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**Family Rhetoric as Social Order**

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This is an analytic report of continuing work on the social rhetoric of the family based on field data gathered in human service settings. The work concerns the reality-defining discourse that presents a sense of who or what is considered to be family and how this is so—topics in the sociology of folk knowledge. An earlier report dealt with the “who” question, pertaining to which relationships, collectivities, or types of conduct were assigned family status (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982b). This article deals with the “how so” question, with the organization of native understandings and interpretations of enduring family conduct.

**RHETORICAL PRACTICE**

Although the folk knowledge addressed is expository in that it sets forth native senses of the family, membership, and members' conduct, it is also rhetorical in that its related discourse serves to

*Many thanks to Carol Warren for comments on an earlier version of this article and to the journal's anonymous reviewers.*

JOURNAL OF FAMILY ISSUES, Vol. 6 No. 1, March 1985 129-152  
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frame thought and influence action. When the devoted daughter of
an aging and demented father bitterly claims that her only brother
"never really acted much like a son" because her brother "hadn't ever
lifted a finger" in caring for the father, she presents her understanding
of what being family is like in that regard. When she adds, "As far as
we're concerned, I'm the only family Dad's got," she suggests, too,
that her family should not be perceived as having included a brother.
When, on another occasion, in her brother's presence, she chastizes
him for this lack of filial concern, she implies that his family status
might be different if he were caring for the father more. In using
familial understandings and interpretations for the caregiving
situation as she sees it, the daughter not only describes the social
order of her family but also has done something with words,
distinguishing what she believes the actual family to be from what it
should be, informing us that what she takes to be family is
represented by her exclusory description of a thoughtless other, not
"brother."

The rhetoric is not merely discursive, but practical. It is used to
describe the concrete activity of those to whom it pertains. As offered,
it serves as a pretext for further activity as well as a context for the
explanation of past actions. Family rhetoric is current and historical,
both articulating and affecting the known past, present, and future
social order of the family.

In a programmatic paper, Jackson (1957) first used the term
"family fictions," stressing the desirability of treating the family in
psychiatric encounters—rather than the patient alone—in order to
discover the interactional patterns that contribute to psychopathology.
Jackson saw fictions as public prescriptions of patterns of
family interaction that muddled real configurations and the basis of
their stability. He treated family fictions as something to be
therapeutically penetrated. Quoting from Jackson (1957, pp. 80-81):

The view of "how it must have been" is obscured by the fog of family
fictions—the family, as members tell themselves they were, usually
contrasts with how they actually were. The family first presented by
the patient is usually the version offered for public consumption; and,
only after several interviews does the real family emerge for the
psychiatrist's scrutiny.

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Jackson’s (1965) and others’ (Ferreira, 1963; Haley, 1967) interest in family fictions contrasts with our sense of family rhetoric. In our usage, family fictions or beliefs are a rhetorical feature of social order in their own right—not cast, a priori, as veneers overshadowing the family’s ostensibly real organization. In rhetorical practice, the so-called real order said to underlie its fictive representation is itself a representation—a kind of presumptive sign. As folk attributions, fictions bespeak of native distinctions between familial appearances and realities; they do not reference an outsider’s diagnosis of the difference. Moreover, fictions are only part of the total stock of familial representations. Some interpretations of enduring family conduct do not present invalid beliefs as overshadowing “how it must have been” or “what it’s really like.” Rather, they resemble what Mills (1940) once called “vocabularies of motive” and, later, Scott and Lyman (1968) and Hewitt and Stokes (1975), respectively, labeled “accounts” and “disclaimers.” As social rhetoric, all are means of representing the order of a social form.

Jackson (1965) and others believed that could reveal the realities of family organization in the context of familial psychotherapy. The texture of family fictions was not taken to be a situated feature of therapeutic understandings of family life, but, if analytically intrusive, merely psychotherapeutically meddlesome fictions that might crop up in therapy itself, serving to further fog familial realities. We take rhetoric in general, fictive and nonfictive representations, to be situated articulations of enduring family conduct, the contextuality of the rhetoric being a feature of family organization. The family rhetoric of one context of reference and discourse articulates an order not necessarily found in another—the native fictions of one situation perhaps being the folk realities of some other.

Jackson’s (1965) and others’ contributions lie not so much in what they aimed for as in what they suggested we seriously focus upon in studying family organization. They pointed to the means by which an observer could witness members actually engaged in making sense of family life, in and through its discourse. The organization of family rhetoric in family therapy could—as any social context would—reveal, through situationed articulations, how enduring family conduct is understood and interpreted on that occasion; the existential order of family life in that time and place.
As rhetoric, the family is not as much conceived as an objective thing to be described and explained as it is a way of socially ordering everyday life, and, of course, influencing it at the same time. Jackson and others understood very well that the ordering and the influencing were intimately, though alterably, intertwined. Following a description of the field settings, we discuss four aspects of their practical, but essential, interconnection: (1) scope of application; (2) rhetorical transformation; (3) signification and order; and (4) rhetorical predominance.

