



# **Family Systems Theory: Applications for PSA Casework**

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# Welcome

- Please tell us:
  - Your name
  - Where you are from
  - Something interesting about the people you consider your “family”

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# Overview Goals

- Exploring definitions of “family”
  - To gain an understanding of Family Systems Theory and the Family Systems Perspective
  - To practice the application of Family Systems Perspectives to casework with PSA clients and their “families”
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# Brainstorm...

Who is “family” to you?

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# Defining Family

## A broad definition of family includes:

- The traditional family definition (parent and child),
  - Intimate partners,
  - Trusted others,
  - Individuals living in the same household,
  - Individuals who have daily interactions with one another and those who care for the person in question.
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# **Family Systems Theory**

## **An Overview**

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# Family Systems Theory

- Emerged from General Systems Theory
  - “bounded set of interrelated elements exhibiting coherent behavior as a trait.” (Constantine, 1986)
  - “an assemblage or objects related to each other by some regular interaction or interdependence.” (Webster)
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# Family Systems Theory

- **Interrelated Elements**
    - The members
  - **Patterned interactions**
    - Predictable interactions
  - **Boundaries**
    - Open and Closed
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# Family Systems Theory

- **Function as a whole**
    - Sum of all of the parts
  - **Shape member behavior**
    - Using messages and rules
  - **Subsystems follow the same rules**
    - Smaller groups within the larger whole
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# **Family Systems Perspectives**

## **A Continuum of Family Health**

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# Overview to Family Systems Perspectives

- Most families fall on a continuum somewhere between *healthy* and *dysfunctional*
  - This continuum represents the range of experiences, history and functioning of a family system
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# Family Systems Perspectives

- Family members actions influence all members of the system
  - All families are in a constant state of change
  - The family system seeks stability in the midst of these changes
  - When individual members change, the system seeks to restore itself
  - A family is more than the sum of its parts, it is a system
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# Characteristics and Family Dynamics

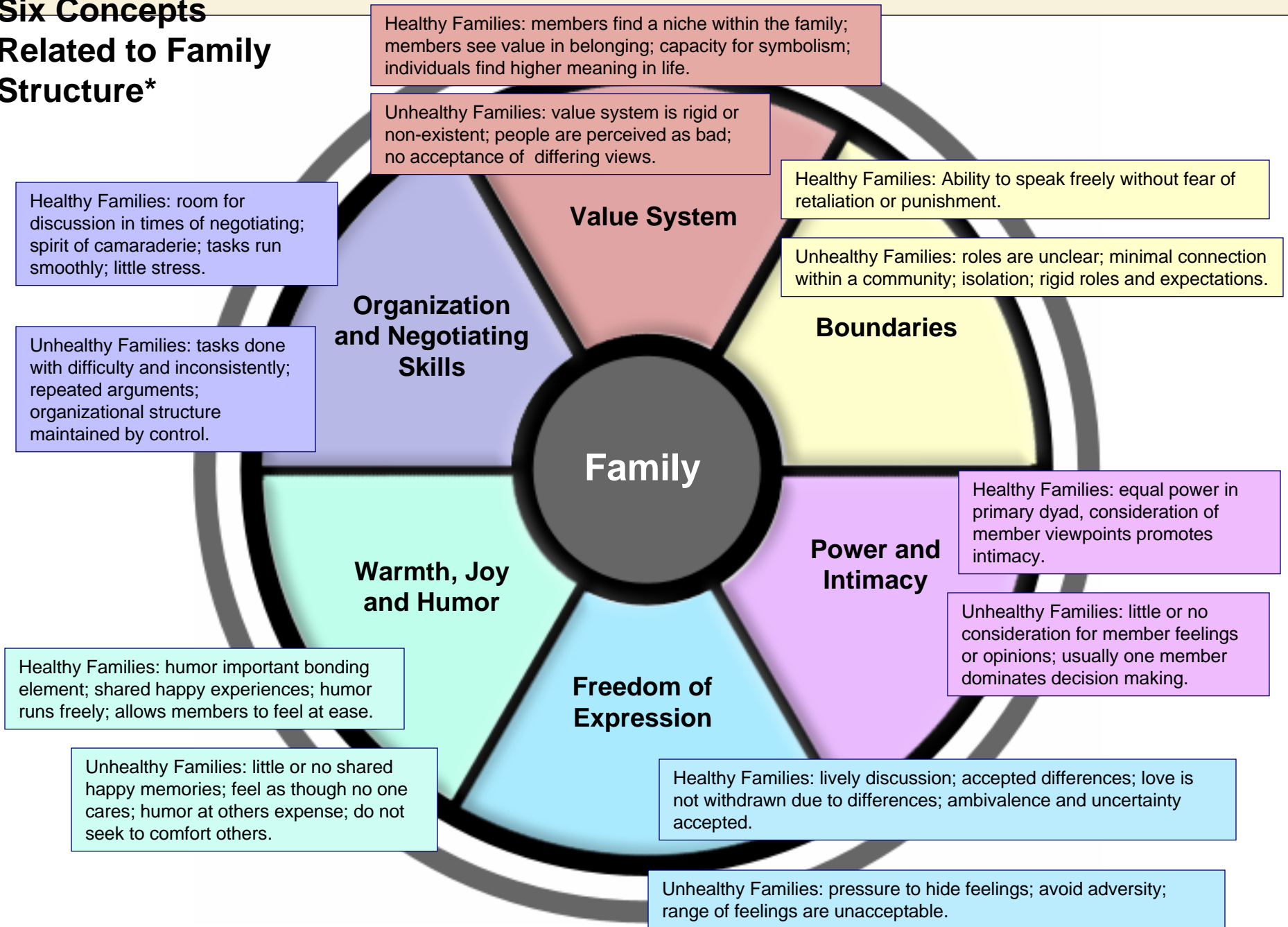
- Identifying individual characteristics of either *healthy* or *unhealthy* families does not necessarily indicate where a family is situated on this continuum
  - Multiple characteristics must be observed when attempting to identify the “health” of any family
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# Six Concepts Related to Family Structure

