

641-40-05 Diagramming Families for Assessment

Introduction

Out of family systems theory has come a useful way of assessing families in which the families themselves can participate. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the implications of the family systems approach and to introduce some assessment tools that have been developed. The assessment process and procedures described here depend upon the mutual engagement and participation of both the Social Worker and family.

The use of diagrams to describe complex family relationships can reduce or replace the use of lengthy written narrative. The four methods of diagramming discussed in this chapter are:

- Genograms, used to describe and gain insight into relationships and roles within the family unit;
- Ecomaps, used to document the family unit's relationship to outside systems;
- Time Lines, used to observe the relevant events experienced by the family; and
- Sequences of Behavior, used to observe the behavior patterns that surround the presenting problem.

By using the various methods of diagramming, the Social Worker and family may learn something about the relationships within the family, the location of the family's boundaries, and the variety and quality of the family's connections to outside systems. In addition to assessment, the use of these diagramming methods may be useful as:

- Interviewing tools that can be used with individuals, couples, or the entire family;
- A way to facilitate participation by providing a clear structure and can assist people who might have difficulty entering into discussion;
- Helpful additions to the case recording, since they give a clear quick view of the family; and
- Tools for organizing information to assist in the case planning and preparation for services.

Family Participation is Crucial

The use of these assessment methods recognizes the family as the most knowledgeable source of information about itself. As the kind of data requested is concrete and not extremely personal, their use encourage. an interviewing style that tends to be non-threatening. Most people will more readily DISCUSS themselves and their backgrounds under these circumstances and share more personal information as rapport established.

The use of these methods offers the Social Worker an opportunity to observe and engage the family in their environment. Having the family members sit beside the Social Worker and assist in a diagram's completion (rather than across the table in an adversarial position) is a good example of how this method fits in with family-centered approach to providing social services. It leads the family to open communication and insight into their past and present. Through these methods, the Social Worker and family can learn about:

- Who the family is - their names, ages, relationships, occupations and religion;
- Roles in the family and who performs them - Are grandparents, older children or others involved in the parenting? Do members identify any unfulfilled tasks? Who is perceived as having the most power in this family?
- Family rules - What are the family rules regarding decision making; child care; discipline; intimacy/distance; expressions of love and anger? What are the rules with respect to relationships between generations?
- The family communication - Are there identifiable channels of communication? Who communicates to whom and how?
- The relationship system(s) - How do members of this family feel about the other members? Who is close to whom in this family? Are there identifiable alliances? What are the major conflicts within the family from the point of view of each member?
- The family through time - What is the significant history about the development of the family (marriage, children. etc.)? What are the significant themes, patterns, events in the family history--major losses, changes--and how has the family handled them?
- The family network - What persons or systems are important to the family? Outside the immediate family, where does the family turn for support?

How does the family "fit" in relation to larger society? Are there problems with other organizations--schools, work, church, etc.?

For example, while charting the mother's family of origin on a genogram, the Social Worker can explore how the mother perceived her parents and siblings. This can

lead to how, why, and when she left home and married. In turn, this information can lead the Social Worker into exploring the initial attractions and expectations the mother had about her marriage and lead her to discuss her current perceptions and frustrations. The same process can be duplicated to obtain information from other family members.

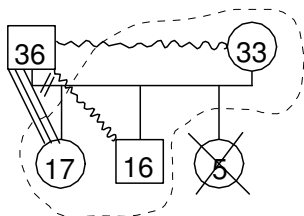
- **Genograms**

The genogram is basically a family tree diagram that includes social data.

It can include as much information as the Social Worker thinks is needed in order to make a thorough assessment of the family. Names, ages, significant family events, marriage dates, etc., are examples of information to include on the genogram.

Hartman (1978) points out that the use of a genogram provides a picture of the family system through time. It enables an individual to step out of the system, examine it, and gain insight into complex family dynamics that have developed over time and how they affect the current situation.

FIGURE 1 – BRIEF GENOGRAM



3 persons in household;
Father and mother divorced;
Ages included on figures;
2 teenagers in custody of mother;
1 female child died at age 5;
Father has close ties to daughter,
conflictual ties to mother and son.

