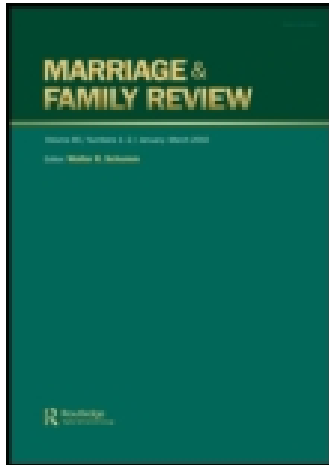


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### Family as a Discursive Achievement: A Relational Account

Pedro Pablo Sampaio Martins<sup>a</sup>, Sheila McNamee<sup>b</sup> & Carla Guanaes-Lorenzi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA

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## **Family as a Discursive Achievement: A Relational Account**

PEDRO PABLO SAMPAIO MARTINS

*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto,  
University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil*

SHEILA McNAMEE

*Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, Durham,  
New Hampshire, USA*

CARLA GUANAES-LORENZI

*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto,  
University of São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo, Brazil*

*Beginning with an understanding of family as a social construction, this article suggests that people actively make meanings about family during social interchanges. The idea is that family can be conceived as a discursive achievement: Family is defined in terms of what people who are drawing on various available socially produced discourses describe together as family. We propose that different realities regarding family are created via social processes of negotiating meaning in the interactive moment. Therefore, there are many different versions of family, and each of them has diverse implications for the social world. Examples of these implications for psychological theories, research, and family therapy are also presented, in considering how they might be useful in the field of psychology.*

**KEYWORDS** *family, family relations, family therapy, psychological theory, social constructionism*

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Address correspondence to Carla Guanaes-Lorenzi, Avenida dos Bandeirantes, 3900, Monte Alegre, Ribeirão Preto, Brasil, CEP: 14040-901, Universidade de São Paulo, Departamento de Psicologia, Bloco 5 (CPA), sala 33A. E-mail: carlaguanaes@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

What is a family? It has been called an institution, the first nurturing place, and the true value of being a human. Family has been described in many ways: As being the connection between individuals and society, a comfortable place to be in the world, and a producer of unique psyches. It has also been said that families are the locus of uneven gender relations, a group of people the individual is supposed to differentiate from, and a hierarchy that must be respected. Many descriptions regarding the definition of family have been offered during the past centuries. In fact, we have become so used to these conceptions of family in our lives that sometimes it may seem difficult, if not impossible, to question the existence of *an essence of family* in the world. Psychology has taken a special interest in this subject since the 1950s when family itself became an object of analysis. Curiously, although many different versions of family have been articulated, psychologists have traditionally conceived of family as a reality and have thereby discussed the concept of family as if it was an objectified fact (e.g., Ackerman, 1958).

However, in sharp contrast to this kind of treatment, the field of Family Studies has long acknowledged and taken interest in the social construction of family. For at least four decades now, different perspectives such as symbolic interactionism (Hess & Handel, 1959), phenomenological (McLain & Weigert, 1979), feminist (Lloyd, Few, & Allen, 2009), and postmodern theorizing (Doherty, 1999) have been influential to the field. In numerous publications, researchers and theorists have articulated about the social processes by which individuals determine their familial relationships to one another (e.g., Carsten, 1999; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Stacey, 1990), and different concepts such as fictive and chosen kin, for instance, have emerged to supplant the presumed biological “fact” of family ties (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Stack, 1974). In the same vein, discomforts regarding essentialist versions of family also started to take place in the field of Psychology (e.g., Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

We realize that there have been many successful and influential endeavors in both fields—Family Studies and Psychology—to overcome simplistic, naturalized, and essentialist versions of the concept of family. We also note that studies about the theme have usually focused on discussion about the concept of family and its implications for societal practices such as family therapy, marriage policies, or adoption. We admire such efforts, and much of our own argument here follows their achievements and their concerns with the pragmatic effects of our academic ways of describing family. However, in this article we want to address a specific question: How is it that people actually make use of different social discourses about family *in their daily lives*? It seems to us to be very rare for people to explicitly call on institutionalized academic concepts when engaged with their peers in day-to-day conversations.