THE FIELD SETTINGS

Among the settings in which family issues regularly arise, human service organizations are prominent. In the three-party interactions occurring between service providers, family members, and clients, the family side of impairment, service delivery, treatment, and care routinely raises a number of questions, among them: "Which family members can be trusted to be the primary caretakers, to act like family?" "How does the client perceive his family as a source of support?" "What conceptions do select members have of the client's personality or family role?" In one way or another, the family side of service provision is linked to assertions about the families, family aims, and the character of, or reasons for, particular members' actions. Broadly conceived, service provision offers diverse contexts for observing rhetorical variability.

Nursing homes commonly hold patient care conferences, in which problems of patient management are discussed by staff and care plans formulated (Gubrium, 1975, 1980). Whoever the participants, family beliefs and opinions are offered and discussed by all as a means of gaining insight into patients' actions and their care needs. The staffs of residential treatment centers for children conduct psychiatric staffings and team conferences—in the presence or absence of family members—in which children's behavioral problems are evaluated, to a large extent in relation to home life. Here, too, descriptions of enduring family conduct are offered as explanations for children's behavior. At the treatment center observed (Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1979), presentations were tied to the children's emotional disturban-
ces. Hospitals hold utilization reviews in which the inpatient status of clients is assessed. In the rehabilitation hospital studied (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982a)—where the average length of stay is four to six weeks for the treatment of physical impairments arising from debilities like stroke and spinal cord injury—perceptions of, and beliefs about, the family in relation to prospects for the long-term care of the disabled are an important feature of care reviews. Many service organizations sponsor, or indirectly assist, support groups for clients and/or family members. Support groups for the families of Alzheimer's disease patients were observed in two cities (Gubrium, 1984; Gubrium and Lynott, forthcoming; Lynott, 1983). With the help of facilitators, participants informally discuss their caregiving experiences and, in the process, make frequent references to how they “have always been viewed by their families in times of need” and “what everyone expected” from certain members, among a host of explanations offered for “why things turned out as they did,” for enduring family conduct.

SCOPE OF APPLICATION

For years, sociologists have debated the issue of how to define the family (see Skolnick, 1973, pp. 5-33). The effort has been joined by those who see the need to construct a cross-culturally sound definition as well as those who choose to validate it historically. The upshot of the concern is that so much variability has been revealed in what the family has been and is, that arriving at a single definition seems futile. Still, family has been and continues to be a meaningful category of human organization.

One way out of the dilemma is to rethink the task. Rather than aiming for a single definition, we turn to usage, treating the family assignment process itself as the definition. Family therefore becomes how and to what family is assigned, focusing our attention on its signs and signification. As such, family's scope of application is not precariously delimited by some standard form. Rather, should standards exist at all, they are assigned in accordance with usage and its social conditions (see Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982b). Although there
may be more or less clear ideas of what it means to "be family," who or what is family is socially discretionary.

Consider the scope of everyday objects and concerns that focus family rhetoric and signal the family's social order. The field data show that the representation of family order cannot be contained by an a priori definition of family affairs; rather, it is the reverse. Family order is interpreted by whatever matters those who are concerned deem appropriate or important. Although Parsons's (1951) classification of levels of social life is a handy means of cataloguing the variety of family applications found in the field data, it is important to point out that representation is essentially open-ended. To define family order in terms of its signs and assignment practices is necessarily to transform definition into defining and, as a result, to unbind the limits of application. The following instances, then, are not exhaustive but illustrative of scope.

Signs of family order range from ideals to material resources. At the normative level, family members and others speak of the goals, aims, or desires that families have for themselves. This may be accompanied by cynical comments about whose norms they really are. For example, referring to the family of an emotionally disturbed boy named Joey, his special education teacher reports:

He comes from the kind of family that puts a lot of pressure on their kids to succeed. You know the type . . . everyone has this image of everyone making it and becoming a star. They aim for the best, plain and simple. I'm not sure they all [family members] feel the same way about it . . . but the mother does, you just know that. That's why Joey's so uptight. He can't live up to it. No one says anything about it but you just know they don't all feel the same way about it. Joey said so himself. I think that's why the kid's so screwed up. They're all trying to measure up to the mother's ideas of what she wants from her family and it's destroying them. And Brad [her husband] won't say a thing. And it's been that way for years.

