

GENOGRAMS

in Family Assessment

Monica McGoldrick
Randy Gerson



W · W · NORTON & COMPANY New York · London

2

CONSTRUCTING GENOGRAMS

Genograms are part of the more general process of family assessment. In this chapter we will describe how to both construct a genogram and elicit relevant genogram information from a family during assessment.

CREATING A GENOGRAM

Creating a genogram involves three levels: 1) mapping the family structure, 2) recording family information, and 3) delineating family relationships.

Mapping the Family Structure

The backbone of a genogram is a graphic depiction of how different family members are biologically and legally related to one another from one generation to the next. This map is a construction of figures representing people and lines delineating their relationships. As with any map, the representation will have meaning only if the symbols are defined for those who are trying to read the genogram. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of diversity in the way clinicians draw genograms. Different groups have their own favorite symbols and ways of dealing with complicated family constellations, which often leads to confusion in reading other clinicians' genograms. Recently a group of family physicians and family therapists (a Task Force of the North American Primary Care Research Group), chaired by McGoldrick, has collaborated to standardize the symbols and pro-

**Diagram 2.1 Gender symbols****Diagram 2.2 Index person symbols**

Birthdate → 43:62 ← Deathdate

**Diagram 2.3 Birthdates and deathdates**

cedures for drawing the genogram. These procedures form the basis for the guidelines presented here.

The family structure shows different family members in relation to one another. Each family member is represented by a box or circle according to his or her gender (Diagram 2.1). For the index person (or identified patient) around whom the genogram is constructed, the lines are doubled (Diagram 2.2). For a person who is dead, an X is placed inside the figure. Birth and death dates are indicated to the left and right above the figure (Diagram 2.3). The person's age at death is usually indicated within the figure. For example the male depicted here was born in 1943 and died in 1962 at the age of 19. In extended genograms that go back more than three generations, figures in the distant past are not usually crossed out, since they are presumably dead. Only relevant deaths are indicated in such genograms.

Pregnancies, miscarriages, abortions and stillbirths are indicated by other symbols (Diagram 2.4).

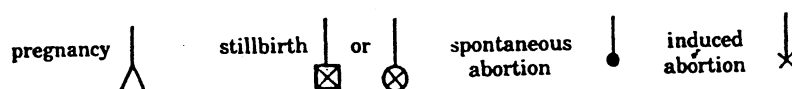


Diagram 2.4 Symbols for pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion and stillbirth

The figures representing family members are connected by lines that indicate their biological and legal relationships.

Two people who are married are connected by lines that go down and across, with the husband on the left and the wife on the right (Diagram 2.5). "M" followed by a date indicates when the couple was married. Sometimes only the last two digits of the year are shown (e.g., m.48) when there is little chance of confusion regarding the appropriate century. The marriage line is also the place where separations or divorces are indicated (Diagram 2.6). The slashes signify a disruption in the marriage—one slash for separation and two for a divorce.

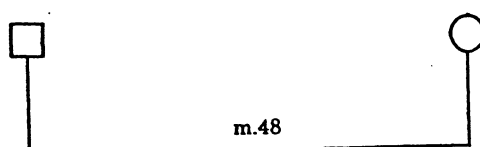


Diagram 2.5 Marriage connections

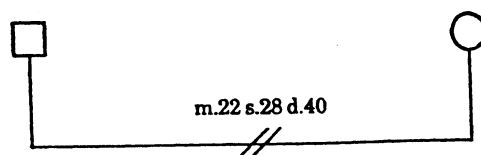


Diagram 2.6 Separations and divorces

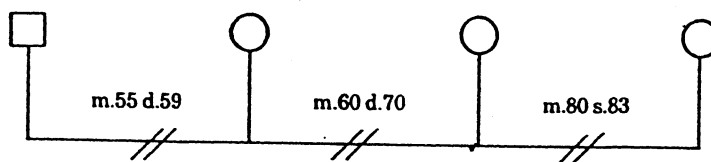


Diagram 2.7 A husband with several wives

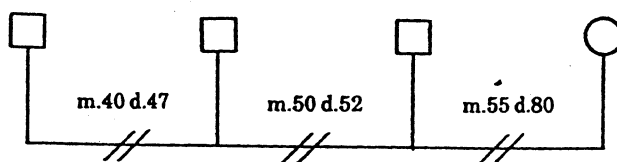


Diagram 2.8 A wife with several husbands

Multiple marriages add a degree of complexity that is sometimes difficult to depict. Diagram 2.7 shows one way of indicating several wives of one husband, while Diagram 2.8 shows several husbands of one wife. The rule of thumb is that, when feasible, the different marriages follow in order from left to right, with the most recent marriage coming last. The marriage and divorce dates should also help to make the order clear. However, when each spouse has had multiple partners (and possibly children from previous marriages), mapping out the complex web of relationships can be very difficult indeed. One solution is to place the most recent relationship in the center and each partner's former spouses off to the side, as in Diagram 2.9.

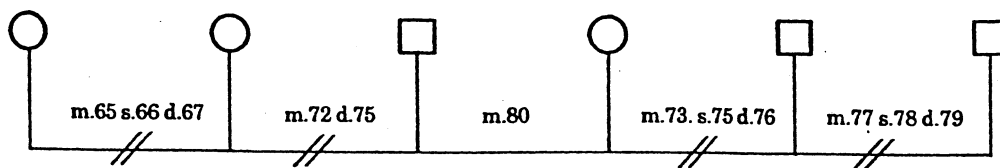


Diagram 2.9 Two partners who have each had multiple spouses

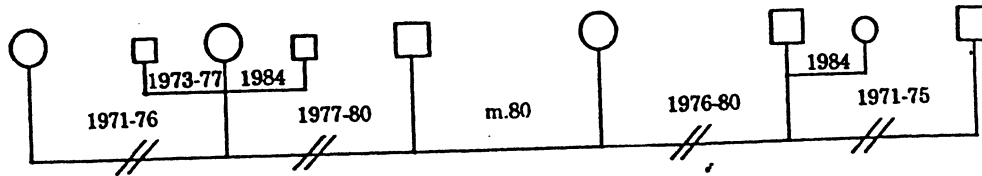


Diagram 2.10 Remarriages where each spouse has had several other partners

If previous spouses have had other partners, it may be necessary to draw a second line, slightly above the first marriage line, to indicate these relationships. In Diagram 2.10 each spouse has been married twice before. The husband's former wife had been married once before she married him, and she remarried afterwards. The wife's second husband has remarried since their divorce.

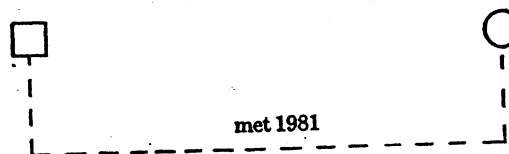


Diagram 2.11 Unmarried couple

If a couple are involved in a love affair or living together but not legally married, their relationship is depicted as with married couples, but a dotted line is used (Diagram 2.11). The important date here is when they met or started living together. (This may also be important information for married couples.)

