

Pathways from Marcus Hook to Athens:  
 Recounting a Life of Privilege in Family Science

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**ABSTRACT.** I recount my career as a family scientist through a relationship lens, describing important career paths and turning points substantially influenced by my colleagues. My self-described life of privilege in family science began with schooling in individual psychology, and experiences with youth in an adolescent psychiatric setting. My early family science career was spent as a graduate student in Kansas and in North Carolina, and continued with faculty appointments at Virginia Tech and The University of Georgia. Along the way I have collaborated with a collection of excellent family scholars, who also are equally excellent as people. This has resulted in a career centered on the resilience and vulnerabilities of families, and one enriched by relationships, connections, and networks.

**Recounting a Life of Privilege in Family Science**

Family science is the discipline I have been a member of for over 40 years. Since 1972 I have been associated with a family science department, beginning as a graduate student at Kansas State University, and now as a faculty member at The University of Georgia; in between there was graduate school at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a grand stint of thirty two years on the faculty at Virginia Tech. It is a privileged professional life, and as much a surprise to me today as it has always been, for in my mind I am a barber's son from Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, rather than someone who has participated in and benefited from the most outstanding system of higher education in the world. I am grateful to my parents, Jay Albert Mancini and Vetra Robinson Mancini, for providing opportunities, for making sacrifices, and for instilling motivation to head for the academy. When asked to contribute to this collection of stories from family scientists I thought the words would flow easily, when in fact there was little that proved to be easy. It became clear to me that my story of a family scientist is mainly about people in my professional life who have shaped how I do my work and how I interact with others in the profession, including faculty and students. My story is organized around time and place, and important people in my development as a family scientist.

**Briarcliff Manor, NY, 1967 to 1971**

My years as an undergraduate student might be termed largely unremarkable except for a few events that had far-reaching results. I attended The King's College, a small college that was much too close to the temptations of New York City. That being said, my career path was dramatically influenced in those days by O.H. Mowrer, Jonathan Kozol, and Victor Frankl.

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Mowrer was a learning theorist at University of Illinois who developed “integrity therapy” sometime in the 1960’s. Kozol is known for, among other things, his writing on education reform, and author of *Death at an Early Age* (1967). Frankl’s writing on “meaning” and his experience in concentration camps, led to his conceptualization of logotherapy (*Mans’ Search for Meaning*, 1963). While a student at The King’s College I had the opportunity to listen to each of these outstanding observers, and not only did their ideas energize me but the idea of striving to be part of a discipline focused on the mind and on society took root. For awhile I worked at a local variety store near the college, mainly sweeping up and running for coffee for the store manager. However, next to that store was a marvelous book store that had a substantial section on behavioral and social science, and what little money I made went to buying books mainly in psychology, and some in sociology. I read Piaget, Freud, Miller and Dollard, Adler, and Jung, as well as many others. The fire for devouring the thinking of others through engaging their writing had been lit, as had my intent on being part of someone’s discipline focused on human development. During the summers I took psychology courses at Pennsylvania Military College (now Widener University), and was encouraged and mentored by Dr. Frank Matthews, a psychology faculty member who provided direction at a pivotal time. I did not have a clear sense of how families played into the behavioral sciences because most of my reading had centered on individuals and very little on their relationships.

### **Philadelphia, PA 1971**

I received the B.A. degree in psychology from The King’s College, in Briarcliff Manor, NY. I eventually wanted to attend graduate school but needed some employment experience to give me a little more direction. The Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital, located in West Philadelphia, had an opening for an entry-level position in its adolescent treatment center. It was a jack-of-all-trades position that they seemed to hire males for, mainly because corralling youth with emotional problems, complicated with drug and alcohol use, had its challenges. My position at The Institute was life-changing in a career sense because I was in a front-line position working with troubled youth, as well as with highly educated psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, and psychologists. I knew very little in a textbook world sense at the time about adolescents and their families but became immersed in adolescent problems, and interventions designed to make a positive difference. I still remember a few events from that year or so at The Institute, including physical altercations with and among youth who were “speeding”, the heartbreaking situation of a young woman with an eating disorder, youth who left the unit with hopes of doing well on the outside only to return a few weeks later because of drug and alcohol issues, and of the spirit of hospital staff who made a place in their hearts for these adolescents. It was here that I first got to know strong African-American women who were on the hospital staff, and saw the mix of toughness and caring. During this year and some months at The Institute, I began searching for graduate programs, mainly in psychology departments. When reading the American Psychological Association guide to graduate programs, I noticed Kansas State University’s Department of Family and Child Development. I viewed the K-State program as a one-of-a-kind, not having any idea of the Land-Grant University System and the 50 or so universities that focused on families. By the time my work at The Institute ended I knew the family science discipline was for me (though I do not think we used the term “family science” in those years).

