

The Art of Being a Failure as an Academic Field: A Cautionary Tale for Family Science

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ABSTRACT. Recent mergers and other reorganization efforts at colleges and universities across North America have generated fundamental questions about the visibility and therefore the long-term viability of certain academic areas. This article focuses more specifically on one of those fields – family science – and centers attention on the prominence and sustainability of this particular community of scholars. The connection between leadership efforts and the present and future state of family science are discussed in light of the theory of therapeutic failure and its application to unsuccessful management and administrative activities.

Keywords: family science, family science leadership, family science future

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“If you don’t like change, you’ll like irrelevance even less.”
General Eric K. Shineski, U.S. Army Chief of Staff

Human Ecology. Human Sciences. Human Environmental Sciences. Social Work and Family Studies. Family, Consumer and Nutritional Sciences. Family, Youth and Community Sciences. Sport and Human Dynamics. Behavioral Sciences. These are some of the many and varied names of departments in colleges and universities across the country that currently contain family science programs.

According to Hans (in press), there are over 100 different variations on department names containing family scholars, and a recent survey of approximately 750 of these academicians reveals widespread apprehension about this deviation in nomenclature. In related fashion, another recent survey of family scholars conducted by Hamon and Smith (in press) uncovered a variety of worries among the professorate that accompanied the focus on name diversification. Chief among these recognized concerns was the felt need to more clearly articulate a professional identity for the family science field, especially in order to effectively market the discipline to students (and especially undergraduates) seeking a major.

What is happening to the family science field in general and to its brand more specifically? One significant component of the answer to this multi-pronged question is connected to the phenomena of mergers and other reorganizational activities within higher education. Mergers, which have been given amplified attention in the literature as the number of reorganizational efforts within colleges and universities has increased (Harman & Meek, 2002), often as not can be a source of identity diffusion for academic disciplines. And as the departmental names listed above imply, family science has not been immune to this condition.

What is known about mergers that might be of some use to scholars within disciplines facing issues related to visibility and sustainability? Lawlor and Boyle (2007) have provided an excellent review of scholarship related to merger activity in higher education, situating much of this work in the larger body of literature concerned with contemporary corporate strategies to reorganize in both the private (Bower, 2001) and public sectors (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). These authors assert that “by their nature, academic mergers denote significant, and indeed, radical change” (p. 134). Interestingly, marriage is used as a metaphor by Lawlor and Boyle (2007) to focus attention on those “post-merger issues” that follow the courtship (pre-merger) and wedding (merger process) phases of a reorganization effort in higher education.

Not unlike a marriage, the long-term quality of any academic merger is going to be influenced by a wide variety of individual and interpersonal factors that become evident in the courtship/pre-merger and wedding/merger process phases. Harman’s (2000) work, which distinguishes between different types of mergers in higher education seems particularly salient in the use of the marital metaphor to discuss the outcome (or relationship quality, if you will) of these reorganizational activities. One such distinction made by Harman (2000) revolves around the voluntary versus involuntary nature of the merger. If the assertion that arranged marriages likely will have intrinsically different characteristics than choice marriages (Hoetler, Axinn, &

Ghimire, 2004), then it is fair to contend that academic units compelled to merge will tend toward different dynamics and outcomes when compared to those units that voluntarily come together. In Western society at least, it is a fair bet that most of us would rather have choice in both our marital partners and those units our discipline might associate with in an academic setting.

Two other differences related to mergers noted by Harman (2000) may be relevant here. One additional distinction concerns the degree to which a merger reflects consolidation – whereby one unit is relatively unaffected while absorbing other units that are most significantly affected – versus more egalitarian merging activity that demands relatively equal amounts of change for all parties. Similarly, marriages can reflect differing levels of power and conflict as partners assert different wants and needs (Anderson, 2010), and can result in significant differences in terms of decision-making processes and other interpersonal dynamics related to influence levels. It may be axiomatic to state that, at least in the abstract, most academic and marital partners would choose a “fair give and take” approach¹ rather than participate in a “hostile takeover.”

