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Practice methods for ADR practitioners

Use of the genogram in training mediators and mediation sessions

Mieke Brandon

Family mediators work with all types of families and disputes and observe many levels of closeness and distance in these families. To enhance the mediator's understanding of the dynamics of family interaction, principles from systems theory can be synthesised and related to the practice of family mediation.

This article first addresses how genograms can be used in training family mediators. Second, it describes how the information from a genogram can be used in the context of the mediation process, including intake and supervision. Third, it illustrates through a case study how a genogram can be used to depict family structures and act as a basis for the discussion of conflicting needs and interests in a combined family.

Introduction

Originally the genogram was used by Bowen[1] and other family therapists who found it useful to contextualise clients' 'issues' by developing a multigenerational 'map' of the client family. This approach is pattern and structure orientated. The information gathered by vertically mapping the family could be used to explore how past events have influenced current patterns of interaction through transmission along generational lines. The genogram is now widely used in disciplines such as relationship counselling and medicine, and as a self-administered task by clients and patients. Genograms are used in the training of family therapists, relationship or marriage counsellors, doctors and, more recently, family mediators.

In family mediation a genogram can be used for the personal and professional development of mediators in order for them to gain insight into each member's place within the family of origin. The construction of a genogram at intake can assist in building rapport, encouraging discussion and collecting of data. Mediators can use a genogram in the mediation session itself to 'join' with the parties, collect factual and emotional information, challenge cultural stereotypes based on class or gender based assumptions, or explore unresolved generational or current family based conflicts.

What does a genogram look like?

A genogram is a visual representation of a family structure which provides information on the individuals who make up the family and their relationship to one another through the use of symbols (such as a square for male and a circle for female). The genogram provides specific information (births, deaths, marriages, de facto and multicultural relationships). A variety of lines (dotted, crossed, zigzag) are used to show the degree of closeness / conflict in relationships between family members (see p 50).

continued on page 48 ➢

➢ continued from page 45

A simple genogram is used to establish (i) factual data on the current generation of a family, (ii) descriptions of individuals and their relationships with each other, and (iii) differences in perceptions and impressions. A traditional diagram may not adequately represent the way many people from different cultures live within larger groups and/or extended families. Here, the genogram needs expansion. Colours may be used to represent cultural groups. The genogram can identify intercultural marriage or relationships, and show people adopting a new culture besides the one with which they primarily identify.

How might the genogram be used?

Genograms can be used to illustrate one generation of a family or more. Multiculturalism or cultural homogeneity can be immediately recognised by the (sensitive) use of colours.[2] The genogram allows information to be gathered on one or all parties involved in the mediation and may also show elements of their connection to the outside world, for example chronological events, the role of each family member and the families' operating or organising principles. Behaviours regarded by the family as positive or negative (for example, culturally based pride or shame) or behaviours in time of stress and anxiety can be identified and discussed.

Through using the genogram the mediator may also collect data on aspects surrounding transitions within the family, for example physical, social, emotional and behavioural changes experienced at particular points in time — birth, death, migration, relocation, adolescence, retirement, children leaving home, redundancy, addiction or substance abuse.

Relationship changes are depicted along horizontal lines, for example stresses related to one person in the family are most likely to influence others in the same family. Intergenerational or historical 'themes of anxiety' are often transferred down the generations and represented vertically in a genogram. When a family faces the task of reorganising their relationships at crucial points along the family lifecycle, obstacles may appear such as the challenging of family or gender roles, rules, values and characteristics. It is how these obstacles are negotiated that will have significant influence on the couple, their children and their family relationships. The resulting family dynamics provide important information about how differences and conflict are managed in the family. When the context of the extended family is seen, the picture becomes more complex.

Families can become 'stuck' as a result of their inability to resolve conflict. When this impasse is reached they may find it difficult to move into the next phase of their family lifecycle and it is often at this point in time that mediation is sought. For example, when a family member dies and others had unfulfilled expectations about their inheritance, a family could find themselves in dispute.

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Family mediators' training

Structuring a genogram for personal and professional development helps explore contextual issues such as cultural heritage, religious, spiritual or ethnic affiliations, and socioeconomic and social network changes. The issues one's family argued or argues about — such as money, sex, children, drugs, inlaws, intimacy or honesty — may either parallel or be significantly different from those of another party's family. Like family therapists, mediators also need to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for differences that exist between and among families and examine their own cultural identities and how this influences their understanding of people and 'acceptance of those who are both of culturally similar and dissimilar backgrounds'.[3]

For family mediators to become familiar and adept at using genograms in their practice it is recommended that they first construct a three generational genogram of their own family. The aim of this exercise is to allow the mediator to differentiate their own issues from those of their clients. Drawing one's own genogram can be a useful tool to explore values around conflict, gender issues and beliefs that come from the family of origin. The family 'map' over time may also provide the mediator ➢

➢ with some positive and useful information about issues of transition, family development and personal change.

