Harold Christensen wrote in 1964 that family research was a difficult undertaking because of the inability of scholars to put aside their strong values about family living and their own family experience for the sake of objective social science research. The literature in family science has more than tripled since Christensen made this statement, and we're now talking about a distinct knowledge base in family study, i.e., family "science." Yet we would contend that not only is family research still difficult to conduct, but that it suffers qualitatively as a result of persisting personal and even political bias in the formulation of research problems and the interpretation of research findings.

Demos (1975) states that "to study the history of the American family is to conduct a rescue mission into the dreamland of our national self-concept" (p. 9). He means by this that Americans have a tendency toward nostalgia, i.e., to seek a happier past when faced with social problems in the present. This nostalgic view of yesterday's stable, happy American family life has made it very difficult for many researchers to rationally study the realities and complexities of family living. Much of family literature, in fact, assumes a family ideal that has never really existed for the majority of American families (Goode, 1963).

This literature often reflects a romantic view of the American family as a stable, happy unit with an employed father and a non-employed mother with two or more children and close ties to extended kin. It was a family that sacrificed for one another and lived in a tranquil white, middle-class setting. Variations from this perceived normative role structure have been viewed as problematic, if not deviant or pathological. Thus it would seem that family scientists have been content to follow the definitions of reality held by laypersons and conservative political and religious groups (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, and Thompson, in press).

Because of this traditional ethnocentric, white, middle-class perspective, we are left with many parochial findings about family life. For example, we have little understanding of the ethnic and social class diversity of family life in America. Also, we have failed to use existing data on these subgroups to reconceptualize our notion of families. For example, the understanding that family scientists have
acquired of black families in the 1960's and 1970's should challenge our ideas about family structure, process, and functioning; about family composition and quality of life; about the permanence of family boundaries; and about the various defining properties of family (Fox, 1981).

If family scientists have given only minimal attention to American culturally different family forms, they have largely ignored cross-cultural comparisons. Berardo (1981) notes that multi-cultural testing and validation of research is essential to avoid further cultural binding, to avoid constraints of knowledge about families, and to avoid limiting conceptual and theoretical developments.

In the same vein, emerging conceptual perspectives on families are often viewed as nonscholarly if they challenge this normative view of family life in America. For example, the feminist perspective has often been labeled as an unscientific and a radical philosophy at best. Instead, feminism, like other alternative perspectives, provides us with a fresh perspective from which to analyze many traditional topics.

This narrow and parochial view of American families has also resulted in a reluctance to acknowledge and thus study the linkages between families and other social systems. Too often family dynamics are viewed as somehow innately good, self-generating, and immune to wider societal influences. For example, changes over the last 20 years in age at marriage, fertility, divorce, and remarriage are more the result of the increasing number of women in the labor force than of domestic interaction patterns (Aldous, 1981).

This traditional view of what family life has been and ought to be has led to many methodological weaknesses in family research today. Even the use of the term "family" as opposed to "families" suggests that there is one "right" family type, and it is this ideal type previously described. Thus, instead of researchers speaking of the diversity of family structures in existence, we hear pronouncements about the family as if there were one ideal family type. This ideal family type of two parents, an unemployed mother, and minor children at home presently accounts for only about 10% of all households. Other terms used in family research also reflect a similar bias, e.g., broken family and one-parent family suggest that a one-parent family is an aberrant family form or even a non-family form.

This view of an ideal family type has been reinforced by the United States Department of Agriculture which traditionally has funded family research. This organization has glorified traditional rural family life and been most supportive of those studies which did not tamper with this ideal. This group has further reinforced this bias in family science research by viewing family research as superficial or unscientific because it dealt with things people already knew or didn't need to know (McKenry & Price, 1984; Schlater, 1970).

As a result of this ideal family type perspective and the perceived threat of variations, the vast majority of family research has been concerned with family problems. This particular focus would not be so bad if the research conducted on these problems were methodologically strong. However, much of this research has been based on what is termed a deviance perspective -- which, of course, influences the original interpretation from the nuclear family. All step-families have been basically rooted in Western family life as if that form were always involved, as well.

The typical traditional bias of family researchers has various pragmatic consequences. For example, because of the husband/father role, good wife/mother roles have been basically in stable marriages over the last 20 years (Ball, 1980).

To more scientifically understand how family research can overcome persistence.

Dyad Formation

Probably the most prevalent of family research has been focused on premarital sex, which has been much concerned with family life. Familian behavior outside the marriage.

Although there is extensive premarital sex research which focuses on the development, sex education, and contraception, there is a need to acknowledging and that (b) (1980).

Although a subject of little love is universal.

May, 1988
the original purpose, the questions asked, the variables focused on, and the interpretation of findings. This approach forces the researcher to view variations from the nuclear family ideal as inherently dysfunctional. For example, research on step-families has focused almost exclusively on ill effects—assuming no positive or even benign outcomes could befall individuals involved. This deviance perspective is rooted in Western religious values that interpret monogamous, lifelong, nuclear family life as the only form that enables society to survive. Any variations from that form are typically considered a basic threat to the families and individuals involved, as well as to wider society.

