

## FAMILY RULES: Family Life Styles

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*The authors view the family as a rule-governed system, and present material from family assessments to indicate that family rules can be inferred from a family's repetitive behavior. Five family rules are found to be of such magnitude that they are designated as "family life styles." It is suggested that the therapist's willingness to state and restate the rules explicitly creates a redundancy that may set into operation counter rules, which may eventually lead to a renegotiation of the family rules.*

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If we are to accept Jackson's assertion,<sup>7</sup> "The family is a rule-governed system,"<sup>2, 6</sup> we must answer three questions: 1) What is a "family"? 2) What is a "system"? 3) What is a "rule"?

For our purposes, we have taken nearly identical definitions for "system" and "family." A "system" is "an assemblage of objects united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence" (Webster). A "family" is "an assemblage of *people* united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence." But, what is a "rule"? The dictionary definition of a "rule" is "a prescribed guide for conduct, action,

usage" (Webster). The synonym for "rule" is "law." Riskin<sup>9</sup> defines family rules as:

... hypothetical constructs formulated by the observer to account for the observable behavior in the family. The family may be totally unaware of them.

Jackson<sup>7</sup> defines family rules as:

... an inference, an abstraction—more precisely, a *metaphor* coined by the observer to cover the redundancy he observes.

Therefore, family rules are not quite the same thing as those rules that are written down and posted for the use of the tennis court or swimming pool. ("All

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players must wear tennis shoes." "No eating by the pool.") Nor are family rules the same as those laws that are set down explicitly, that govern society, and relate to the specifics of operating a motor vehicle, payment of taxes, and gathering in public places.

What are family rules, then? First of all, as Riskin suggests, family rules are seldom explicit and rarely written down. They are implicit; it is the "unwritten law" that governs. Once the law has been written down and has become explicit, it loses much of its power.

Second, family rules are inferences; they are abstractions.<sup>7, 9</sup> Rules may be inferred from any behavior<sup>11</sup> that has occurred often enough for the observer<sup>1, 5</sup> to say he has "seen or heard that happen before."

Third, family rules have the dimension of repetition and redundancy.<sup>1, 5</sup> Since repetition and redundancy require time, family rules have the dimension of repetition-redundancy over time.

Fourth, family rules have the attributes of systems;<sup>2, 6</sup> that is, they come to have rules, too—although of a different level and/or abstraction.

Fifth, family rules have autonomy and tend to perpetuate themselves. In taking on the attributes of systems (*i.e.*, having rules), family rules come to have qualities and powers that were not originally intended—and which, in the present tense, may not serve any useful purpose. In the beginning, family rules prescribe and limit behavior.<sup>6</sup> Having been repeated often enough, family rules come to describe and further *prescribe* what is necessary. For example, a family rule that says, "Don't say what you feel," repeated over time will not be a statement about what is forbidden but rather about what is expected.

As we talk about rules, it is apparent that rules are of larger or smaller order; for example, it is clear that a rule, "All players must wear tennis shoes," is of a different order than a rule that relates to "gathering in public places." To make this example more extreme, we can compare the rule, "All players must wear tennis shoes," to ". . . conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." In this paper we are concerned with those larger or largest of family rules. These supra-ordinal family rules are roughly comparable to, "The United States is a republic," or ". . . conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." All larger or largest of rules (whether for the family or another system) express a *philosophy*, contain a *definition*, and refer to a *theoretical ideal* or a *goal*. They have *character* and *style*. We have collected data about these larger family rules; in our view the effects of these larger or largest family rules is so pervasive that they are best separated and called "family life styles."

While collecting data on family life styles, we have also compiled an overwhelming sample of smaller family rules. Some of these rules are cited below in the sections describing the "family life styles." Smaller or smallest of family rules have to do with the operation or the mechanics of the system. For example, the rule, "The United States is a republic," has a smaller rule, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech," which is for the purpose of implementing the largest rule. This smaller rule still contains philosophy and style and a goal or ideal and has character. At the extreme, however, smaller rules have little or no style, phi-

