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Almudena Moreno Mínguez *Editor*

Family Well-Being

European Perspectives

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Family Well-Being

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European Perspectives

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Almudena Moreno Mínguez

In recent years, there has been extensive research into the subject of changes in the family, particularly into family structures and typologies, demographic and economic dynamics, the repercussions of the progressive entry of women into the workplace and the different family policies enacted by the various welfare states. In fact, the family has taken on a key role in comparative economic and sociological theory since the 1980s (Castles 1998; Esping Andersen 2009; Ferrera 2005). However, the conceptualisation and empirical research into the topic of 'family well-being' (McKeown and Sweeney 2001), within the area of family change and well-being, is a topic which has barely been analysed in sociological and economic treatises on the family (Jordan 2008).

On this basis, an OECD working paper, for example, introduced the concept of equitable and sustainable 'well-being' (Hall et al. 2010). According to this approach, human well-being consists of both individual and social well-being, and it is embedded in culture, the economy and governance (Kroll 2011). Moreover, the human system must always be considered in relation to the ecosystem and its interactions with it. Important cross-cutting themes in determining the well-being of a society also include (a) fair distribution and (b) sustainability with regard to the available resources. It is also important to add that the concept of quality of life is traditionally measured by means of so-called 'objective' and 'subjective' indicators (Noll 2004). The first provide external descriptions of people's conditions of life, while the second is based on direct questioning of people concerning how satisfied they are with their lives overall and with particular aspects (such as work or family). Taking this conceptual basis of well-being as a reference, the general objective of this book is to collate, using different theoretical and methodological approaches,

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the various research works currently underway into the quality of life of the individuals who live in families in today's context of family change throughout the various stages of the family cycle. The European comparative approach has been used in order to include the main aspects of family change and its effects on well-being throughout the different stages of the family cycle.

Thus, this volume will focus on the comparative analysis of family and well-being, a dimension which literature has not covered sufficiently till the present in a European perspective. This book collects the studies made in Europe on family well-being comparing family change and well-being in different institutional and cultural contexts. This book takes a deeper look at early evidence of family well-being and a compilation of findings from the main researches on this topic. In this book, we present reasoned arguments on the need to focus upon much more than simply economic interpretations of well-being. Thus, this book covers a broad range of topics, from the theorising of children's well-being to the development of specific measures of family well-being and quality of life.

The book has therefore been structured around three major objectives. In the first place, it introduces and presents the concept of family well-being as a central study objective in economic theory, as people's individual well-being is in part dependent on the well-being of the family. The book thus seeks to define and delimit the term 'family well-being' from a variety of viewpoints in order to be of use in future empirical research. Hence, one of the most important contributions of this book is that it incorporates family well-being into the scientific debate.

In the second place, the book presents the results of the most important current European research into the subject of well-being of individuals at different stages of the family cycle (childhood, adolescence, family formation and the elderly). This family perspective is examined throughout the whole of the life cycle of the family in order to highlight the most significant research currently underway into the well-being of individuals and families in today's society, within a climate of increasing risk and uncertainty.

In the third place, the book takes a look at the effects produced by factors such as immigration and the new family dynamics and structures on people's well-being and quality of life. This is a multidisciplinary approach which is designed to integrate the analysis of family changes with the well-being and satisfaction of the individuals who are themselves the main protagonists of these family changes.

The book also dedicates particular attention to gender issues deriving from the impact of women's entry into the workplace on questions, such as the division of labour within the home, and policies designed to address the work-life balance from a comparative European point of view.

This work therefore offers a comparative macro outlook on family change and the well-being of individuals, and also provides an analysis of specific examples of these changes in particular national contexts. This approach enables the comparative international perspective to be integrated with the specific historical perspective of all the different national contexts analysed in the book.

The book has been structured into various chapters in order to respond to the general objectives of the work. Chapter 2, by Shirley Zimmerman, presents an introduction to the concept of family well-being based on a compilation of the various current theoretical approaches to family change. According to Zimmerman, the application of different conceptual frameworks allows a more holistic and contextual approach to the subject and a closer examination of the implications of the policies enacted by governments that affect families – and almost all policies do, whether directly or indirectly, implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or not. Given the importance of families regardless of their form, not only for individuals but for society and its future, such an examination could facilitate the enactment of family policies that do in fact enhance the well-being of families.

In Chap. 3, Pamela Abbott and Claire Wallace analyse the social quality of families in Europe by focussing upon parents with young children using the European Quality of Life Survey, 2007. It considers the role of employment and unemployment in modifying the quality of life for fathers and mothers in 27 European countries. The aim of the chapter is to test the applicability of the social quality model to this particular group and to look at the variation in European countries.

