

## Essay

# Toward an Ontology of Family: F-A-M-I-L-Y as a Care-Constituted Relational Nexus

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## Abstract

Family science lacks a shared ontological account of its central referent: what *kind* of thing F-A-M-I-L-Y is remains unclear. This gap undermines theoretical coherence, inhibits cumulative knowledge-building, and weakens the field's policy relevance. The essay traces how family science inherited distinct frames from parent disciplines at founding, without consolidating a shared ontological account. Drawing on the metaphysics of organized and feature social groups and the philosophy of deliberate care, the essay applies systematic ontological analysis to F-A-M-I-L-Y as a candidate distinct social kind. Comparison across six metaphysical dimensions reveals that F-A-M-I-L-Y shares features with organized groups but diverges in structural-functional organization, collective intentionality, member volition, and the source of these shared features. These are not definitional failures; they are a coherent ontological pattern. The paper suggests that F-A-M-I-L-Y is a *care-constituted relational nexus*: a structured web of care-bonds among particular persons, constituted by deliberate care oriented toward the adequate viability of those persons through the real conditions of their existence. This framework resolves apparent tensions between embattled conceptions of F-A-M-I-L-Y, accommodates technological complexity in reproduction, and provides actionable methodological guidance for researchers. Ontological precision and genuine inclusiveness are not competing goods; the care-constitution framework demonstrates they are mutually reinforcing.

**Keywords:** philosophy of science; “family” definition; care ethics; family ontology; family science

## 1. Introduction

The six letters F-A-M-I-L-Y carry extraordinary weight. They connote the most central value held by a near majority (49%) of Americans across demographic groups ([Aspen Institute & Gallup, 2025](#)), and something that should be abolished because the nuclear family is an inherently repressive, racist, and heterosexist institution ([Democratic Socialists of America, 2025](#)). I argue that such dramatically opposed positions result from widely varying conceptions of F-A-M-I-L-Y, some of which were introjected into the discipline at its formation and maturation without critical examination. Therefore, the science bearing the name of that same six-letter symbol has not yet consolidated on even a basic account of what *kind of thing* F-A-M-I-L-Y is.

Agreement, even tacit agreement, on what kind of *thing* F-A-M-I-L-Y is has direct consequences for the discipline's coherence, methodology, and policy relevance. Family science has been characterized as being in “code red” decline ([Gavazzi et al., 2014](#)). I ask readers to momentarily suspend a common dismissal (i.e., “family cannot be defined.”)



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because lack of consensus, often driven by diverging metaphysical presuppositions, inhibits the articulation and understanding of the very rules and conventions that enable “puzzle solving” and subsequent scientific advancement (Kuhn, 1970, p. 38).

One branch of family science has suggested “family” has “become a sponge concept with multiple meanings” (Popenoe, 1993, p. 529), and another contends the evidence leads to the conclusion “family is an ideological and symbolic construct that is socially constructed” (Stacey, 1993, p. 545). These authors fundamentally disagree on the philosophical foundation of what kind of thing F-A-M-I-L-Y is.

In this essay, I use the convention F-A-M-I-L-Y throughout to suspend preconceived associations of the more familiar form. The six-letter English word is merely a symbol, not a natural kind. The Latin *familia*, from which “family” is derived, entered usage in English in the 1500s, denoting a household including spouses, children, and slaves. Over a millennium earlier, Aristotle’s *oikos* similarly encompassed marital unions, offspring, extended kin, and enslaved persons under one roof (Aristotle, 1998; Okin, 1979). Likewise, over five centuries earlier in ancient Mesopotamia, Nemet-Nejat (1998) characterized the Akkadian *bītu* as primarily a function of co-residence and economic interdependence rather than biological kinship.

All three of these household concepts, spanning substantial time and cultural variation, have identifiable structural features. Each designates a bounded relational unit, a social formation defined simultaneously by an inward orientation toward maintaining and continuing its members and by an outward boundary distinguishing those for whom care is obligatory from those for whom it is not. In each case, membership in the household generated an obligatory orientation toward household viability: the household head bore legally and socially encoded responsibility for the household’s survival, persistence, and development of particular persons, not persons in the abstract, but these dependents, in this household, under these conditions of existence. The boundary was not merely administrative or architectural; it was the necessary consequence of care directed at specific persons rather than persons in general. Inward care produced an outward boundary as its structural corollary. Although brief by necessity, this overview illustrates that Stacey’s (1993) position that, as quoted above, family is pure symbolism and social construction may be overstated. The matrix of ideas underlying the Latin *familia* and its precursor cultural and linguistic formulations (i.e., *oikos* and *bītu*) illustrate a possible continuity across varied cultural and material conditions. Of course, three cases spanning millennia cannot establish a continuous historical pattern; the point is illustrative, not demonstrative. This comparison does not commit the error Thornton (2001) identified as reading history sideways, inferring developmental sequence from cross-cultural variation. The claim is structural, not sequential: these configurations share an identifiable orientation, not a common trajectory.

This continuity claim requires two qualifications. First, gendered and generational authority varied substantially across these configurations; women held property, ran enterprises, and exercised real authority in some periods and cultures, and children were treated as cared-for members among some classes, even as other periods and classes show near-total subordination. The pattern was not uniform powerlessness. Second, *oikos* itself was not a single, uniform care nexus. It combined a care-constituted relation among some members with a domination-structured relation over enslaved persons, who were maintained instrumentally, as means to the household’s economic output, rather than as ends whose own adequate viability the household was oriented toward. This is precisely what distinguishes vocational or instrumental maintenance from care constitution under the framework developed below: the household head’s orientation toward an enslaved person’s welfare, however real in specific instances, was structured by that person’s utility to the household, not by an internal bond with them as a particular person. *Oikos*, on this

reading, is not a counterexample to the framework; it is a historical instance of exactly the distinction the framework is built to draw.

An astute reader might ask, “What is wrong with simply continuing to use “family” as a sponge concept, or more broadly, a relative concept interpreted in any given social, historical, or cultural context.” Flexibility in the meaning of F-A-M-I-L-Y has served family science well in one respect: it protected inclusiveness and pluralism across the discipline’s history. That is not a trivial achievement. However, inclusive breadth and ontological precision serve different purposes, and the discipline needs both. A concept that can mean whatever any researcher, practitioner, or policymaker needs it to mean does not provide sufficient ontological traction for cumulative science (Kuhn, 1970). Findings cannot travel across studies. Theories cannot be tested against one another. The argument here is not that family science needs a single fixed definition. It needs a precise account of what *kind* of thing F-A-M-I-L-Y is: rigorous enough to anchor inquiry, open enough to accommodate the remarkable variability F-A-M-I-L-Y has always displayed.