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talk about rules, it is apparent that the order of larger or smaller order; therefore, it is clear that a rule, "All must wear tennis shoes," is of less order than a rule that relates to behavior in public places." To make the rule more extreme, we can compare the rule, "All players must wear tennis shoes," to ". . . conceived in order and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." In this context we are concerned with those larger or smallest of family rules. These supra-family rules are roughly comparable to, "The United States is a republic" or ". . . conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." All larger or smallest of family rules (whether for the family or the system) express a *philosophy*, *definition*, and refer to a *theory* or a *goal*. They have *characteristics*. We have collected data on these larger family rules; in our analysis the effects of these larger or smallest of family rules is so pervasive that they are categorized and called "family life

rules." In collecting data on family life rules we have also compiled an oversample of smaller family rules. In this study these rules are cited below in paragraphs describing the "family life rules." The smallest of family rules have to do with the operation or mechanics of the system. For example, the rule, "The United States is a republic" has a smaller rule, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech," which is for the purpose of implementing the largest rule. The smallest rule still contains philosophy, style and a goal or ideal and character. At the extreme, however, some rules have little or no style, phi-

losophy, definition, or character but have the strict purpose of regulating behavior. An example is: "All players must wear tennis shoes."

From material collected during videotaped family assessment interviews,<sup>4</sup> we have come to agree with Jackson:<sup>7</sup>

If one can reliably infer the general rules from which a family operates, then all of its complex behavior may turn out to be not only patterned but also understandable—and as a result, perhaps, predictable.

The five larger or largest family rules that we wish to emphasize here are general rules; they are "family life styles."

#### FAMILY LIFE STYLES

1. *Children Come First*. This rule and the pattern it describes and prescribes was first thrust upon us by a family with five children. At the beginning of the family assessment interview,<sup>4</sup> the children responded first to our questions; the general noise level was distracting and interruptions were frequent. As the interview progressed the husband made some attempts to maintain order; the wife sat remote and depressed. Our response was to feel overwhelmed; we realized that we could not complete our interview unless some order could be imposed on the family behavior and communication. We, therefore, made a rule—it was not explicitly stated—that only one person could speak at a time. We made the rule and enforced it by refusing to go on until we had heard what each person said and had completed each transaction.

In this less confusing and overwhelming atmosphere, we learned that both the husband and wife were professional people. She had given up her career for housewifery, and he had gone on to greater and greater professional attain-

ments. His achievements kept him away from home for protracted periods; he had also acquired a considerable number of hobbies and interests outside the home. We inferred that the early common ground between them had not been substantial and that their attempts at intimacy had failed. In this context their first child had arrived. Having a child aggravated their disappointment and led to further attempts at intimacy. Further attempts at intimacy resulted in more children and more children led to greater difficulty in experiencing intimacy.

In a process such as this the children must be neglected. In their attempts to get attention the children create disturbances and interrupt. These interruptions lead to confusion, which results in further neglect. The net effect of all this is nearly continuous noise and turmoil. Further, since children do come first, either parent, in order to gratify himself within the family, must become another child. This eventuates in the loss of one spouse and increases the parenting burden of the remaining spouse. No doubt this pattern contributes measurably to the wife's depression and is partly responsible for the husband's many absences. Ironically, the wife's depression and the husband's outside activities allow them to endure—themselves, each other, and their relationship with the children. Some of the smaller rules in this family were:

1. Don't talk so anyone can hear.
2. Don't listen to what anyone says.
3. Don't make sense of what's going on.
4. Make noise or interrupt when a transaction nears completion.
5. Don't let on you want anything for yourself.

In summary, families with the life style, "Children Come First," are expected to have one spouse who is depressed and

one who seeks most of his/her gratification outside the home. The pattern of depression and pleasure away from home tends to split the family as a functional/effective unit, and the split tends to reinforce the rule.

2. *Two Against the World.*<sup>8</sup> This life style describes the relationship between any two people in which there is a collusion with the emotional significance of survival. This notion is commonly expressed as, "I can't live without you." Since survival in fact is rarely a question, these collusions begin with a skewed view of reality and a kind of "I won't tell on you if you won't tell on me" agreement. These collusions have to do with reinforcing each other's view of reality; the outside world is seen as the enemy. The partners in this relationship need not agree about what the danger is or whether there is any danger. They need only to agree that, "If there is danger, it emanates from out there." In this system anything that reduces the danger of the outside world automatically threatens the relationship. This phenomenon explains the threat posed to some relationships by individual psychotherapy; it explains the symptoms or breakdown that may occur in one marital partner as the other improves.