On the contrary, in the flow of everyday life, people seem to find their ways of understanding family using a very different kind of language than that of academia. But exactly how does that happen? Can we make a theoretical account for the kind of process taking place when people talk about family in their usual, taken-for-granted activities?

Given these questions, the present article aims to elaborate a discursive option for understanding the way in which the idea of family is made possible in people's talk together. To accomplish this aim, we consider contributions from the social constructionist movement in psychology (Gergen, 1997; Shotter, 2008) that have posed challenges to traditional concepts and practices in the field. Constructionist ideas invite practitioners and scholars to focus on the various relationships in which we first engage and from which we extract the senses of reality by which we live. Social construction is interested in exploring the ways in which people jointly construct the terms by which they understand the world. Focus is on interactions that are situated in specific cultural contexts. Thus, meaning is negotiated in each interactive moment. And, these interactive moments are always related to broader social discourses that are available in culture. As Gergen (1997) notes, knowledge is created through communal practices.

The main argument of this article draws from the understanding that knowledge is a byproduct of negotiation. If different realities are constructed in the local negotiations of persons, then the specific ways that are used to describe the world result from these social processes. Words and actions gain meaning via negotiation and thus become "sensible" within different discursively constructed realities. How then can we understand the concept of family in the context of these ideas? Let us begin by holding to the idea that from a social constructionist perspective, family can be described as a discursive achievement—family is defined in terms of what people, who are drawing on various available socially produced discourses, describe together as family in the context of their interactions.

Let us construct the theoretical and pragmatic understandings upon which our argument about family is held. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) notes that our participation in language games (i.e., our taken-for-granted, cultural forms of interaction) creates specific forms of life. For example, particular language games are deemed appropriate for a sales interaction, whereas others are constitutive of an intimate relationship. Our ways of talking and acting together literally create a "way of being" in the world (or a form of life). Wittgenstein calls our attention to an observation that we create realities by persistently talking and acting in certain ways. Could the notions of language games and forms of life be useful as we explore what constitutes a family? What types of language games create what we come to know as family? What do we accept as the reality of family today? And, more important, is there *a* reality of family?

## DOMINANT DISCOURSES AND SITUATED PRACTICES

A quick recount of social life shows us the importance of the concept of family in how we organize our lives. In accordance with our culturally held concept of family, we think of the first insertion of people in the world through their families. We use familial surnames to connect individuals to one another, and these familial relations mediate our conversations with other people. We have regulations that regard family as an institution, and we abide by a concept regarding the way in which heritage must rightfully flow to family members. Furthermore, academic treatments, such as the psychological, sociological, and anthropological understandings of family, continue to examine how family shapes an individual, a society, and a culture. If we decide to further that quest, we will inevitably realize the idea of family sustains so many social practices that life would be almost unintelligible without it. In short—borrowing Hacking's (1999) phrasing—the idea of family is currently taken for granted.

Thus, we begin to wonder about the implications of the aforementioned observations. First, we could be led to believe that if the family is simply a natural and obvious aspect of the social world, then what we do in families has little bearing on that reality. In other words, “family is what it is; that is just the way things are.” However, let us explore what the “natural,” taken-for-granted understanding is. The dominant discourse about family in the West describes an adult man and woman, engaged in a heterosexual couple, living in the same household as their biological children. However, consider Gergen and Davis' (1997) reflection: “How can a single model of family adequately serve a diverse, heterogeneous society?” (p. 8). We believe that in the complex world of today, the idea of family as an unquestioned, unified, historically pervasive description is worth deconstructing. Fortunately, returning to our comments concerning Family Studies, this field has already established the ground for understanding family as a social construction and this allows us to engage in inquiries about different understandings of “family.” We believe it is well worth exploring how families and family members, communities, and cultures, as well as historical periods, construct what counts as family.

