

The Use of Genograms, Eco-maps, and Time Lines in Adoption Practice

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The use of these three tools has been part of social work, child welfare, and therapy practice for many years. This course does not teach how to construct genograms, eco-maps, or time lines but rather gives information on how to use the tools specifically in adoption practice. *For information about the way to construct these tools, please see the materials in the section “Suggested Readings” for Session 2.*

Genograms are a wonderful way to see visually how families develop over one or more generations. They are tools for family systems mapping. As Hartman stated, “Not only is each individual immersed in the complex here-and-now life space, but each individual is also part of a family saga, in an infinitely complicated human system which has developed over many generations and has transmitted powerful commands, role assignments, events, and patterns of living and relating down through the years” (Hartman, 1979, p. 305).

Patterns, themes and relationships can be studied on the page as well as being useful to illustrate key points, such as where a child or children would fit in a family. Are there other children (cousins, for example) approximately the same age? What role might a child take in this family? Might this child be seen as a replacement for a member of the family who has been cut off or who has passed away? How does this family accept new members? Is this an ethnically, racially or culturally diverse family? What might be the impact of a sibling set? Or a disabled child?

Families are sometimes able to see via a genogram what had remained either unclear or unspoken about a proposed adoption. Genograms can make excellent homework assignments for families during the home study process. Many people, when given such an assignment, go to other family members to seek information with which to complete the genogram; that interviewing process can generate important conversation and exploration. An assignment to plumb for any one of the core issues via genograms can also be a valuable exercise. For example, “Where have losses occurred in your family and how does your family respond to members who experience loss?” Or, “What is the identity of your family? Who carries that identity? How can a new member acquire the family identity?” Genograms can be re-visited after a placement to see how the issues in the family and extended family are emerging.

It is often helpful and instructive to have birth families complete genograms as well. Patterns of loss may become evident. With the birth family’s permission, passing the genogram along to the prospective adoptive family can provide an adoptee with a sense of belonging in and not just “to” the birth family and, perhaps, a better understanding of the reasons for the placement.

Genograms are useful, of course, in the therapeutic setting to facilitate the understanding of the impact of the adoption and the accompanying issues as well as any conflicts that may emerged. Genograms tend to increase empathy, promote understanding, and encourage communication when used as a therapy tool.

Eco-maps are another tool to help clients visualize the connections they have personally and as a family with other individuals, groups, and systems. Eco-maps can be used as an assessment, planning, and interventive tool. Eco-maps plot the major systems that are part of a family’s life and the relationships between the family and those systems, such as the religious community, the



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extended family, schools, friends/peer systems, etc. It can be helpful to a family to lay out where they may find their greatest support or to help a family better understand their isolation which may negatively impact the adoption. It is helpful also to show the strength of the connection by a variation in the lines and to demonstrate the flow of energy by drawing arrows along the connecting lines. For a family considering the adoption of a medically-fragile child, for example, it might be useful to first map the family's current eco-map, then map the child's, and then to look at the two maps combined. More complex maps can be developed which show the family as a whole as well as individual family members' connections to other systems. Eco-maps can also be used to look backwards and forwards. For example, a clinician might ask a family to construct an eco-map of their current situation, then to ask the family to draw an eco-map of how they would like their family connections to be. The question then can be asked, "What will have happened to cause the eco-map to change in that way?" The answer(s) to that question allow for planning intervention with a quickly engaged family. As Hartman stated, "The connections, the themes, and the quality of the family's life seem to jump off the page, and this leads to a more holistic and integrative perception" (Hartman, , 1979, p. 304).

Finally, **time lines** can be useful in connecting up the parts of children's episodic lives. Art projects can accompany the creation of time lines. Children and families can go back in time to places a child has lived, for example, to take or draw pictures. Clinicians can help children and families arrive at an understanding of how the child has developed specific behaviors, fears, or thoughts. It is also helpful for parents to make a separate time line for their lives during the time before the child came into the family. The parents' time line and the child's can then be placed together on the same page parallel to each other, so that each can see what the other was doing while they were not together.

All three of these tools allow children and families to organize, objectify, and visualize a great deal of information about themselves and the family that they live in as well as other family systems. Because much of the work of the creation of the tools can be done without the practitioner being present and brought into sessions or meetings, the three tools may be especially helpful for use by busy professionals. They make valuable additions to the record and can also make transitions to new workers slightly easier by providing for the transmission of important information. In addition to creating genograms, eco-maps, and time lines by hand, computer software is available. The links can be found on the Internet.

Reference

Hartman, A. (1979). The contact phase. In B. Compton, & B. Galaway (Eds.), *Social Work Processes*, (pp. 299-310). Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press.

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