

## Postmodern Approaches in the Use of Genograms

Jacob Mosgaard<sup>1</sup> and Monica Sesma-Vazquez<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Private Practice, Kongens Lyngby, Denmark

<sup>2</sup>University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

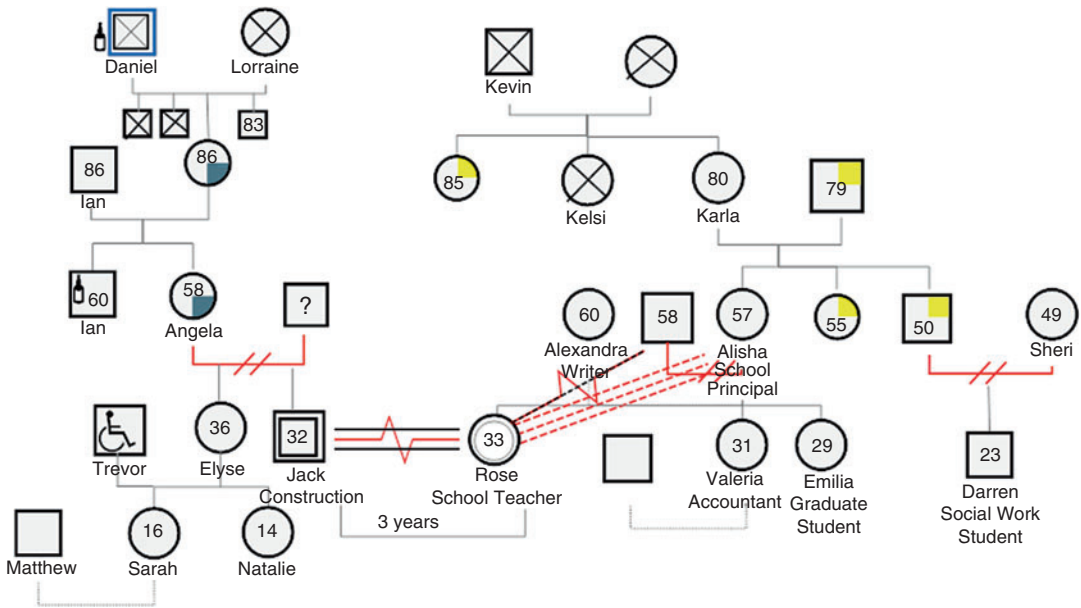
### Introduction

In the field of couples and family therapy, genograms are widely known and used as graphic tools for gathering general or detailed information about family structure and interpersonal relationships, including relevant data regarding family demographics and key aspects of the past and present. Systemic family therapist Monica McGoldrick is not only a pioneer in developing, popularizing, and describing how to depict different family structures, and establishing codes and symbols, but she also proposes diverse modalities to utilize genograms as therapeutic instruments for assessments and interventions (McGoldrick et al. 2008).

A genogram is designed to help understand family composition, dynamics, and patterns across generations. Genograms in a sense are versions of family trees. Some people define them as graphic representations for mapping psychological factors and transgenerational relationship punctuations that influence individuals' behaviors, emotions, and performances.

Traditional genograms include symbols to portray the so-called index person (also called “identified patient”), gender, age, marital status, and deaths, among other factors (see Fig. 1 for exemplification). The classic genogram is used by therapists to elaborate hypotheses, formulate the clinical case, and include other potential explanations concerning causes or factors that preserve couple and family problems. These explanations are attempts at understanding the role of “symptoms” within the family. Traditional genograms moreover have the goal of determining the most affected member in the family, inform therapeutic goals, orient therapists' decisions, and assist in designing therapeutic interventions. Traditionally, genograms have specific guidelines on how to create and intervene on them.

Different fields of practice (such as sociology, psychiatry, social work, etc.) and therapeutic schools (psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, among others) have adopted the use of genograms. Though emerging in the 1970s, unlike many other systemic tools genograms are still widely used. They are still seen as practical devices for gathering information as well as complex gateways to connecting with family members. Besides being tools for information and intervention, they can help generate rich conversations, whether approached traditionally or from a postmodern perspective.



**Postmodern Approaches in the Use of Genograms, Fig. 1** Traditional genogram

## From Systemic to Postmodern Approaches to Genograms

The change from modernist systemic practice to postmodernist practice is essentially a shift in epistemology, from systemic thinking to social constructionism. Following this shift is the development of new methods and the continuation of already existing ones, but with altered theoretical underpinnings. The same questions may be asked (for instance “circular questions”) and the same tools may be used (for instance “genograms”), but their implications may differ.

