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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Family Relations*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Jul., 2002), pp. 206-214

Published by: [National Council on Family Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700136>

Accessed: 12/12/2012 22:16

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# Rethinking Family Development Theory: Teaching With the Systemic Family Development (SFD) Model

Tracey A. Laszloffy\*

*Although family development theory has made significant contributions to the field of family studies, virtually all of the models based on this theory are fraught with two fundamental conceptual weaknesses: the assumption of universality and the skew toward a single generational focus. The Systemic Family Developmental (SFD) Model is presented here as a process-oriented and holistic alternative to existing models of family developmental theory. Following the presentation of a case example that demonstrates how the SFD Model can be used to study an actual family, detailed recommendations are provided for the use of the Model in undergraduate family development and family studies courses.*

One of the conceptual foundations in family studies is family development theory. It offers a unique way of thinking about and studying families because of its emphasis on the evolution of families over time, the developmental tasks facing families and their individual members, and the recognition of family stress at critical periods of development (Duvall, 1988). The unique perspective that family development theory provides has contributed to family specialists' understanding of and ability to work effectively with families. For example, family therapists use their knowledge of the family lifecycle to make clinical distinctions between normative and dysfunctional behavior among the families they treat (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). According to Duvall (1988):

Community programs designed to help family members with their developmental tasks have been quietly at work for years (Hardy, 1965; Hummel & Smith, 1959). Schools increasingly use our conceptual framework in their work with students and teachers (Johnson, 1976), as have religious programs of the various faiths for many years. Family research teams organize their studies by stages of the family lifecycle as Olson and McCubbin (1983) have demonstrated so productively. (p. 132)

Unquestionably, family development theory has made significant positive contributions to family studies and to the work of family specialists. However, the existing body of family development literature and the various models derived from it are plagued by two fundamental conceptual weaknesses. These weaknesses greatly diminish the utility of family development theory as a framework for thinking about and working effectively with families.

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*Key Words: family development, family lifecycle, Systemic Family Development Model.*

(*Family Relations*, 2002, 51, 206–214)

206

## A Critique of Family Development Theory

### *The Assumption of Universality*

Historically family development theorists assumed that all families develop in the same way. This assumption of universality is observable in the work of major family development models that identify a specific number, types, and timing of stages through which families are alleged to develop (Duvall, 1957, 1967, 1977; Duvall & Miller, 1985; Glick, 1989; Hill, 1964, 1986). Although there are variations, each model articulates specific stages of family development and defines when and how these stages occur. This is indicative of an assumption of universality.

Duvall's model (1957) is the most popular and widely used. The family lifecycle is defined in terms of eight developmental stages: (a) married couple (without children), (b) childbearing families (oldest child from birth to 30 months), (c) families with preschool children (oldest child from 2.5 to 6 years), (d) families with school children (oldest from 6 to 13 years), (e) families with teenagers (oldest from 13 to 20 years), (f) families that are launching (from first child to leave to last child to leave), (g) middle years ("empty nest" to retirement), and (h) aging family (retirement to death of both spouses). Clearly, this model is based on a traditional, nuclear, intact family form and does not consider families whose lifecycles are characterized by alternative developmental sequences (couples who live together but never marry, childless couples, and divorced, single-parent, or remarried families). As stated by Falicov (1988):

The timing, the tasks, the rituals for transition, the coping mechanisms, and even the meaning attached to different family life cycle stages vary from culture to culture and from subculture to subculture. . . . Although many universal similarities do exist among families, use of the normative prototype of the American [W]hite Protestant nuclear family life cycle may lead to significant errors. (p. 35)

Whereas Duvall (1985) addressed the issue of family diversity in her later work, she maintained the basic assumption of universality.

Despite the differences between families around the world,

*Family Relations*

and throughout time, family development is common in all humans. All families everywhere form, grow, mature, and eventually dissolve. It is this universality that accounts in part for the wide usage of the family developmental conceptual framework. (p. 132)

Her assertion that all families experience some kind of a developmental process is reasonable but it remains unclear how she justified that this process is universally reflected in the eight stages of her model.

Other family development theorists offer models that at first glance appear to more fully account for the variability found in families. Rodgers (1962) developed a model that consists of 24 stages. Hill (1986) proposed a model that considers the lifecycle of different types of families, including the ideal intact family, the premaritally pregnant intact family, and the late childbearing remarriage family. Hohn (1987) developed a complex model of 12 life courses and accounts for the many possible variations between families by their structure, circumstance, and ultimately lifecycle. Each of the 12 courses are "based upon variations in stability of marriage (or union) and the presence (or number) of children from the marriage(s)" (Glick, 1989, p. 124).

Although these other models more fully account for the variations between families and family lifecycles, defining the specific number, types, and timing of stages of development ultimately perpetuates an assumption of universality. Even a model that proposed such variations could never be applicable to every family, because all stage classification systems are limited in their capacity to account for the realities of family diversity and the possible variations in the lifecycles of all families (Aldous, 1990). This point was advanced by several theorists (e.g., Reiss, 1981; Riegel, 1976; Terkelson, 1980) who argued that models of family development need to focus on broad processes of transformation that transcend stages. Given such diversity, a pressing need exists for models of family development that challenge the assumption of universality and better reflect the infinite variations possible within and between families.