A genogram is most useful in assessment when it covers at least three generations. This can provide an intergenerational history that can assist in identifying extended family support systems.

Instructions for Completing a Genogram:

1. Begin by diagramming the members of household. Symbols describe the sex of the individual. A male is indicated by a square; a female is indicated by a circle.

A triangle is used to indicate if the sex of the person is unknown (i.e. the sibling of a great-grandparent or a still-born child whose sex is unknown).

An "X" through a figure indicated the person is no longer living.

2. Draw connecting lines between these symbols to describe the composition of the family system. (See Figure 2 on the next pages.)

Marital separation is indicated by a single slash along the connecting line; a divorce is indicated by two slashes.

Location of the slashes on the connecting line denotes which parent has custody of the children. See the genogram in Figure 1. The slashes on the marital line indicate the couple is divorced. The location of the slashes set the father off from the children and indicates the mother has custody of the children.

Additional lines are drawn between the symbols to describe the emotional quality of the relationships. (See Figure 3.)

3. Children born to the couple are drawn below the parents and the child's symbol is connected to the line between the parents, starting with the oldest to the left.

Twins are connected to one another and a single line connects their line to their parent's line.

Again, additional lines are drawn to describe the type of relationship that exists between the children and the parents or between the siblings.

4. A dotted line drawn around the group of individuals denotes the household composition.
5. Repeat the process vertically and horizontally to include persons in the extended family.

Grandparents are connected and diagrammed above the parents (vertically). Connecting lines extend from the the grandparent's line to the parent.

Repeat the process horizontally, as needed, to include the aunts, uncles, and cousins of the children.

6. Upon obtaining the skeletal structure of the family, it is important to fill in the diagram with identifying and historical information, such as:

- a. Names, birthdates, and deathdates that are written next to the person figures;
- b. The age of the individual can be written inside the person figure for quick reference;
- c. Marriage dates and dates of separation and divorce are written next to the connecting lines between the individuals.
- d. Occupations, interests, and descriptive characterizations, health condition, etc., can be written next to the individual.
- e. Information that further describes the family unit, such as race, income, religion, ethnic or cultural influences family can be written in the border.

FIGURE 2. CONVENTIONS OF DIAGRAMMING FAMILY STRUCTURE

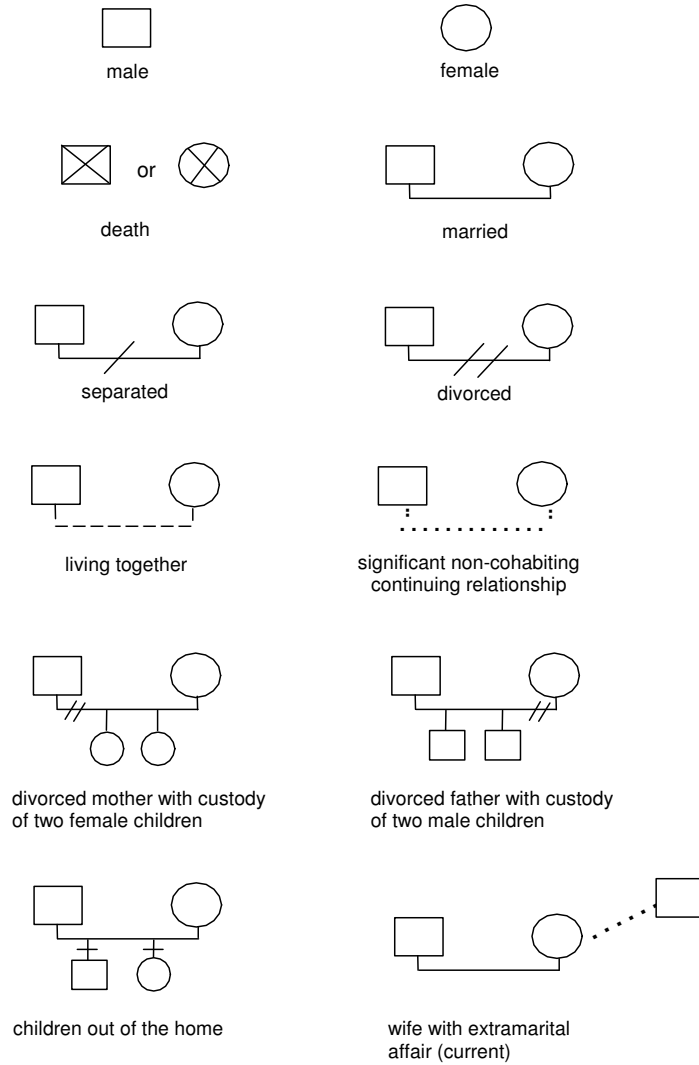
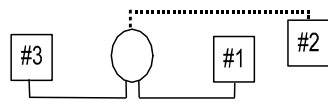


