

## **Family Lifestyle Assessment: The Role of Family Myths and Values in the Client's Presenting Issues**

**William G. Nicoll and E Clair Hawes**

One of the family's basic developmental tasks is the socialization of children to fulfill roles both within the nuclear family and in outside social groups (Aldous, 1978). The family serves as the primary source from which the individual develops a sense of personal identity in relation to the world (Adler, 1958; Bowen, 1970; Minuchin, 1974). This socialization process involves the transmission of family values, attitudes, myths, and apperceptions regarding how one should best approach social, marital, and occupational roles. Personal growth in counseling, therefore, may be facilitated by assisting the client(s) in obtaining insight into dysfunctional myths and values derived from his/her family-of-origin and its effect upon present life adjustment. The client can then be assisted in making new decisions or developing new perspectives regarding his/her approach to life problems.

This article is the result of a project to develop a systematic counseling technique for assessing the impact of the Family Lifestyle on the client's present life difficulties. In particular, this technique is designed to elucidate specific values, attitudes, myths, and mistaken apperceptions developed within the family-of-origin which are adversely affecting the client's present functioning in social, occupational, and/or marital roles. The counseling technique developed combines aspects of the Adlerian individual lifestyle assessment technique (Eckstein, Baruth, & Maher, 1975) with the family genogram technique (Barnard & Corrales, 1979). The authors have found this approach to be useful in both individual and group counseling settings and to be applicable to marital and family counseling as well. Following a review of the principal

concepts involved, lifestyle and genograms, the counseling technique will be described and a brief, illustrative case study presented.

### The Family Lifestyle

Through the familial socialization process, each individual develops his/her own unique system of beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding him- or herself, others and his/her relationship to the world; that is, an Individual Lifestyle (Adler, 1956). Adler defined his concept of the Individual Lifestyle, or style of living, as based upon the individual's "law of movement"; that is, his/her particular set of attitudes, values, and apperceptions regarding life, goals in life, and how best to set about attaining these goals. The individual's Lifestyle is viewed by Adlerian counselors as a *cognitive framework* by which behaviors are selected, generally at a level of *unawareness*, that will move the individual toward his/her goals in life while avoiding behaviors or actions that would endanger his/her sense of value and belonging (Papenek, 1972).

Adler's development of the Individual Lifestyle concept was in part influenced by the earlier works of the sociologist Max Weber and his work on the Collective Lifestyles of groups (Ansbacher, 1967). Weber (1946) noted that members of different groups, subcultures, and cultures tended to share similar values, attitudes, and patterns of living that differentiated them from other groups or cultures. As an intermediate step between the development of the Individual Lifestyle as noted by Adler and the Collective Lifestyle of the cultural group(s) to which the individual belongs as noted by Weber, Deutsch (1967) has suggested the concept of the Family Lifestyle. This concept reflects the family's unique "biased apperceptions" (Dreikurs, 1967) of the outside world or society and the family's *prescribed*, as well as *proscribed*, approaches toward coping with and having a significant place in this world. The Family Lifestyle, then, represents the family's own shared values, myths, and attitudes regarding appropriate goals and behaviors for its members.

The concepts of Collective Lifestyle, Family Lifestyle, and Individual Lifestyle are interrelated. The individual's unique Lifestyle—or personality style—will of necessity reflect, to some extent, the Family Lifestyle within which it developed. Moreover, the Family Lifestyle will, in turn, reflect the particular Collective Lifestyle of the subculture(s) and culture to which it belongs. In partial support of this concept of the Family Lifestyle, one notes the large number of authors in the field of family therapy who have made similar observations. That is, when one analyzes a family system over several generations, one becomes aware of both functional and dysfunctional values, myths, and interactional patterns

which have been transmitted from one generation to the next (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Sparks, 1973; Bowen, 1976; Ehrenwald, 1963; Framo, 1970; Trotzer, 1981; Whitaker & Keith, 1981).

Rhodes and Wilson (1981) have noted that from the day we are born until the day we die, families remain powerful influences whether the family members continue to be involved with one another or remain completely aloof. This is true even though the family is no longer a structured social unit with well defined roles. The structure of any family's shared identity or value system—i.e., Family Lifestyle—will be influenced by its history, myths, and the cohesive quality of the interrelationships. The particular lifestyle or personality of individual members will, in turn, be affected by their perceptions of personal value within the family constellation, the justice of the family environment, and their sense of encouragement or discouragement as a family member.