Although members and others describe family order in terms of common goals, they also make references to ideals prescribed for particular individuals. As the elderly sister of a stroke patient for whom she cares bemoans the fact that everyone in her family idealizes her ability to see through crises to the end—"something that none of the others [siblings] had to live down"—she contrasts the family's
idealized representation of her membership with how her siblings conceived it. She questions the validity of the representation when she adds that she grew to resent the obligations that their beliefs entailed—on the contrary, she had ideas of her own about her family responsibilities.

At the organizational level, family members and others speak of the familial roles into which they are cast. References typify particular members as being, for example, “the motherly type,” “the wanderer,” “the family pet,” “the troublemaker,” “the favorite” (or someone’s favorite), “always a winner,” and the “dependable one.”

The reality-status of family role assignments may be openly reviewed. The mother of a head-trauma patient in rehabilitation after a motorcycle accident explains in a family conference that her son, the patient, is known as the family troublemaker—“a real rabble-rouser”—and that “maybe what he’s doing is living up to what is expected of him.” Remorsefully, she adds:

I think sometimes that it’s just all our faults for always thinking of him that way. I could just kick myself for all the times I introduced him to everyone as “our little troublemaker.” It was kind of cute, but was a damn shame. Maybe we learn from our mistakes. Who knows? He really isn’t a bad boy when you think about it.

In a support group, a sister compares her family status with another family member and offers a correct version of her role in contrast to the other’s role as “family favorite”:

He [her brother] was always looked up to. “Raymond this and Raymond that.” Raymond was everything anyone could ever want to be. That’s what they all thought. Raymond was pretty wonderful... well, I still think he is. But, damn it, so am I! And where did it get me? I got kicked around, that’s what! Look... don’t get me wrong. We all did our share and we were all pretty good at helping out. Equal I’d say. It’s just that, for some damned reason, they all thought Ray was special. He got all the brownie points. Ray does use that to his advantage sometimes, I think.

There is rhetoric, too, about the order revealed in the enduring personal traits of particular family members. Sometimes this is conveyed in terms of the way select members are said to have always
expressed their feelings. For example, in a support group, a woman once described her sister as “forever wearing her feelings on her face,” explaining that the sister has always been the type of person whose emotions could readily be seen in her outward expressions. She noted further that her sister believed otherwise but that the matter never had been discussed until now. The sister, who was present, respectfully claimed that, on the contrary, she was not that uncircumspect and self-centered—indeed was always private about her feelings. With this, the two calmly but firmly debated the validity of their attributed beliefs about how one of them always presented herself in family affairs, further articulating their understanding of family demeanor.

References also are made to sensory acuity, intelligence, and temperament. It is said that some family member or other was “sharp,” “penetrating,” “wooden,” “a typical smartass,” “a go-getter,” among other presumed personality traits, and that such traits made family life what it was. Like other representations, whether or not these are real in some factual sense does not deny that they serve to interpret features of family life, as told by members and by those who, in other capacities, enter into family affairs.

Application extends to material conditions, to deficits and resources. Family members present family life in terms of presumed poverty or alleged wealth. Explaining how she manages to care for her senile husband at home, a wife relates:

Well we never had much of anything, you know. That’s what they [her parents] always told us anyway. So we believed it and never made any demands on them. When they passed, boy, did we find out different! But it was a good lesson in a way . . . living with the idea that we had nothing . . . because I know now how to manage on very little. And, God knows, taking care of Henry has gotten me to rock bottom.

In contrast, the aunt of a spinal-cord injured young man foresees difficulty for her nephew in “making ends meet” because of the financial “delusions” that the boy’s father “built into” his children:

My brother [the father] filled those kids . . . built into them all kinds of delusions about how much money they had. He was a real free-wheeler. They weren’t poor but they didn’t have as much as they all
thought. Well, all the kids got to believing in it . . . and they act like millionaires. Now that Riek [the nephew] is paralyzed, it’s going to be twice as hard on the guy to make ends meet.

Although some family members and outsiders reference particular enduring conditions or fictions in representing family life, others locate family order in manifold actualities or fictions—for example, combining those pertaining to family resources with those centering on personality traits. Family order is further ramified by assessments of who, among family members and concerned others, adhered to particular senses of family affairs. At one extreme is someone who retrospectively explains that all members lived under some illusion about the family, that family affairs remained as they did for years because there was uniform adherence to a particular belief that only now is revealed to have been fictional all along. An outsider, like a social worker, family physician, or family friend, may confirm the same range of adherence. At the other extreme are those who explain that only select family members unwittingly adhere to what are really fictions and that others put up with the beliefs and related activities “for the sake of the family,” thus sustaining the prevailing sense of its order. Manifold representations, the attributed diversity of adherence to particular signs of order, and reflections on both, are multiple layers of rhetorical practice, simultaneously being nested and interpenetrated forms of family order. It is evident in the varied matters taken to reference enduring family affairs that family rhetoric assigns family order in whatever domain it is applied. The social order of the family turns on the broad range of related attempts to understand and interpret it, attempts centered on any imaginable sign.

