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The Multilevel Engagement Theory

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present the multilevel engagement theory to conduct research studies and explain real-life situations. The multilevel engagement theory considers culture and diversity as central aspects along with the multilevel influences and sociocultural and historical contexts for understanding complex relationships and functioning among individuals, groups, and families in societies around the world. A critical review and assessment of the contemporary theories were conducted which uncovered important gaps and helped the author to demonstrate the contribution of the multilevel engagement theory in the relevant fields of study. Then, the author discussed the principles, assumptions, concepts, and propositions of the multilevel engagement theory. The use, application, and operationalization of the multilevel engagement theory in empirical research were also described with specific examples. The author also provided specific and testable hypotheses and qualitative themes for additional clarity and explanation of the multilevel engagement theory. The multilevel engagement theory offers researchers a comprehensive theoretical framework and a unique lens for studying family relationships and functioning in contextualized and inclusive manners. The implications and limitations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the author discusses the multilevel engagement theory including its principles, assumptions, concepts, and propositions, and provides specific research questions/hypotheses, qualitative themes, and methodology to demonstrate an accurate use, application, and operationalization of the multilevel engagement theory in research studies. The multilevel engagement theory provides researchers with a comprehensive theoretical framework and a unique perspective to study families in diverse societies around the world. The multilevel engagement theory considers culture and diversity as central aspects of the understanding of contemporary families. In addition, the multilevel engagement theory also examines the multilevel influences on today's families, and how they change over time and are influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts. Such a comprehensive and inclusive theory helps researchers to adequately examine and

understand the issues, relationships, experiences, and functioning of contemporary families.

According to the multilevel engagement theory, there are three engagement levels, such as the proximal level, the influential level, and the holistic level. Different Individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations are situated at each of these engagement levels. For instance, families, nongovernment organizations, support groups, schools, administrative departments, social activists, etc., are situated at the proximal level. Media (e.g., print media, electronic media, social media, internet, etc.), funding agencies, and/or public state or federal level institutions, which are responsible to form policies and programs are situated at the influential level. Culture and areas of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, class, disability, language, religion, sexual orientation, immigration, and place of residence) are situated at the holistic level. These individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations have reciprocal relationships with each other within and between the engagement levels (Raza, 2022).

Additionally, these engagement levels have also reciprocal relationships with each other. The dynamics of these individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations and their reciprocal relationships within and between the engagement levels change over time and are influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts (Raza, 2021). Hence, family relationships and functioning are influenced by the reciprocal interactions among individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations in society within and between these engagement levels, which may change over time and is influenced by sociocultural and historical factors (Raza, 2021). Given the growing family structures, emerging cultural groups, and increasing issues of diversity in society, it is essential to understand and examine family relationships and functioning in contextualized and inclusive manners with a central focus on culture and diversity for adequately understanding the experiences of individuals, families, and groups in societies globally.

Current theories are lacking to address the plurality of culture, issues of diversity, and complexities of life in contemporary societies. Due to growing diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, class, disability, language, religion, sexual orientation, immigration, and place of residence) and a cultural plurality (e.g., individualistic and collectivistic cultures) among individuals, families, and groups which have been happening around the world, families are changing and new family structures are emerging (Andersen & Collins, 2019; Olson et al., 2021). Consequently, family relationships and functioning are becoming more dynamic and complex (Mendenhall et al., 2019). Moreover, families have always been a fundamental unit and an active agent of society, which influence society and are influenced by it. Due to the advancement of technologies and the emergence of new modes of communication, such as television, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., family interactions with other individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations of society have become dynamic, multifaceted, and complex (Raza, 2021). As a result, family relationships and functioning are influenced by their reciprocal relationships with other individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations within and between the engagement levels, which may change over time and is influenced by sociocultural and historical factors

(Raza, 2020). Therefore, new theoretical frameworks are needed that can provide culturally and globally appropriate understanding and examination of family relationships and functioning with central consideration of family diversity and culture in diverse societies around the world. To address the aforementioned gaps, the multilevel engagement theory is presented in this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the existing theories to highlight the gaps and demonstrate a need for new theorizing. Grounded in this discussion, the author elaborates on how the Multilevel Engagement Theory addresses those needs. What is new and unique is that the Multilevel Engagement Theory offers to adequately deal with the cultural plurality, diversity issues, and complexities of lives among contemporary families globally. This paper discussed the principles, assumptions, concepts, and propositions of the multilevel engagement theory. The author provided some specific and testable hypotheses and qualitative themes for additional clarity and explanation of the multilevel engagement theory. This theory helps researchers to develop and drive their research questions and/or hypotheses, describe facts and findings of their research studies, and explain real-life situations. The multilevel engagement theory also provides researchers with a unique theoretical lens and perspective to appropriately examine complex issues of family relationships and functioning in contextualized and inclusive manners. This framework assists scholars to consider family culture and diversity as central aspects of family life and the multilevel influences on family relationships and functioning within sociocultural and historical contexts. Hence, the multilevel engagement theory proves to be an important theoretical framework in the field of family science and human development, sociology, social science, psychology, social work, and other related fields.