Part of the danger of reinforcing or validating the reality of another person is that difference and differentness between people become obscure; when two people think alike, feel alike, and do the same things, one of them is unnecessary.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although differentness and difference are feared, the threat of similarity is even more awesome and must also be worked out. It is not surprising therefore that collusions are particularly prone to internecine warfare and to

serious breaks with reality. Curiously enough, both these events may occur while both the partners manage to continue to view the outside world as the enemy. The problem of trust is never confronted; and since it is not, trust never develops. Children in families with the rule "Two Against the World" tend to take on the hue of the outside world, and are often seen by the parents as destructive and threatening.

One of the families in our study came to conjoint therapy after the wife had involved herself in individual psychotherapy. The reasons for changing the format were failure of the individual therapy and the indifference, defiance, and withdrawal of the two teenage daughters. They were referred for family assessment consultation because family therapy had reached an impasse. They were stuck; they had formed yet another collusion—to see that the therapy did not work. During the family assessment interview, the husband and wife fought continuously; they left us with a threat that was intended to put us in the "enemy camp." Several weeks later they terminated the therapy on the strength of our report. Some of the smaller rules in this family were:

1. Follow the leader.
2. Obscure any difference or differentness.
3. Don't let on what you really think and feel.
4. Do the "right thing."

In summary, the rule "Two Against the World" is a collusion between two people with grave self doubts, high suspicion, and undeveloped trust. They establish a relationship characterized by mutual reinforcement of views of reality; a primary agreement is that the outside world is the enemy. This mutual reinforcement tends to minimize differentness, and results in internecine warfare and insanity.

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Children of these relationships tend to become identified with the enemy and are eventually extruded.

3. *Share and Share Alike*. The word "share" has two different meanings. One meaning has to do with intimacy and participation: "Share, participate, partake, to have, get, use, etc., in common with another or others" (Webster). The other meaning is, "Share implies either the granting or receiving of the privilege to use, possess, enjoy, etc." (Webster). The latter meaning has no implication of involvement with others except in the sense that the share has been granted by others. It is with the latter meaning that we are concerned. The rule, "Share and Share Alike," was first conceptualized by us as the result of a family assessment interview in which the husband was a hard drug addict and the wife was a mental health professional. She had been married before and brought her children to the marriage. Although they pretended that he shared the financial and emotional burden of the family, he was, in fact, on drugs, in the hospital, or busy seeking ways to involve his wife in "psychotherapy."

The life style, "Share and Share Alike," is at best an ambiguity; it implies "share" in the sense of "participate," but factually it describes a situation in which things, time, and geography are divided up. This couple "shared their time with us." Each had his turn to talk and listen, but the subjects covered and the emotional distance between them showed quite clearly that they were not relating to each other—rather they related to such abstractions as "the time" and "the space." They touched emotionally and psychologically only at some endpoints. They related to each other consecutively, rather than concurrently

or consequentially. Their relationship appeared to be more of a coincidence than a plan. Some of the smaller rules in this family were:

1. Don't express your pain verbally.
2. Don't express your anger.
3. Do the right thing.
4. Maintain individual areas of autonomy at all costs.
5. If anything goes wrong and it can't be denied, blame someone or something else. (If you can't deny, project.)
6. When communicating, see to it that understanding can only occur by chance.
7. Don't say what you really think and feel.

In this linear system it is only possible to share incidents and abstractions; this means that there can never be more than one spouse at a time and thus there is always "one more child." Since one cannot have the company of one's spouse, this family lends itself to addictions and to "helping others" (which can also be an addiction); companionship can be found in drugs or in being needed by others. In other words, *it is necessary for the husband/wife to continue their addiction in order to maintain their relationship*. We expect that this family will breed individuals who will resort to behavior characterized by "Every Man For Himself" (see below).

In summary, the family life style, "Share and Share Alike," describes a system in which an ambiguous kind of sharing occurs. This kind of sharing is best described as consecutive rather than concurrent. It results in a linear type of system; the adults take turns as parents and never experience a true partnership. This kind of relationship eventuates in "divide and separate," rather than in intimacy.

