

FAMILY: THE NEXT LARGER PICTURE

by Dyrian Benz, Psy.D.

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Clearly, something was off in my life a few years ago. For months I had been depressed, ended a troubled marriage, and gave up my therapy practice and my home. My external and internal life were severely adrift. No doubt, I needed to do some concentrated work on myself, which would include therapy.

As chance would have it, my work would take me to my hometown for an extended time. This seemed like a good opportunity to do some personal work on the very roots and the foundation of my personality. Here all my memories of growing up were so much more alive. The same forest that provided much boyhood playtime immediately infused me with memories of playing hide and seek with the neighborhood children. Years later it would be the secret hiding place of my first shaky kiss on a cool fall evening. Still facing that forest is the sandy hill with the many nesting holes where we would sit on the warm summer evenings and watch the streamlined swallows dashing in and out with their erratic flight. From there I can still hear my mother's voice calling me home for dinner. When her call was followed soon by my father's whistle signal, going home seemed suddenly more urgent than watching the swallows.

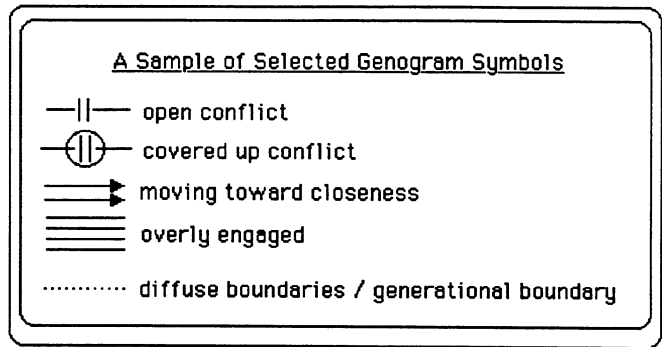
The therapist I began to see had a family therapy focus, even though she worked only with me individually. On my way to the therapy appointment the wonder, the complications, and the strength of my childhood would flood their way into my consciousness. My walk to her office became a quietly cherished, private ritual of walking back into my childhood where all its characters sprang to life again. Taking the final steps down to her basement office was the descent into the family system that was still churning and reverberating in the depth of me.

At this point, let me bring Hakomi into the picture and weave some connections. In Hakomi therapy, even though we traditionally focus on the patterns and system of the individual, the entanglements with all the characters from the family system are often so present in the session that they may as well be invited to sit down. If we take this additional step from the individual to the next larger system, so to speak, we end up squarely in the family system. It seems almost trite to say, but it certainly is true, that the most lasting influences come from our life with our family. In early life we learn our most lasting lessons about how to be with other people. Here, for the first time, we get to observe how parents, or intimate adults, interact with each other, and we learn lessons for life from that. Despite the title of a previously popular book, it is clearly not only "my mother, myself" but rather "my family, myself." The family unit is also the strongest single filter for all the emotional and environmental influences on our development. These external conditions include the culture and language, the times we live in, the geographical and climatic conditions, and the socioeconomic context. It is primarily the family that interprets the meaning of these factors to a curious, inexperienced child. Certainly no one seriously questions the lasting and critical influence the family structure exerts on the character of the individual. The kind of relationship we had with our family still easily manifests itself in our present, everyday interpersonal relationships, especially if we are not aware of these family patterns.

It is a natural extension of Hakomi to pay more explicit attention to the family patterns and roles that are handed down and assumed by all of us. Even though we deal with character and the parental influences involved in shaping this character, we rarely focus explicitly and in detail on how our individual

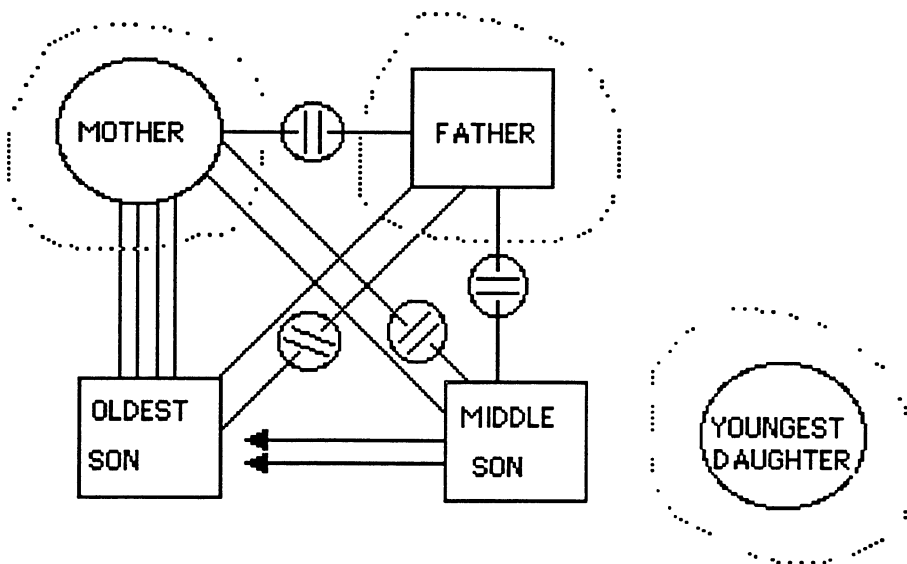
character is embedded in the entire family configuration. To do this work, the whole family does not necessarily have to be present. For it need not be our goal to restructure the entire family. In the framework of individual therapy, it is generally enough for the individual client to deeply see, feel, understand, and *know* the family connections and entanglements. If the family system is flexible and receptive to movement, which is usually *not* the rule, then the changes in the client can even set off reverberations for considerable change in the entire family. Under less favorable conditions, when the family system is heavily invested in protecting its boundaries and structures, at least the client can have a better awareness of family patterns, and consequently be less manipulated by them. As even one family member begins to step outside the structure, change for other members and patterns of interaction becomes at least possible. Let me suggest some ways in which we can begin to include a family perspective in Hakomi based on my own study of family therapy and my therapy experience.

