A Call for Action Regarding Issues of Inclusion and Diversity in NCFR

To: NCFR President, President-Elect, and incoming President-Elect
Copy: NCFR Executive Director; NCFR Inclusion and Diversity Committee
Date: Monday, October 12, 2015

NCFR’s mission is “… to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships, establish professional standards, and work to promote family well-being,” with the goal of being the premier family research and practice organization. NCFR’s stance of “neutrality” on controversial family issues prevents NCFR from truly achieving its mission; as a result NCFR lags behind peer organizations with respect to inclusion and diversity. We request dialogue and institutional change to create a premier family organization that seeks to strengthen all families. Below, we summarize some of the events that led to this call.

The NCFR Inclusion and Diversity Committee (IDC) was created as a Board committee in 2011 and charged with engaging members in scholarly dialogue, reviewing all organizational policies and practices, and making recommendations to the NCFR Board of Directors concerning all issues pertaining to inclusion and diversity. Due to competing definitions of “inclusion,” the NCFR IDC charge has been interpreted as ensuring that all members of the organization have their views validated, including those who have been historically dominant, or who have held power in both the organization and society. The experiences and perspectives of those who are oppressed or marginalized are erased, silenced, or reduced to opinion. In comparison, other professional societies (e.g., SRA; SRCD) have similarly-named “diversity” committees charged with ensuring the inclusion and representation of historically marginalized groups – but not those who have been historically dominant.

NCFR has attempted to remain “neutral” by not taking official policy positions. The stated reason has been that NCFR is prohibited from taking policy positions due to its 501(c)(3) tax status. This assertion, however, is incorrect (American Bar Association): Taking an organizational position on a policy issue is not equivalent to lobbying.

In this Call for Action we describe several examples of the ways that NCFR’s current organizational understanding and interpretation of “inclusion and diversity,” as well as its organizational position of “neutrality,” has thwarted full inclusion and diversity.

The NCFR Board’s 2013 Statement on Marriage Equality
In 2013 some NCFR members – as well as NCFR itself – came under media fire for their connection to the highly flawed and controversial New Family Structures Study, which argued that growing up with a sexual minority parent caused a host of negative health outcomes in adulthood. In light of the controversy, the NCFR Board of Directors issued a “statement on child well-being, same-sex parenting, and marriage” at the 2013 conference which asserted that: “because children thrive in stable families, and because marriage helps to stabilize unions, the well-being of children is enhanced when same-sex parents have access to marriage and all of its social and legal benefits and protections”. The statement was affirmed based on years of supporting research evidence, but was subsequently undermined by the following qualifier
posted with it on the NCFR website: “The statement reflects the board’s opinion with regard to the current research on the well-being of children in the context of family structures. The statement is not an NCFR policy statement. The board acknowledges that not all NCFR members share its interpretation of the research evidence and welcomes all members to express their views openly and freely.” The qualifier reduces the statement to mere opinion, suggests that other opinions are equally valid, and disingenuously distances NCFR from the pressing policy questions implied by the statement.

**Dialogue about Racialized Police Brutality**

In fall 2014/winter 2015, the IDC turned its attention to the deaths of unarmed Black men and boys at the hands of U.S. police officers. The IDC was inspired by the response from other professional organizations (SRA; APA) and drafted a call for dialogue. In February 2015, the NCFR Board forbade the IDC to claim authorship of its “I Can’t Breathe: A Call for Dialogue and Action” piece in the NCFR Report. The IDC was told that the Board did not want to be associated (through the statement of a Board-constituted committee) with a potentially controversial statement about racial injustice because some NCFR members (e.g., those with police officers as family members) might be offended. IDC members were allowed to sign on as individuals without their IDC position titles.

**“100 Scholars of Marriage” Amicus Brief**

In April 2015, the highly-criticized “100 Scholars of Marriage” amicus brief was submitted to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) arguing that same-sex couples should not be given access to civil marriage, and signed by several NCFR members. Soon after, NCFR released a Policy Watch statement, celebrating the fact that NCFR members’ research, as well as research in NCFR journals, were highlighted in amicus briefs submitted to SCOTUS. IDC and GLBTSA focus group members raised concerns regarding the neutrality of the Policy Watch statement and were told that “NCFR does not position itself regarding policy issues.”

**2015 SCOTUS Decision on Marriage Equality and NCFR Response**

In June 2015 the SCOTUS extended the Constitutional right of civil marriage to same-sex couples across the nation. The majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges* pointed to the injustice of denying same-sex couples and their children the legal and financial benefits of marriage, as well as “the recognition, stability, and predictability marriage offers.” The Court’s opinion was consistent with NCFR’s mission to promote the well-being of families, as well as the NCFR Board of Directors’ 2013 “statement on child well-being, same-sex parenting, and marriage.” Prompted by members, the NCFR Board released an “NCFR Board update: U.S. Supreme Court decision on marriage for same-sex couples”. The response was problematic for several reasons:

1. It is dismaying that NCFR, the “premier association for the multidisciplinary understanding of families,” was unprepared to respond to the SCOTUS ruling: The Board took action only after being prompted by members.
2. The “NCFR Board update” was disseminated only to NCFR members: It was not a public statement.
3. The Board edited the draft provided to them by the IDC, adding the phrase: “we also recognize that not all members are in agreement with the Court’s decision.” This phrase
negates the positive impact of the statement by legitimizing the stance of members who oppose legal recognition of marriage for same-sex couples.

In response, a group of members expressed these concerns and called upon the Board to make substantive change to the organization in regard to its understanding of and approach to inclusion and diversity. Specifically, the group asked the NCFR Board to “hire an external consultant with expertise in issues of diversity and inclusion – especially in regard to LGBTQ issues and race/ethnicity. …to evaluate and assess the organization as whole and to work with the NCFR Board, staff, and the IDC to create a strategic plan to move the organization forward on issues of inclusion and diversity.” The Board’s response was that they did “not see a need to implement [our] suggested actions at this time.”

We no longer will accept NCFR’s stance of neutrality on issues of diversity and inclusion: Neutrality is impossible and serves only to perpetuate the status-quo.

Our Call for Action

NCFR cannot claim to be the “premier” association for a research-based understanding of families while also legitimizing heterosexist beliefs and failing to challenge white privilege and racism. NCFR’s stance of neutrality is unacceptable.

We ask the NCFR Board of Directors to take action that will guide NCFR toward an organizational culture that is stronger with respect to inclusion and diversity.

We request time for up to 3 of us to meet in person with the Board of Directors at your November meeting in Vancouver. We know your agenda will be full: We ask for no more than 10 minutes to provide additional background for this call for action, and will be available to answer questions or have dialogue in person.

We request a response to this request by Friday, October 23, 2015.

Signed:

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