our behaviors or actions were driven by the hope of reaching a desirable goal, and what is desirable is defined by the cultural system of which we are a part. He developed five pattern variables that reflect the value orientation of individuals and societies as they make decisions about what actions to take. In each of the word pairings below, the term that comes first is the expressive characteristic and the term that comes second is the instrumental characteristic. The expressive aspects, more often associated with the roles of women, refer to those things that must be done to maintain the culture and our relationships, keep people involved and integrated, and help to manage and resolve internal tensions and conflict. In contrast, the instrumental aspects, associated with the roles of men, are focused on making sure that problems are solved and tasks are accomplished.

The first pattern is *Ascription/Achievement*, and it is based on the concept of what is earned versus what is biologically predetermined. Ascription describes your individual status, or those things with which you were born, such as sex, ethnicity, race, family status, and family composition, whereas achievement refers to those things that you earn based on your performance. For example, we might say that although Oprah Winfrey's ascribed status was one of poverty, her achieved status was one of superstardom and great wealth.

Diffuseness/Specificity refers to the functions of relations, or the nature of our relationships and how broad or narrow their expectations are. If you practice diffuseness, you have a wide variety of relationships that meet a large range of needs, whereas specificity indicates that you develop relationships that meet a specific need. For example, although your friends and family may meet many of your needs, such as support, validation, conversation, and shared activities, other interactions, such as seeing your physician or accountant, satisfy specific needs.

Whereas the previous category dealt with the types of obligations within a role or relationship, *Particularism/Universalism* refers to the range of people with whom we come into contact. Particularism refers to the fact that our behaviors are guided by the person with whom we are interacting and the nature of that relationship. In other words, we act a certain way simply because, for example, we are with our parents and they have a certain set of expectations for our behavior. Universalism refers to the fact that we behave in certain ways based on the norms and values that guide our behavior at a societal level, or that dictate what we should and should not do. The fact that everyone is presumed to be equal in the eyes of the law is an example of this.

Affectivity/Affective Neutrality is based on the quality of our relationships and refers to the amount of emotional expression that is appropriate or perhaps even expected in a given situation. If you have an affectivity approach, then your relationships are based on things such as love, trust, close personal involvement, and other forms of emotion, whereas if your interactions are affective neutral, they are based on what people can do for you, or perhaps on what you can do for them.

Finally, one can focus on *Collectivity/Self* when performing any action. In the first concept, the focus is on the interests of others, or the social group of which one is a

part, whereas in the second concept, the focus is on one's own interests. The fact that people do charity work or exhibit altruistic behavior would be explained by the first concept, whereas our economic activities could perhaps fall into the latter category.

PRIMARY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Structure

Structure refers to the composition of the family, or what members make up the family institution within a particular society. Is it a nuclear or single-parent family? Is the marriage intact, or has there been a death or divorce? Structure can also be used to describe the framework of a society or an organization.

Function

What services does the family provide to society? The family exists for the functions that it serves, which in turn enhance the survival of the larger group. We can best understand the purpose of any organization by examining what it does, or its functions.

Instrumental

Tasks that need to be performed within a family to ensure its physical survival are instrumental in nature. The focus is placed on providing for the material needs of the family members, and it is often assumed from historical analysis that males are best suited for these tasks. This would include earning the family income, paying the rent, and providing for transportation and clothing. These are the tasks that Ralph, from our vignette, feels he should perform.

Expressive

The relationship interactions necessary for the psychological satisfaction of family members are expressive in nature. They include love, communication, and support and are generally assumed, because of biology, to be tasks best suited for females, much the way Alice did throughout her marriage to Ralph in our vignette. Thus, mothers are often assumed to be better able to meet the emotional needs of their children than fathers.

Equilibrium

The assumption here is that any human system will resist change. Even though change comes gradually, family members tend to function best when things are in balance. Parsons (1951) felt that this was most easily achieved when family members shared the same values and goals and when they performed differentiated roles (i.e., each spouse fulfilled a different function, such as an instrumental husband and an expressive wife (Winton 1995).

The Benchmark Family

The benchmark family refers to the traditional nuclear family composed of a husband, wife, and their children, with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as homemaker. (Yes, Ward, June, Wally, and Beaver Cleaver, from the popular television show *Leave It to Beaver* in the 1950s, may come to mind here!) Some Americans consider family structures that differ from this ideal to be less desirable, or even deviant, by comparison (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 1993).

