A Response to My Genogram

By Derek Rutter

Wake Forest University
When I think about my family, either side, I think about Sundays—the day my families have always gotten together. As a child, I understood this ritual as a given: on Sunday we go to the Rutter’s after church, then out to the Bateson’s in the evening. Today, I no longer simply view this as a routine of my youth, taken for granted like other obligations, rather something quite different—something special. These meals were more than meals; they were celebrations—celebrations of what we were creating as individuals, as nuclear families, and as larger families—celebrations thrown every week on both sides of my family.

Now, more than ever, I see how much we have had to celebrate, and I feel blessed to have been born into such a narrative. As McGoldrick suggests, “We are born not just into our family, but also into our family’s stories, which both nourish—and sometimes cripple—us” (2001, p. 59). My life has been well-nourished by stories of successful marriages, structured homes, modeled values, and generally good communication. Still, like all families, my family has had its secrets, its triangles, and its dysfunction, and these have challenged my family in ways I am yet to fully comprehend. It is my hope that in illustrating the patterns of my family that I may come to a deeper understanding of myself, my loved ones, and the roles we each play in creating the system that connects us.

What immediately jumps out of my own genogram is the structure. Neither set of my grandparents divorced, and this seems to have served as something of a model on both sides. On the Rutter side, no one has divorced thus far in three generations. On the Bateson side, there have only been two divorces out of thirteen total marriages, and both of these eventually resulted in successful remarriages. Aside from simply staying together, the couples in my family have typically been in love and functioned well. Furthermore, every marriage on either side of my family (with the exception of one married cousin) has also produced at least two children. When
viewed visually from the genogram, the balance that results from such a pattern is striking. Within the context of my life, this structure was a real source of stability. I have a brother and two parents. In addition, I have many cousins who also have siblings and two parents. Any of us could go to another family member’s house and find our self within a home that reflected our own home’s dynamic. As a result, my family structure itself is a pattern repeated many times over.

I did not fully grasp the value placed on structure in my family until I began examining the on-going criticism two of my aunts seem to experience. Both of these women, Beth and Sherrie, married into the Rutter family but have lacked the acceptance that my mother and Aunt Gayle have experienced. While I grew up thinking that the criticism Beth and Sherrie received followed flaws in their character, I now believe other forces are at play. First, both of these women come from families outside of Bowling Green, Ohio. Second, both women come from divorced families. Finally, both women were quite vocal about their distaste for their families, especially their mothers. What also must be understood is that my Grandma Rutter’s birth family, the Johnsons, is held in high regard within the Rutter family.

The pattern that I now see at work is that of a family which places great stock in the maternal line as seen in the embracing of the Johnsons. This has been reinforced by a generation of men (my father and his brothers) either choosing a partner that mirrors my grandfather’s choice of wife (i.e. local, never-divorced, from a functional family) or choosing otherwise. As McGoldrick states, “Marriage shifts the relationship of a couple from a private twosome to a formal joining of two families” (2011, p. 244). Those women who essentially mirrored my grandmother’s lineage have been embraced, while Beth and Sherrie have remained outsiders as the Rutters have struggled to embrace joining their respective families. Interestingly, my
brother and I, the first males of our generation to approach marriage, have both become engaged to women who follow this “accepted” pattern of female partner.

Other elements of structure have also informed my family’s health and constellation. First, there is little history of hereditary disease on either side of my family, with arthritis and high blood pressure being the only two issues that seem to repeat. Second, both sides of my family hold predominantly Christian beliefs and are members of some form of church congregation. Third, everyone who is of age thus far holds a high school diploma, and the bulk of us also have college degrees. Fourth, there is virtually zero family history of addiction or other diagnosed mental health disorders, at least that are spoken of. Finally, everyone that is able and wishes to be employed has work and nearly all of these individuals work in a career of their choosing. Certainly, this list is not inclusive of all elements that contribute to healthy family structure, but these factors have undoubtedly contributed to my family’s stability.

On a more covert level, various themes seem to sew my family together. Perhaps most interesting of these themes is the push and pull of individualistic and collectivistic ideals. On the one hand, both sides of my family hold and express somewhat idealistic notions of the “self-made man” who “picks himself up by his bootstraps” and chases the American dream. This makes sense too; both of my grandfathers were this man, and they were successful. Consequently, everyone in my family has been raised to believe that we can be whoever we wish to be, that we should follow our heart, be our own person, and that anything is possible with enough hard work and a willingness to fail from time to time. Interestingly, what has simultaneously been communicated across both sides of my family is that we are all a part of something much greater than ourselves—our family—and everything that we say and do reflects upon our family in some way. This was a difficult dichotomy for me to bear in my late teenage
years as I strove for freedom and independence from my family, while simultaneously wishing to maintain my family bond. My rebelliousness ultimately led to some minor encounters with the law, which inspired my own re-evaluation of how I challenged my family boundaries. What I failed to see at that time, because no one spoke of it, was that various uncles and cousins of mine, from both sides, came into troubles around the same time in their own lives. I can’t help but wonder to what degree this theme of late-teen male rebellion is correlated with what sometimes feels like our family’s conflicting ideals of individualism and collectivism.

A second theme that seems to have characterized our family is that of leadership. Both of my grandfathers were breadwinners in their families, as well as well-respected men in their communities. My Grandpa Bateson was heavily involved in local politics and served as the Wood County Auditor for several years. He also built a substantial family farm with the help of his sons who now carry on the farming tradition. My grandpa Rutter was a baseball coach actively involved in establishing little league baseball in Bowling Green, Ohio. My parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins have carried on this tradition of leadership as coaches, entrepreneurs, business executives, and community leaders who value education, organization, and cooperation.

Then of course there are secrets. Perhaps the most fascinating secret was my Grandpa Bateson’s, which he shared with my mother and my cousin shortly before his death. At this time, he explained that he was not a cook in the marines during WWII as he had told everyone, but rather an infantry man who saw heavy combat in Guam and Iwo Jima. He also told of a best friend that took care of him while he was injured, and then who was eventually killed in action beside him. He explained feeling a loss unparalleled and that he would never again allow himself to become close to anyone else in the service.
I think about the effect the war must have had on my grandfather and how he carried this around with him for the rest of his life. I think about the emotional distance my mother described feeling between her and him growing up. I think about my uncles, his sons, neither of whom are particularly revealing of their emotions; I think about the challenges they have faced in marriage and child-rearing. I think about these things, and I can’t help but wonder how these have been affected by my grandfather’s secret.

As I reflect on these observations of my family, I feel as aware of my lineage as ever before. Yet, in some ways I almost feel as if I know less, because my examination has revealed many things that I have failed to see until now, and these elements are new and almost foreign to me. Nevertheless, I can’t help, but feel like the journey into my family has just begun—there is always more to discover and make sense of—and this excites me.
References