Following are the research objectives of the current study: (1) to critically review and assess the contemporary theories; (2) to describe the Multilevel Engagement Theory and its different components; (3) to demonstrate the use and application of the Multilevel Engagement Theory to research and real-life situations.

METHODS

This section provides information on different components of research methodology that can be used to operationalize and test the multilevel engagement theory in empirical research. It is worth mentioning that the author provided a briefly proposed methodology for the multilevel engagement theory, whereas a detailed description of the multilevel engagement theory's methodology with additional examples and case studies will be the focus of future research.

Research Design

Although longitudinal research designs are more appropriate to test the multilevel engagement theory (Raza et al., 2021; Samek et al., 2015), cross-sectional research designs can also be used to test the multilevel engagement theory (Raza, 2017; Raza et al., 2019). Researchers can also use retrospective designs that may help them to collect facts/information about the respondents that they experienced in the past and over time (Bharat et al., 2021). In quantitative studies, experimental research designs, quasi-experimental designs, and survey research designs can be used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Remler & Van Ryzin, 2022). For qualitative studies, phenomenology research design, case study research design, narrative research design, ethnography research design, and portraiture research design can be used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For mixed methods research studies, convergent mixed methods research design, explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, and exploratory sequential mixed methods research design can be used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is worth mentioning that researchers do not have to test the entire multilevel engagement theory because it is quite complex and multifaceted. They can also test a portion of this theory. For instance, they can collect data on sociocultural factors, which are currently prevalent in society if they do not have any data on the historical time of the phenomenon in addition to collecting data on family relationships and functioning and the multilevel influences of the three engagement levels on families. Researchers can also integrate primary and secondary data to answer their research questions (Raza, 2018a). For instance, sociocultural and/or historical contexts can be examined through preexisting data, whereas researchers collect

primary data to study the current experiences of families. Since the multilevel engagement theory is broader enough and simultaneously it is narrow to the extent that it can be empirically testable, which allows researchers to choose one of the many research designs that they can use based on their research questions, expertise, time, and available resources.

Research Techniques

Researchers can use quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research techniques to test the hypotheses or research questions they drive or develop from the multilevel engagement theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Raza 2018b). For quantitative research studies, researchers can collect numerical data from the respondents about each of the engagement levels including sociocultural and historical contexts/factors. For qualitative research studies, they can ask open-ended questions about respondents' experiences within and between the engagement levels, the multilevel influences of these engagement levels on the respondents, and questions about sociocultural and historical contexts (Raza, 2018b). For mixed methods studies, researchers can use various strategies. For instance, they can collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously (convergent mixed methods research design), collect quantitative data first and qualitative data second (explanatory sequential mixed methods research design), or collect qualitative data first and quantitative data second (exploratory sequential mixed methods research design; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers can also use content analysis design and/or critical/synthesized literature reviews to investigate their research questions (Raza 2018a), which they develop/drive from the multilevel engagement theory. Hence, there are many options for researchers to use, apply, and operationalize the multilevel engagement theory to investigate their research questions and conduct their studies.

Data Analysis

Since the multilevel engagement theory is comprehensive and multilevel, researchers may expect that data collected to test this theory will be analyzed through complex statistical tests and analysis techniques. However, it is worth mentioning that the focus should be given to a more thorough and critical analysis/examination of data and phenomena rather than the use of complex data

analysis techniques and/or modeling. For instance, it is ideal to test the bidirectional relationships when using the multilevel engagement theory, but researchers can collect data and analyze unidirectional relationships to examine the multilevel influences of the engagement levels on family relationships and functioning. Researchers can use correlations, multiple regressions, structural equation modeling and/or multilevel modeling statistical techniques to test the Multilevel Engagement Theory and investigate their research questions (Raza et al., 2012; Raza, 2018c; Raza et al., 2021).

Multilevel modeling and/or two- or three-ways moderation models may help to test the multilevel engagement theory in complex and appropriate manners (Heck et al., 2014; Prati & Zani, 2016). For qualitative analysis, within-and between-case analysis and/or multilevel thematic analysis including cross-section and longitudinal data are appropriate data analysis techniques to analyze qualitative data and answer research questions by using the multilevel engagement theory (Miles et al., 2014). Content analysis is also an appropriate data analysis technique, which may help to use secondary data and test the multilevel engagement theory (Raza 2018a). Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative data can be analyzed either simultaneously or one after the other to investigate research questions, which are developed by the multilevel engagement theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section critically reviews and examines major contemporary theories, which are commonly used in the field of family science, human development, sociology, social science, psychology, and other related fields, highlights the gaps in existing theories, and presents the multilevel engagement theory.