## CULTURAL VARIATION OF “FAMILY”

Let us explore the contributions of feminist and anthropological studies about family that show us the meanings of “family” vary dramatically between cultural groups. From a constructionist standpoint, we should consider this kind of analysis as an ideological critique (Gergen, 1997), because we understand that some ways of describing family create forms of living that serve certain interests, such as gender, generation, race, or class domination.

Looking back over two decades of feminist thinking, Thorne (1992) identified five central trends to what she calls a critical approach to family. The first of these argues that a transformation from an understanding of “family” as a natural unit rooted in biological processes to one in which family is defined as a historically situated, ideological product has occurred. The second trend emphasizes the gender, generation, sexuality, race, and class structures that facilitated the emergence of the concept of family that is generally held in Western society. The third trend refers to a rejection of a notion of family as a self-contained unit that is autonomous and isolated from society, and the fourth trend redefines the nurturance responsibilities in terms of a critique of the oppositions between family and community and between public and private groups. The last trend is one in which the diversity of experiences that people have with family is acknowledged and appreciated; this trend is presented in opposition to the traditional idea that family is always a safe and protected place (for essays regarding all of these themes, see Thorne & Yalom, 1992). Thus, according to Thorne (1992), the family is living a period of rapid change in which the complexity of its configurations, from a visionary perspective, might for the first time in history have a chance for a truly democratic gender and kinship order.

A Brazilian feminist anthropologist, Fonseca (2007), points out that the family has an important value for many individuals. However, we are reminded that using “family” as an analytical term creates certain risks to the extent to which science is put to work in favor of conservative truths. In that sense, “. . . ‘family’ comes to be analyzed as a historically situated political and scientific notion” (p. 26). Thus, we can see that feminists bring a critical stance to family studies and privilege the understanding of family through the lenses of social and historical processes.

Studies among indigenous communities presented by Carsten (2000) help us broaden this understanding. These studies were conducted with the aim of comparing cultures of relatedness. The author explains that she chooses to use the concept of relatedness instead of a concept of “kinship” because the latter carries with it a series of assumed preexisting conceptions. When discussing relatedness, she tries to understand the effects that “being connected” creates for certain people, and she favors an understanding that these phenomena may be determined in quite specific cultural ways that extend beyond the notion of ancestry. For instance, depending on the community under consideration, various components of relatedness, such as blood, semen, mother’s milk, feeding together, and even the engagement in shared daily work, are determinants of the creation of the types of deep and lasting relationships that are usually associated with kinship and family.

However, the aforementioned differences do not only occur in the context of examining differences between different societies. Let us consider the way in which the answer to the question “what is a family?” has varied widely over time within the specific cultural context of Brazil. Vaitsman (1995) traces

the prevailing model of a Brazilian middle class family to a historical process that is marked by both gender division and a separation between the public and the private realms that kept women confined to the domestic area of family life for several decades. According to her account, changes in the social context that occurred during the postmodern period and the advancement of women to the point of overcoming the clear divisions between the public and private realms have challenged the patriarchal model of family and have set the stage for a variety of family arrangements. Thus, heterogeneity was legitimized as being culturally dominant, and the family has become plastic and flexible; familial aspects that were formerly considered deviant can now exist alongside a variety of characteristics.

