Genograms in research: participants’ reflections of the genogram process

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The genogram is a visual, symbolic representation of multiple generations of a family, structured in much the same way as a family tree. Genograms emerged within systemic family therapy as an assessment and intervention tool, but in their ability to generate rich data, they are gaining traction as a research method. While the benefits of genograms in therapeutic practice have been well documented, the literature exploring their use in research is limited. This article aims to contribute to this knowledge by considering participants’ experiential reflections of constructing their genograms, a process they engaged in as part of a broader study that explored the intergenerational transmission of family violence. We illustrate that while genograms generated powerful qualitative data, they also had unintended therapeutic and transformative effects on participants which transcended the interview room. We consider the ethical complexities of using genograms as a qualitative method and make recommendations for future research.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

genograms; visual methods; graphic elicitation; ethical complexities; family research

\textbf{Introduction}

The genogram is a visual representation of multiple generations of a family, structured like a family tree (see Figure 1 for example) (Iverson et al. 2005). Genograms can include the symbolic depiction of relatively objective 'factual' information, such as family structure, sociodemographics, deaths, disease, and illness, as well as subjective information, including relational dynamics, stressful life events, behaviours, and culture (Castoldi et al. 2006; Mackay 2015; Watts & Shrader 1998). Genograms emerged within systemic family therapy as an assessment and intervention tool (Mackay 2015; McGoldrick 2016; McGoldrick et al. 2008) but have also been adopted in other spheres such as social work (Hartman 1995; Piedra 2016), medicine and health care (Leonidas & Santos 2015; Werner-Lin & Gardner 2009), and education (Crowell 2017; Hardy & Laszloffy 1995; Keiley et al. 2002). In their ability to generate rich and immediate data, they are also beginning to gain traction as a research tool (Iverson et al. 2005; McGoldrick et al. 2008; Watts & Shrader 1998).
The benefits of using genograms in therapeutic practice have been well documented. Genograms can facilitate clients’ deeper, more nuanced explorations of family and, when created as a co-construction between therapist and client, genograms can support engagement and enhance the therapeutic alliance (Altshuler 1999; Burley 2014; Mackay 2015). This ability of the genogram to develop rapport has also been observed by researchers. Reflecting on their use of visual methods in conjunction with interviews, Rempel et al. (2007) maintained that interactive genograms (used together with ecomaps - a visual depiction of social relationships) were particularly powerful in the research process because they aided rapport and promoted “…a relational process between researcher and participant” (p. 403). In sensitive research that invites participants to disclose information of a personal nature, the development of rapport is essential, and data collection dependent on it. However, as research may only involve a one-off encounter between the researcher and participant, encouraging the development of rapport introduces an ethical dimension, the likes of which is not present in the therapeutic process. In therapy, for example, sessions can run in the mid-long term; endings are regarded as an important part of the therapeutic process and are carefully negotiated by the therapist. Managing rapport and the close of contact do not necessarily feature as integral components of research training. Thus, tools that develop rapport, such as the genogram, may require careful consideration and planning by researchers to ensure sensitive implementation.

As they provide “systemic contextualisation,” a representation of the individual-in-family, genograms can support engagement with social constructionist understandings of reality, moving away from more realist perspectives (Iverson et al. 2005). However, because standard genogram construction typically represents ancestral descent through biological or spousal relations (Tasker & Granville 2011), it has received criticism for its
tendency toward excluding the depiction of counter-hegemonic ‘family’ compositions, such as non-kin, extra-familial, same-sex, or adopted families (Singh 2009). As it presumes Western ideologies of ‘family’ in its biological preoccupation, the standard genogram automatically disables the representation of different cultural conceptualisations (Singh 2009; Watts-Jones 1997). Watts-Jones (1997) proposes an African American genogram, one that transcends the assumption of ‘family’ as solely biological. Other authors have also espoused ways standard construction and notation might be adapted to better represent diverse family compositions and cultural contexts in sensitive and nuanced ways (Milewski-Hertlein 2001; Tasker & Granville 2011; Congress 1994). Ensuring that genograms are capable of depicting participants’ conceptualisations of family is an issue for researchers wanting to use them as a visual method, and one requiring careful consideration to avoid eliding or marginalising particular family structures.