Deviant Behavior

Merton (1957), expanding on the original principles of structural functionalism, developed a typology of deviant behavior to show how behaviors that deviate from the social norms can still play a useful role in the theory, and in society for that matter. His typology was based on five categories that are reviewed below: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. The examples for each of these are drawn from Kingsbury and Scanzoni (1993), but you could also use examples based on people you know.

Conformity

Nondeviance is the same as conformity. For instance, a husband/father who is a good provider and does so in the approved manner of hard work and achievement has conformed to the social norm of being the family breadwinner.

Innovation

A woman who accepts the goal of material success but attains it in an illegal or otherwise socially unacceptable manner is in this category. She is both conforming and deviant. An example of this would be a mother who tries to have it all but uses drugs in order to have the energy/stamina to get everything done that the "perfect mom" should do. This is a huge social trend.

Ritualism

Ritualism refers to a man who gives up on success but still works hard. No matter how hard he tries, he will not meet his wife's expectations of him as a provider. So, why does he continue to try? He does so because that is his nature, or his ritual.

Retreatism

Retreatism refers to the person who rejects both the normative goals and the means to obtain them. Drug addicts and homeless people are examples of individuals who might fall into this category. They avoid both the rewards of society and the frustrations that come with trying to attain them. In other words, they retreat from cultural norms.

Rebellion

Rebellious individuals are similar to those in the previous category, except that they also attempt to create a new social structure. They might argue that material success is corruptive, and that we should focus on spiritual or other goals instead. This last category in particular allows functionalism to deal with change in ways that Parsons (1951) could not.

COMMON AREAS OF RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

Structural functionalism has been most useful in guiding comparative research about the family, chiefly as it was carried out by anthropologists and sociologists who were searching for any universals in family life. It has also been used to explore cultural variations among families and societies. This research has provided the foundation upon which much of modern family science is built. Even though this framework has basically not been used since the 1960s or 1970s (Lane 1994), it still influenced much of the work done in the field both prior to and since that time. Below are some of the key areas of knowledge that was attained thanks to the structural functionalism framework.

Family Structure

George Murdock (1949) surveyed 250 societies that were described in the "Human Relations Area Files," an immense collection of ethnographic field notes on cultures around the world. From this research, he concluded that what he called the nuclear family was the basic social structure for humans everywhere. It consists of a husband, wife, and their children. This was the minimum structure, and it was the norm in one-fourth of the societies surveyed. The others were either polygamous or extended families, but they had nuclear families at their cores.

A similar study was done by Crano and Aronoff (1978), which assessed 186 societies that were chosen to reflect a representative sample of the world's societies. They were interested in examining the idea of complementarity in the expressive and instrumental roles in families across these diverse cultures. They found that, while the mother was the principal caretaker for infant children in almost every society, the same was not true as children got older. The father was found to be significantly involved in the expressive functions of the family as children grew up. They concluded that having expressive and instrumental roles as an absolute dichotomy was too restrictive, as men and women in these societies exhibited both characteristics.

Family Functions

Historical analysis demonstrates that, across time, the family has provided many important functions for society. In modern times, many of these functions—religion, health care, protection, education, and entertainment—have been taken over by other institutions. Today we have churches, the medical establishment, the police, public and private schools, movies, and other entities to meet these needs. As these kinds of

changes occurred, the family adapted and focused on what it does best (Ingoldsby and Smith 1995).

Murdock (1949) concluded that there were four essential functions that the family provides in all societies. The first is *sexual*. All societies have found that this powerful impulse must be restrained in order to avoid chaos. However, it must not be over-regulated or personality problems and an insufficient population would result. The compromise found everywhere is marriage. Although sexual relations do occur outside of marriage, most sexual expression occurs in marriage, and it is the one context in which sexual behavior is always socially acceptable.

The second function is *reproduction*. This follows naturally from the fact that marriage is the primary sexual relationship in all societies. Although many children are born out of wedlock, the majority are born according to society's preference, which is within the family. Such children are usually privileged in terms of acceptance, inheritance, and other factors.

The third function is *socialization*. In addition to producing children, the family must care for them physically and train them to perform adult tasks and adopt the values deemed appropriate by their particular culture. As Lee (1982) pointed out, this is much more than simply learning occupational skills. It involves language skills and the transmission of culture as well. All societies depend on the family to love and nurture their children so that they will become civilized.

