Deprivatization and the Construction of Domestic Life
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Published by: National Council on Family Relations
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/353410
Accessed: 25-12-2015 20:38 UTC

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Interpretations of family and domestic life are increasingly deprivatized, that is, accomplished in various sites outside the household. Addressing this situation, this article has two goals. First, it presents a constructionist approach to family studies that views family as a social object constituted through interpretive practice. Second, it documents how family images and meanings are rationalized, public accomplishments. Featuring two interpretive conditions—local culture and organizational embeddedness—we illustrate the socially situated construction of family and discuss analytic implications of the constructionist approach.

The family has long been cherished for its privacy. Its image in Western societies as an entity separate, distinct, and sheltered from other social institutions has flourished in popular culture, everyday discourse, and family studies (Demos, 1979; Gubrium & Holstein, 1987; Jeffrey, 1972; Laslett, 1973; Skolnick, 1979). In this view, the family is a “sphere” or “world” set apart from other realms, with distinct functions and discernible boundaries (Berger & Kellner, 1970; Hess & Handel, 1994; Parsons & Bales, 1955). For better or worse, domestic order is believed to exist authentically within households, the family’s natural habitat. Ultimately, the inner reaches of the home are fully accessible only to household members and close associates. Family life goes on “backstage” (Goffman, 1959), behind closed doors, in an “intimate environment” (Skolnick, 1987).

Popular sentiment, traditional political interests, and professional scholarship have all—in their own fashions—placed the “private” family in opposition to the dehumanizing forces of modernity and bureaucracy, often going so far as to suggest that the family, as it is conventionally known and valued, has been besieged by forces that undermine domestic sanctity. Perhaps Christopher Lasch (1977) articulated this most succinctly and poignantly when he portrayed the family as a “haven in a heartless world.” Lasch warned that the traditional domain of domestic privacy was being invaded, overrun by the myriad organizations and institutions of modern society. Adopting a version of the private image, Lasch depicted the family as an endangered “refuge from the cruel world of politics and work” (p. xxiv).

Key Words: deprivatization, ethnomethodology, family discourse, interpretive practice, qualitative family studies, social constructionism.
Despite its popularity, ubiquity, and persistence, however, this vision of the family has been challenged on empirical, theoretical, and political grounds. The most notable assault accompanies a call to “rethink the family” (Thorne & Yalom, 1982). With feminism as the central galvanizing force, the notion of a single, monolithic family form has come under attack. The central argument is that THE FAMILY writ large—as in the traditional family image—is more ideology than empirical reality (see Bernardes, 1985; Osmond & Thorne, 1993; Thorne, 1982).

At the same time, feminists and others have assailed the notion that the family is (or should be) insulated from external structures and forces. Family isolation, they argue, is illusory given the close connections between families’ internal lives and the organization of the economy, the state, and other institutions. Matters of race, class, and gender further undermine the public-private distinction (see Baca Zinn, 1992; Collins, 1989; Kessler-Harris, 1982; Osmond & Thorne, 1993). This suggests that, like the monolithic family, “the separation of private from public is largely an ideological construct,” (Okin, 1989, p. 23)—more artificial than substantial—further “demystifying the dichotomy” between public and family spheres (Osmond & Thorne, 1993, p. 608).

The growing repudiation of the monolithic, private image has led to what some are calling a “paradigm shift” in family studies (Allen & Demo, 1995)—a trend towards more “inclusive” family theorizing and research (Baca Zinn, 1992) that increasingly recognizes family pluralism and diversity (see Baber & Allen, 1992; Thompson, 1992; Walker, 1993). Research is beginning to note how persons have creatively and resourcefully “remade” contemporary family life into the varied, fluid, and unresolved arrangements that Judith Stacey so eloquently calls “brave new families” (1990). The emphasis on diversity among “postmodern” families (Cheal, 1991, 1993; Luscher & Schultheis, 1993; Stacey, 1990) is evident in the proliferation of family texts that eschew the terminology of the family in favor of the plural form families (e.g., Baber & Allen, 1992; Baca Zinn & Etten, 1990; Cheal, 1993; Stacey, 1990; Winton, 1995).

Nevertheless, and the new outlook notwithstanding, the family and its private image stubbornly persist in both everyday and academic parlance. Dorothy Smith (1993), for example, argued that the image of the “Standard North American Family” (SNF) is a virtual interpretive tem-plate—a ubiquitous ideological code—that even today thoroughly insinuates both everyday and scholarly discourse. “SNAF infected texts,” Smith wrote, “are all around us” (p. 63). Contemporary political debates centering on “family values,” welfare reform, entitlement programs, and reproductive rights are almost exclusively framed in the language of the traditional family that has supposedly been “debunked.” Indeed, Marie Osmond and Barrie Thorne (1993) noted that even the “language of family social sciences perpetuates monolithic imagery” (p. 168), pointing to the title of the field’s premier journal—Journal of Marriage and the Family—as a prime example. As Leslie Miller (1990a, 1990b) suggested, the origins, ubiquity, and resilience of the traditional image of family and the modern public-private duality beg further analysis.