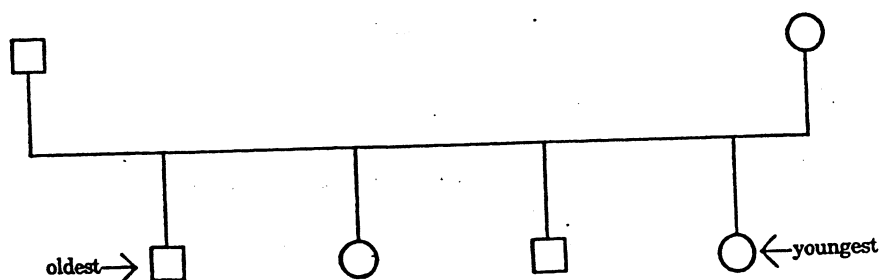


Diagram 2.12 Birth order

If a couple has children, then each child's figure hangs down from the line that connects the couple. Children are drawn left to right going from the oldest to the youngest, as in Diagram 2.12. If there

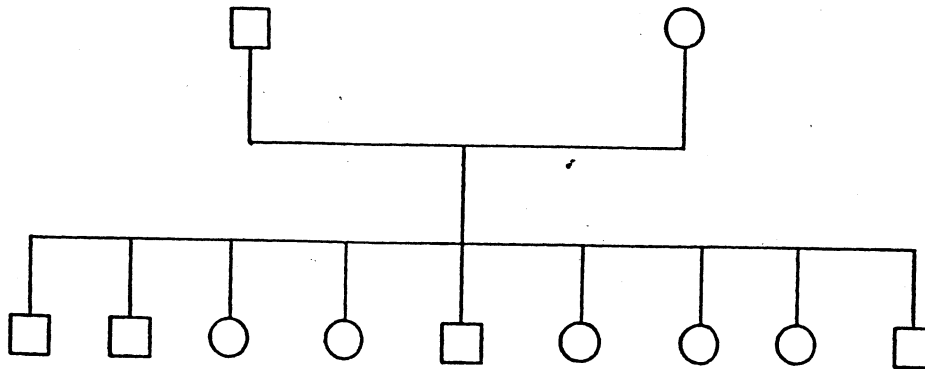


Diagram 2.13 Alternative method for depicting family with many children

are many children in a family, an alternate method (Diagram 2.13) may be used to save space. A dotted line is used to connect a foster or adopted child to the parents' line (Diagram 2.14). And finally, converging lines connect twins to the parental line. If the twins are identical, a bar connects them to each other (Diagram 2.15).

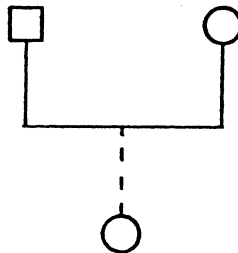


Diagram 2.14 Foster or adopted children

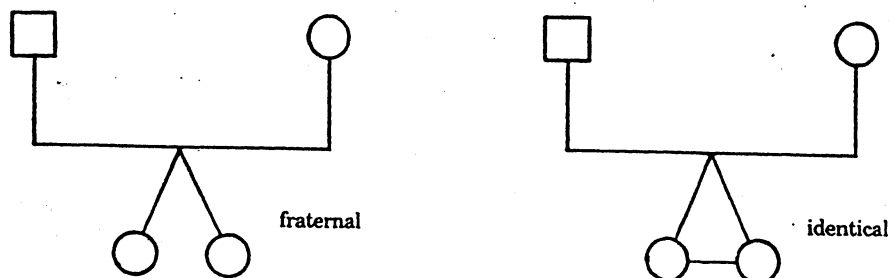


Diagram 2.15 Twins

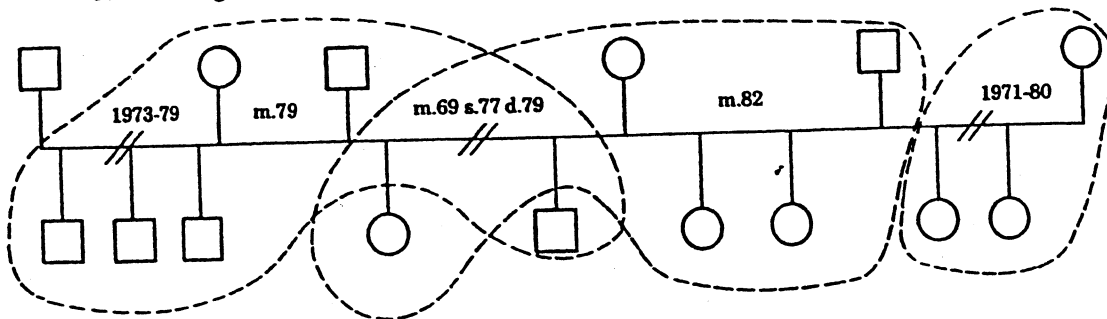


Diagram 2.16 Households of remarried families

Dotted lines are used to encircle the family members living in the immediate household. This is especially important in remarried families where children spend time in various households, as in the genogram shown in Diagram 2.16.

Now that we have the basic symbols and procedures for mapping the family structure on a genogram, let us put them into practice by using the family of a well-known celebrity of the psychiatric world: Sigmund Freud. Neither Freud nor his biographers ever did extensive research into his family and the details of his family life are sketchy. Nevertheless, we do know the basic structure of the Freud family.

First, we draw Sigmund's marriage to Martha and their children (Diagram 2.17).

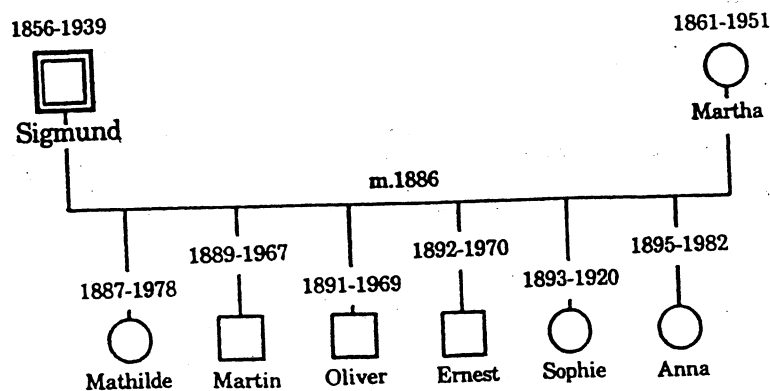


Diagram 2.17 Freud nuclear family

Next, we go back a generation and include both Sigmund's and Martha's parents and siblings (Diagram 2.18). In fact, we usually go back to the grandparents of the index person, including at least three generations on the genogram (four or even five generations if the index person has children and grandchildren).

