

## **The Self-Reflective Financial Therapist: Creating a Financial Genogram**

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*The financial genogram offers the therapist an opportunity to explore and unpack his or her own financial journey as a method of self-reflection and self-discovery as well as to become more responsive and understanding toward our clients. This manuscript utilizes an experiential financial therapy framework to make a case for why this self-of-the-financial-therapist process is beneficial, provides steps on how to create the therapist's financial genogram, and outlines a guide of reflective questions for the therapist to consider as part of the financial genogram process.*

*Keywords: financial genogram; self-of-the-financial-therapist; self-of-the-therapist; self-reflective therapist; genogram*

Genograms are a well-known intervention that is perhaps the most widely used assessment tool among couple and family therapists. Originally developed and made popular by Murray Bowen's (1966) intergenerational family therapy, the genogram has been expanded in recent years to further its usefulness and hone its purpose to specific areas of a client's life. The focused genogram, introduced by DeMaria, Weeks, and Hof (1999), is an assessment method that comprehensively explores a particular aspect of the client or family's values, feelings, and patterns around a particular content area. Although DeMaria and colleagues (1999, 2017) described the use of focused genograms for topics including anger, sexuality, culture, gender, fairness, and trauma, an additional application of the focused genogram is the topic of money (Gallo, 2001; Mumford & Weeks, 2003; Weil, 2009).

Money is a common clinical problem and intertwined with many presenting problems (Mumford & Weeks, 2003); however, beyond just being a topic of relevance to our clients, it is a topic of relevance to us as clinicians. This manuscript uniquely explores the financial genogram *not* from the perspective of use with clients, but from the perspective of aiding *therapists* in our self-of-the-financial-therapist growth and reflection. Although we certainly encourage the use of financial genograms with clients, we aim our writing toward first helping the therapist do his or her own "money work" before leading clients in this exercise. Our framework for the financial genogram as a tool for self-of-the-financial-therapist growth is experiential financial therapy (Klonz, et al., 2015). Experiential financial therapy holds that unfinished business (*i.e.*, unexpressed feelings from past experiences and memories; Corey, 1990) must be acknowledged and resolved in order to live more fully in the present (Wegscheider-Cruse et al., 1990). The financial genogram is an exercise that can be used to bring unfinished business regarding money and finances to light for the therapist and

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provide opportunities for reconstructive experiences (opportunities to create new meanings for old events) that can assist the financial therapist in their healing and growth (Klonz et al., 2015).

One strength of this experiential focus is that investing in self-awareness and applying this assessment tool to our own lives can aid in our understanding of ourselves. This foundation allows us to first respond to ourselves compassionately regarding financial topics and concerns so that we can then respond to others around these issues. Second, this also allows us to identify our potential triggers and biases around financial topics that can keep us from engaging in countertransference with our clients as we help them work through their financial stories (Nichols & Davis, 2017). Another strength of this focus is that engaging in this exercise personally can give us a new level of preparedness and appreciation for using this clinical approach with clients. Although we know the vulnerability that we ask of our clients in exploring their unfinished business, it is essential for us to engage in this vulnerability ourselves as a reminder of the work that it takes to pursue growth and change. We have probably all completed our own genogram and perhaps even a cultural genogram, but most of us have probably not completed a financial genogram. Whether or not you can readily identify money issues in your own life, we encourage you to consider the ways that creating a financial genogram might be both helpful and healing to you, and we offer this manuscript as an invitation and guide to aid your self-reflective-financial-therapist journey.

### **Creating a Financial Genogram**

In your financial genogram drawing, include the following elements: basic genogram symbol structure, occupations, age information, salary estimates, debt information, generosity, and relationships significant to finances. Each of these elements provides context for your experiential self-of-the-financial therapist journey and is described below.

**Basic genogram symbol structure.** Use the common circles and squares to denote sex and the lines denoting lineage used at the structure of any genogram (McGoldrick, et al., 2008). Include any family members who are important to your financial self-reflective process. For example, if your cousin's children (or even your cousins) are not necessarily important to your financial reflective process, feel free to leave them off.