“Rethinking the family” can take forms other than theoretical or empirical calls for the recognition of substantive diversity. Recently, an ethnographers methodologically informed constructionist approach to family studies has emerged to challenge standard ways of conceptualizing family (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). Whereas the approach resonates with feminist arguments against a singular family form, its point of departure is more interactional than structural. While feminism is theoretically, methodologically, and politically diverse, feminist family studies have tended to focus substantively on how everyday lives are shaped by larger social structures and relations of power (DeVault, 1991; Smith, 1987). The constructionist approach—in a complementary, if not corresponding, fashion—emphasizes how interaction, discourse, and interpretation produce domestic order. Whereas feminist critiques have vigorously disputed the ideology of the singular, monolithic family, the constructionist alternative challenges the very notion of family as a determinate social form that corresponds to any concept of the family (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Smith, 1993).

In many ways, feminism and constructionism offer intersecting analytic trajectories that challenge traditional assumptions about family and the meaning of domesticity. From either standpoint, myriad questions persist regarding the source and shape of the familial. The constructionist position, in particular, is animated by questions like who or what defines the substance and organization of domestic life, and how are the parameters of family meanings established? While not opposed to structurally oriented feminist
agendas, it has more in common with those versions of feminism that are predominantly concerned with everyday practice (see Baber & Allen, 1992; DeVault, 1991; Lather, 1991; L. Miller, 1993; Stacey, 1990; Thompson, 1993).

This article has two goals. First, we present an ethnomethodologically informed constructionist approach that treats family as a matter of interpretive practice. Presupposing that family obtains its defining characteristics somewhere, somehow, in real time and place, we argue that family is not objectively meaningful—that it does not take on the substantive contours of a specific ideal, past or present; instead, it is constantly “under construction.” We outline the theoretical underpinnings, methodological imperatives, and analytic implications of this position. The second goal relates the constructionist approach to what Norbert Wiley (1985, p. 30) has called the “deprivatization” of the family. We aim to demonstrate how family, with its commonsense image of unity and privacy, is an increasingly rationalized, public accomplishment. This represents our attempt to tie a constructionist view to a broader theory of experience and interpretation in contemporary life (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b). We are motivated by a central analytic question: In a world of myriad and competing interpretations of domestic life, how is family defined and experienced?

“Family” as Interpretive Practice

Rather than adopting the private image of the family as a distinct entity sequestered in households or placed in opposition to organizations (see Silverman, 1970), family can be viewed as a socially constructed, situationally contingent cluster of meanings. Embracing this position, social constructionists have begun to analyze family as a constellation of ideas, images, or terminology that is used to assign meaning to aspects of everyday life—in this case, domestic meaning (see Bernardes, 1991, 1993; Gubrium & Holstein, 1987, 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994a; Hopper, 1993; G. Miller, 1991; L. Miller, 1990a, 1990b). Undergirding the approach is the argument that, in order to take account of the myriad and competing definitions of family in contemporary life, we need to conceptualize domestic order in relation to interpretive practice—the situationally sensitive procedures through which experience is represented, organized, re-produced, and understood (Holstein, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium 1994b).

This contrasts with the more customary vision of family as a group or object to be described and explained; instead we frame it as the practical product of diverse ways of interpreting social relations. “Family” and related terms of reference are an interpretive vocabulary, a set of conceptual resources for constructing the meaning of social bonds. Concretely, what comes to be known and understood as domestic order (or disorder) is produced by way of family discourse, making family an interactional accomplishment.

The constructionist perspective offers an alternative to more traditional forms of family studies by making the topic of inquiry—family itself—problematic. Traditional (and even critical) approaches typically assume that the family, or even diverse families, exist as part of the life world in some objective condition, apart from acts of interpretation. Research typically attempts to describe and explain what goes on in and around this living unit. Because families are assumed to be located in households (even as they have varied institutional linkages), unobtrusive access is a general concern. Naturalistic qualitative approaches, in particular, emphasize the inconspicuous observation of families in their natural habitat, with the goal of producing rich descriptions of family members’ experience or points of view (see Adler & Adler, 1994; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

In contrast, as a point of departure, the constructionist approach considers family to be an idea or configuration of meanings, thus problematizing its experiential reality. The objective is to understand how family meanings are assembled and used in any physical site or social location, and how this situated process of interpretation gets transmuted into concrete domestic life. The focus is on the interpretive activity and resources that produce domestic order and meaning.

Consider, for example, the following interpretation of domestic ties and family structure that was offered by an African American woman living in a Midwestern urban community.

Most people kin to me are in this neighborhood . . . but I got people in the South, in Chicago, and in Ohio too. I couldn’t tell most of their names and most of them aren’t really kinfolk to me. . . . Take my father, he’s no father to me. I ain’t got but one daddy and that’s Jason. The one who raised me. My kids’ daddies, that’s something else, all their daddies’ people really take to them—they always doing things and making a fuss about them. We help each other
out and that’s what kinfolks are all about. (Stack, 1974, p. 4)

In this extract, a key informant from Carol Stack’s (1974) classic family study All Our Kin interprets family structure and meaning by using a familiar, recognizable vocabulary to construct and convey what it means to be family. The parameters of family are established in terms of a network of care and cooperation, not formal kinship designations. By assigning family status in this way, the woman indicates what persons mean to one another, simultaneously designating their interpersonal rights and obligations. She instructs her listeners in how to interpret and understand the concrete meaning of particular social ties, publicly constituting domestic order in relation to the practical circumstances that compose the life world that she confronts daily.

Compare this with the interpretation of family offered in a recent attempt by a municipality to define the family in order to regulate residential occupancy. A controversy had emerged over the revelation that a “boarding house” had been established in a residential neighborhood. To limit the legal number of persons who could occupy a “single family dwelling,” the planning commission of the middle-class, mostly White community at the edge of a university campus proposed an ordinance “directed at preserving the residential character of the village and the values and relationships—both moral and legal—found in the traditional family unit, which unit is a basic epicenter of such values and relationships.” The proposed ordinance went on to state that “Family is defined...as immediate family through marriage and offspring, living and cooking together as a single housekeeping unit, and one or more people related by blood, adoption, or guardianship.”

