

PART 1

Essential Knowledge and Skills

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Variations in Family Systems and Family Life Cycles

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It is only during the past 40 to 50 years that couples, marriage, and family counseling and therapy have garnered the full attention of practitioners in the helping professions. Although Alfred Adler's work with families and communities began in Vienna 100 years ago, most of the emphasis in counseling, psychology, social work, and psychiatry has been on working with clients on an individual basis (Bitter, 2014). Starting with the work of Sigmund Freud, practitioners drew from the tenets of Jungian, existential, person-centered, gestalt, behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, rational emotive, reality, feminist, solution-focused, narrative, brief, dialectical, and numerous other theories that all primarily focused on one-to-one counseling and psychotherapy (Capuzzi & Gross, 2011; Corey, 2013). Most of these theories were based on values associated with individualism, autonomy, independence, and free choice and, for the most part, were well received in Western cultures (Bitter, 2014). In the 1950s and 1960s, family therapists and the application of systems theory began to challenge these notions.

SIDEBAR 1.1

Working with a family, especially when it is the entire family, results in a group counseling situation. The dynamics occurring in a family group session have both similarities and differences with those occurring in a group comprised of individuals who are not part of a family. If someone who was not a counseling professional, or who was new to the profession of counseling, asked you to describe the similarities and differences, what would you say?

One of the greatest challenges, if not transformations, a family therapist must make is to think systemically when observing, assessing, conceptualizing, and intervening within a family system. To undergo this transformation is to cultivate a dynamic systemic view rather than the linear cause–effect view that is predominant in Western culture. Most counselors understand that working with couples and families is quite different from individual counseling and psychotherapy because the client unit is not just the individual, but can be a dyad, a subgroup of a family, an entire family, or even multigenerational families. A more nuanced understanding is that a family counselor works with the family system even when there is only one individual in the therapy room. In addition, the counselor must think systemically throughout counseling in order to meet the client from his or her worldview. Unlike Western cultures, in collectivist cultures, interdependence, family connectedness, hierarchies of relationships, and even ancestral perspectives guide and inform the daily experiences of people. Adept counselors and therapists in Western cultures have realized that individuals cannot be viewed in isolation from the people and systems (family, neighborhood, school, work, social–recreational, church, etc.) with which they interact daily. Counselors and therapists have appropriately adopted systemic models as conceptual frameworks for couples and family counseling and place less reliance on theories designed for individual counseling and psychotherapy.

SIDEBAR 1.2

Systemic thinking directs the focus of the counselor or therapist away from the individual and individual problems toward relationships and relationship issues between individuals. A linear cause–effect reality does not exist, and the emphasis is on reciprocity and shared responsibility. The counselor does not ask *why*, but makes observations holistically to try to figure out what is going on between and among the members of the family. Patterns and power hierarchies are more important than intrapsychic and historical reasons for the behavior of family members.

Theorists, researchers, and practitioners such as Nathan Ackerman, Gregory Bateson, Murray Bowen, Oscar Christensen, Rudolf Dreikurs, Jay Haley, Don Jackson, Cloe Madanes, Monica McGoldrick, Virginia Satir, and Carl Whitaker are just a few of those associated with the development of the foundation for systemic work with couples and families. Currently, counselors and therapists are also beginning to incorporate the positions of professionals such as Tom Anderson, Harlene Anderson, Insoo Kim Berg, Steve de Shazer, David Epston, Kenneth Gergen, Harold Goolishian, William O’Hanlon, Michele Weiner-Davis, and Michael White in their efforts to assist couples and families seeking assistance (Bitter, 2014). Doing so has further expanded viewpoints about family systems and life cycles.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the differences between family function and dysfunction, the variations in family systems, the issues members of those

systems may bring to a counselor or therapist, and some information about the life cycle of a family and needs often connected to this life cycle, it is important to point out that couples, marriage, and family counselors receive their training from programs with differing orientations. There are couples, marriage, and family counselors who receive their education and supervised practice in graduate programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE), the accrediting body for the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). There are also couples, marriage, and family counselors who receive their training in counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and who are members of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC), which is a division of the American Counseling Association.

SIDEBAR 1.3

Identify a journal published by AAMFT and compare it with a journal published by IAMFC. What similarities and differences can you identify?

FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

If the readers of this textbook were to survey the literature written during the past 30 or 40 years about what makes a family function well, they would discover a myriad of definitions, descriptions, and variations related to the topic of a healthy family system. So what are the characteristics of a family system that promote functioning, health, and well-being? The authors of this chapter found James Bitter's (2014) comments interesting and pertinent to the topic of functional versus dysfunctional families. He pointed out that family system theorists have used words such as functional, dysfunctional, healthy or unhealthy, normal or abnormal for decades, and he believes that, over time, these terms have taken on a pejorative connotation. He defines a *functional* family as a family in which family processes are successful in meeting the normal developmental demands as well the abnormal and unexpected stressors experienced by most families. He defines a *dysfunctional* family as one in which there has been a breakdown in coping or in which the family continues to engage in patterns that are no longer successful. What distinguishes Bitter's viewpoint is that he prefers to identify family processes or relational patterns as dysfunctional to avoid stigmatizing the family by labeling it as dysfunctional. The authors subscribe to this approach to understanding family dynamics and add that labeling a family or family member is not helpful; instead, professionals should try to understand and address patterns, behaviors, communication, and other elements of the family system that are unhealthy at a certain point in time in the family context.

Much has been written about functional versus dysfunctional characteristics of a family system. For example, Gladding (2007) listed the following functional characteristics:

- Commitment to the family and its individuals
- Appreciation for each other (i.e., a social connection)
- Willingness to spend time together
- Effective communication patterns
- High degree of religious/spiritual orientation
- Ability to deal with crisis in a positive manner (i.e., adaptability)
- Encouragement of individuals
- Clear roles (pp. 32–33)

Becvar and Becvar (2000), on the other hand, prefer to discuss family functionality in terms of process dimensions. They discuss healthy families as those in which there is a focus of authority that has been established and supported as time has passed, a set of rules that is established and consistently followed, an ample amount of nurturing, effective and clear child-rearing and couple maintenance expectations, a set of goals for the family and the individuals in the family, and enough flexibility and adaptability for the family to cope with developmental issues and unexpected crises.

A solid body of research suggests that family system dysfunction affects individual mental health and psychopathology and vice versa. Family system dysfunction leads to internalizing and externalizing family symptoms; for example, when unclear family boundaries create childhood anxiety and a child from that family, as an adult, carries the family symptom of producing anxiety in interpersonal relationships (Pagani, Japel, Vaillancourt, Côté, & Tremblay, 2008). To note how tangled this becomes in a system, Pinheiro and colleagues (2006) provide this comment on examination of cocaine addiction and family dysfunction: “The symptomatic child . . . becomes the ‘battlefield’ that keeps the issues of the mother–father relationship in denial, originating intergenerational alliances that separate parents, stimulate the competition between them, and predispose the child to alcohol and drug abuse” (p. 308). The centrality of the family in a culture may heighten or mediate the interplay between family system functioning and individual mental health. For example, research by Chen, Wu, and Bond (2009) suggests that not only is suicidality heightened when there is family distress or fighting but also such family discord may affect Chinese adolescents even more because of the centrality and weighted importance of family in Chinese cultures.

Although working with multiple members of the identified family may complicate conceptualizing therapeutic intervention, it also may provide reasonable avenues for positive change from the same therapeutic investment. One criticism of individual counseling is that the individual leaves counseling and often returns to the system that is not collaborating in therapy, placing the individual solely responsible for systemic shift. Furthermore, with one person in session it is harder for the therapist to explore all the family members’ perspectives and conceptual frameworks.

VARIATIONS IN FAMILY SYSTEMS

The definition of what constitutes a family and a family system is ever changing and varies from culture to culture. In the past, European Americans defined *family* as including only those related by blood, and it was identified as the *nuclear family*. Other groups, such as African Americans, defined family in terms of a network of kin as well as community, and included anyone who was psychologically connected and categorized as a friend of long standing. Asian Americans include ancestors and all descendants in their definition of what constitutes a family (Gladding, 2007).

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau defined *family* as

a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such people (including related subfamily members) are considered as members of one family. Beginning with the 1980 Current Population Survey, unrelated subfamilies (referred to in the past as secondary families) are no longer included in the count of families, nor are the members of unrelated subfamilies included in the count of family members. The number of families is equal to the number of family households; however, the count of family members differs from the count of family household members because family household members include any non-relatives living in the household.

As you might surmise, it is difficult to arrive at a definition of what constitutes a family. For the purposes of this book, our definition will be comprehensive and will include those who are connected via birth or psychological, economic, or historical ties. This definition includes those who marry or never marry, have children or never have children, adopt, are gay or lesbian, or families that are comprised of some other alternative constellation of individuals.

Turning the clock backward illustrates the changing nature of how people in the United States have perceived the definition of a family, especially when contrasted with current thinking about families and family systems.

Flashback to the 1950s

Sixty years ago there were not as many accepted family forms as there are today. Typically, families could be categorized into three subgroups, which are discussed next.

