

Genograms

| a guide to understanding
one's own family system

AS many segments of the health care system move toward a more holistic approach, the emphasis on the client's family system increases. Most mental health professionals realize the necessity of working with the client's family; consequently family therapy is an integral part of most psychiatric facilities.

While working and teaching in psychiatric/mental health nursing, I enrolled in a family systems theory course to increase my awareness and expertise in working with families. One of the exciting components of the course was the opportunity to do a family genogram on myself and my husband. Since the genogram experience increased my awareness of self and other family systems, I have since incorporated a genogram exercise into the baccalaureate student's basic six-week psychiatric clinical nursing experience. The genogram exercise helps students to increase awareness of themselves, their extended families, and their

clients' family systems. For the first time students begin to look beyond the identified patient to the system from which he/she came and will most likely return.

Family Systems Theory

In family systems theory, the family is viewed as a homeostatic system, and a change in the functioning of one family member results in a compensatory change in the functioning of other family members. Symptoms in one family member indicate dysfunction in the family system as a whole. Don Jackson states:

The family is a rule-governed system. Members behave among themselves in an organized, repetitive manner and this pattern of behaviors can be abstracted as a governing principle of family life (1965: p. 6). The homeostatic mechanism, the means by which norms are delimited and enforced, will function to bring the family back to the norm when disruption occurs (1965, p.12).

In the following discussion, Murray Bowen's family systems theory is applied to the data derived from Guerin's genogram construction guidelines (Bowen, 1976).

The major components of Bowen's family systems theory are differentiation of self, triangles, the nuclear family emotional system, and the emotional cut-off.

Differentiation of Self

The concept, differentiation of self, is the core of the Bowen theory and centers on the degree to which people are able to distinguish between the feeling and the intellectual process. Persons with low differentiation of self have a fusion of their emotions and intellect. The undifferentiated family ego mass refers to this fusion in families which seem to be easily stressed into dysfunction (Bowen, 1976). These families are preoccupied with keeping their dependent relationships in harmony and are intolerant of family mem-

ers who express ideas different from the family belief system. The self-esteem of the individual with low self-differentiation is dependent upon others and much of his/her energy is spent in seeking approval and pleasing others. Persons with high degrees of differentiation can retain autonomy in periods of stress and are seen as more flexible, more adaptable, and more independent. Such persons would be able to think, plan, know, and follow their own beliefs rather than react to the cues from their family (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976). Since one is never totally independent of one's family system, it is important to become as highly differentiated as possible within that system. The success at achieving such differentiation of self can be measured by assessing the degree to which one is a part of the family without automatically being one of the emotional dominoes" in the system (Friedman, 1971). Families with high degrees of differentiation can bring up and tolerate discussion of toxic or controversial issues in a rational manner without extreme anxiety. Such families encourage their members to formulate "I-positions" without having to attack others or defend themselves (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976).

Triangles

In the family or any other group, the triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. Bowen states that "the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system" (Bowen, 1976). The typical triangle consists of a comfort-

Bowen's family systems theory applied to data derived from Guerin's genogram construction guidelines.

ably close twosome and a less comfortable outsider. As anxiety, stress, or conflict occur, the positions in the triangle will shift: each in the twosome will work to achieve the outside and currently more comfortable position. The triangle can be viewed as dysfunctional "in the sense that it offers stabilization through diversion, rather than through resolution of the issue in the twosome's relationship" (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976).

The emotional forces in the tri-

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angle are constantly in motion; the healthier the relationships the more flexible the positions in the triangle. Most family or group members have experienced situations where alliances were formed with other members of the triangle to obtain a goal or have a need met. The triangling becomes a chronic dysfunctional pattern when it is repeated over time and becomes fixed. For example, in the father-mother-child triangle, a stereotypic dysfunctional pattern is the distant father, the domineering mother, and the impaired child. An individual's chances of becoming situated in a fixed triangle are increased by any stress in the situation and a decrease in the individual's level of differentiation. When other members in the family system find themselves talking about the third person in the triangle in ways of blaming,

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sympathizing, or taking sides, this would be an indication that the third person has been triangulated in a fixed manner.

Nuclear Family Emotional System

The concept of the nuclear family emotional system refers to the emotional functioning and relationship patterns between parents and children in the nuclear family. Bowen states, "Certain basic patterns between the father, mother, and children are replicas of the past generations and will be repeated in the generations to follow" (Bowen, 1976). A person will pick a spouse with the same levels of differentiation. The lower the level of differentiation, the more emotional fusion will exist in the marriage. Undifferentiation in a marriage is manifested in three primary ways (Bowen, 1976).

