

A Biopsychosocial Instrument to Study and Intervene in the Complexity of Changes and Stability of Family and Community System Health: The Genogram

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Abstract

The genogram is a tool that can be used by health professionals to provide a comprehensive, holistic picture of the client and his environment. The realization of the genogram in medicine allows recognizing, clarifying and expanding information on risks and health problems in the individual and the family, both of a biological, psychological and social nature. This has beneficial implications for the doctor-patient relationship, for diagnosis, treatment, long-term follow-up of the patient, prognosis, screening, preventive care, focus on care of those most at risk, and to implement proactive assessment and educational programs. The genogram has also applications on preventive medicine and public health, to identify pathways of transmission in epidemiological studies, and it is a biomedical, health economics and public health research tool, as well as a qualitative research method. The genogram is a tool that connects individual care with community care. The exercise of community medicine in general medicine is "contextual medicine", which means knowing, sharing, intervening on the connections in the patient's relational matrix. Physicians, patients, community and Health Public system benefit from the thorough histories collected by genograms.

Keywords: Family History, Family Relationship; Family/psychology; Intergenerational Relations; Genogram; Patient Care Planning; General Practitioner

Introduction

Nobody discusses theoretically and conceptually the important role played by the family in the health and well-being of its members, but in everyday medical practice the family is a frequently forgotten or only partially considered element (1). Each individual faces transitions during their life from childhood to adult life that are associated with changes in school, marriage, children, retirement, etc. This means that each individual goes through stages of continuity and change during his life that modulate personality, self-concept and relationships with others, as well as giving rise to changes in social working conditions, social roles, social rights, health, sexuality, cognitive functioning, coping with stress in the course of life and in personal

relationships (2). Therefore, maximum emphasis should be given to "family" as a theoretical system (3).

An individual's problems are usually best understood when placed in the context of the family. Problems are often shared by more than one individual in the family, and the family itself may hold the key to successful solutions (4-8). Health professionals often find that they have inadequate tools with which to manage information about complex phenomena. Family and community are some of such complex phenomenon of interest to nurses and doctors (9). Thus, Family physicians/ General practitioners (GP) continue to struggle with the problem of how to make optimal use of family and community information in everyday clinical practice.

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One important task in addressing this problem is systematically describing the categories of family information that are incorporated into the usual clinical problem-solving process used by physicians (10).

There are several instruments to help understand, study, conceptualize and investigate the structure, relationships, resources and changes in the course of family life; also to intervene educationally and clinically on the family; And to apply them for purposes of community medicine, preventive medicine and public health. Due to its functionality and applicability, the genogram is the instrument that stands out in its use as an instrument for the study and approach of the family and community (11-16). However, the family genogram has been and is an underutilized clinical tool for years (17).

In this context, this article, which is a personal view, that it is based on an unsystematic or opportunistic search for information and in the author's experience, aims to summarize and conceptualize some of the basic elements of the genogram from general medicine.

Methods

The comments in this article should be considered as a personal point of view, based on the author's experience during more than 30 years of work in general medicine, plus an unsystematic or opportunistic search for information considering the bibliographic references of selected seminal articles, reviews of books and opportunistic searches on the Internet related to family genogram and its importance in clinical medicine, community medicine and public health.

Discussion

The family diagram and its derivative the genogram are widely used in marriage and family therapy, other mental health disciplines, and family medicine (18-20). Genograms have long been used to elucidate complex family and psychological patterns through visual representations and are therefore a useful tool in meeting this need (21). Genograms are an important clinical tool for many counsellors, therapists and other health care professionals and can be used for assessment, gathering

information on family relationships and exploring themes in counseling practice (22).

The family genogram is generally used when the clinical situation suggests that a family assessment is warranted. Owing to the prevalence of psychosocial problems in primary care, a screening genogram that is administered to patients routinely may have a significant impact on the care provided by clinicians (23). The family genogram is used to aid diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive care decisions. In addition to medical history, the genogram interviews should include questions about the family and social environment, a subject that is rarely discussed during the physicians interviews with patients (24).

The genogram constitutes a tool that allows the health professional to represent the family structure as a group, with a history, limits, hierarchy, internal and external alliances with the social environment; assesses the changes in the family organization over time, in relation to events that occur in its existence, that mobilize resources or resistance; reveals intra-family cohesion and the quality of communication, perception of roles, myths, beliefs, etc.; it helps to understand family processes, thanks to the abundant information it provides about the family group (25).

The genogram promotes thinking in system and transactional terms, and shifts emphasis away from individual problems to relational and community issues. A family system can be given a visual focus, and this often reveals patterns and connections previously unnoticed (26). Genogram construction provides the client and counsellor or to GP with important information about client relationships and interactions. Genograms typically focus on historical data, more problematic interactions, and past patterns of behaviour (16, 27). It also allows the GP to obtain information on the type of home, stages of development, vital events, family context, friends and/or neighbours, social institutions, school, work, detect or hypothesize about transgenerational experiences of health and disease, determine repetitive patterns individual and family on forms of relating, facing critical situations, etc. (28).

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The genogram is an instrument or tool of the biopsychosocial model that gives information about the patient, their family and context, and that implies a prognostic value and useful information for the consultation. The biomedical family history means collecting problems of genetic transmission, but from the biopsychosocial point of view it can go much further: the elaboration of the genogram produces a therapeutic link with the family, implying a qualitative change in the relationship; the genogram gives rise hypotheses – in circular terms- about patients' risks for family related illnesses or stressors, such as diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, substance abuse, and depression; It allows developing a provisional explanation about how the family system is organized around a problem; genogram shows events of family life, transitions and turning points, that mean opportunistic prevention and treatment moments (11).