It is a change from language as a depiction of reality *as it is* (e.g., family systems) to language as *creating* reality. This shift may seem subtle at first since both the systemic and the social constructionist stances stress a focus on relationships. But the differences become clearer when looking at specific applications, such as the uses of genograms. The differences reside in the center of attention of the professional practice. Systemic genogram practice places the individuals as the core elements of these relationships (e.g., “Who is closer to whom?,” “What is he doing, when she is doing that?,” etc.), whereas postmodern genogram practices position *relationships* as the basis, even of “individuals”

(e.g., “What are we together making possible and impossible?,” “Which cultural ideas are these relationships enforcing?,” etc.).

The shift in epistemology is not merely a peaceful refocusing exercise. It entails some substantial criticism, some of which is of importance to the shifts in the uses of genograms as well. Systemic thinking has been criticized for overlooking social or power issues such as class, gender, and race (see Paré 1995). As for the professional positioning, it has been criticized for being too functionalist, being too fixated on hierarchies, or subject-subject relationships (hence risking becoming individualist). This leads to a traditional construction of the professional as the master analyst and the goal of the genogram as assessment.

The aspirations of postmodern genogram use are more anthropological, more concerned with *exploring* than *uncovering*. They are aspirations of trying to not focus on “the family as a known entity,” but on a family as a complex and always unique set of ideas, values, preferred identities, and relational practices (see Iversen et al. 2005). The postmodern genogram is not functionalist, and therefore not seeking final or authoritative answers, but may be used as a scaffold for dialogue Table 1.

**Postmodern Approaches in the Use of Genograms, Table 1** Comparison of modern and postmodern uses of genograms

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Postmodern</b>
Created by the therapist	Cocreated with the client
Oriented toward symptoms (index person)	Oriented toward dialogue and conversation
Symbols are important (predetermined, consensual, and specific). Therapist could follow institutional genograms or software	Symbols are cocreated, flexible. Symbols are creative and organic. Graphics are created by people involved in the process and make sense within local dialogue
Focus on family structure and relational patterns	Focus on clients’ stories, narratives, remembering, among others
Focus on behaviors of individuals and families	Focus on rhizomes and social complexities
An objective portrayal of the family	A generative visualization tool
<i>Truths</i> about the family	Family <i>stories</i>
An invitation to formulate systemic hypotheses	An invitation for genuine curiosity
Emphasis on content	Emphasis on process
Static	Fluid
Therapist perspective and interpretation	Client/therapist perspective, multiple voices
Helps the therapist (orienting questions and strategies)	Helps both therapist and client (creating new meaning)
No playfulness. Stays in the room and within the client’s life	Clients can invite others to their therapeutic conversations by sharing their genograms and bringing their voices

**Genograms as Entry Points for Dialogue**

When leaving a structuralist application behind, genograms become not static snapshots, but dynamic vantage points for dialogue and for relational reflections. Postmodern practitioners consider the genogram a starting point for conversations about relationships, and the purpose is a creative deconstruction and reconstruction of the complex meaning ascribed to these relationships. In other words, postmodern therapeutic approaches to genograms tend to become workshops of creativity, stepping from the evaluation of traditional family structures into unknown territories.

**A Not-Knowing Approach to Genograms**

The focus on dialogue highlights an important shift in the use of genograms – the changing of professional positioning. The postmodern practitioner is less interested in seeking the truth behind the genogram, recording information, and generating interventions, than in pragmatically collaborating in a process of exploration of the meaning and possible or preferable paths ahead for the

clients coconstructing the genogram. When no longer utilizing the genogram for seeking answers to questions of “the world out there,” the professional ceases to act as an expert and starts working as a *collaborator*. It is a step from knowing *better* and knowing *enough* to knowing *differently*. The new position is one of thinking *with* the client instead of thinking (and talking) *about* the client (Shotter 2006). It strives to include the clients’ voices with as much solidarity as possible. It implies a shift from being helpful (a heroic savior of sorts) to being useful (in the service of the client’s wishes and truths) (Cecchin et al. 1992).

Postmodern approaches to genograms build on a *not-knowing stance* (Anderson 1997). The professional does not know where the dialogue is supposed to end or which steps will be the correct ones. The client does not know either. It is a shared process of discovery. This points to a noticeable difference in traditional systemic and postmodern or social constructionist use of genograms – the assigned expertise. In a dialogical use of genograms, the role of interpreter lies not so much with the professional as with the client, and even more preferably in a *collaborative effort* by the professional and the client. Thus, there are no “correct” ways of interpreting the

meaning or the important areas of the genogram. Since it is not understood as a “truthful” depiction, but rather as one visual image of a possible many, what should be stressed or reflected upon is not set in stone. This shifts the use of the genogram from a tool for “unmasking” to an aid in a hopefully useful dialogue around issues of importance for the client.