TRANSFORMATION

Family rhetoric does not occur in a social vacuum. Enduring family conduct is considered and discussed in contexts ranging from informal bantering about the state of the family in general or someone’s family in particular, to formally scheduled psychiatric conferences for the evaluation of family stability. Some spokes-
persons implicitly reference the aegis under which their utterances are made; they indirectly inform us of how representations are to be understood. Take the case of the spouse of a demented patient who begins a familial assessment with, "Speaking as a family member"; the spouse distinguishes this description from what might be offered from the perspective of another role. What the family is like, in appearance or reality, in the context of one role is not necessarily what it is like in another, the principle of which this speaker is at least tacitly aware (see Garfinkel, 1967). The social organization of family rhetoric is as much a part of the social order of the family as the ostensible family is its subject.

Consider variability in formally organized professional assessment—in particular, psychological consultation at Cederview, a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children. The center must conduct semiannual reviews of each child and report the results to the child's county welfare department. Reviews are conducted in conferences, called staffings, in which a psychological consultant, the child's treatment team, and interested others discuss and deliberate over the child's progress in treatment, much of which is taken to hinge on the child's family life. Regular staffs include a special education teacher, social worker, cottage (dormitory) parent, cottage and social work supervisors, and the school's principal.

At the time it was studied, Cederview was served by two psychologists and a psychiatrist. When one could not attend a staffing, another would substitute. One might staff a child at one point in time, with another consultant serving in the same capacity for that child six months later. The consultants' theoretical orientations differed. The psychiatrist was a Freudian; one of the psychologists was a behaviorist; the other psychologist took what he called an eclectic view, combining depth psychology and behavioral principles. Although the Freudian considered emotional disturbance to be deeply rooted in personality, the behaviorist saw disturbances in terms of their manifestations and consequences. The eclectic consultant contributed to the proceedings in whatever way he felt suited the interpretation of individual cases.

The consultants' respective orientations did not completely define the way each reasoned about the children's conduct and family life. All readily entered into Freudian and behavioral discourse on occasion. Rather, their orientations served as preferential frame-
works, within which they aimed conceptually to lodge and word familial representations. From a particular orientation, each consultant would occasionally caution staffers not to take the facts as "all mind" or "all environment," among other reminders that suggested how participants should see a case. Some staffers knew the families; others had never met them. That did not as much determine who was believed to be accurate in interpretations of family life as it was used to establish interpretive credibility; as were professional expertise and practical experience in working with such families; among other persuasions.

It was assumed that, in fact, there was sense to be made of the children's family lives—that there was, as a staffer once put it, "some rhyme or reason there." Even in moments of great confusion over the facts or their interpretation, it was expected that, in time, actual conditions would be revealed for what they really were, thus shedding light on the child's emotional disturbance.

Yet, what were accepted as the facts of a case—claimed to be concretely known about a family—were sometimes substantially transformed in the process of taking those very facts into account in representing their subject matter. For example, the fact that 10-year-old Freddy's family was intimate and close-knit, was suddenly rethought when the psychiatrist suggested:

I know that every one of these reports states that they're a close-knit bunch. I know that a couple of you say that you've seen it for yourselves. I know all that. In fact, I got that myself when I met the mother and aunt a while ago. But, you know, did you ever think that might not be what it's really like? You've heard of intimacy-at-a-distance? Well, I really think that this is a case of "distant intimacy," where no one really knows anyone because each is really so selfishly into their own thing that they're "close-knit" [he gestures quotes] with each other in order to get what they want from each other—what I would call inauthentic intimacy.

A distinction was being made between what the facts were as opposed to what they appeared to be. Initially, the documented facts of this family's social life were taken to represent well-established and commendable realities. The psychiatrist's remarks suggested that perhaps the facts lay behind what actually might be fictions.

This led to deliberation over the possibility that the facts at hand may have been mistaken perceptions all along, as details of this
family's social relations became embedded in the deep emotional discourse introduced by the consultant. Surface facts were systematically penetrated for familial realities, in the manner suggested by Jackson (1965) and others. The social order of Freddy's family was rhetorically transformed from being close-knit to having been loosely-coupled all along.

Another staffing led to further transformation as consultation was served under different auspices. The eclectic psychologist refrained, as he put it, "from taking that kind of view too far," explaining:

Look, I appreciate what you're saying and, frankly, I can see some of that, that kind of thing really happening behind the scenes. But you've got to face the facts, too. I mean you've all said you've seen a lot of real intimacy and concern for the other guy there. Well, why not take it for what it is? And I'm sure there's some of the other stuff, too, behind the scenes going on.