Family systems theory, family stress theory, and ecological systems theory are some of the theories, which are commonly used in the field of family science and are discussed here. Family systems theory was formally developed in the 1960s (Goldenberg et al., 2017; Smith & Hamon, 2022; White et al., 2019). Family systems theory was grounded in general systems theory, and it is commonly used in the areas of family science, marriage and family, and family therapy

(Bertalanffy, 1968; Olson et al., 2021). Family systems theory states that the family is a system and family members are interconnected with each other, such that if one member is affected, that family member affects the other members and the entire family system. Hence, it is important to study the family as a system rather than studying everyone separately because the whole is more than the sum of its parts (Smith & Hamon, 2022). Family systems theory is frequently used in the field of family science and couple and family therapy (Olson et al., 2021).

This theory provides researchers with a framework to understand family relationships. Further work is needed to make family systems theory more specific so that the concepts of this theory can be operationalized and tested empirically in research. It is a micro-level theory that focuses on how relationships function in a family. Moreover, the family stress theory was developed in the 1940s (Hill, 1949; Pickard & Ingersoll, 2017). There are two models discussed in family stress theory, such as the ABCX model and the double ABCX model. Family stress theory explains why some families do better than others when they experience stressors. Those families, which effectively utilize their resources and maintain positive perceptions in dealing with stressors experience more functional outcomes (i.e., Bonadaptation) than other families (Hill, 1949; Pickard & Ingersoll, 2017). Family stress theory focuses on family stressors only and resources specific to the stressor thereby being limited in scope. Furthermore, ecological systems theory was developed in the 1970s (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Raza et al., 2019). According to this theory, five ecological systems are interrelated and affect individuals. These ecological systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Smith & Hamon, 2022). The chronosystem was included later in the ecological systems theory. Ecological systems theory not only is used in family science but in other fields, such as human development and psychology. It provides a comprehensive framework for researchers to conduct empirical research. However, this theory poses challenges of operationalization for researchers, and it is difficult to determine the boundaries of each ecological system.

There are three versions of Bronfenbrenner's theory. The third version discusses the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model to describe human development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Raza et al., 2021). The primary focus of the ecological systems theory is on systems' influences on individuals, whereas the later version (bioecological theory) focuses more on individuals' characteristics and interactions, how they shape individuals' development over time and are affected by different ecological systems. This theory discusses culture and time but lacks consideration of the issues of diversity and culture and diversity as central to the understanding of individuals, families, and groups because the focus was more on different areas of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Raza et al., 2023). If we examine these three theories (i.e., family systems theory, family stress theory, and ecological systems theory) family systems and family stress theories provide a micro-level examination of families whereas, ecological systems theory also considers other ecological systems (macrolevel factors) in addition to the family system.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, family development theory, and biosocial theory are used in the field of human development, which are discussed here. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development was developed in the 1960s (Erikson, 1963; Suggett et al., 2017). According to this theory, there are eight psychosocial stages that individuals experience throughout their life. Each developmental stage brings challenges or crises for individuals that they need to resolve to achieve personality strength or virtue to ensure their development (Erikson, 1963; Suggett et al., 2017). This theory helps researchers to examine and assess the challenges that individuals experience in different stages/periods of their life. Due to growing diversity and cultural plurality among individuals and families, individuals' experiences and challenges may substantially vary from one another over the life course. Consequently, individuals may not experience these development stages in the same sequence or at a particular point in time whereas, their experiences of each stage may vary from one another. Further, family development theory was developed in the 1940s (Duvall & Hill, 1948; Smith & Hamon, 2022).

According to family development theory, families experience eight development stages over the life course. Each development stage is associated with specific tasks, roles, and responsibilities. Families also experience challenges when they move from one stage to another or face any transitions. Hence, family members need to fulfill their roles and responsibilities associated with each developmental stage to effectively deal with every stage and make smooth transitions from one stage to another stage, which increases the likelihood that the family will perform well in the next stage. Family development theory provides important information on these development stages and the potential tasks and responsibilities that family members may have to do for each stage to better prepare for each stage. Families are changing and experiencing development in different forms, times, and sequences due to growing diversity and culture, which makes it difficult to predict which stage a family may experience in the future and what challenges and opportunities would be associated with each stage for specific family structures. Moreover, although, the biosocial theory has roots in Darwin's evolutionary theory of natural selection (Darwin, 1859), it was initiated in the 1960s (Hamilton, 1964; Smith & Hamon, 2022).

The biosocial theory states that both genes and environment play an equally important role in shaping individuals' development. Hence, it is important to examine individuals' experiences with both genes and environment rather than focusing more on one aspect of their life than the other. There are currently many versions of the biosocial theory, which requires further work in the organization of fundamental assumptions and concepts that specifically belong to biosocial theory to use and test this theory in empirical research. If we examine Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, family development theory, and biosocial theory, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development focuses on individual level development, family development theory studies family development over time whereas, biosocial theory considers both individuals' genetic characteristics and the environmental influences and discusses their equally important role in individuals' development, whereas the role of diversity and culture as central aspects were lacking in these theories.

