

President's Address:

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Exploring the Family Life Cycle: *Partnering and Starting New Families*



As I begin my service as president of the Society for Family Psychology, I want to invite everyone to continue the task initiated by our previous presidents to review and explore the identity of family psychology and reflect on the future of the field. This year, I hope to be more specific, and examine particularly what family psychology has to offer in terms of understanding and providing service to families throughout the life cycle.

The concept of the family life cycle has come a long way, as exemplified by the seminal work of Betty Carter, Monica McGoldrick and their colleagues in the various editions of their book on the family life cycle. The 4th edition of this work was recently published under the title *The expanded family*

life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2011). A review of the different editions of this book from 1980 to the present reflects how the concept of family life cycle has evolved over the years. This development is reflective of the increasing diversity among families in U.S. society. Cultural diversity, socioeconomic differences, social changes over time, the changing role of women in the home and workplace, health care improvements leading to longer life expectancy, increase in divorce and remarriage, and a host of other factors contribute to different life cycle issues for different populations or sub-populations in contemporary U.S. society. During this year, I want to invite all family psychologists to take a critical

look at various life cycle issues to explore what we know about them, what we have to offer to families experiencing difficulties at different stages, and what areas need more research to further develop our knowledgebase.

In this issue of *The Family Psychologist*, I will start with the family life cycle stage of partnering, coupling, or marriage, which is generally considered the beginning or the formation of a new family. The alternative terms I am using along with marriage show how much the concept has evolved. Previously, the institution of marriage was typically considered to be the only legitimate way to start a family. However, over the years, other forms

of forming a family have become common, such as unmarried couples, single parent adoptions, gay and lesbian marriage, and domestic partnership, etc. (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2011). All these have called into question what marriage really means or entails. These discussions go beyond psychology and academia, and are often hot issues in social and political forums, as evidenced by the current debate on gay and lesbian marriage. What do family psychologists have to offer in these dialogues or debates? What empirical data from research or clinical practice would substantiate the various viewpoints?

Searching for potential partners and dating are common preludes to the formation of a new family. Again, one can easily notice how today's social norms and practices concerning these processes are different from those of the past. For example, presently, more people are accepting of pre-marital sex, and more young people are becoming sexually active at an earlier age. In terms of meeting potential partners, the development of the internet and social networking in cyberspace have opened up new frontiers that were not thought of just 15 or 20 years ago. What is the impact of these changes on marriage, coupling or partnering? How is the formation of new families affected?

When two persons join to form a new family, there are two major areas that require adjustment. Firstly, the couple has to adjust to living with each other. Secondly, they have to adjust or realign their relationship with their extended family, friends, and community (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2011). The process of adjusting to each other may be stressful. Frictions and conflicts

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may arise proverbially when the honeymoon is over. In the long run, other factors such as personal or life issues may further complicate the situation. Addressing the conflicts that threaten the couple's relationship is a common focus of clinical work. In addition, some clinicians, following the prevention and wellness approach, seek to foster the couple's love and mutual understanding through marriage encounters and similar activities. These are all important aspects of family psychology. However, clinicians must also pay attention to the second aspect of adjustment, that is, the realignment of relationship with the extended family and social network. While this may be an issue of concern in the typical white American family rooted in individualistic mainstream culture, it is often a more serious concern in ethnic communities with familistic or collectivistic cultures. For example, the couple may have an agreement on how often to visit their parents, but their parents may still feel slighted or betrayed because their children are not devoting as much attention to them as before. Conversely, even when there is no complaint from the parents, a spouse may still experience guilt about spending too much time with his/her partner and "neglecting" the parents, especially aging parents. Other times, a spouse may feel the parents-in-law are demanding too much attention, and give the ultimatum "either me or them". These are common situations I encounter in families in ethnic communities with familistic cultural orientations. The realignment of

relationships is a delicate balancing act that involves more than the couple. In this regard, the systemic perspective is a cogent reminder for family psychologists to look at the broader picture beyond the couple when trying to address their issues. They also need to be aware that their own world views may be different from those of the clients, and they must be able to address the issues within the clients' sociocultural context.

Finally, on the topic of working with couples but on a different note, I want to point out that the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) has recently changed the designation of the specialty of *Family Psychology* to *Couple and Family Psychology*. This change highlights that family psychologists work with *couples* as well as *families* (defined narrowly as units of parents and children), a fact that may not be obvious to the general public or those outside our profession. ABPP has a very close relationship with our society. In fact, the president of the American Board of Couple and Family Psychology serves as an ex officio member of our board. We work together to advance the field of Family Psychology. In this regard, I want to invite our members in clinical practice to consider obtaining ABPP certification in Couple & Family Psychology, if they have not already done so. ■

Reference

McGoldrick, M., Carter, B., & Garcia-Preto, N. (Eds.) (2011). *The expanded family life cycle. Individual, family, and social perspectives* (4th Ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.