With this, the original facts regained a measure of their former facticity. As the formal and informal organization of the proceedings flowed, so did the actual social order of Freddy's family.

Rhetorical transformations of family order are not automatically determined by their formal organization. The relationship between rhetorical practice, representation, and context is not that fixed. Context serves discourse as a working frame, not as a directive. Although we might have expected the psychiatric consultant to make a difference in how the facts of Freddy's family life would be interpreted, his attempt to bare the reality presented a choice over the figure and ground of matters before participants. Would the rhetorical context be the psychiatric framework offered by this particular consultant, with the only seemingly apparent facts to be penetrated? Or would the documented facts remain unchallenged, serving as concrete grounds for glossing the psychiatrist's suggestions? On this occasion, the proceedings led to a transformation of documented facts; a formally variable feature of the staffings (this consultant as opposed to another) served to alter family order. On other occasions, though, the other choice is made—the rhetorical context is sustained, and the persistence of family order secured.

This brings us to the meaning of enduring in the phrase *enduring family conduct*. We take enduring to mean something rhetorical and
practical, being, in a manner of speaking, a matter of interpretive endurance. As a working feature of its social order, family rhetoric enters into the very object of its concern: family. In its reproduction, the rhetoric simultaneously offers the potential for a sense of family tradition, as if to tell us: “That’s the way Freddy’s family has always been, obviously” (see Berger and Kellner, 1970). As we saw earlier, what had been so obvious, clear, and factual—indeed documented—all along, was transformed with a shift in rhetorical context and reinvented in practice, retrospectively warranting what then was taken actually to be enduring family conduct, establishing a new order or nascent tradition.

SIGNIFICATION AND ORDER

Although those concerned with the organization of family life take it to have distinct patterns, its social order is not directly visible. Social order is assumed to exist behind its signs, implicit in what is taken to represent it. Jackson (1965), for one, understood this, although he wanted to separate social order from social influence. As Jackson aimed to penetrate a surface system of signs (fictions) for what he took to be authentic, so family members and others make the distinction. All concerned—from psychiatrists to laypersons—distinguish systems of representation. Every attempt to discern what it means to be family presents the task of locating signs of order and inferring or explaining how those signs represent what they are claimed to.

Ongoing rhetoric and courses of action in respect to particular families or family members may gloss the distinction between sign and order. “Sure signs” virtually come to stand for a family’s character, its particular lifestyle, its order. Although some sure signs are beliefs, others are events and, as such, are demonstrable. For example, asked what it means that a particular family is “your typical community of saints and martyrs, always humbly pious but ready to tell you, at the same time, that they’re sacrificing for you,” one may literally point to an intended interpretation. Overhearing a member of the allegedly pious family offering to “go out of his way” to help a co-worker, one might turn to a listener and indicate, “Did you hear that? [pointing to the member] That there is a family of martyrs if I’ve
ever seen one.” As sure signs become communal property, in common rhetorical usage, the signs become collective representations, the enduring family conduct itself that is otherwise being represented (Durkheim, 1961).

However, familial representation may be claimed to prevail over members—not only enduring but endured—existing as virtually unquestioned versions of what they actually are. Explaining why certain beliefs about family affairs persisted as they did, those concerned may cite silent acceptance. There was reluctance, for whatever particular reason, to take issue with a belief that seemed to be so taken for granted, it might be said, by almost everyone. Questioning it would have been nearly seditious or disruptive, if not profane. A social worker remarks:

One time I tried to lay it on the line with Pam’s parents that she [Pam] wasn’t all that emotionally uncontrolled, that some of it, I believed, might have something to do with her home life. I tried to persuade them to join the parent effectiveness group, but, hell, they wouldn’t even think about it. They wouldn’t listen to the home life bit at all. I knew right away I shouldn’t even have mentioned it. Hey, man, they even accused me of teaching the kids [in residential treatment] to be disloyal to their parents. Get that! Her parents really believe that it’s all Pam; it always was Pam. You just say something else and they accuse you of trying to stir up trouble. So that’s the way it is. They’re not the first set of parents to live in a complete world of make-believe as to their innocence in matters like this. And you dare not question it either. They believe what they believe—really believe.

