

## CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ITALIAN AMERICAN HOME

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Most studies on the family tend to take as their principal subject matter the social roles and interpersonal relationships which comprise this particular institution. In the case of the Italian-American family system, research in recent years has focused upon how this institution has adapted in succeeding generations to the changing conditions provided by the social environment. While such research has contributed greatly to our understanding of the Italian experience in the United States, some alternative perspectives upon the Italian-American family deserve to be explored. For example, in addition to being a social institution, the family as a concept also refers to the location of a human group in a specific physical setting. We customarily and closely associate the family with a *home*. Yet, the relationship of the family to its home is a relatively neglected aspect of our research.

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The methodological or procedural dimension of our problem basically asks the question: Why do we not have, at this time, an adequate ethnography of Italian-American home life? The question may be rooted upon an epistemological foundation. For many of us, the study of ethnicity is not independent of our private lives. We not only study the Italian-American experience, but we take part in it ourselves. Many of us would be quite willing to admit that we are seriously involved in the preservation of the Italian-American heritage; that we would work for the promotion of Italian-American group

interests, and that we are quite willing to express publicly our pride in identification as Italian-Americans. While being a member of a specific ethnic group may provide a tremendous advantage, in some respects, in attempting to use that same group as a subject for research, this fact may also contain certain inherent risks and limitations. Some old piece of wisdom holds that the very last thing of which a fish could ever know the existence would be water. In some respects, Italian-Americans who study the Italian experience in America are like fish trying to study water. But it is not merely a matter of being able to perceive cultural patterns, but also one of constraining our values and feelings about Italian-American life. What has struck me frequently is the fact that colleagues who are not of Italian descent can be so perceptive in their observation of Italian-American life, particularly in regard to behaviors and values to which many Italian-Americans must be oblivious. What has struck me is that when I attempt to recall writers who have presented useful ethnographic studies of Italian-American life, the names that come to mind are Phyllis Williams, William Foote Whyte, Herbert Gans, and Gerald Suttles. Ironically, while social scientists of Italian descent seem to find it difficult to look into their own lives, families, and communities, it is necessary to point out that the work of Pietro DiDonato, Jerre Mangione, Mario Puzo, and many others indicated that Italian-Americans can generate a creative literature about the same subject. It might be very instructive to explore the differences between creative writing and social research, which might account for this anomaly. I suspect that the greater freedom of the creative writer allows him to manipulate his subject matter with reverence while the researcher must take it as it comes.

Unlike the relative freedom which allows the creative writer to celebrate his ethnicity, even as he engages in description and analysis, the social researcher is bound by the strictures of his profession. By default, both popular and scholarly views of Italian-American life have often been constructed by outsiders, for whom this realm was not so sacred. If this image is defective, distorted, over-simplified, or misleading, no one is in a better position to correct it and to reinterpret it than the Italian-American who has been trained as a scholar, but who is also willing to stare into his own self. Nowhere will the task be a greater challenge than in our willingness and skill to examine and to reveal the Italian-American homes.

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