### **Manhattan, KS and Greensboro, NC 1972-1977**

My first experience in a family science department was in the M.S. program at Kansas State University. This was also my first experience in what was then termed “home economics”. Call it what you will, a discipline that takes an integrative approach to the multiple facets of individual, family, and community life, was and is very attractive to me. It was at K-State that I was first exposed to the notion of intentionally extending research information to prevention, intervention, and educational activities, a core value in family science departments. Up to that time my familiarity with ecological approaches to the study of everyday life was limited. Though at The Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital I had observed how layers and levels of everyday life experience had a bearing on adolescent development, I was largely unaware of the literature that would give form and substance to those observations.

When I arrived in Greensboro, NC in the summer of 1974, I did not realize the challenges that I would encounter in the doctoral program. Earlier Larry Ganong and I had taken a road trip to visit family science departments at Florida State University and UNC at Greensboro (Larry had also visited Missouri, and ended up there for his doctoral studies). When I visited UNC-G the department chair, J. Allen Watson, and a then current doctoral student, Vince M. Rue, warmly welcomed me. The personal touch in Greensboro tipped the scale and I became a North Carolinian. I remain connected to UNC-Greensboro through a scholarship we funded in the Human Development and Family Studies department to support graduate students. While in Greensboro, I interacted with a set of faculty members who were demanding and supportive, chief among them Dennis Orthner, Hyman Rodman, and Vira Kivett. Dennis had just completed his doctoral degree at Florida State University and was doing well-recognized research on time-use and families, Hy (at one time a student of Talcott Parsons) had enjoyed a long and successful career as a family sociologist and most recently had been at Merrill-Palmer Institute in Detroit (he was an Excellence Foundation Professor at UNC-G), and Vira was conducting important research on the quality of life in old age. I was Rodman’s research assistant for two years, and learned a great deal about being a social science scholar. In retrospect I was probably good enough to be admitted to UNC-G but very, very far from being remotely qualified to actually receive a degree. The support of Orthner, Rodman, and Kivett introduced me to the possibility of being a family science scholar. I also had the opportunity to take a class or two from E.M. (Bud) Rallings, a professor in the department of sociology at UNC-G. Bud was not only knowledgeable, but he truly cared about students and their success. Toward the completion of my work in Greensboro, Erdman Palmore, Duke University sociologist and faculty member there in social gerontology, taught a course on mid-life and aging with Vira Kivett. I recall debating the concept of “roleless role” with Palmore, as if I had a deep understanding of such things. I appreciate his tolerance to this day. My awareness of aging as an area of study boomed, and as a result, much of my early career centered on family gerontology. My greatest debt is owed to Dennis Orthner, now a friend and colleague of close to 40 years. Our work on families and time use has in many ways withstood the test of time. Dennis taught me to think as scholars do, and in addition, how to craft winning research project proposals.

I joined the National Council on Family Relations in 1973, one of the smartest decisions related to the profession I have ever made. I attended my first annual meeting in Toronto. Not only did I observe my own professors as they plied their trade in family science, but also then was exposed to many others that were building the discipline. I recall the kindness and encouragement of Murray Straus, whom I met and interacted with briefly at an NCFR annual meeting. I also remember the periodic interaction with James C. Walters, who preceded me as

professor and department head at The University of Georgia by several decades; Jim could be counted on to be upbeat and most encouraging. I was elected to the NCFR board of directors as a student and young professional representative, about 1975, again a remarkable opportunity to become part of the family science discipline. I recall attending board meetings at the annual meetings, totally star struck to be in the mix of such outstanding professionals.