My first piece of homework after my initial therapy session was to write an "autobiography" of my mother's life written in first person style (as if she were writing it). This was then later followed with the same homework for my father. It reminded me of the "mirroring exercise" in Hakomi where we "take on," or copy the body of a partner as closely as possible in order to get a sense of them from "the inside out." This work, most of which took place outside the therapy session, immediately threw me for a loop. All of a sudden I had to see my parents from their own perspective. I realized just how invested I was in keeping them in this mystical parent role and how little I had considered their own struggles and joys as "regular people." It also gave me an understanding



of my mother's sense of emotional repression in her family which was instantly familiar to me from my own life. My therapist then helped me focus on the complexity of this pattern in my own life, i.e. where I had simply taken this pattern over and where I had differentiated from it.

She also worked out a genogram with me. The genogram is as essential for the family therapist as the character map for the Hakomi therapist. If you are not familiar with the genogram, the basics are easily learned, although it takes considerable practice to apply it skillfully. Essentially it is a pictorial representation of the family dynamics, a kind of pictorial family landscape. My therapist started with the representation of both of my parents' families. Normally, in a genogram, all the multi-generational, interpersonal connections are drawn in and explored. In order not to get too complicated in this article, I will only represent a section of my own genogram. This section includes my maternal grandparents and their children, which includes my mother as the youngest child. In this constellation my grandmother turned out to be the most powerful individual in the family dynamics. (For a more complete description of the genogram see: "Genograms in Family Assessment" by M. McGoldrick and R. Gerson, W.W. Norton: New York, 1985.)



A brief interpretation of this genogram is that my grandparents had a weak and blocked connection, meaning that there was a conventional, socio-economic connection but very little emotional life. Grandmother was heavily invested in the oldest son, but had weak and blocked links with the younger son and a diffused and undefined relationship with her daughter, my mother. Grandfather had a conflicted relationship with both sons (competing for grandmother's affection) and also a diffuse relationship with his daughter, which

left her without any orientation in this family with such diffuse boundaries.

All this made it clear to me how little room there was for my mother to exert her individuality and develop her maturity in this family. As my therapist had me put myself into the role of my mother in her family, the youngest of her siblings, I felt the hopelessness of her position. She was not really able to make a deep connection with anyone in the family. As part of the family dynamics, the only role left for her was that of an outsider trying to get in, a difficult position to learn about open and loving emotional closeness. In my life, I, too, would have trouble with the same issue. In the therapy, I felt and understood, with a deep inner impact, how my own difficulties in this area had been influenced by growing up in an unclear, foggy emotional atmosphere. Even though we probably all recognize and give lip service to some of these "passed on" patterns in our life, this family focus brought them home to me with power and immediacy.

I recall one particularly important session where I vividly experienced my own family role, with some of the accompanying entanglements. Here is a brief part of an emotionally charged segment where I begin to try coming to grips with this reality.

Client: It somehow demands a complete... a total... reorientation of my thinking about my family... where I never appreciated the difficulty in the family... where I never consciously realized how broken up the whole thing was.

Therapist: Yes.

Client: How compulsive all these reactions in this family system are... I mean I know it on one level... but mostly on a mental level, and now to feel it is a totally different thing... it feels overwhelming.

Therapist: Right now feel in your body what each family member has sent over to you and what you have taken in from your father, mother and brother... What is there from them in your body right now...

I recognized how little I know about clear boundaries and emotional self-sufficiency. It was painful and yet at the same time also somehow hopeful for me to experience how little I was able to draw on my own inner resources without first looking for approval from external sources. I had learned to look outside for confirmation of myself and I felt the emptiness, shame and hopelessness of all that.

Let me conclude this article with some practical suggestions. First I will recapitulate the techniques mentioned previously and then suggest a few additional ones, borrowed from family therapy, which could be applied effectively in Hakomi therapy.

1) Writing the life autobiography of each parent can serve as an excellent introduction for incorporating a family focus in therapy. It stimulates much childhood experience. It also humanizes the parent and helps to make the parent more of a person in their own right.

2) For the genogram, all the connections can be explored as to their feeling and meaning in mindfulness, and potentially lead into extended processing. This procedure can either yield material for a few sessions or it can be appropriately condensed. For example the procedure can be shortened by drawing only one genogram for the client, siblings and parents, without drawing extended ones to include the grandparents.

3) The therapist can, at the direction of the client, set up a chair for each family member (even letting the client pick the right chairs for the different members, etc.), and the client can explore in mindfulness the connections and the blocks with each family member, paying attention to all the usual points of Hakomi work, such as studying feelings, meaning, physical distance and generating probes, etc.

4) Or similarly, the therapist can ask the client to have the family stand around him or her, again, paying attention to the points mentioned above.

5) As in the previous short segment of the therapy, the client can be asked to explore in the body what the different family members tried to convey to him or her, what was actually taken in, and the implications of all that.

6) The client can be asked to bring in pictures from his or her early life, and the pictures and their meaning, emotions and memories can be explored, experienced and processed.

In conclusion I can say that family-oriented therapy has been a great help for me in understanding and experiencing my family "predisposition" more clearly. It has brought an added dimension to understanding how my character structure developed, and showed me more precisely what I was up against in my childhood. At appropriate times I have included some of these elements in my work as a therapist, and found them consistent with Hakomi, while adding an additional, and often crucial, dimension to the therapeutic work.