In research, genograms have been used to study a diverse range of intergenerational aspects from relational dynamics and stressful events (Castoldi et al. 2006) to the parenting and contact practices of incarcerated fathers (Dyer et al. 2018). Watts and Shrader (1998) found that genograms provided an effective visual summary of their data and functioned as a reflexive tool for participants and researchers during follow-up interviews. Rempel et al. (2007) also attest to the value of genograms in research and note their ability to facilitate researchers’ understandings of participants’ families. As a visual methodology, genograms may be particularly beneficial in sensitive research because they can function as an “intermediary artefact,” enabling participants to indirectly express “difficult memories and powerful emotions” through their drawings (Prosser 2013, p. 188). As with other visual methods, genograms can promote both nonverbal and verbal reflections, enabling exploration of conscious or nonconscious issues, and uncovering experiences and memories previously unarticulated (Mitchell et al. 2011). Together with interviews, genograms can support the generation of rich data, both in raw visual form, and by facilitating verbal accounts.

Genograms can be a co-construction of several family members, but they tend to be individually constructed. Even when they are created on an individual basis, genograms represent and, therefore, involve (by proxy) immediate and extended family members and (ex-)intimate partners who are neither consulted in how they are represented nor privy to the consent process (Fontes 1998; Langford 2000). Because of this, using genograms in research raises a number of ethical challenges that need to be thought through. Furthermore, as genograms incorporate details about a particular group of people, the risk of identification may increase (McGoldrick et al. 2008), and this in itself is a major disadvantage of using genograms as a research tool.
As noted here, genograms present a myriad of ethical challenges for researchers wanting to implement them. Their value in therapeutic practice and training has been well reported, and their utility in research is increasingly being recognised. However, literature exploring genograms as a method of qualitative research and, in particular, participants’ experiences of them is limited. In light of their capacity to effect change in people’s perceptions when used in therapy, it is crucial that we gain a better understanding of their potential impact on research participants. This article aims to contribute to the literature on genograms in qualitative research by considering a small group of participants’ experiential reflections of engaging in the genogram process.

Research methods

Participants

Participants were recruited as part of the first author’s doctoral research (supervised by JC and LF), which explored the intergenerational transmission of family violence. This study included a small and specific sample of women who identified as having experienced family violence in multiple generations. Fifteen in-depth individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine women aged 22-50 years (see Appendix 1 for participant table). The study adopted a pluralist qualitative approach (Frost & Nolas 2011), incorporating genograms and ecomaps alongside semi-structured interviews. This article focuses on interview data directly relating to participants’ experiential reflections of constructing and engaging with their genograms.

Women were recruited via two UK-based domestic violence (DV) agencies and professional networks. Inclusion criteria for participation related to safeguarding and required women to be “immediately safe” (Sullivan & Cain 2004) and away from violence at the point of interview and, where relevant, to be deemed by agencies working with them as such. At the time of interview, the majority of participants were either receiving or had historically received support from specialist DV services (n=8), and only one woman had never received any specialist DV support. Two women were residing in refuge at the time of interview. Others were attending counselling or had access to less formalised support systems, such as church or peer support groups, where they were used to talking about their experiences of violence and their intimate relationships.

Recruitment

Recruitment was a relatively slow process, and some women who were initially interested decided not to participate, largely due to concerns around
identification. Safeguarding issues also cropped up during recruitment; for example, one woman wanted to bring along her new partner to the interview, and another said she would have to ask permission from her family before she agreed to take part. These examples illustrate the potential vulnerability and safeguarding issues (for researcher and participant) that research involving family by proxy might entail. During the recruitment phase, the first author contacted a total of 12 organisations, nationally and locally, that were either dedicated DV or family services. The recruited cohort consisted of eight White British women and one White Italian woman. As this sample comprised white and heterosexual women only, it is limited in its capacity to reflect the diversity of the target population.

**Ethical considerations**

This project received ethical approval from The University of Northampton’s Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Researchers adhered to the ethical standards of the British Psychological Society (BPS 2009). We intend to discuss the ethical complexities of this project in greater depth in a separate publication, but outline the key ethical considerations here.

To ensure that potential participants were fully informed, the first author met with each individual in person to explain the nature of the research, genogram construction, their involvement, and ethical rights and protections.

Since this project required participants to share material of a highly personal nature with an emphasis on family violence, there was a risk of inducing secondary traumatisation and emotional upset in participants. There are risks associated both with recollecting traumatic incidents (Carter-Visscher et al. 2007) (such as violence) and of genogram production (Crowell 2017). However, various authors indicate that while interviews might induce a low level of distress, quickly afterwards participants typically recall their experiences positively (Bunnell & Legerski 2010; Carter-Visscher et al. 2007). The interviewer (first author) had prior training and experience of working with families affected by violence in a research capacity, was cognizant of the complex safeguarding issues inherent in research of this nature, and was experienced in using a distress protocol. Following participation, where necessary, participants were signposted to relevant agencies or referred to organisations directly for onward support. One woman was signposted to a rape counselling service, another to a DV counselling service, and additional support was sought for one woman accessing DV services.