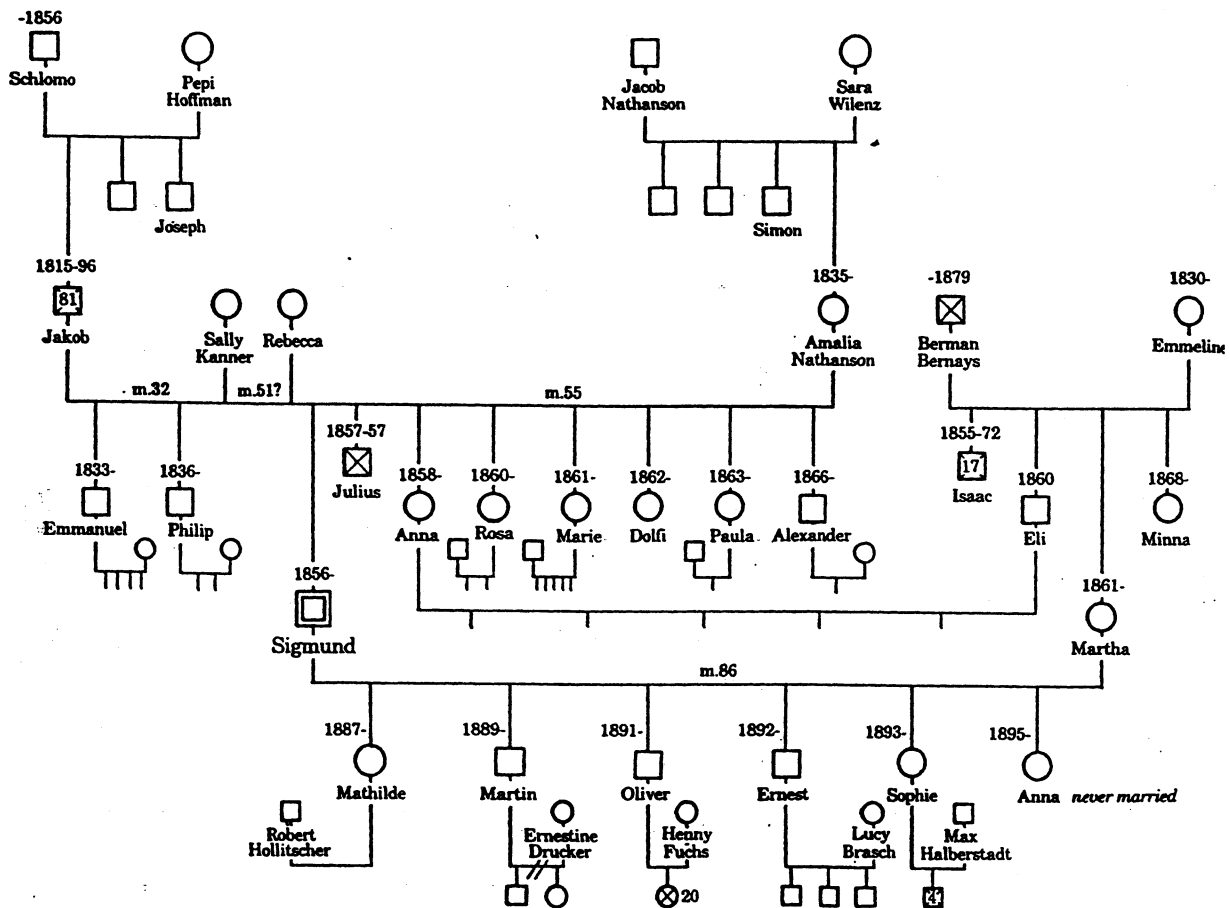


Diagram 2.18 Freud family – five generations

To highlight their central importance, the figures for Sigmund and Martha are lowered out of the sibling line. As can also be seen on

this diagram, the spouses of siblings are also usually placed slightly lower than the siblings themselves, to keep the sibling patterns clear.

After the family structure has been drawn, the members of the household are encircled. Diagram 2.19 shows the Freud household in 1896, the year after their last child, Anna, was born, and the year that Sigmund's sister-in-law came to live with them.

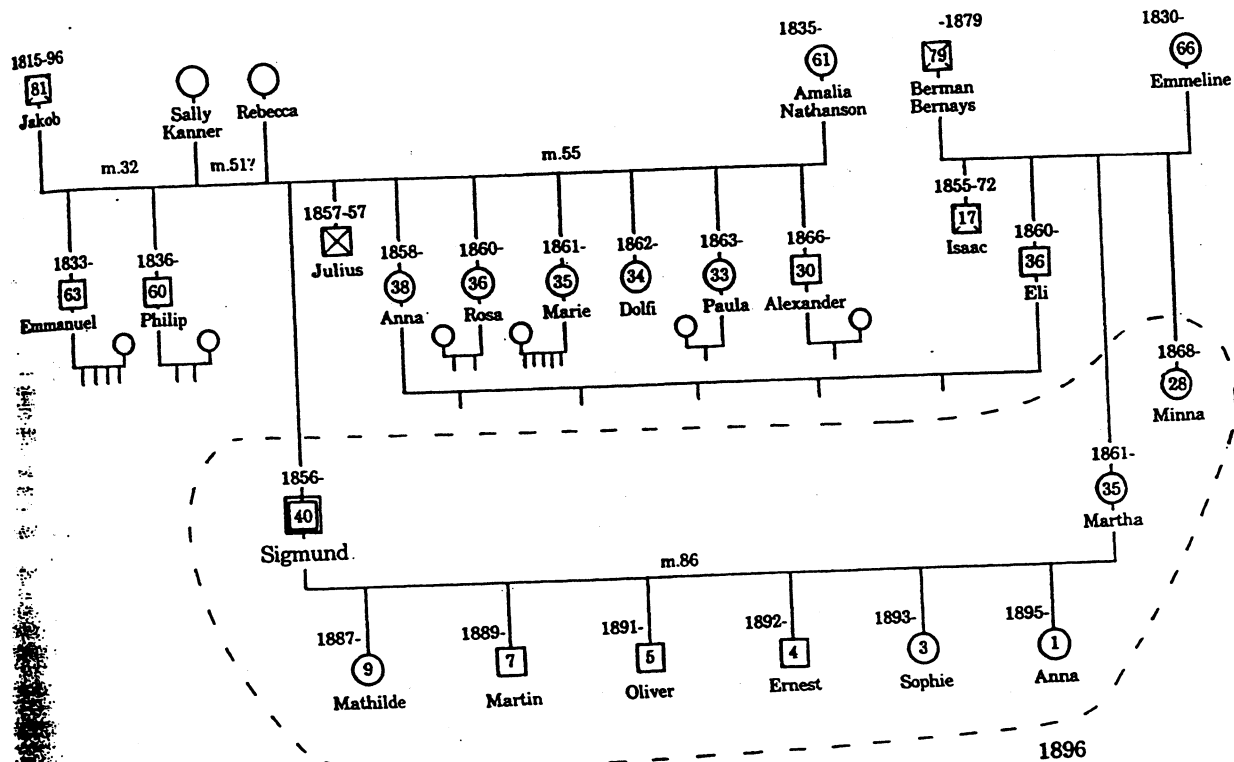


Diagram 2.19 Freud immediate household

The date in the bottom righthand corner tells the year when this genogram snapshot was taken. A clinician might use the genogram to freeze-frame a moment in the past, such as the time of symptom onset or critical change in a family. When we choose one date in a person's life, other information, deaths, ages and important events are calculated in relation to that set date. It is then useful to put each person's age inside his or her figure. If the person is dead, the

age at death is used instead. In Diagram 2.20, for example, we have somewhat arbitrarily chosen 1900, the year when Freud's first major book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was published. At that date there had been only a few deaths in the family—Sigmund's father, his brother Julius, and Martha's brother Isaac.