**Occupations.** Include the occupation of each adult in your genogram. This can be done with a simple word notation (e.g., "teacher" or "electrician") or using an abbreviation (e.g., EE for electrical engineer, JAN for janitor, or SP for speech pathologist) by that person's symbol. Alternatively, you may create a legend with colors or symbols for each occupation. Having all occupations noted will help identify patterns or significant family values displayed through educational backgrounds, occupation, and socioeconomic status. For example, through this activity, the first author recognized that the majority of family members – including all grandparents, almost all aunts/uncles, and over half of her cousins – are entrepreneurs in their respective fields. Additionally, you are encouraged to note if there is specific educational background information that is influential to your self-exploration. For example, a person might see through these notations that many of the women in his or her family held a college degree but worked as stay-at-home mothers during their working years,

which might hold significance in his or her financial self-reflection and reflection on financial values. Also worthy of note are significant vocational changes or difficulties holding a job, which can also be noted in whatever way is desired on the genogram.

**Age information.** Consistent with the original genogram, include the age of each family member. However, for adults, also include the age at which each person entered the workforce. For older adults, include their age of retirement (if applicable) and whether they have/had a retirement plan. This will help you to identify if there are patterns or family expectations for age of employment and/or retirement.

**Salary estimate.** Include annual salary estimates for any family members of which you are aware of their salary. This is often considered sensitive information, even among families, so use your discretion as to whether you would like to inquire about salary information that you do not know. This may be a good time to reflect on whether financial discussions are permitted or not permitted between family members and why that may be. Whether or not you know specific numbers, it can be helpful to estimate what you think a person or family's income might be (e.g., use a scale of \$, \$\$, \$\$\$, or \$\$\$\$) to identify potential patterns, family expectations, or financial values among your relatives.

**Debt.** Although we often do not know the specific value of mortgages or debts among our family members, include debt estimates for any family member of which you are aware. Again, this is sensitive information you may not want to inquire about, but an estimate similar to salary estimates (perhaps written in a different color) could be helpful information to identify patterns and values. If anyone in your family is known to be debt-free, have maxed out credit cards, have or previously had gambling debts/addictions, note that as well in whatever way is meaningful to you.

**Generosity.** Generosity is a quality that is viewed and carried out in vastly different ways among individuals and families. There are many ways in which a person can be generous; however, the most common type of generosity is generally considered to be financial generosity. Consider what is known about your family's financial generosity and if there is anything of value to note, include this on your genogram. This can be done by choosing a symbol to represent either generosity or the value placed on it in low, medium, or high levels (e.g., +, ++, ++++) if specific percentages and dollar amounts are unknown. For example, in this exercise, the first author noted her family's commitment to tithing and how this commitment was passed down through generations on both sides of her family. Although she did not note this on the genogram, she considered how generosity was also displayed through volunteering of time and lending of resources on her father's side of the family, significantly influencing her own values around generosity with both time and money.

**Relationships significant to finances.** In the original genogram, all significant relationships are notated using lines describing healthy, enmeshed, rigid, or other types of communication patterns. For this financial genogram, focus on topics of money and finances to draw your relationship lines among family members. In some families, this may be a complex piece of artwork, and in other families, there may be little to note. Include whatever

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is helpful to your self-reflection. For example, if your wealthy grandfather's estate recently caused high levels of tension among the entire family, this might be worth noting. Another example would include identifying financial cut-off within the family. Relationship lines (depicting closeness, disengagement, enmeshment, etc.) used in a standard genogram can be used and included in your legend, or your own method of labeling relationships can be created.

**Other noteworthy dynamics.** The categories above can represent diverse types of families to varying degrees. However, the authors acknowledge that there are many other facets of family finances that might be unique to families or cultures that would be essential to note for a complete self-of-the-financial-therapist reflective process. Although this is not an exhaustive list, some other topics of family finances that can be considered – and noted as needed on the financial genogram – are insurance (or lack of insurance) patterns, important historical events, estate planning, funding for education, investments and wealth-building practices, tax law adherence, bankruptcy, and welfare recipients. Consider whether these topics (or others) are relevant to note on your genogram as you engage in this self-reflective-financial-therapist journey. Also consider the level of financial transparency in your family. Did you know the answers to many of these questions without having to ask anyone, or was much of this a mystery? How comfortable would (or did) you feel asking family members for information on these topics? Family openness and communication patterns around finances vary greatly. In some families, financial transparency leads to parents imparting helpful financial knowledge and skills to their children (Thorson & Horstman, 2014), and in other families, financial topics are not discussed or even considered taboo. Determine what questions you want to ask to gain more knowledge about your family's finances and which questions would be unhelpful or intrusive if vocalized to your family members.