According to Watarai and Romanelli (2009), associations can be drawn between the observed broadening of family arrangements and a series of social changes, particularly the inclusion of women in the workforce, which enabled them to have increased autonomy from men. The authors then assert that various family models are now in the process of being accepted and considered valid. From a social constructionist perspective, language is seen as performative, meaning that describing things is not a passive, representative process but rather an active action in the world. Therefore, these many forms of family may illustrate the “multiple shifting definitions” of the concept of family and support the idea that the “notion of what a family is continues to change dramatically to include a rich and ever-increasing variety of family units” (Anderson, 1997, p. 81). So it is not that previously existing family units or organizations are simply recognized as family from one point forward. In fact, the very process of defining family in one way or another, and then recognizing particular arrangements as fitting the definition, gives to some of these arrangements the pragmatic status of *family* while leaving other organizations out. This account can only make sense if we think from a situated perspective of *what counts as family for whom at what point and by which standards?*

For instance, a rather controversial Project of Law known as the “Statute of the Family” is currently under discussion in the National Congress of Brazil. According to this project, “the family entity” is to be defined “as the social nucleus compound from the union of a man and a woman through marriage or stable union, or, additionally, a community compound by either one of the parents and their descendants.”<sup>1</sup> Should this retrogressive project be approved, defining family as it does would mean that, by the standards of legal rights for the Brazilian government at that point, many family arrangements would not even be considered “family” in the first place. This would have real and serious effects for the lives of millions of people who actually call themselves “family” from different definitions other than the one proposed by the law. This point should become clearer as we develop our argument throughout this article. For now, however, let us emphasize that understanding family as a social construction recognizes the family as an

emergent product of social, historical, and cultural processes that are continually evolving. It also highlights the many ways in which a family can be described.

Consider the following: If, in fact, there is something that resembles an absolute reality of family, as opposed to a socially constructed notion of it, then some essential, stable, and unchanging elements must exist that can be used to determine what constitutes a family. Yet we can quickly see that family has not always been viewed and understood as it is today. In fact, we note cultural distinctions in our understanding of what a family is; the family is not the same around the globe. When we realize the social processes involved in the construction and substance of the realities we inhabit, we become concerned with the consequences of accepting our current concepts of family without questioning them. How, then, can a social constructionist account help us address these issues? By what means are various realities of family created?

#### CRAFTING REALITIES IN MICROSOCIAL PROCESSES

Various understandings regarding the concept of family arise from a number of different perspectives. Within academia, the field of Family Therapy has been particularly interested in the subject. Early family therapists began working with families within a psychoanalytic theoretical framework that gave special attention to the interactions between family members and their personalities (Scharff & Scharff, 2003). In the 1950s, however, inspired by the pioneering work of Gregory Bateson and his colleagues Paul Watzlawick, Don Jackson, Janet Beavin, and others, the psychoanalytic approach to family gave way to a systems-oriented approach. In their groundbreaking work on schizophrenia, Bateson and colleagues introduced what, at the time, was a radical approach to the study of pathology. Rather than focus on the psychoanalytic relations among family members, the focus turned to communication patterns within families (see Jackson, 1968a, 1968b). Nearly 50 years later, with great hindsight, we can now see that even this radical systems approach was still using concepts somewhat situated within an individualist ideology, because they tended to regard the dynamics of family systems as composed by interrelated—yet somewhat separate—individual pieces. However, we must admit that it was the beginning of an exciting new understanding of what it means to be a family.

The systems approach that was so popular in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to what is known as a second-order cybernetic approach in the 1980s (see Maturana & Varela, 1992; von Foerster, 1981). Here, and closely aligned with our own argument, the “observer” (therapist or other professional) was recognized as participating—through his or her questions, comments, and interactions with the family—in the construction of the family. These



therapists/professionals began to question the possibility of objective knowledge about the family system by arguing that it did not appear to be possible to make a distinction between the observers and the observed (Becvar, 2003). By centering communication processes, both systems theory and second-order cybernetics transformed our understanding of the social world from one that exists and awaits discovery to one that is the byproduct of our interactions with each other—not just interactions within the family but interactions among family and professionals/others.

As these ideas were further developed, ideas from social constructionism stimulated a transition toward understanding human systems as linguistic systems from which meanings are constructed, and this understanding has important consequences for the way in which the family can be comprehended (Anderson, 1997; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). In retrospect, we can see a logical progression from the movement away from viewing family as a collection of individuals (thereby identifying the individual members as the units of analysis) toward viewing interaction (communication patterns and processes) as the analytical focus.

