Learning from the Double and Triple Genogram in Supervision*

Shirley Braverman

Since the publication of “The Use of Genograms in Supervision” (Braverman, 2002), it has become much more common to use supervisee genograms as part of supervision and training. This is particularly true of transgenerational supervisors. (See Chapter 10 in the accompanying book.) Less well known is Braverman’s double genogram technique, which can be used in supervision to compare a clinical genogram with the supervisee’s genogram or could equally well be used to compare specialized genograms such as the cultural genogram (Hardy and Lazoffsky, reprinted in these electronic resources). Ultimately, supervisees can also learn to make such systematic comparisons themselves in self-supervision. Supervisors can also add their genogram creating a triple genogram to the mix and focus on repetitive patterns that occur with particular supervisees. Guidelines for double and triple genograms are reproduced here.

—Editors’ introduction

The genogram can be particularly useful for supervisors who are dealing with persistent learning blocks. McGoldrick (1982) believes that persistent blocks that therapists have with client families are the result of negative emotional reactions stemming from experiences in their families of origin (i.e., countertransference

feelings). Ideally, these feelings should have been resolved prior to supervision, either through normal maturation or through therapy. In fact, because we are human, we cannot resolve all conflictual issues from our families of origin. Because family therapy is so emotionally powerful, it does tend to stir up old conflicts despite their apparent resolution. There are four stages in supervision that supervisors should go through with supervisees before considering a focus on counter-transference problems. First, supervisors can help supervisees clarify their systemic hypotheses about cases. Second, supervisors can assist supervisees in understanding how presenting problems are being perpetuated by the behaviors and attitudes of family members. Third, they can teach supervisees techniques for changing the family interaction. Finally, supervisors can discuss their supervisor-therapist relationships to see whether supervisees’ inabilities to be effective learners are related to some suppressed negative feelings about their supervisor.

The Double Genogram Approach

Once the aforementioned supervisory stages have been passed to no avail, supervisors can then describe the following family-of-origin approach to supervisees and invite them to try it to resolve the learning impasse. This is never imposed on supervisees because it involves sharing aspects of their personal history with supervisors (and supervisory groups, if supervision is done in a group). If supervisors use this approach, including it in the learning contract from the start avoids any unexpected or threatening surprises for supervisees. If, after giving it some thought, a supervisee declines, the supervisor must respect the decision and then suggest that the supervisee consult a therapist to discuss the issue. This approach is recommended particularly if learning blocks are sufficiently serious to hamper a supervisee’s professional development.

If supervisees decide to go ahead with a family-of-origin approach, supervisors ask them to make two genograms: one of the client family and one of their own family. The quality of the relationships in each genogram is depicted (Figure 5E.1) and discussed. The aim of these sessions is to uncover possible emotional links between the two families that are creating a learning block for supervisees. Because of the task-oriented attitude of supervisors and supervisees plus time-limited supervisory sessions, supervisees’ affect does not become intense as may happen when doing genograms with clients. Supervisees have more cognitive control than they would have if supervision were part of an all-day or weekend session devoted to the exploration of families of origin.
Both genograms are put side by side. Supervisees are then asked whether there is any similarity between the relationships portrayed in the two genograms. The genogram helps supervisees gain some distance from the material and, in a Bowenian sense, use an intellectual process to master some emotional reactivity. Patterns quickly emerge. Supervisees tend to see client family members who remind them of a conflictual relative as more disturbed and rigid than they are in reality, tending not to see their strengths as clearly as those of other family members. Supervisees cannot recognize certain client behaviors as defensive and are therefore unable to get to that individual’s fear, even though they had been able to do so with other family members. Conversely, supervisees tend to have some blind spots for those clients who are similar to an idealized relative; seeing how that person can be manipulative and self-serving can be particularly difficult. It is, therefore, important to explore the positive relationships in the client families as well as to link them to supervisees’ idealized relationships in their families of origin. Supervisees’ negative dyadic relationships, as well as their triangulated position in their families of origin, must be addressed when they contribute to a learning block.

