

Foreword to the 2025 Special Compilation on “Family Therapy and Family Studies in Supporting Mental Health”

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Harmonious and resilient relationships within couples and families contribute to the well-being and life satisfaction of individuals as well as to the strength of societies. Conversely, chronic challenges and difficulties in close relationships and family functioning can make individuals and wider communities vulnerable (Li et al., 2025; Walsh, 2016). Systemic family therapy, combined with informal support from family members and their communities, can be an effective intervention in child and family protection (Hertlein, 2023). The Special Call titled “Family Therapy and Family Studies in Supporting Mental Health” was announced in 2024 following a significant period of population stress in recent years, during which family resilience and support were of paramount importance globally due to health crises, natural disasters, geopolitical conflicts, wars, and economic hardships. The peer-reviewed and edited articles were published throughout the year, and we are now publishing the entire Special Compilation at the beginning of the academic year. In addition to other publications in our journal, this 2025 Special Compilation features five articles. In this short editorial fore-

word, we – a sociologist and a psychologist – aim to present some interdisciplinary thoughts on contemporary family life, family studies, and family interventions.

The concept of family occupies a central position across a wide range of scientific disciplines and professional practices. However, interpretations of what family means vary significantly depending on the perspective and focus of each field. Understanding family concepts and relationships in medicine, psychology, sociology, and education directly influences interventions designed to support the physical and mental well-being of individuals and families. Developing a shared language for discussing and examining family life is essential for ensuring the effectiveness of decisions, interventions, and actions that affect families (Crosbie-Burnett & Klein, 2009).

In a broad sense, a family may be defined as “a group of individuals who are connected to each other emotionally, cognitively, and usually behaviorally, regardless of legal ties and physical locations, potentially even including deceased persons” (Crosbie-Burnett & Klein, 2009, p. 38). Family forms and family life are fundamentally shaped by culture, social structures, and historical context. This means that definitions and understandings of family are

not universal and are continuously evolving. In the early stages of family studies, particularly in Euro-American contexts, the theoretical framework predominantly encompassed more restrictive definitions with a pronounced emphasis on legally recognized nuclear households of middle-class families (Cheal, 2008). However, demographic trends, developing social ideologies, and shifting cultural expectations have contributed to a wider recognition of family diversity over time, highlighting the increasingly pluralistic and dynamic nature of family forms and functioning in contemporary societies (Kramer, 2021; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Thus, family can be conceptualized as a social construct that emerges through the interactions and observations of individuals within particular cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, families can be regarded as dynamic systems that create meaning for their members and the wider environment (Cheal, 2008).

Contemporary demographic phenomena are often interpreted as signs of social or familial crises and relational uncertainty. Examples include declining marriage rates, increasing rates of non-marital cohabitation, rising divorce rates, declining fertility, the postponement of childbearing, and rising rates of childlessness (OECD, 2011; Seltzer, 2019; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). However, as Hungarian sociologists Tóth and Dupcsik (2007) pointed out, families as social institutions have historically undergone significant changes, which are often accompanied by moral panic and societal anxiety. Currently, there is a demonstrable shift in family and individual life courses, a phenomenon reflected in measurable demographic trends. Despite these structural and demographic changes, Tóth and Dupcsik (2007) conclude that the role of the family remains fundamental: *“There is no societal entity that questions the significance of the family in society and individuals’ lives”* (p. 432). While forms of cohabitation and family structures are diversifying, the functional significance of families in supporting individual and societal well-being remains indisputable (Tóth, 2012).

In recent decades, a variety of factors, including changes in working patterns, economic conditions, technological developments, and diverse personal and family choices, have significantly impacted societies in developed countries. Economic and social changes occurring simultaneously in developing countries have also led to a change in how families are viewed, as well as the practical preferences associated with family life (Furstenberg, 2019; Mokomane, 2023). In such contexts, researchers and practitioners must demonstrate a high level of cultural sensitivity. Translation studies, where scientific knowledge informs practice, serve as a crucial bridge between current family theories and family-related interventions (Thoburn & Sexton, 2016).

Although the traditional concept of the nuclear family remains important to many, it does not reflect the experiences of many others around the world. Therefore, when helping couples and families, it is important to consider both their structure and how they function (Weston & Hayes, 2012).

Theoretically, systemic family psychology views the family as a complex, open system that is constantly changing and interacting with its surroundings. The model identifies three interconnected processes: the individual level within the self, the relationship level between people, and the social and environmental level representing the wider world. These processes affect each other over time. Family systems operate at various levels, including individuals, couples, families, extended families, communities, and cultures (Carr, 2016; Stanton, 2009). The way a family functions is an indication of how well each individual and the family as a whole will fare (Harjis, 2025; Izzo et al., 2022), significantly impacting various domains, including mental and emotional health, relationship quality, personality development, academic performance, and social integration. This raises the question: Is there a form of family functioning that can be considered “normal”?