Because the interest of a constructionist stance is on processes of interaction, our attention must be directed to what people *do together* in any interactive moment. In focusing on interactive processes, the qualities or attributes of individual people recedes and communication processes become central. In this case, inquiry necessarily has to be sensitive to the cultural and historical discourses in which people are situated (McNamee, 2010), that is, to those more or less stable and pervasive versions of what counts as a family in the groups and societies of which we are part. However, when we pragmatically choose to focus our attention on microsocial processes of interaction, we can also highlight the ways in which people in joint action (Shotter, 2008) create and manage meanings about family in their very local, everyday activities. This kind of approach places our attention on the *use of language* in the quotidian for the construction of the versions of family that people use to operate in their lives. Thus, we come to the position that “family” is a discursively produced achievement of interactive processes.

## FAMILY AS A DISCURSIVE ACHIEVEMENT

Let us consider a hypothetical homosexual couple. In a recent decision in Brazil, the Supreme Federal Court granted homosexuals the legal right to get married and consequently acquire the status of a family entity. However, we can easily understand that stable unions between homosexual partners are not a recent historical fact. This prompts a series of questions:

- Before the decision from the court, if both partners of a homosexual couple lived together under the same roof for 10 years, are they a family?

- What if the couple had lived under the same roof for 1 year? Are they a family?
- Consider the partners of a homosexual couple who had been dating each other for 15 years but living in different households. What would define them as composing a family? What would exclude them from being one?

As we discussed before, the notion of what counts as a family may be viewed as socially constructed instead of as a natural and existing-for-itself entity in the world. However, if family is socially constructed, then how do we see, observe, and, most importantly, *experience* family as an entity or object existing in the world? In an attempt to answer this question, let us turn to the constructionist notion of meaning making. Here we find a focus on language practices (i.e., what people do together and what their “doing” makes). Again, we are reminded of the constructionist focus on interactive processes and not entities or objects. In the dominant (modernist) discourse of today, family is an unquestioned entity, a natural object in the world that, although possibly variant, waits to be studied and described *as it really is*. Yet to the constructionist, social interchange is a privileged space where participants negotiate the social order. This social order, of course, includes family.

The relational theory of meaning (Gergen, 1997) asserts that meaning is a communal achievement arising out of situated interactions where participants coordinate their actions together. This is in direct contrast with the more traditional understanding about meaning as located within an individual mind and transmitted to an interlocutor via a passive representative language. A person’s utterance has no meaning by itself; rather, the construction of meaning actually begins with the supplementary actions that are taken by a potential interlocutor, (i.e., when he or she responds in a particular way). In doing so, it is neither one participant nor another who is responsible for any emergent meaning. Meaning is in the “in between” processes of relating, not “in the head.” Each move in a conversation both opens possibilities for new meaning making and constrains other possibilities. With each unfolding action in the process of relating, meaning remains “on the way.” That is, meaning is never finalized (Frank, 2005); it is always open to further supplementation. “Meanings are subject to continuous reconstitution via the expanding domain of supplementation” (Gergen, 1997, p. 267), and they are therefore temporary achievements situated in particular interactive moments. Shotter (2008) also describes the way in which meaning can be achieved in the most unpredictable and unintentional ways in the joint action between interlocutors; embodied conversations make the production of knowledge about both the world and ourselves possible.

We should keep in mind that there is no such a thing as “the beginning” of an interaction: We are always situated in a broader conversational flow and immersed in a number of various relationships. The implication of our

situation within this context is that locally achieved understandings are not at all separated from broader social discourses. Thus, from the relational theory of meaning, we may understand that we are always immersed in the meaning-making universe, so every time we attempt to define family, we are calling on socially produced vocabularies situated within specific historical times that allow us to produce *versions* of what a family *might be*. Thus, attempting to arrive at a true definition of what family *essentially is* becomes a futile task with no possible ending in this context.

