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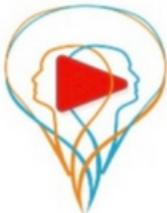
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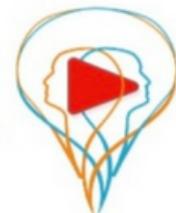
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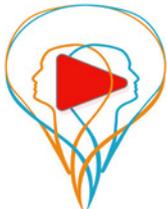
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Instructor's Manual

for

**HARNESSING THE POWER
OF GENOGRAMS IN
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

with

MONICA MCGOLDRICK, LCSW

Manual by

Ali Miller, MFT



psychotherapy.net

The *Instructor's Manual* accompanies the DVD *Harnessing the Power of Genograms in Psychotherapy with Monica McGoldrick, LCSW* (Institutional/Instructor's Version). Video available at www.psychotherapy.net.

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Miller, Ali, MFT

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Instructor's Manual for

HARNESSING THE POWER OF GENOGRAMS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH MONICA MCGOLDRICK, LCSW

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS

Make notes in the video **Transcript** for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after the video.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION

Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers' observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The **Discussion Questions** section provides ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. ENCOURAGE SHARING OF OPINIONS

Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What are viewers' impressions of what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER

See suggestions in the **Reaction Paper** section.

5. PRACTICE CREATING GENOGRAMS

The **Genogram Practice** section incorporates the *Genogram Interview Outline and the Standard Symbols for Genograms*, with instructions you can give to your students in the classroom or training session.

6. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL

Assign readings from **Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading** prior to or after viewing.

About the Contributors

VIDEO PARTICIPANTS

Monica McGoldrick, LCSW, PhD (honorary), Featured therapist, is the co-founder and director of the Multicultural Family Institute in Highland Park, New Jersey, and Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. She received an Honorary Doctorate from Smith for her many contributions to the field. Among many other awards, she has received the American Family Therapy Academy Award for Distinguished Contribution to Family Therapy Theory and Practice. She has written and spoken widely on a variety of topics including culture, class, gender, the family life cycle, loss, genograms, remarried families, and siblings. She is the author of several books including *The Genogram Journey: Reconnecting with Your Family* and *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*.

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PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less "theater" than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personality. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

Summary of McGoldrick's Approach to Using Genograms*

Genograms make it easier for clinicians to keep in mind the complexity of a client's context, including family history, patterns, and events that may have ongoing significance for patient care. Just as our spoken language potentiates and organizes our thought processes, genograms, which map relationships and patterns of family functioning, help clinicians think systematically about how events and relationships in their clients' lives are related to patterns of health and illness.

Gathering genogram information should be seen as an integral part of a comprehensive clinical assessment. There is no quantitative measurement scale by which the clinician can use a genogram in a cookbook fashion to make clinical predictions. Rather, the genogram is a subjective, interpretive tool that enables the clinician to generate tentative hypotheses for further evaluation.

Typically, the genogram is constructed from information gathered during the first session and revised as new information becomes available. Thus, the initial assessment forms the basis of treatment. Each interaction of the therapist with the client during treatment informs the assessment, and thus influences the next intervention.

By creating a systemic perspective that helps to track clients' issues through space and time, genograms enable the clinician to reframe, detoxify, and normalize emotion-laden issues. Also, the genogram interview provides a ready vehicle for systemic questioning, which, in addition to providing information for the clinician, begins to orient the client to a systemic perspective. The genogram helps both the clinician and the client to see the "larger picture," that is, to view problems in their current and historical context.

A Family Systems Perspective

The genogram comes out of a family systems perspective that encourages people to think of issues (e.g. marital conflict, addiction, acting-out teenagers, difficult relationships, loneliness, etc.) in terms of multigenerational families or "systems." In this view, people are inextricably interconnected and part of broader interactional systems,

6

Video Credits

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION:

Director of Photography: Corryn Cue

Producers: Monica McGoldrick, LCSW, Marie-Helene Yalom, PhD, Victor Yalom, PhD

SESSION:

John Freeman played by Robert Bronner

Post-Production: Chris Cheng

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

The faculty of the Multicultural Family Institute for their consultation.

POST-PRODUCTION & DVD AUTHORIZING: John Welch

DVD ARTWORK: Julie Giles

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about him in terms of that.

YALOM: You really have a nice style, a nice way of connecting with him.

MCGOLDRICK: Thank you.

YALOM: I think that he felt that. And that is a different conception, I think, than we're typically trained with. But it's kind of an affirming one for clients.

Well, I want to thank you so much for this conversation and for sharing this delightful case. And I hope that our viewers have found it helpful and will be inspired to consider bringing not only the tool of genogram, but more importantly your perspective into their work.

MCGOLDRICK: Thanks a lot.

the most fundamental of which is the family. The family is understood to be a system of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system. The family is the primary and, except in rare instances, most powerful system to which we humans ever belong.

In this framework, "family" consists of the entire kinship network of at least three generations, both as it currently exists and as it has evolved through time. Family is defined as those who are tied together through their common biological, legal, cultural, and emotional history and their implied future together. The physical, social, and emotional functioning of family members is profoundly interdependent, with changes in one part of the system reverberating in other parts. In addition, family interactions and relationships tend to be highly reciprocal, patterned and repetitive. As the field has evolved, the concept of the family is more commonly defined in terms of strongly supportive, long-term roles and relationships between people who may or may not be related by blood or marriage.

Murray Bowen, one of the main pioneers of family systems therapy, posited that the family is a system in which each member has a role to play and rules to respect, determined by unspoken relationship agreements among family members. In his view, differentiation is thought to be a lifelong endeavor in which we learn to better manage our connection to and independence from our family of origin and other close relationships. Higher levels of differentiation make us less apt to be drawn into the emotional dysfunction of others (being "triangled") and less emotionally reactive to close relationships. Severe problems within the family unit stem from a multigenerational transmission process whereby levels of differentiation among family members can become progressively lower from one generation to the next.

Within the boundaries of the family system, predictable patterns develop as the behavior of certain family members influences and influences other family members' behaviors. Maintaining the same pattern of behaviors within a system may lead to balance in the family system, but also to dysfunction. For example, if a husband is depressed and cannot function, the wife may need to take up more responsibilities to pick up the slack. The change in roles may maintain the stability in

the relationship, but it may also push the family towards a different equilibrium. This new equilibrium may lead to dysfunction as the wife may not be able to maintain this overachieving role over a long period of time.

A basic assumption in this approach is that problems and symptoms reflect a system's adaptation to its total context at a given moment in time. The adaptive efforts of members of the system reverberate throughout many levels of a system—from the biological to the intrapsychic to the interpersonal, i.e. nuclear and extended family, community, culture, and beyond. Also, family behaviors, including problems and symptoms, derive further emotional and normative meaning in relation to both the sociocultural and historical context of the family. Thus, a systemic perspective involves assessing the problem on the basis of these multiple contextual levels.

*Adapted from *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*, Second Edition, by Monica McGoldrick, Randy Gerson, and Sylvia Shellenberger; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_therapy; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murray_Bowen; <http://www.genopro.com/genogram/family-systems-theory/>

awkward—I would have rather said, “why don’t you think about these things we’ve been talking about and maybe let’s do a follow up in a couple of months or something.” I wanted to give him time to really process it.

But then I was thinking, a couple of months, that will be just before the baby’s born. Maybe we should wait till after the baby’s born. And then I wasn’t really sure about that. I would leave it relatively open though if I want a person to take time to really think about it. And in his case, which that doesn’t happen for sure in every first session, it seemed like he got to a place where he was beginning to rethink what was distressing him and think differently about how he might want to be in the new family with his new baby and with his wife.

And I thought he might be OK with that. I don’t think people always need to be in therapy to sort through their issues. So I thought it made sense to give him some time to process it. But I had every intention of following it up if he didn’t. I mean, I left it open for him to let me know.

But I will do that with people and then send them an email and say, “how’s it going? You want to have another session?” But I kind of like to leave it pretty open. I mean, I thought he was, first of all, quite healthy and second of all, processing something that could have been a problem. But if he could see his way to managing it differently, he could really have a different life.

YALOM: So you really have a lot of faith in clients to kind of sort those things out and make that decision. If he wants to be back in touch with you, he can do that.

MCGOLDRICK: And I think in this I might be pretty different from many therapists. I think there is an issue of clients becoming too dependent on us and that they have to tell us every story and every fight they had and every time something went wrong, and that we do better when we give them some things to work on and think about and the time to process it and trust that they might really be able to do that, and then let us know when they get stuck. And, hopefully, we can then help them go to the next level. So I am a big believer in that and in trusting people to do their business. And I had a very good feeling

So I use it as a reference point for helping the person think, how could they learn more about what’s going on in their family right now to make better sense of it?

YALOM: Whether you’re working with an individual or you’re doing family therapy?

MCGOLDRICK: Right. And in some sessions, it might not come up at all. In other sessions, we might actually spend most of the time talking about, well, if you were going to—I had a case last week where a 60-year-old woman was sexually abused by a cousin when she was quite young. And she’s making a trip now. And she’s been thinking of confronting that person’s mother, who she was always attached to.

And so, I took out the genogram and was strategizing with her about who would be the relevant people. And how might she approach it. And what would she want to say to that aunt and so forth.

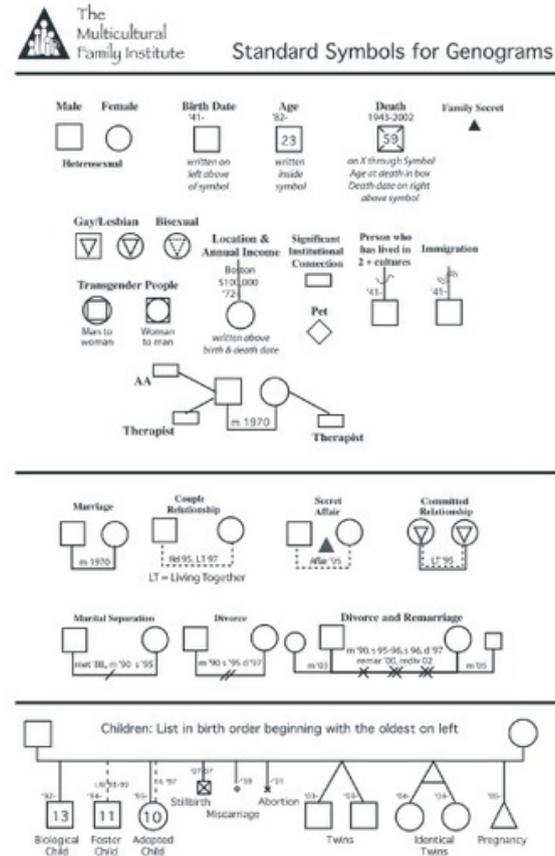
YALOM: And that conveys to a client that you know about her system. You know about her family.

MCGOLDRICK: And we had had conversations a number of months ago about—she initially thought she would never raise the issue in the family. Although, of course, there’s never a family gathering that that’s not a prominent issue for her. That’s organizing how she relates to all of them. And a few months ago she said, “I can do that. I want to do that before my aunt dies. “I was like, “wow, that’s amazing because it’s also about you feeling free, that you love your aunt, but it’s also her business. And it would have been good if you could have told her years ago, but that’s great.” So now she’s going out, I think, this week.

