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CHAPTER 44



Italian Families

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Although all cultures value the family, for Italians the family is an all-consuming ideal, providing continuity to life. Its power is one's first loyalty and its honor must never be betrayed. To be without family has meant to be totally bereft, *un sacco vacante*, or an empty sack, as Gambino puts it (1974, p. 34). *La via vecchia* (the old way) symbolizes for Italians a value system organized primarily around protecting the family (Gambino, 1974; Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972; Johnson, 1985; LaGumina, Cavaoli, Primeggia, & Varacalli, 2000; Mangione & Morreale, 1992). Family continues to provide a strong sense of security and identity for many third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans, although there are others for whom it stifles individual needs and desires for success (Messina, 1994; Riotta-Sirey, Patti, & Mann, 1985; Rolle, 1980).

What most Americans refer to as "Italian" is not representative of all Italian culture, but applies rather to those who trace their ancestry primarily to the provinces south and east of Rome, the Mezzogiorno. Italy's history, geography, and economy created major differences between northern and southern Italy, which became indeed "two sharply different civilizations with different cultures, customs languages, and history" (Mangione & Morreale, 1992).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1870, after years of rebellions and struggles, Italy was unified as one nation. Previously, its provinces had existed as separate states ruled by a number of other countries and the Catholic Church (Ciongoli & Parini, 2002). The people of the north had an identity connected to the renowned culture that had produced the Renaissance; they entered the industrial age with dreams of progress. Meanwhile, the Mezzogiorno and other parts of southern

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Italy had for centuries been ruled and influenced by the Byzantines, Normans, Arabs, and the Spanish Bourbons, which were oppressive regimes that forbade southern Italians even to travel. By the 19th century, the Mezzogiorno was still steeped in a feudal system of farming, with its people oppressed by the landowners and living in great poverty.

Although it was generally believed that Italians were by nature "as attached to their soil as an oyster to its rock," dissatisfaction with the unification of Italy led first the northerners, and then the southerners, to set their sights on other lands (Mangione & Morreale, 1992). The new Italian government implemented a series of laws that benefited the north, decreasing their need to emigrate, while further impoverishing the people of the south. In addition, an outbreak of malaria exacerbated the Mezzogiorno's poverty and a series of volcanoes and earthquakes destroyed their land and led to an exodus of southern Italians in the late 1800s. Their numbers were so great that in 1901 the mayor of one southern Italian town introduced Italy's prime minister with "I greet you in the name of eight thousand fellow citizens, three thousand of who[m] are in America and the other five thousand preparing to follow them" (Hoobler & Hoobler, 1997, p. 17).

CORE VALUES

Oppression and domination were instrumental in forming the character and belief system of Southern Italians. They had learned through centuries of invading armies that they could ultimately count only on their own families and townspeople; they developed a complex and all-demanding, if unwritten, code of obligations regulating relationships within and outside the family, known as *l'ordine della famiglia* (Gambino, 1974). At its core was a cynicism or mistrust of the outside world and a loyalty to the home and family that suggested disloyalty and shame if a person aspired to go beyond it (Mangione & Morreale, 1992).

Adaptability and resilience became ethnic trademarks. Italians took pride in their ability to cope with difficult situations. They also developed a belief in fate (*destinu*) an acceptance of the inevitable (Mangione & Morreale, 1992). To counter the harshness in their daily lives, they mastered the ability to savor fully the present, particularly with family gatherings, music, and pleasure from food, a primary source of emotional and physical solace (Femminella & Quadagno, 1976; Mangione & Morreale, 1992; Yans-McLaughlin, 1980).

IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES

Between the years 1880 and 1920, 4.5 million Italians immigrated to the United States, usually to find "work and bread" to feed their families (Gambino, 1974). Many, who largely settled in the urban centers of the Mid-Atlantic States, New England, and California, expected to return to their families in Italy after making enough money to buy land. More than half did so, a proportion greater than that of any other immigrant group.

