Multidimensional Family Development Theory:

An Evolution of Family Development

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Abstract

The general concept of family development seems to persist, despite the criticisms of family development theory and the difficulty in applying it to modern families. We aim to take further steps in the evolution of family development theory, and propose the multidimensional family theory. Addressing issues and criticisms that have plagued the theory, this evolution includes theoretical modifications that might provide greater flexibility to the theory of family development, while retaining useful concepts and propositions established by previous scholars.

We break down the composite stages into their individual parts, and derive four dimensions of development: individual (biological), couple, vocational, and generative/childrearing. We discuss each of these dimensions and how they develop. We further discuss their relationship within an individual, and how they reciprocally interact across the entire family. Roles and stages are discussed within the context of these dimensions of development. We examine the feasibility and utility of retaining stages, stage comparison, and family tasks, while still allowing for family individuality and uniqueness in matters of development. The link between process and structure in terms of development is posited. We propose common language for discussing issues related to family development in areas as diverse as multi-partner fertility and disability, and vocabulary to the relationship between structure and process. We discuss how the theory can be applied in research, touching on how the theory can generate hypotheses, promote research questions, guide methodology, make predictions, and explain observed phenomenon. Practical application in terms of counseling and education is discussed.
Multidimensional Family Development Theory: An Evolution of Family Development

The general concept of family development seems to persist, despite the criticisms of family development theory and the difficulty in applying it to modern families. That is, scholars still address the idea that families change and develop over time (e.g. Davies & Gentile, 2012; Laszloffy, 2002; Martinengo, Jacob, & Hill, 2010). This idea may fit with many individuals’ experiences with families (Daly, 2003), but for family scholars and interventionists, the lack of a theory with adequate yet variable, flexible structure hampers the ability to discuss, examine, and address developmental phenomena in family contexts.

We aim to take further steps in the evolution of family development theory. We propose theoretical modifications that might provide greater flexibility to the theory of family development, while retaining useful concepts and propositions established by previous scholars. We hope to provide a wider variety of tools to discuss and examine phenomena related to family development (and individual development in the family context). We also aim to give common language for discussing issues related to family development in areas as diverse as multi-partner fertility and disability.

To be of maximum use, family development theory must be infused with flexibility in how families are framed and researched. We thus focus on modifications to the theory that we hope will allow better adaptability and specificity in research, generate hypotheses, promote research questions, guide methodology, make predictions, and explain observed phenomenon. We examine the feasibility and utility retaining stages, stage comparison, and family tasks, while still allowing for family individuality and uniqueness in matters of development. With multidimensional family development theory (MFDT), our aim is to give vocabulary to discuss phenomena of family development, including the relationship between structure and process.
History and Background

Family development theory emerged as part of efforts to address “family disarray” in the post-World War II years (Duvall, 1988, p. 127), and as such became one of the first theories that specifically focused on families. Family development theory exists as a hybrid of family sociology and human development within family context, and thus its roots extend earlier than the theory itself (Duvall, 1988). Even in the mid-20th century, during the active formulation of family development as a theory, its components were not new. For example, family developmental stages were integral early in the 20th century to Rowntree’s (1906) study of poverty among working families in rural England. Moreover, Duvall’s conceptualization of development stemmed from individual patterns and processes of human development. These included key periods of physical development, longitudinal personal development (including biological and environmental aspects), and even personality, psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development (Duvall, 1988). In order to use these concepts to speak to the family, Duvall (and others) formulated family development theory, and focused much of the theory on the family life cycle and family developmental tasks (Duvall, 1957).

Family development theory is built on the idea that families develop in a manner similar to individuals (White, 1991), and that there is a universal nature to the way a family develops (Duvall, 1988). The development of the family consists of the family life cycle, a series of stages that encompass roles and tasks (Duvall, 1957). The most common parsing of these stages are the eight put forth by Duvall (1957): (1) beginning families (the establishment phase), (2) childbearing families (the transition to parenthood), (3) families with preschool children, (4) families with school children, (5) families with teenagers, (6) families as launching centers, (7) families in the middle years, and (8) aging families. Over the years, there have been other
attempts to parse out stages of the family life cycle, but most in use today (e.g. Davies & Gentile, 2012) are derivations of the eight posited by Duvall (1957).

Criticisms

There have been three overarching criticisms aimed at family development theory: an assumption of universality, a focus on a single generation (Lazsloffy, 2002), and a lack of scientific utility (White, 1991). To put it succinctly, the theory has been criticized as being nothing more than an outdated description of the mid 20th century middle-class, heterosexual, white family.

