

The Family Folklore Album: Using the Power of Stories to Engage Students in Family Science

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**Abstract.** The Family Folklore Album project is a pedagogical tool in which students interview family members in order to collect stories which are then organized and critically analyzed using concepts and insights gained from a family science course. The Album is designed to help students to gain an awareness of their own family and their place within it, as well as the multiplicity of ways of *being* family. Formal assessment data of the project reveals that, in general, students appreciate the opportunity to spend time with and learn more about their family members, while at the same time gaining a deeper understanding of family science concepts and their own identity.

Family science educators are charged with the responsibility of preparing future family service professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective prevention and intervention work. Given the cultural, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, and structural diversity of families within the United States, it is imperative that family science graduates be able to recognize and understand the complexity of families and their various contexts. In order to facilitate student comprehension of diverse family issues and capitalize on the tendency to consider the relationship of family science content to one's own family life, it is critical that faculty enliven their classes with experiential and other types of assignments that are responsive to a variety of learning styles, take advantage of students' tendency toward introspection relative to disciplinary material, and make course content relevant to real world experiences. Because it integrates multiple learning styles and necessitates personal reflection, the Family Folklore Album project is one pedagogical strategy that is well-suited for fostering students' ability to recognize, appreciate, and understand the unique characteristics of their own family so that they can recognize the diversity in other families. Similarly, it's a project that promotes deeper understanding and application of family science concepts.

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### *What Is Family Folklore?*

“Family folklore is a living part of a family and cannot be successfully separated from the everyday activities of [a] family” (Baker, Kotkin, Yocom, & Zeitlin, 1976, p. 4). It is narrative or story-telling which conveys information about one’s family (Zeitlin, Kotkin, & Baker, 1982), “connect[ing] us to our roots” (Atkinson, 1995, p. xii). Family folklore includes any stories that family members tell to one another and are repeated. Often they include tales of immigration, courtship, births, family gatherings, holiday activities and unique, often humorous stories of individual family members that showcase their personality. “Folklore represents one of the important ways we give life meaning beyond the immediate present” (Zeitlin, et al., 1982, p. 8). These ever-evolving stories often serve as a glue to connect individuals with their past through their family history and functions as a means to understand the present. Although it is often difficult to know why some stories get passed down from generation to generation or from one family member to another, often the stories that remain within a family are those that define the family and demonstrate family values that are consistent with the identity that family members have formed of themselves and their families (Atkinson, 1995; Zeitlin, et al., 1982).

### Family Folklore Album Assignment.

#### *Preparation for the Family Folklore Album Project*

In preparation for creating their own Family Folklore Album, students are required to read a supplemental textbook in which the use of family folklore or storytelling is demonstrated. In the past we have used Elizabeth Stone’s (2008) *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How our Family Stories Shape Us*. In this text, Stone relates her own family stories, as well as the stories of over 100 other informants from a variety of backgrounds. She illustrates how individuals use stories to make sense of their families and their place within them. Most recently, however, we use another text for this purpose, Katherine Morgan’s (1980) *Children of strangers: The stories of a black family*. A briefer and more concise supplement, Morgan’s book is an integrated collection of her family stories, dating back to the Civil War, which are organized by identified themes that she sees running through several generations of her family. In addition to exposing students to examples of family folklore and how individual members can reconstruct the same incident differently, Morgan demonstrates one of the many functions of folklore; “our folklore was the antidote used by our parents and our grandparents and our great-grandparents to help us counteract the poison of self-hate engendered by racism” (p. xiii). After reading Morgan’s book, students discuss identified themes, family strengths that they observed in her family, the impact of incidents related to gender and race, and other notable family dynamics (e.g., communication patterns, family rules, family traditions). In a short reaction paper, students are also asked to apply concepts and theories from the first few weeks of class that might help make sense of the Morgan family’s experiences. This step prepares students to more fully appreciate the value of family memories for family and individual identity and well-being, as they anticipate collecting stories about their own families.

In addition to utilizing *Children of Strangers*, approximately one class period is devoted to discussing family folklore and the Family Folklore Album assignment. In preparation for this particular class, students are required to read the article *Family Folklore Interviewing Guide and*

*Questionnaire*, published by the Folklife Program Office of American Folklife Studies at the Smithsonian Institute (Baker, Kotkin, Yocom, & Zeitlin, 1976). This article gives a brief overview of family folklore and detailed advice on how to conduct interviews with family members. The class period is devoted to encouraging students to begin by being their own first informant; students are asked to recollect important family traditions and tales as they work through the series of questions provided in the article. General guidelines and tips for interviewing, helpful equipment for interviewing, how to select and approach other family informants, the interviewing process, and the centrality of honesty and ethics in conducting interviews are also reviewed.

