

**The Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity: An emergent interdisciplinary
MARIAL perspective on family function and its application to the study of family
adjustment**

Marshall P. Duke, Ph.D.

Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life
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One of the things that renders the MARIAL project unique is its multidisciplinary focus on families. However, while a multidisciplinary emphasis means that families are examined from many different perspectives, there is one additional perspective that emerges when these multiple disciplines engage the same topic simultaneously. To anticipate a notion that will be introduced shortly with regard to families themselves, when n disciplines gather to study the same topic, there are actually $n + 1$ points of view possible. In the case of MARIAL, each of the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, and geography provides its individual view of families and to this point this is what we have done for the most part. However, the $n+1$ th perspective—the truly interdisciplinary one—is the view that emerges from the integration of these perspectives. In the same way that a gathering of four people comprises five entities (each of the four plus the group itself) and a marriage comprises three entities (each of the spouses plus the marriage itself), I propose that MARIAL has evolved to the point where an emergent perspective is in fact present, but as yet not formalized. The purpose of this working paper therefore is to propose an inchoate emergent conceptualization for what may be termed the *MARIAL Perspective*, a view of myth and ritual in the American family that represents an integration of our multiple disciplines or what E. O. Wilson (1998) would term a consilience of the separate disciplinary views that have guided us thus far. The MARIAL perspective is not meant to replace the individual perspectives any more than the presence of a marriage erases the individuality of spouses. Rather, the interdisciplinary conceptualization will provide, I believe, a source of new understanding for our existing knowledge, and a foundation for new directions of theory and research.

The rationale for the MARIAL perspective

In a Spring 2005 MARIAL colloquium, one of our core faculty, theologian Nancy Eiesland, reported on the emergence of family individualism in America. Family individualism represents the belief that each family is like an individual person, forging its way through the world and being able to function as a unit unto itself, an independent entity. Although much of the folklore surrounding the early American family creates this same image of family independence as the American standard, family historians such as John Gillis (1997; see also Coontz, 2000) make it very clear that our predecessors actually lived in homes that were much more penetrable by outside forces and that “families” were not independent entities composed of only nuclear members, but included distant relatives, servants, long-term visitors and the like. According to Gillis, while the myth of the individualist family has deep roots in America, actual family individualism seems to be of much more recent vintage.

Regardless of folklore, the movement of the modern American family towards individualism represents an opportunity, I believe, to re-think the ways in which we conceptualize the family. In specific, viewing families as individuals raises the possibility that many of the theories and methodologies that have been developed and used over the years in the study of persons as individuals may be applicable, as well, to the study of families. Hence, theories of individual personality may be applicable to the “personality” of families. Measures of individual personality variables such as locus of control, trust, intraversion, extraversion, agreeableness etc, may also be modified for use in the assessment of families. Further, well-established relationships that exist within individuals, (e.g., the correlation between locus of control and psychological adjustment)

may be hypothesized and tested for in families with the expectation that they would have similar deleterious or salutary effects. Finally, in addition to the understanding of the normally functioning family, established knowledge regarding the development and amelioration of stress and psychopathology in individual people may be applicable to families as individuals.

The basic motivation behind this working paper is the hope and belief that we are at a point in our development where we can move to a higher level of understanding and application by taking advantage of the wide range of existing knowledge already available to and through MARIAL and combining that knowledge with the knowledge that can be generated via the interdisciplinary MARIAL Perspective that I believe to be an emergent property of our project. To achieve this admittedly ambitious goal which is based to a large degree on the transferability of theories about individual functioning to the study of family (as individual) functioning, it will be necessary to offer some very broad views on individual behavior that I believe might be adaptable to the notion of families as individuals. I will therefore begin with a brief description of the basic extant views of family functioning and follow this with discussion of a reconciliatory view, situational stream theory, a way of thinking about the flow of human behavior that will provide, I believe, a pathway toward a new way of thinking about family functioning and will lead as well to the proposal that the family narrative is the *Leitmotif* in the interdisciplinary study of family life.

Traditional ways of viewing family functioning

Historically, there have been three major non-biological major perspectives which have guided the study of individual behavior and which may be re-framed for use

with families. They may be termed the family-oriented view, the environment-oriented view and the interactionist view.

Generally, the family-oriented perspective locates the basic sources of family stability and reactivity within the structure of the family itself. Depending upon the specific interpretation of the term “structure,” the focus here might be on parent-child dynamics, spousal dynamics, family composition and the like. The variability, stability and predictability of the family thus are seen to derive from the variability, predictability and consistency of the “personality” of the family, from its own sense of identity and from its capacity to function as an individual unit. Thus a well-functioning family might be seen as one in which all of its members are well-adjusted and get along fairly well. A troubled family, on the other hand, may have some disturbed members or communication difficulties that prevent it from dealing effectively with the course of life..

From the environment-oriented perspective, the functioning of the family is seen primarily to be the result of environmental factors. In this view, the behavior of the family is seen as a response to some external stimulus complex comprising community, social network, work, schools and the like. From the environment-oriented perspective, the variability, stability and predictability of the family are traced to the stability and consistency of the environment. Thus a family that is not functioning well might be seen as failing because of environmental circumstances such as disadvantage, work stresses and such.