YALOM: Going back to the case of John Freeman, I had a question about how you ended it. It seemed to kind of end at loose ends. You didn’t set up an appointment with him to come back the following week or the following month. You said, well, I think you should think about that a while. Is that typically what you do? Because so many of us are trained to think that our goal of a first session is to get them to come back for a second session.

MCGOLDRICK: OK, well, I do think about it differently. I think on second thought, I would have rather—but the timing was a little bit

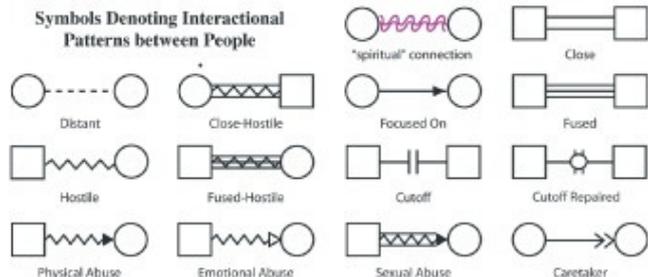
Standard Symbols for Genograms



Symbols Denoting Addiction, and Physical or Mental Illness



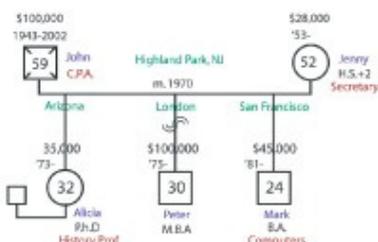
Symbols Denoting Interactional Patterns between People



Annual Income is written just above the birth & death date.

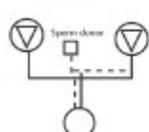
Typically you would include the person's occupation and education near the name and the person's whereabouts at the top of the line connecting to the symbol.

Symbol for Immigration =

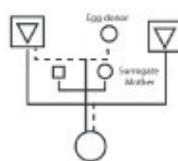


Artificial Insemination

Lesbian couple whose daughter was conceived with egg of one partner and sperm donor.



Gay Couple whose daughter was conceived with sperm of John and an egg donor, and carried by surrogate mother till birth.



MCGOLDRICK: Well, any session I have, I always use my computer. And I always have three things open. I have notes. I have a genogram always open on my desktop. And I also have a family chronology so that I can keep track of the timeline of events, because a genogram's not very good at tracking that.

YALOM: So what is the family chronology?

MCGOLDRICK: It just is like a list of when did they meet? When did they marry? When did he get sick? When did she leave the first time? When did he start drinking?

YALOM: Oh, I see, as opposed to notes, which would cover whatever you're talking about in that session.

MCGOLDRICK: Exactly.

YALOM: OK.

MCGOLDRICK: And then the genogram, and often as we're talking about whatever is on the person's mind today, I might say, "what does your brother Joe think about that issue?" Or "have you talked to him about it?" And make reference to other members of the families on the family genogram.

YALOM: So you're continuing to—

MCGOLDRICK: I'm continuing to look and think about that, of "have you discussed this with your sister or your aunt?" Or who might know about that? You know, somebody can't make sense of something. "My father is being so nasty. And I can't make sense of it."

"You know, I never really asked you that much about your father's brother. Do you have any contact with him? Might he know something about your father's history?" And then, of course, sometimes they'll say, "well why they hell would I want to talk to him? He's as bad as my father."

And then you're like, "well, OK. Is there any other source?" But you also might say, "well, maybe the reason is because he might know. And you're struggling with your father. And your father's old. And your father's been sick. And it could be worth your while to talk to Joe or Paul or whoever that is."

YALOM: Just practicing it.

MCGOLDRICK: Just practicing doing it. But you can also do it with any biography you read, any novel you read. I mean, I always do the genograms of any book I read. I'm always doing genograms.

YALOM: Really?

MCGOLDRICK: Always.

YALOM: Why?

MCGOLDRICK: Because it's such an easy way to keep track of who people belong to. I just finished the Steve Jobs thing. I was telling you. I had to do his genogram because it was the only way I could remember who he was connected to. It gets complicated.

YALOM: So that's just the way you see the world.

MCGOLDRICK: It's just the way. So I do that for any book I read. I'm always drawing the genogram in the margin or on a piece of paper.

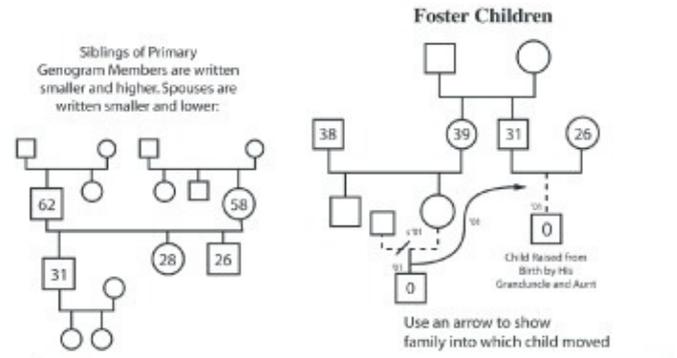
YALOM: And then the second part of the question is, then how do you learn to kind of incorporate genograms and use them in the course of therapy over time? How do you do that?

MCGOLDRICK: And that's the deeper part because that's the part that's really about thinking systemically, thinking about how people are connected, and looking for patterns. For that I think—and this is what Murray Bowen said long ago—your study of your own family is your best way of learning to think systems. So in our training, we always have our students use their own families as a major learning tool.

YALOM: It makes sense. So like in psychoanalysis, if you want to be a psychoanalyst, you go through psychoanalysis. If you want to be a family therapist, you—

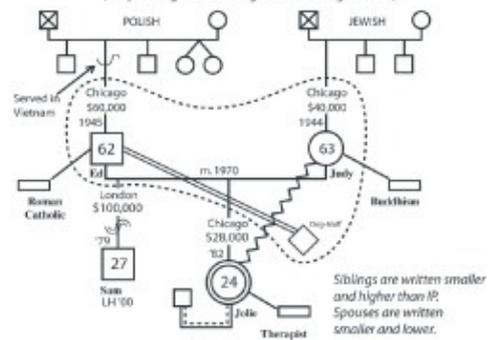
MCGOLDRICK: Have to look at your own family system. Makes sense, I think. Yeah.

YALOM: And so then how do you typically use the genogram throughout the course of therapy? Do you bring it out from time to time? Do you keep bringing it in? What do you do?

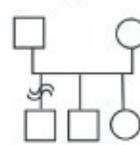


Household

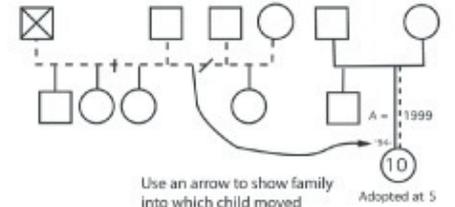
Household shown by encircling members living together (Couple living with their dog after launching children)



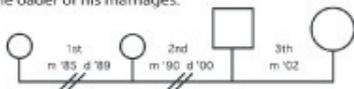
Symbol for Immigration



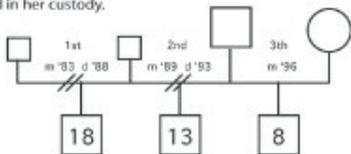
Adopted Child



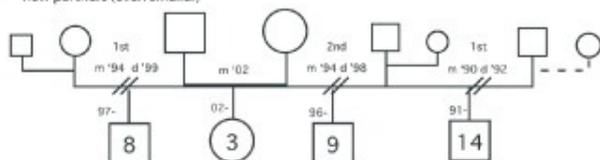
- 1 Husband, His Current Wife and his Ex-Wives (who are shown lower and smaller). Husband's wives may go on left to be closest to him. Indicators "1st," "2nd" etc. make clear the order of his marriages.



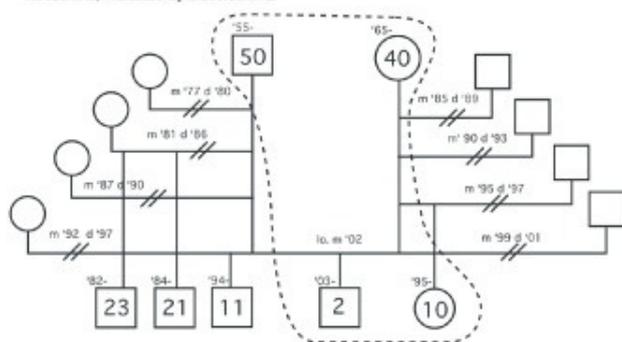
- 2 Wife, Her Current Husband and her Ex-Husbands (who are shown lower and smaller). Wife's previous relationships are shown on left to keep children in birth order, since they remained in her custody.



- 3 Couple with 3 year old, showing their previous spouses (smaller) and those spouses' new partners (even smaller)



- 4 Couple living with their joint child and her child from a previous relationship. The other spouses of the partners are shown smaller and lower on either side of the present household, indicated by a dotted line.



something I'm trying to be more conscious of in general but that I also regret—is that some of the questioning, as I looked over the video, was pretty heterosexist. When I asked him, for example, if his brother had a girlfriend, I wish I'd said, does your brother have a partner and not made the assumption that, you know.... Because I think that makes it harder for patients to tell you what their experience is if it doesn't fit in with heterosexist norms or whatever norms. And I think we want to create a context that is as open as possible to allow them to tell us what their experience is.

YALOM: I know you've been an advocate of genograms in therapy.

And you've trained many, many students in this. What are some of the challenges in learning how to maybe—just the mechanics of doing genograms in the context of a session or using it throughout the course of therapy? What's hard about learning that?

MCGOLDRICK: Well, you need to know the mechanics. But genograms are really not about the mechanics. They're about the underlying history of a person's context, you know. So while students need to learn to do genograms according to the format, because it's a language so that we can read each other's genograms and know what's being talked about, it needs to be a common language.

The harder part is really to get it, that it isn't squares and circles on a page. It's really about who you belong to. And what are the patterns in your family that might be influencing how you behave in your current situation?

YALOM: Let's take those one at time. First of all, just learning the mechanics of it, what's a good way to learn that, to practice that?

MCGOLDRICK: Well, you could do your own genogram. That's obviously a good way because that helps you also notice where there's information that's missing. And if somebody can fill that in for you, then you begin to learn also. I mean, noticing what is unknown about the family history is also important.

You know, sometimes you learn all about your mother's family but nothing about your father's family. And it's like, I wonder why that is. So you have to look at the missing history on the genogram. That's part of it.

African American and obviously had trusted me, he didn't know me personally. So I wondered if he was afraid that I might be stereotyping his father in some way as not having been—

YALOM: Being an absent father?

MCGOLDRICK: Being absent, and I didn't really feel I knew him well enough to challenge that directly right at that moment. So I wanted to kind of ease around it. But I also felt we had to talk about his father. And I needed to build trust with them in order to have that conversation.