It is notable that its key scholars theorized at least somewhat about family diversity, examining various longitudinal trajectories of premaritally pregnant intact families, single parent families, and ‘reconstituted’ families (Hill, 1986). From a hermeneutic perspective, family scholars at that time dealt with the realities of families impacted by war (e.g., the stress of a father’s absence or abrupt presence; a mother’s reluctance to give up vocational independence). The challenges of devising a theory adaptable to varying family situations was salient during the theory’s formation. However, the “modal intact family type” (Hill, 1986, p. 27) was the theory’s family structure of reference. This remains the case in the theory’s core conceptualization, resulting in the relatively fixed concepts and propositions of family development theory.

Despite attempts to adapt family development theory to diverse family structures and processes (i.e. White, 1991), family development has been viewed from the perspective of family time: that is, in terms of stages that emerge from the physical, psychological, social demands of family members and of society (Hill & Mattessich, 1979). The couple relationship was integral to the stages of family development, with the couple’s relationship largely viewed as composite with childrearing, work, and individual development, with stages defined by marriage, childbirth.
and child development, and finally, with vocational adult retirement and individual aging (Duvall, 1957).

It is also important to note that White (1991) made substantial effort to address the issues of scientific utility by encouraging researchers to consider family development as a dynamic process, involving social context and events. He also outlined the methodological needs to make derive meaningful, testable proposition. Despite his efforts, however, family development theory tends to be considered unable to account for modern family life.

**Systemic Family Development Model**

Most recently, Lazsloffly (2002) posited the systemic family development model (SFD) to address the issues of assumption of universality and a single generation focus. In this model, stages are no longer named or used; instead, they are replaced with an emphasis on how families as a system develop over time. She borrows from systems theory (Becvar & Becvar, 2006) and from family stress literature (McCubbin & Figley, 1983) to show how the family is a complicated systems spanning multiple generations, and that changes in the lives of family members leads to increased stresses that result in crises. These crises represent how families change roles and develop over time.

**Criticisms.** SFD gives family development a model that does exactly what Lazsloffly intended it to do—a way to consider the development of families in the context of multiple generations while allowing for idiosyncratic development of each family. However, despite the usefulness of its contribution, SFD does not ameliorate all of the criticisms aimed at family development theory. Notably, SFD does not provide testable propositions—it is still primarily descriptive in nature. In addition, SFD adds some limitations of its own. Namely, it has an emphasis on process to the extent of sacrificing structure. This stunts the ability of researchers to
consider the development of more than one family at a time; there is no provided means to compare across the idiosyncratic development of families.

**Multidimensional Family Development Theory**

Building on the work of scholars before us, we propose an evolution to family development theory. This evolution is designed to provide greater flexibility while retaining useful concepts and propositions established by previous scholars. We hope our modifications to the theory will address concerns of scientific usefulness while still allowing for a more comprehensive view of the family and diverse family development.

**Dimensions**

Integral to Duvall’s original eight stages are actually four main lines of development. In family development theory, these four lines were posited to be composite and relatively universal across time. Separating these developmental elements into discrete but connected dimensions of development would allow for retention of these key facets of development, but allow them to covary and thus reflect diversity of family structures and processes, within and between families. We thus propose that there are at least four fundamental *dimensions* of family development: (1) individual, (2) couple, (3) vocational, and (4) generative/childrearing. We propose that development can occur in each of these dimensions, and that development in any given dimension is not necessarily composite with the other three—although there is reciprocal influence between the dimensions. Further details of each of these are discussed below.

Ontogenesis drives these developmental dimensions, while social forces shape them. Thus, although we believe the overall concept of these dimensions are fairly universal, and derived from the self, the specifics of how they function can vary according the cultural and historical timeframe in which the individual and family develop. Coupling and generativity
(Erikson, 1950), for example, may look very different in various parts of the world. It will be up to empirical work to identify what, if any, universals there are across cultures within each dimension. However, as most research is framed within the culture of the researchers and participants, we feel that this is not a major limitation of the theory, but a reflection of the nature of research. We recognize that emic work (from various specific cultural perspectives; Berry, Poortina, Segall, & Dasen, 1992) is warranted for any theoretical endeavor. However, we acknowledge our own cultural views and the social forces that influence us in the industrialized West, specifically the U.S. We thus take an etic view, theorizing relatively universal components that can later be transported and tested as a first step in cross-cultural work.