The typical unit of analysis used by family researchers also conveys a traditional bias. Although family researchers propt to study families, most researchers have focused on one family member, i.e., the wife/mother, in addition to various pragmatic reasons, researchers have continued this practice because they have basically felt that the wife/mother is all-knowing about her family, and the husband/father or children would have little insight as his family role was primarily that of good provider. Others defend this practice of relying only on the wife/mother perspective by contending that disagreement between spouses is minimal in stable marital relationships. While this practice has been referred to by many over the last 20 years as the greatest weakness in family research, it is still widely prevalent (Ball, McKenry, & Price-Bonham, 1983).

BIAS IN MAJOR AREAS OF FAMILY STUDY

To more clearly illustrate the impact of this research bias, major content areas of family research will be reviewed. In addition, examples will be identified where scientific understanding has been undermined by the failure to set aside or overcome personal agendas.

Dyad Formation

Probably no other area reflects as much subjective bias as that of dyadic formation and premarital relationships. In this area, family scientists have largely focused on perceived deviancy. For example, premarital sex has been a topic of much concern and thus much research because of its perceived threat to traditional family life. In fact, most research on premarital sexual behavior has examined this behavior outside the context of the relationship in which it ordinarily occurs. Although there is an abundance of data on the frequency and incidence of premarital sexual behaviors among various demographic groups, there is very little research which links premarital sexuality to related aspects of relationship development, i.e., dating, the mate selection process, love, cohabitation, contraceptive usage, and sexuality in marriage. Researchers have appeared reluctant to acknowledge that (a) sexual activity is common among the young or unmarried and that (b) it typically occurs in an intimate relationship (Clayton & Bokemier, 1980).

Although love is considered inherent in family relationships, it has been a subject of little research by family scientists. An assumption appears to exist that love is universal and flows naturally when people of similar background marry and
live a "respectable" family life—even though Steinmetz (1987) notes that many injure and kill in the name of love. One of the first Proxmire awards for misuse of Federal funds was, in fact, given to a family scientist who received funding for a project that sought to determine how people fell in love. Proxmire dismissed this project as a waste of federal monies because love was spontaneous and natural and to study it would be interfering with romance and the family.

The study of adolescent pregnancy also reflects this sentimental concern with a family ideal. While adolescent pregnancy has long been problematic for those individuals and their families involved, it was not until the rate of pregnancy among white adolescents began to greatly increase and large numbers of white adolescents began to keep their out-of-wedlock children (and thus threaten the white, middle-class ideal) that researchers and funding sources began to recognize that there was any major problem. It was only then that the American family was seen to be threatened. (Likewise, drug abuse became a concern of family scientists only when large numbers of white, middle-class individuals became involved).

Marriage

Research on marriage also is biased with sentimental views of what families are or should be. For example, studies of marital adjustment have typically implied that women should do the adjusting; i.e., women have been seen as the so-called "keepers of the hearth" and responsible for the happiness and/or success of marriage and the family while their husbands carry out the instrumental good provider role. Thus, most conceptualizations of marital adjustment until fairly recently have been based on social conventionality, i.e., focusing on how well men and women have carried out traditional roles, not how well they actually were resolving conflict in their relationship. Family scientists have generally idealized the husband-wife bond as one of love, consensus, and equals and have thus been reluctant to focus on disagreements, conflict, or pathology as if marriage was immune from these negative aspects of relationships. For example, research on family and conjugal power typically focuses only on outcomes, failing to deal with disagreements or the sometimes negative dynamics involved in any human interaction.

Similarly, family violence for many years was viewed as a severe pathological dysfunction that was not common between "normal" husbands and wives. In fact, it was not until 1971 that the major research and theoretical journal in our field, Journal of Marriage and the Family, published its first article focusing on family violence (Steinmetz, 1977). Since that time we certainly have come to recognize that family violence is a social problem deeply imbedded in American culture. Traditionally, family scientists have refused to admit that some degree of pathology characterizes most marital relationships as it does all relationships; we have tended to assume that families are either inherently healthy or severely disturbed. This dichotomous perspective is derived from researchers' attempts to distinguish between clinical and non-clinical samples. We have thus focused on why some families fail to cope rather than on how most families rather successfully manage the stressors in their lives. No valid generalizations can be drawn about families without some understanding of both the functional and dysfunctional interactions of the family system.
The study of divorce reflects evidence of similar bias. Some researchers would have us believe that divorce ends family life. Witness again the terms "broken family" and "one-parent family" that imply that family living terminates with the end of the marriage and that these residual family forms are somehow inferior. We now know that divorce does not terminate family living and does not necessarily negatively affect the quality of family life. Also, for better or for worse, divorce usually does not terminate the relationship with the absent family member.

Finally, in regard to research in marriage, we know very little about marital sexuality, especially as compared to non-normative forms of sexual expression, i.e., premarital, extramarital, and post-marital. Not only would we have to conclude from these studies that sexual expression is rare in marriages, but that sexual behaviors are a phenomenon of the young as sexual behaviors of middle-aged and older individuals are largely unstudied.

