

Pathways and Turning Points in My Career as a Family Scientist

Jason D. Hans
University of Kentucky

ABSTRACT. My career trajectory has been primarily shaped by an industrious work ethic, resiliency in the face of adverse circumstances, and a series of fortunate circumstances. Most important among those fortunate circumstances has been the mentorship I received from exceptional and established scholars during my undergraduate and graduate training; I have since strived to emulate those role models as I progress in my own career. This article describes the key pathways and turning points that have impacted my career as a family scientist, and describes the affirmation I have found for my career ambition through traumatic personal life experiences that have elicited introspection on the meaning of life and the importance of forming a legacy.

Keywords: family science, career trajectory, resiliency, mentors

Direct correspondence to Dr. Jason Hans at jhans@uky.edu.

Pathways and Turning Points in My Career as a Family Scientist

Throughout childhood, my paternal grandfather was the only adult who encouraged me to attend college, and he lived over a thousand miles away from me. Although friends often described me as “book smart,” I was born to teenage parents with only a high school education and, on at least one occasion that I can remember when I was perhaps 9 years old, my birth father—a career factory worker—actually *discouraged* me from attending college by saying that I would be better off getting a stable job after high school than attending college. My birth parents divorced when I was in kindergarten and have now been married a total of seven times between them. My mother recoupled immediately following my parents’ divorce, and the stepfather and stepsister (six years my senior) with whom I cohabited the majority of my childhood both dropped out of high school. As these circumstances convey, despite my academic aptitude, I was not socialized to value education. Even today, despite several nieces and nephews in their early- to mid-20s, I remain the only person among my parents and their (step)children and (step)grandchildren to earn a bachelor’s degree. Given this background, my career in academia is an unlikely one. In this article, I will describe some key experiences that led me to a career as a family scientist and that have shaped my professional identity.

Palomar College, 1991-1992

With limited opportunities in higher education following a high school career in Escondido, CA that was focused more on athletics than academics, I attended Palomar College—a nearby community college in San Marcos, CA—primarily because I wanted to continue playing football. I did not pass a single class during my first semester at Palomar, but not due to academic difficulties, *per se*. A month into the semester my mother and stepfather moved to Oklahoma for a new job, so my focus consequently shifted toward meeting my basic needs for food, housing, and transportation as an 18-year-old living 1,300 miles away from my parents and without any financial support other than that I earned for myself. After several months of struggling to meet those needs, I enlisted in the United States Army for four years with an eye toward earning the \$40,000 in Army College Fund and G. I. Bill money the army was offering to attend college after completing a 4-year enlistment.

United States Army, 1992-1996

The military provided both time and opportunities for me to mature, separated me from high school friends and patterns, and gave me a glimpse of what life would be like without a college education. Consequently, the last few years of my military enlistment, while stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, I earned college credits by attending classes on nights and weekends, taking several College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, and using credits available through the American Council on Education’s (ACE) recognition of military training and experience. A few months before completing my enlistment, I earned an Associate of Arts general studies degree from a nearby satellite campus of Columbia College. As a military veteran who had earned an Associate of Arts degree with honors (4.0 GPA), I was able to gain admission to the University of Missouri (MU); upon completion of my enlistment, I moved a few hours by car north of Fort Leonard Wood to start attending the university.

University of Missouri (Undergraduate), 1996-1999

I began at the university as a secondary education major because I wanted to work with adolescents as a counselor and coach, but I balked midway through my first semester when my academic advisor presented my emphasis area options: English, mathematics, science, or social studies. None sounded appealing; none had the life skills and decisions focus that I envisioned for myself, so at that point it was unclear to me how to attain the career I desired. I was coincidentally enrolled that semester two courses offered by the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) that fulfilled a few of the university's general education requirements, including the first class Jennifer Hardesty ever taught. Jennifer was a master's student at the time, but now she is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois. After becoming disenchanted with my options in secondary education, I realized that HDFS seemed more likely to lead to the type of work I desired, so I changed my major accordingly.

