

# Family Science: The Emergence of a New Discipline, 1982-2007

Laura S. Smart, Ph.D., CFLE  
Northern Illinois University

**ABSTRACT.** Family science emerged as a separate social science discipline in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the mid 1980s, two organizations gave recognition to the new discipline. The Family Science section of National Council on Family Relations was formed, and a separate organization, the Family Science Association, also was formed. The purpose of this article is to describe the development of family science, with a focus on 1982-2007. Eight categories of family science scholarship from 1987-2007 are reviewed: academic programs, curriculum development, ethical guidelines for practice, philosophy of science, research methodologies, the interface between research and practice, and career development.

This article is to review the development of family sciences as a separate social science discipline, with a focus on 1982-2007, the transitional time when an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the family became recognized as a new discipline. The interdisciplinary roots of family science reach back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of family science as a discipline occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and can be attributed in a broad sense to all of the scholars who labored to understand families through use of the scientific method.

A few of these scholars who studied families stand out as important progenitors of the field, because their published works conceptualized the family as requiring theories and methodologies that are adapted to its study as an institution and as a small group. Hollinger (2002) cited Ernest Groves' (1946) reference to *science of marriage and family* as the first published use of the term "family science." As he mused about professionals that he identified as *family life educators and researchers*, Jay Schvaneveldt (1971) also contributed to the discussion, which led to the development of family science.

The family scholar who gave the biggest push for recognition of the study of the family as a new discipline was Wesley R. Burr. Burr's scholarship regarding family theory (Burr, 1973; Burr, Hill, Nye, & Reiss, 1979) and his role as president of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) no doubt helped him conceptualize the need for recognition of family science. In his 1982 presidential address, which was published in 1983 in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (Burr & Leigh, 1983), Burr voiced some concerns to the organization's membership. Burr and Leigh argued that the study of the family had outgrown its interdisciplinary roots to become a new discipline.

A task force was appointed in 1984 by Bert Adams, NCFR president, to examine the "development of the family discipline" (NCFR Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline, 1988). The task force conducted open sessions at the 1984 and 1985 annual meetings of NCFR (Jewson & Walters, 1988). NCFR members debated the relative merits of the terms *famology*, *familyology*, and *family science*. The task force recommended the name Family Science be adopted, "where the primary goals are the discovery, verification, and application of knowledge about the family" (Jewson & Walters, 1988 pp. 129-130). In 1985 the NCFR board of directors approved the change of the status of the task force to section status. At first called the Family Discipline section, it was renamed the Family Science section in 1992. In 1988, Burr, Day and Bahr published the preliminary edition of their introductory textbook, *Family Science*.

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The author gratefully acknowledges Elizabeth Turner's assistance in researching this article. Direct correspondence to Dr. Laura S. Smart at lsmart@niu.edu.

That year, the scholarly journal *Family Science Review* published its first issue, and the Family Science Association was formed. The name of the new discipline was secured. However, the membership of NCFR did not immediately identify themselves as family scientists. In 1993, Ingoldsby and Bowen conducted a survey of the membership of NCFR, finding that the members identified primarily with four disciplines: Marriage and Family Therapy (18%), Family Science (17%), Sociology (15%) and Home Economics (9%). The remaining 41% were split among 11 other primary disciplinary affiliations.

The NCFR Task Force (1988) and Hollinger (2002) provide excellent reviews of the roots and development of the discipline of family science. Vaines' (1995) comparison of the disciplines of family science and home economics provides support that scholars in a related discipline recognized the existence of family science. In 1994, home economics scholars and practitioners agreed to re-name their discipline *family and consumer sciences*. (See also Ponzetti, 1995, for a comparison of family science and home economics).