Once again, familiar terminology is invoked to define the domestic unit, but in this instance, as in others, interpretive practice shapes our understanding. Family is formulated in legal, moral, and biological kinship terms, not in the vocabulary of commitment, caring, and obligation used by Stack’s informant above. Responding to a different configuration of concerns, the second definition offers a version of family that is equally recognizable, yet strikingly different from the preceding example.

Our intent here is not merely to suggest that persons have occasion to define and describe social relations to suit their immediate needs. Nor is it to suggest that some family definitions are more legitimate or authentic than others. Rather, our point is epistemological and analytic: Family structure and the meaning of domesticity are interactional, interpretive projects that are conditioned by decidedly public circumstances and practical concerns. From this perspective, the essence of family is found in interpretive practice, not in idealized social forms, no matter how diverse they are touted to be.

While the constructionist approach in general derives from phenomenological initiatives (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1970), the version we are presenting reflects ethnomet hodological sensibilities that place interaction at the heart of meaning making (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Pollner, 1987). Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), for example, suggested that social institutions, once constructed, are virtually self-maintaining in the absence of problems or challenges; institutions “tend to persist unless they become ‘problematic’” (p. 117). Ethnomethodology, in contrast, construes institutional realities as ongoing, locally managed accomplishments. Rather than treating institutions as self-sustaining, it focuses on how constitutive actions continually produce and reproduce local realities, with context and interpretive process being reflexively related (Heritage, 1984). Thus, an ethnomethodologically informed constructionist approach to family emphasizes interaction as mediating family meaning and domestic reality. It is more concerned with the articulation of domestic meanings—family usage—than with the “finite province of meanings” that compose family (McLain & Weigert, 1979) or the cognitive principles that sustain “the family” as a social form.

Conceptualizing family as interpretive practice invites new ways of addressing issues relating to the family privacy debate. For instance, while we appreciate Lasch’s insight into the increasing public “intrusion” into the family realm, we—like many feminists—reject the wholesale distinction he and others draw between the private sphere and public life. Taking the contrasting position that the form and substance of “privacy” are a matter of public definition, we construe family and the realm of domesticity as socially constituted, experiential entities. Just as Michel Foucault (1980) argued that Victorian efforts to suppress sexuality virtually invited an animated public discourse of sexuality—simultaneously constructing an aspect of human experience that previously was all but silent—we are suggesting that public discourse and debate shape and sustain the experiential structure of domestic privacy. The pro-
duction and attachment of domestic meanings to interpersonal relations is decidedly social, including meanings that cast family in the traditional private image.

DEPRIVATIZATION

Bureaucracy and formal organizations are hallmarks of contemporary Western society; life is carried out more and more in relation to professional and disciplinary practices (Ahrne, 1990; Drucker, 1993; Foucault, 1979; Giddens, 1992; Presthus, 1978). Where family matters are concerned, large- and small-scale organizations increasingly articulate and evaluate nearly all aspects of domestic experience, from the reading readiness of children and the emotional control of adolescents, to the stability of marriages and the filial responsibility of adults for aging parents. Very personal matters are considered in organized public circumstances. Organizations and their agents—especially, but not exclusively, human service professionals—literally make it their business to interpret domestic life so that they can address and ameliorate the troubles that beset clients. Because those who are troubled, or those responsible for them, often don’t know themselves what ails them, the organizations and their agents are either freely or involuntarily encountered as sources of definition. Whereas Lasch and others have portrayed these organizations rather negatively as the perpetrators of “encroachment” or invasion, we take a different view. Avoiding judgement, we treat organizations as prevalent sources of domestic meaning—sites that regularly give public voice to the existence of a private sphere. To the extent that domestic meanings are increasingly formulated in organized public settings, domesticity and the family are becoming more deprivatized.

To say that domesticity is deprivatized is not a lament. Rather, we take it as the recognition that life today is widely defined in organized public settings whose discursive and surveillance practices shape interpretations of everyday life, including family living (see Foucault, 1979). At the same time, interpretations are mediated by decidedly local challenges, using local interpretive resources, even while the latter are varied and linked with broader institutional practices. The question of who or what is family is answered in the course of dealing with real life concerns within concrete social settings, many of which are formally organized.

As Marx (1964) has told us, people construct their lives, but not completely according to their own desires. While the social construction of family can be described as “artful” and a matter of “practical reasoning” (Garfinkel, 1967), it is not socially unfettered. Domestic meaning is not assembled from the ground up, so to speak, on each interpretive occasion. Rather, the process is mediated by the interpretive conditions at hand. Interpretive practice is a kind of bricolage of domesticity (Levi-Strauss, 1966), as Clifford Geertz (1983) recognized when he argued that knowledge is “always ineluctably local” (p. 4); the bricoleur’s descriptive activity is shaped by the circumstances of its production.

Interpretation is conditioned by practical exigencies and relies upon delimited cultural categories—collective representations, in Durkheimian (1961) terms—that are diversely and artfully articulated with, and attached to, experience. We refer to these interpretive resources and parameters as local culture (Gubrium, 1989). Culture, from this perspective, is not a set of prescriptions or rules for interpretation and action; rather, it is a constellation of more or less regularized, localized ways of assigning meaning and responding to things. It provides familiar interpretive resources and standards of accountability to which those members must orient themselves as they formulate their actions. By characterizing culture as local, we are suggesting that it comprises the proximate, ordinary, circumstantial particulars that are taken into account and used to establish the meaningful objects and events of everyday life.

