Building Stronger Family Bonds

THROUGH INNOVATIVE MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH
Greetings! Fiscal Year 2014 greeted us with the fantastic news that the Institute’s clinician-researcher, Dr. Lynne Knobloch-Fedders, and her colleagues had been awarded a federal grant for the research study, “Reunification Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment.” This is the first federally funded research grant awarded to a researcher at The Family Institute. We couldn’t be more thrilled. It is truly an accomplishment to applaud and celebrate.

The inter-connectedness of the Institute’s clinical, research and educational components has kept the Institute on the cutting-edge of integrative psychotherapy research. Our research findings add to our knowledge base and new knowledge, in turn, informs what we teach our students and how we treat our clients. What happens in our classrooms and therapy offices refines our research. And, as we conduct our research, we provide hands-on experience to our future leaders – our research fellows.

This newsletter highlights the ground-breaking research of Dr. Knobloch-Fedders and Dr. Rick Zinbarg. It provides an update on STIC research which will now be conducted under the auspices of the newly-named Dan J. Epstein Family Foundation Center for Psychotherapy Change.

The dedication of our current and future researchers, along with the generosity of our donors, helps us to fulfill our mission to strengthen and heal families from all walks of life through clinical service, education and research.

With gratitude,

William M. Pinsof
President
Research and Its Role at The Family Institute

By Tammy Sher, PhD, Counseling Adjunct Faculty, Affiliate Therapist

The mission of The Family Institute is to strengthen and heal families from all walks of life through clinical service, education and research. These three areas work together as three legs of a stool, where each is reliant on the other to hold up the base.

Many people associate the Institute with our direct work with clients. It is also well-known that our education mission enables us to train the clinicians of tomorrow. It is that third leg, the research leg, that can be the hardest to understand.

Clinical work is a combination of art and science. As clinicians, we need to be able to weave together where a person is now with where they want to be in order to set a direction for the therapy process. This is clearly art. However, clinical work is also science in that what we do with our clients is based on scientific evidence that proves its effectiveness.

Research supplies that science. Thus, research tells us what therapy should include, as well as what works or does not work. For example, it is helpful to know that if we really want to effect change within a person, we need to understand the other people in their environment, such as in their family groups. However, researchers take this truism a step further by highlighting why this is important — from the impact of families on the ability to fight disease to their impact on our self-confidence — and how we, as therapists, can intervene to make a difference.

Research at The Family Institute is divided into 4 key areas. One of our research teams studies how change occurs in therapy, and what the barriers might be, so that we can pinpoint what helps and what might actually hurt the healing process as it is happening. Two other teams of researchers focus on deepening our understanding of anxiety and depression by applying what we know about couples to heal and strengthen the individual. We also have research projects looking at depression in returning veterans and how anxiety interacts with family functioning. Finally, another team of researchers at the Institute studies how couples and families are affected by physical illness, and in turn, how couples and families affect the illness process.

What is most unique about research at The Family Institute is that it does not exist in isolation as often happens at academic institutions. What we learn from our research can be immediately adopted by our therapists and taught to our students. In turn, what our clients and students teach us informs future research questions.

Mental health practices rely on research to be effective. The Family Institute is embracing the future of mental health through its research.

For more information on our research program, please visit www.family-institute.org/research.
Tracking Change through the STIC®

To help deepen the understanding of how people change and to improve the quality and efficiency of therapy, researchers at The Family Institute developed the STIC® (Systemic Therapy Inventory of Change), a cutting-edge measurement and feedback system. The STIC is the first instrument that simultaneously looks at client's individual symptoms and the quality of their important relationships. The STIC is designed to monitor weekly changes in a client's personal and relationship functioning. Through the Dan J. Epstein Family Foundation Center for Psychotherapy Change, we use the STIC as both a research tool and a way of fostering better clinical practice.

A key upgrade to the STIC is the new website where therapists can quickly review their client’s results before each therapy session. Using the STIC website during a session, therapists and clients can set clearer goals, assess progress in real-time, and make informed treatment choices.

As one therapist said, “Using the STIC with clients allows a therapist to see — in a visual form — the problems that clients are describing in session. [It] adds more depth and understanding to the processes of hypothesizing, treatment planning, and monitoring progress. I have found that my clients enjoy looking at their data and use it to discuss in greater detail the things they want [me] to understand.”

