

The Family in the Social Complexity: From A View of Social Systems Theory

Hamano, Takeshi

(School of Human Relations, Department of Humanities)

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Abstract

Taking the elaboration of social systems theory into account, this paper aims to explore the ways in which the family today can be theorized in social theory. As a result of the functional differentiation of the process of modernization, the family, as a distinctive functional system, has been given quite particular meanings. In relation to other self-referential social systems and the structural couplings and communications through them, it may also be necessary for the theory to involve a wider range of family organizational patterns while remaining a space wherein intimacy is maintained. The functional approach to the family of Niklas Luhman's social systems theory will account for a radical model of the family. If the family today must be investigated with consideration to its wider dynamic relationships (or communications) with other social components beyond regional or spatial limits in the age of globalization, his theoretical elaboration can be further investigated in that it redefines social systems theory by drawing attention to the alternative traits of modernizations in our society.

Introduction

Sociological analysis of the family can be categorized into several major genres, each of which, regardless of their specific theoretical outlines, primarily focuses on historical shifts in the process of modernization (Engels 1972; Chodolow 1974; Allan 1985; Ochiai 1996; Ueno 2009). One of the major approaches foregrounds an attention to the structure of the family in an examination of ongoing conflicts among family members, inequalities which it produces a

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critical analysis of sexuality and gender divisions of labor in the family. The family has been one of the dominant social topics in gender studies, as evidenced by the critical inquiry about the concept of patriarchy. Increasing concerns about the welfare (and human rights) of children in the family, along with family diversity, can be discussed within the theoretical revisions of sexuality and intimacy. Not only do studies that engage with these questions identify problems and solve inequalities, but also attempt to move towards greater equality in family patterns and membership. Policy-making approaches in both sociology and other social sciences (e.g. social work or psychology) can be incorporated into this framework, although they sometimes lead to normative discourses about what the family should be.

In addition to pragmatic approaches to the family and society, another more theoretical approach focuses on the reconstruction of the structure and function of the family in society, giving an account of the family in the context of macro social theory (Parsons et al. 1955). Regarding the family as a comprehensive and distinctive system in society, this type of sociological endeavor seeks to theoretically and empirically examine the ways in which the family has been (re)constructed in the process of modernization, and also to explore its formal distinctions as such. Of course, the structural and functional characteristics of the family system need to be assessed inclusively, with consideration to other social structures and functions in society as a whole. Namely, assuming some degree of common structure and function, the family can be understood as both an exclusive and relational (or historical) system that is reconstructed at every period of time¹.

The main aim of this paper is to execute a sociological inquiry into the theory of contemporary family. Considering the diverse formations of the family and the social issues that arise with it, the study explores the ways in which social theory of the family is capable of dealing with both the complexity of the family and its individuality in society. In doing so, this paper highlights social systems theory and its theoretical elaboration in sociology. Given that the family today must be investigated with consideration to its wider relationships (or communications) with other social components, and that the modern family's boundaries stretch across national borders throughout the entire globe, it leads us to focusing on the functional approach featured in social systems theory. This view will allow for the establishment of more concrete structural and institutional explorations. While social systems theory provides a relevant structure for examining present

¹ The social constructionist approach places the construction of the family in its cultural and historical contexts (see Gubrium and Holstein 1990).

society to some degree, the functional approach in the theory seems to account for a radical model of the family that involves both common traits of modernizations and different characteristics in their particular trajectories. A functional approach to the family in social systems theory might be able to address “the paradox of the modern family,” a subject detailed later in this article. This paper borrows most heavily from the social systems theory of the family submitted by Niklas Luhmann. In the tradition of Parsons’ general system theory, Luhmann’s theoretical elaboration is considerable in that it redefines social systems theory by drawing attention to the functional traits in the construction of society. He published only a few papers about the family, in contrast to the large number of enthusiastic works he wrote applying social systems theory to various topics, among which social systems of the family is found in relatively few of them (Luhmann 1990b). Through a discussion of the family as a social system, following Luhmann’s distinctive account of modern society, this paper hopes to submit several agendas for further investigation into the role of the family in society.