Local culture is thus a situationally assembled array of resources and conditions for interpretation, not a monolithic set of injunctions or absolute directives. Like Foucault’s (1973) notion of the “institutional gaze,” local culture may “incite” (Foucault, 1979) particular interpretations and supply the vocabulary for their articulation, but it neither dictates nor determines what is interpretively constructed.

Considering family discourse from this standpoint, local cultures of domesticity convey relatively stable and distinct ways of conceptualizing family, posing delimited conditions of interpretation that are, in turn, subject to interpretive practice. For example, a family therapy program conceiving of the family as a configuration of sentiments provides participants with a particular orientation and vocabulary for interpreting and portraying domestic troubles, to be articulated in
the language of feelings and sharing. Another therapy agency, with its corresponding image of the family as a hierarchy of authority, would formulate family order and disorder quite differently, in terms of power and authority (see Gubrium, 1992). While far from totalized or deterministic, local culture offers ways of thinking and talking about experience, providing interpretive tools and materials that can be used to fashion meaning.

Interpretation in contemporary life is further conditioned by differential organizational applications of local culture. The structure of organizational relations—such as the specialized mandates and missions, or the professional and occupational outlooks and orientations that make up an organization—provide additional resources for constructing domestic relations. To the extent that localized configurations of domestic meaning are mediated by particular perspectives or positions in a setting, we consider the meaning making process to be organizationally embedded (Gubrium, 1987). Professional outlooks and agendas combine to influence the local assignment of meaning in distinctive ways. In involuntary mental hospitalization hearings, for instance, the judicial concern for the availability of a “safe home” often contrasts with a therapeutic emphasis on psychiatric treatment. Here, different professionally oriented voices articulate the contours of troubled lives in somewhat different terms within a shared local culture of community mental health care (Holstein, 1993).

At this point, several caveats are in order. First, while organized settings provide accountable modes of interpretation, we must reiterate that settings do not determine interpretive practice. Local culture supplies resources for interpretation, not injunctions or absolute directives. Experience constituted in a particular organization or setting may take on the general qualities that the organization or setting promotes, but practitioners of everyday life are not “organizational dopes”—mere extensions of organizational thinking (Douglas, 1986). They exercise interpretive discretion, mediated by complex combinations of meaning. Prevailing domestic interpretations thus emerge as adaptations of diverse local resources and conditions.

Second, it is important to note that organizational embeddedness refers to the circumstances in which domestic order is constituted, not to the actual integration of families or their members into the workings of groups or organizations. It is interpretive practice and, in particular, interpretations of domesticity, that are embedded in, and shaped by, the organizational meaning-making apparatus, not actual persons or the family as objective entities.

Third, in this article, we tend to employ the concept of organizational embedded!ness rather narrowly, focusing mainly on formal groups and organizations. Theoretically, however, the idea has broader application. Interpretive practice can be analyzed for the ways that any socially organized circumstances—those of race, class, or gender, for example—supply interpretive options, constraints, and agendas. One might, for example, examine the discursive practices or “family language” (Collins, 1989) of racial or ethnic communities, documenting the indigenous ways in which family meanings are constructed and used (see Anderson, 1981; Stack, 1974). And there are myriad other strategies for examining how race, class, gender, and other structural conditions mediate family interpretations (see Brewer, 1988; Miller, 1993).

Finally, we must keep in mind that interpretive practice is a complex process that responds to multiple layers of interpretive constraints and resources. While interpretation is always local, those contingencies that come to bear at any particular place and time coalesce from a vast array of possibilities. Race, gender, professional affiliation, physical location, and myriad other sites and circumstances come together at the nexus of interpretive domains to be sifted and employed. Given these complexities, it is virtually impossible for interpretation to be dictated by any single source, in any totalized fashion.

Studying the Hows and Whats of Practice

As local resources and organizational orientations mediate the assignment of domestic meaning, we can see the way in which even the most “private” sphere of the family is interpreted in relation to public, organizational, and institutional practices. For over two decades, we have conducted ethnographic field research in a variety of organizational settings, focusing on the way meanings are locally produced. Taken cumulatively, the studies provide material for comparative analysis of organizationally grounded interpretive practice. Because of the cultural importance and ubiquity of family, the interpretation of domestic matters was central to the daily activities of all of these organizations. Over the years, and from site to site,
our observations provided myriad instances of the deprivatization of domesticity.

From nursing homes (Gubrium, 1975, 1993) and treatment programs for troubled youth (Buckholdt & Gubrium, 1979), to courtrooms (Holstein, 1993), mental health centers (Gubrium, Holstein, & Buckholdt, 1994), social service agencies (Holstein, 1988), family therapy programs (Gubrium, 1992), a rehabilitation hospital (Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982), and caregiver support groups (Gubrium, 1986), we have repeatedly found that the social circumstances of interpretation distinctively shape renderings of the domestic realm.

The distinctiveness of an ethnographically oriented approach to family studies lies in its commitment to examining how domestic meaning and order are produced and sustained interactionally. This means that our research relies upon observational fieldwork that documents reality-constituting processes. Accordingly, we record on audio tapes or in detailed “process notes” the fine-grained detail of talk and interaction within the various field sites. Our concern is to capture the give and take of interaction in naturally occurring circumstances, in real time (see Silverman, 1993). We treat the activities we observe and record as the methods everyday persons use to structure their experience and assemble their meaningful realities (hence the term “ethnomethodology,” see Garfinkel, 1967).

