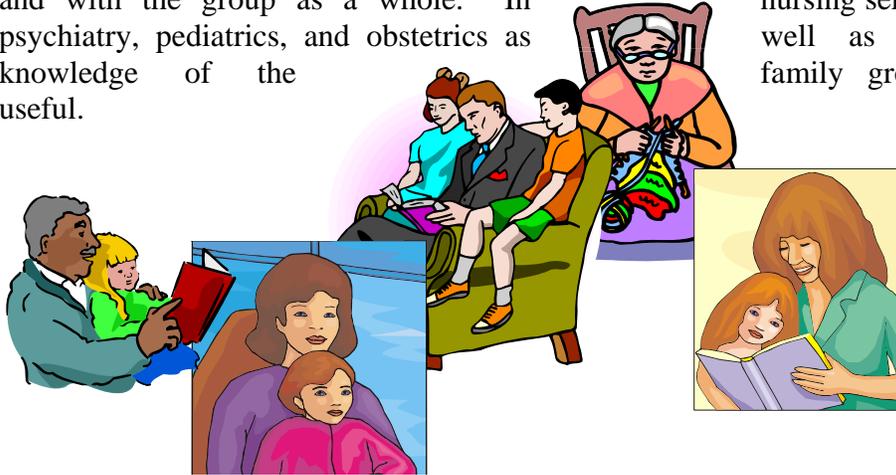


## The genogram, a means of enriching the interview: the principles (I)

By Margot Phaneuf, RN, Ph.D.

Each member of a group acts, interacts and reacts with every other member of the group and with the group as a whole. In psychiatry, pediatrics, and obstetrics as knowledge of the useful.

nursing services, especially in well as in education, a family group can be very



In fact, it may be important to understand not only the persons under our care but also the parental structure of origin on a larger scale and over several generations. In order to do this one may use a genogram, an analytical tool used in sociology. With its little icons set up and presented on a proportional tree diagram, it presents us with a clear and meaningful graphic representation of the family circle.

### The genogram: origins and theory

We owe the widespread use of the genogram as a therapeutic tool to the pioneers of family therapy associated with the Palo Alto school in the United States who, influenced by the work of M. Bowen and his theory of family systems, promulgated its use as a therapeutic tool in the 70's.

Family system analysis emerged from systems theory, itself born of a mathematical model adapted to human groups. The systems concept has been

known for a long time, even in antiquity, the Greek philosophers considered the universe as an organised whole composed of interdependent parts each having its proper character.

**A family system:** is composed of persons in a close circular and interdependent relationship. The members are united by blood ties, by marriage and by certain conventions and values. Their relationships result in affinities, rejections, disruptions, accords, economic phenomena and emotional reactions. All takes places in a dynamic situated in time and space and extends over several generations. These phenomena give a distinctive character to the family.

This notion however remained forgotten until the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who studied biological, mathematical and other systems put it on the agenda. His work, "Théorie générale des systèmes" (general system theory) influenced its application to sociology and to the family and enabled the analysis of complex human systems (L. Von Bertalanffy (1973). This theory permits us to see the family group as a system which is open to its surroundings and environment, and to discover and take into account the influences outside the family such as certain friends or the school environment.

**A system:** is a set of persons, objects or concepts which are related amongst themselves by ties of various natures that can be summarized by the term circular. It is precisely these ties which enable the system to exist. The structure which forms the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The modification of one of the parts entails changes in the others and the whole is thus transformed. The system always tends towards homeostasis, an equilibrium state. These are the laws of systems.

Even though the genogram is the tool par excellence of the systems approach, this theory is not the only one that influenced it. The research on communication of the psychologists of the Palo Alto school, the studies on the dynamics of groups and Lewin's theory of force fields also left their mark. Other non-negligible influences are those of Freud's theory of the individual unconscious, Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, and the works of Moreno who introduced the presence of a conscious and an unconscious which is at once familial, social, of the group and

the generation, which he named the *co-unconscious*. These latter theories would explain the transmission of many messages whose origin arises from the unspoken. They convey the family past inherited from our parents and grandparents, for we no longer believe that we are influenced solely by our immediate parents (Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, *Lien social* no. 711, juin 2004, p.4.interviewed by Katia Rouff).

### The theorists who had an influence on the genogram

- The Palo Alto school with its research on the family system and communication.
- The work of M. Bowen on the systems approach to the family.
- The systems theory of Ludwig von Bertalanffy.
- The studies on groups dynamics and Lewin's theory of force fields.
- Freud's theory of the individual unconscious, Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the works of Moreno on co-consciousness.