### *Bias Toward A Single Generational Level*

Because families are complex, multigenerational units, it is difficult to specify types and timing of stages a given family will experience. Families are comprised of innumerable interactional dynamics that occur between individuals, all of whom experience their individual developmental trajectories while simultaneously sharing membership in a collective that undergoes its own unique process of growth and development. Unfortunately, most models of family development are skewed toward an individualistic or single generational emphasis that fails to reflect the intergenerational and interactional complexity of families.

The labels given to stages within major models of family development quickly expose their bias toward a single generational level. Stages labeled "The New Couple" or "The Family in the Middle Years," are examples of a single generational bias. Because families are multigenerational units, it is myopic to focus narrowly on only one generational level. For instance, the stage referred to as "The Aging Family" implies that all members of the family system are in their later years. In some unique situations this may be true. However, in general, most families with elderly members also are comprised of members at other generational levels. Hence this label overlooks this multigenerational view.

Another commonly defined stage of family development is

the "Launching Stage" or the period when parents launch their adolescent/young adult children and when adolescents/young adults leave home for the first time. Family members at two generational levels (minimally) are involved in and affected by this stage. However, the term Launching Stage emphasizes the parental generation and marginalizes the adolescent/young adult generation. A more balanced and accurate description of this stage would be the "Launching and Leaving Stage," as it reflects the launching process that entails a reciprocal leaving process. A true family focused developmental perspective should offer a more balanced view of the intergenerational, interactional nature of a family's lifecycle.

A central defining attribute that differentiates family studies from related disciplines (e.g., psychology, human development, and gerontology) is its focus on families rather than individuals. Although family scientists study individual development, theoretically these studies occur within the context of family development. Yet, because of the single generational emphasis reflected in many family development models, the functional reality is that little differentiates family development theory from individual development theory.

Hill (1971) was one of the first to suggest that family development theory needs greater emphasis upon the wholeness of family systems. As stated by Falicov (1988):

Hill proposed a rewriting of the family life cycle framework to present the interdependence of parts as a variable, changing in degree over the life cycle. . . If we were to heed Hill's proposal, the presentation of the family life cycle could take a process-oriented form based on parameters of systems change: the interconnectedness of family members alternating between degrees of closeness and distance (separateness). (p. 8)

Unfortunately, three decades later, little has been done to disrupt the dominance of a single generational focus in family development theory and offer a perspective that reflects more fully the wholeness and complexity of family experience.

### **The Systemic Family Development (SFD) Model**

The Systemic Family Development (SFD) Model is a process-oriented model that addresses the two aforementioned conceptual weaknesses associated with traditional family development theory. As its name indicates, the SFD Model is grounded in systems theory, which provides the foundation for challenging the assumption of universality and the bias toward a single generational focus within existing family development theory. The SFD Model described below is guided by system concepts. It expands the utility of a family development perspective by emphasizing family sameness and diversity and the wholeness of family systems.

#### *Families are Similar and Diverse*

Borrowing from systems theory, the SFD Model assumes a process-oriented view of families and family development. This view recognizes that all families share a common process of development; however, there is tremendous variation in terms of how this process manifests. Within the SFD Model, the common developmental process that all families experience consists of the emergence of a stressor (a phenomenon that exerts force on a family system thereby pressuring it to change and adapt). The process of changing and adapting is known as making a transi-

tion. When a family makes a transition, shifts in family roles and relationships inevitably occur.

All stressors produce stress, which is the inevitable discomfort that arises from the pressure to change and adapt. When a family is able to make a transition, the stress that accompanied the stressor is relieved. In some instances a family may find it exceedingly difficult to make a transition. Although faced with the pressure to change (the stressor), they find themselves unable to do so. They experience what Pittman (1987) called a "snag point," or a core inflexibility that "makes it difficult for family members to make the necessary changes to adapt to this particular stress" (p. 18). When this occurs, the inevitable stress that accompanies a stressor intensifies. When stress passes a certain threshold, a family hits a snag point and is unable to access the resources they need to make a transition and achieve new stability (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). This is what leads to a crisis. In other words, a crisis is generated when a family is faced with a stressor(s) that generates so much stress they become stuck and are unable to make a transition (further exacerbating the experience of stress and the sense of crisis) (Joselevich, 1988).

Families tend to hit snag points when they are faced with several stressors within a relatively short period. Commonly referred to as stressor pile-up (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), such pile-up is associated with a corresponding increase in a family's level of stress. As stress increases, a snag point is likely to emerge thereby interfering with a family's capacity to make necessary adaptations, thus leading to a crisis. Hence, an essential process mediating between stressors and crises is stress management, or the ability to access and utilize resources to cope effectively with the stress that stressors generate, thereby averting a crisis (Boss, 1988). This phenomenon is typically depicted by the Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Figley, 1983) that suggests that when a family is faced with a stressor event (A), the interaction between their coping resources (B) and their interpretation of the event (C) will determine whether the outcome (X) will be a crisis.

Beyond the common developmental process all families share, the SFD Model does not attempt to define or limit the specific types and timing of stressors and crises that occur within a given family. For example, it may be reasonable to assume that most families experience the stressor involving the birth of a child. It is far more difficult to determine when this stressor will occur, or what other stressors may occur simultaneously. It might be that at the time of a birth, older children are preparing to leave home for the first time, or a divorce has occurred. It is the complex interplay between the nature and timing of stressors that makes family development highly idiosyncratic. Hence, by acknowledging that all families experience a common developmental process but by avoiding conclusions about what or when specific types of stressors occur, the SFD Model is able to reflect the sameness and the diversity that exists within and between families.