### Scholarship in Family Science

Articles reviewed herein were identified primarily by using the search term "family science" in internet searches of scholarly articles. Scholarship published since 1987, the first year that *Family Science Review* was published, was sorted into the following eight categories, which will be discussed in turn: *academic programs in family science* (Burr, Schvaneveldt, Rolender & Marshall, 1988; Day, Quick, Leigh & McKenry, 1989); *curriculum development in family science* (Bean, Crane, and Lewis, 2002; Benson et al., 2006; Brock, 1987; Fang, McDowell & Holland, 2006; Ganong, Coleman & Demo, 1995; Keim, 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Koblinsky, Kuvalanka & McClintock-Comeaux, 2006; McAdoo, 1996; Quoss, 1993; Smart & Berke, 2004; Smart, Keim, Pritchard & Herron-Miller, 1993; Toews & Cerny, 2006); *ethical guidelines for the practice of family science* (Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert & Keim, 2001; Adams, Keim & Dollahite, 1995; Arcus, 1999; Quoss, 1993); *philosophy of science and family science* (Allen, 2000; Klein & Janning, 1997; Knapp, 2002; Lavee & Dollahite, 1991; Lloyd, Few & Allen, 2007; Walker, 2000), *family science research methodologies* (Gilgun, 2005; Snyder & Kazak, 2005); *the interface between research and practice of family science* (Doherty, 2000; Monroe, 1991; Small, 2005); and *career development in family science* (Endsley, 1998; Keim, 1995).

### Academic Programs in Family Science

The new journal, *Family Science Review*, provided a forum for discussion regarding the newly named discipline. Volume 1 (1987-88) included articles about graduate and undergraduate family science programs (Burr, Schvaneveldt, Rolender & Marshall, 1988; Day, Quick, Leigh & McKenry, 1988). Day and colleagues' article reported their study of the structure, available curricular options, course names, and program names for family science-related graduate and undergraduate programs in the United States. Burr et al. reported data gathered from a convenience sample of 55 family scientists at 18 graduate programs. Respondents ranked graduate programs regarding the training of family theorists and researchers, family life educators, and marriage and family therapists. They also ranked universities' production of research and theoretical publications and the creation of family life educational materials. University of Minnesota was ranked first in four of five categories, and ranked second, after Brigham Young University, in training family life educators.

### Curriculum Development in Family Science

As Brock (1987) noted in the first issue of *Family Science Review*, enrollment of majors in many family science programs (as well as social science in general) was decreasing in the late 1980s. Brock called for the development of a comprehensive family science curriculum that would provide skills training as well as a solid background in research and theory. He recommended a two-phase practical experience that would include an on-campus practicum and a capstone community internship. Keim (1990) and Smart, Keim, Pritchard and Herron-Miller (1995) described a family science program which included 100 hours of volunteer work prior to an off-campus internship. Smart et al. found that student engagement in out-of-classroom family science experiences was beneficial to student learning. Recent work by Toews and Cerny (2006) confirmed this finding.

Smart and Berke (2004) surveyed undergraduate family science programs regarding types of out-of-classroom experiences available to or required of students. They found that curricula were designed to integrate classroom learning with skills training; however, there was considerable variation in the number of credit hours and clock hours required, the job titles which students gained after graduation, number of graduates produced per year, and the nomenclature used for the out-of-classroom experiences.

Another aspect of curriculum development in family science is the development of courses which promote student skill development, including professional practice (Keim, 1993b), group process (Keim, 1993a), and ethics training (Quoss, 1993). The importance of educating students regarding diversity has been described (Fang, McDowell & Holland, 2006; McAdoo, 1996). McAdoo and Fang and associates recognized the international roots of United States' culture. McAdoo criticized family science for applying Eurocentric theories to American families of non-European descent. Fang et al. described ways in which family science programs could infuse an international multicultural approach into their curriculum. However, there remains a need for family scientists to increase the production of family science research using diverse samples. Bean, Crane and Lewis (2002) pointed out that culturally sensitive training of researchers and practitioners depends upon the existence of a rich research base, which currently is lacking.

Several articles provide descriptions of graduate programs in family science. Using Boyer's (1990) four types of scholarship, Ganong, Coleman and Demo (1995) described the competencies desirable in family scientists and the experiences that doctoral students need to have in order to gain the competencies. They concluded that students need a core body of knowledge, but they also acknowledged that work needed to be done to define core knowledge in family science.

Doctoral students need opportunities to perform research (the scholarship of discovery, in Boyer's terms) and to connect knowledge across disciplines (the scholarship of integration). Ganong et al. also recommended that students have opportunities to apply knowledge through (1) teaching opportunities with undergraduate students and the public (through Cooperative Extension), and (2) engagement with governmental and social service agencies. Benson et al.'s (2006) and Koblinsky, Kuvalanka and McClintock-Comeaux's (2006) articles describe the transformations of a master's program and a doctoral program, respectively. Faculty in both programs sought and created innovations that would more adequately prepare students as family scientists. Interestingly, the faculty noted that transformation of the master's program (Benson, et al.) had a salutary effect upon the doctoral program at the same institution.

