'More Than Blood': Identity Reformation of the Western Contemporary 'Evotypical Family'

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Synopsis:

The contemporary family is discussed in terms of identity changes, interactions, behaviors, and discourse. Eight original tenets are shared that frame the new system called "evotypical famlies."

'More than Blood': Identity Reformation of the Western Contemporary 'Evotypical Family'
By Sherilyn Marrow, Ph.D. and Dennis Leoutsakas, Ph.D.

The bamboo that bends is stronger than the oak that resists.... Japanese proverb

The contemporary American family is a system that acts and reacts; it transitions and goes through cycles, and optimally, acts as a safe refuge to all or some of its members. Yet the changes in the modern family are real and undeniable; intuitively, we realize that this contemporary constellation *looks* and *feels* different than it did in the days of our parents and ancestors. Cognitively, we acknowledge that a family is more than a human institution with collective behaviors. It is more than its biological inheritance, blood relatives, laws, and social networks. Emotionally, despite the blurred and often complicated family systems to which we belong, we relentlessly strive for acceptance and inclusion, mindful that being a part of the family membership is *usually* more comforting than painful exclusion.

Now, in the new millennium, our perceptions of the family system are different. Those rigid rules, characteristics, and standards that once influenced our understanding of family, no longer apply. Adjectives like typical or normal, once used to modify "family," are obscure, if not obsolete. Due to advancements of globalization, civil rights, and family planning (or lack thereof), the conceptual framework of the once "typical family" has been relegated to memory.

The Changing Look of Family

When discussing the changing family, there is a strong urge to compare the contemporary family to the modern families of the mid- twentieth century, a man and a woman with 2.2 children, but the twenty-first century family with that statistic is no longer the majority and must take its place alongside all other families as just one family structure among a constellation of familial dynamics.

According to family researcher Andrew J. Cherlin (2010), demographers are challenged

by categorizing and measuring the new family. He writes:

" Demographic trends in the 2000s showed the continuing separation of family and
household due to childbearing among single parents, dissolution of cohabiting partners,
divorce, repartnering, and remarriage; that trends such as marriage and divorce were
diverging according to education; the elder population will largely increase, and that overall,
demographic trends produced an increased complexity of family life and a more ambiguous
and fluid set of categories than demographers are accustomed to measuring" (p.403).

 Radical changes abound as reflected by these select demographics, as primarily reported in

Cherlin's (2010) research entitled "Demographic Trends in the United States: A Review of

Research in the 2000s." Heterosexual couples are waiting longer to marry, with the median age

at first marriage rising to 27.4 for me, and, 25.6 for women in 2008 (U.S. Bureau of the Census,

2009a). This is especially prominent with those pursuing education as most do not marry before

the ages of 25 (Martin, 2004); Heterosexual married couples no longer represent the majority

partnership form; only 20 percent of American families fall into the category of traditional

families—married couples with children- down from 43 percent in 1950 (Tavernise, 2011). The

risk of divorce is declining from its high in 1980, yet, nearly all studies report the divorce

probability lying between 40% and 50% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). Cherlin's earlier

research (1992) stated that the probability that a marriage would dissolve rose sharply for all

groups, but, since then, he notes that divorce has actually declined among married couples in

which spouses are college-educated (Cherlin, 2010; Martin, 2006); Over 20% of married

couples dissolve their unions by separation or divorce within the first 5 years, and considering

couples who begin the relationship by cohabiting, over 50% close their unions within 5 years,

whether they marry or not (Anderson & Philipov, 2002); Fertility rates (2006) for women,

overall in the U.S., reported an average birth rate per woman of 2.1, a number required to