We have now moved away from the initial question regarding what essentially constitutes a family toward a different question, namely the question of which versions of family are made possible in each particular relationally contextualized conversation. This brings us back to our initial point: Family is what people describe together as family. To understand family as a discursive achievement is to realize that the contours and boundaries of what does and does not count as a defining aspect of family are constructed as valuable knowledge in the process of meaning negotiation that occurs during conversations, as people make use of different social discourses about family in their quotidian. Therefore, the knowledge that arises during conversation credits the associated versions of family that are constructed with the status of being *real*. As Anderson (1997, p. 80) would put it, “the family is a reality based on communication.”

We could illustrate this process by revisiting the previously introduced example of the homosexual couple. Suppose we give two people the task of observing a homosexual couple in a public environment for approximately 1 hour, after which they will have to answer the question of whether the two people whom they observed are a family. Assuming the observers take their task seriously, we can easily imagine that observation alone is not sufficient to solve the puzzle because the two observers must arrive at a collaboratively constructed answer. At the very least, the two observers would need a couple of minutes of *conversation* to determine the criteria they are going to adopt for answering the question. These criteria must not only satisfy the two observers and be valuable for making just decisions, but they must also be criteria that are convincing to both the people who are being observed and to other potential external people, including us, as those who have posed the question. How could the observers come to an answer?

As we can illustrate with this example, any possible answer to this seemingly simple question would have to be negotiated and constructed in conversation between the two people who have been faced with the task at hand. It is in their conversational process that they arrive at a set of criteria that describe what a family is and that allows them to subsequently decide whether a particular couple fits their description or not. Thus, a concept of family will be momentarily achieved during discursive activity and will then sustain an answer. It is important to emphasize the point that there are no

objective criteria per se on which the answer can be built. Rather, the choice of criteria is always a relative decision that is specific to each interactive moment of language in use. This is not to suggest that the dominant discourses circulating within a community or a culture do not bear much weight in the matter. However, to the constructionist, the “taken-for-granted” ways of talking about family only remain unquestioned and only take on the sense of “real” or “true” as participants continue to make use of them. To engage in a Foucaudian analysis (1969) locates our understanding of family in specific historical, cultural, and local moments and provides the means by which we might begin to ask what other understandings of “family” might be possible in different historical, cultural, and local circumstances.

Three observations regarding this example should be taken into account. First, this is only an example, and it is intended to illustrate the process of meaning making regarding the idea of family. In an attempt to make the process clear, the aforementioned example describes a hypothetical situation; the process of meaning making is not likely to occur in such an explicit manner in real life. However, the clarity derived from using a simple example allows us to pay attention to how certain conversational resources are used in particular moments in conversation (McNamee, 2004). That is to say that any meanings about family achieved during a given conversation are socially circumscribed, relational accomplishments. Thus, determining whether a particular couple is or is not a family (in a matter-of-fact manner) is neither up to the observers, nor to the couple, nor to anyone in particular. Rather, the point is that any answer to the question of whether the couple is a family is one more answer, consistent with some particular version of what a family can be. Of course, we do not make meaning from nowhere. Given the positions in society from whence various individuals are speaking, the contexts in which they find themselves, the power relations of which they are part, and the like, different voices may be stronger or weaker, more or less validated by others regarding certain matters and may therefore create potentially more communally sustained descriptions than others.

Second, we should pay attention to the word “momentarily” because it helps us remember that any meanings constructed between the two observers in our example are only valid for the specific relational frame in which they are situated. The constructed meanings of family that are achieved during the presented task are subject to change as a result of a variety of contextual differences. For example, contextual factors such as whether the observers are being watched during their conversation, whether they believe the couple is going to hear about their answer, whether they have beloved close friends or family members who are homosexual, whether they are homosexuals or not, whether they are intimate partners, and so on may result in differences in the negotiation process as it occurs and in its outcomes.