Some family members, too, report that, though they always felt contrary to what they thought other members of their family believed, they never considered discussing it openly. Or, remembering it once, they never did again. The sense of possible disloyalty typically is couched in terms of the consequent disturbance of existing ties: “all the trouble it would make.” An adult daughter noted that she never challenged her parents’ characterization of herself as a cold, efficient person and her sister as warmhearted and easygoing because, she explains, “They [the parents] would have thought I was trying to put myself above my sister and that, I know, would have meant to them that I was not being sister-like.” Another daughter whose mother cares for the senile father at home complains to her support group that her mother
lives with the idea that it’s her duty to take care of him forever. So when I questioned that, she accused me of being unnatural and unfeeling, of trying to stir up trouble. She made me feel ashamed of myself for having even mentioned putting my father in a nursing home. I was only concerned about her health. That’s all. After that, I never said anything about it. That was about six years ago.

To some family members, even raising the possibility that certain prevailing beliefs were dubious was being profane. As they explain, “It was something you just didn’t talk about.” One son pointed out, “How we knew that, I don’t know, but we knew that that’s the way things were felt to be and you didn’t say anything about it.” It is a characteristic of the sacred that to describe it, to speak of it, is to violate its sanctity. The sacred is something accepted, not questioned; lived, not analyzed. So it is that some representations are said to prevail within families.

In their own ways, members describe silent acceptance in degrees of family socialization. Its weaker form appears in the guise of a presented adherence to fictional familial beliefs (see, for example, Goffman, 1959), a type reported by many and referred to by a few as “the games we all played.” Its stronger form is reputed to be a state of internalization, wherein prevailing fictions are said, retrospectively, unknowingly to have been one’s own, recognized only now upon differentiation. Whatever the degree, routine silence is the way some families are said to conduct daily living, approximating on a small scale what Freire (1972) once called a “culture of silence” underwriting the families’ public forums.

There is a tendency in the social sciences to strive for causal explanation. It is clear in the varied descriptions of, and explanations for, their family affairs offered by members and others in the human service settings studied, that representations of enduring family conduct are both causal and traditional, considered to be equally explanatory. The weight of tradition is not necessarily a cover for other explanations of family order, but, rather, is referenced as a type of explanation in its own right (Weber, 1947). As explanation, tradition can take on a life of its own. Its perceived weight, in turn, serves representational persistence, social order—in effect, feeding on itself. As the wife of an Alzheimer’s disease patient named Martin related to her support group:

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It was funny in Martin's family. I mean I knew what was going on. My father-in-law used his children. It was not duty or loyalty. I could see that. Martin knew it. They [the children] all knew it. But you get used to thinking a certain way. That's what they believed and they tried not to think the worst of their father for it. And, by God, Martin did the same, but he said it was duty and loyalty. Well, what else could I believe? And so that's the way things came to be by us too. I know all that but that's what I do . . . even myself . . . I tell my children. Sometimes I feel I'm being selfish, you know. But when you think, duty and loyalty . . . they're not all bad, are they?

The weight of tradition penetrates the feelings said to surround pervasive representations, forming a conservative impulse (Marris, 1975). The reciprocal influence of tradition and sentimental attachment is evident in a spouse's response to a support group facilitator's suggestion that the spouse now try to make up with her husband's brothers:

Look, it's not that easy. You know, you get to see things a certain way and think that they see things another way and you kinda make your bets that way. And when you find out different . . . well, things can't all of a sudden be all chummy. It's the way I've felt about them . . . and what I thought they felt . . . all these years. The feelings, the hostility, is still there. That's what kept us apart for so long.

PREDOMINANCE

It could be argued that though tradition is used to portray ongoing family affairs and member activities, the representation is ultimately supported by the relative power or influence of those whose interests it serves. At times, family members indeed describe their cynicism over familial beliefs in just these terms, implicating overbearing parents, influential siblings, or others believed to harbor particular representations. At other times, however, those concerned do not feel such connections are justified, explaining that certain ideas are what everyone adheres to, "that's all," or that it "just was always that way." As a mother mentions to her husband and her spinal-cord injured son's rehabilitation team in a family conference:
I suppose I should have pointed things out to him [son] so that he would have been more realistic but... well... he had these ideas about himself that I just didn’t feel he should put so much of himself into. You know what I mean? We all went along. You know how it is. I still don’t think we could drum up the courage to bring anything up.

The husband adds:

I hope you [the team] don’t think that our kids ran all over us. We brought them up to know who were the parents of the family and they listened.

And, then, the mother interjects:

Yeah! Sure! That’s right. For the sake of the family, you go along with a lot of things. Right? That’s all.

As this and related exchanges suggest, members distinguish between what they could have done but what they chose not to, in the matter of challenging what they believed to be familial representations—fictional or not. Their choices are made at the junction of what they take to be the persistence of ongoing family affairs, on the one hand, and their more or less silent concern over the validity of related family beliefs and the desire or ability to question them, on the other. The social road from one, it seems, veers in a different direction than the other.

