The Private Image:
Experiential Location and Method in
Family Studies

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Prevalent in family studies is the private image of domestic life, in which household
members’ perceptions of family living are considered to be more realistic and telling than
those of other persons. This article considers the private image for its methodological
assumptions and implications. Recasting the assumptions in terms of descriptive practice,
the authors present an alternate approach that construes family order as bound to organ-
ized, collective representation. Field data are offered in illustration, and procedural and
theoretical outcomes are addressed.

Studies of family life continually engage the idea
of privacy, as domestic affairs are assumed to be
located in the inner reaches of the household. It’s
not that the family’s hidden—some say
“psychosocial”—interior (Handel, 1985) is taken
to be a “dark underside,” but rather that
whatever is natural to family life is understood to
be sequestered in its native habitat, the home.
While many accept the familiar adage that a house
is not necessarily a home, the household
nonetheless remains the presumed location for
discovering the realities of family life, whatever
their form or function, for better or worse.

The link between family life and location sug-
ests that studies ideally should attempt to
penetrate the native experiences of the household.
A prevailing methodological issue in family
studies thus becomes how to approximate the
ideal. Some have seen a need to actually reside in
households for periods of time (Henry, 1963,
1971; Howell, 1973; Speedling, 1982), while
recognizing the procedural problems incurred
(e.g., Henry, 1965/1985). Others have lived in
close proximity to households under study, if not
in the actual physical structure (Lewis, 1959,
1961; Stack, 1974). Still others have attempted to
discern the family’s domestic order by means of
intensive interviews with family members,
preferably as near as possible to native habitats
(Bott, 1957; LaRossa, 1984; LaRossa, Bennett,
and Celles, 1981; LaRossa and Wolf, 1985).
Several have pointed out that the validity of
domestic data is enhanced by joint, especially
couple, interviewing in depth (Bennett and
McAivity, 1985; Hess and Handel, 1959; LaRossa
et al., 1981; Thomas and Calonico, 1972). There
are even those who simulated the household in the
laboratory by placing members in ostensibly real-
life situations (Reiss, 1967; Strodtbeck, 1951;

In this article we address the methodological
issue cutting across such studies by framing it
primarily as an empirical, not procedural, prob-
lem, although procedural implications, of course,
follow. We suggest a rethinking of the experiential
location of family life, arguing that the form and
substance of domestic affairs, as known and inter-

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interpreted by those concerned—be they members or nonmembers—are bound to the social organization of related descriptive practice. As such, the private realities of the household are embedded and embodied in the public pronouncements, interpretations, and prevailing understandings that serve to articulate them, wherever they occur. We deal with four considerations. First, the various assumptions of what is here called the private image of domestic affairs are drawn from the family literature. Second, an alternate conception is briefly introduced. Third, field data in illustration of the new approach are presented against the assumptions of the private image with, fourth, concluding comments addressing procedural and theoretical implications.

THE PRIVATE IMAGE

Perhaps the most poignant formulation of the private image is Lasch’s (1977) account of the gradually disintegrating, final haven of the heart, the deprivatization of the household. As the subtitle of his book suggests, the family is “besieged” in the contemporary world by a variety of “therapeutic” interests whose ameliorative concerns mask the calculation and rationality of the marketplace. According to Lasch, “the family [is] drained of the emotional intensity that formerly characterized domestic relations” (p. xxiii), such that its distinct sanctuary has gradually been colored by, and become undistinguished from, “the cruel world of politics and work” (p. xxiv). While Lasch does not separate the structure of domesticity from public life, he implies that domesticity ideally has a distinct, virtually unique order of its own: sentimental, loyal, protective, and private (see Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982b).

Distinct Domestic Order

The first assumption of the private image—that of a distinct domestic order—is central to Lasch’s critique and reflects a broad current in the family studies literature. An early statement, in fact, likens the distinct existence of family—domestic order—to the person. Burgess’s (1926) characterization presents the family as a separate entity that changes and grows on its own. As he notes in passing, “I was about to call it a superpersonality” (p. 5). While Burgess does not necessarily characterize the separate order in the way Lasch does, make the same connections, or present the same analytic concern, they both nonetheless isolate the experience of domesticity.

Some family scholars have described a self-contained, domestic order fueled by the separate but mutual articulations of members. Berger and Kellner (1964) see each family constructing its own character out of the private, “nomos-building” exchanges of consensual conversations. According to Reiss (1981: 1), families develop particular ways of regulating and ordering their own inner life and dealing with the outside world. In Kuhn’s (1970) terminology, various families have separate “paradigms” for managing their affairs, a view strikingly reminiscent of Hess and Handel’s (1959) concept of “family worlds” (Reiss 1981: 72).

Others have signaled a distinct family through an internal-external demarcation of what is and what is not familial. Bott (1957: 1), for example, describes families as interacting with external persons and institutions, while Adams (1986: 11) writes of structures, functions, and “the other internal aspects of family life.” Handel (1985) entitled his anthology The Psychosocial Interior of the Family. Rodgers and others (Rodgers, 1964) refer to the family as an entity whose inner dynamics and outer conditions serve to regulate its course of development over time. Put simply, each family has an inside and an outside.