In the weeks that followed, I began thinking more specifically about career prospects with a HDFS major. Earlier that semester, in my first month at MU, I had met the woman with whom I would be married within a year, so supporting a family in the future was at the forefront of my mind. One day in class Jennifer was talking about divorce, and when describing divorce mediation she made an impromptu remark stating that mediators make a lot of money. This piqued my interest, and as the child of multiple divorces I already had a keen interest in divorce, so my educational and career path took shape: I would complete the master's program in family mediation offered by HDFS at MU, and become a mediator.

In the spring prior to the start of my final academic year in the undergraduate program, I was informed by my academic advisor, Dr. Teresa Cooney, that the HDFS faculty had identified me as a candidate for the McNair Scholars Program. The McNair Scholars Program is a U.S. Department of Education program that provides research opportunities and academic mentoring for underrepresented college students who have demonstrated academic potential for graduate education. Although I viewed myself as a nontraditional student following my years enlisted in the military prior to attending the university, I had never thought of myself as underrepresented; at that time, it was surprising to me that being a first-generation college student with financial need qualified me for such a program. Nonetheless, I enthusiastically applied and was accepted.

As a McNair Scholar during my final year in the undergraduate program (1998-1999), I did original research for the first time; Dr. Mark Fine and I conducted a study on children's experiences of divorce after their parents had participated in a divorce education program (see Hans & Fine, 2001). The McNair program also provided financial support for me to attend my first National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) annual conference, in Milwaukee in the fall of 1998, and I was immensely impressed upon seeing that many graduate students in the department were presenting at the national conference. This led me to the realization that I was capable of presenting research there, too. While at that conference, I decided that I would present something there every year; over the 15 years since, I have authored or coauthored a mean of nearly four presentations per year at NCFR's annual conference. Noteworthy too, during that 1998-1999 academic year Mark, who was Department Chair in HDFS, arranged for me to be an undergraduate teaching assistant for Jennifer Hardesty, who by then was a doctoral student and

had matured tremendously as an instructor since I was enrolled in the first class she instructed. The teaching style I observed in her over that academic year greatly influenced my own style as I moved into a teaching role myself.

At some point I had decided that, in addition to family mediation, I might also like to be a marriage and family therapist. HDFS at MU does not have a clinical program, so I prepared applications to several marriage and family therapy programs in addition to HDFS at MU. Dr. Marilyn Coleman, then Director of Graduate studies in HDFS, convincingly shifted my focus away from a clinical master's program and back to the HDFS graduate program, in part by successfully nominating me for several large-dollar graduate student fellowships and offering me a full-time graduate assistantship position. Prior to applying for the master's program with an emphasis on family mediation, however, my thinking had already turned to earning a doctorate so I applied and was admitted into HDFS's graduate program as a post-baccalaureate doctoral student. The stipulation was that I had to earn a master's degree along the way prior to completion of the doctoral program.

University of Missouri (Graduate), 1999-2004

HDFS at MU was a terrific place to be in graduate school in the 2000s because no family science department placed more graduates into tenure-track positions at what were then called Research Extensive, and previously Research I, universities according to Carnegie Classifications. Some among my departmental peers in graduate school, in alphabetical order, were Tashel Bordere (University of Missouri), Annamaria Csizmadia (University of Connecticut), Amy Halliburton (Oklahoma State University), Jennifer Hardesty (University of Illinois), Timothy Killian (University of Arkansas), Tanja Laschober (University of Georgia), Elise Radina (Miami University), Elizabeth Sharp (Texas Tech University), Melinda Stafford Markham (Kansas State University), Scott Tobias (Kent State University), Jessica Troilo (West Virginia University), Adrianna Umaña-Taylor (Arizona State University), and Shannon Weaver (University of Connecticut). There is no doubt that we were successful in large part because of the excellent training we received from the faculty, which included Drs. Mark Fine (former editor of *Family Relations* and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*), Marilyn Coleman (former editor of *Journal of Marriage and Family*), and Larry Ganong (the most impressive all-around professor I have known), among several noteworthy others. Although some among my peers were advised to go to HDFS at MU or went on their own accord to work with a particular faculty member, it was just dumb luck that I ended up there based on my last military assignment and Marilyn's sway as I entered graduate school.