The book dedicates a second section to an analysis of the impact of family change on well-being and child poverty. The purpose of Chap. 4 written by Daniela Del Boca and Anna Laura Mancini is to examine several dimensions of relative and absolute poverty among children, with a special focus on the Italian case, and to explore its underlying factors mainly related to the nature of the labour market and the structure of the welfare state. Given that child poverty outcomes result from complex interactions between joblessness, in-work poverty and the impact of transfers, the countries achieving the best outcomes are those that are performing well on all fronts, notably by combining strategies aimed at facilitating access to employment and enabling services (childcare, etc.) with income support (social transfers other than pensions).

In Chap. 5, Simon Chapple focusses on research published in the 1990s or later that investigates relationships between child well-being and single-parent family structure in OECD. According to Simon Chapple, in comparison say to some policy-related literatures like the impact of education on earnings or even the employment effects of minimum wages, the empirical literature on the impact of family structure on child outcomes is at an immature stage. The immaturity is signalled by the lack of a consensus regarding the existence of a causal effect of lone parent family structure. The extent to which different welfare regimes across the OECD influence the transmission of causal effects of lone parenthood is extremely difficult to judge, since the causal effects of lone parenthood are so difficult to define. In conclusion, policy makers should be aware that the current immature state of the literature does not allow strong conclusions to be drawn regarding the impact of lone parenthood on child well-being in the absence of additional strong priors.

Karin Wall and Anna Escobedo (Chap. 6) explore the diversity of leave policy models in contemporary European society. Seven empirically based ideal types are identified by looking at data for the 22 countries on leave systems, early childhood services and maternal and couples' employment patterns. They address the complex interplay between leave systems and work family, gender and welfare regimes. The analysis reveals three sets of conclusions, which relate to convergence and divergence in care leave policies across Europe, leave generosity and its linkages to gender equity and family well-being.

The third section of the book refers to the subject of work-family balance and gender. Anders Ejrnæs and Thomas P. Boje (Chap. 7) examine how different welfare policy regimes have influence on the social risks which individuals are confronted in managing and reconciling the relationship between work and family life. This chapter examines how institutional as well as individual dimensions determine the risk of spending more time than wanted outside paid work because of care responsibilities. This study includes both individual and institutional factors in analysing to which extent the individuals are forced to sacrifice their employment career in order to take care of family members or relatives. This question is closely related to the discussion about inequalities in the opportunities or capabilities individuals have in realise their life goals.

Joris Ghysels in Chap. 8 addresses family well-being through a discussion of spousal preferences regarding the task division between partners in a couple. For the empirical analyses of this chapter, Joris Ghysels rely on data of the 2004–2005 Flemish Families and Care Survey (FFCS), which provides a representative sample of families with young children. This chapter shows it to be relatively rare that both spouses agree in their task division preference and are able to get what they want. Particularly, women have trouble to realise their task division preferences. This has much to do with many women having less traditional preferences than men, combined with our gendered care culture which makes women more receptive to care demands in their household than men. According to Joris Ghysels, the data does not sustain that relatively more wealthy spouses would be more likely to realise their task division preferences than the relative poor. Further inquiries, however, suggest limited evidence of monetary compensation for households with an unbalanced preference outcome.

The aim of the study presented in Chap. 9 by Almudena Moreno is to analyse how far institutional and cultural factors linked to a particular family model, as well as individual factors such as education, work situation and occupation, affect a couple's decisions and actions with regard to the WFB, depending on the cultural context of each country, with particular emphasis on the Spanish case. This chapter describes the extent to which the gender stereotypes rooted in a given cultural context and family policies condition the reconciliation strategies adopted by citizens in distinct institutional and cultural contexts. In a second part of this study, the author uses more complex statistical analysis to find out the extent to which individual factors such as professional status, education, and so on, neutralise the impact of culturally assigned gender roles and consequently the expectations and strategies of work-family balance.

In Chap. 10, Bernard Harris attempts to review some of the evidence in relation to a range of European countries in order to examine the extent to which differences in the circumstances of male and female lives during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were reflected in health statistics. This chapter has explored the extent to which the particular hardships experienced by the female population may have been reflected in the size and shape of women's bodies and in their mortality rates. Although these are important dimensions of welfare in their own right, the chapter has been particularly concerned to examine the extent to which they can be associated with underlying differences in the circumstances of male and female lives.

The final part of the book contains a range of research into youth, the elderly, migration and social work. Andreas Walther, Barbara Stauber and Axel Pohl in Chap. 11 analyse the meaning of success and support in youth transitions from a life course perspective. This has a comparative dimension with regard to different 'transition regimes' and a biographical dimension asking for the subjective views of young men and women. In this chapter, the authors have tried to enlarge a dominant institutional perspective which reduces success in transitions to work and adulthood to entering the labour market, founding a family and avoiding poverty and which informs policy measures aimed at supporting young people in their transitions to work. First, they have shown that assumptions of success and support held as generally valid actually do differ across different contexts and constellations of youth transitions. Second, they have found that successful transitions for them include not only stable and well-paid jobs – although this remains important – but also trajectories they can identify with. Their findings suggest that research which up to now has concentrated on input and output of young people's agency needs to put more stress on analysing the complex interpretation and negotiation processes that underlie individual decision-making.