The extent of domestic privacy has also been addressed. Laslett (1973) provides a useful account of the history of domestic privacy, arguing that changes in the composition and physical segregation of households increasingly served to sequester family affairs; the separation of the workplace from family living thus enhanced the hiddenness of the household. Challenging this view as well as Berger and Kellner’s (1964) “maximum privacy” model of marital conversants, Wiley (1985: 29) writes that “the long, historical rise in family privacy has crested and is sliding in reverse.” He argues that the empirical grounds for Berger and Kellner’s insular, consensual view of the marital conversation have changed such that contemporary conversations over domestic life are more “loosely coupled,” spread in several directions outside the private domain of the household and articulated by a variety of concerns and interests. We shall return to this theme and adapt it as a feature of an alternate view.

Household Location

A second assumption underlying the private image stems from a geographic interpretation of the location of familial experience. If the inner reaches of family life are anywhere, they lie in the household. Whatever is known about domestic affairs from other sources can, at best, only approximate that which is experienced by resident household members; at worst, family truths can be “obscured by the fog of family fictions” (Jackson, 1957: 80).
There is ample recognition that some familial experiences do occur outside the physical confines of the household and that what takes place in the home may be repeated readily enough in other locations. Certainly, behavioral studies that make use of laboratory settings to research family life take families outside the household proper (see Miller, Rollins, and Thomas, 1982). Still, two terms in frequent usage—natural and native—inform us that, while the family can be studied outside the household, what is known or discovered about it is taken to refer to natural occurrences rooted in the inner reaches of a native habitat. If the familial truths of other locations are pursued as viable interpretations of domestic life, they are treated as mere versions of what might be discovered if direct access to the household were available.

Bott’s (1957) pioneering network study, for example, is informed by geographic usage. Remarkably, the central place of family life in society, Bott states that despite the family’s importance (being the “backbone of society”), very little is known about the relationship between families and society. She points out that still less is known about what goes on in households: “there are not even very many studies of families in their natural habitat, the home” (p. 1). She maintains the private image in pointing to the difficulty encountered in researching the natural location of family life, and in a chapter on methodology and field techniques, she clearly specifies the geography of familial experience:

- Family life goes on inside homes, not in the street or in universities, schools, clinics, churches, factories, or any other institutions to which research workers might have easy access. Unless one is invited inside a home, one cannot learn much about a family as a working group. [P. 6]
- Bott subsequently (p. 24) admits that familial experience does extend outside the household, such as to the husband at work and the interactions of family members with friends, neighbors, and relatives, but the extension is still rooted in the familial affairs of the household proper. She sees no urgent need to follow members outside the household to understand interpretations of domestic affairs from other points of view. Rather, extensions of “the total social life of the family” outside the home merely present a procedural inconvenience.

Bott’s usage is not dated; there are more recent references to the same locational logic. Henry (1965/1985), who actually took up residence in the households he studied, and LaRossa and his associates (LaRossa et al., 1981; La Rossa and Wolf, 1985) have offered understandable pleas for the qualitative study of families as a means of gaining access to what they take to be the richest grounds for revealing domestic affairs—the home. Once again, the terms natural and native abound (Henry, 1965/1985: 51 and 60; LaRossa et al., 1981: 307). What is native to the household is the family-at-home: unobserved, not on guard, not presenting portrayals for public consumption. It is the private family, whose informed consent might reveal its “pervasive and emotional back regions” (LaRossa et al., 1981: 312). Calling on Laslett’s (1973) history of familial privacy, Skolnick (1983: 56) summarily locates American society’s “most secret institution” behind closed doors, the only place it really is “at home”:

... family life goes on behind closed doors (Laslett, 1973). The home is a “backstage area” (Goffman, 1959) where people can be relaxed, informal, and off guard precisely because they cannot be observed by outsiders.

Privileged Access and Method

If the distinct, natural order of the family lies within the household, its members have privileged access to it. This is the third assumption of the private image. Family members, as insiders, have knowledge of the actual goings-on of the home, even if their knowledge, at times, may be obscured by family myths. Outsiders such as service providers, neighbors, and family researchers can, at best, only approximate household actualities. Skolnick (1983: 134) highlights the insider’s privileged access in writing of the family household as a back region, informing us of a methodological consequence of the assumption:

Because family behavior is a backstage kind of interaction, it is, of course, extremely hard to observe. As Goffman noted, people in backstage regions know about their own unsavory secrets, but they are not in a position to know about those of other people.

Others, however, while granting the privileged-access assumption, differentiate between knowledge held and knowledge known. This seems to be the point of Henry’s (1965/1985: 60) description of the “better accounting” an outside observer can offer of household realities. Henry believes that we need to approximate family members’ privileged access to domestic affairs by observing them at close range. Yet, at the same time, concerted and systematic scrutiny by an outside observer formally makes available to us (as well as to family members themselves) what is experienced but often unacknowledged by members, who are likely to be concerned with...
familial, not observational, matters. Similar arguments have been made from clinical and therapeutic perspectives (Anderson and Bagarozzi, 1983; Bagarozzi and Anderson, 1982; Ferreira, 1963; Haley, 1967; Jackson, 1957, 1965; Perlmutter and Sauer, 1986).

