

A STUDY OF MULTIGENERATIONAL MEANINGS FAMILY MEMBERS
ATTACH TO THE 1937 NEW LONDON, TEXAS SCHOOL EXPLOSION

A DISSERTATION

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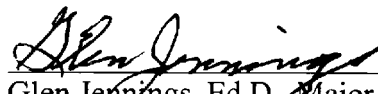
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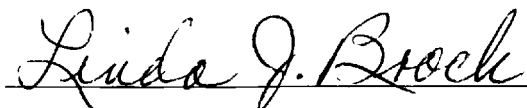
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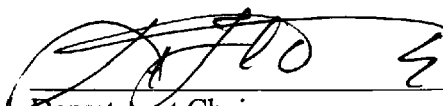
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jamie Littlefield Stroud entitled "A Study of Multigenerational Meanings Family Members Attach to the 1937 New London, Texas School Explosion." I have examined this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Family Therapy.


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DEDICATION

To my parents for setting this precedence and for showing me the way, I will always follow you.

My husband for which there can be no words to describe the value I place on your unconditional love for me.

My daughter and son, you are my greatest accomplishments and the very reason all this matters.

To the community of New London, Texas for sharing your family stories with me. Through the museum and your dedication, you teach us everyday the power and significance of a shared history.

ABSTRACT

JAMIE LITTLEFIELD STROUD

A STUDY OF MULTIGENERATIONAL MEANINGS FAMILY MEMBERS ATTACH TO THE 1937 NEW LONDON, TEXAS SCHOOL EXPLOSION

DECEMBER 2009

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover and describe through individual interviews the experiences across generations of family members of those who died in the New London School Explosion of 1937. This study attempted to identify and examine emerging themes and patterns relating to the explosion in these respective families. Specifically, the participants in this study were family members of those who died in the explosion.

The study examined the findings through phenomenological and Bowen Family Systems Theory perspectives. The participants in this study were asked for their voluntary participation via a letter from the London Museum curator. The participants in this study were interviewed in face-to-face interviews and via telephone interviews.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Story of the 1937 New London School Explosion

In the middle of the Great Depression, the east Texas town of New London and its surrounding communities were experiencing a boom in the economy thanks to the discovery of oil in the county in 1930, making it the wealthiest rural school district in the world. The town's school, which housed grades one through twelve, catered to residents of New London and the families of oil field workers who lived scattered in a 15-mile radius in every direction from the school. The school was surrounded on all side by the landmarks of oil field districts: oil well derricks, gas flares, etc.

In early May, the school board, in order to avoid what was generally viewed as needless spending of approximately \$250 a month, opted to cancel their gas contract and hired plumbers to tap into the Parade Gasoline Company's residue gas line. This was a fairly common practice for public and nonprofit organizations at the time, and was generally overlooked by oil and gas companies since the natural gas derived from these lines, often referred to as "residue," "raw," or "wet" gas, was a byproduct of drilling for oil and was burned off via flare. While the practice of tapping into such a line resulted in an irregular supply and varying pressure, it posed no more hazards than normal gas utilities. The gas was used to power the estimated 72 gas heaters that operated within the

walls of the school, which were installed after the original proposal of a central steam heating plant was viewed as too expensive.

The school building itself occupied 30,000 square feet and was constructed in 1932 with additions added in 1934. Underneath the school, encased by 12-inch concrete was a dead space created by the sloping ground on which the school was built. The space housed gas pipes, plumbing, and electrical wiring for the school but was inadequately vented, containing only four small vents which could not create circulation within what is conservatively estimated as at least 46,000 cubic feet of enclosed space. Two small doors on the south and north sides of the dead space provided entrance from the school. It was in this enclosure that gas collected on March 18, 1937, most likely from a leaking pipe or valve.

At approximately 3:05 in the afternoon on March 18, 1937, a single explosion destroyed New London School, originating from the north wing. Surviving students from the explosion reported that the door in the manual training classroom that led into the north side of the dead space was partly open when the explosion occurred, which was ignited by the class instructor plugging a portable sander into an electrical outlet located approximately two feet away from the door. Natural gas is odorless, so the leak could not have been noticed by smell. This resulted in a flash fire that ignited the collected gas sitting beneath the entirety of the school. The explosion could be heard from miles away, and caused such force that a two-ton slab of concrete was hurled 200 feet from the school, landing atop a parked automobile. While the explosion put out the gas fire, the

faculty, visitors, and estimated 737 students in attendance that day were buried under the resulting rubble.

Rescue efforts began almost immediately following the explosion, initially from uninjured students and the members of the Parent Teacher Alliance who were meeting in the gymnasium some 100 feet from the main building. Bystanders and investigators of the noise soon followed suit, as well as the oil field workers surrounding the school. These workers, most trained in first aid and with experience with the movement of debris, brought with them machinery and equipment that greatly aided rescue efforts. The nearest hospital was quickly filled with the injured, so makeshift accommodations were set up in the nearby Rusk Hotel and the First Baptist Church. Doctors and Nurses from throughout the eastern half of Texas quickly commuted to New London, along with representatives from The Salvation Army, The Red Cross, and several other groups.

Fourteen teachers and faculty, and 280 children were killed as a result of the explosion, though there is speculation that the number of children may be higher since many students came from transient oil field families who left New London following the explosion. Due to the help of funeral directors across the state, each of the deceased was individually embalmed, buried, and given some sort of religious ceremony. Classes resumed ten days after the explosion, in tents. A new school building was completed in 1939 on the same property. This new building rested on compacted, flat earth, contained extra supports so that the second floor did not rest completely upon the first floor, and contained no gas piping, except for in science labs. As a result of the explosion, a bill

requiring that a malodorant be added to all natural gas was passed by the Texas legislature on May 17, 1937, with the rest of the nation quickly passing similar bills (Derived from Facts and Stories in *Living Lessons from the New London Explosion*; Jackson, 1938).

Qualitative Lens

Bowen Family Systems Theory, the most comprehensive theory of family functioning, posits that important events, as well as patterned transactions, have their effects not only with individuals within one generation, but also with those individuals who follow across subsequent generations (Bowen, 1978). These effects stem from patterned events that create markers across multiple generations. They include, but are not limited to, violence, trauma, incest, addictions, multiple divorces, giving children away, abuse, and emotional and physical neglect (Bowen).

Bowen (1978) and his work with Kerr (1988) suggested that the multigenerational transmission of themes and patterns continues across generations. In any nuclear family, there is (usually) one child who is “most caught up” in absorbing the anxiety of the family. This child emerges with a lower level of differentiation than the parents, and does less well in life. Other siblings who are less emotionally impacted by anxiety within the family (and their patterns and events) emerge with levels of differentiation similar to their parents. If we follow the most impaired child through successive generations, we will see one line of descent producing individuals with lower and lower levels of differentiation. The process may move rapidly a few generations, remain static for a generation or so,

and then speed up again. Bowen believed the process was capable of slowing down or staying static a generation or two. Bowen further theorized that it was this process that inevitably produced poorly functioning people who make up most of the lower classes.

Bowen (1978) posited the following:

If we follow the line through the children who emerge with about the same levels of differentiation, we see a remarkable consistency of family functioning through the generations. History speaks of family traditions and family ideals. If we follow the multigenerational lineage of those who emerge with higher levels of differentiation, we will see a line of highly functioning and very capable people.

A family at the highest level of differentiation can have one child who starts down the scale. A family at the lowest level can have a child who starts up the scale.

(p. 384)

What follows is a brief discussion of trauma, abuse and neglect. These three factors have been laced together by Carnes (2001), whose research suggests that individuals who experience one, two, or all three of these in any combination are those most likely to show symptoms in adulthood. For example, the largest numbers of individuals who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are Vietnam veterans and rape-trauma survivors (Carnes, 2001). Thorough review of the literature reveals that no one to date has submitted for publication any scholarly article linking Bowen's multigenerational process to traumatic events. However, some highly important articles have studied the secondary trauma effects of the Vietnam and Holocaust

survivors. These studies focused primarily on long-term trauma as opposed to a sudden and unpredicted event. Neither does a review of the literature indicate that the second generation, i.e., children of trauma victims and survivors, have been fully studied. These factors provide the requisite impetus to proceed further.

Charles Figley (1995) has researched the study of secondary traumatic stress in families who have a member who has experienced a traumatic event. Figley defines secondary traumatic stress as those symptoms of stress that are a direct result of hearing about a tragic event experienced by a friend or loved one. In his book, Beyond Trauma, he asks, “Should we consider the difficulties of adult children of World War II survivors as the result—direct or indirect—of their parents’ traumatic experiences?” Reuben Hill (1949) was the first to study the responses to stress in families who have experienced trauma. In his classic study of World War II veterans, he found that the family system of these family members was greatly affected by crisis events.

Davidson and Mellor (2000) reported that, “recent research suggests that there may be intergenerational effects associated with exposure to extensive or long-term trauma” (p. 58). Fifty children, ages 16-30, of 50 male Vietnam veterans were compared, using sub-groups according to their fathers’ PTSD status, to an aged matched group of civilians. Participants completed a questionnaire with measures on self-esteem, PTSD symptoms, and family functioning. Results concluded that the group of veterans with PTSD and their children were more likely to be unemployed than their civilian counterparts. The veterans also rated their family functioning at clinically dysfunctional

levels on all measures except behavior control. Additionally, the veterans with PTSD rated their overall communication with their family as more indirect and more vague than the civilian group. The results on the offspring group were less significant but did reveal that the offspring of the PTSD fathers' reported worse functioning than the control groups with regard to affective responsiveness, problem solving and global functioning (Davidson & Mellor).

The body of research referenced focuses mostly on long-term effects with long-term exposure to trauma such as wartime trauma or repeated abuse. The present study focused on trauma that was abrupt and unexpected. The DSM-IV-TR, the diagnostic and statistical manual that guides the diagnostic process of all mental health personnel, indicates that symptoms are more pronounced and more resistant to recovery efforts if the trauma is unexpected or not of human origin.

Further, in an earlier study, Sigal, Silver, Rakoff, and Ellin (1973) studied second-generation effects those who survived Nazi persecution and reported that "Nazi concentration camp survivors are known to continue to suffer the adverse physical and psychological effects of their internment." The study focused specifically on the effects on the children of those persecution survivors. A clinical sample of mid-adolescent children of survivors was found to have more behavioral and other disturbances and less adequate coping behavior than did a clinical control group. Parental preoccupation is suggested as a contributing factor.

An exhaustive survey of scholarly archives related to trauma point to several categories of studies: (a) those studies that relate to survivors of ongoing persecution such as Holocaust survivors and their offspring, (b) those who survived natural disasters such as earthquakes in Turkey and hurricanes in Louisiana, (c) those who survived wartime trauma such as Vietnam War survivors and their offspring, (d) those whose rape trauma experiences were either an event or an extended ordeal, and (e) those families who lost a child as a result of a traumatic event.

The foregoing paragraphs addressed the broad issues related to the study and scholarly research regarding abrupt trauma as opposed to trauma that was expected, or occurred, in a patterned manner across time. This study related specifically to the reported themes and patterns in family members of survivors of a specific traumatic event that occurred in a small and relatively affluent town in East Texas in March of 1937. At exactly 3:17 p.m. on March 18, 1937, a deadly natural gas explosion destroyed the school and brought an oil-rich community to its knees (Olson, 2001).

Olson (2001) states:

Nearly 300 students, teachers, and visitors- an entire generation of East Texans were killed. Those who survived and those who worked tirelessly in the debris to find the dead and injured were forever changed. Because their memories were so painful, the intimate details of the worst school disaster in American history were silenced for decades. Although attendance records were destroyed, it is believed

that all but about two-dozen of the 752 students were in attendance on March 18, 1937. (p. 20)

Statement of Problem

In a thoroughgoing survey of scholarly literature relating to second-generation survivors of trauma, what emerges is a collection of studies about themes and patterns in families who experienced severe trauma and the behavioral patterns in individuals and families who survived the trauma. While the individual survivors and even their own families have been studied, few studies have addressed subsequent generation with regard to themes and patterned threads that may emerge in their lives. This particular study focused primarily on the transgenerational meanings family members attach to the New London School Explosion in March of 1937. The culmination of research stated above combined with the proposed data collection and analysis involving the New London family members resulted in new viable data and information that can add to the existing body of work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover and describe, through individual interviews, the multigenerational meanings family members attach to from the New London School Explosion of March 1937, and the impact of the events on family relations. Using the lens of Bowen Family System Theory, the focus of this study was to discover, identify, and describe the themes and patterns evinced in the stories of the New London School families regarding the event across generations.

Methods of inquiry included phenomenological reflection on the data elicited by existential investigation of family members' experiences.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following research questions were explored. As such, the two research questions that formed the basis for more specific interview questions were:

1. What meanings have the family members given the event?
2. How has the event impacted family relations?

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide the study. A phenomenological perspective framed the individual participant's self-reported experience, while the Bowen Family Systems Theory provided the lens through which the data could be understood.

Inherently, qualitative research employs interpretive and material practices that make the world more visible or readily seen using sources which include photographs, recordings, interviews, artifacts, life stories, case studies, and observations. These practices were ultimately used by the researcher to interpret the world and the human experience in an effort to better understand and give meaning to the lives and experiences of others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Relatively new as an interpretive theory and method, phenomenology within qualitative research enables researchers to give a voice to various aspects of human experience. Alfred Schultz (1967 1970) introduced the concept of phenomenology

disputing the long accepted positivist approach that reality was “out there” and ready for us to observe. Instead, Schultz argued that reality was socially constructed and that people describe their world not as others define it, but how it makes sense to them. A phenomenological frame brings the perspective of examining the world as each individual experiences it (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993).

According to Creswell (2003), phenomenological research employs the essence of human experience in relation to a particular phenomenon to identify, describe, and understand the human experience. Moustakes, as quoted by Creswell (2003), stated that, “understanding the ‘lived experiences’ marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships and meaning” (p. 15).

The phenomenological method was employed throughout this study with the individual participants as they told their respective stories of experiences as surviving family members of the New London School Explosion. This study assumed that the reported experiences bring a phenomenological perspective in which the participant attaches his or her own meanings. The responses to the interview questions were identified and described with an eye toward recurring patterns and emerging themes. In the final stage of the study, patterns and themes were viewed through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory.

According to Bowen (1978), the second framework views the family as an emotional unit and, as such, uses systems thinking to describe the complex interaction of the unit. Psychiatrist Murray Bowen conceptualized that intellectual functioning and emotional functioning were distinctly different; he conceived that the most important difference between man and lower forms of living animals is the cerebral cortex and the ability it gives us to reason and think (Bowen). The major concept in Bowen's theory is "developed around the notion of fusion between the emotion and the intellect and that the degree of fusion in people is variable and discernable. The amount of fusion in a person can be a predictor of the pattern of life in that person" (Hall, 1983. p. 305).

According to Bowen (1978), there are varying degrees between the emotional and intellectual systems of individuals. The greater the fusion, the more life is controlled by automatic emotional forces that operate, despite man's intellectual verbalization to the contrary and the greater the fusion between the emotion and intellect, the higher the likelihood that the individual is fused into the emotional fusions of individuals around him (Bowen). At the cornerstone of his theory is the concept of differentiation of self.

According to Bowen :

Less differentiated people live in a feeling controlled world, in which their emotions and subjectivity dominate objective reasoning most of the time. These individuals do not distinguish feelings from fact, and their primary life goals revolve around relationship characteristics such as love, happiness, comfort or security. More differentiated people make up a smaller proportion of the

population. Such individuals have a fairly clearly defined autonomous self, or basic self, a greater capacity for goal-directed activity. They can distinguish between feelings and objective reality more accurately than less differentiated individuals. (as cited in Hall, 1983, p. 53)

Bowen (1978) theorized when a system is stressed, the usual balance of forces is disturbed and the system is inclined toward a state of imbalance. To adjust to this, it appears all biological systems have adaptive mechanisms that can be activated to cope with the increased stress on the system. However, if the stress is too great and sustained, or the basic reserve of the system is too low, then the stress-induced imbalance can overload these adaptive systems and symptoms can emerge. The type of symptom that develops is frequently a complication or exaggeration of the mechanism that has been used to preserve the system's balance in the first place. Bowen's belief was that family members so profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same "emotional shadow." The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others (Bowen).

Bowen (1978) postulated that losses can, and do, influence a family's equilibrium such that a less differentiated family might display little reaction at the time of a serious life event but, rather, respond later with the onset of symptoms that might include: physical or emotional illness, social misbehavior, or alcohol and/or drug abuse. Bowen

defined this response type as the “emotional shock wave” or a “network of underground aftershocks of serious life events that can occur anywhere in the extended family system in the months or years following serious emotional events in a family” (p. 325).

There are eight key interlocking concepts Bowen uses to describe family interactions, patterns, chronic anxiety, and the emergence of symptoms. As stated earlier, differentiation of self is the cornerstone of the theory. Bowen Theory uses the concept of triangles to describe the way in which people relate and involve others in stressful issues between them. The theory operates on the assumption that a two-person dyad is inherently unstable, and that in times of stress or anxiety, the two people will involve a third person in the issue to stabilize the dyad (Bowen, 1978). With regard to differentiation, the lower the level of differentiation in the dyad, the more emotional tension and the more intense and automatic the triangling in the system.

Bowen Theory uses the concept of family projection process to describe the way in which parents can project their own problems to their children: the theory further posits that this process is apparent to some degree in all families. The concept of multigenerational transmission process describes the overall projection process as it proceeds over multiple generations. A metaphor often used to describe this process is the river that runs through families carrying emotional process across generations. Bowen Theory uses sibling position to attempt to understand the level of differentiation and projection process across generations. This theory borrows from the earlier work by Toman (1961) on personality profiles for each sibling position.