Figure 2. (Continued)



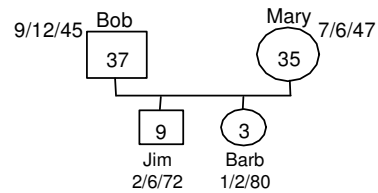
Woman having significant
Non-cohabiting relationship
Between two marriages



abortion (A) and miscarriage (M)

General Rules

- Put age inside and date of birth outside



Put first name of each
person

- Put exact dates of marriage, divorce and separation if different

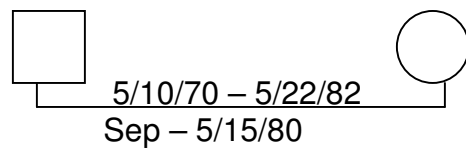
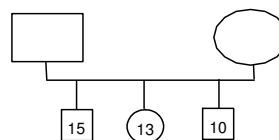
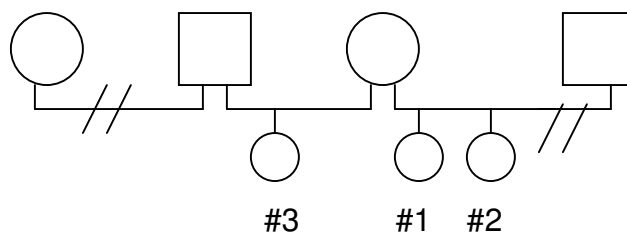


Figure 2. (Continued)

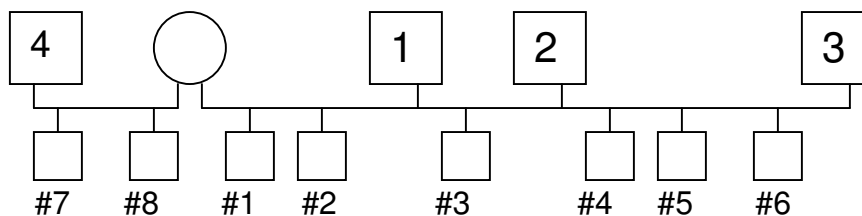
- Put children in birth order, oldest at left, except in case of multiple marriages (see examples, next page)



Examples:



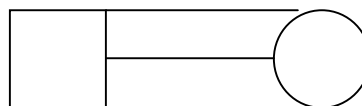
Two spouses each previously married: wife had two children, husband had none; Current couple has one in-common child.



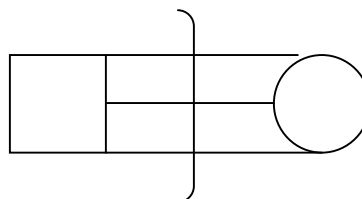
Wife's four marriages: 2 children in first; 1 child in second; 3 children in third; 2 children in fourth.