The Family Lifestyle, as noted by Deutsch (1967), begins to develop in the early years of marriage in much the same manner as Adler noted that the Individual Lifestyle, or personality, begins to develop in early childhood. Each marriage joins a man and woman plus their respective family systems and Family Lifestyles. Often partners come to the marriage expecting to recreate, albeit with some improvements, their own family of origin's style of living. Each spouse may then strive, overtly or covertly, to gain preeminence for his or her particular family lifestyle. The successful resolution of this sometimes stormy and difficult period is the emergence of a unique couple or family identity. This new family identity, or Family Lifestyle, will reflect a synthesis of values, attitudes, and myths from each spouse's family of origin. Thus, the characteristic values and interaction patterns of past generations will have a significant impact upon the myths, values, and interaction patterns of present and future generations (Barnard & Corrales, 1979). As family relationships continue through the generations, the life of the family is extended almost infinitely (Rhodes & Wilson, 1981).

**Family Myths and Values.** The Family Lifestyle may be viewed as being comprised primarily of the shared values and myths of the family system. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Sparks (1973) have discussed the importance of family values in terms of loyalty issues. Membership in a group, such as the family, requires that one, to some extent, internalize its value system. Each individual member develops a set of values and attitudes that comply with its internalized injunctions or rebel directly against them (i.e., the "black sheep"). Through such loyalty commitments, a sense of belonging or cohesion and having a significant place or role within the family system is provided. This process can be observed at a variety of

levels, from the national or societal to the subcultural or ethnic group to the familial level. Viewed systemically, each level serves as a subsystem of the preceding larger subsystem and therefore reflects or incorporates in some way its value system as well. Thus, one important element of the Family Lifestyle is the shared value system of the family group.

The second major aspect of the Family Lifestyle is the "family myths" (Ferreira, 1963). Ferreira has defined family myths as "well integrated beliefs shared by all family members concerning each other and their mutual position in the family life" (p. 457). These myths tend to go unchallenged in spite of the distortions in reality which they typically incorporate. Thus, family myths specify the particular roles, attributes, and value of family members in their transactions with one another. Byng-Hall (1973) has suggested that such myths are of three types: (1) "ideal self-images," which are behaviors all members are pressured to adopt; (2) "consensus role images," which are the roles all agree each individual actually occupies; and (3) "repudiated role-images," which are proscribed behaviors and attitudes of the family. Dysfunctional family myths maintained by the client often serve to lock him/her into rigid roles and behavioral patterns throughout his/her life. It is important for counselors to assist such clients in reexamining these myths and adopting more functional or growth-oriented attitudes.

The importance of identifying significant family values and myths and their impact on a client's presenting issues is further indicated in Trotzer's (1981) observation that conflicts typically revolve around value/belief issues. While presenting problems may be defined in terms of role, behavioral, or individual dimensions, there is always an ultimate relationship with the value system of the individual or family (Trotzer, 1981). This view is also reflected in Adlerian psychology, which maintains that deviant, ineffectual, or conflict-creating behavior stems ultimately from dysfunctional or mistaken attitudes and values (Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

Contextual Family Therapy, as developed by Boszormenyi-Nagy, & Ulrich (1981), also recognizes the need to organize interventions around identifying and resolving conflict issues emanating from the transgenerational and cultural heritage of the family of origin. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Sparks (1973) note that members develop a sense of loyalty to the groups to which they belong and particularly to their family of origin. Since the family is the initial and primary source for meeting one's need to belong (Dreikurs, 1964), any behavior which then contradicts familial expectations or family myths and/or values might be viewed as threatening to one's sense of familial belongingness. Thus, the family value system and family myths tend to continue throughout life; that is, to influence, usually at a level of unawareness, each individual

member's perceptions of self and his/her relationships to others and society.

### Family Lifestyle Assessment

Family myths and the family value system are the two primary components of the Family Lifestyle. One means by which these myths and values appear to be transmitted in the family socialization process is through family stories and descriptions of ancestors, siblings, and/or relatives. This process is similar to the transmission of culturally shared values and beliefs—i.e., the Collective Lifestyle—through folktales and children's stories. One example is "The Three Little Pigs," which substantiates the Protestant work ethic so dominant in our culture. In investigating the role of family myths and values in the client's presenting issues, it is therefore useful to focus upon these family stories and descriptions of extended family members.

