

CHAPTER 5

Family Structure and Marital Relationships

A Story

Randi sat down to fill out the form at the church food pantry. This was so embarrassing . . .

My spelling is terrible. And some of these questions . . . What did they want all this for? "What is your driver's license number?" "How long have you lived at this address?" It's like being back in school! "Marital status?" That's kind of hard to say this week. Terry's gone again . . . and who knows when he'll be back. "Do you want a visit from a minister?" Would that mean more help, or just more questions? "Who recommended that you come here for help?" Who do they want to recommend me? Who do they not want?

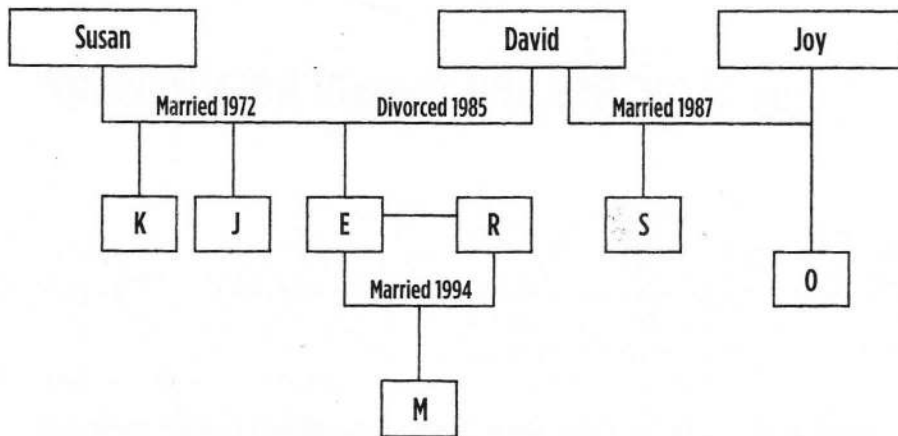
"Who lives with you in your home?" Let's see . . . There are the kids: Tommy, Sarah, Ruth. Terry has moved out; that's why I'm here! What if Bonnie comes back this weekend and brings the twins? . . .

FAMILY PATTERNS IN GENERATIONAL POVERTY

One of the most confusing things about understanding generational poverty is the family patterns. In the middle-class family, even with divorce, lineage is fairly easy to trace because of the legal documents. In generational poverty, on the other hand, many marital arrangements are common-law. Marriage and divorce in a legal court are important only if there is property to distribute or custody of children. When you were never legally married to begin with and you have no property, why pay a lawyer for something you don't have, don't need, and don't have the money to purchase?

In the middle class, family diagrams tend to be drawn in this fashion:

DIAGRAM OF MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

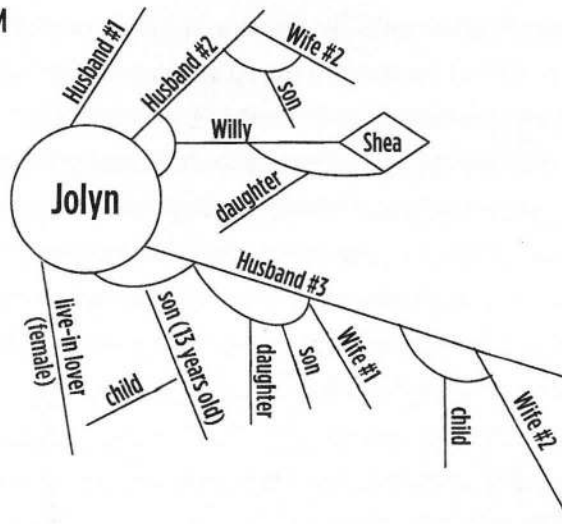


The notion is that lineage is traceable and that a linear pattern can be found.

In generational poverty, the mother is the center of the organization, and the family radiates from that center. Although it can happen that the mother is uncertain of the biological father, most of the time the father of the child is known. The pattern shown on the next page is based on a real situation. (Names have been changed.)

In this pattern, Jolyn has been legally married three times. Jolyn and Husband #1 had no children. Jolyn and Husband #2 had one child, Willy. They divorced. Husband #2 eventually married the woman he lived with for several years, and they had a child together. She also had a son from a previous marriage. Willy has a common-law wife, Shea; Shea and Willy have a daughter. Jolyn and Husband #3 lived together several years before they were married, and they have a son named M.J. When M.J. was 13 he had a child with a 13-year-old girl, but that child lives with the girl's mother. Husband #3 and Jolyn divorced; Jolyn is now living with a woman in a lesbian relationship. Husband #3 is living with a younger woman who is pregnant with his child.

DIAGRAM OF FAMILY FROM
GENERATIONAL POVERTY



The mother is always at the center, though she may have multiple sexual relationships. Many of her children also will have multiple relationships, which may or may not produce children. The basic pattern is the mother at the heart of things, with nearly everyone having multiple relationships, some legal and some not. Eventually the relationships become intertwined. It wouldn't be out of the question for your sister's third husband to become your brother's ex-wife's live-in boyfriend. Also in this pattern are babies born out of wedlock to children in their early teens; these youngsters are often raised by the grandmother as her own children. For example, the oldest daughter has a child at 14. This infant becomes the youngest child in the existing family. The oldest daughter, who is actually the mother of the child, is referred to as her sister—and the relationship is a sibling one, not a mother-daughter one.