The essay has three parts. The first traces how family science inherited vague meanings from parent disciplines without consolidating a shared ontological account. The second applies Ritchie’s (2015, 2020) metaphysics of social groups to F-A-M-I-L-Y, concluding it is a distinct ontological kind: a *care-constituted relational nexus*, that I conceive as a structured web of care-bonds among particular persons, in which those bonds are not merely co-present but mutually conditioning. The apparent ambiguity of F-A-M-I-L-Y on organized-group features is not imprecision; it is ontological evidence. The third section offers concrete guidance for researchers and next steps.

## 2. A Brief History of Family Science

Family science as a discipline was born in 1938, curated by the National Council on Family Relations. Three founders shaped its character. Paul Sayre, a University of Iowa law professor, sought to elevate marriage and family life through policy. Ernest W. Burgess, a University of Chicago sociologist, brought empirical study of family dynamics. Rabbi Sidney E. Goldstein infused the enterprise with ethical and theological insight.

Three features of this origin matter for the meaning of F-A-M-I-L-Y. First, family science has always been interdisciplinary (law, sociology, religion). Second, family science was applied from the outset: born on the heels of the New Deal, it aimed to protect children by strengthening families. Some have called this “translational science” before the term existed (Grzywacz & Allen, 2017; Hamon & Smith, 2017). Third, the discipline has unavoidable religious roots; two of the first five NCFR presidents held terminal degrees in religion.

Born during the New Deal recovery from the Great Depression, the fledgling discipline had little time or space for conceptual scrutiny of F-A-M-I-L-Y. The working meaning, borrowed from sociology, treated F-A-M-I-L-Y as a social institution: a patterned set of roles, norms, and practices (Durkheim, 1938). Aristotle’s older conviction that F-A-M-I-L-Y is the basic building block of society ran beneath this institutional framing without displacing it, although some contemporary sociologists strongly contend it is not an institution (Rogers, 2017).

The first NCFR conference sessions (Table 1) suggest the tacit assumption at work. Topics like *Number and Quality of Children Born*, *Effect of Divorce on Children*, and *Plans for a Successful Marriage* presuppose F-A-M-I-L-Y as a specific, perhaps universal thing. Topics like *Working Mothers* and *Juvenile Delinquency* frame deviations from the nuclear household as threats. The agenda does not establish that founders consciously reified a single form of F-A-M-I-L-Y; it suggests that a culturally specific conception was introjected from the beginning.

**Table 1.** Synthesis of the meeting program from the First Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Family Relations ([National Council on Family Relations, 2026](#)).

| Session Title                                                                         | Selected Talk Titles & Presenters                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Status of the Family                                                           | Marriage Laws (Albert C. Jacobs, Columbia Law School); Working Mothers (Hans von Hentig, Univ. of Colorado Law School); Housing Problems (Mr. & Mrs. Ernest R. Groves, UNC); Divorce, Separation and Alimony (Max Rheinstein, Univ. of Chicago Law)                                                                                                                                       |
| Children and the Family                                                               | Number and Quality of Children Born (Ellsworth Huntington, Yale Univ., American Eugenics Society); Juvenile Delinquency (F. Lovell Bixby, Osborne Association); Placing of Orphans in Private Homes (Mr. & Mrs. Lee M. Brooks, UNC); Effect of Divorce on the Children (Sidney E. Goldstein, NY State Conf. on Marriage and Family)                                                       |
| Luncheon Session: The Contribution of the Family to the Cultural Wealth of the Nation | Address by Dr. Sidney E. Goldstein; Address by Professor Ellsworth Huntington; Address by Miss Mary Anderson (U.S. Women's Bureau); Address by Miss Louise Stanley (Bureau of Home Economics, USDA)                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Background of Family Success                                                          | Biological Basis of the Family (Frederick Osborn, American Eugenics Society); Predictable Factors in the Success or Failure of Marriage (Ernest W. Burgess, Univ. of Chicago); Plan for Successful Marriage (Joseph K. Folsom, Vassar College); Housing Plans: A National Outlook (Ernest M. Culligan, U.S. Housing Authority)                                                            |
| Cultural Values Secured Through Family Relations                                      | Social Security: Policy and Practice (Geoffrey May, Social Security Board); Avoidance of Divorce by Judicial Agencies (Judge Joseph N. Ulman, Baltimore Supreme Bench); Gap Between School and the Established Occupation (E. B. Reuter, Univ. of Iowa); Preparation for Marriage in College (Moms Jung, Univ. of Iowa); Preparation for Marriage in High School (Lawrence A. Frank, NYC) |

### 2.1. Concurrent Historical Developments of F-A-M-I-L-Y

Other disciplines like anthropology contributed distinct but equally unexamined conceptions. [Malinowski \(1913/1963\)](#) treated F-A-M-I-L-Y as one node in broader kinship networks. [Radcliffe-Brown \(1950\)](#) embedded it in lineage and clan systems. [Murdock \(1949\)](#) diverged from European precedent and declared the nuclear family universal, serving four essential functions: sexual regulation, reproduction, socialization, and economic cooperation. Psychology framed F-A-M-I-L-Y as a matrix of early attachment and emotional development. The child guidance movement positioned the family environment, especially parent–child relations, as central context for children's 'normal' development and the primary site where maladjustment emerged and ought to be corrected ([Mills, 1968](#)). [Bowlby's \(1969\)](#) attachment work, later codified by [Ainsworth et al. \(1978\)](#), made the family the ground of security, dependence, and exploration. Home economics and the American Home Economics Association treated F-A-M-I-L-Y as a site for applying scientific principles

to improve sanitation, nutrition, budgeting, and child-rearing (see [Nickols, 2008](#) for history and review). F-A-M-I-L-Y here was not theorized but managed.

Each discipline projected its own conception onto the emerging field. To sociology, it was an institution. To anthropology, a kinship node. To psychology, a developmental matrix. To home economics, a management site. Family science inherited all of these without consolidating a shared ontological account of what F-A-M-I-L-Y is. Each conception illuminated something real; none provided sufficient traction for cumulative, cross-disciplinary inquiry. The discipline began, and largely remained, like the proverbial blindfolded scholars studying an elephant.

## 2.2. Pressing Forward

The meaning of F-A-M-I-L-Y did not consolidate as family science matured. The [NCFR Task Force on the Development of the Family Discipline \(1988\)](#) declared family science a distinct field, citing [Burr and Leigh's \(1983\)](#) claim that F-A-M-I-L-Y is “one of the most fundamental and complex human **institutions**, distinct in many ways from other **institutions** and aspects of reality” (p. 468, emphasis added to illustrate sociological influence). The claim rested on a conceptual claim and practical necessity, not an ontological argument. The institutional framing was borrowed, not examined.