**Genograms.** One method which has proven productive for focusing the counseling session on the influences of the Family Lifestyle—i.e., family myths and values—is the genogram. When combined with the conceptual approach of the Individual Lifestyle assessment (Eckstein, Baruth, & Naher, 1975; Mosak, 1977), the genogram provides the counselor with a logical and useful extension of the Adlerian counseling technique. Guerin and Pendagast (1976) have aptly referred to the genogram as a "roadmap of the family relationship system" (p. 452). It has been utilized in counseling to identify such problematic family issues as finances, sex, parenting, and affection (Guerin & Pendagast, 1976) as well as to give the counselor insight into attitudes regarding sex roles, occupational injunctions, divorce, family relationships, and the power and communication processes in families. For further information on the genogram one may refer to Barnard and Corrales (1979), Carter and McGoldrick (1980), and Paul and Paul (1982).

A further benefit of the genogram has been suggested by Orfandis (1979), who noted that clients frequently become interested in their genograms and are able to begin work themselves to obtain insight into their particular problem(s). Furthermore, the genogram technique has the benefit of appearing less "psychological" and mysterious to the client(s) than many other insight-oriented techniques such as projective testing. Reluctant clients, group members, or family members can therefore often be more readily "won over" to entering into the counseling process by being invited to share seemingly more factual information regarding their families of origin. This can be particularly beneficial in

marital or family therapy with reluctant fathers. Shapiro and Budman's (1973) research has pointed out that the father's attitude toward and investment in counseling is the critical factor for both continuation and positive outcome in family counseling. Guerin and Pendagast (1976) have noted further that the genogram technique transforms the initial evaluation process into "an emotionally validating experience for the family and as such fosters the process of engagement" (p. 457).

The Family Lifestyle assessment technique utilizes the genogram along with the conceptual strategy of the Individual Lifestyle assessment technique to identify those dysfunctional aspects of the Family Lifestyle—i.e., shared values and myths—which adversely affect the client's present life adjustment. During an Adlerian lifestyle assessment, the counselor looks at the relationships within the family-of-origin to better understand the values, beliefs, role expectations, and biased apperceptions of the individual. Further, the counselor looks at early recollections, or early memories, as symbolically representing themes directly related to the client's current attitudes and approach to life and relationships (Adler, 1956; Mosak, 1958). Similarly, in assessing the Family Lifestyle the counselor and client utilize the family genogram to look at both relationship patterns and characteristics of extended family members, defined within the family-of-origin as being essentially positive or negative, to identify family values and family myths. Also, often repeated family stories regarding members and ancestors are interpreted much like early memories to identify themes which embody highly salient family values. The Family Lifestyle assessment, therefore, extends the Individual Lifestyle investigation vertically through several past generations and horizontally in terms of the extended family. This provides a greater understanding of the origins and, more important, the relative strength of family values and myths and the meaning they hold for the client.

The client(s) is first presented with a large sheet of newsprint and provided with instructions in developing a family genogram. After completing the genogram for three to four generations, the client(s) is instructed to go back over the data and, for each person represented, recall from his/her perspective as a child how the family tended to view that person and whether he/she was defined as a positive or negative model. The counselor then requests that the client provide recollections about stories told within the family regarding extended family members or ancestors. Often the client never met, or remembers little of, a particular relative or ancestor about whom family stories have been passed down through the generations. Embodied in such family stories, however, are strong family values regarding who or what they should or should not be in order to obtain a position of status, value, or significance within their family system. The descriptions of extended family

members, on the other hand, tend to reveal myths regarding relationships and role prescriptions and injunctions. Thus, these family stories, as well as the client's personal recollections regarding family members, are found to reveal powerful family myths and values which the client has, in some manner, internalized and which continue to influence decisions and behavior in his/her current life situation.

**Application in the Counseling Process.** Upon completion of the genogram data, the client(s) is invited to share the information in the genogram with the counselor as follows: "Begin with yourself and tell us about each person you have put on the genogram." As the individual discusses the family, he or she often begins to see emerging patterns or to discover new insights. If not, the counselor may ask questions to lead the client toward significant themes: "Do you see any trends forming?" or "How do you feel about that information?" The degree to which each client has a pattern of similar issues, attitudes, or values across several generations is scrutinized. This knowledge provides the counselor and client with a better understanding of the impact these conclusions have on present functioning in occupational and interpersonal roles.