The Nuclear Family

A nuclear family consisted of a husband, a wife, and their children. Usually the husband worked outside the home and the wife worked inside the home, assuming a large percentage of the responsibility for parenting, completing household chores, and making sure the needs of all family members were met. This family form was idealized through television shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*

(which ran from 1952 to 1966) and *Leave It to Beaver* (which ran from 1957 to 1963). Generally, the characters that were promoted and popularized on television were the career-focused husband as the decision maker and the wife who was well-groomed at all times, supportive of her husband's efforts, and an excellent hostess, especially of events that would serve to promote her husband's movement up a career ladder. The image of a dual-career family or a unmarried couple living together with children was not promoted or even discussed to any great extent.

The Divorced Family

During the 1950s, divorce was an option, but it was not really approved of in the United States. The rising divorce rates in the 1960s and 1970s changed people's attitudes about permanent separation (Cherlin, 2010). In a divorced family, women were typically the custodial parents to any children resulting from the marriage. Women were likely to receive child support and alimony for a defined period of time, and they joined the workforce, moved back to their parents' homes with their children, or both. In many cases, as is true today, the family stayed in contact with the former spouse, who participated in parenting the children, at least to some extent. Divorced women were not well received and were referred to, askance, as *divorcées*. Although many divorced women remarried, others found that they were perceived to be flawed and not the best prospects for marriage.

The Stepfamily or Blended Family

In a stepfamily, or blended family, at least one of the two people who marry have children from a previous marriage. In the 1950s and 1960s, the term *stepfamily* was used; the term *blended family*, which has a more positive connotation, was not in wide usage until much later.

At the time, many people assumed that a stepparent could not parent as well as a birth parent, even if the stepparent was more stable and grounded and was very fond of the children brought into the family via marriage. The depiction of stepparents in fairy tales as unaffectionate and unaccepting of their spouse's children did not alleviate this misperception. As time has passed, Americans' views of family forms and constellations have changed dramatically.

Fast Forward to 2015 and Beyond

One way of tracking the changing views of what constitutes family in America would be to watch episodes of *Modern Family*. This television show debuted in 2009 and is an ensemble comedy that revolves around the experiences of three very different families: (1) a post-midlife man (Jay), his second (much younger) wife, her son from a previous relationship, and a son they had together; (2) Jay's daughter, her husband, and their three children; and (3) Jay's son, his husband, and their adopted daughter. The series chronicles the ups and downs of parenting (including parents talking to their teenagers about safe sex), marriage, and family relationships, and features a very accepting depiction of same-sex parenting.

SIDEBAR 1.4

Locate and watch some episodes of *The Golden Girls*. Would you classify the three women who shared a home in this television series as a family?

This is a very different depiction of families in America than would have been portrayed 60 years ago and is illustrative of the many family forms or types that exist today and are described next.

The Single-Parent Family

In a single-parent family, either a mother or father is raising children without a partner. During the past 30 years, divorce and nonmarital childbearing have dramatically increased the proportion of single-parent families in the United States (Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). This change has precipitated a myriad of research on the short- and long-term effects of single parenting on the family system and the well-being of children raised in single-parent families (Golombok & Badger, 2010; Parent, Jones, Forehand, Cuellar, & Shoulberg, 2013).

Researchers and clinicians frequently refer to the difficulties and issues that many single-parent families face (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010). These issues are often related to the structure of the family (Parent et al., 2013) and whether it is headed by father or mother and whether the single-parent status is because of never marrying, divorce, death, military service, or some other reason. Financial insecurity, higher stress levels, school dropout, early childbearing, and nonmarital births have all been linked to single parenting (Wojtkiewicz & Holtzman, 2011). There is a lot of conflicting research, however, about whether single parenting really does negatively affect the children raised by a single mother or father (Hornberger et al., 2010). Some research shows that the children in single-parent families fare very well if they experience closeness as a family and feel a sense of accomplishment because they work through their difficulties.

The following case study illustrates some of the possible dilemmas a single parent might face. As you read it, think about what could be accomplished in counseling and how some of the described difficulties could be addressed and dealt with so the family would benefit and feel a sense of accomplishment.

The Case of Amy and James Amy is the mother of James, a 5-year-old boy. Amy had James after a brief relationship with James's father, whom she is still in regular contact with to share custody of James.

Amy and James live in a small two-bedroom apartment that Amy found through another single-mother friend. Amy has several other friends who are also single parents. Amy works two part-time jobs and lives paycheck to paycheck. She receives some benefits from the Department of Social Services, such as food assistance, day care, and medical benefits, which help her make ends meet.

James started school this year, and Amy is going through a big adjustment. She had to take time off work to get him enrolled, which means she will lose a day's pay. James was nervous about starting school and Amy wanted to be there on his first day, but she had to be at work so he went to school from day care. As James progresses through kindergarten, Amy finds it difficult to help him with his homework because she is always working to provide for the two of them. James also has some difficulties in school, especially when other kids ask about his dad and why his mom and dad don't live together. James doesn't have an explanation to give.

