Influential Literature in the Family Field

ROBERTA MAGARRELL*

This paper is an attempt to begin identifying the literature that has had and is having the most influence in the family field. A random sample of members of the National Council on Family Relations was surveyed to determine which books and articles had the most influence. The responses indicated there is considerable diversity in what people view as the most influential literature in the field, and the patterns are different for different disciplines.

Most scholarly fields monitor their progress in a variety of ways (e.g., Buss, 1975; Kail and Herman, 1977; White and White, 1977), and family science has begun several of these monitoring practices. The oldest and most valuable of these is the tradition of publishing decade reviews (Broderick, 1970; Berardo, 1980). More recently, a number of articles have appeared that report progress and the lack of it in areas such as hiring professionals in family science (Day, Patterson, and Rolleder, 1987), characteristics of training programs (Berardo and Shehan, 1987), publication patterns (Meridith, Abbott, and Lamanna, 1987), and quality of graduate programs (Burr, Schvaneveldt, Rolleder, and Marshall, 1988).

Information also is available about the influence of professional literature in the Journal Citation Reports for the Science Citation Index. It provides various types of information on 2,630 science journals. This index lists the total citations accruing to each journal and the impact of the journals based on these totals (Nisbett, 1978). The Social Science Citation Index provides a similar recognition of journals. Also, several articles have been written on ranking journals (Adams and Peery, 1980; Boor, 1973; Buss and McDermott 1976; Kail, 1977; Koulack and Keselman, 1975; Levin and Kratochwill, 1976; Mace and Warner, 1973; Meltzer, 1978; Perry and Adams, 1981; Porter, 1978; Rushton, 1978; White and White, 1977). These rankings provide information on the relative suitability of particular journals for various topics and audiences. According to Porter (1978), if the rankings are used cautiously, they provide useful information for journal selection by psychologists, sociologists and human development specialists.

This study attempts to add to the existing information about the influence of the literature in the field by identifying the books and journal articles that have been the most influential in the field of family science. Such knowledge may be helpful in determining what influence patterns span the field and which differ in different parts of the field; whether influence patterns differ for scholars with differing areas of focus or whether they are helping unify them. With such information reading lists for graduate students can be up-dated, while it may also help in establishing some baseline

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data about an important aspect of the field.

METHOD

The subjects were 400 regular members of the National Council on Family Relations chosen randomly from the NCFR register. They were mailed a questionnaire and a self-addressed stamped envelope and asked to fill out the questionnaire and return it to the NCFR office. In the questionnaire they were asked to: 1) list the author and title of 5 to 10 books that influenced them the most professionally, 2) list the author and title of 5 or 10 articles or papers that had influenced them the most, and 3) to respond to several demographic questions relating to NCFR membership, gender, degree, their primary professional identity, and amount of professional articles they had published.

Of the sample of 400, only 61, or 15% of those surveyed, responded. Of the 61 respondents, 34 were males and 27 were females. The low return was unfortunate, it limits the inferences that can be made from the data, but enough data were acquired to provide several useful insights.

RESULTS

The respondents were asked to indicate their primary professional identity. Respondents who indicated they were marriage and family therapists, family therapists, or family life educators were grouped together into a category called family scientists, and the majority of the respondents fell in that category (N=26). Sociologists (N=11), psychologists (N=7), and home economists (N=6) were next in frequency, and the "other" category included people in social work, clergy, etc. (N=11). The family scientists were fairly evenly represented by gender, but the sociologists, psychologists, and home economists were not. Sociologists and psychologists had more males than females, and home economics had more females than males.

In response to the question regarding books that influenced them the most, the 61 respondents listed a total of 286 books. The two books that were mentioned the most were Burr, Hill, and Nye's (1979), Contemporary Theories about the Family (mentioned 10 times) and Kantor and Lehr's (1975), Inside the Family (mentioned 7 times). Since there were few books that were mentioned by a large percent of the respondents, and the majority of the books were only mentioned once, the data suggest that the field is diverse in terms of the literature that is seen as being most important. It appears that the field of family science is not dominated by a few theories, perspectives, books, or bodies of literature. This finding is not surprising since the family field traditionally has been multidisciplinary.

Respondents were asked to indicate their primary professional identity to determine if there are patterns between and within the disciplines that were represented in the NCFR sample. Table 1 shows the frequency of various books by discipline. Family Scientists listed 122 different books, 13 of which were mentioned two times or more. Sociologists listed 80 different books, 11 of which were listed two times or more. Psychologists listed a total of 43 different books, two of which were listed two times. Home Economists listed a total of 29 books, four of which were mentioned two times. Those classified in the "other" category listed 66 different books, 13 of which were listed two times or more.

