

FORUM SECTION

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Family Science and the National Council on Family Relations

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Let me say from the outset that I am a loving and loyal member of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). I joined while attending graduate school at the University of Georgia in 1977, and I have not missed an annual meeting since that time. NCFR is the professional home for family scientists and, as such, is worthy of our support and our scrutiny. The purpose of this brief commentary is to provide a friendly critique of NCFR in the hopes of generating some discussion and to make a few suggestions toward some positive change.

A look at the history of NCFR (Walters & Jewson, 1988) indicates steady growth from its 1938 membership of 200 to 2,967 in 1949. Growth tabled for the next decade, as the 1960 membership was only 2,800. During the 1960s and 1970s, membership nearly doubled, to 5,500 members by 1978. Ten years later, however, our membership is only 3,513.

It appears that NCFR is in trouble, and we need to know why. I will make some suggestions as to what I feel are some of the problems and their solutions. In doing so, I shall discuss only the organization as it has been for the last eleven years, the time in which I have been a member.

THE LEADERSHIP

I am amazed each year when I receive the copy of the *NCFR Report*, which includes the names of the people running for the various offices. Where have I seen those names and pictures before? Oh yes, in last year's issue! My impression is that there is a small group of family sociologists who are perpetuating themselves as the NCFR leaders. They are divided into two groups: one half serving on the nominating committee and nominating those from the other half. They then switch roles the next year. Every two

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or three years, a new person is admitted into this inner circle (generally it is a recent student/young professional representative).

They are all good people of course, but there are drawbacks to running an organization this way: a) there is a tendency for the organization to become rigid, "set in its ways," and not open to, or even aware of, new ideas; and b) other members who would like to participate and serve the organization may become discouraged. Such members do not try to recruit new members, and they may not even renew their own membership.

Another flaw in our leadership selection process is our tendency to choose people on the basis of their fame as researchers. While scholarship is to be applauded and may be the keystone of our profession, it is not always the best criterion for predicting administrative excellence. Surely some very good people are being overlooked due to a lack of the name recognition that comes with many publications.

We can think of our NCFR leadership in family systems terms: a relatively closed system, rigidly perpetuating now maladaptive patterns. One example is the continued urging that state councils exist and flourish. There may have been a time when the state affiliates worked well, but today the majority of them seem to struggle along, run by people who do so out of loyalty to NCFR rather than because of any intrinsic benefits. Annual state meetings often are poorly attended and are considered to be just another chore for already busy people. The most successful affiliates are those which ignore state boundaries and take in larger members, such as the Southeastern Council. Rather than homeostatically forcing the continuation of state councils, many should be allowed to die, or they should be reorganized around membership clusters. State councils may be an idea whose time has passed.

THE JOURNALS

There are two problems with the NCFR journals. First, many of the articles in them tend not to be sufficiently interesting or readable. Secondly, there are simply not enough NCFR journals. I was recently talking with a past president of NCFR, who told me that his earlier issues of *Journal of Marriage and the Family (JMF)* are well worn from perusal, but that issues from recent years tend to set pristine and unread on the shelf. The length of our methodology sections has grown, at the expense of the literature review, results, and discussion sections. We seem to be evaluating the quality of an article by the complexity of analysis, worshipping at the feet of each new statistical technique, such as LISREL. Methodology is important, of course, but is it more important than the research idea? It certainly is less interesting than the results and implications. We need to be sure that our methods and analyses are used because they are best for our research, and not just to convince ourselves and others that we are as good as the "hard" sciences. Qualitative, descriptive, and review articles should not be considered second-class. If we are not careful, *JMF* will become like *Child Development*: a collection of complex articles which are small in scope and bone-crushingly dull.

As to the second problem, literally dozens of family related journals have been created in the last two decades. Yet NCFR still supports only two. We claim to be a significant home for family therapists and there are many family therapy journals, yet none belong to NCFR. We claim to be the leaders in the field of family life education, yet we have no publication on family life in the popular literature, such as *Psychology Today* is for the American Psychological Association. This truth does not strengthen NCFR's claim as being the professional representative of family scholars.