1. **Marital Conflict**—In marital conflict each spouse invests considerable emotional energy into the other. The relationship goes through cycles of intense closeness, conflict, making up, and closeness again. The conflict may be a displacement of earlier extended family conflicts, now appearing in the nuclear family. The marital conflict does not harm the children directly since they are largely outside the emotional process. In this situation, the marital partners keep the conflict between themselves and seem able to reach resolution from time to time. The children may even seek the outside position in the triangle, and play the parents off against each other.

2. **Dysfunction in One Spouse**—Dysfunction occurs when one

spouse loses the ability to function and make decisions for self. A moderate amount of stress will push the underfunctioning spouse into dysfunction such as physical or emotional illness. Usually the degree to which one spouse underfunctions is the degree to which the other overfunctions. An example of this would be an overfunctioning spouse who acts as rescuer to a spouse with a chronic illness who becomes the victim in the situation. This rescuing

Children—This occurs when the conflict or dysfunction between the parents is projected onto a child in the family. The parental undifferentiation that impairs one or more of the children is the family projection process; this is a replay of the same triangular pattern over and over in one family. The parents may be unable to recognize dysfunction in themselves or are unwilling to deal with their own conflict, so the emotional energy that should



The Family Portrait

behavior on the part of the overfunctioning spouse will increase the other's dependency and underfunctioning. The children may become rescuers also, but will most likely learn unhealthy patterns of parenting.

3. **Dysfunction in One or More**

into their relationship is focused on a child. Such children may demonstrate behaviors that become labeled as deviant or abnormal by their family, school, or society. Without family intervention, many of these children become dysfunctional in a psych-

susceptible for this projection process. According to Bowen, "The children selected for the family projection process are those conceived and born during stress in the mother's life; the first child, oldest son or daughter; an only child of either sex; one who is emotionally special to the mother; or one the mother believes to be special to the father" (Bowen, 1976). A child with an emotional or physical handicap may be seen as special by the family. It is quite possible that the father and significant others in the family system may also play a major role in determining which child will be seen as special.

Emotional Cut-off

The concept of emotional cut-off concerns the way people separate themselves from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation (Bowen, 1976). Everyone has some degree of unresolved emotional attachment to their parents. The lower the level of differentiation in the individual, the greater the unresolved attachment will be with the parents. Bowen states, "The unresolved attachment is handled by the intrapsychic process of denial and isolation of self while living close to the parents; or by physically running away; or by a combination of emotional isolation and physical distance" (Bowen, 1976).

Such a cut-off does not end the emotional process, but in fact intensifies it (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976). A person may be unconsciously spending energy on

that may be needed for current emotional needs and responsibilities. The more intense the cut-off, the greater the chance to repeat with the marital partner the pattern established with parents. Bowen believes the generation gap is a form of the emotional cut-off. He states, "The more a nuclear family maintains some kind of viable emotional contact with the past generations, the more orderly and asymptomatic the life process in both generations" (Bowen, 1976).

The generation gap can be lessened by using genograms and working on the relationships in one's own family.

This brief introduction to family systems theory should assist the reader in understanding and applying the theory to the next two sections: genogram construction and a case study. Each person is encouraged to work on his/her own family system prior to working with the families of clients.

Genogram Construction

The genogram delineates the action that occurs within the family system over three generations. Philip Guerin's article, "Study Your Own Family," provides guidelines for its construction (Guerin, 1972). For specific descriptions on diagramming, the reader is referred to the Data Base. (See Appendix A) The Problem Dictionary (See Appendix B) lists external and internal stressors that are common in many families. Look for stressors that have occurred in your own family system and indicate them on your genogram.

The starting point for the investigation of one's own family is the nuclear family and the primary and central relationships of the spouses. Some of the areas to identify in the functioning of the nuclear family include: relationships that work well and that work with difficulty; the handling of emotional issues; the shifting patterns of alliances and their operation; and the presence or absence of work productivity, socialization, isolation, and emotional and physical symptoms (Guerin, 1972).

The next step, after considering such issues in the nuclear family, is to examine the extended family of each spouse. General areas to be explored in the extended family include the cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliations along with its socioeconomic level and relationship with the community in which it lives (Guerin and Pedagast, 1976). Events that have a significant emotional impact on families, such as births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and retirements, should be investigated. On the genogram such events are indicated by the appropriate symbols. If the family system is open and flexible, the emotional issues will be dealt with and discussed rather than buried and closed off.

