



Taking Family Systems Theory Beyond the Family

A Review of

Families in an Era of Increasing Inequality: Diverging Destinies

by Paul R. Amato, Alan Booth, Susan M. McHale, and Jennifer Van Hook (Eds.)

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Murray Bowen's family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) posits that many of the principles of systems theory are applicable to larger social groups. The final principle that he developed, the eighth in a series of interlocked concepts, was "emotional process in society" (Bowen, 1978, pp. 413–449). The patterns of managing anxiety in agencies, institutions, and governments are remarkably similar to those demonstrated when families experience stress. In both families and larger social structures, chronic anxiety crosses generations, provokes triangles, and seeks to assign blame for perceived problems.

Without mentioning Bowen or his theory, Amato, Booth, McHale, and Van Hook amalgamate a wealth of data and analysis in *Families in an Era of Increasing Inequality: Diverging Destinies* to address the rampant inequality that exists among American families and children in the 21st century. Certainly the increasing social, economic, and political polarization in America is a reflection of serious inequality within the population and more people are at the lower range of the socioeconomic spectrum. This fact is hardly questioned, but efforts toward resolution rarely find agreement.

The general method of the book is to examine the question of the impact of inequality at certain levels of child development and parenting, as well as programmatic and policy implications within the context of inequality. The 16 chapters consist of prepared, invited presentations at a conference, The 21st Annual Penn State Symposium on Family Issues in 2013. McLanahan and Jacobsen (Chapter 1) updated previous work on inequality to provide a framework to which other scholars responded from the areas of their own expertise, which included sociology and criminology, child and family development, social work, and psychology.

For example, Chapter 7 is "Inequality Begins Outside the Home: Putting Parental Educational Investments into Context." Chapter 5 is "Inequality Begins at Home: The Role of Poverty in the Diverging Destinies of Rich and Poor Children." There is no attempt to

reconcile these points. Clearly, in good systems fashion, they both can be true. Among the more interesting points of the book is the attention to children's development to the transition to adulthood. How does poverty, or more broadly, inequality, influence this movement? The importance of this issue for the education, health, and welfare of families is critical and its importance for educational, health, and social welfare institutions is obvious. The recognition of the influence of poverty on families provides perspective for administrators to develop different programs for children and families with particular needs. A currently successful example is the school breakfast and lunch programs for children of needy families. Additionally, children with intellectual disabilities from families living in poverty have needs that differ from those children who function within a normal range, particularly more specialized needs.

No particular theoretical position drives the collection of information across the chapters of the book. They appear to be efforts to collect objective data that reflect concerns from the inequality experienced by American families. The atheoretical presentations underscore the valuable contribution to scholars, students, policy makers, bureaucrats, and front-line workers, such as teachers, physicians, mental health clinicians, lawyers, judges, social workers, and administrators. It invites a theoretical perspective to give order to the data, formulating them in such a way to be responsive to specific questions and problem areas. A theoretical perspective enables the data to be organized around specific concerns of policy makers or questions of researchers and scholars.

It appears that a systems theory is necessary to embrace two important characteristics of the presentations in the book. First, a systems theory can bring together the diverse contexts, developmental processes, and institutions that are relevant to families and children in America. Second, it is sensitive to the interaction among institutions and processes that are relevant to families and children—the influences of politics, economics, and existing institutional configurations that influence the policies that have brought America to the point of inequality that we currently experience.

Of course, ideologists will beat these data into the weapons or plowshares of their choosing to support the parts of the system that support them and their points of view. This ignoring of the process by which ideology is formed continues the social, political, and economic gridlock that, in part at least, lies at the basis for the inequality that drives the concern that led to the development of this book. This abuse of the book does not, however, detract from its effort to describe the process, consequences, and likely future of inequality. A dispassionate understanding of the process likely is necessary to move toward doing something meaningful about it.

Equally important, though, in the understanding of process, is the continued critical examination of the data that are presented in the book and to the resulting analyses of that data in light of the experience of family inequality in America. That examination must entertain the possibility that this reviewer is wrong in the judgment that no theoretical perspective drove the collection and presentation of data in this book, and that this reviewer is working his own agenda. That is the importance of the systems point of view and of the focus on the process of understanding rather than assigning blame.

Reference

Bowen, M. B. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Aronson.