Toman's ideas on sibling position ultimately provided Bowen a way of understanding why, and how, a child is chosen in the projection process. The concept of nuclear family emotional process is used to describe emotional family process and functioning in a single generation including the range of relationship patterns in the system between the parents and their children. Bowen (1978) added the concept of emotional cut-off to describe one way in which a family can handle unresolved conflict; the theory posits that the life pattern of cut-off is determined by how people handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents. Hence, the lower the level of differentiation the more intense the unresolved attachment, the more likely the cut-off is to occur. The eighth and final concept involves the link between family and the larger society (Bowen).

Bowen's (1978) theory states:

When a family is subjected to chronic, sustained anxiety, the family begins to lose contact with its intellectually determined principles, and to resort more and more to emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment. The results of the process are symptoms and eventually regression to a lower level of functioning. The societal concept postulates that the same process is evolving in society; that we are in a period of increasing chronic societal anxiety; that society responds to this with emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment; that this results in symptoms of dysfunction; that the efforts to relieve the symptoms result in more emotional band-aid legislation, which increased the

problem; and that the cycle keeps repeating just as a family goes through similar cycles to the states we call emotional illness. (p. 386)

Definition of Terms

Disaster- A situation or event that overwhelms local capacity and causes great damage, destruction or human suffering (Executive Office, 2003).

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)- The essential feature of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death, serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity, or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person.

Second generation syndrome- Phenomenon which connects higher rates of suicide, suppression, feelings of guilt, failure to succeed in personal relationships and in jobs among those who were still little children during the holocaust or were born to survivors after it (Barocas, 1980).

Secondary traumatic stress- Refers to the stress symptoms resulting from hearing or experiencing the grief of a loved one or friend who has experienced a traumatic event (Figley 1995).

Trauma- An emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person.

Operational Definitions

Family members- any group of persons closely related by blood as parents, children, uncles, aunts, and uncles.

Sibling- One of two or more individuals having one or both parents in common; a brother or a sister.

Delimitations

This study was limited to individuals who lost a family member in the New London School Explosion of 1937. This study also confined itself to interviews with individuals whose families were impacted by the New London School Explosion of 1937.

The Researcher as a Person

The researcher as a person is a part of the research process in qualitative studies (Patton, 2002). The researcher is a doctoral student working on her PhD and is also a wife and mother of two young children. The researchers realized that some of the limitations for this study were specific to her position as researcher due her background in marriage and family therapy as well as being a wife and mother. The researcher made every effort to suspend any biases as she interviewed family members that lost a close family member.

Summary

Individuals who lost a family member in the New London School Explosion of 1937 were interviewed with regard to their experiences in a family that was impacted by the explosion. The experiences were included, but not be restricted to, how disclosures

were made about the explosions, how the story of the event was disclosed to the family member, and of their own experience in a family that sustained a loss in the explosion.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Impact of Early Loss History

A review of the literature was conducted for the purpose of examining existing literature on the multigenerational transmission process of second-generation trauma effect. Much of the research in this area consists of individual case studies and histories of families across generations ranging from Holocaust families to families who have experienced loss of a child. To date, very little has been studied about family and trauma together; most studies focus primarily on individuals and ignore their families, the support they provide, and the impact trauma has on the entire system. What follows is a sampling of recent qualitative studies with regard to families who have experienced trauma and its long-term effects.

Porterfield, Cain, and Saldinger (2003) studied the impact of early loss history on parenting of bereaved children. This qualitative study interviewed parents and children over time, focusing largely on the surviving spouse's history of loss prior to age 18 and their memories and understanding on the ways in which these experiences affected parenting of their bereaved children. Seventy-nine percent of the participants were able to remember at least one example of a way in which their loss experience as a child influenced their own parenting of their grieving children. Overall, the parenting behavior of some of the participants was strongly influenced by their own experiences with early

loss. Yet for others, the connections between childhood experiences and their own bereavement parenting were less clear.

Organization of Traumatic Memories

Harvey and Bryant (1999) investigated the organization of traumatic memories of survivors of motor vehicle accidents. In this qualitative study, fourteen Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) participants and 15 non-ASD participants who were admitted to an inpatient facility were interviewed in a structured clinical interview. The findings reported that disorganization within the re-telling of the story was observed more in ASD than in non-ASD participants. The researchers found that fragmented memories may impair an individual's ability to coherently organize and retrieve their traumatic memories.

Coping Patterns of Holocaust Survivors

Chaitin (2003) explored how families of Holocaust survivors worked through their own traumatic past by studying the coping patterns adapted by family members over time. Open-ended questions were used as a guide with the 57 individuals from 20 families in which there were two or three generations still living. The information was analyzed using Danieli's (1988) typology of post-war families' adaptation (victim families, fighter families, those who made it, and numb families). This study also found reason to add two more typologies (life goes on and split families). In this study, the victim style of coping was most predominant. Therefore, even though the Holocaust

ended over five decades ago, the survivors in these families had sent the message over several generations that the world is still a dangerous place.

In an attempt to search for symptoms of “second generation syndrome,” Major (1996) studied the entire population of Norwegian-born Jews who survived German concentration camps, and their children, and compared findings to Norwegian-born Jews who escaped to Sweden, and their children. The researcher found five survivors (concentration camp fathers) and 19 children who fit the criteria, and all agreed to participate. The comparison groups consisted of Norwegian born Jewish men who escaped to Sweden, and their children. Of the 23 men who fulfilled the criteria, 18 agreed to participate and of the 46 children, 37 agreed to participate. All participants completed a 25 page self report questionnaire regarding their experiences and symptoms. In addition, 73 of the 79 participants were personally interviewed by the researcher.

The study concluded that the fathers who lived in concentration camps suffered from significantly more symptoms (difficult concentrating, fatigue, restlessness, hot-temperedness, irritability, dizziness, nightmares, sleeping difficulties, sadness, and anxiety) than the fathers who had fled to Sweden. In addition, the children of the fathers who lived in concentration camps reported that their fathers were more introverted and that overall, their home life was less harmonious than the children of the fathers who fled to Sweden. Compared to the Swedish children, the children of the fathers who lived in concentration camps reported higher incidences in psychological problems, 21% of the

children from fathers who lived in camps compared to 5% reported by the Swedish group (Major, 1996).

Adjustment of Children of Australian Vietnam Veterans

Davidson and Mellor (2000) studied the adjustment of children of Australian Vietnam veterans for evidence of transgenerational transmission of the effects of war-related trauma. The authors noted that posttraumatic stress disorder in trauma survivors has been connected with family dysfunction and symptoms in their children, including lower self-esteem, higher disorder rates, and symptoms resembling those of the traumatized parent. This qualitative study investigated 50 children of 50 male Vietnam veterans who were compared with an age-matched group of 33 civilian peers.

Participants completed questionnaires and were interviewed. The study confirmed that the PTSD veteran group was less well adjusted than the civilian groups. There were few differences between the civilian and non-PTSD groups in areas of adjustment. However, PTSD in the veteran father did not seem to be a predictor to his children's adjustment. This study found that disrupted family functioning is the most consistent outcome for trauma survivors with PTSD.

Pfefferbaum et al. (2006). described findings in 156 children who knew someone killed in the 1998 bombing of the American Embassy. The 156 children were middle school children in Nairobi schools and interviewed 8 to 14 months after the incident. Participants were selected from schools in five zones and from four private schools. Recruitment was aimed at finding children with a range of exposure from throughout the

community. The 793 original participants consisted of children from 38 public schools and 4 private schools. Approximately 20-25 pupils from each school constituted the sample. The convenience sample used in this study consisted of 156 students who knew someone killed in the incident and who had no missing scores on the grief scale. The sample included 64 boys (41%) and 91 girls (58%). The mean age was 11.46 years.

Of the 156 children, 96 heard the bomb when it exploded and 66 felt it. Forty-seven children reported smelling burning gas right after the bombing. Twenty-nine children (46%) were close enough to have been covered with dust or dirt from the explosion. Seventy-two children heard yelling and screaming and 114 (73%) reported seeing injured people. One hundred thirty (83%) saw blood from injuries and only 16 came into direct contact with blood. Eight children lost a parent, 2 a sibling, 58 another relative, 50 a friend and 65 an acquaintance in the bombing. The researchers found that bomb-related posttraumatic stress was associated with physical exposure. Grief was associated with bomb-related posttraumatic stress and type of bomb-related loss (Pfefferbaum et al., 2006).

Posttraumatic Stress Among Mexican Victims of Disaster

A qualitative analysis of Posttraumatic Stress among Mexican victims of disaster conducted by Norris et al. (2001) used unstructured interviews with twenty-four Mexican survivors to describe their responses to disasters in Guadalajara, Florida, and Oaxaca. These disasters included a neighborhood explosion and two hurricanes. Each interview was analyzed and categorized by physical or psychological symptoms. In summary,

participants in these studies identified a broad range of emotions with the most predominant emotion being depression. In addition, 83% of the participants had lasting somatic complaints. This study seemed to conclude that physical, as well as psychological symptoms, can result in long-term issues with regard to PTSD.

Stressors of Families Who Have Experienced a Traumatic Event

Figley and McCubbin (1983) attempted to characterize the differences and stressors of families who have experienced a traumatic event as opposed to families who experienced normative stress. The researchers found seven stressors that differentiated normative stressors (those that affect most families) from traumatic stressors experienced by other families. First, these families had little time to prepare for the traumatic experience; they had little or no anticipation preparing for the event unlike normative developmental anticipation such as children leaving for college. Additionally, these families also had little or no previous experience with what to expect after the event or how to handle the sudden change. Many times these families lacked access to others who were experienced in dealing with traumatic events, and ultimately felt they had no control over their lives, their safety, or of the long-term consequences of the trauma.

Ultimately, Figley and McCubbin (1983) realized from their work with traumatized families that even though the event—the explosion, the tornado, the wreck, the rape—may only have lasted a short time, the reactions and emotional toll reverberated for years to come. Catherall (1998) went further to suggest that as human systems, families who have experienced trauma develop an altered worldview and use reality

“filters” to attempt to make sense and cope. These coping mechanisms, Catherall suggests, become reinforced over time through family interactions, hence a heightened focus on safety or a more suspicious distrustful world view.

Children of Holocaust Survivors

Shoshan (1989) interviewed dozens of Holocaust survivors in an attempt to understand the complexity and burdensome responsibility of being the child of a Holocaust survivor.

Shoshan (1989) noted:

These survivors seem to be in a state of permanent, incomplete mourning, expressed in somber states of mind, which their children, the second-generation, have absorbed almost from birth. A unique kind of mutual dependence developed between these children and their parents. Their longing replaces the deep mourning of their parents. In their search for an optimistic identity, the members of the second generation, adults now struggle in different ways with the significance of having Holocaust survivors as parents. This increasingly open-search, their quest for a deeper emotional understanding is expressed in a multitude of ways. (p. 206)

Children of Hurricane Andrew

Numerous studies have been instrumental in expanding our knowledge base with regard to children’s reactions to disasters. Shaw, Applegate & Shore (1996) studied internalizing and externalizing symptoms in a longitudinal study of elementary children,

ages 6-11, who were exposed to Hurricane Andrew. Participants in this study were students in high and low impact schools. The high impact school was directly in the path of Andrew. The majority of children from both schools exhibited moderate symptoms of PTSD. Two months after the event, children in the high-impact school had significantly higher posttraumatic symptom frequency scores than those in the low impact school. At 21 months, 70% of all the children from the high impact school still exhibited moderate to severe symptoms.

Traumatic Grief- World Trade Center Bombing

“With traumatic grief, thoughts and images can be so terrifying and anxiety-provoking that a child suppresses other thoughts or images of the deceased that might serve as comforting reminders of the person” (Brown & Goodman, 2005, p. 115). Brown and Goodman examined children ages 8-18 of uniformed service personnel killed in the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Factor analysis identified three distinct child response factors: (a) a traumatic grief factor that included PTSD symptoms such as intrusive re-experiencing, avoidance, numbing, hyperarousal, revenge, yearning, and impaired functioning; (b) positive memory and ongoing presence; and (c) delineated normal grief responses. According to the findings, positive memory appeared to capture the process of memory construction needed.

Oklahoma City Bombing and Alcohol Use

Researchers have established a relationship between trauma and alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence, but few studies have focused on alcohol use in victims of disaster

(Pfeifferbaum & Doughty, 2001). The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building provided family researchers the opportunity to study the relationship between increased alcohol use and trauma in this group. Forty- three participants who acknowledged alcohol use were selected from a larger nonrandom sample of 85 individuals seeking crisis intervention and supportive treatment after the bombing. The participants were recruited at Project Heartland, the federally funded Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services between October and November 1995, approximately 6 months after the bombing. The sample was comprised of 43 individuals who acknowledged use in response to the questionnaire item measuring increased alcohol intake. Twenty-six (60%) participants denied any increase in alcohol use after the bombing, 8 (19%) reported drinking, "a little more," 7 (16%) "Some more," and 2 (5%) "a lot more." Men and women did not differ on alcohol increase scores (Pfeifferbaum & Doughty, 2001).

Further studies of the Oklahoma bombing produced a study of coping, functioning, and adjustment in rescue workers. North et al. (2002) investigated 181 firefighters who had been directly involved with the rescue effort after the bombing. The sample (N= 181) was primarily male and Caucasian, ages 30-49 with partial college education. The majority of this population (94%) reported being married and (43%) of those ever married had been divorced. Most firefighters (80%) reported being directly involved with body excavation and removal of rubble. More than (77%) reported their work performance and overall job satisfaction as high before the bombings.

The study found that in the 34 months since the bombing, this group had experienced 24 divorces. The most common coping method reported by the firefighters after the bombing was turning to friends and relatives for support (50%). Drinking alcohol was the second most frequent response. Drinking alcohol to cope with the upsetting feelings after the bombing was reported four times as often among workers with an active alcohol use disorder diagnosis after the bombing (44%) compared to others (11%). Few workers (10%) reported using medication to cope with upsetting feelings (North et al., 2002).

World Trade Center and Alcohol Use

Finally, a study by Adams, Boscarino, and Galea (2006) examined the relationship between alcohol use and mental health status within the context of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The data came from a 2-wave panel study of adults living in New York City on the day of the attacks. Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews occurred one and two years after the attacks. A total of 2,368 individuals completed the first survey and 1,681 individuals completed the second survey. Overall, the data pointed to an increase in alcohol consumption positively correlating with symptoms of PTSD in these individuals.

Living with Loss

Walsh and McGoldrick (2004) compared the multiple and fluid responses of individuals in family systems to disasters and loss as they synthesized current research in *Living with Loss: Death in the Family*. According to the authors, when mourning is

blocked by family roles and responsibilities, communication is thus prohibited by certain family members and the grieving process is altered such that the unspoken may go underground only to surface later as symptomatic behavior.

The authors noted:

One may carry all the anger for the family while another is in touch only with sadness, one may show only relief, while another is numb. The shock and loss can shatter family cohesion, leaving members unsupported in their grief. (p.12)

Family members of disaster seek understanding in order to come to terms with their loss and, Soshan's (1989) study illustrates that even members of the second generation suffer and seek understanding often times without access to information or open communication about the event. This quest for understanding and meaning by the second generation is expressed in many ways. The New London Museum, built and staffed by community members who lost loved ones in the explosion is a vivid illustration of one community's search for meaning and healing in an effort to come to terms with what happened to the families in their community over 70 years ago.

Summary

In short, after more than fifty years have passed since the Holocaust or the event in New London, countless individuals have told their stories through words and actions, and passed onto future generations their very own, unspoken "emotional survival guide." It is this guide that will continue to help family researchers better understand the transgenerational meanings families attach to serious life events, as seen with victims of

events such as the New Orleans hurricane, the World Trade Attacks, and even events that have yet to occur.

Collectively, these previous investigations show the lasting and intense experiences seen in families who have experienced traumatic loss, and illustrate adjustment, coping patterns and long-term impacts on family relations across generations. Each individual study adds a piece to the growing body of literature on understanding the lasting effects of trauma in families across time. The literature indicates that there is a need for further research to be conducted on how family members attach meanings to serious life events across generations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to conduct interviews with individuals who lost family members in the 1937 explosions. Specifically, regarding the meanings the family has given to the event and the impact it has had on their family relations. Using the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory, this qualitative study attempted to discover and describe the emerging themes and patterns relating to the meaning attached to these stories across several generations. Methods of data collection included telephone interviews of the participants who live out-of-state, and face-to-face interviews of the participants who live in Texas. The interview process consisted of structured, open-ended questions aimed at producing rich information of individuals' developmental experiences within families who were impacted by the loss of a family member in the New London School Explosion.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored:

1. What meanings have the family members given the event?
2. How has the event impacted family relations?

Triangulation Method

Triangulation is a means of combining multiple theories, methods of analysis, sources of data, or researchers to broaden the scope of the study, thus leading to enhanced

validity (Keyton, 2006). The present study used two theoretical frameworks to guide the study. A phenomenological perspective was used to provide a frame of the participant's self-reported experiences, while the Bowen Family Systems Theory was used to provide the lens through which the information can be understood. In addition, the research used published literature to create meaningful interview questions and background information, as well as interview survivors and their family members as sources of data in the present study. In addition, two researchers examined and coded the data for increased consistency in the findings.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was voluntary participants who are individuals whose family was impacted in the New London School Explosion of 1937. Although attendance records were destroyed in the explosion, it is believed that all but two dozen of the 752 students enrolled in grades five to eleven were in attendance on March 18, 1937 (Olson, 2001).

A list of survivors and their families was provided by the London Museum in New London, Texas. All participants were notified via letters describing this study and asking for their voluntary participation. Follow-up calls were made by the museum assistant (a long standing member of the New London community) for the family's permission to interview. Interviews were conducted by the researcher using face-to-face and telephone contact. Information from the interviews was recorded and coded using

“in-vivo” coding techniques to gain insight into patterns and themes of the participant’s experiences.

Instruments

Personal data information included demographic information about the participants. The demographic information included gender, age, birth order, and place of residence. The interview questionnaire was administered by the researcher and recorded on word documents and spread sheets. Tape recordings were used with permission from the participants.