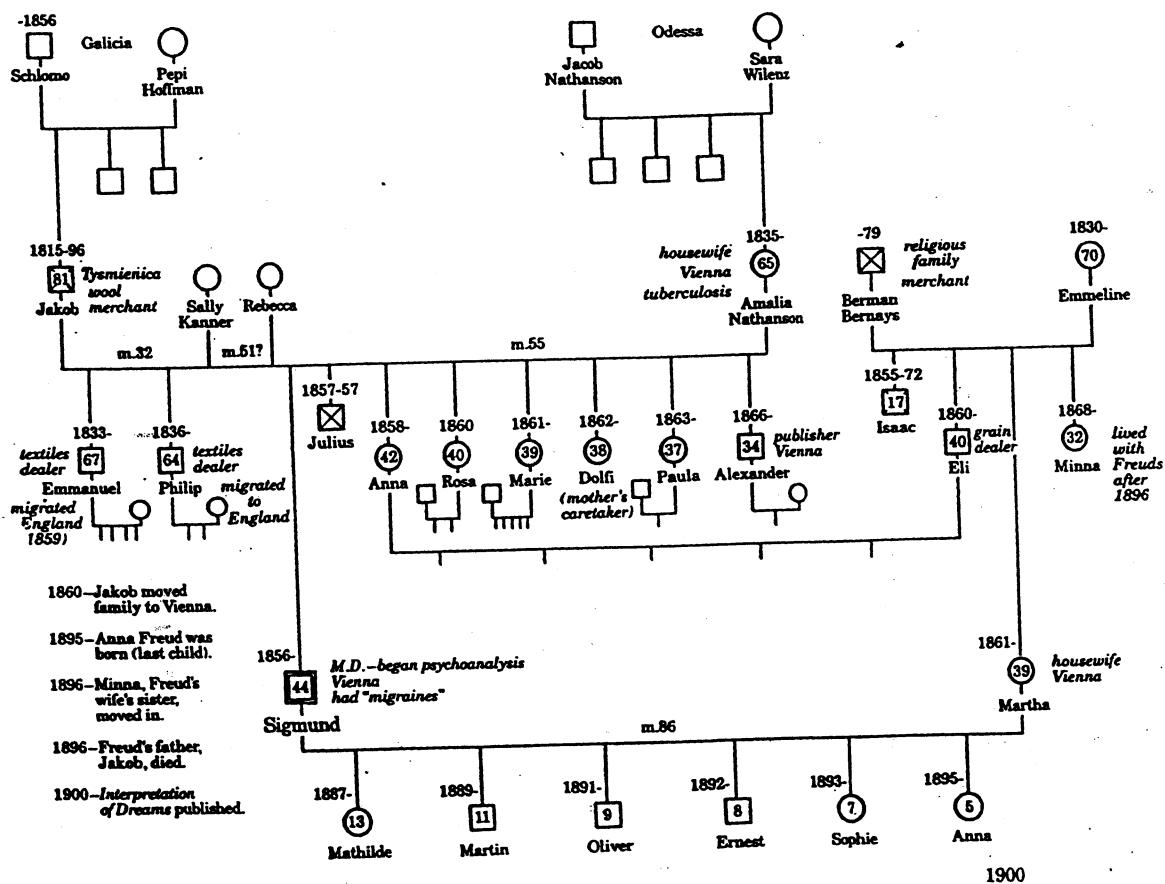


Diagram 2.20 Freud family with demographic, functioning, and critical event information.

When only partial information can be unearthed, that is included. For instance, Sigmund's father was married three times. We know that he had two children with his first wife, but little is known about his second wife, Rebecca (Clark, 1980; Glickhorn, 1969). The third wife, of course, was Sigmund's mother, Amalia Nathanson.

Freud's is a relatively simple family to map. Unfortunately, not all families are so easy to show in simple graphic form. The numerous divorces and remarriages of many modern families and their complex biological and legal family relationships make drawing family structures a challenge. Later in this chapter we will discuss more complex family structures.

Recording Family Information

Once we have drawn the family structure, the skeleton of the genogram, we can start adding information about the family, particularly: a) demographic information; b) functioning information; and c) critical family events.

Demographic information includes ages, dates of birth and death, locations, occupations, and educational level.

Functional information includes more or less objective data on the medical, emotional and behavioral functioning of different family members. Objective signs, such as absenteeism from work and drinking patterns, may be more useful indications of a person's functioning than vague reports of problems by family members. Signs of highly successful functioning should also be included. The information collected on each person is placed next to his or her symbol on the genogram.

Critical family events include important transitions, relationship shifts, migrations, losses and successes. These give a sense of the historical continuity of the family and of the effect of the family history on each individual. Some of these events will have been noted as demographic data, e.g., family births and deaths. Others include marriages, separations, divorces, moves and job changes. Critical life events are recorded either in the margin of the genogram or, if necessary, on a separate attached page.

We generally keep a family chronology with the genogram. This is a listing in order of occurrence of important events in the family history that may have affected the individual. At times we make a special chronology for a critical time period, for example, to track

a family member's illness in relation to other significant events. An individual chronology may also be useful for tracking a particular family member's life course (symptoms, functioning) within the context of the family.

Both the year and a brief description of each occurrence should be listed. For example, the following short list of critical events might appear on the Freud genogram:

- 1860 Jakob moved family to Vienna.
- 1895 Anna Freud was born (last child).
- 1896 Minna, Sigmund's wife's sister, moved in.
- 1896 Sigmund's father, Jakob, died.
- 1900 *Interpretation of Dreams* published.

When family members are unsure about dates, approximate dates should be given, preceded by a question mark, e.g., ?84 or ~84.

A more extensive chronology of family events could then be placed on a separate sheet of paper:

- 1855 Jakob Freud and Amalia Nathanson marry.
- 2/21/1856 Salamon Freud (Jakob's father) dies.
- 5/6/1856 Sigmund Freud is born in Freiberg.
- 4/1857 Julius Freud is born.
- 12/1857 Julius Freud dies.
- 1858 Anna Freud (Sigmund's sister) is born.
- 1860 Jakob moves his whole family to Vienna.
- 1866 Sigmund enters gymnasium (age 10).
- 1866 Alexander Freud is born (last child).
- 1873 Sigmund begins medical studies (age 17).
- 1879 Sigmund serves in military for 1 year.
- 1881 Sigmund receives medical degree (age 24).
- 1882 Sigmund becomes engaged to Martha Bernays.
- 1884 Sigmund publishes paper on cocaine.
- 1885 Sigmund attends Charcot lectures in Paris.
- 1886 Sigmund and Martha marry.
- 1889 Jean Martin Freud is born (first child).
- 1894 Sigmund's self-analysis begins.
- 1895 Anna Freud is born (last child).
- 1895 Sigmund publishes *Studies on Hysteria*.
- 1896 Minna, Sigmund's wife's sister, moves in.

- 1896 Jakob dies.
- 1900 Sigmund publishes *Interpretation of Dreams*.
- 1900 Sigmund ends self-analysis.
- 1902 Sigmund becomes Extraordinary Professor.

Clearly, a family chronology can vary in length and detail depending on the breadth and depth of the information available.

Let us look again at the Freud family genogram, with information on demographics, functioning, and critical events (Diagram 2.20, p. 18).

Showing Family Relationships

The third level of genogram construction is the most inferential. This involves delineating the relationships between family members. Such characterizations are based on the report of family members and direct observations. Different lines are used to symbolize the various types of relationship between two family members (Diagram 2.21). Although such commonly used relationship descriptors as "fused" or "conflictual" are difficult to define operationally and have different connotations for clinicians with various perspectives, these symbols are useful in clinical practice. Since relationship patterns can be quite complex, it is often useful to represent them on a separate genogram.

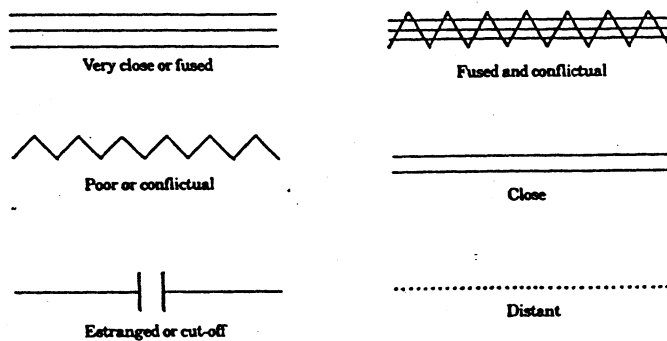


Diagram 2.21 Relationship lines

Again, the Freud family will be used to illustrate. Speculating on the relationship patterns of historical figures is a chancy business.

Without trying to justify our speculations, the genogram in Diagram 2.22 presents some of the *possible* relationship patterns that the available family background information on Freud suggests to us.