As with context and signification, there is no simple relationship between familial representations and what might be called power or influence. In Cedarview’s semiannual staffings, the familial views of the consultant do not always prevail, although particular psychological orientations are placed centerstage by their respective proponents. In the family conferences between staff and family members at the rehabilitation hospital studied, neither staff nor ostensibly influential relatives necessarily predominate in their assignments of family order. In the support groups for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease patients, the meaning of truly caring—of “really” being family—is bandied about by any number of influential spokesmen. The connection is an articulated one. Representations of family order do not simply jump out of sure signs; they are indicated and warrantably assigned.
A great deal must be accomplished, or taken to be settled, before those concerned can proceed with elaborating and/or acting upon the familial order being represented in its rhetoric. Subject to variable representation, the social order of the family is not always a central concern in its own consideration; its representational grounds occasionally become more focal. The work of figuring warrantable grounds in respect to representation might be called the establishment of a rhetorical base. Rhetorical predominance is a problem of grounds and warrants, necessary concepts for the analysis of the flowing order of familial affairs.

In this regard, consider the rhetorically variable family order of an Alzheimer's disease patient. At local chapter meetings, the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association (ADRDA) regularly hosts informative talks by those expert in particular aspects of the disease experience. Physicians are frequent spokesmen, offering information and advice about the neuropathology of Alzheimer's disease, advances in memory enhancement, psychopharmacological management, disease symptomatology, course of progress, differential diagnosis, and caregiving strategies.

A physician not only describes what "it's like" for the family and, in time, "what's likely" to happen to familial relationships, but exemplifies what he says by means of specific disease occurrences, commonly centered in the actual experiences of those in attendance, who reciprocally confirm their own representation. For example, describing what is said to be a typical familial response to the victim, the representation is empirically confirmed by family members' testimony of the "exact same way" it is in their own families. In turn, the physician virtually re-presents the testimony as sure signs of the representations—a way of concretely illustrating his general understanding.

When someone challenges the aegis under which the so-called typical familial pattern is being presented, its representational context is shaken and, thus, its current credibility. For example, it would not be unusual for some participants in these informative meetings to appreciate a presentation, but later in a discussion session to turn contextual tables on the proceedings, altering their representational grounds, as the following audience member's response indicated following a physician's presentation:
My question is this. I appreciate what you're saying. I think we all do. But you're speaking as a doctor. I can really see that what you're saying makes a lot of sense. That's what happens, and that's what's going to happen to all of us I'm afraid as things get worse. For some of us, God forbid, the family will break down altogether. It's no rosy picture.

But I don't see things that way all the time. Sometimes I can see that, like you [the doctor] say, things just go from bad to worse and everyone's pulling apart, like each of them [family members] can't wait to get away from my father [the patient]. Myself, I think that sometimes and, I think, "Well, that's what they say happens and it's happening." But later on, I think to myself, "No, it's not that my sister and brother hate me and no wants to take care of Dad. No, we're really still family underneath but it's that damn Alzheimer's that we're reacting to." So, doctor, how do you fry them eggs? I'm mixed up. Speaking as a caregiver, I'm not that sure.

The physician immediately responded with sympathy. At the same time, he confirmed the contrasting representational grounds for the disease, the basis for locating its typical familial effects. The doctor remarked:

I understand what you're saying and, believe me, you're the experts here. It's your families and, if anyone knows, you people know them better than anyone. Sometimes, because we're doctors, and want to help really, we talk as if we're the ones with the hands-on experience. But, like I said, you're the real experts. And, like you say, that's the way the disease is. It has no pattern. One type of family responds in one way and another type the opposite way. That's typical. I've yet to come to know what it does to us, as I'm sure you're feeling.

The representation of the familial effects of the disease experience was shifted from the testimony of medical expertise to the informed expertise of knowledgeable practitioners, "the real experts," transforming the sure signs of family order.

As the discussion continued, rhetorical grounds shifted several more times. On one occasion, it returned to a medical aegis, whereupon the doctor—who had just appreciated the real expertise of caregivers and the fact that there was no typical pattern to the disease or a typical familial reaction to it—carefully laid out for his audience how husbands and wives differ in responding to a demented
spouse. Responding to a question from a caregiver, the doctor contrasted the typical marital relationship of a demented husband with that of a demented wife. The doctor's tutorial orientation produced order in the comparison he drew, that, as before, was subsequently empirically ramified by the caregivers as the latter offered examples from their own experiences. What had been agreed to earlier as the unpatterned character of the familial response, in this context became what "you all should expect as husbands and wives," represented by an expert at the behest of those presently nonexpert.