During my first year in graduate school I saw an opportunity advertised in *Report*, NCFR's quarterly newsletter, to purchase the rights to *Family Index* and *Graduate Study in Marriage and Family* from Dr. John Touliatos. They were well-established serial publications and I was eager to make a name for myself in the field, so I purchased rights to the publications using student loan money, created Family Scholar Publications, and began editing and publishing the titles myself. Editing the guide to academic programs in the family field provided tremendous name exposure for me because I had to routinely collect data from department chairs, and I extended that reach by expanding the guide to also include undergraduate programs.

After about 10 years of editing and publishing the program guide in book format, I transitioned the publication into an online format on NCFR's website, which I continue to edit. *Family Index* was an annual printed index of all (roughly 6,000) English-language research articles on family issues published each year. After publishing one annual printed edition, I transformed it into an online database titled *Family Index Database* and edited it until the database was purchased in 2005 by EBSCO Information Services, the world's largest producer of academic databases.

Over my last three years in graduate school I worked as Project Director on a grant Marilyn and Larry had received from the National Institutes of Health. Through that position I learned their multiple-segment factorial vignette design (see Ganong & Coleman, 2005), which I have since used extensively in my own research. In fact, the vast majority of my professional socialization into academia and research was provided by Marilyn and Larry; those two have influenced my career development and maturation as a scholar more than all other sources of external influence combined. For good reason, I refer to them as my academic parents.

I began writing my dissertation the evening of October 12, 2002. Later that same evening my wife, Irina, who had completed the bachelors and master's programs in art history at MU and was in Washington for an internship at the Smithsonian's American Art Museum prior to beginning a doctoral program, was murdered in an act of random violence while returning home after an evening performance of the National Symphony Orchestra. We had been waiting to have children until we finished our doctoral programs and established our careers, but we had already chosen our future children's names and they were often a topic of discussion. I had learned about posthumous reproduction over the preceding years while scouring the law library for articles to include in the *Family Index Database*, so in the immediate aftermath of her death I requested that her gametes be preserved so I could eventually bring our reproductive plans to fruition despite the circumstances. Long story short, the gamete retrieval and preservation did not work out as I wished, but that experience would later play an important role in my career.

University of Kentucky (Untenured), 2004-2010

Upon arrival to the Department of Family Sciences (Studies, then) at the University of Kentucky (UK) in 2004, the doctoral program was in its infancy, the faculty was experiencing a large amount of turnover and about half of the faculty were early in their careers and untenured, the early childhood component of the department had recently split from the department and joined the College of Education, and the College of Human Environmental Sciences had just been reorganized as a School and housed within the College of Agriculture. Indicative of the upheaval, I had four different department chairs in my first four years in the department. I was uniquely attracted to the UK position despite these challenges—perhaps even due to them—because the period of instability and transition provided an opportunity to have a meaningful voice in shaping the direction of the department, even as a new assistant professor. Moreover, I felt confident that the training I had received in graduate school, especially from Marilyn and Larry, had adequately prepared me to succeed without a great deal of additional mentoring from departmental colleagues.