It has been the authors' experience that it is best to allow the client to lead, as much as possible, in exploring his/her genogram and the family stories. This allows the counseling session to become a mutual process between counselor and client(s). Moreover, it removes the counselor from the role of "omnipotent healer" expected to "cure my problems" and invites the client(s) to become an equal partner in counseling with equal responsibility for outcome. Having the graphic product of the genogram to view and reflect upon has also been found to increase the level of involvement and understanding for the client. Clients typically take the genogram home between sessions and spend considerable time reviewing and gaining new insights from their genograms and the descriptions and stories they have provided. The counselor intervenes when it becomes evident that the client is avoiding or overlooking significant value messages and myths appearing in the genogram and gently redirects the client to confront these issues.

The technique has proven particularly useful in group counseling and personal growth group work. The counselor can utilize input from the group to assist the client-on-focus in identifying messages regarding appropriate roles, behaviors, values, myths, and so forth. Further, in a group setting, clients find it growth-inducing to observe the broad range of family values and myths which occur. They are confronted, in a sense, with the undeniable subjectivity of their conclusions and approach to life. The Family Lifestyle assessment technique appears par-

ticularly amenable to several counseling/therapy situations for assisting clients to understand and reconsider the values and myths derived from their family of origin which may be affecting their current life situation. Some potential uses of this technique would be:

1. Individual counseling when unresolved issues with one's family of origin are apparent.

2. Premarital counseling to identify the rules, values, and myths that each spouse is bringing to the relationship. Thus, assistance might be given in assessing strengths while also noting potential problem areas which might be discussed on a preventive basis.

3. Marriage and family counseling to assist members to gain a better understanding of how and why problems are experienced as they are. Such knowledge can provide a sense of optimism that there is a positive direction yet to move in.

4. Sexual dysfunction often involves family of origin issues around sex which need to be explored (Kaplan, 1974, 1979; Masters & Johnson, 1970).

5. Enrichment or personal growth groups with individuals or couples to focus and redirect decisions around past messages, myths, and value systems that influence present personal and relationship satisfaction.

6. Couple enrichment where a more intense understanding of the meshing of family dynamics provides a sense of the accomplishments within the relationship that the couple has attained.

7. Divorce support groups where individuals can observe patterns they may have been following which result in difficulties in intimate relationships.

