You are encouraged to read the whole book, and please make a proper citation if needed.

White, J.M., & Klein, D.M. (2002). *Family theories* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Family theory

1. For a theory to be about families, there must be at least one family concept in the theory. We cannot decide what a family concept is, however, unless we first decide what a family is.

- Families last for a considerably longer period of time than do most other social groups.
- Families are intergenerational.
- Families contain biological and affinal relationships between members.
- The biological (and affinal) aspects of families link them to a larger kinship organization.

The systems framework

1. Assumptions

- All parts of the system are interconnected: This assumption is a basic epistemological statement announcing that systems theory is not concerned with isolating Cause A and Effect B from the environment in which they occur. In this sense, the assumption is a statement about the ecological validity and inclusivity of systems theory.
- Understanding is only possible by viewing the whole: The assumption that one must consider a system in its entirely serves a similar epistemological function to our first assumption. The argument that social groups such as families were "real" and greater than just a collection of individuals has raged in these fields for a considerable time.
- A systems' behavior affects its environment, and in turn the environment affects the system: Some of the outputs of a system becomes input of the system (feedback). The notion of feedback is twofold: It is both a concept and an epistemological assumption. The most simple of systems may not incorporate direct feedback loops, but this assumption serves to sensitize us to the fact that even the most simple systems affect and are, in turn, affected by their environment. In this sense, all systems have some form of feedback.
- "Systems" are heuristic, not real things. Systems theory is not reality but a way of knowing. The assumption is that defining an object as a system composed of subsystems, inputs, and outputs is just one among many possible ways we might

study the object.

2. Concepts

- System: A system is a unit that can be distinguished from and that affects its environment.
- Boundaries: All systems have some form of boundaries. A boundary is a border between the system and its environment that affects the flow of information and energy between the environment and the system. Boundaries can be measured on the dimension of permeability to the environment as running from “closed” boundaries, through which nothing goes in or out, to completely “open” boundaries, in which there is no impediment to energy and information transfers of any kind. Clearly, a completely closed system can only be imagined, and a completely open system would lose most of its identity as a system because it would be difficult to separate from its environment.
- Rules of transformation: All systems have internal rules of transformation. A rule of transformation represents a relationship between two elements of the system. One of the major functions of a rule of transformation is to transform inputs to the system from the environment into outputs from the system.
- Feedback: Feedback refers to the circular loop that brings some of the system’s output back to the system as input. Feedback can be of two types. On the one hand, it may be positive, or deviation amplifying. On the other hand, negative feedback is deviation dampening.
- Variety: All systems have degrees of variety. Variety in a system refers to the extent to which the system has the resources to meet new environmental demands or adapt to changes. A system that has a large array of diverse resources would have more options (variety) available to meet the diverse adaptations required by a dynamically changing environment. Some systems may lack the requisite variety to adapt to changes.
- Equilibrium: Equilibrium refers to a balance of inputs and outputs. A family system can also be described as homeostatic. A homeostatic system dynamically maintains equilibrium by feedback and control. A family may maintain its dynamic equilibrium by using its resources to maintain its rules.
- System levels: Systems have levels. A first-order system is simply composed of environmental input filtered through the system’s rules of transformation and exciting as outputs into the environment. There is no method of control or error correction. A second order system (and all higher order systems) has a comparator that monitors the output and compares the output to the goals of the system. If the comparator computes an error, it then corrects the first-order (level) rules of transformation.

- Subsystems: One way of viewing the family system is that it contains sibling subsystems, marital subsystems, and parent-child subsystem. Each of these subsystems could be further analyzed in terms of subsystems. In general, a subsystem is a part of a system that is analyzed separately as to its exchanges with the system and other subsystems.

The family life course development framework

1. Assumptions

- Developmental processes are inevitable and important in understanding families. This assumes that individual family members, the interaction between family members, the structure of the family, and the norms composing expectations about family roles all change with the passage of time. Individual age, relationships have duration, family stages are traversed, and family structure changes. The changing roles and expectations for different stages of family are viewed as essential to an understanding of the family.
- The family is a semiclosed or semipermeable group. The intermingling and integration of effects on the family group have led family development scholars to adopt a definition of the family as semiclosed and semipermeable.
- All family life course developmental theorists assume that time is multidimensional.

2. Concepts

- Family change and development: Two distinct versions of development have emerged. Child development focuses on “ontogenetic development,” which is founded on the genetic capacity of the species to progressively learn language and thought. A second, sociological meaning of development is focused on the traversing of normatively expected family events.
- Positions, norms, and roles: A position in the kinship structure is defined by gender, marriage or blood relations, and generational relations. Norms are social rules that govern group and individual behavior. Norms may be rules about the way something is to be accomplished at various stages of the family and at various ages for an individual. Thus, many norms are age and stage graded. A family role is defined as “all the norms attached to one of the kinship positions. Because positions are defined structurally, however, the content of a role (the norms) may change from society to society or ethnic subculture to ethnic subculture. And like the norms that compose them, social roles may be age and stage graded.
- Family stage: A family stage is an interval of time in which the structure and interactions of role relationships in the family are noticeably and qualitatively

distinct from other periods of time.

- Transitions: Transitions are shifts from one family stage to another. A family's career is composed of many such transitions between stages. Transitions from one family stage and events are experienced as events between stages. Family stages and events are experienced as "on time" or "off time" with the expected timing for these events.
- Developmental tasks: The notion of developmental tasks was an attempt to integrate age- and stage-graded social norms with the ontogenetic maturation of individual family members. However well intentioned the concept, it has fallen into a myriad of difficulties. The notion of developmental tasks has been criticized as making nonscientific value judgments about what constitutes "success."
- Family life course (family career, family life cycle): For most developmentalists, the concept of the family life course has replaced the earlier concept of family life cycle. The original concept of family life cycle contained the connotation that family life somehow "cycled." This was not the meaning life course theorists meant to convey. Rather, development as a process is viewed more like a career, in which current stages are affected by the past, but there is no teleological end to the process that would bring it full circle. The family's life course is composed of all the events and periods of time (stages) between events traversed by a family.

3. Propositions

- Family development is a group process regulated by societal timing and sequencing norms.
- If a family or individual is "out of sequence" with the normative ordering of family events, the probability of later life disruptions is increased.
- Within the family group, family members create internal family norms.
- Interactions within the family group are regulated by the social norms constructing family roles.
- Transitions from one family stage to another are predicted by the current stage and the duration of time spent in that stage.
- Individuals and families systematically deviate from institutional family norms to adjust their behavior to other institutional norms, such as work and education.