Another direction the privileged-access assumption has taken is the recognition of multiple access—that is, the privileges of access held by more than one family member or household occupant. For example, while not dismissing the geographic assumption of domesticity, Safilios-Rothschild (1969) has taken issue with the belief that the relative amount of time spent in the household serves as a criterion for who best knows its affairs. Criticizing what she calls “wives’ family sociology,” Safilios-Rothschild questions the tenet that homebound wives necessarily provide the fullest information about the family’s domestic affairs. This has led a number of researchers to formulate methods for accessing and analyzing several members’, and especially couples’, interpretations of family life (Bagarozzi and Van Loo, 1981; Bennett and McAvity, 1985; Neal and Groat, 1976; Thomson and Williams, 1982).

AN ALTERNATE APPROACH:
DESCRIPTIVE PRACTICE

The methodological problems posed by the private image of domestic life are challenging. They range from difficulties in unobtrusively gaining access to the native affairs of the household, to the problem of sorting out who speaks for the family, or—if more than one member is being heard—how to distinguish the most accurate voice or to combine the representative voices. Many of the problems have been technically addressed and deftly managed, as one or another family researcher either took precautions to be circumspect while intruding into domestic life or provided reasons for why intervention did not invalidate data.

The alternate approach we propose stems not from contending with such technical challenges but from reexamining the private image that informs them. Rather than conceiving of the family as a distinct entity, we consider it a way of interpreting, representing, and ordering social relations (Gubrium and Lynott, 1985). The family’s social organization, therefore, is not to be discerned through carefully focused attention to its component parts but rather is gleaned from the diverse categories and varied contexts in which considerations of family order are raised (Gubrium, in press).

Adapting Lasch’s (1979) and Mills’s (1959, 1963) insistence on seeing what is understood to be private about human affairs as inextricably linked with public life, we treat the distinct domestic order of the household as bound both to its public understandings and its own assignment practices. However, the emphasis on “public” is as much practical as it is institutional (cf. Taylor, 1985: 273–274). Public understandings are the existing ways of thinking about domestic affairs, the available categories that, in application, serve to catalog family experiences. For example, when we learn that families can be thought of as normal and abnormal, we find that we share with others, who likewise learn, a two-category structure for classifying our own domestic affairs. The structure, as a classification system, provides a basis for comparing, objectively or invidiously, what we do or do not experience in the family. While there may, of course, be a wide variety of such available structures (which compelled Lasch to comment on their wholesale intrusion into contemporary privacy), each nonetheless presents to those concerned a shared public means for interpreting what family members are to each other. To apply Durkheim’s (1973) usage, interpretive structures and categories for domestic life are collective representations, common understandings of the concrete experiences they reflect.

To the extent that domestic order is taken to be distinct and private, it is something that is assigned these characteristics out of available representations. Whether systematic or disjoint, what is assigned is not a mere set of labels but understandings of domestic reality; the assignment and the reality reciprocally ground the family experience. To assert, say, that one’s family life has disintegrated, is not merely to cast reportorial light on private domestic actualities but to formulate a distinctive meaning for one’s concrete experience. In application, to speak of disintegration is not merely to represent family breakdown but to present its actual occurrence as understood by those concerned. The privacies of the household are part and parcel of public issues, more than mere cognitive interpenetration (Gerth and Mills, 1953; Mills, 1959, 1963).

Yet, the private and public sides of familial experiences are not mirror images. They are joined together in the descriptive practices of those who articulate their concern. Making concrete sense of domestic order amounts to interpretive work—reality construction—that shapes the private world of the household, whether one’s own as a family member or an outsider’s. To attach meaning to domestic action (Weber, 1947: 88) is not automatic. Rather, it is a practical, par-
tially artful matter of deciphering and defining domestic social order according to public schemes of things. As such, the distinct domestic order(s) of the household is produced out of whatever circumstance and auspices underwrite its representation. We can actually witness the articulation of discrete domestic orders on the various occasions and in the diverse organizations where the concern is embedded (Gubrium, 1987; McLain and Weigert, 1979), as we see and hear those concerned systematically decipher and define domestic reality. Family is made visible as discourse makes it topical.

This brings us to the second assumption of the private image, geographic location. The assumption and its methodological hurdles are completely transformed in the alternate approach. The locus of household privacies is bound to diverse domains of available, shared understandings, thus placing the sense of domestic order as much on the latter’s premises as within the confines of the household. In fact, as we shall illustrate later, long-term household witnesses to familial affairs, including members who have resided in the home all of their lives, regularly admit that they have come to understand their domestic lives better outside the household than in it.

This does not mean that household is a trivial notion, only that the household does not discretely locate home life. As part of descriptive practice, household is a cultural category, the place we assume that family privacies ultimately occur, even while the privacies may be assigned their meanings in other locations. The delocalized household, then, is a kind of rhetorical anchor for the convincing interpretations that accrue to its affairs. As far as descriptive practice is concerned, the household is the place talked about and ultimately felt to contain family life, not the a priori site of a separate and discrete domestic order.

