

**Media Depictions of Family Systems Paper**

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## Introduction

Family systems have been portrayed in the media since a long time ago. From “Little House in the Prairie” to “Modern Family” many shows explore what families are and how they behave. However, these media depictions of family systems aren’t just merely entertainment. Contrarily, they actively shape the understanding that we have of families. They serve as frameworks of how we perceive families, they affect interactions and change our expectations. In this paper, I aim to explore different concepts from Family Communication and apply them to the TV show “This Is Us.” Moreover, I will analyze specifically the following components that the show depicts: the type of family interaction structure they have, apply Family Systems Theory to the portrayed family, evaluate the family cohesion and adaptability, explore the biggest family stressors and how they respond to them.

“This Is Us” is an American TV show created by Dan Fogelman. The show has six seasons and 106 episodes, and it aired for six years, from 2016 to 2022. The show portrays the Pearson family, an American family living in Pittsburgh. The family is composed of the married couple Jack and Rebecca Pearson and their three children: Kevin, Kate and Randall. The show follows the span of life of the Pearson’s, it starts with the birth of the children and continues all the way to adulthood, including flashbacks and flashforwards that expand more on the lives of the characters. Overall, the show touches on very different topics, such as adoption, loss, grief, racism, mental health struggles, relationships, and addictions. Considering that I watched the entire show, I will address behaviors and tendencies of the family during all seasons. However, I will be referring specifically to scenes from two episodes: “The Pool” from season one and “Sunday Superbowl” from season two.

## Interaction Structure

There are two main types of interaction in families: decentralized networks and centralized networks. On the one hand, decentralized networks do not have one single member who is the hub of information. It has two main types; all-channel network and chain network. All-channel network stands for everyone talking to everyone. In the chain network family members relay messages through a chain of family members. On the other hand, centralized networks have one member of the family that acts as a hub of communication. This member talks to every other member and then passes information along to the rest of the family. Within this type of network, there are two main types, wheel networks and Y-networks. In the wheel network, the central member at the hub connects all the rest of the members at the spokes of the wheel. In the y-networks, the central member acts as gatekeeper. The gatekeepers talk to every other member, but only allow some messages to get through to members.

When analyzing the Pearson family, I would argue that they are a decentralized structure. Decentralized networks do not have one single member who is the hub of information. I would specifically consider them an all-channel network, since everyone communicates with one another. The episode “The Pool” from season one portrays very clearly how this family operates as an all-channel network. In this episode, Jack and Rebecca take the kids to the pool, but as soon as they arrive there, the day doesn’t go as planned because the three children experience some sort of stress. Kate is bullied by other girls there, Randall is upset because he wants to play with other kids of his race and Kevin is frustrated because his parents aren’t paying attention to him. Given this, different family members start to reach out with one another to try to make each other feel better and find balance back.

Firstly, Rebecca notices, after another woman pointed out, that Randall's skin is itching because he was not receiving the treatment that dark skins needed. This is very eye-opening for her, revealing that even though she tries so hard not to make a difference in between her children, she has to acknowledge Randall's different raciality. This makes her have an uncomfortable conversation with Randall and promise him to arrange playdates with other black kids, and that she would help him get rid of the rash. At the same time, Jack notices how affected Kate was by the girl's comments, so he invites her to share her feelings and tries to make her feel better. Kevin feels left behind, so he also joins their conversation and shares his emotions.

This episode captures very organically how the Pearson family operates as a decentralized, all-channel network. Throughout the entire episode, the communication is flowing freely among the family members instead of being filtered through a single hub. Each member engages directly with another one to express feelings, respond to problems, and provide support.

### **Family Systems**

According to Segrin & Flora (2019), Family Systems Theory is derived from General Systems Theory (GST), a theoretical perspective developed for explaining how elements of a system work together to produce outputs from the various inputs they are given. In this way, a system is nothing more than a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment. Through Family System Theory a family can be analyzed as a special type of system. There are multiple components and processes in this theory. I will be focusing specifically on families as an open and ongoing system, the process of mutual influence and the process of homeostasis through feedback and calibration.

Firstly, families are an open and ongoing system. An open system means that families take input from the environment and produce output back to the environment. An ongoing

system means that it has a past, present, and future. This idea is specially portrayed in the show. This is Us works with multiple timelines that allow you to explore the different moments of the family. Viewers can see the past, with Rebecca and Jack raising the babies; the present through Kate, Kevin and Randall as grownups, and a future where the siblings are grandparents. In this way, the Pearson clearly reflects how families are an open and ongoing system.

To continue to analyze, there are major processes in Family Systems Theory that are assumed to play an important role in the family's day to day functioning. Mutual influence in the process that explains how all family components are interdependent. Moreover, what happens to one member affects the rest of the family because everyone influences each other. The Pearson family showcases this phenomenon and "The Pool" episode portrays it. Each family member's emotions and actions affect the others so they all communicate with each other to try to solve the situation. This example also ties with the concept of homeostasis. Homeostasis is defined as "maintaining a state of equilibrium through feedback and calibration" (Segrin & Flora, 2019). In this case, the parents are recognizing that their children are losing the state equilibrium, so they respond to it and try to bring balance back to the family. Moreover, they engage in feedback and calibration by observing each child's needs, and creating specific responses to each of them. In this way, they find balance back and effectively maintain homeostasis.

### **Family Adaptability and Cohesion**

When it comes to family functioning, theorist Davis Olson suggested the Olson's Circumplex Model. This model proposed two primary dimensions: adaptability and cohesion, so that can be applied to analyze families. Family Adaptability is defined as "the ability of a marital/family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress (Olson et al., 1979, p. 12). Family cohesion

represents “the emotional bonding members have with one another and the degree of individual autonomy a person experiences in the family system” (Olson et al., 1979, p. 5).