Chapter 12 written by Frédérique Hoffmann, Manfred Huber and Ricardo Rodrigues, seeks to provide an overview of the challenges facing informal carers today and in the near future, while also presenting a critical appraisal of the public policies in place to support them. The first section of this chapter discusses the division of responsibilities between the family and the state in the provision of care and portrays informal care giving in Europe as being in a state of flux. In the second section, the authors turn to some of the main policies that exist to support carers, namely, cash benefits, care leaves and in-kind benefits and analyse whether they sufficiently meet the challenges caregivers are faced with. The final section concludes by summarising the main findings and policy trends.

Ulla Björnberg in Chap. 13, drawing upon a study of the experiences of asylum-seeking children and their families in Sweden, examines how children cope with their life situations while awaiting their asylum decisions. In the text, the author asks what influences the well-being of asylum-seeking children caught up in a tension between experiences of past and present exclusion and expectations of improvement upon arrival in the host country. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with 18 children (aged 9–18) and 18 parents (one parent for each child). Among the asylum-seeking families studied, family bonding provided a strong source of resilience for both the parents and the children, in particular in families with many adversities to cope with. Uncertainty about the future was usually accompanied by a desire to appear independent and self-reliant vis-à-vis the environment.

In the last chapter, Chap. 14, Antonio López and Sagrario Segado presents some of the results of their research on family social work and well-being. The authors first analyse the main paradoxes of our societies which influence our ability to live with dignity and achieve our aspirations. They then present the theoretical orientation that has guided our intervention projects, namely, empowerment. Finally, based on the experience they have gained through our projects, they discuss the elements that should be included in a key stage of any family intervention project: the assessment process. In short, the aim of this chapter is to complement other theoretical approaches presented in the chapters of this book by delving deeper into a key issue, namely, how to take the step from describing a reality to actually transforming that reality using a properly designed method of assessment. In this process of constructing social well-being, social work plays a key role.

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Part I
Approaches to the Study of Family Well-Being

Chapter 2
Conceptualizing Family Well-Being

Shirley L. Zimmerman

Introduction

This chapter focuses on family well-being as a family policy goal. Family policy is defined as all of the actions of governments that affect families, directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or not. Three frameworks are presented together with their underlying assumptions and concepts for assessing the extent to which such policies meet the family well-being standard: family systems theory, exchange and choice theories, and family stress theory.

The application of such frameworks allows for a more holistic and contextual approach to the conceptualization of family well-being and the implications of policies that governments enact that affect families. Given the importance of families, not only for individuals but also for society, such an approach is long overdue.

Given trends in family life, how should we think about families and their well-being? This chapter is written from a family policy perspective, providing frameworks that can be used to assess the effects of policies that governments enact that affect families and their well-being, directly or indirectly, intentionally or not, regardless of country. Collectively, such policies are known as family policy (Zimmerman 1988, 1995, 2001), that is, temporarily agreed-upon courses of action consisting of a series of interrelated choices affecting families (Kamerman and Kahn 1978), their goal presumably being to enhance the well-being of families. The frameworks presented in this chapter include family systems theory, exchange and choice theories, and family stress theories. The concepts associated with these frameworks provide criteria that can be used to assess the degree to which

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different family policies indeed foster family well-being. Frameworks also useful for assessing family well-being but not presented here because of space limitations include symbolic interaction, conflict theory, feminist, and cultural theories; interested readers can find discussion of these frameworks in other venues (Zimmerman 1988, 1995, 2001).

Defining Well-Being

Well-being has been defined in several ways. Webster's dictionary defines it as "the state of being healthy and free from want." The family and sociological literature operationalize it similarly, based on indicators such as income, employment, health status, housing, and so forth, as well as on psychological and interpersonal measures that include satisfaction, self-esteem, affect-balance, and so forth. Campbell et al. (1976), Andrews and Withey (1976), and others (Rettig and Bubolz 1983; Rettig et al. 1991) view it as a composite of satisfactions in such life domains as marriage, jobs, leisure, family, and housing. Inglehart (1990) holds satisfaction to be a part of a broad syndrome of attitudes that people hold toward the world in which they live, positive or negative, which Herzog et al. (1982) regard as the outcome of long-term socialization and developmental processes and concurrent environmental conditions. Griffin (1986), like Webster, defines well-being in terms of basic needs and the degree to which they are met, basic needs referring to that which is essential for survival, health, the avoidance of harm, and proper functioning. Sen (1980, 1985) says the primary feature of well-being can be seen in terms of how a person "functions in the broadest sense" which here extends to families – how families function in the broadest sense. Each of the frameworks and all of the chapters in this publication speak to one or more of these definitions, illustrative of their application across countries (Wallace and Abbott 2012).

What Is Family?