During the UNC-Greensboro years I was exposed to the vast literature dealing with families and society. Three particular items captured my attention, and I remember them well to this day. First there was William Goode's *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963). Then there was Elliott Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967), and an article by John Sirjamaki in *American Journal of Sociology* (1948, "Culture configurations in the American family"). Goode helped me to think in very broad and international terms, and to challenge conventional thinking that was not well-aligned with systematic science, while Liebow impressed me with his methods of studying street corner society in Washington, DC, as well as his rich reporting of what he observed and experienced. Sirjamaki's paper centered on about six or so values held in America in the later 1940's, and for me this became a baseline template that could in a way contextualize my own emerging understanding of families. My professors at UNC-G conducted research grounded in theory, so consequently I did not escape the opportunity to read widely in the family theories of that day, most notably, symbolic interaction. Books most influential in my theory-related development as a family science scholar were Christensen's *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (1964), Wesley Burr's *Theory Construction and the Sociology of the Family* (1973), and Nye and Berardo's *Emerging Conceptual Frameworks in Family Analysis* (1966). My first college teaching experience occurred at UNC-G, including teaching as a Graduate Teaching Assistant during the academic year, and as an instructor during summer sessions. I had also held research assistant positions and by the time I left for Virginia Tech, it was clear to me how much more difficult it was to teach successfully, as compared to conducting successful research.

### **Blacksburg, Virginia, 1977 and for the Following Thirty-Two Years**

To sum up my years at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), the words opportunity, support, and relationships are key. Michael Sporkowski was already a professor by the time I arrived in 1977 (Mike later served as president of the National Council on Family Relations). Mike's career pivoted around family science and around family therapy. He was ahead of his time in two matters that I recall, one being his interest in the intersection of family therapy and financial counseling, and the other his focus on lessons learned from long-term marriages. From the time I arrived in Blacksburg until the time Mike retired from Virginia Tech, he was a constant support to me, a good friend and a good colleague. About 1979 Mike recommended me to Felix Berardo, then editor of *Journal of Marriage and the Family (JMF)*, to be on the editorial board; I had very little experience with seeing my name printed anyplace, so to be located in a list of scholars on the *JMF* masthead was quite something. I learned a great deal about my profession through my association with Mike. I would like to think that my years with the editorial review group of *JMF* was helpful to the journal, but for certain grappling with submitted papers was enormously helpful to my professional development. The complexity of the family science discipline was evidenced by the diversity of papers submitted to *JMF*.

Rosemary Blieszner joined the Virginia Tech faculty in 1981. I was on research leave, so we caught up with each other for the first time at an NCFR meeting. Rosemary came to Virginia