The final function is *economic*. This does not mean that the family is the economic unit of production, although it has been in many times and places. Here, Murdock (1949) was referring to the division of labor by gender: "By virtue of their primary sex differences, a man and a woman make an exceptionally efficient cooperating unit.... All known human societies have developed specialization and cooperation between the sexes roughly along this biologically determined line" (7). In other words, because males have greater physical strength and females bear the children, marital pairs have found that their survival is enhanced if they divide responsibilities according to their capacities.

In addition, the functions of rituals and behaviors within the family were also analyzed. Every culture has its own approaches to birthing, parenting, sexual taboos, and other matters. A productive way of understanding these family rules is to investigate what functions they each serve for the family and the society at large.

Origin of the Family

The answers to the questions of how and when the family originated among humans are presently considered to be beyond the reach of science. However, there have been many philosophical and theoretical speculations, and most of them have come to the same basic conclusion: The structure of the family developed as the result of the economic division of labor. Social and technological changes have reduced this traditional (expressive/instrumental) division of labor proposed by the functionalists (Ingoldsby and Smith 1995), but the argument that economic efficiency and sexual attraction are the basis for marriage and family life is still a powerful one. As Lee (1982) explains:

The family originated among human beings because a certain division of labor between the sexes was found to be convenient or efficient and maximized the

probability of survival for individuals and groups...the logic here implies that the origin of sex roles...coincided with the origin of the family. (54)

Family Universality

Functionalists have wanted to determine if the family exists worldwide as a social institution. If it does, then it can be said that the family may be necessary for the survival of human society. However, if it can be demonstrated that there exists even one culture without the family as we define it, then it must be concluded that, although the family unit is common, there are viable alternatives. Murdock's (1949) research convinced him that the nuclear family is universal and necessary for human social life:

> No society, in short, has succeeded in finding an adequate substitute for the nuclear family, to which to transfer these functions. It is highly doubtful whether any society ever will succeed in such an attempt, utopian proposals for the abolition of the family to the contrary notwithstanding. (11)

Stephens (1963) described the work of Edith Clarke in Jamaica and Melford Spiro with the Israeli kibbutzim, which tells a different story. Clarke argued that fathers are missing from lower-class Jamaican families, and thus the structure there is a mother–child dyad, rather than the father–mother–child triangle of the nuclear family. Similarly, Spiro's work gives the impression that the socialization and economic functions are not provided by the family in the kibbutz. Despite these studies, careful reviews by scholars have rejected these arguments and found in favor of Murdock's ideas instead.

However, Lee (1982) demonstrated that there are a few stable societies, such as the Nayar of India, in which biological fathers do not live with or provide for their families or help socialize their children. Mother–child dyads, typically with help from other male relatives, do exist as the norm in a few places and function much like single-parent families do in the modern Western world. By means of comparison, divorce can be said to provide the important function of enabling adults to escape from difficult relationships, and single parenting may become a necessary adaptation to that situation. In these other societies, however, mother-only parenting is the preferred family structure, even though the couple remains married.

A case could also be made that there are other functions beyond Murdock's four that have emerged as important family contributions to society. The principal one would be providing companionship and emotional support to its members. Although love is not yet found to be essential for marriages everywhere, it is playing an ever greater role in urban, industrialized societies (Ingoldsby and Smith 1995). Given that, in 2007, more than half of the world's population was living in cities, this is becoming increasingly important (Population Reference Bureau 2007).

Marital Structure

Students are often surprised to learn that historically polygyny (multiple wives) is the preferred marital structure in over three-fourths of all societies. This is the case despite the fact that the relatively balanced sex ratio results in most people practicing monogamy. The temptation has always been to blame polygyny on the male sex drive,

although functionalists make a very convincing case that it is actually about economics. Societies that engage in light agriculture and animal husbandry tend to prefer polygyny, because the labor of women and children creates wealth and, therefore, these families are better off than monogamous ones. In contrast, polyandrous (multiple husbands) unions, which are very rare, appear to be adaptations to economic poverty attributable to life in a harsh environment (Ingoldsby and Smith 1995).