Figure 3: Diagramming Emotional Relationships

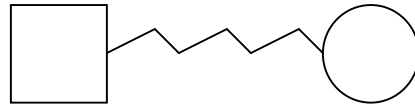
intense relationship



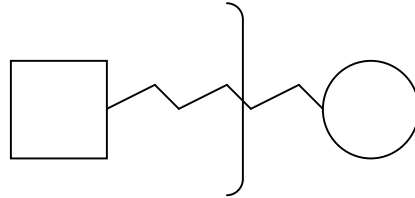
intense relationship cut-off



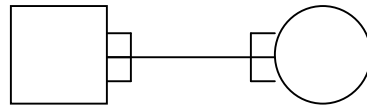
conflictual relationship



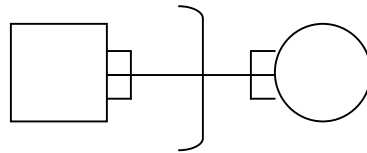
conflictual relationship cutoff



distanced relationship



distanced relationship cut-off



intense conflictual relationship

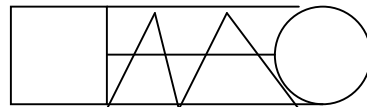
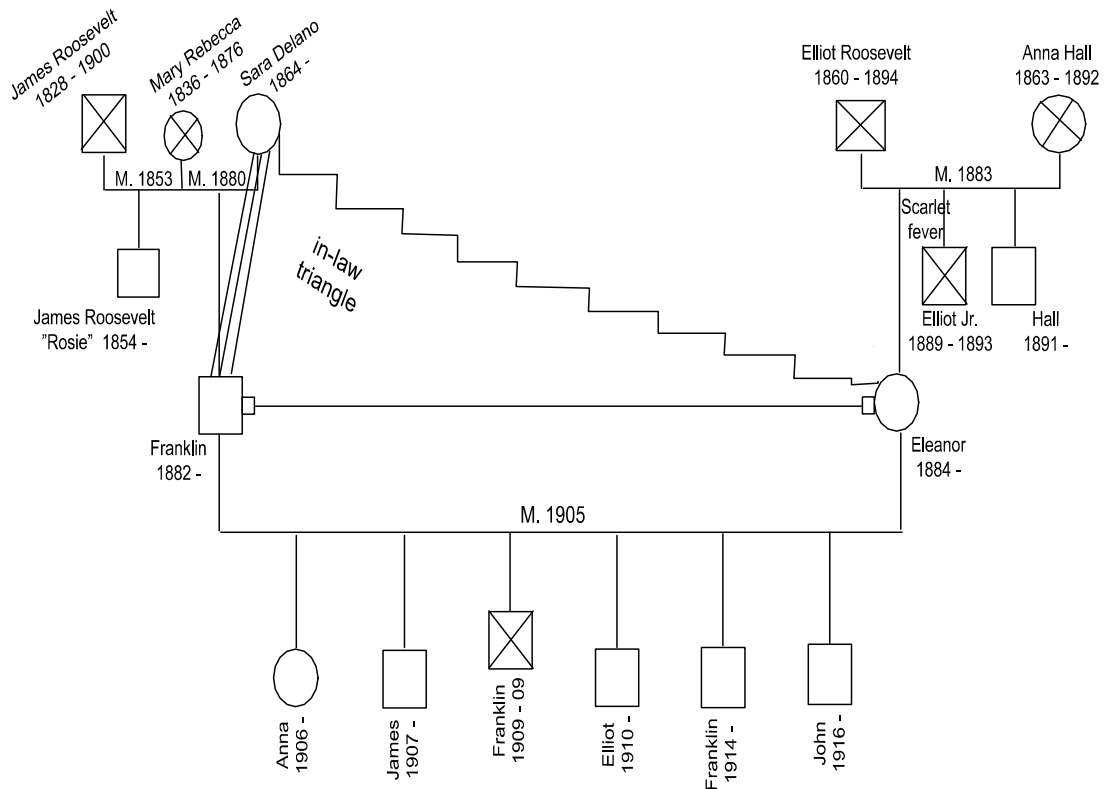


Figure 4. Example of Completed Genogram



Written Narrative on Roosevelt Family Genogram

Household family consists of seven members: Father is Franklin, born in 1992. Mother is Eleanor, born in 1884. They are married in 1905. Their relationship is a distant one.

Their marriage has produced six children: five male and one female: Anna born in 1906. James. born in 1907. Franklin. born in 1909 and died in 1909. Elliot. born in 1910. Another child named Franklin born in 1914. John born in 1916.

