



What's in a Name?

Defining Family in a Diverse Society

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In 2015, the Vanier Institute of the Family will be celebrating its 50th year as an independent and national teaching and learning organization committed to promoting the well-being of families in Canada. For five decades, the Institute has sought to enhance knowledge and understanding through research that documents the richness and complexity of families, family life, and family experiences, expectations and aspirations. A central component of this research has been the *functional definition of family* used by the Institute since the late 1980s.

The Institute defines a family as any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement, and who together assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following: physical maintenance and care of group members; addition of new members through procreation, adoption or placement; socialization of children; social control of members; production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; and affective nurturance (i.e. love).

The Institute needed a definition that allowed people to have a *discussion* rather than an *argument* over what constituted a “family.” Inclusiveness was the key to achieving this; the definition needed to apply to everyone’s *experience* of family, regardless of their history, nationality, socio-economic status, ethno-racial background, sexual orientation or family type. But the definitions being used by organizations and individuals at the time tended to reflect the personal family of whoever was *providing* the definition. They were projecting their own experience of family into a public policy sphere or into a sociological or community discussion.

This is understandable, as people’s perceptions of social institutions are shaped by their own upbringing and surroundings. But since families aren’t homogeneous (even in the Institute’s early years, when there was less diversity in the structure and composition of families than today), this approach to defining families left many

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out of the discourse, such as sole-support families, blended families and families with LGBTTQ parents. Rather than focusing on what families *look like*, the Institute instead decided to create a definition based on what families *do*, regardless of the particular structure of the family or who performs roles within.

The deliberate broadness of the Institute’s definition of family sparked some controversy at first. After some of the Institute’s early documents were released, one of the first questions asked by members of the media was whether it included families with LGBTTQ parents – and the answer was, without hesitation, yes. Yes, because the definition is about people who engage in the task of raising the next generation, regardless of who they are. This initial controversy may have been inevitable, but it was necessary if the Institute was going to take an inclusive approach.

The Institute’s definition is not about the status of the adults looking after the child. It’s a family if there is a *set of relationships* over time with individuals looking after the needs of another. It’s not about a marriage per se, but rather the commitment made – it could be common-law, sole-support or any number of family structures. The definition doesn’t require children, but it does require at least one relationship between an adult and another person – a relationship *over time*, which signifies that a commitment has been made. How it’s made and what specific form it takes is independent of the definition.

It was in the years leading up to the 1994 International Year of the Family, as governments were searching for definitions of family for use in public policies



“The Vanier Institute must be thoroughly in touch with family life of all kinds, not the ideal of the family but the reality of the family as people live it.”

– Beryl Plumpre, 1972

that involved or affected families, that the value of the functional definition became clear. Up until this point, people were still trying to justify either a nuclear family or one that reflected their own familial experience, rather than trying to find a general approach that captures a better picture of *all* families. The Institute’s definition then started showing up in textbooks in the mid-1990s and has since become one of the most commonly cited definitions used in family research nationally.

The definition leads to interesting discussion when one realizes that all families (even if they happen to look alike) do the same things, we may just do them *differently*. One hundred years ago, people fed their families first by growing the food, then canning or preserving it, then cooking it and then finally serving it to other family members. In later generations, people fed their families by going to the store, buying the food, cooking it and then putting it on the table in front of family members. Now, we may also go to restaurants to buy prepared food and then eat it with our families. Today’s grocery stores, which are selling as much prepared food as raw ingredients, are the next iteration of how we’re feeding our families in a modern context. This shows that families can fulfill the same basic function of providing nourishment while doing so in different ways. It’s all just another way of saying that *families are dynamic*, constantly performing the same functions but adapting how they do so in response to ever-changing social, economic and cultural contexts.

This definition was also meant to show that the relationship between families and society is a *two-way street*. Families are shaped by and react to social, economic and cultural factors, but they have an impact on these same forces as well. They create changes at the *micro* level by making decisions about family aspirations, labour market participation (or the lack thereof) and the consumption of goods and services. Collectively, these changes over time create change at the *macro* level, as institutions and organizations react to patterns of

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behaviour among families. Families are not simply the recipient of policies, whether it’s government policies or employment policies – they engage, resist and/or modify them based on *their* immediate and personal needs. So there’s a constant negotiation and renegotiation between family and culture. They are agents of change, but at the same time they are compliant to the norms of culture to some extent.

The Institute’s definition demonstrates that, throughout time, there is consistency in terms of what families do to the benefit of their members *and to the benefit of society*, which has an expectation that families are preparing young people for the economy and the society that they are going to encounter. Society benefits through the future contributions of children, who grow to become the next generation of employees, taxpayers and community members.

Due to its recognition that families are diverse, complex and dynamic, the Institute’s definition facilitates discussion about families and family life without pitting the interests of one family against another. This was a problem we regularly experienced before this definition was created – there were judgments being made about one type of family versus another due to their structure or composition, which was hurtful to the families being talked about *and* hurtful to our culture. As Dr. Elise Boulding once said, there isn’t enough love in the world for us to reject loving relationships, whatever their form. So, by looking at what families do, it’s easier to take an appreciative stance rather than a critical one, and it’s a reminder to the culture that when families and parents begin, the culture continues.

In a sense, all of those points in the definition don’t just describe family but also the community that surrounds the family. They have a role in every one of those functions because they pick up where the family leaves off. It’s a very inclusive definition for a reason – it’s a way of saying we all have a responsibility and it’s shared. We are creating not just individuals but also a culture through an agglomeration of families who are performing these tasks on behalf of the society. ♡

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