

My Genogram Journey

Ashley Gartner

Wake Forest University

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Due to a lot of pain and loss in my family history, this assignment was challenging for me. However, it was also enlightening and made me realize things about my family that I never took the time to understand before. For example, I never realized how alike my eldest half-brother and I are and how many traits we share. As he is someone that I genuinely dislike, this was not necessarily a fun realization. I relived some painful events and further processed others. I began by looking at the description of a genogram in Gladding (2019). This gave me a base to start constructing my genogram. McGoldrick (2011) supplied some interesting questions that made me drill down into my family's history, adding some additional detail. This assignment also allowed me to reach out to some family members and ask for their help in supplying these details.

In discussing relationships within a family, one should start with their parents and immediate family. I am incredibly close with both of my parents. They have always encouraged me to be independent, embrace my intelligence, and not worry about what other people think or say about me. They emboldened me to step out of social norms and become the powerhouse woman I have become. I even got a coffee cup for my Dad that said, "Dad, thank you for teaching me how to be man, even though I am your daughter". There was never any concern whether or not I would get married because they made sure I knew how to live on my own.

Working through this assignment, I realized that all of the women in my family fit this profile. My paternal grandmother even had the nickname "the General" because of how she ran her household. Neither of my aunts got married until much later in life. My mother knows how to do more household maintenance work than my father does, and he was a construction worker while he put himself through dental school. I have always had powerful women in my life, and

they taught me that it was okay not to be on the social clock. That is was okay for me to live my life my way and not how everyone else said I should.

On the next level of my immediate family, you will find my half-brothers. In terms of birth order, I am in a unique position. I am the youngest child for my father and the only child for my mother. I am also the sole girl that my close family had (my close cousins are also male). My brother, Jed, and I are as close as any full brother and sister. It's funny, even though people know my Dad was married previously, when they see our relationship, they assume that Jed is my mom's son. That is how close we are. As evidence of this, my mother even has a cassette tape recording of he and I when we were little, laughing and playing together in the bathtub.

My eldest brother, Jeremiah, and I do not have this kind of relationship—the reason for which is the first of our family secrets. For several years when I was very young, Jeremiah sexually abused me. When my father found out, he shut down and withdrew from the rest of the family. From a family therapy standpoint, I suppose one could argue that he was acting out to get attention from our father by destroying something precious to him (aka me). From this perspective, it worked. On the other hand, he has a lot of anger about our father leaving his mother to be with mine, so one could say he acted out of anger. It is impossible to know for sure.

There is some obvious triangulation happening between my siblings and me, and it echoes a pattern found in my genogram. There is always one sibling that is outcast from the group. In my case, it either Jeremiah or myself, depending on the situation. This also happened with my Dad and his siblings. When he was growing up, he and my uncle Dan would gang up on my uncle Don (DJ) because he was younger. As they got older, Dan moved away, so Dad and DJ became close, and Dan was outcast. Now that Dan has passed away, Becky has replaced him as the outcast sibling. My mother and all of my grandparents had similar situations in their lives.

While the triangulation is not necessarily a healthy thing, it does allow for some separation between myself and Jeremiah, and that is okay by me.

The issue of siblings brings up another family secret. Of my paternal grandfather's siblings, two were institutionalized for mental illness. One (Clara) was turned into a running family joke, and the other (Joseph) was never discussed. I did not even know that Joseph existed until I was building my genealogy on Ancestry.com almost ten years ago. When I reached out to my uncle and my father to get some information about these two people, the discomfort was almost palpable. The discussion violated one of our implicit messages; one does not discuss the mental illnesses within the family. This implicit message only compounded the issues resulting from my secret.

Another implicit message within my family is that family is the most important thing, and familial duty is to be put above all else. This message was given from both sides of the family. We have always had family holidays, birthdays, and events together, as well as many other family rituals. Every family member is expected to be at these gatherings, regardless of what else you have going on. Now that our central patriarch and matriarch are gone, I will be curious to see whether or not these rituals continue.

The last implicit message that my mom has stressed to me is always to say, "I love you" when departing. She will forever regret the final conversation she had with my grandmother before she was killed, and she never wanted me to feel that. It is hard to imagine how I will handle the loss of my best friend. I can only hope that I have learned enough from her to process that loss gracefully.

References

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