

Who Do You Think You Are?

Clues from your family of origin

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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Family Legacy is the basis of understanding the ecology of being human. It offers not only the origins of our evolving sense of who we are, but the context in which to explore self-fulfillment and well-being. While the family context can uncover many descriptions, interconnections, and identities, it may also lead to unpredictable outcomes. However, it also provides resources to be a more integrated part of the many interdependent aspects of our world.



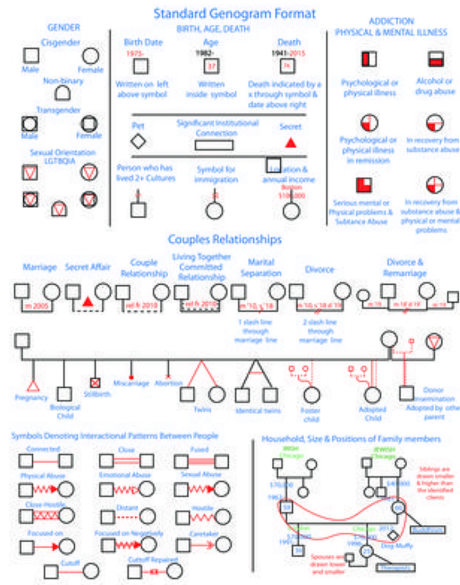
"All The Grouchos"

Source: Artist, Natasha Rabin (c)

An extremely useful tool for understanding how you were influenced by your family of origin is the Genogram, developed by Monica McGoldrick (*The Genogram Journey: Reconnecting with Your Family*, Norton: New York, 2011). A Genogram is a trans-generational depiction of one's family pattern and legacy. I have created thousands of Genograms in my practice and seen their benefits. This easily learned tool provides a tangible and visual means to map large amounts of information in a concise manner. At a glance, one can see the complexity of the family context and its connections to past and current emotional issues. The Genogram affords one a

clear and personal framework to explore and inform future life directions by providing a sense of history and psychological attributes. The Genogram portrays one's ongoing evolutionary journey that is simultaneously part of the larger contexts of education, employment, race, culture, identity, ethnicity, class, religion, health and many others that are critical parts of our existence.

The Genogram



Standard Genogram Format
Source: Monica McGoldrick

Living systems are ecologically driven. They adjust and maintain, but don't adhere to narrow cause and effect means to exist. In nature, there are seldom dichotomies or opposites, as expressed in the Yin and Yang of the "Tao." This dynamic emphasizes context over *content* and is a means of understanding the many contradictions or paradoxes in life. For instance, Self-Fulfillment is usually defined through *content*, which quantifies high self-esteem, a good paying job and family values. Viewing it through *context* would be to ask qualitatively how someone exhibits a good feeling about themselves, utilizes their resources and maintains a healthy family life. Big difference!

Family Perceptions

How do your family members think about one another? This can provide articulation of joys and pains. Examples of enmeshment and cut-offs can be the origin of past and present illnesses, aggravations, resentments and grievances. Knowing you cannot change or minimize pain which has already occurred will lead to the opportunity of creating solutions in the present that can help you differentiate from past injurious patterns.

Characteristics

Were there coincidences between the births of family members, moves or migrations, illnesses or death, changes in family finances, etc.? Who was named for whom in your family? How much did the family conform to gender stereotypes of their culture and era? Which members did not conform, how were they viewed and how did the family demonstrate flexibility (or inflexibility)?

Relationships

What kind of relationships did one's parents have with their parents? How did you relate to your parents: the good, the bad, any grievances, life cycle and developmental issues, etc.? How did you relate to your siblings and others?

Behaviors

How did the family deal with rituals, stress, rules, leisure, beliefs, and explaining or telling stories of death, money, education, and betrayals? How were siblings expected to behave? What roles did you and your siblings have in the family? What are the patterns that couples exhibited in your family? Look at the influence of divorce, power struggles, gender roles, employment, strengths, weaknesses, and how this impacts your development? Describe how your temperament was viewed and supported (or not) in your family of origin?

Maintaining Factors

How have spiritual factors impacted you? What emotional and physical sensations did you experience in your different life cycles i.e. childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, etc.? How did you and your family deal with trauma? What unique, unusual and/or extraordinary sensations do you recall growing up?

Implications From Your Family Legacy

Think about the above Genogram questions and any other ones that come to mind. How might your answers have supported or held you back in finding yourself? When we look at our family legacy and the energy that sustains it, we can gain insights and make positive changes in our life. We can also identify and learn from the interactive connections of our family of origin, some of which may have hindered or supported self-development.

There is mystical energy in our family systems. Repetitive behaviors of cut-offs, addiction, decision making, secrets, etc. can point to understanding how certain consequences have occurred or supported who you are and could become from your family legacy. Lifelong habits can be traced to successive generations in a multitude of ways. This demonstrates how we are truly baked from our family energies, yet we are in truth all half-baked with room to grow and evolve.

There is an opportunity to put past hurts in perspective and not let our history control us in negative ways, by going home to reaffirm our strengths and resources. It is from the family legacies that we are taught to deal with conflict and the paradoxes of life on our path to continuing our ever-present journey of self-fulfillment. I wish you all well in this important endeavor and its far-reaching benefits for present and future well-being.