### *Families are Complex, Multigenerational Systems*

The SFD Model borrows from systems theory the concept of nonsummativity, or "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Systems theory emphasizes the wholeness and interrelatedness of families. It recognizes that families are comprised of individual members but it advances the notion that together these members form a whole (the family) that is not reducible to any of its individual parts (individual members). Accordingly,

the SFD Model assumes that families are complex, multigenerational systems that cannot be reduced to a single generational level.

Although it is infinitely simpler to focus on a single generational level, family development theory must extend beyond mere study of individual development within the context of the family. Rather, it must study the development of the family as a unit. By avoiding the use of predetermined stages, the SFD Model avoids the pitfalls that can result in a single generational focus within models of family development. By focusing on the developmental process that all families experience, the SFD Model provides a basis for studying families in terms of their wholeness and the interactional, multigenerational complexity that is endemic to them.

The Model's emphasis on family developmental process, diversity, wholeness, and the intergenerational nature of the family lifecycle are complex, abstract concepts that can be difficult to make concrete. Following is a way of demonstrating core concepts from the SFD Model using an illustration that compares the family lifecycle to a cake.

### *An Illustration of the SFD Model: "It's a Piece of Cake"*

One way of making concepts from the SFD Model concrete is by using a metaphor that compares the family lifecycle to a round, layered cake. The cake metaphor demonstrates the idea that the whole (the family) is greater than the sum of its parts (individual members) and it offers a visual image of the multigenerational nature of families. The metaphor also demonstrates that, in spite of the common developmental process all families experience, each family is unique with regard to the set of specific stressors and crises they face and how these are handled both within and between generational levels.

According to this metaphor, the ingredients in a cake are like the individuals in a family and when the ingredients are mixed together and baked, what emerges is a cake or a family. Although the ingredients (i.e., butter, milk, flour, sugar, and eggs) all are used to make the cake, once the ingredients are mixed and baked, a product that is greater than the sum of its parts emerges. The cake is more than just the individual ingredients—it is a unique entity that is not reducible to any of its parts. This is true for families.

The layers of the cake are synonymous with the generations in a family and the roundness of the cake is synonymous with the passage of time representing the cycle of the family's life over time. Thus, the cake revolves in a circular motion and, rotating with the passage of time, it sheds old layers (older generations) and adds new layers (new generations). The additions and losses of layers are transitional stressors that require the cake to adapt. Shifts must occur so the cake can establish a new balance. If the cake is unable to make a transition, the pressure associated with these stressors accumulates, distorting the cake and making it lopsided until eventually the stressor becomes a crisis. There are many different types of stressors and crises and when these occur and how they effect a given cake vary considerably. For example, chunks of chocolate might be inserted within the cake requiring a transition that incorporates the chunks so they do not distort the shape of the cake. The layers need to shift somewhat to create room for the chunks and the chunks need to melt so they can ooze within the layers, establishing a new balance.

*Family Relations*

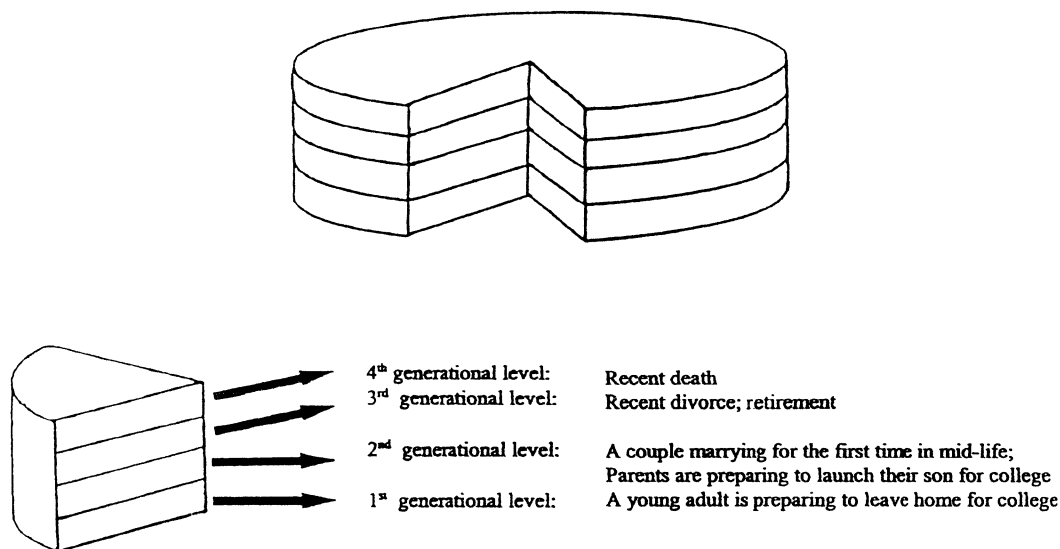


Figure 1. The Systemic Family Development Model as illustrated by the round-layered cake.

One way to punctuate the idiosyncratic nature of family development is by slicing a piece of cake, which is analogous to freezing a moment in the lifecycle of a family. By removing the slice, a cross-section of the cake (family) at a particular moment is exposed, making it possible to observe and analyze the specific stressors and crises (and the associated effects) occurring within and between layers (multiple generations of the family) of the cake at that time. The slice is a visual representation of the family in the midst of its developmental process. Ideally, this visualization aid should make it easier to consider how the family needs to adjust in response to the pressures associated with whatever stressors and crises are occurring to achieve a new form and balance.