In this way, by combining the adaptability and cohesion dimension it is possible to determine family functioning in a two-dimensional space: the Circumplex Model of Family Functioning. To begin with, families who are in the periphery of the circumplex model are extreme families, which means they have either very high or very low adaptability and/or cohesion. These types of families are considered the least functional families. Secondly, families that are closer to the middle of the circumplex model are characterized as mid-range families. These families are more functional because they are balanced on one of the two dimensions of family behavior. Finally, the families that are located at the center of the model are considered the most functional because they are balanced on both dimensions of family behavior.

Considering this theoretical background, it can be argued that the Pearson family has both high levels of adaptability and cohesion, which would locate them as the most functional families in the Circumplex Model. In terms of cohesion, the Pearsons demonstrate strong emotional bonds. They would be specifically aligned with a “connected” family; they present moderate to high cohesion, high emotional bonding, closed external boundaries, strong marital coalition, they value time together over personal space and individual decisions are shared and made with family interests in mind. In terms of adaptability, the Pearsons consistently adjust to major life stresses. This would include them as a “flexible” family, which is a family with high adaptability. This means they are generally assertive, egalitarian (fluid leadership), they engage in good negotiation and problem solving, they have more fluid family roles and rule changes and more implicit than explicit rules. Together, these variables would collocate them as a “Flexibly

Connected” family; one of the four most balanced families of the Olson’s model. These levels of adaptability and cohesion gives them a healthy level of functioning.

### **Family Stress**

Family stress is something every family experiences. However, the type of stressors are not always the same. On the one hand, normative family stressors involve those changes or progressions in family life that occur for most families and they usually have to do with the passage of time. Some examples could be marriage, birth of the first child, deaths of elderly. These stressors are characterized as ubiquitous and expected. On the other hand, non-normative stressors are difficult to predict because they happen randomly and do not occur in every family, and they are usually more traumatic than the normatives. For instance, the serious illness of a child, involuntary separations of a family, divorce.

The ABC-X model serves as a framework of four interrelated factors that are theorized to describe the experience of family stress. The A factor represents the event or situation that the family encounters. This interacts with the B factor, which is the family’s resources. The event or situation also interacts with the C factor. Collectively the A, B, and C factors produce the stress or crisis reaction, which is the X factor. This model can be applied for the Pearson family's most important non-normative stressors: the birth of the triplets and loss of one baby, and the death of Jack.

Firstly, with the birth of the children, it must be considered how Rebecca’s pregnancy was cataloged as high-risk because they were expecting triplets. During birth, one of the three babies died, and shortly after that, they decided to adopt another baby that was in the hospital. In this way, the birth of the children meant a non-normative stressor for them: although they were

anticipating having three kids, they were not prepared for one of their babies to die during birth, navigate parenthood while grieving a child, nor adopting another baby.

In this case, the A factor is introducing three children into the family while grieving the loss of one baby. The B factor includes the family's resources, such as strong marital communication and support from medical staff. The C factor is the family's perception of the event as both joyful and overwhelming. Together, these factors produce the X factor, in this case stress, since it was a moment that denoted a change in the family's steady state, but it was not a crisis.

Secondly, Jack's death was also another major non-normative stressor. His death is during "Super Bowl Sunday", the fourteenth episode of the second season. In this episode, the family is asleep when they wake up because of weird noises, discovering that the house is on fire. Jack manages to get the family out of the house safely, but he gets back in to get Kate's dog. He came back alive, but inhaled lots of smoke. Rebecca takes him to the hospital, and shortly after he dies of a heart attack.

In this case, the A factor is Jack's death. The B factor includes the family's resources, such as extended family and friends that supported them. The C factor would be how the Person perceived Jack's death as a devastating and life-changing tragedy. All together, these factors produce the X factor, which in this would be a crisis, due to the amount of disorder and disturbance that it created in the family system.

These were both clearly the most stressful events that affected the family. It deeply changed the nature of the dynamics of the system and family members had to implement different types of coping strategies. On the one hand, during the birth of the triplets and the loss

of one baby, Jack and Rebecca engaged with mapping and help-seeking. Mapping is coping with a problem by trying to obtain more information about it; Rebecca and Jack continuously asked people around them about the pregnancy, what to expect with triplets, and later, how to raise a child from another race. Help-seeking involves asking for help from other family members, neighbors, coworkers, or experts, in this case, there was a big reliance on the medical staff.

On the other hand, Jack's sudden death meant other types of strategies. Furthermore, Kevin engaged mostly with substitution, which is employing indirect methods to solve a problem, in his case, drinking. Kate often relied on avoidance, withdrawing herself from the family and not sharing her emotions. Finally, both Rebecca and Randall engaged mostly with improving shortcomings by trying to improve aspects of their lives in order to deal with the stress.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay explores key concepts from Family Communication and applies them to the TV show *This Is Us*. The Pearson family has an all-channel decentralized interaction structure, in which all family members talk to each other with no hub of information, which was illustrated in episode six of season one. The family was also analyzed through Family Systems Theory lenses; they are an open and ongoing system, they engage in mutual influence, and they seek for homeostasis through feedback and calibration. When it comes to family adaptability and cohesion, they showed high levels of both, which would locate them as a "Flexibly Connected" family, one of the most functional types of family. Finally, they experienced some major non-normative stressors, which were analyzed through the ABC-X model, generating different coping strategies in all members of the family. Overall, examining the Pearson family through

these theoretical frameworks demonstrates how media portrayals reflect complex family processes. Analyzing these processes through Family Communication deepens our understanding and interpretation of families depicted in media, and helps us make sense of processes that occur within our own families.

### References

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