Amy also struggles to have a social life as a single mother. She would like to go on dates, but she is worried that people will think badly of her for dating. Amy would like to go out for drinks with her friends after work for a short break, but she is worried she will be looked at negatively for going out. Amy often feels stuck because there is no end in sight for how hard she has to work to maintain a home for her and James. Amy seeks the help of a counselor to deal with the stressors of day-to-day life as a single parent.

If you were the counselor, how would you work with Amy and what goals would you hope to develop for the counseling process? Would you want James's dad to participate in the counseling process with Amy? At what point would you suggest that that couples counseling take place? How could you reframe the situation so Amy and James feel a sense of pride in working through their issues?

The Child-Free Family

This type of family results when a couple makes a conscious decision not to have children, or they cannot have children because of infertility or health-related reasons (Gladding, 2007). In 2007, Daniel Gilbert represented the thinking of many American couples when he wrote the best-selling book *Stumbling on Happiness*, in which he discussed the fact that many couples decide not to have children for personal, economic, career, and a variety of other reasons. This decision would have been considered almost bizarre in the 1950s, but increasing numbers of couples are making the decision not to have children because they feel it is congruent with who they are and that it would not be in the best interests of children.

Despite the decision to be childless, there is always the possibility that child-free couples will face many challenges from those around them (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). Assumptions that the couple is infertile, dislikes children, disapproves of adoption or foster parenting, or that the individuals had unhappy childhoods are just a few of the attitudes the couple may be faced with and asked to explain. Many child-free couples encounter pressure, disapproval, and ostracism by their peers who are raising children. In addition, some child-free couples mourn the lack of a family as they age and question their earlier decision to remain childless. Although this type of family system is becoming more and more common in the United States and other countries, many child-free couples seek counseling because of pressures they experience.

The Same-Sex Couple Family

There is an abundance of recent research on the topic of same-sex couples with or without children (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011; Berkowitz, 2011; Byrn & Holcomb, 2012; Mallon, 2011; Parker, Tambling, & Franklin, 2011). As noted by Ausbrooks and Russell (2011), it is estimated that one in three lesbian couples and one in five gay couples are raising children. This, too, is a departure from what existed 60 years ago and is representative of the heterogeneity (Berkowitz, 2011) that characterizes contemporary American families.

SIDEBAR 1.5

Same-sex families were not in the public eye during the first half of the 20th century. If you were talking with someone born in the 1930s or 1940s and attempting to explain or describe that such a combination of adults and children constitutes a family, what would you say? How would you answer the person's questions about how the children would respond to inquiries they might receive about who was their father and who was their mother?

In addition, of the 250,000 children living in U.S. households headed by same-sex couples, 4.2% were either adopted or are foster children (Berkowitz, 2011); this also represents a development that is different than what existed in the past. Recently, three very interesting books, *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* (Epstein, 2009), *Gay and Lesbian Parents and Their Children: Research on the Family Life Cycle* (Goldberg, 2010), and *Becoming Parent: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Family* (Riggs, 2007), address the topic in ways that might interest the readers of this book and highlight some of the issues faced by these couples. Gay and lesbian families are gaining more social acceptance in recent years as evidenced by the depiction of these types of families in mainstream television sitcoms and real-life situations. Despite this, gay and lesbian families continue to experience stigma and discrimination that increase stressors to family dynamics.

Living Apart Together Families

These families consist of couples who are married or in marriage-like relationships (with or without children) but who live in different households (Cherlin, 2010). Reports from national statistical agencies in the United States, Britain, Canada, and France indicate that living apart together relationships are relatively common, but they also suggest difficulties in conceptualizing and measuring the phenomenon (Cherlin, 2010). Much more research is needed about how the individuals in these family systems interact and communicate, since this type of family constitutes a growing demographic in the United States and in many other countries.

The Dual-Career Family

In dual-career families, each partner places a high priority on his or her career advancement and mobility. As noted by Gladding (2007), more than half of couples with children have careers to which they are highly committed. Some dual-career couples live apart and commute (living apart together) in order to satisfy their career aspirations. Some dual-income families are known as DINKS—dual income, no kids (Gladding, 2007).

The Netflix series *House of Cards* is a contemporary depiction of a dual-career family and the issues precipitated when two very career-minded individuals become a couple. The series is an interesting rendition of the issues such couples sometime face, the efforts members of such a dyad may make in order to foster and preserve their career aspirations, and the pressures and issues that such striving creates in the relationship. Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright do an excellent job of portraying a dual career couple caught up in the politics of the White House and the power wielded by those with money and influence in the Washington, DC, area of our country.

SIDEBAR 1.6

Watch a few episodes of *House of Cards* and list what rules you think the two main married characters followed in their relationship. What kinds of values do you think provide the underpinnings for how they view their careers and how they make career-related decisions?