During participation, mindful that the material could be emotionally challenging, women were offered breaks at appropriate points in the research process, or where signs of upset were visible. Women were also offered the opportunity to break down genogram construction/interview over a number of sessions. It was envisaged this would not only help to minimise distress by
giving women a break between sessions, if they wanted it, but would also help to generate a greater level of complexity in the data, representative of family and intimate partner violence. Four women attended once, four others attended twice, and one woman attended on three occasions.

To help ensure that participants did not interpret intergenerational trends in their genograms as fixed and unchangeable, or as prophetic of their own futures, the first author was transparent about the limitations of genograms from the outset. Participants were informed that their genograms provide only one perspective, a symbolic representation of a given time, and that they are limited in their capacity to fully and holistically reflect the complexities, contexts, or transience of relationships over time.

**Genogram construction and interviews**

To ensure participants had a good understanding of how to create their genograms, they were shown examples and provided with an explanation of how to construct them. They were also shown an electronic example (created using GenoPro 2011 software) to give them an idea of how their hand-drawn genograms would look after they had been electronically re-created and anonymised by the researcher. The study was designed so that genogram construction would be, to a certain extent, informed by the GenoPro software, and the symbols made available to participants were determined by its legend which included 36 “emotional relationships,” such as “harmony,” “close,” “distant,” “conflict,” and so on. To represent changes to family structure and relationships over time, the women were invited to construct two genograms each, one “Retrospective,” depicting family composition and relational dynamics in childhood, and the other “Active,” representing family at the time of interview. Typically, the women identified experiences of violence in four generations of their families.

Step-by-step support was provided to help participants represent relationships technically accurately, for example, ensuring a line was drawn vertically to represent a child rather than horizontally, which could represent a marriage. Despite this, the technical construction elicited some anxiety in several of the women. In these cases, genograms were produced as a co-construction, and the researcher drew them as participants talked through who they wanted to include and what they perceived the relationships to be. To make sure the researcher accurately captured the information, they echoed participants’ instructions both before and as they drew to enable participants the opportunity to correct or make changes. A member-checking phase was also implemented following participation to enable participants to amend their electronic genograms. Because of the issues in interpreting genograms (Rohrbaugh et al. 1992), and visual methods generally (Banks 2012), they were used in this study as a graphic elicitation tool and were not
themselves analysed. While interviews predominantly focused on family violence, they touched upon genogram construction, which facilitated documentation of the women’s experiences of the process.

**Data preparation and thematic analysis**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and genograms were electronically recreated. Transcripts and genograms were anonymised, and all names, locations, and identifying information were either replaced with pseudonyms or omitted. Women’s transcripts were coded for reflections related to the genogram method, including experiences of construction, limitations, and feelings about depicting families/relationships. For the purposes of this article, all textual data relating to genograms were extracted from the women’s transcripts/reflections and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke 2006). Cross-coding formed part of the doctoral research, and during preliminary analysis all three authors coded the same extract of a 39-page transcript, and discussed observations and coding in supervisory meetings.

**Participant reflections**

Thematic analysis of women’s reflections of the genogram process identified three key themes: “Re-envisioning Family, Reframing Self”; “Simplifying the Complex: The Limitations of Labels”; and “Genograms as Transformative.” The first theme offers insight into how genogram production functioned as a reflexive tool for participants, facilitating renewed understandings of themselves and their families. The second illustrates participants’ struggles in attempting to symbolise highly complex family relationships and histories of violence. The final theme describes how some participants used their genograms outside the research space, to connect to family, or to instigate changes in their relationships. We discuss these findings below, considering the value of genograms in the data collection process, and the ethical implications they bring to the research context.

**Re-envisioning family, reframing self**

In this theme, we explore how genograms shifted the women’s conceptualisations of family and self. Renewed understandings were expressed by some participants as positive and empowering but as surprising by others. We consider the capacity of genograms for inducing new insights and “altered perceptions” (Hartman 1995) and discuss the implications.

Constructing her genogram enabled one of the women (Naomi) to see her family from a more reflective and balanced perspective:
Int: [...] what does it feel like to kind of put your family history in a drawing?
Naomi: [...] We keep ourselves to ourselves sort of thing and everything bottled up, which is like our main problem. I know that from experience, that’s our main problem. So to see it down flat it does make me think that’s a lot more violence and hostility, anger and unsolved problems throughout the family. I don’t think it’s just one side of the family, which is quite interesting really. Because I’ve always thought it was from my [paternal] gran. [...] I always thought it was coming from her, coming down that way. [...] But to see that it’s also on the other side of the family is very interesting.