For illustrative purposes, imagine that a cake is used to represent the four-generation Family X. If a slice of the cake were removed at an arbitrary moment, it might reveal that several developmental stressors are occurring simultaneously within Family X. In the first generation a child is preparing to leave home for college. In the second generation two people are getting married in mid-life for the first time. In the third generation, a couple is divorcing after 35 years of marriage and this coincides with one partner's retirement. In the fourth generation, a recent death occurred (see Figure 1). This example reveals developmental stressors occurring simultaneously at each generational level within the Family X. Using the SFD Model it is possible to study the family's developmental process irrespective of the specific numbers, types, and timings of the stressors.

In summation, the SFD Model accomplishes two essential tasks. First, by emphasizing the common developmental process all families experience and by avoiding conclusions about the specific number, types, and timings of stressors and crises, it challenges the assumption of universality and recognizes the diversity that exists within and between families. Second, it challenges the bias toward a single generational focus by recognizing that wholeness of families and the complex, interactional, multigenerational nature of their development. The SFD Model and these concepts are illustrated by visualizing a round, layered cake.

2002, Vol. 51, No. 3

### The SFD Model "In Action"

Following is an illustration of how to apply the SFD Model to an actual family. Family A serves as the vehicle for this demonstration, which entails shadowing this family over the course of seven, arbitrarily spaced periods. Following the first point of contact with Family A, their development is examined during intervals of 4, 5, 1, 3, 1, and 18 years. These intervals are completely arbitrary, which is important. Family development is highly idiosyncratic and cannot be reduced to a formula of predetermined stages that evolve according to a specified timeline. One of the few global descriptions that can be made with respect to family development is that all families undergo a common developmental process that consists of the onset of stressors that demand transitions. When families are able to make transitions, shifts occur in family roles and relationships, and a new stability is achieved until the onset of the future stressors. When they cannot do so, the stressors eventually lead to a crisis that can inflict discomfort and frustration. Once this discomfort becomes unbearable, a family is forced to change and adapt to relieve suffering.

All families repeatedly experience the same basic developmental process; however, the number and types of crises that transpire and their timing vary. In this way, no two families are alike. Moreover, these crises have an intergenerational and an interactional dimension. Hence, the following observations and analyses of Family A remain focused on the family as a unit. Although certain individuals and subsystems within the family may be more affected by particular events than others, ultimately Family A focuses on how various developmental crises affect and change the unit as a whole. Using the cake analogy, Family A's lifecycle is sliced into seven pieces, enabling examination of various "moments in time" during the family's development.

#### Family A

When the first slice of cake is removed from the life of Family A, they are comprised of six living members who occupy three generations. Spouses, Bernice (60) and Benny (62), are

209

members of the eldest generation. Their daughter, Kenita (39), and her husband, Kareem (43), are members of the middle generational level. At the third and youngest level are Bernice and Benny's grandchildren, Neshia (18) and Nicole (11).

*Piece 1.* During this moment in the lifecycle of the family, the stressor of launching and leaving is occurring. Neshia (18) is leaving home to begin her college education. Her departure signals the end of her childhood and the beginning of her adulthood. In a sense, the family is losing the little girl who was her parents' firstborn child, her grandparents' firstborn grandchild, and her little sister's big sister. With the stressor of launching and leaving, the family must negotiate several shifts with regard to family roles and relationships. For example, Neshia's departure eases the sibling tension between her and Nicole, who will now have more direct access to her parents, especially her mother. Neshia also experiences greater freedom and autonomy, allowing her to become more of her own person without the intrusions from her parents and little sister.

At the same time, Kareem and Kenita are losing the stabilizing dynamic in their marital relationship. For years Neshia diffused intensity between her parents and, in particular, offered her mother emotional support and companionship. With her departure, family roles and relationships need to be reorganized to accommodate Neshia's absence. Accordingly, the leaving and launching stressor generates shifts within each generation (e.g., between Kenita and Kareem who must now face their identity as a couple after years of allowing their parenting roles to obscure their marital roles), as well as between generations (e.g., between Nicole and her mother who are able to move closer to one another).

*Piece 2: Four years later.* Four years later, the family faces a variety of cross-generational stressors that revolve around work and career. Neshia (now 22) is striving to establish a new career. Kenita (now 43) and Kareem (now 47) are re-examining their relationship to their work after several decades of employment—both inside and outside of the home. Kenita, who spent much of her adulthood raising her family, has decided that now she wants to have a career outside the home. Simultaneously, Kareem, who has been an accountant for 20 years, finds himself re-evaluating the meaning of his work. He is no longer challenged by his career and wants to explore a new profession. Additionally, Benny (now 66) is retiring from his lifelong career as a postal carrier. Each of these work or career related stressors inevitably demand shifts in family roles and relationships. For example, Neshia is beginning her career and Benny is ending his. Although Neshia may have less time to devote to her family as the demands of a new career require her focus and energy, Benny now has more time available. Although he faces the loss of an important aspect of his identity, there are relational gains associated with the increased time he has for marriage and his family.

