



EXPLORING AND DEVELOPING THE USE OF ART-BASED GENOGRAMS IN FAMILY OF ORIGIN THERAPY

**Sharing the Potential for
Understanding and Healing
Through the Art Process**



Deborah Schroder

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IN FAMILY OF ORIGIN THERAPY**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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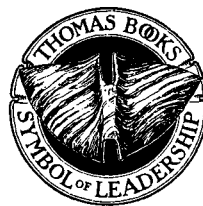
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By

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FOREWORD

This book embodies a genuine and personal look at the makeup of families and how previous individual family members affect future generations and carry forward past generational patterns. Art therapy provides a safe and respectful way to explore this information in a creative, uninhibited manner. The author shows the reader a new way of looking at recording these patterns by making the traditional genogram come alive through art therapy images. This process removes the art maker (student or client) from the limitations of square boxes and circles, allowing the true essence of each family member to burst through in metaphorical drawings and imagery.

The author takes this whole process one step further by acknowledging the importance and meaning of the art materials used, starting with the foundation on which the genogram is created. The foundation of the art-based genogram provides fruitful information about the family generational theme that is revealing and insightful for the art maker. It allows support for a creative depiction of the art maker's ancestral pain, sufferings, joys, celebrations and life viewpoints. Ultimately, this creative endeavor reveals therapeutic information that art makers can then integrate into their current, present-day lives.

As an art therapy graduate program director and professor, the author takes the reader step-by-step through the manner in which she teaches her students about art-based genograms in her Family Art Therapy classes. She does so by recounting various students' experiences with art-based genograms. Many of these stories reveal the internal and creative struggle students endure to come to an understanding of their families, and ultimately, to come to a resolution of past assumptions and beliefs. It is with compassion, respect and awe that the author provides a window into each story's unraveling and then reweaving of personal family perceptions. The core belief system of this art therapy program is that students must personally experience the art therapy intervention that they ask their future clients to do.

The author reveals her own vulnerability by displaying the results of her work in creating a personal art-based genogram and the cultural awareness

ripple effect that resulted from her work on her family. She weaves personal acknowledgments of how her awareness of the world around her has become more attune with the historical patterns of the loved ones in her life. She discusses the intricacies of her daughter's adoption and how this affects her daughter's personal knowledge base and self-identity. The author discusses multicultural diversity, creating a unique view of how the art-based genogram influences the art makers' exploration of whom they are.

Throughout this book there is a fresh look at the power and effectiveness of art therapy. It demonstrates a wide variety of uses for art-based genograms in the teaching and professional preparation of art therapy graduate students, and ultimately, with art therapy clientele.

Deborah A. Good, Ph.D., ATR-BC, ATCS, LPAT, LPCC
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Past-President, The Art Therapy Credentials Board

PREFACE

I've been teaching Family Art Therapy for many years now. One of my requirements for this course is that each student create his or her own art-based genogram, and share it with the class. These art-based genograms are always visually fascinating and often emotionally challenging for the student to create.

Over and over we learn, in doing therapy, that it is imperative that we “do our own work.” Requiring students to do their own work on who and where they come from is important to me. As we help our clients understand the gifts and struggles that they've taken on from their own family of origin, our ability to contain and hold the powerful emotions that come forward depends on our ability to stay centered and present as witnesses and guides.

This book was written after witnessing the power of using art in family of origin work with clients, and as part of my experience with my students. In my client work I can appreciate the urge that clients often have to “fix the problem.” Sometimes we can explore the problem together without looking backwards. But often, we really need to understand the historical context for the patterns and beliefs that have influenced our lives. People make jokes about “blaming mom” when they talk about going to therapy. My interest in family history isn't ever to blame anyone. I'm much more excited about bringing our relatives' strengths and challenges and especially messages (conscious and unconscious) out into the open where choice is possible as one moves forward. And for me, the most meaningful and effective way to do that is through making art.