Working Women

Early functionalists found working mothers to be destabilizing and, therefore, a threat to quality child rearing. Political conservatives who continue to take that position blame "uncaring" and "greedy" mothers in a materialistic society. However, structural functionalism tends to look to outside forces, particularly economics, to explain change—for example, the rise in the number of working mothers since the 1960s has resulted from the shift in the United States from a manufacturing to a service economy. Because these new salaries are much lower than those paid for skilled factory work, couples have found it necessary for both of them to work outside the home in order to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. In this way, many valued benefits for their children, such as music lessons and sports activities, can continue to be provided. This theory always encourages us to look to larger societal forces to explain changes in the family, as it adapts only when there are other factors that require change in order for the family to reestablish equilibrium.

Expressive/Instrumental Roles

As was previously stated, although structural functionalism as a theory in its entirety has not been used for several decades, it is true that concepts from it have been used since that time. A good example of this is the work exploring the existence of expressive/instrumental gender roles in various groups/relationships. For example, Venkatesh (1985) used this concept to address the adoption and use of technology in the home and whether or not such technology is used for instrumental or expressive purposes. He reported that households take both of these purposes into consideration when choosing which technology to purchase, and couples are most likely to choose technology that can provide a high level of functioning in both arenas.

Finley and Schwartz (2006) assessed whether or not the father's instrumental role has changed in the fifty years since Parsons began writing about it by studying an ethnically diverse sample of 1,989 university students who retrospectively reported on their father's behaviors. It was found that, in this sample, the fathering role remained substantially instrumental in nature, although there was some indication that fathers were beginning to show expressive behaviors.

Another interesting, recently conducted study by Caldwell and Mestrovic (2008) concerns the roles of instrumental and expressive behaviors as exhibited by the military personnel involved in the charges of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. They used the language of instrumental/expressive behaviors to explain both the actions at the prison as well as the defenses of two of the military personnel who were charged with these crimes. The military is seen as primarily instrumental in nature and function,

and the role of this in the exhibited behaviors was also discussed. The authors concluded by listing eight ways in which you can summarize these experiences from a Parsonian perspective.

Use by Other Fields of Study

Although there are probably many similar fields of study that have benefited from the earlier work of structural functionalism theorists, one field that frequently used this approach was political science (Lane 1994). In fact, Groth (1970) suggested that "among the recent approaches to the study of politics one of the most stimulating as well as influential has been structural functionalism" (485). It is useful for this field because it stimulates research, can fit together puzzle pieces that seem very different, and can help to compare two areas or types of politics that on the surface seem very different. Silverman and Gulliver (2006) further stated that it allows for a comparative analysis of different political systems and aids in the cross-cultural comparison of diverse political structures.

One interesting area of research, especially given the current "graying of America," is in the relationship between aging and cumulative advantage/disadvantage (CAD). CAD is based on the principle that some people are more advantaged when it comes to resources, where they live, financial status, health, and so on, and that the gap between those who are advantaged and those who are not is widening. It also suggests that this is not purely a matter of individual characteristics or abilities, but is also reliant on the society in which one lives and the structures set forth in that society. Thus, it makes sense that structural functionalism might be applied to develop a better understanding of CAD, because it is focused on figuring out how structures that are in place meet the functions needed by a system (Dannefer 2003).

Finally, Chilcott (1998) wrote an interesting article asserting that structural functionalism could be modified to help analyze school systems. If you think of the school itself as a system, with principals, teachers, and students each playing roles within that system, such a framework could be used to better understand why a system does and does not work. You could also research how those roles work together to form an integrated whole. Thus, you can see from this brief review of the literature that, although structural functionalism itself has not been used much in recent research, it has been influential in different ways and modified for many uses over the years, making it an important component in the history of family theories.

CRITIQUE

A number of problems have contributed to the general decline in the acceptance of and use of structural functionalism. The main ones are listed below (see Kingsbury and Scanzoni [1993] and Winton [1995] for a more detailed description).

First, very few scientific ideas can be completely free of the dominant values of society, and structural functionalism is no exception. Historically, it developed in a conservative time and, therefore, values traits that were popular at the time, such as structure, stability, and unity. One must remember that, at the time this theory was developed, it was believed that the family had been growing and changing for decades.

and that in the 1950s we had finally arrived at the "normal" American family. Thus, the ideal of the heterosexual couple who is married and raising children based on gender role expectations of the male being instrumental and the female being expressive was the standard that would be followed for decades to come (Scanzoni, 2001). As we know, this standard did not last for long, and women like Alice in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter started wanting to express themselves in both realms. As political views and cultural values changed, support for the theory waned.