The third perspective that is often applied to families is the interactionist view originally described by Magnusson and Allen (1983). The interactionist view can be applied to families by stating that family functioning represents an :

...ongoing bi-directional interaction between a [family] and its environment. In the interaction process, the [family] and the environment are indispensably linked to one another.... The [family] and its environment form a moving bi-directional system . [Family] functioning in the process is not determined by [family] factors or situation factors in isolation, but by the inseparable [family] and situation interaction. The [family]-environment interaction is regarded as a continuously emerging and ever-changing process over time. (Magnusson & Allen, 1983, p.71).

Magnusson and Allen were in agreement with von Bertalanffy (1981) in conceptualizing the family as an *open system*. According to von Bertalanffy, an open system (in contrast to a closed system such as a TV set or an automobile which remains relatively the same from day-to-day regardless of what is going on around it) may be characterized as an ongoing process in which there is a bi-directional relationship between the system and its environment. Over the course of time, an open system affects its environment, is affected by its environment, and grows towards ever increasing levels of complexity. An open system may be composed of any number of open sub-systems. Among these subsystems would be, for example, each of the members of the family, which von Bertalanffy also holds to be individual open systems. Thus, the functioning of the family can best be thought of as an interaction between the family as an emergent entity and its members as subsystems on the one side and the situations (systems) external to the family on the other side.

Whereas the interactionist view seems to be saying that there are situational factors on one hand and they contribute “x” to family functioning and there are internal family factors on the other hand and they contribute “y” to family functioning, the family

situational stream hypothesis I propose is that *situations wholly determine family function*. To clarify and further develop this proposal, I will now present an extended introduction to this point of view which may strike some as counter-intuitive.

The (Family) Situational Stream Hypothesis

As early as the end of the 19th Century William James was among the first psychologists to describe human behavior with a stream metaphor, the idea that behavior is an ongoing, unstoppable flow requiring constant awareness of the interaction between internal and external forces, between the person and the situation he or she is in. In more modern parlance, many psychologists have described human beings as “moving bi-directional systems” constantly responding to and altering the very nature of the worlds in which they live. In fact, most people are quite familiar with the metaphorical notion that each person’s life is a story, a novel to which one page is added each day. Not by chance it turns out, when individuals look back on their “novels”, the chapters seem somehow to stick together; the story makes logical sense--there is continuity. One thing leads to another as if there were some independent author and careful editor being sure that there are no illogical connections and unexplainable actions. What we know is that the internal consistency of one’s life narrative is the result of an interaction between an individual and the world, such that regardless of what the world brings forth, the individual has some say in what gets into the narrative. In fact, the experiences one has are shaped through co-existing processes through which people interact with their worlds in three basic ways—*reactive* , *evocative* and *proactive* .

A reactive interaction describes the response of an individual to situations that occur in the internal or external environment (examples would be such things as rain or a stomach ache). Proactive interaction describes people's capacity to place themselves in situations of their own choosing, thus controlling their experiences. (An example would be choosing never to go on a roller coaster or always eating at MacDonald's when on a car trip.) Lastly, evocative interaction refers to the capacity of an individual's own behavior (either in or out of awareness) to produce or evoke in the outside world specific kinds of reactions from others. (Thus, someone with a smile on his face tends to evoke smiles from others, thereby experiencing the world as a friendly place. Conversely, a person with grumpy countenance "lives" in an unfriendly world.)

In 1987, I proposed (Duke, 1987) the situational stream hypothesis as a way of explaining the manner in which people function as moving bi-directional systems in interaction with an ongoing stream of situations that they confront during their lives. This hypothesis builds upon the notion that the defining and shared characteristic of all living things and of all systems composed of living things is the existence of a continuous, unstoppable stream of behavior. A human being cannot stop behaving; a family composed of human beings therefore cannot stop behaving. Thus, both individuals and families are characterized by a stream of situations, behaviors, and experiences. Were one to keep track of everything that occurs in this stream over time we would have captured the person's life history or *personal narrative*. In like manner, the contents of a family's situational, behavioral and experiential stream would comprise the *family narrative*. The question before us as students of the family is "What contributes to the nature of this stream of behavior, to this narrative?" I propose that the source of this

continuous stream of behavior is a parallel continuous stream of situations to which the family reacts in a continuous manner (See Figure One).

Within this model, the family narrative is an epiphenomenon emerging from the chaining of family behaviors and experiences with the ongoing stream of situations that the family faces and moves through. Hence, the narrative is actually the surface representation of myriad situations, coping behaviors, internally and externally generated situations, familiar situations, and unfamiliar situations. The focus of the MARIAL project appears to be on two major aspects of this model. The first is the narrative itself, wherein there has been an effort to identify the structure of the narratives and the impact of the narratives on the adjustment of the family. The second aspect appears to be a focus on the mechanisms that are utilized by families in their efforts to deal with the ongoing stream of situations. Among these mechanisms are the variety of idiosyncratic, secular, cultural, religious or spiritual narratives and rituals that we have examined as well as the multiple community and social supports that families draw upon in their daily functioning.

