Identifying Family and Relationship Theories in Family Life Education Materials

Brief Descriptions of Major Family and Relationship Theories/Philosophies

Note that there are many grand and smaller theories that have been applied to families, relationships, and social groups. What follows are some major theories. Some materials and programs may combine theories or use approaches that are not outlined here.

Family Systems Theory

This theory views families as living organisms and stresses boundaries, rules, expectations, and behaviors that help the family maintain equilibrium and the status quo or homeostasis. If something changes in one part of the family, other parts will need to adjust as well. In addition, the family is part of other systems in the community, so changes in one family will create imbalance and lead to changes in other systems that surround that family. Materials that use this approach will address these interconnected units and never assume an individual can change without these other adjustments. This means that such programs need to take the surrounding environment into account, because it will try to maintain the status quo unless an intervention is aimed at the context as well.

Look for:
- Recommendations that address several different individuals and relationships at the same time
- Discussions of how changes in one part of the system will interact with other parts of the system
- References to boundaries, roles, rules, and relationship patterns
- Recognition of how a person might be responded to by others when making changes
- Suggestions for respecting boundaries or making them stronger

Human Ecology Theory

This theory sees development and interactions as taking place in a nested system of environments ranging from the immediate microsystem (e.g., a child and a parent, or one couple) to the exosystem, which encompasses the culture, natural environment, and global influences on individuals and relationships. It also considers the time in history and changes over time. The focus is on the fact that it is not possible to account for a person's development or relationships without looking at all the levels of influences surrounding that person or relationship. Materials and programs based on this theory would recognize that change must address many levels and that change will be dependent on resources available in the community, societal expectations, media influences, and climate in addition to individual skills and desires.

Look for:
- References to influences at many different levels
- Recommendations that take into account many aspects of the environment
- Statements mention culture, media, and global influences in addition to mentioning individual needs and skills
- Recognition of the fact that some members of the family provide connections for other members to systems outside the family

Exchange Theory

This theory is related to theories of economic systems. It assumes that people make decisions based on the costs and benefits they perceive from those decisions; they assess how they can minimize costs and maximize benefits of their choices. Social exchange theory assumes that people try to be close to and emulate those people who possess positive characteristics or seem to be rewarded for what they do. This is similar to the parenting theory of behavior modification, but it focuses on the internal processes of decision-making and weighing of rewards and punishments rather than the external manipulation of those rewards and punishments. In relationships, exchange theory predicts that people will increase their commitment to a person if they see that they are getting more benefits than experiencing costs.

Look for:
- Decision-making recommendations focused on costs and benefits or rewards and punishments

- Recommendations that reflect the expectation that people will do something good for a person who has done something good for them
- Weighing pros and cons
- Attempts to help participants to reassess positives and negatives

Family Development Theory

This theory proposes that families develop in predictable ways and experience identifiable developmental stages as they do so. Although the specific stages vary as described by different theorists, the assumption is that most families at a particular stage will be very much like other families at that stage. Some theorists stress that there are biological, psychological, and social influences that accompany family life events and that these influences create stages that are helpful in understanding and intervening with families.

Look for:
- Materials that focus on a particular life stage or provide recommendations that are associated with specific stages
- Descriptions of progressions that families will experience as they advance through marriage, parenting, or other family events
- Materials that emphasize age of children, length of relationship, or age of adults more than individual differences

Empowerment/Feminist/Liberation Theories

Although there are many different views of these theoretical approaches, one common assumption behind them is that power is unevenly distributed in society and that some people—often women, minorities, the very young or very old, families with limited resources—are oppressed or silenced. A second common assumption is that social structures support and maintain those inequalities, consciously or not. Another assumption is that people aware of these inequalities need to live within the existing structures while trying to change them. These theories suggest that helping people to become aware of inequalities and identifying ways in which they can exercise power will reduce the oppression. Materials and programs using these approaches focus on providing a voice to those who have not been heard, facilitating collective action, and creating social change.