The predominant attitude of those concerned served to articulate the family's prevailing order, something not expressly tied to any one attitude or orientation. It was clear that when the physician either spoke as a doctor or was invited to do so, he structured the disease's familial order. When he spoke as family, or for a family member, that aegis "unpatterned" the same family order—its respective sure signs as indicative of familial realities as the other signs (in another context) reasonably represented contrasting realities.

It is the working power of words that is at stake here, rhetorical practice, not mere words; rhetorical predominance, not sheer power. It is evident that spokespersons are not just describing, but doing things with words— in this instance, either teaching or agonizing over the familial effects of the disease experience. Depending on the predominant task at hand, representation either rhetorically constructs or deconstructs family order. If we choose to speak of power or influence in matters of familial representation, it must be linked with ongoing interpretations of representational effectiveness and the sense of order under consideration (see Foucault, 1975, pp. 12-13, x-xxii).

The flow of representational work, of family rhetoric, is not necessarily as smooth and cordial as it was in the foregoing proceedings. On occasion, there is concerted deliberation over grounds. Sometimes heated, sometimes cool and calculated, the rhetoric of grounds both precedes and intervenes in ongoing family discourse. Its modes of influence are as varied as assessments of the present relevance of particular roles, appeals to organizational commitment, moral indignation, formal authority, informal tradeoffs, and job security. For example, in regard to job security, a supervisor at one of the institutions studied once reminded the varied treatment teams that they might best rethink what the current family lives of their clients were like lest their "glowing pictures" lead to too many more dis-
charges and subsequent staff layoffs. Or, for instance, in respect to role relevance, participants in some support groups for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease patients routinely discount the pseudo-expertise of the professionals concerning the disease, touting in its place the “real expertise” of experienced caregivers, thus altogether disparaging professional representations of related family life.

CONCLUSION

There is a line of thinking about the social order of family life that conceives of stability as a product of the formation of common consciousness. Hess and Handel (1959, p. 10) once argued that family stability—indeed, “stable human relationships”—grows out of a high degree of congruence in the images that members have of the social form to which they belong. More recently, Berger and Kellner (1970) offered a vision of marriage as a discursive construct of coalescing typifications, wherein what they called “nomos-building” becomes the virtual order of the relationship. The concept and data of family rhetoric challenge this thinking. Interpreting the family’s social order in rhetorical terms shows that what Hess and Handel called family stability is as fixed as ongoing concerns with it. As concern over any particular family can vary considerably in rhetorical practice, transformations of family order are by no means limited to internal familial developments. Although the social conditions of coalescing typifications may be prevalent in certain domains so that common consciousness is apparent, that should not overshadow the fact that it is an orderly achievement in concrete time and space. The common consciousness that exists in respect to family life is, first, practical and, second, conditioned by its representational contexts. The common consciousness that represents family order, that signifies stable human relationships, may be the particular state of family life as it is taken to exist in some situation but not necessarily in another.

The rhetorical order of family life occasionally is transparent to those concerned—revealed in concerted attention to order in relation to varied representations. Indeed, the existential status of family order itself becomes representational—a sign in its own right—when the question is raised, “What are we really talking about here?” As
such, reality and representation are equally and mutually signifi-
cative, the one rhetorically taken as given, the other rhetorically
subjected to depictive consideration. Rhetorical practice is thus a dia-
logue of signs, a tacit if not fully apparent problem of representation.

The family fictions originally addressed in Jackson's (1965) article
were a program. It was Jackson's intent to lay out a new means of
investigating the family affairs of those troubled by them. The con-
cept of family rhetoric is also programmatic. It provides a new way of
investigating enduring family conduct by taking studied account of
its representational practices. Because family rhetoric is socially
organized in its own right, its investigation is a means of studying
family life in terms of what it is not. An investigator need not attempt
to get inside or intimate with families in order to get "real life"
understandings of what they actually are like. That aim is based on
the assumption that familial actualities are located and found some-
where within the confines of the concrete families proper. But where
are these concrete social forms? At home? In Jackson's and others'
family life in terms of what it is not. An investigator need not attempt
fessionals? In support groups? In staffings? Family rhetoric shows
that the family at home is no more actual than the family anywhere.
The study of family order turns on its representation, on its signs, and
those whose rhetoric attempts to reveal it for what the latter take it
surely to be. That aim leads students of family life anywhere that its
rhetoric occurs, in and about the family.

Lasch (1977) once lamented that family life was increasingly being
infringed upon by interests as broad as social science and human
service. We would do well to recast his concern into a research
program, to zero in on family discourse and lay out its rhetorical
conditions and representational products, to trace the social organi-
ization of concern over the infringement; indeed, to investigate its
native understanding. What is and is not family, what should and
should not be familial, is not just of moral significance to profes-
sionals; it is of interest to all who raise the questions revealed in their
related concern.

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