A Double Genogram Case Example

The following case example illustrates a situation in which family-of-origin work, utilizing the double genogram approach, was used as part of ongoing supervision. Although the purpose of the work was to have a direct effect on the supervisee’s performance in this specific case, it is hoped that the beneficial effects will carry over to other cases.

The learning block

Eric was a forty-year-old social worker who was having a great deal of difficulty with the Tanner family in which the presenting problem was a ten-year-old boy, John. The child was having increasingly violent temper tantrums, which terrorized his mother and seven-year-old sister. The client father, Mr. Tanner, was an intelligent and articulate man. A school principal, he was also heavily involved in extracurricular community activities and was rarely home. The client mother, Mrs. Tanner, was a submissive, gentle person who could not tolerate confrontation; she either withdrew or developed physical symptoms in the face of any expression of anger. She was always home, available to the children and her husband, and never complained about her lonely life. The other child was obedient, an excellent student, and frequently helpful to her mother—a model child. The children were not close. Both parents expressed satisfaction with their marital relationship. Mrs. Tanner spoke of her husband with great respect, and said she felt his loyalty and support even though he was so busy outside the home. Mr. Tanner described his relationship with his wife as very close and said it was because of her support that he had been able to achieve so much in his profession and his
community. John, their son, had always been a bright, achieving child but had temper tantrums from a very early age. In the past year, they had increased in frequency and intensity so that they could no longer be ignored, as they had been in the past.

Eric’s perception of Mr. Tanner was that he was a self-centered man whose needs superseded those of any other family member. His need for praise and recognition was enormous; he exploited his wife and children, using their interest and caring as support for his fragile self-esteem without responding to their needs in any way. Eric saw Mrs. Tanner as an all-giving, kind, and devoted woman controlled by her stronger, charismatic husband. He saw John’s temper tantrums as a reaction to the neglect he was experiencing as a result of his father’s absence.

In supervision Eric was able to identify the mother-father-John triangle and was able to see John’s symptom as a way of getting his father’s attention in the family in a way that his mother could not. He understood John’s temper tantrums as an unsuccessful attempt to provoke his mother into taking some initiative with her husband, her children, and in her extra-familial life. He saw John as being unable to bear his mother’s passivity or her loneliness. Despite his understanding of the dynamics and the supervisor’s suggestions about how he might change the interactions among family members, Eric was not able to follow through. His anger at John and Mr. Tanner and his sympathy for Mrs. Tanner paralyzed him.

The supervisor focused on the supervisor supervissee relationship. She discussed her feeling that even though they had a good relationship to date Eric was beginning to see her as a demanding, critical authority. She noted this as a problem for both of them. Eric agreed, expressed frustration at feeling stupid, and annoyance at the supervisor’s demands. No conclusion was reached after this discussion. The supervisor’s stance was to listen and agree that she could feel Eric’s frustration; she would be prepared to hear any other thoughts he had about the case. The supervisor left it for a week to see whether anything would change in Eric’s handling of the case after this discussion. Nothing changed.

The supervisor then suggested the possibility of the two genogram family-of-origin session as a way of resolving Eric’s learning block in this case. She clearly conveyed that this was not mandatory and that there was no certainty it would work, but it had been helpful to other therapists who had encountered serious learning blocks in the course of their clinical work. Because Eric sensed that if he did not do something quickly the family would drop out of treatment, he decided to try the family-of-origin session. He was asked if he preferred to do this in private with the supervisor or in the presence of his supervisory group. Eric chose the group.