The career challenges facing Kenita and Kareem are complex because these changes are located outside of the family system and they have significant implications within the family. As Kenita and Kareem venture down new career paths, their new roles outside of the home involve corresponding role shifts within the home that entail having less energy to devote to their marital and family relationships. Hence, within the family, various issues related to work affect all three generations simultaneously. It is critical to consider the tasks that must be negotiated within and between each generational level.

*Piece 3: Five years later.* Nicole (now 19) recently began dating and announced to her family that she has fallen in love.

The stressor of dating signals Nicole's exit from childhood and emergence into adulthood and, in a sense, her exit from the role she played within her family. This stressor also introduced the possibility of new members joining the family (e.g., Nicole's partners). Because she is experiencing "first love," Nicole spends a great deal of time with her new partner, a woman named Nancy (20). This creates tension within the family because they want to extend Nicole the freedom and latitude to date and meet new people. However, the family also is fearful of losing Nicole and does not want to risk sharing her with others. Combined with the stressor of dating and first-love, there is an additional layer of tension that exists within the family because Nicole's new partner is a woman. Although some within the family are comfortable with Nicole's sexual identity, others are not. Hence, Nicole's "coming out" is related to various relationship strains that emerge.

The divergent reactions that Kareem (now 52) and Kenita (now 48) have to Nicole dating and to her identity as a lesbian amplify their marital tensions. These tensions erupt when Kareem admits to having an affair with a (much younger) woman he met at his new job. After 30 years of marriage, the couple divorces. However, they also decide to withhold sharing this decision with their family for several weeks because Neshia (now 27) has announced that her boyfriend of 3 years, Nate (30), asked her to marry him and she has accepted.

Within a relatively narrow slice in the life of the Family A, several major stressors around intimate relationships occur, and these entail various shifts in family roles and relationships. For example, Nicole's first-love relationship signals her impending departure from the family and the possible introduction of a new member. The family also experiences the loss of the marital bond between Kenita and Kareem and this creates shifts in family roles and relationships. Finally, with Neshia's impending marriage, the family experiences the loss of Neshia in the way that she had once been a member of the family, while simultaneously they gain a new member in her soon-to-be-husband (and his entire family -of origin).

*Piece 4: One year later.* One year later Neshia (now 28) and her husband are struggling to adjust to their newly acquired marital status. Meanwhile, Kenita (now 49) and Kareem (now 53) are divorced. Although Kareem is involved in another relationship, Kenita struggles to adjust to the loss of a significant relationship and her new identity as a single woman. Nicole (now 20) is facing a similar stressor. After dating Nancy for nearly a year, the couple dissolved when Nicole realized she needed to explore other relationships. Despite their generational differences, the different circumstances surrounding their singlehood, and their different sexual orientations, Kenita and Nicole are negotiating new identities and developing a new relationship with each other that incorporates what it means to both be adult, single women.

*Piece 5: Three years later.* Three years later Neshia (now 31) and her new husband are having a baby. This pregnancy is a stressor signaling the arrival of a new family member. Again, everyone has to readjust for the newest entry into the family system. After Benny's death 4 months earlier, the family reconfigured itself in response to this loss. Now they reconfigure in response to the entrance of a new baby.

*Piece 6: One year later.* With the birth of a baby comes the beginning of an individual developmental lifecycle and the birth of new parents. Neshia (now 32), her husband, and baby, Geneva, are locked in a developmental dance whereby each shapes the

other as they grow, become, negotiate, and renegotiate their roles and their relationships on a daily basis. Just as the birth of a new child signals the birth of new parents, it also brings the birth of other new family members (e.g., grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts). Hence, Nicole (now 24) has to adjust to being a first-time aunt, Kenita (now 53) and Kareem (now 58) must adjust to being grandparents, and Bernice (now 73) must adjust to being a great-grandparent.

*Piece 7: Eighteen years later.* At this time the family is facing the stressor of adolescence. Geneva (now 19) is ferociously testing limits, sending strong but contradictory messages about her desire for her family connection and independence. Nesha (now 50) and her husband are confused by the stranger who is their daughter. They find it difficult to relate to her moods and mixed messages but they also are fraught with contradictions. On one hand, they want Geneva to be independent and self-assured but they also want her to continue to depend upon and need them. The pressure within the family system is necessary because in time, it will lead to the stressor of launching and leaving. Once again the family will make a transition and reconfigure its roles and relationships.

### Applying the SFD Model to the Classroom

The SFD Model has practical implications for teaching family development courses, family studies courses, or both. Because of its emphasis on the ways that families are both similar and diverse and on the systemic nature of families, the SFD Model is an ideal theoretical framework around which family development and family studies courses (especially at the undergraduate level) can be organized. An outline of how the SFD Model has been used to structure an undergraduate course follows to illustrate this.

#### *An Introductory Undergraduate Course on Family Development*

This course is required of all undergraduate majors within a department of family studies at a mid-size university located in the northeastern region of the United States. The course title is *Family Development*. The syllabus indicates that the objective of the first part of the course is to introduce students to family development from a theoretical perspective with the SFD Model serving as the guiding framework. The material provides a conceptual basis for understanding the foundations of family development and assists students in connecting the material to their personal life experiences. In the second part of the course, the objective is the application of the material to situations and scenarios that might reasonably face a variety of family professionals. As students are required to respond to these scenarios by applying the concepts they learned from the SFD Model, they also are encouraged to connect the theoretical material to real-life situations. This adds a practical dimension to their educational experience. A detailed outline of the course material to demonstrate how students are introduced to the SFD Model and how it serves as the guiding framework for the course follows.