### **Reflecting on Your Financial Genogram**

Once you have created your financial genogram, look over it to identify overarching financial patterns, themes, values, expectations, and norms within your family. Using an experiential financial therapy framework, this reflective process can help you to identify unfinished business and “financial flashpoints” in your family financial history. Financial flashpoints are “an early life event (or series of events) associated with money that are so emotionally powerful, they leave an imprint that lasts until adulthood” (p. 8, Klonz & Klonz, 2009). Financial flashpoints have been found to be associated with disordered money behaviors and posttraumatic stress; however, even for those who are not actively experiencing high levels of distress around their finances, exploration of financial flashpoints can provide the opportunity for resolution of unfinished money business. As you study and process your financial genogram image/drawing, here are some guiding questions to help you reflect *What are your most influential money memories? What emotions did money evoke in your family? How did your family resolve conflict around financial matters? What did your family intentionally teach you about money? What did your family teach you covertly about money? How does your family treat people who have different financial values and beliefs? What are your most important financial values and goals?* Each of these reflective questions is discussed below.

**What are your most influential money memories?** The meaning of money is taught in our family of origin (Mumford & Weeks, 2003). Consider what stands out to you from your childhood when you think about memories that involve money, both positive/happy and negative/difficult. These would be considered your financial flashpoints (Klonz & Klonz, 2009). Also consider if any historical events, political policies, religious or spiritual values, or cultural trends significantly affected your family's financial patterns (Nelson et al., 2015). After identifying these memories, reflect on what you learned from those memories and why they have had a lasting effect on you. Having these memories in your mind as you work through the following questions will be helpful. For example, one salient money memory from the first author is when she and her brother saved up to buy a trampoline when she was around age 10. She and her brother begged their parents to purchase a trampoline for them, their parents decided that this was a time to teach their kids how to save. She and her brother saved up for over a year, and this financial discipline and goal-setting provided a wealth of memorable financial lessons. We do want to note that, although it is preferred for our most influential money memories to be positive, there are times when this is not the case. Many financial flashpoints are traumatic experiences, and financial struggles can be intertwined with the aftermath of trauma that does not begin as a money-related issue. Compassionately and mindfully giving yourself permission to recognize the struggles, anger, and intense emotions that may come from this exercise is important.

**What emotions did money evoke in your family?** From the positive and negative experiences recognized above, identify the range of emotions, whether narrow or wide, that money brings out among your family members. Also, consider how those emotions are tied to the values that the individual or family holds. Discrepancies between values and behaviors regarding money create tension and negative emotions, while congruency between values and behaviors regarding money reduces tension and anxiety (Young, 2021). As you identify the emotions and corresponding values in your family, work to identify your own emotions around money and whether these emotions are consistent with your values. For example, if you say you do not value material possessions and wealth and yet realize that you are plagued by feelings of jealousy and discontentment surrounding money, this may be something you want to explore further.

**How did your family resolve conflict around financial matters?** This may be an extension of the previous question for many of us, as we all likely have emotions tied to these memories. We acknowledge that this can be a sensitive or triggering topic and encourage self-care as you engage in this reflective process. In some families, money is used as a method of power, control, and manipulation and can be intertwined with chaos, trauma, and abuse (Dew & Dakin, 2011; Ross et al., 2022). This may result in loud and violent conflict or quiet and passive resentment – or anything in between. Consider who was responsible for the financial decisions in your family, how and/or why that decision was made, and how much flexibility or rigidity that responsibility carried. Also consider the timing of the conflicts that occurred and what types of money concerns or worries you and your family experienced as you grew up (DeMaria et al., 1999; Mumford & Weeks, 2003).

**What did your family intentionally teach you about money?** After considering salient memories and emotions, identify what your family members taught you through open

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communication, starting with your primary caregivers and expanding out to your extended family. This might include any talks about finances, budgeting, financial planning, salaries and income, bank accounts, credit and debt, or spending and savings. For example, the first author remembers when her parents sat down with her and taught her about using a bank account and how to write checks and balance a checkbook. Also consider how often money was talked about and what those conversations were like (DeMaria et al., 1999; Mumford & Weeks, 2003; Nelson et al., 2015).