Clients also see the value in using the STIC. “Sometimes I get discouraged when I feel like I’m not changing but then I see the line graphs and I realize how far I’ve come. It gives me motivation to work on continuing to change.”

The STIC has broadened its reach as a research and clinical tool. To date, 169 therapists at The Family Institute have utilized the STIC with 1,647 clients. Through participating Chicago agencies (Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Jewish Child & Family Services, and Community Counseling Centers of Chicago), 73 therapists have used the STIC with 585 clients. We are currently conducting randomized clinical trials in the United States and Norway to gather empirical data on the use of the STIC and therapeutic outcomes while broadening the reach of the project as a pre-eminent research tool.

For more information on the STIC, please visit www.family-institute.org/stic.
For example, at The Family Institute, I am the Director of the Anxiety and Panic Treatment Program and the Patricia M. Nielsen Research Chair. At Northwestern University, I am a Professor of Psychology. In these roles, I provide clinical services through The Family Institute, teach through Northwestern University, and conduct psychological research in conjunction with both. I am currently researching collaboratively with Dr. Ken Paller, a Northwestern University neuroscientist and Psychology department faculty member, and two Northwestern students. We are examining the potential improvement of anxiety disorder treatment via memory enhancement during sleep.

The impetus for our research is the scientific evidence showing that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), currently the leading form of therapy for anxiety disorders, produces what might be considered cures for only about 50% of patients (Zinbarg, Lee & Yoon, 2007). Cognitive reappraisal, or the replacement of negative thoughts with more balanced ones, is a common component of CBT that can contribute to the reduction of anxiety. Our research examines how to enhance cognitive reappraisal therapy during sleep by attempting to trigger an anxious individual’s memory with a sound, thereby increasing the therapy’s effectiveness.

As clients practice cognitive reappraisal during therapy, they hear specific sound cues. Later that evening, that same sound cue is played to half the participants while they sleep. Participants return to the lab and complete final assessments to answer the project’s central question: Can auditory reminders during slow-wave sleep enhance the effects of cognitive reappraisal? If the results suggest that cognitive reappraisal can be strengthened during slow-wave sleep, the process would be a promising new technique in the treatment for anxiety, and perhaps other emotional problems.

This research is just one example of the shared links between The Family Institute and Northwestern University, and how we conduct research together. Because we are able to work collaboratively, we widen our research’s potential. Our affiliation enriches the research we conduct, and the ways in which that research impacts our clients.

References

The award, received in collaboration with Dr. Leanne Knobloch from the University of Illinois and Dr. Benjamin Karney from UCLA, will fund the study “Reunification Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment.” This four-year project, the first federally-funded research study conducted by The Family Institute, is designed to investigate how military couples reunite after a soldier returns home from combat. The reentry of service members back into family life after deployment can be extremely challenging for military couples. Although many returning service members and their partners look forward to homecoming with joyful anticipation, their reunification can pose numerous challenges, including difficulty getting reacquainted, adjusting to daily life, managing a partner’s mood changes, worrying about the possibility of another deployment, identifying sources of support, redistributing household and parenting responsibilities, and completing day-to-day work activities.

Both military personnel and their at-home partners are at risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and relationship distress during the six months following homecoming. In fact, scholars have argued that incorporating a service member back into domestic life can be more demanding for military families than deployment itself. There is an urgent need for research to inform prevention and intervention services for couples during this difficult transition. Initial evidence suggests that the mental health of returning service members and their partners, as well as the dynamics of their romantic relationship, shape resilience upon reunion. However, much remains unknown about how these factors operate separately and in tandem to predict reintegration difficulty.

The goal of the grant-funded research project is to evaluate how people’s mental health symptoms and intimate relationship characteristics predict reintegration difficulty following deployment. The study will collect online survey data from 250 couples one month before homecoming after deployment, at homecoming, and for seven consecutive months after homecoming, in an effort to evaluate patterns of change in mental health symptoms and relationship characteristics as the transition unfolds over time.

Results from this project will be used to generate research-based guidelines to inform the curriculum and timing of education, prevention, and intervention efforts designed to assist military couples.

To learn more about this study, contact Dr. Knobloch-Fedders at lknobloch@family-institute.org.
Spotlight: Clinical Research Fellows
By Colleen O’Connor, Content & Grant Manager

The Family Institute’s two-year Postdoctoral Clinical Research Fellowship Program provides funding for postdoctoral fellows to pursue research and receive clinical training at the Institute. The Fellowship Program aims to train science-practitioners to become clinical and scientific leaders in the field of family psychology. Thanks to generous donations, the Institute boasts two Clinical Research Fellows. Each is charged with a specific research project during their two-year tenure.