Redefining household in this way suggests that no one can be taken automatically to have privileged access to domestic truths, and thus challenges the third assumption of the private image. Laing (1969: 67) hinted at this when he commented about his own familial experiences, “The first family to interest me was my own. I still know less about it than I know about many other families. This is typical.” Yet, Laing combined this with a diagnostic view, aiming to see through what those with native access often cannot perceive on their own. The alternate approach we present here merely takes privileged access to be a claim.

Conceiving of family in terms of descriptive practice has distinct methodological consequences. First, it compels us to discern organized structures of familial understandings, the public side of domestic privacy. It directs us to examine how domesticity is seen from one setting or organization to another. As the public discourse of family life varies in time and circumstance, so too does the meaning of privacy. This cautions us to be prepared to give equal status to domestic truths found both inside and outside households. The approach might lead one to explore, for example, where the “theory” of broken homes and delinquency is used and by whom. Is it a regular feature of the family discourse embedded in some human service settings but not in others? The implication is that, should the prevailing understanding about the sources of delinquency in some organization be tied to domestic life, household realities would likely be framed and discovered accordingly, for better or worse.

Second, from the viewpoint of descriptive practice, we avoid household location and privileged access as procedural problems, transforming them into empirical ones. We now see the household as a presumed location toward which both members and nonmembers present, share, and argue social order. It is also a place to which differential access is accepted or claimed, regardless of residence. For example, there are claims for the privileged access of objectivity or expertise, just as there are counterclaims for the privileged access of actual occupancy. Although we shall not develop it here, the social organization of claims and counterclaims offers a means of addressing description as power in practice (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972, 1977/1981; Gubrium, Buckholdt, and Lynott, 1982; Gubrium and Lynott, 1985: 144-149).

As research topics, the distinctiveness of domestic order, household location, and privileged access are not taken to be purely conversational or merely “artful” (Garfinkel, 1967). The familial understandings and cognitive practice that enter into the work of figuring domestic order are embedded in concrete organizational cultures (see Dingwall and Strong, 1985; Gubrium, 1987; Silverman, 1985). The latter impose their own diverse, consensual, and conflicting agendas—structures—on domestic affairs. As such, while familial experiences are practical and construed, they are also organizationally produced and circumscribed, which takes family life well beyond the limits of households.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Viewed as descriptive practice, the family may be found in any setting where it becomes topical, that is, wherever it is talked about, described,
challenged, praised, or explicitly dismissed. In our own research, for example, we have detected family as a salient feature of a variety of organizational settings where data were collected. This section offers illustrations of family and descriptive practice in several settings. All in some way entertained the family as a source of, or remedy for, the individual troubles they dealt with. What goes on in the inner reaches of the household was variously taken to have entered into matters such as mental illness, burdens of care, emotional disturbance, and senility. Those concerned ranged from service providers to clients and family members. In their ways, each entered into the construction of family order as they sought and discussed its realities for a variety of practical purposes. Likewise, they were capable of making varied claims for the validity of their knowledge.

The settings studied were part of continuing projects on the descriptive organization of care and family troubles: nursing homes (Gubrium, 1975, 1980), a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children (Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1985), the physical rehabilitation hospital (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982a), support groups and a self-help organization for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease (senile dementia) victims (Gubrium, 1986), and community mental health settings and involuntary commitment hearings (Holstein, 1984, 1987a, 1987b). In each setting, we found organized descriptive practice—in particular, the family rhetoric that both specifies the household’s domestic order and persuades those concerned of the validity of the description (Gubrium and Lynott, 1985). These data allowed us to address the assumptions of the private family image.

A Distinct Order?

Regarding the distinct-order assumption, let us consider the semiannual psychiatric staff conference (a “staffing”) concerning an emotionally disturbed, 11-year-old boy, named Kirk, in residence at Cedarview, a treatment center (Buckholdt and Gubrium, 1985). Kirk’s record showed that he was a “troubblemaker” in the series of schools he had attended, having instigated truancy and gambling among peers and classmates. According to a multidisciplinary team’s placement recommendation, Kirk was “really much older” for his age than his friends and classmates, a “typical streetwise kid who can hold his own with the best of them.” As the proceedings of Kirk’s staffing unfolded, it was apparent that the way his family entered into the boy’s disturbance was not only “artfully” accomplished by participants but was constituted out of available structures for understanding the essential character of home life.

Characteristic of most staffings was the consideration of how the family served as the source of problems, how it entered into care and custody, and how it affected treatment. Attending this particular staffing was a typical collection of participants: Kirk’s social worker, his special education teacher, the center’s principal, the social service supervisor, the child care worker, a consulting psychiatrist, the child care supervisor, and the speech therapist. After some discussion of the child’s background, the social worker suggested that Kirk’s “acting out” and “advanced maturity” were his way of trying to get attention because, from what the social worker had discerned from careful inquiry of family and relatives and numerous home visits, “the kid’s family’s always come down pretty hard on him and he’s had to make it on his own.”