YALOM: Because the fact was his father wasn't around most from the age of four, so when they separated. But when you pointed that out, he defended his father and said—

MCGOLDRICK: He did.

YALOM: He was there.

MCGOLDRICK: He was a good role model. He worked a lot.

YALOM: Anything, looking back at the session, you might have done differently? I mean, I think any of us if we looked at one of our sessions—

MCGOLDRICK: You bet. That's always true. I think it's embarrassing. But I also think it's very important for us to think about what might we have done differently. And initially, when he first told me about his problem of staying out, I wish I had not reacted so strongly that I sort of said, whoa or something. And it was, what, three minutes into the session or something.

YALOM: I kind of liked it because I know you. It just seemed very genuine. You weren't sugar-coating it.

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah, but I didn't know him. And I think it would have been better to have taken a more interested, supportive position about that. Just because he might have then felt, well, hey, if she's

going
to react like this—

YALOM: He could have taken it as a judgment.

MCGOLDRICK: Exactly. How am I really going to tell her some of the other things that are going wrong? And the other thing—which is

Genogram Interview Outline*

Start with the Presenting Problem

- What help are they coming for at this moment?
- When did the problem begin?
- Who noticed it?
- How does each person view it?
- How has each responded?
- What were relationships in the family like prior to the problem?
- Has the problem changed relationships? How?
- What will happen if the problem continues?

Move to Questions About the Household Context

- Who lives in the household (name, age, gender)?
- How is each related?
- Where do other family members live?
- Were there ever similar problems in the family before?
 - What solutions were tried in the past? ! erapy? Hospitalization?

Visits to doctor, religious helper, family member?

- What has been happening recently in the family?
- Have there been any recent changes or stresses?

Gather Information on Families of Origin

- Parents and stepparents (name, age, occupation, couple status, health status or date and cause of death)
- Siblings (name, age, birth order, occupation, couple status, children, health status or date and cause of death)

Inquire About Other Generations

- Grandparents (name, age, occupation, couple status, health status or date and cause of death)

Cultural Variables

- Cultural heritage of family members
- Religious or spiritual orientation of family members
- Family's migration history
- Gender roles and rules in the family

Life Events and Individual Functioning

- Traumatic or untimely deaths
- Stressors such as illness or job problems
- Medical or psychological problems
- Addictions
- Legal problems (arrests, loss of professional license, current status of litigation)
- Work or school achievement or di& culty

Family Relationships

- Special closeness of any family members
- Serious con% ict or cuto" of any relationships
 - Quality of couple relationship, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse

Family Strengths and Balance

- Family roles: Who are the caretakers and the sick ones? ! e good ones and the bad ones? ! e successful ones and the failures? ! e warm ones and the cold, distant, or mean ones?
 - Family resilience: What are the sources of hope? Humor, loyalty, courage, intelligence, warmth?
 - Ability to connect with resources: love, friends, community, money, religious community, work, etc.

*from *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*, 1st Edition, by Monica McGoldrick

the sisterhood throughout his family, that somehow he'd be excluded. It seemed at least not an explanation fully for why he is this way but at least raises some questions.

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah. No, no.

YALOM: Now, there were some times, like when he got into his sister and the fact that she had a different father, and initially, he didn't really want to go there. Eventually he did. He said he was comfortable. But his family wasn't comfortable. How often do you run into the things that people just don't want to talk about? And what do you do in those cases?

MCGOLDRICK: Very, very often. And it depends on the particulars. If I felt I didn't have enough connection yet, I would try to just let it go and work around it till I felt I had more of a sense of trust and could maybe press it again or maybe make the argument on why it was relevant.

In that case, I might have dropped it had he not come around as he did and said, well, it wasn't that he really cared. It was more his mother's secret. And he just kind of had learned the rule not to talk about certain things. If it was a secret that he was feeling the need to keep, maybe I would have been more cautious because I wouldn't have wanted to press him too hard in the initial session.

I did feel, for example, that he was quite defensive about his father. And I didn't want to press hard on that. I felt that he was clearly trying to present the story in a way that didn't really fit with his experience, as if his father had been more present than he was telling me he had been.

YALOM: What do you make of that?

MCGOLDRICK: I don't know. But that was, I found, a little tricky in terms of how much to press because he is just about to become a father. And so, what kind of relationship he had with his father is relevant. But on the other hand, I was always conscious that I'm white. He's African-American.

That raises it, and the barriers of race are huge in general. And, even though he was referred by somebody who knew me, who was also

parents, did they ever have any similar conflicts?” And really tie it into “he’s worried his wife might leave him today” kind of thing.

YALOM: Yeah, because in this case you clearly made it relevant for him. He was curious enough that it seemed, somehow, this was connected to some of these things.

MCGOLDRICK: It doesn’t always happen that things begin to make sense. But I must say that more often than you might think, when people have problems that they themselves experience as very surprising, when you look at the genogram, it’s curious how often there are hidden things that they’ve perhaps been reacting to without realizing it. So that part is, in my experience, quite common actually.

YALOM: I don’t know if you’ve encountered this question or criticism. But is it overly deterministic based on family? I mean, there are so many other forces that influence us. Whether there’s a bad economy and you’re unemployed, and you’re depressed because of that. Or you have some illness. A variety of other social factors, and this places so much emphasis on the family.

MCGOLDRICK: Well, I absolutely think you have to take the general economic situation and a person’s state of physical health into account and the physical health of other members of the family and so forth. I think all of that is very relevant and does affect people’s well-being and sense of where they are.

What I would say about the family, as opposed to just focusing on the individual’s experience, is that I think we are all so formed by the families that we come from. And that what happens with them matters to us throughout our lives, that not to ask about it seems absurd to me.

As a general point of inquiry, I’d say we need to ask about all the aspects of what’s going on in a person’s environment but definitely including their families.

YALOM: And it seemed with him, once you explained that to him—because he asked a few times, “what does this have to do anything?”—that you seemed to pique his interest. And when there are these coincidences, that his father had the heart attack when he was 39 and

Genogram Practice

After watching the video and reviewing *Summary of McGoldrick’s Approach to Using Genograms*, hand out copies of the *Genogram Interview Outline* and *Standard Symbols for Genograms*, which are also included in this manual. Organize participants into groups of two, and assign each dyad to role-play a therapy session utilizing the genogram interview outline as a guide. The purpose of this exercise is for participants to get familiar with the standard genogram symbols and to practice creating a genogram with a client. Try to make sure that everyone gets a chance to be the therapist.

Participants who are playing clients should come up with a presenting problem, and they can either be themselves or role-play a client of theirs, someone else they know well, or they can completely make it up. The point here is not to bring the client to resolution on their issue but for the therapist to just gain practice gathering and mapping information.

Once participants have chosen who will be the therapist first, invite them to conduct the session by going through the *Genogram Interview Outline*, taking notes, and creating a genogram on a piece of paper, using the symbols from the *Standard Symbols for Genograms* document. If the client does not know the answers to any of the questions, they can make it up.

After both people have had the opportunity to be the therapist, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. What was it like to be the therapist asking the questions and gathering the information? How was it to create the genogram? What, if anything, was confusing or unclear? Did any of the symbols not make sense? How did it feel to be a client in the session? How was it to be interviewed and for the therapist to be writing throughout the session? Was it distracting? Did clients feel they benefited from the genogram process? If so, how? Conclude with a general discussion of the strengths and challenges of using genograms in psychotherapy.

An alternative is to conduct a single interview in front of the whole group with one therapist and one client; the rest of the group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion on what participants learned about using genograms in psychotherapy.

Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

- 1. Why distancing?:** John came in wanting to understand why he was distancing from his wife. What hypotheses, if any, did you have about this throughout the session? After the session, how would you answer this question?
- 2. Larger context:** Do you agree with McGoldrick that when people are in distress they tend to become over-focused on the immediate problem and are unable to appreciate the contextual factors that may be contributing to their current issue? How important do you think it is to explore background and context? Are there certain presenting problems that you think warrant more or less exploration of background and context? Other than using genograms, how else do you help your clients appreciate the larger context in which their issues arise?
- 3. Personal experience:** Have you ever used genograms in your sessions, either as a client or therapist? Relative to McGoldrick in this session, how much do you tend to focus on familial context when working with clients or in your own therapy?
- 4. Transparency:** Why do you think McGoldrick doesn't generally talk about the genogram tool at the outset? What do you think about the way she wasn't transparent upfront with John that she was going to be creating a genogram? How might this disclosure have changed the session? Do you think you would tell your clients explicitly about the genogram? Why or why not?
- 5. Taking notes:** John seemed hesitant at first when McGoldrick asked him if it was alright with him if she took notes during the session. What do you think of how McGoldrick responded to his hesitancy? How do you think you would have responded? Have you ever had any clients who were not okay with you taking notes during the session? If so, how have you handled this?
- 6. Beginning the session:** What do you think of the way McGoldrick

session. How typical is that of an introductory session that you lead?

MCGOLDRICK: Well, in some ways, probably because even though he was initially defensive about it, he moved towards it. And it began to help him make sense of his situation. Perhaps I got more detail and took it further than I might in a first session if somebody continued to be resistant. If they are resistant, I try to move it back to the presenting problem and then take smaller steps: "so let's go back to the original problem, the reason you're here." And then maybe say, "did anyone else in your family ever struggle with that?" and make more clear connections. In John's case, even though he was initially resistant, he seemed to shift and take it on himself. It made sense to him.

YALOM: Well, there were certainly a lot of things that came up throughout the course that certainly seemed to have relevance for the problem that he presented with, which at first seemed mysterious to him. Like, "why am I acting this way? It doesn't make any sense." And there are certainly a number of threads you could pull together that at least raise questions about that.

So yeah, he was resistant or a little guarded, defensive. And it seemed to me that that could be fairly common because people are coming in with a problem. Whether it's a relationship problem, whether they're depressed, or a work problem and, suddenly, you're asking them not only about their siblings, their parents, but their grandparents. And I would imagine folks thinking, well, "this isn't really why I came here."

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah. In that situation, perhaps it was easier because he himself was puzzled by his behavior. So it made it possible to say, "well, do you think if we look here, if we look there, maybe some of it would make sense?" If a person comes in and they have a very actively difficult relationship they're struggling with, and you begin to go as far back as their grandparents—

YALOM: And they're saying, "but my wife's about to leave me!"

MCGOLDRICK: Right, "what do you care about my grandmother for?" Then I would have to slow it down and say, "OK, let's talk about you and your wife." And then maybe take it to, "can we talk about the family you grew up in? Was there anything similar? And then to your

JOHN: It makes sense.

MCGOLDRICK: So you know what I'm thinking, is maybe what to do is just sit with these thoughts a while. But it sounds like you kind of have an idea. And now the question is to try to follow out what you want to do and not let these forces define you, you know? I mean, would that make sense to just sort of live with it a bit?

JOHN: It makes sense. I just can't believe that my family has impacted my life.

MCGOLDRICK: In that way?

JOHN: I would never have thought that.

MCGOLDRICK: Family's powerful.