The symbolic depiction of the family’s relational dynamics enabled Naomi to view her family system in its entirety, and to see how other members had been touched by violence. It also facilitated an understanding that violence was perhaps more embedded within the family system than she had previously understood, or perhaps than had been expressed in the family narrative. As Naomi alludes, genograms might make the individual’s lived version of the story visible for the first time. Understanding that violence is present in both maternal and paternal relations makes space for her to alter her identification of paternal relations as the source of all familial discontent. In this sense, Naomi’s genogram allowed her to move polarised stories of family violence, which individualise and blame certain members, toward a more integrative account which considers violence and victimhood across the whole family system.

Like Naomi, Georgia’s genogram helped to illuminate other family members who had suffered violence as she had:

Int: Can I ask you, Georgia, what did it feel like doing this [motions towards drawings] and what does it feel like seeing all your family relationships like this?

Georgia: It felt weird because it shows that, on that drawing really, it wasn’t just me that suffered from abuse in the past; it has been other family members as well. So it’s like it’s [transmitted] [...] because it seems whatever way you look at it on my mum’s side and my dad’s side, it looks like there’s always been abuse there throughout the years.

These extracts exemplify how participants’ genograms helped to uncover or validate other family members’ experiences of violence. This suggests that they helped to generate information that verbal accounts alone may not have produced. In making particular aspects of family visible, they illuminate distinctions between lived and narrated stories, and the gaps — the aspects/ persons that participants elide from depictions or accounts (Rempel et al. 2007),
the information they do/do not know, and what they can/cannot articulate. The key purpose of genograms in systemic therapy is to elicit new insights by highlighting relational patterns across the system. Quotes indicate genograms had a similar therapeutic effect on research participants, and this signals a blurring of the boundaries between clinical and research impact. Indeed, one participant directly remarked on the likeness between genogram production and therapy:

*Int:* What did it feel like doing [your genogram] and what does it feel like looking at it?
*Jenny:* A bit like a huge counselling session, that’s how I felt this morning. Because I’ve never written all that down like that on a piece of paper.

By drawing a parallel with counselling, not just a 'regular' session but “*a huge counselling session,*” Jenny gives us a glimpse into the emotive and embodied experience of the research process, specifically of depicting her family on “paper.” While this quote supports genograms’ capacity for therapeutic impact, it also illuminates the possible emotional toll on research participants. It is this potential for instigating a metaphorical opening of Pandora’s Box in the research space that carries with it one of the greatest ethical challenges for researchers wanting to implement genograms. Perhaps these effects are an inevitable consequence of using a therapeutic tool in research. Nonetheless, they necessitate our attention and demonstrate the need for greater investigation into the impact of genograms on research participants.

Isla’s Retrospective genogram (see Figure 2) sheds light on the physical abuse running through her family from the fourth to the second generations.

*Figure 2.* Extract from Isla’s retrospective genogram, identifying intergenerational history of physical violence
Reflecting on her genograms enabled Isla to link her own behaviours in adulthood with intergenerational patterns in her family-of-origin:

Int: So if we look at all these blue lines (from fourth generation through second), these are all “physical abuse.”
Isla: It actually makes me understand why I am like I am, a little bit.
Int: What are you “like”?
Isla: A bit aggressive. [...] That’s the build up, you know. If I get built up and aggressive, I sometimes see that red mist. I haven’t done it for a long time but it is literally, if I’m getting arrested, I’ve actually lost control and attacked whoever’s coming towards me. [...] I’m holding it down, but it’s scary holding it down because if I’ve got no release for it, it’s going to come out in the wrong way again, and that might happen again.

By linking her behaviours in adulthood with her family’s history of physical abuse, Isla creates a connection between her responses to physical constraint (“I’ve actually lost control and attacked whoever’s coming towards me”) and her experiences in the family. Although not explicitly articulated, this may also link to her prior experiences of constraint in childhood (“She used to lock me in the cellar,” “I was always locked in my room”). Engaging with her genogram elicits a shift, an “altered perception” (Hartman 1995), which calls into question her self-identity as “aggressive.” Instead of locating “aggression” within herself as an inherent personality trait (“like I am”), she can see it as a co-constructed, congruent response to her family history.