- Boundaries
  - Power and Intimacy
  - Freedom of Expression
  - Warmth, Joy and Humor
  - Organization and negotiating skills
  - Value Systems
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# Six Concepts Related to Family Structure\*



\*Adapted from Peterson, G. (1996)

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# Applying Family System Perspectives

## Activity

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# Assessment...

- Determine the psycho-social functioning of our primary client
  - Conducted through direct interviews, client self-report, archival records and collateral information
  - Provides the framework for intervention
  - *Family Systems* provides an opportunity to utilize members for information and support
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# Intervention...

- Relies on a complete, accurate assessment
  - Includes client in the process and increases self-determination
  - Utilizes client to identify problems, goals, and potential solutions
  - Must include all relevant systems related to the problem and alleviation of the problem
  - That includes the *Family System*
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# Important Note: Cultural Influences

- Working with individuals from diverse populations holds many of the same practice strategies as working with individuals from the dominant culture.
  - ***You should always begin with the client sitting with you.***
  - This practice is very similar to the way in which you interact with any family as all families have different cultures or prescriptions for how they operate.
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# Important Note: Cultural Influences

- The descriptions about any groups are generalizations and **do not** describe all persons identifying with the group
- There is a great deal of diversity within groups as well as within cultures
- You will bring with you to any assessment the sum total of your experiences with persons from diverse backgrounds
- The assumptions you may make regarding clients from a different background can create a barrier to identifying and intervening in family systems...be mindful of this

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# **Fish Bowl**

## **Case Examples in Action**

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# Instructions

- We will need 5 or 6 chairs in the center of the room
  - All other chairs should be placed in a circle around the center
  - We will need 5 or 6 volunteers for each case
  - We will read the case vignette and then role play a meeting between the caseworker(s) and the family
  - Everyone IN and OUT of the fish bowl will need to report on the experience
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# Case Study 1: Jan X

## Actors/Actresses:

- What was this experience like for you?
- Caseworker(s): Who in this family did you like? Dislike? And why?
- Do you think that understanding family systems perspectives helped you in your interactions with this family?
- Were there any cultural influences at work here?
- Family members: What did you think of your caseworker(s)? Do you think that he/she can help your family? Why or why not?

## Observers:

- Where do you think this family falls on the continuum of family health with this current level of functioning? Why?
- Do you think this system is functioning in a way that will assist you or hinder you in your work?
- Who in the family do you see as potentially supportive? Potentially disruptive?
- Knowing a bit more about this family and about family systems in general, how would you proceed?

# Case Study 2: The Sun Family

## Actors/Actresses:

- What was this experience like for you?
- Caseworker(s): Who in this family did you like? Dislike? And why?
- Do you think that understanding family systems perspectives helped you in your interactions with this family?
- Were there any cultural influences at work here?
- Family members: What did you think of your caseworker(s)? Do you think that he/she can help your family? Why or why not?

## Observers:

- Where do you think this family falls on the continuum of family health with this current level of functioning? Why?
- Do you think this system is functioning in a way that will assist you or hinder you in your work?
- Who in the family do you see as potentially supportive? Potentially disruptive?
- Knowing a bit more about this family and about family systems in general, how would you proceed?

# Case Study 3: Sophia

## Actors/Actresses:

- What was this experience like for you?
- Caseworker(s): Who in this family did you like? Dislike? And why?
- Do you think that understanding family systems perspectives helped you in your interactions with this family?
- Were there any cultural influences at work here?
- Family members: What did you think of your caseworker(s)? Do you think that he/she can help your family? Why or why not?

## Observers:

- Where do you think this family falls on the continuum of family health with this current level of functioning? Why?
- Do you think this system is functioning in a way that will assist you or hinder you in your work?
- Who in the family do you see as potentially supportive? Potentially disruptive?
- Knowing a bit more about this family and about family systems in general, how would you proceed?

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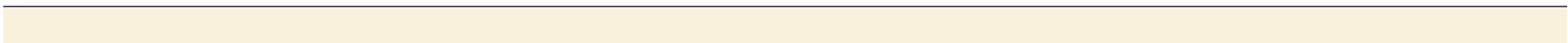
# Pulling it together...

- We defined family very broadly recognizing that there may be many persons of influence we need to consider in our work
  - We learned about Family Systems Theory and how it can give us clues to the dynamics at work in our client's lives
  - This perspective may also help us to find supportive family and to discover family members who might be barriers to our work
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# Pulling it together...

- And finally, we know that all of this information will help our practice and will help us to better understand the needs and wishes of our clients



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# Thank you!

- Have we answered all of your questions?
- Can you take a few minutes to fill out your evaluation? It will help us to understand how we did and how we can do better in the future.
- You can find a copy of this presentation at:  
[www.albany.edu/aging](http://www.albany.edu/aging)

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