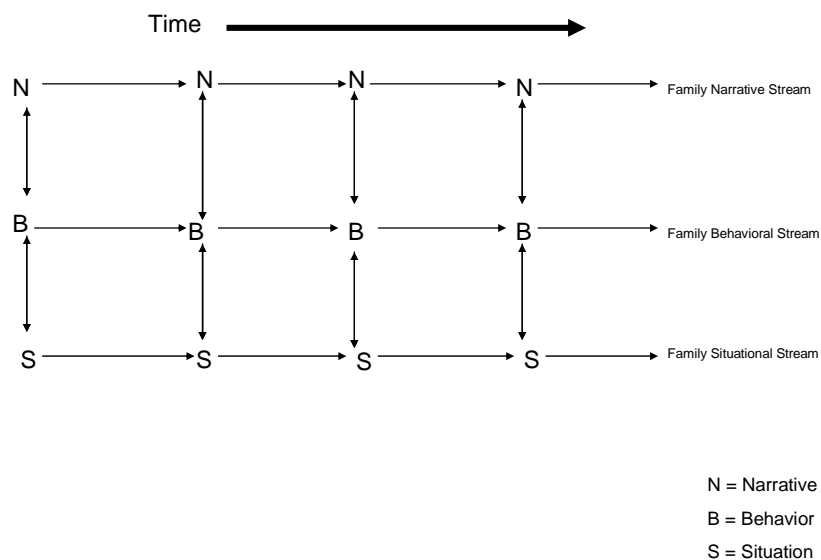


Figure 1. The family situational stream as the ultimate source of family narrative.

A taxonomy of situations

A “situation” may be seen as a “combination of circumstances at a given moment: The sum total of the internal and external stimuli that act upon an individual [or family] within a given time interval” (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Situations can be perceived as existing inside as well as outside a family, as varying in such characteristics as duration, intensity, frequency and regularity, and as being composed of many different stimuli. If family behaviors are in fact chained with family situations as depicted in Figure 1, family behaviors will also vary in the same characteristics of duration, intensity, frequency, regularity, etc. A linchpin of the situational stream hypothesis is that behavior is *always* a reaction to a situation and that characteristics of behavior are direct reflections of characteristics of the situations to which the reactions occur. With this emphasized, I shall turn to discussion of the types of situations with which families can be faced; I

propose that the situations and the family's responses to them form the template for the family's ongoing narrative in much the same way that a piece of string dipped repeatedly into a container of melted wax will ultimately provide the foundation and form for a candle.

Whether they are *experienced* as internal or external in nature, the components of a family's situational stream may be *generated* either intrinsically or extrinsically. The interaction of situational *experience* and situational *source* yields four types of situations (See Figure Two). These are: *externally generated "external" situations* (Type EE—e.g., time, weather, illness, things beyond the family's control); *externally generated "internal" situations* (Type EI—e.g., family crisis caused by an unexpected major school deadline or a power failure; emotional disruption of the family caused by a parent needing to stay late at work); *internally generated "internal" situations* (Type II—e.g., parents fighting produces tension in family and kids start bickering or dinnertime conversations initiated by a mother); and *internally generated "external" situations* (Type IE—e.g., an extremely complicated activity schedule, alarm clocks, increased demands at work caused by parent's desire to earn more money).

Each of these four types of situations may occur or co-occur at any point in the ongoing process of a family's life and together they produce a continuous stream. As said earlier, the family's reaction to (or their efforts to deal with) these continuing situations will result in a continuous stream of behaviors, emotions and perceptions that will ultimately serve as the raw material for the construction of the family's narrative.

Type EE Situations:

Type EE situations are *generated* by factors external to families and are *experienced* as coming from outside the family. These situations include such common

		Experience of Situation	
		Internal	External
Source Of Situation	Internal	<p>Type II (Hungry children, aging parent, sickness)</p>	<p>Type IE (Harried carpool schedule, alarm clock)</p>
	External	<p>Type EI (Bad day at work, bad report card)</p>	<p>Type EE (9/11, contagious illness, gas prices)</p>

Figure 2. Components of the Family Situational Stream

regular and/or continuous phenomena as time, day, season, weather, religious or cultural calendar events and behavior of others beyond the family's boundary or control.

Time is arguably the most potent type EE situation. Described as an “external pacing event” by McGrath and Kelly (1986), time is a continuous situation with which myriad situationally controlled behaviors are associated. Included here are morning and evening rituals on school days, bathroom sharing, food preparation, holiday rituals, work-day routines, etc. Time can be seen as the source of many regular, predictable and familiar family patterns. Depending on the unit of time under consideration, one may observe changes in family functioning from second to second (as in dinnertime conversations), from hour to hour (the difference between family behavior in the morning

versus the evening), from day to day (family behavior on school days versus weekend or holidays), from season to season (clothing worn, decorations in houses, foods prepared) and year to year (functioning of a family with small children, versus the same family years later with an adolescent or two). Knowing what “time” it is on the family’s multiple clocks (much like the wall of clocks in a newsroom) tells us a great deal about the sources of a family’s behavior.

In addition to time, place is also an important Type EE situation. Where a family is certainly contributes much to the emission of particular behaviors. A church situation will surely produce different family behavior than a baseball game situation (Harre, 1986). In addition, behavioral geographers (e.g., Gold, 1980) have presented evidence that many of the commonalities among people and families may represent reactions to Type EE situations such as the nature of the terrain where they live, elevation, rural versus urban setting, etc. Gold noted “man shapes as well as responds to his environment...people and environment are dynamically interrelated. People [and families] are motivated social beings whose decisions and actions are mediated by the cognition of their spatial environment” (p. 242).

Thus, from the perspective of the situational stream hypothesis, many (and, perhaps, most) universal/common family behavior patterns are determined more by time and space factors (as well as other EE situations such as weather, noise levels, and light levels) than by internal, idiosyncratic family factors. Recall that each situation is part of a constellation of situations to which the family continuously responds, each response being a part of a continuing stream of behavior and experience that ultimately yields the family narrative.