The Family in Social Systems Theory

What is the function of the family in modern social systems, and how has this function systematically developed through the process of modernization? Talcott Parsons in the 1950s argues that, as a result of structural differentiation in American society, “the family has become distinctly a more specialized system in the society as a whole than it had been” (Parsons 1955:27). In his study on the rise of the American nuclear family in the mid-20th century, Parsons characterizes the family as an integral part of modern social systems, identifying two key functions of the family system (Parsons 1955: 19). First is the primal function, which describes the way the family is formed as a social group in which, at an early stage, the child can “invest” all of their emotional resources in the overwhelming commitment to and full dependence upon their parents. To work with those functions for the sake of the young child, the members of the family are in turn expected to play certain roles, which may vary according to their gender roles. However, it is important to realize that those natures of the family for the child are, according to Parsons, temporary rather than permanent, since the ultimate function of the family system in modern society is to enable the child to socialize, thereby enhancing its prospects of contributing to the reproduction of the modern social and personal systems (individuals). The development of the primal function indicates the ways in which the family system is both an exclusive and

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inclusive system, which must be understood with regard to its structural relationships with other social systems. In Parsons' social theory, socialization also involves the development of the child's personality regulation by both sides of parents. As a result of this regulation, the growth of a sense of intimacy between family members became an exclusive aspect of the modern family. Describing the key roles of the modern family system, Parsons argues that, "[h]ence the family must be a differentiated subsystem of a society, not itself 'little society' or anything too closely approaching it" (Parsons *ibid.*). In contrast to ones in which the pre-modern family was an inclusive social system, in the process of functional differentiation, the modern family system, mostly represented by the elevation of the nuclear family, was reconstructed as an exclusive, irreplaceable system for socialization, as well as for maintaining the stability of the modern individual's personality in the early childhood². Finally, it is important to note that not only did the modern family system provide those key functions for children, but it also became crucial for adults, enabling them to maintain stable personalities through intimacy with family members.

Placing this theoretical examination of the nuclear family in the context of modern America, Parsons refers to the differentiation of sex [sic.] roles within the family (Parsons 1955:23)³. This division of gender roles in the family is both a major structural axis of the theory and constitutes the functional characteristics of the modern family system. In this sense, the functional understanding of the family is necessarily regarded as a particular social system, rather than merely referring to the biological functions of its condition, such as reproduction or differentiation of sex roles. For instance, Parsons observed that in the modern nuclear American family, a gendered division of labor (i.e. gender roles) has been enforced (Parsons 1955:23). The differentiation of gender roles in the nuclear family is explained as follows: first, due to the differentiation between the family system and occupational system, the instrumental responsibility of the family was sharply imposed upon the father through the ramification of an extended kinship system; second, the isolation of the nuclear family required the female parent to carry out maternal duties to the child, cutting her off from her kinswomen and her male partner. For this reason, the nuclear family has commonly been described as a partnership between father as a breadwinner and mother as a housewife who brings up the child and is the chief manager of the household. This theorization of the nuclear family, with its sharp and rigid differentiations of gender roles, is contestable. For

² For a historical explanation of the differentiation of social systems in the general social systems theory, see Luhmann (1997:613) and also Borch (2011:48), although it will be discussed briefly below.

³ Today, the term "gender" would be more appropriate in this discussion.

example, in Japan, while the transformation of the family has traced a slightly different trajectory due to an alternative experience of modernization, it would be appropriate to say that the nuclear family, which became common in the 1960s, had continued to be renowned as the common structure and function for gendered division of labor between parents (Ochiai 1996).