Mediators may wish to examine how intimacies, conflict, closeness, distance, celebrations, anger, loss and grief were managed in their family of origin. This is again best explored over three generations, for example: what messages did they receive as a child from the 'norms' established over the generations and how useful are these values and beliefs for them as adults?

The purpose of this exercise is to discover what impact the family of origin has had on the mediator's adult life and their role as family mediator. It may assist the mediator to empathise and understand that the parties' families of origin significantly influences family conflict. It may also raise questions such as how family of origin issues might influence how a mediator structures the content and process of the mediation session, and how future agreements between parties might be influenced by the past.

Using a genogram at the intake stage

Although the family mediator may use the genogram at any stage of the mediation process, the advantage of using it at intake is that it can provide a point of focus that not only describes the family in conflict but also outlines the complexities of the family system. This assists the mediator to clarify information while at the same time providing the parties with a broader perspective on the conflict in which they are involved.

Adolescent/parent mediation

For example in an intake interview between an adolescent and his or her parents, the mediator asks the adolescent to explain his or her family while the mediator draws a genogram on the board. The young person may feel more comfortable in explaining what is known (construction) than in explaining how he or she feels about the situation or dispute with his or her parents at this stage. Through a discussion of how everyone 'fits' into the family, and the relationship they have with each other, the young person may start to open up and provide more information about the current situation or history of conflict.

A systemic approach would suggest that the issues with one person in a family couldn't be usefully explored without also exploring the person's relationships to other members of the family. This type of information gathering needs to include other factors such as interactions with friendship networks, sexual preference, school, work, church, community and cultural identity. Using a genogram gives both mediator and young client a method for viewing how past events may have influenced current difficulties. Information is shared and visually displayed, which differs significantly from the more traditional 'history taking'.

The family 'map' shows the structure of the family system and may act as a basis to highlight various features of that system, for example, the messages handed down about 'right' and 'wrong', behaviours which underlie conflict, triangulations and enmeshments. Triangulation occurs when tension between two people becomes 'emotionally unbearable' and they invite or draw a third person into their dispute. (Triangles can also be formed between three people and between two people and a memory of a third, between parent and child and the family pet, between parents and their newborn baby, and so on.[4]) Enmeshment concerns lack of differentiation between family members and their capacity for autonomy.

Where the family has labelled one family member as 'the problem', other members of the system are unlikely to move towards changing their own behaviour. In this circumstance there is a risk that the agreements made in the mediation room will not be sustainable. As Becvar and Becvar suggest,[5] a problem does not lie with one person it lies within the family system.

The mediator can also use the genogram to describe and 'normalise' adolescent developmental issues. In this example, the construction of the genogram can be done from the young person's perspective with input from the parents on completion of the 'map'. Their input may include similar or different interpretations, which provide 'grist for the mill' in mediation.[6]

Alternatively, a genogram structured by the parent(s) and the young person together may engage them in a shared dialogue/process which, incidentally, helps them focus on something 'objective' rather than on their anger with each other. If managed well by the mediator, this task may give all parties time to 'cool down'[7] and separate 'the people' from 'the problem'. It may build bridges as they share information and perceptions, let go of their fear of being criticised, or laugh about a shared perception of who the 'goodies' and 'baddies' are in the family. It may also serve to inform the young person about their parents' or their grandparents' generation.

Will and estate mediation

In testamentary disputes a genogram can help visualise the family structure and the complexities of parties' relationships. These disputes are often traumatic as grief, jealousy and unfulfilled expectations are mixed with legal and social issues. Mediation can help not only to clarify and resolve the issues of the will and estate but also to explore the future relationships within the family.[8]

During intake, or while in a mediation session, the mediator may find that family members may have been treated differently by the distribution of the estate. These differences can be based on values and beliefs held within the family, for instance where a family farm is passed on to the brother(s) and the sister(s) are left with next to nothing; or in a family where one of the daughters has taken primary care of the last living parent and inherits in contrast with other members of the same family who may have indirectly contributed, for example ➢

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➢ through financial support. Alternatively, some members of the family could have taken items or borrowed money from the deceased which, in the opinion of other members, created an unequal distribution.

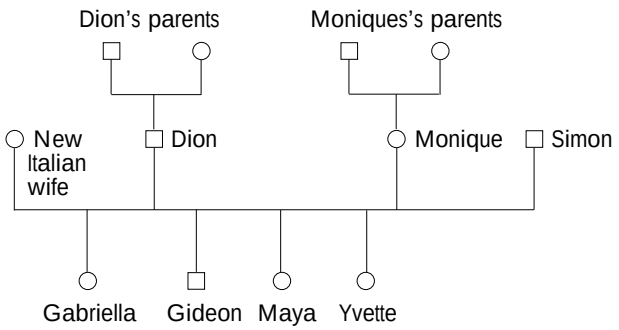
Where once there may have been emotional closeness within these families, which could have enabled them to console each other over their loss, these family members find themselves instead in an emotional crisis.

