

Genograms or “housework”

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Abstract

Housework is a narrative and visual strategy that is similar to genograms in the co-construction of meaning and understanding between counsellor and client. This article seeks to describe what housework is and to compare it with genograms. It outlines the advantages and potential value of housework as a tool for engaging and supporting secondary students in counselling. It also illustrates how housework can be used by guidance counsellors and as well as within the wider counselling field.

Keywords: genograms, housework, co-construction, visual mapping, counselling

The use of genograms in counselling interventions is a well-established practice. The process involves visually mapping complex multigenerational patterns of relationships with the client(s) and the ongoing integration of this information into assessment, planning, and goal-setting (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Information shared through a process of developing and discussing a genogram can include relationships among family members, family structures, and demographic information. While this can be an initial strategy to enhance engagement, it can also become an integral part of the ongoing relationship. The value is in supporting both the counsellor and the client to co-construct meaning and understanding. Altshuler (1999), who reviewed the use of genograms with children in care, suggests that it can result in an increase in rapport between counsellor and client, particularly where there are ethnic differences.

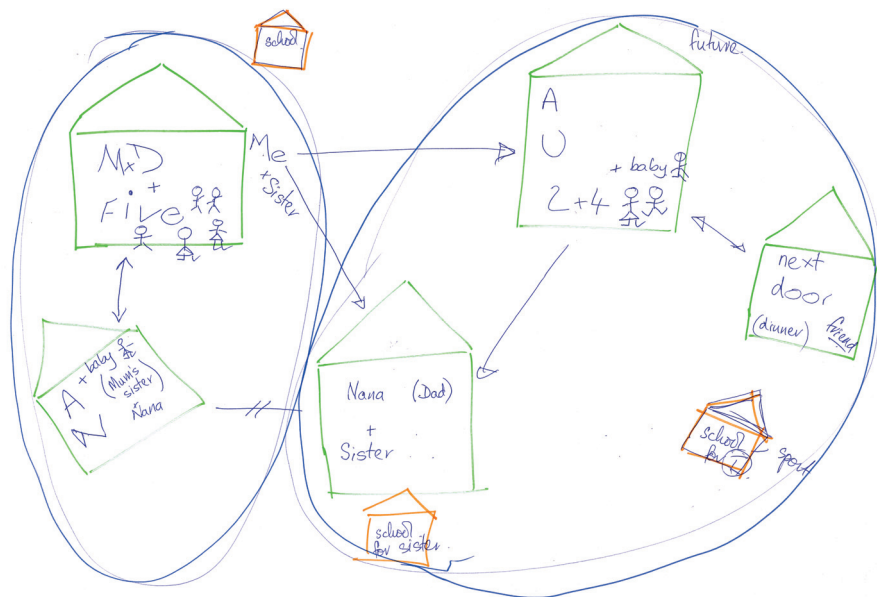
I am interested in using genograms with secondary school students. However, I find that the use of this strategy with adolescents is complicated by the reliance on specific meaning-laden symbols. These include squares (males), circles (females), solid lines (legally connected family members), dotted lines (distant or non-legal connections), and jagged lines (conflictual relationships) (Altshuler, 1999).

I looked for another, simpler way to map stories. Initially, my concern was with a client group of students who changed schools frequently. There is a strong association between school transience and residential mobility, and both are associated with changes in family circumstances and accommodation arrangements (Child Poverty Action Group, 2014). As well, there are significant long-term effects related to family, school, and extra-familial support networks for adolescents who move houses frequently (Fowler, Henry, & Marcal, 2015). The strategy, which I call “housework,” was developed to support these vulnerable students. It has similarities with genograms but its simplicity seems to help to engage the young people. Among the advantages of using this strategy is that it is based on the premise of co-construction of knowledge to use and visually map their narratives. As I use this with a range of students, I realise that it can be useful for many—not only those who move schools and houses frequently, but also students who have difficulties and experience tough times at home.