regenerate our population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2009a); however, the American overall fertility rate was elevated by Hispanic women, (mostly of Mexican-origin) whose total rate was 2.89; In 2007, 39.75% of all children were born outside of marriage, dramatically up from only 4% in 1950 (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2009b). Living arrangements within families have changed due to high levels of divorce and the increase in childbearing among cohabitating couples, or unpartnered adults. This results in children experiencing multiple partnerships, parent figures, and family communication dynamics. For example, children born to cohabitating adults, are at least twice as likely to see their parents separate as are children whose parents are married at the time of their birth" (Heuveline, Timberlake, & Furstenberg, 2003; Cherlin, 2010). The most recent Census data reports that 13.6 million single-parents households exist, comprising approximately 29% of households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009b).(2 single parent households; Immigration continues to impact families in that, by 2006, the foreign born population comprised 12.1% of the American population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008c), the highest since the early 20th century (S.K. Brown & Bean, 2005); the immigrant population continued to be mostly Hispanic and Asian; During the past decade, Hispanics grew in numbers, outnumbering the African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States; Also, many families consider themselves couples or a family, but, live in separate households. This family arrangement is known as "living apart together." (Cherlin, 2010, p. 410). The American population, 65 years or older, make up 12% of the population (U.S. Census 2008), and is expected to increase to 16% by 2020, due to the baby boomers lifecycle; Support from grandparents providing partial or full responsibility for caring for grandchildren is substantial, with 5.8 million grandparents (42%) being responsible for most of the basic needs of

one or more grandchildren; In late 2011, it was reported that 4.6 million parents were living with an adult child, up 13.7 percent from 4.05 million parents in 2008 (Quinn, 2012).

These demographics highlight some of the changes in contemporary family structures. Such familial evolution necessitates an ongoing redefinition of the "typical" family or forces the recognition that such a term has lost its meaning. Newly evolving family types face some of the predictable and unpredictable stresses encountered previously by families, now considered normative, while enacting new possibilities. We contend that the American family has changed in its structure, commitment, enactment, communication, external influences, and expectations.

Emergence of "Evotypical" Families

Demographics and emerging family forms make rejecting past definitions of family a relatively easy task compared to the greater task of explaining the current state of families in contemporary U.S. society. The kinship relationships for each person is individualized and in a constant state of flux or change. Families are no longer static and there is no longer an ideal family configuration. Galvin (2004) writes, "Families can no longer be usefully categorized in unitary terms, such as step-families, lesbian partners, single-parent families, or adoptive families, due to overlapping complexities of connection" (p. 677).

Since there is no typical family or unitary terms, we advance the term "*evotypical*" as a more accurate word for conceptualizing Westernized families; We contend that evotypical families are different from the previous family unit in terms of their identity, commitment, enactment, communication, external influences, expectations, inspiration, and change. The following represent what we call, the basic tenets of the evotypical family system:

1) The "evotypical" family has become a prevalent family system. (Identity)

Defined, evotypical families are "kinship ties bound together by the desire of caring for one another with the common goal of surviving as a single small group unit;" Note the positivity in this definition as we contend the evotypical family is both uplifted and challenged by its new identity. There are definite signs of hopefulness and a sense of rekindled spirit, non-contingent upon its previous responsibilities to its biological members, or its fixed place in society; Evotypical families embrace a non-static, unstable system that allows for its members to co-create precisely what they want or don't want in their family identities and interactions. The family structure may often consist of relatives and "more than blood" nonrelatives as their core membership and influential network. They look both inside and outside the family photo frame for their collective meanings and identities.

2) The contemporary family is dependent upon commitment by its members, not obligation. (Commitment)

The sense of loyalty to the family members, simply for the sake of family membership, seems much less prevalent in evotypical families; there appears to be more of a perceptual freedom from family members as to how much or how often "acts of doing family" *need* or *should* occur. Additionally, there seems to be a reduction of the hold that a family has on its members; no generativity is required whereas once there was an expectation to teach future generations what had contributed to that family's uniqueness; In contrast to Confucianism where family duties are performed out of respect, obedience, and expectation, members of the evotypical family will be a family because they want to be a family. One can make a choice whether or not one wants to be an active part of that system without experiencing as many repercussions as in generations prior.

Galvin (2006) discusses these families as choice by using descriptions such as

"intentional, "fictive" or "self-ascribed kin" (p.6). These families are formed without the blood or legal connection, and maintained by members' self-definition while performing family functions for one another. In many ways, this voluntary commitment may be more genuine and healthy to the satisfaction of the system; yet may run the risk of diminishing the initial family's existence and legacy.