An Aging Family

Aging families, characterized as headed by individuals aged 65 years or older, are often involved in the launching or relaunching of adult children, caring for their much older parents, planning for and transitioning to retirement, long-term marriages or partnerships, the loss of a spouse or partner, grandparenting, and, quite often, acting as parents to their grandchildren. Living on a diminished income and coping with the loss of lifelong friends are other adjustments that may need to be made by aging families.

Because the demographics of the United States are rapidly changing and the percentage of older adults in our country can be expected to continuously increase, counselors can expect to have more older adult clients than in the past.

The Multigenerational Family

In this type of family, more than one generation lives within the same household. Many young couples, whether married or cohabiting, live for a period of time in the household of one of their parents at the beginning of their union (Ghodsee & Bernardi, 2012). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2002) estimated that by the year 2020, many American families will be comprised of four generations in a single

household. Other examples of multigenerational households might include immigrants living with relatives during the time they adjust to a different culture and locate work, several generations living together because of a housing shortage or the high cost of housing, or unmarried mothers and their children living in their parents' homes. During periods of economic turndown, the number of multigenerational households can be expected to increase as families are forced out of their homes because of foreclosure after job losses.

As the reader might guess, a multigenerational living arrangement can lead to conflicts and other relational issues that need to be addressed, as illustrated in the following case study.

The Case of Joseph and Kalee Joseph and Kalee are a married couple in their 30s and they have three children: Brian, age 10; Alyssa, age 8; and Kyle, age 4. Joseph works in heating and cooling as a skilled worker, and Kalee works as a hairstylist. Several months ago, Joseph's parents fell into some financial problems and had to move in to Joseph and Kalee's house. Together, the family of seven lives in a three-bedroom house with an attached suite that Joseph built for his parents.

Joseph and Kalee both typically work normal business hours, but occasionally Joseph is called out on emergency repair jobs, and Kalee sometimes works late to accommodate her clientele. When Joseph's parents first moved in, space was limited, and the family had some difficulty adjusting. Together they solved this by pooling their resources and building the attached suite on the house. This was an almost ideal situation because Joseph's parents were able to provide live-in child care if Joseph or Kalee was unable to be home on time.

After several months, however, things were not going so smoothly. Joseph's father, Robert, had taken more and more of a paternal role in his grandchildren's lives. Robert was often disciplining the kids before Joseph or Kalee could intervene, and the adults in the household had very different disciplinary approaches to raising children. Joseph and Kalee both spoke with Robert and his wife, Mary, on several occasions, but the discussions seemed to go nowhere. The entire family presents to counseling to devise a plan so they can all live under one roof without damaging relationships.

If you were the counselor for this family, how do you think you would begin the session? Would you suggest goals for the family counseling process, or would you ask the family to establish goals for themselves? Why or why not? What, if anything, do you anticipate would be difficult for this family to discuss?

The Military Family

An estimated 3.5 million Americans comprise the active duty and reserve military armed forces in the United States (Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, 2012). Currently, there is increasing concern about lack of support for those returning after deployment and attempting to reintegrate into the mainstream of community and family life, as well as into the workforce. Military families face the same issues that other families face, but often resolution of these issues is complicated because of deployment and redeployment experiences.

The Transgender Family

A transgender family may be comprised of both adults and children. Often a transgender family is one in which one of the adults has decided to transition to the opposite gender. Such a transition can be confusing to many (e.g., the children in the family, neighbors, relatives, coworkers), and changing gender can precipitate the need for counseling connected with a variety of issues that were not previously part of the family dynamics. Because this is a type of family system that many people know little about, the following case study may prove helpful.

The Case of John and Melissa John has always felt as though he did not have the correct body and that he should be a woman. He remembers going to sleep as a child and hoping he would wake up a girl. John learned to push these feelings down, and he became hypermasculine. Eventually John married Melissa, and they had two children, RJ and Becky.

John shared his feelings with Melissa when they got married, but his feelings seemed to be put on hold when they got pregnant. John later decided he would like to start transitioning, but thought he would wait until RJ was 18 years old. However, they got pregnant again, and John was both happy and frustrated.

Once Becky was 11, John decided he would like to begin transitioning. He talked to Melissa, and together they told the kids. RJ (then 22) was immediately defensive and stormed out with his girlfriend, and they stayed away for a couple days. Becky cried a lot, but then started asking a lot of questions. John found a counselor to work with as he started the transition process. John eventually chose the female name Jennifer and began taking on a female persona.