Constructing their genograms led some of the women to identify one individual as the root cause of the disharmony in their family systems. These revelations were accompanied by a strong sense of injustice and polarised language, which represented those identified as wholly malevolent:

Jenny: So when it’s down here on paper and you’re going, oh my God, and she was abused by him and I was abused by him, and – you know, and he was just evil, my dad was just evil, you can see all the people he’s abused, including my auntie in a way.

Depicting her family makes the intangible (and unarticulated) tangible, more concrete, and the “truth” of this visibility seems incontrovertible for Jenny. She expresses a sense of shock (“oh my God”) at seeing her family symbolically “on paper” and the renewed perspective of her father that this induced (“he was just evil, my dad was just evil”). Methodologically, genograms seemed to generate new insights from participants, which may not have been produced without this kind of visual tool. As such, insights are a co-production, created in the context of the researcher-participant encounter and in the interactions between participant and methodology.
Sue also expressed a similar sense of surprise. Sue’s interview was peppered throughout with references to the “closeness” of her family. Reflecting on the final image of her genogram, though, instigated a re-framing, a movement from a narrative about cohesion to one which more closely aligned with the estrangements represented in her visual depiction:

*Sue:* Yeah. The genogram was quite scary actually. Looking back at it now, you think, oh, is this really my family? It’s spread out everywhere… and no contact with my younger brother or my older brother, which is very scary because we were a close family when we were much younger. […] It’s just pretty scary really, looking at it all. […] how somebody can sort of split a whole family up where our family was so close. He [step-father] split up the whole family.

Rather than inducing a more systemic framing of the family system, sympathetic with all members, Sue’s genogram resulted in an identification of one person as pivotal in the damage and dissolution of what she considered to be her “close family.” Sue’s experience of her genogram as “scary” signals a level of shock at seeing a visual representation in stark contrast with her verbal narrative of “closeness.” These kinds of contrasts cultivate space in which to explore discrepancies and, in turn, provide opportunities to enrich interview data. However, epiphanies or, indeed, the unveiling of “myths” induced by genograms, illuminate their power to shift realities of relationships (Iverson et al. 2005). The strong expressions of surprise, as expressed by Sue and Jenny, highlight the potential risk of inducing emotional upset or anxiety (Crowell 2017) when using genograms in sensitive research.

When used in conjunction with interviews, genograms have enormous potential to generate rich qualitative data. They can aid researchers’ understandings of family structures and relationships and make visible the previously unidentified and unarticulated. They highlight discrepancies between family narratives and participants’ lived stories and, as a result, can lead to renewed insights of self and family. This kind of therapeutic effect presents an ethical challenge and highlights the risk of inducing lasting effects and emotional responses in research participants.

**Simplifying the complex: the limitations of labels**

This theme explores the limitations of genograms in enabling accurate depiction of participants’ families and considers the struggles that emerged for the women in trying to symbolise their complex relationships and histories of violence.

Amy articulates the difficulties of symbolising familial relationships and roles when they subvert normative, hierarchical family structures:

*Int:* [gesturing to genogram] Anything you want to add within these immediate family relationships?

*Amy:* I haven’t really put how I felt, but I don’t think there’s anything that - because it’s such a complicated feeling, and this is where it gets really
difficult because I took on a maternal role in that situation but it wasn’t necessarily out of love but it was more of a necessity, so maybe I could just make a little note somewhere?

As genograms typically represent genealogies via hierarchical and linear ancestral descent, they risk neglecting different cultural and economic contexts of family that prioritise or that require, out of necessity, shared family responsibility, community involvement, or the subversion of traditional hierarchical roles that might more accurately represent family for some (Krause 1998; Singh 2009). As they created their genograms, the women tried to navigate these kinds of restrictions to ensure their experiences were made visible and represented graphically. As Amy discovered, this was not always possible through the symbols alone. To circumvent some of the limitations, the research process was flexible, allowing participants to make written notes on their genograms, to date particular interactions, and to communicate this information dialogically in interview.

Depicting ambivalence, a feature of violent relationships (Sammut Scerri 2015), was also difficult for some of the women:

Amy: I would say my mum was very manipulative, that’s how I’d put—I struggle to put down my relationships with other people but—
Int: What do you mean?
Amy: Well, when we were doing this map […] I was really struggling to—because of how complex my relationships are with people that they could be abusive and loving in the same time, which makes absolutely no sense to anybody who is outside of that situation. How you can love someone who is so horrific to you, and how they can love you, and they do love you, which is the most twisted thing in the whole—as close as they can understand love I suppose. And it’s hard to say.