3) Evotypical families "perform" the institution of family through diverse and complex interactions, rituals, and roles. (Enactment)

As in a performance, evotypical family members can choose whether to attend, stay, or leave the metaphorical "show" called family; One has the privilege, most often, to make a conscious choice to play a role or perform a set of behaviors within the family. It is virtually impossible to define exactly what those enactments look like or should look like, as ideally, each family arbitrarily designs their own performance map; however, once determined, balancing diverse and complex interactions, rituals, and roles is part and parcel of "doing" family; The crucial factor in this evotypical tenet is that family members interact. Performance of these family interactions, rituals, and roles now become paramount as many evotypical families do not share the same name, blood, or zipcode.....diverse factors that once served to define and unify families.

4) The functionality of the evotypical family relies upon the ability and action of its members to communicate with each other, including the use of technology, (Communication)

Galvin discusses family relationships being discourse-dependent and how language must be considered, along with blood and law, as a significant indicator of familial identity; it plays a constitutive role. She eloquently frames this *More than Blood* reader with her introductory chapter entitled "Evotypical families talk themselves into being;" "– the evolving family forms

that represent the cutting edge of family identity at any given point in time, emerge at the point when imagination, commitment or need overrides norms and traditions" Marrow & Leoutasas, p.2, 2013.

Further, Marrow's fundamental contention that **"**Your talk is your family" corroborates with this belief, meaning that one must communicate with the family to sustain its state of being. In essence, families' silence will take them out of being; Candidly, if you *want* to dissolve your family and cease the potential for generational influence and ongoing dynamic, just simply stop talking to your family members. Positively, family systems thrive on communication and the open and honest talk that provide its collective members with family life skills including boundary-setting, priority identification, emotional expression, decision-making, value clarification, and behavioral management.

Challenges that compete with the discourse-dependent family are often technology-related. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010), the average child, ages 8-18, spends over 7 ½ hours a day using technology gadgets equaling 2 ½ hours of music, almost 5 hours of TV and movies, and three hours of internet and video games. If you count the content streams separately—a lot of kids, for example, text while watching TV—they are logging almost 11 hours of media usage a day which adds up to 75 hours a week (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010).

 Along with extensive media usage in families, one must consider the bleak study from California State University (2012) where researchers found that the number of minutes per week that parents spend in meaningful conversation with their children averages only 3.5.

It is strikingly apparent that technology and family cannot be treated as two mutually exclusive spheres in these contemporary times; Today, as the family experiences discourse-dependency, it becomes crucial to find better ways to incorporate technology into the family

structure and daily interactions so as not to jeopardize its very existence.

   5) Societal influences significantly impact evotypical families, regardless of life stage,
   membership, or living arrangement. (External Influences)

Popular culture portrays contemporary families as a flexible and provocative system. Many scholars advance the power of the popular culture in shaping our lives; Professor Thomas G. Endres conducted a content analysis of a one-day snapshot of pop culture, "Top in Pop" via 2011 Music Billboards, Movie attendance and TV Guide ratings, to examine how much, or how little, relationships and families are attended to in popular media. Rhetorical analyses of this media overview are somewhat troubling, concluding that the rhetoric associated with the song lyrics were void of explicit, permanent relationships. Additionally, the songs' primary focus was on "partying and hooking up." Almost nothing in these collective song lyrics referred to deeply committed and loyal relationships. Family portrayals in these selected movies were occasionally mentioned in context (e.g. Courageous); however, the main theme of these movies seemed to be "overcoming adversity"- be it families or baseball teams or robots or dolphins. Not surprisingly, half of the television shows were "reality-based." According to Jaffe, (2005), the vast appeal to watch reality television is to experience the sense of *schadenfreude*-- a German term for taking joy at the suffering of others. For example, media consumers can delight in experiencing other's misfortune and public demise, while escaping their own unremarkable lives.

   6) Evotypical family relations benefit from successful management of the dialectical
   tensions of "fantasy vs. reality." (Expectations)

Rapp discusses the ideology between family norms and realities. "Norms concerning families are that people should be loving and sharing within them, and that they should be protective. The

reality is too often otherwise, as the recent rising consciousness of domestic violence indicates"

(2008, p.191). Disturbing research that jives with national statistics reveals typical family

stresses; one study by Rubin revealed that 40 percent of the adults she interviewed had an

alcoholic parent; and 50 percent had been affected by parental desertion or divorce (p. 191).