### *Objectives and Expectations of the Family Folklore Album Project*

The following objectives are specific to the Family Folklore Album project. 1) To gain a new understanding of and appreciation for the history, traditions, and strengths of one's own family; 2) To better understand how one's personal and family identity have been shaped by one's family-of-origin experience and family stories; 3) To recognize and describe themes and common patterns of family interaction; 4) To gain awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity of families; and 5) to provide an opportunity to apply theoretical family science concepts from the course to "real life" family situations.

The purpose of the Family Folklore Album project is to help students gain an awareness of their family -- its history, processes, themes, and identity--, as well as their place within it. The assignment is also intended to provide students the opportunity to reflect on and process situations in their own family life and all of its complexity and diversity, providing a more realistic frame for studying and respecting the many ways of *being* and *doing* family.

The assignment requires interviewing family members and organizing and analyzing the stories collected. Although students are encouraged to include some of their own stories (in their own words) they are also required to interview at least three other family members. Recognizing that some students have particularly difficult family situations, however, we have made exceptions to this requirement. Students are encouraged to use face-to-face interviews but are allowed to use e-mail and phone interviews to accommodate the fact that many students do not see their family until the end of the semester. Students are instructed to record family members' stories verbatim (and record them in their albums verbatim) so that the storyteller's voice remains intact. As students transfer and organize their stories into their albums they are asked to be sure to indicate the storyteller of each story. This is especially important when they collect different versions of the same event from different family members, as siblings or spouses might recall an experience differently.

After collecting their family stories, students are encouraged to give each story a title that is meaningful to them. Using narration around the stories, students utilize at least three family themes to help them organize and connect the stories, pointing toward various aspects of their family's identity. A typical project includes 12 to 16 stories that are organized into three or four themes. For example, after collecting stories and reflecting upon them, students often notice that many of their family stories portray the use of humor to cope, or a reliance on faith to persevere. They may also note themes of hospitality, hard work, service, outdoor activities/nature, sports, music, travel, persecution, or education. Students are also encouraged to identify cross-generational themes such as secrecy, poverty, or cohesive mother-daughter relationships. Collecting, organizing and analyzing these stories exposes students to qualitative research

methods and demonstrates the importance of systematic and organized analysis. Illustrative photos might also be inserted to place family members and events in context and enliven the presentation of the Family Folklore Album.

Finally, after recording and organizing the stories in a Family Folklore Album, students are required to further apply family science theories and concepts in a two- to three- page reflection paper. Students are asked to ponder the following types of questions: Were there fragments of family history that you heard for the first time? What surprised you most? What most disappointed you? What made you most proud? What insights does this give you about your family? Did the project change your overall perspective of your family? If so, in what way? What connections do you see between the stories your family tells and particular concepts, terminology, readings, research findings or theoretical paradigms from the course?

The grading rubric provided to students is included in the appendix. Students receive these grading criteria as part of their syllabus, in advance, so that they know how grades will be assigned.

### Method

Although students have been creating a Family Folklore Album as part of the requirements of our introductory family science course for more than ten years and we have been impressed with the quality of the projects and the insights they portray, we decided to more formally evaluate this specific project. The Family Folklore Album was assessed during the 2007-08 academic year using two measures. First, 97 Foundations of Marriage and Family students completed an anonymous survey to assess what they felt they had learned from doing the Family Folklore Album project (this assessment was approved by our Institutional Review Board). The survey consisted of four open-ended questions, allowing the students to write what they wished (e.g. “What was the most valuable thing you learned from this project?”), as well as eight questions using a 5-point rating scale (e.g. I appreciate my family more as a result of completing this project” and “The Family Folklore Album helped me apply course concepts to real life.”). Quantitative responses were calculated using percentages and open-ended responses were analyzed for helpful insights so that we can further refine the guidelines and expectations and provide the necessary resources for the project.

The second measure we used to assess the Family Folklore Album was the two-to-three page reflection section at the end of each student paper (because these are part of the graded assignment, this measure was not anonymous). In the two-to-three page reflection section, students reflected on what they have learned about themselves, their families, and/or the family science discipline. All quotes from student papers and surveys are used with the students’ permission and all identifying information has been changed to maintain their confidence.