Brock's (1987) call for the vitalization of undergraduate programs in family science was an early effort to increase the relevance of academic family science programs to students by implementing curricula that engaged students in the application of knowledge. This type of

curriculum is now characteristic of many family science programs (Smart & Berke, 2004). The integration of more traditional forms of scholarship with application remains cutting edge in the new century (Weber & Duderstadt, 2004).

### Ethical Guidelines for Family Science

In 1993, Quoss published an article in *Family Science Review* regarding the teaching of ethics in an undergraduate child and family services course. Concurrently, the Family Science section of NCFR provided a forum for discussion of the discipline's developmental needs, including more emphasis upon ethics. The section's members supported the need for the development of ethical guidelines for the section (Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert & Keim, 2001). Adams, Keim, and Dollahite (1995) published a draft of family science ethical guidelines in the NCFR Report. Following the section's adoption of the ethical guidelines, discussion among the general membership of NCFR pointed to the desirability of NCFR as a whole adopting the ethical guidelines. Deliberation by the NCFR Board of Directors and the membership-at-large led to NCFR's adoption of the *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Family Scientists* (Adams, et al., 2001). Arcus (1999) contributed to the discussion by elaborating on key dimensions of ethics education that were found in the scholarship of other fields. Arcus provided a coherent discussion of ethical theories and their application to ethics education in family science.

### Philosophy of Science and Family Science

Family science developed primarily from positivist science which dominated social science throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Positivism, also known as empiricism, is the belief that knowledge obtained through the scientific method is the only authentic knowledge. Positivism rests on the realist assumption that the world out there exists independently of the observer. For the past 20 years, post-positivism, the belief that it is not possible to make observations that are completely objective, has been an important influence within the discipline of family science. An example of post-positivism is constructivism, which holds that the world as perceived by an individual is "constructed" by the mind of that person (Gilgun, 2005).

Positivist assumptions were dominant in family science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and remain important today. Lavee and Dollahite (1991) called for increased explicitness of theory in empirical family science research, a point of view completely consistent with positivism. The authors noted that the groundbreaking work of Burr and associates (1979) laid a foundation for reciprocity of research and theory in the field. Lavee and Dollahite proposed a systems model of scientific inquiry where theory construction and testing of theory provide feedback for each other, with the system output of systematic explanation of phenomena related to the family.

During the last two decades of the century the constructivist viewpoint gained importance in family science scholarship. Constructivists (also known as constructionists) assume that human beings in general and scientists in particular *interpret* data. Constructivists argue that all scientists choose topics and interpret findings through their own lenses. They believe that the interpretive acts should be thoroughly explained by authors as they write up their scholarship. For example, Knapp (2002) argued that scholars should make explicit the roles they play as interpreter as they construct arguments and present their results.

Klein and Janning (1997) surveyed participants in the 1992 Research and Theory NCFR Pre-Conference Workshop regarding their philosophies of science. Their article's premise is that family *science* is based upon assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge, which should be

examined and made explicit. Their quantitative methodology led them to the tentative conclusion that individual family scientists are guided consistently by their philosophies of science, and that few family scientists surveyed were strongly tied to positivism or to constructivism. The senior author of the article, Klein, noted that he considered himself to be a positivist, albeit one who was becoming more interested in constructivism.

Allen (2000), Walker (2000) and Knapp (2002) all identified themselves as constructivists. Knapp argued that positivist writing conventions such as “our findings indicate” or “our results showed” remove from the text an indication that authors provide interpretation when writing their articles. Knapp noted that while positivists believe this language is “objective,” constructivists believe that objectivity results when researchers critically self-reflect upon their assumptions, methods, and conclusions.

Allen (2000) and Walker (2000) agreed with Knapp regarding the importance of self-reflectivity. Allen wove her own practice of self-reflexivity throughout her essay when she described her experiences as a family member, a group member, and as a researcher. Family scholars, she argued, must be cognizant of the impacts of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism upon the study of the family. Walker’s article is at the interface of philosophy of science and curriculum development. Like Allen, Walker called for scholars to be mindful of the limitations of scientific research as they practice research and pedagogy. Walker summarized four exemplar studies of family scholarship. Each year in a graduate family science class, Walker engages students in discussion of recent scholarship that has important implications for family science as a discipline. Instructors of graduate courses on family science could use Walker’s essay as a jumping-off point for their own courses when the goal is to help graduate students understand the meaning and significance of research on families.