The process of the transition was difficult and lengthy. Jennifer went through the courts to change her name and started taking hormones. Jennifer also began wearing female clothes and coming out to her coworkers, friends, and family. As Jennifer's identity became more prominent, her marriage to Melissa began to weaken. Melissa does not have good memories of the marriage and now does not know how to feel about Jennifer's transition. Melissa and Jennifer come to counseling to work on their relationship and determine the new roles in the relationship, or even if the relationship will continue. Jennifer would very much like to remain in the relationship, but Melissa is having trouble with the idea of having a wife instead of a husband. The stress is also taking its toll on the relationships with the kids. The entire family decides to go to counseling for help.

Do you think you would be able to counsel such a family? Why or why not? If you felt you could not do a competent job on behalf of this family, what would you do and how would this decision relate to the ACA code of ethics?

All of the previously described family types experience family life cycles over time. The next section provides a generalized description of what many families experience. As one might expect, however, no single description can account for variations caused by individual family characteristics and changes in society.

THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Family life cycle theory describes the developmental stages a family usually experiences as time passes (Berge, Loth, Hanson, Croll-Lampert, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2011). A number of researchers and theorists have addressed the topic of the family life cycle; Evelyn Duvall (1977) was one of the first to draw this topic to the attention of practitioners. Duvall's model was based on the concept of the traditional nuclear family so popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Other professionals (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Gladding, 2007) have also addressed this topic.

One of the dilemmas inherent in describing the life cycle of a family is the fact that most depictions are stage theories and are linear in nature and those practicing couples, marriage, and family counseling think systemically and interactively. Stage theories, although helpful in assessing critical tasks that are usually experienced during a specified period of time, do not completely address the interpersonal relationships, power hierarchies, and family rules, and they provide only a snapshot of what transpires at a given time. In addition, they do not take into account the couple or family's interaction with the systems around them, variances from family to family, the impact of culture, and the many forms or types of families found in the United States and other countries today. That being said, subsequent discussion of the topic will provide the reader with an outline of the normal, developmental stages of the family life cycle and the tasks and issues that need to be addressed at each stage.

The Single, Unattached, Young Adult

This stage is characterized by the necessity of facing the critical task of differentiating from the family of origin and developing a new relationship with parents. Both the young adult and parents may experience some starts and stops as the young adult transitions to a more independent lifestyle and parents adjust to letting go of control. The young adult may further develop peer relationships, experiment with the establishment of a career, and assess whether a marital relationship is the option of choice.

Many young adults choose to live with someone of the same or opposite sex and gain experience with maintaining a day-to-day relationship with the same person. This is very different than what the norm was 50 or 60 years ago, and it provides couples with a rehearsal prior to making a marriage commitment. It is during this time that some young adults experience pressure to marry, which can be internally, as well as externally, imposed. In some cases, issues connected with lack of ability to separate from the family of origin or with difficulty in maintaining even short-term relationships can precipitate the need for counseling.

The New Couple

In the past, this second stage of the family life cycle could easily be labeled "the newly married couple," but because so many couples live together without being married, such a label would be a misnomer today. This is the stage during which

both individuals adjust to what they think will be a long-term relationship, work through their idealized perceptions of each other, make room for their partner in each of their families of origin, and further develop career goals.

This stage could last anywhere from a few months to a few years and often involves a series of role modification expectations. Marriage may or may not occur during this early stage of the family life cycle, and, based on the laws in a particular state, if a marriage does take place, it could be between two people of the same or opposite genders. Issues, if they arise, can relate to a myriad of topics inclusive of changing perceptions and roles, lack of acceptance in families of origin, the beginnings of career competition between the individuals in the relationship, and conflicts over the importance of making a marriage commitment.

SIDEBAR 1.7

Interview a new couple and ask them about some of the adjustments they have had to make since moving in together. These could be related to living together, pressures experienced from their respective families, and so on. Ask them to identify which of these adjustments could precipitate a decision to seek couples counseling. Evaluate whether you think you could counsel a couple around the identified area. What kind of supervision do you think you would need?

Families With Very Young Children

Starting a family requires changes in routine, loss of freedom, the escalation of responsibility, and an alteration of lifestyle. One way of describing this stage would be to point out that the marital or couples system has to be adjusted to make room for a parenting role. In addition, the extended family must adjust to grandparenting during this stage. New parents, more likely than not, experience fatigue, a changed social calendar and less time available to spend with friends, interruption of career-related work habits, and the necessity to alter financial and other priorities.

Parenting requires around-the-clock responsibility for child care and safety. Unlike many of the neighborhoods of the 1950s and 1960s, neighborhoods today may be too traffic and crime ridden to allow children the free, unsupervised run of the neighborhood, and parents must drive children to activities and monitor many children's activities on a full-time basis. Many couples make play dates with parents of other children in their desire to make sure their preschool-aged children engage in age-appropriate activities with peers. Any of these responsibilities associated with child rearing could precipitate the need for couples or family counseling.