However, there are critiques of the early Parsonian formulation of the family (e.g. Allan 1985), which point to the radical structural differentiation of the family that took place over the past few decades (Aulette 2010). This condition demands theoretical scrutiny because of the experience of further functional differentiation of the family, as well as other social systems in our contemporary society (Luhmann 1990:25). Parsons already recognized the significance of sexuality in his theorization of the modern nuclear family, which is the product of growing erotic overtones with an idea of romantic love in the couple (Parsons 1955:24). He suggests that both masculinity and femininity are changed in the nuclear family, while its differentiation (gendered division of roles) remains a construction of the nuclear family. Given that its process signifies a differentiation of both the structure and function of the family from an early inclusive system into diverse members that are responsible for multiple functions, it might be understandable why Parsons' theorization of the modern nuclear family came to conclude a sharp gendered division of labor, the ultimate consequence of functional differentiation. While referring to the advent of exclusive functional roles in the family, it is possible to further scrutinize the trajectory of modernization of the family in society. When Parsons and his followers examined the family and its systematic characteristics in the mid-20th century, it would likely have appeared intuitive to regard the nuclear family as such.

Meanwhile, one would also agree with an argument that, over the past few decades, the process of modernization in developed societies has deconstructed the primal structure of the nuclear family: a heterosexual couple with a child. Nowadays, the gendered division of labor between the spouses is highly contested, a departure from Parsons' social systems theory of the family, which presumes that a heterosexual couple is necessary for the maintenance of the family and the socialization of the child within it. Over time, sexuality has become differentiated from the heterosexual norm, and varieties of sexual identities in the contemporary family have become more commonplace. Although, in early modern society, it was believed that the heterosexual nuclear family was the basic structural unit of the family system, such a plain structure is no longer descriptively sufficient. It can be argued that Parsons' early nuclear family model in social systems theory needs to be reconsidered with regard to its strict division of labor and emphasis

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on sharp gender differences. Just as “gender” has been differentiated from the general idea of the difference between man and woman under the term of “sex,” so too have homosexuality and other various modes of sexuality been discerned from heterosexual norms. Taking this differentiation into account, one might reexamine the gender roles in the contemporary family with consideration to social systems theory.

For Parsons, the growth of the nuclear family constituted a functional and structural transformation, and was also responsible for the emergence of “the kinds of emotional disturbance which we associate with processes of differentiation and reintegration” (Parsons 1955:27). Following the Durkheimian sense of the dilemma of the functional and structural differentiations of the family in the process of modernization, the ongoing process of reconstructing the family in that period may have naturally been perceived as disturbance. Given the nature of nuclear family, in the family today, this emotional disturbance can be described in the following three points. As an autopoietic self-referential social system, the family can be maintained on the condition that its members are able to reproduce intimate communications among themselves, since, in order to maintain the family, all other functions have been differentiated to other independent social systems (e.g., economics, education, and law). As a functional system in society, it is necessary for the family to sustain continuous organizational communication with other social systems, although intimate communications are required to main the structure and function of the family system itself. In contrast to the attainment of an exclusive communication code for the (re)construction of the modern and future nuclear family, the family system, which primarily relies upon contingent communications of intimacy, is more vulnerable in the context of a highly differentiated society. As social systems differentiate, so too does an individual, and this might lead the person to the same situation as surrounding social systems under the term of “individualization” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

The normalization of a love marriage and an increase in the number of divorces can be explained as a consequence of structural differentiation in society, at both the structural and individual level. In addition to those trends in marriage, I would like to suggest that the transformation of the perception of the child in the family (e.g. the emergence of the idea that shared parenting is in the best interest of the child) will be realized. While this perception recognizes the ways in which the family proceeds to further disintegration in society, it may also create an urgent need for the re-integration of the family in the wake of moralistic discourses. Two of Parsons’ exclusive functions, socialization and stability of personality, are still significant

in the modern family system to some degree. Even so, while the contemporary family remains crucial and exclusive for us with regard to the stability of personality, it is necessary to question Parsonian assumption that the nuclear family is founded on a heterosexual couple,

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Given that the family today is diverse in terms of membership and sexual identity, the Parsonian family system must be placed under critique. The modern family is by no means wholly represented by the heterosexual nuclear family model. For instance, shared parenting in a separated family, stepfamily or same-sex family are feasible today. Certain key functions of the family remain, such as early socialization of the child and the guarantee of intimacy among the members. My point is that such functions have been exclusively improved, a fact that gives force to the argument that social systems must be theoretically elaborated in order to deal with the functional roles of the diverse forms of family that exist today. This article proposes that Luhmann's theoretical traits of social systems theory are significant because they conceptualize society as the result of functional differentiation and ceaseless communications among distinct social systems. Highlighting modern social structure as the consequence of a shift away from rigid hierarchy and towards functional differentiation, Luhmann's theory discusses the ways in which each social system, including individuals as a psychic system⁴, communicates in the dynamic formation in *Gesellschaft* (Luhmann 2013;1997;1990a).