Tech after a very successful stint in the doctoral program at The Pennsylvania State University, and was (and still is) well-connected with a core group of family science researchers. I learned a great deal from her about crafting the well-written paper and for quite a number of years we focused on the same issues in family gerontology. The precision Rosemary uses in approaching her scholarship is first-rate and I “went to school” as much as I could by working with her. Because Rosemary was so well-educated in the adult development and aging discipline, I was able to greatly improve my own knowledge and then apply it to family systems. I also learned persistence, as we submitted a paper to the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Science*, and four revisions later it was published. Rosemary has recently completed a term as editor of that very same journal. Quite a few years later, another gerontologist joined the Virginia Tech faculty. Karen Roberto came to us in 1996 as director of the Center for Gerontology (later Karen also became director of Virginia Tech’s Institute for Society, Culture, and Environment). My conversations with Karen always seemed to lead to something important and, better yet, toward taking action. At a point Karen remarked that her work in social gerontology as it related to care situations for older people seemed to have some relationship to my work related to communities. Our NIH-funded project on long-term care facility employee retention was the result; we viewed the long-term care facility as a community. Some years later Karen offered me a half-time position with the Institute for Society, Culture and Environment as Senior Research Fellow. At a point we were talking about Institute initiatives and its mission centered on transformation and change; not too long later we gathered Virginia Tech faculty, along with colleagues from Canada, Ireland, and England, and held an international conference in Riva San Vitale, Switzerland on human development and change. Karen Roberto’s perspective on human development accounts for the multiple disciplines that have something important to contribute, and her example has increased my own attention to the multiple lenses needed to fully understand humans, their development, and the family and community contexts in which they live. My years at Virginia Tech also included a multi-year research program on the sustainability of community-based programs for at-risk families, work I did with Lydia Marek. This initiative was another example of integrating theory, research, and practice (in this case, community programs), which should be a hallmark of family science. These studies with Lydia, an expert on evaluation research, set the stage for my more recent work on building community capacity. I also experienced first-hand the merits of deploying multiple methods to address an important research question; we began this sustainability work without much direction from the extant literature, therefore we conducted many in-depth interviews across the United States with people staffing programs for at-risk families. We have been able to contribute to how programs are researched, as well as how they are implemented. Though I began my career as a family scientist with gaining experience with adolescents, it was not until I began working with my Virginia Tech colleague, Angela Huebner, that I actually was involved in research on youth. Angela was conducting an on-going state-wide survey of youth issues, and invited me to participate in preparing manuscripts on youth risk and resilience. Since that time we have collaborated on several additional studies, mostly focused on youth in military families. It was Angela who guided me in understanding key adolescent development issues that should be researched; our collaboration on military family issues continues, and Angela is a consultant to our Family and Community Resilience Laboratory at UGA. Among my fondest Blacksburg memories was my retirement bash held at Virginia Tech in the fall of 2009; that evening I came close to saying, “never mind, I’m staying.” The Virginia Tech years passed very quickly, at least as I now look back at them. I was department head from 1989 to 1996, a role I was not to return to until 13

years later at The University of Georgia. I would like to think I am more effective this second time around, but others will have to be the judges of that.

At Virginia Tech I was assigned undergraduate classes for the first six years. More senior faculty had a lock on the graduate courses and not so willing to trade them for teaching hundreds of undergraduates. I taught classes as large as 600 students in a single section; it is unclear whether this still qualifies as teaching, and perhaps requires more entertainment skills than knowledge of the discipline. It did help me learn to manage time, so that working on papers was usual and consistent rather than sporadic. It was during this period that I had to figure how to discern the differences between being busy and being productive, and to minimize the former while elevating the latter.

I took research leave from Virginia Tech in 1981 and worked with Dennis Orthner and Gary Bowen (very recently president of the National Council on Family Relations), back in Greensboro, with Family Research & Analysis, Inc. Gary was a student of Dennis', probably a couple of years after I went to Virginia Tech. Dennis was the principal investigator on several military family projects. I met Gary when he was Orthner's research assistant and running SPSS analyses. Personally we "hit it off", as they say, and were pretty quickly kindred spirits. For the record, Gary believes we first met at a NCFR conference in Boston, rather than in Greensboro, but I think he is wrong about that. From about 1981 to 1983, we worked with the U.S. Air Force to assist in implementing and evaluating family support centers. This was my first experience with a family science research project that was connected with building prevention programs, and that had substantial promise for influencing policies and practices for supporting families. This was also the start of an ongoing focus on military personnel and family issues that exists to this day. I spent a great deal of time traveling around the globe as part of this Air Force family research, and gained valuable experience interacting with professionals who develop prevention programs for families. As the projects on military personnel and families continued, I began a more focused applied research program that included aspects of social organization, in particular, building community capacity. Gary Bowen introduced me to that literature, to his own theorizing on communities, and since 1999 we have collaborated on several community-oriented projects, including a current one funded by the Department of Defense. Gary continues to push my own thinking about conceptualizing and researching contexts. Also in the late 1990's I met William H. (Hugh) Milroy, then with the Royal Air Force, and now the Chief Executive Officer for Veterans Aid, a highly successful charity in London that is focused on homeless ex-servicemen. Because of Hugh I became far better educated about the intersections of vulnerability and resilience, and how to conduct research on those intersections. Our friendship and collaboration continue to this day. My take on what family science should have as a focus includes the intersections of vulnerability and resilience.

