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HOW WE STUDY THE FAMILY

Theories and Research Methods

To every complex question there is a simple answer and it is wrong.

Source: —H. L. Mencken, 20th-century American writer

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Understand the theories of family relations that originated from ideas in the *Communist Manifesto*.
- 2.2 Explain the key tenets of each theory that evolved out of newer scientific advances.
- 2.3 List the basic steps used in experimental research designs.
- 2.4 Describe the process of creating a correlational study design using two family-related variables of your choice.
- 2.5 Evaluate the importance of demographic variables and intersectional identities on family research.

When I was in graduate school and found out my dissertation adviser had grant money to study a group of severely abused children living in a residential treatment center, I was excited about the possibility of learning more about these kids. I read what little research existed at the time, and it noted that many maltreated children had severe social skills deficits. Previous studies had shown that they couldn't make friends, they were unpopular with peer groups, and they were aggressive. I wondered what could explain these patterns. In scouring the literature, I found that one theory really helped me conceptualize why abused children might be socially unskilled: bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This theoretical paradigm helped me understand the complex influences on abused children's lives. I realized that it wasn't just the abuse they suffered that affected their social relationships. Their problems were also the result of the commonly elevated levels of physiological arousal abused children experience, which lead them to lash out at others. Also, their parents often had few role models to teach them parenting skills while they were growing up. Moreover, they rarely had supportive teachers because teachers didn't know how to deal with troubled kids. Their communities also lacked effective interventions or innovative programming by social services. Not to mention that the kids lived in a time period and culture where child abusers faced no real consequences for their action so their children were returned time and time again to their custody.

In sum, I had to consider influences from every ecological system if I really wanted to understand how we could change these kids' lives for the better. In my situation and in virtually every other researcher's experience, doing good work requires the application of an adequate theory. We use our theories to help us conceptualize and design the appropriate type of study that can best examine our research questions. Strong, coherent theories and sound research designs are invaluable tools in discovering avenues for understanding and improving family relations.

This chapter provides an overview of some key theories that guide research on the family and explores the scientific methods most commonly used in research studies. You will see that the theories we endorse can shape the types of questions we ask as well as the methods we use to study a given issue. First, we'll take a look at theoretical perspectives that may direct, guide, or influence the way studies are conducted. When researchers view the world through a specific theoretical lens, this viewpoint helps them to organize their data and generate predictions regarding how families function.

Once researchers have endorsed a theoretical perspective, they are prepared to conduct a study from that perspective. To do this, the researchers must use the **scientific method**, a series of steps they follow to ensure a well-done study, one from which valid conclusions can be drawn.

This chapter will explore the scientific method in detail so that you will be armed with the background enabling you to understand, critique, and apply research findings discussed in the text. A general comprehension of organizing theoretical frameworks and various research methods is essential for forging a true understanding of family health and well-being.

THEORIES INFLUENCED BY COMMUNIST IDEOLOGIES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Understand the theories of family relations that originated from ideas in the *Communist Manifesto*.

A **theory** is a set of ideas or principles about how something works. Theories allow us to organize our ideas into a cohesive set of concepts that guide our thinking about issues and allow us to organize our approach to research. Theories should help us to understand a phenomenon and design good studies that accurately investigate a question at hand. They help researchers avoid taking a stab in the dark by providing a foundation for looking at issues systematically. On the negative side, however, the theoretical perspective you choose to use can also be one possible source of bias in research. Once someone endorses a particular theory or set of theoretical propositions, it can cloud their vision so that they see the world only through that lens.

Much of the time, researchers use an **eclectic approach**, whereby they incorporate the best parts of several different theories into their work. Every theoretical framework has strong points and can be helpful in aiding our understanding of important phenomena in the social sciences, such as family relationships. One theory is rarely sufficient to explain every aspect of a topic of interest.

The theoretical perspective used in this textbook, **bioecological theory**, assumes that families are extremely complex and that to understand them we must examine family members' biological makeups, personal characteristics, interactional styles, culture, religion, and even their neighborhoods. This perspective will be discussed further later on.

Let's begin exploring theoretical perspectives by looking at some classic theories used to explain social phenomena related to the family. Most of these theories have made excellent contributions to our understanding of families, but they may be limited by their simplicity or their failure to take into account the diverse influences on family functioning that the bioecological theory provides. You might not consider Marxist or Communist theory to be relevant to family relationships, but several of the theories I present in the following sections actually stem from early ideas put forth by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their publication *The Communist Manifesto* (1848/2004). These theorists specifically focused on social systems like cities and governments, but their ideas also relate to common power struggles many families experience. In fact, sociologists and psychologists gleaned a lot of information from communist ideologies in their attempts to generate the theories we will discuss, which help us understand the experiences of people living in families.

Communism

An early theory of social order is presented in *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848/2004). In this thin pamphlet, Marx and Engels laid out a framework describing how capitalist systems can destroy the underclass of a society and eventually even

destroy themselves, through greed and unfair advantage. Capitalist systems include societies where a free market reigns, and a small wealthy upper class controls most of the resources. Writing about the various cultural revolutions that had taken place in France and Russia, they explained how there is always a class conflict between the rich (the bourgeoisie) and the average worker (the proletariat). The *Manifesto* argued that the rich can only become rich by exploiting and politically oppressing the poor and downtrodden. The poor are often kept illiterate and ineffectual in order to maintain the status quo. In this vein, Communists were vehemently opposed to the colonialism and political imperialism exhibited throughout history by countries like Britain and the United States. They argued that these systems oppress the native people who never benefit from their own labor, yet their labor supplies the means for a high standard of living for the already wealthy. Marx and Engels went further by stating that lower classes eventually tire of working to support the luxuries of the rich and often revolt, sometimes causing coups, wars, or government takeovers.

Marx and Engels argued in favor of a society run not by wealthy capitalists but by the community at large, the working masses. They hoped that societies could be restructured to allow the means of economic production to be controlled by the proletariat so that people could rule themselves and ensure a good quality of life, including living wages for all. Everyone would work for the good of the community, and everyone would benefit equally from that work, as all goods and services would become communally owned.

Communism tends to have negative connotations today because we associate it with governments where dictators rule and people have little power, like the People's Republic of China, under Mao Tse-tung, and the island nation of Cuba, under the dictators Fidel and Raul Castro. Keep in mind, however, that these countries early on were experiencing a people's revolution meant to topple governments that were seen as being controlled by powerful capitalists who exploited the common person. They were never truly communist in nature.

The evolution of families in western societies is not dissimilar to the evolution of cultures just described. For example, it was common historically for women and children in families to be completely controlled by fathers. They were the "underclass" of the family and had to do as the father dictated. However, over time, women grew tired of not reaping benefits for all of their hard work, and women's rights movements fought for them to have equal say in their families and communities. Likewise, there is currently a worldwide movement to provide children with human rights, including the right to speak their minds in their families (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1992).

Structural-Functionalism

Building on the ideas of Marx and Engels and using the key idea of conflict between those with more and those with less power, theories were developed to explain the workings of governments, political groups, and even families. The best-known of these theories is **structural-functionalism** (Parsons, 1951), which argues that social groups like families have an established structure that allows the group to function as a cohesive whole. Families and larger groups like societies continue to exist cohesively over time because there is an equilibrium, or a normal sort of interdependence, between the parts. Each family member is a piece of the puzzle and must remain in their position in order for the social structure of the family to maintain integrity.

Any social structure usually includes some members who are wealthy, more privileged, or more powerful (like elders or men) than other members (like children or women), just as Marx and Engels discussed regarding societies. For example, if elders in a community held all the power to make decisions and were revered more than younger people, it is likely that



PHOTO 2.1 The Feminist Movement. The feminist movement led to an “overthrow” of the traditional power structure in families. Here, American author and women’s rights activist Betty Friedan speaks at a party thrown by arts patrons Ethel and Robert Scull in support of women’s rights on August 8, 1970.

Tim Boxer/Archive Photos/Getty Images

most senior members in that community would like to maintain the existing social order. They would not want to change the family system so that, say, teenagers, began to make crucial decisions because that would upset the social order that maintained them at the top of the family’s hierarchy. Such a community needs younger people to act in deference to the older people in order to maintain the family system. If adolescents decided to question this hierarchy, a revolution might occur to disrupt the equilibrium. In other words, a family is a system, like the societies Marx discussed are systems, wherein each member is interdependent with every other member. Early structural-functionalists often argued that this order should be maintained, that each family member’s role is like a spoke in a wheel. If you remove a spoke, the wheel falls apart. Thus, they often advocated for the status quo, or leaving the structure of the family (and thereby society) the way it was, to prevent damage to its daily functioning.

This theoretical perspective is helpful in trying to understand why systems continue over time without any changes in their dynamics or power structures. For example, when I ask my students to raise their hands if they like domestic violence, no one budes. In fact, I would guess most people you ask would say they abhor domestic violence. Yet it continues to occur, generation after generation. Structural-functionalism can help us analyze what function domestic violence might serve in maintaining the current hierarchy and power structure in families. It might argue that when men dominate women, it keeps them at the top of the hierarchy, the way things historically have always been, and some might argue, should continue to be.

However, an important problem with the structural-functionalist perspective is that it often assumes the status quo is beneficial simply because it has lasted for so long. In reality, as can be seen in the previous example, systems often function in ways that harm their members. Many times, the system requires a shake-up, revolt, or radical change—the kind of change Marx and Engels discussed and that occurred periodically throughout history. Because most cases of severe battering are perpetrated by men and men have more power and wealth in most families and in

society at large, we might argue that we'd have to overturn the status quo and fight for women's rights. And that is exactly what has been happening over the past few decades. One result of the "proletariat" revolt for women's rights is that women are now allowed to divorce battering husbands without having to prove their wrongdoings, which makes it easier for women to leave than it was 40 years ago. Today, we are all used to the idea that if you get caught abusing your power as a spouse and you harm your partner, authorities can step in and take away your power (such as in the case of mandatory arrests of batterers). However, this structural-functionalist explanation for domestic violence, one based on maintaining the male power hierarchy, is too simplistic and unidimensional. There are many types of violent families, and even though most of us live in a similarly structured family or social system, very few men are violent. Thus, structural-functionalism helps us understand a piece of the puzzle regarding why a social system or pattern of family interaction is maintained, but it's not the whole story. In order to understand this issue and any other, we must consider the broader, interconnected dynamics of individual families as well.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Cox et al., 2001), an application of structural-functionalism, argues that we cannot understand a family without recognizing that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Each person's role in the family is crucial for maintaining a balance in functioning between all members. Family systems theorists argue that we cannot understand a family by looking at only one member or even a dyad or triad. We must examine the whole system to understand why one member is having problems or how the family continues to be healthy and happy. For example, if your sister left home, got married, and moved away, this would affect not just you but your parents, both as individuals and a couple, as well as any other siblings in the home. You might feel mature, getting to move into her old bedroom, your mom might feel a sense of loss, your dad might feel excited about the prospect of grandchildren, and your younger siblings might miss all the games they played with her. Each of you would respond individually, but the move would also change the way each dyad and triad in the system interacts with each other, since a key "spoke in the wheel" is now gone.

An important application of family systems theory is that it influenced the development of family systems therapy, which views entire families as the "patient" during therapy because every individual in the family exists within a dynamic web of relationships. The power structures, communications styles, and boundaries of each part of the family web (and the whole web itself) provide crucial information for the family therapist. To help a family achieve mental health and happiness, a therapist must treat the whole web of interactions; we cannot "fix" just one person and send them back to the same system, expecting any changes to last.

Unlike earlier structural-functionalist ideas, family systems theory (and its related approach to therapy) views changing the system as often helpful. With change, the family can gain new skills and achieve a new level of relationship balance. Sometimes, when the status quo gets shaken up, a new, stronger family system emerges. With the right systemic intervention involving all members of a family, what began as conflict over power may lead to new balance and family harmony.

Conflict Theory

Another theory stemming from structural-functionalism is **conflict theory** (Dahrendorf, 1959). From this theoretical perspective, there are always conflicts between individuals and groups in society. These conflicts often involve power struggles. Unlike the communist viewpoint,

however, no uniform bourgeoisie is seen as controlling every segment of society. There may be many power holders in different realms of the community (for example, in education, the workplace, and the family). Also, conflict theory views conflict in a positive light because it creates movement toward change. Unlike structural-functionalism, which focuses on the necessity of maintaining the status quo to keep the system intact, conflict theory emphasizes conflict and struggle as necessary forces of change. If people from different political or religious groups have conflicts, theoretically, they can get things out in the open and resolve the conflict or come to some kind of compromise.

