

My Genogram Journey

Marc Scott

Department of Counseling: Wake Forest University

Dr. Michelle R. Ghoston and Dr. Farren Stackhouse

July 17, 2022

The Genogram Journey

McGoldrick and the genogram

A Genogram represents what looks like a family tree, visually depicting with figures and lines the history and thus the story of an individual's upbringing and family dynamics (Gladding, 2019). "We are all a part of all that our families have been and that keeping our connection matters (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 19)". McGoldrick introduces in his book the importance of family history in drawing a genogram. What seems to be a simple picture can turn into a work of understanding of conflicts that have arisen in the past and those that are current and in the present. There are many painful experiences, "Even the worst and most painful family experiences—alcoholism, sexual abuse, suicide—are part of our accumulated identity" (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 21), that are identified in the illustration that almost bring it to life. A Genogram is able to tell a story on its own behalf and point out the path to which an individual has been put onto, almost without any knowledge of the guidance they have inherited. "To make sense of what we experience in the present—to understand our symptoms, conflicts, cutoffs, and even the multiple characterizations of different family members—we must understand our family's history"(McGoldrick, 2011, p. 33). Understanding our family patterns and responses that happen automatically or automatic thoughts that are programmed into us as children have a compounding effect as we get older, however, without knowing where and why these thoughts come to us automatically, and also without knowing their history, we cannot be aware if they are correct or incorrect (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 34). As McGoldrick correctly pointed out, "it is important that you not begin asking questions until you are prepared to handle the answers" (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 48). There are many things that come out of the preparation of one's Genogram that may produce more questions, it is essential to remember that "each person in the

family typically views his or her perspective as the correct, just, and object one, and yet, as we know, every story is...made up of as many points of views as there are participants.”

(McGoldrick, 2011, p. 35). Knowing and understanding what the Genogram is used for and what it represents is something that I felt the book did a great job of communicating. There are many things that have transacted in my family in the past four years, which has brought up circumstances which at first appeared to be surface issues, but in fact can be traced to a long history of abandonment, and the fear that abandonment may once again be a part of our story. “Respect for the family’s resistance to change is crucial to any effort to understand family patterns.” (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 46) However, it has been a difficult dance to navigate these feelings and fears of abandonment that pervade our family’s structure, and affect any significant change, as there is often secrecy and evasion when discussing my parents’ up-bringing, especially. I agree with McGoldrick that “going bluntly after information, disrespecting the pain that such secrecy reflects for the family, or, on the other hand, fearing to raise relevant issues at one’s own expense” (McGoldrick, 2011, p.47) have both been significant reasons that many of the issues regarding said abandonment is rarely brought up by either other members of my family, nor myself.

Patterns Repeating

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the pattern that seems to be present in my family is that of abandonment. My father and his parents (my grandmother and grandfather) were divorced when he was three or four, at which time his relationship with his father was then non-existent, as my grandfather moved to Arizona from Indiana right after the divorce. It is interesting to note that any information I have regarding my father’s upbringing has come almost exclusively from my step-mother only recently, and even then, in bits and pieces. While the

relationship between my father and grandfather was later re-established when my father was an adult, many years of alcoholism had caused great physical damage, and unfortunately took my grandfather at the age of seventy-three. While substance abuse appears to have been the root of much of the distance between my father and his father, all that seems to be recalled by my father is the abandonment that occurred and the pervasive idea that my father was left. "Typically people tend to think of themselves as the reactors in their family drama, viewing parents as the actors who determined their fate. We need to shift this perspective to realize that we are all actors and reactors." (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 47). For my father, however, this shift in perspective has never been realized and thus his fear of abandonment has continued to be present and acted upon, even affecting his daily life. His mother, who also had her own battle with alcoholism, would leave him when he was very young for days at a time with only the remnants of meals that had been previously cooked. As a result, my father to this day refuses to eat any sort of leftovers.

My father, who was an only child, has had five children from two different marriages, having remarried when I was four years old. The eldest child is currently estranged from our family due to a conflict with my father that has resulted in a lawsuit. Currently, there is an ongoing battle that is taking place in a courtroom wherein sides have formed, and unfortunately taken. "Typically, conflicts between any two family members will affect others in the family. As anxiety rises, conflicts have a ripple effect. Family members become polarized. It is hard to avoid taking sides. Even those who try to remain neutral and above the fray will be seen as having chosen a side by their very silence" (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 114). Three of my father's children, myself included, are parties to the lawsuit on my father's side, and another brother no longer speaks to my father, having taken the oldest's side. As my father has experienced

abandonment once again, this time in the form of estrangement from my two brothers, his behavior has become somewhat erratic and controlling as he tries to maintain some semblance of connection out of fear that he will lose even more of his children.

Having finally learned even the barest of details about my father's childhood has fortunately helped me develop empathy for the "programmed" behavior of my father. (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 47). For much of my life, I only experienced frustration and repulsion by my father's incessant need to choreograph our relationship, the same behaviors that I believe drove my brothers away. However, as I came to understand the deep rooted insecurities and "programming" that is so embedded in his psyche, I am able to "eliminate behaviors of my own that adversely affect our relationship." (McGoldrick, 2011, p. 47). I no longer allow myself to become combative and angry with his sometimes toxic behavior, and instead remind myself of the fatherless little boy who spent significant periods of time on his own to eat food that was days old, while wondering when his mother might come back home.

References:

Gladding, S. T. (2019). *Family Therapy: History, Theory, and Practice* (7th Ed.). Pearson

McGoldrick, M. (2011). *The genogram journey: Reconnecting with your family*. W.W. Norton.