Families With School-Age Children

Allowing children to establish connections that parents are not involved in monitoring on a full-time basis often presents the biggest challenge for parents

of children who are entering preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. Parents often have trouble letting go, even if children are only at school for part of the day, because up to this point, parents may have been with their children on a full-time basis. Even though most parents want to support their children's educational progress and extended socialization opportunities with peers, they worry about how the child will fare at school and may even experience feelings of loss. These feelings of loss may relate to the absence of the child in the home or under parental supervision on a full- or part-time basis, or they may relate to generalized feelings of loss of control. In many instances, parents experience even more demands on their time as the children express interest in participating in an increasing number of activities. Parents sometimes lose touch with each other as these demands crescendo.

As might be expected during this stage of the life cycle of a family, parents may struggle to balance responsibilities between work and home, and conflicts over child supervision can occur with more frequency as parental stress escalates. Sometimes one member of the parental dyad begins to feel overburdened, and confusion or arguments over whose career has priority may occur, especially if each adult is quite committed to climbing a career ladder. It is not unusual for any of these areas to precipitate the need for counseling.

Families With Adolescent Children

Adolescence can be a time of turmoil as children adjust to changing bodies and emotions. At times, parents attempt to delay this period of their child's development, especially during the "tween" years (ages 10 to 12), because seeing children mature can make parents more aware of the passage of time. Often parents spend time assessing their own achievements and career progress, and past feelings of uncertainty can be rekindled. Parents may simultaneously be dealing with their children's demands for independence and the realization that they themselves are now middle aged. Parents may have difficulty with the fact that they cannot expect to control everything their child says and does and maintain the set boundaries and limits of the past.

It is also during this period of time that parents may be expected to take responsibility for their own parents as the normal aging process limits their autonomy or changes in physical or mental health create complications that must be addressed. Every reader of this book has heard the term *sandwich generation*, applied to the squeeze experienced by adults who are simultaneously parenting their own children and looking after aging parents. If anything, responsibility and stress escalate even more during this time in the life cycle of a family. Sometimes watching the capacities of aging parents diminish precipitates concern about individuals' own aging and vulnerability. Although many families experiencing this developmental stage cope well because of a history of good communication with one another, excellent time management skills, and grounded personalities, it is during this stage that many couples begin distancing themselves from each other and find that they need counseling if the relationship is to endure.

SIDEBAR 1.8

Now that you have read all but the last two descriptions of the stages of the life cycle of a family, identify the stage that was most challenging for you and share your thoughts about this with someone in your class. What were some of the adjustments or issues you faced and how did you cope with them? Do you think you are equipped to assist a family with similar adjustment issues? Why or why not? What do you need to do to be as prepared as possible? Ask a partner to share his or her feelings on the same questions.

Families With Children Who Are Launching or Leaving the Nest

Releasing children who are leaving for college, the military, or the workforce or who are entering relationships presents other challenges to families in this stage of the family life cycle. Finances may be of great concern because of the escalating cost of obtaining a college education. Many parents and their children go deeply in debt during this time period unless they have been setting money aside since their children were quite young. Parents of a child who has chosen to enter the military worry about deployment and whether their child will be injured far away from home or, even worse, killed in the line of duty. Parents of a child who enters a live-in relationship at a young age and prior to completing college or vocational preparation often worry about the financial well-being of their young adult child and feel obligated to contribute financially. When a young adult enters the workforce immediately after high school graduation, parents may be concerned about the potential for advancement and financial security of their child.

Families in Retirement and Later Life

During this stage, the family is usually comprised of a couple in their last years of employment or in retirement. The age range is 62 to 65 or older, although recent fluctuations in the financial markets have resulted in the postponement of what used to be the typical retirement age. In general, the ages of 65 to 74 are considered the “young old,” 75 to 84 the “old old,” and 85 and older the “oldest old.” Currently, because of increasing longevity and the increasing percentage of the older adult population in the United States, older couples or widowed individuals may experience a myriad of problems because of factors such as:

- Loss of identity after retirement
- Dwindling finances and buying power
- Decreasing energy
- Grief reactions after the death of a spouse, partner, or long-term friend

- Chronic or terminal illness
- Escalating costs connected with assisted living facilities and skilled nursing care

There are many dilemmas that aging families face for which the assistance of a counselor could prove helpful. The following case study provides an illustration of what a family counselor or therapist may encounter.