Data Collection

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to collect information from the target population. Data from the participants was entered into the excel spreadsheets and word documents using coding in an effort to derive patterns and themes from the information provided by the participants about the meanings the family members have given the event, as well as how the event has impacted family relations.

Analysis and Interpretation

Data collected from the participants was analyzed and interpreted for recurring patterns and emerging themes of the meanings the family members have given to the event.

Protection of Human Participants

Trustworthiness

Efforts were put into place to ensure trustworthiness of this study. Peer reviews were conducted to view through different perspectives, for thorough examination, and clarity of direction. The researcher's graduate committee, graduate school, and Institutional Review Board of the Texas Woman's University reviewed and approved the study on the human subjects before the study was undertaken. Also noted was the element of time between the explosion and this study. Many of the participants shared information learned over time and from long-term memory. This could affect the overall accuracy of information, but not the subtle nuances of their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Professional conduct in carrying out the research study and confidentiality of participant information was of utmost importance. The participants were informed and willing volunteers in this qualitative study. The participants were asked via letters and phone calls for their voluntary participation in this study. The participants were also informed in writing and in person that they could choose to end their participation in this study at any time.

The Researcher's Role

The study was conducted by a doctoral student currently working toward a PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy at Texas Woman's University. The researcher was also a

wife and mother of two elementary-aged children and resided in Fort Worth, Texas.

Within this study, the researcher attempted to suspend biases and personal definitions about motherhood, family, loss, grief, and beliefs about the importance of community support systems during and after times of crisis. The researcher also worked diligently to present the data from the interviews in the context from which they came rather than from her own individual filters, lenses and scope of experience.

The researcher has developed a greater interest in the experiences of people who have experienced traumatic loss. Moreover, the researcher acknowledges that the information provided in the interviews was coded and used to provide information on patterns and emerging themes in the collective lives of the participants using subjective techniques.

Person of the Researcher

The researcher realized that it was important to convey the emotional tone of the findings of this study. The degree and importance in how families collectively process and synthesize their own unique experiences gave rise to the researcher's interest about the role in which communication and meaning of family events is passed from one generation to another. The researcher was careful not to have a personal bias about how personal experiences, as well as those of prior generations of family may color or even alter how people interpret and give meaning to everyday life.

Another bias implied with a qualitative study surrounds the constructivist view that there are multiple realities and co-created meanings in the lives of individuals and

their families. As the current study commenced, the researcher made every effort to view and interpret the present study with objectivity and an understanding. First and foremost, the researcher made every effort to respect the rights, values, and needs of the participants. Every effort was made to protect the identity and right to privacy of the participants using name coding during transcription. Written permission from the Institutional Review Board and graduate school was received before the current study began. Finally, the research objectives were given both in writing and verbally so that the participants clearly understood the objectives, risks, and protocol before giving their consent.

Development of Codes and Themes

The researcher began to analyze the data by transferring the original interview transcriptions to excel so that each person's answers to a particular question were in the same excel sheet. Then the researcher read through the answers for each interview question recoding comments, and themes that occurred in each interviewee's answer. These codes and themes were then used to summarize the research findings.

At this point in the initial data analysis, the researcher met with her advisor at Texas Woman's University to discuss analysis, and coding. The researcher's advisor examined the initial analysis. Together they decided on new codes to add to the protocol based on the researcher's observations and data. Consequently, the original observation protocol was revised based on the initial data analysis to ensure clarity in coding. Thus, some categories were combined under one category, other categories were added.

Summary

In summary, this qualitative study investigated the multigenerational meanings family members have given the New London School Explosion of 1937 and, more specifically, how the event has impacted family relations. The study included data about emerging themes and patterns with regard to how the families made disclosures about the explosion, the loss of a sibling, how the story of the event was disclosed to the participant, and the participant's own experience in a family that was impacted by the event. The findings were viewed through a phenomenological and systems perspective.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to conduct interviews with individuals who lost family members in the 1937 New London, Texas school explosion. The results of those interviews have demonstrated many similarities between how the families affected by the explosion coped with the tragedy as well as how the community responded and rebounded.

Interviewee Characteristics

The majority of the participants, 62.4%, were in their sixties or seventies at the time of the interview. Seven men and nine women participated, all Caucasian with one reporting they were Caucasian and Native American (Table 1). Most participants, 74.8% were retired, and predominately practicing Christians (Table 2). Perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of data collected is that twelve of the sixteen who included their place of residence during the interview still live in the New London, TX area including Overton and Arp, while two of the other three who answered live within the state of Texas (Table 2).

On a more personal level, many of the participants are married (68.7%) and have children ranging from their 20s to their 60s (Table 3). They reported having zero to seven siblings ranging in age from their 40s to their 90s (Table 4). As is presented later in this

chapter, some of those participating also lost siblings in the explosion who are not listed on table 4.

Table 1

Age, Sex, Ethnicity, and Type of Education of Participants

	N	%
Age		
50s	1	6.3
60s	6	37.4
70s	4	25.0
80s	4	25.0
Not given	1	6.3
Sex		
Male	7	43.8
Female	9	56.2
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	15	93.7
Caucasian & Native American	1	6.3
Type of Education		
High School	7	43.8
Associate's Degree	2	12.5
Bachelor's Degree	5	31.1
Master's Degree	1	6.3
Not Given	1	6.3

Table 2

Occupation, Place of Residence, and Religion of Participants

	N	%
Occupation		
Retired	12	74.8
Retired and Part Time Court Clerk	1	6.3
Self Employed	1	6.3
Secretary	1	6.3
Scale Operator	1	6.3
Place of Residence		
New London, TX	5	31.1
Overton, TX	4	25.0
Tyler, TX	2	12.5
Arp, TX	1	6.3
Texas	2	12.5
Louisiana	1	6.3
Not given	1	6.3
Religion		
Baptist	10	62.3
Methodist	1	6.3
Church of Christ	1	6.3
Nazarene	1	6.3
Christian	2	12.5
Not given	1	6.3

Table 3

Marital Status, Number of Children, and Age of Children of Participants

	N	%
Marital Status		
Married	11	68.7
Divorced	2	12.5
Widowed	2	12.5
Single	1	6.3
Number of Children		
0	1	6.3
1	3	18.7
2	5	31.3
3	7	43.7
Age of Children		
20s	1	3.2
30s	4	13.0
40s	8	25.7
50s	8	25.7
60s	4	13.0
Step Children	1	3.2
Not given	4	13.0
Not applicable	1	3.2

Table 4

Number of Siblings and Ages of Siblings of Participants

	N	%
Number of Siblings		
0	1	6.3
1	3	18.7
2	3	18.7
3	1	6.3
4	1	6.3
7	3	18.7
Not given	4	25.0
Age of Siblings		
40s	1	5.3
50s	2	10.5
60s	2	10.5
70s	1	5.3
80s	2	10.5
90s	2	10.5
Deceased at 48	1	5.3
Step-siblings, age not given	1	5.3
Biological siblings, age not given	6	31.5
Not applicable	1	5.3

Themes

An analysis of all the interviews resulted in the following eight themes. These themes include silence in the community and families about the school explosion, short and long-term relocation, emotional problems with the families, overprotection of children, community grew closer and bonded, reunions helped the healing process, and faith in God. These eight themes frequently appear in several of the tables as participants talked about their family histories.

One of the main over-riding themes that was present throughout participants' responses, and consequently the results, is that the families simply did not discuss the tragedy, even in later years. Respondents frequently mentioned that it was not discussed. Several participants mentioned that families either moved a short distance away from the explosion site or they moved permanently to a new location, even to a different state. Another theme that is commonly spoken about is that of the severe emotional problems suffered by parents and siblings of the victims. These emotional problems ranged from depression to suicide.

Furthermore, another theme that reappears throughout participants' responses is that of how their parents became very protective of them and consequently, they themselves were extremely protective of their own children in later years. The fact that the New London community grew closer and bonded together in the aftermath of the tragedy is yet another prevalent theme throughout participants' responses. Another recurring theme was that the reunions that resulted from this bonding and closeness of the

community aided in the healing process of the victim's families throughout the decades. Additionally, people's faith in God and subsequent religious experiences are another common theme throughout the responses. Finally, there is an element of irony present among the responses as people wondered why did some children die when others were spared.

Interview Questions

Question One: How was your family involved in the New London School Explosion of 1937?

Interviewees were first asked how their family was involved in the school explosion in New London. Some respondents were not born at the time of the explosion, thus had indirect relationships to the explosion. Others were not at the school when the explosion, however a family member may have been. For example, Participant Ten reported that she was at home with her mother that day, however her sister was "just going to school here and she got killed." Specifically, she reported that

"Well me and my mother was washing laundry at that time, there was no electricity around here or nothing. You just heated your water in a washpot and then washed it on a rub board. And I was helping that day and King lived next door to us and she came up there and thought it was just a boiler probably exploded and my mother said the oil field was just booming. And there were different explosions... It was not uncommon to hear explosions. But just when it

happened, the refinery we lived right below it. Between it and 323 here and there were just police, sirens.

Mr. McClelan came over. He lived across the woods over there. But they was the ones that come over and told us they'd found my sister. Everybody had cars in that days that didn't have gas in them or they wouldn't run or something. He started out to walk to catch a car at the top of the hill which it'd take him a while to catch a ride... half brother and the oldest one there was JT, he had already found Dale here at the school. He worked here in the oil field. He found Dale and he stayed with her as long as he could and daddy didn't show up because he had to wait for a ride, so he didn't show up at that time. At the meantime while he was coming, JT came to get him. Daddy had already caught a ride. While that was taking place they'd taken her over to American Legion."

While another participant stated that:

"Daddy was one of the first oil field men to show up with his truck that would pull up heavy concrete truck and he just so happened...I'll tell you where I was when the school blew up. I was on a school bus and he, when he drove up, he saw me on the bus and it was a relief. And we didn't have phones back then so he ran home in that truck and said "Our daughter is safe. She's on the school bus and will be home in a little while. Yeah. See I was just ten years old at that time, when the school blew up. But the reason I was sitting on the school bus and the reason I say that I'm a survivor, because I was not in the building when it blew up, but we

had practice in the auditorium. We was in the PTA program and we was to have it in the auditorium. And just when we went up there the day before to practice on the stage and the next day the president said 'let's move it out to the gymnasium because the floors will be so much bigger for that group.' There was a bunch of us doing that Mexican hat dance and Indian dance and minuet, all of those things. So they moved all of us that made us move all the teachers, all the mothers, and all the kids out into the gym. Had we stayed there every one would have got killed. That place, everything inside of it was blown out. And there were four girls left in there. They had gone in there cause they found out we had left to the pianos were in there and they was going to county meet...you know what county meet is, instead of UIL, the next day in their music. And they said, 'oh, they've gone to the gym, let's go in here and practice for the meet.' And they all four got killed. We would have to if we'd been up there, because everything was blown out. So that's the reason I say I'm a survivor because they, if we had stayed there, none of us or the teacher or anybody have been."

Participant Eleven stated she and her mother were at home on the farm of the Kilgore highway. She stated:

"So momma heard that and she hollered for Jake to come running up to the house and we was there. And then a half mile from us...there's a family lived half a mile from us and she came running down the road and every few seconds she'd look back to it. But she came running and told us the school had blowed up.

She put out daddy down in the country and the whole store down there and we went up to these neighbors house and in school too. We hadn't heard from Bud (family friend). And he was in the school where...he was blowed out through three walls in the shop where it blowed up from... he was blowed out on the ball field and he was just a running. And he stopped he said, he told himself 'well why am I out here on the ball field running?' and he turned around and looked and of course the building was going up and so he run back and he was trying to find Shirley and Marianne was standing in the elementary school doorway waiting for the bus to come down and pick the kids up. Of course he knew that that building was safe. And he was...and the people was trying to get him to the car to take him to the hospital. But he wouldn't go. It just blowed through...blowed him out and backwards. Bruised. He wasn't disfigured or anything that he couldn't go look for his Shirley and Margie. So Daddy looked and looked and looked."

Another first generation interviewee reported

"...after going to London there then, you saw the elementary school and you saw the high school and how they were separated. I was in the elementary building, but some of the members of our class were going to be in a little PTA skit program for the PTA members. It was supposed to have been conducted in the auditorium of the high school so when mother came and picked me up, she went over to the high school. She parked right next to the building there then and we went in the building, and when we got there they said "well, the PTA meeting

has been moved to the gymnasium” cause the high school theatre class was going to be doing a play and they were practicing for that in the auditorium. So we parked our car somewhere around this telephone pole, right along in there. This car here, that’s where it was. So when we, when they told us that So we came and we went through the building there then right out the back side. The gymnasium was right back in here. So we watched a little program out there then. And it must have been mothers and smaller children there too. You know, if it hadn’t been for the play, they would have been in the explosion. anyway they were all out there. Anyway, after the program that they had they were going to have a meeting, the PTA, the women, so were the mothers. And I said ‘well, mom, I think I’ll go to the car and read my book.’ She said no, you’d better stay here and I said...you know how a seven year old is...Anyway I says well, I’ll just feel better out there in the car. And she says well, I tell you what, you go out there in the car, we won’t be in here over 15 or 20 minutes. When I come out there you’d better be in that car.

So then I went out there then and I came around back there see and I came just about to here probably as close to my car there then and the building asked me how close I got to it. And so when I got to that point there then I got ready to open the door and I heard this voice. Don’t open the car. Go back to the gym. And it was my angel. So I went back and the Gym, back here, it had a door open out to this back right here. Anyway when I heard this voice I said help me here. I’m an

elementary student. An elementary student is not supposed to be at the high school. High school kids aren't supposed to be at the elementary building. I said I've been caught and they're going to reprimand me and I don't know what to do. But I looked all around and it just had to be my angel, my angel and I'd better do what they said. And there wasn't any question about that. I just turned and when right on back and the gym there and the door was closed. There was about six steps going down... I got up to the top there and stood right there by the door. Well, just imagine this. There were some kids playing that couldn't play in the gym there, the gym kids. The back part of the gym there was a class out there throwing the basketball around and playing or whatever. I heard them laughing and hollering and everything. And off the steps I kept looking around. I didn't want my mother to catch me there or any other teacher there.

Anyway I stood down there and I said well, there's a safe place here. I said when she comes out that door I'm going to be in the car. I'll run to it. Well I stood there and less than a minute or two ... pick myself up off the gravel there ... I really don't know. The noise, there you know and I don't know if a concussion knocked me down or if my feet couldn't get traction because I was trying to run. pick myself up. And the only scratches on me were from where I fell down. But anyway when I got myself up and my feet got traction I was moving on. And it must have been a couple hundred feet to the end of the gym there that I was running but when I looked back to see what that noise was, all I could see was

like it was on 9/11, all the film and pictures we saw. Dust in the air, and that cloud of dust .But it was coming, it was rolling from the bottom up. Weird there. It was coming at me just like it was going to catch me. You know, a seven year old could figure out when in the world that could be. Something bad was going on and I'd get to the end of the gym there and steps going down and so I went over there and got under that, the steps there then. Of course everything was covered in the sand and the dust. I thought about the silence that was the worst thing I've ever witnessed in my life. All the sudden, after all that noise, seeing that all you could here was people running and I got out to see what, you know, the dust was settled enough that I could see now. Of course, I had so much sand and it settled on me there and I couldn't see. I think about that there a whole lot and I think well I was only seven years old and I have a good excuse for, you know.

Then I stood there for a minute and the boys in my classroom come by from the elementary building and his house was back up here, there was a row of houses up behind, called my name and I said "explosion" and I said what do you mean and he said the building blew up. And he said you can't see very well, could you see well enough to help me? And he said I just live down south if you hold my hand there and lead me down there. And I said I can't see too well myself. He said I'll tell you what, there's a little creek down below to get the sand out of my eyes. We held hand there then. We got down there and got the sand out of our eyes and he said I got to get up to the house real quick my parents are going to be

in the car. If she gets to that car and I'm not there. So I went back. And I got in the area right here and there wasn't anything...I had to be careful where I stepped. ... I just kept easing my way to the car and I got there and there was a group of men and they were just walking round and around that car and my mother says 'he told me that is where he was going to be.' I walked up to her. And when I heard him tell her, I walked up behind her she was out of it, really hysterical. She turned around and she saw me and we got pretty emotional. She squeezed like I've never been squeezed before...There was so much going on there then. Everywhere there were people carrying, hollering and calling kids' names looking for their kids and all. So we walked, we had to get out of the way of it there. So much commotion. The superintendents house was right up here on a little knoll. So my mom said let's get up here on this little grassy knoll there and let's stand there until we find out what's going on. There were people just doing everything. Just trying to be helpful and, one of our neighbors was at school at that time and she came up there and she was covered with all that sand."

Second generation participants (those who were not born or were too young at the time of the explosion) reported about their parents, siblings or other family members who were directly impacted by the explosion. For some interviewees, their family members were not killed in the explosion. For example, Participant One reported that her

"mother, Helen, she was not in the school. She was in the younger part, elementary. And my grandmother asked to go get my mother out of class. They

had a PTA meeting early that evening, that afternoon, at the school. So she asked the teacher if she could get out and the teacher let her get out. And they had just gotten out of the room and started out in to the foyer, walking down the hall. And they were holding hands and they were blown apart. I think mother said she remembered going up but, you know, they lost touch. You know what happened...She had had a lot of headaches all her life. She was, well she was hit in the head and they didn't find her for a little while. They found her walking around I think. But she was hit in the head that way. And she had some kind of adhesions and stuff in the back of her head from the brick. My uncle was not hurt. He jumped from the second storey and I don't know. I didn't never hear...he probably had sprains but, I mean, he didn't break anything.

As mentioned, many second generation participants lost siblings in the explosion of 1937. The data reveals that six participants (37.2%) lost a brother or a sister in the explosion, and two lost two or more sisters that day (see Table 5). Specifically, one participant reported:

"I wasn't born until the year after. My mother and father had a son. I guess he was about 7 or 8 and he apparently had a speech lisp. And he was in elementary actually and he was over here with Queenie Price. I guess you've heard. taking speech lessons. And the story went that he had a brand new raincoat and he went back in the building, he had forgotten his raincoat."

