

Harold Feldman

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Harold Feldman was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a son of immigrant parents, and grew up during the Great Depression. His father was a leader within his community of Jewish socialists. Harold received a B.A. in psychology and an M.A. in social work from the University of Minnesota, interrupted by four years of military service. After the war, he entered the graduate program in psychology at the University of Michigan, receiving his Ph.D. in 1952.

In 1948 Harold Feldman came to Cornell as instructor in the College of Home Economics; he retired (nominally) in 1980 as emeritus professor of human development and family studies. His active career as teacher, researcher, and advocate began while he was a graduate student at Michigan and continued without significant interruption until his sudden death while attending the convention of one of his favorite organizations — the Groves Conference on Marriage and the Family.

Three words sum up Harold Feldman's approach to college teaching: informal, innovative, and involving. He had little use for the laboratory tradition in psychology, which he regarded as a futile attempt to imitate the natural sciences. He saw psychology as the study of interpersonal relationships, and teaching as an exercise in applied group dynamics. From the beginning of his career, he excelled as a leader of discussion groups, the more controversial the topics discussed, the more Harold enjoyed the process. And his students enjoyed it too.

As a teacher, Harold saw his task primarily as one of provoking thought rather than expounding a subject. He liked to bring in living examples of whatever kind of human relationship his course concerned — people who could describe their own experiences from their own point of view. And he liked even better to expose his students directly to the life situations that shaped these experiences. One of the key features of his course on families in poverty was a weekend spent by each student in the household of a poor family.

In most of Harold's courses, students kept journals in which they recorded and analyzed their experiences while taking the course. One of his explicit goals was to encourage emotional as well as intellectual growth. Another aim was to challenge conventional ideas and conventional wisdom. He loved to tell jokes and make outrageous puns — perhaps to demonstrate that language itself can often be stood on its head.

The serious side of Harold's teaching is reflected in his choice of subjects and in his basic social philosophy. He was a tireless advocate for oppressed social groups — minorities, women, the elderly, the poor. Especially noteworthy

was his pioneering work in women's studies at Cornell. In 1953 he began offering a large introductory course called "The Modern Woman: Her Personal Relationships". Fifteen years later, he helped plan a course on the female personality taught by Joy Osofsky in what is now the College of Human Ecology.

The Cornell Women's Studies Program grew out of this course, and Harold served for a number of years as the only male on the program's board of directors.

In his research, as in his teaching, Harold was again a pioneer. His special contribution lay in the kinds of questions he chose to investigate. He continually pushed himself, his students and colleagues, and in time the entire field, to break with traditional molds and search for fresh and important new perspectives. Two decades ago, while most of his colleagues were still asking how the family situation might affect the child, Harold was asking how the children affect the marriage relationship. When most developmental psychologists were focusing on the period of childhood and adolescence, Harold's research was dealing with developmental issues throughout the entire life cycle. While much of the research in our field was focused on the "problems" of family living — probing the roots of failure and pathology, as seen in such phenomena as broken homes, mental illness, school failures and juvenile delinquency, Harold's studies focused on the "people who made it" (as he put it) with the cards stacked against them: black teenagers in inner-city broken homes who were doing well in school; mothers in poverty who managed to get off of welfare; couples who were coping successfully with problems of having to take aged parents into their homes. Much of this work was done in collaboration with his wife, Margaret Feldman, a full partner both in his research and its translation into policy and practice.

In all of his research projects Feldman was particularly effective in getting his students actively involved, in farming out interesting thesis problems to them, in inviting them to co-author publications with him, in encouraging them to present papers at professional society meetings, and in goading them to think about the policy implications of their research findings.

Harold's abilities, interests, and social philosophy made him an active participant in community affairs at the local, state, national, and international level. He served as president or vice-president of the Ithaca Family Society, Challenge Industries, and Planned Parenthood. He was local co-chairman of Shirley Chisholm's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. In 1965, at the request of his Dean, he organized an Interdepartmental Research Group on Poverty which laid the basis for subsequent efforts by College of Home Economics faculty members on behalf of poor families in New York City.

At a national level, Harold became most visible in 1972, when he became president of the Groves Conference on Marriage and the Family and a member of the Board of Directors of the National Council on Family Relations. In 1978, he was a visiting scholar at the American Home Economics Association's Center for the Family. In 1985, he characteristically invented a new social form as he and his wife Margaret became co-presidents of the New York State Council on Family Relations.

After his retirement in 1980, he focused on concerns of the elderly and their middle-aged children. He spent about half of his time in Washington, where, jointly with his wife, he worked with the staffs of the White House Conference on Aging, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging, the National Council on Aging, and the Villers Foundation.

Early in his Cornell career, Harold had developed international interests. He held a Fulbright Scholarship in 1956-57 at the University of Ceylon, and in 1964-65 he was visiting professor at the University of Ghana. During his Ghana stay, he helped home economics faculty and students at the University Training College in Winneba organize a program of research on Ghanaian family life. He participated in several international conferences on family policy and family life. At one time or another he gave talks in France, England, Sweden, Italy, Ceylon, India, Ghana, Togo, and Sierre Leone.

But whatever enterprise Harold was engaged in — be it teaching, research, or social action — his participation (indeed sometimes it seemed as if it were only his mere presence) would bring the situation to life. People would begin to talk to each other, to come up with their own original ideas, and then to move easily from words to actions, as if that was what they had intended all along.

Nowhere was his legacy more manifest than in the memorial service held in his name. It was characteristic of Harold to have left instructions that upon his death there should be no mourning, but a celebration of life. And that's what it was. In a church filled to overflowing with people from many parts of the community, a Dixieland sextet ushered in spontaneous statements from those he loved and who loved him in return. Family, friends, colleagues, students (past and present), neighbors, politicians, and mere strangers whom he had moved by a friendly greeting — all testified to his special gift of empowering others in fulfillment of their own lives.

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