*Part 1: Week 1.* During the first week the instructor introduces students to the classical theoretical frameworks within family studies: structure-function, conflict, symbolic interactionism, social exchange, and traditional family development theory. To help students make connections between abstract theoretical concepts and real-life situations, the instructor shows a short video-clip of a family's interaction and asks students to analyze it

using each of the different frameworks. This exercise requires students to apply each theory to an actual family situation. It also demonstrates that theories are merely different ways of thinking about and explaining family interaction. Because each theory makes different assumptions about reality, they lead to different conclusions about the meaning of a given phenomenon. Hence, the same phenomenon (i.e., the family interaction depicted in the clip) is explained in different ways depending on the theoretical framework used.

In addition to introducing students to the five major theoretical frameworks, they are encouraged to think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of each. For example, in terms of structure-functionalism, the emphasis on examining the relationships between families and society is a strength of the theory, as is the emphasis on the stable and orderly aspects of family and societal organization and functioning. On the other hand, a weakness of the theory involves its overemphasis on the orderly and stable aspects of life that fail to recognize the necessity of familial and societal conflict and change. In contrast, a strength of conflict theory involves recognition of the critical role that conflict plays in bringing about necessary changes in human relationships at both the familial and societal levels. Yet, a weakness of the theory consists of its overemphasis on the conflictual and coercive aspects of human relationships at the expense of acknowledging the necessary and healthy parts of family life that involve order, stability, affection, and consensus.

With respect to traditional family development theory, a strength involves its focus on how families change over time and how they experience stress during developmental transitions. A weakness is its assumption of universality and the bias toward an individualistic or single generational focus.

Following, students are introduced to the guiding theoretical framework for the course, the SFD Model. This model is presented as a framework that builds upon the strengths of traditional family development theory, while attempting to compensate for its weaknesses. This is accomplished through the model's emphasis upon the complex interactional and intergenerational dynamics within families and its process-oriented definition of the family lifecycle that recognizes the ways in which all families are simultaneously similar and diverse.

To aid students in grasping the systemic nature of families, the instructor presents the cake analogy using a three-dimensional model as a demonstration aid. The 3-D model is easy to construct from styrofoam, wood, clay, or other craft materials. The 3-D model depicts a round, layered cake complete with removable slices that visually demonstrates core concepts associated with the SFD Model. This demonstration aid enables students literally to see how the cake is analogous to a family and that it is more than the sum of its individual ingredients. It clearly demonstrates how the layers are like generations and the roundness of the cake represents the cycle of the family's life over time. Students can see the cake revolving as it shed old layers (older generations) and added new ones (new generations). A slice of it enables students to visualize a cross-section in the family's life at a particular moment. They are able to examine the piece with its layers and can visualize this moment as frozen, thereby allowing the class to study and analyze the family's developmental process at that specific point.

*Part 2: Weeks 2–8.* During the next 7 weeks students are introduced to a hypothetical family (referred to as the Demo family). The class examines this family during seven successive, arbitrarily spaced periods, using the SFD Model to conceptualize

and analyze the family's developmental process. Each week the instructor informs the class of a new stressor or set of stressors that occur within the Demo family at the next punctuated period. The class engages in an analysis of how the family might be affected by and cope with these stressors. Each week, the instructor reaffirms the point that the particular occurring stressors are all hypothetical and arbitrarily selected. Therefore the order, timing, and types of stressors that occur do not reflect a universal pattern that applies to all, or even most, families. Within the Demo family, the stressors that are examined each week are: (a) leaving and launching; (b) stressors related to work or careers that are occurring at three generational levels simultaneously; (c) dating or mate selection, getting married, and getting divorced; (d) marital adjustment and newly acquired singlehood; (e) pregnancy and childbirth, and death; (f) early childhood, new parenthood, new grandparenthood and widowhood; and (g) adolescence as preparation for launching and leaving.

Each week the class is challenged to consider the specific tasks that the Demo family must negotiate in association with each of the stressors stated to occur at the next time within the family's lifecycle. For example, during the third period, one of the stressors the Demo family faces is divorce. The divorcing couple are members of the youngest generation who were married for 5 years. The class is asked to consider the types of tasks that the family will likely have to negotiate within and between generational levels in response to this divorce. Students are particularly encouraged to think of divorce as a relational stressor and to consider the types of tasks that have to be managed in relational terms. The comment that follows was shared by a student in response to this task:

Before this class I thought about divorce as something that just happens between two people. I used to think it's a private thing and nobody else's business. But now I realize that a whole family is affected when there's a divorce—everyone, children, parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relations are affected by a divorce. In this family, the wife had a lot of guilt because she thought she'd failed her parents by getting a divorce. The divorce wasn't just about her and her husband. For a long time she wanted a divorce too but was afraid because she didn't want to disappoint her parents. So whether she liked it or not, they were a part of the whole divorce thing. And once she made the decision to go ahead and do it, part of how she dealt with the loss meant she had to face her parents and work out her relationship with them and the guilt she felt. It truly was a family affair.

