

## Genograms

**Source: Kathleen M. Galvin**

<http://faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/commstud/galvin/Genograms/>

**Q: What is a genogram?**

A: A genogram is a family diagram, which can be thought of as going a step beyond the family tree. Genograms provide a way of mapping family patterns and relationships across at least three generations. Genograms report information on family structures like family trees do. For example, both a family tree and a genogram of the Adams family would report that Fred, the son of Mark and Leah, married Jane, the daughter of Gary and Cathy, and together Fred and Jane have two children, Sam and Lucy

**Q: What makes a genogram better than a family tree for understanding family relationships?**

A: Using the above example, the genogram could also tell you that Jane has a conflictual relationship with Leah, that Fred is the oldest child with 2 younger sisters, and that Mark and Leah have a distant relationship. The genogram might also show that Fred and Jane had three miscarriages before Lucy was born and that Fred has an enmeshed relationship with Sam. Genograms show intergenerational patterns of relationships, communication, and other behaviors.

**Q: Who uses genograms?**

A: Genograms are widely used by family therapists as a tool to map family relations, giving both the therapists and the clients an overview of family relationships and patterns. The genogram may help the therapist get to know the family and help them deal with their current issues. Genograms may help a husband and wife understand each other's learned patterns for responding to stressful situations, handling intimacy or conflict, or managing gender issues. Genograms are used by medical professionals to better understand their patients' medical and psychosocial history. Genograms are also useful for anyone who is interested in better understanding the patterns and issues in a family.

**Q: How are genograms constructed?**

A: Genograms may be developed by individuals who know their family history and the genogram coding system (described in the next section). They may be developed by therapists or workshop leaders who interview individuals about their history, draw the diagrams and help interpret them. Genograms reflect an *individual's* point of view. Although most members of a family agree on the basics of a family tree, there may be major differences when describing the relationships among family members.

**Q: How do genograms relate to family communication?**

A: Genograms provide a broad framework in which we can view family relationships. Understanding the family is done in part by understanding family communication. Family communication both shapes and is shaped by family relationships. For instance, couples who attend marriage education classes learn better ways to communicate with each other. Changing their communication habits in their marriage may ultimately have a major effect on their

relationship. In another example, siblings who lose both parents at an early age, may become very close. The relationship they have as children may have lasting effects on their communication throughout their lives. As they grow older, marry, and move far away from each other, they may still communicate frequently, disclosing their disappointments and joys with each other. Those interested in family communication can learn a lot from genograms. As you learn more about genograms, keep the question of "How might this affect the family's communication?" in your mind.

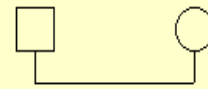
**Q: What if two members of the same family disagree about the meaning of a genogram?**

A: Interpretation is influenced by the creator of the genogram. There is no absolute "right" genogram for one family. Different family members may have differing perspectives on the relationships in the family and may therefore construct genograms of the same family very differently. For instance, perhaps the oldest child in family has left home while his younger teenage sister is still at home. He may draw a genogram showing his sister as having a closer relationships with their parents than he does. His father, however, may see his relationship with his daughter as strained, as she is going through her teenage years. He may view his adult son as more of a friend, and depict that relationship as closer.

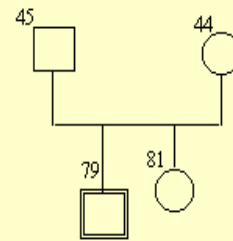
## Basic Genogram Components

Although there is general agreement on the basic genogram structure, and codes, there are some variations on how to depict certain family situations, such as cutoffs, adoptions etc. (Bowen, 1980; Kramer, 1985; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). The following are the codes we will use in this site:

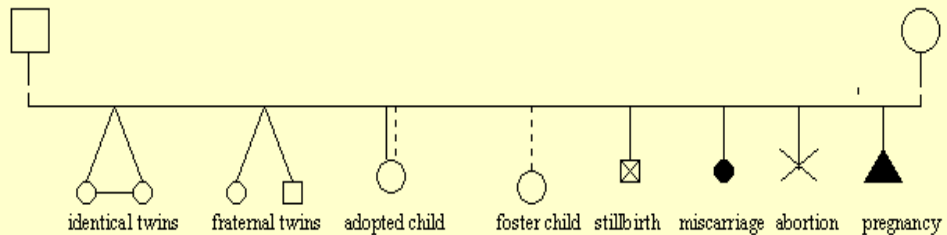
The male is noted by a square, the female by a circle. The male is placed to the left of the female in the father/mother dyad. Marriage is shown by a line connecting the two.



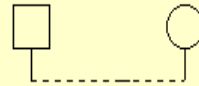
Children are noted oldest to youngest, left to right. The index person of the genogram (or person from whose perspective it is being drawn) is set off from the others and marked with double lines. Birth dates are often recorded to the upper left or right. If the first two digits of the year can't be mistaken, the last two digits of the year are often all that's needed.



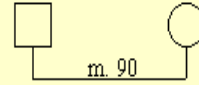
Other importation notations are shown below:



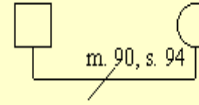
**Liaisons** or a couple living together are displayed similar to marriage, but with a dotted line.



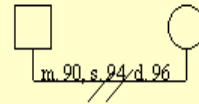
**Marriage** dates are recorded above the line connecting husband and wife.



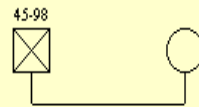
A **separation** of a couple is marked with one slashed line. The date is also usually recorded.