Look for:
- Target audiences who are out of the mainstream or power structure
- Discussions of the wider political and social context
- Analyses of ways in which individuals and families are oppressed
- Agendas and activities determined by participants rather than leaders
- Activities and practices that analyze policies and encourage change

Social Learning Theory

This theoretical approach concentrates on how people learn through interacting with other people. It includes the concept of observing other people being successful or failing when they engage in different behaviors, and choosing to emulate or deviate from those behaviors based on the expectation that one will also be successful or fail. Basic behavior modification principles are also often included.

Look for:
- An emphasis on modeling and imitation
- A discussion of motivations for behavior and outcome expectancies
- Rewards and punishments in a social setting

General Sexual Development Theory

This theory is based on the assumption that sexual development takes a predictable course and that education about sexuality is appropriate and valuable at all of the stages. It also suggests that such education should be developmentally appropriate and linked to the development that is taking place at that stage. One principle is that individuals need to accept themselves as sexual beings and learn to value their bodies and their feelings. At the same time, this theory encourages instruction in decision-making and responsibility.

Look for:
- Recommendations for sexuality education at different ages
- Statements about developmental appropriateness
- Sex being presented as natural and healthy

Moral Development Theory

This approach is similar to other developmental theories in that it is assumed that development takes a predictable path through identifiable stages. Its focus, however, is on how people make decisions related to values, morals, and behavior. Although moral development is related to cognitive development in some ways, they seem to be independent in others. Most moral development theories propose that decision-making is self-centered and pragmatic at earlier stages and more altruistic and principle-based at later stages. There are differences in whether the theories are based on men vs. women or on varying cultures, however.

Look for:
- A developmental approach that discusses stages and signs of advancement
- An emphasis on values, value conflicts, decision-making, setting priorities
- Concentration on internal processes and thought rather than on outside manipulation

Humanistic Psychology Theory

This theory (along with approaches touted by Carl Rogers) emphasizes emotions and feelings. Such approaches are based on the assumption that positive relationships are crucial to a person's well-being. They are heavily focused on communication, affirmation, and providing support in relationships.

Look for:
- Creating a safe and empathic environment as one of the program goals
- Encouragement of free expression of feelings
- Lowering risk in situations where individuals self-disclose
- Complete acceptance of participants

Cognitive-Behavioral Theories

These theories concentrate on how people think about issues, such as their attitudes and expectations. They connect those attitudes and expectations to behaviors and teach new skills and actions. Behavior change is assumed to be a conscious decision and under the control of the mind, but changing attitudes is not enough. Practicing skills is part of the educational process.

Look for:
- A focus on both feelings and behavior
- Suggestions for changing thinking patterns
- Exercises and coaching to develop more effective behaviors

Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalytic theory was based originally on Freud. It assumes that the personality components of id, ego, and superego are central to development, behavior, and well-being. It is based on and supported by clinical evidence more than empirical studies, and focuses on how early experiences influence later progress. The primary emphasis is on individual development more than relationships or context.

Look for:
- Citations from Freud
- References to id, ego, and superego
- Discussion of the psyche
- Attributing much of a person's developmental outcomes and personality to parenting in the early years

Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory focuses on predictable stages of development that are defined by successful or unsuccessful achievement of developmental tasks. While it is related to Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory, it is more inclusive of the social environment. It also looks at the entire life span from infancy to old age.

Look for:
- A discussion of specific developmental tasks, especially Erikson's eight stages
- The assumption that unsuccessful completion of one stage will hamper completion of later stages
- A recognition of societal influence along with a focus on personality development and the psyche

Based in part on Powell, L. H., & Cassidy, D. (2007). *Family life education: Working with families across the life span.* Long Grove IL: Waveland Press. And Myers-Walls, J.A., & Myers-Bowman, K.S. (1999). Sorting through parenting materials: A values approach and the example of socially conscious parenting. *Family Science Review, 12*(2), 69-86.