Genograms as any other form of visualization tool functions as a sort of common third, a shared project to explore. This process is sometimes called loitering (a term from narrative practice) since it is in no hurry to get anywhere specific. Genograms can thus be used as starting points for a mutual exploration of the hitherto unknown. When neither professional nor client has fixed answers to questions arising from the genograms, this exploration may evolve into discovering or even creating new relational realities. This approach to genograms demands a basic curiosity on the behalf of the professional, a tolerance of uncertainty (see Seikkula and Arnkil 2014), and what might be termed an “anthropological gaze” (Mosgaard *in press*). For the relational links that may appear or that may be part of a dialogue of anticipation will often be new, and even surprising.

### **Genograms Within Therapeutic Contexts**

Postmodern uses of genograms in therapy can be the traditional practice of static depiction with the purpose of getting an overview of relationships of importance to clients. From this starting point, conversations may venture into subjects such as attachment experiences, relational identities, preferred stories, and/or highlighting significant relationships (e.g., in a narrative remembering conversation). They may be introduced as a visualization of crucial relationships and as a way of discovering the strong or weak links with other people: “Who is closer or distant to me, and do I prefer it this way?”

Traditionally, a genogram is a depiction of the family as it is. The focus lies primarily on the family and the microrelations between its individuals. A postmodern approach removes the focus

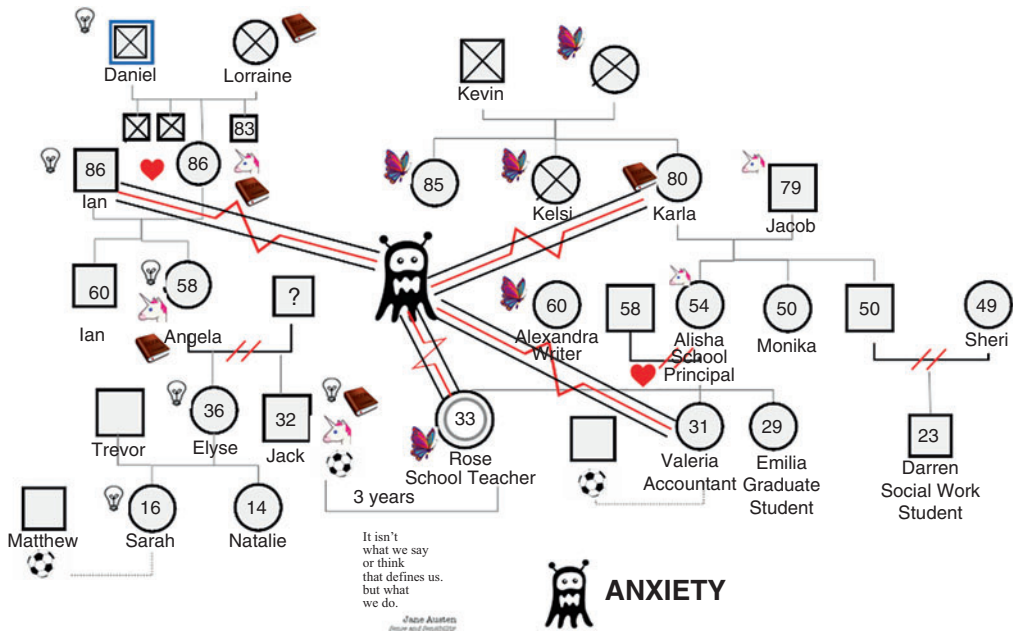
from the singular focus on the microcosm of the family, and – if of interest to client and therapist – broadens the scope to include other networks of importance (Sesma-Vazquez 2011). A genogram thus can include community, institutions, multiple families, friends, kin, significant others, and the weak or strong links between the multiple agents; and it may include other information, dreams, or values of the clients. It may even include externalized concepts of importance to bring into the dialogue the relationship between the human agents and the externalized concepts (see White 2007).

As with traditional genograms, they can be used in individual, couples, and family therapy. With more than one client present, it is possible to do both a shared genogram with their current family unit as the center of attention and do two or more genograms (especially of interest to adults) of their respective families of origin and expanded networks. This may lead to reflections on overlapping qualities or special difficulties or tensions noticed or clarified when comparing the genograms.






### **Genograms Within Clinical Supervision and Training Contexts**

Supervision of psychotherapy and other relational practices, such as social work or family counseling, is a practice of metareflection. This reflecting process may benefit from using genograms of significant relationships, of the clients in focus of the professional work, or placing the professional relationship in the genogram as well. It may even be illuminating to include the supervisory relationship itself, as a visualization of the complexities of relational and metarelational connections.