At the same time, however, we are equally attentive to the context within which reality-constituting interaction takes place and the meanings that are produced and oriented to—the *whats* of the social construction process. Because interaction is conditioned by material, cultural, and interpretive circumstances, and relies upon locally available and useful resources, we attempt to document these features of the setting we study. But we are careful to note how contextual features are themselves invoked, oriented to, and made consequential by the participants in a setting under study. Thus, we try to focus on both the locally salient and meaningful features of a setting, as well as on what is going on in the setting, and how the activities of the setting constitute the setting’s realities (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1993b, 1994a; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994b).

Data analysis follows these theoretical commitments. We examine transcriptions of interaction, never ignoring the observational records (e.g., ethnographic fieldnotes) that provide information about the contexts within which the interactions took place. Our objective is to describe how the taken-for-granted features of everyday life are constructed. This means that we must analytically “bracket” commonsense meanings in order to examine how they are accomplished. We neither trivialize nor ironicize (Pollner, 1987) everyday meanings; to the contrary, we take them quite seriously by making them—and their construction—the explicit focus of our analysis. We resist invidious comparisons between the constructed realities of everyday life and some scientific, objective, or transcendental standards for what reality “should be” or “really is.” This means that we are interested in documenting the construction and navigation of the practical working realities that persons experience as real.

In the process, we “deconstruct” the family as a social form, working backward from taken-for-granted social realities toward practices and interpretive conditions that produce them. This approach to family studies makes problematic the very essence of what is family. Our intent is not to supplant other studies of domestic life and relations. There is certainly need for all kinds of research on how persons—mothers, fathers, children, and significant others—organize and conduct their daily lives. Instead, we hope to expand family studies, by focusing on the ways that the meaning and organization of family is publicly constructed.

Drawing upon two examples from our research, we now illustrate the deprivatization of domestic life, highlighting, respectively, the mediating effects of local culture and organizational embeddedness.

**Local Culture and Domestic Life**

Local cultures provide myriad representations of domesticity. The deprivatization of the family is nowhere more noticeable than when alternate settings are compared in terms of their related interpretive assets and constraints. Differing sites or contexts, as we will demonstrate, serve to realize contrasting domestic orders according to their descriptive resources and limits.

Take, for example, how contrasting local cultures lead to distinctly different ways of constructing family in two family therapy programs (Gubrium, 1992). Westside House, an outpatient program, is oriented to domestic order as a system of authority. (Throughout our illustrations, we fictionalize the names of all persons and places.) A functional family is viewed as one in which parents or other properly responsible adults
are in control, making the consequential decisions of the home. The therapeutic aim is to reestablish traditional authority when it has eroded, putting the parents back in control, preferably with the father at the top of the hierarchy. In contrast, Fairview Hospital, an inpatient, psychiatric facility, orients to domestic order as a democracy of sentiments—a relational complex where everyone’s feelings are equally important. Domestic disorder results when family members fail to share their feelings with one another. Clients who bring similar domestic troubles to these programs, such as drug or alcohol addictions, wife and child abuse, or truancy, encounter different understandings and vocabularies for interpreting domestic lives that are taken to be integral parts of the troubles.

Yet the concrete signs used to link these contrasting views with the facts and elements of family life are remarkably similar. For instance, the seating arrangement and composure of family members in therapy, including members’ styles of verbalization, are used in both settings to signal the social order of the home. In both programs, parents and children in therapy are scrutinized for their physical comportment and for the way they present themselves and speak to one another. But these signs, while similar, are interpreted locally; their meaning is related to local orientations to domestic order. For example, the rare father who at Westside House selects a so-called power seat (usually centrally located in the therapy room’s seating arrangement) and presents in a clear and commanding manner, tolerating no interruptions from other family members, is typically interpreted as showing that he is in charge of the home, that the family is properly ordered and functional. Staff at Fairview Hospital, however, view a similarly presenting father as inappropriately using power to spoil what should be a proper democracy of emotions in which every member needs to actively share his or her own and others’ feelings. In this instance, the father’s comportment is viewed as a sign of family disorder.

To illustrate how family is discursively constituted from such signs, consider the way that the posture and seating arrangement of family members are read at Westside House. In a meeting of counselors reviewing a videotape of a therapy session with a mother and her sons, participants are told that the mother is divorced and depressed, and that her twin sons are repeatedly disruptive at school, “out of control,” so to speak. In the following extract from the proceedings, note how, in the counselors’ talk, the sons’ status as troubled youth is embodied in mundane signs and interpreted in relation to the prevailing local culture of domesticity.

Just before the videotape of the therapy session is played, Leila Korson, the counseling intern and former schoolteacher who is presenting the case to the other counselors, summarizes the so-called family situation. As the tape is played, the counselors (Gary Nelson, Nancy Cantor, Tammy Horton, and Donna Reddick) turn to the monitor, where they expect to “see” the family situation. The counselors listen as Korson, on tape, asks the boys how it feels to grow up as twins. Nelson then tells Korson to put the tape on pause and to identify the persons on the monitor. As Korson does, she comments on the seating arrangement, designating posture as a clue to the “problem in this home.”