**Stages and Roles.** In the original form of the theory, stages emerged chiefly from roles, which in turn were largely driven by the biological, psychological, and social needs of family members (Hill & Mattessich, 1979). Stages were thus amalgams of coupling, childrearing, vocational elements, and of aging (Duvall, 1957). Later updates to the theory attempted to refine this formulation and make the theory more flexible. For example, White (1991) focused on transitional events, which he considered the markers for stage change. A transitional event was an event that changed the roles of family members, and thus changed the stage the family was in (i.e. the birth of the first child to a couple changed roles from just husband and wife to father and mother; White, 1991). While White (1991) did not create stages himself, he called for an empirical construction of a comprehensive list of stages, based on transitional events. Laszloffly (2002) abandoned stages and focused on roles in the context of the process of crisis resolution, with the idea that crises in a family’s life lead to changes and adaptations in roles.

We build on these previous conceptualizations. We also borrow the concept of recursion from family systems theory (Becvar & Becvar, 2006), in that roles and stages are reciprocally
defining. A logical way to conceptualize a stage is that it is a period of time when roles become at least somewhat established and consistent, and the nature of the stage is defined by the nature of the roles being enacted. Conversely, roles reflect the stage because roles are defined, in part, by the responsibilities inherent to a particular stage. Note that this definition of roles and stages does not follow the classical idea of a fixed stage theory. Rather, the use of the term “stage” is closer to the notion of “phase” or “period.” Additionally, it is possible for a person (and for a family) to be in multiple stages at a time. This multiplicity of stages comes as a result of the complex and layered nature of the roles that exist in the course of family development. The idea of roles and stages becomes conceptually clearer as the differing types of roles and stages are clarified, below.

**Single Dimensional Space**

Development is the longitudinal realization of potential, and thus the accumulation of change over time. The view of development as an accumulation suggests that the history of development constrains and informs the future of development without determining it. This accumulation is captured in a construct called trajectories, detailed below. In MFDT, we recognize that family development originates from the interdependent nature of the development of its individual members. Thus, to understand how the dimensions of development are connected in family development, it is requisite to first understand how the dimensions of development function within the individual.

Each individual experiences development in all four dimensions, and each dimension has its own theoretical “space” where the direction of development can be traced. This direction of development consists of an idiosyncratic developmental pathway, or trajectory. In this way, a trajectory is conceptually similar to the way that the term is used in life course theory (Elder,
1998). However, in life course theory, a person’s trajectory refers to an overall direction of an individual’s life, whereas in MFDT, trajectories are restricted to the particular dimension of development they describe. A trajectory, then, represents the history and current direction of development within the space of one of the four dimensions.

Trajectories are shaped by developmental events that alter the developmental pathway (Elder, 1998). These events represent life changes that alter how an individual progresses in that dimension. As such, a developmental event is derived from the transitional events posited by White (1992), and related to the crises posited by Lazsloffly (2002). A particular difference that needs to be noted here is that transitional events and crises are an aspect of the whole family, whereas developmental events relate to a particular dimension of an individual’s development. As an example, two commonly studied developmental events in the vocational dimension of development are dropping out of school (e.g. Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2016) and completing an education (e.g. Wojtkiewicz, & Holtzman, 2011). It is important to note that the events that shape a person’s trajectory then alter the possible future shape of that trajectory, without committing the individual to a specific path. Thus, a trajectory within a dimensional space reflects the duality of determinism and non-determinism in the accumulation of changes that makes up development.

It is also important to note that developmental events are not necessarily in a chronological or other fixed order, and that these trajectories will have commonality across individuals while still maintaining uniqueness to each individual. To continue the above example in the vocational space, many individuals enter the workforce after completing education. However, the education, the job, and the length and effort of attaining each are unique to each
person. Additionally, some lose their jobs, others transfer jobs, and others may keep that first job their entire life.

**Individual (biological) development.** The dimension of individual development deals with the growth, maturation, and development of the individual as a person, including the psychosocial and biological aspects. It is thus primary in driving the other dimensions of development, although the other dimensions have impact. Some of the clearest events are birth and adolescence, and other normative markers for growth. Developmental events can also include non-normative experiences, including disability and accidents. There already exists in the human development field a large number of theories that organize and predict many aspects of this dimension of development (e.g. Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1952; Bandura, 1986; etc.), though many of these theories also blend in aspects of the other dimensions of development rather than keeping them separate. While the organization used by these theories could be conceptually useful in considering the individual (biological) developmental dimension, we consider life course theory (Elder, 1998) as the most applicable theory of human development. This is largely because life course perspective deals with time (and thus aging), linearity, history, and trajectories. Regardless, the important aspect to remember for MFDT is developmental events shape the trajectory within this dimension.