## Definition

Anne Ancelin Schützenberger states that the genogram, which is a family tree over three generations reveals certain of life's events as well as showing the ties between children, their parents and their grandparents. She specifies that the **genosociogram**, which is

more comprehensive, covers five to seven generations. Both indicate the dates of marriage, birth, death and the important events in the family history (*Lien social*, no. 711, juin 2004, p. 4). The genosociogram requires an important investment in time and research which makes it less practical for use in health care and education.

### DEFINITION

The genogram is an analytical tool which enables one to visualize the family structure by a succinct and rapid graphic image often over several generations. It shows the alliances and ruptures, the generational repetitions of behaviours. of dependence or vulnerability.

In the current definition, the genogram is an

instrument of analysis of the family structure permitting a rapid and succinct graphic image. For practical purposes, it is done over two or three generations, which renders it easy to use in nursing care for example. It enables us to see the alliances and ruptures, the repetition of illnesses and social problems across generations as well as the vulnerability to certain dependent behaviours.

## The major objectives

The first objective of the genogram is to synthesize, in the form of a clear and easy to read diagram, information about a person and their family.

This objective is particularly important in a health team where all the participants must have access to precise and synthesized information. However, many other objectives can be attained by this means and the following tables demonstrate this.

### The genogram: objectives (1)

- Clearly present the history of the immediate family and its origin by showing the relationships between the various persons.
- Consider the family context from the generational perspective by searching for the sources of the behaviours or difficulties encountered.
- Identify the processes of the transmission of values, habits, difficulties as well as the phenomenon of generational repetition.
- See at a glance the dynamic complexes which are taking or have taken place in the family system. For example, children born out of wedlock, abortions, fugues, abandonment, etc

## The family as revealed by the genogram

**Genogram : Objectives (2)**

- Understand the effects of certain events on the family and the individual : the effects of unresolved mourning; unspoken messages; understand situations such as a substitute child, failures in life, recomposed families, or a marked out patient.
- Show how the various roles and rules governing the family influence the relationships within the group.
- Show the ties which each member of the family, whether parent or child, has with the other members of the family.
- Express the feelings related to conflicts, separations, distance, reunions.

One of the strongest social groups in society is the family. It brings together individuals related by blood or marriage, who share certain common characteristics of social status, culture and economic situation. It is the most elementary and most important group

of the social fabric for it is the first group to which we belong, where we develop, and where we learn to live in society.

The family constitutes the basic cell of a community. But like everything else in the world, it is in constant evolution and we cannot define it today as we did in the past. In substance, this is what Claude Levi-Strauss, famous ethnologist, tells us. "In a more contemporary

**The family**

- The family is the first and strongest system to which a person belongs.
- It is formed by a network of parents where physical, social and emotional functions are deeply interdependent. The ties are not only horizontal (the actual situation) but also vertical, for ties also exist with the past generations, the historic context of the family.
- In the family system, the interrelations between the members and their vulnerabilities have a tendency to reproduce themselves from one generation to another, at times even to escalate, for example, alcoholism.
- This is called generational transfer.

manner, one can define the family as the articulation of the ties of union and **kinship**.

This definition of the family as a function enables us to avoid pre-establishing its content: today a family doesn't necessarily begin with a marriage, it can unite people who cohabit or live together in common-law marriages, people of the same or different sex, or a recomposed family of previously existing unions. The family is both a group and a social institution".

Source:Wikipédia:[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociologie\\_de\\_la\\_famille#Comment\\_d.C3.A9finir\\_la\\_famille\\_.3F](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociologie_de_la_famille#Comment_d.C3.A9finir_la_famille_.3F) . consult also : Mémo, le site de l'Histoire : <http://www.memo.fr/Dossier.asp?ID=304> ).

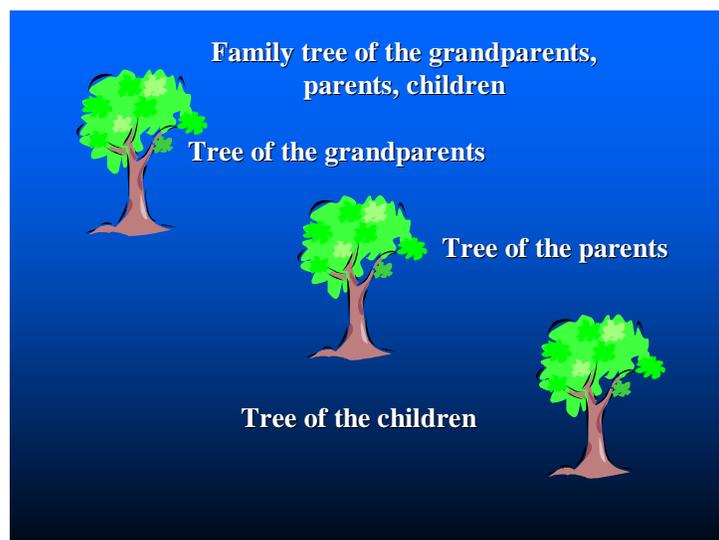
Its composition may include:

