

Chapter 2

Why Affinographs?

Abstract One reason to consider affinographs is that graphic imaging methods have not kept pace with the changing family forms. An affinograph is an interdisciplinary method for imaging the dynamic family systems across cultures. The affinograph images are distinguished from other imaging methods in that they relate to a general definition of the human family system. In addition to imaging the static family structures, an affinograph provides images of relationships that accumulate through descent and affinal unions such as marriage, remarriage, civil unions, or informal unions. Affinographs could be applied in social work, counseling, family therapy, and in family science teaching and research in general.

The fundamental rationale for “why affinographs” is the same as the rationale Lewis Henry Morgan provided for his systemic, graphic imagery of “Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family” (Morgan 1870/1997). Morgan proposed the use of images to “ascertain differences and typical forms of general family systems” (p. 7). In the nineteenth century, the family systems were predominantly stable and predictable. Since then, American families have become more diverse, less predictable, and predominantly serial rather than monogamous and stable (Starbuck 2010, p. 268; Cherlin 2005). By age 45, more than half of American men have had eight or more partners and more than half of American women have had four or more partners (Mosher et al. 2005). Accompanying this trend is “the increasing number of cohabiting unions and the emergence of same-sex marriage” (Cherlin 2004). The currently promoted imaging methods for applications in family life education and in clinical settings have not kept pace with the changing family forms. Therefore, affinographs are proposed as an alternative imaging method in applications dealing with diverse, complex, and dynamic families.

The affinograph is not the only dynamic model for family imaging. Anthropologists and mathematical sociologists have developed formal, dynamic models for imaging family relationships (Howell 1988; Klov Dahl 1981; Levi-Strauss 1949/1969; Tjon Sie Fat 1983; Wellman 1988; White 2004; White et al. 1999; White and Jorion 1992; White and Reitz 1983). The affinograph is still needed, because formal models tend to be complicated and impractical. None of the formal models has been designed for clinical applications. In applied settings, family imaging has been limited

to the use of static models only, such as genograms (DeMaria et al. 1999; Marlin 1989; McGoldrick and Gerson 1985; McGoldrick et al. 1999), family maps (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 2008, pp. 192–194; Mattaini 1997), and family diagrams (Bradt 1980; Butler 2008).

In general, applications of static models in family counseling and therapy tend to be restricted to the immediate family members (Carvalho et al. 2008; Coco and Courtney 2003; Duba et al. 2009; Eichholz 2003; Kelly 2003; Lewis 1989; Lim and Nakamoto 2008; Massey et al. 1988; Nichols and Schwartz 2006, p. 89; Worden 2003, p. 109).

Some forms of counseling such as spiritual counseling (Hodge 2001, 2005), child welfare practice (McMillen and Groze 1994), and individual counseling (Daughhe-tee 2001) also tend to exclude family members beyond those immediately involved in counseling. Even group counseling (Davis et al. 1988) seems to restrict genograms to the immediate family members. Health professionals (Like et al. 1988; Tomson 1985; Waters et al. 1994; Werner-Lin 2007) and educators (Howell 1988; Shellenberger et al. 2007; Willow et al. 2009) also tend to isolate the family of origin and family of procreation. Given that the “intimate psychological network” typically includes about twenty five people (Pattison et al. 1979), the affinograph is suggested as a method for imaging more complex family constellations.

There appears to be a niche for applications of genograms and affinographs. For example, in my family classes I introduce students to genograms and affinographs as two versions of family diagrams. I then ask them if they have no objection to choose one or the other to diagram their own family. An overwhelming number of students with divorces and remarriages in their own families choose to use affinographs. Those with intact families tend to choose genograms. I anticipate that clinicians would make the same choice the students do. In encounters with stable, monogamous families, a clinician would likely choose a static model. However, if the family is dispersed among several households, or composed of serial relationships, the clinician might discover that genograms are not enough.

Genograms Are Not Enough: Family Imaging in a Historic Perspective

The history of graphic imaging of families may be the beginning of network thinking in social sciences. The affinograph is a method to advance that thinking along the lines proposed by Alvin Wolfe:

The network analyst does not conceive a social network that is structurally fixed, does not reify the patterns of relations observed, does not attribute purpose to them. Purpose enters only at the level of the elementary relation, which has persons transacting. Yet, the network approach does not entail reductionism, for the relation itself is more than the sum of its parts. Network theory, when it develops, will generalize about relations among relations, how transactions affect such relations, how such relations affect transactions (Wolfe 1978, p. 56).