Another respondent also stated “I lost two sisters in the explosion and my brother was in the explosion but survived.” Another participant reported that “my sister died in that explosion” while yet another participants stated that “he (my brother) was hit in the head with a brick and died of a concussion later at the hospital.” Finally, another related how her sister was found: “My mom found my sister in school with her head laying on her desk like she was asleep, she’d died of a concussion.”

Table 5

How Participant's Family was Involved in the New London School Explosion of 1937

	N	%
First Generation		
Immediate Family		
Lost older sister	3	18.6
Lost 2 or more sisters	2	12.4
Lost older brother	3	18.6
Lost sister-in law	1	6.3
Extended family/friends		
Lost best friend	1	6.3
Lost friends	1	6.3
Second Generation		
Immediate Family		
Lost an aunt	1	6.3
Lost an aunt and uncle	1	6.3
Lost aunts, uncles, and cousins	1	6.3
Mother and aunt injured	1	6.3
Other		
Father was rescue worker	1	6.3

Table 5 also breaks down how some of the interviewees' aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends were either injured or killed at the school. One participant stated that "basically I had two aunts and two uncles in the explosion. There was about three cousins killed that were close family members." Another participant related that "my father lost a sister in the explosion." Finally, one participant related how her mother had lost a sister but did not know it at the time. One interviewee stated:

"And they got to look...they found Dot, the one that was killed. And the only way she recognized her was they had a sheet over her already but her leg was sticking out and she recognized her leg.....they had to go back and look for them...to look for her again. And that was my mother, dad, and my grandfather when they found her."

Whereas only one of the participant's father was indirectly connected to the explosion (see Table 5), later in the chapter, it is discussed how many of the participant's parents suffered emotionally and mentally from their losses.

Question Two: How did you come to know about what happened to your family during and after the explosion?

The participants were asked how they came to know about what happened to their family during and after the explosion. Many were able to relay the events of that tragic day as 50.0% actually remember the event taking place (see Table 6). One participant related how he/she heard and saw the explosion: "Oh, it wasn't a very loud racket but I saw it. See when I was on the bus. I had just got on that bus and sat down facing the school and I saw it all go up. Oh, I saw those big old slabs, it just scared me to death."

Another stated that “I always knew about the explosion because I remembered it. I was four at the time. I remember hearing the sirens and knowing something had happened.” Another participant reported that “it was my eighth birthday and Mom and I were waiting about 100 yards from the school when it exploded...I was already out of school for the day.”

Another said that his own memories were supplemented by later reading about what occurred. One participant reported “every year on the anniversary of the explosion, the newspapers would always have something about it that we’d see or read.” These memories proved to be key in preserving the event as many families never talked about that day. One participant reported that he/she “didn’t know any of the details. They didn’t really talk about it.” Another stated that he/she “grew up knowing about it, we all did. We just never discussed it.” Furthermore, surviving family members had to learn about the event indirectly from extended family and/or friends (see Table 6).

One participant stated:

“Mainly nobody in the family talked about it. And it seems like when I was about 12 years old I went to a ball game down in Russ (?) Texas and some kid came up to me and says ‘hey this is the school where they had the school explosion wasn’t it?’ and I said ‘Yeah, I guess so.’ I didn’t know. Then I started asking questions a little bit. Of course my mother and daddy would never talk about it but my aunt and uncle Arthur would. And sometimes I’d ask...but he’s about the only one in the family that would talk about it at all.”

Table 6

How Participants came to know About what Happened to their Family During and After the Explosion

	N	%
First Generation		
Personal Memories		
At the explosion/survivor	8	50.0
Grew up knowing		
Not of school age/home sick	3	18.7
Second Generation		
Grew up knowing, but was seldom discussed	5	31.3

Another respondent reported:

“Uh, yeah cause mainly nobody in the family talked about it. And it seems like when I was about 12 years old I went to a ball game down in Russ Texas and some kid came up to me and says “hey this is the school where they had the school explosion wasn’t it?” and I said “Yeah I guess so.” I didn’t know. Then I

started asking questions a little bit. Of course my mother and daddy would never talk about it but my aunt and uncle Arthur would. And sometimes I'd ask...but he's about the only one in the family that would talk about it at all.

Oh yeah, we knew about it but nobody ever talked about it. Now one thing I mentioned to Ronnie this morning was Ms. Lancaster that was our junior high social studies teacher, she was the only one that ever said anything about the explosion and we had her 6-8 grade ... And that is the only recollection I can recall of the explosion being talked about while we went to school there."

Question Three: How has your family been most affected by the event?

Respondents were also asked to discuss how their family was most affected by the event. It would seem logical to conclude that so many in the community knew about the tragedy even without the family discussing it as there were so many families affected by the explosion. Table 7 shows how the participant's family's were directly affected by the event. Twenty-five percent of the mothers of the interviewees had nervous breakdowns. One participant reported "Right after the explosion my mother had a miscarriage. lost a child. That was in '38. And then right after, and my mother is a very strong person, she had a nervous breakdown. And I don't know if it was because of the child or because of the explosion or just everything. But I think it all had its toll. Of course, you never know, but I think that it was a factor." Another stated that "my mother had a nervous breakdown after the explosion. We (kids) just thought it was because she was Chicago and living in the country....just miserable." One participant stated. "It changed my mother, she was

angry- she couldn't understand why? Why her daughter? She was devastated."

Additionally, 12.5% of fathers had emotional problems, nightmares, or struggled with the memories. One participant reported that his/her father

"stayed out there three days and three nights with his truck, pulling up these big old slabs,...and he kept telling us how he was scared to death when he latched on to that. He was afraid that he might be crushing somebody underneath it, you know? And he didn't know what, which way to go, there was no way that he could deliberately lift it up, he had to do it sideways or something. And did you know that when he quit working after three days, nights, he helped, well they got through carrying everything off, and then they had to just go and build caskets. And then after they got through with that he came home. And he, as long as he was working and doing something he was alright but let him sit down at home or sit down at the supper table he'd just start jerking. He would just start having....and he had nightmares every night and, oh it was, we, the whole family just had to go through that."

Another reported that his/her father committed suicide by hanging himself, saying "my daddy took his life when I was a freshman in college.....we always felt like it was just a lot of guilt that he had...he always felt guilty."

After the explosion some families became more religious (6.3%). One interviewee reported that:

“My mother was Presbyterian and my father was Catholic. But a Baptist minister reached out to them in the aftermath of the explosion and they became Baptist and we still are today. I have always thought that was an interesting part of the story. My parents and my sister and I have a very strong belief in God.”

Another said “My parents went to a different church. My daddy was Catholic and my mother was Presbyterian....And apparently after receiving pastoral support and whatever they moved to that. So I think their faith. I always still stand in awe of how these people survived.”

Other families dealt with the tragedy by moving elsewhere. One participant reported “He (father) finally wanted to go somewhere. He went. his parents had a big farm down in Cheryl, Texas (?) close to Georgetown, all down in there was all kinfolks. He just wanted to get out of town, so he carried all of us down there for a good while.” Another said “I was sent to another town to go to school because they did not want me to go to NL (New London) schools.”

Additionally, some of the interviewees themselves discussed their own emotional issues and nightmares suffered after the explosion (see Table 7). One participant responded to the question about his/her own emotional issues, stating that

“...there’s years that I wouldn’t say anything. My mother and daddy never heard me say this, they never knew. They just knew that I had emotional problems and knew that it wasn’t easy for me to talk about so they didn’t ask about it, and they

didn't want anyone else to ask about it. So I never said anything. I never even talked to my brother about it, but then as time went on it kept building up."

Table 7

How Participant's Family has been most Affected by the Event

	N	%
First Generation		
Short and long distance relocation		
Father most affect and moved family	2	12.2
Moved out of state	1	6.3
Emotional problems within family		
Mother had nervous breakdown and changed faith to Baptist	1	6.3
Mother had nervous breakdown	2	12.2
Mother depressed and participant went to work with father	1	6.3
Emotional problems/depression	1	6.3
Emotional problems/depression and attempted suicide	1	6.3
Emotional problems/depression and father left the family	1	6.3
No response given	1	6.3
Second Generation		
Short and long distance relocation		
Mother and aunt relocated as adults, but later moved back	1	6.3

Table 7, continued

How Participant's Family has been most Affected by the Event

	N	%
Emotional problems within family		
Mother had nervous breakdown	1	6.3
Father depressed	1	6.3
Father committed suicide	1	6.3
No response given	1	6.3

Question Four: How has the community been affected by the event?

Respondents also talked about how the community was affected by the event. Families were not the only ones who were affected by the explosion, but the entire community was as well. A combined forty-three percent of respondents claimed that the community became closer as a result of the tragedy (see Table 8). "Everybody began to love everybody because somebody lost someone," claimed one person. Another stated that,

"We're just amazed and...the cohesiveness of our school and our buddies...it was like we were all held together by that common bond. Plus the oil field. We were all here because of that. But you feel a closeness...I feel like I could call Miles. I could call Becky, you know it's a beautiful thing that came out

it and a very rare thing. I think our teachers taught the sisters and brothers and it was a small school and on down, so everybody knew everybody and nobody had anymore than other, you were very much the same oil field workers. But as cohesiveness like...and it's still there."

Ironically, despite people becoming closer and supporting each other, many people in the community didn't talk about the disaster openly. When added together, an overwhelming 87.5% of participants answered in this way about the community (Table 8). One person claimed,

I mean, you just couldn't get anyone to talk about it. Even when the people would visit, it was a hush deal. It was years and years before anybody would start talking about it. It just....it just was never mentioned. But, it brought everybody together. though...because just about everybody in this community lost someone.

Others are able to reflect now about the resiliency of the community as well as how the community has been forever affected by the explosion. One participant believed that, "there will always be a heaviness in the community. There was such loss and sadness. I think the community grew closer because of it and I think most of us turned to God for help." Another, however, has a slightly more optimistic view.

"The people here would not talk about it and it took that first reunion forty years later for people to start talking. People came in, they saw what happened, they realized it and seemed to put it behind them. I think it tells a lot about the resiliency of a community, how it could come back after that.

Table 8

How the Community has been Affected by the Event

	N	%
First Generation		
Community did not talk about it, but reunions helped	2	12.5
Community focused on surviving children and did not talk about it	1	6.3
Community was devastated and did not talk about it	2	12.5
Community bonded and were supportive but did not talk about it	5	31.1
Community came together, returned to church, reunions helped	1	6.3
Second Generation		
Did not talk about it, but the reunion helped	4	25
Community bonded and the museum helped	1	6.3

The quote above also reflects many of the other “smaller” issues represented in Table 8. most notably how reunions helped with the healing process as well as how many turned to God or their faith for help, support, and guidance. As one participant stated,

“At first people were upset about the reunion. They did not want it all brought up again. They were pretty upset, but nevertheless, most of them came

to the reunion. A lot of them have passed away but, I think if you could ask them or any of us, we'd all say that the reunion actually helped us and the community. It certainly has helped us keep so close all these years. The community has been tremendously affected by the explosion. The reunion at the museum helped a lot of them begin to heal. For my dad and the rest of New London, reunions are a very big deal."

Questions Five: How did your family deal with the explosion immediately after the explosion and over time?

Participants were asked to describe how their family dealt with the explosion immediately and over time. Tables 9 and 10 demonstrates how the families of first generation participants and second generation participants respectively, not only dealt with the aftermath of the explosion immediately after it occurred, but also how they handled it over time. One participant explained,

It taught my family to cherish the little things. I have the dress that my aunt wore the day of the explosion, it initially may have cost a few dollars or have even been homemade but, to me it is priceless.

Another participant stated, "Time helped my parent cope. Mother coped with depression for the rest of her life. My father did not show his feelings, he just worked a lot. And I think overtime it brought our family even closer. We all just went on and did the best we could."

Table 9

How Participant's Families Dealt with the Explosion Immediately After and Over Time.
First Generation

	N	%
First Generation		
Immediately		
Short or long term relocation		
Moved across town	1	5.0
Moved away	3	15.0
Family had another child	2	10.0
Kept children out of school or switched schools		
Sent kids to another school	2	10.0
Kept kids out of school for an extended period	2	10.0
Had emotional problems	1	5.0

Table 9, continued

How Participant's Families Dealt with the Explosion Immediately After and Over Time.
First Generation

	N	%
Over time		
Did not/rarely talked about explosion		
Did not talk about it	1	5.0
Did not talk about it and had emotional problems	5	25.0
Did not talk about it, turned to faith, and had emotional problems	1	5.0
Did not talk about it and turned to faith	1	5.0
Did not talk about it and became closer	1	5.0

Some children had to attend other schools or were kept out of school all together while others moved away (Table 10). One participant explained, "...my parents relocated so that the three youngest kids could go to school in Henderson. My brother and I did not want to leave New London." Another reported that "my mother kept me out of school for awhile. She was just too scared to send me." The stress of losing children and witnessing the explosion and its aftermath caused some families members to become

mentally ill, 35% total in first generation (table 9) and 23% total in the second generation (table 10). One participant explained about his/her mother: "I think that sometimes that somebody has alluded to my mothers, quote nervous breakdown. Now I don't know what occurred. It may have been a depression, but I don't know when that was. I suspect if that were true that it was connected." Another participant reported that: "I don't remember a lot because I was so young. I have books, articles, and annuals that I look through every so often, but I put them up for a couple of years. It was so painful."

Another respondent talked about the emotional toll on her father.

"Daddy stayed out there three days and three nights with his truck, pulling up these big old slabs, as big as the top of this table, and he kept telling us how he was scared to death when he latched on to that. He was afraid that he might be crushing somebody underneath it, you know? And he didn't know what, which way to go, there was no way that he could deliberately lift it up, he had to do it sideways or something. And did you know that when he quit working after three days, nights, he helped, well they got through carrying everything off, and then they had to just go and build caskets. And then after they got through with that he came home. And he, as long as he was working and doing something he was alright but let him sit down at home or sit down at the supper table he'd just start jerking. He would just start having....and he had nightmares every night and, oh it was, we, the whole family just had to go through that."

Participant Four talked about how the explosion caused her father to commit suicide three years after the event. Specifically,

“Three or four years later. ’37 to ’40, ’41. And my daddy took his life when I was a freshman in college. He hung himself. We always felt like it was just a lot of guilt that he had, plus if he had any brain dysfunction or whatever. But you can’t help but think...he always felt guilty. From his mother’s death and then having to go through this too. And he was a real soft hearted person. I think he probably felt like the brothers and sisters, you know, they were close. We went every Sunday and had dinner at Ronnie’s house. But I think daddy probably felt too that he was the reason their mother was dead. I mean, you couldn’t help but feel a little guilty.”

Another 15.3% claimed that their parents became more protective in the long run. To elaborate on this further, a participant explained, “Mother was also very protective, she always wanted me far away from any danger.” Another reported that “it affected how they felt about letting us out of sight. They were both..they didn’t hover but you had to let them know where you were. They were very sensitive to what we were doing. Mother was concerned...mother was always afraid something was going to happen to us.”

Table 10

How Participant's Families Dealt with the Explosion Immediately After and Over Time, Second Generation

	N	%
Second Generation		
Immediately		
Emotional Problems	1	7.7
Did not talk about it	3	23.2
Over Time		
Did not talk about it	3	23.2
Overprotective of kids	2	15.3
Had emotional problems	2	15.3
Family grew closer/cherished moments together	2	15.3

Note. N=13

Question Six: What has been the most challenging for you and your family in the aftermath of the explosion?

As a follow-up question to Question 5, participants were asked about what was most challenging for them and their family in the aftermath of the explosion. The protective mentality responses raised in Question 5 most likely caused by the sorrow.

depression, and nightmares that plagued the participants in the aftermath of the explosion as shown in Table 11. One person recalled, "Devastation and death was everywhere. You couldn't get away from it, I still can't." Another participant reported that "it changed my mother, she was angry all the time....Then when I was 14, my dad left us and we never saw him again. He left us like he didn't even care. We were devastated, just devastated. We never talked about any of it."

Additionally, a feeling of helplessness left survivors wondering, 'what if?' (3 participants of the first generation and one of the second generation: Table 11). However, more than anything else, the most difficult part for the survivors was not really understanding or knowing what happened (52.5% combined between the generations: Table 11). As previously mentioned, a central theme that interviewees repeatedly mentioned was the lack of conversation about the explosion. Participant Seven reported "you know I had known that there had been an explosion but I didn't know any of the details. They didn't really talk about it." Another stated "I don't recall my parents talking that much about it, I guess that's probably right, at least of survivors. But I know my mother must have spoken about it. She didn't verbalize a lot about it. So I guess somewhere over the years I picked it up and then when I got to school I'm sure I heard more."

Another stated, "we didn't understand because they really didn't talk about it that much. That's about the only thing that I remember." Also resonating the tone that parents did not talk about the event much, another stated "and growing up always, I always

thought it was another lifetime ago and actually it was just seven years before I was born.
So, when you get older things go into perspective a lot more.”

Table 11

The Most Challenging Thing for the Participant and their Family in the Aftermath of the Explosion

	N	%
First Generation		
Silence from family members and community	6	31.5
Element of irony/ what if's	3	15.7
Emotional/family problems		
Mother and father's depression	1	5.3
Mother depressed and father left	1	5.3
Mother had nervous breakdown	1	5.3
Depression and memories	1	5.3
Second Generation		
Silence from family members and community	4	21
Element of irony/ what if's	1	5.3
Emotional/family problems		
Father committed suicide and mother depressed	1	5.3

Note. N=19 (16 respondents, 3 with multiple answers)

Question Seven: How easy or difficult has it been for your family to openly discuss the explosion and the family story after the explosion?