The third distinction discussed by Harman (2000) to be applied here focuses on the degree to which a merger brings together similar versus dissimilar (labeled cross-sector) units. The author states that “cross-sector mergers pose special problems, especially when institutions in different sectors have distinctively different missions, roles and cultures, and are funded differently” (p. 346). In parallel fashion, while the debate about “like attracts like” versus “opposites attract” in the courtship and marriage literature does not seem to have been resolved at this time, the evidence supporting the notion that more satisfying unions exist amongst partners with more similar characteristics (cf., Klohnen & Luo, 2003) may indicate that these sorts of marriages require less effort (at least initially) to maintain partner fulfillment. While less robust, it might be asserted here that academic and marriage partners coming together as “birds of a feather” would experience a less challenging set of merger-related demands than those people and units that might seem comparable to “apples and oranges.”

Faculty members with family science backgrounds have witnessed at least their fair share of mergers in the past several decades, and it is highly probable that the field has not seen the last of these reorganizational activities. In turn, if scholarship in this area is accurate, then continued involvement in merger-related phenomena will result in the family science field’s ongoing exposure to “radical change.” In turn, transformation at these greater levels of magnitude will be guided at the very least by the degree to which future shifts are launched voluntarily², are designed to achieve equality, and would aim to bring together like-minded academic units.

But does any of this truly matter to the family science field as a whole? Would attention to these trends and issues make any difference at all in terms of the long-term viability of family science within the realm of academia? Should leaders in the family field and its professional organizations feel at all compelled to take any sort of action, or even think about such matters? It

¹ A reasonable alternative viewpoint would suggest that members of a larger and more prestigious (and perhaps more resourced) academic unit might be loath to “give up” anything if compelled to take on smaller and less influential units.

² There is some reason to question whether or not a truly voluntary merger would ever occur in academia.

is asserted here that another smaller body of literature – one that is focused on failure both in psychotherapy and in management and administrative activities within other social science fields – may contain hints and clues about where our field might be headed through inactivity, inattention, ill-chosen priorities, and/or misdirected efforts.

Prescriptions for Failure

Over forty years ago, family therapy pioneer Jay Haley (1969) wrote an essay entitled “The art of being a failure as a therapist,” which catalogued the many and varied steps that a clinician could take to assure a complete lack of success in work with clients. Just over a decade ago, this work was reapplied directly to leadership and administrative efforts in the psychiatric realm by Shevitz (2000). It is asserted here that there is great utility in extending this scholarship to the family science field in order to better understand what it would take to truly fail as an academic enterprise in the face of the increased pace of mergers and other reorganizational efforts in higher education.

The first of Haley’s (1969) steps in creating therapeutic failure was actually a cluster of three partitioned activities that included the need to dismiss presenting problems as being unimportant, refuse to directly treat or otherwise deal with these problems, and insist that work done on such problems would unnecessarily divert attention away from more important matters. The application to family science would be embodied in any number of declarations about the present state of the field. For instance, the use of the first strategy would assert that mergers generate no real and present threat at all to family science. Given the lack of discussion in our professional literature to date about the impact of mergers on family-focused academic units, this would seem to be the strategy that the field has selected so far, at least by default.

Alternatively, an argument could be constructed that recognizes the family science field does in fact face certain vulnerabilities related to mergers, but the overall perspective adopted would include the assertion that there is nothing anyone in the field can or should do about it. A variant on this same stance might be adopted through some personal modification of the following statement: “I just can’t focus any of my attention right now whether or not the family science field is in jeopardy, because I have a grant deadline looming and a revise-and-resubmit to complete.” Or alternatively, “It is going to happen anyway and there is nothing we can do about it.” Any of these latter strategies do validate the presence of some challenges related to where the family field may be headed, but the external locus of control and/or personal life circumstances prevent the individual³ from envisioning the need to become concerned or involved.

Extending Haley’s (1969) work on this matter a bit further, another step in setting up failure would be to couch the conditions of the family science field in terms that are disconnected to any sense of being able to take any action whatsoever. This includes framing the situation as being outside of one’s own personal control by assigning responsibility (and blame) elsewhere.

³ As a parallel argument, it might be asserted that it is patently unfair to ask assistant professors to do more than they already are asked to accomplish through the promotion and tenure process. In turn, associate professors might argue that “getting involved” in anything could generate some risk of not accomplishing the national and international stature in scholarship required for promotion to the level of full professor at many major universities.

For instance, the family science field's current vulnerability is the result of actions taken (or not taken) by administrators such as department chairs and deans. Or alternatively, the precarious state of the family science field is the fault of our own professional organizations.