All of us know how harsh reality can be, individually, and on family members on the whole,

whether it be severe cases of dysfunction or minor disappointments over how holidays should be

spent together. Sometimes, the act of fantasizing or theorizing how things *could* or *should* be

different, may help assuage some of the pain attached to the stark realities in family life;

Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Kellas (2006) discuss the role of fantasies in conjunction with

Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (1985);   "Fantasy is the creative and imaginative

interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need. Some fantasies include

fanciful and fictitious stories of imaginary characters, yet others deal with events that that have

actually happened to members of the group (or family) or that are reported in works of history, in

media outlets, or in the oral history or folklore of a group"(p.149). While these fantasies within

the family are grounded in reality, they can become a helpful tool in tempering some of the

disappointments and creating a more powerful vision. However, fantasizing about the ideal

family dynamic or situation will never bring total fulfillment, as fantasy, by the very nature of its

meaning, is elusive and unattainable. Therefore, the art of "relative satisfaction" lies somewhere

in between the balance of fantasy and reality.

7) The charisma or spirit within evotypical families may be developed and maintained by
   strong leaders including hero/heroine-like members who consistently act out and narrate
   their feats to other family members. (Inspiration)

Heroes, or legendary family members often serve as inspiration for evotypical families; Living or deceased, heroic figures create a sense of belonging by instilling those similar values within a family. The heroes in the family don't have to be flawless, nor possess superhuman qualities; they simply exhibit behaviors that are respectable, followed by the family members' telling and retelling of the various worthy feats.

Renowned family therapist Virginia Satir (1988) focuses on heroes and the roles they play in the family dynamic. Satir describes the family hero as a member of the family that holds the pride and appearance of the family in their hands, and is a success that represents the entire family (Wood, 2006). These figures as sources of pride can play a forceful role in confirming the family's existence and adding a heightened sense of respect for the family system. The feats of heroes can be especially enjoyed through the storytelling and fantasy-chaining narrated by the family members. Fisher (1987) discusses the power of the narrative paradigm as central to all human communication;

8) The future of the evotypical family relies on its ability to embrace the paradoxical truth that "its stability is in its instability." (Change)

An interesting paradox is created when looking at the paradigm of the evotypical family and the contradiction around change; the contemporary family's identity is that it is in a constant state of flux, much as families throughout history have experienced change. The unique aspect of family is that its stability, or, sense of certainty, lies within its unstable state.

We turn to researchers who have drawn on the notion of "paradox" to explain contrasts in worldviews and human behavior, especially in the fields of psychology and mental health. To quote Dr. Paul Watzlawick in his seminal work, *The Language of Change* (1978):

"Paradox is the Achilles heel of our logical, analytical, rational world view. It is the point at which the seemingly all-embracing division of reality into pairs of opposites, especially into the Aristotelian dichotomy of true and false, breaks down and reveals itself as inadequate" (Watzlawick, 1978, p. 99).

Further, paradox is defined as "A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true." (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000); and "paradox is made possible by dissociating dissociations so that the apparent and the real become so interchangeable that one cannot be discerned from the other (Foucault,1977, p.8). To end the paradox, Watzlawick (1978) recommends taking a *both-and* perspective that considers both the needs and difficulties surrounding the phenomenon, as well as the strengths and successes that may not, at first-glance, be apparent within the phenomenon. There is something reassuring in knowing that the evotypical family system does not require survival in a fixed state; that its stability lies within its instability. With this reality, the status quo in families is always being challenged by critical thinkers and activists desiring change, a positive force.

This process has become a stabilizing factor for families and attests to the resilience of the contemporary family. With reframing or altering our viewpoints, the once perceived unstable family system becomes more stable as the changes and nuances become more typical. We must embrace this "stable instability" and appreciate the family system's ability to stay intact, with constant changes.

CONCLUSION

While the evotypical family is definitely in a state of flux, the intent of this paper has not been to portray its identity as if it were in a state of decline or major upswing; but rather as an intricate network barraged with change. Whether or not these changes have enhanced the contemporary family's identity is worthy of reflection. One could argue that the state of the

family is stronger than ever... highly resilient to its diverse problems and challenges. Or, at the other extreme, the family is fledgling and weak... on the verge of extinction. Wherever one's opinion lies on this continuum dictates, to a large degree, how one enacts, experiences, and values family. Ultimately, the challenge will be for all of us to become more aware and accepting of the constant changes occurring in contemporary families, and for each of us to take an active participatory role in doing whatever necessary to protect and enhance this century-old institution.

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