The physical proximity and distance between members of the family is another area to explore (Guerin, 1972). In some families a cohesiveness is apparent, and members may live within close proximity. In families with emotional conflict, members may deal with this by becoming either over-distant or over-involved with the problem. Some degree of physical distance seems necessary

and may help to facilitate a relatively objective view of what is going on. Extreme physical distance and lack of contact with extended family members should not be equated with independence and maturity. Guerin states that rather than independence, this represents a reactive distance to unresolved conflict in an important relationship. Much like Bowen's concept of the emotional cut-off, the reactive distance leaves the problem unresolved and attempts to close off feelings connected to the conflictual relationship. Instead, the family member needs a planned distance to enable thought and planning for re-entry to deal with the conflictual issues.

As stated earlier, the triangles are the building blocks of the family system. One should begin by recognizing that triangles do exist and search them out in one's own family system. Based on the idea that the emotional process between two people is unstable and moves to stabilize itself by triangling in a third person or object, one can begin to identify areas of triangulation. Guerin states:

The dysfunctional or undesirable aspect of this process is that it prevents the emotional process between two people from ever being worked out. Detriangulation of oneself and the development of a one-to-one personal relationship with each family member are the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in the project of work on one's own family (Guerin, 1972, p.455).

Bowen recommends that therapists work to stay detriangulated

emotionality of the spouses so that the spouses can develop and strengthen their own emotional relationship. This principle can be applied to the triangles found in one's own family. Even though it will be difficult to be as objective as an outsider, one can detriangulate oneself from family relationships by fostering resolution of conflicts and discussion of issues within dyadic relationships. Rather than

As the genogram is filled in and the family process becomes apparent, one can begin to formulate concepts about the family's operating principles concerning: times of calm and stress; generational and personal boundaries, conflictual issues; triangles; personal closeness, and emotional cut-off; and the patterns found in the past to present generations.

If one desires to change one's behavior in the family, the family

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be pulled into any dyadic conflicts, one can encourage family members to deal directly with the other person involved. One can also be a role model for one's own family by not triangulating others in to deal with conflicts and by giving direct, clear messages to the involved family member. Establishing this one-to-one personal relationship with one's parents can be quite difficult. Parents tend to pull together into a position of "we-ness" when either one is confronted individually. It is necessary to have time alone with each parent to develop a personal relationship. Only then can each parent be seen as an individual who is not to be totally blamed or congratulated for one's shortcomings and success.

will eventually accommodate the change. Any change involves a minimum of three steps: the change, the family's reaction to the change, and dealing with the family's reaction. There are many techniques for changing family patterns. One technique commonly used in therapy is the reversal (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976). In using a verbal or behavioral reversal, the individual says or acts in a manner that is uncharacteristic of himself. The message is, "I won't play your game" and may produce more adult behavior in family members. A similar method is to switch the means of communication one uses with family members (Friedman, 1971). One can either use a different method of communication, such as a letter

vs. the phone, or change the individual one usually communicates within the family. Humor is another technique that can quickly reduce the intensity of a situation (Carter and Orfanidis, 1976). By refusing to be serious about what the family is rigid or uptight about may help lessen the tension and increase the flexibility in the situation. Such techniques are not meant to replace the desired person-to-person relationship with each family member. When used with care they can be substitutes for destructive emotional games and repetitive interchanges that exist in all families.

Case Study

Mary Jones is a nursing student who has just completed a three-generation genogram on her family as part of her psychiatric nursing course. While collecting the data for her genogram, she realized how little she really knew about the relationships and patterns in her family. She is now beginning to understand some of the reasons for her own behaviors as well as the behavior of her family members. The following narrative corresponds with Mary's genogram and reflects some of the information she gained and the conclusions she drew after investigating her family.

Mary's nuclear family consists of her father Bill, a pharmacist, her mother Ann, a housewife, and her brother Mike, a medical student. Mike attends medical school in a neighboring state and is currently living with June, another third-year medical student. Mary attends nursing school in her home state, so she returns to her parent's home during school holi-

days. In recalling her childhood, Mary believes she had most of her physical wants and needs met, but not the emotional needs. Her parents have had a conflictual marriage and there was not much affection shown toward the children. She and her brother were always encouraged by their parents in academic and athletic pursuits, but there was not much family togetherness. She now realizes that her father's devotion to his work probably hurt her parent's marriage as much as her mother's drinking problem.

At this point in her life, Mary feels closer to her brother than either of her parents. This closeness has only recently developed, since throughout most of her childhood Mary had a strong alliance with her father. The alliance between father and daughter developed for several reasons. The main factor that drew them together was Ann's drinking problem. As Ann withdrew more and more into the alcohol, Mary turned more to her father for attention and advice. When Bill and Ann separated for a year in 1967, Mary did not understand and felt deserted by her mother.