In her 2012 article “The New Normal”, Walsh — a leading researcher in family resilience studies — argues that modern families are far more diverse than those of the past. The concept of “normal” in psychology, once widely used, is now being replaced by the idea that there is significant variation and that what is “optimal” depends on the situation. What is considered normal is determined by societal norms and prevailing attitudes. Walsh (2012) notes that most well-known ideas about family development originate from Euro-American sources and were created by white, middle-class individuals who studied families from similar backgrounds. As families become more diverse, we need to recognize that there is no single type of family. The way a family functions cannot be understood universally, but rather in relation to a family’s values, organization, relationships, social environment, and lived experiences (Nichols, 2013; Walsh, 2003, 2016).

Twenty-first-century families face many challenges. International organizations such as UNICEF, the WHO, the World Bank, the OECD, and the European Union discuss key issues (see policy papers and reviews on these organizations’ websites). These issues include balancing family, work, and private life; addressing the challenges posed by ageing populations, such as the burden on care systems and the “sandwich generation”; reducing social inequalities and child poverty; managing community crises and trauma, such as war, terrorism, and migration; tackling the growing prevalence of mental health disorders; and responding to global environmental threats such

as climate change and pandemics. In order to address these complex issues, it is crucial to engage individuals, families, communities, society as a whole, and regions at multiple levels. In times of crisis, it is vital to have supportive policies in place. While families naturally provide individuals with protection, they can also be at risk. In such cases, societal systems can offer additional support. It is essential to recognize and value diversity, promote strategies that leverage people's strengths and resources, and foster supportive social environments (Nichols, 2013).

The articles included in this Special Compilation are related to the above themes in several ways. They explore family structures and demographic trends in different regions of the world; contemporary issues related to artificial intelligence in family life; the stability and vulnerability of couple relationships and co-parenting; and monitoring the effectiveness of couple and family therapy interventions.

In their narrative review, *James L. Spencer et al. (2025)* provide a concise summary of global family trends, including marriage, cohabitation, divorce, parent-child relationships, and kinship patterns. The findings suggest that, alongside modernization and economic development, shifting gender norms as well as cultural and religious factors influence family transformation, resulting in distinct regional patterns. Policymakers and researchers must be aware of these trends in order to support family well-being.

Integrating AI into family life is a significant and multifaceted issue. While AI can offer benefits such as enhancing communication, supporting various family roles, and promoting family cohesion, it also introduces challenges. The key message of *Szondy and Magyary's (2025)* perspective article is that, to ensure AI aligns with family values and strengthens bonds, a careful balance must be struck to avoid the negative effects of over-reliance and address ethical and privacy concerns. This emphasizes the importance of fostering AI literacy within families.

In their perspective article, *Woolley and Koren (2025)* present a practical framework for addressing infidelity. They integrate Woolley's (2011) motivation-based typology of affairs into Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and the Attachment Injury Repair Model (AIRM). This framework offers both general and specific treatment recommendations, based on an understanding of different motivational types, which could help therapists support their clients more effectively.

Co-parenting is a key concept in developmental psychology and systemic family therapy. Over the past decades, several theorists have developed various dimensions and measurement tools for it. Using a sample of Hungarian mothers, *Pilinszki et al. (2025)* validated the long and short versions of the widely used Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS; Feinberg et al., 2012), a reliable and valid measurement tool based on Feinberg's theoretical concept (2003). This instrument reliably and validly assesses parental cooperation across several national adaptations, including the Hungarian context. Information gathered by the instrument can serve as an important reference point in family research, family therapy, and child welfare and protection work.

In their article, *Johnson et al. (2025)* introduce the Marriage and Family Therapy Practice Research Network (MFT-PRN; Johnson et al., 2017) and summarize the network's existing research findings. After providing a brief introduction to Routine Outcome Monitoring and the practice research network approach in marriage and family therapy, the article reviews the MFT-PRN's procedures and assessment instruments, emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of implementing them. It then summarizes key topics and findings from studies based on MFT-PRN data, including work on questionnaire development, therapeutic alliance, therapy outcomes, and the use of teletherapy. Given the rising prevalence of mental health and relational difficulties, the authors argue that networks such as the MFT-PRN are especially valuable for bridging research and practice, improving client care, and advancing systemic therapy. To date, the MFT-PRN has collected data on over 14,000 clients and continues to undergo further improvements and expand its network of partners.

In summary, the objective of the Special Compilation is to contribute to ongoing efforts by integrating perspectives from family sociology and family psychology. The compilation highlights both the theoretical foundations and the practical interventions required to address the evolving realities of family life and the diversity of family structures and processes. It also explores the resilience mechanisms that enable families to navigate contemporary social, economic, and environmental challenges. In a rapidly changing world, it is crucial for those seeking to promote family well-being and social cohesion — including researchers, policymakers, and practitioners — to understand families as dynamic, contextually embedded systems that demonstrate adaptability and evolution.

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Beáta Dávid, Editor-in Chief and **Ildikó Danis**, Deputy Editor-in-Chief

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