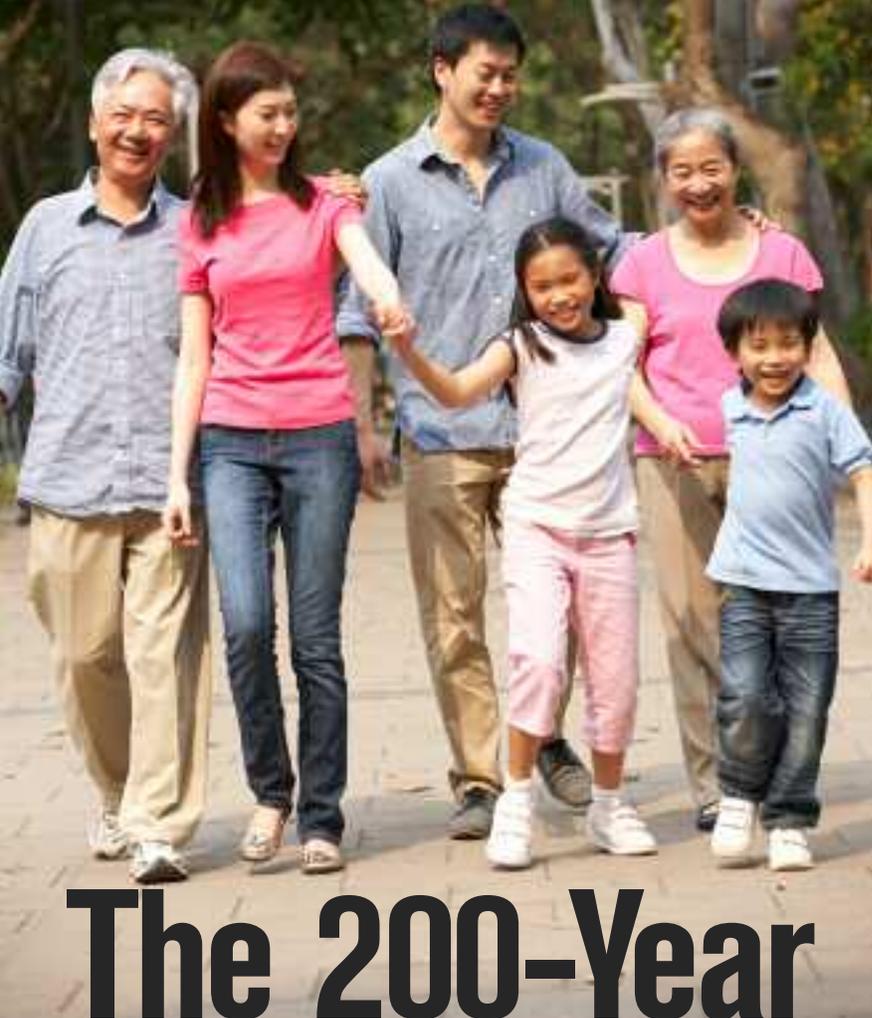


Connections and exchanges between our generation and those that precede and follow us provide a greater lens through which we can view society.



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# The 200-Year Present

NORA SPINKS

In 1981, the Vanier Institute hosted a public lecture with keynote speaker Dr. Elise Boulding, who described how our experience of family can be viewed from a “200-year present” through our grandparents (who connect us with the previous century) and through our grandchildren (who connect us with the upcoming one). Connections and exchanges between our generation and those that precede and follow us provide a greater lens through which we can view society – a perspective grounded in a diversity of experiences.

At the Institute, the concept of the 200-year present guides how we explore and understand families and family life. Recently, I spoke at the University of Ottawa to a group of about 200 students and asked how many had day-to-day contact with a parent. Almost every hand in the room went up. I then asked how many had regular contact with a grandparent (once a week or more), and two-thirds of the hands stayed up. Then, I asked how many kept in touch with a *great*-grandparent regularly (once a month or more). I expected to see just a few hands. However, the vast majority of those who had contact with their grandparents *also* had contact with their great-grandparents. Most said they maintained contact through technology, either with Skype, smartphones or social media. Some were living with their parents and/or grandparents. Some were living with *and* caring for their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents.

Curious as to whether the statistics we have on file reflect the same multigenerational experience, I pulled up our “grandparent file” when I got back to the office. Unfortunately, there is little information about great-grandparents, because Statistics Canada only collects information on grandparents and doesn’t count whether you’re a first- or second-generation (i.e. grandparent or great-grandparent). It’s hard to determine whether the group of students I had spoken with earlier in the day was unique or whether it was representative of students in their twenties across the country.

So, what we want to do at the Vanier Institute is hear about people’s experiences with multiple generations to enrich our understanding of grandparents and great-grandparents. In light of this, we would like to engage Canadians in a conversation about how they interact with multiple generations across the country and around the world – connections that are often facilitated by communication technologies.

One of the most popular and frequently requested presentations that the Vanier Institute gives is about generational diversity – in the workplace, in the community and in the home. Clearly we are not alone in wanting to learn about the intergenerational experience in Canada. Later this year, the United Nations will be holding a series of meetings about the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family, of which one of the three main priorities is intergenerational experiences. As one of 15 participants in these gatherings, the Vanier Institute will bring a Canadian voice, informed by our research and conversations we have had with families across the country.