Those who remained in the United States missed their families and worked hard to send for them (Gambino, 1974; Mangione & Morreale, 1992). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 15,723,555 people identify themselves as Italian American, making them the fifth largest ethnic group in the country. Their settlement pattern was largely influ-

enced by the importance placed on family, neighborhood connections, and relationships with children who felt obligated to remain close to their aging parents (Johnson, 1985; Ragucci, 1981). In *The Italians*, Luigi Barzini (1964) states:

The Italian family is a stronghold in a hostile land; within its walls and among its members, the individual finds consolation, help, advice, provision, weapons, allies and accomplices to aid in his pursuits. No Italian who has family is ever alone. He finds in it refuge in which to lick his wounds after a defeat, or an arsenal and a staff for his victorious drives.

The clash of cultures between the Mezzogiorno and the New World was enormous. Italian cultural attitudes contrasted strongly with the dominant American values that emphasized individualism, independence, and personal achievement over group affiliation. Italians were considered inferior, uneducated, dangerous, violent, and criminal. Prejudice and discrimination against them grew as their presence increased.

Italian immigrants saw the dominant culture as hostile and, as they had done for centuries in the Mezzogiorno, they turned to their families as a defensive strategy against this hostile force (Gambino, 1974). They formed enclaves, known as "little Italys," with others who came from the same region or province, which helped them preserve their old ways. The neighborhood became an extension of the family.

Italian Americans took pride in home ownership, for renting would leave them dependent on outsiders, as they had been as sharecroppers in the Mezzogiorno. The home was a symbol of the family, not of status, and the family table was its center.

Immigrant parents saw their children's acculturation as a betrayal. In turn, some children saw *l'ordine della la famiglia* as stifling to their personal success. This clash of cultures sometimes led those in the second generation to distance themselves from their Italian ethnicity to pursue the dominant culture's marks of success, and others adhered to "the old way." Both paths had their costs: Individual success sometimes led to a sense of alienation from family, whereas staying loyal to family could mean feeling unsuccessful according to the definitions of the dominant culture.

RELIGION

The Catholicism practiced by southern Italians incorporated a mixture of pagan customs, magical beliefs, some Muslim practices, Christian doctrine, and their own pragmatism (Gambino, 1974). A long history of subjugation by outside invaders and natural disasters led to a belief that evil lurks around every corner. Each village had its own saint to ward off evil. People paid homage to their saint protectors through elaborate forms of devotion. But if a particular saint failed to protect them, they did not hesitate to replace him or her with a new saint.

When the Italians joined the Catholic Church in this country, their religious practices shocked the Irish, who dominated the Church and ran the parochial schools to which the Italians sent their children. Nelli (1980) states, "Italians in America found the Church a cold, remote, puritanical institution, controlled and often staffed, even in Italian neighborhoods, by the Irish. Even devout Italians resented the Irish domination of the local church and early demanded their own priests" (p. 553).

Italians prize church rituals more for their pageantry and value in fostering family

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celebrations and rites of passage than for their religious significance. For most Italians, God is viewed as a benign friend of the family and the Church as a source of ritual and drama, in striking contrast to the Irish, with their dire warnings about the Day of Judgment and emphasis on the Church's authority.

EDUCATION, WORK, AND UPWARD MOBILITY

As in all things, the immigrants' attitude toward education was influenced by *l'ordine della famiglia*. In the Mezzogiorno, very young children worked to contribute to the family's support and survival. In the United States, the immigrants' attitude toward education was also based on whether it met the practical needs of the family. Children were sent to elementary school to learn to read, write, and do simple arithmetic, practical skills that could help the family. Boys sometimes attended school beyond the elementary level to learn a trade if their families could afford to do without their wages, but secondary school for girls was seen as wasteful. Girls could be better taught in the home, where they were more useful to the family (Cohen, 1992). Thus, first-generation Italian immigrants interpreted the "American Dream" as an opportunity to obtain steady work to provide food and shelter for the family.