Structural differentiation, the basic assumption of modern society in social systems theory, is elucidated as follows. In functional differentiation (or simply modernization), each social system (subsystems) are common in equality and inequality. All subsystems are equal in that they are, in *Gesellschaft*, parallel constructs, unlike the center-peripheral structure or hierarchical differentiation of early society. All subsystems are technically able to communicate with one another. However, subsystems are unequal in that each of them constitutes an autopoietic functional system, which is to say that they are individually operated with a distinctive binary code, which is a self-referential system. Each system is unable to directly perceive or communicate with other social systems, or to properly regard structures outside of the system as "environment" at all. Self-

⁴ By "psychic system," Luhmann refers to, the person as an independent autopoietic system in *Gesellschaft*, as well as social systems. This view is different from early social theory, which is theoretically modeled on the inclusion of individuals in the social structure.

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referential systems can make every possible effort to communicate with the environment (*other-reference*) within it: this is the system's self-reference communication (Luhmann 1997:613). Borch explains the relationship between the system (one particular subsystem) and environment (other subsystems) as follows:

In accordance with the autopoietic framework and the thesis about operational closure an input of external operation is simply not possible. While there can be no casual relation between system and environment, the former might depend on specific environmental traits which so to speak work as structural preconditions (rather than as operational input). This is what the notion of structural coupling captures. (...) Crucially, and this follows once again from the basic autopoiesis assumption, irritations can only be precisely that irritations. They do not determine action. (...) [T]he system interprets the irritation in its own language. (...) Even if this is triggered by external systems, the irritation is observed through the lenses of the social system, just as the consequences are purely internally produced efforts (Borch 2012:30-31).

The chain of self-referential communication through the expectation with the environment (other subsystems) by internal *other-reference* leads to a construction of a particular social structure in *Gesellschaft*, although this structure, by the nature of its expectable communication, is mundanely open for unexpected communicative conflicts between subsystems, as well as for the remaining contingency of possible change. While the expected structures of social systems are possibly observed through structural couplings in order to function in relation to other social systems, communications of self-referential systems call for alternative communication or contingency, both of which may result in the reconstruction of the social structure as it is. For example, social systems theory presumes that, in the process of functional differentiation in modern society, individuals also have been differentiated from other social systems into an individual psychic system. Contrary to early social theory, which attempts to locate the ways that individuals are assumed to be structurally included in society, social systems theory today simply observes structural couplings and communications between psychic systems and social systems (Luhmann 2013:180-211; Borch 2011:20-26).

Luhmann's strong attention to the functional facets of social systems is useful in helping us to recognize substantial traits of our society for several reasons, explained below. First, it enables

us to generalize the common characteristics of social systems, regardless of actual structural differentiations, according to historical and spatial differences. Next, it allows us observe how society is, possibly, being transformed through communications, while simultaneously and necessarily being constituted by a particular social structure. Analyzing the family through the lens of Luhmann's social systems theory enables us to generalize the major functions of the family in reference to the structural diversities particular to each society. Social systems theory emphasizes that, through mundane communications with other subsystems in the structural couplings, one particular social system, such as the family, can be maintained while retaining its own self-referential system.

