

A Recommendation About the Identity of the Family Discipline

Task Force on the Development
of a Family Discipline *

THE HISTORY

In 1981 there were 51 universities that offered a masters or doctoral degree in a family department (Burr & Leigh, 1982, 1983). However, there was little consensus about what to name these programs. This can be illustrated by the following partial listing of the names that were used: family development, family ecology, family economics, family education, family environment, family interaction, family life, family living, family relation(ships), family resources, family science, family services, family social science, family studies, family therapy, and "the family."

Burr and Leigh's 1982 survey of the membership of NCFR indicated that 79% of the members believed that this identity confusion was a *serious* problem; only 12% thought the status quo was desirable (Burr & Leigh, 1982, 1983). Therefore, they proposed that a number of changes be made to reduce the identity confusion.

During the 1983 NCFR conference, a number of meetings were held to discuss these issues. These resulted in Bert Adams, then president of NCFR, appointing a Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline. This Task Force was charged to try to encourage consensus about whether there was an emerging family discipline, promote dialogue about the identity issues, and facilitate the development of the field. Nine scholars were appointed as the officers of the Task Force, and an open invitation was extended in the February, 1984, *NCFR Report* to those who were interested in joining the task force. Eventually, 78 scholars joined and participated in the deliberations and decision making.

The Task Force subsequently published a newsletter as a part of the *NCFR Report* and arranged several sessions in the 1984 NCFR meetings where the identity issues were discussed. During these sessions, an open meeting of the Task Force was held, and a formal and unanimous vote was taken to accept the position that there is a distinct and identifiable family discipline.

* Appreciation is expressed to Godfrey Ellis, Oklahoma State University, for chairing the group that developed this recommendation.

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During the 1984 NCFR meetings, five "Task Groups" were created to deal with the tasks that had then been identified. One of these was a Task Group on the Name of the Discipline, which was charged with "promoting dialogue and then decision making about which term is the best label for the family field" (Burr, 1984). This task group subsequently invited comments from the NCFR body with the goal of obtaining a "clear label for the field which would build a sense of self-esteem among those working in the area and facilitate recognition by other professions" (Ellis, 1984).

At about this time, Kingsley Davis presented a paper that developed a typology of disciplines and evaluated the nature of the family field. The Davis paper was subsequently published in the Task Force Newsletter in *NCFR Report* (1985). In the Davis typology, *primary* or *basic* disciplines contribute a large number of independent explanations, and they are almost universally labeled with some type of Greco-Latin term such as psychology, sociology, or economics. *Secondary* disciplines rely primarily on the basic disciplines for their explanations, but they also provide some independent explanations. They tend to be labeled with a two-word terminology that combines a descriptive label with the word, "science" -- such as political science and health science. The *tertiary* fields do not have independent explanatory power, and they tend to be labeled with an adjective that designates what is being studied and the term, "studies" (Middle-East studies, women's studies, etc.).

During 1984 and 1985, the Task Group on the Name of the Discipline coordinated an extensive analysis of the issues associated with a name for the family discipline. This included considerable correspondence, telephone discussions, and exchanges of ideas in the issues of *NCFR Report*. After a thorough analysis of the alternatives, the Task Group prepared a written recommendation advocating the term, "family science," as the label to be used to designate the family discipline.

The written recommendation was submitted to the Task Force at the 1985 NCFR conference in Dallas, Texas, and was discussed in an open meeting attended by 89 family-oriented scholars. Acting on a motion by Godfrey Ellis, chairman of the Name of the Discipline Task Group, the recommendation was unanimously adopted. The unanimity of the endorsement was interpreted as a virtual mandate -- further justifying subsequent action, such as changing the names of courses, majors, and eventually departments around the country.