The theoretical literature followed suit. [Nye and Berardo \(1966\)](#) approached F-A-M-I-L-Y as something that could be studied from multiple perspectives without specifying either the object or subject. [Burr et al. \(1977\)](#) labeled it a “non-variable” because it “could encompass dozens of variables” (p. 18). [Christensen and Johnsen \(1971\)](#) offered the blunt summary: “[M]arriage plus children make a family” (p. 20). [Thomas and Wilcox \(1987\)](#) noted that theorizing depended on the “received view”: either an intimate collective under siege or an institution failing to adapt. Two sourcebooks ([P. G. Boss et al., 1993](#); [Adamsons et al., 2024](#)) describe the discipline’s history without consolidating its ontological referent.

Some voices pushed toward clarity. Burgess described F-A-M-I-L-Y as “a unity of interacting personalities . . . a living, changing, growing thing” ([Burgess, 1926](#), p. 3) and “a social-psychological unit with a highly variable cultural structure” ([Burgess, 1947](#), p. 6). The meaning of these descriptions is unclear, but the implied object is evident in his opening to *The American Family* ([Burgess, 1942](#)):

*Everyone in America today is more or less aware of the concrete problems of family relations: those arising between husband and wife, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, and between the family and the community. (p. 7)*

[Beutler et al. \(1989\)](#) offered the *family realm*, a seven-dimensional model for differentiating F-A-M-I-L-Y from other collectives. [Knapp and Wurm \(2019\)](#) shifted from Durkheimian objectivism to Weberian subjectivism, treating F-A-M-I-L-Y as an institution knowable only through member experience. Others argued for distinctiveness despite individualized meanings (e.g., [Gilding, 2010](#); [McCarthy, 2012](#); [Wilson & Pahl, 1988](#)). These contributions are valuable, and they point in the right direction. What remains missing is a shared ontological account of what type of *thing* F-A-M-I-L-Y is and why it differs from other human collectives, serving as a common referent across the discipline’s theoretical diversity.

## 2.3. Consequences of Incomplete Foundations

The costs of an unresolved ontological referent are concrete. Treating F-A-M-I-L-Y as interchangeable with other small groups risks erasing its potentially distinctive features. For example, the National Council of Family Relations defines family science as “the scientific study of families and other intimate relationships,” leaving open the question of how “family” differs from “intimate relationships.” This produces misapplied theory,



fragmented knowledge, and weak conceptual foundations (Kuhn, 1970). Professionally, ontological ambiguity fuels identity confusion in academic departments and professional associations, undermining training and collective scholarly identity (Hamon & Smith, 2014; Han, 2014). Societally, conceptual incoherence keeps the field invisible, fragmented, and underfunded. Without ontological precision, F-A-M-I-L-Y risks becoming either too vague to mean anything or too narrow to reflect reality.

Allied fields have moved forward. Medical social work's CHIEF framework reconceives F-A-M-I-L-Y in research and practice, particularly for communities experiencing structural racism (Ellis et al., 2024). It treats F-A-M-I-L-Y as a configuration rather than a standardized category, including extended and fictive kin. Weston's (1991) work on chosen families among gay and lesbian communities made the same point from another direction: blood and legal affiliation often lack any semblance of care, while deliberate bonds among non-kin constitute F-A-M-I-L-Y in every meaningful sense.

### 3. F-A-M-I-L-Y as a Specific Type of Organized Social Group

Two philosophical terms need brief clarification before the argument proceeds. Metaphysics addresses the most general features of reality: existence, causation, time, and possibility. Ontology is a subfield focused on the nature of being: what kinds of things exist, how they are categorized, and what their most general features are. The distinction matters. Metaphysics asks what reality is like; ontology asks what kinds of things are real. Both are deployed here.

This essay advances a descriptive ontology, not a normative definition of the good family. It asks what kind of thing F-A-M-I-L-Y is, not which family forms are preferable. A descriptive claim about a care-constituted kind still carries internal evaluative content: some instances embody that constitution well, others poorly, the way a claim about what a heart is implies some hearts fail to function as hearts. This differs from importing an external moral standard. The sections that follow engage domination and disrupted care directly, in response to reviewers, because the ontological claim itself requires it, rather than deferring these cases.

#### 3.1. *The Metaphysics of Social Groups*

Ritchie (2015, 2020) asked whether social groups exist at all. Nonrealists argue they cannot be "real" because some social groups, such as the United Nations, have shifting membership and function, whereas other social groups are socially constructed designations (e.g., "African Americans"). Ritchie acknowledges these problems but counters that social groups are efficacious and indispensable to our best theoretical frameworks. Groups like the G-7 and "young voters" have real power. She begins from the position that social groups exist and are real, at least in the sense that they are useful and consequential.

Drawing on Ritchie (2015, 2020), organized social groups are realizations of social structures: networks of functionally defined roles occupied by individuals. Ritchie (2015) offered six metaphysical dimensions that could be used to identify social groups into two distinct kinds: Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 she originally labeled "organized" social groups like teams, committees, courts, and clubs. Type 2 was later (Ritchie, 2020) labeled "feature" social groups because existence is based primarily on a shared feature with limited to no volition in membership. This framework is formally presented in Table 2 because it provides the most tractable basis for specifying what makes F-A-M-I-L-Y a distinct ontological kind rather than a variant of these other forms: it supplies a set of features precise enough to reveal, through systematic comparison, where F-A-M-I-L-Y diverges and what that divergence means.

**Table 2.** Distinction of F-A-M-I-L-Y based on Ritchie’s (2015, 2020) metaphysical dimensions of organized and feature social groups.

|                                     | Organized Social Group | Feature Social Group | F-A-M-I-L-Y |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Variable membership                 | yes                    | yes                  | yes         |
| Non-identical coincidents           | yes                    | yes                  | yes         |
| Structural-functional organization  | yes                    | no                   | mixed       |
| Shared or collective intentionality | yes                    | no                   | mixed       |
| Member volition                     | yes                    | no                   | mixed       |
| Shared feature                      | no                     | yes                  | mixed       |

F-A-M-I-L-Y shares two metaphysical dimensions with all social groups: variable membership and non-identical coincidents. Variable membership is straightforward: F-A-M-I-L-Y changes through unions, births, deaths, and relational dissolution, just as Congress shifts every two years and book clubs gain and lose members. Non-identical coincidents means all members of one group can simultaneously constitute a different group: the same family members can form a small business, a Walk for Cancer team, or a caregiving unit. F-A-M-I-L-Y diverges from organized social groups on four features: structural-functional organization, shared or collective intentionality, member volition, and shared features. Table 2 summarizes these comparisons.

Rather than treating these divergences as definitional failures, the analysis that follows reads them as a coherent pattern; one that, taken together, constitutes the evidence for a positive ontological claim about what kind of *thing* F-A-M-I-L-Y is.

### 3.2. Ontology of F-A-M-I-L-Y: A Care-Constituted Relational Nexus

The four “mixed” verdicts share a common structure. Each organized-group feature is present in F-A-M-I-L-Y, but transformed. The source of transformation is care: specifically, the deliberate care oriented toward adequate viability that Kane (2019) identifies as F-A-M-I-L-Y’s fundamental characteristic.