**Couple development.** We have labeled the dimension of the development of intimacy, romantic relationships, and partners as couple development. We recognize that this term carries with it assumptions of a Western culture, and that the aspects of development we describe are culturally bound. However, we believe that aspects of couple development are likely at least somewhat universal, and that these concepts can be extended to other cultures so long as the trajectories mapped are consistent with the time and place of study.
Unlike how family development theory has historically considered it, in MFDT, coupling is relatively fluid, and may or may not include marriage and/or eventual break-up (Sassler, 2010). This is because coupling is no longer central to fixed stages, but rather exists as its own dimension.

The couple dimension subsumes processes of couple development over time, interdependent with (but not dependent upon) generativity. Most couple scholarship focuses on intra- and interpersonal processes related to couple well-being or distress (e.g., Gottman, 1999), issues of developmental marital competence (Carroll et al., 2006), or the processes and structures of partnering (Sassler, 2010), rather than developmental trajectories per se. The couple dimension does include courtship, coupling, decoupling, recoupling, extracoupling, and markers of formal commitment, such as cohabitation, engagement, marriage and other forms of civil unions. Couple development may possibly include processes such as those posited by Bader and Pearson (1983), including symbiosis (couple identity), practicing (self-definition within the relationship), and mutual interdependence (balanced connection within the relationship).

**Vocational development.** In essence, this dimension consists of learning and using the skills needed to provide for oneself and one’s family members, and to contribute to one’s society. In the U.S., and other similar cultures, this entails obtaining an education and entering the work force, as well as associated intra- and interpersonal processes (e.g., identity from one’s education and work). Events associated with this dimension include: starting school (at each level of schooling), completing degrees, dropping out, entering the work force, getting promotions, changing jobs, losing jobs, and retirement. In other cultures, it may involve differing pathways to self-sufficiency and productivity.
**Generativity/Childrearing.** Historically, in terms of family development theory, generativity and childrearing has been the primary defining feature of family life cycle stages. Most operationalization of stages has used the age of the eldest child (Duvall, 1988). In MFDT, the dimension of generativity extends beyond just childbearing, and closely resembles the notion of generativity as put forth by Erikson (1950).

The most commonly studied trajectory of generativity within the family literature is that of childrearing, including events such as the birth of the first child (e.g. Porat-Zyman, Ben-Ari, & Spielman, 2017), adoption (e.g. Foli, South, Lim, & Jarnecke, 2016), and child loss (e.g. Fouts & Silverman, 2015). Included in this set of trajectories are other events commonly associated with family development theory, such as launching children (helping them move out of the home and into a certain level of independence; Duvall, 1957), and having grandchildren. However, generativity can include other events that shape the trajectory within this dimension, such as running foster care, placing a child for adoption, or becoming an aunt or uncle.

**Single dimensional stages.** At their most basic level, roles and stages emerge from within the single dimensional space. There is temporal time between developmental events within each of the four dimensions. During this time, the individual will have a role within that dimension that typically reflects the relative stability of being between events as well what the previous event was—and/or the normative expectation for the next developmental event (i.e. student or newlywed). Inherent within these roles are the needs and/or responsibilities that the individual has to progress developmentally, which needs and/or responsibilities comprise the single dimensional stage. At this low level, roles and stages are functionally interchangeable. For example, within the individual (biological) dimension, one could be a toddler, which denotes both a stage and a role, which stage and role reflect very different needs and responsibilities than
an adolescent. With this richer understanding of the single dimensional space, we can now recursively redefine developmental events as *changes in a person’s life that alters the role (and thus the stage) of one or more dimensions of development.*

**Multidimensional Space**

The four dimensions of development are non-composite. However, the four dimensions do not exist in isolation, but comprise a larger dimensional space that reflects the needed aspects of family development within the individual. Thus, within each individual, these four dimensions of development interact to create a multidimensional space of development. This happens because each dimension of development is partially dependent on the others, and changes in one dimensional trajectory can influence the others. Because all four dimensions are in existence simultaneously, the influence of each on the others is reciprocal in nature—there is no direct, linear causality among the four dimensions. For example, generative behaviors when an individual is young are likely to be different from when that same individual is older, which shows how the dimensions may be partially dependant on each other. However, the development of generativity at a younger age will likely influence whether and when that individual couples, which can in turn influence physical health and lifespan expectancy (Su, Stimpson, & Wilson, 2015).