Type EI Situations

Although similar to EE situations in being generated by external, often uncontrollable factors, EI situations are experienced and responded to as if they were internal. Examples of EI situations in an individual would be pain following a physical injury or feelings experienced in response to the words or actions of others. In families, EI events might be exemplified by distress created by a fender bender with the family car, the emotional turmoil surrounding a terrible report card for one of the children, one of the parents having a bad day at work and being abrupt and impatient at the dinner table, or viewing a TV news report that is unsettling. The most egregious example of an EI situation was the emotionally charged response of each American family to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

As with type EE, situations EI events can be either discrete or continuous. Discrete events will result in short term family reactions and efforts to cope. Continuous events will tend to become part of the family's identity over time. Thus, if there is a child with a chronic school problem, the family will be required to cope internally with this problem on a daily basis. The work of Coie and Dodge (1998) has shown that over time families are changed dramatically by such chronic outside situations as they gnaw away at the sense of security and competence that the family might have otherwise had. When looking at the modern American family, it will be important to isolate those EI situations that are common to most or many families (e.g., September 11; contagious illnesses; the strength of the economy; gas prices) and to contrast these shared external experiences with those that are idiosyncratic to particular families (a leaky roof in the den; an old business partner who pesters Dad).

Type II situations

Type II situations are stimulus complexes that are both *generated* internally and *experienced* as internal to a family. Examples would be a disability experienced by a family member; caretaking requirements placed upon a family by an aging grandparent ; physiological needs of family members such as hunger, thirst, or other “creature” discomforts; demands, requests or needs that arise from varying family members. Thus, for example, if a parent announces that he needs everyone to be quiet so he can listen to music, the entire family would need to respond to this internally generated situation.

In contrast to Type EE and type EI, Type II situations are typically less commonly shared by large numbers of families and may represent idiosyncratic processes (e.g., having everyone sit down to dinner and say something about their day or implementing special sleep routines and rituals). In fact, many idiosyncratic family rituals would fall into this category. It is also proposed that Type II situations might serve as “default” situations when the family is free from the effects of externally generated situations. Since, there cannot *not* be behavior in a family (or individual), in the absence of external stimuli, one would expect internally generated situations to carry the family forward through time. Thus, storytelling, family game playing, watching TV together or other non-scheduled spontaneous activities might appear in the absence of other things drawing the family’s attention.

This notion of a “default “ behavior is reminiscent of the classic work of Nystrom (1978) on waiting behavior. Nystrom noted that human beings need to appear as if they are engaged in some behavior at all times—the stream of behavior cannot stop. She noted as well that just as nature abhors a vacuum in the physical world, the absence of

any activity is abhorred in the behavioral world. This does not mean relaxing and “doing nothing” is not a desirable event sometimes. It means rather that “doing nothing” is in fact doing *something!* Families that are relaxing cannot sit idly and stare as a group into space for an hour. They need to be doing *something* while they are doing nothing. Hence, Type II situations seem to be ways of maintaining the situational stream while at the same time maintaining the functional level of the family. It is proposed that idiosyncratic family rituals are type II situations that help families maintain themselves over time.

Type IE Situations

The final component of the family situational stream are those situations that are *experienced* as external, but are actually *generated* internally. There are two primary manifestations of Type IE. The first of these might be termed *situational stream programming*, in which families program their experiences such that at various points in time, they must respond to situations that appear external, but which in fact they have produced. A simple example would be the setting of an alarm clock so that the family arises at a certain time for school or for a trip. Other examples would be doctor’s appointments, reminder lists, after school activities, church services that the family commits to, or anything that the family decides it will do that requires specific manipulations of location or activity. Thus, the harried soccer Mom filling her van with kids and snacks, who bemoans the pressures on her with so many things to do is actually responding to a situation which the family itself has produced. This sort of scheduling must be contrasted with the Type EI schedule in which outside forces such as schools or workplaces set times to which the family must adhere. Type IE situations are more

controllable than Type EI, but both are often responded to as if they are outside uncontrollable forces.

The dynamics of the situational stream

From the situational stream perspective, family life is not static, but is seen as an unending sequence of responses in reaction to an unending stream of internal and external situations. If, in fact, the sources of the continuing family narrative are situations, then it should be expected that situations also are continuous events which exist not only in time, but over time. Therefore, like the family behaviors they induce, situations may be seen as continuing processes rather than states, processes that can range in duration from ephemeral (Mom, where are my socks?) to decades long (the in-house presence of the first child for 18 years). Although they can vary in duration, intensity and source, there cannot not be a situation in the life a family.

Much of the variation in family experience, and hence family narrative, is involved in the monitoring of, anticipation of, maintenance of and reaction to the continuous stream of situations. The dynamics of the situational stream reflect the interplay among these activities. The basic types of situations comprising the stream are not mutually exclusive. Rather than being singular, the stream is actually a matrix composed of many simultaneous situations, which are attended to in sequence based upon prioritizing by and in the family. Thus, a Type II situation (two siblings fighting over a bathroom) might be superseded by a type EI situation (the time pressure produced by the impending arrival of the school bus). A classic concept in psychology that seems handy here is that of “current concern” (Klinger, 1977). Current concern is defined as the

“hypothetical state” that underlies a number of ongoing thoughts and actions associated with one or more continuous situations:

People [families] are normally in the grip of several or even numerous current concerns at a time. For instance, as student may be committed to pursuing a degree, maintaining or improving a relationship with a close friend, finding a part time job, eating dinner, planning a vacation, etc. (p. 37)

For our purposes, Klinger’s notion can be effectively transferred to the family which at any given moment may be dealing with career goals, hopes and dreams for children, a roof that leaks, a bad report card from school, money problems, the need to fix dinner, homework, etc. At any one point in time, only one current concern can be attended to but all co-exist and affect the family’s functioning. The situational stream is filled with concerns—there cannot be a moment when nothing must be responded to. The family’s narrative describes which are to be attended to and how.

