

# OFF THE VANIER BOOKSHELF

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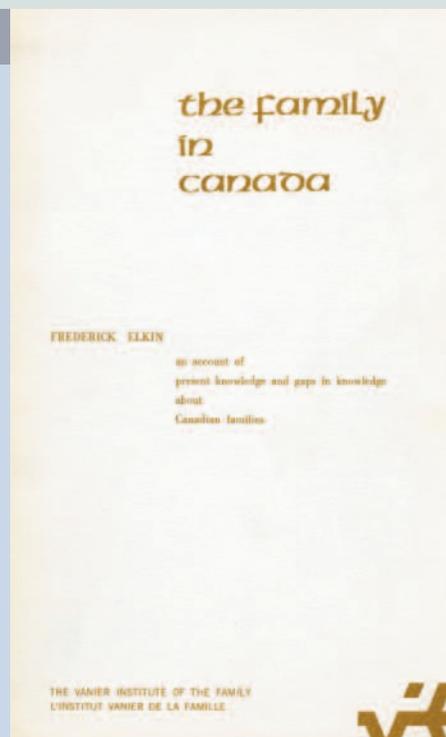
Since its founding 50 years ago, the Vanier Institute of the Family has become a national resource for educators, journalists, policy-makers, family service providers and others seeking to learn about families in Canada. The Institute owes its existence to the *Canadian Conference on the Family*, which was convened in 1964 by a group of dedicated Canadians under the leadership of then Governor General Georges P. Vanier and his wife Madame Pauline Vanier to enhance the national understanding of families and family life across the country. Dr. Frederick Elkin wrote *The Family in Canada* as a reference book for the conference, but it would later become a resource for the Institute itself, which was created following the success of this event.

In writing *The Family in Canada*, Dr. Elkin shared the conference goals of mobilizing existing research from across the country and identifying knowledge gaps to provide a framework for future research about families in Canada. Drawing on the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (the precursor of Statistics Canada), provincial bureaus of vital statistics and many academic theses, Dr. Elkin's book offers a portrait of families at the time and an account of factors that affect family life, with chapters covering topics such as the history of families in Canada, demographics, diversity and family lifestyles. It also provided some of the first substantial coverage of such issues as immigration, leisure and the household economy through the family lens.

Dr. Elkin found that emergent issues of the time were no different in Canada than in other parts of the world, such as the changing role of women and their move to the workplace, the increasing freedom of partners to choose and leave their mates and couples' increasing control over family size. However, he maintained that there were unique trends in Canada warranting special attention: a lower divorce rate than most western industrialized countries, a climate that created distinctive labour market cycles by way of seasonal employment, limited areas of settlement for retirees and a mosaic of ethno-cultural groups that had "no direct counterpart anywhere in the world" at the time.

## The Family in Canada: An Account of Present Knowledge and Gaps in Knowledge about Canadian Families

by Dr. Frederick Elkin



In writing *The Family in Canada*, Dr. Elkin shared the conference goals of mobilizing existing research from across the country and identifying knowledge gaps.

In compiling the facts and figures for *The Family in Canada*, Dr. Elkin realized he was gathering a record of the family caught in a *particular moment in time*. His recognition that no snapshot told the full story and that families were dynamic and evolving, perpetually adapting to ever-changing realities, was every bit as insightful and valuable as the portrait of the times he provided in his book. As he writes,

The family has never remained constant. Even when life was most traditional and stable, children were never exact replicas of their parents. Now change is a key concept for any family analyst. The family, with its crucial functions, does not expire, it changes. In varying ways, it adapts and bends and, of course, in turn, it influences.

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Dr. Elkin emphasizes the *two-way relationship* between families and the social, cultural and economic contexts in which they live. He writes, "The family is not an isolated unit; it exists and functions in the context of a society which in recent generations, with industrialization and urbanization, has been undergoing radical readjustments." These trends (and others) shape family experiences, inform family expectations and influence family aspirations – but the behaviour of families in turn has its own effect on the societal institutions that help *create* these contexts (e.g., governments, businesses, financial institutions). This mutually influential relationship between agency and environment has guided much of the Institute's work, past and present.

"Observers once spoke of the dissolution of the family. We recognize now that the family does not disappear, rather it changes and adapts and develops new patterns."

"[Parents] act not only in their own right, but as intermediaries of the larger culture, teaching the values of the larger society and of their own national, socio-economic, ethnic, and religious groups."

"There is no one Canadian family. With its distinctive geography and history, Canada is much too heterogeneous to have one or ten or twenty distinctive family types."

"Recognizing the crucial role of the family for each of us in the society as a whole, we can safely predict that the interest in questions of the family will remain high; let us hope as well that we shall always have the active workers and researchers to sustain and develop this interest and to augment our knowledge."

The knowledge gaps and emerging topics identified by Dr. Elkin provided research focus for the Institute in its early years, which went on to conduct landmark studies on issues of domestic violence, single-parent families, family diversity and divorce. This early research enabled the Institute to make significant contributions to policy discussions and legislative frameworks surrounding family law reform, divorce legislation and immigration policy.

Some of the language and framing used to describe families and the realities they face has certainly changed since the publication of *The Family in Canada*; terms such as "delinquent behaviour" and "illegitimate births" were common at the time, but are now a relic of the past. However, this language itself gives readers insight into how families, family relationships and the issues families face were conceptualized at that time and how things have changed since.

While some of the language in *The Family in Canada* may strike today's reader as dated, Dr. Elkin's focus on what families *do* and on the many of the functions that families serve – providing care, managing resources, raising the next generation – is timeless. This focus on function would later be central to the definition of family adopted by the Institute in the early 1990s. Knowledge mobilization, central to Dr. Elkin's book and the *Canadian Conference on the Family* itself, remains one of the Institute's priorities today as it continues to enhance the national understanding of families in Canada.▼

**Subsequent editions were published by the Vanier Institute of the Family in 1968 and 1971.**

**English and French editions are available for reading in the Vanier Institute library.**

**See also *The Canadian Conference on the Family: Proceedings of Sessions Held at Rideau Hall and at Carleton University, Ottawa, June 7-10, 1964.***

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