A Sociological Perspective

- Families are a social institution
- Social institutions have a set of roles and rules that define its importance to society
- Families are impacted by external forces in the social world

The Sociological Perspective on Families

- Roles, rules, and relationships are created and maintained by the larger society

The Life Course

- The life cycle versus the life course
  - The life cycle is a sequence of social roles among individuals and families
  - The life cycle tended to focus on reproduction and parenting
  - The life cycle does not orient research to the coordination of multiple roles
  - The life cycle is insensitive to temporal locations and timing
  - People’s lives in historical times

The Life Course

- It is a theoretical orientation - a theoretical orientation established a common field of inquiry by defining a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationale, and strategies for design and analysis.

The Life Course

- The concept of the life course refers to a sequence of socially defined, age graded events and roles that individuals enact over time.
- An emphasis on the social meaning of age;
- The timing and ordering of events is important;
- Can be placed in history by linking it to cohort status;

Cohort

- A group of individuals who share the same experience at about the same period of time;
- Common examples include birth cohorts, marital cohorts, divorce cohorts...
- More useful than generation because generation lacks a historical location
The Importance of Time

- Life time (individual time)- is indexed by chronological age and refers to the stage or position in the developmental aging process;
- Social time- focuses on the age-patterned sequences of events, and includes “family time”;
- Historical time- refers to a person’s location in history;

The Life Course

- Social relations;
- Age and temporality;
- Life span concepts of development;

Hareven’s Chapters

- Tamara Hareven is a family historian, now at the University of Delaware; founding editor of the Journal of Family History.
- Her book, Family Time/Industrial Time, published in 1982, is a classic example of historical research that is influenced by the life course perspective.

Hareven’s Research:

- Examines interrelationship between work and family for millworkers at Amoskeag, a huge textile mill in Manchester, NH.
- Follows the mill and its employees and their families from the late 1800’s through the 1930’s.
- Takes a multi-method approach utilizing factory and other records, letters, in-depth interviews with elderly retired workers.

Hareven’s research is an important contribution in several ways:

- One of several important studies arguing that industrialization did not destroy the nuclear family…families adapted—and even shaped—world of work.
- Illustrates creative ways in which families structured migration—within a network of people stretching back to rural Canada, offering “insurance” during hard times (a place to go back to).

How does it exemplify the life course perspective?

- Look at the four themes at the end of the Elder chapter…..(p. 961)
1. “The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their life time.” How does the Hareven’s research illustrate this theme?

Note active role played by kin in shaping who worked in the mill and where they worked.

- Kin brought in their relatives, trained them, monitored their work, helped them when they got old, etc... but there were limits...
- This active role became harder to implement when hard economic times hit the textile industry.

2. “The developmental impact of a life transition or event is contingent on when it occurs in a person’s life.”

Examples of people who put their own marriages and families on hold, sometimes forever, because their parents needed them to stay home.

3. “Lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.”

Many examples of interrelatedness: kin hiring kin; one family member’s decision to marry having impacts on another member’s ability to do so; etc.
4. “Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the constraints and opportunities of history and social circumstances.”

Note that the organism is seen as active, as someone who makes choices, albeit from a range of options that varies with historical time and circumstances.

Main focus

Examines the assumption concerning the “fit” between the nuclear family and the industrial system;

Was the three-generation extended family the common family type in the pre-industrial past?

Under what historical conditions was the family able to control its environment? How did the family reorder its priorities to respond to new conditions?

Sociological perspective

Examines not only the ways that industrialization work affected family organization and work roles, but also how families affected conditions in the factory;

The family and industrialization

What are some examples from the Harevan reading of the role family played in industrialization?

The life course

“A life course perspective views the interrelationships between individual and collective family behavior as they constantly change over people’s lives in the context of historical conditions. The LC is concerned with the movement of individuals over their own lives and through historical time and with the relationship of family members to each other as they travel through personal and historical time.”
The life course

- The life course converges on the issue of timing:
  - Family time
  - Individual time
  - Historical time

The role of kin

- Kin played an important role in the recruitment of workers;
- Kin played an important role within the factory for hiring, job placement, and the work process;
- Kin provided assistance in critical life situations;

Thornton, A. The developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and family change.

- Developmental paradigm
- Reading history sideways
- Cross cultural data

The confluence of these three elements has dominated family change for centuries;
The conclusions of generations of social scientists combined to form a package of propositions that have been a powerful force of family change;

“... few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: Australian (aborigines), Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian, ..”
Development was a process that transformed traditional families into modern ones.

The developmental model, as well as the conclusions drawn from reading history sideways from cross-sectional data, also provided a model and blueprint for the future.

The developmental paradigm is a powerful influence for political, social, cultural, economic, and family change, both in the West and in many other parts of the world.

Basic Propositions of DI
- Modern society is good and attainable;
- The modern family is good and attainable;
- The modern family is the cause and effect of a modern society;
- Individuals are free and equal, and social relationships are based on consent;

The four propositions of DI provide a system of beliefs that can guide a broad array of behaviors and relationships.

What is important is not whether these propositions are true or false, but whether people believe them and are motivated by them.

Modes of Production
- The shift from producing most of what the family consumes to buying what the family consumes is one of the most fundamental changes in Western family history over the past few centuries.
### Modes of Production

- **Familial mode of production** - families were largely self-sufficient, producing all that they needed.
- **Labor market mode of production** - individuals worked for wages and then purchased the goods that they needed.

### “Modern” Families

- Marriage was increasingly based on affection and mutual respect, rather than male authority or custom.
- The primary role of the wife became the care of children and the maintenance of the home.
- The attention and energy of both the husband and the wife increasingly centered on children.
- The number of children per family declined, in part because children were seen as needing more emotional care and time.