As one of the most important institutions shaping human life (Frankel 1976), the definition of family has broadened in recent years to include a wide variety of family forms and structures. Family(ies) is (are) defined here as two or more people who share the same goals and values, are committed to one another over the long term, and usually live in the same household. According to Charles Frankel (1976), the family is "the most immediate and ineluctable of human settings," linking the generations by involving people in the care of their children and, increasingly, their aging parents. As such, it is the source of social memory, legend, history, and a person's identity. Or as the lead actor in a play titled "Somebody, Nobody," by Jane Martin, shouted in a local performance, "In families, people stick, no matter what." Family groupings include married couple families, single-parent families, blended or stepparent and stepchildren families, adoptive parent and adopted children families, intergenerational families, cohabiting heterosexual or gay couple families, and so forth. Given the many forms families can take, how can the different family frameworks presented here be used to conceptualize their well-being? The following discussion includes the assumptions underlying each of the frameworks together with a presentation of their associated concepts and relevant news illustrations.

Conceptualizing Family Well-Being

Family Systems Theory

The family systems perspective that guides the discussion here is drawn from Reuben Hill's (1971) paper titled "Modern Systems Theory and the Family: A Confrontation." Not surprisingly, because it is more structural than other versions of family systems theory such as Broderick's (1993) and Kantor and Lahr (1975), data to support it are more readily available through public sources such as the Census Bureau. Hill begins with the assumption that all family systems are characterized by four properties:

- The tasks they perform to meet the needs of their members and the environment with which they interact.
- The interdependence of component parts, that is, their members.
- Boundaries and boundary maintenance proclivities that serve to differentiate on family from another and the external environment.
- Equilibrium and adaptive propensities for ensuring system viability.

Family Tasks and Functions

The task performing property of families pertains to the functions families are expected to perform. These include (a) the physical maintenance and care of family members; (b) the addition of new members through procreation or adoption and their relinquishment when they mature; (c) the socialization of children for adult roles, such as spouse, parent, worker, citizen, neighbor, community member; (d) the social control of family members to ensure the maintenance of order within the family and groups external to it; (e) the maintenance of family morale and motivation to ensure the performance of tasks that are central to the family and between the family and its external environment; and (f) the production and consumption of goods and services needed to support and maintain the family as a unit. From a system's perspective, then, and according to Sen (1980, 1985), family well-being can be conceptualized as the capacity of families to perform their various functions.

Here, it is important to note that the ways in which families perform their tasks vary and change over time in conjunction with the family life cycle which is determined not only by the age of family members and their sex but also by families' ethnic and socioeconomic background. Thus, the urgency with which such tasks are performed at different life cycle stages – the establishment, childbearing, school age, adolescent, launching, post-parental, and retirement stages – varies and changes accordingly. Because the sequencing of family life cycle stages has blurred in recent years, the timing of the tasks associated with these stages has changed as well. For example, the retired parents of adolescent children who have children may be required to perform tasks associated with both parenthood and grandparenthood simultaneously. Culture too plays a role in the ways in which families perform their developmental tasks. For example, Hmong children enter adulthood as farmers or soldiers when they are 13 or 14 years old, the concept of teenager being alien to the Hmong culture (Mydans 1994). Nevertheless, from a systems perspective and taking culture into account, family well-being can be conceptualized in terms of the effectiveness with which families perform their various tasks, that is, their socialization, social control, physical maintenance, economic, morale, and membership functions, at different life cycle stages.

Interdependence of Family Roles and Positions

The concepts of interdependence and interrelated positions also may be applied to the conceptualization of family well-being. These concepts refer to the interacting reciprocal positions and roles that make up the family system, such as husband-wife, brother-sister, mother-father, father-son, father-daughter, and so forth. Implicit in such positions are roles that must be performed if the family as a system is to fulfill its functions for its members and the larger society. Based on shared values and normative expectations, a network of family relationships develops that serves to unite members in ways that distinguish one family from other families and groups. These relational networks which vary with social class and culture are likely to persist unless or until disrupted by members who challenge the system's basic values and norms. Such relational networks are able to continue even when members are geographically dispersed, largely because of technological advances in communications and transportation that make meaningful family exchanges and the retention of family identity possible (Litwak 1985). Even in the area of finance, technological advances enable families to perform essential caregiving roles for aging parents living in another community and become ill or disabled. Given the leadership content inherent in the parent role, social/community supports for parents in the form of parent education, family and medical leave, child care, and so forth, take on particular significance in terms of families and their well-being. Because of increased longevity, this same observation can be extended to middle-aged children who are responsible for the care of aging or disabled parents and require social, financial, and community supports to perform essential caregiving tasks.

Structural Deficit and Excess

Structural deficit is characteristic of families with empty or unoccupied family positions, such as female-headed or male-headed households with children. Because tasks associated with particular family positions are important for family functioning, such tasks must be allocated or reallocated to other or remaining family positions. Those positions tend to become overburdened with having too many tasks to perform as heads of single-parent families, both male and female, and grandparent-only families frequently report. Some positions also may become overburdened by having new or additional tasks to perform (e.g., the care of frail elderly parents, a grandchild, or stepchildren in addition to one's own) unrelated to family structure. A different case is families, such as blended or polygamous families, with more than one set of parents that could have too many competing occupants for different family positions. Such families are characterized by structural excess. Family structure, in terms of both deficit and excess, often plays a role in conceptualizing, discussing, and assessing family well-being.