In spite of its promising beginning, the network thinking has not penetrated the applied fields of family sciences. Person-centered graphic representations, such as pedigrees and genograms, still dominate even as static models become less applicable. It seems that the family imaging methods are still closer to the original family trees than to “generalizations about relations among relations” (Wolfe 1978, p. 56).

The most enduring representational method, the family tree, has been in use at least since the ninth century (Freeman 2004, p. 21). A family tree visually connects the names of one generation to the next revealing the lineage of the mother on the one side and the father on the other side of the family tree. Nothing changed in the use of family trees until a thousand years later anthropologists Morgan (1870/1997) and Macfarlane (1883) introduced circles and lines to represent relationships within and across generations among various cultures around the world.

Another method of family imaging developed independently from anthropology. Nineteenth-century eugenicists standardized a set of symbols used to construct *pedigrees*. Pedigree symbols have been retained in the modern day genograms. Davenport (1911/1972), Goddard (1912), and Wiggam (1924) published works using pedigree images of families that identify males with squares and females with circles. They arranged circles and squares in stacked horizontal rows. As in a genogram, each horizontal row represented a generation. Another pedigree remnant found in genograms was the use of vertical lines to join parents with their children.

Early in the twentieth century, a British anthropologist W. H. R. Rivers expanded the applications of the family tree and pedigrees to represent marriage customs, boundaries of totemism, and demographic characteristics of marriage partners (Rivers 1900, 1910). These early conventions of associating individual traits with the graphic symbols are similar to the way genograms are used in family assessment today (Becvar and Becvar 2000, pp. 155–180; Bowen 1978; Goldenberg and Goldenberg 2008, p. 193; McGoldrick and Gerson 1985; McGoldrick et al. 2008; Titelman 2003). A part of that historical convention is a method of representing generations by relative positioning of symbols.

The rigid positioning of symbols precludes applications of the network or graph theory in general. Consequently, the use of genograms becomes limited to more stable family systems. Minor variations in the use of geometric symbols could not compensate for the drastic changes that the family has undergone in America over the twentieth century. In psychiatry, genetics, social work, and family therapy, a square has represented a male and circle a female since the inception of these professions. Horizontal lines connecting a square and a circle indicate a marriage. Anthropologists and sociologists varied their representational techniques slightly. Instead of a square to represent a male, they used a triangle. The circle stood for a female across all disciplines. Instead of a line connecting a triangle and a circle, an equal sign has been used. Sociologists reserved the square to represent “other gender,” “gender unknown,” or “gender unspecified” (Winch and Goodman 1968, p. 142). Instructional manuals on genograms do not acknowledge that sometimes two genders are not enough (Devor 2009).

Imaging Changes in Family Systems

Changes in family systems demand changes in methods of family imaging. The change in family structure is accompanied with a change in the meaning of relationships. Historically, being married meant being removed from the field of eligibles for mate selection. The term *field of eligibles* referred to single people of legal age and opposite gender. It was taken for granted that marriage was between a man and a woman who were expected to live together until one died. Most remarriages occurred after death of a spouse, a condition easily represented by a genogram. These stable families centered on biological parents and their children. Step parenting after divorce and parenting without marriage were rare. It was assumed that each child had exactly one father and one mother.

An argument in favor of affinographs is that “it is no longer the case that a child born today can expect to live his or her childhood with both biological parents” (Teachman et al. 2000, p. 1243). As marriage bonds weakened, married people continued to be available whether or not they had children (Cherlin 2004; Farber 1964). By the 1990s, the traditional mate selection, marriage, and childbearing became a special case (Cherlin 2005; Kephart and Jedlicka 1991; Kreider and Fields 2002; Kreider 2005). Because of these changes, it has become more difficult to define the human family. Without a definition, however, we cannot understand that what we study. Therein lies another reason for “why affinographs”: An affinograph can serve as a model between a general definition of the human family and the specific real-world manifestations of family systems.

Affinographs and a Definition of the Human Family

I am seeking a definition of the human family that is discernible as a graphic image in any culture, in any historical period, and without a predilection toward any family form or gender combination. Ideally, the definition should include both structural and functional rudiments of a family system at a high level of generality. Even though there is a long history of grappling with the definitions of the human family, the literature remains pessimistic even about the possibility of such a definition. A long-standing view among family scientists has been that there are only situational definitions. Robert Winch, one of the most prominent family sociologists of the twentieth century, commented in 1952 that the scientific definition of the family is a matter of sheer expediency:

In scientific writing, however, there has arisen the convention of the author's privilege to define as he pleases, so long as his definition is explicit and his use of it consistent. Let us conclude, therefore, that the criteria of a “good” scientific definition are not those of “truth” and “rightness,” but rather the utility of the term, or what it enables us to see when we set about to use it (Winch 1952, p. 13).