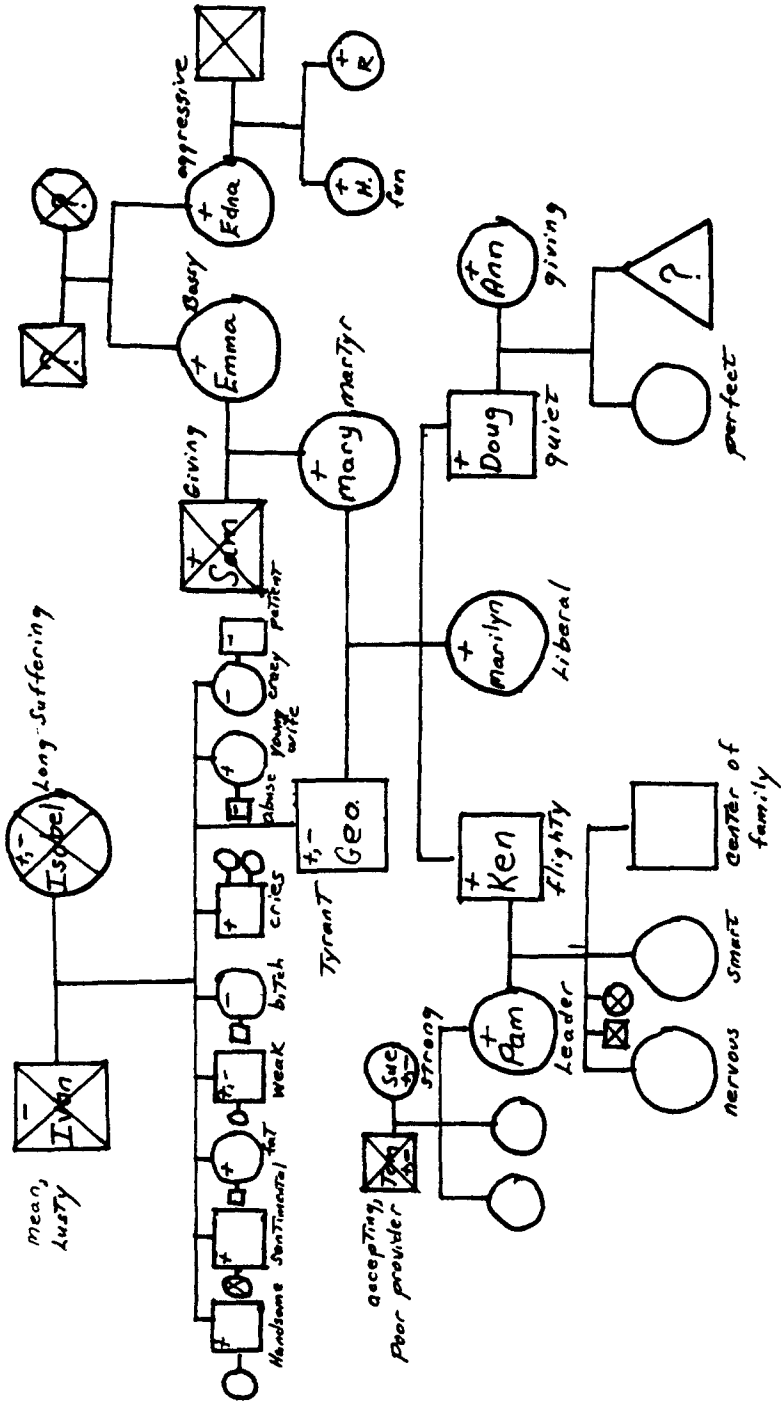
### Case Study

Marilyn was a thirty-six-year-old female, never married, who came to a personal growth group with specific concerns regarding her difficulty in developing satisfactory intimate relationships with men. After completing the genogram as instructed, Marilyn began the interpretive process. Pointing to each person on her genogram (figure 1) as she described them, she stated:

"I'm 36; my older brother Ken is four years my senior and my brother Doug is eight years my junior, and we are the three siblings of Mary and George . . . Ken, first born, flighty, nervous, loving, preoccupied, successful. He is an officer going on twenty years in the army. I came next, four years later. The stories about me were always that Mom held her breath before I spoke, that I was before my time, that I was too liberal for the fifties when people wanted women to shut up and I



Figure 1  
Marilyn's Geneogram



wasn't shutting up . . . Doug came eight years later . . . The stories about him in the family revolve around his tremendous need for privacy. He is very quiet, he is very resourceful . . ."

Marilyn apparently began at an early age to express her goal in life of declaring her independence and resisting the possibility of being squeezed out or controlled by others, e.g., her two brothers. As she began describing the significant males on her genogram, a pattern emerged in which she regarded males as typically tyrannical, not particularly dependable or good providers, the source of family problems, and tending to be guided by their emotions. She particularly focused on her father and paternal grandfather as prototypical male figures especially in terms of their roles in intimate relationships with women. This was reflected in Marilyn's perception of her father and other men as being bigger than they are: "After a couple of years in therapy, the therapist said to me, 'How tall is your father?' and I said, 'Oh, about 6'1"; and he is shorter than I am [5'4"]. Amazing!"

Women, as Marilyn described them, generally were other-oriented and "fun" individuals. However, of central importance for her were two models, her mother and paternal grandmother, whom she viewed as long-suffering, used by men, and "martyrs" due to their marital relationships. This then was the family myth; women lose their independence and sacrifice their potential in intimate relationships because men tend to be tyrannical and domineering.

Reinforcing the strength of these family myths as perceived by Marilyn was a family story which conveyed an important family value for her. During her monologue the family story about Sam, her maternal grandfather, emerged as highly significant in her life.

"The story about him which breaks my heart is that apparently I was his favorite, and it seems I never walked until I was 18 months old. I would walk, but I wouldn't let go of his one finger. Then he died, and a week later I walked by myself. My mom always said, 'Your Grandpa wanted to see you walk.' That was a very dear story because even though I didn't know him, I knew that he loved me, and knew that I was always accepted by Sam. He was a homebody. Emma would go out and get into her political thing, and travel like crazy, and party and everything, while Sam was home, making the bread. A very giving man."

Fifteen minutes into her monologue, Marilyn stopped suddenly. As with most clients, she spontaneously began to make her own interpretations with minimal guidance. This high level of involvement of the counselee in the discovery/insight and redecision process is one of the unique strengths of the technique.

Counselor: What are you noticing, Marilyn?