Boundaries and Boundary Maintenance

The boundary of any system, another system property, can be conceptualized as the demarcation line separating the system from other systems in its environment. Family boundaries can be determined by differences in the intensity, frequency, and content of interactions that take place within the family from those that take place between the family and other families with which it interacts and such community institutions as schools, social service agencies, churches, hospitals, workplaces, and so forth. Indeed, because of the intimate functions that families perform for their members, family privacy laws have been enacted to protect families from outside intrusion when their boundaries are threatened – unless the safety of a family member is at stake, such as in the case of domestic and child abuse.

Equilibrium and Adaptive Propensities

The notion of equilibrium assumes a range of possible states within which a system can function and to which it presumably can adapt (Hill 1971). In terms of families, if patterns of interactions develop in conformity with the range of norms that members share, they probably can continue to function and survive as systems. The point at which this range has been exceeded becomes apparent in the behaviors of individuals members, such as when a teenager runs away from home or when one of the marital partners engages in an extramarital affair or risks the financial solvency of the family. John Edwards, US senator and presidential candidate in 2008, whose wife, Elizabeth, subsequently divorced him, comes to mind. She died in 2010.

States of equilibrium and adaptation are made possible through negative and positive feedback processes which can be either negative or positive in their consequences for families (Hill 1971). Families as social systems need information and feedback about their performance in relation to their external environment and internal component parts, that is, their members. Information and feedback incongruent with established family goals become the basis for modifying family behaviors and operations. Such feedback is used as inputs into family decision-making processes. Families, for example, need information about changes in the Social Security program as input into decisions about retirement as well as other information pertinent to their situation, such as the status of their pension fund. In this manner, they may be able to make decisions that will ensure the maintenance and viability of the family once labor force participation is no longer their income source. The same may be said with regard to health care reform in the United States, particularly as it pertains to health care coverage for members with a preexisting health condition.

Feedback about family task performance can be both negative and positive without necessarily being negative or positive in its consequences. Both negative and positive feedback begin with error or a mismatch between system behaviors and internal and external standards or values. Negative feedback differs from positive feedback, however, by acting to reduce the mismatch between information about a system's performance and values, triggering behaviors to bring the two into convergence. In this respect, negative feedback is a change-resistant set of operations, geared toward the status quo or morphostasis. Positive feedback, on the other hand, is a deviation-amplifying rather than a deviation-reduction process. Viewed as instructive and system enhancing, positive feedback is considered essential to the morphogenic process through which systems grow and change. Change that occurs as a result of positive feedback is referred to as morphogenesis. Morphogenesis can take many forms such as a change in system values, purposes, and standards such as can occur during periods of economic downturn when family members may be out of work – or an economic upturn when family fortunes might improve. It also can occur when families move to a different country, adopting the latter's culture as their own, as many immigrant families in fact do.

In addition to changes in system values, purposes, and standards, morphogenesis may take the form of changes in a family's internal and external input operations, such as changes in the ways in which parents communicate with their children – or with each other – at different stages of family development or as a consequence of changes in members' attitudes and knowledge. Illustrative is a mother who reported that she learned how to be a better parent as a result of participating in family education programs. Finally, such change may take the form of the ascendance of members with new and different properties and attributes in the governance and management of the system. Here again, family education programs that teach *both* mothers and fathers how to parent and assume their leadership roles in the family are illustrative.

Integrally related to the concepts of positive feedback and morphogenesis is the idea of "mapping for variety" and the necessity for a continuous flow of varied information, experience, and input into the system – new and different ways of looking at problems or the world in which families live. Here, computer technology and the internet, by making information on a wide variety of subjects instantaneously and readily available to families, are relevant. Also relevant are the disparities in access to such technology among families at different income levels in the United States, accentuating differences in family well-being as well.

The Environment

The environment refers to conditions or influences external to the system that are both system specific and general in nature (Hall 1972). General environmental conditions affecting all systems include weather, economic globalization, technological advances, war, social unrest, and so forth. Examples of environmental conditions specific to families as systems include political and financial support for child care, child care subsidies for working parents, insurance coverage for prescription drugs for elderly family members, access to health care, banking regulations, and so on. Terreberry (1972) characterized the environment in which families live as highly complex, interactive, and turbulent, constantly presenting families and other social systems with sudden and unpredictable changes that continually threaten to upset their equilibrium and capacity to adapt and predict the future and control the consequences of their actions. Thus, families as systems are vulnerable not only to disequilibrium internally induced by their members and their own developmental processes but also are vulnerable to the turbulent nature of their external environment, and threatening to their well-being. The ongoing restructuring of the economy and the uncertainty surrounding health care reform in the United States are but two examples. Terreberry's conceptualization of the environment in terms of systems' transactional interdependencies underscores the importance of the input–output processes connecting families to their environment, such processes facilitated through linkage or liaison roles incorporated into different family positions, such as mother/father. These liaison roles have serious implications for family well-being in terms of facilitating the input–output processes with respect to government policies and programs that affect families, directly or indirectly.