This ontology diverges from Kane’s original account, which focused on “care oriented toward ‘flourishing’.” Flourishing names an achieved state and implies a fixed ideal. It makes F-A-M-I-L-Y structurally prone to failure: any unmet need becomes evidence of inadequate care. More importantly, flourishing is historically anachronistic. Across different cultures and periods, such as Akkadian *bītu* (Bronze Era Mesopotamia), Greek *oikos* in the Hellenistic era, and Roman *familia* (in the late Republic and early Empire), the content of household life varied considerably, shaped by the dominant cosmology, legal structures, and material conditions of each epoch. What counted as adequate provision under Hammurabi’s code differed substantially from what Aristotle’s *oikos* demanded, which in turn differed from what Roman *pietas* required of the *paterfamilias*. The operative orientation was not toward idealized well-being but toward something more fundamental: the survival, persistence, and development of members within the actual conditions of their existence.

The telos is therefore better described as the adequate viability of particular persons through the conditions of their existence: sustained survival, development, and belonging, calibrated to actual constraints. Adequacy is judged relationally and contextually: by the members of the nexus, the conditions they face, and the reasonable expectations those

conditions generate, not by an external, idealized standard. Domination and coercion (e.g., “patriarchal terrorism”; Johnson, 1995) are addressed directly in Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.5, not excluded from the framework’s scope. Sustained care orientation requires genuine orientation toward viability, which excludes configurations organized primarily around control, exploitation, or the suppression of members’ capacity for development and belonging. Care can be genuine even when outcomes are constrained by poverty, illness, or loss; the measure is whether the orientation toward members’ continuation is real and sustained, not whether adverse conditions undermine it.

Commitment in this sense is not contingent on momentary affect, which can ebb under hardship, stress, and personal change. Nor is it independent of affect. Sharing the same road through good and bad often deepens both together: hardship faced and survived jointly builds commitment, and that commitment produces a less transient, more durable affect in turn. This synergy, tested and renewed through ordinary difficulty rather than avoided, is the sustaining mechanism of care constitution.

Two boundary conditions also deserve explicit acknowledgment. First, compensated caregiving, foster placement, residential care, and therapeutic relationships involve a genuine, often profound, care orientation. They are not disqualified on moral grounds. But they are structured by a purpose external to the care nexus itself (compensation, placement mandate, therapeutic goal), which distinguishes vocational care from constitutive care. A paid caregiver may enact deep and responsive care; that care does not thereby constitute the caregiver as a member of the care-constituted relational nexus in the ontological sense developed here. Second, biological or legal parents who do not enact care-bonds may remain *legally* related; they are not ontological members of the F-A-M-I-L-Y in the relevant sense. This distinction is implicit throughout the framework and is taken up more directly in the objections section below. Section 3.2.3 develops it further, including abusive and neglectful configurations.

If Kane (2019) is correct that care-toward-adequate-viability is constitutive of F-A-M-I-L-Y rather than merely something F-A-M-I-L-Y performs, then its features will look like organized-group features under pressure: present, but restructured by the logic of care rather than the logic of function. The four “mixed” verdicts are evidence for this claim.

One principle generates the four dimensions that follow. F-A-M-I-L-Y individuates by particular persons, not by function, and its purpose is internal to the bond itself, not externally chartered by a third party. Three of the four dimensions below are direct consequences of this single principle. The fourth, shared features, is doubly mixed rather than a single entailed consequence: variable at the bond’s origin, and cumulative over time.

### 3.2.1. Structural-Functional Organization

Ritchie (2015) contends that organized social groups have structural-functional organization: roles defined by function, filled by replaceable individuals. This is not to be mistaken for *structural functionalism*; Ritchie simply conveys ideas such as that a committee chair can be replaced, whereas the department head’s position survives whoever holds it. The role is ontologically prior to the person occupying the role.

F-A-M-I-L-Y has roles. “Parent,” “child,” and “partner” carry structural weight across millennia and cultures. But the direction of the constitution is inverted. In organized groups, individuals instantiate pre-existing roles. In F-A-M-I-L-Y, roles express care-bonds between particular persons. Whereas a “committee chair” role may transfer among any number of people through appointment alone, a “parent” role may transfer to a new person only *together with a new care-bond* because the role is constituted by the care relationship itself between *this* parent and *this* child, not by appointment to a function. For example, “fatherhood” passes from a sperm donor to the man who rears the child conceived through



that donation because a new care bond was formed. What adequate parenting requires must reconfigure continuously as the child's conditions change. Structural-functional organization is present; it is care-particularized rather than structurally prior.

Function is not eliminated by individuation; it persists, but as oriented effort calibrated to actual capacity, not a fixed checklist of provision, protection, and guidance applicable to any child. A deployed or incarcerated parent may be unable to provide directly. They can still enact the role through letters, guidance, and whatever support remains possible. What counts as adequate is fixed by this child's conditions, not a general standard.

This differs sharply from [Parsons and Bales' \(1955\)](#) instrumental/expressive role framework, which assigns family roles as functional prerequisites of the social system: family exists to produce stable, socialized members for society, and a fixed division of labor is justified by what that system is assumed to require. The present account inverts this. F-A-M-I-L-Y's orientation is toward its own particular members' viability, not the social system's functional needs, and because purpose is internal and individuated rather than externally chartered, no particular division of labor is built in as a functional necessity.

### 3.2.2. Shared or Collective Intentionality

Organized social groups form around explicit, articulable shared purposes. A business earns profit. A jury renders a verdict. The purpose precedes the members, can be chartered, and defines the group across membership changes.

F-A-M-I-L-Y has *care intentionality*: a shared orientation toward the adequate viability of its members. This is a genuinely shared orientation, not arbitrary or coincidental across history and culture. But it differs from organized-group intentionality in three ways. First, it is *person-responsive* rather than goal-directed: care cannot be specified in advance of knowing what this person in these conditions requires. Second, it is *temporally open*: what viability requires for a newborn differs from what it requires for an aging elder. Likewise, the pre-cognitive infant, as much as an adult with an intellectual disability, may only have vague conceptions of how to give and receive care. Third, it is *tacit and enacted* rather than chartered: the shared orientation is carried in relational practice and accumulated care history, not in a ratified statement of purpose. Organized-group intentionality is explicit, fixed, and person-independent. Care intentionality is tacit, responsive, and constituted through relation.

A fourth qualification matters. Collective intentionality, strictly speaking, requires the capacity to hold a shared intention; infants and members with significant cognitive impairment cannot. Among members capable of it, this orientation is genuinely mutual. Where capacity is absent, it is unidirectionally sustained: carried by capable members on the dependent's behalf (see Section 3.2.3).

### 3.2.3. Member Volition

Organized social groups are substantially voluntary. Members can join and exit. This voluntariness is constitutive: membership is choice rather than inheritance.