**Multidimensional stages.** Just as the single dimensional spaces interact to generate a multidimensional space, the roles in all four dimensions also interact to create a multidimensional stage. The interaction (or reciprocal interplay) of these roles represents a person’s personal stage. A person’s personal stage reflects the needs and/or responsibilities that the individual has to progress developmentally across all four dimensions, and thus incorporates the interdependent and reciprocal nature of the roles that emerges from each dimension.
Hyperdimensional Space

As the single dimensional spaces interact to create an individual’s multidimensional space, so do the individuals’ multidimensional spaces interact with those of other family members to create a multi-multidimensional, or *hyperdimensional space* (see Figure 1). Similar mechanisms that govern multidimensional space govern the hyperdimensional space—that is, interdependence and reciprocity. It is in this hyperdimensional space that the whole of the family development is considered. Another way to conceptualize the hyperdimensional space is to state that the family’s development is a result of an increasingly complicated weaving of each family member’s dimensions of development. This may seem to be an overly complex and unwieldy way of considering family development; however, as outlined below, this conceptualization lays the groundwork for generating meaningful and useable constructs.

**Hyperdimensional stages.** In the current conceptualization of the theory, we perceive family level stages as emerging from the interrelated nature of the roles within the hyperdimensional space. A family-level stage is defined by the various roles of the family members, and roles in the hyperdimensional family space reflect the responsibilities an individual has in meeting the family developmental tasks. Many of these roles are complementary and recursive in nature, meaning that they define each other (e.g. husband and wife, parent and child). Conversely, a family-level stage comprises the family developmental tasks, and roles are defined by the constraints of the stage. The stages as posited by Duvall attempted to capture this complex interrelation of roles, despite their inadequacies. It is important to remember that the stage at this level comes from the whole of the hyperdimensional space, so (to borrow one of Duvall’s stages) when parents are launching children, the children are preparing to launch.
It is easy, at this point, to feel as though the number and possibility of stages is so large and undefined as to be unwieldy at best, and unusable at worst. The operationalization and benefit of conceptualizing stages in this way is discussed in further detail later in this paper. For now we simply restate it is possible for families and individual to be in multiple stages at once, and emphasize researchers can and should focus on the stage(s) that most effectively relate to the developmental phenomenon under consideration.

Laszloffy’s (2002) process of role change is also subsumed in the idea of hyperdimensional stages. As stages are defined by roles, the way that a family transitions between roles is also how they transition between stages. The change in one person’s developmental trajectory rarely, if ever, has an isolated effect, and as a result, the crises a family experiences that shape the family level stages are typically one or more developmental events occurring in one or more family members. We therefore consider Laszloffy’s (2002) crises within MFDT a more comprehensive expansion of White’s (1991) transitional events.

**Family Developmental Tasks**

Perhaps one of the most defining features of the hyperdimensional space is that of family developmental tasks, which tasks are balancing the developmental needs of each dimension of each family member. In order to develop in a healthy, or culturally acceptable, way, individuals need access to resources, help, and opportunities to have appropriate developmental events shape their trajectories. The need for appropriate developmental events within each dimension is shaped, in part, by the other dimensions within the multidimensional space. It follows naturally that a similar pattern then emerges in the hyperdimensional space. However, different needs can weigh in at different levels of importance, and it is possible for some needs to not be met as a result. Each family must learn to balance the needs within their own hyperdimensional space. As
an example, it doesn’t matter whether it be a young heterosexual couple with young children, a single parent of teenagers, an uncoupled uncle living with family, or an older lesbian couple that chose to never have children, every member of each family has needs within his or her own spaces of development. The developmental task that faces the family as whole, then, is to balance and meet these (sometimes competing) needs.