KORSON: This one twin [Johnny] was kinda quiet at first. I couldn’t get him to say anything. Later in the session, he moved over here [points to his current seating position] and then he started to talk more, like he was the boss around home. I think he’s the dominant one [twin]. Look at the way he’s sitting. [Johnny sits upright and forward in his chair.] He’s like that all the time, even when he was sitting over here [points to the seat at the right, out of camera range].

CANTOR: Now he’s in the power seat and he feels more comfortable [pause] more like himself.

HORTON: Yeah, like he feels at home.

REDDICK: The mother, to me, is giving mixed messages to the boys about living at home and going to the father [who lives nearby]. She tells them if they don’t behave, they can just get out of the house and go to their father. Then she tells them that they better behave or they’ll turn out just like him.

HORTON: [Pointing to the monitor as she restarts the tape.] Yeah [pause] and just look at that kid [Johnny]. Look at how he sits at the edge of the chair [pause] like he’s going to jump all over Mom if she dares to cross him. Just look at him! It’s written all over him. That look he’s giving her. My God, it’s just telling her [mother] that he’s in charge. And he knows it. If she crosses him, he’ll just march over to Dad and live there.

CANTOR: And would you look at the other one [twin]. He’s watching his brother real close-like, waiting to see what to do. And would ya look at Mom! [All watch the monitor for a
few seconds.] Look at how she looks down at the floor all the time, like she’s being stepped on when Johnny gets going. You can see what a bad scene it is. That’s not a very healthy home. No wonder those boys are delinquent.

Counselors view and point to the monitor as if they were actually witnessing domestic order and the competence of family members before their very eyes. With comments such as “Look at Mom,” “Just look at him,” and “That’s not a very healthy home,” the speakers sound as if they are directly observing the household’s social order and, at the same time, how the twins figure into it. Mundane signs are used concretely and locally reference and constitute what otherwise is abstract, in this case, “not a very healthy home” and “delinquency” (see Pollner, 1987).

Fairview Hospital’s contrasting culture of domestic order looks for the healthy household in signs relating to a democracy of emotions. Each and every family member or significant other has feelings. No one is without them, not even the youngest child or other seemingly insignificant member of the household. Feelings—especially love—are the bedrock of domestic order. A household in which it is possible to express feelings and whose members actively listen to each other is a healthy home, where individual self-esteem democratically integrates the membership.

A democracy of emotions is also very abstract, not something simply observed. As at Westside House, a system of signs links the abstract with the mundane to embody domestic life. At Fairview, signs of domestic order can be seen in the same words and gestures as at Westside. Seating, posture, and verbalization are significant. However, at Fairview, seating refers more to being seated than to the seating arrangement of family members. Sitting down is thought to be more conducive to communication and the reception of feelings than standing up. The father who sits down while describing his unruly son’s behavior is more likely to convey authentic feelings and be truly heard than the father who stands up and intimidates listeners. Posture, especially “sitting back,” reflects communicative receptivity. For example, the mother who not only sits down to communicate, but sits back in her chair, is seen as better equipped to empathetically listen to her daughter’s anxious complaints about a boyfriend’s drinking than the mother who sits at the edge of her chair and appears ready to cut her daughter off at any moment. Verbalization is seen as centering on voice modulation. Those who speak in an inviting and calm tone of voice and who, in turn, show evidence of being prepared to “actively listen” facilitate the expression of feelings. In the extract from Westside, Johnny clearly did not present this way.

While the signs of domestic order and disorder are similar, they mean different things in the context of the two programs. At Westside, staff interpret a parent who, during a therapy session, seats himself or herself prominently in the room, presents confidently, and speaks forcefully as being in authority at home. This is the way parents should be, according to the local culture. As a rule, parents, especially fathers, who are counseled at Westside do not behave this way, which typically serves to explain domestic troubles. Or fathers might “overpresent,” which signals domination and possible abusiveness. At Fairview, staff would view such fathers as intimidating and thwarting effective communication, featuring them as dysfunctional parts of the family system.

The two programs’ local cultures of domestic order, in effect, provide resources for interpreting signs relating to ostensibly private matters such as personal competence and domestic functioning. Family relations—from authority to intimacy—are signalled according to public, yet local, interpretive schemes, deprivatizing these most personal aspects of domestic life.

**Organizational Embeddedness and Family Meaning**

Organizational embeddedness helps to explain how family might be differently constructed from the “same” local culture, showing how interpretively elastic local culture is in its own right. Consider the contrasting interpretations of family in an exchange between a community mental health center psychiatrist, Dr. Conrad, and the judge of an involuntary commitment hearing (see Holstein, 1988, 1993). The two professionals generally agree about what constitutes personal troubles, public danger, and the need for, and effectiveness of, intervention, but their organizational perspectives cast what is ostensibly shared in different terms.

Involuntary commitment proceedings are initiated when persons are believed to be severely mentally ill and either a danger to themselves or others, or are unable to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. In arguing for the release of one of his patients, Tyrone Biggs, Dr.
Conrad asserted that Biggs’s therapeutic program would be completely disrupted if Biggs were hospitalized. Conrad claimed that Biggs was able to function adequately in a community setting and should not be committed. The judge was concerned about Biggs’s living arrangements, which led to the following exchange:

**JUDGE:** Where’s Mr. Biggs gonna stay while he’s being treated?

**DOCTOR:** Tyrone lives with his family. They have an apartment in Lawndale.

**JUDGE:** I thought Mr. Biggs was divorced last year?

**DOCTOR:** He was, your honor. But he’s moved in with his girlfriend and their two children. They share a place with her aunt. He really seems to be getting along fine.

