

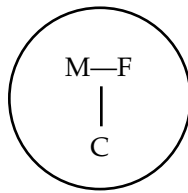
## The Generational Family

Terrance D. Olson, professor of marriage, family, and human development, Brigham Young University

We are here to claim that the generational family is relevant, important, and even essential in every culture. So, while I present examples from only a few cultures to make my point, my hope and claim is that the generational family contributes, in every culture, that which is irreplaceable. My purpose is to provide a starting point for discussion. Generally, I will speak in the language of the general public. While I am interested in showing the necessity of certain kinds of public policy in support of the family, I am also interested in illustrating the internal dynamics of family relationships. My springboard for discussion is a knowledge of what can go in with family members while they are riding that horse, and how the waters through which they are traveling can be sometimes calm and other times rough. Ultimately, I hope that what I present is not so much new as it is an affirmation of what you already know from personal experience—in a family.

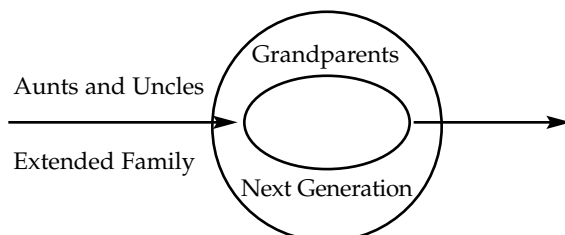
I propose a different view of the family, a view that I hope is not dead in Western society (see Figure 1). I am convinced that this view substantially characterizes the family in many

Figure 1. A Western View of the Family



cultures. It is a starting point in viewing the generational family, and does not intend to address the several permutations and styles the generational family expresses. But, it does claim to define the substance of the generational family. Briefly, my definition of the generational family is—two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or legal definition, across at least two generations (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Generational Family



This view of family is extensive. It acknowledges that we have ties across time and across generations. A family residence may include more than two generations, and the village or region may include aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and/or nephews. Identity is linked with family, and the more family members one is introduced to, the richer one's identity and sense of place and heritage becomes.

With these two views of family as a backdrop, I will begin with a few stories. First, a little over forty days after the NASA shuttle *Challenger* exploded and took the lives of seven astronauts, the crew compartment was found on the ocean floor. Prior to telling this story to the press, NASA officials contacted the next of kin of all the deceased astronauts so they could notify family members prior to any public announcements or newspaper stories. This is a revealing act by NASA. Whatever turned out to be right or wrong regarding how NASA approached this launch, they did at least one thing right. They remembered that each astronaut was somebody's son or daughter, and in most cases somebody's husband or wife, and somebody's mother or father. NASA remembered that family comes first. Family comes before announcements to the press, before mounting a recovery operation, and so on. A familial response to others' sorrows brings us closer to them. Responses that are solely economic, political, or self-centered tarnish our mutual identity or humanity and eclipse altogether the fundamental meaning of family. We cannot escape the fact that every human story is a family story.

Second, as a college student, I can remember sitting in the stands at a football game when the crowd began to behave in a way that supported the cartoon portraying sports fans as prehistoric beings—invoking the image that they had no class, style, morality, grace, kindness, or civil sensibility. I was tempted to send a note to a ranting fan a few rows in front of me who was yelling things at the home team quarterback that I would not want my own children to hear yelled at anyone. What my note would have said was, "The woman sitting behind you is the mother of the quarterback." I didn't send the note. While the content of it would not have been the truth, I felt I had the right to represent the quarterback's mother.

When I attend an athletic event, I cannot get out of my mind that every player on the field or on the court is somebody's son or daughter. It changes the way I respond to the way they play. I rejoice and agonize with them.

Third, Leo Tolstoy presents a fable of the old grandfather and his grandson. The scene is a peasant hut in Russia. One

night at dinner, the grandfather, who is getting a bit weak and feeble, slips and breaks his stoneware bowl. The mother is upset and threatens the grandfather, "If you cannot be more careful, then you will have to sit over by the hearth and eat out of a wooden bowl." For the next few nights, while the family gathers around the table for the evening meal, the grandfather is over at the fireplace eating out of a wooden bowl.

Later in the week the mother is hauling water from the well and sees her son carving on something with a metal spoon. "Misha," she asks the young boy, "what are you carving?" Her son replies, "I am carving a wooden bowl for you to eat out of when you are old." That night, the grandfather is restored to the table with everyone else and he eats out of a stoneware bowl (As retold in Olson and Wallace, *AANCHOR*, 1984, p. 87).

These stories illustrate various ways the family meanings of our experience are remembered or forgotten. Whenever I hear someone's story—be it as lengthy as a biography or as brief as an incident from last week, I am reminded that the full meaning of the story is not available unless the meaning of it to other family members is included. In other words, every story would be recognized as a family story, if the whole truth of the story were to be told.

The sorrow the U.S. experienced over the loss of the *Challenger* astronauts had to include a sorrow in behalf of the family members, even mourning with those family members who were mourning. If the sorrow were to have been only economic, or political, or private, we truly would have had a sign that the U.S. is an impoverished place to live, both in familial and spiritual matters.