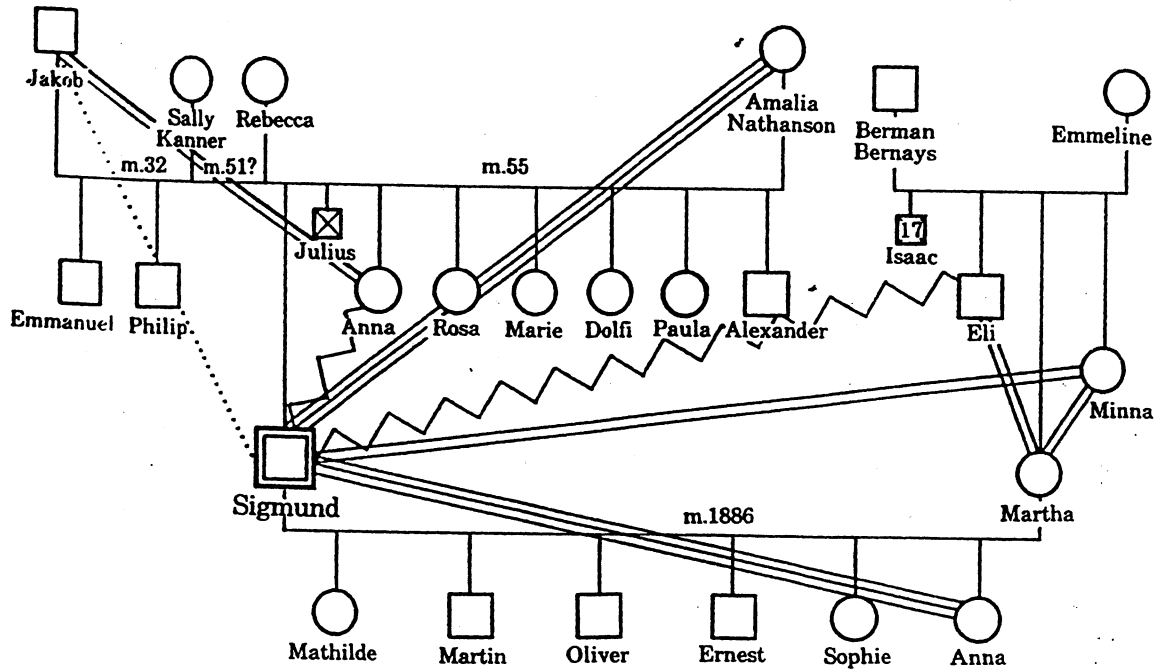


Diagram 2.22 Freud family—relationship patterns

COMPLEX GENOGRAMS

Genograms can become very complex and there is no set of rules that will cover all contingencies. We will show some of the ways we have dealt with a few common problems.

First, how do you plan ahead? Obviously, if you fill three-fourths of the page with father's three siblings, you will be stuck when you get to the mother and find she is the youngest of 12. It helps to get

an overview of the number of siblings and marriages in the parental generation before starting. The following questions will help you plan and thus anticipate complexities from the start:

- How many times was each parent married?
- How many siblings did each parent have and where was he or she in the birth order?

For example, if you mapped the structure of Jane Fonda's family of origin, the basic framework would look like Diagram 2.23. The genogram shows Jane's parents and grandparents. Each of her parents had had previous marriages and her father, Henry, had subsequent marriages. The other marriages are shown to the side of each parent and are dated to indicate the order.

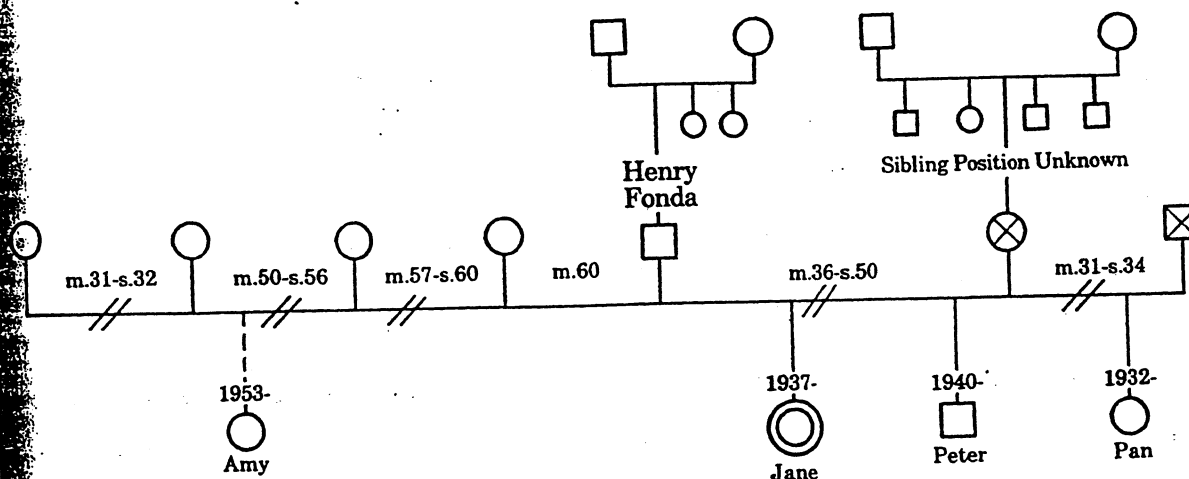


Diagram 2.23 Fonda family – basic structure

- Multiple marriages are common in this family.
- Both of Henry Fonda's first two wives committed suicide.
- Henry Fonda separated from his second wife, Jane's mother, only a few months before she committed suicide. He had already started an affair with his third wife, Susan Blanchard, whom he married eight months later.
- At the time of the third marriage (in fact, during the honeymoon), Peter Fonda, Jane's brother, shot himself (and nearly died).
- Henry Fonda had two close friends who committed suicide. His son, Peter, fell in love with Brigit Hayward the year that she killed herself, and also had a friend who committed suicide.

Nevertheless, there are limits to what the genogram can show, particularly regarding multiple marriages. Sometimes, in order to highlight certain points, the arrangement of the genogram structure is reorganized. For example, the Fonda family genogram has been arranged to highlight the ongoing relationship of the Haywards with the Fondas. Henry Fonda was married five times. His first wife, Margaret Sullivan, was married four times; Henry was her second husband. Margaret's third husband, Leland Hayward (who was also Henry Fonda's agent), was married five times, including twice to the same wife. Some of his spouses were also married numerous times, and so on.

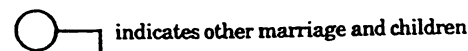


Diagram 2.25 Notation for additional information

Some complex family situations may require more than one page of genograms. It is important that the different genograms are connected in some way. Gerson has developed symbols (Diagram 2.25) to connect different genograms displayed on a computer (see Chapter 5). This notation can be used on any genogram to indicate that information about other marriage(s) and child(ren) can be found on another genogram.

Genograms are necessarily schematic and cannot detail all the vicissitudes of a family's history. For example, the Fonda genogram does not include the following information.

- Henry Fonda's first wife, Margaret Sullivan, lived very near the Fonda family in California with her third husband, Leland Hayward, Fonda's agent. After she separated from Leland Hayward, she moved with her children to Connecticut, where she lived very near the Fondas.
- Jane Fonda and Brook Hayward, Margaret's daughter, reportedly were best friends growing up and hoped that their parents would get back together again (Teichman, 1981, p. 132).
- Jane's mother's death was apparently kept from her and she only later found out about it in a movie magazine.
- Henry reportedly never discussed his wife's suicide with Peter and Jane.
- Henry Fonda and his mother-in-law held a private funeral for Jane's mother, which only they attended. Henry went on stage that same night.
- When Peter shot himself in the stomach during his father's third honeymoon in December 1950, eight months after his mother's suicide, Henry never asked Peter if he was upset about his mother's death (which Peter had been told was due to a heart attack).
- During Henry Fonda's fourth honeymoon in 1957, Peter got himself into such a bad state with drugs that his sister sent him to his aunt's in Nebraska. Henry had to return from his wedding trip to arrange for psychiatric treatment.
- Just after Henry Fonda's fifth honeymoon in 1965, Peter was involved in a drug arrest. His trial ended in a hung jury.