Franklin (father) has a half brother. "Rosie," 28 years his senior. His father, James Roosevelt, was born in 1828 and married his first wife, Mary Rebecca, in 1853 when she was age 22. Rosie was their only child. Mary Rebecca died in 1876. James remarried to Sara Delano, Franklin's mother, in 1880. At age 72, he was twice Sara's age. Franklin. born two years later, was their only child. James died in 1900 age 72. Franklin has an intense relationship with his mother. Sara's relationship with Eleanor is conflictual, resulting in an in-law triangle.

Eleanor Roosevelt is the oldest of three children born to Elliot Roosevelt and Anna Ball. Elliot, born in 1860, married Anna in 1883. Anna was born in 1863. Elliot was related (relationship unknown) to Franklin's father. Eleanor had a brother. Elliot Jr. who was born in 1889; he died of scarlet fever in 1893. Another brother. Hall was born in 1891.

- Ecomap

Briefly, the ecomap is a way of mapping the family system in its world. It provides the family and Social Worker with a way of actively gathering data about itself and drawing conclusions about that data. This method of diagramming depicts the family in their dynamic ecological system. Other important systems that influence the family are included in the ecomap. Ann Hartman describes the following functions of the ecomap. The mapping procedure:

- Portrays an overview of the family in their ecological situation;
- Pictures the important nurturant or conflict-laden connections between the family and the world;
- Demonstrates the flow of resources, or lacks and deprivations; and
- Highlights the nature of the interfaces and points of conflicts to be mediated, bridges to be built, and resources to be sought and mobilized.

Instructions for Ecomapping:

1. Draw a large circle in the middle of the map. This represents the members of household.
2. Inside the large circle, draw a genogram that describes the makeup of the household. It is often useful to add names and ages. Limited space may prevent adding additional descriptive information.

Use the symbols that are normally used in genograms (see figure #1).

3. Inquire into what outside systems influence the family unit and its members. Examples of these outside systems may include work, extended family, church, school, health care, social welfare, recreation, and friends.

Draw smaller circles around the large household circle and label them to represent the outside systems.

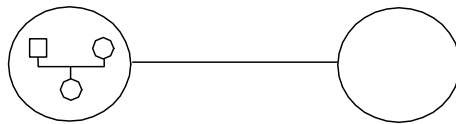
4. The next step is to begin to draw the connections of the family unit and its individuals to the various systems in their environment. These connections

are indicated by drawing lines between the family and the circles representing the outside systems.

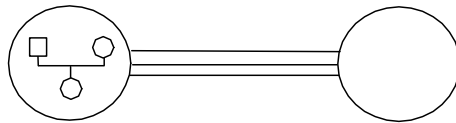
Some of the connections may be drawn to the family unit as a whole or to the individual members. This differentiation demonstrates the way the various family members are connected to the environment.

The nature of the connection is described by the type of line that is drawn:

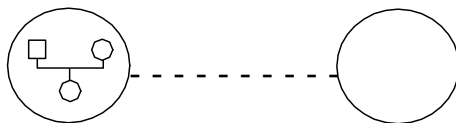
- a. A solid or thick line represents a strong connection;



- b. Three solid lines indicates the strong connection is an intense relationship;



- c. A broken line indicates a tenuous relationship;



- d. A zig-zagged line shows a stressful or conflictual relationship;