JOHN: It's like one of those things you sort of have seen it all the time. But you haven't. Anyway, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

MCGOLDRICK: No, I was just going to say, and in your family in particular, there are these people who really overcame odds to do that. I mean, what Mac did to stay connected to your father and to all of you and to the other nieces and nephews, he was an amazing person. And my sense is that your father was too in ways that he wasn't always. You didn't get to see him in the best of times because you only knew him after the heart attack, which seemed to have taken some of the life force out of him.

And then there's your grandfather. God, I'd love to know what his story really was, you know? Maybe someday you'll go down South and check out other people who knew him when. That could be interesting.

JOHN: Well, it could be. But maybe we can talk about that at some other point too. I'll tell you a few stories.

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah, I'd love to hear.

Discussion

YALOM: Well, that was a very clear demonstration of using genograms in therapy. I mean, it really set the structure for the whole

began the session with John, by asking about why he came to see her and letting him know they might "work backwards" and "look at the larger picture"? Do you like the way she implied that they might explore the larger context? Would you have been more direct about your agenda to explore family-of-origin issues? How do you tend to begin first sessions with clients?

7. Laptop: What do you think about the way McGoldrick had a computer on her lap during the session? Do you take notes on a computer during sessions? How have your clients responded to this, or how do you imagine your clients would respond if you started creating a genogram on a computer during the first session? How do you think this might impact the therapeutic relationship?

8. Surprise: How did you respond when John shared that his wife was pregnant? Were you surprised, as McGoldrick was? Do you agree with McGoldrick that surprise revelations like this often indicate issues around which people have developed particular anxieties? How do you think you would have responded to this?

9. Details: What do you think about the way McGoldrick shifted into asking detailed questions about John's siblings and parents, such as names, ages and dates of birth? Why do you think these specific details are important for McGoldrick to know? Do you tend to gather this level of detail about your clients' relatives? Why or why not?

10. Absent father: What was your reaction when McGoldrick pressed John more directly about his father, when she suspected that John might be minimizing the importance of his father's absence in his life? Do you agree with McGoldrick that there could be a connection between John distancing from his wife as they are about to have a baby and his own father's distance from their family? What did you like and dislike about the way McGoldrick inquired into her hypothesis through questions and revealing what she was thinking?

11. Resistance: Do you agree with McGoldrick that when a client begins to resist exploration of family issues, it is useful to slow down and return to the presenting problem? In what other ways do

you respond when clients resist exploring family issues?

12. Validation: Why do you think McGoldrick was feeling the need to validate how hard it is to talk to a stranger about personal issues, especially across both gender and racial barriers? As you watched the session, did you also want to offer John this validation? Would you have explicitly named the gender and racial differences if you were McGoldrick? Why or why not?

13. Relevance: How did you react when John stated that he didn't understand why talking about his family was relevant? What do you think of how McGoldrick handled this? Did you like her explanation? Do you think she should have explained her rationale for asking about his family of origin upfront? Why do you think she didn't?

14. Family secret: How did you react when John asked, "Why is that important?" when McGoldrick asked him who Carol's father was? Did you perceive him as defensive? Did you agree with McGoldrick's assessment that she stumbled into something secretive or private? What did you think of her response to his question and hesitation?

15. Race and gender: What do you think of the way McGoldrick incorporated race and gender into the conversation with John? What do you think of her drawing the connection between the impending birth of his daughter and his family's legacy of pushing men to the periphery of the family?

16. Bringing in brother: What do you think of McGoldrick's idea to bring John's brother, Brad, in to help the two of them explore the impact of their family experiences on their attitudes about life, marriage, and gender? Is it common for you to invite clients to bring in their family members to psychotherapy? What do you think the benefits and risks are of doing this?

17. Uncle Mac: McGoldrick capitalized on John's positive relationship with his Uncle Mac by asking John, "If you could have a conversation with your uncle Mac and tell him about what you're struggling with, what would he say?" What do you think of this

I thought that I had very little time left to get married. And I luckily found someone who I really care about and we got married. And I thought, you know, problems were over.

And having a child was not planned. But it's a great thing. It's not like we're not in a position to have one. It's a beautiful thing. But that has been scaring me a great deal. And not because I don't think I can take care of a child.

I see, or at least I understand a little bit more now. Because it has been on my mind that I'm going to mess this up and that I'm going to end up alone. And how does somebody make that jump to having a child to being alone? You know what I mean?

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah. But, you know, at the same time, I think knowing it can help you think proactively "what should I do here?" But you're still going to have to make the phone call and not just stay in the bar and avoid it. You know what I mean? It's like, you're going to have to actively say, I want to create this instead of that.

JOHN: Well, basically what I hear you saying is that I have to choose to be Mac. Or I have to choose to be like my grandfather at those moments.

MCGOLDRICK: Your grandfather's another one. And you're named for him. That's a really interesting thing because, as you were describing it, your grandmother actively pressed her daughters never to see him. And he, in spite of that, stayed connected to them all their lives. That was a remarkable story.

JOHN: Which is really what's most important anyway, you know?

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah. I mean, really, actually you have very strong models for doing it a different way. But you know, it plays out in the mythology that it sounds like you heard. That sort of, you can't count on men and so the women close in. But actually, there have been very strong male models in your family who didn't do that, in spite of all the pressures. I mean, not to mention the way racism operates and influences all these things and makes it hard, you know?

JOHN: Yeah. But I want to do it differently. I want to do it differently.

MCGOLDRICK: Sounds good.

JOHN: No, he's actually pretty strong. So, he smoked a lot. And that's what ended up killing him. But he was pretty strong.

MCGOLDRICK: But he also sounds like he kept engaging. I mean, he engaged you and your sisters and your brother.

JOHN: Everybody. He was very much there. He was more like an uncle, grandfather, father kind of thing for all of us and very important for me. And I think he would tell me, "don't let this baby ruin your relationship."

MCGOLDRICK: Well now, the other part of what seems such a strong thread in this is the whole thing of your father's heart attack just before you were born and when he was the same age as you are now. That was a very traumatic thing that, as you're describing it, really shifted your parent's marriage.

And kind of was the beginning of the—I mean, it's like at first it pulled your parents together, and then it tore them apart. And your mother kind of closed in, in the way perhaps her family had around Carol being born.

JOHN: You know, I'm kind of afraid something's going to happen.

MCGOLDRICK: Are you?

JOHN: And that I'm going to end up doing the same thing.

MCGOLDRICK: So I guess that's the question. You know, because one of things to me about thinking about all these things in this way is, it gives us choices. That even if it happened quite a few times in your family, that the sisterhood closed in and the men went to the periphery, there were also examples—I mean Mac most powerfully, but your father in the early days. I mean your father was in. It sounds like the heart attack really shifted things.

JOHN: That's true.

MCGOLDRICK: So it's like now you don't have to say, "Oh well, that's what's going to happen," because you can make something different happen. You could make something like Mac happen.

JOHN: I didn't realize. That's true. It is true. I think I've been a little concerned that there's just no way to avoid it happening. You know,

intervention? How do you think this question contributed to the session?

18. Ending the session: What do you think about the way the session with John ended? What did you like and dislike about the way McGoldrick urged John not to let the forces of his family history define him? Did you find her words encouraging and inspiring? How else might you have brought the session to an end? What is your general style when it comes to ending sessions with clients?

19. Therapeutic Alliance: How successful do you think McGoldrick was in developing a therapeutic alliance with John? What do you think McGoldrick did or said that contributed to or impeded an alliance with him? If you were John's therapist, how do you think you might have related to him differently in this first session?

20. The approach: What are your overall thoughts about McGoldrick's approach to psychotherapy? What aspects of her approach can you see yourself incorporating into your work? In particular, can you see yourself incorporating genograms into your work? Why or why not? Are there some components of this approach that seem incompatible with how you work? What in particular would you do differently from McGoldrick?

21. Personal Reaction: How would you feel about having McGoldrick as your therapist? Do you think she could build a solid therapeutic alliance with you? Would she be effective with you? Why or why not?

Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: *Harnessing the Power of Genograms with Monica McGoldrick, LCSW*

• **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.

• **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.

• **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. It is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

What to Write: Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. Key points: What important points did you learn about

McGoldrick's approach to psychotherapy and how she uses the genogram? What stands out to you about how McGoldrick works?

2. What I found most helpful: What was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. What does not make sense: What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?

4. How I would do it differently: What might you do differently from McGoldrick in the session in the video? Be specific about what different approaches, interventions and techniques you would apply.

5. Other Questions/Reactions: What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the session with McGoldrick? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?

did split at some point. And they never get remarried. The women never get remarried it seems. It's the damndest thing.

COMMENTARY: *I want to challenge John's gender narrative that women end up only with each other, with the sisterhood at the center of the family and men disappearing or becoming marginalized. And the question is, what role will John and his brother Brad decide to take in their families? John's father, Robert, seems to have played a more participatory role earlier in the family life before John's birth and the separation.*

The maternal grandfather, for whom John was named, left the family but maintained his relationships with his daughters until his death, in spite of his wife's injunction that they should cut him off. And then, most interestingly, John's uncle Mac obviously played a major caring role as mentor and friend as he had in the previous generation for John's father.

MCGOLDRICK: So let me ask you something. If you could have a conversation with your uncle Mac and tell him about what you're struggling with, that sort of feeling of not being yourself and pulling away, what would he say?

JOHN: I don't know. I think he'd probably say, well, what are you afraid of?

MCGOLDRICK: But what would he say about the sort of pulling back from intimacy or that whole sense you seem to be describing that the women, the sisterhood takes over or something?

JOHN: I think he'd say that their circumstances don't have to yours. You have your own life.

MCGOLDRICK: In contrast to what you described about your father, who, after they separated, Mac was more present. So it's really like he did it differently. He stayed present, even for his nephew's children.

JOHN: Yeah, that's right. I mean, I guess he knew that there just seems to be this way of pushing men out of the picture, that that's the way my mom's family is. They've always been that way. But he's managed to do it differently with my aunt Pauline.

MCGOLDRICK: He didn't let himself get pushed out.

grandfather and a father, because he sort of saw me as, I'm the first. I was the male, first-born son. And so, I was for my dad. He was very close to my dad. So I think Uncle Mac became much closer to us and to me and to my brother too. But more to me after my parents separated.

Yeah, so he sort of filled in that role. He told me things about my family. He told me things about my dad that my dad wouldn't share with me because I was too young. And then after he died, you know—

MCGOLDRICK: So that's actually kind of a different pattern on that side because he was very active. I mean, very much of a—

JOHN: I thank God for him.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? How do you mean that?

JOHN: I mean, having men around is a very important thing for boys.

And I was very lucky to have somebody who was around and who knew my father very well and who was from the same gene pool. As weird as it, how likely is that to happen?

Married to my mother's sister and related to my father. You know, he knew both families. So that has been pretty huge.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? When did he die?

JOHN: In '97. '96, '97? But he was around for quite some time. He's one of the older positive males on that side at least. I mean, my sisters haven't really stayed married. So it's not like I ever got to really connect with my brothers-in-law, with their husbands.

MCGOLDRICK: Your oldest aunt, she didn't marry, right?

JOHN: No, she didn't. She never got married.