Different developments of the traditional genogram have been proposed, such as its use to raise awareness of the dynamics of the person and the activation of individual, family and transfamily/ community resources (29), or the sexual genogram (30), a cardiovascular-specific genogram (31), the self-administered genogram (32), or an adaptation of the family genogram to enhance professional self-awareness (33). The genogram may go beyond the household to include supportive neighbors, friends, community resources and religious and spiritual support (34). Likewise, its can be use to assess psychosocial family problems. "Complex" genograms present families with psychosocial problems that can be expressed like biomedical problems. The genogram can be used as a screening system in all patients, at their first glance, regardless of the problem that motivates their consultation, to identify biological or psychosocial problems that would manifest themselves later. Genograms provide a quick gestalt of complex family patterns, stimulate clinical hypotheses linking the clinical problem to the family context, and track the evolution of the presenting problem and family relationships over time (11, 35).

Health professionals such as GPs and nurses, but also health researchers, are often interested in capturing variation between individuals' life courses over time (36). In this way another development or extension of the traditional genogram arises that we can call "geno-chronogram." The genogram gives information on the family life cycle, and consequently is a useful tool for continuity of care. But, genograms are a fixed photograph of the family at a certain moment, and the concept of "chronogram" (evolution of the same genogram over time) or "line of time or life" should be incorporated. It is common for family patterns of "functioning" and "relationship" to intensify when a structure repeats itself from one generation to the next (37-39).

In addition, different types of illnesses have key phases in their natural history, which give rise to significantly different psychosocial demands for the ill individual and his/her family (40). Also, genogram can assess multicultural aspects (race, ethnicity, gender, immigration, social class, and spirituality) and the worldview of family members, as well as to establish a relationship with diverse families (41). Likewise, it has been proposed to use the genogram as a quasi-projective technique that reveals unarticulated fears, wishes and values of the individuals comprising the family unit (42). Likewise, it must be taken into account that genogram is also an educational tool for health professionals (43).

The genogram allows a better diagnosis and treatment; the genogram is an excellent tool for describing patients and their family and community environment (for example, counselling in family therapy and social work, immobilized patients, cancer patients, genetic counselling, the elderly client and his environment, for assessing and planning care for children and adolescents, for hospice patients and families, in palliative care, to determine if a predisposition to heart, stroke, cancer and other debilitating conditions can be detected or alleviated through patient education and preventive medicine, etc.), allowing that their level of problems are defined and care needs established, as well as the type of family relationships which can make care difficult, leading to a worse

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prognosis (34, 44-49). Genogram can identify individuals, families, and groups at risk for different diseases allowing GP to focus attention on those most at risk, and to implement proactive assessment, screening, and educational programs (31). There are several software developments to perform genograms (50-53). However, software should be developed and disseminated to facilitate their creation and management (54).

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the genogram is also an intervention or treatment tool (27, 55, 56) as well as a biomedical, health economics and public health research tool and method (9, 57, 58). In addition, the genogram is useful for identifying pathways of transmission in epidemiological studies (59, 60). There are therapeutic benefits embedded in both the

process of genogram interview and data produced (61, 62). For example contributes to the elderly adequate care planning (63). Utilizing a solution-focused genogram creates a context in which families are able to focus on coping more effectively and based on this, how their future might be different (64). Genograms are effective and useful in counselling practice (65).

In conclusion, the genogram is a useful tool in many disciplines and tasks of health care at the individual, family and community level; in biological, psychological and social aspects, in the doctor-patient relationship, in diagnosis, treatment, screening, education, prevention, health promotion, public health, epidemiology and research (**TABLE 1**).

Table 1: Utilities and Applications of the Genogram

| UTILITIES AND APPLICATIONS OF THE GENOGRAM | |
|---|--|
| 1 | In marriage and family therapy |
| 2 | In mental health disciplines |
| 3 | In counselling in family therapy and social work |
| 4 | As aid to biological diagnostic; for example, immobilized patients, cancer patients, the elderly client and his environment, for assessing and planning care for children and adolescents, for hospice patients and families, in palliative care, etc. |
| 5 | As aid to psychosocial diagnostic |
| 6 | As aid therapeutic; allowing that the level of problems are defined and care needs established, as well as the type of family relationships which can make care treatment difficult; There are therapeutic benefits embedded in both the process of genogram interview and data produced; creates a context in which families are able to focus on coping more effectively; creates therapeutic link with the family |
| 7 | As a screening system in all patients, regardless of the problem that motivates their consultation, to identify biological or psychosocial problems that would manifest themselves later; to determine if a predisposition to heart diseases, stroke, cancer and other debilitating conditions |
| 8 | As aid to preventive care decisions; For detecting events of family life, transitions and turning points, that mean opportunistic prevention and treatment moments |
| 9 | Implies a prognostic bio-psychosocial value; "Complex"genograms present families with psychosocial problems that can be expressed like biomedical problems |
| 10 | Allows assess multicultural aspects (race, ethnicity, gender, immigration, social class, and spirituality) |
| 11 | Allows genetic transmission; genetic counselling |
| 12 | Allows detection of disease risks for family related illnesses or stressors, such as diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, substance abuse, and depression; Allows to focus attention on those most at risk, and to implement proactive assessment, screening, and educational programs |
| 13 | As an educational tool for health professionals |
| 14 | As a health economics and public health research tool |
| 15 | For identifying pathways of transmission in epidemiological studies |
| 16 | As a qualitative research method |

The genogram is a tool that connects individual care with community care. The exercise of community medicine in general medicine is "contextual medicine", which means knowing, sharing, intervening on the

connections in the patient's relational matrix (66-68). Physicians, patients, community and Health Public system benefit from the thorough histories collected by genograms (69).

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