Shevitz (2000) writes that this type of submissive yet accusatory strategy "works well with faculty in particular. If they are reactionary, passive-aggressive, or unmotivated for change, one need not work on remediation, because none is possible" (p. 1048). In turn, department chairs, deans, and leaders in the family professional organizations might adopt a similar compliant stance and concurrently blame even more nefarious (and even more senior) administrators who "just don't understand our field's importance." And finally, leaders of our professional organizations could disavow any role they could or should play in terms of providing guidance and direction to the field on these matters.

There may be other more egocentric and/or political reasons undergirding the lack of desire to act. The academy in general has rather significant numbers of professors who are at or near retirement age. Perhaps more senior family science faculty members, who may be in the best position to act decisively and effectually due to their status, nevertheless would rather go "gently into the night." Alternatively, family science professors may already have been merged into other units in ways that had more of the "hostile takeover" flavor described in the previous section, resulting in a spirit-crushing environment that might have generated feelings of hopelessness and apathy. And regardless of how compassionately any sort of cross-sector merger was conducted, family science faculty members may now find themselves representing a program within a unit that espouses a very different value system, demanding that faculty members direct their time and energy toward survival issues⁴ within a new department.

The denial of or refusal to deal with challenges related to mergers in academia is not the only guarantor of failure, however. There are other components gleaned from Haley's (1969) original work that more action-minded individuals might take to downgrade the visibility and sustainability of the family science field. Chief among these is the insistence that there is a single solution that will alleviate the many and diverse challenges and difficulties facing the family science field in the midst of these mergers. Both Kaplan (1964) and Maslow (1966) have discussed this as a situation where everything looks like a nail to an individual who only has a hammer in her or his toolbox. The family field might therefore look forward to the requisite minimum, perhaps coming in the form of a conference seminar or two that would result in a call to "do something," with a special emphasis on doing the *one* thing⁵ (i.e. hit *this* nail with *this* hammer) that will allow faculty members to go back to teaching, research, and service activities.

Haley (1969) ends his article by proffering a motto he labels "The Five B's which Guarantee Dynamic Failure," and suggests that this be placed on the wall of every institution that provides training to therapists. The Five B's are:

⁴ Metaphorically, it might be argued that fish out of water need to find a new source of oxygen before initiating a campaign against the trawling industry.

⁵ Task-oriented individuals could augment the appeal of any one activity by connecting it to the "good old days" of family science, defined loosely as any year prior to the merger or reorganization of one's home department or college.

1. Be Passive
2. Be Inactive
3. Be Reflective
4. Be Silent
5. Beware

If we were to adopt a similar motto for the family science field, then we might similarly hang the Five B's on the walls where department and college faculty meetings are hosted. Passivity, inactivity, reflection without subsequent action, and silence indeed seem to be the exact prescription for our field to get ready to watch what will happen when we are not an active part of the reorganizational-oriented conversations currently being conducted on college and university campuses across the country.

The Leadership Road Less Traveled (so far)

An alternative stance would argue for a more proactive approach to the situation that the family science field finds itself in regarding the larger context of ongoing college and university efforts to reorganize. In fact, given the potential for an acceleration of mergers within higher education over the next decade, this more dynamic approach might well be portrayed as an outright mobilization effort on behalf of the field. There is a war to be “won,” this line of thinking might go, at least in terms of the struggle to remain visible on and relevant to campuses across the nation. And while there are many different areas where “battle lines” could be formed – issues surrounding the return on investment that students might expect to receive upon completion of a family science degree immediately comes to mind in these financially challenging times within academia – ultimately the field is reliant on its leadership to manage and direct those efforts that will determine the future of the discipline.

If a more active stance is advocated for and subsequently adopted by members of the family science community, however, such deployment efforts would make increased demands on present-day leaders to aggressively pursue agendas that promote discourse regarding the intrinsic value of the discipline to the academic mission of their campuses. In turn, the field would be compelled to become much more intentional about growing the next generation of proactive leaders within the discipline (and for the academy as a whole). Such leadership cultivation would aim to promote the current health and well-being of our family science departments, as well as to position these units to be maximally ready for the inevitable changes coming from future merger efforts. In essence then, the family science field needs to become more intentional in how we train faculty members to become effective department chairs, how we encourage department chairs to become the deans who will reward and nurture successful family units, and how we inspire deans to become the provosts and presidents who will provide support to and for the family science field.