4. *Every Man For Himself*. This family life style occurs when the husband

and wife are banded together because of the need to achieve an external goal. They are like pirates on board a ship—banded together in the quest of treasure but without any other common bond. Similar kinds of relationships may occur when it is important that the principals in any group strive for some common goal. Curiously enough, the husband and wife in this type of familial relationship appear to be opposites or complementary, but true differentness between people in this system is absent, thus concentration on external goals is urgent. One spouse commonly assumes the stance of innocence; the other becomes self-righteous. Families with this life style see frequent switches between the spouses as to which is innocent and which is self-righteous. Explosions of anger are common, and rage is a major occupation or avocation. Lack of trust, impotence, and irresponsibility—with mutual projection and blame—are common. *Intimacy is forbidden or unknown.* Feedback is perverted, convoluted, or missing. When feedback is given it is in the form of attacks, angry outbursts, or is disguised as value judgments (or value judgments are said to be feedback). This atrophy or maldevelopment of the feedback circuits propels the family members outward; absence of the return circuits makes it difficult or impossible for the family to reassemble psychologically. The same is true for painful experience: when a family member fails or is unhappy, he has no ways of asking directly for help of other family members. In the presence of "pain" the family tends to split, whereas, other families tend to come together.

One family in our study came for an assessment interview as a prelude to beginning conjoint family therapy. They

had several children, one of whom had had an acute schizophrenic break. The assessment interview was marked by a kind of super reasonableness, but it was punctuated by anger. There were accusations and fault-finding and blaming. The undercurrent was depression and hostility. From time to time there was a kind of lighthearted irrelevancy that relieved the otherwise grim explosive atmosphere. There was a constant threat that someone—anyone—might just leave. Some of the smaller rules in this family were:

1. Don't ask questions.
2. Don't give yes/no answers.
3. Don't make sense and order out of what's going on around you.
4. Don't make sense and order out of what's going on inside you.
5. In the event you are in danger of finding out about yourself or someone else, be irrelevant or play dumb, change the subject or start a fight.
6. Don't listen to what others say.
7. Listen to what you say then pretend it is someone else and treat him that way.
8. It's important to appear to disagree.
9. Take the no-risk position of bad or depression so that whatever happens will be experienced as good.
10. Don't complete anything.
11. Good things can only happen once.

In summary, the family life style, "Every Man For Himself," describes a system that is external-goal-directed. The emphasis is on what the individual can get for himself by using others. There is an absence of ordinary feedback, both positive and negative. This deficiency is compensated for by hostile attacks and value judgments. Since the absence of feedback results in anomalous development, children in these families never truly can separate themselves emotionally from their parents.

5. *Until Death Do Us Part.* This life

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style implies that the only outcome is to part and that parting can only occur as the consequence of death. This is the most portentous of the family life styles. Love and loving are proscribed, since the expectation is death and parting. Consequently, love becomes equated with hurt in the most literal sort of way. The following are some of the lesser rules from a family that follows the, "Until Death Do Us Part," life style:

1. Look good and be nice.
2. Don't say what you think and feel.
3. Don't say what you want for yourself.
4. Blame someone if anything goes wrong—yourself is the first choice.
5. Look for the good guy.
6. Know everything, and before anyone else.
7. Don't talk about the past.
8. Don't get your hopes up.

The rule, "look good and be nice," tends to level the differentness between people. "Don't say what you think and feel," eliminates the intermediate step between perception and coping/conclusion; as a result, ending anything or being prepared to cope is forbidden. "Blame someone if anything goes wrong," means that no matter what happens you must behave in an irresponsible way—this no doubt lowers already low self-esteem. "Look for the good guy," means that there is a good guy and a right way to do things and that *you* haven't found the way. "Know everything and before everyone else" means that you have to find out everything for yourself and that you may not have help in your search. "Don't talk about the past," means that you may not use your history to explain or change your present life style. "Don't get your hopes up," says that an outsider who can see a flaw or defect in these rules may not comment because the hurt that ensues will be greater than

that which already exists. Given these lesser rules, it seems logical that anyone so confronted would naturally leave; but the life style rule is, "Until Death Do Us Part," and so one cannot leave unless there is death. It does not require imagination to know that these are the families who kill themselves or each other. They develop malignancies; they commit murder and suicide. Our sample indicates that the children in these families tend to be quietly desperate; they overachieve just a little bit—or they are just a little bit brain damaged. They eat a little too much, they eat a little too little. There is nothing very different or special about them. In fact, there is so little "nothing different" about them that they tend to be different by having anniversary reactions. We suspect that they, too, develop a cancer or commit murder or suicide.

In summary, then, the family with the rule, "Until Death Do Us Part," is a family that begets cancer and homicide in order to consummate the relationship. Their children are prone to follow literally in the parental pattern.