To begin, I have paper (usually A4) and pens ready on a nearby table. As I listen to the story being told to me, I am alert to any references to family members. Bringing the paper closer to both of us, I say, “So tell me who’s in your house?” And I draw a simple house shape (a rectangle for the base and a triangle for the roof) and say, “If we think of this as your house, let’s draw you in the house. Where shall we put you?” At this point the student either picks up the pen I am offering, or points. If the student doesn’t draw, then I start by drawing a stick figure. Depending on the sense of engagement from the student, I may spend time adding details like features, hair, or clothing, and a name or initial.

I gradually, and with careful use of time and silence, ask a series of questions and branching questions. As the responses come, either I continue to draw stick figures or the student takes over.

- Who else is in your house with you? (I include pets, as this can be helpful in a later discussion.)
- Do you share a room with anyone in your family?
- Who are you the most close to in this house?
- Is there anyone important who doesn’t live in your house?
- Where do they live? Can you draw where they live? (As this second house gets drawn on the paper I think about degree of closeness and distance in its positioning.)
- Have you ever lived in another house? Can you draw this house on the paper? Who lived with you in this house? Why did you move from this house? Did that mean you had to change schools? Can you tell me about that?



This work illustrates the use of housework to support the narrative of a 14-year-old boy, T. He and his sister have had to move from their house with Mum and Dad and five younger siblings because of overcrowding. Initially he and his sister moved to the house of their Nana (maternal grandmother) in the same suburb so they could stay at their school. Nana lost her job, and Auntie's baby, who also lived with her mother in Nana's house, kept crying, so T and his sister shifted into two separate family houses with different parts of their extended families in a neighbouring suburb. They go to different schools now.

T likes being with this Auntie and Uncle (on his dad's side) and it means he can go and see his sister. His friend's house is next door and he sometimes goes there after school and has dinner there. He likes his friend's mum and his new school but he misses being with his mum and dad. They don't have a car and it's too far to walk. Maybe he will ask Uncle to take him to see his mum and dad one day.

N.B. Any inconsistencies in the diagram's format are due to the nature of the working discussion. The blue boundaries represent different suburbs. This work was constructed jointly.

- Are there other houses that you stay in? (We draw this house, too.)
- Where do Nana and Poppa stay? Where's their house?

In this way, information about relationships and conflicts in the student's home becomes apparent visually. With some students, I learn about the impact of overcrowding. With others, I learn about the loneliness of being home alone, waiting for

parents to come home from work. Some students are anxious about increasing rents, or the vulnerability of being in a single-parent house, and many students (across the economic spectrum) express worry about having to move house. I ask about family construction: single generation, extended or multigenerational. It is also worth asking how students go to and from home as this may elicit experiences of bullying.

Sometimes I ask the student to describe their house and they talk about the emotional warmth (“happy,” “unhappy,” “I feel scared in my house”) rather than the colour or shape of the house. I ask about how they look after themselves in their house and who cares for them. This is when I might bring the pets in and discuss friends, aunties, and extended family (and draw their houses also). This can lead on to talk about a house where the student finds emotional and physical safety or a safe house to escape to. The discussion may lead to students talking about specific situations of loss and grief, about family members dying or leaving, and/or the losses and grief about how and where they live now.

I sometimes ask, “What would you like to change about your house?” This needs to be done with care as many students lack the agency to make changes. However, this may lead on to a discussion about how to strengthen a house. Building language is helpful here (foundations, windows, open doors (opening minds)). For Māori students, the whare tapa whā model (Durie, 1982) can be used to talk about strengthening the whare with the four sides that embody physical and psychological wellbeing.

I also explore another possible source of support for students at school. Many schools organise the student body into vertically structured houses. For some students this is the most consistent, reliable house in their world, offering both secure boundaries and opportunities. I try to recognise this and if appropriate I spend time strengthening these bonds.

During the session, or in a follow-up session, the student or I can return to look at a particular house again, reflecting on what the page shows and thinking about different ways of looking at the arrangement or changing it. At the end of the session, for some students, the paper can be covered in houses and people moving between them. The houses tend to be higgledy-piggledy over the page as they are reflecting relationships that are complex and fluid.

Co-constructed creative work such as this can be used by counsellors to support young people to discuss and process what may be overwhelming events or distressing home environments. I have used this “housework” with success, predominantly with adolescent school students, and I believe it would also work well with younger children.

References

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