F-A-M-I-L-Y membership is partly volitional (partners choose unions; adults choose adoption) and partly non-volitional (children do not choose parents; siblings do not choose each other). Standard accounts treat this as a tension between two poles. But this framing misses a third mode: *commitment*. Commitment is the sustained orientation of care toward a particular person over time. It is volitional in that it must be continuously enacted; unexpressed commitment is inert sentiment. But it cannot be simply revoked, because care-bonds are constitutive of who the carer is, not merely choices they have made. The parent who sustains care through illness and disruption (not from contract but from identity) enacts commitment. Commitment recurs across the widely separated configurations (i.e., *bītu*,

*oikos* and *familia*) considered here, though the evidence remains illustrative, not definitive. What varies is the social scaffolding (legal, religious, customary); the underlying structure of care-sustained belonging does not, in these cases.

This mode of membership requires further specification, addressed only briefly above and developed fully here. Genuine care orientation must be joined to viability, not to commitment alone. Among members capable of reciprocal orientation, this requires mutuality: each party's standing to give and receive care. Toward members who cannot reciprocate, because of age or incapacity, unidirectional orientation toward their viability is sufficient, and is what distinguishes caregiving from exploitation of a dependent.

Domination is diagnosable within this structure. It is the imposition of a permanent-dependency structure on someone capable of mutuality, or a pattern that intensifies rather than recedes as a dependent's own capacity for self-directed viability develops. In both cases, it eliminates the other's standing to develop or express care on their own terms. This diagnostic does not rest on a party's stated intentions, which are not independently verifiable; a controlling partner or an abusive parent can sincerely believe their conduct serves the other's good. It rests instead on an observable pattern: whether care tracks and supports the other's actual, changing conditions, or intensifies specifically when their growing capacity threatens the discipliner's control.

Domination is not a form of care; it is a different orientation occupying the same structural position. Genuine care tracks a dependent's need and responds accordingly. Domination redirects that same tracking capacity toward suppressing the dependent rather than supporting them. The result, inside a bond that would otherwise be care-constitutive, is the same instrumentalization already identified in the discussion of *oikos* above: the dependent is oriented to as a source of utility for the dominant party, not as a particular person to whom the dominant party is bonded.

Mutuality and domination are poles on a continuum, not the only two available states. Asymmetries in whose needs are named, whose costs are absorbed silently, or whose preferences default to priority can persist without rising to domination as defined here (Young & Seedall, 2024). These asymmetries, especially in the context of unfolding developmental and relational time, remain an important site for future empirical and theoretical work.

### 3.2.4. Shared Features

Organized groups differentiate through roles; feature groups (Ritchie, 2020) are constituted by attributes held in common prior to the group's existence. F-A-M-I-L-Y does something neither type does: it *generates* shared features through care over time.

Genetic inheritance gives children biological features shared with parents. But this is not the basis of the care relation; it is a consequence of one reproductive origin of care-bonds. Adoptive families share no genetic material without diminishing their reality as F-A-M-I-L-Y. More broadly, members acquire shared features through sustained care under shared conditions: narrative and memory, emotional attunement, somatic habits, moral orientations, and the accumulated marks of navigating the same conditions of existence together. These shared features are not the precondition of membership; they are its product. The "mixed" verdict records that F-A-M-I-L-Y has both role differentiation and feature-sharing. The source of the shared features is neither prior attribute nor structural position; it is sustained care under shared conditions over time.

Unlike the other three dimensions, which trace to the single generative principle stated above, F-A-M-I-L-Y's relationship to shared features is doubly mixed: variable at the bond's origin, never functioning as the membership criterion the way it does for a feature-group,

and separately cumulative over time as sustained proximity shapes convergence. This is a deliberate departure from the tighter derivation used elsewhere, not an oversight.

### 3.2.5. Two Levels of Care Constitution: Bond and Nexus

Care constitution operates at two levels that the preceding analysis has treated together but that require separate treatment. The first is individual care-bonds. Care need is not a fixed provision but a response that varies both systematically (e.g., developmental stage) and idiosyncratically (e.g., circumstance). F-A-M-I-L-Y is the primary site where such need is met as it arises, not a checklist discharged on schedule. A bond's care orientation is *impaired* when it is degraded relative to what the other's actual, changing conditions require, while remaining genuinely oriented toward their viability (e.g., an incarcerated parent who calls regularly and engages with a child during visits). Impairment is gradable, not binary, and does not remove a bond from the care-constituted kind, any more than a diseased heart stops being a heart. A bond is *lost*, by contrast, when no orientation remains to grade: through death, or circumstances that make care impossible (e.g., an individual missing in action or held captive with no channel of exchange). Sustained repudiation, where a member capable of enacting care refuses to or turns the relationship toward harm, also illustrates a lost bond.

The second is the nexus level or the aggregation of individual-level bonds within the distinct kind of social group known as F-A-M-I-L-Y. A nexus can be characterized as "*strong*" or "*robust*" provided it ensures *all members'* sustained survival, development, and belonging, calibrated to actual constraints. The nexus can also be "*strong*" if an impaired individual bond (e.g., an incarcerated parent with limited care opportunity) is compensated by another existing or new bond (e.g., a mentor). A nexus is *weakened* when that finite capacity is stretched by one or more impaired bonds, and more severely so when several bonds are strained simultaneously or when compensation itself displaces care onto a member still owed it. A nexus is *dissolved* when no bond within it retains an intact, enactable orientation toward another member's viability. This is a criterion of remaining care provision, not of headcount; a large nexus struck by one major catastrophe (e.g., a house fire, a car crash, armed conflict) dissolves as completely as a small one, because what matters is whether a provider remains, not how many members there were to begin with.

A final case is not a degradation of an existing bond or nexus at all. A biological or legal grouping in which no bond ever crossed into being care-constitutive has nothing to lose, and so cannot dissolve. This distinction is developed further in Section 3.2.7, between a configuration that *is* F-A-M-I-L-Y and one that merely *resembles* it.

### 3.2.6. Summary: F-A-M-I-L-Y as a Care-Constituted Relational Nexus

The four "mixed" verdicts describe a coherent ontological profile. F-A-M-I-L-Y has structural-functional organization, but it is care-particularized rather than structurally prior. It has collective intentionality, but it is care-responsive rather than chartered. It has member volition, but it generates committed membership rather than free association. It generates shared features, but they are care-produced rather than presupposed.

These are not four independent deviations. They are four expressions of one principle: F-A-M-I-L-Y is constituted by bonds of deliberate care oriented toward the adequate viability of particular persons through the real conditions of their existence. Organized social groups are constituted from the outside in; structure, roles, and purpose precede the individuals who fill them. F-A-M-I-L-Y is constituted from the inside out: care relations among particular persons generate and continuously reshape the roles, orientations, bonds, and shared identities that give it form. The telos of organized groups is a fixed goal specifiable independent of the persons who pursue it. The telos of F-A-M-I-L-Y is the

ongoing viability of the particular persons it is constituted by, recognizable in the historical configurations considered throughout this essay.