**JUDGE:** Now who is it that takes care of him? You say these two ladies are going to be able to keep him out of trouble. How long has he lived with them? What happens when he gets delusional again?

**DOCTOR:** We’re hoping that’s under control. . . . I think it’s important to understand that being close to his family is extremely important to Tyrone’s [treatment] program. His family wants him there and they make him feel like he belongs. He needs that kind of security—the family environment—if he’s ever going to learn to cope and he’s not going to get it from anyone but his family.

**JUDGE:** That may be so, but you still haven’t told me who will keep him under control. Who’s going to make him take his medication? . . . I just don’t see any family there to look out for him. You say this is his girlfriend and her aunt? How old is this woman [the aunt]? How are they going to handle him? I’m sorry, doctor, but this just isn’t the kind of situation I can feel good about. I really don’t see much of a family here. If I thought there were people there who could really be responsible for this man, it might be different.

The judge and the psychiatrist view this case from different organizational perspectives. Their conceptions of family are narratively linked to, and shaped by, their professional backgrounds, mandates, and interests in cases. Dr. Conrad uses the language of therapy, speaking of how he hopes to improve Biggs’ mental health. He articulates family in terms of assistance for the psychiatric treatment regimen; from that standpoint, people who provide a supportive environment for the troubled are “family.” The judge, however, is concerned with containing the public trouble that he anticipates from Biggs, because he believes Biggs is mentally ill and cannot control himself. The judge is oriented to managing trouble in order to avoid future problems. He sees no family in Biggs’s life because there is no one available to “keep him under control.”

“Family” thus embodies the organizational perspectives and interests of the various parties involved in the exchange. The judge articulates his concerns in custodial terms; when family matters are raised, they are interpreted in relation to how “family” might help control and care for Biggs if he is released. “Family member” is used synonymously with “caretaker.” Dr. Conrad reveals his profession’s remedial concerns as he describes Tyrone Biggs’s “family” in therapeutic terms. The same arrangement, in which the judge finds no family to speak of, becomes a “family environment” through the interpretive voice of the psychotherapeutic community. Embedded as they are in institutional practices, images of Biggs’s family are publicly constructed from organizationally and professionally preferred discursive linkages.

**Implications for Family Studies**

From our constructionist viewpoint, family is interactionally accomplished. Family construction is increasingly common in organizational contexts. This ties what has traditionally been thought of as a distinct private sphere to its public production. Our emphasis on the public side of family interpretation, however, does not imply that domesticity alone is being deprivatized. To the contrary, we view this as part of a larger transformation of intimacy and interpersonal relations in everyday life (see Giddens, 1992). From Max Weber onward, social commentators have written about the negative consequences of organizational and bureaucratic proliferation for everyday life (Gerth & Mills, 1946; Mayer, 1943). Fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills (1943) described the implications for self-definition of what he called “the professional ideology of social pathologists.” More recently, Jurgen Habermas (1987) has depicted the life world as “colonized” by economic and political forces. As Michael Burawoy (1991) noted, “In the face of commodification through money and administration through power, everyday life loses its autonomy and shared purpose” (p. 2). Kenneth Gergen’s (1991)
account of a “saturated self” further emphasized this public invasion of the private sphere.

Our aim is neither to bemoan the demise of the private sphere nor to decry organizational proliferation. Rather, we want simply to underscore how profoundly the public, organized circumstances of contemporary life influence and diversify interpretation, constituting “the family” accordingly. Deprivatization signifies the social side of interpretation and suggests that family (or any other) constructions can vary from one organizational setting to the next. As an analytic matter, one organizational embedded version is not considered to be more objectively authentic or accurate than another, and no local culture of domesticity has a privileged rendition of the way family “really” is. Rather (and sounding a potentially positive note), diversely situated constructions offer an array of interpretive opportunities that reflect the circumstances of their production. This has important analytic implications for family studies.

Method and Meaning

First, analyzing family in terms of interpretive practice requires a commitment to studying the social processes through which domestic meanings are constructed. Research into this meaning-making process demands a distinctive qualitative approach that attends closely to talk and interaction on the one hand, and interpretive conditions on the other. The methods used to collect and analyze data must be continually sensitive to this practical quality of family realities.

Researching deprivatized family construction requires that we examine how family images and discourse are applied in diverse public settings to formulate meaningful representations of domestic life. The aim is to systematically document what participants do with words as they use family and related terms as a working vocabulary for interpreting interpersonal relations. The focus is on usage, not just communication; interpretive practice is the object of analysis. This, in turn, suggests that we can locate and study family whenever and wherever people engage in its discourse. Consequently, family research is not bound to the geographic locale of the home. Rather, any site where family is made topical becomes a circumstance for research. We need not be so concerned about penetrating the privacy of households to find “the family,” but, instead, can cultivate research sites wherever family is constituted.

Whatever method is used to research family’s interpretive practice—interviewing, participant observation, or content analysis, to name just a few possibilities—data are ineluctably about both that which is being represented (family) and the process of representation, respectively, the *whats* and the *hows* of interpretive practice. Gathering data about how interpretive practice unfolds is as critical as collecting data about what kinds of family meaning are assigned to interpersonal relations in the process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Process, in other words, is not separated from content.

