

Strong Families Around the World: An Introduction to the Family Strengths Perspective

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SUMMARY. The family is one of society's oldest and most resilient institutions. Although the structure of the family may vary around the world, the value of *family* endures. Most of the research on families, historically speaking, has focused primarily on the problems or weaknesses of families. Over the past three decades, researchers have studied families from a strengths-based perspective. Around the world researchers have found that families are amazingly similar. The similarities point to a set of qualities that describe the characteristics of strong families. These qualities are showing appreciation and affection, commitment, positive communication, enjoyable times together, spiritual well-being, and the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively. Twenty-two propositions have also been suggested that have relevance in how we look at families in general. The information has relevance and purpose and should serve to inform and expand our thinking about families. The information may have significance to some specific areas and particular fields, especially to the areas of family services, family education, marital and family therapy, and social policy. doi:10.1300/J002v41n01_01

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WHY ARE STRONG FAMILIES SO IMPORTANT?

The family is perhaps society's oldest and most resilient institution. Around the world the family is valued and celebrated. From the beginning of human life on Earth, people have grouped themselves into families to find emotional, physical and collective support. Although in recent years there have been those who have predicted the failure of both marriage and the family, they not only survive but continue to change and evolve. The structure of the family may vary around the world, and yet, the value of *family* endures. People still bond into couples and seek the long-term commitment that marriage promises, even if this does not always happen. Children are born and cherished even when there is economic or political upheaval.

Families—in all their amazing diversity—are the basic, foundational social units in every society, as far as we know. Therefore, healthy individuals within healthy families are essentially at the core of a healthy society. It is the responsibility of society and in everyone's best interest to help create a positive environment for all families. This can be a labor of love for all of our social institutions: educational institutions, businesses, human and family service agencies, religious institutions, the military, health organizations, literally everyone involved in the daily life of a community.

Families are our most intimate social environment. They are the places where we begin the vital processes of socializing our children: teaching them—in partnership with countless others in the community—how to survive and thrive in the world. Life in families can bring us great joy or excruciating pain, depending upon how well family relationships are unfolding. A healthy marriage and family can be a valuable resource for helping us endure difficulties that life inevitably brings. On the other

hand, unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create serious problems that may persist from one generation to the next.

Family Life from a Strengths-Based Perspective

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, family theorists have tried to create a theory or framework that explains the family and the place that it holds within society. According to White (2005), early family theory focused on the place of the family in American culture, creating frameworks that borrowed from other disciplines such as anthropology and economics. In the last half of the 20th century, the focus moved to the functions of the family using typologies to classify families. An interest in cross-cultural comparisons also led to a new look at previous perspectives in an effort to internationalize family theory. Since that time, researchers have largely failed to advance any new theories about the family. Is it possible that the reason that no one theory or new emerging theory has come to explain families around the world in the 21st century is that the uniqueness of families and the various ways that families function cannot be collected into one understanding?

The focus on family strengths brings into a more reasonable balance our understanding of how families succeed in the face of life's inherent difficulties. By concentrating only on a family's problems and a family's failings, we ignore the fact that it takes a positive approach in life to succeed. The family strengths perspective is a world-view or orientation toward life and families that is positive and optimistic, grounded in research conducted around the world. It does not ignore family problems but restores them to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our vital human connections with each other.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILY STRENGTHS RESEARCH

Most of the research on families, historically speaking, has focused primarily on the problems or weaknesses of families or the individuals within the family. Early research on family strengths began in the 1930s with Woodhouse's study of 250 successful families during the Great Depression, followed by Otto's work on strong families and family strengths in the early 1960s (Gabler & Otto, 1964; Otto, 1962, 1963).

Not until the 1970s did family strengths begin to gain momentum when Nick Stinnett began his work at Oklahoma State University in 1974 and subsequently at the University of Nebraska in 1977. Stinnett, DeFrain and their many colleagues then began publishing a continuous series of articles and books (Casas, et al, 1984; DeFrain, DeFrain, & Lepard, 1994; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Olson & DeFrain, 2006; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985; Stinnett & O'Donnell, 1996; Stinnett & Sauer, 1977; Xie, DeFrain, Meredith, & Combs, 1996). Family strengths conferences, beginning in 1978, proved to be a catalyst for research on strong families. Nine volumes of proceedings were published as a result of the National Symposium on Building Family Strengths series (Stinnett, Chesser, & DeFrain, 1979; Stinnett, Chesser, DeFrain, & Knaub, 1980; Stinnett, DeFrain, et al., 1981; Stinnett, DeFrain, et al., 1982; Rowe, DeFrain, et al., 1984; Williams, Lingren, et al., 1985; VanZandt, Lingren, et al, 1986; Lingren, et al., 1987). An International Family Strengths Network (IFSN) began working on a series of family strengths gatherings in the late 1990s, and to date there have been more than 30 conferences held in North America, Asia and Australia with upcoming gatherings planned for Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America and Australia.