Participants were also asked how easy or difficult it has been for their family to openly discuss the explosion and the family story after the explosion. Already mentioned as one of the central commonalities between survivors and their family member's responses, while growing up, 100% those who were interviewed just knew not to bring up or discuss the explosion 100% (Table 12). One claimed that "We never discussed it, never talked about it. Mother was just so angry, I knew to say nothing." Another agreed. "We never discussed it. I guess we thought we might upset him and my mom was always worried about him, not upsetting him. We talked about everything else just, not that." Yet another participant explained that out of town family members wanted to talk about the disaster, but it was not talked about. "We always had people out of town like from Hawkins or Talco or Corsicana, they'd come and visit mother and daddy and that's what they wanted to talk about.....I did not want to hear it. That had affected me more just not to listen to it, because in my mind I saw too much." Another reported that "you just don't talk about it."

Participant Ten stated that

"It just didn't affect people like...I don't know why. Like they've have a school now that'll have a shooting maybe and someone gets killed. Well they bring in counselors and all that stuff. But counselors wasn't, in those days you didn't have counselors and stuff. And actually the pastors would say stuff and

help but the movement as I say here again. The cars didn't move around and a lot of times it was just wagon and buggy or a horse. Our preacher was coming, as I say, at that time he was riding a horse. That wasn't but once a month out there at the Glenhill Church. He rode a horse there at that time. So the counseling just wasn't there. At what time you had service and stuff, the preacher would counsel people and do what he could but visitation was not like it is now. I mean, just now, all people who counsel will come to your home, will come to different places. They didn't have that then. So that's the reason it was so much different in that day and time (skipping...) you just dealt with it yourself and as I say, life had to go on. Even though that many was taken at one time. Life had to go on."

Table 12

Ease or Difficulty for Participant's Family to Openly Discuss the Explosion and the Family Story after the Explosion

	N	%
Never talked about it	16	100.0

Question Eight: How has the extended family dealt with the explosion?

Participants were asked how the extended family dealt with the explosion. So traumatic was this event for some that one participant claimed that her mother, "still

wouldn't...to her death, she wouldn't talk about it. If there was a documentary on TV, she wouldn't watch it." However, despite this lack of discussion, the tragedy did help the family to grow closer in other ways. Over 44% of participants in the first and second generations agreed that their family grew closer as a result of the explosion (Table 13). "It draws you closer to your own," stated one participant, "It is a healing over time," noted another.

Additionally, the healing process was aided by survivor reunions. As shown in Table 13, thirty-one percent of the participants combined talked about how the reunions were good because they helped survivors and their families to begin to process what happened, "they [the reunions] helped us to see that everyone was still suffering, not just us." A more detailed recollection mentioned that

It wasn't until 1977 when they had their first reunion of the survivors that it really started flowing. And, everybody had the same feeling and when they all got together and they saw where they all had the same feelings, the same emotions, that they were holding things back, tears just started flowing and it just all started coming out. Because it was that common bond that they were there, they all went through the same tragedy; that they were all able to talk about it. And, I think that is when the healing started, right then in this community.

Table 13

How the Participant's Extended Family Dealt with the Explosion

	N	%
First Generation		
Faith in God increased	5	17.3
Reunions helped to heal	5	17.3
Family and/or community grew closer and more supportive		
Family became more important	2	6.9
Family grew closer	3	10.3
Everyone grew closer	4	13.8
Everyone became supportive of each other	1	3.4
Second Generation		
Cherished moments/saw it as part of life	2	6.9
Reunion participation helped families heal	4	13.8
Family and/or community grew closer and more supportive	3	10.3

Note. N=29 (16 participants answered, 10 with multiple answers)

It is worth mentioning that some participants included their family's increase in faith and cherishing moments that they have together as other ways that those involved in the explosion's extended family dealt with the aftermath of the events (Table 13). One participant explained,

“We have grown closer and our faith in God has seen us through. Family is very important to us, may be more so than before. ...my brother went to war and wanted to go to but he was adamant that he did not want me to go. I was a nurse, I could have helped. I realized later that he just wanted me to stay safe. He did not even want me to be a nurse to see any suffering.”

Question Nine: How did the explosion influence parenting over the generations?

Participants were also asked how the explosion influences parenting over the generations. Both parents who lost children as well as the survivors who grew up to be parents themselves seemed to become more overprotective of their children as a result of the explosion. Table 14 shows that 77.1% of all participants claimed that over the generations, as a result of the explosion, parents tended to be more overprotective than normal. “We were very protective of our children without meaning to be, it makes you more aware that something can happen,” responded one. “My mother was so scared something was going to happen to me, very protective of me. I keep my family very close. We've been very protective of our children” admitted another. Another explained that even today, he/she worries, saying “I don't care where she (daughter) goes even now

and she's in her 30s. I have to know she's made it home and then I can sleep. So I think that part's carried over. That intense fear."

Table 14

How the Explosion Influenced Parenting Over the Generations

	N	%
First Generation		
Overprotective of children	9	58.3
N/A, had no children	1	6.2
No response given	1	6.2
Second Generation		
Overprotective of children	3	18.8
No response given	2	10.5

Question Ten: How would you describe your family's geographical closeness over the past few generations? Emotional closeness?

Finally, participants were asked to comment on their family's geographical and emotional closeness over the past few generations after the explosion (Table 15). An overwhelming combined majority, 82%, claim that they are both emotionally close as

well as geographically close. As one participant explained, “I always wanted to stay here, close to my parents. And, I had no reason except I wanted to be able to watch after them.” Another reported that “we are very close and talk with one another almost daily. We all know it is important to my parents because of what happened in New London and because we don’t have a big family...it’s just us.”

Table 15

Participant’s Family’s Geographical and Emotional Closeness over the Past Few Generations

	N	%
First Generation		
Geographically close and emotionally close	9	57.0
Geographically far and emotionally far	1	6.0
Geographically far but emotionally close	1	6.0
Second Generation		
Geographically close and emotionally close	4	25.0
Geographically close but emotionally far	1	6.0

For those few who did move away, distance has not severed the relationship. “Even when we are apart, we’re close.” Another stated “Our family is very, very close. Bettye and I talk all the time. You know, even though we never talked about it growing up, we talk about it now. I live in Louisiana and she in Texas, but it doesn’t make us less close.” Another person explained, “We have lived here forever and one of our son’s does, too. Our other children live in different towns, but, they are closeby. We are very close.” Only two interviewees claimed that they were not emotionally close to their families. One person stated that “I wish we spoke more and all but there’s no issue between us. They’ve got their life and I’ve got mine.”

Summary

As was demonstrated by the results of the interviews collected on survivors and family members of those who died in the 1937 explosion in New London, TX, several themes emerged linking the various families’ experiences after the tragedy: Silence within community and families, relocations, emotional problems, overprotection of children, bonding of community, benefits of the reunions, faith in God, and element of irony. Without a doubt, the biggest commonality that was mentioned was that families did not talk about the explosion afterward, but many suffered silently both emotionally and psychologically. Despite this, families and the community seemed to grow closer to each other, but at the same time becoming more overprotective of their children. Finally, despite such great loss at the time, through the help of reunions, the building of the

museum, and overall more discussion of what happened, great healing has been able to occur.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to conduct interviews with individuals who lost family members in the 1937 school explosions in New London, Texas. Methods of data collection included telephone interviews of the participants who live out-of-state and face-to-face interviews of the participants who live in Texas. The interview process consisted of structured, open-ended questions aimed at producing rich information of individuals' developmental experiences within families who were impacted by the loss of a family member in the New London School Explosion. The results of those interviews have demonstrated many similarities between how the families affected by the explosion coped with the tragedy as well as how the community responded and rebounded.

For participants who were interviewed in the first generation, nearly twenty percent reported that their families relocated away from the New London community as a way of distancing themselves from their own pain as well as daily stimulus reminders of the explosion and its aftermath effect on them and on their families. One participant reported that "my parents relocated so the three youngest kids could go to school in Henderson." Further, almost fifty percent reported that their family was affected by emotional problems as a result of the explosion with some reporting nervous breakdowns. "Everyone was sad. My mother had a nervous breakdown and her sister-in-law took her

to New Orleans under a doctor's care. I don't know how long she was gone, but we just kind of go on with life." In the study conducted by North (2002), individuals interviewed reported an increase in divorce in the months after the bombing. The second most frequent response was drinking alcohol as a way of coping. In Majors study (1996), the adult children of concentration camp survivors reported that their fathers were more introverted than fathers who fled to Sweden. Overall, the adult children of these survivors also reported a higher incidence of psychological problems than those whose fathers fled to Sweden. Moreover, the findings from the qualitative analysis of posttraumatic stress among Mexican victims of disaster by, Norris, et al (2001) concluded that the participants identified a broad range of emotions including depression and lasting trauma in the aftermath of the disasters. These studies seem to support the findings of the current study in that several generations of these families seemed to have been affected emotionally in the aftermath of the explosion.

With regard to community sequele (Table 8), the adult children of survivors reported that in more than sixty percent of their families, an unspoken family rule emerged such that almost no one talked about the explosion or its aftermath effects on the individuals, the families or the community. Nearly an entire generation of children of survivors grew into adulthood without having had disclosing conversations about the explosion. One participant reported that "they (parents) wouldn't talk about it (the explosion.) And I was afraid to ask them," and another stated "you just don't talk about it." Further, almost sixty percent of the first generation survivors reported that

notwithstanding the physical and emotional devastation in the community, as families, they came together to give and receive emotional support in churches, in latter day reunions and touchingly, in shared nurturing, protection and care of surviving first and second generation children. The literature supports these findings with regard to community support. Thirty-four months after the Oklahoma City bombing, North (2002) found that more than fifty percent of firefighters turned to their families and friends for emotional support. Walsh and McGoldrick (2004) discussed the multisystemic approaches to recovery for families and communities struggling to cope with the aftermath of major disasters, and the importance of the responsiveness by larger systems. The authors borrowed Landau's (2004) themes that may be key processes in a community's ultimate resilience. The four themes are, building community and social connectedness, participate in shared storytelling and validation of the trauma, re-establish the routines of everyday life, and arrive at a new vision of the future with renewed hope. The community of New London illustrates each of these themes in the bonding of families in the immediate aftermath, their tenacity in carrying forth with their lives and maintaining hope as seen through the protectiveness often displayed with the children in the community and ultimately, through the validation and re-telling of the story at the reunions and in the museum.

Tables 9 and 10 demonstrate how participant families dealt with the explosion immediately after and over time. Overwhelmingly, both first and second-generation participants report that the explosion was not talked about immediately after or overtime

as a coping method used by many families in dealing with the explosion. Pfefferbaum (2005) concluded that traumatic events do not occur in isolation and secondary adversities such as traumatic reminders may intensify symptoms. The author defines these adversities as displacement and relocation, disrupted interpersonal networks and family and social problems. Certainly, family problems arose in the community of New London first as a direct result of the disaster and also indirectly by the community's silent pact to not discuss the explosion.

The participants from the first generation and second generation reported that the most difficult challenge was the silence from family members and the community regarding the event (table 11 & 12). Chaitin (2003) used Danielli's (1981) typology to further understand how Holocaust families use coping patterns to work through the past. Chaitin was able to add two more distinct coping patterns to Danielli's existing work. Danielli's typology patterns included victim families, fighter families, those who made it and numb families. Chaitin's work added, split families and life goes on families. Danilelli defined the numb families as those families who live in pervasive silence and, went further to add second generation family members often know little of what their parents lived through. The community of New London has succeeded in breaking away from the silence with the help of frequent reunions and the ability of the museum to bring people together to promote information sharing and ultimately, creating a healing community for its families.

Table 13 demonstrates how extended families have dealt with the explosion.

Overwhelmingly, the participants reported positive and healing sentiment in how families have forged ahead in the years since the explosion. Thirty-two percent of the first generation and ten percent of the second generation reported that their families and the community grew closer as a result of the disaster. And, thirty-one percent reported that the reunions helped their families heal. Tamar Shoshan (1989) noted that second generation Holocaust families by and large, had not been “given” many memories of life before and since the trauma and as a result, this generation experienced a frustrating ‘gap’ with regard to family history and information about the Holocaust. It does not come as a surprise that Holocaust Museums continue to proliferate across the country and that the New London Museum arose too, from the efforts of the subsequent generations yearning to fill-in its own ‘gaps’ in history.

Table 14 illustrates a finding that is greatly supported by the literature. Over seventy-seven percent of the participants in the first and second generations reported that overprotection of children was a direct result of the explosion. Shoshan (1989) noted that Holocaust survivors’ energy seemed to be invested in the concern and well being of their children. Pfefferbaum (2006) noted a five-year longitudinal study of Israeli families displaced because of damage to their homes by SCUD missile attacks during the first Persian Gulf War that family cohesion - the emotional bonds between family members – was a predictor of preschool-aged children’s adjustment. While the disengaged families might not help the children process their frightening experiences, the enmeshed families

were at high risk for communicating highly negative emotions to the children. Porterfield, Cain and Saldinger (2003) found that many participants in this study reported that they were given very little information about the deaths in their family and were provided very little opportunity to ask questions. In retrospect, one can easily perceive that the protection of the children and the silence of the community of New London were a valiant effort of a grieving community to protect the children who had not perished in the explosion. How and why these two parallel themes have been transmitted through another generation is for another study to discern.

Conclusions

Several themes emerged from the participants' responses. These responses included silence in the community and among family members, short and long term relocations, emotional problems of family members, overprotection of first and second generation children, bonding of community members, reunions aiding the healing process of community and family members, faith in God, and element of randomness. This small study seems to indicate that these themes are still prevalent today in the families of New London and have been passed through the generations of the families who were so profoundly affected. As seen in many of these families, the healing appears to be a result of the onset of reunions over thirty years ago and the opportunity it has afforded these families to finally talk openly and about its impact in their lives. Family researchers will know more about the impact of the tragedy as time continues to change the landscape of this community.

Limitations

Several limitations in this qualitative study should be addressed. This was a convenience sample and therefore, may not be representative of other families who have experienced a traumatic loss. The majority of the participants lived in and around New London, Texas, thus having access to the community's support networks including the reunions, New London Museum and other family members versus families who moved away and have not had access to the community's support system. These findings are largely anecdotal shared through personal lenses thus, not verifiable.

This convenience sample may also not be generalizable to current day populations due to the fact that communities across the nation now have access to recovery projects, community services, counseling and federal money in the aftermath of disaster. It does however; give us a baseline and a collection of experiences from a population who did not have access to these services. Another threat to validity is this convenience sample was largely middle-class, Caucasian and overwhelmingly Christian. Finally, cross sectional results can give us a momentary glimpse of a certain subject or phenomena but will fall short in giving us a bigger picture.

Implications

The results of the current study revealed several implications for professionals who work with those who have suffered a traumatic event as well as their family members. In addition to family counselors, school officials may also benefit from the results of the current study if another such tragic event should occur. When working with

families who have experienced traumatic loss, family therapists need to address/assess the effect/impact of the event on multigenerations. Therapists also need to be aware of coping mechanisms, such as silence, that families may use in an effort to carry on with life. School officials/counselors should also be aware of the effects of PTSD on children of victims and make every effort to ensure they feel as safe as possible in their environment.

Future Research

With regard to future research, a longitudinal, multigenerational study with families like these will give family researchers abundant and rich information about the effects and impacts traumatic loss has on families. The majority of first and second generation family members agreed that the event and its impacts were not discussed: children were over-protected and the community of New London both then and today has experienced a bonding and increased caring for one another not present before the incident. These themes are the foundation for future research.

Summary

Silence of the community and family, short/long term relocation, emotional problems of victim's families, overprotection of children, New London community growing closer and bonding, reunions helping in the healing process, faith in God and element of irony are the prevalent themes found in this particular study. No doubt, this community has carried their pain and anxiety in various other ways not mentioned in this study.

There has been no dénouement in New London to resolve the raw pain and tender feelings of those generations who came after the explosion. For both first and second-generation trauma survivors of the explosion and its aftermath, the memories are still stark and sharp, filled with pain and wonderment after seven decades. If Bowen taught us anything, it is that just as individuals can carry anxiety and pain, so can families and communities. The resilience of the community manifested by the care of their children, their faith that offered respite for many amid trauma and pain, and the courage and determination of those who established and who continuously nurture the museum community in New London give credence to the fact that the healing continues.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT LETTER

July 1, 2008

Dear _____:

As the final step in my education for the doctoral degree in Family Therapy at Texas Woman's University in Denton, I am conducting research on the meanings family members attach to the New London, Texas School Explosion in March 1937. The university has approved and authorized my research. Your name was provided to me, thanks to the gracious help of the London Museum, as a person who might want to be contacted about participating in this study.

I am very interested to learn more about how family members may have been affected over time by the events, and the stories of the events, of that long ago day. I hope you will agree to talk with me in a confidential audio-taped interview that will last about an hour at a place and time convenient for you. Your thoughts, memories, and experiences represent an extremely valuable and unique resource toward the goal of this study, to better understand how various families respond to and deal with such difficult events.

Before you decide whether to participate in this study, I hope you will contact me so I can answer your questions about the research and tell you more. You may telephone me or contact me by email.

I have enclosed a copy of the Consent to Participate in the research that has additional information, including the telephone number of my Research Advisor at the university.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

Jamie Littlefield Stroud, M.S.

(817) 939 - 4531
JLStroud@charter.net

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM AND REFERRAL LIST

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: A STUDY OF TRANSGENERATIONAL MEANINGS FAMILY MEMBERS
ATTACH TO THE 1937 NEW LONDON, TEXAS SCHOOL EXPLOSION

Investigator: Jamie Littlefield Stroud, BA, MS

JJLStroud@charter.net
(817) 939 - 4531

Advisor: Glen Jennings, PhD

GJennings@mail.twu.edu
(940) 898 - 2695

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in the dissertation research for Jamie Littlefield Stroud at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this qualitative study will be to discover and describe through individual interviews the experiences of individuals who lost family members in the New London School Explosion of March 1937. The focus of this study will discover, identify, and describe the emerging themes and patterns relating to their stories and the meanings attached to them across generations.