Conflict theory, structural functionalism, and feminist theory are used in the field of sociology, which are discussed here. Conflict theory was developed in the 1940s (Hobbes, 1947; Smith & Hamon, 2022). According to this theory, resources are scarce in society, and individuals or groups compete against each other for these resources. Conflicts continue unless individuals or groups manage them or come to an agreement/consensus. Family conflict and group conflict are different in nature because group members can leave the group as their participation in voluntary whereas, family members stick to each other in times of conflict/crisis due to their emotional attachment and commitment to the family. Conflict theory focuses on the conflict or negative (or less positive) aspect of family relationships thereby, lacking consideration of family strength by building positive relationships and maximizing family resources including tangible and intangible resources.

Structural functionalism theory was developed in the 1950s (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Smith & Hamon, 2017). According to this theory, families and societies function well when men and women perform those roles and tasks which are appropriate to their sex. For instance, men should perform instrumental roles, such as making economic resources for the family whereas, women should perform expressive roles and tasks, such as performing household work and caring for and nurturing children (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Smith & Hamon, 2017). This theory is limited in scope and application because of the growing diversity in family structures (e.g., single-parent families and same-sex families) and considering that gender has become a continuum rather than a dichotomous category in contemporary society. Feminist theory was initially developed in the 1960s and three major waves of feminism brought many versions of feminist theory.

According to feminist theory, women's experiences are central to the understanding of a family (Gilligan, 1982; Raza et al., 2023). Since women are oppressed in society by men, it is important to empower women in different domains of life including the family for better functioning of families and society. Feminist theory initially focused on gender. but this perspective is further strengthened due to multicultural feminists (i.e.,

intersectionality theory; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020) that brought attention to other areas, such as race, class in addition to gender, which play an important role in shaping men's and women's experiences in society (Andersen & Collins, 2019; Raza, 2017). If we examine conflict theory, structural functionalism theory, and feminist theory, structural functionalism theory focuses primarily on the macro level and the survival of society but it also talks about families and the roles of men and women whereas, conflict theory and feminist theory examine both micro levels as well as macro-level factors. In general, all three theories can be used to examine family or societal-level phenomena. However, feminist and functionalism theory focuses on gender, conflict theory discusses conflict over resources, and multicultural feminists talk about other social locations, such as race, and class in addition to gender thereby, lacking a comprehensive and multilevel framework on its own.

Symbolic interactionism theory, social learning theory, social exchange theory, and attachment theory are used in the field of psychology, which are discussed here. Symbolic interactionism was developed in the early 1900s (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Smith & Hamon, 2022). According to this theory, individuals make meaning based on their interactions with others, which can be influenced by their past experiences. This meaning may vary from person to person, such that if two individuals interact with each other or experience an event, they may show or describe different experiences or meanings of that interaction or the event they had together. Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory, which provides a framework to study individual, couple, or family-level interactions. Social learning theory was developed in the 1960s (Bandura, 1977; Richardson et al., 2021). The fundamental idea of this theory is that people learn through observations and modeling. For people to repeat the learned behavior, they need positive reinforcement and self-efficacy. When people believe that they can perform certain behaviors that lead to a desired outcome and when they also see a benefit associated with that particular outcome, they are more likely to repeat that behavior.

For instance, those students who value good grades and they believe that they can work hard to get good grades, consequently, they are more likely

to do well in their studies compared to their counterparts. Social learning theory is a micro-level theory that focuses on individual learning and lacks dynamic relational and societal factors that also play an important role in influencing individuals' behaviors and learning, such as family relationship dynamics, neighborhood, support in society, etc (Bandura, 1977; Richardson et al., 2021). An expanded version of social learning theory is known as social cognitive theory, which explains that learning is an outcome of the interplay between an individual, behavior, and the environment together (Bandura, 1986a; Nelson, 2021).

Social exchange theory was developed in the 1950s (Smith & Hamon, 2017; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). According to social exchange theory, people maintain or dissolve their relationships based on their assessment of costs and rewards. For instance, if individuals gain more rewards than costs associated with any relationship, they are more likely to stay in the relationship. The assessment of individuals is subjective that includes both tangible and intangible costs and rewards. Social exchange theory is a micro-level theory that is limited in scope and focuses on individual relationship dynamics. Attachment theory was developed in 1950 (Bowlby, 1958; Smith & Hamon, 2022).

According to attachment theory, children need to develop a secure attachment with their primary caregiver. An insecure attachment shows long-term negative effects for individuals that may also determine how individuals behave with their children and spouses later in life (Ainsworth, 1989; Smith & Hamon, 2022). Those primary caregivers who are more sensitive and responsive to the child's needs, have positive interactions with the child and create an environment, which encourages the child to develop an emotional connection or a strong bond with them which results in a secure attachment (Bowlby, 1960; Smith & Hamon, 2022). Attachment theory focuses on the micro-level interactions between a child and her/his primary caregiver whereas, factors, such as family socioeconomic status or family/friends support may

help to examine this phenomenon with further complexity. If we examine symbolic interactionism theory, social learning theory, social exchange theory, and attachment theory, all four theories provide micro-level perspectives and can be used to examine interactions between individuals and family members. However, the issues of diversity and multilevel influences were not considered in these theories to understand the experiences of individuals and families.