Luhmann also attempts to describe the family as a social system. Historically, the family, as a social system in modern society, has been differentiated through the same processes as other social systems: from segmental differentiation to functional differentiation (Luhmann 1997:613). As several anthropological studies indicate, in early modern society, the family system was embodied as a whole set of multiple functions in the society. For example, in early times, the family supported the social functions of economic organizations, political bodies, and educational institutions, among others. However, after the procedure of functional differentiation of modern society, the family system has been differentiated as a functionally peculiar social system in relation to other subsystems in *Gesellschaft*. The other functions included in the former family system were both structurally and functionally differentiated, in accordance with actual institutionalization (e.g. school or state social security). Once again, those differentiated subsystems in modern society are still substantial for the family system through structural couplings. Luhmann mentions, "unlike in the case of segmental societies, there are no institutions that allow a multitude of families to act as a unit" (as a clan, a tribe, a tribal association) (Luhmann 1990b:210). Families as a collective group do not have a social function and therefore there are none that could be called "the great families of the country" (Luhmann *ibid.*). Indeed, in social systems theory, the family is seen as a distinguished system of intimate communications:

Although personal communication is to be found in all social systems, it is a special feature of the family as a basis for the differentiation of a social system. This differentiation makes it possible to attribute to the families and only the families the function of the inclusion of persons. These characteristics concern does not only the legally institutionalized families, but all instances of intimate relations: systems in which it is not permissible to deprive

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communication of something personal (Baraldi *et al.* 2015:58 *my translation*).

In this light, Luhmann sees the family as a social system that has followed the functional differentiation of modern society. Generally speaking, a family is comprised of those who know each other, in relation to outsiders, but in the social systems theory, it is explained as a functional system that is constituted by a structure of communications, as opposed to actual relationships between human beings (Luhmann 1990b). In that sense, in the analysis of the family in the social systems theory, it is necessary to make a distinction between “a living, a psychological, and a communicative reality, and assuming different autopoietic systems” (Luhmann 1990b:196-197).

With the previous discussions on the structural couplings of social systems theory in mind, one may conclude that the family should be assessed as a closed, self-referential system placed in a mundane communicative relationship with other subsystems in society, a condition that enables one to regard both constructive and deconstructive social events within a wider range of dynamic social circumstances. For instance, when looking at the family today, one can understand that normative (structured) and transformative (restructured) traits exist simultaneously. Also, considering the different trajectories of ongoing communications with the family, it may be possible, through social analysis, to contextualize the structure of the family as a result of different sets of communication. Beyond simply referring to historical or spatial relativism, this perspective may contribute to an understanding of the ways in which the family has been transformed through modernization, as a result of alternative trajectories of communication with other subsystems.

Given that the family, as a social system, can be maintained through mundane communication with other subsystems, how can one describe family membership and internal communications between family members? In other words, how, in social systems theory, are family members able to distinguish themselves from others? To explain this, it is important to remember that, in Luhmann’s social systems theory, individual persons are signified as autopoietic psychic systems, as well as members of other social systems. As social systems communicate with each other and employ self-reference and *other-reference* (reference to the environment) in the system, a set of psychic systems can develop a structural coupling through this communication. Communication among family members in the coupling is unique in that it enables them to reduce the probability of unlimited communications or complexity among psychic systems. Indeed, relying upon the historical formats of communication, such as family memory, the family

system enables its members to communicate in a specific mode: the prospective intimacy of family members (Luhmann 1990b:204). Meanwhile, I would like to suggest that it might call for conflicts of communication as family disputes due to its unique couplings among them. Taking those things into account may provide insight into why, with the advent of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the family has come to be regarded as more essential among its members, even while they may have deconstructed the normative (or structural) traits of the family, such as generation, class, and sexuality (Giddens 1992). In that sense, eliminating the structural components of strict gender roles, one of the primal functions of modern family system as theorized by Parsons, seems to be more understandable in our society today.

