

FAMILY MYTH AND FAMILY LIFE STYLE

ANTONIO J. FERREIRA, M.D.

San Jose, California

A propos Danica Deutsch's paper on family life style (1) which I have been asked to discuss, there are marked similarities between this concept and mine of family myth (2, 3, 4, 5).

Family myth refers to beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their respective roles in the relationship; beliefs which, although unsupported by reality, are well-integrated in and made part of the family's everyday transactions.

Family life style as defined by Deutsch runs parallel to the Adlerian concept of the individual life style, and is thus "a holistic concept denoting the family's 'biased apperception' of the outside world [its view of the world] and its automatized reactions to, or means of coping with this world" (1, p. 2), according to its "law of movement" toward reaching its fictional, non-objective, goal.

From these definitions, it is apparent that both concepts agree in their view of the family as a system endowed among other properties with some sort of homeostatic device (7) which permits it to resist change or alteration even in the face of ill-fitting "realities."

Distinctions between these two concepts, seem to be as follows. Family life style speaks primarily of the way the family appears and behaves in its dealings with the outside world; it assumes that the family, as a unit, "moves" towards some goals; it refers mostly to what could be called the "outer image" of the family, that is to say, the front or facade which the family strives to present to others. Family myth, on the other hand, refers primarily to the workings within the family boundaries, to the ways in which family members describe and explain their behavior vis-a-vis each other, and their verbalized views of the relationship; it speaks of the way the family appears to its members, the "inner image" of the group, an image which all family members contribute to produce, and, apparently, strive to preserve. Indeed it is grounded on homeostatic considerations, and the individual family members' assumed need to preserve the nature and assure the survival of the ongoing relationship.

A concept which appears to be particularly similar to family life style is family theme as introduced by Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel (6).¹ These authors defined a family theme as "a

¹Handel actually is co-author of a book and a paper featuring life style in their titles (Rainwater, L., Coleman, R. P., & Handel, G. *Workingman's wife: her personality, world and life style*. Dobbs Ferry, N. Y.: Oceana Publications, 1959;

pattern of feelings, motives, fantasies, and conventionalized understandings grouped about some locus of concern which has a particular form in the personalities of the individual members"; the theme, which involves all family members and serves as a point of orientation for the family's behavior, expresses the family's "basic forms of relating to the external world." Whereas the concept of family myth refers mostly to the manner in which family members deal with each other, the concepts of family life style and family theme focus primarily on the family's ways of relating to the external world.

Although the concepts of family life style, family theme, and family myth undoubtedly represent congruent observations of the family, it seems that each covers a different angle and apportions different fragments of the whole picture. The three concepts are of a different logical type (8) and may also be regarded as representing progressively higher orders of abstraction (9). Family myth would be regarded, then, as covering only particular elements within a given family theme and life style.

Together with such other concepts as family homeostasis, family rules, etc., family myth, family theme, and family life style, seem to reflect a considerable body of recent clinical observations on the family which are in harmony with one another. Having been independently arrived at, these concepts may be regarded as mutually validating. Thus, though hazily defined, they may serve as the basis for future formal research.

REFERENCES

1. DEUTSCH, DANICA. Family therapy and family life style. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1967, 23.
2. FERREIRA, A. J. Family myth and homeostasis. *Arch. gen. Psychiat.*, 1963, 9, 457-463.
3. FERREIRA, A. J. Family myths: the covert rules of the relationship. *Confin. Psychiat.*, 1965, 8, 15-20.
4. FERREIRA, A. J. Family myths. *Amer. Psychiat. Ass., Psychiat. Res. Rep.*, 20, 1966, 85-90.
5. FERREIRA, A. J. Psychosis and family myth. *Amer. J. Psychother.*, 1967, 21, 186-197.
6. HESS, R. D., & HANDEL, G. *Family worlds: a psychosocial approach to family life*. Chicago: Univer. Chicago Press, 1959.
7. JACKSON, D. D. The question of family homeostasis. *Psychiat. Quart. Suppl.*, 1957, 31, 79-90.
8. KORZYBSKI, A. *Science and sanity*. New York: Country Life Press, 1933.
9. WHITEHEAD, A. M., & RUSSELL, B. *Principia mathematica*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univer. Press, 1910.

Handel, G., & Rainwater, L. Persistence and change in working-class life style. In A. B. Shostak & W. Gomberg [Eds.], *Blue-collar world*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp. 36-41).—Ed. note.