I would encourage anyone reading this book to create your own art-based genogram. I make a new one every time I teach my course and new insights, images and sometimes people, show up every year. I look at how I'm moving forward and what kind of emotional legacy I'm creating, and it all shows up rather magically in the messages within the art.

D.S.

INTRODUCTION

I remember the electric moment when I took those little squares and circles of my genogram and changed them out for images. It was magical! And I thought I was the first one to figure that magic out. Many other art therapists use shapes, lines, and color in genograms, and I'm proud to be one of the bunch, grateful as always to that large family of art therapists past, present, and future. Those first few sentences were all I wrote, originally, for this introduction. I was a little puzzled with myself – where had my other thoughts disappeared to? After some soul-searching, I found them.

Writing about generations of family inevitably resulted in my own deeply personal awareness of the assortment of roles that I've held over the years, including daughter, granddaughter, sister, partner, aunt, mother and grandmother. I touched into those fragile places at the intersections of good intentions and actual lived experiences, over and over again. I have some sadness associated with the word "family," and perhaps that somewhat accounts for my yearning to help people work on family of origin and generational family issues.

There is a sacredness to me in this talk about family. I hold tenderness around the hope that I carry, that family relationships can indeed "get better" and that all people have the right to show up, in family, in their own authenticity. The idea of choice is mentioned frequently in this book because it is critical. It is a treasure to choose what beliefs, rules, and ideas get taken in from all those generations before us. It is a treasure to expand who family can be and where we can connect in relationship. And the connections can be joyful. When one can touch joy in the midst of everything else that life brings, it feels miraculous.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my clients, colleagues, and students who have shared their art and stories with me. Client stories and art have been modified, and names and identifying details have been changed in order to protect confidentiality.

Leslie Monsalve-Jones, Larry Harkcom, and Claudia Escareno-Clark have such generous spirits and I appreciate their support and technical help. Claudia took many of the photos that appear in this book.

Dru Phoenix never wavered in her belief that this book should be written – her encouragement was priceless.

My heart has been touched by Wendy Wasserman's family stories and her perseverance to create an art-based genogram that she could be at peace with.

I was asking clients to create art-based family trees long before I really grasped the intricacies of Bowen's genograms. Art therapist Ruth Omlin gave me solid guidance in this area.

Heartfelt thanks to my partner Joey Esquipula Montoya, the solid, sheltering tree in my art-based genogram. And I'm so grateful for those two little bright spots of hope, my grandsons Elijah and Damian, who appear in my genogram as the adorable, cuddly little teddy bears that they truly are.

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Chapter 1

THE HISTORICAL USE OF GENOGRAMS

There were two volcanoes in the image. One was huge, spewing hot orangey-red lava and deep black smoke, smeared across the paper with soft, messy chalk pastels. Molly and Tom had created the large volcano together, representing their father who was no longer living with them. Tom, who was fifteen, also created a smaller volcano as an image of himself. He had recently been involved in an intense physical fight at school, which was the reason that Lillian had brought her family to therapy. Thirteen-year-old Molly looked up with tears in her eyes. “Sometimes it’s hard to be a turtle in this family – especially next to his volcano.” She pointed to her brother’s image. In the discussion that followed, there was no blame, just quiet talk of what they all used to do to try and prevent dad’s temper from erupting. The red, oozing lava flowed toward each of them, encircling the turtle, and Molly (the turtle) was being ineffectively shielded by her mom, who had pictured herself as an umbrella. And Lillian, the umbrella, was exhausted (see Figure 1).

Painfully aware that she hadn’t been able to shield her kids from her ex-husband’s anger, she was terrified that Tom would turn into a huge volcano like his dad. Looking at the lava in the image we instinctively understood the overwhelming feeling of being surrounded by a family member’s rage.