RATIONALE FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

There are many reasons it is desirable to adopt the term, "family science," as the name of the field where the primary goals are the discovery, verification, and application of knowledge about the family. Eight of these reasons are:

1. *Family Science is a Clear Label.* The present pattern of labeling family programs in the academic community is so confusing that it makes it difficult for both students entering the field and colleagues in other

disciplines to know what the family field entails. As Burr and Leigh commented in the study, "we were shocked and remain professionally embarrassed by the pervasiveness of the chaos" (1983, p. 472). The widespread adoption of the term, family science, will eliminate this confusion.

2. *Family Science is Easily Understood.* Some of the terms that have been considered, such as famology, consanguinology, and familiology, would eliminate the confusion caused by multiple labels, but they would introduce a different type of confusion. They would not be readily understood in either the academic or non-academic communities, and the field would need to go through a period of explaining what they mean. The term, family science, would avoid this problem; it also would avoid the negative response that has tended to accompany the Greco-Latin labels (Voydanoff, 1985).

3. *Family Science is an Accurate Label.* The term, family science, is the most accurate descriptor of the family discipline. The majority of scholars who have participated in the dialogue about naming the discipline, including Burr (1985), Davis (1985), Ellis (1985), Spanier (1985), and Voydanoff (1985), maintain that the family discipline is currently a secondary discipline. Davis' typology, therefore, suggests that family science is the best label for the new field.

4. *Family Science is an Up-to Date Label.* Davis' typology is informative and interesting. But it is not clear that Greco-Latin terms are best suited to disciplines emerging in the 1980s. According to Voydanoff (1985), Greco-Latin terms "point us in the wrong direction -- looking to the past rather than the future. I would suggest that 'family science,' on the other hand, is more forward-looking and reflective of current developments in academic disciplines. We need to build a discipline for the 21st century, not one based on a 19th century model."

5. *Family Science Provides a Professional Identity.* The term, family science, will provide individuals in the discipline with a meaningful professional identity. One who studies or applies family science can be known as a family scientist. This is important if those who specialize in the family field are to be accepted as equals with those who specialize in other disciplines. This is also one of the reasons that family studies would not be a desirable label, as it fails to provide a meaningful identity: one cannot be a family studiesist, and the labels, family expert or family specialist, imply being on the periphery of the academic community.

6. *Family Science Allows Flexibility.* The term, family science, has the potential to adapt to the myriad circumstances of family departments. Burr and Leigh have pointed out that it is "equally useful in describing majors, courses, and departments" (1983, p.8). There are many family departments that are combined administratively with child development or human development programs. In these units, the department name can continue to describe both parts if terms such as family science and child development or human development and family science are used. As an alternative, the plural, family sciences, could embrace both the family discipline (narrowly

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7. *Family Science Can Include Discovery and Application.* Science traditionally includes basic and applied dimensions, so family science can embrace both the theory/research aspects of the field and the applied aspects such as family services, family economics, family life education, family extension, and marriage and family therapy. Hopefully, the basic and applied aspects of family science will always be seen as intricately interrelated, complementary, and mutually facilitating; and those who specialize in either emphasis will appreciate their dependence on the other part.

8. *Family Science is Acquiring Momentum.* The term, family science(s) is already starting to be adopted in programs around the country. Brigham Young University changed the name of the family department to family sciences when the Department of Child Development and Family Relations was combined with the Department of Family Resource Management in 1981. The faculty in the family department at the University of Maryland also "voted overwhelmingly to change the department name to 'family science'" (Rubin, 1985). The family department at the University of Minnesota already is called Family Social Science -- a name that is close to the one being proposed.

THE RECOMMENDATION

The Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline therefore recommends that:

1. The term, family science, be used to refer to the field of study where the primary goals are the discovery, verification, and application of knowledge about families.

2. Students, faculty, and administrators in departments that use one of the names, such as family development, family studies, family ecology, family relations, etc., should give first priority to changing the names of the appropriate courses, majors, and programs to family science.

3. Students, faculty, and administrators in the family-oriented departments should give second priority to changing the names of the departments to include the term, family science. (In departments where family science is combined with child development, they may wish to have two components in the department name or to use the plural, family sciences.)

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