At a deeper level, the theory is criticized for confusing "function" with "cause." Even though it may be possible to demonstrate that families perform certain functions that are necessary to society, it does not necessarily serve as a causal explanation for why families exist. The theory does not do a good job of explaining the historical process of how family types come to exist in a given society.

Chilcott (1998) also suggested that structural functionalism does not adequately account for change. Because it is based on a static model of society, explaining change becomes difficult. Similarly, he states that dysfunction is not dealt with in a way that is helpful. Both of these problems, however, have been addressed by people who use this theory as a basis from which to start, rather than as their only theoretical framework.

Functionalism also focuses on a macroanalysis of large social systems and assumes that maintaining a steady state is important. Many other theorists feel that understanding the interpersonal struggles that go on in family life is critical and that disagreement must be assumed to be intrinsic to family life.

Finally, some theorists have made the mistake of assuming that, just because something is functional, it deserves to be maintained. Feminists in particular have been offended by the notion that women should always perform expressive tasks, because this is seen as hurting their status within the system. Therefore, the status quo has been dysfunctional for women, even if it has been functional for the rest of the family or the overall society in some times and places. This can be further expanded to include the idea that this theoretical model would be problematic when applied to same-sex relationships. In fact, Parsons considered any family form that was not the benchmark family as deviant and harmful, not diverse. The inability of the theory to allow for the diverse family forms present today has been the source of its most damaging criticism.

However, structural functionalism has a number of strengths that result in its usefulness in family studies today. As mentioned previously, the organic analogy is still used in other, more current theoretical approaches. Family systems theory takes the basic concepts of equilibrium and roles and successfully applies them to a microanalysis of family relationships.

As the research examples in the chapter demonstrate, the theory is very useful for cross-cultural scholarship. No other framework has been as successful in providing us with an understanding of different family forms and why they work at various times and in various places. An example would be the relationship between marital structure (monogamy, polygyny, etc.) and economy (Lee 1982).

Finally, as Pittman (1993) explains, "the presumed moralism allegedly undergirding functionalism with a conservative, consensus-based, status quo bias, is almost certainly the product of the period of theory development (1940s and 1950s) rather than inherent to the theory itself" (221). For example, the theory itself does not demand that all families need to be nuclear, with the husband acting instrumentally

and the wife expressively. Researchers using this framework have simply noted the historical and comparative success of this approach in many societies. As times and circumstances—such as social views and economic structures—change, other structures or functions may prove to be more useful. Equilibrium can change and, therefore, be understood as dynamic. The basic theory is neutral in that it looks at stability but does not necessarily value it as superior to other possible forms. More modern interpretations of the theory have attempted to integrate conflict and change into the paradigm.

APPLICATION

1. Think about the couple described in the vignette at the beginning of the chapter. How much can we learn about a family just by analyzing its structure and the functions that are performed? Would this theory be able to help Alice change her situation?

2. Write a short paper listing every member of your own family of origin. What was its basic structure? Who performed the instrumental and expressive tasks? Were there other roles necessary for smooth family functioning, and if so, who carried them out?

3. Think back to a time of family crisis. What changes were taking place? Was a new and different equilibrium reached? Did anyone play a rebellious role in the crisis, and if so, how did that turn out? How strong were societal forces for things to remain the same?

4. How typical are the families that you know? How many do you think meet the criteria for being a benchmark family as described earlier in the chapter? How well, in comparison, do you feel that the less traditional families function?

5. The article that follows is about gendered styles of caregiving. After you read the article, think about other types of behaviors that are gendered in our culture and discuss whether they are similar to or different from what Parsons outlines. How is this similar to or different from what you know about caregiving for children?

REFERENCES

Caldwell, R. A., and S. G. Mestrovic. 2008. The roles of gender in 'expressive' abuse at Abu Ghraib. *Cultural Sociology* 2(3): 275–299.

Carroll, M., and L. Campbell. 2008. Who now reads Parsons and Bales? : Casting a critical eye on the "gendered styles of caregiving" literature. *Journal of Aging Studies* 22: 24–31.

Chilcott, J. H. 1998. Structural functionalism as a heuristic device. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 29(1): 103–111.

Crano, W. D., and J. Aronoff. 1978. A cross-cultural study of expressive and instrumental role complementarity in the family. *American Sociological Review* 43(4): 463–471.

Dannefer, D. 2003. Cumulative advantage/disadvantage and the life course: Cross-fertilizing age and social science theory. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Science* 58B(6): S327.