In future sessions we explored the effect of the raging lava on the turtle and the smaller volcano’s lives, the relationship they formed and how their experiences of anger impacted all relationships in their lives. Tom felt like he had started out as a playful puppy and eventually he replaced his volcano in the art-based genogram with a jumping puppy. Lillian wondered if any of them would ever learn how to be angry in a

healthy way.

Using the turtle image, Molly shared how she used to wonder every day if she would be the problem that would set off the tremors that would result in the volcano coming to life again. She talked about anxiety and insomnia and the urge to be invisible. She and her mom and brother had developed exquisite, finely-tuned antennae that they scanned their environments for danger with.

I share this particular case story because it captures the immediacy and accessibility of the images present in an art-based genogram. Emotions and relationship struggles were present, along with the gifts and strengths of family members. And in my enthusiasm I've jumped ahead of myself. It's important to understand the meaning behind genograms and they've been used.



Figure 1. Lillian's Family's Art-Based Genogram.

The concept of the genogram didn't initially include art. Murray Bowen, well-known for his development of family systems theory, used

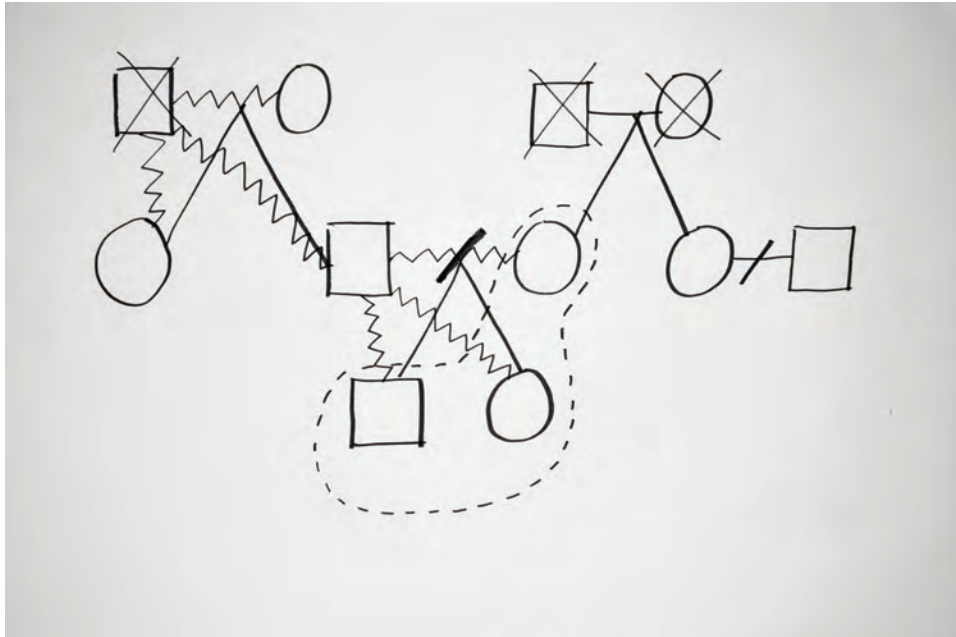


Figure 2. Lillian's Family's Traditional Genogram.

the concept of creating a sort of map of family members from the work of family physicians who tracked medical information generationally (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). As Bowen mapped family members and important data including births, deaths, marriages, divorces, medical conditions, race, employment, etc. emerged, he developed ideas about how families intentionally and unintentionally transmit beliefs, emotional reactivity and ways of being family, across generations. He understood that his individual clients had been shaped and guided by many generations of their ancestors, either consciously or unconsciously. Bowen stated: "After having spent thousands of hours sitting with families, it became increasingly impossible to see a single-person without 'seeing' his total family sitting like phantoms alongside him" (Bowen, 1978, p. 152).

On the first day of my family art therapy course I always invite my students to understand that the room will be filled, every class, with our ancestors. As we start sorting them all out, I think it's important to first understand and use the traditional genogram and I encourage them to explore McGoldrick's thorough examples (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). I also like to show clients the traditional structure as a be-