When informally offered the position the evening after my interview, I was given a choice for my initial teaching assignment between a human development course and a human sexuality course. Neither were specific to my areas of expertise, so my on-the-spot decision was human sexuality simply because it sounded more fun. The course turned out to be popular with students too; I had roughly 4,500 students in classes I instructed over my six untenured years at the UK (87% of them in the human sexuality course), which was far more students than any other instructor at the university had enrolled in his or her classes over the same period of time. In fact, to date the smallest undergraduate class I have instructed at MU or UK had an enrollment of about 150 students. Although managing and teaching large-enrollment courses is not particularly challenging for me, teaching classes with enrollments as high as 610 students in a single class garnered a lot of attention from colleagues and administrators, as did the seemingly routine protests from students, parents, or conservative community groups about the provocative content and expectations of the human sexuality course. Nonetheless, each time university administrators started asking questions in response to complaints, I always had a sound pedagogical rationale and substantial documentation to support what I was doing with the class, and the administration was ultimately always supportive of the goings-on in my course. My wife's mother had a saying that my wife would often repeat: "First work for your reputation, then your reputation will work for you," and the human sexuality course certainly provided a platform upon which to develop a reputation. Largely due to the reputation I developed through that course, I was nominated for and received several teaching awards, including the 2009 United States Department of Agriculture Excellence in Teaching Award. I mention that award in particular because, perhaps not coincidentally, my first teaching mentor, Dr. Jennifer Hardesty, won the same award the previous year.

My research areas began to transition during these years away from divorce and stepfamilies and toward sexuality and reproduction. Most notably, I developed a programmatic line of research on posthumous reproduction, which has been described as "the most challenging, difficult, and sensitive [ethical conundrum] in the field of medicine" (Bahadur, 2002, p. 2769), and has a great deal of personal interest to me given my life experiences following my wife's death. Although an unusual research topic for a family scientist—medical, legal, and bioethical perspectives are common—posthumous reproduction lies at the intersection of marriage, reproduction, parenthood, grief, and widowhood, so the processes and experiences associated with this topic are therefore well suited for social and behavioral scientists, including family scientists. My initial focus was on attitudes toward posthumous reproduction, research I primarily conducted using multiple-segment factorial vignette designs, and emphasized policy and medical decision-making implications. Now I am transitioning to qualitative methods to understand why people desired to pursue posthumous reproduction, which I believe will have implications related to the meanings we associate with marriage, family, genetic lineage, and parenthood.

Sabbatical as Fulbright Scholar in Ukraine, 2010-2011

Shortly after being granted tenure in the spring of 2010, I was selected as a Fulbright Scholar and spent the 2010-2011 academic year on sabbatical teaching classes in Odessa, Ukraine. That was a worthwhile professional experience and a much-enjoyed career break

following over a decade of first trying to obtain a tenure-track position then earning tenure. That said, it was more meaningful to me as a personal experience because my wife was from Odessa; her birth family lives there and I spent the year living in an apartment where her grandfather had spent the last years of his life, which was perhaps a mile from the cemetery where Irina is buried. I typically spend a few months each summer in Odessa, but living and working there for 14 months straight was a special experience and an opportunity that few other careers would afford.

University of Kentucky (Tenured), 2011-Present

Since returning from sabbatical in the fall of 2011, I have served as Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) and have only taught graduate-level courses on theory, research methods, statistics, and professional development. These responsibilities largely emerged as a matter of circumstance, but I was well-groomed for them by my academic parents; for the entire eight years I was at MU, Marilyn was the DGS and Larry taught only graduate-level courses. Now I model my roles as DGS and graduate instructor after Marilyn and Larry, respectively. I aspire to emulate Marilyn's mentoring relationships with students and careful attention to the graduate program's vitality and status; to achieve Larry's exceptional professional competence with teaching and mentoring, quantitative and qualitative research methods, and administration; and to attain both Marilyn and Larry's remarkable and sustained level of productivity across their careers.

Continuing the theme of following in the footsteps of my mentors, I was recently selected as the 2016-2019 editor of *Family Relations*. My McNair Scholars Program mentor, Mark Fine, was also editor of *Family Relations* at a similar stage in his career, only a few years prior to our collaboration. Mark was also editor of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* for the entire time I was a graduate student in the same department, and is the epitome of a journal editor in my mind. In my role as editor, I hope to match the energy, passion, and focus that I observed in Mark while carrying out his editorial duties.