Parenting

Like many areas of family study, research on parent-child relationships often suffers from the use of a deficit perspective. That is, a basic tenet in much of the research in this area is that variations from the nuclear family ideal will produce undesirable deviations in children's personality, social behavior, and school success (Marotz-Baden, Adams, Bueche, Munro, & Munro, 1979).

Another major assumption often seen in the study of parenting is that childbearing is a requirement for family living. Voluntary childlessness, for example, denotes that a couple violated the societal norm or what should naturally have occurred when they made this decision. Also, family scientists have tended to carry with them the notion that children are innocent, inherently good, and positively motivated. Family scientists have ignored the fact that children are important determiners of their own behavior as well as the behavior of their parents (Maccoby, 1980). Thus only recently have researchers studied the role of child characteristics in eliciting abusive behaviors, negatively affecting marital satisfaction, and negatively influencing a sibling's development. If children are not good, then, of course, it is the parents' fault according to traditional notions of family life. Family scientists study the parent-child relationship, completely ignoring (a) the 6-10 hours children spend in school or with peers, (b) the socioeconomic status of the family, and (c) the child custody arrangements. Likewise, family practitioners develop elaborate programs for custodial parents, while often ignoring the other significant figures in a child's life.

Family scientists too often study the parental role like the marital role as if there was only one parent in a family, i.e., the mother. A prime example of this practice is the "empty nest syndrome." For years family scientists have discussed the empty nest syndrome as an all-pervasive depressive state that women went through at mid-life as they disengaged from their major role in life, i.e., motherhood. Even though little empirical evidence ever indicated that this stage existed, researchers consistently wrote about this phenomenon. Interestingly, in recent years, most researchers have dismissed this notion altogether and concluded that if anyone experiences stress associated with family changes at mid-life, it is men.
The area of gerontology is a rather recent area of family research. In 1971, Troll noted that studies in the second half of the life cycle were few in number, and in 1981, Berardo stated that the field had experienced little qualitative advancement in the decade of the 1970's. This very lack of research on this topic reflects a biased view of families as important and viable only when individuals composing them are in their childbearing years. When researchers have looked at families in the second half of life, they have focused on aged individuals with problems, and the generalization that has been made is that these individuals are frail, struggling, helpless, economically depleted, and very unsatisfied with their lives.

This picture, in recent years, has been somewhat rejected as researchers indicate a relatively healthy, happy, and economically secure group of Americans as compared to the general population (McCubbin & Dahl, 1985). However, as a result of prevailing stereotypes of the aged, researchers have failed to study marital interaction, dating patterns, sexual behavior, and remarriage among this age group—assuming that such behaviors are not salient among these asexual individuals. Instead, studies primarily have been focused on intergenerational linkages, especially transfer of support between generations, individual adjustment to aging, and responses to various biological and social problems. Interestingly, when researchers have looked at healthily functioning aged individuals, they have given us romantic generalizations of kind, loving grandparents who are always available and willing to assist their adult children and grandchildren. We have failed to acknowledge that older individuals have much the same needs and evidence essentially the same strengths and weaknesses of individuals at other stages of the life cycle; i.e., they want to live independent lives of their own, have goals for themselves other than caring for their children and grandchildren, and are not transformed into saints as a result of reaching a certain age in life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this sentimental bias in family research seriously challenges family scientists' ability to speak about the nature of families and family life and our authority to recommend directions for social policy affecting families. Our content area is often neglected in national funding priorities, and even among other social and behavioral sciences, we do not maintain the same scholarly respect. The expertise of family scientists was all but ignored during the 1980 White House Conference on Families and the more recent Meese Commission Hearings on Pornography. The interest in families is greater today than any time in the past, and there is obviously an important role that family scientists can play. But we will not have the respect of the scientific community nor make any significant impact on the understanding of family life until we can approach our research with greater objectivity and begin to critically evaluate the biases we have held in the past.
REFERENCES


The first issue of the newsletter was published in May 1988. The editors and contributors recognized the importance of family science as an interdisciplinary field and the need for a publication that would provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information. The family science field had been developing rapidly, with the emergence of new research and theoretical perspectives. The editors believed that Family Science Review would fill a void in the literature by providing a platform for the dissemination of research findings, theoretical developments, and practical applications.

The Need for Family Science Review

The family science field is characterized by a complex and dynamic array of issues and concerns. These include family structure, family processes, family development, and family well-being. The field is also influenced by a wide range of social, cultural, and economic factors. The editors of Family Science Review believed that there was a need for a publication that would provide a comprehensive overview of the field, including the latest research, theoretical developments, and practical applications.

The editors and contributors to Family Science Review recognized the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches in advancing family science. They believed that the publication would foster a sense of community among family scholars and practitioners, and would help to promote the development of family science as a distinctive and respected field.

The editors and contributors to Family Science Review were committed to providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information. They hoped that the publication would contribute to the growth and development of family science as a field of study.

The editors and contributors to Family Science Review recognized the importance of maintaining a high standard of quality and rigor in the publication. They believed that the publication would be an important resource for family scholars and practitioners, and would help to advance the field of family science.