If we examine all these theories together, ecological systems theory discussed cultural beliefs, values, and ideologies in the macrosystem ecological systems as the fourth ecological system which is distal from individuals than the other ecological systems and does not talk about the issues of diversity, whereas, multicultural feminists/intersectionality perspective described different social locations, such as race, class, and gender and their impacts on individuals but lack consideration of multilevel influences on individuals and families. It is worth mentioning, that all these theories have been playing an important role in helping scholars to conduct their research and explain research findings. However, some theories can only take researchers so far and consequently, they need to be used in conjunction with other frameworks to be able to fully describe the complex life experiences of individuals, families, and groups in contemporary societies. In addition to cultural plurality, diverse individuals, families, and groups are growing and emerging in society around the world, and family relationships and functioning are shaped by multilevel influences. Hence, a theoretical framework like the Multilevel Engagement Theory which considers culture and diversity as central aspects to the understanding of individuals, families, and groups along with multilevel influences with sociocultural and historical contexts to study family relationships and functioning is needed. Table 1 provides an assessment of the theories discussed above based on different parameters.

Table 1. Assessment of Current Theories

| Name of Theory | Culture | Diversity | Multilevel Influences | Sociocultural time | Historical time | Microlevel | Macrolevel |
|--|---------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Family Systems Theory | X | X | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | X |
| Family Stress Theory | X | X | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | X |
| Ecological Systems Theory | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development | X | X | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | X |
| Family Development Theory | X | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Biosocial Theory | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Conflict Theory | X | X | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ |
| Structural Functionalism | X | X | X | ✓ | X | X | ✓ |
| Feminist Theory and Intersectionality | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Symbolic Interactionism Theory | ✓ | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| Social Learning Theory | X | X | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | X |
| Social Exchange Theory | X | X | X | X | X | ✓ | X |
| Attachment Theory | X | X | X | X | X | ✓ | X |

Note: ✓= Selected parameter is addressed; X = Selected parameter is not addressed

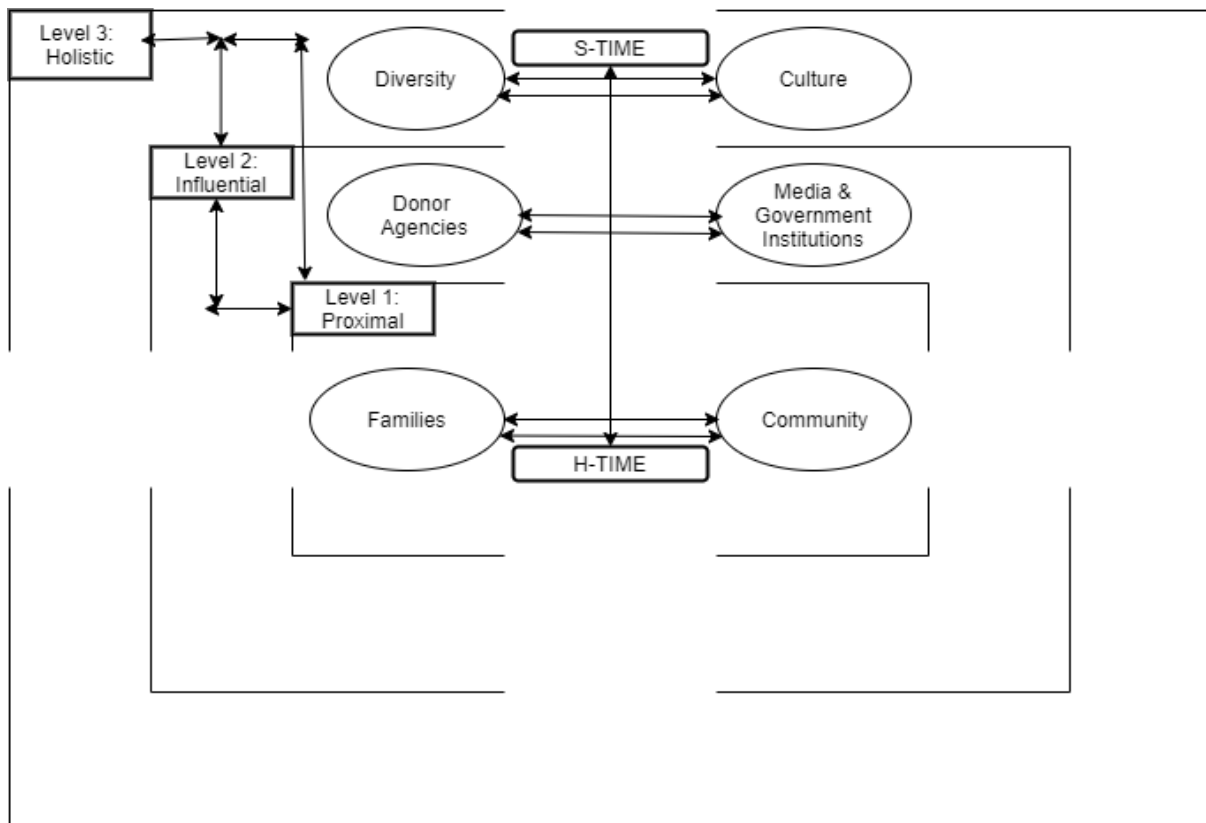
To address the aforementioned gaps, the author developed and presented the multilevel engagement theory, which considers culture and diversity as the central aspects to the understanding of individuals, groups, and families, provides researchers with a comprehensive and inclusive framework to examine family relationships and functioning, and offers a contextualized and multilevel understanding of family relationships and functioning to sociocultural and historical contexts.