### Research Methodologies

It is beyond the scope of this article to even scratch the surface of scholarship regarding research methodologies in family science. However, it is significant that the March, 2005 issue of *Journal of Family Psychology*, which is published by the American Psychological Association, was entitled “Methodology in Family Science.” The introduction to the issue, by editors Snyder and Kazak (2005) referred to “the recursive interaction of research methodology and theories underlying family science” (p. 3).

In this issue, Gilgun (2005) explained the utility of qualitative methods for psychological research on families. Gilgun argued that qualitative methodology is compatible with a view which combines aspects of realism (the world exists independently of the observer) with constructivism. In this combined view, the scientist’s observations of what is “out there” in the world is filtered through the scientist’s perceptions, values, and prior experiences. Gilgun then explained conventions of qualitative research and how these methodologies have been used in the study of the family. The article would be useful to individuals trained in positivist methods and also to advanced undergraduate and graduate students of research methods in family science.

### Interface of Research and Practice of Family Science

A theme in family science scholarship is the integration of research, theory, and their application to practice. Earlier in this essay I gave examples of scholarship in which the authors called for a curriculum in which students would learn to apply knowledge. Family science

practitioners also are called upon to integrate research and theory into their practice (Doherty, 2000; Monroe, 1991; Small, 2005). In his 1999 presidential address, NCFR president Doherty (2000) described a model of community partnership with families. The traditional model consists of researchers providing research-based information to practitioners, who in turn pass the knowledge on to families. Instead, Doherty conceptualizes families as the core source of support, learning and growth for themselves and their communities. Ideally, professionals would be available to assist as co-learners. This model allows the systemic flow of information among the three systems (families, researchers, and practitioners).

Small (2005) confronted the problem of a lack of integration between research and practice in family science. He examines reasons for the gap, which include different cultural contexts of researchers and practitioners, lack of accessibility of research findings, and challenges that researchers face when attempting to study real-world problems. He suggests strategies to bridge the gap, including academic-community partnerships for conducting research and improvements in the clarity and dissemination of research findings.

Monroe (1991) provided a guide for the participation of family scientists in state legislative action. She described career possibilities related to advocacy and consulting, and also outlines ways in which family scientists may secure sponsors for legislation, work with staffers and draft legislation.

### Career Development

Implicit in the discussion of developing meaningful curricula for family science programs is the goal of preparing students for careers. Keim's (1995) description of careers in family science has become a classic. A special issue of *Family Science Review* in 1998 focused on career development. Endlsey (1998) called for an analysis of career development within family science in order to strengthen undergraduate and graduate programs and maintain the vitality of the discipline.

### Family Studies as an Alternative Term

I have argued that family science has emerged as a discipline over the past 25 years. However, because of the positivist connotation of the term *family science*, feminists may prefer the use of the term *family studies*. The word "studies" lacks the positivist connotation of the word "science." The April 2007 issue of *Journal of Family Issues* was entitled "Feminist Theory, Methods, and Praxis in Family Studies." One of these articles (Few, 2007) showed in a search on Google Scholar © using the term "family science."

### Summary

The discipline of Family Science was named in 1985, although its interdisciplinary roots reach back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Family Science (originally named Family Discipline) Section of the National Council of Family Relations was formed in 1985. In 1987, the Family Science Association was formed and began publishing the scholarly journal *Family Science Review*. Scholarship over the past 25 years in family science has a theme of integration of research, theory, and practice, as evidenced by work centering on family science curriculum development, program development, and the practice of family science. Ethical guidelines for the new discipline were developed and adopted. Family scientists moved from a strong identification

with positivism toward constructivism, without abandoning the more traditional philosophy of science. Scholars in related disciplines, including family and consumer sciences and psychology, recognize the discipline of family science. Members of both the National Council on Family Relations and the Family Science Association can take pride in their work which has resulted in the creation and growth of a new social science discipline. Its continued development is now in the hands of new generations of scholars.

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