Over the past three decades researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln led by John DeFrain, at the University of Alabama–Tuscaloosa led by Nick Stinnett, at the University of Minnesota–St. Paul led by David H. Olson, plus affiliated institutions in the United States and around the world have studied families from a strengths-based perspective. The similarities that are found among research with families globally point to a set of qualities that describe the characteristics of strong families. When people from country to country and culture to culture talk about what makes their family strong, these are some of the traits they identify:

Appreciation and Affection

Caring for each other
Friendship
Respect for Individuality
Playfulness
Humor

Positive Communication

Giving compliments
Sharing feelings
Avoiding blame
Being able to compromise
Agreeing to disagree

Commitment

Trust
Honesty
Dependability
Faithfulness
Sharing

Enjoyable Time Together

Quality time in great quantity
Good things take time
Enjoying each other's company
Simple good times
Sharing fun times

Spiritual Well-Being	The Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively
Hope	Adaptability
Faith	Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities
Compassion	Growing through crises together
Shared ethical values	Openness to change
Oneness with humankind	Resilience

Research on strong families has not only resulted in models for better understanding the qualities of strong families; it has also suggested a number of propositions that have relevance in how we look at families in general, and how we can successfully live in our own families.

Twenty-Two Propositions Derived from the Family Strengths Research

Understanding the family is not a static set of ideas or rigorously-testable hypotheses, but more like a family itself: a constantly growing and changing dialogue about the nature of strong marriages and strong families. Our training as skeptical social and behavioral scientists teaches us to be very cautious when talking about universals. And yet our studies of strong families in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, lead us to the conclusion that there are remarkable similarities among families who feel good about their lives together and express satisfaction in their competence in dealing with the challenges that life brings. These similarities are much more apparent than the differences from culture to culture.

Over the past three decades, researchers looking at couples and families from a strengths perspective have developed a number of propositions derived from their work around the world that we believe merit serious consideration:

- *Families, in all their remarkable diversity, are the basic foundation of human cultures.* Strong families are critical to the development of strong communities, and strong communities promote and nurture strong families.
- *All families have strengths.* And, all families have challenges and areas of potential growth. If one looks only for problems in a family, one will see only problems. If one also looks for strengths, one will find strengths.
- *It's not about structure, it's about function.* When talking about families, it is common to make the mistake of focusing on external family structure or the type of family rather than internal family functioning. But, the fact is there are strong single-parent families,

strong stepfamilies, strong nuclear families, strong extended families, strong families with gay and lesbian members, strong two-parent families, and so forth.

- *Strong marriages are the center of many strong families.* The couple relationship is an important source of strength in many families with children who are doing well. Parents need to find ways to nurture a positive couple relationship for the good of everyone in the family.
- *Strong families tend to produce great kids;* and a good place to look for great kids is in strong families.
- *If you grew up in a strong family as a child, it will probably be easier for you to create a strong family of your own as an adult.* But, it's also quite possible to do so if you weren't so lucky and grew up in a seriously troubled family.
- *The relationship between money and family strengths is tenuous.* Once a family has adequate financial resources the relentless quest for *more* is not likely to increase the family's quality of life, happiness together, or the strength of their relationships with each other.
- *Strengths develop over time.* When couples start out in life together, they sometimes have considerable difficulty adjusting to each other, and these difficulties are quite predictable. Adjusting to each other is not an easy task. Many couples who are unstable at first end up creating a healthy, happy family.
- *Strengths are often developed in response to challenges.* A couple and family's strengths are tested by life's everyday stressors and also by the significant crises that all of us face sooner or later.
- *Strong families don't tend to think much about their strengths, they just live them.* It is, however, useful to carefully examine a family's strengths and discuss precisely how family members use them to great advantage.
- *Strong families, like people, are not perfect.* Even in the strongest of families we can sometimes be like porcupines: prickly, disagreeable, eager and ready to enjoy conflict with each other. But we also have a considerable need to cuddle up with each other for warmth and support. A strong family is a work of art continually in progress, always in the process of growing and changing.
- *When seeking to unite groups of people, communities, and even nations,* uniting around the cause of strengthening families—a cause we can all sanction—can be a powerful strategy.
- *Human beings have the right and responsibility to feel safe, comfortable, happy, and loved.*

***MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES AND APPLICATIONS
TO STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICE***

This two-part project will be a discussion of strong families around the world. The first part will focus on three areas of the world and the individual countries represented in each of these areas: Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Somalia); the Middle East (Israel, Oman); and Asia (China, India, Korea). The second part will focus on the strong families of Oceania (Australia, New Zealand); North America (Canada, United States of America); Latin America (Mexico, Brazil); and Europe (Russia, Greece, Romania).

