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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FAMILY STUDIES AS A DISTINCT ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the evolution of Family Studies as a distinct academic discipline, focusing on its interdisciplinary nature, the theoretical challenges it faces, and its institutional development in the United States. Unlike classical scientific disciplines with a unified paradigm and clear theoretical roots, family studies have emerged as a result of a dialogue among multiple scholarly fields—Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Demography, Gender Studies, and other related disciplines. This interdisciplinary distinctiveness, while enriching the analytical dimension of the field, simultaneously leads to methodological fragmentation and the absence of a coherent theoretical framework. The paper analyzes both sides of this debate—the critiques of theoretical dependence and the support for interdisciplinary innovation—as key to understanding the disciplinary status of Family Studies.

This paper is based on a historical-analytical method, through which key institutions, academic publications, and milestones in the field's development are mapped, with particular attention to the societal and academic factors that have influenced its institutionalization. Special emphasis is placed on the analysis of the American context, its process of institutionalization, and its development across different phases. Additionally, the most significant research centers and academic journals that have contributed to establishing family studies as a legitimate scientific field are examined. In this way, the paper offers a systematic overview of the consolidation process of Family Studies as a distinct discipline, assessing its scientific relevance and potential for further development.

Keywords: *Family Studies, United States of America, scientific discipline, scholarly debate*

Introduction

The debate surrounding the position of Family Studies as a distinct scientific discipline represents a critical point for understanding their academic legitimacy, interdisciplinary nature, and conceptual and methodological boundaries. Unlike classical disciplines that developed from a clearly defined theoretical and institutional root, Family Studies lack both a single founder and a unified paradigm. Instead, their emergence is deeply rooted in a so called interdisciplinary dialogue among Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Demography, Gender Studies, and other related sciences (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Bengtson et al., 2005).

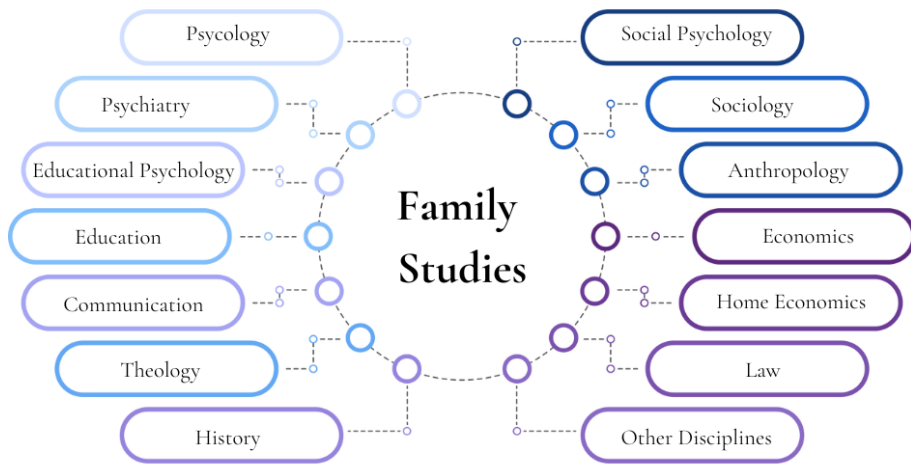
On one hand, the interdisciplinary character of Family Studies is considered one of the field's main strengths, enabling a rich analytical framework that transcends the limitations of individual disciplines. On the other hand, it leads to methodological fragmentation and the absence of a coherent theoretical identity. Critics generally argue that Family Studies often rely on theories and methodologies borrowed from other fields without developing an autonomous theoretical foundation (Bernardes, 1997; Hamon & Smith, 2014; Cheal, 1991; Burr & Leigh, 1983).

Although the roots of Family Studies in the United States can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their broader academic institutionalization began only after the 1960s. This process intensified with the establishment of the first university programs, departments, and research institutes in the United States, Australia, and Canada, marking the beginning of the codification of Family Studies as a distinct discipline (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Bernardes, 1997). This development was accompanied by the emergence of specialized academic journals such as "Journal of Marriage and Family" (originally founded in 1939 as "Living"), "Family Relations" (1951), and later "Journal of Family Issues" (1980), which solidified the field's theoretical and empirical autonomy (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Bengtson et al., 2005).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the origin and development of Family Studies as a distinct academic discipline, with a particular focus on its internal divisions, boundaries, and epistemological-linguistic debates. The research seeks to provide a systematic analysis of how Family Studies were institutionalized in the United States, which scientific and societal factors enabled their emergence, and how the discipline evolved from interdisciplinary research into a distinct scientific field. Methodologically, the paper relies primarily on the historical-analytical method, which enables the reconstruction of the developmental trajectory of family studies by identifying key thinkers, institutions, academic journals, and milestones in their evolution.