### Findings

The extent to which students believed the Family Folklore Album helped them to achieve six outcomes is reported in Table 1. These six outcomes were measured using six out of the eight rating scale questions from the anonymous survey. These items are directly related to our objectives for the project, which have evolved over time, based on student feedback and adjustments to the assignment over previous years. Two additional rating scale questions were

asked to assess students' feelings about completing the Family Folklore project. These results are also reported in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Students' Responses for Each of the Eight Rating Scale Questions*

Item statement	Percent of students who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with item
I appreciate my family more as a result of completing this project.*	88%
I know more about my family's history as a result of completing this project.*	80%
Overall, the positives of writing the Family Folklore Album outweighed the negative feelings I may have had toward this project.	72%
The Family Folklore Album helped me apply course concepts to real life.*	69%
The Family Folklore Album interviews gave me an opportunity to appreciate the diversity which exists within my family.*	58%
Understanding my own family has helped me to understand other families.*	58%
I understand my family's traditions more as a result of completing this project.*	51%
I would like to continue adding stories to my Family Folklore Album outside of class.	39%

\*Item is reflecting an outcome or objective of the Family Folklore Album

As noted in Table 1, 80% or more of the students in the classes felt that the Family Folklore Album helped them to appreciate their families more and learn more about their family history. In addition, more than 2/3 of the students in the classes felt the project helped them to apply course concepts to real life. Finally, over half of the students felt that understanding their own family helped them to better understand others and that the project allowed them to better appreciate the diversity in their own families.

Student responses to the four open-ended survey questions, as well as their two-to-three page reflection papers, provided additional rich description of the outcomes of the project. Most of these coalesced around the objectives for the project.

*Appreciation for the History, Traditions and Strengths of One's Own Family.* Many students write about family traditions and rituals in their albums. Family rituals often help us identify our roles in our family and can help us identify the skills that other people, particularly family members, see us possessing. Family rituals also allow us to incorporate meaning into life as we explore our identity by connecting the past, present and future. Many students report that they hope to continue a particular tradition or ritual with their own children because it has become special and important to them.

Consistent with the assertions of Gunn (1980), Wilson (1996), and Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker (1999), hearing family folklore aided students in identifying their family's strengths and other positive characteristics, fostering students' ability to recognize, appreciate, and understand the unique characteristics and strengths of their own family as well as other families and how these strengths help families cope in difficult times.

Many students indicate that the Family Folklore Album allowed them to see their family in a new and positive light, despite the imperfections they may notice on a daily basis. For example, one student wrote, "...my family has a tenacity and resilience that I did not give them credit for previously. This helped me see strengths and not the weaknesses." Another student wrote:

Honestly, before I did this project, I didn't have that good of a view of my family in light of some present circumstances...I found that, even though there are some things that disappoint me about my family, I really am proud of our accomplishments and our strengths. I love my family, and am proud to be part of a rich tradition of perseverance and love, which I hope to continue one day when I start a family of my own.

Yet another student expressed appreciation for and acknowledgement of her family's strengths in overcoming alcohol abuse,

Before I outlined my family history, I viewed our mass quantities of obstacles as a negative aspect of my family. Now I can see the flip side of that in the fact that my family overcame every one of those obstacles and came out the other end stronger because of them. I have fallen in love with my family members, history and stories all over again.

Rather than seeing the negative in her family the student focused on how the album helped her reframe it as an "obstacle" and stressed her family's ability to overcome it. From a family strengths approach, this is beneficial in that individuals are aware of the strengths that their family has and can be better prepared to utilize these strengths in the face of stressors or traumas experienced by the family (DeFrain & Stinnet, 2003).

*Impact of Family Stories on Personal Identity.* In the reflection section of their Family Folklore Album, students discuss several personal benefits of the project, including developing a better understanding of their personal and family identity. Most students comment on how the Family Folklore Album has made them more self-aware of their personal and family identity and

how their families have contributed to the uniqueness of individual family members' identities. For example one student wrote, "The most valuable thing that I learned while doing this project is how unique each family member's story is and their stories are what impacted how they behave today. It was also cool to realize that if one of them had done something slightly different, I may not have ever been born or my life might be drastically different."

One of the major sources of individual identity includes the feedback received from family, for better and worse, which is demonstrated in the following statement,

...I am able to see how... the looking-glass self is completely applicable to my life. Without realizing it, I have been basing my perception and how I feel about my self on the feedback I receive from others... Because talking to [family member] was like talking to a wall and because I never saw [family member's] support in my talents and interests, I formed these irrational thoughts that the things I had to say were unexciting and unimportant.