A job that could provide steady income for the family meant success for Italians of the Mezzogiorno, who for centuries had lived in fear of starvation. Higher education was not necessary for small business, construction, masonry, or bricklaying jobs, in which Italians could see the results of their labor. Today the number of Italian Americans earning college degrees is increasing, although they still lag in achieving graduate-level degrees. Italians may now view a college degree as practical because it is an entry-level requirement in many fields (Calandra Institute, 2000).

Achievement for Italian Americans has also been influenced by the popular belief that most Italian Americans are connected to the Mafia (organized crime). Originally, the term *mafia* had, in addition, a more benign meaning among Italians:

It was an adjective used to describe someone who commanded respect, who knew how to "take care of things" without running to the authorities. It referred to an individual who had both power and dignity, while also inspiring fear. He was, most importantly, a person whom one could approach when in need. Thus, such a term might be applied to a family patriarch who had no connection with the organization known as the Mafia. (Giordano, 1986, pp. 207-208)

Although the Mafia is composed exclusively of Italian Americans, relatively few belong to it. (According to the FBI, there are fewer than 1,700 members.) Yet the Mafia stereotype of Italian Americans remains pervasive. National surveys reveal that more than 70% of Americans surveyed believe that most Italian Americans are connected in some way to organized crime (Response Analysis Corporation, 1989; Zogby, 2001). In 1992, then-governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton was caught in a taped telephone conversation saying that New York governor Mario Cuomo "acts like a member of the Mafia." In the November 2002 election, U.S. congressman and Maine gubernatorial candidate John Baldacci discovered his political opponent airing television commercials that attacked him by using phrases and expressions of a mafioso, spoken in "mobspeak."

This image of Italians has become part of American folklore through the popular media's fascination with the Mafia mystique and movies and television shows like *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. Representations of Italians as gangsters can influence the personal aspirations of young Italian Americans, as well as what is expected of them by other members of our society. In some cases, this can also be a serious social and psychological issue for Italian Americans.

Frank Galgano, a successful 42-year-old businessman, was referred by his physician for depression and panic attacks. Two years earlier, he had gotten into a financial dispute with a business rival. The disagreement dragged on for months and became highly personal. Frank's accounting firm began to lose business, and contracts were not being renewed.

When Frank investigated to see why his business was failing, he learned that his competitor was spreading rumors that he was a member of the Mafia. After trying unsuccessfully to confront his rival and convince his clients that he never had any connection to organized crime, he became consumed with trying to clear his name. For months, Frank did not share this problem with his wife or two teenage daughters. He confided only in his father, a retired sanitation worker, whom he would consult daily. As the business continued to dwindle, Frank became very anxious and unable to sleep, fearing the shame and ridicule his family would experience in their predominantly non-Italian suburban community.

Despite the fact that Frank was a third-generation Italian American with a graduate education and an upper-middle-class lifestyle, the core of his identity and behavior was rooted in the traditional family values and beliefs of his Sicilian grandparents. Frank finally shared with his family and took the matter to court, where he won a defamation suit against his business rival. Although he felt less depressed and the physical symptoms disappeared, he remained apprehensive about the future. He said that he will always feel that someone in his work or social world will whisper to another person, "I hear he has 'connections.'"



FAMILY PATTERNS AND ROLES

Social interactions, like everything else for Italians, were guided by *l'ordine della famiglia*. Within this code, family comes first, and members are expected to stay geographically and psychologically close, coming together in a crisis and taking care of vulnerable family members.

Family members must never do anything to hurt or disgrace the family. They must neither take advantage of other members nor talk about the family to outsiders. Occasionally, though, close relatives maintain secrets to define boundaries in a particular relationship. When two individuals share a secret that is withheld from other family members, this neutralizes the family's engulfing nature. The significance of such secret keeping, though it may appear dysfunctional to a therapist, more often lies in boundary keeping, than in the content of the secret itself.