The client family genogram

In preparation for the session, Eric gathered more information from the client family about the parents’ families of origin for the genogram (Figure 5E.2a). The client mother came from a family in which women were submissive, serious, and took the major responsibility for the family’s cohesion and functioning. The men were seen as aggressive, superior, and controlling all family resources. Mr. Tanner came from
a large, poor, rural family in which he had little emotional support from his overburdened parents. The nonverbal message to Mr. Tanner from his mother was that education and achievement were the only way out of their poverty. The children who did achieve were given nonverbal recognition from their depressed mother. Mr. Tanner adapted to this depriving environment by investing in an objective rather than in an interpersonal relationship: achievement brought him emotional rewards that intimate relationships never had.
The supervisee’s genogram

Eric’s genogram (Figure 5E.2b) showed the primacy of his mother and her side of the family in his life. His father’s family lived in another country and he had no contact with them before they died. Eric was the oldest of three children; he had two younger sisters. His father was a very preoccupied, successful businessman who was distant from the family. Eric had the closest relationship in the family with his mother and maternal grandmother. Both were warm, kind women but whereas his grandmother was an energetic woman, his mother was lethargic and suffered from periodic bouts of depression. His grandmother died when he was nine. Eric remembered greatly missing her cheerful, energetic presence. His mother’s first serious depression, during which she took to her bed, was when Eric was ten. His father left his wife and children to deal with each other as if the family was not his domain. At the beginning of their marriage, his wife took care of the children with the support of her mother. Later, when her mother died and her depressions incapacitated her, it was the children, mainly Eric, who took care of their mother.

Resolving the learning block

In describing his family, Eric readily expressed exasperation with his father’s preoccupation with business to the exclusion of his family. He felt he was a disappointment to his father, otherwise his father would have shown more interest in Eric. Nevertheless, he was able to express admiration for his father’s intelligence, energy, and initiative. On the other hand, Eric was very positive about his mother’s warmth and caring. He expressed no negative feelings about her. When the supervisor asked if there was anything about her he had ever wished were different, he was thoughtful for a long time. Slowly, he admitted that sometimes he wished she were cheerful and energetic. It had been hard, at times, to have a depressed mother; he wished there had been more lightness and pleasure in his home. He missed his grandmother terribly because she had brought that dimension into their family life. He realized he had put all the blame for their muted family life onto his father; he resented his father for not taking part in the family because he was a cheerful and energetic person. It appeared to Eric that his father had given up the task of livening up his depressed wife and left the children with her as their burden. In fact, Eric did admit that his mother was very hard to cheer up; he knew because he had tried. Livening his mother up was a full-time job!

Eric’s awareness of his ambivalence about his mother made him realize how protective he had been of his client, Mrs. Tanner. He recognized that he had identified with John and was angry with him for having the courage to fight (i.e., to have severe temper tantrums to involve his father in the family and to shake his mother out of her passive withdrawal). John was only ten years old yet he had not given up; Eric, however, had given up long ago. When asked to draw the most significant triangle in his family of origin, Eric drew his mother, his father, and himself. The cross-generational coalition between him and his mother became clear. He realized that his father had contributed to, and reacted against, his closeness to his mother by withdrawing and becoming the marginalized parent.
Eric was touched emotionally during the session, but it was not primarily an emotional experience for him. The genograms seemed to help Eric use his intellect to distance from his client family as well as his own. Interestingly, once Eric could be touched affectively during the presentation of his family of origin, the genogram became an integrative tool; it allowed him to use his emotion and his intellect so that he could develop more empathy for the key individuals in the genograms. It freed him as a person and as a therapist in relation to them.

This session seemed to unblock Eric’s difficulty, not only in dealing with his male client’s aggression, but also with his own. He was gradually able to become more confrontive in his work with the submissive Mrs. Tanner and the marginalized Mr. Tanner. His inability to challenge the homeostatic balance in the Tanner family was because it so closely resembled the balance in his own family. With time, Eric began to understand the complicated nature of ambivalence. The genogram session helped him not only with this particular family but in his general therapeutic style.

The most important information depicted on the genogram during supervision is the quality of the interpersonal relationships. Factual data, given verbally, is not put on the genogram so as not to obscure the relational map. Although this method was inspired by the Bowenian model, the supervisor’s questions or comments to the supervisee come from an integration of an object-relations and systems theory model. The resolution of the session, in which no specific suggestions for treatment are made, comes from the expectation that emotional awareness and intellectual insight may free the supervisee to behave in a therapeutically appropriate way. Directives from the supervisor are not necessary at this point. If needed, they can be given at a later time.