It is clear that Fonda family members have been greatly influenced by suicides and remarriages and that the Hayward and Fonda families were closely intertwined. Perhaps the extraordinary strength and force of personality that Peter and particularly Jane have shown in their careers reflect the many traumas they managed to overcome in their childhood. A comparable force was shown by Eleanor Roosevelt in response to many childhood traumas, as will be discussed later. Given the toxicity to families of suicide, the most traumatic of all deaths, the relevant facts surrounding the suicides would be critical to an understanding of the Fonda family. Such ad-

ditional family information that does not fit on a genogram should be attached to it and noted by an asterisk.

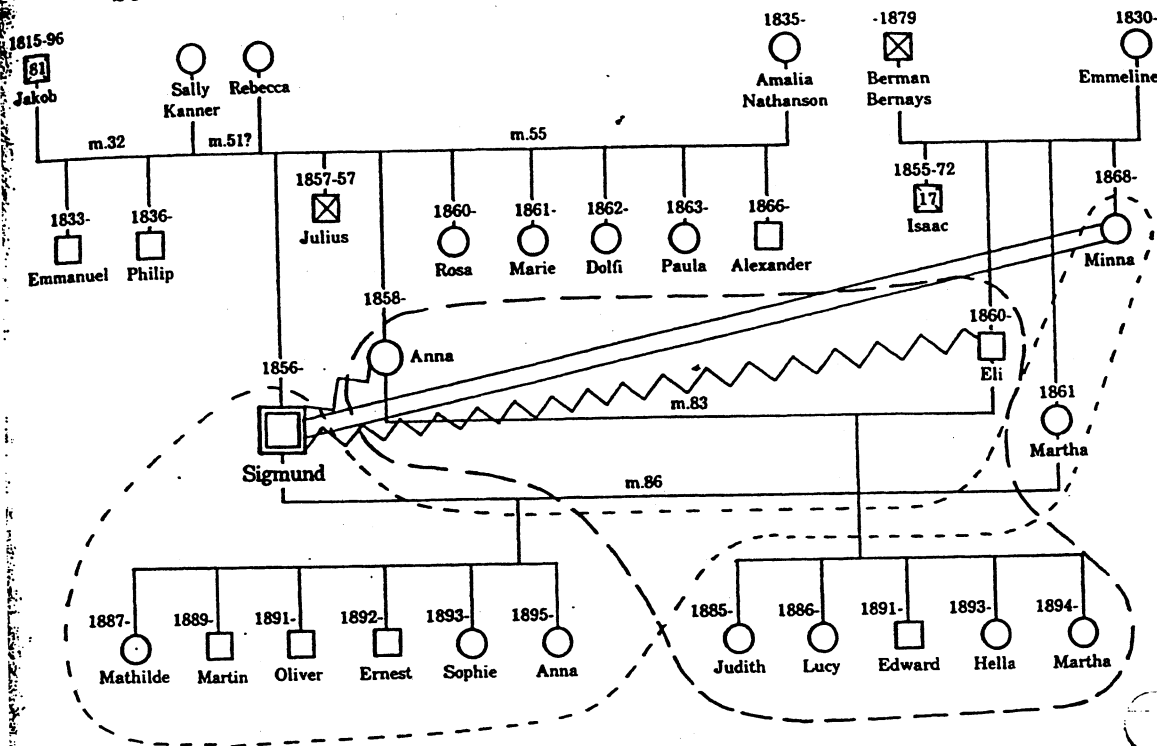


Diagram 2.26 Freud family—intertwined

Other problems arise where there are multiple intermarriages in the family, e.g., cousins or stepsiblings marrying, or where children have shifted residences many times to foster homes or various relatives or friends. There comes a point when the clinician must resort to multiple pages or special notes on the genogram to clarify these complexities.

Sometimes a genogram may be confusing because of the multiple connections between family members, as, for example, in the Sigmund Freud family (Diagram 2.26). Both Sigmund and his sister Anna married siblings in the Bernays family, and the third living Bernays sibling, Minna, was part of the Freud household from 1896 on. Marital lines are necessarily crossed in this genogram. In addition, the relationship lines show the conflicts and alliances that reflect the merger of these two families. For an example of an even more intertwined family, see the Jefferson family in Chapter 3 (p. 68).

whenever possible. In Diagram 2.28, each son has given a different report of the date of the father's death and of who is closer to their mother. Bradt (1980) uses color-coded genograms to distinguish the source of information, although this method might seem impossibly cumbersome to many clinicians.

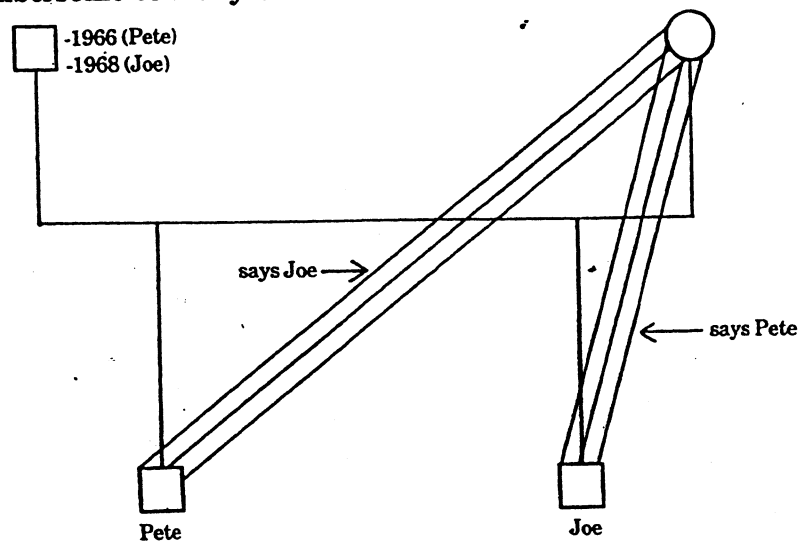
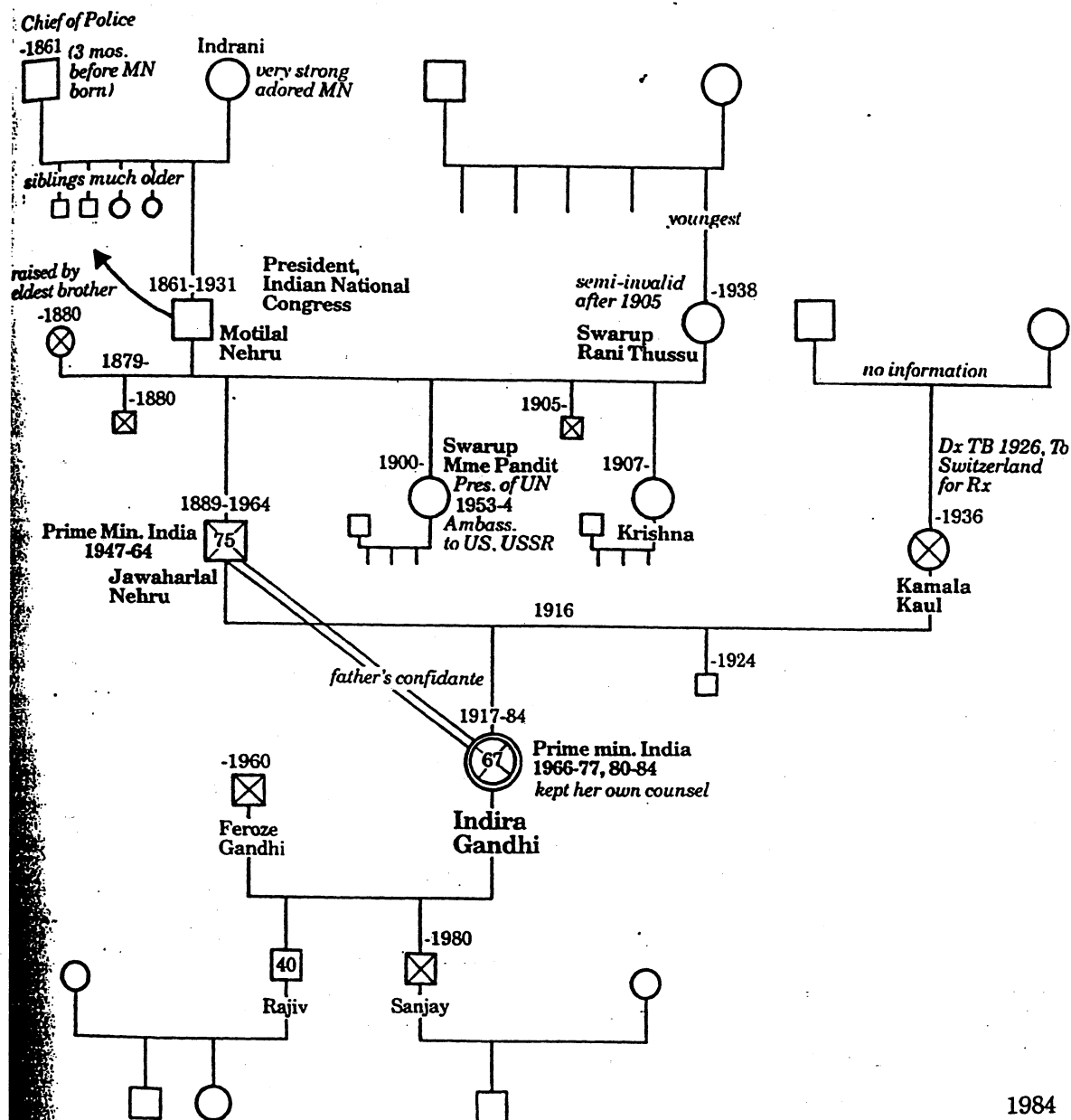