Separation mediation

In separation, mediation parties may have issues which affect combined families, and as such it may be useful to draw genograms and interactional patterns on a whiteboard.

Case study

Dion (a 47 year old IT specialist) divorced Monique (a 44 year old who works in her own business selling aromatherapy products) almost 10 years ago. He has been living overseas much of that time. Their three children (Gideon 14 years old, Maya 12 and Yvette nine) live with Monique and her partner of five years, Simon (a 40 year old, UK born, Swedish massage therapist and teacher). When Dion returned permanently with his new wife (a 30 year old Italian engineer) and their one year old daughter Gabriella, he wanted the other three children to live with him 'to make up for lost time'. Monique's Dutch parents live near their daughter and continue to play a significant role in the children's lives. Dion's parents — who had regular contact with the children when they were younger and before Monique moved in with Simon — are now elderly and in a nursing home.



Above is a basic genogram of this extended family.

With the help of the parties, the mediator uses the whiteboard to draw a family chart as a mutually supportive exercise to help all present understand the implications of this blended family's interactional pattern. The mediator adds ages and significant dates and uses other symbols such as those for divorce, distance, closeness and conflict, to highlight the interactions between the extended families, for example, the grandparents and possibly the family of Dion's new wife. A dotted line is drawn around the family to indicate the members who live together. Care is taken, however, not to overload the construction.

Ethical considerations

Some cultural groups may have difficulty with providing information about the previous generation due to information being destroyed in war, or because of genocide, slavery, being part of the stolen generation or other such circumstances. When focusing on past and current interactions it is important to be sensitive to the use of language to describe meanings. The mediator must be aware of their influence on the construction and the parties' influence on each other through verbal (tone of voice, inflection, word emphasis, phrasing of questions, description of issues, use of metaphor) and non-verbal (body language, positioning, venue, room layout, eye contact, gestures and greetings) means.[9]

Mediators need to remain sensitive about how information is discussed in joint and private mediation sessions. Discussion needs to be pre-empted with information about how confidentiality will be managed and parties' levels of discretion considered. Information shared in mediation must be relevant to the concerns expressed or issues negotiated from the list of issues or 'agenda' of the parties. Mediators need to be forever vigilant about their 'duty of care' regarding family violence in its many forms.

'Mediators need to remain sensitive about how information is discussed in joint and private mediation sessions. Discussion needs to be pre-empted with information about how confidentiality will be managed and parties' levels of discretion considered.'

Risks and benefits of using genograms

The indiscriminate use of genograms may lead to power imbalances, blame, bias or shaming behaviours. Not all ➢

➢ parties warm towards the idea of constructing a genogram and may even consider it 'a waste of time'.[10] The parties' attitudes need to be constantly monitored by the mediator and the mediator needs to make the purpose of its use overt so the process is mutually respected and the structuring of the genogram is a 'collaborative partnership'.[11] The mediator also focuses on the parties' strengths, resilience and positive attributes while discussing the interactions to help reframe things for the future, encouraging exploration and resolution of the issues.

Alternatively, mediators may structure the genogram from the information obtained either prior to or during an intake session. Mediators may have the family representation, as they understand it so far, drawn on the whiteboard prior to the parties entering the room. The mediator may use a very simple genogram showing the names and ages of the children for parents in separation mediation. The mediator and the parents are thus reminded to focus on the decisions to be made in the best interests of the developmental needs of the children who are 'visually represented in the room'. Mediators may use a genogram of the family structure in their personal notes to remind them of the case.

Supervision

Mediators may also use genograms as tools in their own professional supervision as a way of describing the case to their supervisor to provide a lot of information in a fast and economical way. This may also open up discussion about the mediator's own family of origin which may be influencing their practice. Use of a genogram may keep the supervision session focused on the process and interactions, instead of the content information.

Conclusion

Genograms are relevant if they help to create positive changes in perceptions or deeper understanding of family issues and conflict. Genograms can assist in the parties' acknowledgment and transformation and help to author previously untold stories. Genograms can be used to encourage discussion on the history of relationship patterns and provide a dramatic pictorial map illustrating the patterns of functional relationships. They may illustrate where transition difficulties have arisen as a result of preserving or preventing some relationship patterns, or the family wanting to protect itself from change.

This article has shown that the genogram is an appropriate and flexible tool which allows the family mediator to map and detail family structures and relationship patterns across a number of generations. The tool can be used in different professional contexts such as at intake, during mediation sessions, for notetaking and in supervision.

Mediators should first examine their own family of origin issues through the use of a genogram. By participating in this personal exploration mediators will be better equipped to use a genogram in their professional life. In turn, parties may then be assisted to overcome the impasses in their family lifecycle which led them to mediation in the first place. ●

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