The third observation is a pragmatic one. Considering an answer as a momentary achievement does not by any means devalue it. In fact, the

relationally produced descriptions generated by the two observers are going to have specific and direct impacts on the actions of the people who are faced with the task of making a decision about the couple, as well as the actions of the couple themselves. Suppose the observers are the owners of a store at which the couple shops and these owners decide the two members of the couple constitute a family. The couple may then be given the “family discount” offered by the store that week. This hypothetical effect of meaning making is just an immediate and small effect that only matters to a few people. However, the social world is much more complex than simple tasks of “yes” or “no” answers. What would happen if, for example, the owners of the store decided that a couple was actually a family, but later the couple told them they do not consider themselves to be one? How much more complex could the process of meaning negotiation get as we expand the domain of supplementation? And, taking a step further, what if we considered the same process as one that occurs during the course of everyday life in which not only billions of civilians may be faced (either explicitly or not) with a similar task but also professionals, organizations, governments and institutions? What can we take as implications of understanding that family is actively being made during conversations?

### FAMILY LANGUAGE IN USE: IMPLICATIONS

The implications of describing family as a discursive achievement are open-ended. If our point is clear, we recognize the description of family that results from defining it as a discursive achievement is not a finalized version of family, and the implications of this description for the social world can only be known after they are actually in motion in local, real, and specific relational contexts. In other words, our account remains open to supplementation. Even so, the reflexive exercise of considering the effects of our descriptions of the world is an important one.

In our view, the main implication of adopting a discursive conception of family is the possibility of keeping an open stance that allows us to understand the different ways in which people describe their connections with others and how these relationships work in the context of their situated realities. In the following paragraphs, we discuss some of the ways in which we believe that viewing the idea of family as a discursive achievement may be useful for the development of psychological theories of family, research, and family therapy practices.

#### Implications for Theorizing

Sustaining all descriptions of family as valuable knowledge (because of their use within given communities of persons) suggests a shift from an understanding of psychological theories about family that are assumed to depict or

represent the essence of what family really is. Alternatively, we come to understand these theories as being particular ways of discussing and describing families that have been developed to achieve certain goals. Thus, family theories can be viewed as byproducts of a continuous academic conversational flow that in making statements about family are also responsible for creating different realities for it. This, in turn, offers an invitation for psychologists to recognize, question, and make their assumptions explicit as they study, theorize, and write about family. This invitation also encourages psychologists to illuminate both the processes by which their descriptions and accounts are made possible and the implications their theories might have for the social world (Gergen, 1997). Furthermore, this account situates family theories as discursive options in the sense that it becomes unnecessary to choose a single, finalized, and once-and-for-all explanation of family; instead, a discursive definition of family places psychological theories about family as “*potentially* viable and generative ways of engaging relationally with each other as well as with our clients” (McNamee, 2004, p. 236).

### Implications for Research

We can also imagine the implications this type of description has for research. On one level, researchers who share the notion of family as a discursive achievement are encouraged to reflect continually on both the assumptions they make about family and their reasons for these assumptions. The researchers in question will also recognize that any particular choice regarding a specific way of describing family has its own implications. As they proceed with their inquiries, researchers should question both which types of families they are favoring and which types of families are being left out or unheard. The answers to these questions are directly related to the types of social action that are likely to be facilitated or constrained by any knowledge that results from a particular study (McNamee, 2010). On another level, researchers are also invited to further explore the ways in which people create different realities regarding family as they work cooperatively to make meaning. Researchers might want to understand the types of conversational resources people turn to when invited to talk about the subject of family, they may be interested in situating the influence of various social discourses in the construction of local descriptions of family, and they can try to understand the effects of particular understandings of families for people’s lives. Many possibilities can be explored.