**Alignment and Misalignment**

Alignment vs. misalignment refers to the interaction of dimensions within multi- and hyperdimensional spaces. Alignment is theorized to occur to the extent that development in each of the dimensions is relatively congruent. This occurs in reference to the trajectories within each developmental space. Because the multidimensional space is made of how these trajectories depend on and influence each other, it is possible for the multidimensional space to become misaligned. In other words, relative to one dimension, it is possible that events in a second dimension will come soon, late, or in some other asynchronous way, and thus conflict with events in a different dimension of development. For example, a young teen may have a child with someone to whom s/he is not partnered. It is likely the teen would thus lack symbiosis and interdependence from the couple dimension (Bader & Pearson, 1983), and would be in relatively early vocational development, thus signaling a degree of misalignment which may possibly (but not necessarily) reduce the adolescent parent’s ability to meet their own developmental needs and that of the new child. Alternatively, a couple in their early thirties with relational interdependence and more established vocational development would be more likely to have alignment on all four dimensions.

The concept of alignment and misalignment carries through to the hyperdimensional space. Misalignment within one family member’s multidimensional space will influence the
whole of the hyperdimensional space, as there is a certain level of interference and reciprocity there as well. In the case of the first example, the misalignment of the adolescent parent’s multidimensional space would affect the hyperdimensional space of his or her larger family context in all directions: parents, siblings, and new baby.

In terms of the theory, alignment and misalignment is defined by how the ordering and interaction of events in the individual dimensions of development increases or decreases a family’s ability to meet their family developmental tasks. However, this means that alignment and misalignment is also shaped, in large part, by social forces and cultural norms.

**Structure and Process: Development over Time**

In her SFD model, Laszloffy (2002) discussed how the process of overcoming crises in a systemic model led to the changes in roles that represent the overall development of the family. Implicit in that model is an idea that we would like to make explicit in this rendition of the theory: the structure of the family is a result of the processes of development. This is similar to how family process scholars (e.g. Minuchin, 1974) consider the relationship between structure and process, but rather than discussing a process of communication that leads to a structure of alliances and triangles, we are considering how the process of development leads to a structure of the family (e.g. single, married, step, cohabitation, etc).

The reciprocity of trajectories across the entire hyperdimensional space, and the way that developmental events ripple through the hyperdimensional space as crises and as role changes, are the primary mechanisms that account for the connection between processes and structure. Thus, as one or more members of the family experience developmental events, it can lead to significant role changes—roles that both reflect and define the structure of the family. Such a view emphasizes the importance of considering the current state of the family in the context of
their development. For example, a decoupling following a formalized commitment (divorce would be one such case) is different than a decoupling following a short coupling that had no courtship—and the timing of childbirth in this process would also be of great importance. In order to consider how the history of development influences a family structure requires that researchers also consider the length of time between events as well as the ordering of events.

One major advantage to this conceptualization of process and structure is it allows for the great work being done in the family structure literature to be considered in the light of a developmental theory. Take the divorce literature as an example. Originally, the divorce literature made sweeping comparisons of outcomes of divorced families to “intact” families (Amato, 2010). More recently, scholars have been paying attention to many of the nuances involved in divorce, such as levels of hostility that existed before the divorce and the type of coparenting strategies used afterward (Amato). Using the mechanisms outlined in the SFD model, and the trajectories outlined in this paper, it becomes possible to talk about the processes that led to the divorced family structure in terms of family-level development. Diverse child outcomes could then be framed within a developmental context. This could benefit the field by giving common language to discuss, and additional constructs to investigate, this phenomenon. What is more is that the use of MFDT would also allow researchers to investigate how similar aspects of development (the timing of events and the nature of the crises) influence other questions related to structure, such as multipartner fertility, serial cohabitation, intentionally single parent families, and more.

Summation: Core Assumptions

Below is not a list of all of the assumptions associated with family development theory, but are the assumptions most directly connected with the evolution of it presented in this paper.
The fundamental nature of family development is the interdependent, interrelated nature of two or more linked people in their own human development stages. This assumption is what gives rise to the dimensions of development and the single, multi-, and hyperdimensional spaces.

Though driven by ontogenesis, development, including family development, is shaped by social forces, cultural norms, and historical context. As expounded on above, this carries implications for the developmental events that are available and important, what is considered aligned or not, and other ways that development influences outcomes and future development. Empirical work is required to delineate the extent of said influence.

Current development is, in part, a result of the history of development. In other words, current development is a result of what developmental pathway events have happened when, and in what order, in relation to other dimensions.

Because each family’s development is unique, each family will be unique; however, similarities and differences in the developmental trajectories of various families allows for comparisons and investigations of the impact of development on both familial and individual outcomes. This is why we look at process, timing, stages, and structure. Patterns of similarity and patterns of difference both aid our understanding of families and how they develop.