To aid students in applying the theoretical concepts, the instructor strongly encouraged them to make connections between the material covered in class and their personal experiences. This constitutes another vehicle through which the material "comes alive," and students are guided to relate to it in practical terms. For example, one student made the following association between the material and her experiences in her family:

I have a lot of trouble in classes where the material doesn't relate to real life in a direct way. In this course almost everything can be related to my life, or to someone I know. I can see how everything we're learning is important because it's about the realities of life. One of the most important things I've learned is that my parents have been afraid to let me go. For years I've been in the middle of their marriage to distract them from dealing with each other. I had a

really hard time coming here to college and I always thought it was just me, that I was messed up. Now I see how part of my struggle is connected to them and their fear that when I left they'd be alone together for the first time. And that's what happened and sure enough they started fighting a lot more. I guess that should scare me but I actually feel hopeful because another thing I'm learning in this class is that people can work on their relationships and things can get better. I have been talking to my mom about going to therapy with my dad. I've been telling her some of what I'm learning, and she's listening.

*Part 3: Weeks 10–13.* During the second part of the course students assume the roles of various family professionals and apply the SFD Model. They are presented with common scenarios that confront family professionals within various work settings, and they are asked to devise ways of addressing each of these scenarios using the SFD Model.

During Week 10 students consider family professionals who work as family life educators. They are provided with a brief introduction to careers for family life educators and learn about the educational and experiential requirements necessary to work as a certified family life educator (CFLE). Students are asked to imagine themselves as family life educators and confront a typical situation. They use the SFD Model to address the situation (see Appendix 1).

During Week 11 students place themselves in the role of a family counselor. They receive an introductory lecture orienting them to the nature of the work that family counselors do, including an overview of the standard educational and experiential requirements that must be fulfilled before one can ethically practice. Then students are presented with a scenario that requires them to apply the SFD Model while in this role as counselor (see Appendix 2).

On Week 12 students are introduced to careers in family policy. They briefly learn about the work in which lobbyists, advocates, and researchers engage and how these careers have direct policy implications. Students also learn about the type of education and experiences one needs to become a professional in this area. Following this, students are presented with a contemporary family policy issue that they address using their knowledge of the SFD Model (see Appendix 3).

For Week 13, students are presented with an overview of human service agencies from the perspectives of case managers and administrators. Students are informed about the types of qualifications that are generally required for those who wish to pursue these careers. Following the overview two scenarios are presented, one that confronts a case manager and one that is faced by a program administrator. Once again, their challenge is to use the SFD Model to guide them in their efforts to address each of these situations (see Appendix 4).

The final week of the course is used to summarize the semester and help students achieve a sense of closure. This exercise is critical because it highlights a core concept from the course, namely that life is a series of transitions from one developmental stage to the next. With each transition there often is a sense of ending and beginning, but in reality, life is a fluid process that consists of continuous change. Hence, as the course draws to its literal end, the students are "launched," as they make transitions into new experiences guided and aided by some of what they learned.



## Summary

As illustrated by the case of Family A, family development is extraordinarily complex and highly idiosyncratic. Established models of family development theory are not well-suited to capture the interactional and intergenerational richness found in most families. Moreover, although established models might predict some of the types of developmental stressors and crises faced by a given family, it is impossible to predict the timing and sequencing of all stressors and crises within every family. Thus, the SFD Model is unique. As applied to Family A, the SFD Model can be used to track the basic developmental process found in all families, without making the error of attempting to predefine the specific nature, types, and timings of stressors and crises that the family experiences. As a result, Family A illustrates how the SFD Model can be used to understand a family's wholeness and the sameness or diversity of family development. Also, a specific example of how the SFD Model is used to organize and teach an undergraduate course of family development shows a practical application of the Model as a way of contributing to innovations in teaching.

As the world grows increasingly diverse and complex, it is critical that our theories evolve in ways that emphasize the family as a whole system. Such theories also need to reflect the broad developmental process common among families, while recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of each family. The SFD Model is presented as one possibility of how to attend to these goals, thereby enhancing the philosophical, theoretical, and applied strength of the field of family studies.

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## Appendix 1

### Writing Assignment for Your Role as a Family Life Educator

Madonna and Guy have recently married. In their wisdom, they realize that the transition to marriage is difficult, especially because Madonna has a 3-year-old daughter that she is bringing into the marriage. Therefore, the couple has decided it is in their best interest to attend an educational workshop on newly married couples, prepared and presented by a family life educator.

Madonna and Guy decide to hire you as the family life educator who will prepare and present the workshop that will help them make a smoother transition into their new life together. Your task is to prepare a workshop that will help educate the couple about the issues, concerns, and dynamics they may have to face as a newly married couple and as a stepfamily. Please design the workshop you would present to the couple. Specifically, please outline and describe the major ideas you will address in your effort to inform this couple about what they may have to face in terms of:

1. Being a newly married couple;
2. The presence of a young child that one partner is bringing into the marriage;
3. Each of their families of origin;
4. Any other salient issues with which this couple might be faced.

## Appendix 2

### Writing Assignment for Your Role as a Family Counselor

You are a family counselor seeing the Peters family for the first time. They consist of a mother (Ruby), father (Leroy), and three daughters, Denise (21), Sandra (17), and Rena (15). In the first session the family says the presenting problem involves Rena, who refuses to go to school. Rena says she hates school and prefers to stay at home with her mom. She says school is waste of time and she wants her mom to homeschool her. During the session, you also discover:

Leroy is a traveling salesman who spends most of his time on the road. He has been involved in this profession since the second year of the marriage, which was right after the first daughter was born;

Ruby has been the primary parent because her husband travels and works so much. During the past several years she has made some extra money for the family by typing address lists at home for a mail-order company;

Denise moved out of the home when she was 17 to live with her boyfriend. Her parents were very unhappy with this decision but because the relationship seems to be going strong, they have grown more accepting of the arrangement. Denise works for an insurance company and is happy with her job;

Sandra is a senior in high school and is preparing for college next fall. She

was accepted at a university in another state and is very excited about going away to college;

Rena has never expressed displeasure about going to school in the past so her sudden aversion seems strange to her family. She has always been a good student but now that she is missing so much school, her grades are dropping. Rena says nothing in particular is bothering her except that she thinks she will miss Sandra when she leaves for school.