The information-gathering process itself can be deeply implicated in the production of family. For example, interviews have become the method par excellence for experiential data gathering, in both research and popular formats. As David Silverman (1993) put it, we have become an “interview society.” If interviewing is seemingly ubiquitous and family is a widely recognized and featured vocabulary for assigning meaning to interpersonal relations, then interviewing—from survey research to human interest talk shows—can be seen as a common occasion for depicting family. Domestic life is constructed through a particular interpretive format, organized around focal and probing questions on the one hand, and considered and individualized responses on the other. With the proliferation of interviewing in contemporary life, family is being increasingly constituted in relation to research and information-gathering practices. Family research thus becomes an important source of the deprivatization of domesticity and the constitution of domestic order (cf. Foucault, 1970).

Deprivatization and Diversity

With our lives more and more intertwined with organizations, people are likely to call upon professionals and formal organizations to interpret and respond to the personal questions, dilemmas, and troubles in which family is interpretively implicated. Human service agencies abound, offering help and advice at every turn. Schools and churches socialize the young, while support groups see us through mid- and later-life changes and crises. And mental health specialists deal with our sentiments, obsessions, and confusions.

As these institutions and agents assess personal experience, featuring family as a significant explanatory framework or variable, the meaning of family becomes more and more an organizational
and professional accomplishment. Organizations and professionals construct domesticity to their own specifications, producing "the-family-according-to-this-expert," "the-family-from-that-organizational-perspective," and so on, as socially hyphenated realities. While the family as a singular, coherent entity may be historically dubious, there is little doubt that contemporary life leaves its current manifestations increasingly multi-sited and multidimensional as a "postmodern" social form.

This picture may be unsettling from the standpoint of the modern cultural belief in object constancy. It seems to thoroughly relativize and undermine the family as it has been commonly known. But the constructionist perspective also provides a way to "see through" the hegemony of commonsense interpretations—even those promulgated by professionals and experts. Indeed, it is by understanding the interplay between interpretive processes and resources that we might account for, if not fully integrate, the multiplicity of family interpretations.

If family is a deprivatized social construction, it is as diverse as the occasions of its interpretation. Deconstructing commonsense renderings of family reveals no single, authentic social form, but rather, myriad multi-sited versions. A constructionist perspective provides a basis for appreciating this diversity, as well as a means of grounding the multifaceted postmodern family in concrete practices and circumstances (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b).

Politics and Practice

Finally, this brings us to the politics of interpretive practice. Any and all interpretations are political in the sense that they vie with their competitors for validation and acceptance. If power can be understood as the ability to have one's position heard (and heeded), then constructionist family studies might attempt to document the ways that power is implicated in the constitution of family meanings.

Feminists and others have pointed the way for understanding the macropolitics of definition, that is, the ways that collective representations or ideologies are developed, sustained, and imposed, providing the basis for enduring—even hegemonic—depictions of family. Recently, poststructuralist influences have encouraged analyses of power and resistance that underscore the role of discursive structures in the production of social objects like the family (see L. Miller, 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Foucault, 1979).

But power is also something enacted—something to be interactionally achieved, not merely a quality to be possessed or imposed. Therefore, studies of family construction must also engage the micropolitics of interpretive practice. Such studies might focus on interactions in relation to household settings through which the meaningful contours of domesticity are brought to life—through words and actions, silence and subordination—making them real for their participants (see DeVault, 1991; L. Miller, 1993). Or they might examine the ways in which diverse interpretive resources are brought to bear in interpretive contests in other settings where definitions of the domestic order of the household are at stake (see G. Miller, 1991). Indeed, the nexus of organizational and household domains may prove the richest grounds for studying the micropolitics of diversity and deprivatization.

As ubiquitous as the politics of family interpretation may be, and as vast, amorphous, and powerful as the forces behind them may seem, we must remember that politics and power are always manifested locally. Ideology must be applied in actual everyday situations. Definitions must be assigned to aspects of lived experience. Culture writ large cannot simply impose itself; shared beliefs and images must always be articulated, somehow, somewhere, by someone. In recognizing this, the constructionist approach tempers the nihilistic overtones of more totalizing theories of structural or cultural influence—the grand narratives of functionalism or Marxism, for example. Indeed, it suggests the possibility of effecting local interpretive change even as dominant ideologies persist.

Consider the examples of the two family therapy agencies discussed previously. The model of family that guides activities at Westside House is readily characterized in patriarchal terms: a hierarchy of authority with the father at the top, his wife by his side, and children in lesser, subordinate positions. One might easily conclude that the broader culture simply permeated, if not overwhelmed, the organization. At the same time, in the same macrocultural milieu, Fairview Hospital sustains a working image of the family as a democracy of emotions—perhaps the antithesis of the patriarchal hierarchy. These different sites developed significantly different local cultures of domesticity to which their interpretive activity is oriented. Of equal importance, interacting indi-
individually had to articulate the contrasting models with the “real” cases that they encountered in practice. At the same time, each site provided possibilities for resistance, reformulation, and realignment. The politics of interpretation were never totally resolved at the level of ideology because they were always enacted locally, interactionally.

To the extent that deprivatization multiplies the occasions when interpretation is publicly at stake, it offers expanding opportunities to contest totalizing schemas. A constructionist perspective on the deprivatization of domesticity thus provides ways of looking through and beyond familiar realities, revealing the practices by which family has been constituted. This, in turn, suggests ways for deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings of family life.

**NOTE**

This article is a revision of a paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Los Angeles, 1994. We would like to thank the following people for their helpful comments and criticisms: Katherine Allen, Joe Hopper, Doni Loseke, Paul Rosenblatt, and Dorothy Smith.

**REFERENCES**


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