Development of the Field of Family Studies

The history of family studies began in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the work of an interdisciplinary group of scholars who focused on studying the complex nature of the family, particularly addressing the challenges families faced as a result of the processes of industrialization and urbanization. Family Studies represent a relatively new scientific discipline compared to fields such as Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, History, or Social Work. Family Studies are an interdisciplinary field that explores the structures, functions, and dynamics of the family in various historical, cultural, and societal contexts (Hamon & Smith, 2014).



*Other Disciplines: Social Work, Political Science, Medicine, Nursing, Architecture, Literature etc.

Figure 1: The relation of Family Studies with other related scientific disciplines.

Source: Burr, W. R., & Leigh, G. K. (1983). Famology: A New Discipline. "Journal of Marriage and Family", 45(3), pp. 467–480.

The majority of theorists (Hamon & Smith, 2014) consider the evolution of Family Studies as a distinct scientific discipline in three phases: (1) Discovery stage (1880–1920), (2) Pioneering stage (1946–present), (3) Maturing stage (1980s–present), and an additional fourth stage of Innovation and Evaluation (2000s–present), during which Family Studies developed new analytical tools and reassessed their existing theoretical and methodological corpus.

Discovery Stage

Family Studies, or the Family Science as it was initially called, emerged between 1880 and 1920 when an interdisciplinary group of scholars (sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, theologians, social workers, etc.) were drawn to the challenges and difficulties families faced due to the processes of urbanization and industrialization, concluding that the family represented a significant field for research. In 1938, the National Conference on Family Relations (NCFR) was established in the United States, representing the oldest nonprofit, nonpartisan, and multidisciplinary professional association focused exclusively on family research (Hamon & Smith, 2017). According to NCFR's research, all disciplines from which these scholars originated studied the family within their respective fields of interest, but there was no dedicated discipline in which the family held a central place (Hamon & Smith, 2017, pp. 550–551). In the first decades (1920–1950), this interdisciplinary group of scholars focused on researching the challenges faced by families during that period and finding appropriate solutions to their problems. NCFR's founders believed that, precisely for this reason, the identity of Family Studies from its very beginnings was based on both research and its practical application (Hamon & Smith, 2017, pp. 550–551), further qualifying this scientific discipline as part of the so-called translational sciences, which connect academic knowledge with practical application. In the context of Family Studies, this means using research to develop programs, policies, and practices that enhance family well-being. The authors argue that, from their beginning, Family Studies were not only research-oriented but also focused on applied work with families—particularly in the field of education, prevention, counseling, and public policy development (Hamon & Smith, 2017).

The following figure displays a timeline of the development of Family Studies in the first decades, i.e., the discovery stage, offering a detailed overview of the discipline's most significant achievements, including the development of the first courses, studies, conferences, and organizations in the field of Family Studies.

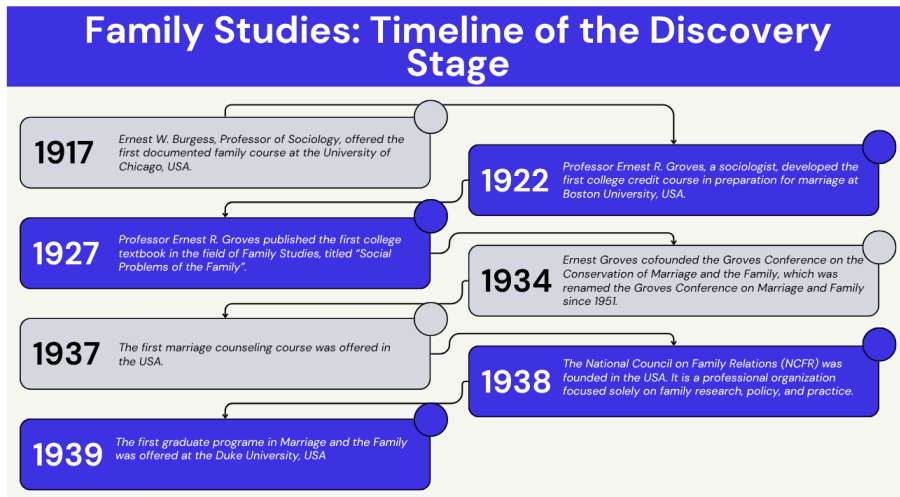


Figure 2: Family Studies: Discovery Stage

Source: Hamon, R. R., & Smith, S. R. (2017). Family Science as Translational Science: A History of the Discipline. *Family Relations*, 66(4), pp. 550–567.