Research Application

Shifting lens approach

Families are diverse and complex, and one of the shortcomings of previous versions of family development theory is that they failed to allow the researcher flexibility in approaching the family. Because of the complex possibilities that exist in our conceptualization of stages, we propose here what we are calling the “shifting lens” approach. In the most basic form, this means that we are not planning on outlining particular or important stages. Rather, stage construction is
handled by the researchers on the study level. Additionally, the shifting lens approach applies to the vertical (grandparents, parents, children, great-grandchildren, etc) and the horizontal (siblings, cousins) aspects of families. It is impossible (and we argue, meaningless) to capture the entirety of a family, both in terms of who is included and what aspects of their lives come under consideration. Thus, the shifting lens approach is the idea that researchers can approach which elements of the family are theoretically, empirically, or rationally important to the phenomenon under investigation.

**Stage construction.** Stages are derived from the roles of family members, and thus stage construction is built around the roles salient to the research question. In addition, a thorough development of stages will consider the crises, or developmental events behind the crises, that led to said roles as part of the stage definition. The roles should be inclusive of all family members who are part of the stage (i.e. parents of teens would translate to the roles of mother, father, and adolescent child).

If the hyperdimensional space is considered to be a universal address, then stage construction allows researchers to focus on what part of the address is needed to make sense of a study. If a researcher is dealing with homes within a particular neighborhood (within the hyperdimensional space), then only the street addresses are needed. Comparing across state lines would require state information, but perhaps not home numbers. An intensive study on a single family may use all address information available to locate where a family is developmentally.

**Within a study.** For a more concrete example consider the work of Martinengo et al. (2010). In this study, the authors investigated how family life stage influenced work-home conflict. Their operationalization of their stages was derived from Duvall’s stages (1957). However, recognizing the impossibility of forcing all of the families into those stages, the
authors instead opted to operationalize stages around child age. The authors then asked, as a separate question, how being married influenced work-home conflict. These had to be asked as two separate questions because the theory as it then stood did not have sufficient flexibility to consider stages in a different light. Additionally, many participants were excluded because these participants could not be categorized using the stages as conceptualized. Under MFDT, the authors could have re-conceptualized the stages to consider the biological, generativity, and couple roles of the parents (i.e. age, parenting status, and marital status), as well as the corresponding role of the children (i.e. age). If the events that led to these roles mattered to the research question, this too could have been included in the stage definitions. The authors could have simply developed a higher number of stages, or they could have considered the families to be in multiple stages at once, and organized stages and substages, based on the factors of interest.

**Between studies.** Here, before we continue, we would like to re-emphasize that stages should be derived from the theory, and the derivation process should be included. This transparency is vital to using this theory. When other researchers can clearly interpret how stages reflect development, it fosters conceptual clarity between studies. Other researchers can then use the same stage construction, or, if they believe stages need to be constructed differently, it is clear where and why the stages differ. Results, and discussion of the results, can then be meaningfully compared and contrasted. While differing stage construction forbears the direct comparison of means, it does allow authors and readers insight as to why results may be the same or different, thus fueling further research.

One of the end goals is to provide space for empirically crafted commonalities that can exist, such as identifying the common tenants of a particular stage, and what impact they have on the family or individual. In addition it can clarify what differences are important to consider in a
family’s stage, and what aspects of development have greater weight for particular outcomes. Thus, we believe that the flexibility of the researcher constructing the stage (and the wide variety of stages that could be constructed) is actually a strength that will generate dialogue and frame our understanding of a phenomenon.

**Operationalization, propositions, and hypotheses.** The mechanisms of the theory and its propositions allow for the derivation of scientifically testable propositions. Due to the large scope of the theory, it is not feasible to fully operationalize its concepts in any single study. However, conceptualizing family development as having multiple dimensions with recursive influence may allow the researcher greater flexibility to better respond to family diversity, and focus on that which is of greatest importance to the phenomena under investigation. The shifting lens approach means that not all of the questions that are asked through this theory require stage construction. For example, questions could be asked about an individual’s multidimensional space, or timing and spacing of developmental events within families’ hyperdimensional spaces. Vocational development, for example, could be operationalized as level of education. This particular operationalization misses a great deal of the concept contained in that dimension of development; however, operationalizations are sometimes mere proxies that attempt to measure a particular concept. If a researcher is concerned with job stability (or marketability), and its impact on family development, level of education would be an insufficient operationalization.