The social worker’s statement offered grounds for elaborating the quality of the boy’s family life and how it affected his disturbance and delinquency. While all took for granted that family life was a key ingredient in children’s development and could “make or break a kid,” it was their charge to discern the distinct domestic order at stake in each case. As staffers responded to, and embellished, the social worker’s contention, it soon became evident that the character of Kirk’s family life was by no means uniformly perceived. Indeed, each depiction accorded with either of two emergent “theories” of the fundamental realities of the household, now cutting across and now coinciding with their spokesperson’s professional commitments.

The social worker portrayed family life in terms of what she had seen and believed to know. According to her testimony, she had not only observed considerable favoritism regarding the children but had been told as much by two concerned aunts and the maternal grandmother, who were claimed to know the boy’s parents and, as the supervisor stated, “[could] see from how they acted toward each other here [at Cedarview] time and again, that home life must be hard on Kirk.” In a man-
ner reminiscent of Laing and Esterson’s (1964) detailed depiction of the unwitting yet evidently pathological nuances of intrafamilial conduct, social work and child care personnel “spelled out” the concrete particulars of the family’s rampant favoritism as the source of Kirk’s disturbance, what they claimed that anyone could see with his very own eyes.

It was soon evident, however, that a rather different understanding of familial order—one located in deeper affect—could also guide the interpretation of household facts. At one point, Kirk’s teacher inquired of the participants whether they were perhaps not being “too surfacey” in what they were seeing. The teacher stated that, from what she could discern by spending every day with Kirk in the classroom and talking with the mother about his progress, there was a “very deep layer of emotional support in the family” that was the “real core of home life, not the surfacey things we all see in others, day to day.” The consulting psychiatrist, an admitted Freudian, elaborated the teacher’s view, in effect arguing that what governed this family’s relations were its solid affective bonds, something that secured its members’ mental health despite the interpersonal unfairness that was often evident. Indeed, addressing the social and child care workers, the psychiatrist added that perhaps what appeared to be favoritism’s negative consequences were in actuality signs of a basically solid and emotionally well-integrated household. According to the psychiatrist, this strength allowed the family to tolerate its seeming inequities, something which, he claimed, a less healthy group couldn’t handle. The upshot of this way of thinking about the household’s domestic order was that, if anything, Kirk’s family life had worked to prevent Kirk’s behavior from being much worse than it was.

The two understandings were not each merely taken to address part of the proverbial story. Rather, as the proceedings unfolded, those arguing the implicitly behavioral view could explain both the appearances and what were said to be the “so-called” depths of Kirk’s family life, just as those holding to the affective understanding took the family’s surface reality to be epiphenomenal to its depths. While there were moments when the current advocates of the two understandings did try to settle their differences by accepting that each might hold only a partial view of the separate and distinct order of the household, there were other times when both took holistic views.

The two understandings were partially independent of their advocates and the latter’s professional commitments. The psychiatrist, a Freudian, did harbor the behavioral view on occasion, as he now and then entered into the discourse of its current advocates and elaborated it out of theoretical knowledge and clinical experience. The social worker did likewise as she periodically entered into the discourse of deep feelings and emotional bonding, even though she was, by professional commitment, an avowed behaviorist, trained in behavior modification.

Whether or not family life, in the final analysis, is really at bottom behavioral or emotional is not as important here as the fact that an ostensibly discrete domestic order, such as Kirk’s home life, was tied both to the available structures for understanding it and to its advocate’s articulations. Wittingly or not, staffers’ conversations indicated that two separate rhetorics of domestic order served and organized what was said and suggested about the household. While the presumed distinct order of the household was given separate existence, its practical reality was bound to delimited organizational visions. The staffers’ work of deciphering and defining domestic matters as a key ingredient of emotional disturbances used the logic of the respective discourses as much as the descriptive work entailed was pulled along by the discourses’ separate lines of reasoning. A participant might indulge either mode of understanding, but doing so publicly committed one to reasonably articulate that interpretation, not another, or to suffer accusations of not making any sense.

The particular interpretive structures were embedded in the familial concerns of Cedarview staffings; this much is known from observations in that organization. As such, the social order of Kirk’s family, like that of the other children, was variously articulated along either line, in effect becoming a line’s distinct familial reality. Field data from other settings showed that still other organizationally embedded structures of understanding cast family living in their own molds. Perhaps most notable of all was that family members themselves, who differentially entered into the diverse service settings observed, likewise used and articulated a variety of understandings within and outside the household to discern what some otherwise assumed that only family members could really know. Indeed, family members at times pleaded with outsiders to tell them, through the latter’s knowledge, “what they [family relations] are really like and what it all means.” This was not merely a matter of the external conditioning of family life but a partial constitution of it.
Assigning a Home

If we take the family’s social order to be bound to its representations and rhetoric, analysis is freed from another assumption—geographic location—as a methodological constraint on viewing the life of the household. Location becomes a matter of placement in deciphering what is and what is not a home. In practice, family order is found anywhere its signs and assignment practices occur; the household proper no more locates family truths than does any other scene generating family understandings.