During the 1940s and 1950s, other significant achievements followed, among which the most notable include: the establishment of the American Association of Marriage Counselors in 1942 by sociologist Ernest Groves and a group of scholars; the founding of the Philadelphia Marriage Council at the University of Pennsylvania in 1950 by social worker Emily Mudd; the introduction of marriage counseling in the United Kingdom by David and Vera Mace, etc. (Hamon & Smith, 2017, p. 553).

Pioneering Stage

The pioneering stage is considered to have begun in the mid-1950s, specifically in 1946, when Professor Ernest Groves called for the creation of a new science of marriage and family. Groves envisioned Family Studies as a translational science that would prepare professionals to use their skills and research expertise to help families address challenges before they arise. However, during this period, there were critics who believed that the new Family Science would face difficulties, primarily due to overlaps with other related disciplines (Hamon & Smith, 2017, pp. 553–554).

Additionally, the pioneering stage was also marked by a linguistic debate regarding the discipline's name and the standardization of terminology (Hamon & Smith, 2014). According to Burr and Leigh (1983), in the 1980s, there were 53 different denominations for departments and institutes of Family Studies. During this period, the term "Family Studies" was most commonly used, but this denomination in English did not allow for appropriate naming of profes-

sionals who graduated in Family Studies. The next most used term was “Family Science,” and several other proposals emerged, including the term “Famology.”

The linguistic debate led to a choice between two terms: “Famology” and “Family Science”. The weaknesses of the first term included its perceived acoustic roughness and the fact that it was an entirely new name, which was thought to be less readily accepted in academic circles. On the other hand, the term “Famology” had several strengths, including the use of a single term to denote the discipline rather than two, as was the case with most related disciplines, and the suffix “-logy” from the Greek “logos”, which was considered more comprehensive than the term “science.” However, Burr and Leigh’s 1983 proposal to use the term “Famology” was not accepted, and the NCFR president formed a Task Force of 9 scholars and 78 participants tasked with further developing the new discipline and finding a solution for its name (Hamon & Smith, 2017). Additionally, at the following annual conference in 1984, NCFR formally voted to accept the position that a distinct discipline for studying the family existed with its own identity (Hamon & Smith, 2017, p. 554).

At the 1985 conference, a solution for naming the new science was sought again, and the term “Family Science” was unanimously chosen, and it was defined as “a scientific discipline focused on the discovery, verification, and practical application of knowledge related to the family and family life” (Hamon & Smith, 2014; Hamon & Smith, 2017, p. 554). Reasons for choosing this denomination included the following: “Family Science” was considered a clear, modern, and easily understandable term, provided a professional identity for scholars, and could encompass both research and education. However, even after several decades, the linguistic debate did not end with the selection of this term, as Family Studies still lack a single unified name (Hamon & Smith, 2017).

Finally, the pioneering stage was also a period when new professions emerged, with practitioners being experts in this field (family educator, community family counseling specialist, family therapist, etc.), further solidifying the position of the Family Science in both academic and professional spheres.

Maturing Stage

During the maturing stage, Family Studies gained institutional form through the establishment of departments, educational programs, journals, and professional organizations such as the National Council on Family Relations in the United States. This new scientific discipline was established with a clear subject of study—the family—and its basic methodological and theoretical frameworks were defined (Hamon & Smith, 2014).

In the maturing stage, Family Studies continued their development, marking a critical period for their affirmation as a legitimate scientific field. At the NCFR’s suggestion, seven criteria were considered necessary to determine whether a discipline constitutes an academically recognized and legitimate

scientific field. According to Hamon and Smith's research (2017, pp. 556–561), Family Studies met the required criteria to be recognized as a true discipline:

1. Distinct Subject of Study. In addition to the family being a unique and complex institution, distinct from other social groups, scholars in the maturing phase believed this criterion was solidified through research on family processes, a focus on family systems, the life cycle, and application in clinical practice.

2. Extensive Theory and Research. Over the years, Family Studies developed a rich research corpus and theories (systems theory, exchange theory, etc.). Particularly in the maturing stage, handbooks, textbooks, and journals were published.