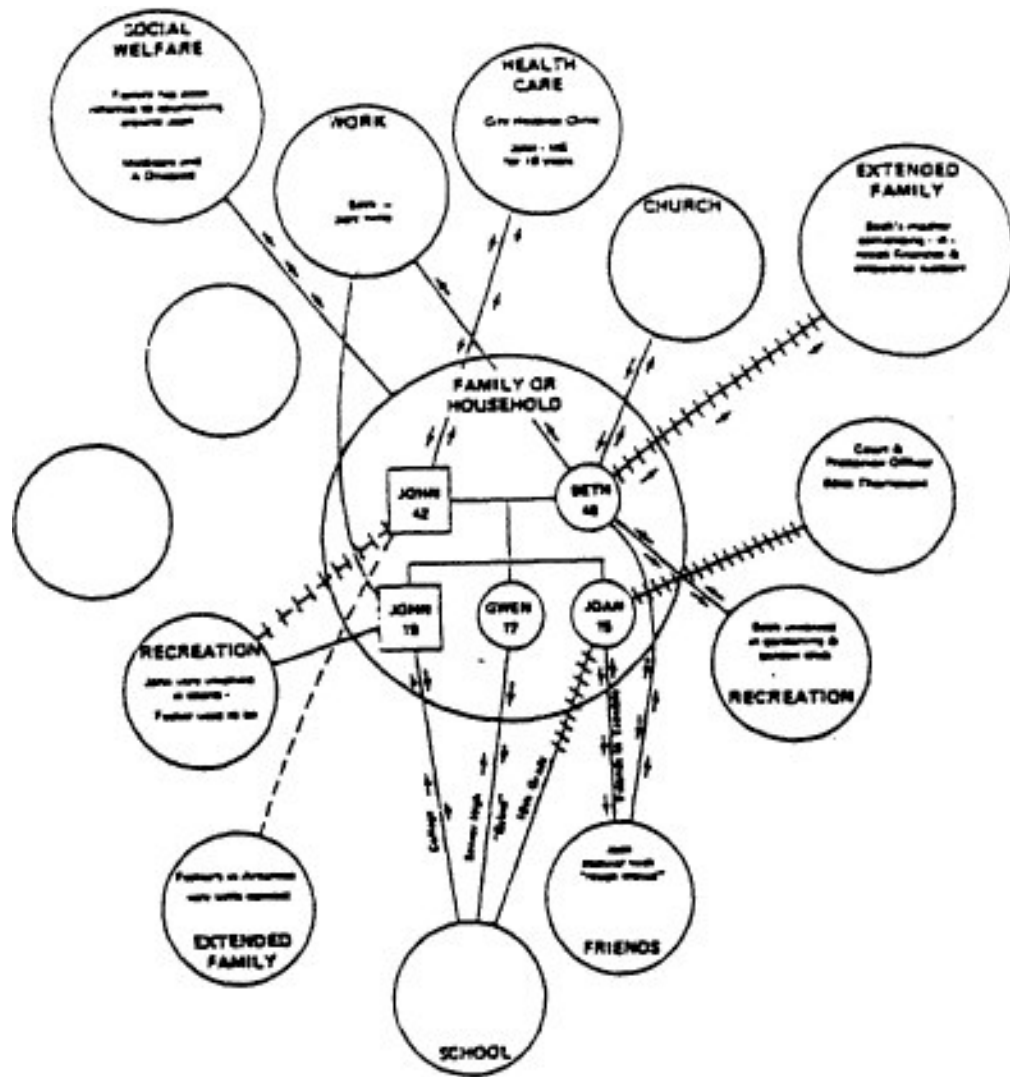
Refer to Figure #2 for other variations and examples for diagramming emotional relationships.

- Next, indicate the direction of the flow of resources, energy, or interest by drawing arrows along the connecting lines.



- Finally, write a word or two beside the connecting lines or smaller circles to further describe, clarify or highlight information drawn on the ecomap.

Figure 5. Example of Ecomap



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It is important for the Social Worker to study the family's presenting problem and its function within the family system. The presenting problem is usually the behavior which brought the family to the attention of the Division. The techniques presented here to assist in this study are: 1) time lines; and 2) diagramming the sequence of behaviors.

The same type of non-confrontive interviewing techniques that are used when completing genograms and ecomaps should also be applied when completing time lines and behavior sequences. Use of these methods should come after the completion of the genogram and ecomap. This should allow the Social Worker an opportunity to develop rapport with the family. The family may be more willing to share information about the presenting problem when rapport is established.

- Time Lines

Time lines are used to identify the significant events experienced by the family. By plotting these events on a linear line, this method can help determine the onset of the presenting problem and what was generally going on before and after the onset. (See Figures 6 and 6a.)

Instructions for Completing a Time Line:

The Social Worker may start anywhere in time, but it may be more useful to focus on significant events (such as the birth of a child, loss of a job, death of a family member) that surround the presenting problem. This will usually be the incident that brought the family to the attention of the Division, such as an incident of abuse.