Mary had not developed a close relationship with her brother as he was quite independent and chose to deal with the family conflict through avoidance. Mary has become aware that her alliance with her father produced a need in herself to try constantly to please him. An example of this is her drive to maintain an "A" average in school and to feel like a failure if she falls below this. She now admires her brother's independence and has been working on getting to know him better.

When obtaining information from her parents about their parents and childhood, Mary began to see some of the patterns in her family. Mary knew the least about her father's background, because he never talked about his past. Bill was raised in a small town where his father was a prominent lawyer and his mother was a housewife. His grandparents were from Scotland and perhaps the strict ideas of child-bearing that his father possessed came from that heritage. Bill's father was respected in the community but dreaded at home. He was a stern disciplinarian and took most of his harshness out on Bill. His daughters escaped most of the abuse Bill received as they were girls and somewhat protected by his wife. Bill never seemed to be able to live up to his father's expectations, but never stopped trying either. The recurrent depression that his father suffered was not known outside a close circle of family and friends. So his father's suicide in 1955, one year after Bill's marriage, was a big shock to the community.

When Mary asked her father how he felt when this happened, he told her that he was sad and happy at the same time and still has many unresolved feelings toward his father. Bill's mother never saw bad in her husband. She will not talk about his suicide and only speaks of his good qualities and accomplishments. Bill visits his mother regularly since she lives nearby with his older sister Margaret. Bill's marriage to Ann was not encouraged by Bill's parents since they felt Ann's family was "too different" from their own. Bill now believes that his marriage was the first thing he

did in his life completely because he wanted to and not to please his father. His mother still does not get along with Ann and never misses a chance to remind Bill what a mistake he made in marrying her.

In contrast to Bill's family, Ann comes from a close and loving family. Even though Ann's father is of Italian descent and her mother is Irish, their Catholic religion brought them together. Since Ann was the first live birth following two miscarriages, she received much love and attention. After the birth of her twin sisters when she was four, she began to share the household responsibilities with her mother. She told Mary that she enjoyed helping her mother raise her brother and sisters since it kept her close to her mother. Ann and her mother remain very close and Ann believes that Bill resented the closeness that her family shared. Ann's parents were not pleased with Ann's marriage to Bill either, since they felt the religious difference would be a problem. Ann told Mary that her husband's coldness and harshness scared her early in their marriage and she used the alcohol to cope with his behaviors. She also felt inferior to him and his family, a fact which they never let her forget. After receiving treatment for her alcoholism, she tried to make her family work, but found her husband set in his ways and her children already drifting away from her.

Mary asked her mother why she stayed with her father and Ann replied, "With my history I never could have obtained custody of you and Mike, and you both meant too much to me to lose." Mary felt she was just beginning

to understand the struggle and trauma her mother had experienced during her marriage.

The main triangle in Mary's nuclear family is between herself and her parents. The reasons for Mary's alliance with her father and for her mother's withdrawal were previously discussed. Bill's poor relationship with his father has probably contributed to the lack of closeness between Mike and himself. Mary has seen some progress in the relationship between the two of them since her father's realization that he probably "drove Mike away" by not allowing Mike to be his own person. Mike has realized that he cannot continue to cut himself off from his father forever. Now that Mary and Mike are living away from home and are not as apt to be pulled into their parent's conflicts, Mary hopes they will work more of their problems out together.

The advantage to Mary's parents of such conflict resolution should be to help strengthen their marriage. Mary's benefit will be a decrease of tension that she has been experiencing when drawn into such conflicts. She is certain that the family conflict plus the pressure from school that she puts herself under have contributed to her ulcerative colitis. Consequently Mary has set the following goals for herself and her family: 1) to work on her own autonomy, 2) to continue to develop the relationship with her brother, 3) to get to know her mother better, 4) to appreciate her parent's individuality, and 5) to encourage her parents to work out conflicts between themselves. Even at this early stage of working on her family system,

Mary already feels she knows herself better.

Genogram Sharing

Guerin (1972) gives several reasons for sharing the work on his own family with his students. He believes that this sharing demonstrates to his students that he really means and does what he says. In other words, he did not assign work to his students that he was not willing to do himself. The sharing shows his openness and gives his students a frame of reference from which they can start work on their own families.

I have experienced similar reactions from students when I share my family genogram. Mainly, I think it helps them get to know me better and feel free to share about their own families. The students have given many reasons why they enjoyed and benefited from the exercise.

Notations

Illustrated on genogram and marked as 1, 2, etc.

1. Solid paired line indicates marriage.
2. Broken paired line indicates non-marriage relationship.
3. Solid vertical line indicates children of the couple.
4. Broken brackets indicate divorce, separation.
5. "Rocker" between children indicates twins, triplets, etc.
6. Aborted fetuses are triangles.
7. Name of person writing genogram and date of completion. →