3. Specific Methodologies. In addition to the aforementioned theories, Family Studies developed methodologies specific to studying families. The handbooks, journals, and textbooks published used combined qualitative and quantitative approaches.

4. Supporting Infrastructure. Throughout all developmental phases of Family Studies, supporting paraphernalia were created, including professional organizations and conferences (National Conference on Family Relations, Marriage and Family Conference, Family Science Association founded in 1987, American Association for Marriage and Therapy founded in 1942, Council on Contemporary Families), journals ("Family Relations", "Journal of Marriage and Family", and others), and online resources. These organizations and structures enabled collaboration between researchers and practitioners, strengthening the discipline's translational nature.

5. Applicability. One of the criteria for distinguishing family studies as a distinct scientific field is that the discipline demonstrates practical value through professions and programs. Family Studies stood out primarily through professionals in education and therapy, namely through the establishment of the professions of family educator and family and marriage therapist. In 1985, the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) certification began to be implemented, requiring graduated professionals to demonstrate proficiency in 10 areas, including family relationships, life cycle development, and ethics. This certification emphasized the importance of applying research in educational and preventive programs.

6. Ability to Educate Scholars. From their foundation, but especially in the maturing stage, Family Studies developed undergraduate and graduate programs. The number of programs grew from 51 in 1982 to 302 in the United States by 2017. Strengths of Family Studies programs include: (1) a focus on the family and relationships within family systems, (2) the use of an interdisciplinary approach in family research, and (3) an emphasis on prevention, education, and practical application of research.

7. Consensus on the Discipline's Existence. During the maturing stage, there was a consensus among scholars that Family Studies constituted a distinct discipline despite the field's interdisciplinary nature. The NCFR Task Force in 1988 emphasized that the discipline was both an independent scientific field

and part of an interdisciplinary area of study. Additionally, the discipline's relevance for addressing contemporary family challenges was highlighted.

Furthermore, several key academic journals played a critical role in shaping the distinct identity of Family Studies as a separate and interdisciplinary scientific field throughout all historical phases, with particular emphasis in the maturing stage. These journals have been central to the institutionalization of Family Studies, providing platforms for theoretical development, empirical research, and methodological innovations within Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, History, Gender Studies, and other related sciences. Below is a list of key journals that have historically defined and shaped family studies:

- "Journal of Marriage and Family" (JMF) is the official journal of NCFR in the United States, published continuously since 1935 and one of the most cited journals in the field of Family Studies. JMF publishes original empirical research that significantly contributes to understanding all aspects of family life (Wiley Online Library, n.d.).

- The journal "Family Relations" was founded in 1951 and is published by NCFR in the United States. It features contemporary scholarly content about families, aimed at professionals working with families: empirical studies, systematic literature reviews, conceptual analyses, and texts intended for education and public policy development. In this way, "Family Relations" establishes a dialogue between researchers and practitioners working with families (Wiley Online Library, n.d.).

- The journal "Family Process" has been published since 1962 by the Family Process Institute and is a significant resource for professionals in mental health and social services, as well as scholars studying the family (Wiley Online Library, n.d.).

- "Journal of Family Issues" began its publication in 1980 by SAGE Publishing and features contemporary research, theories, and analyses on marriage and family life. Published research offers an interdisciplinary perspective from fields such as Family Studies, Psychology, Social Work, Sociology, Gender Studies, etc. (SAGE Journals, n.d.).

- The "Journal of Family Psychology" is a leading scholarly journal in the field of Family Psychology. Founded in 1987, it is published by the American Psychological Association (APA, n.d.).

- "Journal of Family Theory & Review" is a more recent journal published by NCFR since 2009. It is considered a leading academic journal dedicated to advancing family theory, evaluating methodological innovations, critically reviewing existing empirical research, and providing critical analyses of books and media related to the family. Emphasis is placed on scholarly articles that apply interdisciplinary, international, and intersectional approaches to Family Studies and related disciplines (Wiley Online Library, n.d.).

Other influential specialized scholarly journals for family studies research include: "Journal of Comparative Family Studies", founded in 1970 for publishing high-quality articles based on comparative and intercultural re-

search in family studies (JSTOR, n.d.); "Journal of Feminist Family Therapy", which provides an international forum for further exploration of the relationship between feminist theory and family therapy theory and practice (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.); "Child & Family Social Work", which publishes original and significant contributions in research, theory, policy, and practice in social work with children and their families (Wiley Online Library, n.d.), and many others. These journals not only fostered academic recognition of Family Studies but also contributed to their transformation into a dynamic and critical scientific field.

