

The Genogram: Family Patterns Workshop Notes¹

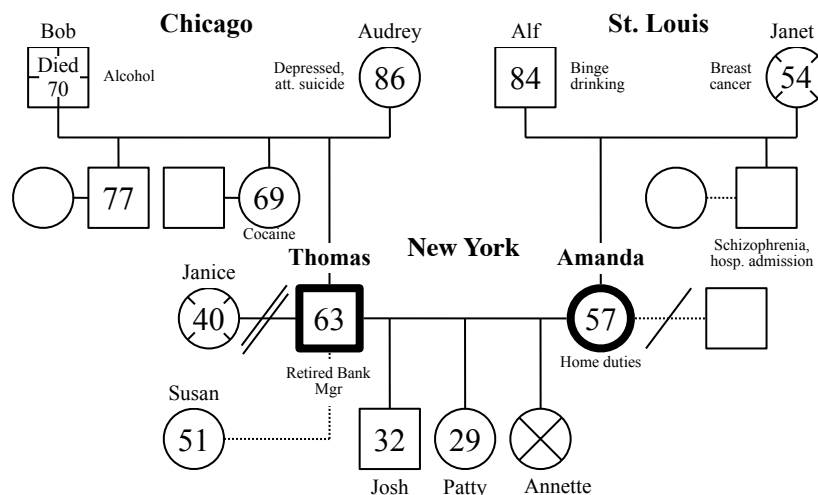
Abstract

Understanding Intergenerational Family Themes

This 1.5 hour workshop will teach and use the genogram, a tool from family therapy, to explore emotional and spiritual themes that run in families. The Rev Dr Bruce Stevens, endorsed clinical psychologist, will lead this interactive workshop. Discover both healthy and maybe not so healthy patterns – and think about what might need to change. You are welcome to bring a friend or family member who might be interested. Wesley Centre, 4pm, Saturday 27 January.

Introduction

The genogram was developed in family therapy by Murray Bowen. The symbols create a kind of family tree, and the relationship lines indicate “who begat whom.”² This is what a genogram looks like:



The genogram portrays three generations of Thomas’s family. He is married to Amanda and they have two adult children (another, Annette, was stillborn). There are some family problems, which are indicated in the diagram.

¹ This is taken from my book *Before Belief: Discovering our first spiritual awareness*, Lexington 2020.

² See Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, (3rd ed) *Genograms in family assessment*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 2008.

Google “genogram” to start doing your own diagram. There are lots of helpful sites. Some will offer software such as *GenoPro* to picture your family on a computer. Fill out the diagram and include members of your family on paper or on your computer. Include your parents, wider family and even more distant relatives. Look over the generations. Can you identify any patterns? You might also identify cultural issues. Look for patterns of migration. Did people value tertiary education or business or learning a trade? You might see positive patterns, such as older children looking out for younger siblings.

Why are patterns important? Patterns can be the result of common qualities of family members. They can be functional, such as taking responsibility, or negative, through problem behavior such as misusing prescription drugs.

Ken was the oldest son of a farmer. He was expected to take over the family farm, following the example of his father and other males in his family.

In what way was culture embodied in the family? Were customs, traditions, religious practices, views of history, or markers of ethnic identity present? How did the family celebrate? What were special days (birthdays, anniversaries, religious events)? How were values expressed? Was there an honored place for the aged? This provides a context for family life, and it is formative.

Reflect: What expectations were placed on you about how you should live your life? Were you given a life script to follow? Did you feel you were appreciated as a person?

In my own genogram, it was clear that family members often moved to other countries:

My maternal grandfather came to Australia from New Zealand. My father was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and served in the army in World War 2. He met my mother in Sydney, Australia. After they married, my parents moved to the U.S.A., where I was born. When I was 10 years old, the family returned to Australia. In 1983, I moved with Jenny and our children to Boston to do graduate studies and later returned to Australia. I have a younger brother, Mark, who has lived in the Philippines, Hawaii, mainland U.S.A. and Australia. He married Jo from the Philippines.

Yes, before drawing the genogram I could have said, “People travel in my family.” But by doing the work and noticing patterns I came to realize how it typified my experience of family. Travel was part of my early learning. There is a family belief that it is important to

take every opportunity—not only to travel but in life! This has been translated into an encouragement to follow our dreams.

The family is our first context. Think about it as an incubator of early learning. Family life includes our first take on everything important: people, relationships, how to live responsibly, to love and be loved.

Identify dysfunctional themes

Alcoholism

Violence in relationships

Mental illness

Sexual abuse

Gambling addiction

Crime leading to incarceration

Drug dependence (prescription and recreational)

Suicide (include attempts)

Further Symbols to Express Emotional Themes

You can use another colour to ‘overlay’ your genogram to express emotional themes. Begin with the following:

Emotional cut-off in a relationship ----I I----

Conflict in a relationship vvvvvvvvvv

Intense almost symbiotic _____ x3 (lines)

Triangles who is close to someone, but at expense of someone else who is distanced?

This will convey something of the nature of the relationship. Again look for patterns.