The same might be true in families. For example, research on teenagers and their parents shows that conflict tends to rise to its highest level in early adolescence, when teens are about 14 years old. However, unlike the stereotype of a raging teen and an anguished parent, studies show that these conflicts are actually *positive*. They teach adolescents how to argue for what they want, negotiate their perspectives, and often convince their parents to change rules around the house to allow them more freedom. As long as the conflicts are not violent or habitual, some elevated parent–teen conflict can, just as conflict theory would argue, allow the two sides to renegotiate the power in the relationship and come to a new understanding that benefits the adolescent’s long-term development (Branje et al., 2009). Conflict theory helps us examine how power relationships influence conflicts and how conflicts can be used for personal and relationship growth. However, like most theories, this theory only explains part of the puzzle of family relationships.

Social Exchange Theory

The “give and take” aspect of the parent–teenager relationship is illuminated by another theoretical framework, **social exchange theory** (Homans, 1958). According to social exchange theory, people are always weighing the costs and benefits of their actions and trying to maximize gains and minimize losses. From this perspective, most of our behaviors are explained through a series of mental calculations in which we weigh the possible outcomes of each choice. An internal monologue from social exchange theory might run something like this: *Should I date John or Frank? Well, Frank is very attentive and sweet, but he reminds me too much of my dad. That would get on my nerves. John is more aloof and doesn’t talk about his feelings, but we have so much fun together. For me, right now, I think fun is more important than dating someone like Dad.* According to social exchange theory, if we have an internal monologue like this one, which takes a mental tally of the costs and benefits, we might decide to date John.

For a complex issue like domestic violence discussed earlier, social exchange theory would argue that a husband may unconsciously go through an internal dialogue such as this: *If I continue to hit my wife, she may leave me; however, it’s very unlikely that she will ever tell anyone, so I can continue to get my way and coerce her into doing what I want through harsh physical treatment.* In this case, the benefits of physical abuse outweigh the less likely costs the spouse might encounter with law enforcement.

Social exchange theory is helpful in identifying why people may make the choices they do. There may be hidden benefits to their actions, or the costs of a certain decision may be too steep. Of course, it’s probably rare that people consciously think things over like this, and that’s one of the main problems with social exchange theory. People perform a lot of actions and make a lot of choices, both consciously and inadvertently, which have no benefit for themselves and may actually involve steep costs. Can you think of a decision you made or an action you engaged in that had more costs than benefits, yet you did it anyway? Humans are rarely as rational as an accountant’s ledger, lining up profits and losses. We often skew things in our minds to fit the way we want the world to be and often don’t view the world the way it really is. Social exchange theory,

like all of the theories stemming from communist ideologies, helps us understand some aspects of family dynamics. However, as the social sciences advanced in the second half of the twentieth century, more rigorous studies further illuminated the nuances of family interactions.

THEORIES INFLUENCED BY SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

2.2 Explain the key tenets of each theory that evolved out of newer scientific advances.

In the theories discussed so far, there has been an assumption that there is an objective reality around which to develop our ideas. However, as the social sciences advanced after World War II, scholars began reflecting on how the same event can be viewed quite differently by different parties. What happens in families when we start to view events not as objective facts but as perceptions developed differently by each family member?

Social Constructionism

One theory that gets at the root of our mental reconstructions of the world is **social constructionism** (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This perspective argues that we cannot know reality, even if there is some objective world out there, because we filter information and then reconstruct everything we encounter through our own viewpoints. In other words, humans socially construct their own realities and live in the reality they've created, not in some objective world "out there."

A good example of social constructionism is the concept of race. **Race** is thought to be a biological or genetic characteristic that makes humans different from each other. Its outward signs include skin color, the shape of the face, and the texture of the hair. However, most scholars today agree that there is no such thing as race, nor is there any evidence that there have ever been biologically distinct races of people. Heine (2015) explains that ever since modern humans left Africa to migrate around 60,000 years ago, every "race" has been mixed. From the beginning of human history, people who came into contact with each other have intermixed. Moreover, even something that is "biological" can be influenced, or constructed, through interactions with the environment.

In an interesting example of this point, Heine (2015) describes how skin color arose from genetic adaptation to the environment. The skin must synthesize vitamin D to help with absorption of calcium and other nutrients. In order for our bodies to synthesize vitamin D, the sun's ultraviolet radiation (UVR) must penetrate our skin. There is a lot of UVR in Africa because it is close to the equator. Perhaps over generations, genetic adaptations occurred, which eventually led to the ability to produce melanin. Melanin darkens the skin and allows UVR to penetrate it without causing damage from severe burns or skin cancer. This adaptation led people with darker skin to live longer and reproduce more, and the tendency for darker skin remained in the human gene pool. As humans migrated to the northernmost climes, their bodies had to work harder to absorb enough UVR to synthesize vitamin D because there was less sun. Over generations, another genetic adaptation occurred that resulted in less production of melanin and thus lighter skin, making it easier to absorb UVR and synthesize vitamin D. Research shows that dark-skinned people, such as the Inuit, who live in low UVR conditions, have compensated

for low levels of vitamin D by evolving mechanisms for better absorption of calcium and better transportation of nutrients in their bloodstreams (Frost, 2012).

Jablonski and Chaplin (2000) found that 70% to 77% of the variations found in skin color can be accounted for by variations in UVR exposure. Thus, what we call “race” is actually determined more by the environment than our biology. In fact, the American Anthropological Association (1998) issued a statement on “race” that says

Human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Ninety-four percent [of biological variation] lies within so-called racial groups. Conventional “racial” groupings differ from one another only in about six percent of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them. . . . All of humankind [is] a single species. (para.1)

The U.S. Office Management and Budget (OMB), which determines the racial categories for all government documents and surveys, concurs and states that “race” is not a scientifically valid construct but is a “sociopolitical” construct and should never be thought of in terms of genetically differentiated groups (as cited in Walker et al., 2007, p. 10). Therefore, the OMB requires all federal forms to allow for people to identify as belonging to more than one race. For example, people identifying as Hispanic or Latino can also identify themselves as belonging to any of the other races. The current choices are: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020d).

If there’s no biological basis for the term *race*, then our ideas about race must be *social constructions*, right? But even social constructions can have real and serious consequences. “Race” is such an important demographic variable that virtually every research study done today describes the race of the participants. Access to education, health status, and civil rights all vary by race. And racism is a very real challenge that people of color face. So throughout this book, I will explain how research findings on marriages and families vary by race.

Social constructions are real in their consequences because we create our own reality. The good news is that something that has been socially constructed can also be *deconstructed*, taken apart, or disposed of. Do you think we may get to a point where race is no longer a defining factor in a person’s life? Will the ethnic groups become so mixed that there will be very few clear distinctions between them?

Social constructionism is helpful because it reminds us that our own viewpoints may not be factual or objective. Other people may have valid constructions of their own. Family therapists work hard on illuminating how each member of a family construes the issues at hand because sometimes conflicts can be resolved by a true understanding of another person’s construction of the world. We often try to force our viewpoints on others and assume theirs are wrong, which can lead to power struggles and conflict. Try to imagine some beliefs or behaviors you have, which you think are “natural” but may actually be social constructions. Social constructionism may help you understand these ideas or actions better.

One problem that stems from social constructionism, however, is that some things are real. There are objective facts out there, and we can’t just assume everything is relative to our experience. Some events like divorce or infidelity are real. They aren’t in the eye of the beholder. Moreover, when viewpoints on various issues have been constructed by people who hold an unfair advantage over others, “facts” about those issues can be skewed enough to harm others. For example, my grandmother told me about how when she was pregnant with my mother (in the 1950s), prevailing wisdom by the male-dominated medical profession was that women should not breastfeed. Because she was a woman who was less educated and had less power than

these medical doctors, she did what they instructed her to do and fed my mother a mixture of powdered milk and sugar, which today we know has very little nutritional value. During the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, mothers decided to take to the streets and protect their rights to breastfeed, to have natural, unmedicated births, and to construct their own ideologies and birth plans based on the information they gathered themselves (Blum, 1993). This new, feminist, construction of motherhood empowered women to have faith in their own abilities to regulate their birthing experiences. Out of this movement came a new wave of female theorists and researchers, to whom we now turn.

Feminist Theory

In an attempt to reconcile the historical marginalization of women, **feminist theory** was developed to counteract the idea that the male perspective should be seen as an ideal framework for analysis (de Beauvoir, 1952). Instead of using male traits, behaviors, or health trends as “the norm” and comparing women to them (a practice known as **androcentrism**), feminist scholars choose to make their discourse “womanist,” or from the perspective of women’s experience. In regard to life in families, feminist viewpoints do not privilege the standard North American family (SNAF) because they view all family forms as legitimate and normative (Peterson et al., 2000). Thus, a feminist approach can include legitimizing same-sex and single-father families because feminists argue for complete gender equality for all. They see gender discrimination not only as impeding career and social success but also as detrimental to mental and physical health.

Up until 1990, researchers conducting clinical trials were not even required to include female participants. Medical trials on heart disease and even such things as breast cancer, commonly associated with women, were researched with male participants (Hyde, 2007b). Researchers in both medical and social science fields typically worked from a **female deficit perspective**, using theories, methods, and interpretations of findings that assumed women were inferior, deficient, or in some way pathological (Chrisler & McCreary, 2010). However, feminists argue that there are very few substantive differences between males and females beyond those that have been socially constructed. Through centuries of oppression, domination, marginalization, and sexism, they argue, women’s experiences have historically been ignored or pathologized.

Feminists seek to normalize the female experience, document that experience, and study women’s biological, social, emotional, and cognitive development as valuable in its own right, not just in comparison to the development of men. This often involves a reimagining of research methods and interpretations. For example, when studying how mothers’ speaking styles may relate to children’s emotional adjustment, a feminist researcher might argue that it’s important to include fathers’ speaking styles as well. Similarly, if a study finds gender differences, say in self-esteem, with girls having lower self-esteem than boys, feminist theory would argue that it’s important for researchers to interpret the findings from the perspective of both genders. Do girls have a *deficit* in self-esteem? Or is it equally likely that boys have *inflated* self-esteem? Without data examining the girls and boys in depth, it would be difficult to answer this question.

Feminist theory has allowed social scientists to reexamine the questions they ask, the samples they study, and the interpretations they make of their data. It helps us organize our thoughts in new, inclusive ways, as well as use more in-depth research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, where the research participants’ viewpoints can really be heard. Critics of the feminist approach argue that it puts too much weight on patriarchy and oppression as causes of behavior, to the exclusion of other explanations. Feminists of color and lesbian feminists also argue that traditional feminist theory and research privilege the experiences of white, middle-class, educated women and ignore the needs of other types of women (Hooton, 2005). For example, early

research on domestic violence included mostly white women. While white middle-class women may feel comfortable calling police when experiencing domestic violence, women of color may have had negative experiences with law enforcement and may hesitate to ask for help (Cohen & Jackson, 2016). Without understanding the diversity of women's experiences, feminist theories cannot advance our understanding of families. Moreover, feminist theory still tends to focus on binary gender constructions, with emphasis on men versus women. However, current theorizing disavows the idea of strict binaries and focuses instead on the vast diversity of gender identities and presentations (Few et al., 2016). Feminist theory also fails to integrate biological processes, psychodynamic ideas, and issues regarding fathers and other men in families. Attachment theory integrates many of these latter ideas, perhaps providing a more practical perspective, when attempting to help us understand the relationships between parents and their children in diverse families around the world.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) emphasizes the important influence that the child-caregiver bond has on a person's mental and physical health, both in childhood and later on. One of the main influences on this theory was Freudian psychodynamic theory. Attachment theory's founder, John Bowlby, was a psychoanalyst trained in the Freudian tradition of emphasizing the important impact of early childhood experiences on adult personalities and mental health. In the Freudian tradition, he also acknowledged the workings of the unconscious mind. Attachment theory emphasizes that we carry with us a mental template, or **internal working model**, of both ourselves and others, which guides our interactions. Based on the quality of our early experiences with caregivers, this unconscious internal working model is shaped in a more or less positive and healthy or negative and unhappy manner.