- The presence of a heterosexual or homosexual couple.
- The marriage or cohabitation of this couple.
- Children either from the couple or from one of the partners, or adopted children.
- Recomposed families resulting from the cohabitation of two preexisting families either through remarriage or cohabitation of the parents.
- “the legal ties, the duties and obligations of an economic, religious or other nature; a precise network of sexual rights and prohibitions, and a variable and diverse ensemble of psychological feelings such as love, affection, respect. . .” (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1979. *Textes de et sur Lévi-Strauss*, coll. Idées, Gallimard, in [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociologie\\_de\\_la\\_famille#Comment\\_d.C3.A9finir\\_la\\_famille\\_.3F](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociologie_de_la_famille#Comment_d.C3.A9finir_la_famille_.3F)

In the genogram, the family is depicted over several generations and should include the grandparents, parents, father, mother, uncles, aunts and the children on both the father's and mother's side. It should also include adopted children, illegitimate children, members of reconstituted families and even in certain cases those who live under the same roof but are not related to the others.

## Function of the genogram

The genogram, on account of its systems approach, puts into perspective an organised vision of the family which reacts as a complex whole governed by a particular mentality, one might even say, by internal laws. The genogram helps us to understand how the family group influences the individual, and how the behaviour of one of its members, in turn influences the group. We thus see that each member is indissociable from the dynamic of the whole.



With the addition of biomedical and social information, the genogram enables us to visualize the existence of certain vulnerabilities within the group. It enables us to see that they are found not only in the immediate family, that is in the present, but also within the other generations, for our values, modes of functioning, and way of solving problems are related to our past generations. Because of the generational influence, the family system is particular whether the relationships between members are harmonious or conflicting, and vulnerabilities have a tendency to reproduce themselves, even to escalate. One often sees this in cases of alcoholism and certain diseases.

The genogram is thus a way of drawing up the family tree and demonstrating in analogic fashion a representation of its functioning, thus helping the concerned persons to better understand their relationships, the influences which marked them and the symptoms manifested by certain members.

### **How is the genogram used?**

The genogram is a precious tool which not only enables us to grasp the evident actual relationships between the members of a family but also those which until now were unknown, hidden or buried in the unconscious. For example, one might see the preference that a parent may have had for one child in particular or on the contrary, the rejection of one of them. This

facilitates the evaluation of the group dynamic. It also enables us to assess the importance of these ties and their repercussion on the existing problems in the family, such as: deviant behaviour, symptoms of certain illnesses, as well as the repetition of events from one generation to another with their resonance stemming from the past. Other examples include failure at school and a low level of education which one finds in certain families despite sufficient intellectual capacities. The values attributed to education, lack of ambition, the relationship to money and culture, even low self-esteem; make these almost a family tradition.

#### **Usefulness of the genogram**

- Helps families recognize their strengths and weaknesses.
- Helps the nursing staff understand the relationships, influences, and vulnerabilities of the individuals and the conflicts within the group.
- Helps understand the bonds which form the basis of the family matrix whether they be harmonious, difficult or too close.
- Enables a consideration of the pattern of functioning of the family as a whole, without leaving anyone out.
- Reveals all the major events which touched the family (births, marriages, separations, divorces, major illnesses, adoptions, deaths, economic failures, etc).
- Spots repetitive modes.

One of the important advantages of the genogram is to foresee the risks of future illnesses and perturbations which may affect the family members such as diabetes, cancer, alcoholism, sexual abuse, suicide, divorce, mental illness.

In fact, what the genogram shows us is the effort of adaptation, successful or not, of the members of a family to the context of their lives. It shows us that the failures, the deviant or positive behaviours, which touch one part of the system touch the whole family and that the place, the values, the actions of one member of this ensemble can influence the relations and behaviour of all the others of the same generation and even the generations which follow. One may thus see the repercussions of the behaviour of the alcoholic grandfather or the illiterate father on the economic situation of the family as well as on the physical and mental health of the descendants and the symptoms of dependence of some of them.