Amy’s quote not only illuminates the limited capacity of genograms to be representative but also how in itself the process of working through genogram construction can generate valuable research data. In this case, we get a glimpse into the turmoil accompanying ambivalent relationships and learn that Amy’s relationships, affected by violence, are counter-hegemonic and, as such, are difficult to articulate lest to label. The frustration of the reductionism of genograms generated data in its own right, provoking participants to further elaborate on the complexity of family relationships, and to identify, navigate, and reconcile the reductionism of their genograms with detailed verbal accounts.

Participants also struggled to represent relationships retrospectively, especially where they considered them to be volatile and unstable over time. For example, Kerry illustrates how family “truths,” dependent on context, are changeable:

Kerry: In a funny kind of way, it would have been really interesting to have done this five years ago, because I think everything I would have said would have been very, very different.[…] I think the reason there’s so
much unknowables and so much confusion is because the trust in [mother-daughter] relationship has been broken. So a lot of the “truths” – I know about this family picture, even about the abuse my father suffered, all of that is filtered through my mum. Everything I know about my family is via my mum. [...] Which is why it’s hard, in a way, to map a particular point in time because it’s very hard to put myself back in how I truly felt at that time, because it’s hard not to be clouded by what I know now, if that makes sense.

As genograms are generally reflective of a specific time, it is more difficult for them to be fluid, capturing the temporal and transitory nature of family relationships and composition. As such, they can be somewhat static, risking the portrayal of family dynamics as a-contextual or ‘timeless.’ In sensitive research, this risks entrenching unhelpful discourses involving intergenerationality, especially around proclivity to repeat family patterns.

This theme has illustrated that while genograms can generate rich research data, they can also mute the visual depiction of dynamic and rapidly changing relationships, those subverting hierarchical structures (e.g. caring roles) and ambivalent relationships. Without sufficient symbols or techniques to notate the complexity, variation, and transitory nature of family contexts and relationships, especially those counter-hegemonic, we risk disabling the representation of families as participants envisage them. Genograms provide a “snapshot” of family and are, to a certain extent, necessarily limited in the information they symbolise. In isolation, this snapshot is overly simplistic and reductionist and presents a difficulty for researchers hoping to analyse genograms in isolation. However, interviews can counter these restrictions by giving participants the opportunity to talk about the difficulties they experienced in trying to symbolise their families. In this way, the restrictions themselves can enrich participants’ accounts, allowing them to identify and talk about the tensions between their family and normative, depictable ‘family.’

**Genograms as transformative**

This theme represents how some participants re-created or engaged with their genograms outside of the research space, of their own accord. There is some crossover between this final theme and the first. Both touch upon the ways genograms affect participants. However, this theme explores direct reports from participants about the active ways they used genograms (or insights garnered from construction), outside of the research space. We explore the capacity of genograms to impact people’s lives in the long term and consider the ethical implications of this for research.

As a risk-reduction measure, research-related paperwork for this study was restricted, and furthermore the women were made aware prior to participation that they were not required to carry out any research into their family histories. Despite this, two of the women informed the interviewer they had created their
own genograms at home, one prior to interview and the other in-between sessions. Below, Claire notes the practice run she did with her sister (Candace) the day before her interview:

*Int:* So it’d be great if you could add your partners in, previous partners.
*Claire:* (Laughs) Got more paper? Me and Candace done that yesterday with me and my partners. Right.
*Int:* What did you do?
*Claire:* She was writing my— from the kids here to the partners...

Like Claire, Sue also created her genogram at home. Sue’s re-creation though seemed to have more of a purpose, that is, to illustrate to her son’s girlfriend (Darcy) the impact her son’s father (Bob) had on the family system:

*Sue:* I don’t want to upset you with all this. It’s a daunting situation for you, I suppose really, looking at all this.
*Int:* Well it’s interesting for me to listen to your story, as much as you’re willing to tell it.
*Sue:* It is a daunting one for you to look at and you think, oh god, this is a mixed up family. It is a mixed up family but—
*Int:* Do you think that it’s difficult for other people to understand this from the outside?
*Sue:* Yeah. Yeah. I wanted Darcy to know about it, which is [Son’s] girlfriend, and she went, “Cor, I’d like you to do a family tree.” I showed her and she went, “Oh, it is a bit—”
*Int:* So you did your own family tree for her?
*Sue:* Yeah, and she went sort of, “Oh my goodness!” […] but I didn’t put all these lines to say who hated who. But this was all my line and she went, “Oh, how weird is that.”
*Int:* So it sounds like it’s important for you to speak about it and show people what’s happened.
*Sue:* I do because, at the end of the day, I would never have turned round to Darcy and said, “Stay in the house with Bob on your own. Go to the house on your own.” I’ve got to make sure somebody’s there.