### **Athens, GA, 2009-2015**

The University of Georgia is the final stop on my career path, at least in a formal, institutional sense. It is providing me a chance to take the lessons I learned as a Virginia Tech department head and apply them to a situation that has both new and familiar dimensions. As a department administrator I am less focused on substantive research areas in the family science discipline, and more concerned with the significance of family science as a profession, and as a viable major at a research university. When I speak to groups about my department I more or less say: *"my department is about resilience and vulnerability, and their intersections..... also*

*about individuals, families, and communities, and how they intersect around resilience and vulnerability. Our instruction, our research, and our outreach, focus on the life cycle and the life course, and within the contexts of family systems and relationships.*” I feel this is an easy story to narrate; it is compelling because the experience of family life is in everyone’s individual narrative. A challenge is to differentiate family science from other social and behavioral sciences, including education, social work, psychology, and sociology. My version of family science is broad and ecological in the sense of embracing the “noise” that surrounds individuals and families (i.e., the many layers and levels of context that nuance our experiences). A pragmatic, administrative challenge I have is to articulate the linkage between what we do in our courses, our research experiences, our practicum and internships, and relevant occupations once our undergraduates receive their UGA degree. I find it is easier to say what family science is than it is to say what family science educated people actually do. My concern is mainly with family science undergraduate degree professionals, somewhat less with master’s-educated professionals, and very little concern with doctoral-educated professionals. As a discipline that draws on so many other social and behavioral sciences, we sometimes lose sight of the niche we occupy.

I continue to learn from established scholars, including Gene Brody (at the UGA Center for Family Research), whom I first met in the late 1970’s, and from Chalandra Bryant and K.A.S. Wickrama, outstanding family scientists who are my first hires since coming to The University of Georgia as department head. My senior colleagues are in the thick of the important conversations in family science, and much like scholars I have interacted with over the past four decades, push my thinking and my research. I am again part of a strong College of Family and Consumer Sciences, and am benefitting from contiguity to successful scholars who focus on issues such as obesity, housing and family financial issues, and near environments. I am supported in my administrative role at UGA by a strong, fellow department head (Housing and Consumer Economics), Anne Sweaney, and by upper administrators who set a tone of excellence and community. My academic environment at UGA is exceptional because of the great number of successful social and behavioral scientists in my own department and in my college, as well as in sociology, psychology, and education. Since family science in part accesses theories and methodologies from the more historic disciplines, being located at a university with strengths in those disciplines is invaluable.

Our Family and Community Resilience Laboratory at UGA is the home for our current array of research projects focused on the intersections of vulnerability and resilience. This work is funded by HQ Army Child, Youth, and School Services and by the Department of Defense Office of Military Community and Family Policy. There are a number of family scientists at various colleges and universities who are making significant contributions to the well-being of military personnel and their families, testimony to the relevance of the discipline and the commitment of family science scholars.

### **Omnibus Perpensis**

All things considered, my pathway in family science has been remarkable because of the networks, connections, and relationships formed along the way. The data on me suggests that any progress I have made is within the framework of being advantaged by many scholars, some I have never met and others I have worked with for many years. For me, understanding individuals, families, and communities has required collaboration, and not just a little of it, but a rather large portion of it. I am sure I have neglected to mention any number of other colleagues

who have made a positive difference in my experience in family science; I offer my apologies. The literature I began wrestling with in the 1960's, albeit in mainstream individual psychology, provided a solid platform for my foray into family science. My on-the ground (or in actuality, in-the-institution) experience at The Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital was my first chance to begin connecting the textbook world with people's everyday life experiences. My scholarly world was opened quite wide as I formally joined family science academic units in Kansas and North Carolina as a graduate student; the UNC-G years were especially pivotal. I have benefited from being a faculty member in two solid family science departments, at major research universities. Quite a number of outstanding family scholars have invited me to be in their circle, and have allowed me to remain a member.

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