## Results

*Ability to Recognize Themes and Patterns.* As a result of this project, students are more capable of identifying family themes and patterns. One student acknowledged patterns, both positive and negative, in her family over several generations: "The information I gained about my family and who we are is invaluable. I see consistencies I never saw before such as: addiction, humor, motivation. What I now know about my ancestors will always be valuable."

As students collect stories, they often identify themes, such as hardworking, valuing education, a love for children and animals, commitment, addiction, or divorce. Often times students recognize how the themes of strength (e.g. commitment) helped their family cope with more negative themes (e.g. addiction). Identifying these themes provides students with the opportunity to see how family members have shaped their values, where these values have come from or why they themselves may hold them, and to try to stop negative intergenerational patterns, such as addiction or poor parenting, and avoid incorporating those into their identity. For example, one student wrote, "I learned to really appreciate the way my parents raised me because they had to abandon views of parenting taught by their parents because [the] example they learned from was negative."

*Gain Awareness of Cultural Diversity of Families.* As a result of completing the project, many students observed cultural distinctives of their families, noting their family's similarities and differences from others. In fact, examples of diversity could be seen throughout many students' projects. For instance, stories of family history often include tales of immigration to America that allow students to understand their ethnic identity and give meaning to their past and to themselves. One student, who had not really thought of herself as having a cultural or ethnic identity prior to writing the paper, wrote in her reflection,

...I realized how much I have developed an ethnic identity...while my skin color does not make me a minority, there are limited people in this country that are Swiss and German. ...These rituals [referring to those surrounding her Swiss and German heritage] can give a family their identity, security, and provide countless memories... We strengthen our identity,



provide security for each other by setting aside that time to reunite as a family, and create memories that will forever be etched in our minds.

*Understanding and Applying Concepts in Family Science.* By using the Family Folklore Album as a teaching tool, students are able to link research and theory to their own family experiences. In their Family Folklore Albums, students have competently tied information from the textbook and class to instances that have happened in their own life. For example, one student wrote, “We probably had moderate to high levels of flexibility after the divorce, going through periods of being in a flexible system or a chaotic system as we dealt with the changes and new stresses” as she discussed her family’s reaction to divorce from a family systems perspective. Another student observed, “[A family member’s] drinking...caused stress pileup since these stresses happened everyday and were never dealt with due to a lack of open and positive communication...” as she related her family’s situation to concepts from theories of stress and coping discussed in class.

As students collected the stories for their album, they reported a newfound ability to connect their own families to the readings, more often volunteered their insights in class as examples for concepts, and saw the relevance of the topics being discussed in class.

*Challenges of the Family Folklore Album Assignment.* While most students implied that they had an overall positive experience completing the Family Folklore Album, there are several challenges that we have identified in employing this assignment. One of the most prevalent challenges that we face has to do with procrastination on the part of the students in interviewing their family members and collecting family stories. As indicated by many students on the project evaluation survey, one of the most challenging aspects in completing the project for them is catching family members when they are available or getting them to share stories. Upon closer inspection it appears as many of the students had been waiting until one or two weeks before the project was due to interview family members. The students then became frustrated because some of their family members were busy and could not sit down for an interview on short notice. In order to help prevent procrastination and to alleviate some of the difficulty in scheduling a face-to-face interview with family members, we have allowed students to conduct e-mail “interviews” as well as phone interviews. In addition, we spend approximately one full class period within the first weeks of the course specifically devoted to discussing family folklore, traditions, and the Family Folklore Album project.

Another challenge has stemmed from students becoming frustrated in understanding how to actually compose this assignment. First because there is a 10-page limit for the album, most students are unable to include all the stories that they have collected. Deciding which to eliminate can be difficult for students. In order to aid students in this matter, they are encouraged to choose the stories that hang together the best to illustrate a theme.

Many of the students in our Foundations of Marriage and Family course are first-year students who are still adjusting to college. Coming straight from high school, many of them are used to having grading rubrics that specifically offer set values for various components of an assignment. Because of the unique and personal nature of the Family Folklore Album, many students fear that they may not be completing the assignment “correctly” because they have a tremendous amount of freedom in the way the paper is organized, analyzed, written, and

presented (using photos, not using photos, using a scrapbook, etc.). In order to address this issue we emphasize the importance of the uniqueness or personal nature of this assignment. We tell the students, that because each family is different, there is no one correct way to complete this assignment. If there are 30 students in the class, then there are 30 correct ways to complete the assignment. Although certain things are required to receive credit for this assignment, each album will be unique. Because having specific grading criteria has seemed to alleviate some of the frustration in completing this assignment, we have developed our own general “checklist” and grading criteria for students in our classes (see the appendix for an example).