Research Procedures

For the purpose of this qualitative study, face-to-face or telephone interviews will be conducted with family members of the survivors of the New London School Explosion of March 1937. Your interview will be audio recorded for later transcription and data analysis, and to provide accuracy in reporting the information discussed. The maximum time commitment for the interview is approximately 60 minutes.

Potential Risks

A possible risk to you as a result of your participation in this study is release of confidential information. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. Only the researcher and the transcriber will have access to the digital audio

Participant's Initials
Page 1 of 2

recordings. In order to preserve confidentiality, neutral coding will be utilized to identify each participant, with any identifying information being known only to the researcher. All information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. A master list with participant's names will be stored separately from other data. All disks and audiotapes will be erased no later than a year of the study, though transcriptions containing no personal identification will be donated to the Graduate School at Texas Woman's University. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be published in the researcher's dissertation, as well as in other research publication, though no names or other identifying information will be included in any publication.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research. Should you become tired or emotionally drained during the course of the interview, inform the researcher immediately.

Participation Benefits

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The only direct benefit of this study to you is that at the completion of the study a summary of the results will be mailed to you or sent to you electronically upon request.

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

Signature of Participant

Date

REFERRAL LIST

Counseling and Family Development Center

Texas Woman's University
Human Development Building
Room 114
Denton, TX 76204
(940) 898-2600

East Texas Medical Center Behavioral Health

4101 University Boulevard
Tyler, TX 75101
Info Line: (903) 266-2200
Crisis: 1-800-566-0088

Rusk County 24 Hour Behavioral Health Crisis Line

1-866-494-8444 (toll free)

Kilgore College Counseling Center

1100 Broadway Boulevard
Kilgore, TX 75662

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participant Code: _____

Name: _____ **Age:** _____

Sex: _____ **Occupation:** _____

Race/Ethnicity: Asian _____ African American _____ Caucasian _____ Hispanic _____
Native American _____ Other _____

City/State of Residence: _____ **Religious Affiliation:** _____

Relationship Status: Married _____ Single _____ Divorced _____
Widowed _____ Other _____

Number of Children: _____ **Children's Ages:** _____, _____, _____, _____, _____

Number of Siblings: _____ **Sibling's Ages:** _____, _____, _____, _____, _____

Education level: Elementary School _____ High School _____ Associate's Degree _____
Bachelor's Degree _____ Master's Degree _____
Doctorate Degree _____ Other _____

Economic: below \$20,000 _____ \$20,000-\$34,999 _____ \$35,000-\$42,999 _____
\$43,000-\$52,999 _____ above \$53,000 _____

Relationship to Survivor of the New London School Explosion: _____

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant Code: _____

“Hello, my name is Jamie Stroud and I’ll be conducting the interview today. As you know, this interview is part of a study concerning how certain events affect families across generations. This research is part of my doctoral dissertation, and one of the final steps I must take before being awarded my doctorate. The focus of our interview today will be the New London School Explosion of March 18, 1937, which directly affected a member of your family. If at any point in time during this interview you should need to take a break or end our discussion, please tell me immediately. Because the focus of my study deals with potentially sensitive family history, I also have information available concerning resources should you feel an emotional strain or exhaustion as a result of our conversations today.

“I will be asking you a series of open-ended questions concerning the New London School Explosion, with follow-up questions arising as needed for clarification. If you would rather not answer any of these questions we can skip it, but because this is a scientific study it is important that you answer my questions as honestly as possible. With your permission, I will be digitally recording this interview. Your name or any identifying information will not be transcribed.”

“I’d like to take a moment to go over the consent form.”

“Do you have any questions about the consent form or the study in general? Once you’ve signed the form, I will give you a copy for your records.”

“I’d like to start at the beginning, by asking, generally, how your family was involved in the New London School Explosion of 1937.”

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW GRID

How has the event impacted family Relations?	What meanings have the family members given to the event?	Research Questions
1. How has your family been most affected by the event? 2. What has been most challenging for you and your family in the aftermath of the explosion? 3. How easy or difficult has it been for your family to openly discuss the explosion and the family story after the explosion? 4. How did the explosion influence parenting over the generations? 5. How would you describe your family's geographical closeness over the past few generations? Emotional Closeness?	1. How was your family involved in the New London School Explosion of 1937? 2. How did you come to know about what happened to your family during and after the explosion? 3. How has the community been affected by the event? 4. How did your family deal with the explosion immediately after? Over time? 5. How has the extended family dealt with the explosion?	Interview Questions
		Themes
1. Silence in community 2. Short/long term relocation 3. Emotional problems 4. Overprotection of children	5. Community grew closer/bonded 6. Reunions helped the healing process 7. Faith in God 8. Element of irony	

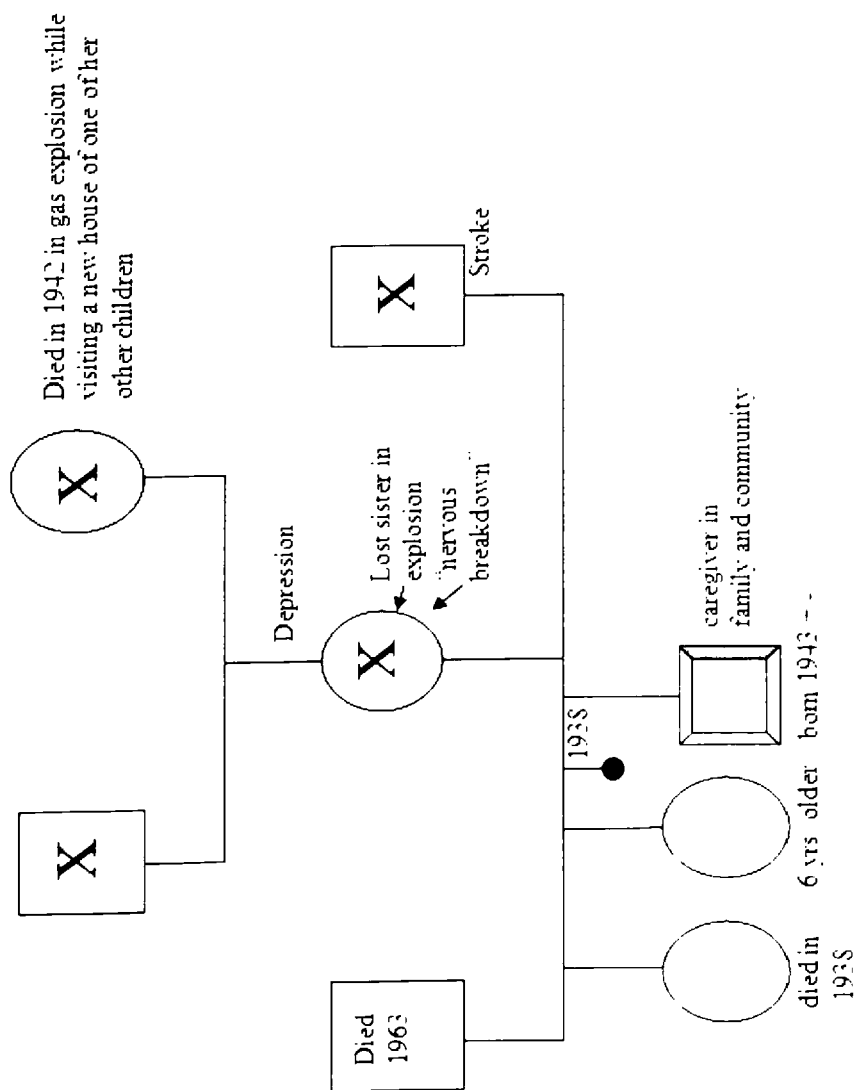
APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. How was your family involved in the New London School Explosion of 1937?
2. How did you come to know about what happened to your family during and after the explosion?
3. How has your family been most affected by the event?
4. How has the community been affected by the event?
5. How did your family deal with the explosion immediately after? Over time?
6. What has been most challenging for you and your family in the aftermath of the explosion?
7. How easy or difficult has it been for your family to openly discuss the explosion and the family story after the explosion?
8. How has the extended family dealt with the explosion?
9. How did the explosion influence parenting over the generations?
10. How would you describe your family's geographical closeness over the past few generations? Emotional closeness?

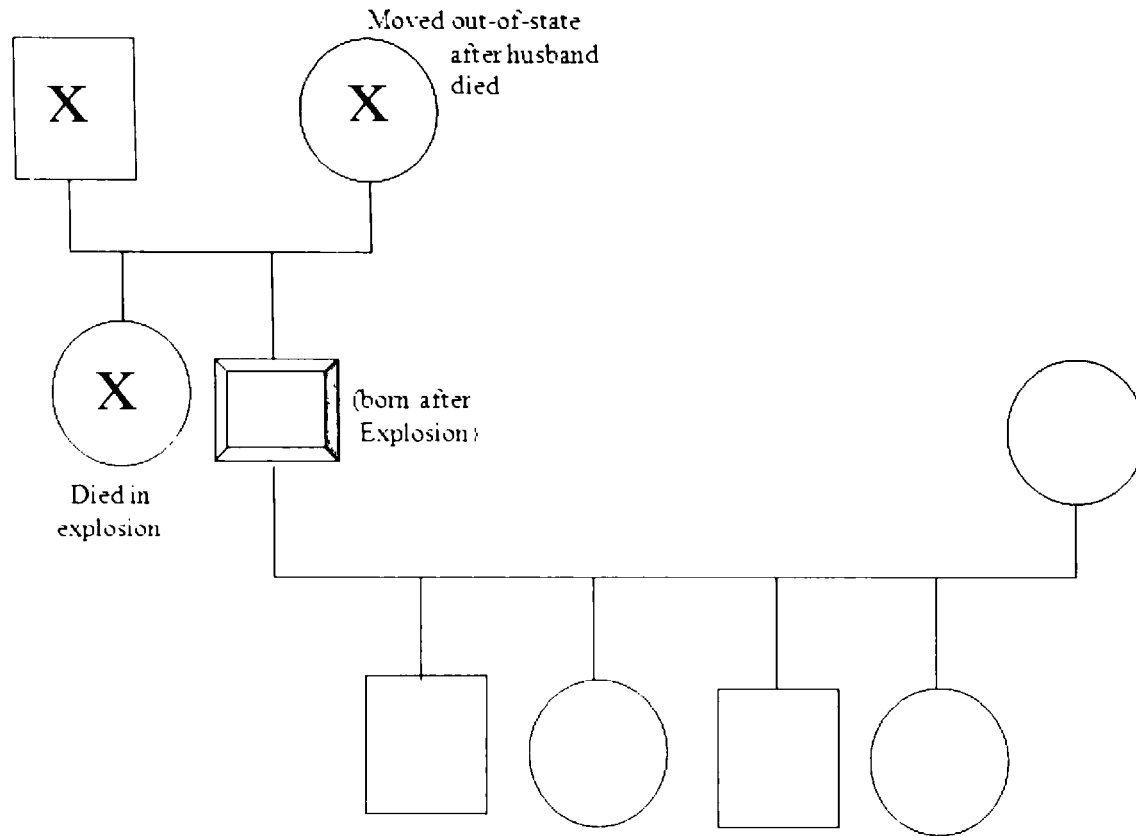
APPENDIX G
GENOGRAMS

Genogram- (P-1)



"Mother list sister in explosions also lost cousins- this participant lost aunt and cousins

Genogram- (P-2)

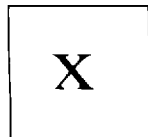


*lost sister in explosion

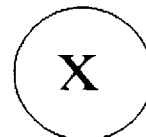
Genogram - (P-3)

Oil field worker
and rescuer during
explosion. Never talked
about experience.

died
2006

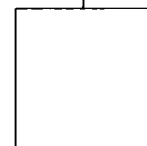
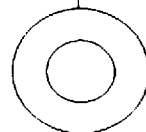
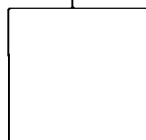
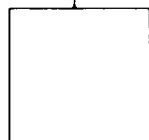


moved to New London
in 1936



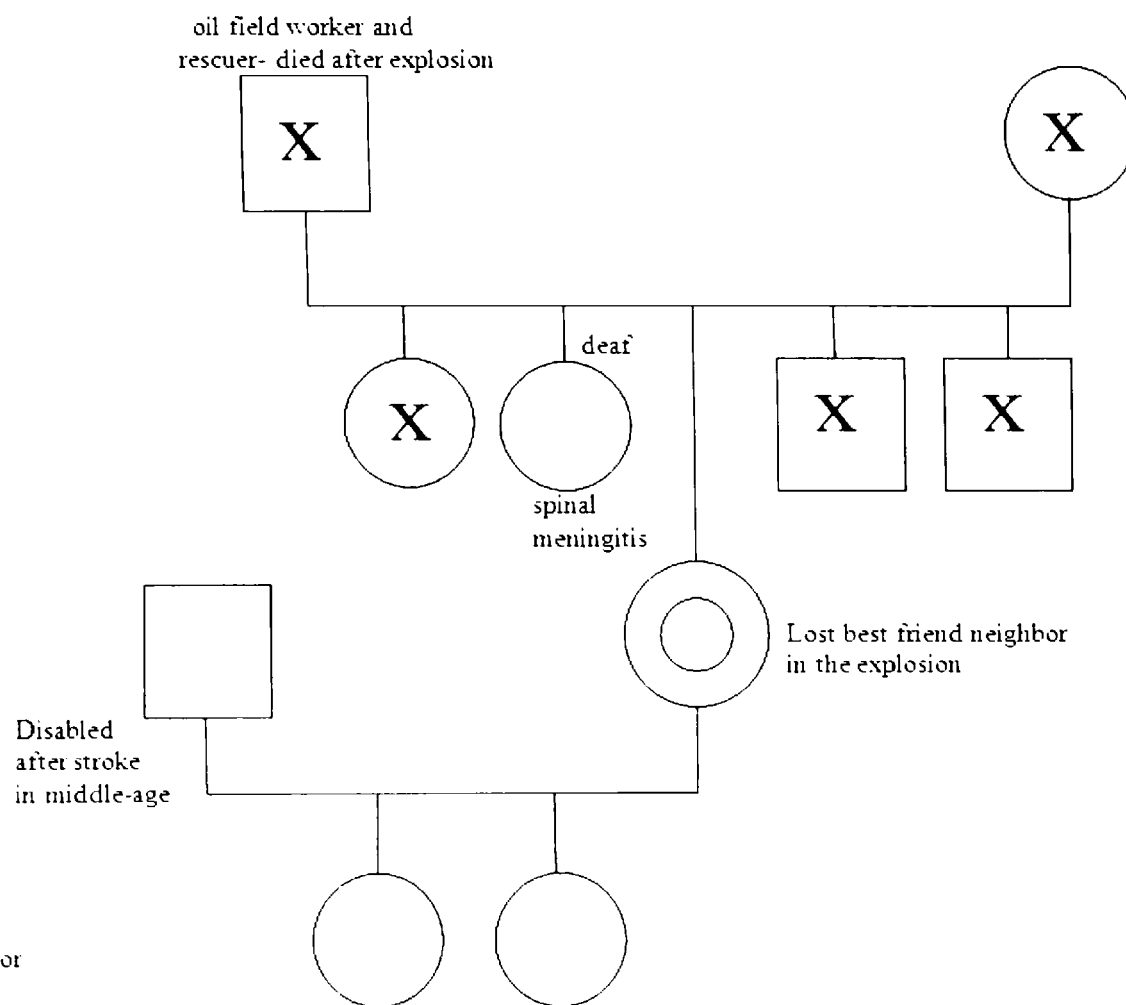
died
in 1938

married after explosion



31 yrs old

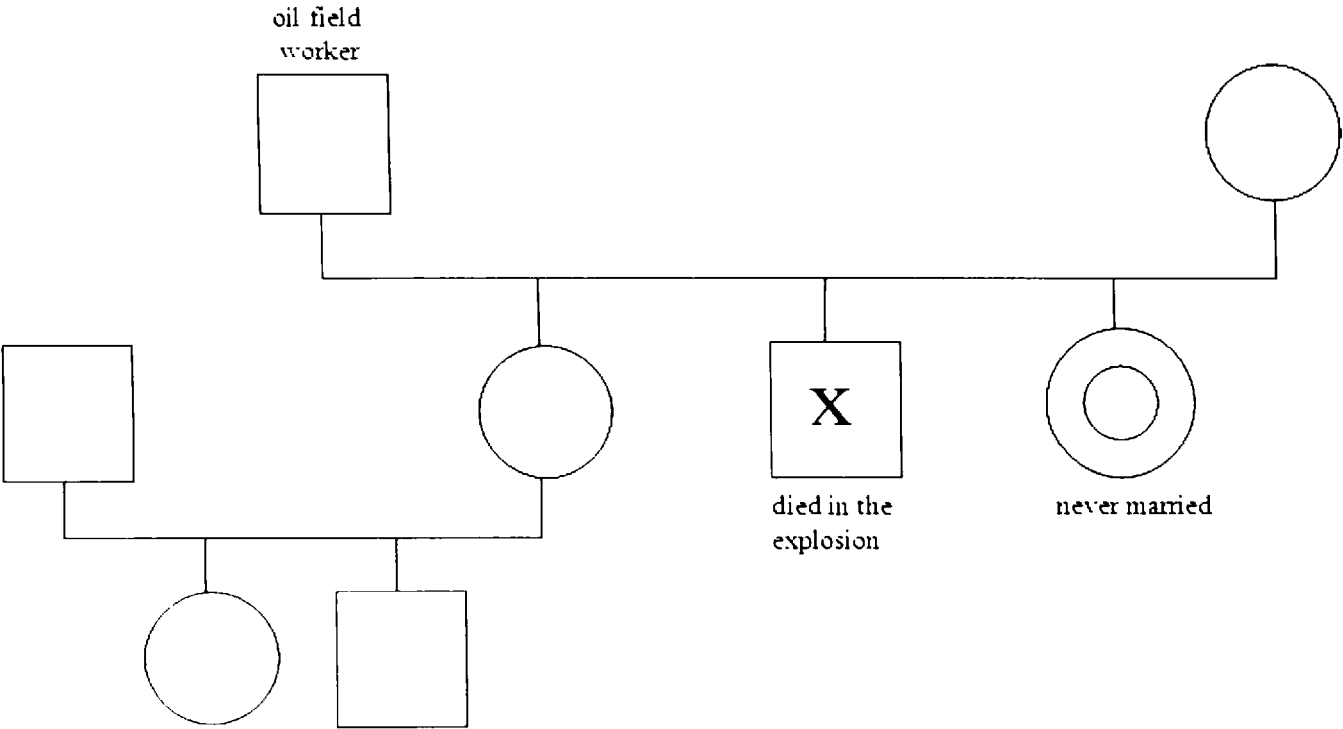
Genogram- (P-4)