Steve N. Du Bois, PhD, Dr. John J.B. Morgan Fellow

I am grateful to have been selected as the Morgan Clinical Research Fellow at The Family Institute. This fellowship allows me the unique opportunity to develop my research skills while putting that research into practice through my clinical work. I have always been drawn to the connections between clinical service and data. Being able to tell my clients how research supports the effectiveness of their treatments is empowering — it allows me to bring research into therapy in inclusive, accessible ways. In turn, my clinical service experience allows me to bring my clients’ voices into research. In doing both clinical work and research, I am able to enrich my research with therapeutic understanding, and vice versa.

I conduct research at the Institute with Dr. Tamara Goldman Sher. We share an interest in learning about individuals’ physical health in the context of their romantic relationships. We have submitted a grant proposal to study phone-based therapy for couples, collaborated on manuscripts to submit for publication, and begun designing our first collaborative research study investigating whether the relationship-based health benefits extend to individuals in long-distance relationships.

I am fortunate to have had diverse research experiences at The Family Institute, despite being here for a few months. I have the opportunity to be, simultaneously, a researcher of individuals and couples while also providing therapy to individuals and couples. The Institute provides me with a well-rounded Fellowship experience, during which I can disseminate clinical knowledge to clients and research knowledge to those in the field of Psychology.

Jacob Goldsmith, PhD, Madigan Family Fellow

Between my junior and senior years of college, I transitioned from studying philosophy and music to psychology, and started researching at The Family Institute. I began as a volunteer in the Institute’s Psychotherapy Change Project, which studies how people change in therapy, and the experience ignited a passion in me about understanding how relationships contribute to change in therapy — a passion I still have today.

I loved the research because it was simultaneously a “big-ideas” project, aimed at understanding how change happens in psychotherapy, while maintaining a micro-level focus on what each therapist does with each client. A lot of institutions conduct research until it becomes a rule, and then convey that rule to clinicians. However, at The Family Institute, we use our research directly with our clients — we don’t research behind closed doors.

Currently, I examine the impact of giving therapists feedback about how their clients’ change in therapy as part of the STIC® (Systemic Therapy Inventory of Change) project. My research focuses on client-therapists relationships, or therapy alliance. I study problems in therapy alliances, and how navigating those problems successfully helps clients grow and change, and use that research in my own clinical work as a therapist.

I’m excited to continue working on the Institute’s Psychotherapy Change Project, which has grown exponentially over the past 6 years. We still address big-picture questions, like how to make psychotherapy more effective and efficient, and we are still committed to giving therapists tools they can directly use to encourage positive changes in their clients. My role gives me the chance to contribute something back to the project that started me on my research journey.

For more information on our Clinical Research Fellows or our research program, please visit www.family-institute.org/research.
The mission of The Family Institute at Northwestern University is to strengthen and heal families from all walks of life through clinical service, education and research.

An affiliate of Northwestern University, The Family Institute is a unique, innovative not-for-profit organization, governed by its own independent Board of Directors and responsible for its own funding. We have four staff practice locations, including Evanston, Chicago, LaGrange Park and Northbrook. For more information on our staff practice, please call 847-733-4300 or visit our website at www.family-institute.org.

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Circle of Knowledge Events

March 13, 2014
Unlocking Anger:
A key to strengthen relationships
Edgewood Valley Country Club, LaGrange

March 14, 2014
Shall We Dance? Understanding the choreography of love & intimacy
Exmoor Country Club, Highland Park

April 24, 2014
Two Generations, Two Perspectives:
Straight talk about young adults & their parents
University Club, Chicago

L O C A T I O N S

Bette D. Harris Center–Headquarters
618 Library Place
Evanston, IL  60201
847-733-4300

Millennium Park
8 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 500
Chicago, IL  60603
312-609-5300

LaGrange Park
335 North LaGrange Road
LaGrange Park, IL  60525
847-733-4300

Northbrook
866 Dundee Road, Suite 1501
Northbrook, IL  60062
847-733-4300

If you are interested in more information about our upcoming events, please contact Michelle Weil at 312-609-5300, ext. 480 or mweil@family-institute.org.

For more information, please contact Tamara Reed at 312-609-5300, ext. 484, treed@family-institute.org or visit www.tfigift.org.