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บทความวิชาการ

Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Family Research

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Families differ from other social units in many aspects (Thomas, 1986). First, relationships in a family are primarily affectionate in nature, whereas in other groups relationships begin as task or interest oriented. Affectionate bonds within other groups may result from prolonged interactions; however, they are secondary to the attraction that drew the group together.

The second difference is the variety of ages and genders found within a family. Peer and work groups are generally composed of similar-aged individuals. They often attract same gender members sharing occupational or recreational interests. On the other hand, families have both genders and two or more generations.

Third, a family relationship is virtually permanent. Once you are born, marry, or are legally adopted into a family, you remain a member until death. Rarely is a family member permanently expelled from the group. Finally, a family has a unique culture and tradition that is expected to extend into the future. Family cultures and traditions set a strong precedent for current and future functioning (Thomas, 1986).

There are many perspectives from which to view a family. Each perspective is derived from a researcher's reason for studying a family. A perspective shapes the angle from which the unit of analysis is viewed, and includes or excludes objects of interest or variables within the unit for investigation. In the following paragraphs, two major perspectives of the family are presented.

The Family as an Environment for Individuals

One environmental field in which an individual is embedded is his/her family (Fawcett, 1975). A family is viewed as an environment for individual growth, development, and well being. Researchers valuing this perspective focus on the influence a family as a group has on an individual within a family unit. The unit of investigation or concern is not centered on the family itself ; rather it concentrates on the effect the family has on one member (Thomas, 1986). For example, if an individual has a critical illness, researchers may be interested in that

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family's unique attributes such as support systems, resources, and ways of providing comfort or effect on the individual's health. The effect of critically ill patients on the family is not of primary concern in this perspective.

The Family as a Unit of Analysis

Viewed from this perspective, the family itself is the focus of concern or unit of investigation (Thomas, 1986). For example, it is the influence of adult critical illness on a family that is the most important variable of a study. Investigations or clinical observations of a family's adaptations, responses, or reactions to critical illness exemplify this perspective. Changes in a family's patterns, behaviors, or belief system resulting from adult critical illness are examples of the indicators studied from this perspective.

If we treat a family as a unit of analysis, we may categorize data into three levels : individual data, relational data, and transactional data (Fisher et al., 1985). Individual data mostly involves one informants, whereas relational and transactional data involve several informants (Uphold & Strickland, 1989).

Individual Data

Much of the research on families is based on data involving one family member (Fisher et al., 1985). The assumption underlying the use of individual data in family research is that personal constructions of family phenomena are accorded the highest priority. Theories such as symbolic interaction, and family crisis and stress theory, accord emphasis to such constructions. For example, family crisis and stress theory assumes that it is an individual's perception that shapes one's beliefs, values and behaviors, as well as those of others. Because "one's perception is assumed to be the guiding force behind behaviors within the family, it becomes logical for an individual to become the unit of analysis for the study" (Uphold & Strickland, 1989, p. 406).

Another assumption is that one individual in a family is the most accurate and knowledgeable member. For example, a family member who is the primary care provider for an ill member may be more attuned to family phenomena than other, less involved members.

The primary advantages in using individual data are that it is less costly, is easier to score and interpret, and creates fewer statistical analysis problems than collecting data from many family members. Another advantage is that an individual may express thoughts and emotions more freely if alone, rather than with other family members. Finally, instruments appropriate for individual data are more available (Sullivan & Fawcett, 1991).

Recently, questions have been raised about the validity of measures of family phenomena using individual data. Family phenomena are usually complex, dynamic, and interactive. The individual's data may be out of the context of the family unit, and thus do not reflect family interactions. They may result in a biased perspective of family phenomena (Sidani & Jones, 1995 ; Uphold & Strickland, 1989).



Relational Data

Obtaining data from multiple family members may provide greater insight into family phenomena. Individual-level data from two or more family members are “related” to each other by an investigator through methods such as using an aggregate score, summed score, arithmetic mean, discrepancy score, bivariate correlation, or a multivariate approach (Fisher et al., 1985). This is relational data, which is appropriate when studies are based on theories, such as the family system theory and structural functionalism (Uphold & Strickland, 1989).

Using relational data has some advantages. First, relational data “yield descriptive statements about the family, or represent an attribute of the family as a whole” (Fisher et al., 1985, p.215). Second, there is no need for researchers to develop new instruments. Little or no revision in several existing instruments (previously implemented on the individual data level) can be used to generate relational data (Sullivan & Fawcett, 1991).

However, using several family respondents may present some problems. For example, researchers may struggle with difficult statistical analysis (Fisher et al., 1985 ; Sidani & Jones, 1995 ; Uphold & Strickland, 1989). Another concern is related to the bias that may be created when researchers cannot obtain data from an entire family unit, as one or more family members choose not to participate. Finally, extensive efforts to recruit and retain all family members as participants in the study are required to decrease the likelihood of bias (Uphold & Strickland, 1989).

Transactional Data

Transactional data is derived from the functioning of an entire family unit, and is not a reflection of the separate contributions of family members, individually or in combination. The transactional unification of the family’s elements into a whole is significantly different from the sum of its parts. Transactional data can be obtained directly from naturalistic observations, or from the actual contingent behavior of the dyadic family unit (Fisher et al., 1985).

The major advantage of transactional data is that it actually yields comprehensive and “rich” data with a known context (Sullivan & Fawcett, 1991). However, there are some disadvantages. First is the need for a space large enough to accommodate the entire family. Second, much effort is required to obtain the consent and cooperation of all family members (Sullivan & Fawcett, 1991).

In sum, both perspectives (family as an environment and family as a unit of analysis) are of equal importance, and both can contribute knowledge about the family. They can be simultaneously conducted within a single program of research. However, it is important that a researcher clearly delineates which perspective is being used.





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