That profile did not originate with this analysis. The historical cases referenced above are illustrative rather than exhaustive, but within them, the bounded relational unit oriented toward the viability of its particular persons recurs as a durable social formation. What *bitu*, *oikos*, and *familia* each exhibited was the structural precondition of care constitution: household membership generating commitment (obligatorily or not) toward particular persons, and that orientation producing an inward–outward structure of care directed at these members, with a boundary maintained against those who are not. The ontological argument names what those configurations may have always expressed imperfectly. The move from precondition to constitution shifts from the household concepts of antiquity to the ontological kind that family science studies. It also explains why disruption of care orientation is not merely a failure of performance but an ontological signal, whether that disruption remains a bond-level impairment or crosses into nexus-level dissolution (see Section 3.2.5), whatever legal or biological structures remain in place.

This is the positive ontological claim: F-A-M-I-L-Y is a care-constituted relational nexus, a structured web of care-bonds among particular persons in which those bonds are not merely co-present but mutually conditioning. How each member cares and is cared for shapes and is shaped by the other care-relations within the whole. It is an organized social group whose constitutive principle is care-bonds rather than structural-functional roles, whose telos is adequate viability rather than a fixed collective goal, and whose shared features are generated through care rather than presupposed by membership. It is not an imperfectly organized group, nor a hybrid. It is a genuinely distinct ontological kind. The “mixed” verdicts are not the problem. They are the evidence.

### 3.2.7. Possible Objections

The care-constituted relational nexus takes a substantive philosophical position: F-A-M-I-L-Y is a real ontological kind with a constitutive principle, not merely a culturally variable label. That position will attract objections from multiple directions, and it should. Three objections deserve direct engagement: a conservative objection that the framework destabilizes the normative primacy of the biological family; a progressive objection that it reinscribes exclusion under philosophical cover; and a technological objection that assisted reproduction dissolves its coherence. Each objection, examined carefully, rests on a misreading traceable to a shared assumption: that only a sponge concept can be genuinely inclusive. The care-constitution framework challenges that assumption. A stable ontological kind can be more inclusive than indefinite elasticity, precisely because its constitutive principle is care rather than any institutional, biological, or legal arrangement.

*Objection 1: What about the “traditional” family?* One objection holds that departing from the biological, two-parent, married household as the normative center implicitly sanctions its dissolution. This objection has empirical resources. Murdock (1949) argued that the nuclear family universally fulfills four functions: sexual regulation, reproduction, socialization, and economic cooperation. Christensen and Johnsen (1971) summarized the consensus: marriage plus children make a family. More recently, scholars have documented measurable advantages of the two-parent married household for child development and economic stability (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The care-constitution framework does not dispute these findings.

What it disputes is the inference from empirical regularity to ontological necessity: from “the nuclear household has historically been predominant” to “the nuclear household is what F-A-M-I-L-Y essentially is.” That inference confuses the *content* of care constitution with its *principle*. Across historical conceptions like the Akkadian *bitu*, Greek *oikos*, and Ro-

man *familia*, institutional forms varied widely: polygynous households, multi-generational compounds, households incorporating enslaved persons, and configurations in which biological and legal parentage diverged. These cases do not establish that the orientation of care toward adequate viability is universal. Instead, they illustrate that it is not exclusive to the nuclear form. The nuclear household is one historically specific and often empirically advantaged instantiation among others the historical record attests; it is not the ontological ground. Recognizing this does not weaken the conservative case for supporting conditions under which care-bonds flourish; it clarifies what that case is actually about.

*Objection 2: A “neo-traditional” disguise.* An alternative objection runs in the opposite direction: any framework identifying a constitutive principle will smuggle in normative assumptions that exclude already-marginalized configurations. The sponge concept, on this view, is not a weakness but a strength; its elasticity protects diverse family forms. [Weston \(1991\)](#) showed that bonds of deliberate care among non-biological persons constitute F-A-M-I-L-Y in every meaningful sense, and that biological or legal criteria exclude those most systematically denied access to them. [Ellis et al. \(2024\)](#) made the same point for communities experiencing structural racism, where blood and legal ties frequently fail to track actual care.

The care-constitution framework provides a stronger basis for these configurations than the sponge concept does. The sponge concept defends chosen families by making F-A-M-I-L-Y infinitely elastic: these configurations count because we agree to call them family. That defense is vulnerable; social agreement is contested and changeable. The care-constitution framework defends them on ontological grounds: chosen families, same-sex partnerships, and the households described by [Weston \(1991\)](#) and [Ellis et al. \(2024\)](#) qualify not because we agree to call them family, but because they instantiate the same care-constitutive principle developed above, whatever institutional label attaches to it.

The framework also addresses a distinction the sponge concept cannot make: between a configuration that *is* a F-A-M-I-L-Y and one that merely *resembles* one. Both [Weston \(1991\)](#) and [Ellis et al. \(2024\)](#) observe that ascribed roles arising from blood or legal affiliation often lack any actual care. The sponge concept has no resources for this distinction. The care-constitution framework holds that what makes someone a parent is not a biological or legal fact but a sustained orientation toward adequate viability. This is not a dismissal of legal or biological parenthood; it is an account of what those statuses track when they are doing genuine F-A-M-I-L-Y work, and what they fail to track when they are not. This logic also extends beyond partnership or household co-residence. Two adults (say two best friends since high school) who sustain mutual, non-contingent commitment through decades of joys and hardship experienced by either can meet the same criteria used elsewhere in this framework, whatever ordinary usage calls them. The framework does not claim this is common. It claims only that the boundary is drawn by these criteria, not by folk categories of kinship or partnership.

*Objection 3: Can it hold up against evolving technology?* Assisted reproductive technologies (gamete donation, surrogacy, IVF, embryo editing) produce configurations where biological contribution, gestational labor, genetic inheritance, legal status, and care enactment belong to different persons ([Golombok, 2015](#); [Jadva et al., 2003](#)). A child may have a genetic, a gestational, a legal, and a social mother who are four different people. Which relationship constitutes F-A-M-I-L-Y?

The care-constitution framework answers with precision: the relationship in which care-bonds oriented toward adequate viability are actually enacted and sustained. Genetic contribution, gestational labor, and legal status are routes through which care-bonds have historically formed; none is the constitutive principle. A gamete donor with no ongoing care-bond is not a parent in the ontological sense relevant to F-A-M-I-L-Y. The social parent



who enacts sustained care is. Genetic and gestational connections may be significant to the child's identity and medical history; their significance does not constitute the care nexus as F-A-M-I-L-Y.

This is not an innovation; it clarifies what family science has always implicitly known. Adoption research has long demonstrated that adoptive families are genuine families in every developmental and relational sense (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). The care-constitution framework makes explicit the ontological principle that adoption research has been presupposing. Reproductive technology multiplies the ways in which the biological, legal, and care dimensions of parentage can come apart; it does not dissolve the distinction. If anything, it makes the care-constitution argument more urgent.