Third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans tend to be confused by the family's secrets and alliances and sometimes rebel against these dynamics, causing intergenerational conflicts (Papajohn & Spiegel, 1975). Alternatively, they may find themselves "going along" with the family secret to "keep peace." They are often surprised when

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they find themselves repeating, as parents, the behavior they rejected in their own families (Santo, 1984). While encouraging their children to "get a good education," they may also subtly convey a different message: "Do not leave the family. Do not attend school out of state." A recent study by Patricia Boscia-Mulé (1999) indicates that, even today, third-generation Italian Americans evaluate their individual goals and interests for their compatibility with the welfare of the family before making their personal choices.

For many upwardly mobile third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans, conflict between familial solidarity and the dominant culture's emphasis on autonomy and individuation may engender conscious and unconscious feelings of shame, self-hatred, and identity confusion (Giordano, 1994; Riotta-Sirey et al., 1985; Rolle, 1980). Tina DeRosa (1980) a third-generation Italian American novelist, observed, "I belonged nowhere; that is the price you pay for growing up in one culture and entering another." Her alienation resulted from her parents' insistence that she become educated. But education had changed everything. Her father and other relatives began to regard her differently. She no longer had their approval, nor did she have the approval of the world they had thrust her into (Mangione & Morreale, 1992, p. 434).

Traditional Family Roles

Because traditional family roles are clearly undergoing change, therapists can judge for themselves the extent to which the traditions described here may apply to any particular Italian American family.

The Father

Traditionally, the father was the undisputed head of the household, often authoritarian and rigid in his rule setting and guidelines for behavior. His role was to provide for and protect the family. Family members catered to his desires, particularly in regard to food. He expected his daughters to follow their mother's lead, taught his sons to be like him, and demanded total respect (which he interpreted as adherence to his wishes) from his wife and children. The changing role of women in our society is altering the traditional relationships men have had with their wives and daughters and places a strain on traditionalist Italian men.

The Mother

In a traditional Italian family, the mother represented the heart of the family, receiving much respect and having great power and responsibility within the home. The mother was expected to put the needs of the family first. She was responsible for representing the family properly to the community by maintaining all family relationships with both her side of the family and her husband's. She was never to disagree with her husband in public. When she did so in private, she was expected to express her opinions in a way that did not challenge his authority.

The mother also acted as a buffer between her husband and her children. The extent to which Italian American women question traditional gender scripts depends on their

educational level, their financial resources, and the amount of contact they have with people in nontraditional gender roles (Boscia-Mulé, 1999).

Gender Issues

The Italian man may struggle with the core belief that manliness is reflected in the level of respect he gets from his wife and children. He may feel depressed or angry when his family operates in a nontraditional manner (i.e., not guided by customs of a patriarchal system), while acknowledging that domination is not an acceptable way to relate to women.

Women, although wishing to hold onto the positive aspects of their Italian American identity, often no longer want to maintain their unequal status. Even when working full time, Italian American women may feel pressured to fulfill the same family obligations and responsibilities as their mothers and grandmothers did.

Men and women tend to attribute negative gender stereotypes to each other. Men's perceptions of women reflect a wish for the traditional role (women as mothers, cooks) and anger at both old behaviors (smothering or controlling) and women's new, more assertive roles, as they become educated professionals. This conflict over traditional gender roles is a major reason that both Italian American men and women are seeking relationships with non-Italians in greater numbers than ever before, and is often the impetus for Italian American couples to seek therapy. More than 80% of Italian Americans are marrying partners of a different ethnicity (Alba, 1985; Crohn, 1995).

Children

In Italian families, sons are given much greater behavioral latitude. Indeed, a bit of acting out is expected, even subtly encouraged, as a measure of manliness. Sexual proficiency is especially important, not only to fulfill the masculine image, but also to exemplify a sense of mastery in interpersonal relations, a core Italian value.

Traditionally, Italian girls have been more restricted than their brothers and male cousins. Daughters have been taught to eschew personal achievement in favor of respect and service to their parents and brothers.

Italian couples frequently state that their adult status was not really accepted by their parents, even after career and marital success, until they produced children themselves. However, even then, parents may remain very involved in the lives of their adult children. For example, daughters may seek counsel from their mothers or other female relatives about relationship issues.