MCGOLDRICK: And your younger—

JOHN: My younger aunt, Janelle, she was married. And she had two kids. And they split. They separated. I think my uncle had a drinking problem.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah, but I think they also had problems in and of themselves. Yeah, but I don't really know very much about. All I know is that they

Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

WEB RESOURCES

! e Multicultural Family Institute

www.multiculturalfamily.org

Website for Genopro, the program McGoldrick uses to create genograms

www.genopro.com/genogram/

An in-depth interview with Monical McGoldrick

www.psychotherapy.net/interview/monica-mcgoldrick

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

! e Legacy of Unresolved Loss: A Family Systems Approach with Monica McGoldrick

Family Systems ! erapy with Kenneth Hardy

E" ective Psychotherapy with Men with Ronald Levant

Sex, Love, & Intimate Relationships with Robert Firestone

Bowenian Family ! erapy with Philip Guerin

Internal Family Systems ! erapy with Richard Schwartz

RECOMMENDED READINGS

McGoldrick, M., Carter, B. & Garcia-Petro, N. (2011). *! e Expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives*, 4th ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

McGoldrick, M. (2011). *! e Genogram journey: Reconnecting with your family*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

McGoldrick, M. (Editor) (2008). *Re-Visioning family therapy*, 2nd ed. New York: ! e Guilford Press.

McGoldrick, M. , Giordano, J., & Garcia-Preto, N. (Editors) (2005). *Ethnicity and family therapy*, 3rd ed. New York: The Guilford Press.

McGoldrick, M., Gerson, R. & Petry, S. (2008). *Genograms: Assessment and intervention*, 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

McGoldrick, M. (1998) *You can go home again: Reconnecting with your family*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

McGoldrick, M. (1991). *Women in families: A Framework for family therapy*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Sue, D.W. & McGoldrick, M. (2005). *Multicultural social work practice*. Wiley.

Walsh, F. & McGoldrick, M. (2004). *Living beyond loss: Death in the family*, 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

COMMENTARY: *This comment about nothing but tragedy reminds me that we need to keep seeking sources of resilience in John's family story. Unless I consciously attend to the resources and positives, he could find thinking about his family's history depressing and want to push it away instead of appreciating the ways it can give him strength as he is about to create a new generation.*

JOHN: My grandmother died giving birth to my father. So he never knew her. And he was the only child.

MCGOLDRICK: So then, who did he grow up with?

JOHN: He grew up with my grandfather, George, and my great grandmother.

MCGOLDRICK: And what was her name?

JOHN: Her name was Jeanette. And he also grew up with my uncle Mac, my grandfather's brother. But he was much younger than my grandfather. So he was more like my father's age, like maybe 10 years older. Yeah, Mac was sort of in my father's life like a brother, older brother and mentor of my father for a long time. And their paths were pretty close. I mean, they went to the military. And they had stories to tell about being in the army.

And interestingly enough, at one point, when my family—both sides all lived in New York, because they eventually lived in New York. That's where my parents met. But not only did my parents meet there, but my uncle Mac ended up marrying my mother's second sister, Pauline.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah. So he's both my uncle and my great-uncle at the same time.

MCGOLDRICK: Wow. That's interesting.

JOHN: He was pretty important in my father's life. And actually, until he died, he played a pretty significant role in my life too.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? How so?

JOHN: He was sort of like a second dad, somewhere between a

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah.

JOHN: I think that's why my parents ended up splitting up.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? How do you mean?

JOHN: Well, it wasn't like that before I was born. Their relationship was different. I think when I was born, my mother kind of changed. She became a little bit more cautious and sort of, I don't if paranoid is the word.

MCGOLDRICK: Sort of protective of her kids you mean?

JOHN: Very protective of her kids. And I think her focus was less on him than it was on us. And so I think they sort of drifted apart. My father started working a lot more. And they were just leading pretty different lives. I think my brother was an attempt to pull things back together.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? That sort of didn't quite do it?

JOHN: I think if I'm being honest, I think it made it worse.

COMMENTARY: *I can't help wondering, now that he makes this connection, if some of the brother's negativity about marriage may not be directly related to his place in the family's history. He was the child who was meant to bring the parents together but instead drove them apart. Down the road, I wonder if it could be worth having a meeting with the two brothers to help them explore the impact of their family experiences on their attitudes about life, marriage, and gender.*

JOHN: Because there was another child to look out for.

MCGOLDRICK: Wow. Now, we haven't really talked about your father's family. How did these issues play out in his family? Did he have siblings?

JOHN: No, my father was the only child.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: It makes it sound as though it's nothing but tragedy happening on both sides.

MCGOLDRICK: Why? What happened in his family?

Complete Transcript

Introduction

YALOM: Hello, I'm Victor Yalom, and I'm pleased to be here today with Monica McGoldrick. She's one of the leading experts in family therapy, well-known for her work on the family life cycle, culture, and the use of genograms. Welcome, Monica.

MCGOLDRICK: Thank you.

YALOM: So in a little bit, we're going to have a chance to see you do a demonstration with a client, showing how you use genograms in therapy. But before we get to that, I thought we'd cover some of the basics. First of all, it may sound simple, but what is a genogram?

MCGOLDRICK: OK, truthfully, a genogram is just a fancy word for a family tree. It's just a map of who you belong to, who you come from—in terms of your biological and legal family of origin—but also your friends, your pets, the people you work with who are important in your life.

And a genogram is just a way of mapping those relationships, putting those people out there, and—to a limited extent—conveying who are you close to, who are you cut off from, with whom do you have conflicts, and so forth, so that you can make sense of where a person is at with the people that they belong to.

YALOM: Yeah, you've used that word a couple times. Belong to, that's really key for you.

MCGOLDRICK: It is.

YALOM: How so?

MCGOLDRICK: I think it's something about the meaning of home, of who we are as human beings, that none of us ever goes anywhere alone. We take with us people who live in our hearts. We take with us the wounds of people we have lost or not been able to work things out with. And I think that all matters in terms of how we then think about ourselves and our lives when we get stuck.

YALOM: Yeah, certainly in this society, in the United States—perhaps

the most individualistic society in the world—that belies some of the common ideas we have about the lone, the cowboy, the pioneer, that we're individuals.

MCGOLDRICK: And a whole lot of psychotherapy is done from an extremely individual perspective, as if people were alone in the universe, able to just work out their relationships with each other and with themselves and deal with their anxieties and depression. And I just think that's a false idea.

YALOM: Why?

MCGOLDRICK: Because none of us is alone in the universe. And it's extremely important who we carry in our hearts. And it's important for us as clinicians to remind people who they belong to and who matters to them in order to help them make the best decisions they can for their lives, which is what I think our job is at the end of the day—to help people make the best decisions about what do they want to do next.

YALOM: And how does that help them make the best decisions, reminding them, grounding them in who they belong to?

MCGOLDRICK: Well, if you think you're completely alone, then you have sort of no field of vision about what's the context in which you would be making a particular decision or another. If I get it that I am here because my grandmother loved me and struggled for me and wanted me to do something important in life, then I might be much better able to take the struggle I'm now having with my child or my sibling and say, what would my grandmother want me to do now? And then bring that into who I'm trying to be.

YALOM: Because those are—

MCGOLDRICK: Important relationships.

YALOM: And they've been shaped us.

MCGOLDRICK: And they continue to shape us. I mean, the people who have loved us, even when they're gone, live in our hearts. I truly believe if we can be reminded of who we belong to, it gives us better energy to think, well, OK. So what do I want to do now?

him. She shared some other stories too. He was a very responsible person for them. He provided for them.

He looked out for them. If there were issues of boys and stuff like that, he was very much on the scene too. But it was kind of hard to deal with when my mother got pregnant. I think that was a pretty big blow for him because he couldn't do anything about it. Yeah, I always wonder what I should be doing to live up to or live into the name. It's pretty good. It feels good to know you're named after somebody in the family.

COMMENTARY: *Clearly, being named for his grandfather does have deep meaning for John. This spiritual connection could be relevant to underline for him as we go along.*

JOHN: But yeah, for my aunts—my mother's sisters—and my grandmother, there was this sort of batten-down-the-hatches, kind of, it's really all about us. And we need to be pretty cohesive for survival's sake.

COMMENTARY: *This kind of process of women bonding together for support is common of course. But since he's a man, I want to make sure he'll have a place to fit in the family so he will not be extruded.*

JOHN: It seems like some of the major issues were around relationships with men.

MCGOLDRICK: So now, let me ask you a question. And it might seem odd. But I'm wondering. Soon you're going to have a daughter. And in one sense, you'll be outnumbered by the women in your family. You have thought about that? What do you think about that?

JOHN: I think it's made my mother, at least, very happy.

MCGOLDRICK: Has it?

JOHN: Because there's another woman coming into the family to continue the line and deal.

MCGOLDRICK: But do you think it's possible that at some level that sort of scares you? That it could be, as you're saying, the women sort of get central and the men are pushed to the periphery?

JOHN: I think that's what happened with my father.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: My grandmother—and she didn't ever remarry or anything—but she forbade them from seeing each other. But yet, my mom and my aunts would always go to the other side of town where he lived. And they would see him. So they would talk to him regularly.

I'd never met him. But I heard this actually from my mom. And when he died, the girls got together and paid for and attended his funeral. And they didn't tell my grandmother.

MCGOLDRICK: Wow. When did he die?

JOHN: A long time ago. I don't know. Maybe when he was like 40? 30, 40, 45? So it must have been like in the mid-'50s.

MCGOLDRICK: I see. So Carol had already been born?

JOHN: Yes. Yes, definitely. But they were all living in the same town still.

MCGOLDRICK: But that's really interesting that in spite of the separation and your grandmother forbidding them, they somehow maintained the relationship with them.

JOHN: Yeah, my grandmother was pissed when she heard that they had attended the funeral because she didn't and that they had actually paid for it.

COMMENTARY: *This too is extremely interesting. Even though the maternal grandfather had left the family, he managed to stay connected to his daughters in spite of the grandmother's efforts to keep him out. I always find it fascinating when secrets actually connect family members in spite of overt cut offs.*

JOHN: She was very upset with that.

MCGOLDRICK: Interesting. Now, you're named for him, aren't you?

JOHN: I am. Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: You ever think about that?

JOHN: Sometimes I do. Sometimes I have thought about it. And I say to myself, well, I wonder how he is or how he was. I think that's why my mom shared that story with me, about her close relationship with

YALOM: And it's certainly, for the therapist, it helps give you that in a very quick economical way.

MCGOLDRICK: Enormously. And the genogram is just a map of all those important people that we can then draw on and help people draw on.

YALOM: But as we'll see in this nice demonstration, the act of creating that map, filling it in, quickly gets you thinking systemically and the client thinking systemically.

MCGOLDRICK: Hopefully.

YALOM: Hopefully. So a couple things strike me as I watch this, and the viewers will have a chance to see it in a few minutes. But you spend

a lot of time in the first session with this client, John Freeman. He's a 39-year-old African American graphic designer as I understand.

MCGOLDRICK: Yes.

YALOM: And this is a reenactment?