Bowlby was a great integrator of many different ideas, in addition to traditional psychoanalytic thinking. From the ethological tradition (studying animals to find out something about humans), he learned that all primate babies cling to their mothers. He also saw that when the



PHOTO 2.2 Attachment. According to attachment theory, why are this father and his baby so pleased to interact with each other?

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famous ethologist Konrad Lorenz hatched goslings, they would immediately attach to him and view him as their “mother,” following him everywhere he went (Lorenz, 1935). Bowlby also studied juvenile delinquents and noticed that few of the young thieves he studied had a secure, warm, and loving attachment figure at home to care for them (Bowlby, 1946).

At the same time Bowlby was developing his theory, other research was coming out of orphanages, which showed that even when orphans’ physical health was taken care of—even when they were fed, clothed, and provided with medical care—they often still developed emotional and cognitive problems or even died when they were not held or did not receive love (Dennis, 1973; Skeels, 1966; Spitz, 1955). Harry Harlow (1963) studied young monkeys and found that they would attach to a soft cloth surrogate mother, even if it provided no food. They did not run to a wire surrogate mother when afraid, even if she had a bottle to feed them. These monkeys not only ran to the cloth mother, which provided them with contact comfort, but after they were calmed by it, they were able to confront a feared stimulus or attack a scary object like a toy robot.

Integrating all of these strands of research and theory, along with the theory of evolution, Bowlby developed one of the most important theories of our time to explain family relationships. In brief, attachment theory posits that humans are evolutionarily imbued with the tendency to emotionally attach to babies. And babies are naturally inclined to make physical and emotional bonds with their caregivers. This tendency protects children from harm and allows them to develop into mentally and emotionally healthy adults, provided that the family responds to the infant’s needs in a warm and responsive manner (Grossman et al., 2005). While there are wide variations in qualities of attachment and many ways to parent infants around the world, most societies agree that parents and children form deep bonds that are crucial for the child’s optimal development. Most of the societies examined agree that parents have a responsibility to provide tender loving care and respond to their children’s needs (Morelli & Rothbaum, 2007). The manner in which parents around the world do this can vary greatly. But key emotional attachments between caregivers and children are critical elements for making a healthy family in every society.

Support for attachment theory comes from many sources. Consistent with Harlow’s monkey studies, current research suggests that physical touch plays an important part in the human infant’s physical, cognitive, and emotional health. When premature infants in hospital neonatal care units are massaged daily, they not only gain more weight than non-massaged babies, but they get out of the hospital sooner, have fewer learning disabilities later in life, and experience fewer health problems (Dieter et al., 2003). In sum, touch, responsiveness, love, and warmth are crucial not only for our happiness but for our survival as a species.

Attachment theory is sophisticated and intricate, acknowledging the true complexity of the origins of human relationships. For example, when a father caresses and rocks his newborn infant, the infant’s brain releases pleasure chemicals similar to opiates. With thousands of positive tactile interactions over many months, the father and his child build a synchronized “dance” wherein they gaze into each others’ eyes, smile, and take turns cooing and eventually talking to each other. During this process of coregulation, the infant is soothed and comforted by the father’s voice and touch and the father’s behavior is reinforced by the child’s calm and happy demeanor. Over time, the child begins to feel secure enough to look out into the larger world and explore toys, animals, plants, and other people, knowing that there is a secure base to return to if trouble arises. This coregulation of the child’s physiological and emotional states is the foundation for the development of later social skills, academic success, and emotional regulation abilities (e.g., Perry, 2005; Rygaard, 2006; Shore, 2001).

Attachment theory has generated thousands of studies on topics as diverse as infant speech development and caring for the elderly. Its great strength lies in its integration of biological and

environmental influences. However, it is often criticized for trying to explain too much about people by “blaming” their childhoods. Some argue that people often turn out to have very happy families even when they have terrible attachment histories. In spite of these criticisms, we will revisit this perspective throughout this textbook because attachment research incorporates everything from genes and neurons to families and cultures, which you will learn is an essential viewpoint if we want an in-depth appreciation for what makes families tick.

Any given attachment relationship can only explain part of family health and well-being, however, because we all exist within multiple systems of influence. Like structural-functionalism, family systems theory, conflict theory, social exchange theory, and social-constructionism, attachment theory tells us only part of the story.

Bioecological Theory

To truly understand the puzzle of marriages and families, we need to consider individuals in the family, their interactions within the family system, and the family’s and individuals’ contexts in the larger social world. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1993, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) does just that. It argues that in order to truly understand a person or a family, we must look at several levels of analysis. We must look across diverse systems of influence for a comprehensive view of family development in context. Bioecological theory is often described as a *person, process, context* model. Using it, we look at how a person’s roles, their developmental processes, and their contexts intertwine to create outcomes, such as becoming a tightrope walker or a professional baseball player. True understanding requires complex analyses. It is not as easy as saying “her parents made her a daredevil” or “his baseball skills are in his genes.” To understand either the tightrope walker or the athlete, we must frame the question in complex terms and examine biology, personal characteristics, and the contexts of a person’s life. To understand the bioecological theory, let’s look at each part of the model.

The Person

The first level of analysis in bioecological theory is the person, you. Think about yourself. You are made up of biological matter. DNA, genes, hormones, neurotransmitters—all of the biochemical processes within you affect your development, behavior, traits, and characteristics.

Students of social science often forget to consider the importance of biology when trying to understand families. For example, many neuroscience studies have revealed that the brain is an open, dynamic system that can be changed through interactions with the environment. Therefore, you’re not born with a brain that you carry with you throughout life. It’s constantly under construction, a work in progress. The ways your parents, siblings, and grandparents respond to your overtures, care for your needs, and structure your environment change the structure and functioning of your brain. A study conducted by Paulesu and colleagues (2000) illustrates this plasticity, or malleability, of the brain. They found that while reading, Italians used the left superior temporal regions of the brain, which process sound bits called *phonemes*. In contrast, English readers’ brains used completely different areas while reading, the left posterior inferior temporal gyrus and the anterior frontal gyrus. These brain areas are used to look for *meaning networks* and for *whole word retrieval* and *naming*. The authors believe this cultural difference occurs because the English language is very inconsistent in its use of rules, whereas Italian is much more straightforward. In English, there is a complex letter to sound correspondence. But you can sound out words or sound bits and read Italian easily. I can imagine that having a heated

argument with your significant other or writing love songs for your children might be very different if your brain grew up in Italy versus Iowa. This study shows that the simple act of growing up reading one language versus another significantly changes the way the brain operates and suggests that our interactions with others in any given language may have divergent qualities. Other research shows that people who speak two languages (bilinguals) are better at memory tasks and other information processing skills since they regularly think in more complex ways and from diverse perspectives compared to monolinguals. For example, bilinguals shift their attention from task to task more efficiently and more quickly recognize new stimuli (Rieker et al., 2020). In another fascinating study examining the effects of experience on neural plasticity, Thomas et al. (2016) used MRI scans of middle-aged adults' brains to measure hippocampal volume. The hippocampus aids in learning and memory. The researchers assigned participants to a regimen of six weeks of aerobic exercise and found that their hippocampal volume increased significantly. Related to this volume increase were improvements in learning and memory tasks. Thus, even a brief intervention increasing blood and oxygen flow to the brain can change its structure and function. Together, these studies show that biology plays a key role in how we function, and that how we function changes our biology. Because contemporary research illuminates how crucial biochemical and neuropsychological processes are for every area of individual functioning, it is important to examine such influences when discussing marriages and families.

Each of us brings our brain and body to our relationships, and they play key roles in how we behave and process social information. However, it's also important not to over-emphasize the importance of biology when trying to understand families. Keep in mind that, in addition to biology, there is you, the individual, and your personality. You have certain personality and temperamental traits that make you unique. You exist within many systems of influence, and your individuality both affects and is affected by the family processes that take place at each level.

Processes and Contexts

Moving out from the individual in our bioecological model, we see the first and most immediate system of influence where the *process* level of analysis begins. This system of influence is called the **microsystem** and includes the processes of interactions with others in our immediate environment. This microsystem includes forces and people that regularly and immediately have an impact on you. It can include your parents, peers, teachers, siblings, friends, and partners. Attachment theory is useful for understanding processes in the microsystem. People in your microsystem—people you are intimately and emotionally tied to—are often your attachment figures. Often, when people seek to understand families, they stop at this level of analysis. They don't go beyond thinking about people's parents in order to understand their behavior at a certain point in time. You often hear people saying things like “No wonder she's crazy! Look at her parents!”

But beyond the microsystem lies the **mesosystem**. In this system, members of your microsystem interact with each other to affect your development in a way that is different from how any individual member of the microsystem could affect you. For example, think about how your parent and your significant other interact. How does it affect you if your parent loves this person? How might things be different if your parent were to hate this person? You may have a good relationship and positive attachments with both your parent and your partner; these are microsystem processes. However, if they hate each other or have conflicts, their interactions affect you differently than your interactions with either individual. You may have a great time hanging out with your parent and more great times hanging out with your partner, but if they're vying for your attention, disparaging each other, or bringing negativity to family events, it can completely change the microsystem. The mesosystem, or interaction between microsystems, helps

us understand what makes families tick by allowing us to analyze and factor in a new layer of complexity we wouldn't grasp if we only examined your separate relationships with each person.

A third system of influence related to the *processes* in relationships is called the **exosystem**. The exosystem is a system of influences with which you do not directly come into contact. These influences affect you indirectly through members of your microsystem. For example, your parent's boss can have an indirect effect on you. If this boss doesn't allow much schedule flexibility, your parent may be forced to miss your school activities or sporting events. As a result, you may feel disappointed, and your parent may feel guilty, which puts a strain on your relationship. Or your parent may come home tired and cranky, which will affect your family interactions. Even though we don't have direct contact with *exosystem* influences, they can have a profound impact on us. Can you think of an *exosystem* influence that affects you indirectly, through your own family relationships?

Going out to an even more distant set of influences, there is the **macrosystem**. The macrosystem is composed of larger cultural factors that influence us. These influences may include economic structures like capitalism or socialism. They can include religious views like Christianity or Islam. And they can even include technological advances, such as the use of techno-lingo like "I'll Snapchat you" or the recent addition of the verb "to Google" to the dictionary. The macrosystem may also encompass societal and cultural issues, such as freedom, racism, classism, ageism, or sexism, which have a great impact on us as individuals, as well as on our families (Spencer, 2006).

Each of these systems in the bioecological model impacts and is impacted by the other systems. For example, if a study finds cultural effects, are these effects part of individual psychological traits, part of something in the macrosystem, or a combination of both (Cohen, 2007)? Cohen suggests that differences we find between cultures may not be due to cultural (macrosystem) practices or beliefs alone. Instead, they may be due to individual traits or the effects of interactions in smaller groups like families (microsystems). Think about what could explain cultural differences we find in, for example, attitudes toward premarital sex. Why does one culture accept its members having sex before marriage while another culture does not? Do these attitudes stem from the macrosystem, mesosystem, exosystem, or microsystem? The answer to this question is that it's probably a combination of all these systems interacting continuously over time. And that's the exact point of a bioecological approach: All systems matter. Take a look at the bioecological model in Figure 2.1.