In fact, my experience in a football stadium illustrates a pocket of impoverishment. I fear that had the quarterback been injured, only some of the hostile fans would have felt guilty or sorrowful. Some of them might have cheered the injury as a means of getting him out of the game. Such fans would have been completely oblivious to the family meaning of the story.

Finally, the Tolstoy story. It is the most obviously familial of the three stories, for it includes a call to consider the meaning of our present actions in the context of generations. The story suggests something about how we treat each other, but it also captures the reality of how each of us has or will experience the situation of the younger generation, then the middle generation, then the older generation. In our children, we see how we used to be, and, in our parents, we see what we will become. How we treat each other in the present moment becomes symbolic, either of how we wish we were all treated in our families, or of mistreatments from which we wish we could escape.

In families, when we are at our best, we feel an obligation to act in the best interests of other family members. I deliberately do not use the word self-interests, because I do not

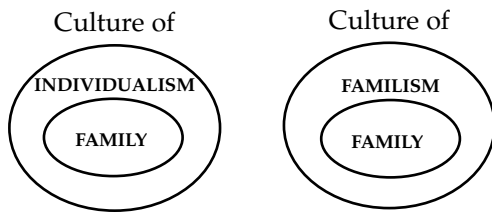
believe it is a synonym for best interests. With self-interests, we can become consumed with our own rights or wants or needs, whereas with best interests, we seek what is best, and that is not always what we think we want or need. To act in someone else's best interests is to seek their well being, learning, or their becoming skilled in knowledge or talents. Acting in someone else's best interests might include living with compassion and gratitude. Typically, although it may not look like it, acting in our own best interests and in others' best interests is the same. This does not mean that all family members in a given situation will agree to that idea. We may have to learn such an idea by doing it. As soon as the Russian peasant woman saw the meaning of eating out of a wooden bowl, she changed how she treated the grandfather. It was obviously in grandfather's best interest to be included in the family meal time and not be isolated merely because he had become more physically weak. And, the inclusion of the grandfather was in the mother's best interests, not just because someday she would become a grandmother, or weak, but because who we are in relation to one another, and our moral commitments and obligations to each other, cannot change with circumstances.

These stories are meant to convey the centrality of family in the health and well being of individuals and communities. They pose fundamental questions for those outside the family context that nevertheless affect the quality of life in families. Anytime we are discussing the quality of life in families, we are addressing the moral domain, a domain that is fortunately fundamental to human experience and inescapable in seeking to enhance the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. Public policy makers must consider the well being of the family in their deliberations and decisions. Specifically, they must be concerned with three questions:

How does my culture or society act in the *best interests* of—Individual? Family? Community?

These questions can be pondered irrespective of culture; the principle of aligning the best interests of these three groups is a starting point to evaluate the practices of any given culture. It is undeniable and universal that, in families, every act in the present moment is an act for or against the previous and the next generation. Of course, families do not carry out their enhancement or destruction of the next generation in a cultural vacuum. Families are nestled in a variety of cultural contexts. Two contrasting examples are found in Figure 3.

In my work as a family life educator, my colleagues and I often confront the task of teaching a familial philosophy to adolescents who are in an individualistic context. Our best way to do this is to ask adolescents to use their own experience and imagination to evaluate the ideas we present. We have varying degrees of success. We ask them to imagine

**Figure 3. The Family in Cultural Contexts**

themselves as being born tomorrow and to describe what they would like the circumstances to be. The vast majority of students describe a desire for parents who love them, who are loyal, compassionate, committed, patient, respectful, and willing to guide them. A few students describe materialistic desires, but not too many. We ask students to identify what heritage they would like to pass on to their future sons or daughters or nieces or nephews. Just inviting them to think generationally—in behalf of someone other than themselves—generates philosophical comments about traditions and beliefs and very practical comments about the need for education, clothing, housing, work, and food. These answers come from adolescents who supposedly can't or won't think about the future because they are so obsessed with the present moment. We have found that if you give young people an invitation to consider the future, they do. If you suggest to them the possibility of being an influence for good for the next generation, they volunteer ways to do that.

Their responses, and the stories with which I began, illustrate the reality of why the starting point of public policy must be family (see Figure 4). Assuming that every culture has in mind the best interests of the community and of the individual, it is nevertheless a mistake to make either intervention in the community or the granting of total independence of "right" to the individual the first priority. Nor is state intervention in families the first task. Seeking to create and

enhance an environment that allows the family to flourish is the first priority; for if we take care of the best interests of the family, we are likely to promote the best interests of the individual and the community. It is because the family is the heart of both community cohesion and individual well being that public policy must first nurture the family. Preserving the family is central to the success of any other worthy community, cultural, or individual goal. By making any given culture a better place for families, families are more likely to succeed in fostering the best interests of the individual and the cohesiveness of the community. The generational family is the fullest presentation of the human story, whatever that story may be.

**Figure 4. The Family as Central to Public Policy**