As illustration, take the family concerns of legal and mental health personnel considering the involuntary hospitalization of 24-year-old Betsy Carlson, who had been diagnosed as chronically mentally ill and had recently been involved in several incidents that prompted a petition for her commitment. While circumscribed by legislation specifying formal legal criteria for hospitalization, involuntary commitment decisions are commonly oriented to the candidate patient’s ability to establish to the court’s satisfaction some tenable living arrangement outside the hospital that can contain the havoc associated with mental illness—an adequate home, as it were, for someone who is psychologically disturbed (Holstein, 1984). In practice, such tenability assessments entail articulating a candidate patient’s individual attributes and needs with a community environment’s ability to accommodate them (Holstein, 1987b). Commitment is likely to the extent that a proposed environment cannot be shown to accommodate and contain adequately the person under consideration. In Betsy’s case, tenability arguments raised the issue of her family’s ability to care for a troubled daughter. The daughter claimed that living in the family household was a viable alternative to hospitalization.

In anticipation of problematic commitment hearings in the jurisdiction studied, the court commissions a liaison to the local mental health consortium to investigate the circumstances surrounding the petition to commit. Typically, this focuses on the candidate patient’s domestic life. Accepting the private family image, the court-appointed liaison officer, in pursuit of an objective picture of domestic life, assembled the family report by interviewing family members in the household several times, taking the opportunities to observe firsthand the family in its native habitat. The Carlson family report indicated “a close and loving unit that cared a great deal for Betsy.” It described a family (Betsy’s parents and 16-year-old sister) that provided a “nurturant environment” that ameliorated many of Betsy’s mental health problems, one that constantly worked to “nurse Betsy back to health,” yet one that also had been “frustrated by being unable to help her get back to her old self.” The family was also characterized as “experiencing a great deal of tension” because “so much energy is expended on Betsy that other relationships suffer.”

At the commitment hearing, the district attorney (DA) argued that hospitalization was necessary because Betsy’s recent behavior while living at her family home was erratic, socially inept, and injurious to both Betsy and those around her. The DA contended that she had twice been retrieved by the police from wandering aimlessly in busy downtown intersections and had recently lost her purse containing a Supplementary Security Income check to a young woman who had admiringly asked to inspect the handbag and then run off with it. In addressing the issue of viable community placement, the DA concluded that Betsy’s family had exhausted its patience and resources for dealing with the daughter; the attorney had cosigned the petition to commit, arguing that the family “isn’t capable of keeping track of Betsy so she’ll stay out of harm’s way.” Betsy’s attorney did not dispute the charge but rather depicted her as docile and compliant, and thus easily managed. In light of the latter attributions, Betsy’s family was cast as competent, if somewhat reluctant, caretakers: “The family is fully capable of taking care of their daughter. They’re very conscientious about her. She’s no big problem to control.” Accordingly, the household environment emerged as a domain of adequate family living—a viable home.

The judge thus confronted conflicting interpretations of the household, grounded in alternative depictions of Betsy Carlson’s temperament and problems, on the one hand, and the candidate environments’ varied capacities to adequately house her, on the other. The social order of the family home was central to a placement decision, but the order proved evanescent, even elusive, as its consideration unfolded in the decision-making process. While the court-appointed liaison officer’s on-site family report might be considered a most credible depiction of home life, it proved to be an inadequate arbiter because its version of the Carlsons’ domestic circumstances did not speak precisely or relevantly to the court’s organizational agenda.

In court, assessments of the household—the assumed site of familial affairs—grant no special authenticity to proximate description per se, since adequate household representation itself is continually subject to review. An observer’s physical access to the household is less relevant to the ac-
ceptability of formulations of domestic order than are the interpretive structures and conditions of assignment that are available to observers and other claimants to household truths. In the preceding example, none of the interpretations of household affairs was dismissed as flawed in principle, although temporary conclusions of the sort were firmly reached. As the judge considered varied depictions of Betsy Carlson’s vulnerability and manageability, his understanding of her home life was structured both by his organizational concern for containing the havoc of mental illness and his changing orientation to alternate claims regarding her character. When her manageability was at the forefront, the family could be seen as “conscientious and capable” caretakers, offering Betsy a proper home. When Carlson’s vulnerability was focal, the family became “incapable of providing the needed supervision.” Thus, what the household contained, as an acceptable domain of family life, was tied to a structure of person-environment comparison embedded in an entirely separate location.

The on-site liaison officer produced family order in response to her own descriptive agenda, just as other depictors articulated their representations of home life. Specifically, the officer’s depiction was less informed by the court’s concern for containment and management than it was by the officer’s professional, therapeutic orientation. Her understanding of Betsy’s family in particular, and what goes on in households in general, was bound to descriptive frameworks rooted in her training as a clinical social worker and her therapeutic practice. The household was evaluated for the nurturance of its environment, its members’ ability to restore Betsy to mental health, rather than in terms of the environment’s constraint and control qualities. An even more proximate view of the Carlson household, Betsy’s mother’s version, characterized the family as “falling apart” and “beaten down” by the trials of dealing with a mentally ill member for eight years. The mother’s thinking dwelled neither on control nor on therapy for the daughter, but represented the household in terms of an entirely different set of relational concerns involving other family members. Thus, the most proximate versions, while thoroughly descriptive in one sense or another, were largely indifferent to the practical organizational concerns of the court and were mostly discounted.

