

# Family of origin literature review, critical genogram, and reflection



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## Part I: Family of Origin Literature Review

According to Chen and Weitzman (2005), children who are exposed to parents with drinking problems are more likely to experience maladjustment, including emotional and behavioral problems, substance use, and academic difficulties. Specifically, paternal problem drinking was associated with children experiencing emotional insecurity resulting in avoidance behaviors or attempts at mediating conflict between parents (Keller, Gilbert, Koss, Cummings, & Davies, 2011). Fathers demonstrated less sensitivity, positive affect and less verbalization of feelings than fathers without alcohol problems (Keller et al., 2011). According to Goeke (2017), children will often utilize their family pets as a source of protection, comfort, and distraction to cope with family stress. Additionally, fathers were more likely to utilize psychological control with their children, such as the use of guilt and domineering interactional styles to manipulate their children to demonstrate certain behaviors (Keller, Cummings, Davies, & Mitchell, 2008).

As children transition into adulthood, adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) were more likely to experience avoidant and anxious romantic attachment styles, as demonstrated by maintaining a defensive and self-protective orientation to relationships. (Kelley, Cash, Grant, Miles, & Santos, 2004). Furthermore, ACOA's had difficulty trusting others, being appropriately intimate and maintaining healthy boundaries due to experiencing inconsistent nurturance in childhood, as well as, parents who prioritized their own needs over their children (Kelley et al., 2004). More specifically, adult

daughters of alcoholic fathers (ADAF) demonstrated significantly higher insecure attachments than non-ADAF (Jaeger, Hahn, & Weinraub, 2000).

Upon reflection of the literature review, my family aligns with the ideas of maladjustment patterns, attachment styles, and psychological control. My father exhibited domineering interaction styles, including verbal and emotional abuse, shame, guilt and threats in order to control our behaviors (Keller et al., 2008). Conflicts occurred nightly between my mother and father, or my brother and father, often during dinner about insignificant problems. My father blamed my mother consistently and perceived her expression of feelings as an attack rather than an attempt at resolving conflict (Keller et al., 2011). I was the mediator in the family, often attempting to defend my father because I desperately sought his approval, despite him never giving me praise or expressing nurturing feelings (Keller et al., 2011). If I could not provide mediation, I would often avoid the conflict by hiding in my bedroom with our family dog, as a form of comfort and distraction. My attachment to my dogs was profound, as I felt their love was consistent and non-threatening (Goeke, 2017). Interestingly, I was the child who outwardly had emotional, behavioral and academic problems; whereas my brother, utilized distractions, such as gaming, to cope with his abuse.

As I transitioned into adulthood, my romantic relationship patterns did align with experiencing avoidant attachment due to inconsistent nurturance in childhood (Kelley et al., 2004). I witnessed the emotional disengagement and withdrawal between my parents which shaped my concept of what constitutes a relationship. Upon reflection, I am uncomfortable with

intimacy, distrust my partner's intentions, have difficulty depending on  
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others and experience overwhelming feelings of anxiety when I feel my partner wants more emotional intimacy. My father's domineering interactional styles has resulted in me avoiding conflict and suppressing any feelings other than happiness due to the fear of being abused or threatened. My mom survived by maintaining a positive outlook towards myself and my brother, which as her way of protecting us from uncomfortable feelings. However, it has only exacerbated my inability to manage strong emotions.

## Part II: Critical Genogram

Using the critical genogram process, two systems of oppression that existed in my family were sexism and classism. Within my nuclear family wealth and social standing were considered attainable and required goals. My parents both graduated high school, with my father completing college and he pursued a career as an electrician, earning him a high wage. His income allowed my family to own multiple homes, attend private schools and live in an upper-middle class neighborhood. Looking further in my family history, three out of four grandparents also completed college, both grandfathers obtained careers that provided disposable income and were homeowners. My family's stable income and adequate housing provided inherent resilience due to the access of resources (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009). Despite the abuse that existed within my family, I was never burdened with additional societal problems, such as financial stress, unstable employment or inadequate housing.

