

4.1 Family Genogram Analysis

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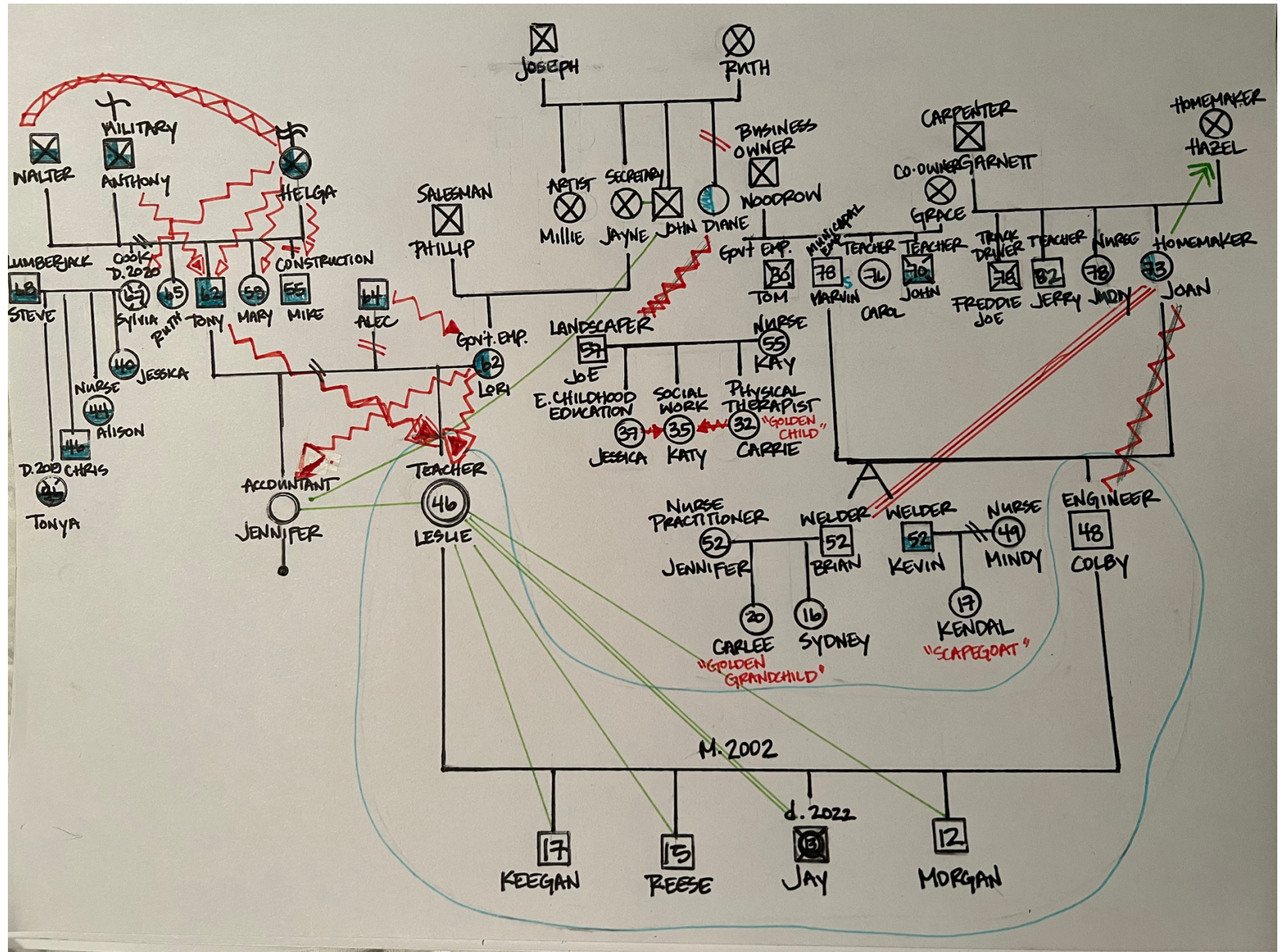
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The Past as Prologue: Overarching Themes

Pervasive Psychological & Physical Abuse

Creating my family genogram was tremendously difficult for me. I have significant gaps in memory, or perhaps I've gotten so good at compartmentalization that I've deceived myself into thinking the past does not affect my present. I consulted a friend I've had since childhood and my sister to help sort through what happened when I was young. Early in the book, McGoldrick emphasizes keeping a "questioning attitude and a healthy skepticism" (2011, p. 46). My default is skepticism, resentment, and anger directed at my mother and extended family on my stepfather's side. Until I resolve these intense feelings, I'm afraid my tenure as a family therapist will not be successful. Two primary notions arose from living with my dysfunctional family growing up: a) I developed a high self-efficacy since I had to do many things independently, and b) I have very low self-esteem. Seemingly contradictory, my high self-efficacy causes me to act as my poor self-esteem questions those actions.