MCGOLDRICK: Yes, it's a reenactment of an actual therapy case. Some details have been modified too.

YALOM: So you spend a lot of time in this session constructing a rather full genogram. I'm sure things can be added later if you continued to see him. And as we'll see, he's resistant at times, a little defensive, wondering why you spent so much time asking about his grandfather or grandmother, things like that. Is that common that clients might be wondering that?

MCGOLDRICK: I would say yes. It's very common for people to wonder why do you want to know about all these people, as he does.

YALOM: What comes to mind [is] kind of the stereotype of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis—of finding all about... and it's all being tracked back to what your mother did to you. But I —

MCGOLDRICK: This has a very different purpose.

YALOM: OK, so tell me.

MCGOLDRICK: Because that traditional psycho-dynamic model was looking for the—I mean, I'm oversimplifying I think only slightly—looking for the villain. And the villain was usually your mother and

what she did wrong before you were five or something.

YALOM: They're focusing on psychopathology.

MCGOLDRICK: Yes, always looking for what made you dysfunctional. What created this problem, what bad thing or bad person. This is a completely different idea because it's about where do we get our strengths and our resources?

And that becomes our best tool, I believe, as clinicians that we have and can draw from all the people who our client has known, cared about, learned from, and struggled with in their lives. So we can say, maybe you weren't able to do it there. But maybe you can do it here.

YALOM: We'll see in this video how you focus a lot initially on trying to understand some of the patterns that might have contributed to his presenting problem, which is around his marriage and his withdrawal from it, but also strengths from some male role models.

MCGOLDRICK: But I do think that the mapping of the context of looking at how did you get here? Of course, it is a life cycle issue, and in John's case, he's at a point in an early phase of the life cycle where what's happened to him up until now is very important. But also, how does he see himself going forward?

Now he's just about to have a child. How does he see that moving forward? And for that, looking on his genogram at what happened in his life is extremely relevant in helping him think about what are the choices he wants to make now as I see it.

YALOM: So for many of our viewers, this is a very different way of working—I mean, people have so many agendas to cover in a first session. If you're working at some agency or something, you might be expected to get an intake, which is not just going to cover family background but mental status exam and your symptoms and all sorts of things and a treatment plan. What are you going to do?

And some of the newer approaches—very empirically validated—having a lot of structure to it, and I'm wondering, how do you fit this in? What's your advice to people? How do you learn to do this?

MCGOLDRICK: My argument would be that we look much too much for the pathology in isolation from the whole human being. And

side of the family too.

MCGOLDRICK: Was she one of all sisters?

JOHN: Yeah, she was the third sister of four sisters.

MCGOLDRICK: Was there some way in which that meant women were, like, really different?

JOHN: I think women are kind of seen as special. Maybe even they kind of rally around each other a little bit. It's sort of important to keep the ranks kind of. So they kind of this,...I don't want to say it's like a fraternal thing. But it's for women. But sorority doesn't quite get it.

MCGOLDRICK: It's a sisterhood somehow?

JOHN: Yeah, it's a little bit of that.

COMMENTARY: *I'm surprised really at how powerful gender appears to have been in John's sibling experience—more powerful, apparently, than skin color or distance in age in their relationships. It makes me want to explore more about how this may have been affected by extended family sibling experiences as well to understand the fraternity-sorority issues John is describing. And also to make sure what ramifications he thinks there are for himself gender-wise.*

JOHN: Yeah, it's a little bit of that. My brother and I, I think we feel that a little bit. Like they have their own sort of clique kind of thing. And they have their own way of thinking about things. And I just don't want to get mixed up in their stuff. And I think it does.

My mom is a little bit like that. And her sisters are—my aunts. It's like when my mother had Carol, there was this sort of rallying around. None of my aunts were married. And my grandmother actually wasn't married at that point. She and my grandfather, John, they separated. But they lived in the same town. And interestingly, she forbade my aunts and my mom to see my grandfather.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah, because they didn't end on the best of terms. And I think it might have involved him cheating or something.

siblings or not really?

JOHN: I don't know. Not a distance. I think there are points where we don't understand each other.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Or where she doesn't understand us because—

MCGOLDRICK: Is there sort of a sense that the others of you are kind of a clump? I mean, she is 10 years older than Denise?

JOHN: Yes, she is. She's much older. I think there's a difference because of age. Definitely, she was pretty much on her own by the time I came into the picture. So I didn't really live with her. And my brother, he certainly didn't live with her. So there's that difference. But no, I think we have a pretty—I think we all sort of—

MCGOLDRICK: Have a pretty strong family feeling?

JOHN: —congeal pretty well. There wasn't really any clumping between us and my sister, Carol. I think a lot of the clumping—well, if you can call it clumping. Or maybe just we tend to gravitate towards each other. There was my sisters on this side. But they were my sisters. And there were my brother and myself on this side. We always perceived them as slightly different. I mean, they're girls. Well, they were older. They got married. They started the family sort of thing. My brother and I always had this sort of feeling like we would never want to marry any of our sisters.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: Why?

JOHN: I guess most guys look at their sisters and probably say the same thing.

MCGOLDRICK: Maybe, yeah.

JOHN: But I think it's also because they just seemed to have—my family just seems to—how can I say this? There just seems to be a different attitude towards men and relationships. And I think it's not just my sisters. I think it's my mom. But it seems like it's my mom's

we don't look nearly enough at the sources of resilience and at who people are as whole people. And people in a cultural context, people in a geographic context, people in a family and social context—those people are stressors here and there, but they're also resources.

And to me, if we don't understand the context in which people live and only look for the pathology—which it's true, that's what we are supposed to be doing in the first session—I think it makes it very difficult to really connect with people. Because I also think we're then re-stigmatizing them by saying, and so what else is wrong? And tell me about this. And what about that limitation? Do you have any limitations over on the other side? And we haven't said at all, who loved you? Who matters to you? Why would you want to solve this problem?

YALOM: So we'll see you working on your computer with the genogram software to construct it. How do you manage to do that and to stay connected and build an alliance with the client?

MCGOLDRICK: OK, well first of all I think—and that's a really, really good question because there is a way in which in order to get the larger picture, it takes you away from the immediate connection in the short run. But I also think you're helping the client to build more of a sense of who they really are in terms of the people they belong to.

So that in the long run, I hope this gets conveyed—it's certainly what I mean to do—is to relate to them through my paying attention to, tell me about your brother. And where is your brother in terms of your need right now? And where is your mother in terms of what you're going through? And try to make sense of what they're struggling with in terms of who else matters to them.

YALOM: Well, I think what does get conveyed is you have a deep interest in knowing him. And that's, for you, a critical way of knowing him is knowing who he's part of, where he's from, where he's going.

MCGOLDRICK: I believe that. Just even using people's names to know, to say, your uncle Mac, your uncle Raymond, your aunt Mamie, whoever it is, I think that makes a big difference. That when we see a person and go through an entire inquiry about what they're struggling with and never find out their brothers' or sisters' names, that's strange

to me.

YALOM: All right. So what should the viewers be watching for, listening for, as we see this session?

MCGOLDRICK: Well, obviously this question of why am I trying to put so much context around it? And how does John respond to that? To pay attention to the resistances because I'm sure the viewers would and will have those struggles themselves in such an inquiry. But, particularly, looking at what's their first thought?

And then, how does their hypothesizing about the situation change as they hear more about who John belongs to? And are there questions that they then begin to think about their own families? Because I think understanding your own family is very much a part of coming to realize why any of this actually matters.

YALOM: One other detail. So you're seeing him individually.

MCGOLDRICK: Yes, which wouldn't in general be my preference. Although for me, family therapy is a way of thinking—it's not about who's in the room. So to me this is family therapy as I practice it all the time, seeing a person alone. But I would have, in general, rather seen him with his wife. But he saw it as his issue. So I went with that.

YALOM: So he requested an individual meeting.

MCGOLDRICK: He requested it. And I figured, why not? That's fine. But I would, in the long run, want to of course meet the wife and see what her story is too.

YALOM: All right. So let's take a look at the session. And you've added some commentaries throughout further explaining kind of what you're thinking, what you're doing. And then you and I will meet after the session to continue this discussion.

MCGOLDRICK: Great.

Session

MCGOLDRICK: I'm very happy to meet you.

JOHN: Hi.

wedlock. And particularly one that there was no sort of support from his side of the family. But also, you know, Carol was bi-racial.

So there was also a little bit of, she was a special child kind of. So it was this weird sort of thing. But I think it had an impact on my family's reputation on my mom's side. And my mom's side of the family is pretty proud.

So I think ultimately that may have caused them to leave the town. My grandmother left first. Well, back in those days, it is what it is. I mean, like I tell you, it's not that I necessarily feel uncomfortable with it because my sister is my sister. But, you know, we don't talk about these things.

MCGOLDRICK: That your mother had to go through all of that and not get the support that she deserved and, you know, have to experience all the racism that went with people's reactions of all that.

JOHN: Well, they were different times. Yeah, I'm sure it was very, very tough.

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah.

JOHN: But my family has loved Carol. I mean, there's no reason not to. And I don't really think that she's that worse off for it. I mean, I think she can be a little bit strange sometimes because she's not like the rest of us in terms of we all look very much like my father.

MCGOLDRICK: Do you?

JOHN: Yeah. And so she doesn't. I mean, there's sort of a difference also in skin complexion. So we're all sort of like medium or dark brown. And then she's sort of a lighter complexion. So we always made fun of her because of that. We used to joke around with her about it so I know she feels a little left out sometimes because of that. But also, there's this sort of sense of some things have been easier for her as a result of that too, if you understand what I'm saying.

You know, life sometimes is easier to negotiate if you have a lighter complexion. So I think that's been a little easier for her in that regard. So she's kind of got this weird space.

MCGOLDRICK: Has that created sort of a distance among you all as

always had this blanket policy of withdrawal or the policy of just not talking about things, of withholding, I think is what I'm trying to say.

And so, we aren't allowed to talk about some things. Now of course, kids talk. So I know stories from my sisters and from other relatives. Anyway, my mother was very young when she had Carol. And Carol wasn't expected, if you know what I mean. My mother grew up in a small town in South.

She had this relationship, which was kind of a relationship that wasn't necessarily sanctioned at that time because race relations being what they were.

MCGOLDRICK: The guy was white?

JOHN: Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: I see.

JOHN: And as far as my grandmother knew and was concerned—I didn't hear this from her—but I heard it from Denise, who heard it from an aunt. You know how stories go. So my mother really liked the guy. And he really liked her. But it was one of those things that couldn't work.

And then my mother got pregnant. And that caused a huge issue in that town.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? The guy was known or something?

JOHN: Yeah, he was. Or his father was at least.

MCGOLDRICK: So what happened?

JOHN: I think, from what I hear, they were no longer able to see each other. And his family renounced any involvement. And I think it was kind of tough on my mom because she was like 17—16, 17.

And she ended up having the child. And she was still living with my grandmother and her grandmother, my great-grandmother at that point. They were all living in—you know how small towns are in the South back in those days.