Showing her “family tree” to her son’s girlfriend gives Sue a way of articulating the danger of Bob, her worries about Darcy being in the house alone with him, a worry she “would never have said.” Her genogram then becomes a powerful nonverbal tool that supports her indirect dialogical communication of the history and of her concerns.

Taking part in the study inspired both Claire and Sue to engage with their histories through the partial (re-)creation of their genograms. By constructing them outside of the research space, it enabled both women to connect with their family members in ways they may otherwise not have done
without participation in the study. This is an unintentional effect of the research that enables us to envisage how using genograms can elevate risk.

Two participants felt their first interviews were transformative and instigated new ways of relating with family members. Kerry suggests that her genogram made her more conscious of the distance that had grown between her and her family, which in turn allowed her to actively foster those relationships, on her terms:

\textit{Kerry:} I think what happened in the previous interview is it really made me think, actually, my family are slowly getting more and more distant because we’re not effectively coping with what happened in various ways. And actually, if we continue to let that happen, we’re going to lose each other completely. So I think what happened was I started to try to make conscious decisions about what I wanted from these relationships. And also to try and forge them on my own terms, regardless of what went before or the fact that abuse has run through my family on both sides for now three generations, that actually effectively I’ve got agency in this now to choose what I allow to affect me and what I don’t. [...] I’m trying to deal with each person individually and not get caught – because this is a hell of a web, like you could easily get enmeshed in all of these complicated lines [relational dynamics] between each person. And what I’m trying to do is not do that and just deal with each person for who they are, with all their foibles. And also try not to let it get to me personally. I think what this process showed me is it’s almost like everyone is dealing with their own shit, if you pardon me using the word, but it kind of is what it is. [...]So in a funny kind of way it started the process of being able to separate my identity perhaps from the messiness of this (laughs) that’s going on.

The research process seemed to be especially meaningful for Kerry, giving her a reflex space in which to take stock of relationships and to envision and instrument a rebuilding of relationships. Further, she implies engagement with her genogram triggered a sense of empathic understanding and an acceptance of family members’ difficulties. Her renewed perspective establishes her as part of the family, but not bound by it, not defined by its history. More importantly, though, is the empowered way she positions herself as an agent for more fulfilling and healthy relationships. Discussing the use of genograms and ecomaps in social work practice, Iverson et al. (2005) maintain they can “… challenge the delimiting realities of the present and open up new possibilities for understanding and action” (p. 16). Similarly, Rempel et al. (2007) propose that genograms and ecomaps can uncover unrealised potential in family systems and social networks. Kerry’s quote indicates that in research, even in one-off encounters, genograms can similarly uncover
potential and instigate participants’ renewed understandings of self and other, and alternative ways of relating.

In a similar vein, Bettina maintains that since participation in the study, the relational dynamics in the mother-daughter relationship altered:

Bettina: …when I came on the research and was able to talk with my mother, now something changed. [...] I talk with my mother and I tell everything. And she doesn’t like it still because she still tries to control, but when before I was calling and she would put me down and I was always upset when I put the phone down, now I don’t care, it’s out. What [she says doesn’t] touch me anymore.

Int: [...] You say what you want to say?
Bettina: That’s it. Gone. I sleep nicely (laughs). I don’t worry. I don’t cry. I don’t— No. Before I was more, hmm, “why did she say that, why is she saying that?”, you know?

Perhaps like Kerry, Bettina’s engagement with her family’s history inspired a more systemic envisioning of the family and, with it, an understanding that all members are navigating their own difficulties. While Bettina’s quote speaks of finding strength and feeling empowered, it highlights how investigating personal aspects of people’s lives might remain with them and in effect beyond the researcher-participant encounter, leading to marked changes in their lives. This theme demonstrates the ways genograms (or insights garnered) spilled outside of the research space and into the lives of participants. These are the kinds of therapeutic effects genograms would be used to elicit in therapeutic practice. In the context of research, though, they are unintended effects that we may not be prepared for as researchers. This gives us insight into the therapeutic power of genograms, of the ethical complexities of applying a therapeutic tool in research, and highlights the need for further investigation into the possible impacts on research participants.