To attend seriously to the descriptive practice of household discernment is to transform the home analytically from the geographic locus of family living into a territorial anchor for assigning domestic order. As such, the household may “house” a variety of familial candidates, as seen in the preceding example. Conversely, putative familial affairs cast adrift from the household anchor may signal family disorganization. For example, the “broken home,” as a household disrupted by divorce, comes to signify disorganized or deficient family life because the household no longer contains a secure complement of parents and their children. Or a mother’s sense of an inadequate family life is revealed by way of contrast when she notes that a halfway house for the chronically mentally ill is “more of a home to Betsy than her own home” because “while we are falling apart at home, they [the halfway house] can always be there for her, look out for her instead of worrying about their own problems.”

Who Speaks for the Family?

While the private image of family life takes householders in principle to have privileged access to the home, field data show that this is an unwarranted assumption. It is not that our alternate approach ignores the idea of privileged access. Rather, it casts privileged access as a claim made by those concerned with family matters that is partially circumscribed by prevailing structures for understanding the situation in question.

Consider the issue of aging and institutionalization, which was at the center of much family-related discussion among staff and family members connected with the nursing homes (Gubrium, 1975, 1980), the rehabilitation hospital (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982a), and the Alzheimer’s disease support groups studied (Gubrium, 1986). The issue presented itself in terms of how to manage a demented elderly person’s continued care—in particular, whether the burden of care was too great to maintain the elder at home and required his or her institutionalization. For elderly patients already in a nursing home, the issue grew out of changes in the organization of the patient’s outside support or in his nursing needs, among other developments. For those in physical rehabilitation, the staff’s discharge planning took into account, for example, whether a stroke victim’s continued care could be secured at home or in the household of a family member, or required the services of a nursing home. In support groups for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease patients, those concerned discussed, and often despaired, over how much longer they could continue to deal with the growing burdens of a demented elder at home and when it was time to seek a nursing home placement.

In each setting, the issue was entertained in terms of the quality of the patient’s home life. A number of questions arose in this connection.
What’s the family like? Are family members secure enough to deal with the burdens of care? Is there someone (a family member) who can be trusted to organize the family on behalf of the patient’s welfare? Is the family realistic about its strengths and weaknesses? Who best knows the family?

The questions addressed the order of a social form: the family. Because the form in itself was unobservable, those concerned necessarily relied on familial representations and representatives to answer their queries—signs of family order culled from household observations, the testimony of those claiming to know the family best, and documented information about member characteristics and household composition, among other forms of credibility (see Gubrium and Lynott, 1985). On one typical occasion, the participants of a support group for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease patients turned their attention to one participant’s, Barbara’s, plea for support concerning a decision about whether to continue caring for her increasingly confused and agitated husband at home. Barbara received some help from her three daughters but refrained from burdening them with what she said was essentially her own problem. After all, Barbara added, while the daughters lived nearby, they had families of their own to look after. Except for the nurse and social worker, who alternately served as primary facilitators for the support group, other participants had and would present similar concerns to those in attendance. It was a common enough topic, about a well-known entity: family support.

As the proceedings unfolded, Barbara offered detailed information about her husband’s activities of daily living. In turn, several participants asked her to elaborate, occasionally questioning whether she had perhaps overlooked something or not taken it into consideration. They were gentle challenges, aimed toward getting Barbara to see and report clearly what only Barbara was taken to really know. As Barbara kindly pointed out in response to such challenge, she did after all know better than anyone what was going on, because, as she put it, “I’ve been there and know from experience what we’ve [her family] been through, what we can and can’t do for him [husband].”

Some time later, another caregiver, Beth, returned to Barbara’s concern following the facilitating social worker’s unrelated assertion that some families “just can’t see the forest for the trees” when it comes to what’s really happening at home. Prompted by what Beth now referred to as “hints” about Barbara’s family that were dropped earlier in Barbara’s comments, Beth turned to Barbara and asked whether an outsider might help her to sort things out, to assess more realistically the family situation in Barbara’s home and whether a nursing home placement was perhaps desirable. Beth’s suggestion was framed in terms of the objectivity of outsider access, implying that insiders most intimately acquainted with family life were likely to have a biased view. With the alternate framing, it became evident that what Barbara had presented earlier was not simply a more or less accurate representation of domestic truths in relation to caregiving but an articulation informed by a specific mode for understanding privileged access.

Only with the alternate framing do we now see that the seemingly straightforward, heard but unnoticed, prior depiction of family support was not only a discursive account but a descriptive structure. With Beth’s later suggestion and the subsequent proceedings, we learn that the question of who best speaks for the family is subject to debate at two different levels: (a) about which descriptive standard (personal experience or objectivity) will affirm the representation of family order, and (b) about how accurate representation is as either an experienced insider’s or an objective outsider’s account. It was evident that there was no such thing as the family as such, either in particular cases or in general, but that what the family precisely was, was bound to credibility structures serving to define privileged access (Bernardes, 1984, 1985).

