The Genogram Interview

Context: In family we learn, from our vantage point in the sibling constellation, what we consider to be normal: normal in terms of closeness and distance, handling conflicts, initiative and submission, and so on. We are usually attracted to people with whom we believe we can recreate something of this experience of normal. The Genogram Interview is a way in which the counsellor may discover each person's version of normal and anticipate how these two worlds will interact. Part of the reason for this is that many couples find it easier to talk about the previous generations than themselves. Also you can discuss behaviours, which reveal more than intended good will. Many couples find discussing the future and expectations difficult.

The Interview: There are more questions listed than you will use with any one couple during a Genogram interview. If you look over the couple's Genogram and read over the questions you will be able to pick out some key questions which you want to pursue with the couple.

Remember the goal: to uncover the couple's pattern of relating (their experience of normal in their family of origin) so that you can encourage them and challenge them to the best marriage possible.

The Facts: The couple is asked to list as much data on the Genogram as possible:

- Names: first, nick-names, family titles;
- Family facts: ages, dates of births, deaths, severe illnesses, marriages, separations, divorces, rites of passage such as moves, graduations, promotions, etc.;
- Physical locations: where people are living in the three generations;
- Frequency of contact between members of extended family and type (mail, phone, visit);
- Style of relating: touch, visual, auditory;
- Closest relationship on each generational level;
- Most distant relationship on each generational level;
- Sibling order with oldest on left;
- Relationship intensity: conflictual, over close, calm, distant;
- Cut-offs: emotional cut-offs around what event? When?

Significance of the facts: As you go over these questions think of the positive and negative impact of each for the couple preparing for marriage.

Names and Nicknames: these may signify an expectation, wish, a favorite person. a role that is hoped the person will fulfill; What privileges, difficulties are attached to name, title, label?
Births, deaths, natural crisis: these reorganize the family system as people react to the stress of change in +/- ways. What events "coincided" (six months --one year before/after) with this marker event? (birth of first born; promotion; loss of job; move; entry into adolescence; death of central family member).

Patterns of closeness and distance: Did you family spend lots of time together or little time together? Did you experience lots of privacy or little privacy in growing up? Separate bedrooms or common bedrooms? Did the family have family friends or did each person tend to have individual friends? Did your family decide things as a family or did someone make most of the decisions? Did your family play together as a rule or was individual recreation the norm? In your family how close was too close? How far away was too far? What reasons were there (will there be) for moving away from (or staying close to) family? What rules exist in your family for privacy? Surprise visits? Duration of stay? Who could change the rules?

Patterns of emotional closeness and distance: Who pursued whom for closeness? Who distanced to get away from closeness? Who would become most anxious if you wanted closeness or distance? (see exercise on Emotional Closeness & Distance in Family Relationships) In which relationships in your Genogram were you a pursuer? A distancer? Around what issues? What was it like to be in your sibling position? Now, who contacts whom? How do people make contact? Is there a central clearing house for family information?

With whom do you have the closest relationships in your own generation? Your parents’ generation? Your grandparents' generation? What are the similarities in these relationships? What is it in these relationships that makes it safe to be personal?

With whom do you have the most distant relationships in your own generation? Your parents’ generation? Your grandparents' generation? What sets you off when near these people?

Patterns of emotional cut-offs: Often in family history a family member commits an unpardonable sin and family member(s) decide that it is better not to talk to this person. This is an emotional cut-off. Are there any emotional cut-offs in your family. When? Around what issues? What was the result? What still goes on in the family if this cut-off continues? What uproar would take place if this cut-off was breached?

Patterns of dominance and submission: Did you experience you parents as :
- Authoritarian -- authoritarian / egalitarian -- limited control?
- Were the rules in your family applied: strictly -- democratically -- leniently -- inconsistently?
- Were decisions made by: negotiation --endless negotiation -- impulsively?

Sibling Position: What was it like to be the _________ child? (Sibling Constellations is a whole topic in itself. Note that complimentary positions (Oldest/Youngest) tend to work best while similar positions (Oldest/Oldest; Youngest/Youngest) tend to be more difficult.

Overwhelmed? That's a huge pile of questions! In any one session you probably wouldn't use more than ten questions. Fortunately, there is a short form for general use. When you need to explore an area more fully,
then you can go hog wild with more questions on a particular subject. See Genogram Questionnaire, Short Form.

So What? Once you uncover a pattern of relating what do you do? The pattern will either be a help or a hindrance to the couple in marriage. It will be relationship building or relationship weakening. What does the couple think of this pattern now that they are aware of it? What do they want to do to change the pattern? (See Change Paper). Here is an opportunity to assist the couple to utilize Christian resources of prayer, healing, the Holy Spirit, obedience for change.

If I see individuals accepting responsibility for their normal way of relating, learned in family and seeking to change negative patterns to positive ones, I encourage the couple profusely that they will do well in marriage. If I do not see individuals accepting responsibility for their negative patterns of relating, I ask the fiancé, What will it be like to live with this for the long haul? Remember our task is not to make decisions for the couple, but to open their eyes to reality.