The Multilevel Engagement Theory

The following section discusses the multilevel engagement theory and its components including the principles, assumptions, concepts, and

propositions. The multilevel engagement theory is a globally and culturally responsive theoretical framework, which considers culture and diversity as the central aspects to the understanding of contemporary families and the multilevel influences on family relationships and functioning in sociocultural and historical contexts. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals, families, and groups at the micro level as well as the macro level. It is worth mentioning that the author briefly included different components of the multilevel engagement theory because a detailed description of these components was beyond the focus and scope of this manuscript.

Figure 1. The Multilevel Engagement Theory



Note: S-TIME = Sociocultural time; H-TIME = Historical Time

The Principles of Multilevel Engagement Theory

The multilevel engagement theory’s principles provide the audience with a fundamental understanding of this theory. These are the grounding principles of the Multilevel Engagement Theory, which explain how this theory works and needs to be conceptualized in research studies.

1. There are three engagement levels (i.e., proximal, influential, and holistic) of the Multilevel Engagement Theory.
2. Individuals, families, groups, and organizations are situated at each of the engagement levels. For instance, at the proximal level, target families, support groups, schools, community-based organizations/agencies, friends, peers, nontarget relevant families, etc. are situated. At the influential level, donor/funding agencies, media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet, etc. and public state/federal institutions are situated. At the holistic level, the areas of diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, disability, language, religion, sexual orientation, immigration, place of residence, and culture are situated.

3. Individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels have reciprocal relationships with each other. For instance, families living at the proximal level have reciprocal relationships with other individuals, families, groups, and organizations situated at the same as well as different engagement levels.
4. Individuals, families, groups, and organizations which are located at the influential level and the holistic level also have reciprocal relationships with individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels.
5. The three engagement levels also have reciprocal relationships with each other.
6. The dynamics of individuals, families, groups, and organizations and their reciprocal relationships with each other within and between the engagement levels (i.e., the proximal, influential, and holistic levels) change over time and are influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts.

The Assumptions of Multilevel Engagement Theory

The following are the multilevel engagement theory's assumptions, which are linked with the other components of the framework, such as the principles, concepts, and propositions of this theory.

1. Diversity is inevitable in every society, which is healthy and positive for societies.
2. Diverse families are growing and emerging in societies around the world with unique structures, complex relationships, and dynamic functioning.
3. Families are not isolated, but their experiences are multifaceted, complex, and multilevel.
4. Families are active agents of their own change, which can reciprocally influence other individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations situated at different engagement levels of society.
5. Individuals and family development over time, and sociocultural and historical factors play an important role in shaping families' experiences and their reciprocal relationships with other individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations in society.
6. Families contain and experience resources and vulnerabilities from each of the engagement levels. Hence, families need to gain new resources and/or strengthen existing resources and decrease existing vulnerabilities, and/or prevent from new potential vulnerabilities to ensure healthy family functioning and development over time.

The Concepts of Multilevel Engagement Theory

The following are the core concepts of the multilevel engagement theory. These concepts are related to each other and can be operationalized and empirically tested in research studies. These concepts are consistent and linked with the other components of the multilevel engagement theory, such as the principles, assumptions, and propositions.

1. Family defines as two or more individuals who are in relationships of different kinds with one another and share various aspects of life, such as financial, physical, emotional, and intellectual with common interests and goals.
2. Community defines as any individuals, families, groups, organizations, schools, and/or government/nongovernment agencies who live

together, share a common place, and influence community initiatives, programs, and/or efforts through direct or indirect ways and vice versa.

