

# Clues to Behavior Sought in History Of Families

By DANIEL GOLEMAN

**I**N their search for the causes of human behavior, some psychologists find themselves drawn ever deeper into the past, beyond the history of any individual and toward that of the whole family.

They discern across many generations of families the development of a kind of subculture, complete with myths, expectations and foibles, that can explain some of the more baffling aspects of life. In this pursuit they are attempting to codify themes familiar in Greek tragedy as well as in modern literature.

One of the new tools in this effort is called the genogram, in which the interplay of generations within a family is carefully graphed so that repetitive patterns of behavior can be clearly identified. Because the rapidly growing popularity of genograms had led to a lack of agreement on what symbols to use, a task force of therapists and physicians recently proposed standard guidelines for constructing these psychological family trees.



Alexander  
Graham Bell

"You're the product of millions and millions of human generations, and you've got to understand what goes on in a family in that grand perspective; you understand too little about a person if you look just at his inner life or immediate family," said Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist who is generally credited with originating the multigenerational approach to therapy.

While family therapists were the first to use this generational framework for treating psychological problems, the orientation is spreading to those in other disciplines, such as history and family medicine.

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# A Family Perspective

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The psychological legacy of past generations is of course not a binding influence on the descendants. It seems to diminish as time goes on, and those in later generations come under the sway of many other psychological influences. And the patterns of previous generations matter little to those who have little awareness of or no contact with their forebears.

Also, the patterns that are revealed are by no means always negative. In Alexander Graham Bell's family tree, for example, there is a three-generation preoccupation with problems in speaking and hearing, which presaged his invention of the telephone.

Bell's paternal grandfather was an actor and elocutionist who wrote a classic book on phonetics and invented a cure for stammering; his father and uncle devoted themselves to teaching their father's technique. Bell's mother and his own wife were both deaf, and Bell himself taught the deaf, studying in great detail the mechanics of speech. It was his father's suggestion to Alexander that he develop a talking machine that set him on the path that led, eventually, to the telephone.

The notion that the traumas and triumphs of one generation can reverberate through successive ones is, of course, as ancient as the biblical warning that "the sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children" for seven generations. As a plot twist it was familiar in Greek tragedy — "Oedipus Rex," for example — and in Shakespeare's family epics, including "King Lear" and "Romeo and Juliet." Modern novelists from Faulkner on have chronicled the intertwined fates of families over generations, as soap operas like "Dallas" do.

## The Adams Family

"Looking at multiple generations helps you see how deep the problem is," said Edward Friedman, a family therapist who has written extensively on the topic. "When you have a deep problem in a family, one that gets passed on over generations, it is more effectively handled if you take more than one generation into account."

Among those outside the field of therapy who have turned to the approach is David F. Musto of Yale, a psychiatrist and historian who is studying the papers of four generations of the eminent Adams family. The Adamses produced not only two American presidents but also several ambassadors and literary figures.

In Dr. Musto's view, the Adams family passed on a destructive family myth about its own place in history, a myth that contributed to serious psy-

chological difficulties, including a suicide, over successive generations. The myth was created and propagated by Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, the second American president. According to Dr. Musto, during the Revolutionary War Abigail Adams was left to suffer loneliness and hardships in Massachusetts during the years her husband rose to fame in Philadelphia and Europe.

"She justified her sacrifice by glorifying her husband and the cause for which he fought," seeing him as the key figure in American independence, Dr. Musto writes in an article in "New Directions in Psychohistory." From that point on she had grand ambitions for her children, particularly John Quincy Adams, who she felt was destined to be "a hero and statesman."

## Impossible Expectations

While that expectation proved true long before John Quincy Adams became the sixth American president, in Dr. Musto's view the family myth also contained extremely idealistic and unrealistic standards which were to prove a burden to later generations of Adamses.

According to the family self-image, an Adams was to be morally superior and find blazing success while remaining aloof from the shabby reality of business and politics. This myth, Dr. Musto argues, created an impossible situation for the Adamses in later generations.

While some of the Adams family in later generations actually did rise to eminence — John Quincy Adams's son Charles Francis Adams was America's ambassador to Britain in the Civil War, and came close to a Presidential nomination — others were decided failures.

Another of John Quincy's sons, George Washington Adams, a heavy drinker, was said to be so disheartened by his failure to uphold the family standards of success that he committed suicide at 28. It was not until the third generation after Abigail, Dr. Musto claims, that the Adams family gave up her inflated vision of the family's destiny as the leaders of the American Republic.