And it was weird because, from what I understand, it was a source of shame for a while, because she was so young having a child out of

MCGOLDRICK: And if it's OK with you, I'm going to take notes on my computer. Is that all right?

JOHN: Yeah, I guess so.

MCGOLDRICK: I find it saves time and helps me organize things. Is that OK?

JOHN: Sure, that's fine.

MCGOLDRICK: Why don't you tell me a little bit why you're here. And then maybe we'll work backwards and kind of look at the larger picture, is that—

JOHN: OK. Yeah, that's fine. Well, I came to see you because I'm having a little difficult right now. I'm having difficult with my wife. But I don't really think it's about her. I think it's probably a little bit about me. We've been married for about two years now. And it's been great. It's been really good.

And, I mean, I wasn't sure I was going to get married, I was ever going to get married actually. But I ended up finding someone. Yeah, so going from not thinking that to actually finding someone has been great. And the relationship has been going great. But I think I've been—we've been having problems because I've been pulling away a little bit.

I guess there are times I go out with friends. And I don't call her to tell her that I'm going out or that I'm going to be staying out late. And sometimes I stay out really late. So it's not like a 12 o'clock or one o'clock come home. It's like I come home the next day if it's a weekend, like a Friday.

MCGOLDRICK: Now, you've been doing this ever since you got together with her?

JOHN: No, actually not. Maybe, I don't know, about 10 months after we got married, that's when it started. I can remember one time I got off the phone with her, I was feeling a little, I don't know, I was feeling a little pent up I think. And I just decided to go to a bar nearby and have a beer.

And I just started sitting and talking with people. Before I knew it, it

was like midnight and I didn't call her. And I think she assumed I was coming home. So it's not like I do it all the time. It's just that, I do do it. And I don't call her. And then she gets upset. And then she asks me what was I doing or how come I didn't tell her.

MCGOLDRICK: Where do you go?

JOHN: Sometimes, I mean, like I said, I go hang out with some of my buddies. They were the guys I hung out with before I was married. Sometimes I stay at work. And I just sort of get more work done.

MCGOLDRICK: But when you don't come home the whole night, you—

JOHN: Oh yeah, usually I'm hanging out with them. And, you know, we go out to a bar. Or we go back to one of their houses.

MCGOLDRICK: Then you just sort of crash?

JOHN: Yeah. That's what we used to do before I got married. It was on weekends. And it's sort of a little bit of the same thing. And that's not so much of an issue, I think, than it is the fact that I'm pulling away.

And I don't really understand why I'm pulling away. And I'm also not really respecting her in the relationship because I'm not letting her know what I'm doing or what I'm going to do. It's just hard for me to bring myself to call her and talk to her.

MCGOLDRICK: So you just sort of get having a few drinks and then you think about calling but you just—

JOHN: I just don't.

MCGOLDRICK: You just don't. How do you feel about her overall? I mean, how are you feeling about the relationship?

JOHN: I love her. I love her a great deal.

MCGOLDRICK: Do you?

JOHN: Yeah, I do. I really do. I feel really close to her. And I feel like she is the one. And she's the person I've been the closest to I think.

MCGOLDRICK: So there's nothing about another woman or feeling like, maybe I settled too soon or?

So I can't help thinking that as you're trying to figure out, how do I love my wife in the way I want to and support her as she's having a kid, then you tell me this very traumatic thing about your father, I can't help thinking that possibly who else your mother loved or was connected to could be a part of her story.

And she's your mother. So that maybe could matter. You know what I mean? I don't know that. But to me, that's why I just sort of get a sense of who do you belong to and who came, who left, who was close.

JOHN: I understand what you're saying. I think probably what's hard for me is that, you know, I don't know you. I feel like everything's fair game because you never know where things might lead. But in my family, there's sort of like certain things you just don't talk about. Or you just don't divulge or share very easily.

MCGOLDRICK: Is there something about Carol's dad that might be problematic to talk about or something? I'm not asking you talk about something you're not comfortable with. I'm just trying to help you understand where you're feeling stuck. And I don't know.

JOHN: Well, the weird thing is that you're asking me if you don't want to talk about something that I'm comfortable with. I don't necessarily think I'm uncomfortable with it. I just think that maybe my mother's uncomfortable with it. And so we just don't talk about it. We don't even talk about it amongst ourselves, even though we all know it.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah. Because I was just going to say that a lot of times we maybe pick up, through our sense of loyalty to our families, rules that we don't even know where they come from, just as maybe we pick up anxieties that we don't even know where they come from. And you know, sometimes they act in the weirdest way.

I mean, you have seemed reluctant a number of times in our conversation here. But at some level I could see why you'd be, what's it to you about who Carol's father is. And on the other hand, we are trying to understand.

JOHN: I understand what you're saying. I mean, I really don't care. For me, she's my sister. So I don't really care. But my mother has

your sister, she's almost 18 years older than you, right? So they'd been together for more than 20 years.

JOHN: Well, yes and no. They'd been together for a long time. But my oldest sister is not his child. And I think they got married when Carol was like seven or eight. So they'd been together for however many years—my sister's age. So they'd been together for a while but not since—

MCGOLDRICK: I see. Not since—

JOHN: Carol's not his daughter.

MCGOLDRICK: I see. So who was her father?

JOHN: Why is that important?

MCGOLDRICK: I don't know. I mean, I'm not saying it to pry but just to try to understand about how the marriages worked in the family and what happened to that person. Does that seem like a strange question?

JOHN: You know, it kind of makes me a little uncomfortable. I mean, because I don't really see how that's all that relevant.

COMMENTARY: *Somehow I seem to have stumbled into something that is secret or private. Even though John has been talking about quite personal things prior to this, he suddenly does not want to mention something, which on the surface seems insignificant.*

The issue is that when we're asking people to tell their story, we never know when a small question may lead to something very difficult to deal with—an issue of shame, trauma, or family secrecy. And we must be prepared for this possibility.

MCGOLDRICK: I don't know how you were referred here.

JOHN: It was a client of yours and had very good things to say about you.

MCGOLDRICK: OK, but even so, you don't know me. And so I could see that my asking you a bunch of questions might seem like, what's it to her. But my view is that a lot of things in our lives may be connected in ways that we don't always know.

JOHN: Settled too soon? I'm 39. Settling too soon. So it's not that. I mean, I think sometimes I have that, was this the right one? Or maybe the better one is coming around the corner. Maybe, but that's normal. I think that's normal male stuff.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah. Sometimes I just pull away.

MCGOLDRICK: Have you and she, are you thinking about having kids?

JOHN: Yeah, we are actually. She's pregnant.

COMMENTARY: *This information surprised me because it appears to coincide with John's pulling back from his wife. Though until I happened to ask about it, he gave no indication that they were having a baby. Often, surprise revelations like this indicate issues around which a person has developed particular anxiety.*

MCGOLDRICK: How pregnant?

JOHN: She is actually six months now.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? So do you know if it's going to be a boy or a girl?

JOHN: It's going to be a girl.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? So is that an issue?

JOHN: Well, I think it does make me a little stressed because I've never had to take care kids, even though I'm one of five kids.

MCGOLDRICK: Which one are you?

JOHN: I'm the first boy. But I'm the fourth of five. I mean, even though I've seen kids be raised, and my mother had to deal with five, one shouldn't be that tough. So, but still, you know that sort of gets me a little bit sometimes. It kind of weirds me out. But yeah, I never thought I would have kids either. Well, at least I wanted to have kids and now I have the opportunity to. Or at least I'm looking forward—

MCGOLDRICK: What are you thinking?

JOHN: I was just thinking about—I mean, I am looking forward to it. But I think it just sort of stresses me out a little bit. Or it scares me a

little. Yeah, it's a pretty big thing.

MCGOLDRICK: In what sense?

JOHN: Well, your life is not about you anymore. It's about raising a child. You know, focus kind of shifts a little bit. It's like your responsibilities change. Your life becomes a little bit more restricted.

COMMENTARY: *John now fills in information about his family. And I can put together the details of his family members. Generally speaking, it's always helpful to get basic family information as far back as grandparents to be sure there is not a major problem or secret among the key relatives, which is organizing the family.*

MCGOLDRICK: Do your siblings have kids?

JOHN: Yeah, my sisters do. I have a younger brother. He's 37. I have three older sisters, each of whom have one child. So I have two nephews and one niece.

MCGOLDRICK: So your oldest sister, what's her name?

JOHN: Her name is Carol.

MCGOLDRICK: And how old is she?

JOHN: She's 57.

MCGOLDRICK: So she was born in 1950 or so?

JOHN: Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: And she has a son?

JOHN: Yeah, she has a son who is, I think he's about 10 years younger than I am. So he's 29 now. His name's Jeffrey, Jeff. My middle sister, my second sister, her name is Denise. And she's 47. And she has a daughter, my niece, Jessica. And Jessica is, I don't know, maybe she's eight. And I have a third sister who is 41. And her name is Gwen. And she has a son, Justin, who is, I guess, 15, 16? 16.

And then there's me. I'm 39. Then I have a brother who's 37.

MCGOLDRICK: So you were born in?

JOHN: I was born in '68.

JOHN: No, I never thought about that.

MCGOLDRICK: Wow. What did you hear about what happened when he had the heart attack?

JOHN: Well, I know that it freaked my mother out. It stressed her out a great deal. And they were concerned that it might induce labor. And my mother, you know, she didn't want to lose him of course. And it sort of changed the mood of my birth because my sisters were also afraid.

MCGOLDRICK: Sure.

JOHN: Yeah, I think it affected my mother a great deal. Yeah, I think so. I think, I hear that their relationship changed after that, after I was born.

MCGOLDRICK: Really? How do you mean?

JOHN: Well, my parents were a little closer I think. So she was a little bit guarded after that, a little bit fearful. She became much more safety conscious of the kids and of me. I think my father started working a lot more after that.

MCGOLDRICK: Why do you think? Do you think he was worried that he might not live too long?

JOHN: I don't know. Maybe he just had work he needed to do.

MCGOLDRICK: Maybe. And then they had your brother. And your father was in OK health.

JOHN: Yeah, he was in OK health. He started taking care of himself a little better at that point. I mean, that's what I hear.

MCGOLDRICK: So what happened that they separated then?

COMMENTARY: *Now I want to track back what happened after his birth to help him see his family's life cycle trajectory and develop more clarity to choose the course he wants to follow, rather than being driven forward by events and feelings out of consciousness.*

JOHN: I just think they grew apart. They just kind of grew apart. And after my brother was born—

MCGOLDRICK: But they'd been together for so many years. Because

very surprising in a casual way—first, when he mentioned staying out all night without calling his wife, second, when he mentioned that his wife was six months pregnant, and now, as he tells of his father’s heart attack just before he was born.

The suddenness and casualness of these revelations may be important to making sense of the story because perhaps they reveal aspects of people’s experience that they themselves have not really integrated into their own narrative.

MCGOLDRICK: Have you ever been scared that the same thing might happen to now that you’re having a child?

JOHN: Yeah, I never thought about that. No, I never thought. Maybe, maybe I’ve thought about it.

MCGOLDRICK: How old was your father?

JOHN: I don’t know. I was what? I was negative two weeks?