In addition to the variety of situations that comprise the family’s situational stream there are variations in the degree to which a family either has experience with resolving a particular situational demand or has the capacity to arrive at some way to deal with that situation. In these variations we find important sources of individual differences as well as grand similarities among families. Based upon the family’s familiarity or experience with varying situations with which it is confronted, the family situational stream can progress in either an *unimpeded* or an *impeded* fashion. In the unimpeded flow of function, the stream presents the family with familiar, recognizable situations with which they have had ample experience. Thus, “where are my socks” is easily dealt with by a response such as “in the dryer.” Similarly, the arrival of Sunday

morning for observant Christian families will be easily met with the behavior of church attendance. Further, a child's reporting a sore throat and high fever can be responded to with increased attention, juggling of work schedules and a trip to the pediatrician.

An impeded stream on the other hand, presents greater challenges. Here a family has come upon situations that it is either not familiar with or has traditionally not been able to resolve effectively. An extreme example of an unfamiliar situation, of course, would be September 11 but in its extremeness, it is especially illuminating. Here was a situation that required families to turn to their resources in ways unimagined before. Huge numbers turned to religion. Many turned to the sociological strength in community support systems; they sought ways of coping in their culture through display of American flags on their homes in many cases for the first time ever. Many comforted themselves with family rituals—prayers, comfort foods, and contacting loved ones around the country and world. Many coped personally as well, with the older people telling the younger ones about earlier periods of war and military conflict. When there was no precedent, the importance of social, cultural, psychological and religious resources became readily apparent. While most easily seen in the unique event of September 11, I propose that these very same resources are the ones that people use on a daily basis to deal with far less extreme and more mundane situational challenges. In specific, I put this notion forward in the MARIAL Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity.

The MARIAL Perspective: An Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity

From a clinical psychological perspective there are a number of individual characteristics of people that seem to be associated with effective functioning and adjustment. Extending the idea proposed earlier that what applies to individual people as units might also apply to families as units, I have attempted to generate some ideas about the ways in which two of these characteristics, *reflexivity* and *locus of control*, may be applied to families and their methods of coping with the situations they face.

While it is a term that seems to appear in a wide array of disciplines from the physical sciences to the humanities, in interpersonal psychology *reflexivity* describes the capacity to respond to changing situations with adaptive behaviors. In a simple example, putting up an umbrella when it starts raining is a reflexive act that is adaptive. Were a person not to open his or her umbrella when the rain started (the situation changed), or to be slow in doing so, this would be an example of non-reflexivity or mis-timed reflexivity. Scholars who have studied reflexivity have typically found that the more reflexive people are, the better they are at everyday functioning, problem solving and adaptation to unfamiliar stresses and situations.

I believe that the notion of reflexivity can be extended to family functioning with good effect. Thus, in like manner to individuals, there are families who can deal with the ongoing flow of situations with ease and grace and there are other families which appear to be humbled by even a slight change in scheduling for a child's T-league baseball game. This "individual" difference among families in itself can be seen as one reason why one must be extremely careful in defining as inherently adverse a specific life style or life situation (overwork, hyper-scheduled, crisis-filled). The fact is that some families indeed thrive on these sorts of challenges while others shrink from them. The

situational stream notion emphasizes the interaction between situations and family reactions to these situations in the development of the family narrative. One family may describe as thrilling and exciting the very same situational stream that another family would describe as horrendous.

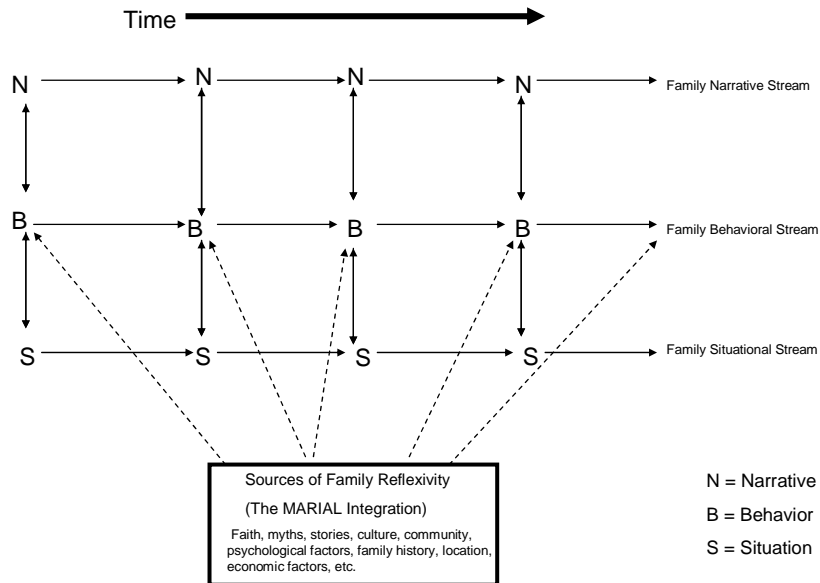


Figure 3. The MARIAL Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity

From the perspective of those working with families both as researchers and clinicians, the notion of reflexivity provides an organizing concept that can direct inquiry as well as intervention. Since MARIAL is inquiry-driven, I will describe some ways in which reflexivity can help to organize and direct our thinking and activities. As seen in Figure Three, the foundations for the reflexive family rest in the interplay of the variety of disciplines that comprise the center—the MARIAL Perspective. This view suggests that there will be individual family differences in the methods families use to provide their continuous responses to the stream of situations. Some will choose formal and widely practiced spiritual solutions, others will use idiosyncratic rituals. Some will use