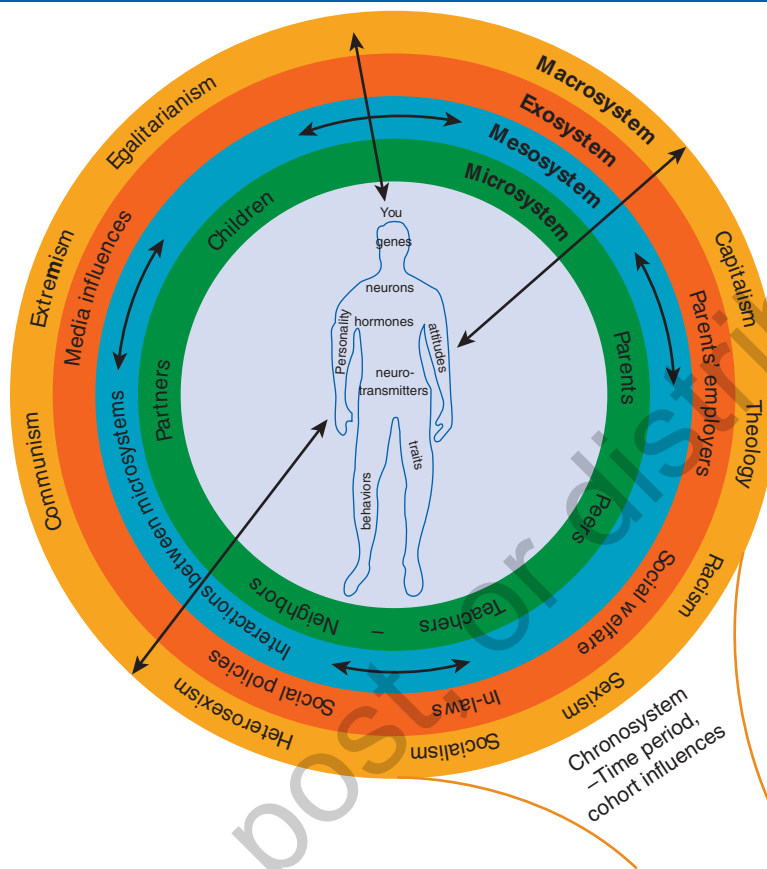
Bioecological theory also emphasizes a **chronosystem**, or the time period in which we are interacting. The content of a course on family relationships would vary quite a bit if the course were offered in different time periods. A textbook from 1880 may not even mention sex at all, and a textbook from 1950 might discuss sex only within the context of marriage. A 21st-century textbook, like this one, has an entire chapter on sexuality because we've amassed decades of research on this topic and have come to understand that sexuality is a key influence in individual development, which then affects relationships within families. The time period we live in affects family health and happiness, as we saw in our historical exploration of American families in Chapter 1.

It might be helpful for you to see all of these theories in one place so you can grasp their main tenets in summary form. See Table 2.1.

To see how the bioecological model works, read Focus on My Family, which profiles Jan, a mother of 10. See how Jan describes the various bioecological systems of influence on her life and her children's lives.

Although the bioecological approach is the overarching framework through which we will examine families in this book, you will notice that I often refer back to the other theories discussed here as well. Each theory can help us explain parts of problems or skills that families experience.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Bioecological Model



Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, Urie; Morris, Pamela A., Lerner, Richard M. (Ed); Damon, William (Ed). (2006). *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development*, Vol. 1, 6th ed., (pp. 793–828). Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Theories in Brief

Theory	Main Tenets
Communism	An analysis of capitalist societies that claims the rich will always exploit the labor of the poor, and eventually, the poor will revolt to reap the fruits of their own labor; emphasizes the need for a communal way of life where all workers benefit equally from shared work.
Structural-functionalism	Stems from Communist theory; emphasizes maintaining the status quo of a society or family, with specific structures remaining in place to ensure the system works as it should with specific people in power; each person plays a crucial role in keeping the family functioning as it always has.
Family systems theory	Stems from structural-functionalism; examines roles and power dynamics present in families; emphasizes that every individual exists within a complex relationship system; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
Conflict theory	Argues that conflict is a normal and natural part of family life; people can use conflicts to help relationships mature and grow through renegotiating power relationships.

Theory	Main Tenets
Social exchange theory	Argues that people make a deliberate tally of costs and benefits during decision making and behaviors they perform in families.
Social constructionism	Argues that humans construct their own reality, and those constructions affect behaviors in families.
Feminist theory	Argues that women can be the focus of theory and research in their own right and not only in comparison to men; urges the use of qualitative research approaches and in-depth analysis of women's perspectives.
Attachment theory	Stresses the importance of early caregiving relationships for shaping the way people process information and adjust socially and emotionally in adulthood.
Bioecological theory	The organizing framework of the current text, which assumes that individuals exist within multiple complex systems of influence, from biology to culture, all of which interact with each other to shape family functioning.

Theories help us generate ideas for research and help us understand the results of our studies. It's important to conduct research that stems from a theoretical base so we're not diving into questions head first without a plan. Like a professional diver, a professional researcher doesn't jump in haphazardly. The theory we use guides our vision, just as most good athletes envision what might happen before they actually perform a daring feat. However, good research and good performance in sports require more than a theory or vision. They must also include fine-tuned technical skills. For researchers, selecting the perfect research methodology helps us execute our vision. Let's start by examining experimental research methods.

FOCUS ON MY FAMILY

JAN'S STORY



Photo reprinted with permission.

Take a look at Jan's story and see which elements of the bioecological approach you can identify. Which people are in her microsystem? How do you see meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem influences affecting her? Check your answers at the end of Jan's story.

In my forties, I had empty nest syndrome after my children left home. I took in two foster children, and from there, my life evolved into what it is today, a single mom of 10 children. I have adopted seven special needs children. Most days are happy but more hectic than I'd prefer. My kids are healthy today, but the demons from their abusive histories creep up to remind me that our family is unique. It wasn't planned, but as I look back on the last 10 years, I wouldn't trade my life for anything.

We practice open adoption so our birth families come and go from addiction, incarceration, and mental illness. Some we see frequently, others stray for months or years. I believe these bonds are crucial to maintain, though.

On paper, my children's combined diagnoses look frightening. They range from reactive attachment disorder to traumatic brain injury, paralysis, seizure disorder, attention deficit disorder, and depression. I forget that most children can use all their limbs and are rarely aggressive or agitated. It's always odd to see other children focus in school for long periods or eat without spilling.

Early on, the most difficult part was handling the deep anguish I carried, unable to let go of the horrific thoughts of my children being hurt by their birth families: the daily beatings, hunger, being locked in closets, and sexual abuse. Many nights, I would lie beside my sleeping children and sob for hours, unable to put the pain they endured out of my mind. I irrationally blamed myself for not being there to protect them when they needed me. I'm not superhuman. I'm still haunted by the memory of the first time I saw my 3-year-old attached to a web of hospital tubes, after being beaten by his birth parents.

Today, it's not easy to protect them from outside forces. For example, during a community festival, an intoxicated man approached me and screamed "Nigger lover!" He had my car blocked in and was becoming very belligerent. This was the only time I felt hatred could endanger us. I was able to put my children in the car and call the police. The thought of them hearing such unacceptable words makes me crazy! I wish I could protect them forever, but sadly, they will continue to experience shallow, uneducated humans throughout their lives. My job is to give them the knowledge and self-confidence to rise above and shake it off.

Today, I still have tears, but they come from a different place. When I watch my son play baseball, batting with one arm and limping around the bases with a huge grin on his face, I thank a higher power that I was selected to be his mom and that we've come so far together as a family. I can tell you, the lesson of forgiveness, which comes so naturally to young children, comes to adults a bit more slowly, perhaps, but it comes and heals the deepest wounds.

Bioecological factors: Jan's children are in her *microsystem*; her children's interactions with each other are in her *mesosystem*; her children's biological parents are in her *exosystem* (indirectly influencing her through her children's problems in the microsystem); *macrosystem* influences include a racist and intolerant culture; *chronosystem* influences include modern approaches to adoption that allow children with multiple challenges to be adopted instead of institutionalized. Many other answers could be correct as well.

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH METHODS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.3 List the basic steps used in experimental research designs.

Chapter 1 of this textbook presented a lot of facts about families, both past and present. How do we know they are facts and not opinions? One way is that scholars who study the family adhere

to the scientific method to gather and analyze data. This method consists of a series of steps researchers must complete in order to ensure their study was done ethically and using proper techniques, which allow for valid conclusions to be drawn. Following these concrete steps allows all researchers to speak the same language and understand exactly what other scholars are doing so that, if they wish, they may replicate, or repeat, the methodology in a study of their own to see if they find the same results. This **replication** method (repeating someone else's study) allows researchers to evaluate the quality and conclusions of research using a common vocabulary and scientific standards. If researchers all find the same results through many replications, we start to develop a set of facts about the phenomenon under study. Thus, facts are generated over time by many different researchers using different samples and adding to each other's work. It would be bad science to base any firm conclusions on a study that had been conducted only once.

For example, how did we determine the fact that smoking is bad for us? Sixty years ago, many mothers smoked while pregnant, and many more Americans smoked than do today. Cigarette packs carried no surgeon general's warnings informing the public of the dangers of smoking. It was only through decades of research replicated in different laboratories in the United States and abroad that researchers discovered how harmful tobacco, nicotine, and even secondhand smoke can be to people's respiratory systems and other organs. Tobacco companies fought the release of these research findings and tried to find flaws in the research designs and conclusions because they are in the business of selling cigarettes. However, eventually, the facts were so well established as to be indisputable, thanks in large part to carefully controlled and replicated scientific studies (Centers for Disease Control, 2010a).

Without scientific research, we might not be able to put the pieces together to realize that cigarettes cause health problems. Suppose your parent, who smokes, develops lung cancer. You may form various opinions about the disease, maybe thinking your parent had a genetic flaw, fell upon bad luck, or was under stress that caused the illness; you may even conclude that the disease was "God's will." Any of these opinions have the potential to be correct, but without conducting scientific research, it's difficult, if not impossible, to determine the causes of diseases. Likewise, without conducting scientific research, it is impossible to determine what specific factors affect family health, happiness, and success.

Hypothesis Testing

Researchers cannot examine things that cannot be measured, like supernatural acts or God's will. However, they can measure aspects of each **hypothesis**, or testable statement, proposed regarding



PHOTO 2.3 Bioecological Systems of Influence. What specific examples from each of the bioecological systems of influence can you think of that will affect this baby's development within his family?

Sajjad Hussain/AFP/Getty Images



PHOTO 2.4 Research Methodology. How were we able to confirm unequivocally that cigarettes cause lung cancer?

Photo by Andy Bullock/ www.flickr.com/

how your parent got lung cancer. Researchers can measure genetic markers your parent might have for specific diseases. They can precisely measure stress levels in your parent's life. They can even examine the "luck factor," or randomness, of disease by looking at distributions of disease among various populations.

Without carefully measuring our ideas, we would have to rely on common sense or intuition to understand the world around us, including issues related to families. But, as decades of research have revealed, our common sense is often wrong. For example, people might believe the old adage "opposites attract," but dozens of studies on mate selection have shown us that it is actually *similarity* between partners that both attracts and keeps people together (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997). Instead of relying on common sense, intuition, or opinions, we can use a controlled and thoughtful approach to investigating questions of interest. This controlled and thoughtful approach is the scientific method. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, when researchers use the scientific method, they begin with a theory, just as I used bioecological theory to organize my thoughts on abused children's peer relationships. Using an established theoretical framework helps the scientist develop specific, testable hypotheses to examine. It's important that research begins with a theory so that we can understand what specific perspective spawned the line of inquiry. For example, if I wanted to study the effects of divorce on children, a

conflict theory perspective might lead me to try to measure the positive aspects of family conflict during divorce. In this case, I might find that dealing with parental conflict may allow children to develop coping skills. In contrast, an attachment theory perspective might lead me to ask how attachment bonds are challenged during a divorce. Thus, the theory we use guides our questions and predictions.

A crucial part of the scientific process is being **unbiased**, or not allowing preconceived ideas or beliefs to have an impact on research. However, most research begins with a theoretical perspective, which can affect the types of questions asked, the research designs undertaken, and the conclusions drawn. So we have to be especially vigilant in weighing possible explanations for research findings other than the one the author of a study proposes. Scientists attempt to be objective in their work, but it's difficult to separate the scientist from the person, especially on topics we all care about, like family relationships. Hammersley (2000) argues that researchers cannot possibly remain completely objective because they go into a research project with particular goals to either support or change the status quo. Research conclusions are often used to make political statements, and research findings often lead to social activism. He suggests that instead of denying partisanship, researchers should just acknowledge their positions up front.

In the scientific method, we begin with a theoretical orientation, which helps us generate specific hypotheses that we can test in a study. To illustrate how this works, we will explore an

example in depth. From an attachment theory perspective, we can hypothesize that disruptions in attachment security, such as we find during family conflict, might elevate children's stress levels. The hypothesis must be a very specific statement that can be tested in our study and in future research. How do we come up with a specific, testable hypothesis?