1. Mark the particular date(s) that identifies the onset of the presenting problem on the line(s).
2. Next, mark the significant events as reported by the family that led up to the presenting problem behavior.

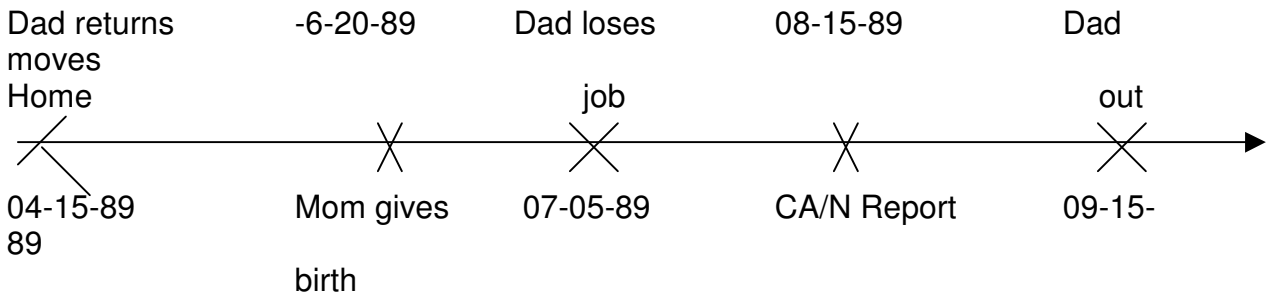
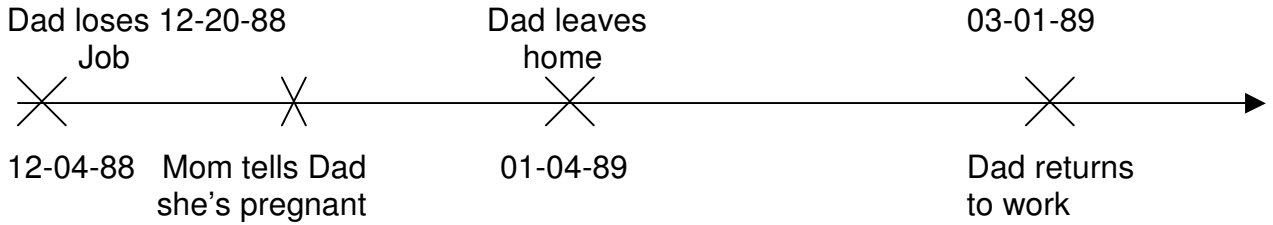
These can immediately precede the presenting problem but may also have been in the more distant past.

3. Next, mark any significant events that followed the presenting problem. This can demonstrate the event(s) experienced by the family after the problem's onset and its consequences.
4. Inquire into whether the presenting problem had occurred before. Mark the significant events that surround any previous incidents. This should help determine if this is an acute or chronic problem.

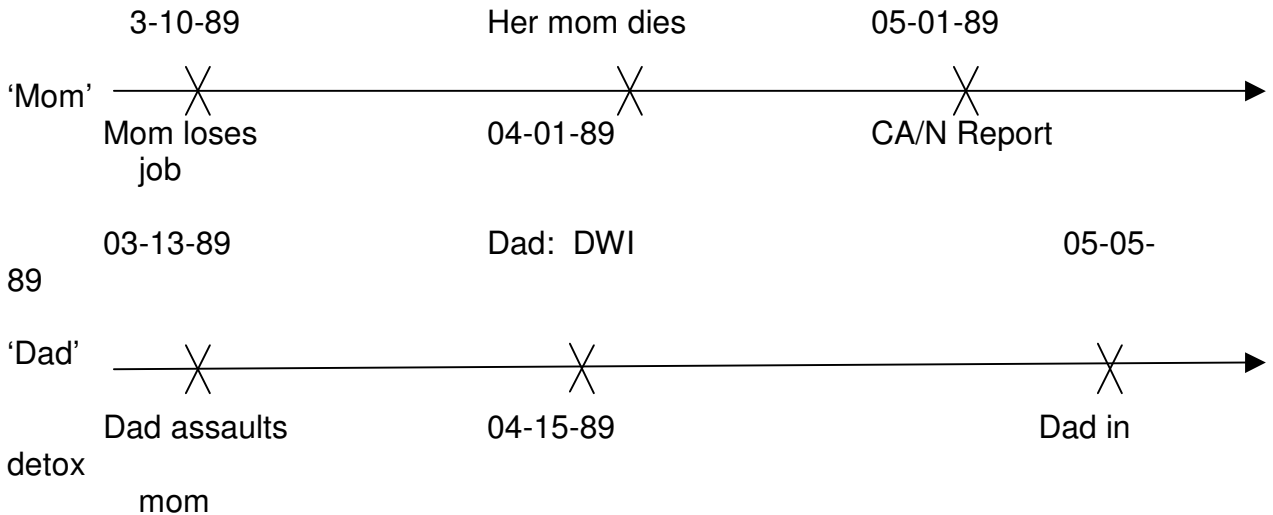
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The Social Worker may also use a line for each household member if it is more helpful to track the events surrounding an individual. (See Figure 6a.)