psychological interpersonal and intrapersonal means and others will turn to the community for support. Further, data from the MARIAL narrative project show that family narratives themselves can serve as a way of helping families move through the adjustments of life. In addition, work-place benefits, social support networks, school affiliations, etc all seem to be used to differing degrees. Finally, it must be noted that some families may resort to maladaptive methods of dealing with life situations; among these would be use of drugs, withdrawal, increased internal conflict, and criminal behavior. Within the perspective I propose here, all of these can be part of a *constellation of coping behaviors* that available to families. Some of these coping methods derive from the families themselves—i.e., are internally generated—and others are externally generated. Both of these sources must be incorporated into an overall model for family adjustment.

Locus of control and family functioning

Inherent in the Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity is the proposition that families will vary in the degree to which they depend upon external coping sources versus internal coping sources. Such a preference (dependence?) on one or the other is remarkably similar to the individual belief in *locus of control*, which is one of the “master variables” in psychology. (A master variable is one that is so powerful and pervasive that it is related to a very large number of other variables and accounts for a significant amount of variance in explaining behavior. Other master variables would be intelligence, extraversion, and affiliativeness, for example.)

Locus of control is a belief in the degree to which people see themselves as being in control of what happens them. Rather than a dichotomy, this variable is distributed in

a dimensional way with one extreme representing an *internal* locus of control and the other, an *external* locus of control. Internally controlled people (and families) believe that what happens to them is the result of what they do, of their own actions or reactions. Externally controlled people believe that what happens to them is the result of luck, fate, significant others or forces beyond their control. Nearly fifty years of research and literally tens of thousands of studies have shown that an internal locus of control is related to better adjustment, better school performance, greater success in careers, stronger social skills and nearly every other interpersonal or intrapersonal variable imaginable. However, more detailed study has shown that there is an interaction between situations that people are in and their locus of control such that sometimes an internal locus of control is the more adaptive approach and sometimes an externally controlled approach works better. This interaction so important that I will discuss it in a bit more detail.

The situation x locus of control interaction

This interaction between situation and locus of control results in the matrix represented in Figure Four. As can be seen, there are situations in which an internal locus of control is more adaptive than an external one, but the reverse is true as well. There are four possible forms of interaction between situation and locus of control: adaptive internality, maladaptive internality, adaptive externality and maladaptive externality. An example of *adaptive internality* would be a family dealing with multiple demands for its time (soccer, school, church, etc) by sitting down and having a family meeting and setting up a schedule of activities and responsibilities. The family narrative here is one which states “When we have to deal with a problem, we can find ways to

work it out.” In *maladaptive internality*, a family tries to solve a problem or deal with a situation on its own, but the situation is one which is actually beyond its control. In an individual, an example of maladaptive externality would be believing

		Perception of Situation	
		Internally Controllable	Externally Controllable
Actual Situation	Internal	Adaptive Internality (Family meeting to set carpool schedule)	Maladaptive Internality (Treating serious illnesses without a physician)
	External	Maladaptive Externality (Excessive reliance on prayer and luck)	Adaptive Externality (Family rituals, stories awareness of limits)

Figure 4. The interaction between family locus of control and situation

that one’s behavior (e.g., filling in crossword puzzles or holding or wearing an amulet) can control the flight of an airplane on which one is traveling. An example of family maladaptive internality would be a family ignoring the requests of a child’s school to meet with teachers to discuss educational problems and trying to solve the problems entirely on their own. Another example would be a family believing that it can nurse a sick child back to health without the interventions of a physician. The family narrative here may be one of dogged independence in which the family “doesn’t need anyone outside telling us what to do.”

Externality can be adaptive or maladaptive as well. In an individual, *adaptive externality* may be seen as the flip side of the maladaptive internal airplane traveler.

Adaptive externality would call for a person being able to put his or her well-being and safety in the hands of outside forces. Such forces are not limited to the mundane example of the airline pilot, adaptive externality includes faith in God, willingness to accept acts of Nature, and capacity to surrender control if a situation (such as a medical emergency) calls for it. Studies have shown, for example, that well-adjusted younger people tend to see their health and well-being as being internally controlled, whereas well adjusted older people tend to see it as externally controlled. In a family, adaptive externality is exemplified by involvement in religious activities and use of faith-based and idiosyncratic rituals in trying to deal with varying life situations. After September 11, a clear example of an externally controlled situation, the majority of families turned to adaptive externality—prayers and rituals and church attendance—to deal with the tragedy. Some turned to maladaptive internality as they bought rolls of duct tape and sheets of plastic and sealed up their homes causing health risks far greater than any risk of individual harm brought on by the terrorist attacks. The family narrative for adaptive externality might be “We know when we can’t do something on our own and we have ways of incorporating those times into our family experience.”