In general, Italian children have shown more conflict than children in other ethnic groups about their upwardly mobile aspirations, which may be threatening to their families. In other groups, children may feel anxious that they will not live up to their parents' ambitions for upward mobility.

Extended Family

Members of an extended Italian family often live in the same neighborhood. Respect and care for older family members is a strong norm. In working with Italian families, it is essential to learn the location of, and level of contact with, relatives.

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Relationship to Outsiders

Members of Italian families may feel that they owe nothing to those outside the family. They are unconcerned with the activities and behavior of “outsiders” and often show respect for—but do not trust—external authority.

Life-Cycle Issues

There is virtually no such thing as a separate nuclear family unit in Italian culture. For many Italian Americans, primary life cycle difficulties have to do with stages involving separation, in particular “launching” and death. Indeed, it has been said that Italian families never actually launch their children; they just send them out far enough to find partners who will come into the family circle. The network of significant others is usually large, including aunts, uncles, cousins, *gumbaras* (old friends and neighbors), and godparents, all of whom may assume important roles in child rearing.

Unlike the British, who raise children to be independent and self-sufficient, Italians raise their children to be mutually supportive and to contribute to the family. Separation from the family is not desired, expected, or easily accepted.

Death, the most difficult separation of all, has historically been met with impassioned grieving by Italian women, which is deemed appropriate, as the women are understood to be expressing grief for the whole family. Historically, Italian men were generally expected to meet the death of a loved one with quiet somberness and control of their emotions. Italians tend to keep their dead with them. They may relay dreams they have had of the deceased or speak of an occasion when they felt the presence of the deceased person, receiving comfort from such experiences and sharing that comfort with other family members.

It is not unusual for parents and grandparents to have multiple contacts during the day with their adult children. Generally, each family member has a well-delineated role that dictates both the pattern and frequency of contact with various other family members. This may complicate the drawing of boundaries, which is a task for a new couple, particularly when one partner is not Italian.

Acculturation

Third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans who prioritize family over individual needs may feel challenged by the American belief that an individual-centered culture is superior to a family-centered one. Yet third- and fourth-generation Italians who reject the insularity of Italian culture and object to the racism and heterosexism that is endemic to a closed system may find themselves in conflict with other family members who feel that their values have been rejected.

Third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans have not had to endure the hardships of the immigrants or to fight for acceptance by the dominant culture, and so can develop their own relationship with the past and define their place within the larger culture (Laurino, 2000). Thus, they often find it easier than their parents and grandparents did to embrace those aspects of Italian culture that nurture them, while rejecting those that do not.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

Italians believe that the family is the cure for whatever ails you and, unsurprisingly, turn to it for help in solving problems, rather than to the available mental health services (Cleary & Demone, 1988; Femminella, 1982; Rabkin & Struening, 1975). When they do seek help, the problem is likely to have reached a serious level, and they may see entering therapy as a sign that they have failed. The therapist first may need to reframe entering therapy as a sign of the family members' importance to each other, rather than as proof of their failure. Moreover, gaining acceptance as an outsider involves not taking the family's initial mistrust personally, validating the caring it represents rather than the suspiciousness.

In early sessions, a therapist can sometimes build trust by honestly sharing common values, which conveys his or her caring and warmth. It is also important to realize that some families interpret extensive questioning as a message that they are "not smart enough," rather than as a way to get at the truth or gain insight. Once a therapist wins the family's trust, most counseling will center on helping family members establish new boundaries and reducing guilt and fear of separation.

For Italian American fathers, therapy may be threatening because it implies that they are incapable of remaining in control of their families. The father may appear open and direct, but often finds ways to elude and rationalize a problem to "save face."

The therapist's first encounter with the family may be quite lively. Italian Americans are often very engaging and colorful speakers; discussions can become passionate, typified by loud voices, elaborate gesturing, and arguments among family members. For Italians, words are not meant literally, but rather give expression to the moment. Passionate outbursts do not tend to cause permanent ruptures or resentments. In fact, for Italians neutrality of expression is associated with a lack of caring (Bryant, 1976). The Italian family's expressive intensity may be overpowering to a therapist from a more restrained culture in which, for example, powerful verbal expressions would be interpreted literally.