Diagram 2.28 Discrepant information

In sum, large, complex families with multiple marriages, intertwined relationships, many transitions and shifts, and/or multiple perspectives challenge the skill and ingenuity of the clinician trying to draw a genogram within a finite space. Improvisation and additional pages are often needed.

THE GENOGRAM INTERVIEW

Gathering information for the genogram usually occurs in the context of a family interview. Unless family members come in specifically to tell their family history for research purposes, you cannot simply gather genogram information and ignore the family's agenda for the interview. Such single-mindedness will not only hinder you in getting pertinent information, but also alienate the family from treatment. Gathering family information and constructing the genogram should be part of the more general task of joining and helping the family.



1984

Diagram 3.10 Indira Gandhi

Indira Gandhi, the second Prime Minister of India, is an example of an only child (Diagram 3.10). She grew up quite isolated and lived primarily in the presence of older people, early becoming her father's confidante. She clearly had the sense of mission and responsibility of an oldest, but as a leader, as befits an only child, she was autocratic and led a rather isolated existence, keeping her own counsel. Of interest is the fact that both her father and paternal grandfather were functional only children. Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was eleven years older than his next sibling and his father, Motilal Nehru, also a leader of India, was much younger than his siblings and raised in the home of his older brother, because his father had died before he was born. The illnesses of both Jawaharlal's mother and Indira's mother may also have compounded the independence of their roles as only children.

Being the sole focus of attention, only children often have very close attachments to their parents throughout their lives. This was the case with Franklin Roosevelt (see p. 52). Although he actually had a half-brother, Franklin Roosevelt was raised as an only son because his brother was 28 years older. As is common in such situations, his mother doted on him, particularly after his father died when he was quite young. To his wife Eleanor's chagrin, he remained quite attached to his mother throughout his life.

Sibling position may predict some marital difficulties. For example, Toman predicts that those who marry a spouse in the same sibling position will have more difficulty adjusting to marriage. He believes that couples who come from complementary sibling positions, for whom the marriage repeats their sibling constellation, will have an easier time, all things being equal.

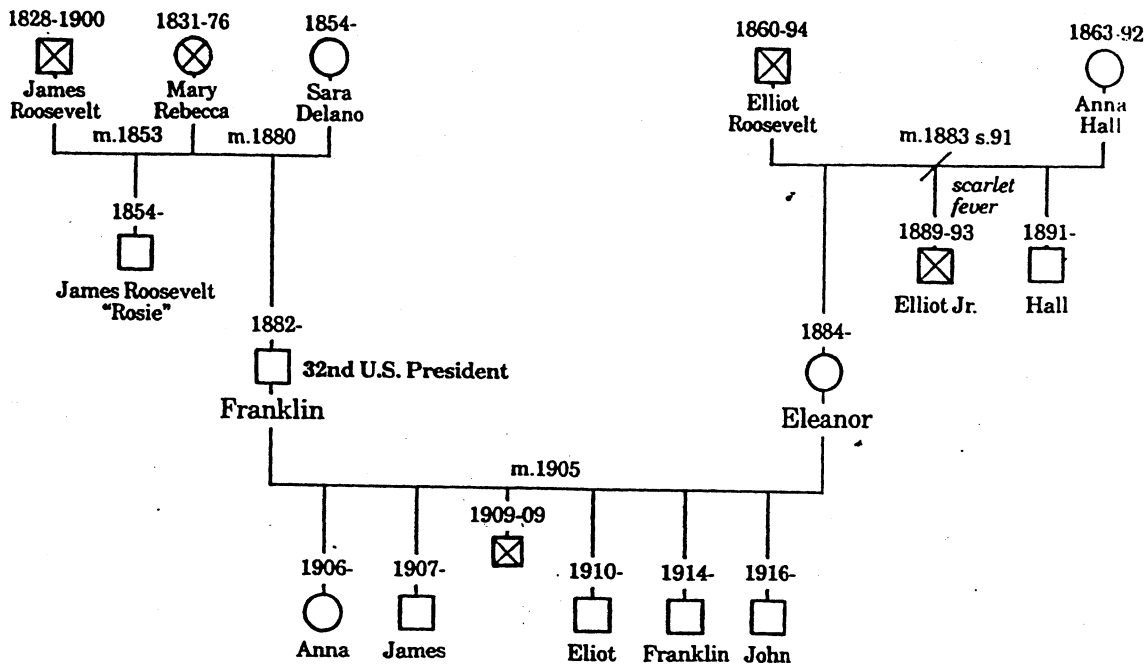


Diagram 3.11 Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt

When two oldest children marry each other, they may have difficulty due to the lack of complementarity in their expected roles. Both may compete for power in the relationship. The Roosevelts (Diagram 3.11) are an example of a strong-willed oldest (Eleanor) and an only child (Franklin) marrying each other. Their marriage was reportedly a difficult one with conflicts around in-laws, careers, affairs and children. Their relationship became more complementary when Franklin was paralyzed by polio and Eleanor began to play a more critical role in his political career.