In contexts of training (e.g., couple and family therapy or social work), genograms can be helpful as a way of training the practitioner’s positioning skills, practicing seeing “reality” from different relational vantage points. Creating genograms of families, maybe of the student’s own, can be an invaluable training in taking a relational (as opposed to a primarily individual) perspective in working with people. The visualizing itself also



**ANTIDOTES FOR ANXIETY**

-  Creativity
-  Making magic
-  Love and accountability
-  Sports, football soccer
-  Writing and journaling



**love:** [luv] - n.  
 1. an intense affection for another person based on personal or familial ties  
 2. the deep tenderness, affection, and concern felt for a person with whom one has a relationship.

Strong independent women, brave, self-confident

**Postmodern Approaches in the Use of Genograms, Fig. 2** An example of a postmodern genogram

introduces the possibility for, on a metalevel, working creatively with families.

**Other Creative Applications**

As postmodern uses of genograms are not attached to any fixed procedure or intervention, being a tool for dialogue rather than intervention, the applications can be manifold. Some ways of using genograms apart from traditional ones are suggested here:

(a) *Dream Genogram*, which can be compared to the “realistic” one and help ground problem-solving or decisions not only in “reality,” but

within the frame of clients’ preferred values and stories.

- (b) *Change-Focused Genogram*, which can help highlight which relationships clients wish to strengthen, weaken, or look more into, and which experiences or relationships they are missing and would like to enrich or bring back.
- (c) *Storying Genogram*, which opens space for exploring family members’ experiences, life transitions, histories/stories of mental health or illness and helps locate the problems in larger societal or gender contexts.

In summary, there can be innumerable applications and uses of genograms. Creativity is the central

component. Couple and family therapist may combine genograms with other relational maps, use maps for meaning making, integrate genograms with mind maps, linguagrams, ecomaps, or other visualized externalizations (Fig. 2).

### Case Example

A married couple came to therapy seeking help in changing what they described as exhausting conflicts, with much shouting and mutual belittling. They did express love for each other, but too often misunderstandings led to protracted discussions and yelling, but not resolution. They agreed on one thing: Their difficulties somehow derived from their different upbringings and different family norms and traditions.

This led to the therapist suggesting the genogram as a way of talking about family history. They each drew one of their family of origin and added some other important relationships of their childhoods. This, in turn, led to dialogues about relational bonds and of values belonging to different relationships. They then compared the two and had a talk about differences and similarities, and about their experiences of listening to the other person talk about subjects of personal significance.

On a subsequent session, they drew a genogram together of their current shared family, brought out the family of origin genograms and drew lines and circles around important connections and significant meanings. This led to talks about future relationships, shared dreams, and ways of dealing with those dreams that were not shared.

The role of the therapist, in this case, was not that of an interventionist, but rather of a curious facilitator of the couples' own reflections and their own conclusions. The couple, as well as the therapist, expressed an experience of ending up somewhere none of the three had anticipated.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Creativity in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Dialogic Practice in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Externalizing in Narrative Therapy with Couples and Families](#)
- ▶ [Family](#)
- ▶ [Genogram in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [McGoldrick, Monica](#)
- ▶ [Postmodernism in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Social Construction and Therapeutic Practices](#)
- ▶ [Social Constructionism in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Therapist Position in Couple and Family Therapy](#)

### References

- Anderson, H. (1997). *Conversation, language, and possibilities: A postmodern approach to therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cecchin, G., Lane, G., & Ray, W. A. (1992). *Irreverence: A strategy for therapists' survival*. London: Karnac Books.
- Iversen, R. R., Gergen, K. J., & Fairbanks, R. P., II. (2005). Assessment and social construction: Conflict or co-creation? *British Journal of Social Work, 35*(5), 689–708. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bch200.
- McGoldrick, M., Gerson, R., & Petry, S. (2008). *Genograms: Assessment and intervention* (3rd ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Mosgaard, J. (in press). Therapy as anthropology. In S. Schlieve, N. Chaudhary, & P. Marsico (Eds.), *Cultural psychology of intervention in the globalized world*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Paré, D. A. (1995). Of families and other cultures: The shifting paradigm of family therapy. *Family Process, 34*(1), 1–19. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1995.00001.x.
- Seikkula, J., & Arnkil, T. E. (2014). *Open dialogues and anticipations: Respecting otherness in the present moment*. Helsinki: THL, Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare.
- Sesma-Vazquez, M. (2011). Pathways to dialogue: The work of collaborative therapists with couples. *International Journal of Collaborative Practices, 2*(1), 48–66.
- Shotter, J. (2006). Understanding process from within: An argument for witness'-thinking. *Organization Studies, 27*(4), 585–604. doi:10.1177/0170840606062105.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: Norton.