**What did your family teach you covertly about money?** Ask yourself what your family members taught you about money through less direct communication, starting with your primary caregivers and expanding out to your extended family. This might include the ways that money was talked about when you were around, but not specifically for your learning. It would also include observations you have made about the ways people behave, worry about, spend, save, give, and communicate about money with those around them. It may also include secrecy about money that you observed (Furnham et al., 2014). Further, indirect money messages are communicated through values and beliefs that are important within your family. It may help to start by identifying some of the money messages that held the greatest influence in your life, and then tracing those messages back to the family members and values that are most relevant, looking for both overt and covert influences from your family. Use this reflection time to look for patterns in financial values and messages over time within your family. This aspect of the reflection process could be lengthy, as there are many financial undertones to the ways families interact, and these undertones are often passed from generation to generation (Mumford & Weeks, 2003; Nelson et al., 2015).

For example, the first author observed her grandfather regularly missing family events during her childhood in order to work, which communicated the message that work/money was more important than family time. This same grandfather has made specific comments over the years about giving exactly equal gifts to children and grandchildren, communicating rigidity and stinginess in how money must be spent or given. None of these messages have been directly addressed and would certainly be denied if ever spoken out loud. However, regardless of her grandfather's intentions, the messages were clearly received by the first author and had a direct influence on her desire to choose a career path that would offer a healthier work-life balance and flexible generosity. In turn, all of this influences her present-day financial values and beliefs.

It can be fruitful to engage in a reflective process about why family members held the beliefs they did and the factors influencing their behaviors and beliefs. Although someone else's financial beliefs may have been distasteful or even harmful to us, it can be helpful to approach their position with thoughtfulness as we consider (or imagine) the events and circumstances that shaped their perception of finances. This process can help us show empathy to that person(s) and engage in acknowledgment of our own emotions, both past and present, toward that person. This can provide a "reconstructive experience," with experiential financial therapy used to conceptualize experiences in which we are able to revisit past hurts and receive healing that had not been previously offered (Klonz et al., 2015).

**How does your family treat people who have different financial values and beliefs?** This can be widely varied across families, so identify if there are representative themes from your entire family or whether various people within your family act differently. Identify the actions and themes with which you agree and/or do not agree, and why. For example, some families look down upon those who have less money, or some families envy or judge those who have more money. Consider the attitudes that you have been exposed to within your own family and how those attitudes have affected you. Also, consider the level of tolerance within your family for those who have differing financial values and beliefs. For example, are family members who view or spend money differently than others excluded from the family fold? For some, this may serve as an exercise in shame reduction, providing a path to separate oneself from problematic thinking that may have been passed down within their families (Klonz et al., 2008). Evaluate how these patterns and values have affected your own financial values and whether this is working for you or not, both personally and professionally.

**What are your most important financial values and goals today?** Identify what is most important to you, in light of all your family and personal experiences. This may be easily identified and something that you have spent much time considering, or it might be something that you have to spend some time considering and articulating. When you identify and consider your most important goals and values, consider to what extent you are living in a way that is congruent with your goals and values, and evaluate whether or not you desire to take action. Consider how your values in general align with and support your financial values and goals, and what this means to you and for you as you move forward. Finishing your financial genogram with this exercise provides a path to reprocessing of unfinished business, reconstructive experiences, and shame reduction as you move forward toward your own financial values and goals.

## Conclusion

We hope that we have intrigued you and that you are planning to complete your own financial genogram to begin or continue your own “money work.” Creating a financial genogram using the lens of experiential financial therapy allows you to reflect on your own financial values, beliefs, and experiences and will aid you in your ability to help your clients more objectively as they address their own financial issues. The topics and questions in this manuscript will help you get started, and we invite you to creatively add or adjust as you see fit while you engage in the process. From a professional development standpoint, building awareness of your own financial bias and money scripts will help prevent you from bringing your own unfinished financial business into your work with clients. Another important component of this self-reflection process is remembering to seek out support if you need help to process the information and emotions that arise from this exercise. Inviting a trusted peer or supervisor into your journey – or seeking out your own therapist – should be considered if this information is too painful or cumbersome to walk through on your own.

More research is needed to validate the use of financial genograms as a self-of-the-financial-therapist tool and as a general self-of-the-therapist tool; we believe this can be a helpful tool to accompany experiential financial therapy identify and process financial

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flashpoints, to help process unfinished business, and to provide reconstructive experiences to help with shame reduction, both for therapists and for clients (Klonz et al., 2015). We hope that you find this financial genogram to be helpful and insightful to you both in your personal journey and in your pursuit of helping others.

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