Writing in a recent issue of *The American Scholar*, Peter Shaw notes two contrasting types over several generations in the Adams family. On one hand, he says, there were self-deniers who never deviated from their sense of duty. On the other were self-indulgents who seemed bent on disappointing family expectations.

## Tracking Legacies by Genograms

The "genogram" was developed by family therapists to track such legacies systematically, using sets of symbols on a family tree to show psychologically significant events: Abor-

tions and stillbirths, separations and divorces and extramarital affairs, for example. In addition, the genogram allows the noting of psychological alliances or distance between family members, as well as unusually close or estranged relationships.

The net result is a family tree that reveals not just the usual relationships, but also, more significantly, the emotional turbulence that is inevitable in a family. Moreover, it shows this turbulence not just in the present, but also as it has survived over generations.

For example, a genogram of the family of Eugene O'Neill shows a pattern of estrangement between father and children over three generations, according to Monica McGoldrick, a clinical social worker in the Department of Psychiatry at Rutgers, who headed a task force that developed standard guideline for genograms.

"Both Eugene and his oldest brother Jamie felt estranged from their father, and all of them blamed each other for the mother's drug addiction," according to Professor McGoldrick. "In the next generation, the playwright was totally estranged from his oldest son and had nothing to do with his daughter, Oona, after she married Charlie Chaplin."

"Biographers should find the technique useful," Professor McGoldrick said, "because it offers a systematic way to analyze the psychological influences of past generations on a person."

## Insights Into Hidden Patterns

The approach reveals not just tendencies toward problems in a family, Professor McGoldrick says, but also offers insights into hidden patterns that influence choices people make in

life such as that of career. For example, she says, students of Carl Jung and his theories would do well to take his family background into account in understanding the sources of his ideas.

Jung was from a family in which, for three generations before him, virtually all the males had been either physicians or ministers. Many members, including his mother, also had strong beliefs in the supernatural. A cousin was a medium, and Jung attended her seances in his youth.

"Jung's becoming a physician with a profound interest in the supernatural and religion fit right into the predominant patterns in his family," Professor McGoldrick said.

Such cross-generational influences on identity are more common than most people realize, Professor McGoldrick said. "If you look back in your family, you are often able to find a psychological twin or near-twin. For example, a patient of mine thought of herself as a total oddity in her family, because she is gay and has a wry sense of humor in a family that is otherwise straightlaced and tightlipped. But she recently found out about a grand-aunt who was rarely mentioned by the family. The grand-aunt had the same sort of sense of humor, and lived all her adult life with another woman, with whom she 'shared a bed,' as her family put it."

"Since family patterns can be transmitted from one generation to the next, recognizing such patterns can often help families avoid repeating unfortunate patterns or transmitting them into future generations," Professor McGoldrick said. The guidelines for using genograms to plot family trees are outlined in "Genograms in Family Assessment"

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who have proposed theories about the psychological dynamics at work in families over generations. Apart from the efforts of Murray Bowen and his students, the major work of this kind has been done by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, a psychiatrist at the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute in Philadelphia, and his colleagues. Family therapists who take this approach often hold therapy sessions at which are present not just the person with a psychological problem, but also his parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and sometimes even cousins.

Some families seem to be far more marked by generational patterns than are others, the theorists say. In such families, for example, there may typically be a continuing pattern of women martyred by husbands who have mistresses, or generation after generation in which there is incest or physical abuse. But in almost all families, the theorists say, there are more subtle ways in which one generation leaves its psychological mark on successive ones.

In almost every family, for example, each generation has a psychological loyalty to the past one, a sense that the child has a set of commitments to his parents to transmit their values and outlook to his children. That transmission, according to Dr. Boszormenyi-Nagy, repays a psychological debt to earlier generations.

It is in this sense that "every marriage is actually two families that are trying to reproduce themselves — his and hers," said Carl Whitaker, a family therapist.

(Norton), which Professor McGoldrick wrote with Randy Gerson.

"The generational approach offers perhaps the most highly developed theory in family therapy, a field stronger on technique and practical problem-solving than on theory," said Richard Simon, a family therapist in Washington, D.C., and editor of the *Family Therapy Networker*, the major trade journal in the field.

There are several family therapists