#### DISCUSSION

Examining family rules and systems is a bit like looking at a mountain range. Standing in the foothills, one can see the distant soaring peaks and the disappearing valleys; shades of color lend a feeling of substance. As one draws closer, it is apparent that some peaks are nearer and some more distant. Finally, among the mountains themselves, it is easy to see that they are composed of an amazing array and disarray of rocks and plants, of many sizes, shapes, structures, and constitutions. Focusing on one mountain or valley prevents the immensity from being overwhelming. In this

vastness, one suspects that the simplicity first observed from great distance is repeated here, if one can only see. So it is with family rules/systems. One is overwhelmed, on the one hand, by the vastness and the complexity, and awed, on the other, by the elegant beauty of their simplicity.

Just as the mountain peaks are a part of the mountain range and, as such, share a common base, similarly family life styles have a common base and share certain of the smaller or lesser family rules; for example, variations of the rule, "Don't say what you really think and feel," occur in "Two Against the World," in "Share and Share Alike," and in "Until Death Do Us Part." Variations of the rule, "Don't say what you want for yourself," occur in the life style "Children Come First," as well as in "Until Death Do Us Part."

One difference between the life styles described above is the number of smaller rules we have perceived. The least number (four) occurs in "Two Against the World," and the greatest number (eleven) in the family that follows the "Every Man For Himself" style. Another way we see family life styles differing from each other is in the language of the rules: for example, in, "Children Come First," the rule is, "Don't let on that you want anything for yourself"; in, "Until Death Do Us Part," the rule is, "Don't say what you want for yourself." The former contains a denial and the latter a prohibition. Certain other related or identical ideas are expressed with varying complexity in the different life styles: in the life style, "Every Man For Himself," the rule is, "Don't listen to what others say." This allows for the rule that follows: "Listen to what you say and then pretend it is someone else and treat him that way." A very similar

rule in, "Children Come First," is, "Don't listen to what anyone says." These rules are clearly related and may be confused with each other; however, the former is a much more elaborate mechanism that allows for a viable creativity.

Some of the families in our study are in it and stand out because their rules are more burdensome than others; the families with the life styles reported here tend to function with difficulty. All of them sought help to improve their systems; but, are any of these life styles inherently difficult or dysfunctional? It is our impression that, if one took a bit of each of these life styles and mixed them together, the outcome would be yet another life style. This "new" life style would have a greater variety of problem-solving and coping techniques and more opportunities for gratification. A closer look at some of the essentials of the life styles may make this premise more understandable: "Children Come First" means many things, including, literally, that children come first. Paradoxically, it also means that, "Children come last"; any family can use some of each of these elements. One of the main themes in, "Two Against the World," is an unquestioning togetherness, a relationship that does not require trust. Any family can use a bit of that, as not all areas of a relationship can be pursued to the point of relative predictability. Since families are frequently faced with "touch and go" situations, all families can use the capacity for consecutive sharing as expressed in, "Share and Share Alike." And it is desirable that any family shares external goals, as in, "Every Man For Himself"; in addition, this latter life style allows for creativity. (The two related rules mentioned in the previous paragraph give a sanction to the

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writing of stories and plays—and the development of paranoia.) And, finally, inasmuch as death is the eventual outcome for all of us, the sense of "consummation in death" as expressed in, "Until Death Do Us Part," will be most appropriate.

This leads to the following questions: "How many family life styles are there?" "How rich can family life be if a family has a useful amount of each family life style?" From these questions there begins to emerge a hazy outline of another family life style: a family with some of each life style and with the option to choose appropriately and explicitly which is to be ascendant at any time.

#### THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS

If it is true that family rules differ from other types of rules in that "they are seldom explicit and are rarely written down," then we are breaking the rules by writing about them and making them explicit. Making the family rules explicit means, among other things, that the rules can be commented upon. In commenting upon the family rules, *i.e.*, making them explicit, the therapist breaks yet another rule: "It's what cannot be talked about in the family that hurts."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, breaking the rule about "family rules are implicit" must be a major stroke in the therapy of any family.

But a word of caution. We are reminded of a comment by Jackson: a student, having heard a review of a family in treatment, asked, "And the first time you say that, the family changes?" Jackson replied, "No, not the first time but maybe the fiftieth time—or the five hundredth." (And we might add, "In 500 different ways.") Jackson

seems to have been remarking on the breaking of rules by making them explicit as well as referring to the redundancy that has to do with establishing the rules in the first place: if one must break the rules fifty or five hundred times, then one is also establishing a rule—a counter rule. And so it appears that rules are broken and changed by the formulation of a counter rule by the therapist; and that counter rule may be nothing more than the family rule itself stated explicitly and repeated again and again.

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