It is important not to be paralyzed by the paradoxical communication of the family as a social system (Luhmann 1990b: 205). This idea is significant since it provides a possible explanation for why the family and its reconstruction need to be examined sociologically. That means that, in order to maintain the system itself, the family, as an entity comprised by communications, must engage with both self-reference and *other-reference* (understanding others as part of the environment of the system). All systems of participatory family communications, including the psychic systems of family members, result in a paradox: the family, in communication with other subsystems, is open to probability, requiring private family issues to be addressed as wider social concerns (for example, gender violence or child neglect). Luhmann therefore reiterates that the family, as a social system, is capable of performing structural couplings with other social systems, and of engaging in self-referential communications with the others in the environment (Luhmann 1990). Of course, this is not meant to deny that the family is a distinguished system of communications (among psychic systems as family members), but the crux of this is that it can never be a stand-alone system in society. To examine this theoretical assumption, it is important to remember that, in our society, family issues always produce malfunctions in other social systems. For example, shared parenting after divorce has a significant influence on legal and economic systems. Poverty in a family affects economic and political systems. Similarly, family health issues affect scientific systems. For the child, successful performance in the educational system is crucial to their participation in the family system.

Social systems theory conceives of society not bounded by spatial or geographical circumstances since it considers *Gesellschaft* as a model of functional differentiation. Social systems, in this regard, can be envisaged as incorporating complex varieties of communications. Accordingly, Luhmann insists that his theory does not necessarily presume spatial coherence:

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General systems theory offers a new approach. At first sight, it looks like Aristotelian theory. A general notion of the social system is used to define the encompassing system as a special case of social systems. The content, however, has changed. Systems theory does not refer to the city or the state in order to characterize the special features of the encompassing system. Our society is too highly differentiated for this kind of design. Instead, systems theory uses systems analysis to disclose the structures and processes that characterize the societal system – “the most important of all social systems which includes all others” (Luhmann 1990a:175-176).

Contrary to other social theories of globalization, Luhmann’s theoretical premise is notable in that it de-emphasizes physical boundaries, focusing instead on semantics and their temporal shift in the process of modernization. In social systems theory, “[m]odern society has realized a quite different pattern of system differentiation, using specific, *functions* as the focus for the differentiation of subsystems” (Luhmann 1990a:177). Contemporary society became globalized through chains of communications between differentiated and differentiating functional systems (Luhmann 1990a:178). The same is true of the family as a modern social system. According to Luhmann, “unlike in older function determinations, socialization cannot be regarded as a special function of the family. It occurs everywhere, occurs in every social contact, as long as the participants learn about the mutual observation or the reaction to impulses” (1990b:211). Under such circumstances, he concludes that one has to maintain a perspective in which “[f]amilies are not trivial machines, but self-repairing machines, which determine their operations through the expectations that have just been updated at the moment. Only the observer will recognize a structure-determined system” (Luhmann 1990b:215). For an example of this, one can recall the recent disputes of international child abduction by parents in Japan, and the impact these disputes had on similar issues in the domestic family. Of course, the family today is still largely affected by regionally (and nationally) coupling subsystems. As global society becomes more complex, communications through the family system seem to extend over national borders. Even though the family is still being reconstructed structurally in the context of domestic society, I propose that its functional traits, particularly its communications with contingency, must be considered as extending beyond borders.

Conclusion

Family is the basic unit in our society, even while it has been differentiated through modernization and social change. In modern society, the family experienced a radical shift in structure and function. The many studies about family in social science that are published every year reflect our perception of society and the way it changes. In addition to addressing family-specific issues, the sociology of family is necessary for discussing the ways in which it is constructed in relation to other social institutions. Indeed, I assume that considering the structural coupling of the modern family through functional differentiation will aid the exploration of pragmatic solutions to family issues. This paper examined a theoretical elaboration of the family in social systems theory. As a general social theory, social systems theory tends to be abstract and comprehensive, which is sometimes as an unpractical scholarly attempt on the part of social science. Still, its wider observation method of *Gesellschaft* that places emphasis on the structure and differentiation of distinctive social systems, is still significant because it allows for the conceptualization of one particular social system within a large network of communications. This perspective will therefore continue to be useful for observation, analysis, and theorization, moving back and forth between the system and environment, as Luhmann stands in his initial articulation of social systems. Finally, The great deal of refining he undertook to develop a functional approach for social systems theory demands further investigations of the family in the context of globalization, and the different experiences of modernization in the West and Asia.

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