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A REFLECTION ON
50 YEARS OF FAMILIES

By Aaron Cooper, Ph.D.

THE FAMILY
INSTITUTE
at Northwestern University



Family.

When we speak of the ties that bind, few pull as tightly as our *family* ties. Whether through birth or by choice, the people with whom we build our strongest connections — the people we call family — can lift us to peaks of joy or deliver us to depths of despair. The grip of family is familiar to us all, its dramas recounted from the time of ancient storytelling through centuries of song and literature, to film and television today. For thousands of years, narratives of family life have brought audiences to laughter and to tears. Of course it's not tales of peace and harmony that captivate us so much as the trials by fire that are part of every family's experience. The irresistible pull of these dramas has inspired many into becoming family therapists and led to the creation fifty years ago of The Family Institute at Northwestern University.

When social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists gathered around a kitchen table in Oak Park, Illinois in the late sixties to create what evolved into The Family Institute, they didn't foresee the big tent that today embraces a variety of family shapes and sizes. Back then, notions of family reflected prevailing post-War images permeating the culture — mass audience programs like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, plus ubiquitous print and television ads depicting white women preparing dinner in proper middle class kitchens. Hidden from view were families of color, single parents raising children, interracial couples, economically impoverished families and same-sex partners living below the radar. The Family Institute in its early years was committed to honoring the lived experience of the people who passed through its

doors, defining family through their lens and without judgment or bias, despite the parochialism of prevailing views. It's a commitment that remains the centerpiece of The Family Institute's mission these fifty years later.

Beginning in the sixties, profound social changes ultimately broadened the view of family. As women entered the workforce, many attained the financial independence to exit unhappy marriages. Rates of divorce climbed through the seventies and eighties while children shuttled between their co-parents' households. Some ex-spouses remained single, others remarried and ushered in the "blended family" era. Increasing numbers of men and women preferred to cohabit without legal obligations. In 1967, the Supreme Court's *Loving v. Virginia* decision affirmed the legality of interracial marriage, which led to a quadrupling in the number of biracial and multiracial youth over the subsequent fifty years. The international adoption movement in the eighties further painted family in multi-colored hues. Once the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 1973, gay and lesbian therapists influenced their workplaces — family institutes among them — to embrace same-sex couples as a legitimate form of family life. When LGBT people brought children into the picture by birth or through adoption, the shape of family expanded yet again. Every step of the way, The Family Institute provided support to often-bewildered partners, parents and youth.

But what remains unchanged — what was understood by The Family Institute's founders and today more than ever — is the central role of family in the lives of its members. Decades of research have affirmed the connection between the health of individuals and the health of



their families, both in the physical and psychological domains. Studies have revealed the toll that illness in one partner can have on the other, the emotional cost to gay people when their families are rejecting, the increased risk of later life illness to children exposed to family trauma. While science has affirmed the centrality of human connection to personal well-being, it has also exposed the price paid when close connections — family in particular — are troubled or impaired.

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When families falter today, the ripples seem to inflict greater damage than in years past. As the role of religious, civic and cultural institutions has weakened in many places, people expect spouse and children to deliver the benefits once provided in part by community: affiliation, comradeship, identity. Five

decades of geographic mobility have uprooted people from siblings, extended family and lifelong friends, further burdening spouse and children with expectations to fill the vacuum therein created, expectations the family system can rarely meet.

The *family system* — a concept promulgated over the past three decades by The Family Institute and its sibling organizations. It reflects the interdependence of family members — cogs in a wheel — as well as the impact of extended family, workplace and community. To assist any individual in realizing a flourishing life, therapists examine the impact of the full *system*, where it impedes and where it promotes. It's this system perspective that remains the distinctive contribution that The Family Institute at Northwestern, and others, have made to the field of behavioral health.

What do the next fifty years hold for the family? Technology will likely play a transformative role, perhaps connecting (and disconnecting) people in ways unimagined up to now. Globalization and widespread migration — diverse cultures living in greater proximity — will expand our appreciation of what's possible when imagination meets opportunity. Who can predict the results as increasing numbers of women in government bring their gendered concerns — universal child care, for one — onto the national scene? And the impact as a tsunami of boomers face declining health: will adult children invite parents into their households? Will aging seniors form new families of choice, joining together for mutual support and caregiving? Whatever may occur, The Family Institute at Northwestern will be at the frontline delivering what's needed to shepherd, strengthen and heal families from truly all walks of life.



THE FAMILY INSTITUTE

at Northwestern University



OF PARTNERING TO SEE CHANGE

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ABOUT THE FAMILY INSTITUTE AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Incorporated in 1969, The Family Institute at Northwestern University is committed to strengthening and healing families, couples, children and adults through the highest quality, relationship-based mental health services. As partners to see change, The Family Institute brings together research, education and clinical practice leading to growth for our clients, the next generation of therapists and the field of behavioral health.

2019 marks The Family Institute's 50th year of offering high quality mental health counseling. As a team of more than 175 therapists and therapists-in-training practicing in four Chicagoland locations: downtown Chicago, Evanston, Northbrook and Westchester, The Family Institute provides therapy for people from all walks of life.

The Family Institute conducts cutting-edge research to better understand mental health issues and treatment, operating two nationally-renowned graduate programs through the Center for Applied Psychological and Family Studies at Northwestern University in Counseling and Marriage and Family Therapy. For more information, visit www.family-institute.org.