To conclude, the maturing stage represents a turning point for the field of Family Studies, where the discipline not only met the criteria to be recognized as a scientific discipline but also strengthened its translational identity. Through the development of theory, methodology, professional infrastructure, and applicable professions, Family Studies demonstrated their ability to integrate scientific findings with practical solutions to improve family well-being. These achievements laid the foundation for the subsequent phase of evaluation and innovation, where the discipline continued to adapt to contemporary challenges (Hamon & Smith, 2017).

Evaluation and Innovation Stage

According to Hamon and Smith (2017), in the early 2000s, Family Studies entered a new fourth phase of development, named evaluation and innovation stage. The development of Family Studies was already characterized by its translational identity, becoming relevant for individuals, families, and communities. Simultaneously, an economic recession in the academic world forced programs to continuously prove their value, effectiveness, contribution to students, and recognizability. In this regard, NCFR formed a Task Force for the Future of Family Science in 2014, aimed at strengthening the discipline's identity, leadership, and visibility. Among the Task Force's activities were the creation of the We Are Family Science website to promote the discipline, the formation of an NCFR focus group for academic leadership, webinars, conferences, etc. (Hamon & Smith, 2017).

Furthermore, in 2009, a study was conducted in the United States with 71 administrators of Family Studies programs to analyze the discipline's uniqueness, key curriculum content, skills acquired by professionals, challenges facing the discipline, and possible solutions. The results of this study indicate that Family Studies still face a so-called linguistic problem, as there are 43 different names for departments in the United States alone, making the discipline less recognizable and increasing competition from related scientific fields. Other challenges for Family Studies identified in the analysis include low visibility and public recognition of the discipline, as well as competition with related fields. The study's authors emphasize that Family Studies should continue to focus on clear disciplinary identification, including standardized nomenclature

(in English, the term “Family Science” is preferred over “Family Studies”) and the promotion of unique skills as a science based on prevention. Additionally, to strengthen the discipline’s identity and relevance, the authors suggest that future studies should explore the perceptions of related disciplines about Family Studies and employers’ opinions regarding the skills of graduated students (Hamon & Smith, 2014).

Ultimately, due to space limitations, this paper focuses solely on the development of Family Studies in the United States and consciously omits analysis at the global level. However, given our geographical position in Europe, it is worth mentioning that, unlike the United States, the institutional development of Family Studies on the European continent has been more complex and gradual. In many European countries, Family Studies rarely exist as a distinct academic discipline and are more often integrated into other scientific fields such as Sociology, Anthropology, Gender Studies, or Social Policy. Nevertheless, despite this structural integration, Europe has a rich network of research centers, academic consortia, institutes, and departments dedicated to studying the family. Among the most notable examples are: the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh, the Austrian Institute for Family Studies (OIF) at the University of Vienna, the European Society on Family Relations (ESFR), the Department of Child and Family Studies at the University of Malta, and many others (Morgan, 1996, pp. 5–6; Bernardes, 1997; Lutz, Richter & Wilson, 2006). On the Balkan Peninsula, Family Studies as a formal program is offered at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje at the University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” in the Republic of North Macedonia, within the undergraduate program in Family Studies. This program was accredited in 2014 and aligns with NCFR’s content. Graduated students earn the title of certified family educator/famologist and acquire competencies to conduct family education (Радуловиќ, Авировиќ-Бундалевска & Кескинова, 2023).

Conclusion

Family Studies have established themselves as a dynamic and interdisciplinary academic discipline, whose development in the United States and partially in Europe has been marked by continuous evolution from informal research to an institutionalized science with a clear subject of study—the family. Through the phases of discovery, pioneering, maturing, and evaluation and innovation, the discipline has successfully integrated theoretical and methodological approaches from multiple scientific fields, creating a rich analytical framework. Its translational identity, which connects research with practical application, remains a key strength, enabling the development of programs, policies, and practices that enhance family well-being.

However, challenges such as the lack of a unified nomenclature, competition with related disciplines, and low public recognition highlight the need for further standardization and promotion. The future development of Family

Studies should focus on strengthening its disciplinary identity, advancing academic programs, and increasing visibility through innovative strategies and collaboration between researchers and practitioners to ensure the discipline continues to address contemporary family challenges.

Future research should focus on strengthening theoretical autonomy, standardizing nomenclature, expanding global presence, and promoting the discipline's translational potential. These efforts can solidify the position of Family Studies as a relevant and influential academic and practical field.

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