Lastly, consider *maladaptive externality*, which in individuals would be seen in someone not following his grandmother’s advice to dress warmly when it’s cold outside and contracting pneumonia because he believes that “whatever happens happens.” Again, note that maladaptive externality is the flip-side of adaptive internality; that is, the belief that one can control the chance of becoming ill by adjusting clothing to fit Type EI situations such as weather. In a family, maladaptive externality might take similar form. Here we would find a family which does not accurately identify those situations in which

it could actually affect outcomes and attempts to cope with ineffective means. Thus a family with a child having school problems might believe that the teachers can handle everything and therefore goes about its life without any effort to alter the homework or activity schedules at home. The family narrative of an externally maladaptive family might include an excessive dependence on faith, government or other family members and friends and an inability to act when actions might really make a difference: “The good Lord will provide for all of our needs, always.”

The measurement of family locus of control

If families have a locus of control belief system that contributes to their effectiveness in dealing with life situations in the same way as individuals, several interesting research pathways open. However, in order to pursue these pathways, it would be necessary to develop a locus of control scale to determine how family members see themselves. Here, rather than asking a parent or child, “Do you believe that you can stop yourself from catching a cold?” or “Do you believe that when bad things are going to happen they are going to happen no matter what you do?”, family members would be asked, “Does your family believe that a person can stop himself or herself from catching a cold?” or “Does your family believe that when bad things are going to happen, they are going to happen no matter what anyone does?” Transforming a standard locus of control scale in this way can provide an entirely new perspective on families and will allow us to apply to families the knowledge gained from the study of individual locus of control. To date, there is no such measure available in the literature. Therefore, we at the MARIAL narratives project have generated a family version of the Adult Nowicki-Strickland

Locus of Control Scale (ANSIE) that we have been using for individuals. The preliminary version of this scale, the Family Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (FNSIE) is included in Appendix A of this working paper.

Applications and implications of family locus control

Establishing a method of assessing the locus of control of families will allow us to turn to the actual study of the interaction between a family's beliefs about their own efficacy and the manner in which they cope with their situational stream. Further, this knowledge will provide a way of examining the mechanisms by which a family's narrative is constructed and maintained. While detailed analysis of the multiple ways in which these interactions might play out is beyond my scope here, this being an introductory and speculative paper, an example might be useful.

Imagine that a family's hypothetical and simplified situational stream at a given moment is composed of four situations: the baby is crying (Type II), Dad is trying to finish a report for work (Type EI), Mom is getting ready to do the weekly shopping on its scheduled night (Type IE) and the buzzer announcing the completion of the washing machine's cycle is sounding (Type EE). A family with adaptive locus of control might do the following: Dad gets up and calms the baby while returning to work on his report. Mom ignores the washing machine for the moment and proceeds to go shopping. Another adaptive solution might begin with Mom ignoring the washer and asking Dad to attend to it later. Mom then attends to the baby and leaves for shopping after the baby is calmer. In these examples, situational components that are internally controllable are attended to and externally controlled situations are either ignored or respected as

unchanging (the report remains due). A maladaptive family might do the following: Dad shouts that he has to get his report finished so he cannot help. Mom says she must get the shopping done because this is the scheduled night. Mom gets the baby and gives it to Dad and says she has to leave and adds that Dad needs to get the wash into the dryer. In the first instance, we are seeing reflexivity used to move the situational stream forward. In the second instance, new Type II situations (tension and conflict) are produced which then add to the family's situational stream rather than help it move smoothly forward. The family narrative in the adaptive family might be "What a moment! Well, we got through it OK." In the maladaptive family the narrative might be: "My God, this place is a crazy house!!"

In addition to moving forward in the family narrative, the interaction between locus of control and the situational stream also plays a part in both maintaining the consistency of the family narrative as well as affirming the family's locus of control. Thus, the adaptive family experiences a basically adaptive narrative and a sense of adaptive internality and adaptive externality, while the maladaptive family continues with its rather chaotic or frenetic narrative and affirms a frequent sense of hopelessness, helplessness and exasperation. In the Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity, the keys, it would seem, to adaptability would be 1) the capacity to differentiate between externally generated and controlled situations and internally generated and controlled situations; and 2) the availability of resources enabling families to act upon those that are controllable and to adapt or adjust to those that are not.

Overview and conclusions

The present working paper has been an attempt to generate a conceptualization of dynamic family processes that encompasses and integrates the varying perspectives represented at MARIAL. However, it is hoped that the proposal goes beyond the limits of MARIAL and offers a way of thinking about families that will be useful to the other Sloan Centers as well as to other researchers and clinicians working with families. To review, the basic notion proposed is that a dynamic family is a moving bi-directional system that can be seen as an “individual” interacting with an ongoing and unstopping stream of situations with which it must cope or to which it must respond. The stream of situations comprises four types of situations that vary as to their source (internal or externally generated) and their experiential locus (experienced as internal or as external). In this bidirectional system, a major task of a family is to determine whether a situation is 1) changeable at all; 2) controllable at all; and 3) whether they, themselves, have the capacity to deal with or cope with the situation.

The degree to which a family is able to adjust is encompassed in an interaction between a family’s belief in its ability to control what happens to it (internal versus external locus of control) and the actual nature of the situations which the family confronts. Thus, in an adaptively internal family response, we would find a family believing it can change something that it actually can change. In an adaptively external family response, we would see a family not trying to change a situation that it cannot in fact alter but rather using adaptively external resources such as prayer, ritual and community/social resources to cope.