**Effective Use of the Double Genogram Approach**

The following recommendations (Braverman, 1984, 1994) are made for those supervisors who consider it within their function to help therapists with their family-of-origin-related learning blocks:

1. Other supervisory interventions should be tried first; using family-of-origin genograms to deal with learning blocks should be a last resort.
2. The purpose should be clear and caserelated. Using two genograms—the client’s and the supervisee’s—helps to keep the session case-related.
3. The double genogram approach should not be imposed on supervisees.
4. Sessions should be time-limited so that the focus can remain on supervision and not on therapy; one-and-a-half to 2 hr for double genogram sessions seems adequate.
5. Supervisors should be available to supervisees after sessions to process any unforeseen supervisee reactions.
6. Responsibility for conducting family-of-origin supervisory sessions belongs with supervisors. If it is done in the presence of a group, there can be a short time period allotted to the group at the end for discussion of the process. The group does not interact with the supervisee presenting the double genograms about any of the material.
There is a certain emotional momentum that builds between supervisors and supervisees in the double genogram process. Experience shows that allowing group members to interact with supervisees defuses that momentum and detracts from supervisees’ learning. The session then becomes a more intellectual exercise because supervisees must block off any feelings that were aroused and must limit their introspection to respond to questions from the group. This puts a premature closure to the process. By having supervisors answer questions for group members, the focus becomes teaching rather than the use of the double genogram for understanding the impact of supervisees’ familial experience on their work. We wish to avoid, at all costs, group members “therapizing” supervisees with clinical comments no matter how relevant they are.

If supervisors are sensitive to supervisees, maintain the focus on learning, and are available for follow-up contacts by supervisees if necessary, the double family-of-origin genogram can be used as an important resource in the supervision of family therapists. Referral to another therapist, if needed after sessions, is part of the responsibility of the supervisor. Generally, this has not been necessary as long as safeguards are employed. Learning takes place in the context of a relationship between supervisor and supervisee. When that relationship is not nourishing or supportive, it hinders the learning process.

**The Triple Genogram in Supervision-of-Supervision**

The triple genogram is an interesting tool for teaching supervisors how their family-of-origin issues influence what they will pick up to focus on with their supervisees. This approach has two parts to it. In the first part, supervisors-in-training (SITs) use the double genogram with supervisees while being observed by their supervisors. Then supervisees leave the room. In the second part, SITs add their own genogram to the others, using the same technique as previously described, to indicate the quality of the relationships. The supervisor then makes any connections between SITs’ interventions and their family-of-origin experience. The emphasis here is on teaching supervisors that we are not neutral observers: supervisors, teachers, and therapists see the world in the context of their own life experiences. The triple genogram is a powerful, experiential learning tool.

It has been suggested that supervisors share their genograms with their supervisees. This procedure is not recommended for two reasons. First, supervisees need to concentrate on their own learning. It is complicated enough to keep track of all the data contained in a double genogram; it would be excessively confusing to supervisees to be confronted with yet another mass of data to integrate as well. Second, the procedure upsets the hierarchy. For learning to take place, especially with less experienced supervisors, the learning structure needs to be supportive and clear. Blurring the boundaries between supervisees’ and supervisors’ issues can be very upsetting. For advanced supervisees or supervisors, this may be an interesting experience, but it is best to use sharing of supervisors’ genograms in supervision-of-supervision situations.
Conclusion

The genogram is a tool, and like every tool it depends on how the artisan uses it. It can be used bluntly or delicately: a genogram can be a distancing device, an intellectual exercise, an experiential one, or a balance between the last two. Depending on the stage of supervision and the level of development of supervisees, genograms can be used in any of the ways mentioned in this chapter, including as an information-gathering device in the assessment phase, which is useful for hypothesis building; as a basis for strategies in problem solving; for increasing client collaboration during a period of resistance; and for unblocking supervisees’ learning problems that are family-of-origin based. The relationship within which a genogram is used will dictate whether it will be an effective tool or not.

References