The Case of Hattie and Felix

Hattie and Felix are a couple in their 70s and they have been married over 40 years. Felix retired from a blue-collar job working in a lumber company, and Hattie has been a homemaker since she married Felix. Hattie and Felix have lived in the same house for 30 years and it is paid off, but the neighborhood is not as nice as it once was, and the value of their home has dropped considerably. Many of their friends and neighbors have passed away or moved into assisted living, and they do not know very many people in their neighborhood anymore. Felix's parents are both deceased, as well as Hattie's father. Hattie's mother lives in assisted living and is barely able to afford this on her social security. Hattie and Felix lost a lot of their retirement in poor financial decisions and now primarily depend on social security as well. Finances between the three adults are often shared to make up differences.

Hattie and Felix have two adult children: Kim, age 39, and Greg, age 36. Kim is married to David and they have one son, Brayden, age 3. Kim and David live several hours away in a larger city. Greg is unmarried and working on his doctorate in another state. Hattie and Felix do not get to see their children or their grandchild except on holidays, because their children are busy and have family and professional commitments.

Recently, Felix was diagnosed with prostate cancer and is reluctant to proceed with care. He often experiences sleepless nights and feels tired all day, most days of the week. Felix has become short-tempered with Hattie and has not disclosed his diagnosis to her as of yet. He is worried about medical costs because neither of them has signed up for their Medicare supplemental coverage and they would be responsible for a large portion of the cost of treatment. Hattie has been talking with Kim, her daughter, about how Felix has been acting, and Kim called the counseling office to make an appointment. All three adults, Kim, Hattie, and Felix, present to the first session.

If you were the counselor for this family, it is unlikely that you would know, at the time counseling began, about Felix's diagnosis. How would you begin working with this family and what might you hope to accomplish?

Additional Factors Affecting the Life Cycle of a Family

There are issues that may arise in the life cycle of a family in addition to those previously discussed. For example, the birth of a child with a disability could require the family to develop specific coping skills for each stage of the family's life cycle. Parents may experience feelings of grief, loss, and self-blame when the infant or very young child is diagnosed with a disability. The necessity for special education

and other school-related support may cause parents and siblings to wish their child or sibling was just like other children who did not need accommodations. Delayed exiting from the K–12 educational system could precipitate resentment and feelings of being different. As another example, the onset of a chronic or terminal illness of family member may precipitate issues around responsibility for caregiving and caregiver fatigue, medical expenses, reduction in family income, and the overall quality of family life.

The varying traditions of certain ethnic or racial groups can also be a complicating factor connected with one or more stages of the family life cycle. The following case study is one example.

The Case of an Interracial Family

Javier is from Argentina and Sakiya is from Japan. They met while in graduate school in the United States and decided to stay in the country. They originally lived in an urban area with a lot of diversity, but they decided to move into a suburban area once they got married and wanted to start having children. The neighborhood they moved into is primarily White and African American. They both feel disconnected from their culture because of the lack of cultural similarities in their current community.

Javier and Sakiya's children are 3 and 5 years old. One time when Javier had the children with him at a grocery store, a woman stopped him on his way out and asked if the children were his. Another time, when both parents were at the school to register their older child for school, the school administrator asked where they adopted their children.

Javier and Sakiya struggle with a decision to see a counselor because they both feel families should handle their own issues, but for different reasons. Javier feels the individual family unit should handle the issue, while Sakiya feels they should both talk to her parents. After many lengthy talks and arguments, the couple decides to seek help from a counselor.

Given what you know about multicultural competencies and issues, what principles would guide you as you worked with his couple?

SUMMARY

Couples, marriage, and family counseling is a rapidly growing specialization within the profession of counseling. Because working with a couple or a family focuses on relational issues and the patterns of relating that family members employ, emphasis during the counseling and therapy process is systemic and holistic rather than linear and individual. The theory and research that a couple, marriage, and family counselor draws from is quite different than the classic theories developed for use in classic individual counseling and psychotherapy. The requisite education and supervised practice required for family counseling can be obtained from programs subscribing to the standards promoted by either the IAMFC or the AAMFT.

Whether a family engages in relational patterns that are functional or dysfunctional, the types of family systems that a counselor may encounter in 2015 and beyond are quite varied and diverse when compared to what were typical and acceptable 50 or 60 years ago in the United States. Even though stage theories only provide a general idea of what families experience during a specific period of the developmental cycle, counselors can anticipate the kinds of adjustments and issues that families may need to address in the context of counseling, depending on how they cope with those life cycle challenges.

USEFUL WEBSITES

The following websites provide additional information relating to chapter topics.

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/blended_families_stepfamilies.htm
<http://blended-families.com/>
<http://www.rainbowrumpus.org/>
<http://www.lgbtfamilies.info/Welcome.html>
<http://www.algbtic.org/>
<http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/>
<http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Index.aspx>
<http://www.grandparents.com/family-and-relationships/family-matters/when-families-live-together>
<http://www.grandparents.com/american-grandparents-association>
<http://www.aamft.org>
<http://www.iamfconline.org/>
<http://www.pflag.org>

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