Operational Definitions

An important step at the beginning stages of the scientific process is being able to generate **operational definitions** of the variables stated in the hypothesis, the variables of interest. An operational definition is one that is concrete and clear enough that any researcher wanting to study the same phenomenon could *replicate* the study easily by using the same definitions. Operational definitions of variables help us clearly test a specific hypothesis. For example, to study the effects of family conflict on children's development of stress, we would need an operational definition of *family conflict*. One operational definition of family conflict is "the number of verbal arguments between parents per week." To make this measurable and testable, we would also need an operational definition of *argument*. Is it yelling? Is it a disagreement? How should we measure conflict—by using family members' self-reports? How would each of the parents' reports differ from the child's reports? An alternate method would be to place a video camera in the home to capture what the researcher would define as *conflict*. But the family might consider the same behaviors as simply teasing. As you can see, creating operational definitions is no easy task. However, creating measurable operational definitions is crucial for good research.

Experimental Procedures

After we construct operational definitions for our variables of interest, we must decide on the research design we want to use. The research design depends on whether we want to determine causality or simply an association between two variables. **Causality** is the certainty that one variable causes a specific outcome or change in the other variable. The only way to determine causality is by conducting an **experiment**. Experiments are carefully controlled studies in which the researcher manipulates the participants' experiences. Any results found can be explained solely by the manipulation performed. For example, to study the effects of family conflict on children's stress levels, we could create a situation that imitates the real-world arguments that happen in families. For this study, we couldn't do a perfect experiment because we can't ethically manipulate, ask, or demand that a family argue or fight. So we would have to figure out a way to simulate what families experience at home. When we imitate or simulate real-world conditions, we conduct an **analog** experiment. An analog is a simulation of real life. The following sections help show how an analog experiment might be done on the effect of family conflict on children's stress levels.

Variables

First, we have to decide what our **independent variable** is. The independent variable is the variable that is operationally defined and then manipulated in the experiment. For our example, we want to study the effect of family conflict on children's stress levels. We are manipulating "family conflict," which is our independent variable. We want to see this variable's effect on children's stress. How would we operationalize family conflict? For our analog experiment, let's say we record two adults arguing. We could write a script for them to follow, which could be provided to other researchers wanting to replicate our study later on. One male and one female adult (maybe we'd choose trained actors to make the argument more believable) would argue about, say, one

person not pulling his or her weight in household chores; this is a common argument in real families. For our hypothetical study, let's say we make the recorded argument last three minutes.

Our **dependent variable**, the variable we measure at the end of the study, is "children's stress." How would we operationalize that? We might monitor children's heart rate, pulse, and amount of sweating; all of these are signs of physiological stress. We might also interview the children using a questionnaire we have devised that asks them how stressed they feel. Questions might include items like, "How happy do you feel right now, on a scale of 1 to 5?" For the operational definition of the dependent variable "children's stress," we are using both physiological and psychological measurements. Once we've determined how to measure our variables of interest, we can move on to placing our participants in groups.

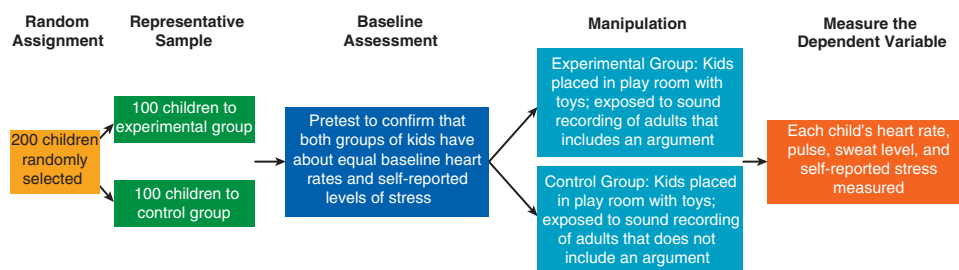
Experimental Design

We will set up two groups and randomly assign children to each group. **Random assignment** is a technique that is invaluable for making sure our experiment is highly controlled. It means that every participant has an equal chance of ending up in Group 1 or Group 2. We can randomize in many ways. We can randomly call every 10th number in the phone book to ask people to participate and then assign those who agree to be in our study to each group using a random method like drawing names out of a hat. Researchers even use computerized random number generators to assign people to groups. We want to perform random assignment to groups because we want our experimental manipulation to work. We will not be able to determine if the experimental manipulation worked if the groups differ systematically before we begin the study.

One of our two groups will be the **experimental group**, the group that receives the experimental manipulation—in this case, exposure to a recorded conflict. The other group will be the **control group**, the group that doesn't receive the experimental manipulation. To make sure that assignment to the two groups is random, we wouldn't want to put all the kids from conflictual families in the experimental group. Likewise, we wouldn't want to put kids with higher heart rates into the control group. Instead, we want a mixture of all different kinds of children in each group. That way, we can see that if we manipulate the kids' exposure to conflict and find an effect of higher stress in those exposed to conflict, we know that it was the recorded argument that *caused* the stress because there are no other systematic differences between the groups. Random assignment should control for any preexisting biases or systematic differences the participants bring to the experiment. See Figure 2.2 for a visual depiction of experimental design.

To make sure our random assignment is successful, we may want to perform a manipulation check, called a **baseline assessment**. To perform a baseline assessment, we measure the dependent variable *before* we do the experiment. That way, we assess whether kids' heart rates and

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Sample Experimental Design: Effects of Family Conflict on Children's Stress Levels



stress-interview answers vary in any systematic way before they even go into the experiment. Researchers hope that the experimental group and control group do not significantly differ in any way from each other at baseline. We hope that, on average, both groups of kids have about equal baseline heart rates and self-reported levels of stress. This will ensure that if we find differences between the groups at the end of the study, we can attribute those results to the manipulation of our independent variable, exposure to conflict, and not to some preexisting difference that biased our results.

In an ideal world, studies would not only use random assignment but would end up having samples of participants that represent the larger population we hope to make conclusions about (in this case, “families”). **Representative samples** are groups of people that are similar to the larger population we want to make conclusions about. Our samples should look similar to the larger population of families racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically and should be composed of gender and age ratios that reflect the larger population. We hope that our sample of kids in this study looks very similar in composition to the population of families at large so that we can rest assured that our results do not apply to only one type of family (for example, white families, girl-only families, and so on).

The next step in an experimental procedure is exposing the participants to the manipulation. For our hypothetical study, they will be exposed to 3 minutes of a recorded conflict. We have to control for how the manipulation is carried out so that all participants receive it in exactly the same way. We might put each child in a room full of toys and tell each of them that we’ll be back in a few minutes to administer a questionnaire. During those 3 minutes, we could play the recorded conflict so that it sounds like the adults are right outside the playroom door arguing. During these 3 minutes, we would record the child’s heart rate, pulse, and sweat level. The control group children would be treated in exactly the same way but would not be exposed to the recorded argument, the independent variable. Instead, we could expose them to a recorded adult conversation that didn’t involve arguing. If we did that, we might want to add a third group, a **no-treatment control group**, for a manipulation check. The no-treatment control group would hear no recording. This *manipulation check* would allow us to see whether hearing *any* recorded conversation raises stress levels. That way, we could be sure that it was the *arguing* and not just hearing people talk outside the door that influenced our results.

Choosing a Research Time Frame

In the study we have been describing, participation in the study is a one-time event. But other studies require that people participate over a longer time span. If we want a picture of how people change over time or if we want to see long-term effects of a variable like family conflict, we also need to figure out for how long we want to follow families. We could conduct a **longitudinal** study in which we follow the same people over a long period of time. This type of study can be expensive to carry out and time-consuming for the researchers. Longitudinal studies can suffer from a number of problems. One problem is **attrition**, which means that people drop out of the study over time, move away, or die. Scientific measures can change over time, so another problem may be wasting money on a study that is soon outdated. The benefits of a longitudinal study include a real developmental picture of change over time and the ability to assess the same people in a lot of depth.

If we don’t have the time or budget to follow a group of families for a long period of time, we may have to settle for measuring children’s reactions to conflict at one point in time. When we measure people at one measurement point, the study design is called **cross-sectional**. Cross-sectional studies measure groups of people all at one point in time, instead of following

them for longer periods. They are less expensive, and we get results more quickly than with longitudinal designs. However, with a cross-sectional study, we can't measure changes over time or long-term effects.

With the time and resources we have, we've chosen to do a cross-sectional design to assess children's stress responses to a recorded argument. Even though it is virtually impossible to design a perfect study, we try to control for as many outside influences on our results as we can. Can you think of any problems with our experimental design so far? See how some real researchers approached this topic in the How Would You Measure That? box.

HOW WOULD YOU MEASURE THAT?

CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT IN RELATION TO THEIR EXPOSURE TO FAMILY CONFLICT (STURGE-APPLE ET AL., 2006)

These researchers studied 210 mothers and fathers of 6-year-old children over a three-year period, so this is a *longitudinal study*. They were interested in the relationships between interparental conflict, the quality of parent-child interactions, and children's adjustment over time. The sample was ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. The parents came into the laboratory for 2 three-hour visits, one year apart. At the first visit, the parents were asked to engage in a discussion about common issues they disagreed on at home. The content and style of these discussions were used to *operationalize* "family conflict." To measure verbal aggression and hostility, the discussions were coded for insults, expressions of disgust, spite, and cruelty; to measure withdrawal, the discussions were coded for repeated or prolonged tense periods of detachment or avoidance. At the second visit, one year later, parents were asked to engage separately in two tasks with their child, a play session and a session in which the parent directed the child in cleaning up toys. This was done to assess a potential mediating factor: parenting style. Parenting style was measured by the parents' level of "emotional unavailability" during the play and clean-up periods, operationalized by a neglecting or distancing style (in comparison to a warm and supportive style). To assess the *dependent variable*, "children's adjustment," the researchers used parent and teacher ratings, two years later, of children's externalizing (aggression, conflict, negative behavior), internalizing (withdrawal, isolation, depression), and academic adjustment (grades and conduct).

The results were surprising. Interparental conflict at Time 1 predicted parent emotional unavailability at Time 2 (one year later), which in turn predicted children's poor adjustment at Time 3 (two years later). Interestingly, parental withdrawal during problem discussions predicted all three child outcomes (externalizing, internalizing, and academic problems). Moreover, this effect was much stronger than any effects exerted by hostility in parent problem discussions. Of note, fathers' emotional unavailability accounted more strongly for all three child adjustment problems than did mothers' unavailability.

Most family research focuses only on mothers' effects on their children's adjustment. If only mothers were included in this study, as is usually done, the authors would have concluded that maternal hostility, mediated by her emotional unavailability, affects children's adjustment, but for only one of the three child outcomes, academic problems. Mothers' variables had very little impact on the other two child outcomes, externalizing and internalizing. In addition, the effect of hostility in general was much weaker than the effect of withdrawal. This work suggests that *paternal* withdrawal and subsequent emotional unavailability are key variables explaining the negative effect of interparental conflict on children's adjustment.

This study gives us a very specific focus for tailoring interventions or family therapies to key influential family dispute styles: withdrawn and silent avoidance during problem

discussions. The authors suggest that withdrawal may be an indicator of very long-standing and chronic problems with no apparent solution. This type of stalemate leaves parents frustrated and disengaged during further discussions. The emotional and cognitive strain may then leave little energy for being emotionally available to their children, which then influences children's emotional and academic adjustment.

What parts of this study were well done and which aspects could have been improved, based on what you've learned about ideal experimental designs?