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Two examples illustrate the short sightedness of our policies. When the Family Discipline Section started the *Family Science Review (FSR)* last year, the Board refused to accept it as part of NCFR. It is astonishing that our Board would punish rather than reward such initiative and excitement. A few years ago, we had a third journal - *The Journal of Family History* - and we actually got rid of it! These conscious actions to *not* be the leader in the family field should be an acute embarrassment for all NCFR members.

In 1983, Dennis Orthner chaired a Presidential Commission on the Structure of NCFR. This commission later recommended greater autonomy for the sections and suggested that they run journals as does APA, ASA, and other groups. I remember when this commission was organized, but there was no real discussion of its final report. Why were the recommendations buried and ignored? Are our NCFR leaders more concerned with maintaining their centralized power than they are with the good of the organization? Are they threatened by new ideas? Instead of our present stagnation, our sections could be strengthened and the members revitalized by involvement with journals: Research and Theory would have *JMF*, Family Action or Education could have *Family Relations*, the Family Therapy and International Sections would have journals similar to those that have been co-opted by more far-sighted organization, and of course, the Family Discipline Section would have *FSR*. As other sections grow, they too could look forward to developing a journal. Perhaps this is where we should look for membership expansion, rather than through the affiliate councils. If the state councils are not seen as threatening to the larger organization, then why should we fear stronger sections?

THE ANNUAL MEETINGS

I enjoy attending our annual conferences and would not miss them for the world. None-the-less, there are some areas in which they could be made more attractive.

a) Location. In the last decade, I have attended meetings in Milwaukee, St. Paul, Dallas, and Detroit, but I have never been to Orlando, Las Vegas, St. Louis, San Antonio, or Honolulu. I recognize that we must give some priority to locations where a strong local council exists and airfare is reasonable, but we should also select cities that people want to visit. It is still amazing to me that when we went to Texas, that all-glass-and-steel and no-ambience Dallas was selected over San Antonio, which is a beautiful convention city. If we are going to continue to meet in the winter, then we should favor southern states over the colder northern locations.

b) The Sessions Themselves. It may be that we are having too many sessions, or that some are being offered at poor hours of the day, as some are very poorly attended. Though we need ways for many to be on the program, it is sad when there are more presenters than listeners in a session! One fact of life that needs to be recognized is that very few members want to attend anything before 9:00 a.m. We should also get rid of having discussants. These people generally feel that they have to prove their worth by finding something to criticize in each paper. This time should be given over to the audience, who are perfectly capable of asking their own questions and making their own comments.

c) The President's Address. This address should tell us about the organization and set new directions for development. I am very disappointed when we are subjected to a recounting of the current president's research activities. These are already well-known. Happy exceptions to this unfortunate trend have been the presidential addresses

by Kate Gardner, Wes Burr, Sharon Price, and James Walters, who talked to us about NCFR, its history, finances, and the discipline of family science.

d) The Parties. Many groups within NCFR are kind enough to sponsor social gatherings during the annual meeting. These can be good opportunities for relaxation, reunion, and that ever wonderful and necessary "networking." Unfortunately, the structure of the parties themselves often make it difficult for these goals to be realized. What we find instead are hot, small rooms, seriously overcrowded with people who are too drunk to carry on reasonable conversation. Surely some adjustments can be made to this approach.

For the last few years the Student/Young Professionals have sponsored a dance at the annual meetings. On every occasion except for 1986, the music played has been of pre-World War II vintage, and as a result, the majority of the young professionals leave the dance after meeting a few friends and go off in search of another place with more appropriate music. It does not seem unreasonable to ask that the people in charge of these events find bands who will play music created since, rather than before, their births.

CONCLUSION

NCFR is the primary professional organization for family scientists. Unfortunately, its membership is declining and its leadership in the field is weakening. We need leaders with vision who will decentralize and reinvigorate the structure of NCFR. Let us break the homeostatic bands which bind us and move onward and upward.

REFERENCES

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