I suggest that the approach offered in this working paper, the Integrative Model of Family Reflexivity, may provide us at MARIAL with a way of thinking broadly about the various aspects of our project. In specific, the family narrative work would seem to be a way of examining the ways in which families conceive of themselves as moving bi-directional systems in which there is variation in the degree to which they can and do adjust to situations facing them. Further, the conceptualization offers us a way of thinking about adjusted versus non-adjusted families and a way of understanding the sources of stress (and non-stress) that working families experience. The studies of rituals, family reunions, structuring of work and family life, etc would fall nicely within the methods that families use to cope with situations that confront them. Further, the consonance between a family's coping mechanisms and the nature of their life stream can help us to understand why some families seem to thrive on the complexities facing them and others seem to flounder.

The addition of the concept of family locus of control to the MARIAL narratives project will also have salutary effect. Given that locus of control is a master variable in the study of and understanding of individual behavior, if our proposal that treating families as individuals is efficacious, the vast array of hypotheses and findings regarding individual locus of control may be applied to families. Thus, we will be able to assess the degree to which a belief in family internal locus of control is related to adjustment, achievement, affiliations (friendship patterns), religiosity, etc. Approaching families as individuals will also open up the possibility that interventions that have been developed for individuals may be applicable to families. While beyond the scope of this working paper, this aspect of family function will be explored further in future proposals.

All families must cope with the world. There will always be a situation that a family faces—some situations are big, others are small; some are significant, others insignificant. All of them pass through the family’s life and are candidates for inclusion in the story that a family tells about itself. Those events that are incorporated into the family’s narrative help to define the family’s identity and sense of “self” for both the family and the outside world. As with individuals, families that have an accurate sense of their own capacity and have the ability to match their behaviors to the realities of the outside (and inside) world, function better no matter what flows toward them in the daily stream of life. A major goal of the MARIAL project is to understand this process better and, ultimately, to help families adapt effectively to the constantly changing world that we all live in.

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Appendix A

Family Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (FNSIE)

- | Yes | No | |
|------------|-----------|---|
| _____ | _____ | 1. Does your family believe that most problems will solve themselves if people just don't fool with them? |
| _____ | _____ | 2. Does your family believe that people can stop themselves from catching a cold ? |
| _____ | _____ | 3. Does your family believe that some people are just born lucky? |
| _____ | _____ | 4. Does getting good grades mean a great deal to your family? |
| _____ | _____ | 5. Does your family tend to blame people for things that just aren't their fault? |
| _____ | _____ | 6. Does your family believe that if somebody studies hard enough he or she can pass any subject? |
| _____ | _____ | 7. Does your family believe that most of the time it doesn't pay to try hard because things never turn out right anyway? |
| _____ | _____ | 8. Does your family believe that if things start out well in the morning, it's going to be a good day no matter what a person does? |
| _____ | _____ | 9. Does your family believe that parents should listen to what their children have to say? |
| _____ | _____ | 10. Does your family believe that wishing can make good things happen? |
| _____ | _____ | 11. When someone misbehaves in your family, does the punishment seem fair? |
| _____ | _____ | 12. Does your family believe that it's hard to change a friend's opinion? |
| _____ | _____ | 13. Does your family think cheering helps a team win? |
| _____ | _____ | 14. Does your family feel that it is nearly impossible to change other people's minds about anything? |
| _____ | _____ | 15. Does your family believe that parents should allow children to make most of their own decisions? |
| _____ | _____ | 16. Does your family feel that when a person does something wrong there's very little they can do to make it right? |

- ___ ___ 17. Does your family believe that people are just born good or bad at sports?
- ___ ___ 18. Does your family believe most other families are better at sports than your family is?
- ___ ___ 19. Does your family feel that one of the best ways to handle most problems is just not to think about them too much?
- ___ ___ 20. Does your family believe that people have a lot of choice in deciding who their friends are?
- ___ ___ 21. Does your family believe that finding a four leaf clover might bring a person good luck?
- ___ ___ 22. Does your family often feel that whether or not kids do their homework has much to do with what kind of grades they get?
- ___ ___ 23. Does your family feel that when a person is angry, there's little anyone can do to stop him or her?
- ___ ___ 24. Does your family believe in good luck charms?
- ___ ___ 25. Does your family believe that whether or not other people like someone depends on how that person acts?
- ___ ___ 26. Do the members of your family help one another if asked to do so?
- ___ ___ 27. Does your family believe that people often get angry for no good reason at all?
- ___ ___ 28. Does your family feel that people can change what might happen tomorrow by what they do today?
- ___ ___ 29. Does your family believe that when bad things are going to happen they are just going to happen no matter what a person tries to do to stop them?
- ___ ___ 30. Does your family believe that people can get their own way if they just keep trying?
- ___ ___ 31. Does your family believe that children should get their own way at home?
- ___ ___ 32. Does your family feel that when good things happen, they happen because of hard work?
- ___ ___ 33. Does your family feel that when a person wants to be your enemy there's little you can do to change matters?
- ___ ___ 34. Does your family feel that it's easy for people to get friends to do what they want them to do?
- ___ ___ 35. Does your family believe that children should have little to say about what they get to eat at home?
- ___ ___ 36. Does your family feel that when someone doesn't like you, there's little you can do about it?
- ___ ___ 37. Does your family feel that it's almost useless to try in school, because most other families seem to have more advantages?

- _____ 38. Does your family believe that planning ahead makes things turn out better?
- _____ 39. When you are doing things with other families, does it seem that your family has little to say about what everyone decides to do?
- _____ 40. Does your family think it's better to be smart than to be lucky?