Exchange and Choice Theories

Although based on a different set of assumptions and concepts, exchange and choice theories offer another way of conceptualizing the input–output processes associated with family systems theory and for thinking about family well-being. From the perspective of family systems theory, such exchanges are forms of inputs and outputs which from the perspective of exchange and choice theories are based on choices. Among the assumptions underlying these theories are that:

- Families are made up of members who as human beings are rational, make decisions, and initiate actions (Blau 1964; Ekeh 1974; Gouldner 1960; Levi-Strauss 1966; Nye 1979).
- Within the limits of the information they possess and their ability to predict the future, they are able to assess the rewards and costs of alternative choices (Sabetelli and Shehan 1993).
- Based on their assessment of the costs and rewards of alternative choices, members choose the alternative that promises the greatest rewards at the lowest cost. In other words, they seek to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs of their behaviors and choices and thereby enhance their family's well-being.
- By engaging in one set of behaviors rather than another, families incur costs in the rewards they seek and forego the rewards of alternative choices.
- The values and standards that members hold determine the rewards and costs of alternative choices.
- If other viable choices are available to them and their costs are low, members will not repeat behaviors that were not rewarded in the past.
- In assessing the costs and rewards of different exchanges, norms of reciprocity and fairness take precedence over profitability.

Rewards and Costs

Rewards from the perspective of the exchange and choice frames are defined as pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications derived from particular statuses, relationships, interactions, relationships, and experiences (Nye 1979). Rewards may include any of the following:

- Social approval in the form of respect, prestige, and admiration
- Autonomy in terms of being able to choose activities, positions, relations, or locales that offer gratification and satisfaction at no or low cost
- Physical security having to do with food, clothing, shelter, health care, physical safety, etc.
- Money for purchasing goods and services that provide pleasure and/or satisfy needs
- Equality based on what the respective parties can offer each other.

Costs are the opposite of rewards. They are defined as statuses, relationships, interactions, and situations that family members regard unpleasant, distasteful, or uncomfortable. Costs also can take the form of rewards foregone as a consequence of choosing a competing alternative, that is, one alternative over another. For example, some adult children, saddled with student loans and out of work, regard the necessity of moving back home with their parents to save money distasteful and unpleasant, in other words, costly. “Living at home absolutely crimps my social life,” one adult daughter low on finances said (Roberts 2010). Other adult children deliberately choose to remain at home because of the financial and other benefits it offers. One scuba diver instructor said that while his family’s rent-stabilized apartment was a consideration in his decision to live at home, so was his grandmother’s age, 90. “The truth is my grandmother is not going to live forever and I want to spend as much time with her as possible with no regrets later,” he explained. Indeed, the number of people in the 25–39 age group living at home with their parents increased by almost a third between 2000 and 2008 – before the full effects of the recession in the United States were felt (Roberts 2010), their percentage almost doubling during that period.

Because of the uncertainty involved in the calculation of the costs and rewards of alternative choices, the actual costs and rewards of alternative choices cannot be fully known in advance – health care reform in the United States again being an example – for individuals, families, and government. Therefore, decision-makers – whether parents or policy makers – often experience considerable anxiety and ambivalence when making choices whose outcomes are uncertain. Choices with regard to retirement often are of this nature, involving uncertain calculations with regard to life expectancy, personal investments, the future of Social Security, health status, and health care costs. Many other examples could be cited. Recently, one newly divorced mother of two young boys wrote that based on her experience today and with the recession raising the stakes, fewer mothers in the future may be willing to risk the choice of opting out of the job market to care for children and the financial sacrifices that it entailed (Read 2011).

In general, unpredictability, ambiguity, uncertainty, and anxiety all represent costs that individuals and families – and governments – must bear when making choices. Such costs may prevent consideration of alternatives that could offer rewards exceeding those presently known. This applies to the uncertainty confronting abused wives when trying to decide whether to leave or remain in their present situation, which they already know. It also applies to those who, fearful that health care reform would result in higher taxes, oppose it, placing their health care and economic security in jeopardy.

Profitability

Profitability strives for the most favorable reward-cost ratio. The profitability of alternative choices can be determined by assessing the potential rewards and costs of a sequence of possible actions. A profitable outcome is one that not only absorbs the costs of an alternative choice but also compensates for it. Such was the choice of the scuba diver who decided to live at home in pleasant surroundings where his grandmother also lived rather than live by himself in less pleasant surroundings that would cost him more money. Some polls show that many families would willingly pay more taxes to profit from the rewards of quality education, better police protection, and health care for everyone. Depending on the values they hold relative to particular relationships, statuses, experiences, and objects, individuals and families vary in their perceptions of the rewards and costs of alternative choices, as illustrated by some of the examples already cited. Such differences can be discerned by observing the behaviors of individuals and families and also by asking them what they like and do not like about the alternatives that confront them.