### 3.2.8. The Common Thread: Ontological Precision Serves Inclusiveness

These three objections arise from different directions but share one assumption: only a maximally flexible concept of F-A-M-I-L-Y can be genuinely inclusive. Prior scholarly efforts to maintain that flexibility were not misguided; they were protecting something real: the diversity and legitimacy of family configurations that dominant frameworks had excluded. The care-constitution framework does not abandon that protective impulse. It redirects it. A sponge concept protects diversity by refusing specification. The care-constitution framework protects diversity by specifying a constitutive principle that is itself non-exclusive: care-bonds oriented toward adequate viability can be enacted in any configuration, biological or chosen, legal or informal, traditional or novel.

The sponge concept does not resolve possible objections like those presented; it suspends them. Without specifying what F-A-M-I-L-Y is, it leaves these intuitions in unresolved tension, each pressing its preferred content into the conceptual vacancy. The result is the disciplinary fragmentation documented earlier: findings that cannot travel, theories that cannot be tested, a field unable to speak with authority in policy (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Knapp & Wurm, 2019). The "traditional" view correctly identifies that F-A-M-I-L-Y has a semi-stable presence across time and culture. The more modern intuitions correctly identify that this structure encompasses far more configurational diversity than any single institutional form can capture. The care-constitution framework holds both truths simultaneously: F-A-M-I-L-Y is a real and stable ontological kind, and no particular institutional arrangement has an exclusive claim to instantiate it.

## 4. Toward (Some) Unity in Family Science

The argument developed here is not intended as yet another perspective in an already crowded market of thinking about F-A-M-I-L-Y. It is a proposal about the ontological floor on which other perspectives in family science could stand. The care-constituted relational nexus is not intended to compete with systems theory, life course theory, or attachment theory for explanatory purchase. It is an account of what F-A-M-I-L-Y is: the kind of thing those theories are theorizing about. Getting this right does not replace existing theoretical work; it gives that work a shared referent, which is precisely what the discipline has lacked since its founding (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Task Force on the Development of a Family Discipline, 1987). The guidance that follows is therefore offered not as optional enrichment for researchers with philosophical inclinations. Instead, it is a set of practices that, if adopted by family science, could enable moving from a loose confederation of subdisciplinary concerns, what Kuhn (1970) calls pre-paradigm, into a cumulative, coherent discipline.

### 4.1. Specify the F-A-M-I-L-Y Under Study, Do Not Assume It

A persistent problem in family science research is treating legal, biological, or household membership as automatic evidence of F-A-M-I-L-Y. This assumption was never

examined at founding; it was inherited from sociology's institutional conception and mid-century American pragmatics (Burgess, 1926; Christensen & Johnsen, 1971). The sponge concept advanced through postmodern critique, including Sprey (1988), making scrutiny feel unnecessary: if family is whatever participants call it, then the researcher recruits a label, not an object.

The care-constitution framework requires more. Researchers should treat identification of F-A-M-I-L-Y as a methodological decision requiring justification. The question is not which households or legal configurations to recruit; instead, it is what care-bonds are operative in this configuration, and what evidence supports the claim that they are oriented toward the adequate viability of the particular persons involved? A parenting study that recruits biological parents without examining care-bonds is not studying F-A-M-I-L-Y; it is studying a demographic category that correlates with, but does not itself constitute, the ontological kind. The mismatch between legal or biological category and operative care-bond is not an edge case (Ellis et al., 2024; Weston, 1991); it is a systematic feature of the social landscape. Indeed, neither birth nor adoption certificates have the power to invoke care for a dependent being.

Consider a study recruiting caregivers for an aging parent. Four people in her life might each be labeled a "family caregiver" on an intake form; the criteria developed here sort them differently. Her daughter visits weekly, tracks her changing medical needs, and adjusts her own schedule as those needs shift; this is a care-bond oriented toward this particular person's adequate viability, constitutive of F-A-M-I-L-Y. A hired home-health aide performs comparable tasks with comparable skill and warmth, but her orientation is structured by the care plan and compensation, not by a bond with this particular person; she is a paid caregiver, not a F-A-M-I-L-Y member in the ontological sense, however genuine her care. A childhood friend calls occasionally and brings soup when she is ill, but has not sustained an orientation tracking the mother's changing conditions over time; this is ordinary friendship, real but not care-constitutive on the evidence given. Her biological son, estranged for fifteen years, provides no care and maintains no orientation toward her viability; the biological tie remains, but the bond that would make it F-A-M-I-L-Y in the relevant sense does not. A study recruiting by household or legal category alone would count the daughter and the estranged son as equivalent F-A-M-I-L-Y and might exclude the friend entirely; specifying the care-bond directly sorts these four correctly.

Therefore, research designs should explicitly specify care-bonds. Describe the relationships under study, state the basis for claiming they constitute F-A-M-I-L-Y, and identify the dimensions of care orientation the study examines or assumes. This is not an additional burden. It is the methodological correlate of having a coherent object.

#### 4.2. Ground Family Processes Ontologically, Not Just Theoretically

Family science studies processes (communication, conflict, decision-making, emotional regulation, socialization) without examining what makes them distinctively F-A-M-I-L-Y processes rather than generic small-group dynamics. Burr and Leigh (1983) acknowledged that small-group theories do not transfer neatly to F-A-M-I-L-Y. That acknowledgment has not produced a systematic account of what makes F-A-M-I-L-Y interaction different. The result is that borrowed process-level theories from social psychology, communication studies, and developmental psychology go without ontological grounding.

A process is distinctively F-A-M-I-L-Y when it bears on the care-bonds constituting the relational nexus: when it is a moment in the enactment, renegotiation, disruption, or reconstitution of the orientation toward adequate viability. Conflict over care-labor distribution is F-A-M-I-L-Y conflict. Conflict over a professional disagreement unrelated to care-bonds is not, even between family members. Socialization transmitting the capac-

ities needed for members' viability is F-A-M-I-L-Y socialization. Incidental socialization without care-constitutive grounding is something else. Theoretical frameworks from allied disciplines (attachment, systems, life course, stress and coping) remain valuable. Their application should be anchored in how the process relates to the care-bonds constituting the F-A-M-I-L-Y under study.

#### 4.3. Operationalize Care as a Theoretically Specified Construct

Placing care at the center of F-A-M-I-L-Y creates an obligation the discipline has not fully discharged: treating care as a theoretically specified, empirically scrutinizable construct rather than a self-evident assumption. The ethics of care literature offers a thoughtful and differentiated vocabulary for doing this. The two forms of care identified by Noddings (1984) may be fruitful for understanding the emergence of "natural caring" and, possibly, strategies for promoting "ethical caring" when natural caring is difficult or impossible. Similarly, Tronto's (1993) caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving may be useful for differentiating the practice of caring in F-A-M-I-L-Y from politically motivated axioms of care. Finally, Held's (2006) central features of care ethics demand attention. The care-constituted relational nexus demands thoughtful consideration of such matters as the importance of emotions and motivations, not merely actions, and an understanding of persons as relational and interdependent rather than autonomous and self-sufficient.