But the mother or maternal grandmother usually keeps her biological children. Because of the violence in poverty, death tends to be a prominent part of the family history. But it is also part of the family present because the deceased plays such a role in the memories of the family. It is important to note when dealing with the family patterns who is alive and who is dead—because in the discussions they are often still living (unless you, the listener, know differently).

Frequently, in stories that come to the attention of church people, the individual will tell the story in the episodic, random manner of the casual-register story structure. Key individuals are usually not referred to during the story because making reference to them isn't part of the story structure. *The most important keys to understanding the story are often the omissions.* For example, when someone says, "He left," you can pretty much predict who "he" will go stay with when there is trouble. If he is having trouble with his mother, he will go stay with an ex-wife or a girlfriend. If he is having trouble with his current wife, he will go stay with his mother. Women tend to go stay with their sisters and sometimes their mothers. Whether or not a mother or ex-wife is mentioned in the story, if the family is in generational poverty, you can be fairly certain that these are key players. You can also be fairly sure that the males are in and out—sometimes present, sometimes not, but not in any predictable pattern. Furthermore, you can know that as the male temporarily or permanently changes residences, the allegiances will change also.

Additionally within these families there tend to be multiple internal feuds. Allegiances may change overnight; favoritism is a way of life. *Who children go to stay with after school, who stays with whom when there is trouble, and who is available to deal with problems are dependent on the current alliances and relationships at that moment.* For example, Ned comes home drunk and beats up his wife, Susan. She calls the police and escapes with the three kids to her mother's house. He goes to his mother's because she arranges to get him out of jail. His mother is not speaking to Susan because she called the cops on him and put him in jail. But Ned's mother usually keeps his kids after school until Susan gets home. Now it is Monday, and Susan doesn't have any place to send the kids. So she tells them to go to her mother's house after school, which means they must go on a different bus because she doesn't know if Ned will show up at the house and be waiting for her. On Tuesday the kids again go to Susan's mom's house. But on Wednesday Ned's mom calls Susan and tells her that that no-good Ned got drunk last night and she kicked him out of her house. So now Susan and Ned's mother are good friends, and Ned is on the hot seat. So Ned goes to the apartment of his ex-wife, Jackie,

because last week she decided she'd had enough of Jerry, and she was very glad to see Ned . . . And so the story continues.

The key roles in these families are fighter/lover, caretaker/rescuer, worker, storyteller, and "keeper of the soul" (i.e., dispenser of penance and forgiveness). The family patterns in generational poverty are different from the middle class. *In poverty the roles, the multiple relationships, the nature of the male identity, the ever-changing allegiances, the favoritism, and the matriarchal structure result in a different pattern.*

MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

In middle class, marital relationships tend to be role-related. For example, a spouse is often referred to as a husband or a wife, a girlfriend or boyfriend, a fiancée.

But in poverty, the relationship is very sexual and gender-related. For example, "this is my woman," "this is my man."

Additionally, "rite of passage" (when adults in one's group consider adolescents or teens to be adults) differs by class. The middle-class rite of passage is about a job, graduation, driver's license, marriage, and military service. In generational poverty, rite of passage is to father or mother a child. In middle class, a teenager having a child is not viewed positively. In generational poverty, there is pride that one's children are potent or fertile. While the rhetoric against it may be harsh, the understanding is that it is expected.

Integral to understanding the marital relationship is to know the primary identity issue. When men go without work for long periods of time, male identity often changes from being a provider to being a fighter and lover. The corresponding female identity becomes a caretaker and a rescuer.

That is why, when a couple from poverty comes to a church to ask for assistance, the man will sit in the car while the woman comes in and asks. A fighter and lover is to protect and support (often unpredictably). But a woman is a rescuer and caretaker.

To understand the marital relationship in generational poverty, three

things must be kept in mind: identity, casual register, and lack of adult voice. Because casual register has very few abstract words, and because the adult voice is usually missing, conversations often occur “in the concrete,” and either the parent voice or child voice is used (which creates a power-oriented, win-lose relationship as opposed to a partnership). The relationship does not have a vehicle for resolving conflicts or issues. Very often the conflict starts over something concrete, gets personal, then becomes loaded with sexual innuendo, and finally turns violent.

Resolution to violence is limited to human fighting or walking out. (Sometimes a man will say, “I left so I wouldn’t hit her.”) Often when the male walks out, he walks to a local bar. As Willie Nelson sings, “The women all get prettier at closing time.” He leaves with another woman or his buddies.

This scenario then becomes laden with the notion of punishment and forgiveness. Often both decide to punish the other—either by not allowing the other back in the house or by staying the night with another woman. Or the man may come back violent. The man (if he leaves) is “trashed” in the neighborhood, whereas he is a hero in the bar. The woman, meanwhile, is a heroine in the neighborhood. It becomes entertainment.

What does this do to the family?

It creates from day to day an unpredictable situation.

If the man comes back and has been violent, then when it’s over the woman has the right to dispense punishment and forgiveness. Part of the punishment for a man may be to purchase something for the woman or, at the very least, take her some place, do as she says, or keep a low profile until he’s forgiven.

Part of what happens in domestic violence is that whoever is in the parent voice generally “wins.” However, if both male and female are in the parent voice, the one who is physically stronger usually wins.

The socialization process is that women tend to socialize with women and men with men. If you’ve ever been in a low-income neighborhood and have seen men standing in a circle drinking beer, they’re socializing by almost certainly exchanging stories of their fighting and loving episodes.