Comparison Level and Comparison Level Alternatives

According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), comparison level refers to the standard by which families compare the costs and rewards of different choices. The assumption is that those perceiving they are less well off than they think they deserve or would like to be will be angry about the choices that confront them while those perceiving they are better off than they think they deserve will feel guilty. Both anger and guilt represent costs. Illustrative are workers whose jobs are retained while those of coworkers are cut when their companies downsize. Newspaper accounts are replete with stories about the anxiety and guilt remaining employees experience as a result of company layoffs and downsizing.

Individuals and families intuitively compare the costs and rewards of alternative situations and choices, aided sometimes by computer simulations that make more precise comparisons possible. Illustrative are computer analyses of the costs and rewards of alternative tax and health care plans for families in different circumstances, such as the costs of the premiums of different health care plans in 2010 compared to projected costs in 2015 – with and without health care reform. The concept of comparison level alternatives is defined as the comparison of the rewards and costs associated with alternative relationships, statuses, or situations. Clearly, the couple who moved with the 28 children they adopted in Haiti to their home in an abandoned school building in Indiana compared their situation favorably to what it would have been had they not adopted the Haitian children.

Reciprocity

In exchange and choice theories, reciprocity as a norm takes precedence over the norm of profitability or for the most favorable reward-cost ratio (Nye 1979). Reciprocity implies interdependence, a spirit of mutuality, of taking other people into account when making choices. It is based on the assumption that people should help, not hurt others, especially those who have helped them in the past. Based on the norm of reciprocity, individuals and families often make choices accordingly, as illustrated again by the couple cited above who adopted the 28 children in Haiti. No-smoking ordinances and the 55-mile-per-hour speed limit also are expressions of reciprocity and a collective awareness of the costs of smoking and speeding for others. Reciprocity is often expressed in gifts of philanthropy and statements of donors who say they want to give back to society and that which they received from others in the past.

All of the concepts associated with exchange and choice theories – costs, rewards, satisfaction, expectations, comparison levels and comparison level alternatives, profitability, reciprocity – can be used as conceptual tools for assessing family well-being from the perspective of these frameworks. The most obvious application of these concepts is that they can be used to assess the relative rewards and costs associated with a specific family policy or program for those most affected by it. The greater the rewards the program is perceived to provide and the lower its perceived costs – for families – the more it meets the family well-being criterion. The concept of comparison level alternatives can be used to compare the relative costs and rewards of alternative family policies and programs for families, such as foster care reimbursement payments and payments to families under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program and for different groups of families. Profitability also can be used to assess family well-being as it indeed is used when critics assert that unemployment benefits contribute to high unemployment rates because a job is not "profitable" for laid off workers who critics say come to rely on such benefits rather than gainful employment for their income. And finally, reciprocity, which implies mutuality and interdependence, conveying the idea that people should help, not hurt, others can be used to assess the implications of different policies and programs for families and their well-being – whether they help rather than hurt families – and which ones.

Family Stress Theory

The original family stress model was called a crisis model. It was developed by Reuben Hill (1949, 1958) and called the ABCX model whereby:

- A is the stressor event that places demands on individual families.
- B is the family's resources for meeting the demands arising out of the stressor event.
- C is the family's definition of the situation.
- X is the crisis.

The basic assumption of the model is simple: depending on the resources available to meet the demands of their situation and how they perceive and define it, families may or may not experience a crisis.

The Stressor Event

The stressor event is central to the framework. It is the A factor, the factor that represents the demands, families are required to meet. It may be normative, that is, an expectable taken-for-granted event in the life cycle of the family, such as marriage, the birth of a child, the entry of the child into kindergarten, and so forth. Such events create the need for families to change the ways they function in a variety of ways.

Given declining rates of marriage, some may question the normative status of marriage today. Boss' work (1987) on boundary ambiguity as a source of family stress is relevant here. Boundary ambiguity refers to uncertainty as to who is and is not a member of the family. She measured the concept based on the physical presence but psychological absence of family members, as in the case of families who live together but whose members are preoccupied with their own individual issues or problems, such as joblessness. She also measured it by the psychological presence but physical absence of family members, as in the case of mothers or fathers in the military.

Nonnormative stressors are unexpected and unanticipated life events, such as car accidents, tornadoes, carjackings, earthquakes, winning the lottery, and so forth, that similarly create demands that have the potential of upsetting the balance that families require to function effectively. Such imbalance for families about to become homeless is in part what prompted the Obama administration to create the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing program within its $787 billion economic stimulus package. The program is based on the assumption that once people become homeless, the odds that they may not be able to regain their balance escalates sharply.