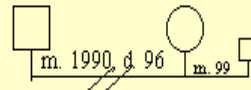
A **divorce** of a couple is marked with two slashed line. The date is also usually recorded.



The **death** of a person is indicated by an "X" through the shape. The birth and death dates are also usually recorded.



A **remarriage** (or former marriage) is shown to the side with a smaller shape. The focus couple is the one in the middle with the larger shapes. *Note: If there has been more than one remarriage, the marriages are usually placed from left to right with the most recent marriage coming last.*



**Closeness of relationship:** You can also depict the type of relationship of two family members with lines connecting those persons. For example, two people with a normal relationship would have one line drawn between them. Those with a close relationship would have two lines drawn between them. Those with a fused (extremely close) relationship would have three lines drawn between them.

Depictions of other types of relationships can also be shown. A dotted line\* between two people indicates a distant relationship (This is different than the dotted line showing a romantic liaison or the dotted line showing a foster or adopted child.) A jagged line shows a hostile relationship. A jagged line with two straight lines shows a close, hostile relationship, and a jagged line with three straight lines shows a fused, hostile relationship. Click [here](#) to see examples of some of these types of relationships. (When you're finished, close the pop-up screen.)

**Dysfunctional relationships:** You can depict some additional, dysfunctional relationships with genograms, also. Sexual abuse is shown by a large jagged line with an arrow from the abuser to the abused. Physical abuse is shown by a small jagged line and an arrow from the abuser to the abused. Click [here](#) to see how to depict abusive relationships. A relationship where one member is focused unhealthily on another member is depicted by a straight line with an arrow from the focused member to the member being focused upon. A relationship that is cutoff, where the two family members do not have contact, is shown with two short perpendicular lines that break up the relationship line.

**Triangles:** Another pattern in family relationships is the triangle. In a family system, a triangle represents the coalition of two family members against another family member (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999) and can be represented on a genogram. Triangles are often seen among two parents and one child, where one of the parents creates an alliance with the child against the other parent. Another classic triangle involves a son, his wife and his mother. Such a triangle may play out in a variety of ways. For example, the wife may blame her mother-in-law for her frustrations with her husband, while the mother-in-law blames the wife for taking her son away (McGoldrick et al., 1999). When you are interpreting genograms or creating your own, look for possibilities of triangles in relationships.

### **Cautions and Caveats**

Because of the sensitive nature of genograms, it is important to be careful of your communication with family members about any genogram you are creating. Ask permission of family members to interview them for your genogram. You may wish to explain it is a class assignment to be seen only by the instructor. You may also wish to promise them confidentiality. This means you have to be very careful about where you keep the genogram.

Understand that there is going to be variation among different family members regarding certain issues that you are interested in. For example, your mother might tell you that she has always had a conflictual relationship with her own mother, while your grandmother sees the relationship as close and conflict-free. If there is information that a family member does not feel comfortable sharing with you, don't push that person to share it. This is a class project; it should never disrupt a family's life.

You can practice creating genograms for functional families such as those found in plays and novels, or of famous people, using their biographies.

After you create your own genogram, you will want to be careful about when and with whom you share it. It is probably not a wise move to pull the genogram out at a family dinner and share it! If a family member does indicate that she or he is interested in your genogram, be sensitive in showing that person your genogram. You may want to explain that the genogram you have drawn is only from one perspective and everyone in the family may not necessarily agree with the genogram. It is wiser to explain that you promised your informants confidentiality or to summarize the information generally.

### **Creating Your Own Genogram**

Now that you're ready to create your own genogram, you may be asking yourself - where do I begin? Before you even start putting pen to paper or mouse to mouse pad, you will need to do some background work. First, you need to decide how many generations you wish to depict on your genogram. You will probably want to keep to three to four generations. Next, you will need to do some research. You may look at a family tree to make sure you have all the names, birthdates and relations correct. You may interview some family members to fill in missing information. You might ask family members to tell you family stories to help you understand what types of relationships different family members have. Remember what you learned in the Cautions and caveats section and be sure to be sensitive in approaching family members.

Once you have the information collected, you can let your artistic talents flow! There are two methods of creating a genogram: drawing and using a computer.

**Drawing:** We've seen family communication students create fantastic genograms with markers and posterboard or a large piece of paper. If you choose to create your genogram by hand, you may want to begin by penciling in the circles and squares to make sure you have enough room, and following up with a darker pen or marker.

**Computer:** If you want to use a computer to create your genogram, the least expensive option is to simply use a "Draw" program such as the one that is found in Microsoft Word.

There are also some computer programs that can be purchased to help you create genograms. If you plan on doing a lot of genogram creation, and don't mind spending some money, you may want to investigate this option. You may also want to do a search on the Internet using "genogram" and see what other sites are offering computer genogram creation programs.

You may also be wondering how much detail (family members' names, occupations, dates, etc.) to put in your genogram. The answer to this may vary depending on the purpose of the genogram. You will notice that the genogram segments depicted in this website differ on the amount of detail given, depending on the index person (IP) and the issues of the family. For your first genogram creation, you may want to focus on one or two primary threads which tie to a specific youngest generation individual. For example you may be the IP, and, although you may note seven aunts and uncles you will not try to develop each person's family unless one is highly significant. Once you have the "family map," you may proceed to introduce the symbols which indicate the type/quality of relationships among key members. Be sure to write in or key in significant issues or events (e.g. hospitalized for depression regularly). Note ethnicity and themes where appropriate. Note stillbirths and miscarriages if possible.

The bottom line is that as long as you follow the accepted symbols for genogram creation, do what you need to so your genograms works for you.