Italian families may spend a great deal of time discussing the problem's emotional impact and social context, as well as the physical sensations involved (Zborowski, 1964; Zola, 1966). They have much concern and awareness about the connections between their emotional and physical well-being.

Italians typically deny difficult problems; "hot" issues are not openly discussed. The therapist should attend to what is *not* being said, particularly because Italians do more sidestepping than most in the initial stage of therapy, reflecting their reluctance to expose private subjects to outsiders.

If the family is in a "crisis," the therapist should promptly give its members some response to their problem. Even a seemingly small suggestion may be sufficient to "hold" the family until more enduring interventions can be found. However, it is best not to offer advice that may undercut the family's authority.

To Italian Americans, resolving a problem often means relieving stress without changing the family's equilibrium. Because parents are more receptive to assistance for their children, joining the family around a child-focused problem can break through the family's resistance. Such intervention is best tolerated in the form of advice rather than "exploration." Third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans, who often hope to find a healthy balance between individual needs and strong familial connections, are more likely to take risks in therapy.

Italians share family problems and share family secrets. They do not seem to have a sense of privacy. Secrecy is not valued. They do not seem to have a sense of privacy. Secrecy is not valued. They do not seem to have a sense of privacy. Secrecy is not valued.

As the therapist enters the family's private world, the therapist must be respectful and sensitive to the family's privacy. Labeling and interpretation are not helpful.

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Yet, for Italian Americans, the therapist must be sensitive to the family's history of problems and struggles.

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Problems in the family's history are explored and discussed.

The therapist must be sensitive to the family's history of problems and struggles.

Italian families, even when speaking openly and engagingly, are usually hesitant to share family secrets. Their very existence may puzzle the therapist inasmuch as the family seems to talk openly about all kinds of issues, including sex, bodily functions, and hostility. Secrets tend to delineate who is inside and who outside of the family system. Therapists must be aware of the sense of betrayal families will feel if their boundaries are crossed. Pushing the family to tell its secrets will usually only heighten mistrust and resistance.

As therapy proceeds, the therapist should constantly find ways to reinforce the family's problem-solving abilities, including affirming its values of protection, loyalty, respect, and ethnic identity, as well as attributes of hard work, warmth, and spontaneity. Labeling or challenging Italian Americans' intense involvement with each other as intrusive, inappropriate, or pathological is likely to increase their anxiety and resistance.

Because of their belief in *destinu*, Italians may not believe in their ability to master the problems they confront. Individuals in third- and fourth-generation families sometimes struggle to gain greater self-differentiation without causing others pain or cutting off relationships. Usually these individuals want closeness to the family as well as autonomy.

Because of the deep meaning of family to Italians, the price they pay for emotional disconnection is high, and they are often relieved and grateful to find ways to become reconnected to their families without becoming engulfed. Coaching alienated family members usually involves encouraging them to space out family contacts, while advocating a high degree of emotional expressiveness when they are with their families. These clients need to be prepared, at each step of differentiation, to deal with their family's intense reactions, which may include feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and rejection.

Yet even a suggestion of separation or distancing may be a "red flag" for an Italian American family. Separations related to life-cycle transitions—a job promotion or getting married—can lead parents to "hold back" feelings of pride in their children's accomplishments. Their children, in turn, may become confused and angry with the parents because of their lack of enthusiasm for their success or may be conflicted about how their accomplishment will affect the family connection.

The intense feelings surrounding separation and individuality are further complicated when a family is dealing with the issue of homosexuality. Despite the fact that there are many gay people of Italian American heritage, a family member's sexual orientation may be a "hot" issue and therefore avoided by Italian American families. Gay and lesbian family members may reduce contact with their heterosexual family members because of this marginalization. At the same time, Italian American loyalty to the group can create enormous emotional conflict for the gay person torn between loyalty to family and to the gay community or a partner. This conflict and the subsequent fear of cutoff, however, may lead members of the family to open their hearts to the gay member, rather than accept the painful alternative of separation and loss.