Furthermore, my social standing allowed my parents to actively foster both mine and my brother's talents, skills and interests by enrolling us in

extracurricular activities. Also, my parents had the freedom to closely monitor my experiences in institutions, such as school or employment opportunities. Interestingly, this created both pressure and shame because if I did not meet my parent's expectations I was punished. I can remember the expectation to earn a job as soon as legally possible, to attend piano lessons despite my lack of interest as it builds "responsibility" and the required minimum 1 hour daily piano practices. However, by avoiding acknowledging that my stressors were all related to the unearned privileges I was born into and that generations of my family had access to, disrupts my progress towards raising critical consciousness (Kosutic, Garcia, Graves, Barnett, Hall, Haley, Rock, Bathon, & Kaiser, 2009).

Not only did classism impact my family functioning, but sexism also played a critical component throughout my childhood. My family had three generations of mothers who stayed at home to raise their children, while the fathers worked high-paying blue-collar jobs. Within traditional Italian cultural family dynamics, women were expected to accomplish the roles of motherhood and matrimony, whereas the men were expected to fulfill the roles as the primary income provider and contributed minimally to domestic duties (Miller, 2004). Furthermore, all of the women on my mother's side of the family lived at home until marriage and developed intensely close bonds with their mother. These gender roles can be traced back from when my great-grandparents lived in Italy and migrated to the United States.

Observing how sexism has impacted my family has allowed me to become more aware of the tensions that have occurred within my household. Most of the women in my family were subjected to conform to oppressive gender

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roles that restricted their ability to explore opportunities outside of the home. Growing up within dominant educational institutions, I was taught independence, autonomy and self-reliance which are concepts that challenged the extremely close family relationships in my family, which were the basis of their social circle. I am the first generation that has accepted more traditional dominant American views and values. My desire to pursue a higher education, prioritize occupation over marriage and demonstrate ambivalence about having children has created a dysfunctional relationship with my mother. She has shamed me for not being as close to her as she was with her mother. The messages I have received are that I am not a good daughter and that I am a disappointment to my mother. Despite my attempts at educating my mother on how I have different values, our relationship remains tense.

Experiencing both sexism and classism within my family has accumulated in feeling both comfortable and not comfortable with owning various aspects of my social identity (Kosutic et al., 2009). During my adolescent years, I was prideful of my upper-middle-class socioeconomic status due to being entrenched in a community that was colorblind to other class statuses. It was not until I entered graduate school that I became fully aware of my privileges and how I have both oppressed and benefitted from the oppression of others. As a child, I remember driving through the downtown area of my hometown and my parents pointing out that the male migrant workers were “ dangerous” and as a woman I had to be very alert of their “ advances”. What I did not realize was that my parents were othering a group of people based on their race, sex, and class. I acknowledge that I

have distanced myself from owning my privileges due to generations of my family having access to wealth and resources. Working through my white guilt in therapy has been challenging and critical in fighting against oppressive systems so that I do not re-traumatize and perpetuate systems of oppression.

### Part III: Reflection

Interestingly, while constructing my genogram and reflecting upon my feelings, I observed that I have had minimal reactions. I have been in therapy since childhood and I have had a lifetime of conversations surrounding the abuse in my family and the impacts on our family dynamics. However, I do question whether my limited reactions are a healthy or unhealthy response. Am I avoiding my feelings? Or have I worked through these problems where I am now able to discuss it without feeling overwhelmed? These questions I will continue to reflect upon and analyze as I continue through this course.

Despite my lack of emotional reactions, I had a lot of thoughts surrounding the intergenerational transmission of violence that were uncovered.

Specifically, the abuse that occurred in both of my mother and father's parents. Identifying the impact of those destructive behaviors influenced how I perceived my father's emotional and verbal abuse. While I still hold anger towards my father, I have been able to logically understand that my father both witnessed and experienced abuse in his household. He learned violence as a form of communication through direct conditioning and

imitation of his parent's behaviors (Stith, Rosen, Middleton, Busch, Lundeberg, & Carlton, 2000).