3. Media defines as any mode, source, and/or platform to learn, gain, or exchange information for people in society and/or globally, such as print, electronic, and/or social media including newspapers, magazines, television, phone, email, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.
4. A donor agency defines as any government or nongovernment organization which provides funds to individuals, families, groups, and/or local organizations. for different purposes.
5. The institution defines as any state or federal public institution which forms public policies and/or programs for individuals, families, groups, and/or organizations to address their needs and provide them with appropriate support and assistance.
6. Culture defines as people's relevant and meaningful ways of living life which include people's beliefs, values, and practices, and determine people's behaviors and interactions with others and the perceptions and meanings that people associate with those behaviors and interactions.
7. Diversity defines as the areas of diversity such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, disability, language, religion, sexual orientation, immigration, and place of residence, which makes individuals unique and different from one another and shapes the experiences of individuals, families, and groups in society.
8. S-time defines as the sociocultural context of the current society, such as social, economic, environmental, political, and/or law and order situations.
9. H-time defines as the historical context of the current society, such as migration, war, and issues of justice, inclusion, and equity.
10. The resource defines as any tangible or intangible means, strengths, and/or support including the personal, interpersonal, and/or group-level resources, which maintain and improve the well-being and development of individuals, families, and/or groups in society.
11. Vulnerability defines as any situation, condition, exposure, and/or experience, such as exposure to hardships, tough life situations, and/or negative experiences including personal,

interpersonal, and/or group-level vulnerabilities, which increase the risks of lowering the well-being and development for individuals, families, and/or groups in society.

12. Family Relationship defines as a close emotional and/or physical interconnectedness between family members, which changes over time and is important for the well-being and development of each family member and the stability and functioning of the entire family.
13. Family Functioning is a family quality or condition when family members form and/or maintain positive interactions and balanced relationships with each other and effectively utilize their resources and minimize their vulnerabilities which strengthens a family and increases its members' capacity/ability to effectively deal with any expected or unexpected events that cause stress or bring additional demands for the family to preserve a healthy family equilibrium.
14. Reciprocal relationship refers to a bidirectional interaction, such that individuals, families, groups, and organizations can reciprocally influence each other.

The Propositions of the Multilevel Engagement Theory

The following are the propositions of the multilevel engagement theory, which demonstrate the relationships between its concepts. These propositions can either be used in the research studies as they are, or additional research hypotheses can be developed based on these propositions.

1. Family relationships and functioning are influenced by their reciprocal relationships with individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels.
2. Family reciprocal relationships with individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels change over time.
3. Family reciprocal relationships with individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels are influenced by sociocultural and historical times.
4. Families contain and experience resources and vulnerabilities from each of the engagement levels. Hence, those families who gain new resources and/or strengthen existing resources

and decrease existing vulnerabilities, and/or prevent from new potential vulnerabilities experience healthy family relationships and functioning over time.

5. Families' positive interactions and balanced relationships invite additional resources and decrease vulnerabilities for them within and between the engagement levels.

Quantitative Testable Hypotheses for the Multilevel Engagement Theory

Below are some specific and testable hypotheses, which are developed and informed by the multilevel engagement theory. These hypotheses illustrate how the multilevel engagement theory can be used, applied, and operationalized in empirical research.

1. Families living in resourceful and supportive communities experience healthy relationships and functioning compared to their counterparts.
2. Family relationships and functioning are influenced based on the extent of resources and vulnerabilities they experience within and between the engagement levels.
3. Family positive interactions and balanced relationships increase resources and decrease vulnerabilities for them within and between the engagement levels.
4. Family relationships with other individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels are dynamic and multifaceted, thereby changing over time.
5. Family relationships with other individuals, families, groups, and organizations within and between the engagement levels are influenced by sociocultural and historical factors.

Qualitative Themes for the Multilevel Engagement Theory

The multilevel engagement theory can also be used in qualitative studies in multiple ways. For instance, researchers can deductively develop qualitative small and/or large themes by using the Multilevel Engagement Theory, which may help to inform their data collection, management, and analysis. Those themes may include but are not limited to family relationships and functioning, community influences on families, media influences on families, institutional influences on families, family diversity and experience, cultural influences on families, social influences on families, historical influences on family relationships and functioning,

family resources, family vulnerabilities, etc. Additional themes include family experiences at the proximal level, family experiences at the influential level, and family experiences at the holistic level, sociocultural family experiences, historical family experiences, etc. Researchers can also inductively collect data and use the Multilevel Engagement Theory as a lens to interpret their findings of the study. The multilevel engagement theory may help researchers to organize, describe, and explain their qualitative data and provide them with an appropriate lens to examine the facts, narratives, and personal stories about their study participants. The multilevel engagement theory provides researchers with a framework to conduct cross-sectional as well as longitudinal/panel qualitative studies. Hence, the multilevel engagement theory can be used in qualitative studies. In addition to that, researchers can use the multilevel engagement theory in conducting critical literature reviews and/or content analysis to frame and organize their studies.

