What's in a Name? Defining Family in a Diverse Society

Alan Mirabelli
The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Vanier Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

Author
Alan Mirabelli

Editing and Proofreading
Veronica Schami Editorial Services Inc.
www.veronicaschami.com

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Denyse Marion
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Vanier Institute of the Family
94 Centrepontie Drive
Ottawa, Ontario K2G 6B1
613-228-8500
www.vanierinstitute.ca

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For more than 50 years, the Vanier Institute of the Family has served as a national resource dedicated to exploring and understanding Canada’s diverse families. During this time, the Institute has sought to enhance and mobilize knowledge 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 Vanier 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 Vanier 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 Vanier 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 out of the discourse, such as sole-support families, blended families and families with LGBTQ21+. 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 Vanier 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 LGBTQ21+ 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.
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The Vanier 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 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 Vanier 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.

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 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 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 Plumptre (former Vanier Institute president), 1972
The Vanier 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 Vanier 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.

Alan Mirabelli was a devoted member of the Vanier Institute team for more than 30 years, serving as Executive Director of Administration and Director of Communications. Alan Mirabelli passed away peacefully on December 20, 2017, at the age of 69. He was a dear friend, colleague and mentor who will be greatly missed by many. His contributions and legacy at the Vanier Institute of the Family will live on forever.

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