An effect of the genogram, which is by no means insignificant, is that it enables the members of a family to see themselves in a more global perspective which integrates both the past and the present. This enables them to make sense of certain behaviours by seeing them in a new light and this distancing helps them to come to a better understanding. By remembering certain events, by the investigation of things unspoken, by the observation of the relationships between the family members, it is at times possible to discover the source of dysfunctional relationships, unhappy situations or family dramas which have, for a long time, been skeletons in the closet.

Being aware of the negative effects of marginalization, one then understands for example, the influence of the grandmother's tuberculosis, the uncle's condemnation or the cousin's madness, on the family climate and its adaptation to its social milieu. By recognizing and comparing the present relational and adaptive modes and relationships with those adopted by previous generations one can often clearly see the same dysfunctional family structures repeat themselves from one generation to another. In fact, families repeat, even multiply their problems, over the course of their evolution.

What happened to one generation finds itself repeated in the following with slight variations in context, for example, the age or the cause of a violent death or the nature of the adaptive response of dependence adopted by certain family members such as, alcohol, drugs or gaming. From one generation to another, the values, dietary customs, and life habits are also transmitted and with them certain health problems which thus have a tendency to repeat themselves. Relational difficulties are also perceived in the same manner and unsound solutions reproduced. We will see for example, infidelities, ruptures of the couple in the case of conflict, and alcoholism in order to forget. The solutions for life's difficulties being transmitted from one generation to another, the actual family, in case of difficulty, takes the same path as the preceding generations with the risks of dysfunction, dependence, all kinds of somatic problems and the dissension which this implies.

The genogram offers a very interesting preventive aspect. When one member of the family succeeds in going beyond the taboos and unspoken laws of the family by writing down, with the help of a nurse, the family problems, vulnerabilities and prohibitions, this knowledge enables the prevention of the gravest difficulties. The analysis of the genogram with the members of the family can help them to get unstuck from this generational impasse loaded with physical and mental illnesses of all kinds, with social

problems, each more serious than the other, such as conflicts, lawsuits, divorces, imprisonment, unemployment, children born of adultery, incest, promiscuity, violent death, the premature death of a child and even murders. Taking note of what this tool presents in such an evident manner, they can consult, speak with each other, and have recourse to mediation in order to avoid relational dead-ends and family breakdowns, which from one generation to another, condemned them to a repetition of the same unhappy scenarios.

The genogram offers us important keys to identify and understand the nature of these dead-ends and helps us to react in order to change our habits, reorganize our lives and relationships and correct certain behaviours while there is still time. Thus, liberated from the constraints born of loyalties to the past, we can take charge of our lives.

But what is the most surprising in the genogram, is that it clearly demonstrates that the influence of the family mentality, its values, its modes of relationship and its habits can go back a long way to previous generations, for example, the irrational grudges maintained over generations or certain problems of dependence which are reproduced. Some authors even see in the global dysfunctioning of the family the reason for the appearance of mental illnesses in one of its members, which is what one calls the “symptom child” (Francis Alföldi, 1999. *L'évaluation en protection de l'enfance*. Paris Dunod., p 135).

## **A résumé of several advantages of the genogram**

The working up of a genogram has several advantages.

- To record family antecedents in a synthetic and clear manner in order to conserve them in our files;
- To facilitate the work of the health team and the multidisciplinary team;
- To give the nurse the chance to bring up family problems;
- To integrate a family approach in general, psychiatric and pediatric care, etc.;
- To furnish the team with synthesized information regarding family antecedents;
- To identify the factors of biomedical and psychosocial risks which threaten the members of a family;
- To help a person discover the unspoken events and secrets of his family;
- To become aware of the values and dynamics of the family;
- To realize that there is a generational continuum to the family history and its ties both sentimental and material;
- To identify the adherence to the past and its unconscious programs in order to help the person go beyond them. For example, the child who doesn't feel capable of going beyond the level of education of its parents, or who feels obliged to take up the same profession or work as the father or takes up the hypochondriac behaviour of the mother;
- To help a person understand the sources of their identity: name, surname, values, education, culture, etc.;

- To perceive and prevent the repetition of patterns of behaviour, attitudes and pathologies from one generation to the next;
- To identify the talents, jobs and professions practiced by the enlarged family;
- To participate in an evaluation of the risks of maltreating a child or a woman;
- To show the potential and the resources which are at the disposal of the family.

P.S.: The rest of the article follows under the title “[The genogram a means of enriching the interview: creation \(Part II\)](#)”.

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