Winch concluded that the most suitable definition is “one which is most consistent with the task at hand” (Winch 1952, p. 14). Almost fifty years later, in a seminal

book entitled *Concepts and Definitions of Family for the 21st Century* (Settles et al. 1999), Holstein and Gubrium reiterate Winch's view under the rubric of *social constructionism*: "Our view, as far as family is concerned, is that there is no 'given' relationship between reality and representation. Rather, the relationship is eminently social and contingent, one of our own making" (Holstein and Gubrium 1999, p. 17).

Over 50 years since Robert Winch wrote about the definition of the family, his assumptions remained a hallmark for family sciences: If something is subjective, situational, or culture-bound, then there is no higher level of abstraction that could define commonality of function and structure across cultures and disciplines. Possibly, because of such thinking, there has been little progress toward developing a consensus on the universal meaning of the human family. Settles (1999) sums it best: "If there ever was a consensus on the definition of the family, it is not to be found in today's research and policy analysis" (p. 209). Nor, according to some experts, are we likely to reach consensus soon (Segrin and Flora 2005, p. 4).

Po Bronson, an American journalist and a critic, gives some reasons why social scientists have failed to reach a consensus on the meaning of the word *family*:

In my book, I spend a lot of time critiquing those who want to define or label a family, so it may seem ironic to have a page of nothing but definitions of "family." But I think that these actually show the fruitlessness of the exercise. Because in that single word are social, historical and cultural values. Embedded in how it's defined are decrees about what's a social norm. Or acceptable behavior. It tells people who's in and who's out. What counts as a family and what doesn't. It's obvious just by reading some of these, some have really been politicizing the family, while others have tried to go with the most pragmatic of definitions. None of these will give you a sense of reassurance. You can't use them to say, "So, we're a family!" (Bronson 2005)

Failing to define the human family so that the definition indeed corresponds to reality may have dire consequences. Dinerman (2004) describes how government agencies define families to suit the political climate of the day. It is reasonable to conjecture, for example, that in the absence of an authoritative, scientific definition, the family status in the society weakens in relation with other social institutions. When experts on the human family cannot agree on the rudimentary structure and function of a family, then other institutions are more likely to use the family as a resource for their own maintenance. Some anecdotal evidence comes from my own field observations. I know of a dying man who threatened to shoot at social workers, because they would not accept his definition of his own family. I have talked to a young man who had to hide from the officials so that the mother of his children could get health care and food stamps. The agency providing services for his children defined him out of the family. These anecdotes support the hypothesis that in the absence of an authoritative agreement among social scientists on what constitutes a family, any definition will stand unchallenged no matter how damaging it may be to individuals and their families.

Experts might find some grounds for agreement if they focus on the universal concepts in family sciences. A consensus could be reached if we adopt what Wolfe (1978) termed *network thinking*. Ordinary people already think in terms of networks, and they have no problems defining their own families. I recently attended

a family reunion in which 29 people posed for their “family” picture. When they looked at the picture each one could say with complete reassurance “We’re a family.” When asked, “Was everyone there?” they knew exactly who was missing and why. If I prepared an affinograph of everyone in that picture and then added those who were absent, there would be a consensus of the feeling “That is our family!”

Now imagine a project where you have the resources to select randomly any residence in the world. Ask a person at that residence to organize a “family reunion.” Even if the culture you selected does not have a concept of a family reunion, you could certainly explain it to them and begin planning. Let us say you had a year to complete the project. It is almost certain that anywhere in the world you could get a group of people together as a family. If all the kin lived close together, a reunion might be easy to assemble. In another location, the family may be gathered from different parts of the world. In fact, people in every culture know whom to invite, how to contact them, and how to relate to them. Their behaviors would reveal network thinking in everyday life. If network thinking is a universal reality in everyday life, then a universal definition of the family should follow from these observed network concepts.

Even though the experts have failed to agree on what constitutes a family, the effort to reach a consensus is far from futile. When the onus for providing a definition is placed on the ego instead of an “expert,” the clarity emerges. The definition of the family proposed below corresponds to the affinograph assumptions. Because a family’s composition can change over a person’s life span, such a definition should include family relations, past and present, from birth to death. Even though the following definition lacks mathematical formality, it is robust and inclusive:

A family is a changing network of three or more relationships accumulated through descent and affinal unions such as marriage, civil unions, or informal unions, with an opportunity or an expectation to procreate, adopt, and raise children.