Family Resources

Family resources, the B factor, are those material and nonmaterial assets upon which families can draw to meet the demands of their situation. Such resources include (1) family cohesion which develops out of common interests, shared values, mutual affection, and financial interdependence; (2) family adaptability which refers to the ability of families to overcome difficulties and change direction (Olson et al. 1979); (3) satisfactions members derive from meeting the needs of one another and move toward collective goals (Koos 1946); (4) the psychological and physical health of family members; (5) a structure that is organized to meet the needs of family members; (6) time, energy, and money; (7) knowledge and information; and (8) friends and community. Other resources include policies and programs that meet specific demands and needs, such as health insurance to meet demands arising from the illness or failing health of a family member, or child care to meet demands arising from parents' employment or child's developmental needs. Whatever the resource, it must be relevant to the situation and have the potential for maintaining the demand-resource balance of individual families.

Definition of the Situation

Families' subjective definitions and perceptions of the situation, the C factor, is integral to family stress theory, just as it is integral to other family theories, such as exchange and choice theories and symbolic interaction. Families' definitions and perceptions of the situation are based on the meanings they assign to the stressor event, the demands of their situation, and the resources they have available for meeting such demands. How families define their situation also depends on their values and previous experience in dealing with stressful events.

The Crisis

The crisis or X factor refers to the inability of families to function as a result of a stressor event, the absence of resources for meeting the demands of their situation, and their definitions and perceptions of the stressor event. If families have the resources necessary for meeting situational demands and do not perceive or define the situation as a crisis, they may never experience a stressor event in crisis terms, despite the operational or structural changes it may impose on them. This is what is meant by the model: A, the demands arising from a stressor event interacting with B, the family's resources for meeting such demands interacting with C, the family's definition of the situation, and X, the crisis that may or may not occur as a result of the interactions between A, B, and C.

Thus, stressor events create demands that some families are less able to meet than others, threatening the demand-resource balance needed to enable them to function and overwhelming their adaptive capacities. The infusion of government resources such as housing and low interest government loans during periods of natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, often help to provide the demand-resource balance families need to avoid a crisis. This was not the case for a family of an 8-year-old boy born with extensive disabilities who required a variety of technological devices in order to live. In a letter to the editor, the mother wrote that because the family's insurance would no longer cover the costs of home health care for children with chronic conditions, it threatened to destroy her family, saying she and her husband would not be able to care for their other two children and provide 24-h medical care for their son at the same time (Westendorp 1994).

The Double ABCX Model

McCubbin and Patterson (1981) elaborate on Hill's original ABCX model by extending it over time to bring longitudinal and process perspectives into the framework. According to McCubbin and Patterson, four additional factors seem to play a role in influencing the course of family adaptation to a stressor event. These include:

- Additional stressors that impinge on the situation, the AA factor, called stress pileup, such where family experiences both normative and nonnormative family events at the same time as when a father of a newborn baby is called into military service.

- Family efforts to generate new or additional resources to bring to bear on the situation, the BB factor.
- Modifications in families' perceptions and views of their situation, the CC factor.
- Family coping strategies that facilitate family adjustments and adaptations to their situation.

Here, it should be noted that different coping strategies could be viewed as the BB factor or AA factor in different situations. For example, alcohol abuse as a coping strategy may increase family strains and tensions for homeless families, thus, acting as an additional demand or stressor for them. Other coping strategies such as going into therapy or volunteering or pursuing additional education might act to alleviate such strains and tensions, thus, acting as additional resources for affected families.

- Family efforts to generate new or additional resources to bring to bear on the situation, the CC factor.
- Modifications in families' perceptions and views of their situation, the CC factor.

It is useful to note here that critics caution the need for cultural sensitivity when assessing families' definitions and perceptions of their situation as it pertains to different ethnic and racial minority families, given that what may be adaptive strategies for some families may be survival strategies for others (Dilworth-Anderson et al. 1993).

Family Coping Strategies that Facilitate Adjustments and Adaptations to the Situation

In a different formulation, coping strategies might be viewed as the BB factor – or the AA factor – in that particular coping strategies, such as alcohol abuse, may contribute to existing family strains and tensions and thus act as additional stressors. Other coping strategies, such as therapy or volunteer work, may alleviate such tensions, in which case these would be additional resources brought to bear on the situation. The denial that some families evidence during periods of natural disasters until they are able to cope with the reality of their situation could be considered similarly. Coping strategies that rely on scarce or inaccessible community resources can compound the stress families experience, the AA factor. Think of families experiencing the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or earthquake in Haiti and, more recently, New Zealand and Japan, or for that matter, in all countries and states suffering serious economic dislocations.

Many stories associated with the increase in the number of multi-generational households in the United States or the "doubling up" phenomenon are illustrative of the Double ABCX framework and successive stressor events and attempts to cope with them. One story in particular is that of grandparents undergoing their own financial struggles when they agreed to having their oldest daughter and her family move in with them after they lost their home to foreclosure in 2008. The grandfather