Examining Results

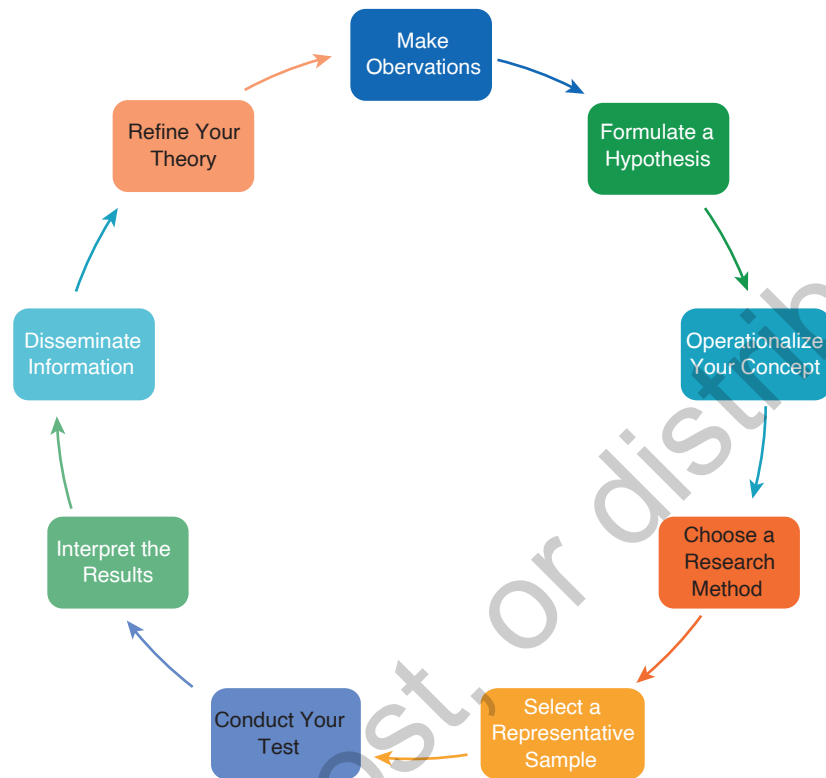
Once our study is completed, we would conduct statistical analyses on the data to determine whether the groups differed significantly from each other on stress measures, our dependent variables. If the groups differed significantly and in the direction we hypothesized (that is, children exposed to arguing have higher stress levels than children not exposed to arguing), we would be able to conclude that exposure to adult conflict *caused* children's stress levels to increase. However, before we alert the media, we should probably *replicate* these findings on another sample of children.

Better yet, other researchers in other labs should replicate the findings to be sure that there is sufficient generalizability to make a solid conclusion. **Generalizability** means that our experimental results can be applied to a wider population of people. Generalizability increases when we have a diverse and, especially, a *representative* sample. We don't want to know if only those children in our experiment are affected by adult conflict. We want to be able to generalize our results to all children or to a large majority of children. When our results apply to the majority of children, we can make policies or procedures to address the problem. If our results are generalizable, we would be able to justify spending money on parenting programs that teach parents how to solve disagreements without arguing. Or we would be able to work with families on conflict-resolution skills. See Figure 2.3 to review the entire scientific method.

Although the laboratory experiment's great strength is determining causality, it is sometimes not very generalizable to the real world because the experimental manipulation occurs in such a controlled and often artificial manner. We cannot conclude, for example, that children in the real world exposed to *parental* conflict react in the same way as children in our lab experiment who listened to a recorded argument. For one thing, the people on the recording were not the children's parents. Second, they were only arguing about one issue, household chores. Third, we could not make the recording too terrifying because it would be unethical to expose children to that kind of conflict.

However, we know that children in the real world *are* exposed to high levels of conflict and even violence in their homes. We cannot re-create those real-world experiences in an *analog* lab setting due to ethical protections for human research participants. Therefore, what we gain in laboratory control, we often lose in generalizability. There is always a trade-off between control and the generalizability of our findings. Unfortunately, it's virtually impossible for researchers to have high levels of both experimental control and real-world generalizability. Many topics cannot be manipulated and measured by using the experimental method. That's why the vast majority of studies on families use correlational methods.

FIGURE 2.3 ■ The Scientific Method



CORRELATIONAL RESEARCH METHODS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.4 Describe the process of creating a correlational study design using two family-related variables of your choice.

Many topics of interest cannot be experimentally manipulated in a lab. We often have two groups to compare, but these groups often occur naturally—we don't randomly assign them. For example, much research is done on gender differences. We can't randomly assign one group to be women and another group to be men. But we are interested in studying gender differences in various topics like communication styles or academic skills. In this case, we might do a **natural or quasi-experiment**, an experiment in which almost everything is controlled, except for the assignment to groups. For example, if we were interested in gender differences, we might do the same study about the effect of conflict on children's stress, but instead of randomly assigning children, we might expose a group of women to the recorded argument, a group of men to the recorded argument, and have a control group of men and women who were not exposed to the argument but whose physiological and questionnaire stress data were still collected as dependent variables.

Another type of natural experiment is done when unexpected events just happen, such as winning the lottery, getting a divorce, or experiencing armed conflict. We obviously could not randomly assign people to experience these events. But groups of people naturally experienced

them in various ways. Researchers take advantage of those natural experiments and collect data on groups of people involved in those situations. For example, researchers investigated the effects of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on different naturally occurring groups and found that those who were closer to the World Trade Center experienced more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder than those who lived several miles away or only watched the event on TV (Dimaggio et al., 2010).

Most social science research is of this correlational nature (rather than controlled laboratory experiments). In this type of design, researchers choose to do a **correlational study**, whereby they look for links, associations, or “co-relations” between variables, but this means they cannot conclude anything about what caused the association. So while proximity to the terrorist attack was correlated with stress, we cannot conclude that proximity caused the stress because we could not perform a controlled experiment examining these variables. Many scholars studying the family prefer to increase generalizability, even if it means a decrease in control over the influence of other unmeasured variables.

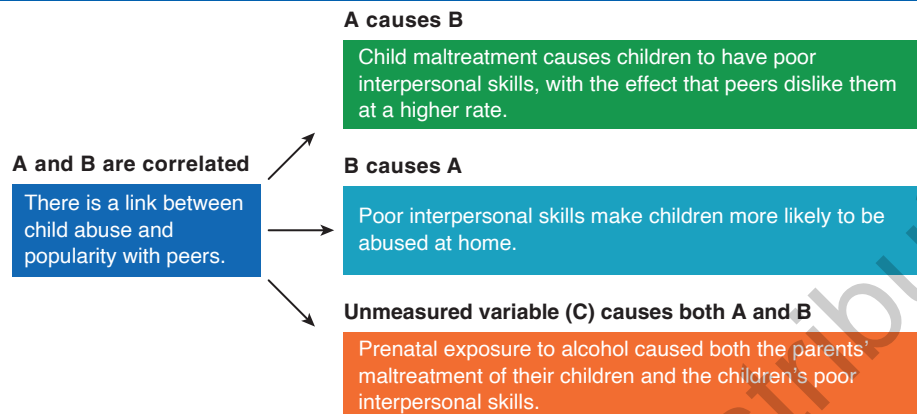
Correlations Versus Causal Inferences

With *correlational* results, we can never conclude that *causality* is at play. We can only determine causality by using a highly controlled experimental procedure that is replicated several times. For example, in my work studying abused children’s popularity with their peers, I compared a group of abused children to a matched control group of nonabused children; the children were matched on age, gender, ethnicity, school attended, and socioeconomic status. By matching, I tried to control for the influence of as many extraneous variables as I could, not wanting a difference in poverty status, for example, to account for any differences I found between the groups. Indeed, in support of my hypothesis, I found that abused children were disliked by classmates at a much higher rate than nonabused children at their public elementary school. Even though it makes sense that child maltreatment might *cause* these results (maybe abusive parents can’t teach their children social skills, or maybe abused children learn to be aggressive with peers through parental modeling), I could not infer causality because this was only a correlational study.

Even though it is tempting to assume causal relations are at play between two variables (and indeed, the media often report correlations as if causality is occurring), it is important for students reading about research to understand that causality can *never* be determined from a simple correlational study. A correlation between two variables (in this case, child abuse and poor peer relations) means just that: a co-relation, a link, or an association has been found. These two variables are correlated, and that’s it. As one variable’s levels change, so do the levels of another variable. In this case, as abuse rates rise, so do peer troubles, so we say the two variables are correlated with each other.

In a correlation, the causal arrow could potentially run in the opposite direction of what we expect. It could be that children with poor interpersonal skills, congenital disabilities, or a lack of social competence—children who would have peer troubles—are more likely to be abused at home. While child maltreatment scholars never want to blame abuse on the child victim, in research, we cannot rule out the possibility that child behavior could have influenced the abuse. Thus, an equally valid conclusion from correlational findings could be that children with poor interpersonal skills are more likely to be abused.

In addition to the causal direction being the reverse of what we might expect, correlations can also be explained by a third, unmeasured variable. While I tried to control for third variable explanations, to be sure variables like poverty couldn’t explain the results (both abused and control children were poor), unmeasured variables could be at work. For example, prenatal exposure

FIGURE 2.4 ■ Three Possible Directions of Causal Influence

to alcohol could explain both the abuse the children experienced and their poor peer relations. It could be that alcoholism caused both the parents' maltreatment of their children and the children's poor interpersonal skills. The point is that we really don't know. See Figure 2.4 for a visual depiction of the three ways to interpret correlational findings.

This is perhaps the most important lesson any student can learn about research: *We can never determine causation from a correlation (even if the relationship makes sense)*. For some examples of variables that are highly correlated yet fairly obviously not causally related, see the Brain Food box. This lists a number of nonsensical examples. Remember some of these examples when you read about research that appears to be causal in nature (or media reports that imply causality is at play), yet the research design only allows for correlational conclusions. Now that you understand correlational research, think of two variables related to families that you are interested in and see if you can design a study examining them.

BRAIN FOOD SPURIOUS CORRELATIONS

The following variables are significantly correlated with each other. You cannot assume one variable causes the other. What explanations can you think of for these correlations between variables?

1. Deaths due to cancer on Thursdays and the number of lawyers in Tennessee
2. The divorce rate in Maine and the per capita consumption of margarine
3. Marriage rates in California and UK military defense spending
4. Per capita cheese consumption and the number of people who died by becoming entangled in their bedsheets
5. Number of letters in the Scripps Spelling Bee winning word and the number of people killed by venomous spiders
6. The age of Miss America in years and the number of people murdered by steam, hot vapors, and hot objects

Source: Vigen (2015, 2021).

If we can't determine the causes of most of the behaviors and traits we study in research, you may wonder what the point of doing research is. Even if most social science research is correlational, as mentioned previously, after a finding has been replicated enough times across enough different groups and types of populations, we can start to conclude that we have generated a "fact." For example, there is ample evidence from hundreds of studies conducted over the past 40 years on many different populations to conclude that child abuse harms children's social development. Based on these many findings, researchers feel confident in arguing that child abuse is bad for kids' socioemotional skill development. There is enough evidence out there for us to advocate for children, to try to help parents refrain from abusing their children, and to develop social policies and programs that attempt to prevent abuse before it happens.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods

The research I have described is largely **quantitative**, meaning that the phenomena under study have been turned into numbers. We measured stress by children's self-reported stress on a scale from 1 to 5, as well as the number of heartbeats per minute. These are good examples of quantitative data. These data can be entered into a computer and statistically analyzed. Our results, then, are also presented in numerical form, for example in frequencies, percentages, averages, or ratios.

Most quantitative results are reported as group averages. For example, a lot of what we know about families comes from large national databases. You've probably heard of the Gallup poll and the U.S. census. There are numerous national and international surveys of people that give us statistical averages and percentages. We can learn what percentage of Americans are divorced, use drugs, are incarcerated, have children under the age of 5, live in extended families, and so on. While we can usually gain valuable insights about families from quantitative results and large national surveys, some researchers feel this approach is limiting because human traits, behaviors, and relationships are more complex than simple numbers may suggest.

If we want to understand variables from a more nuanced perspective, we might try to collect **qualitative** data. These data are usually gathered by open-ended questions or interviews that allow people to talk freely about the topic of interest. They could also be gathered by carefully observing people in their natural environments and taking detailed notes on what we see. We might type up transcripts describing verbatim what occurred and then review the transcripts for a *quality* of interest, such as anger, social isolation, connection to one's ancestors, or religious fervor. For example, if our *quantitative* results showed that men react with more physiological signs of stress and report more negative emotions than women after being exposed to a recorded argument, we might then interview the participants to gather some *qualitative* data. We could ask the men how they felt about the recording they heard. We might want to know if they perceived physiological changes in themselves or what types of thoughts were going through their minds during the recorded argument. Our interviews might find something surprising that the quantitative numbers could not reveal. For example, what if men said they felt angry at the man on the recording and wanted to fight him? This could mean that they felt not stress but anger. What if they said they started remembering times when they had fought with their own partners? This could mean that arguments they heard primed their own memories of personal arguments. What if they said they didn't even notice the argument going on? This could mean they are not self-aware enough to recognize their own internal stress. Their answers to qualitative open-ended interview questions would give us a richer flavor for the *quality* of what we found statistically and what the experience actually meant to the participants.