Empirical inquiry through the lens of MFDT could be either quantitative or qualitative in nature. Indeed, both are needed to further develop and examine the concepts and propositions of MFDT, toward a fuller understanding of the nature of family development. MFDT could easily guide a case study of a family, drive the questions asked in an interview, or help shape large-scale quantitative survey-based studies or observational studies.


**Practical Application**

Though most of this article has focused on how multidimensional family theory serves as research tool, its application is not limited to research. The theory carries applied uses as well; it can be used to help individuals and families think through their own life situation and course. It may be of particular help in showing how a family came to be the way they are, and the control and influence their choices can still have on future outcomes.

**Counseling**

**Therapy.** MFDT could be used in individual, couple, and family therapy. With individuals, therapists and clients could view presenting problems and symptoms within dimensions, strategizing about how growth may be achieved by building strengths within each dimension (particularly individual development), but also with attention to positive reciprocity. For example, growth in the vocational dimension may be used to generate positive cognitions in the individual dimension, thus helping to alleviate depression (Beck, 1967). The dimension of couple development is obviously salient to couple therapy in terms of building attachment (Johnson, 2004), and balancing individual well-being and healthy differentiation with connectedness in the relationship (Bader & Pearson, 1983). Regardless of a client’s couple development, the dimension of generativity/childrearing would be germane to family therapy. Therapists and clients could view presenting problems in terms of the child(ren)’s individual developmental needs, but (for example) also give attention to related issues such as vocational hardship, or whether and how couple development is having impact on the child(ren) in terms of healthy processes or interparental conflict (Grych & Fincham, 2011). The dimensions might help therapists and clients organize clinical work, and see reciprocal impact between domains over time.
Schools. School counselors could also use multidimensional family theory to help students they work with to think through choices they wish to make. Take for example a student who is thinking of dropping out of high school to help support his or her family. Using the ideas outlined in this theory, the guidance counselor could illustrate the student’s four lines of development (mostly focus on individual and vocational, in this case—though coupling may be of concern as well) and show how previous choices have led to where the student is. Then, it could be explained how current choices will constrain future choices. The hyperdimensional space could be diagrammed and discussed, and the student could see how choices s/he makes will influence not just the here and now, but the development of both the family of origin and future family of creation (esp. in terms of alignment and misalignment). Thus, the choice to drop out of school or not is put into a full family context. In this way, the counselor could help the student think through the choice in a more thoughtful, complex, and comprehensive manner.

Education (teaching)

MFDT can also be used as a framework for education, including family education and higher education. For family education, the theory proposed in this paper could serve as a basis of curriculum for both parenting and relationships. It could help families understand the needs that are being balanced in their family unit, and how alignment and misalignment influences their ability to meet those needs. In addition, it can help them understand how crises impact the roles they have and carry. Couples could gain greater understanding about how job stresses, childrearing, and their own personal growth all impact their relationship.

Much like how Lazsloffly (2002) indicated with the SFD model, this version of theory could also be used in an undergraduate course to help students frame how they think about families. Indeed, as most of the SFD model has been incorporated into MFDT, the strategies and
techniques she outlined would still be effectual. We refer interested readers to her article. We simply offer more tools that the students could use to analyze and compare families, as well as to account for cultural differences.

Overall, the quality and variety of practical applications will improve as research uses the theory. As empirical foundations are expanded, the possible applications of the theory will grow accordingly.

**Conclusion**

We submit to the family science community an evolution of family development theory: multidimensional family development theory. In it we have attempted to address many of the weakness and flaws in previous versions, while still maintaining the integrity of the original theory. We believe we have done so, and propose that this new version of the theory gives researchers a wider variety of tools to discuss issues related to family development, such as common language for discussing issues related to family development (including the relationship between process and structure), and a theoretical structure that can generate hypotheses, promote research questions, guide methodology, make predictions, and explain observed phenomenon. Furthermore, we posit that the shifting lens approach allows flexibility in how families are framed and researched and retains the utility of stages, stage comparison, and family tasks—while still allowing for idiosyncratic family development. While we don’t believe that this theory replaces other theories, or should be used universally, we do believe that the adoption of this theory will advance the study of families in a developmental context, and expedite our understanding of what influences, and is influenced by, how families develop.
References


Figure 1. Dimensions of development. Each individual has four dimensions of individual development (individual/biological, coupling, vocational, and generativity/childrearing) which combine to create a multidimensional space of development within the individual. Each member of the family’s multidimensional space interacts to create a hyperdimensional space. This is the space where family development happens.