### Implications for the Practice of Family Therapy

Finally, we can reflect on the ways in which the discursive and relational approach to defining family presented in this article contributes to the development of family therapy practices. First, a discursive description of family

places the therapist's attention on the conversational process that is occurring during the session because he or she realizes the therapeutic conversation is a context for meaning making from which different versions of family may be constructed. This also renders all participants in the conversation, including the therapist, responsible for the versions of family that are created because the therapist too is an active part of the process of meaning making via his or her supplementary responses (comments, questions, embodied responses, etc.). The professional might find him- or herself engaged in a kind of responsive talking, "a way of seeking in one's talk to afford one's interlocutors opportunities to tell of, and to explore further, events and experiences that have mattered to them in their lives" (Shotter, 2009, p. 21).

In turn, this also places the therapist's attention on his or her own assumptions about family and how those assumptions play a part in the ongoing process of meaning negotiation. Next, we should consider who should be invited into the therapeutic setting. We can imagine that any given abstract model of family cannot answer this question. On the contrary, the very decision of who should be included in the therapeutic conversation can be a process discussed by those who are already participating. This is closely aligned with Anderson's (2012) idea that a relationally responsive therapeutic practice is sensible to the various definitions—of self, of problems, and of family, for instance—negotiated from the inside between the therapist and his or her clients. In our case, this calls attention to a number of questions: Who is constructed as belonging to the family as the conversation continues? What types of descriptions are the people in the room creating together? Does anyone feel oppressed by a dominant description? Does it feel like someone is being excluded or ignored? Which descriptions work better for a particular group of clients at a particular moment? Can participants work together toward the construction of different versions of their family? In other words, a conversation about the meaning of family can be used as a therapeutic resource from which the construction of several versions of a family may point to new relational possibilities for clients.

## CONCLUSION

The contributions of the social constructionist movement help us denaturalize the idea of family as an ontological, inevitable, necessary, and self-contained entity within the world. Understanding family as a social construction has important implications for the field of psychology by considering that if there are many possible versions of what constitutes a family instead of *a single family*, we can consider whether each of these versions is useful for certain people and certain purposes at certain times.

So, back to our original question, "how is it that people actually make use of different social discourses about family in their daily lives?", a simple

answer might be this: People engage in processes of meaning making. It is in the unceasing process of dealing with the idea of family, in the continuous conversations about the subject, and in the flowing coordination of actions around the concept that different meanings of family are worked out in the course of daily life. When we focus on a microperspective of social construction, we see that discourses about family are not used in their complete, academic, coherent versions. Instead, they are alive “in between” people as they negotiate meaning. In that case, social discourses may be mixed, juxtaposed, contradicted, and modified as people make use of them in the quotidian according to their specific, pragmatic, and momentary demands of social life. Analytically, we want to know whose standards we are using in any particular conversation to discuss the specific reality of family with which we are dealing. We want to create meaningful and useful ways of going on together (Wittgenstein, 1953). We want to be able to reflect on the implications of our descriptions, and, most important, we want to understand the degree to which various descriptions of family can be useful to particular interests at certain times and what alternative possibilities might be useful in different contexts.

When we shift the focus of our understanding of family away from an essentialist stance toward a constructionist one, we are invited to take a stance of curiosity to understand how people are actively making meanings about family while they coordinate their actions in conversations about this subject and are responsible for creating different versions—and realities—of family. Each description can be considered a discursive achievement that is both situated and sustained in a particular relational context and that people refer to during the course of their daily lives.

Psychologists are thus encouraged to explore the different ways in which people create meaningful relationships with each other and the ways in which people explore and exist in a variety of possible manners of family. This account favors a compromised stance for psychology as a discipline in which it is aware of its effects on society and interested in discussing not only what families already are but also what they can become.

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## NOTE

1. Loosely translated from Portuguese from the Project of Law being processed in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, available at [http://www.camara.gov.br/proposicoesWeb/prop\\_mostrarintegra?codteor=1159761&filename=PL+6583/2013](http://www.camara.gov.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra?codteor=1159761&filename=PL+6583/2013), accessed on May 22, 2014.



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