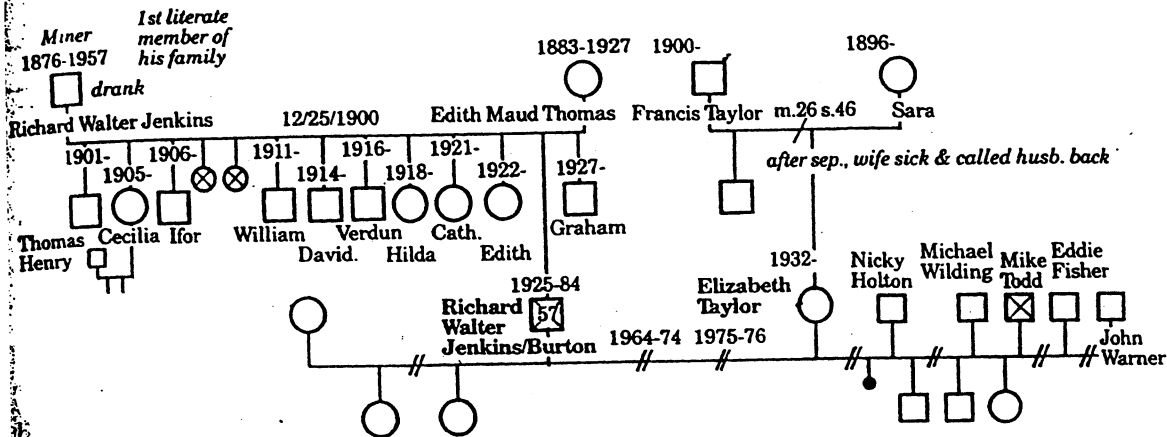


Diagram 3.12 Burton/Taylor—marriage of two younger siblings

On other hand, if two youngest children marry each other, they may compete for "juniority" in the relationship, both waiting to be taken care of. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who married and divorced each other twice, would be an example (Diagram 3.12) of a younger marrying a younger. Burton was the second youngest of thirteen children, but raised apart from his youngest brother. Often in very large families a few of the younger children will have the characteristics of a youngest. Taylor was the younger of two, with an older brother whose needs were often sacrificed to her stardom, which, of course, compounded the tendencies of her sibling position as the "baby."

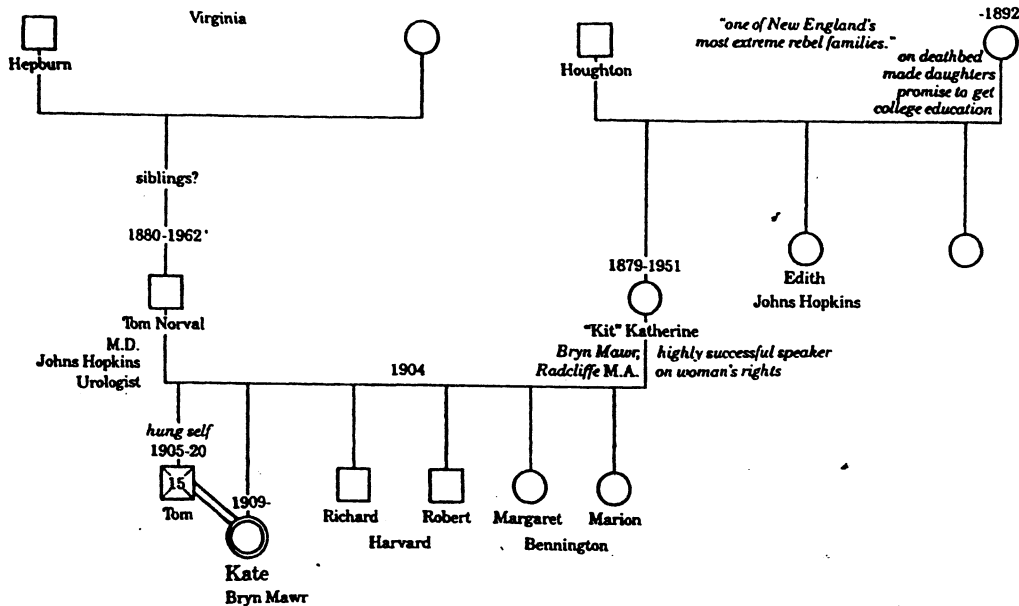
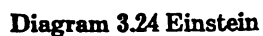


Diagram 3.21 Hepburn

Katharine Hepburn (Diagram 3.21) appears to have become a functional oldest after her older brother hung himself at the age of 15, when she was 11. As a functional oldest, she was a conscientious achiever and her parents had high expectations for her. Several other factors may have influenced this, including the fact that her maternal grandmother cared so much about the advancement of women that she elicited from her three daughters a deathbed promise that they would all go to college. Hepburn's mother, the oldest, was herself a highly successful speaker on women's rights.

As already mentioned, the Kennedy family had high expectations of sons. One factor that may have influenced this was that Joseph Kennedy, the father, was the oldest and only son of a youngest and only surviving son (P.J.), whose own father, Patrick, died at age 35 the year P.J. was born. A paternal granduncle, John Kennedy, died at one year of age in 1855 (see p. 89). The multitude of male deaths (even up to the present) may have intensified the importance of males in this family.

As parental attitudes and biases about gender change, one would expect that the role of gender in understanding sibling constellation will change as well.



The unusual connections seen in the graphic configurations of the Jefferson, Freud/Bernays, and Einstein families might lead to a number of speculations about triangles set up by these intrafamily mar-

and Ted broke his back in a plane crash (seven months after John was shot) and was involved in an accident at Chappaquidick in which one person drowned (12 months after Robert was killed). Two grandchildren were responsible for car accidents in which someone was permanently paralyzed or seriously injured.

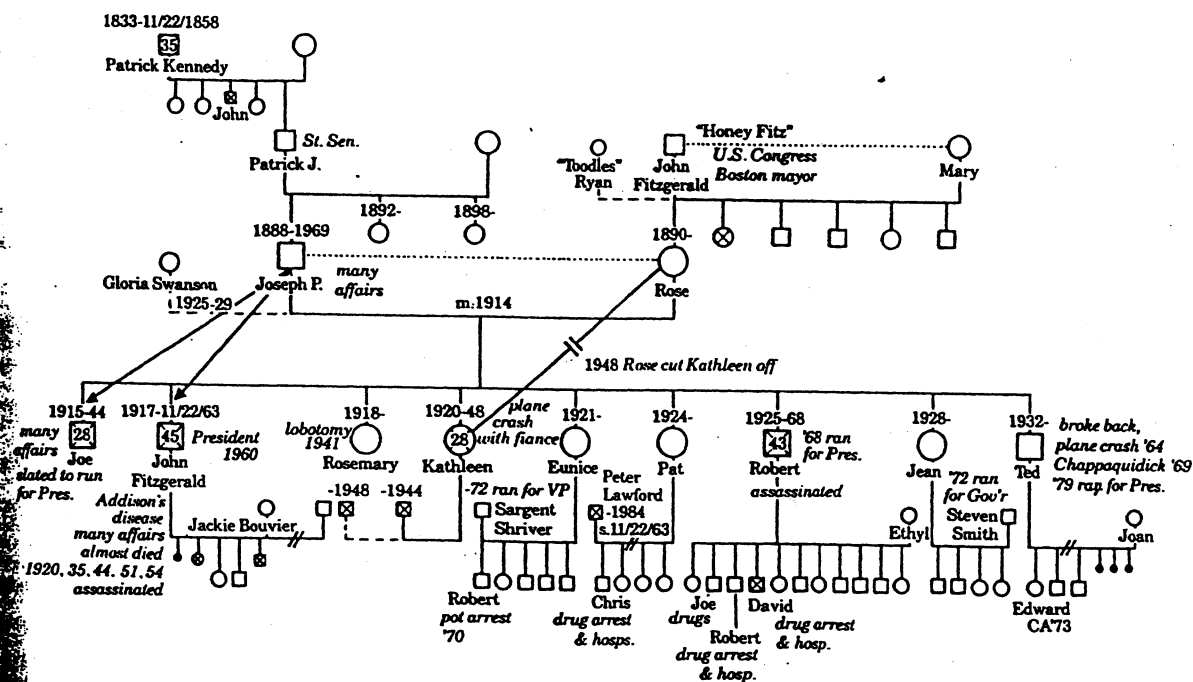


Diagram 3.36 Kennedy family—life changes, transitions and traumas

Often, critical life events in a family will send ripples throughout the family system, having an impact on the family in many different ways. This certainly seems to be the case in the Kennedy family following the assassinations of John and Robert. In addition to Ted's accidents mentioned above, Pat separated from her husband on the day of Jack's assassination. Of the 29 grandchildren, one has

1

2

3