Providing more insights into understanding how silence and secrets play a role in a family's attempts to deal with gay and lesbian issues, a number of Italian American writers have described their own experiences. Robert Ferro (1983), in his several novels, explores homosexual integration into the traditional family. Theresa Carilli (1996) and Rachel Guido DeVries (1986) challenge the stereotypes of the Italian American family as warm and happy.

The therapist often must learn to differentiate between intense closeness and pathological enmeshment in Italian American families. Reframing the issue as a prob-

lem of uncompromising and unyielding "boundaries" may be important, but the therapist must make clear that he or she is not challenging the family members' desire to stay close.

In the final phase of treatment, the therapist will be presented with the therapeutic issue of how to extricate him- or herself from the system. Families may attempt to "absorb" the therapist and make him or her auxiliary family members. Somehow, the therapist must find a way to avoid becoming sucked into the system as a member, while being sufficiently engaging to maintain respect and connection.

Bowen's (1978) systems therapy focuses on understanding and shifting the family process while staying out of the system, but avoids dramatic interventions that may prevent the engagement necessary in treating Italian families. This model appears to be the treatment of choice with Italians who have already distanced from their families, in that its primary focus is differentiation through personalized connectedness.

Italian Americans who move away from their families may suffer loneliness and isolation, despite achieving success according to "mainstream" criteria—money, education, social status. Often, young Italian Americans may seek therapy to support their separating from their families in attempts at pseudo-independence. Therapists may mistakenly foster such attempts by emphasizing the individual experience over the need to maintain interpersonal connectedness.

Gina, a 32-year-old lesbian, entered treatment because of "rage," which she reported was affecting all of her relationships. She reported that she had not told her father about her lifestyle when he died, 10 years prior to her seeking therapy. She had "come out" out to her mother, and she reported that her mother did not like her lifestyle and made sarcastic and demeaning comments about her sexual orientation. Gina responded to these comments with sarcasm and sexual comments meant to shock her mother.

Visits usually ended with Gina feeling enraged, depressed, and swearing not to visit again. She had even tried moving out of state to limit contact with her mother, but missed her and the extended family and returned to her home state. Gina introduced her partners to family members as friends. Her rage appeared connected to her belief that she could not be her authentic self and stay connected to her family, particularly her mother. This hypothesis was shared with Gina, and therapy was focused on developing strategies that would permit her to stay connected to her mother while staying true to herself. Gina did not believe that her mother would ever accept her sexual orientation or stop demeaning her, but she was willing to try anything that would enable her contacts with her mother to be less painful. She was coached to continue visits with her mother, but to let her know how hurtful her comments were and to end the visit before she became reactive. She would phone or visit again as soon as she felt able. Gina was further coached to build a support network with other lesbians and allies and to begin to introduce her current partner to her family as her girlfriend, not just a friend.

Within a year, Gina reported that her family affirmed her relationship with her partner and they were treated as a couple, not as just friends. Her mother had stopped making homophobic comments and really liked Gina's partner. Gina further reported that her "rage" reactions were no longer a problem.

The importance of family for Gina as an Italian American could not be dismissed even while the relationship with her mother was causing her emotional pain. For Italians

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"to be without family is to be "truly a 'non-being' " (Gambino, 1974, p. 34). Helping Gina reach a balance between living her life authentically and remaining emotionally connected to her family had positive effects on all her relationships.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally defined roles, family obligations, and the importance of family connection remain core values for many Italian Americans. Strong family connections can be problematic when a family's insularity prevents individuals from achieving their personal goals. Italian American families have the potential to work through the issues that occur when their individual goals conflict with familial ones. Broader issues such as classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism, which can be endemic to a closed system, may also be transformed because of a desire to stay connected.

As contemporary society becomes more diverse, the children of Italian American families may, through their personal choices, force these broader issues to be addressed by their elders. The culturally aware family therapist can be instrumental in helping Italian Americans open up their family systems while retaining the positive aspects of close family connections.

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