The personal and unique nature of the album does lead to another challenge, and that is the assignment of grades. Grading this album, as is the case with other types of papers, is somewhat subjective. In addition, because of its uniqueness, the album takes considerable thought and time to grade. The average album can take up to an hour or more to evaluate which becomes problematic as class size increases. The implementation of set grading criteria reflected in a grading rubric reduces subjectivity and the content of the albums, the inclusion of humorous stories and insightful reflections help to make light the long hours spent evaluating the projects.

Finally, one of our greatest concerns in using the Family Folklore Album is the potential it has to bring up painful family memories or to further stress families who are already vulnerable for one reason or another. For example, students in families who are dealing with estranged family members, experiencing a divorce, or grieving the loss of a close family member may find it difficult or impossible to complete the Family Folklore Album. As professionals in family science, we are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable families and therefore stress to students that they have the option of completing an alternative assignment in place of the Family Folklore Album. Such options include interviewing a friend’s family and writing up their folklore, doing a personal narrative on oneself similar to the Family Folklore Album using only stories from themselves, or other alternatives agreed upon by the instructor and the student. Although we always give students the possibility of an alternative assignment, and we typically have four or five students a semester come to discuss their concerns and the possibility of doing the alternative assignment, we can only recall two or three students over the years who have decided against completing their own Family Folklore Album. In addition, the students who have come to us to discuss alternatives but end up completing the album tend to tell us that they benefited significantly from it, having discovered strengths in their family members they previously had not recognized due to all the apparent negativity and/or dysfunction in their family. We believe that this positive outcome is due to our intentional emphasis on family resources and strengths throughout the semester, supporting the notion that stories have the power to help us heal and make sense of our lives and various family situations (Taylor, 1996).

### Conclusion

During their four years of undergraduate study, students of family science will be bombarded with family scholarship and information which is bound to make them assess their own families and relationships. Within our family science program, we attempt to afford students structured opportunities throughout their undergraduate experience for personal reflection and application of concepts to their own lives. The Family Folklore Album plays an important role for our first-year students.

This particular project provides an invaluable exercise in its ability to immerse students in family science concepts and theories in a very personal way. The family stories collected for the project have the capacity to highlight salient family themes and prized family values and beliefs. This early identification of family strengths is critical for later classes, when students might otherwise feel more vulnerable or willing to critique their families in other ways.

In the end, the Family Folklore Album has the capacity to be a gift to students, and their families, as they glean the power of stories in learning their family's history; in shaping their own and their family's identity; in identifying their family patterns and strengths; in highlighting their distinctive cultural identity and practices; and in applying family science concepts to real families. The assignment offers an invaluable foundational bridge which links family science to students' own experience and aspirations, so that they are capable of applying the family science material to both their professional and personal realms. It is a project to which we are committed.

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Appendix  
Grading Criteria for Family Folklore Album Project

Your paper should include a total of 10 pages of text. Papers that include photos or other family mementos will be longer. Stories should be indented and single-spaced, while narrative and reflections should be double-spaced and left-justified.

Quality of Stories and Presentation – Are the stories relevant? Did you include the most thought-provoking stories? Did you obtain stories from sources other than yourself? Do the stories tell something or make a larger point about your family? Is your paper set up in a visually stimulating way? If you choose to include pictures or other mementos, are they placed in logical places and integrated with the stories? Is your paper presented creatively and in a way that characterizes your family? 35 points

Identification of Themes and Insights – Were you able to connect the stories together in ways that clearly identify themes found within your family? (For example, did you identify any themes that reflect one of your family’s strengths or captures your family’s identity?) What themes do the stories demonstrate? What do the stories say about your family’s identity? 40 points

Reflection and Connection to Class- Did you discuss insightful reflections about your family. How does your family compare/contrast to the information from the course? You must cite information from class, e.g. (Strong, 312) or (lecture, 9/17). 40 points

Quality of writing – Is your paper well written? Is the paper organized well? Are sentences nicely constructed? Is the paper free from grammatical errors and typos? 15 points

Notes from interviews – You must turn in handwritten notes from your interviews with your family members. Interview notes must include the date and time (beginning and end) during which the conversation occurred. 20 points

Total 150 points