What exactly is meant by becoming more intentional in how we train faculty members to become effective department chairs? Let us start with a fundamental principle inside of present-

day academia: those academic units generating larger numbers of credit hours and more research dollars (including the all-important indirect costs that support the infrastructure surrounding empirical efforts) are more highly valued on college and university campuses. It is therefore axiomatic to state that an effective chair will significantly strengthen a department's ability to be successful in these types of endeavors. In contrast, an ineffective chair can place a department at great risk on many fronts, perhaps most significantly in terms of resource allocations within a college.

And yet, how much training do family science chairs typically have in preparation to first take office? Here the focus of such preparation would be on administrative basics such as budget management and other financial concerns, as well as dealing with issues revolving around human resources, student life, and faculty and staff professional development, to name but a few of the many areas that chairs must routinely handle on any given day and which lead both directly and indirectly to departmental productivity. Regrettably, all too often chairs are not adequately prepared to take on these sorts of tasks, but instead often become "accidental" leaders. As in, no one else would be the chair. Or alternatively, every other senior faculty member already has served as chair, and now "you're it."

The net result of this nearly unintentional ascent into a leadership role is a department chair who faces a steep learning curve upon stepping into the position, one that can take years to overcome⁶. This is at best a risky strategy for placement of leaders in such a crucial position and at such a critical time in the family field's evolution within the academy. Department chairs must be "in the mix" from the start, working with deans, other senior administrators, and campus and community stakeholders in ways that trumpet the teaching efforts, research activities, and service contributions of the family department members they are leading. And if a chair is overwhelmed with the daily tasks associated with running a department, they will be in a precarious position to respond to events and demands that might loom on the horizon of a merger.

What can be done? A recent contribution by Anderson (2013) generated some modest recommendations regarding the development of leadership within the family field, raising the possibility of "leadership mentoring" activities taking place within the *National Council of Family Relations*. Several suggestions were proffered, including the hosting of an administrator support group and the development of succession processes for section chairs within the organization. While these proposals were meant to bolster a "legacy for future leaders" within the professional organization itself, nonetheless this call suggests that at least some members of the academy are thinking about leadership development activities.

Ultimately, however, leadership mentoring must go much farther if the field is going to flourish within a context of academic mergers, and there is both personal and organizational responsibility to be taken here. Family science faculty members can and should be encouraged to participate in leadership development opportunities that routinely are offered on college and university campuses. Present day family science department chairs can facilitate this

⁶ A conceptual connection to the previously introduced marriage metaphor can be made here in terms of our field's general understanding that preparation activities can significantly and positively impact immediate and longer term outcomes (cf. Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007) in part because participants are proactively sensitized to issues and concerns that can and do arise over the course of time.

participation through the provision of rewards (course releases and reductions in other service obligations immediately come to mind here) that will encourage faculty⁷ members to expose themselves to such leadership development activities as a part of an overall succession planning strategy. In turn, professional organizations must work on a number of fronts, including the facilitation of ongoing conversations about the impact of mergers and the parallel need to develop the next generation of department chairs, to help this process along as well.

The encouragement of department chairs to become the deans who will reward and nurture successful family units – and the inspiration of deans to become the provosts and presidents who will provide continued support for both discipline integrity and, wherever necessary, the conscientious integration of family science units with other like-minded academic areas – flows logically within an epigenetic principle which asserts that administrative success at one level will set the stage for developmental progress toward ever higher levels of leadership within academia. In addition, there is an extraordinarily self-serving question to be asked here: Who would you rather have as the leader of your college or university: a dean, provost, or president with a family science background, or someone from _____⁸?

In the final analysis, the family science field faces a rather stark set of choices, and certainly not only on the topic of leadership development. Returning to the marriage metaphor one last time, there is a strong likelihood that wedding bells will be ringing (or ringing again) for many family-oriented academic programs. The only real choices we have surround the level of involvement we wish to have in deciding who we will marry and how we will raise our offspring. Therefore, we either recognize the inevitability of future mergers – and we work to prepare our present and future leaders for this intensified period of radical change – in order to be in charge of our own destinies, or else our futures will be determined for us, and by individuals who most likely do not understand the critical importance of our field to society as a whole.

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⁷ It may also be the case that leadership development courses could be built into the curriculum for family science graduate students, who are after all the very future of the discipline.

⁸ Fill in the blank here with the name of the academic discipline you believe family science would least likely fare well with in a future merger

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