MCGOLDRICK: It was ‘68. And he was born in ‘29. So he would have been like, oh my God. He would have been your very age now, what you are now.

JOHN: No, you’re kidding?

MCGOLDRICK: I’m not kidding.

JOHN: He would have been 39?

MCGOLDRICK: ‘29 to ‘68, he would have been 39.

COMMENTARY: *What is fascinating about the process of tracking a person’s history through a genogram is how often these kinds of coincidences show up, again so often at the margins of consciousness, that may be so significant in terms of people’s sense of their own life cycle. Surely, most of us think of our life trajectory at some time in relation to that of our same sex parent.*

And here is the scariest connection possible. His father’s experience of life threat at the moment of his own birth and at his age. My first thought is that perhaps it’s no wonder he at times wants to escape his own life course at this point, perhaps fearing he will follow in his father’s footsteps.

MCGOLDRICK: You never thought about that?

MCGOLDRICK: And then your brother was born in ‘70? And his name is?

JOHN: Brad. But he doesn’t have kids.

MCGOLDRICK: Does he have a girlfriend?

JOHN: He tends to burn through them pretty quickly. But he has one now.

MCGOLDRICK: He has one most of the time?

JOHN: He has one most of the time, yeah, but he has difficulty staying with them for any long period of time. He’s another one that didn’t—I think he’s even more strongly not going to get married than—I think, I didn’t think I would get married. I think he does not want to get married.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: Yeah. He has a stronger sort of attitude towards that than I think I do.

MCGOLDRICK: So now tell me a little bit about your parents.

JOHN: My father passed away. His name is Robert. He was born in 1929. And he died when I was 11.

MCGOLDRICK: So that was 19—

JOHN: That was 1979. And my mother was born in ‘33. So she’s like 74 or 75.

MCGOLDRICK: And what’s her name?

JOHN: Her name is Jannie. She’s from the South. Her real name is Jannie Pearl.

MCGOLDRICK: So where does she live?

JOHN: She currently lives in our family’s home in South Jersey, Cherry Hill.

MCGOLDRICK: Oh, that’s where you grew up?

JOHN: And that’s where at least my brother still lives. He doesn’t live in the same house. But he lives in the same town.

MCGOLDRICK: Oh, does he? And your sisters are close by?

JOHN: New York.

MCGOLDRICK: So your family stayed pretty close? You have one sister, Carol, and she's still married to her husband?

JOHN: No. Her husband, his name is Ken. And they've been divorced for quite some time.

MCGOLDRICK: OK. But she never remarried?

JOHN: No.

MCGOLDRICK: And how about Denise?

JOHN: Denise, she's still married. His name is Gene. Their relationship is not so great. I don't know why they're still together. And my sister Gwen was married to Henry is his name. And they're separated. They never went through with getting a divorce. But they separated pretty soon after Justin was born.

MCGOLDRICK: And what about your parent's marriage? How did they do?

JOHN: I guess they did OK. They were together up until after my brother was born, maybe two, three years after my brother was born. It was '72 when they separated. They never fully got divorced. They were just separated. But it didn't end on very good terms. So they didn't really talk to each other that much. They were civil to one another. But they lived very separate lives. But my father died when I was 11.

MCGOLDRICK: Oh, I see, because you had told me your father died in '79. So in '72, you were about four.

JOHN: Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: So—

JOHN: Yeah, that's right.

MCGOLDRICK: So do you remember them together?

JOHN: I have little images of them together. Yeah, I remember my dad. Yeah, he was a pretty imposing guy. He was in the military. He

And from what I understand, my father, I think for me, he was there. And I definitely felt close to him because he was my dad. And I also think there was—my father had a heart attack about a couple weeks before I was born.

MCGOLDRICK: Really?

JOHN: About two weeks, yeah, and—

COMMENTARY: *This news, that his father had a heart attack so close to his birth astonishes me. No wonder he's been anxious. Now, his disappearing begins to make sense. I find it extremely common for people to miss such key emotional triggers.*

MCGOLDRICK: Two weeks, whoa, that must have been something.

JOHN: Well, it was for my mom.

MCGOLDRICK: I can imagine.

JOHN: I didn't know.

MCGOLDRICK: Wow.

JOHN: Yeah, that kind of scared her. That scared her a great deal.

MCGOLDRICK: My God, yeah.

JOHN: And she was very close to term. And so, I think it was hard for my family, in general, at that point. But he was OK eventually. There wasn't any long term damage or anything. It wasn't a stroke, thank goodness. It was just a minor heart attack.

But I think that sort of scared him a little, scared him a lot. And he had a very different attitudes towards—you know, I was somebody who was special because I think he felt that he may not have been around to see me. There was the possibility.

COMMENTARY: *Often, the whole family has participated in keeping awareness of the emotional impact of such nodal events out of consciousness. So it's not really surprising that John brings it up in a kind of, oh, by the way fashion. You never know where asking people about their families may lead or when something significant may come out almost without awareness.*

This is at least the third time so far that John has revealed something

MCGOLDRICK: My sense is that a lot of times—especially the kinds of things you’re talking about where you suddenly find yourself doing something that’s a behavior that doesn’t seem like you want to be or whatever—that sometimes, some other larger things related to where we come from may affect that.

And that’s sort of why I start with a focus on—what about your siblings, tell me about your parents—those kinds of questions, to see if, you know, did your father ever do that? Did your mother ever do that? Do you know if anybody else might have had anxiety about having a kid, you know? So to me, those questions are good ways to try to make sense of why might you be going through this now. Does that make sense?

JOHN: It makes sense. It’s a possibility I guess.

MCGOLDRICK: Doesn’t make you really feel so enthusiastic you’d talk about it though, maybe? Listen, this is hard. You know, I’m not meaning to give you a hard time. That seems like it’s distressing you.

JOHN: Well, I mean, I guess I’d feel better if there was a specific question that you were asking because it is kind of hard to talk in general too. I mean, so if there was something specific, like, I don’t know. What’s my relationship like with my brother or something? Or how do you feel about him? You know, just something, but the general question, it just makes me feel a little uncomfortable I guess.

MCGOLDRICK: OK. I hear you. Well, I mean, I am interested in your relationship with your brother. But maybe, what if we start with your parents?

JOHN: OK.

MCGOLDRICK: You didn’t get to know your father for too long. But what sort of relationship did you have with him?

JOHN: I guess it was pretty good. For however long it was, it was pretty good. We had good conversations on the phone. And I really looked forward to seeing him when he came up to visit. You know, he came up to visit a couple of times around the holidays. So around Christmas, it was always nice to get gifts and stuff like that.

was a Green Beret. I know that from stories. I know that he was a Green Beret. But I remember him as a pretty imposing guy. So yeah, I had images of him. And I do remember him.

I used to have bloody noses a lot when I was a kid. So he used to always do the thing where you know to pinch the nose and tell you to hold your head back. I remember that. It’s little things like that.

MCGOLDRICK: He lived around as you were growing up until he died?

JOHN: He lived in Washington, DC. So he really wasn’t that far. And he did call to talk to us. And I saw him occasionally. So it wasn’t like he was completely gone from our lives.

COMMENTARY: At this point, I’m wondering if John isn’t minimizing the importance of his father’s absence in his life. I’m thinking about his presenting problem of distancing from his wife just as he is about to become a father himself. I’m wondering if there could be a connection to his own father. And I decide to press more directly about his father.

MCGOLDRICK: It doesn’t sound like he was that much around. Am I right about that?

JOHN: What do you mean that much around? When they’re separated, you know, when he lives in a different state, it’s kind of hard for him to be that much around.

COMMENTARY: *My question seems to make him a bit defensive. And I try to explain the connection.*

MCGOLDRICK: Well, I’m just thinking that these days you’re finding yourself staying out, not wanting to call your wife. And she is six months pregnant. So that may be more distressing to her even than at another time.

JOHN: Yeah, she says that.

MCGOLDRICK: And what you’re describing is really that your father was kind of gone from the time you were fairly young. So, you know, I guess I was just wondering, is there a sort of an anxiety about how am I going to do it because I didn’t exactly have somebody there to show me?

JOHN: I mean, my mother was there. And my father was financially contributing to the house. And he did call. And he was pretty responsible about keeping in touch with us. He didn't come to see us a lot because my father worked a lot.

MCGOLDRICK: What did he do?

JOHN: He owned his own accounting business. He was kind of a workaholic. So he was constantly working. So I do remember that because I didn't see him that much when I was younger. So the images I do have of him are pretty strong because I didn't see him that much. But he was a good provider. And he worked a lot. Being a provider and being responsible, that's pretty good role model I guess.

COMMENTARY: *John's reassurance again about his father having been a good role model makes me think I need to slow down in looking at contextual issues for his problem. When a client begins to resist exploration of family issues, I generally find it useful to go back to the presenting problem to keep that as the cornerstone for questions about background and context.*

I'm also feeling the need to validate how hard it is to talk to a stranger, especially across both gender and racial barriers, about deeply personal issues. And I want to be sure I stay connected to where he is in the conversation.

MCGOLDRICK: I guess I'm just trying to see if I can understand anything from your overall background that might help to make sense of what you're struggling with now. Maybe let's go back to that issue. And tell me a little bit more about sort of what's happening. What sense do you make of that?

JOHN: You mean what's happening currently?

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah. I mean, what really made you want to come here?

JOHN: I think what really makes—I think I don't seem to have any control over—like, I don't understand why I pull away. And I know what I'm doing is not right. I know it. And I know it's not the responsible thing to do.

And my wife has made those comments about her being six months pregnant. So she needs me even more now, despite the fact that I think women can be a little crazy sometimes when the hormones are off balance. But that's just my own sort of spin on things.

So I know that I should be there more. And I know I should be a bit more sort of consistent in my behavior. But I just don't—and I am pretty responsible in my general life with work. I'm that way with friends. I'm that way with my family. My siblings and my mom, I'm that way.

I've always been that way. But this is a different kind of thing. And I don't really understand why it's happening. And I'm also afraid that it's going to cause difficulties. Well, more difficulties in my relationships, especially now that I'm starting my own family.

MCGOLDRICK: If you can't sort of find a way to stay present.

JOHN: Yeah.

MCGOLDRICK: So now, at the same time—and I mean, you don't know me. So it's sort of hard to just go right into the middle of things and say, tell me this and that about your personal life. And on the other hand, what you're talking about is about something that sort of goes to the heart of the matter when you're pulling away from your intimate relationship. And you don't want to be doing it, you know? But I'm having the sense that, just in asking you a few questions about your family, that you really don't want to talk about it that much.

JOHN: I don't really want to talk about what? My family?

MCGOLDRICK: Yeah.

JOHN: I guess I'm trying to figure out why talking about my family is relevant to my own problem. Because it sort of feels like it's my problem. It's not their problem. And it's not like I do this to them.

COMMENTARY: *While previously John had seemed very defensive about his father, he is now being direct in questioning the relevance of talking about his family. This directness feels very different to me. It suggests that he is now ready to explore issues. He's telling me out right he doesn't see the connection. So I must clarify why I think it may be relevant to explore background and context.*