Additionally, the relationship with my dogs has been a critical coping mechanism as a child and into adulthood. Due to the stress within my family from my father's alcoholism, communication between family members was limited. However, our family dogs became the focal point of all our interactions because it was easier to focus attention and affection on them instead of between each other (Walsh, 2009). I can remember when my father was fighting with my mother, both myself and my brother would tell them to stop because it was upsetting our dog. Rather than communicating how we were feeling, we utilized our dog as a mediator.

Traditional gender norms have had a huge impact on how I perceive relationships. In my family, despite any abuse that occurred, the women have not divorced or left their abuser. Even in my nuclear family, my mother never left my father which has influenced my difficulty in developing romantic or platonic relationships. I am often guarded and reserved when engaging with new people because I fear they will demonstrate violent or abusive behaviors. Additionally, as a social worker who is a trauma survivor and provides counseling for trauma survivors, I have conflictual thoughts. As a social worker, I understand that having love for your abuser is common and I also am aware of the impacts it can have on the family. As a family member, this is unacceptable and frustrating because I have witnessed my mother and brother being severely impacted by my father's abuse.



Being able to reflect on my thoughts and feelings surrounding my family-of-origin has informed my understanding of how it can impact my practice of social work. In my family-of-origin, anger was used as a manipulative tool by my father to get his needs met (Keller et al., 2008). In my social work practice, I have observed that conflict and arguing immediately increases my heart rate, creates a heaviness in my chest and I get racing thoughts. I have diligently worked on developing coping skills to utilize in the moment, such as deep breathing or concentrating on my physical body. My concern is my potential for misuse of power. For example, if I am re-experiencing a conflictual dynamic similar to my family, instead of allowing space for family members to reenact their relational patterns, I might terminate the conversation due to my discomfort with anger.

Despite these challenges, I have also developed strengths due to my family-of-origin. Due to my family's conflicts and having to adapt and adjust to a constantly changing environment has allowed me to be flexible in my social work practice. For example, my previous job as a program manager I was responsible for my team and ensuring their ability to achieve outcomes for our varying grants. During my time there, my agency lost a huge grant that funded a large portion of my staff's position. We were able to reallocate funds to keep the staff, but we had to change how we operated as a team. I recognized that I was able to immediately and instinctively adapt to these changes, instead of demonstrating resistance. This allowed me to provide stability for my team and be able to provide space for them to vent and adjust to the changes.

My strengths and challenges as a result of my family-of-origin creates experiences, orientations and potential biases that I bring with me in my work with families. Due to the intergenerational pattern of the fathers in my family being the abusers, I recognize that in working with families where the father is the identified perpetrator, I might struggle to remain completely unbiased. For example, with Functional Family Therapy, the therapist's role is to change the family dynamics and is an active participant who gets involved with the dynamics of the group (Gehart, 2015). Being an active therapist potentially could result in countertransference. In order to prevent my bias from interfering with promoting change, it is critical that I continue to address any issues with my therapist. Furthermore, seeking out supervision and group supervision around potentially triggering populations so that I am actively trying to prevent any personal bias from interfering with the therapeutic alliance.

Furthermore, my privileges provided access to resources, consistent parental monitoring, stable income and adequate housing which has oriented me to understand family dynamics through my own personal lens. In other words, when working with marginalized families who might be experiencing abuse in the home, I have the potential to view it as an individualized problem due to my personal experiences with my father's alcoholism. However, understanding the effects of oppression provides for a contextual, relational nature of problems within families. I can conceptualize these problems as families struggle to cope and survive within a system based on oppression and injustice. Furthermore, understanding and owning my own privilege, rather than ignoring it, can make visible other families struggles due to

having a lack of privilege. Any progress that a family achieves during therapy is much more significant when I acknowledge they were achieved despite the severe limitations from institutionalized oppression.

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