In addition to teaching, administration, editing, and my research on posthumous reproduction, another current and noteworthy endeavor is focused on consolidating the identity of the family field. In 2002, following a nomination by Marilyn, I was recipient of NCFR's Outstanding Student Award. The nomination instructions required that I write an essay on an important problem in the family field, and I chose to write about the field's naming issue. I had intended to subsequently develop the essay into a full-length manuscript and try to publish it on the 25th anniversary of Dr. Wesley Burr's 1982 NCFR Presidential address, titled "Famology: A New Discipline." However, the essay ended up being set aside for many years in favor of more pressing tasks and projects. I have only recently returned to the topic; I gave paper presentations on the naming issue at the annual NCFR conferences in 2010 and 2013, and recently authored an article in *Family Relations* focused on the naming issue (see Hans, 2014). More importantly, these and related efforts led the Executive Director of NCFR, Diane Cushman, to convene a Task Force on the Future of Family Science to address the issue beginning in the summer of 2014. I anticipate that this is an issue I will continue working on over the coming years, and my hope is that our work will have a profoundly positive impact on the field for many generations to come.

Concluding Thoughts

I learned early in graduate school that documentable productivity is more important than intelligence for achieving success in academia. This has boded well for me because, although many of my colleagues are more intelligent than me or had upbringings that better groomed them to be academics, perhaps the most salient lesson I learned from my life experiences in childhood and participation in sports was the value of an industrious work ethic. One day in childhood when I visited my great grandmother, she gave me a button that she had laying around her house that read, “If it’s to be, it’s up to me.” I was too young to understand the meaning of the adage at the time—having a button to pin to my shirt was exciting enough for me—but the odd saying stuck with me for many years, and eventually I understood its meaning. Not to discount the important roles my academic parents and others have played in my success as a family scientist, but that saying succinctly encapsulates the worldview I internalized through my experiences as an adolescent and emerging adult while striving to become a transitional character in my family lineage.

That mentality has served me well for ensuring that I live a fulfilling life. It has been written that a rewarding and balanced life entails living, loving, learning, and leaving a legacy (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994). Through my career as a family scientist, learning is a process that occurs every day and I build a legacy through those for whom my research, teaching, and mentoring has meaning. In late-January 2014 I was in a violent single-car high-speed accident that, among other injuries, resulted in a cervical fracture (a.k.a., broken neck) and severe head lacerations. It took five months of recovery before I was able to resume a relatively normal lifestyle, but after about a month I was able to sit up in a chair, so I started working again to the extent my condition allowed. When I posted an update of my recovery status on my Facebook wall and mentioned that I had begun working again, I was surprised by how many people responded with comments suggesting that I not worry about work and focus instead on recovering. What they seemed not to understand was that my profession is an important part of who I have become and my work is personally fulfilling, not merely a means to financial gain. Although I have other hobbies and interests and live an adventurous and fulfilling life outside of my career, my academic work provides a sense of purpose and accomplishment that goes a long way toward defining both my identity and my legacy. This was a lesson I learned when my wife was murdered. The proverb about nobody wishing on their death bed that they had spent more time in the office—implying that we should spend more time with those we love and less time working—did not dovetail with my experience because her work as an art historian was also a rich source of passion for her; it brought joy and meaning to her life that resonated brilliantly through her character and daily enthusiasm for life. The time spent living and loving together was also important, but was not necessarily more important than her time spent learning and building her legacy because she would not have been the same person if she had not found and pursued a career path that she so fervently enjoyed. So, too, goes my career as a family scientist.

Jason Hans, Ph.D., is in the Department of Family Sciences, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

References

- Bahadur, G. (2002). Death and conception. *Human Reproduction*, *17*, 2769–2775.
doi:10.1093/humrep/17.10.2769
- Covey, S. R., Merrill, A. R., & Merrill, R. R. (1994). *First things first: To live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (2006). Multiple segment factorial designs. *Journal of Marriage and Family* *68*, 455-468. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00264.x
- Hans, J. D., & Fine, M. A. (2001). Children of divorce: Experiences of children whose parents attended a divorce education program. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *36*(1/2), 1-26.
doi:10.1300/J087v36n01_01
- Hans, J. D. (2014). Whither famology? Department name trends across four decades. *Family Relations*, *63*, 323-332. doi:10.1111/fare.12075