Ruby's mom died almost a year ago. She had been sick for many years so the family was prepared for her death but Ruby admits she still misses her mom a lot.

As the counselor for this family, use the knowledge you have acquired in class about family development and, with the SFD Model as your guide, please:

1. Formulate an assessment of the family by:
  - (a) Identifying the developmental stressor-crisis or stressors-crises they may be facing;
  - (b) Identifying and discussing whatever issues-dynamics you believe are operating.
2. Identify some of the questions or curiosities you might pursue with the family in future sessions to enhance your understanding of what's happening for them. In other words, what else do you think you need to know to improve your assessment of the family's situation?
3. State your ideas about what might need to happen to help the family with their problem.

### Appendix 3

#### Writing Assignment for Your Role as a Congressional Subcommittee Staff Person

You are a staff person on the Congressional Subcommittee for Family Welfare. The senator who chairs the committee wants to sponsor a bill that offers financial incentives to families who choose to support elderly family members in their homes rather than placing them in nursing homes. This senator is of the opinion that it is better for elderly persons to live with and receive direct care from their families, as opposed to being placed in institutional care facilities. As a family specialist who has been hired to serve as a full-time committee staff person, it is your job to write a brief outlining the implications this bill might have for the welfare of families.

Using the knowledge you have gained in this class about family development and guided by the SFD Model, write a brief that identifies the implications this bill might have upon families. Specifically, please address:

1. How elderly family members (whose level of functioning would otherwise qualify them for institutional care) residing with their families might constitute a family developmental stressor.
2. The impact that this stressor might have upon families overall. Be sure to explain how this stressor could potentially become a crisis.

Be sure to consider how this stressor will affect the roles and relationships in families from the perspectives of several different generational levels and the interaction between these. What other stressors might be occurring in families that would add to the complexity associated with this particular stressor? Remember, it is inevitable that there will be advantages and disadvantages associated with this stressor. Try to identify and discuss as many of these as you can so your senator will have as much information as possible to understand the implications of the proposed bill for families.

#### Tips for Writing a Good Brief

1. Simplify your ideas, use clear definitions, avoid jargon, translate complex ideas and statistics into common language, and use examples to highlight major points.
2. Provide summary statements.

3. Provide clear implications of the facts and make recommendations in a separate area of the brief.

### Appendix 4

#### Writing Assignment for Your Role Within a Social Service Agency

(Please choose either Option 1 or Option 2)

##### Option 1: As an Administrator Within a Social Service Agency

Design a comprehensive, holistic program called "Supporting Families in Crisis" that will support families struggling to cope successfully with multiple developmental crises simultaneously.

Write a proposal for your program that consists of the following:

1. A rationale grounded in the SFD Model for why such a program is needed. *Here you should explain the process of family development including a discussion of how some families experience stressors (e.g., poverty, domestic violence, drug abuse) that add to the strain of trying to negotiate normal developmental stressors, which can result in crises. Give examples to support your points and to help the reader understand why this program would be useful.*
2. Develop a program outline specifying the types of services you would include. What services would be offered? How and why would these be helpful to families struggling with multiple crises?

##### Option 2: As a Case Manager Within a Social Service Agency

You are a case manager and you have a family that is experiencing the following:

*Pat (40) is a single mother of three children, John (17), Tania (8), and Lisa (5). Pat and the children's father were not married but lived together until Lisa was born. At that time, their couple struggles were too great and they agreed to end their relationship. He moved to another state and only sees the kids twice a year. Five years ago Pat's mother, Ella, moved in after she retired from her job of 35 years. She loved her work but had to retire because of physical problems. (Ella's husband died 10 years ago.) Since moving in, Ella has been involved in raising the children with Pat. Pat has worked as a full-time nurse's aide for nearly 20 year but she hates it. She says she's tired of taking care of people and only keeps the job to make ends meet. Pat makes enough money for the family to get by but she has had trouble managing her financial resources wisely—a point that often frustrates Ella.*

*Recently it was discovered that John has a serious drug problem. Also, Tania's grades have started to drop, although she was always a good student. She has become withdrawn and sullen. Pat suspects that Tania was abused by a neighbor who sometimes watches the kids. Lisa is doing okay, comparatively, but her kindergarten teacher thinks she has a developmental disability that needs to be diagnosed. Both women are concerned about the children, yet, they feel lost as to what they should do to help. In particular, they argue about John because Ella believes Pat should be more firm with him, and Pat believes he is suffering with the loss of his father and just needs more love and understanding.*

As the case manager for this family please do the following:

1. Use your knowledge of family development and the SFD Model to describe what is occurring in this family and the specific issues, stressors, and crises they are dealing with.
2. What services would you coordinate to help them cope with their developmental stressors, crises, and other related challenges? Explain why you would select these.