*lost best friend & neighbor
in explosion

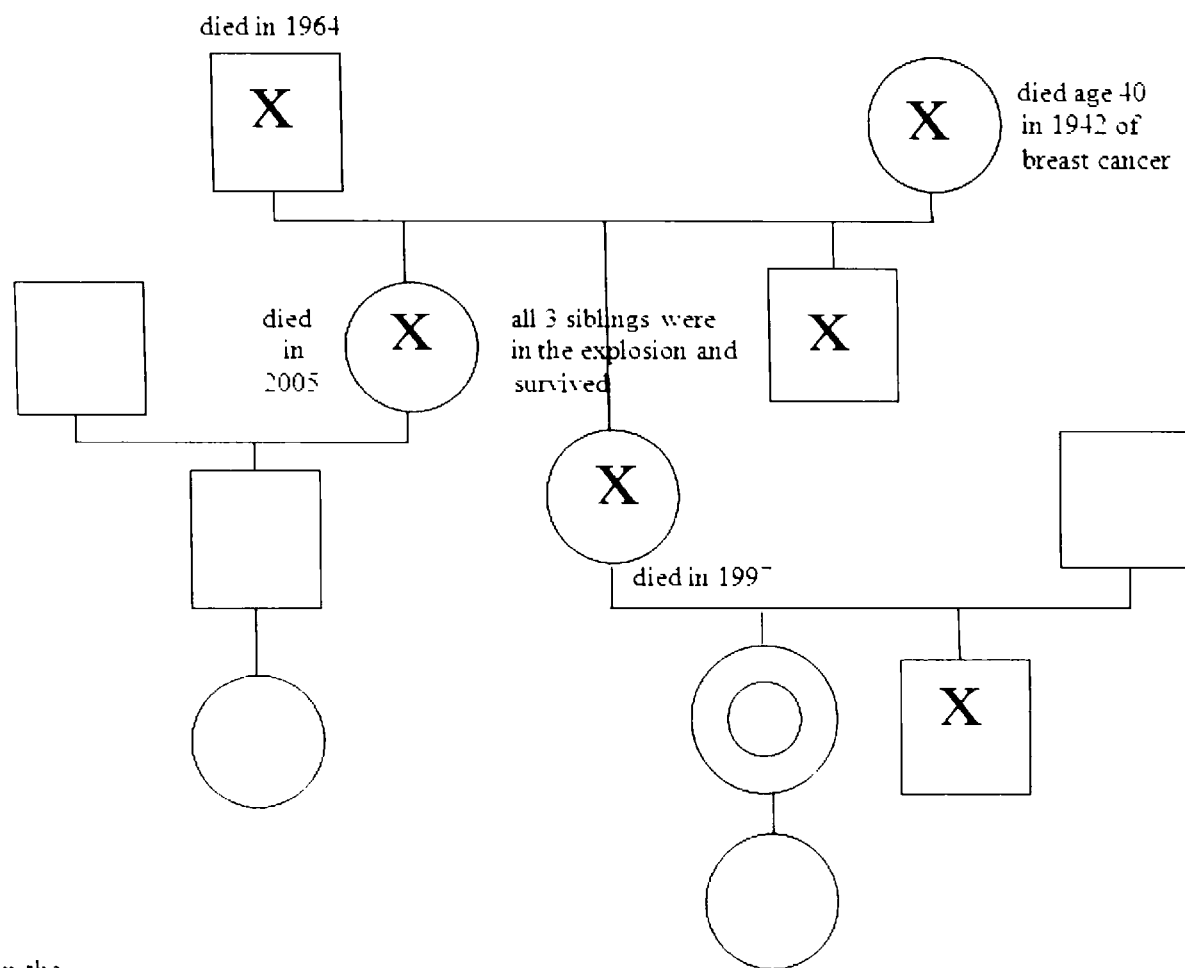
adulthood

Genogram- (P-6)



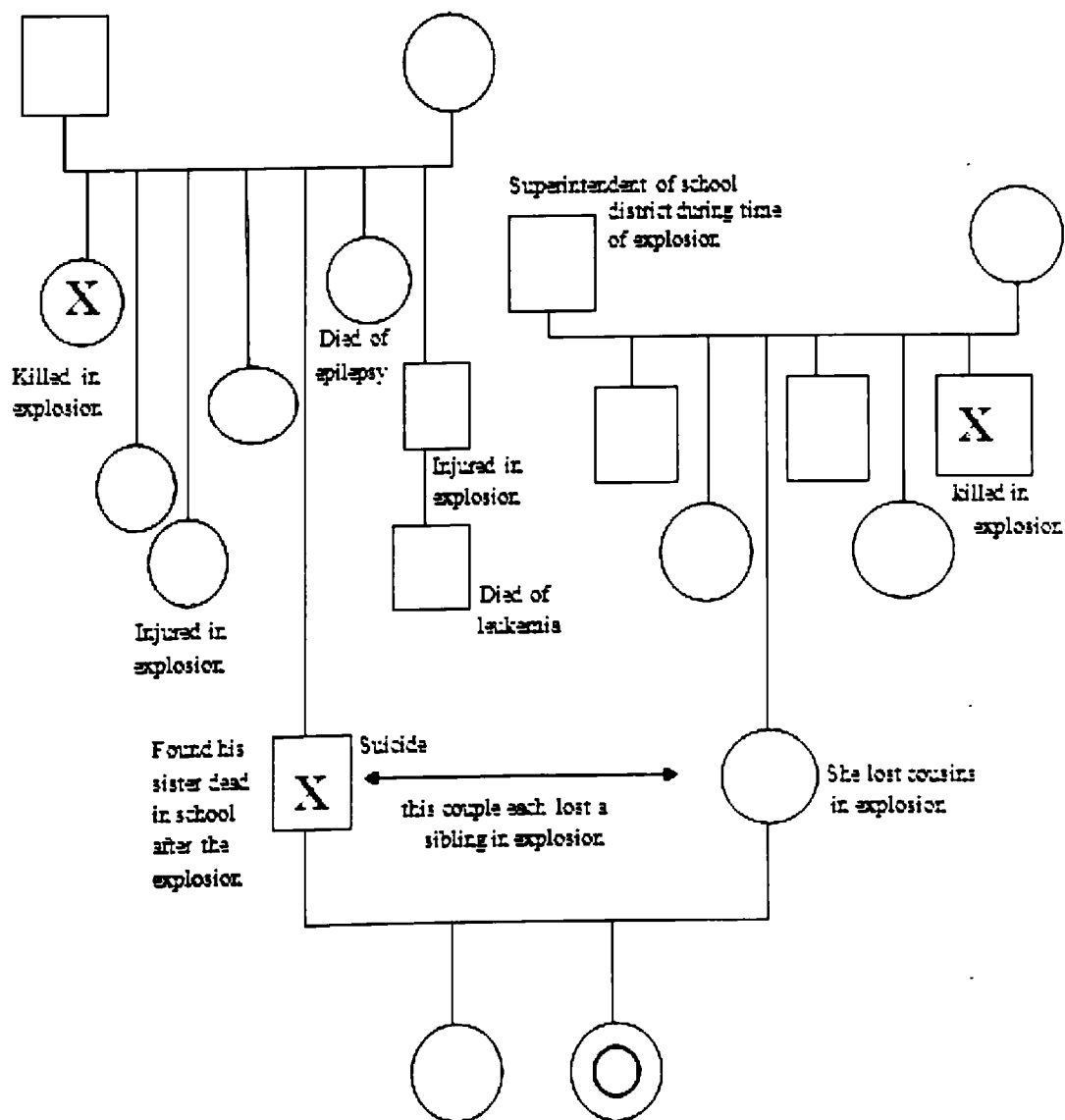
*Lost brother in explosion

Genogram - (P-)



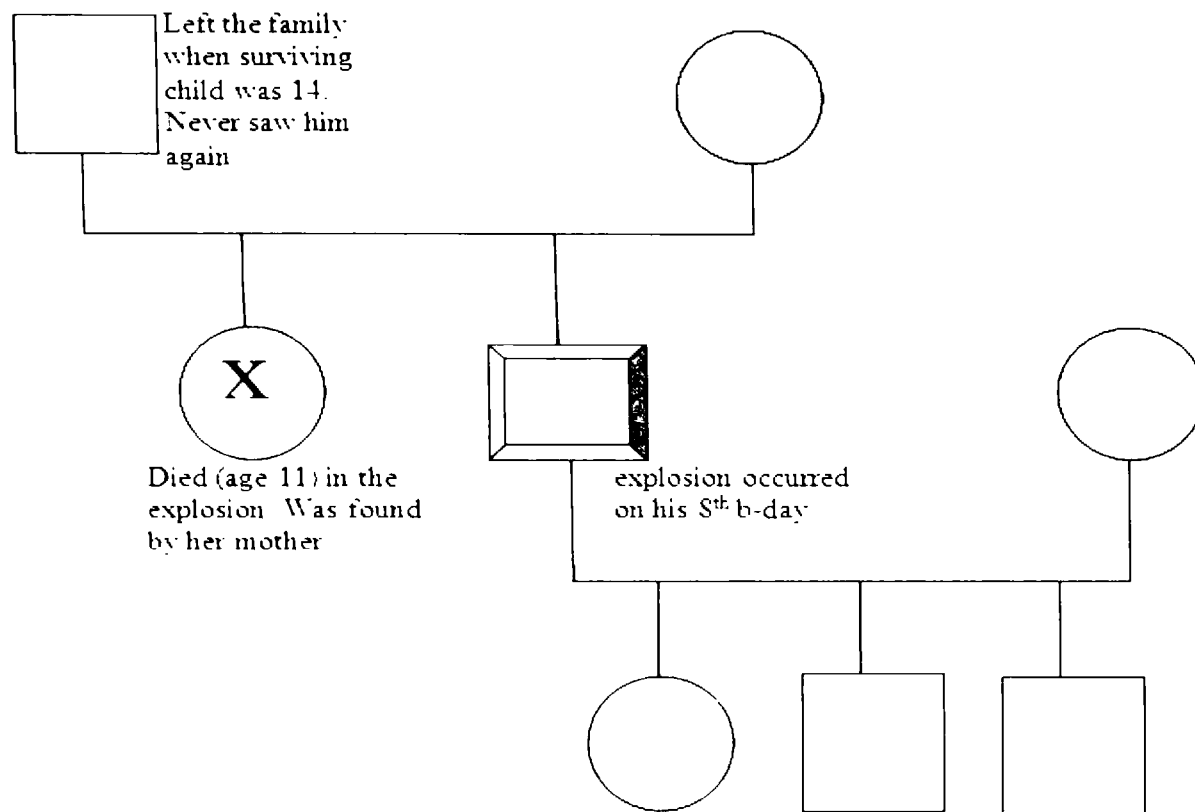
*mother, aunt, & uncle were in the explosion but survived

Geography- (P-8)



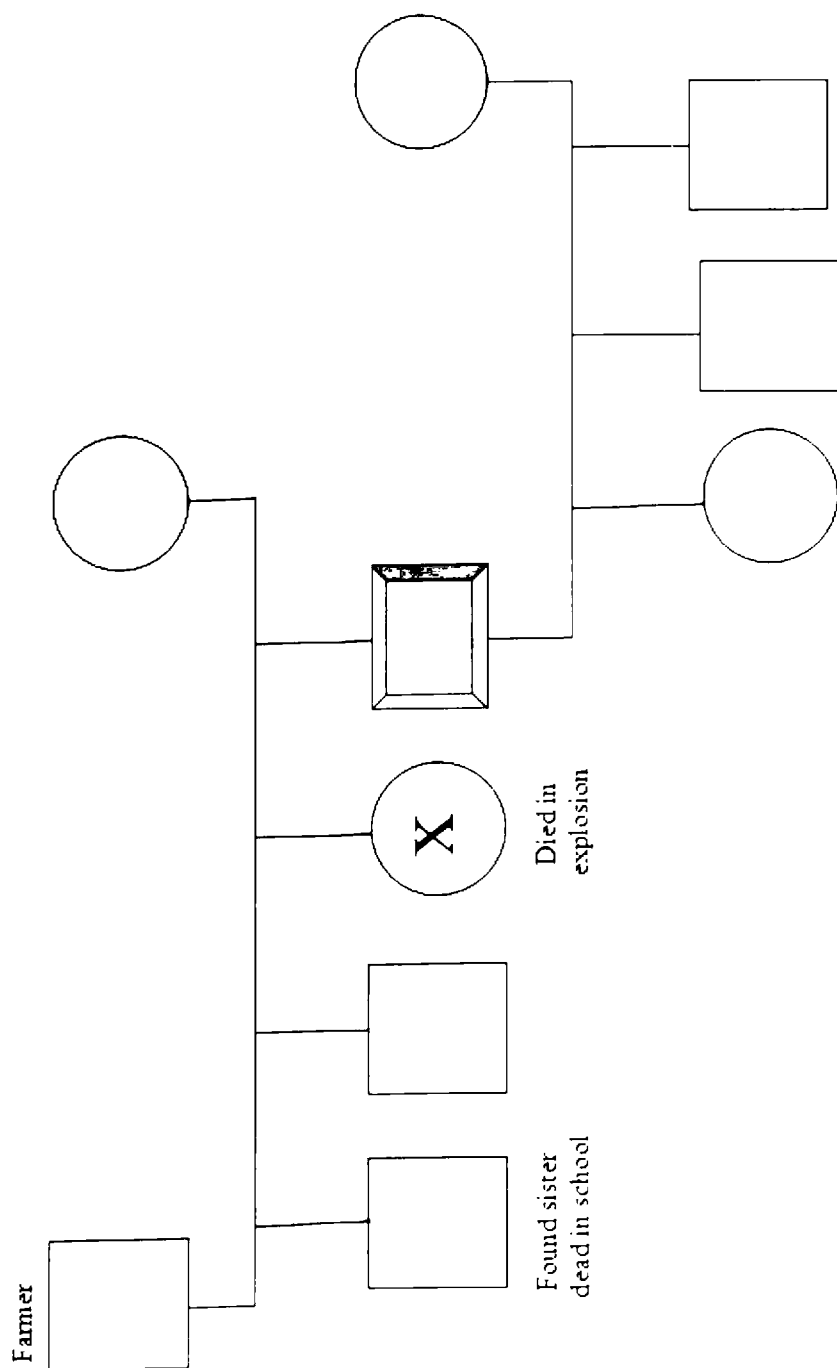
*mother and father each lost sibling- so this participant lost aunt and uncle in explosion

Genogram- (P-9)