These distinctions are empirically consequential. A study measuring care by behavioral frequency alone without examining the orientation of that care (whether it is responsive to this child's conditions or performed for compliance or habit) does not measure constitutive care. A study that aggregates all assistance behaviors without distinguishing care-bonds from transactional exchanges conflates the constitutive with the incidental. Researchers should specify which account of care they draw on, what dimensions their measures capture, and how those dimensions connect to adequate-viability orientation. The ethics of care literature reflects genuine pluralism about care's dimensions; that pluralism is a resource, not an obstacle, provided it is deployed with theoretical specificity.

#### 4.4. Study Disruption and Discord as Analytically Central

The most counterintuitive implication of the care-constitution framework is also the most practically significant. Periods of conflict, disorganization, attenuated care, and relational strain are not evidence of ontological failure, nor are they methodological nuisances to control for. They are analytically central: the moments when the constitutive dynamics of F-A-M-I-L-Y are most visible, most under pressure, and most generative of insight.

This follows directly from the framework's telos. The adequate viability of particular persons is an ongoing project, not an achieved state. Difficulty, hardship, and disruption are not failures of F-A-M-I-L-Y; they are conditions under which its constitutive logic is tested. Burgess (1926) intuited this with his image of F-A-M-I-L-Y as "a living, changing, growing thing." The care-constitution framework provides the ontological account behind the intuition: F-A-M-I-L-Y is dynamic because viability must continuously reconfigure in response to changing conditions. Conflict, illness, economic stress, developmental transition, loss, and relational rupture are not interruptions of the project; they are conditions under which it is most actively prosecuted.

This reorientation generates a specific research program. How do care-bonds sustain orientation toward adequate viability under stress? What processes of renegotiation, repair, and reconstitution allow a care-constituted nexus to persist when care is attenuated or contested? When does disruption cross from productive stress (prompting adaptation and strengthening commitment) to genuine dissolution of the care-bond? These questions

have counterparts in family resilience research (Walsh, 2016), family stress and adaptation models (P. Boss et al., 2017), and relational repair literature (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Family adaptive-strategies research (Moen & Wethington, 1992) and historical work on women's agency within family systems (Kok, 2017) speak directly to this reconfiguration under constraint. Religious meaning-making is one resource some care nexuses draw on to sustain commitment through hardship, though religious involvement on children and families are mixed rather than uniformly beneficial (Bartkowski et al., 2019). The care-constitution framework provides the ontological grounding that connects these threads into a coherent program rather than parallel subdisciplinary conversations.

Studies examining F-A-M-I-L-Y only at equilibrium study the surface of the care-constituted relational nexus, not its structure. The structure becomes visible under load: when members decide whether to sustain care orientation toward someone whose conditions have changed dramatically; when care-bonds are renegotiated after rupture; when the adequate viability of one member comes into tension with another's. Longitudinal designs tracking F-A-M-I-L-Y through transitions, mixed-method designs capturing the behavioral and experiential dimensions of care-bond renegotiation, and intervention studies targeting the reconstitution of care orientation after stress are not merely methodologically sophisticated. They are the designs the care-constitution framework specifically calls for.

These four guidance directions are the practical expression of one disciplinary commitment: family science is the scientific study of a real and distinct ontological kind: a care-constituted relational nexus. Prior efforts to maintain inclusive breadth were not failures; they protected something real and necessary. What they did not provide was sufficient ontological traction for cumulative science. The care-constitution framework offers one basis for traction: a shared floor on which genuine scientific disagreement about processes, mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes can finally take place.

## 5. Conclusions

This essay was designed to address an unresolved gap in family science: the absence of a shared ontological account of F-A-M-I-L-Y as the discipline's referent. I have not defined F-A-M-I-L-Y. I have argued that it has, under various names in the cases examined, exhibited a recognizable constitutive logic: illustrative rather than exhaustive evidence, but a pattern worth taking seriously. Drawing on Ritchie's (2015, 2020) metaphysics and Kane's (2019) philosophy of care, I have argued that F-A-M-I-L-Y is a *care-constituted relational nexus*: a distinct ontological kind constituted by bonds of deliberate care oriented toward the adequate viability of particular persons through the real conditions of their existence.

Returning to a question in the opening: *what is wrong with simply continuing to use "family" as a sponge concept or one lacking conceptual precision?* The complete answer is now available. Prior reliance on an inclusive but unspecified concept of F-A-M-I-L-Y protected pluralism and avoided positivistic overreach. Those were genuine scholarly virtues. But inclusive breadth and ontological precision serve different purposes, and the discipline now needs both. The care-constituted relational nexus does not replace the sponge concept with a rigid definition. It identifies the ontological kind the sponge concept has always gestured toward without being able to name. A sponge absorbs whatever is placed near it. A kind has real structure that explains why certain things belong to it, and others do not, while remaining genuinely open to the full range of forms that structure can take. The care-constitution framework gives the discipline a floor on which to build cumulative, transmissible knowledge: knowledge that travels across studies, anchors theoretical development, and speaks with authority in the policy domains where F-A-M-I-L-Y matters most.

The ideas presented here invite constructive debate. Perhaps the archaeological and anthropological evidence indicate wider differences among cultures and time (e.g., such as that of Bronze Age Mesopotamia, the Greek and Roman Empires). It is an empirical question whether the type of *thing* captured by *oikos* and *familia* (not its composition or form) meaningfully varies across other periods and cultures (e.g., feudal Japan, various Chinese dynasties, the Ottoman Empire), including indigenous peoples globally. Answers to this empirical question would deepen understanding of F-A-M-I-L-Y's historical roots. The boundary conditions of the care-constitution framework (abusive and neglectful configurations, configurations under coercion or domination, the developmental consequences of care-bond disruption) require deeper empirical and philosophical treatment than a single conceptual essay can provide. These are not weaknesses of the framework; they are the scholarly agenda it generates.

One final point deserves attention in closing. To Aristotle, *oikos* encompassed marital unions, offspring, extended kin, and enslaved persons and servants, as well as the household economy. This is far broader than the nuclear family presupposed at NCFR's founding. More importantly, for Aristotle, *oikos* is the raw material *from which* society emerges. The dominant functionalist view reverses this: society creates F-A-M-I-L-Y as one of its institutions. The care-constitution argument takes a crucially different position. If F-A-M-I-L-Y is constituted by bonds of care prior to and generative of the roles, purposes, and shared identities that organize broader social life, then the Aristotelian view is vindicated; not in its specific content, but in its ontological priority (i.e., F-A-M-I-L-Y precedes society, and it is distinct from its members).

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