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Family Psychology in Action



The Society for Family Psychology celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2009. This year is the first of the next twenty-five years in the life of the Society, and coincidentally, the first year of a new decade. So it behooves us to take stock; to look back in order to get a clearer look ahead.

The discipline of family therapy swept through the mental health fields in the decades of the seventies and eighties like the redefining paradigm that it was. It drew from a systemic and ecological epistemology that overthrew the conventional individualistically oriented epistemologies that harkened back to the days of Freud and insisted that human thought, behavior, and feelings could only be understood within the broader context of family, community, and society. The Society of Family Psychology (Division 43) was created in 1984 to provide a home for psychologists in family research, family medicine, family therapy, and family education. The division was initially developed out of its precursor, the Academy of

Psychologists and Marriage, Family, and Sex Therapy which had convened in 1958. The Journal of Family Psychology made its debut in 1987. At the inception of Division 43, Liddle (1987) defined family psychology as using a systemic perspective that broadens psychology's traditional emphasis on the individual, with a primary emphasis on marriage and the family, but utilizing a systemic view that included examining the nature and role of individuals in primary relationship structures and the social ecology of the family. Further, Kaslow (1987, p. 88) noted that family psychology includes basic and applied research, diagnostic testing and evaluation of family dynamics, the co-evolution of individual family members and the family as a unit throughout the lifecycle, as well as optimal and pathological functioning. Her definition delineated the differences between family therapy and family psychology.

Specific achievements of Division 43 over the past 25 years include, but are not limited to: (1) the development of a group of practitioners who clearly define

themselves as family psychologists; (2) the achievement of specialty status with the American Psychological Association; (3) the development of a board specialty, couple and family psychology, for certification with the American Board of Professional Psychology; (4) the development of a strong evidence based research platform for treatment; (5) the development of objective assessment tools and the development of psychologically-oriented treatment theories and protocols; and (6) the development of a strong fellows category in the division and a presence on Capitol Hill over the past decade and a half in the service of family oriented legislation, especially with regard to family medicine.

Many of these achievements occurred in the halcyon early days when there was a kind of revolutionary fervor funneled and amplified through family therapy training institutes. But revolutions, like adrenaline, can only be sustained so long. While there are notable exceptions, in the past decade or so, family therapy training institutes have declined

in number and family psychology has sought to find its way, by and large, through the traditional forms of research, education, training, and service delivery (i.e., the university system, traditional psychology venues for pre-doctoral and post-doctoral training, and the broader health care system). The Society has focused its attention on solidifying its gains and carving an identity for itself through its work with marriage and family life.

Many miss the fervor of earlier days; membership in the Society while up in recent years is still nowhere near what it was in the mid-eighties and, while family psychology has been declared a bona fide specialty in psychology alongside clinical, counseling, and school, it is often treated as a subspecialty within those other specialty areas. The truth, of course, is that we cannot go back to the way things were; we must move on, and to do so we must be clear about where we are now. The field started in revolution, but has evolved, developed, and matured – we must recognize and understand the evolution from the revolution and now take action from that vantage point.

So, to use our crystal ball for the future we must crystallize our understanding of family psychology at this point in its evolution. I want to suggest four areas of vital interest to family psychology that currently hover on our horizon and some specific ways to begin to implement expression of those areas in the coming year.

First, we need to agree that there has been too great a focus in years past on family psychology being defined by population rather than epistemology. The feature that made family therapy so revolutionary was not that clinicians were seeing families, but that psychology was conceptualized from a systemic and ecological perspective. From that perspective it was deemed logical to treat couples and families as well as individuals. The field of psychology as a whole, the American Psychological Association, and our own membership need to focus our attention back to the paradigm – how we think about how we think. That's not to say that population isn't important, but it is epistemology that defines a specialty. Clinical is defined by the medical model, Counseling by the strengths and resources model, and Family should be defined by the systems model. Some who recognize the significance of epistemology have suggested that we change our name to *Systems Psychology*, but I think that is not necessary. The systems model drives us towards a family systems perspective,

working with different populations in our research and treatment. There has been recently, a stronger emphasis on family psychology as epistemologically based, rather than population based. Bray and Stanton's (2009) *Handbook of Family Psychology* included several chapters discussing the importance of epistemology to the field (Kaslow, Celano, & Stanton, 2009; Stanton, 2009). This focus has led to attempts at new definitions for family psychology that highlight systems, context, and ecology in understanding treatment for individuals, couples, families, and communities (Ezzo, 2006; Stanton, 2010).

Secondly, we need to diligently and single-mindedly pursue accreditation for family psychology programs as well as pre-doctoral and post-doctoral training programs. There are many obstacles. There are extant programs in clinical family psychology that at some point will need to apply for dual accreditation and students will need to indicate in their APPIC materials that they are looking for family systems training. This is understandably scary for programs and individuals, but it is absolutely necessary for family psychology to be taken seriously as a specialty. There are training programs that will

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need to strongly identify with family psychology and concomitantly offer challenging training in the field. Students will need to confidently identify their desire to seek pre-doctoral and post-doctoral training in family psychology so that they can competently treat individuals, children, couples, and families from a systems perspective.

Currently, the Family Psychology Specialty Council (FPSC) which is comprised of representatives from the Society for Family Psychology, The American Board of Couple and Family Psychology, and the American Academy of Couple and Family Psychology, has convened a working group seeking to make application to the Committee on Accreditation of APA. The FPSC has developed a Council of Doctoral Programs in Family Psychology comprised of graduate doctoral training programs that have an emphasis (five or more courses) or specialty (ten or more courses) in family psychology. If you are aware of a program that meets these criteria, please let me know – we would like to help your institution

become a member of the Council.

Thirdly, we need to create a unified voice between researchers, teachers, trainers, and practitioners. The Society for Family Psychology is often perceived by practitioners as being primarily interested in research, teaching, and training. My students and I went back through issues of the *Journal of Family Psychology*, and while the emphasis of articles in the *Journal* is definitely on research, there was in at least half of the articles a strong focus on practical application. The private practitioner part of me, however, believes that we can do more, especially for early career psychologists. The developing new Division 43 website that Tom Sexton has been spearheading will be a place with many resources for practitioners working in various venues in the healthcare field, including group and solo private practice. We see researchers such as Erika Lawrence, who has already made significant contributions to the website, creating content useful to practitioners. We see a mentoring program for early career psychologists pursuing board certification in couple and family psychology. We see networking options and continuing education courses in family psychology on the website. We also see discussion forums where practitioners can help educate researchers and educators on trends in the field. We're hoping the website will be one avenue among several that promote fruitful interaction between family psychology professionals.

Fourthly, family psychology needs to develop stronger working relationships in the healthcare world. The 2009 APA president's summit within a summit identified healthcare and organizational psychology as two of the major

areas of growth for psychology as a whole. There are tremendous opportunities for family psychology to work within the healthcare system. Working with family medical practitioners is a natural place of interface; primary care physicians tend to think biopsychosocially and sometimes systemically. Family psychologists joining multidisciplinary teams appear to be one of the venues for the future. Family psychologists working in organizational psychology also seems a natural fit. A systems perspective can be highly useful in increasing corporate functionality.

So, family psychology is moving from revolution to evolution (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2009). In a teleological sense, we are becoming what we actually already are, a field defined by both a systems epistemology and a population; a unique perspective on research, teaching, training, and practice with individuals, couples, families, communities, multidisciplinary teams, and organizations. I believe the family systems model offers a unique voice that combines the best of other models (i.e., the pathology model with the strengths and resources model) and will likely become the defining paradigm in the field of psychology in the decades to come.■

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