The focus is on strong families. Readers will not only notice diversity in the families that are described, but the way in which the authors have chosen to express their perspectives on families and cultures. The strengths of families from culture to culture are remarkably similar, but these strengths sometimes are expressed in creative ways imbued in the culture. For example, because of the popularity of sports in New Zealand, a sports metaphor describes New Zealand family attitudes toward solidarity and resilience quite well.

A preliminary study of strengths of New Zealand families found that a sense of being a team inspired positive responses to stressors. Similar to the notions of teamwork in the ever popular arena of sport in New Zealand, families consistently spoke in terms of being a team, being dedicated to the team, pulling together, one person's strengths making up for the weaknesses of another, each having a part to play, making sacrifices for the good of the team, working hard, and sticking together in the face of tough times.

Other authors chose to focus on the tremendous influence that history and rich cultural tradition holds within their country. In addition, the authors also represent a variety of disciplines and backgrounds that add interest to the story of the families in their country. The authors are researchers and scholars in the fields of cultural anthropology, education, family studies, modern languages, psychology, social work and sociology. This greatly contributes to the diversity in how the chapters are conceived and organized.

***HOW CAN THE INFORMATION PRESENTED
FROM THE VARIOUS AUTHORS BE USED AND APPLIED?***

There are a variety of ways that we can learn from the experiences of families around the world. The information has relevance and purpose and should serve to inform and expand our thinking about families. The

information may have significant relevance to some specific areas and particular fields. Application to the areas of family services, family education, marital and family therapy, and social policy are discussed below.

Family services. Globalization has provided opportunities for people all over the world to interact and collaborate within organizations or through employment. Migration and immigration occurs as people leave their native countries seeking better lives. Individuals, communities, and governments that provide services to displaced families require information about their cultures that are effective. Services are needed that meet the needs within the context of their cultures and must provide help that is relevant and familiar. For example, providing help to a family who is looking for adequate housing will require an understanding of their cultural living patterns and being able to point them to housing that will meet their needs for comfort, safety, and security.

Family education. Where it is being provided, educational programs for families are often culture specific and based on the majority culture. To provide education that meets the needs of all cultures will require an understanding of family life in other cultures. Parenting practices, marital traditions, and family patterns look differently around the world and have developed in a variety of ways for a specific purpose. For example, infant feeding may differ around the world because of resources, cultural practices, and issues of personal acceptance. Even though current research may point out best practices in terms of health and well-being, cultural norms need to be considered and respected.

Marital and family therapy. Individuals and couples who seek therapy will benefit from a therapist or counselor who understands their culture. It is not easy to help someone through a difficult period of life when you have no knowledge or understanding of their basic orientation to life. Different cultures have different ways of knowing and of thinking, different priorities in life, and different approaches to viewing and solving problems. For example, someone from a collectivist culture would find it difficult to think about solving a problem that would involve an individual outcome.

Developing social policy. Making decisions and setting social policy that will affect a variety of cultures requires a basic understanding of those who will be impacted. It is important that lawmakers recognize that certain decisions must take into account the cultural differences that will be represented within that decision. Setting a policy that requires someone to go against their cultural norm will mean that the policy will be met with resistance, will be ignored, or will not be utilized. For example, if a policy is put into effect that requires a particular dress code

that goes against the cultural or religious dress tradition, it will be offensive and seen as a violation in the individual's eyes.

It is our responsibility as a global citizen to be aware of those around us. It is a sign of respect when we consider and value the cultural differences of others. Wherever you live it is likely that you have and will continue to encounter people from different cultures. From personal experience, we have been profoundly changed as a result of opening our hearts and minds to those from other cultures who have so much to teach us about life. It will be valuable if, as you read through the articles in this volume, you allow yourself to go beyond viewing the words through *your own* lens to begin to see it through *their* eyes. You will be changed too!

As you read through the articles, it will become evident that work is being done in countless places and countless ways around the world to strengthen and support families. You will begin to see commonalities that all families face regardless of their location, family patterns, or ethnicity. Families everywhere enjoy the benefits of healthy relationships and bravely endure the challenges that emanate from both internal and external forces. Your faith in the value and purpose of family will be strengthened as you read the accounts of the ways that families around the world band together in times of immeasurable joy and celebration as well as in times of immense sorrow and grief. That precious piece of life connects us all.

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