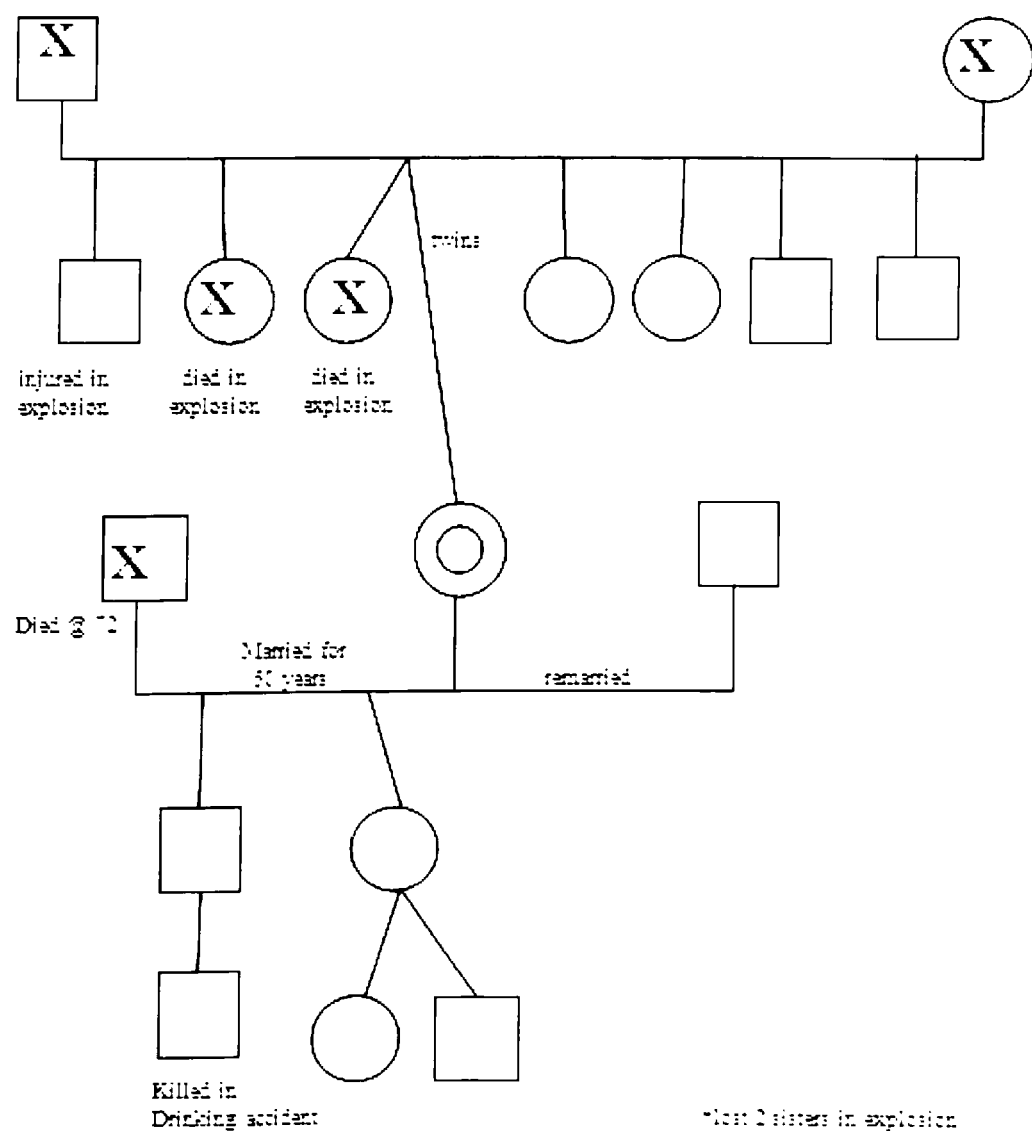


*Lost sister in the explosion

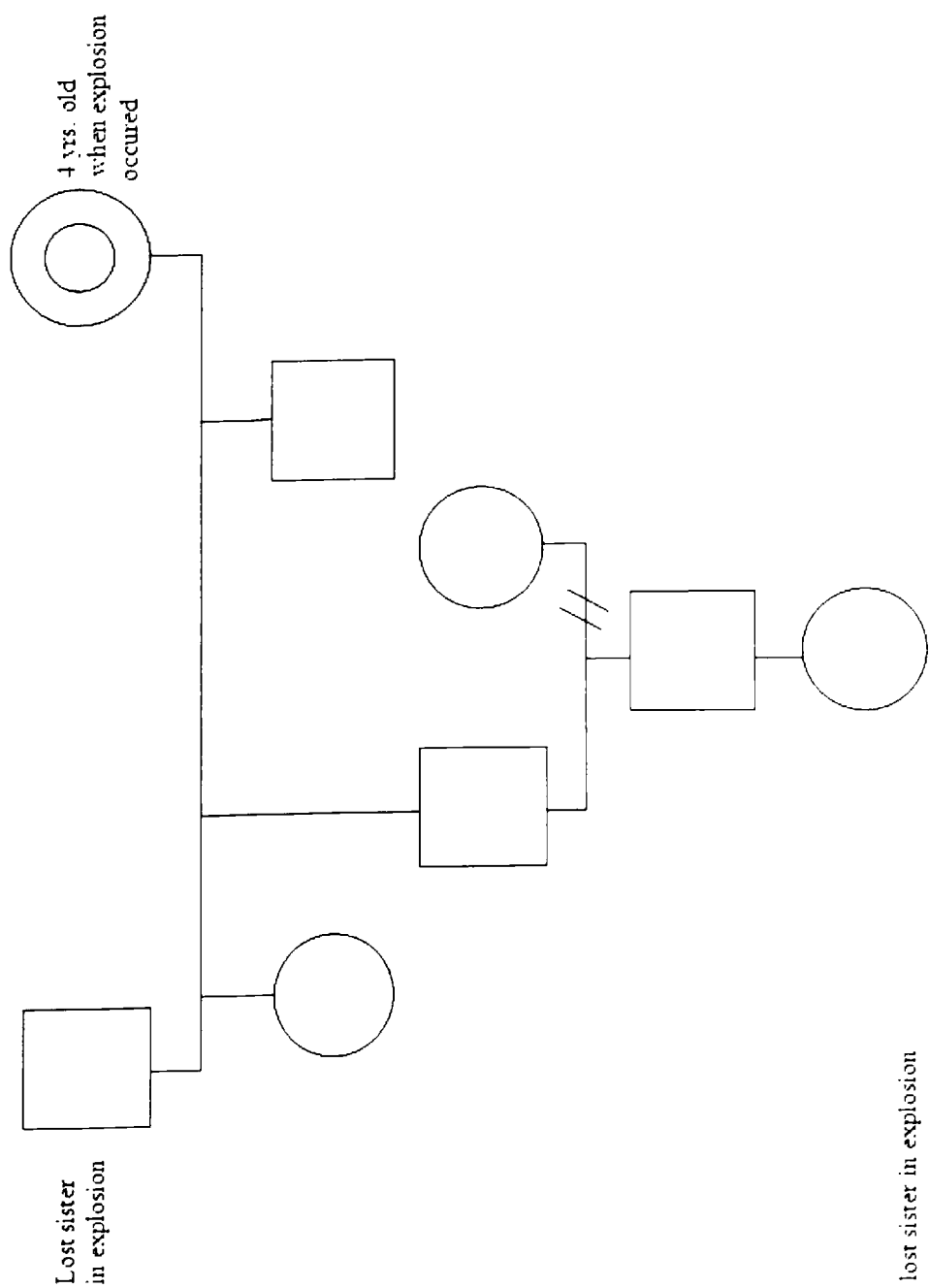
Genogram - (P-10)



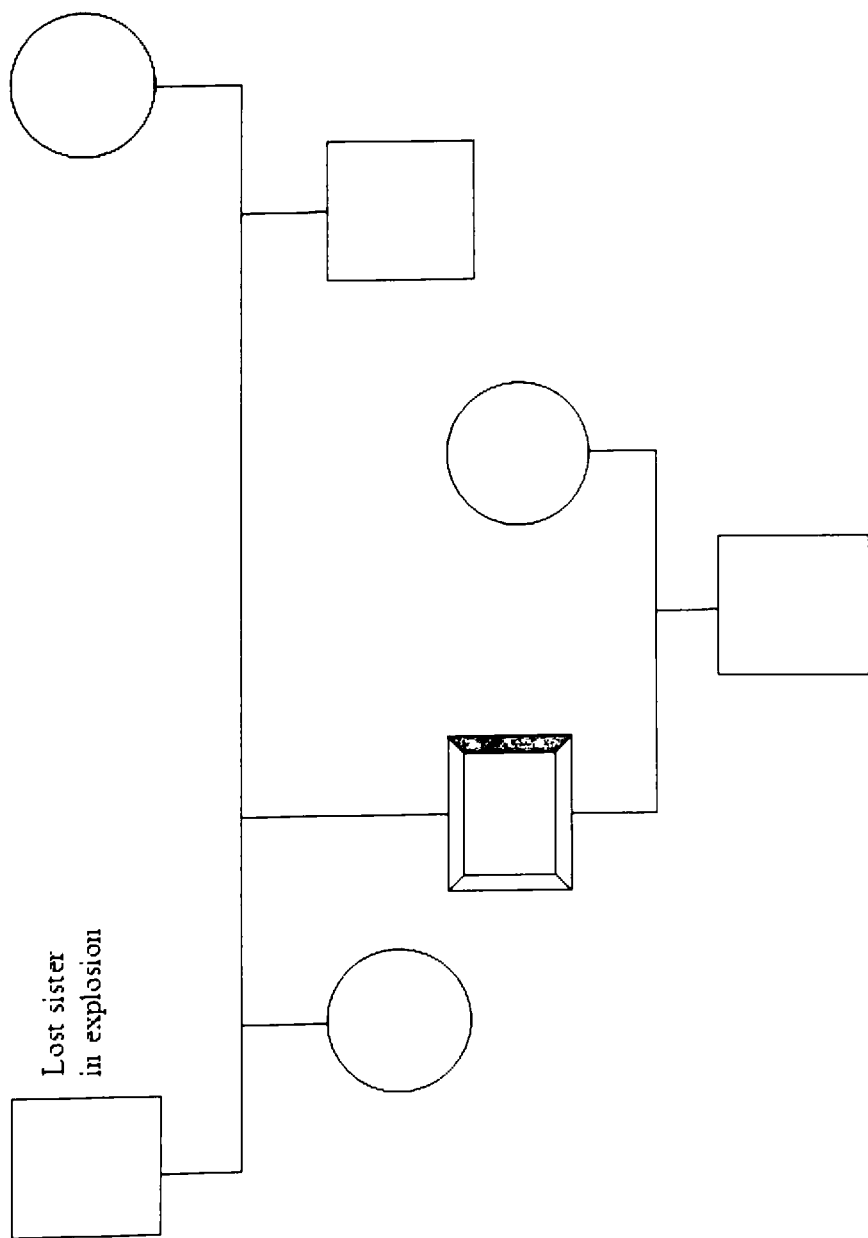
Genogram- P-11)



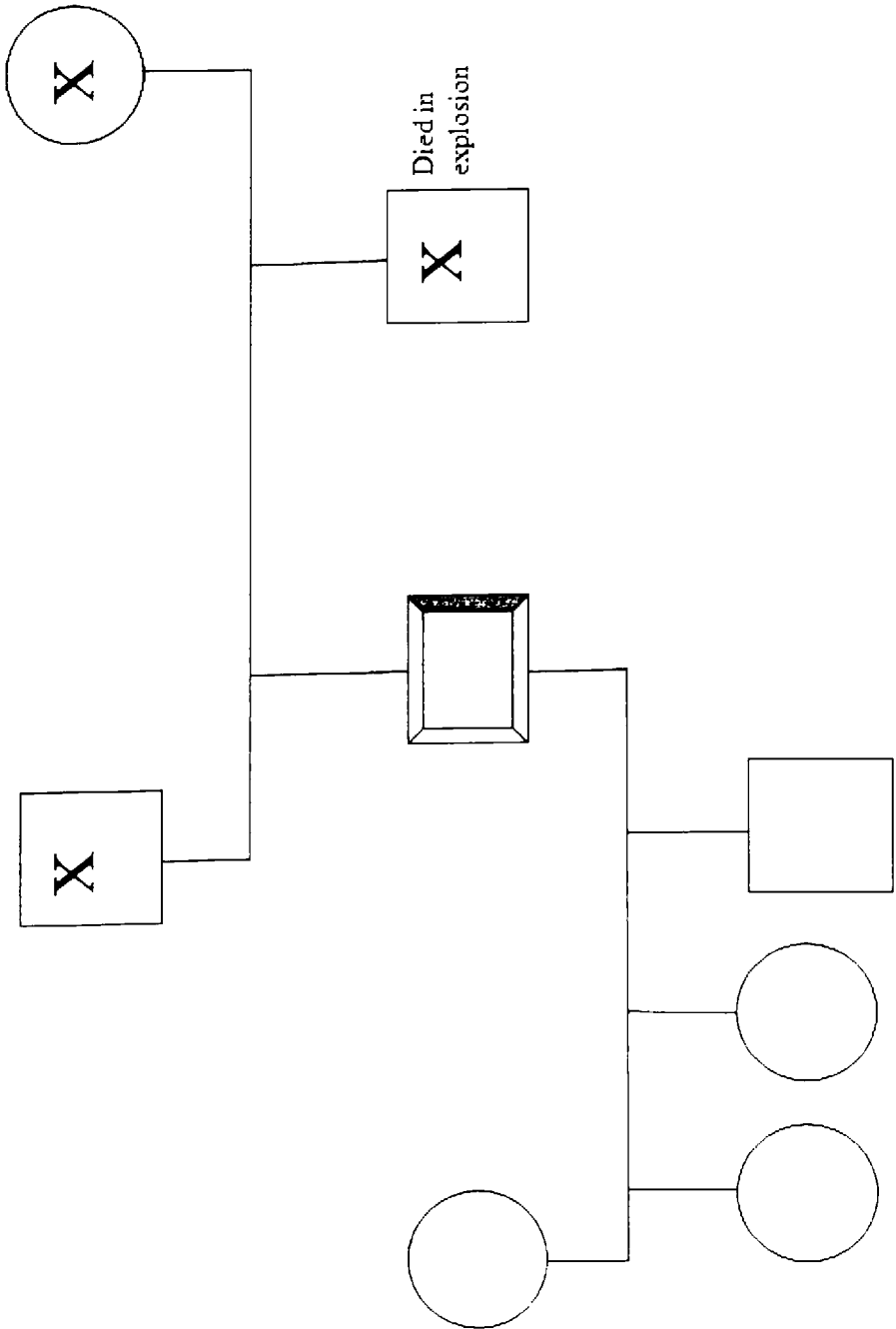
Genogram- (P-12)



Genogram- (P-13)

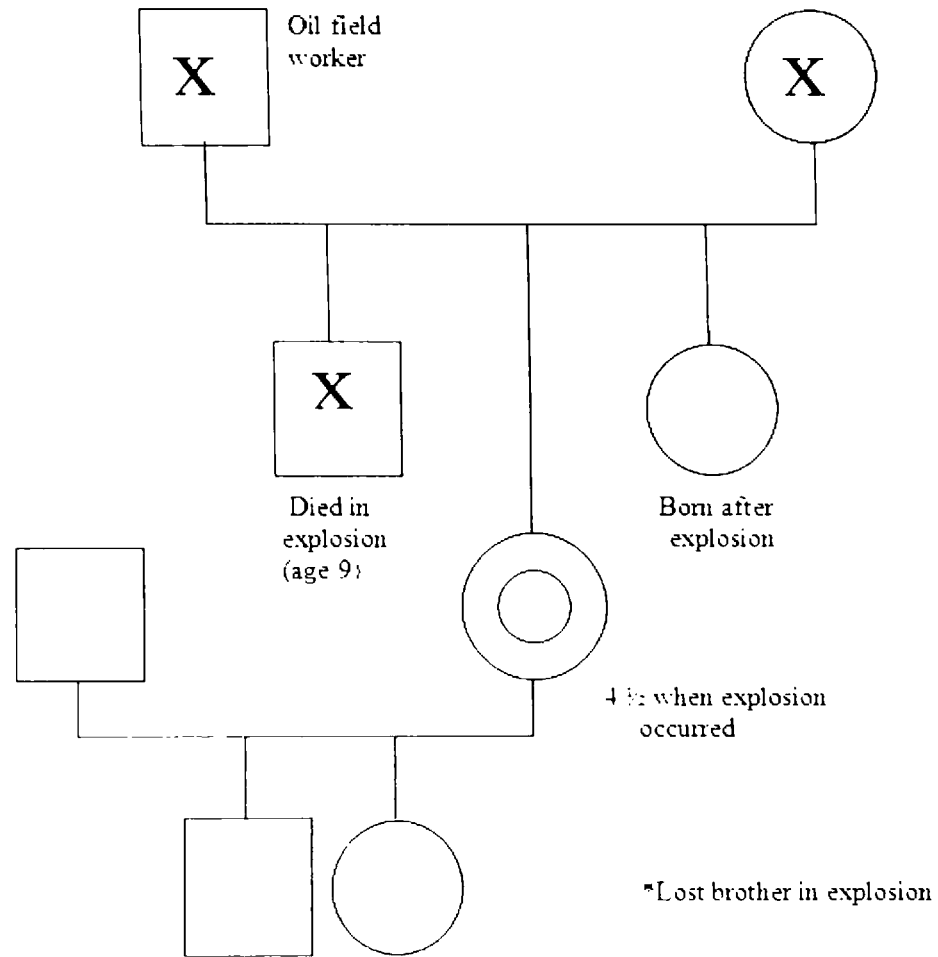


Genogram - (P-14)

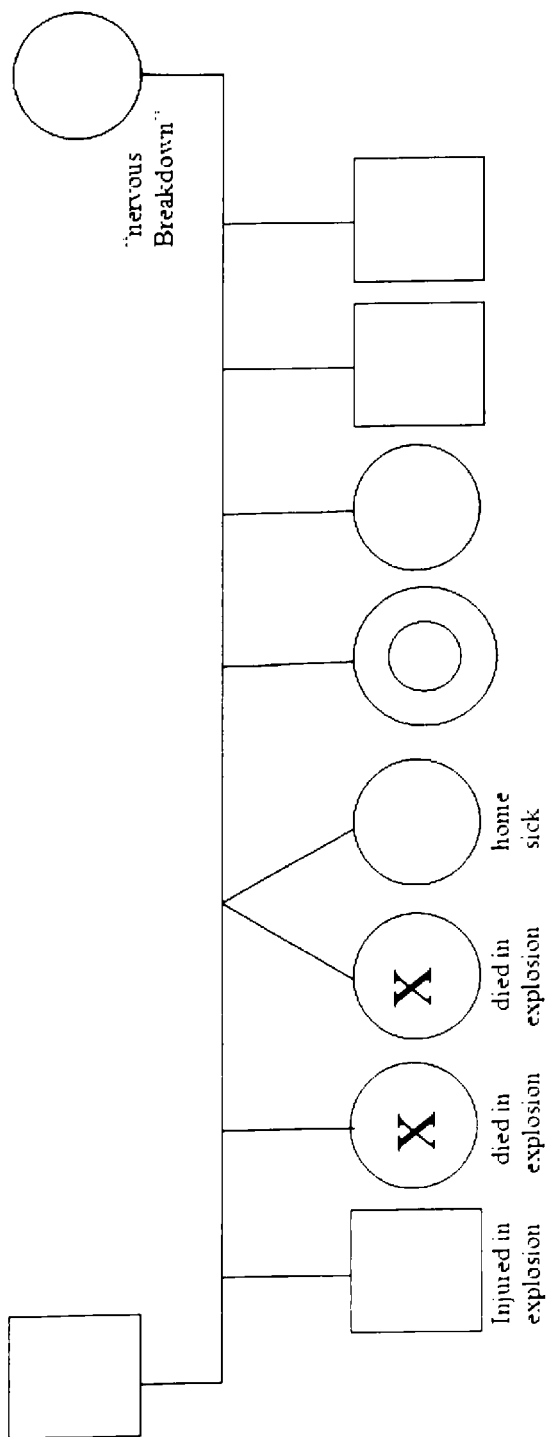


“Last brother in explosion

Genogram - (P-15)



Genogram- (P-16)



•Lost two sisters in the explosion