Marilyn: For years, I have thought that the man was the strong one, and I'm seeing a lot of strong women. They may be behind the scenes . . . I see a lot of aggressiveness, I mean, I have always loved Emma, and when I was growing up in the fifties, I wasn't supposed to be like Emma, I was supposed to keep my mouth shut and not talk about civil rights and not talk about sex. There was a whole list of things I wasn't allowed to talk about and that's why I got beat. But Emma, in my mind, was dynamic and had the fullest life of anybody. And I admired her. I also admired Sam, because he was where he wanted to be. He loved being home; he loved my mom. Emma had a hard time with Mom when she was born . . . she was really sad as she was not to have any more children. Sam said, 'I don't ever want to lose my wife, I can't stand the possibility that you might die.' "

C: I cannot live without my wife.

M: Which is amazing because I thought I was the only one that wasn't married for other reasons. [Long reflective pause] For a long time I thought that men used women as victims, in similar ways that my dad used my mom. God knows, Emma was a survivor, she was such a stable person, as I am . . . I can't believe the strength of all of these women. I've never seen them all in front of me like this!

The counselor's role was to then assist the client in focusing upon the issues that emerged as central messages. In Marilyn's case, a strong family value appeared to be conveyed in her story about Sam.

C: Going back to Sam and Emma. Not only was Emma somehow the epitome of the female, or what you are striving to be, but Sam was the one about whom the story gave the message, at a level of unawareness, "For Grandpa's love, let go of the finger. Once I let go of the finger, I am independent, walking alone, and I am finally being what Grandpa wants—to be more like Emma." I'm wondering if there is some concern with relationships with men in that you are afraid to grab hold of the finger again?

M: Please say that again. [The counselor was close to the central point but needed to restate it more clearly in the client's language.]

C: There is a sense of, "If I get into a close relationship with a man, I am holding on to his finger again." Going back to the story up here, you are afraid of losing something . . .

M: Oh, yes!!

C: It seems you are starting to recognize now that sometimes men are holding on to your finger more than you are holding on to their's.

M: That's funny. Oh, Lordy! But I always felt like I was the weak one, like I needed them, and I was damned if I was going to do that because

when I have, I've gotten stepped on. I didn't realize my own strengths . . . Oh, I'm so glad this is on tape, I don't want to lose this. That is interesting you should say that about Sam and letting go of his finger.

C: Your whole life is trying to somehow show him, "I'm walking alone."

M: Wow!! Oh, Sammy baby! [recognition laughter] I've never seen this before. You know, when your dad beats the hell out of you and tells you to keep your mouth shut, that is pretty powerful.

C: Why did your dad have to beat you?

M: Because I wouldn't keep my mouth shut.

C: You were not going to let some man tell you to keep your mouth shut.

M: Yeah! And Ken, Kenny would stand over there in back of Dad as Dad was coming at me, and Kenny, my God, he is the biggest peace maker . . . he would whisper, "Mar, cool it."

C: So here was another man you weren't going to have tell you what to do.

M: Very good! And I've done anger work regarding Ken too. My God, isn't that something!!

Marilyn had recognized that in spite of much individual therapy in previous years she still had little insight into the myths derived within her family-of-origin regarding male and female roles and her strong family value on independence which, in combination, had led her to avoid intimate relationships. Since this Family Lifestyle assessment was done in a time-limited personal growth group experience, there was not opportunity for Marilyn to work further on redirecting her perceptions and intimate relationships with men. However, like many other participants in these groups, she later sought out further counseling to work on issues which surfaced during the investigation into family myths and values.

As illustrated in the above case study summary, a powerful counseling technique results when the family genogram is approached from the perspective of the Adlerian Individual Lifestyle assessment. Specifically, clients are assisted in working with the therapist to obtain insight into the influence of family myths and family values, as perceived by the individual, on their current perceptions of self and functioning in social, occupational, and marital roles. The technique can be highly beneficial to counselors and therapists in assessing, with the client, current mistaken apperceptions, attitudes, and values as they relate to presenting issues. The counselor or therapist can then assist in helping to redirect the client in more positive and useful directions. Often the models for this more productive view of self and relationships exist in the client's genogram itself. The most powerful aspect of the technique may well be

the client's ability to become actively involved through a tangible object, i.e., the genogram, in discovering new insights into dysfunctional familial influences. Clients can then make new decisions about and use new behaviors in their lives.

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