At times, in professional staffings in particular, objectivity as an understanding of privileged access took a quasi-scientific tenor, where expertise and credentialing served as further criteria of validity against the claims of personal experience. At other times, especially in the support groups, personal experience was fortified with antiprofessionalism, where “the professionals” were cast as sources of obfuscation and useless advice for what family members claimed to know best from their actual experiences. This was much in evidence in the self-help movement in general that surrounded Alzheimer’s disease (Gubrium, 1986). Indeed, in a fashion, the two prevailing standards for making valid claims about domestic truths reflected the ongoing debate in family studies about the relatively privileged access to home life of onsite observation as opposed to unobtrusive measurement, which returns us directly to the methodological theme of this article.

Again, it was clear that the rhetoric of privileged access, like other discourses, was partially independent of its articulation and spokespersons. While Barbara at first tacitly took personal experience as a warrant for her familial claims, she later more expressly indulged the rhetoric of
in a later session, Barbara was found again taking the guide to decision making. And in yet another turn he might, as an expert, please shed light on the just as the partial independence of the languages earlier claims and even asking the social worker if kind of family she and her daughters were, as a objectivity, casting doubt on some of her own up the cause of personal experience as part of the experiences, as they sympathized with self-helping caregivers over how “the professionals” often forget that only family members “really know what it’s like.” The partial independence of the structures for understanding privileged access, just as the partial independence of the languages of conduct and feeling as ways to discover the basic order of family living, informed us that Barbara and others were not so much contradictory or inconsistent in their collective representations as they served the logics of, and articulated cultural variety in, the diverse settings in which they participated.

CONCLUSION

Method connotes both theory and procedure, and refers to how analysis is undertaken. To the extent that assumptions about the phenomenon under consideration remain constant, method is, by and large, technical activity centered on issues of reliability and accuracy. When assumptions are subject to reconsideration, the character of technical activity and its procedural problems are transformed.

So it is in a reconsideration of the experiential assumptions underlying the private image in family studies. We have argued for, and illustrated, a reformulation of the idea of an a priori and distinct domestic order, the relocation of home from a geographic domain to a locational by-product of descriptive practice, and the transformation of privileged access from a technical research problem to a topic for study in its own right. Against the private image of family life, we have presented domestic order as a working, experiential issue in collective representation, a socially symbolic reality (see Bellah, 1973: lii).

While descriptive practice is bound to its real-world referents, family becomes meaningful only by subjecting those referents to interpretation grounded in collective understandings and representations. The “doing” of family is not merely cognitive, or a simple exercise in conversation. There is organization and substance to the familial stuff of talk and interaction. What the inner reaches of the household become are no mere matters of individual definition; they are objects of available and public modes of understanding. What is more, modes of understanding are socially distributed, such that the social order of family as it is cast by its embeddedness in one organization is not necessarily the same reality project it is in another.

The procedural implications of the descriptive and practical view of family as experientially located are manifold. First, it informs us literally to look and listen for signs of domestic order wherever they are presented, in or out of the household proper. Thus, any situation where “family” is made topical becomes an occasion for family study. This is by no means confined to settings where families are considered troubled or to where the family is formally designated as an object of concern. Household thus comes to be understood not as a locutor but a locational presumption.

Second, the alternate approach tells us to take into equal account any and all claimants to familial representation, not principally family members and household occupants. Membership and occupancy are only two—but not the paramount—categories of access claims. The practical assessment and honoring of various parties’ familial depictions and claims to privileged access can thus be added as further topics of family study.

Third, descriptive practice directs attention to the organized and situated actions and interactions of those who engage in assigning meaning to household affairs. The research focus of the approach is on virtual practitioners of familial representation—in the institutions, courts, homes, and other places that provide these practitioners distinguishable and public modes of directly or indirectly presenting familial experience. The method required by such an approach is not simply participant observation (a careful looking on and into the display of a way of life). Rather, it is the focused observation of participants who are active in construing and assigning meaning to a way of living—being family—known but only concretely seen and communicated in its available signs.

As any new viewpoint does, conceiving of family as descriptive practice spawns diverse technical and theoretical questions whose challenges would take us well beyond the scope of this presentation. One technical concern is the question of research access. While we have illustrated the alternate approach from data collected in human service facilities, there would be no reason not to extend the analysis to formal households and other “nondeviant” settings. But a new viewpoint also alters the meaning of old questions. In the pur-
view of descriptive practice, the question of research access would be not so much the issue of obtrusiveness but rather of how to prompt discourse regarding domesticity in places where its discussion is not formally mandated. To study descriptive practice is to allow both deviance and normality to be categories of domestic definition regardless of setting, which, indeed, we witnessed in the research settings considered here.

There are theoretical questions, too. One is how to analyze data about the same family culled from diverse settings. Another is how to treat the social organization of claims and counterclaims regarding both family depictions and privileged access, or how to analyze considerations of descriptive imperialism, which, as we mentioned earlier, would bring us to the sociology of power in domestic representation.

There are even metatheoretical issues, such as the reality status of domestic discourse in relation to concrete household activity. While we have been careful throughout not to deny the realities of the household, we have argued, too, that the meaning of related experiences cannot be separated from the interpretations of those concerned. This perhaps is the most important issue of all, for it turns on what we shall, in the final analysis, take family living to be all about (cf. Bernardes, in press a, in press b).

REFERENCES

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PRIVATE IMAGE OF FAMILY LIFE