Let us examine this definition, phrase by phrase, starting with *changing network*. This phrase implies that relationships are dynamic: People die; children are born; ritual kin are added to the family; divorces and remarriage have become an acceptable pattern. The change goes on from generation to generation and within generations. In American society, the change in networks includes serial sexual partners and the possibility of parenting in multiple relationships. The phrase “three or more relationships” emphasizes the “relationship among relationships.” This phrase departs from the ego-centered perspective. It defines *a priori* two parents and a child as the smallest, naturally occurring building block of a family system. Whether biological parents are physically present or not, each person is assumed to be aware of his or her biological origin. The idea that a triad is the basic unit of a family system was proposed by Bowen (1978) and has been a justification for the use of genograms in family therapy (Guerin et al. 1996; Guerin and Pendagast 1976).

The phrase “accumulated through descent and affinal unions” is certainly a universally recognized component of family formation in every culture. There is no disagreement that families form through affinal unions. The disagreement comes from cultural differences in what constitutes an acceptable union. The “union” is a

reality whether there is a disagreement or not. The phrase *an opportunity to procreate, adopt, and raise children* within those unions is also a “reality.” Every culture provides opportunities with expectations to procreate or adopt children. Unions, procreation, or adoption occur in every culture; hence, it is possible to define a universally recognized family system.

The definition proposed above reflects network thinking and is a step toward understanding the universal meaning of the human family. The premise is that we cannot understand that which we cannot define whether or not we can image it. An image is not a definition. A mindless graphic image cannot be distinguished from a meaningful one without a general definition. The reductionist definitions such as the “single-parent family,” definitions that equate a family with a household, or family definitions based on gender can all be imaged with affinographs or genograms. However, images unframed within a general definition neither elevate the discourse nor improve understanding.

A universal, nonreductionist definition may not initially fill the bill for all concerned. However, unless we make an effort to reach a consensus at least minimally, the ability of family professionals to influence social policy and improve the quality of family life is slim indeed. If the family professions are to function according to their ethics (Auger 1976; Bernstein and Hartsell 2000; Chase 2004; Denham 2003; Corey and Callanan 1993; Westermarck 1994), it behooves them to consider “What is a Family?” without second-guessing those who already see themselves as a part of a family.

Affinograph Applications in Professions

New ideas are introduced into professions through education. Affinographs could introduce a universal definition of the family through courses in anthropology, family therapy, family medicine, psychology, sociology, social work, and other professions involved with families. Teaching, research, clinical practice, and services to families are collectively referred to here as “applications.” Another answer to “Why affinographs?” is to promote interdisciplinary applications of family theory and method using the graph theory as an aid in network thinking.

Chapter 4 is intended to help social workers mediate between the demands of the state and the needs of families. Affinographs can help with tracking children and assessing the meaning of the family as defined by their clients.

Chapter 5 attempts to bridge the gap between licensed professional counselors and family therapists. Both groups of professionals encounter in their work the consequences of change in family structure. Counselors are encouraged to use affinographs when they suspect that complex relationships may influence the emotional state of the client. In such cases, affinographs can identify the relevant relationships and track them from session to session.

Affinographs are particularly suited for applications dealing with gay and lesbian family relationships. Family specialists who have used genograms with gay and les-

bian couples (Feinberg and Bakeman 1994; Swainson and Tasker 2006; Weinstein 1992) may find affinographs more suitable for assessment of serial and ambiguous relationships. Affinographs can handle ambiguity by accepting varied meanings of the same relationship. The meaning of the same relationship can vary with the points of views of the parents, children, and the same-gender partner. Chapter 6 will focus specifically on affinographs applications pertaining to family formation and dissolution among gay and lesbian couples. Chapter 7 introduces ephemeral and extadyadic relations as they influence the quality and duration of primary relations among either the same-gender or different-gender couples.

The potential for application of network ideas in family therapy is explored in Chap. 8. This chapter builds on the *network paradigm* introduced into the practice of family therapy by Pattison (1981). Chapter 8 addresses the question posed by Pattison: “How do we effectively discriminate between the use of social network paradigms as a method of clinical evaluation, as a method for organizing different clinical treatment programs, and as a specific clinical treatment intervention per se?” (Pattison 1981, p. 244). The network paradigm, Pattison and others have employed since then, has been restricted to the *person networks* (Gameiro et al. 2010; Hansen et al. 1991; Hurd et al. 1981; Keams and Leonard 2004; Rao et al. 2001; Sluzki 2010).

Traditionally, family imaging in genealogical trees has also been person based. Because affinographs images focus on relationships, let us call this application *affinology*. Chapter 9 demonstrates the utility of this method by imaging descent of some of the most complicated families in America, including the family of President Obama.

To apply affinographs for any of the purposes listed above some skills are required. The following chapter will describe how to construct affinographs for use in education, research, clinical interventions, and even genealogy.

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