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Table 1 indicates the books that were most influential. The Burr, Hill, and Nye's book, Contemporary Theories about the Family, was mentioned 10 times in various disciplines. These books were conceptual and theoretical and introduced different concepts in different disciplines.
Table 1 provides some additional insight about the diversity in the family field. It indicates there is little overlap between the various disciplines in the books that are the most influential. Only two books were mentioned by people in several of the disciplines. The Burr et al. (1979), *Contemporary Theories about the Family* was mentioned three times in two disciplines and twice in two others. Nye and Berardo's (1966) *Emerging Conceptual Frameworks on Family Analysis* was mentioned once in four fields. Both of these books deal with frameworks from which a professional can view the family -- one theoretically and one conceptually. This seems to indicate there is at least some conceptual and theoretical literature that had been influential to family scholars in different disciplines, but most of the literature that has been influential is unique to each discipline.
Psychologists and those in the "other" category appear to be the most diverse in the literature that was the most influential. However, this must be regarded as a very tentative conclusion since the number responding was very small.

The data in Table 1 indicate none of the disciplines had a pattern of one or two books being mentioned by the majority of the respondents. Instead, the pattern was that a relatively large number of books were mentioned. This suggests that, in addition to the general pattern of diversity in the family field, there is considerable diversity in what is influential in all of the disciplines.

Some interesting gender patterns also appeared. The sample was fairly evenly distributed according to gender, 34 males and 27 females, but of the 286 books listed only 29 were referred to by both males and females. Also, even within the 29, there were important gender differences. A good example of this is the listing of Burr et al.'s (1979), Contemporary Theories about the Family. Eight males listed this book, while only 2 females did. This suggests that males and females seem to differ regarding which literature is the most influential.

Journal articles that were mentioned more than once are listed in Table 2. As is indicated in this table, the respondents responded more completely to the question regarding influential books than to the question regarding influential articles. In fact, the second question often was left unanswered. The only articles mentioned more than twice were Rossi's, "Transition to Parenthood", which was cited five times, and Olson et al., "Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems", which was cited three times. This provides a little information about influential journal articles, but not enough to analyze in more detail.

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<td>Olson</td>
<td>Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems: In Cohesion and Adaptability Dimensions, Family Types, and Clinical Applications. (3)</td>
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<td>Strategies for Developing Family Theory (2)</td>
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<td>Barry</td>
<td>A Cross-Cultural of Some Sex Differences in Socialization (2)</td>
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<td>Belsky</td>
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<td>Gelles</td>
<td>Violence in the Family: Review of the Research in the Seventies (2)</td>
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<td>Goode</td>
<td>The Theoretical Importance of Love (2)</td>
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<td>Haas</td>
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<td>Hill</td>
<td>Contemporary Developments in Family Theory (2)</td>
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<td>The Ident of Conceptual Frameworks Utilized in Fam Study&quot; (2)</td>
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<td>Huston</td>
<td>Concept &amp; Methodological Issues in Studying Close Relationships&quot; (2)</td>
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<td>Kohn</td>
<td>Social Class and Parental Values (2)</td>
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<td>Sussman</td>
<td>The Isolated Nuclear Family: Fact or Fiction? (2)</td>
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A secondary objective of this project was to obtain information that would be useful in revising reading lists in graduate programs, and the findings suggest two matters to be concerned about. First, and most obvious, is that when family-oriented graduate programs are housed in different disciplines, reading lists will be different. Second, reading materials mentioned most frequently across all of the disciplines covered tended to be theoretical books. This suggests that it is theoretical books, suggesting they have the greatest influence and should be in reading lists.

SUMMARY

This survey about the influence books and articles have had in the family field provides some useful information about patterns of influence. Unfortunately, the relatively low response rate makes it important to be tentative about the conclusions that are drawn. The most general conclusion is that there is a great deal of diversity regarding what is the most influential literature in the family field. The field does not seem to be dominated by any particular body of literature. The data also suggest that the literature that is influential tends to be different for each discipline. Apparently, sociologists are influenced by sociological literature, family scientists by family science literature, psychologists by psychological literature, etc. Each of these fields seems to have considerable diversity within as none seem to have a small set of books that are clearly the most influential. The data also suggests there are some gender differences.

These findings may be of concern to those who want the field to be moving toward a unified set of theories, concepts, and findings. It may be, however, that such a desire is inappropriate and unrealistic. The data suggest that the family field is diverse. It is possible that the field may benefit from that diversity in terms of creativity, innovative theories, empirical research, and intervention programs.

REFERENCES


Social Science Citation Index. (1988). Philadelphia: Institute for Scientific Information, Inc.