**Discussion**

Genograms are used in therapeutic practice to promote clients’ deeper reflection, elicit renewed understandings of self and family, and to identify alternative ways of relating (Mackay 2015; McGoldrick et al. 2008). They enhance the therapeutic alliance, develop client-therapist rapport and trust, and contextualise the client’s lived experience of the micro system (Altshuler 1999; Burley 2014; Mackay 2015). Despite gaining traction as a research tool, the literature exploring participants’ experiences of engaging in the genogram process is limited. This article contributes to this literature by providing insight into the experiences of a small cohort of research participants.
The cohort of women were recruited to participate in a qualitative study investigating the intergenerational transmission of family violence. A small and specific sample of women (n=9) who identified as having experienced family violence in multiple generations participated. The women had contact with formal DV or counselling services or with nonformal support systems (such as peer-support and church groups), where they had experience of reflecting on and talking about their histories of violence. This study required participants to share personal aspects of their lives and, as such, likely attracted a particular cohort of women who had experience of and were keen to engage in their family histories.

As a visual method, genograms provided the women with a material object through which to indirectly express “difficult memories and powerful emotions” (Prosser 2013, p. 188). They helped to anchor interviews, contextualise participants’ within their micro systems, and prevent participants from having to provide long-winded descriptions of family members and their relationship to others. The generative capacity of genograms was a prominent feature of this study and, used in conjunction with interviews, produced a wealth of rich data that could not have been generated using interviews alone. While participants expressed feeling restricted by the reductionist labels of genogram construction, interviews enabled them to provide detailed accounts which expanded on their genograms and explored tensions and consistencies between actual and symbolised family.

This article illustrates the numerous ethical challenges genograms bring to the context of research. While the women in this study reflected on their engagement in the genogram process in predominantly positive ways, it is also evident that constructing their genograms had unintended therapeutic effects, induced a deep level of reflection on family history, and transformed the ways they envisaged and understood themselves, their family members, and the role of violence within their family system. These transformative effects (altered perception and renewed insights) transcended the interview room, out of the control of the researcher, and into participants’ lives. This signals a blurring of the boundaries between clinical and research impact and troubles the idea that research such as this, which explores highly personal material, remains within the researcher-participant encounter. This locates genograms as an ethical challenge for researchers, and highlights the need for further investigation into their application in research.

**Conclusion**

When used in research, genograms present a range of ethical challenges that necessitate researchers’ attention. The transformative effects reported by participants involved in this study highlight the potential for genograms to elicit emotional responses when used in research. To reduce the risk of emotional distress, we provide five key recommendations for researchers:
(1) We suggest researchers are explicit about the potential therapeutic effects of participation in studies involving genograms, particularly around their capacity to elicit renewed understandings of self and family and, as a result, to induce strong emotional responses.

(2) Researchers should ensure that participants either have existing contact with support agencies or are able to access support if necessary. Genogram studies may attract participants interested in connecting with their histories or in understanding more about the “patterns” that they have already observed within their families. In sensitive research, it will be especially important they are able to access onward emotional support to explore issues brought to the fore by the research. In this case, following participation, several of the women showed a desire to access specialist emotional support (e.g., for DV and rape). While the research did not initiate this need, it did centralise it as an issue for the women’s attention. As such, it was important that the field researcher was aware of appropriate services, and could signpost/refer participants as and when they were ready to access support.

(3) Genogram construction is time-consuming. This study was designed to be flexible enough to enable women to break down the visual method/interview process or to have follow-up interviews over a number of sessions. This allowed women to have a break between sessions, facilitated a sense of rapport, and better captured the complexities and transitory nature of relationships. The structure and duration of data collection sessions requires careful consideration by researchers to prevent over-taxing participants.

(4) We recommend researchers make the limitations of genograms explicitly clear to participants at three points; prior to consent, during construction, and in debrief. This is with a view to preventing participants construing their genograms as a “map” of their family past, present, and future. In sensitive research in particular, envisioning proclivity to repeat family patterns could prove profoundly distressing to participants. Explaining the limitations around the genogram’s lack of ability to represent extra-normative family compositions and temporality, would also be helpful in establishing a sense of the inherent issues of symbolising family.

(5) We suggest researchers consider alternative ways that participants might represent their families beyond biology and hierarchy, whether this is through graphic or textual notation, or verbalised in interview.
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## Appendix 1. Participant table.

| Participant Number | Pseudonym | Age | Ethnicity       |
|--------------------|-----------|-----|----------------|
| 1                  | Kerry     | 28  | White British  |
| 2                  | Bettina   | 45  | Italian        |
| 3                  | Naomi     | 22  | White British  |
| 4                  | Jenny     | 50  | White British  |
| 5                  | Isla      | 47  | White British  |
| 6                  | Georgia   | 26  | White British  |
| 7                  | Sue       | 46  | White British  |
| 8                  | Claire    | 31  | White British  |
| 9                  | Amy       | 31  | White British  |