Etic and Emic Approaches

Many researchers in the social sciences use a qualitative approach called **ethnography**. An ethnography involves in-depth documentation of the lives and experiences of a population or group of people. This work may consist of a researcher living amongst the group members being studied. For example, a researcher may want to study the arranged marriage practices of families in India. In order to do this from an ethnographic perspective, a researcher would not just show up and interview families about their arranged marriages. They might live in a specific village for several months or years, getting to know the families, in order to understand at a qualitative level how children who grow up in that community view marriage. Talking to families after gaining their trust and building rapport is much different from an outsider coming in to “assess” the situation. An ethnographer might live amongst the population and, though an outsider can never become a true insider, try as much as possible to view marriage through the lens of local religious leaders, children, and parents in that community.

Ethnography requires using an **emic** perspective. An emic perspective is when a researcher is able to study his or her research question from an “inside” perspective, through the eyes of the inhabitants, their history, beliefs, and worldview.

In contrast, many researchers, especially in the past, have used an **etic** perspective, or an outsider’s viewpoint. When studying small clans or tribes of people, for example, a researcher might have described them as “primitive” or “savage.” While outright derogatory statements about groups being studied are relatively rare today, research has yet to progress to the point where scholars eschew viewing the groups they study through a western lens. Researchers may have a difficult time stepping outside of their western, formally educated, financially stable, often white and male viewpoint. This etic bias can influence not only the conclusions that are made when we study people from diverse groups but the actual questions that are formulated in the first place. Compare the following hypothetical headlines and see which one points to research from an *emic* versus an *etic* perspective:

- “Waiting a Lifetime to Meet the Partner My Parents Chose for Me”
- “Why India Has Yet to Abandon Arranged Marriage Practices”

The first headline speaks from the perspective of a child growing up in a village, waiting to meet his or her spouse. The second headline suggests that arranged marriages may not be “normal” or “progressive” or “appropriate.” It also puts an entire country with millions of inhabitants into one category, *Indian*. In reality, not all people in India practice arranged marriage, and there are a variety of populations in India, each with different religions, histories, languages, cultural beliefs, and practices.

To reduce the problem of etic bias, it helps to read research conducted by scholars who come from the group being studied and to include community members in the research group as either consultants or collaborators. Having a community liaison who is already respected in the community being studied can help reduce mistrust and enhance the rapport between the research participants and the researcher.

We must also be extremely careful in generalizing beyond the actual scope of our findings. Because problems like this are fairly common in social science research, you, as an informed consumer of that research, must take care in interpreting the results of what may be biased or incomplete studies. Every research participant is a complicated person who possesses many qualities that may not be measured or even considered or understood when we



PHOTO 2.5 Arranged Marriage. How would an emic versus an etic perspective vary when studying arranged marriages in selected Indian populations?

EyesWideOpen/Getty Images

make conclusions about our findings. Qualitative approaches are effective ways to help us understand the perspectives of the research participants in more depth than most quantitative approaches can provide.

Unfortunately, qualitative data involve little control over extraneous variables. In gathering qualitative data, we are relying on people's subjective opinions, faulty memories, individual perceptions of what the research questions mean and what answers the researcher might be looking for, as well as their abilities to reflect on or analyze their own lives. Each person may interpret interview questions differently. They may not have a "shared meaning" with the researchers. These issues, of course, may also arise with quantitative data collection. Thus it is important to be cognizant of the limitations of any research design. For example, if an interviewer asks a mother if her child is "laid back," one mother might respond in the affirmative, thinking her child is lazy, while another mother might answer in the affirmative because her child is timid. If our researchers scored a "yes" answer as a 2 using quantitative methods, both mothers would receive the same score, yet these two mothers might not share the same meaning of the construct "laid back personality," which limits the conclusions we can draw. Researchers have to be sure their constructs are *operationally defined* and explained clearly and that their own behavior doesn't change the way participants respond.

Demand Characteristics

Demand characteristics can be a serious problem in any study. A demand characteristic is some trait the setting contains or the researcher possesses that may influence the study participant's responses. For example, in the interview regarding reactions to a recorded argument, could it make a difference to the participants hearing the argument if the lab were decorated with posters of tropical beaches and palm trees versus having undecorated walls that were painted blood red? What if the interviewer asking men about their thoughts while hearing an argument were another man versus an attractive woman? Perhaps the interviewer looked like the participant's father, and that affected his answers. If the participant was European American and the

interviewer was African American, this could affect their interactions and the answers provided. All of these factors and even less obvious ones, like a researcher's lisp, a personality style, or bad body odor, could affect the way a participant responds in a study.

Because research can become skewed or biased in so many ways, it's important that you critically examine any studies you encounter. Ask yourself who the research participants were. Maybe even more importantly, ask who was *not* studied. Historically, social science research has been conducted on white, middle-class participants, and then the results have been unjustifiably generalized to the population at large. Similarly, psychological and medical research on men has historically been generalized to women, without women ever having been studied. We must use demographically diverse samples whenever possible.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES IN RESEARCH METHODS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.5 Evaluate the importance of demographic variables and intersectional identities on family research.

Some very important demographic variables affect virtually every research finding about marriage and families. To think critically and clearly about theories and research methods, we must know what these demographic variables are and understand the impact they can have on research results. Important demographic variables include race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender, and social class.

Race and Ethnicity

One variable we must specify when we publish research is the racial or ethnic backgrounds of the research participants. Although race technically doesn't exist (Walker et al., 2007), the term is used in many research reports and governmental statistics. Therefore, race and ethnic background need to be considered in every discussion of marriage and families.

Keep in mind, however, that race is a thorny issue. For example, in the 2020 census, the U.S. Census Bureau changed its approach to documenting the race of Hispanic people in the United States. Now if a person states that they are Hispanic/Latino, they can check a box for Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban, or they can check a box for "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," with the option to write in Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, or other." Then there is a follow-up question regarding which "race" the person is. Because the labels "Hispanic" and "Latino" relate to a large and diverse group of people with varied histories, cultures, and experiences, these are really *ethnic* labels. Hispanic people can identify with virtually any "racial" category (e.g., Black or white). **Ethnicity** thus refers to a shared cultural history, language, and customs. For example, Hispanics may have similar experiences with historical colonization by Spaniards, speaking the Spanish language, and practicing the Catholic religion. People who belong to the same *ethnic* group typically identify as sharing cultural traditions involving foods, religion, rituals, holidays, and beliefs (Walker et al., 2007).

Because *ethnicity* and *race* can be confusing terms, this book uses the term **race** to refer to a person's outside appearance, usually Black, white, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, or Arab American. Even though these groups are all racially mixed, they are often

judged or categorized by their external features. For example, my race is considered to be white. In reality, we know there is no such thing as the “white race”; white people, like all racial groups, are mixed. However, people see me as white, and on surveys, I always have to check the box next to the “white” or “European American” racial category. *Ethnically*, however, my four biological grandparents came from Wales, Sweden, Germany, and England, four distinctly different cultures. In their attempts to become assimilated into American culture as quickly as possible, as was common in the early days of U.S. immigration, my relatives did not maintain many of their cultural traditions. Therefore, I have no real ethnic identification, beyond some vague affinity for the Celtic people of Western Europe for their strength in resisting persecution by the Romans for hundreds of years. Other white people I know, however, clearly identify with their homeland cultures. I know a white woman who identifies as ethnically British. And I know a white man who identifies as ethnically Jewish. Check out Photo 2.6 from a 1932 anthropology book. What do you think of these depictions of the “The White Race”?

The word *minority* can also be confusing. This book will not use the term *ethnic minority*, as it implies that some groups are not as important or “major” as other groups. In fact, the 2020 Census found that in at least six U.S. states, ethnic “minorities” are actually the *majority*. For example, ethnic “minorities” make up the following population percentages: 63.6% of California; 60.3% of Texas, 63.5% of Hawaii, 52.3% of New Mexico, 54.1% of Nevada, and 52.8% of Maryland. In this book, ethnic groups will be referred to using either their specific identity (for example, Japanese American) or by the term *people of color*, which puts the person first. As you can see, issues of race and ethnicity are hard to strictly define. We have to be careful when speaking about such groups, and we have to avoid generalizing too broadly because each ethnic group is composed of very diverse types of people.

Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

At first glance, gender seems more cut and dry than race and ethnicity. It’s easier to tell whether someone is male or female than whether someone is Native American or Hispanic. Some scholars talk about *sex* when referring to the biological sex of people and *gender* when referring to social constructions regarding gender roles or gender differences in behavior. However, it’s often difficult to tell what causes an observed difference between males and females, biology or culture. To address this issue, the term **gender** will be used to speak about topics related to men and women (Hyde, 2007a) and refers to socially constructed categories of male or female. Throughout this book, we will see that social constructions of gender roles have profound implications for people’s lives all over the world. Keep in mind that gender might accurately be conceptualized as a continuum instead of a dichotomy. Many people are not clearly male or female. They may look male but identify as female or vice versa. Or they may have ambiguous genitalia. **Intersex** people do not clearly biologically fit into either the male or female category. But that doesn’t mean that gender roles do not affect their lives as much as they affect the lives of everyone else.

Another factor to consider is that your sex and gender often have nothing to do with your **sexual orientation**, or your choice of intimate partners. Like gender, sexual orientation is better conceptualized as being on a continuum than as two discrete categories like “gay” or “straight.” In future chapters, you will discover that most people are somewhere between 100% heterosexual and 100% homosexual. If we consider our fantasies, behaviors, and desires, few of us would fit strictly into one sexual orientation or the other (Epstein et al., 2012).

It’s very important that you are aware of the impact of sexual orientation and gender on individuals, which in turn has profound effects on family relationships. A person’s sexual orientation has very real consequences. People may be judged, discriminated against, denied



PHOTO 2.6 The “White Race.” Images of the “White Race,” from a 1932 anthropology text called *The Races of Man*.
 Reproduced from Robert Bennett Bean (1932). *The races of man: Differentiation and dispersal of man*. New York: The University Society.

access to services, denied the ability to adopt children, and even physically attacked because of their sexual orientation. For example, when the film *Milk* (about the first openly gay politician, Harvey Milk) was nominated for several Oscars at the 2009 Academy Awards, antigay protesters picketed during the awards ceremony. One sign, referring to deceased Oscar-winning actor Heath Ledger’s role as a gay cowboy in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, said “Heath is in Hell.” As the screenwriter for the film *Milk*, Dustin Lance Black, accepted the Oscar, he stated that his dream as a little boy was to grow up, fall in love, and get

married. He stated that he hoped that someday he would be allowed to do so, but at that time, same-sex couples were not allowed to marry in California. However, same-sex marriage was legalized in all U.S. states in 2015.

Issues like these reveal the importance of considering demographic variables as real, tangible influences on families, even if the categories themselves are socially constructed. Researchers on family issues need to be especially cautious about both **ethnocentrism** and **heterosexism** in their theoretical frameworks and their research designs and conclusions. Ethnocentrism means using a lens from one's own ethnicity (usually a white or European American lens) through which to view others. We may use our own ethnicity as the yardstick against which we compare others. Other viewpoints or practices may be seen as deficient or deviant if they are different from the researcher's ethnic experience. Heterosexism relates to the fact that many theories and lines of research assume the participants are heterosexual or they may make sweeping generalizations about research on relationships when only heterosexual couples have been studied. It privileges the heterosexual experience as "normal" and other sexual orientations as different or deviant.

Social Class

Like racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and heterosexism, we also need to be aware of demographic variables related to **social class**, or level of income (also referred to as *socioeconomic status*, or *SES*). While social class is in large part a measure of income, it is often confounded by other variables, such as education level, access to goods and services, health status, and race. For example, in 2016, the median wealth of white households was \$171,000. That's 10 times the wealth of Black households (\$17,100) and eight times that of Hispanic households (\$20,600). When looking only at the middle-income tier of each ethnic group's distribution of wealth, whites had a median net worth of \$154,400, Blacks had \$38,300, and Hispanics had \$46,000 (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2017). What do you make of these numbers? How are social class and race related and why?

Sometimes in research we may find racial differences because we fail to consider the effects of SES or social class. Poor people of all ethnic backgrounds tend to differ more widely from rich people of all ethnic backgrounds than they differ from each other. In other words, social class often affects family relationships and processes more keenly than does ethnicity.