The current paper critically examined contemporary theories, described the multilevel engagement theory, and demonstrated the use and application of the multilevel engagement theory to research and real-life situations. The author provided an assessment of the current theories based on different parameters and illustrated a need for new theorizing in the form of the multilevel engagement theory to understand family relationships and functioning. Moreover, due to cultural plurality and growing diversity, a culturally and globally responsive theory was needed. Therefore, the multilevel engagement theory is presented and discussed in this paper, which considers culture and diversity as the central aspects of the understanding of individuals, families, and groups in diverse societies around the world. The multilevel engagement theory provides researchers with a comprehensive and inclusive theoretical framework to study families and offers a contextualized and multilevel understanding of family relationships and functioning in sociocultural and historical contexts.

Several theories from different disciplines such as family science, human development, sociology, psychology, and social science were examined in this paper. These theories included family systems theory (Goldenberg et al., 2017; Smith & Hamon,

2022; White et al., 2019), family stress theory (Hill, 1949; Pickard & Ingersoll, 2017), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Raza et al., 2019). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963; Suggett et al., 2017), family development theory (Duvall & Hill, 1948; Smith & Hamon, 2022), biosocial theory (Hamilton, 1964; Smith & Hamon, 2022), conflict theory (Hobbes, 1947; Smith & Hamon, 2017), structural functionalism theory (Parsons & Bales, 1955), feminist and intersectionality theory (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Gilligan, 1982; Raza et al., 2023), symbolic interactionism theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Smith & Hamon, 2022), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Richardson et al., 2021), social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Smith & Hamon, 2017), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958; Smith & Hamon, 2022). An assessment was developed including various parameters (please see table 1 above) to evaluate these theories in different aspects. These parameters were culture, diversity, multilevel influences, sociocultural time, historical time, micro level, and macro level.

After a careful examination of these theories, it was found that ecological systems theory discussed cultural beliefs, values, and ideologies in the macrosystem ecological systems as the fourth ecological system which is distal from individuals than the other ecological systems and it does not talk about the issues of diversity, whereas the multicultural feminists/intersectionality perspective described different social locations, such as race, class, and gender and their impacts on individuals but lack consideration of multilevel influences on individuals and families. It is worth mentioning, that all these theories have been playing an important role in helping scholars to conduct their research and explain research findings. However, some theories can only take researchers so far and consequently, they need to be used in conjunction with other frameworks to be able to fully describe the complex life experiences of individuals, families, and groups in contemporary societies. In addition to cultural plurality, diverse individuals, families, and groups are growing and emerging in societies globally, and family relationships and functioning are shaped by multilevel influences and with sociocultural and historical contexts, hence, a theory like the Multilevel Engagement Theory

which considers culture and diversity as the central aspects to the understanding of individuals, families, and groups and the multilevel influences on families with sociocultural and historical contexts to study family relationships and functioning is needed. Future work will focus on describing each component of the Multilevel Engagement Theory, its significance, use, application, and operationalization with specific examples and case studies and support from empirical data.

CONCLUSION

The multilevel engagement theory is a comprehensive and inclusive theoretical framework that helps researchers to conduct research studies and explain real-life situations. The multilevel engagement theory may help scholars to understand and explain complex phenomena of family relationships and functioning in appropriate and contextualized manners. The multilevel engagement theory may also help researchers to uncover and address important issues of culture and diversity and allow them to examine family relationships and functioning within sociocultural and historical contexts in various societies and cultures around the world. It is worth mentioning that the multilevel engagement theory is broader enough that can be used and tested in various cultures and societies around the world and simultaneously it is narrow enough that can be operationalized and tested through empirical research.

There are a few limitations of the multilevel engagement theory, which are discussed in this section. First, the multilevel engagement theory is a new theoretical framework, hence, additional testing through empirical research in different cultures and societies with a diverse population is required to show the validity and reliability of this theory. The multilevel engagement theory encourages researchers to study multilevel influences on families which change over time and are influenced by sociocultural and historical contexts with a central focus on culture and diversity, which may bring additional challenges for researchers regarding operationalization and measurement. The multilevel engagement theory is developed by a diverse scholar, which promotes family culture and diversity as central aspects to the understanding of family relationships and

functioning in contemporary societies around the world, thereby, may likely face challenges to become a part of mainstream theories.

The multilevel engagement theory is a comprehensive and multilevel theoretical framework that helps researchers to acknowledge the importance of family culture and diversity in studying family relationships and functioning and the multilevel influences on families, which change over time and are influenced by sociocultural and historical factors. The multilevel engagement theory may bring the issues of family culture and diversity into mainstream scholarship and guide researchers to uncover diverse family experiences in different societies and cultures globally. The multilevel engagement theory may help to recognize the voices of diverse and historically underrepresented scholars and population groups and provide researchers with a unique perspective and lens to study families around the world. The multilevel engagement theory can be used at the micro level as well as the macro level, which guides researchers to consider family relationships and functioning as a multilevel and multifaceted phenomenon and encourages them to go much deeper to study family relationships, experiences, and functioning within and between the engagement levels with central focus on culture and diversity.

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