Broken Relationships

Ironically, most of the grief and anger I felt in my early 20s stemmed not from blood relatives but from my stepfamily. My sister, seven years younger than me, had a completely different childhood. I do not get frustrated that she had a great childhood and I suffered; my frustration stems from her misunderstanding and downplaying what I went through. My stepfather Tony was physically abused by both his biological father and stepfather, giving him a specific view of how to raise a child. McGoldrick stresses the pervasive nature of abuse being passed down from generation to generation. However, resentment drove me to do well in school, and I knew one day, my hard work would take me out of my environment.

Divorces abound on my stepfather's side; too many to chart for this assignment. I chose to stick with the family members I knew better than most and who were present, at least for some of my childhood. Along with physical and psychological abuse came substance use disorder. Most of the people on my stepfather's side were current or former addicts, with alcoholism rampant. I was surprised at how much coding I had to use for substance use. My stepfather was physically abused by men his mother dated. When I went to live with him and my mother, I was the reason for his financial issues, problems with his wife (my mother), and a loss of freedom after having a surprise kid to care for in his early 20s. My stepfather's coping skill was to take his frustration out on me (I was tall for my age) and gain some sort of control since he knew he could control me.

McGoldrick states, "Don't attack, don't defend, don't placate, and don't shut down." (2011, p. 320). I have taken this statement to heart, yet I do placate (a lot) and shut down when I visit. I become the same 12-year-old girl desperately seeking approval, appeasing my parents, and going out of my way to make them laugh and do things for them. I do this almost as if saying, "Please love me." Yet the approval never comes, and I drive home thinking, "Why in the world did I make a fool of myself?"

Family secrets and estrangements on my husband's side of the family abound, and I hadn't realized this until creating the genogram. I decided to flesh out his side of the family because even though there aren't many divorces, couples will and do choose to continue to think their lives will get better, their spouses will change, and children will finally unload the dishwasher. When my son came out as transgender, they did not accept him and questioned our parenting skills when we sought gender-approving care. We are not estranged from them, but this has caused a rift in the family that will probably not be repaired.

Mental Health

When my 13-year-old son died, we were unaware of any prior diagnosed mental health conditions within our family. I bear stigma and shame, and it is easy to fall down the rabbit hole, "What if I helped him get off the medication sooner? What if I took him to the emergency room again when he behaved strangely? Why did I safety-proof everything but the extension and power cords?" Now with him gone, all is muted. McGoldrick is right regarding the ripple effect, vibrating throughout the family, causing our household to be fractured, and I find myself floating along without Jay as an anchor. My genogram reflects the close nature of our friendship.

There isn't a triangle that forms between my immediate family (my sister, mother, and father); instead, it is more like a chain that draws them close to each other while I sit in a different room. There is more like a box between my sister and parents, and I haven't yet learned the code (nor will they probably tell me) to become a full-fledged member of the Torres family. This exclusion from the family unit explains my high self-efficacy and low self-esteem. I've had to grow up and essentially parent my little sister until I moved out and was emancipated.

Breaking the Cycle***Healthy Relationships***

Emancipation was helpful and paved the way for me to explore new ideas and learn to make my own decisions (and mistakes), breaking maladaptive patterns. I was most curious how McGoldrick would broach the subject of emancipation, but she visits the African and Jewish diaspora, not children living on their own. This is my main critique: the book relies heavily on historical references. Although interesting, therapists could benefit from vignettes or case studies for people to relate to. I do an icebreaker with my students every year: instead of telling the

group about an exciting thing you have done or an exotic place you've been, I ask students, "What is the most boring thing about you?" Students create more connections with others during this version. Perhaps this book would benefit from having more "general population" anecdotes the reader can connect with.

I have a close and profound relationship with my children after losing Jay. We have become even more intimate as we can see what matters through the pain of losing a child. McGoldrick (2011) is spot on when she says suicide brings stigma and guilt and can affect future generations. My children will always be keenly aware of mental illness—from putting it on health forms to worrying about their children. Reading "The Genogram Journey" brought me new insights into patterns a family falls into and how important it was for me to break the cycle of abuse passed down on my stepfather's side. (My mother is a whole other can of worms that will take another paper.) Through this assignment, I have been able to home in on beliefs, values, and behaviors, and I gained greater self-awareness into the family history that has tormented me for so long. I'm not sure I'm ready to "go home again" yet, but my resistance has softened.

References

Gladding, S.T. (2019). *Family therapy: History, theory, and practice* (7th ed). Pearson.

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