To get a glimpse of how these influences might work, consider research that shows that middle-class parents (both Black and white) see their job as one of "concerted cultivation," meaning they desire to cultivate a wide variety of academic, social, and emotional skills in their children (Lareau, 2002). This means they regularly create specific opportunities for their children to participate in structured activities like sports and class trips. They regularly debate issues with their children and encourage them to question information in their environment. As a consequence, these children feel confident looking authority figures, such as doctors, in the eye and asking specific questions. In contrast, lower-income parents often do not see their role as one of cultivation but one of aiding in the "accomplishment of natural growth." They see their job as supporting their children in developing their own skills and interests without a lot of control and structure over their daily activities. They tend to demand respect and obedience from their children, so these children do not see themselves as equal to authority figures like middle-class children often do. Thus, they are less likely to look doctors in the eye or ask questions of authority figures.

Researchers have discussed how social class influences the amount of conformity and obedience people exhibit. For example, Kohn (1969) discussed that lower-paying jobs require repetition and manual labor without leaving much room for critical thinking or problem solving. Workers in lower-paying jobs do not challenge authority and so may raise their children to

conform to authority as well, knowing that their children will have to survive in a similar work environment. How do you think living in poverty affects family relationships? How do you think being wealthy changes things? Check out Figure 2.5 to help you answer this question.

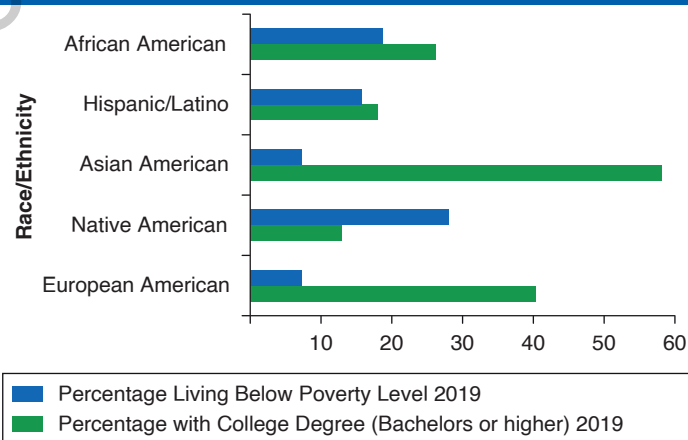
Interestingly, Rank (2003) found that while only a small minority of people at any given time is technically living below the poverty line, poverty is a normative experience for most of us. He found that 60% of people spend at least 1 year in poverty and that at any given time, 68% of the population lives near the poverty line, just not below it, where most statistics focus. Rank also points out that 65% of Americans will get Medicaid, Social Security Insurance (SSI), or food stamps as adults. These are all forms of “welfare.”

Moreover, Rank emphasized that, contrary to the general public’s belief that the United States spends *too much* money on social welfare programs for the poor compared to other industrialized nations, there is actually very little spent on protecting U.S. citizens from living below the poverty line. For example, most European nations have universal health care, have free high-quality childcare with trained and well-paid teachers, give a comfortable amount of money to families for their daily needs, and have long-term (often 6 months or more) paid maternity and paternity leaves. In contrast, the United States has the highest poverty rate in the industrialized world. For example, in Finland, about 33% of people are poor, similar to the United States, but the social welfare benefits provided to prevent poverty wipe out all but 4% of poverty experienced by Finns (Rank, 2003; Reich, 2020).

Hays (2003) found that the U.S. working poor are actually worse off than welfare recipients. They don’t make a living wage, have no provisions for high-quality childcare, and have no benefits. Rainwater and Smeeding (2003) estimated that if the United States spent about \$90 billion (\$1900 per family) on benefits, poverty could be virtually eradicated. More recent estimates suggest that if all 50 states implemented the most generous policies found in individual states in terms of providing supplemental nutrition (SNAP), Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC), monetary support for families (TANF), and Child Tax Credits (CTC), child poverty would be reduced by 2.5% and five million children would be lifted out of poverty (Pac et al., 2020).

By now, it should be clear that all people have complex **intersectional identities**. Intersectional identity refers to the idea that individuals in families are affected by the interactions between our gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, and social class. When studying marriage and

FIGURE 2.5 ■ Poverty and Higher Education in the U.S. Population



Source: Ogunwole, Drewery, & Rios-Vargas, 2012; Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, 2020.



PHOTO 2.7 Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender. How do you think race, class, and gender intersect to impact the people in this image, photographed as they wait in a breadline?

GRANGER

families, we must always keep in mind that these demographic variables interact with each other to influence us as individuals and the families with whom we share our lives. The bioecological approach acknowledges this complexity and steers us away from a simplistic analysis of why families function the way they do. Only when we consider all elements of a person's intersectional identities as well as all the systems of the bioecological model can we truly understand life in families.

An informed consumer of research must use **critical thinking** whenever possible. Critical thinking means looking beyond the obvious explanation, investigating media and other claims fully, and not putting too much stock in findings that have not been replicated on diverse samples. For more on developing your critical thinking skills, see the Building Your Strengths box.

The bioecological approach considers how the individual interacts with various social contexts. But before we can understand those complex relationships and interactions in the family, it's important to have a clear idea of what influences individuals' behaviors and beliefs regarding relationships. Thus, let's examine what makes individuals tick before examining complicated family systems like marriages and parent-child relationships. We begin this examination in Chapter 3, which explores the development of sex, gender, and gender roles and how they affect individuals in families.

BUILDING YOUR STRENGTHS

IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is *purposeful reflective judgment* about what to believe or what to do. When an individual or a group of people is engaged in critical thinking, they are applying their reasoning skills—interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, and explanation—to a question

or problem. Their purpose is to make a decision—for example, whether or not to believe something they have been told—or to solve a problem—for example, deciding what to do in a given situation. They are being reflective and deliberative, which means that they are trying to be sure that their interpretations, analyses, inferences, evaluations, and explanations are sensible, well-founded, systematic, and carefully considered. If not, then the individual or the group makes the necessary corrections.

Critical thinking is courageous in its open-minded search for knowledge. This means that critical thinking objectively follows reasoning and evidence wherever they lead, even if the answers should diverge from or contradict cherished beliefs or preconceptions. Critical thinking is respectful of those who hold other perspectives but firm in its demand that those perspectives, no matter how firmly held or personally important, must be evaluated against evidence. For example, just because a person may know someone who is overweight or smokes yet does not appear to have any illnesses, it does not mean that obesity and smoking are not proven health risks. The scientific evidence establishing that obesity and smoking are health risks is solid, good fortune notwithstanding.

Good scientific research methodology is really just critical thinking refined and applied to scientific questions. Thought of more broadly, *critical thinking is our self-defense against hasty, gullible, uninformed, and unreflective decision making*. Critical thinking tells us, for example, that if a financial deal is “too good to be true” then it probably isn’t true. We might not have experienced the worldwide economic meltdown of 2008 and 2009 had people done some critical thinking before taking on more mortgage debt than they could possibly handle or before investing in get-rich-quick schemes that turned out to be frauds.

Here are some ways to strengthen your own critical thinking skills and habits of mind:

- Exhibit a bold and adventurous intellectual curiosity about a wide variety of topics.
- Endeavor to become objective as well as informed about issues about which you already hold strong opinions.
- Don’t be gullible; evaluate the credibility of the opinions and judgments others offer.
- Trust in reflective, thoughtful, and well-reasoned decision making.
- Be respectful and open-minded regarding others’ views and opposing arguments.
- Be creative and flexible in coming up with alternatives, options, and ways to check the facts before making a decision.
- Be open, honest, and self-critical when you identify your own assumptions, preconceptions, and previously unquestioned beliefs.
- Be willing to reconsider and revise your judgments when the evidence warrants.

Source: Adapted from P. A. Facione (2009). *Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts*. Millbrae, CA: Measured Reasons and the California Academic Press. Used with permission.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

2.1 Understand the theories of family relations that originated from ideas in the *Communist Manifesto*.

There are different ways to interpret the world around us, and theories play an important role in helping us organize our experiences and conduct meaningful research on marriages and families. Many contemporary theories stem from the early ideas of *The Communist Manifesto’s* exploration of power, privilege, and wealthy peoples’ exploitation of workers. Communist theory lent itself to the development of structural-functionalist theories of family relationships, which focus on each member of the family as playing a crucial function in maintaining balance and continuity of functioning. Conflict theory helps us understand that those with less power often rise up and start conflict with those wielding more power, which can lead to positive changes in the system.

Family systems theory examines all individuals, dyads, and triads as they interact with each other. Social exchange theory focuses on family members' systematic, logical consideration of various options for our interactions with others, with more beneficial choices usually taking precedence over choices that would "cost" them.

2.2 Explain the key tenets of each theory that evolved out of newer scientific advances.

Social constructionism emphasizes that many interactions in families are not based on objective facts; there may not even be objective facts since all interactions are based on individuals' perceptions or constructions of the world. Feminist theory was presented as a contrast to the historical focus on male perspectives in research. This theory places women's perspectives and ideas in the forefront and does not consider it necessary to compare women to men.

Attachment theory emphasizes the evolutionarily adaptive behaviors of infants and their caretakers. The internal working model is a cognitive template solidified during early interactions with caregivers. This model provides a framework from which children view the world of relationships, families, and themselves.

The organizing theory of the book (bioecological theory) argues that the biological, personal, and temperamental characteristics of individuals interact with people and social forces in immediate environments and larger social contexts. Microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems are graduated systems of influence, ranging from immediate daily interactions to larger cultural and time-based processes that affect families.

2.3 List the basic steps used in experimental research designs.

Using the scientific method allows us to test specific hypotheses about how families work, live, and love. The impact of confounding factors that can skew research findings helps illuminate the distinction between correlational findings and causal inferences. Only the experimental method can allow causal conclusions because we operationally define our variables, use random assignment, conduct controlled experimental manipulation, utilize comparison groups, and replicate findings to get at the facts. Strict experimental controls help us rule out confounding explanations for our results.

2.4 Describe how to create a correlational study design using two family-related variables of your choice.

Creating a correlational study design involves choosing two variables (such as gender as an independent variable and parenting style as a dependent variable) and seeing how the two variables are linked, or correlated, with each other. Correlational studies are necessary when variables cannot be experimentally manipulated. Examples of correlational studies you can design include quasi experiments and natural experiments. We can't randomly assign gender so this would be a correlational design.

2.5 Evaluate the importance of demographic variables and intersectional identities on family research.

Demographic variables that comprise our intersectional identities include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sex, and sexual orientation. Each of these factors can influence our research findings, and we should always consider how these variables interact with each other. It is important to understand both who is being studied and who is doing the studying. Even more important, perhaps, is to assess who has not been studied and why.

KEY TERMS

- Analog (p. 55)
 Androcentrism (p. 44)
 Attachment theory (p. 45)
 Attrition (p. 57)
 Baseline assessment (p. 56)
 Bioecological theory (p. 37)
 Causality (p. 55)
 Chronosystem (p. 49)
 Communism (p. 38)
 Conflict theory (p. 40)
 Control group (p. 56)
 Correlational study (p. 61)
 Critical thinking (p. 71)
 Cross-sectional (p. 57)
 Demand characteristics (p. 65)
 Dependent variable (p. 56)
 Eclectic approach (p. 37)
 Emic (p. 64)
 Ethnicity (p. 66)
 Ethnocentrism (p. 69)
 Ethnography (p. 64)
 Etic (p. 64)
 Exosystem (p. 49)
 Experiment (p. 55)
 Experimental group (p. 56)
 Family systems theory (p. 40)
 Female deficit perspective (p. 44)
 Feminist theory (p. 44)
 Gender (p. 67)
 Generalizability (p. 59)
 Heterosexism (p. 69)
 Hypothesis (p. 53)
 Independent variable (p. 55)
 Internal working model (p. 45)
 Intersectional identities (p. 70)
 Intersex (p. 67)
 Longitudinal (p. 57)
 Macrosystem (p. 49)
 Mesosystem (p. 48)
 Microsystem (p. 48)
 Natural/Quasi-experiment (p. 60)
 No-treatment control group (p. 57)
 Operational definition (p. 55)
 Qualitative (p. 63)
 Quantitative (p. 63)
 Race (p. 42)
 Random assignment (p. 56)
 Replication (p. 53)
 Representative sample (p. 57)
 Scientific method (p. 36)
 Sexual orientation (p. 67)
 Social class (p. 69)
 Social constructionism (p. 42)
 Social exchange theory (p. 41)
 Structural-functionalism (p. 38)
 Theory (p. 37)
 Unbiased (p. 54)