Figures 6 and 6a. Examples of tine lines



6a.



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- Sequences of Behavior

Sequences of behavior that surround the presenting problem can be diagrammed in a circular manner. This allows the Social Worker and family to see how the presenting problem is embedded within precise sequences of observable family behaviors. It can help gain insight into:

- What behaviors act as antecedents to the presenting problem so that the antecedents can be avoided or altered;
- How the family members react to the presenting problem behaviors and how the family system is influenced by the problem behaviors;
- What functional aspects the presenting problem serves within the family system and why it has become ingrained within the family; and

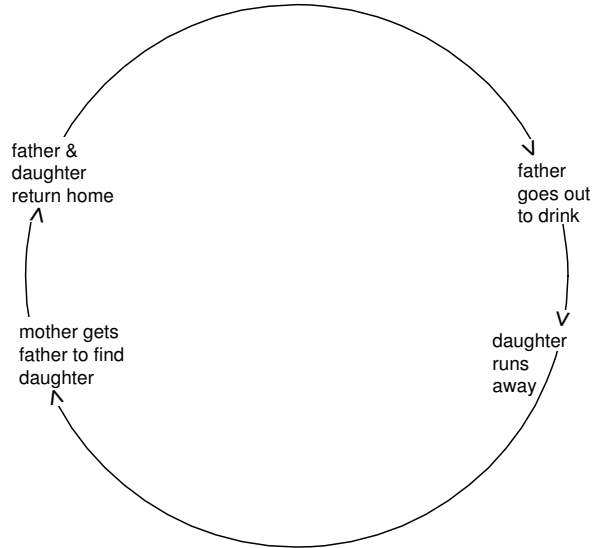
How these repetitious sequences may create counter-productive patterns that the family might have become accustomed to.

Instructions for Diagramming Behavior Sequences

1. Mark the presenting problem behavior on a point on a circle (Daughter runs away).
2. Inquire into what observable behavior immediately preceded the problem behavior (Dad left home).
3. Inquire into what observable behavior preceded this behavior (Dad and Mom were fighting). Follow this process backwards to document the series of behaviors (Dad was drinking) that eventually led up to the presenting problem.
4. Next, inquire into what observable behavior immediately followed the presenting problem behavior (Mom seeks Dad for help).
5. Inquire into what observable behavior immediately followed this behavior (Dad finds Daughter). Follow this process forward to diagram the series of behaviors that followed the presenting problem. (Dad and Daughter return home together; Mom and Dad reconcile; Dad starts drinking again; Mom and Dad fight again, etc.)

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Figure 7.



Sources:

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The instructions for completing genograms and ecomaps were adapted from "Diagrammatic Assessment of Family Relationships," *Social Casework* (October 1978), and "An Ecological Framework for Assessment," from the book Finding Families, 1979, both authored by Ann Hartman.

Figures No. 2 through 5, and 7 are used with the permission of the National Resource Center on Family Based Service., The University of Iowa School of Social Work, Oakdale, Iowa.

Technical assistance was provided by the National Resource Center on Family Based Services for information on diagramming time lines and sequences of behavior.