

The Spiritual Genogram in Training and Supervision

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Religious and spiritual issues often surface in couple and family counseling. In this article, the author describes the spiritual genogram, which is a blueprint of family members' multigenerational religious and spiritual affiliations, events, and conflicts. Used as a tool in both training and supervision, the spiritual genogram enables students and supervisees to make sense of their own religious and spiritual heritage and to explore the ways in which their experiences may affect their work with clients.

The genogram has become a standard tool used by counselors to collect information about various aspects of family life across many generations. Currently, family counselors from a variety of theoretical perspectives employ the genogram in their work with diverse clients (Carter & McGoldrick, 1998; Doherty & Baird, 1983; Garcia Preto, 1996; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Kuehl, 1995, 1996; Magnuson, Norem, & Skinner, 1995; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1996; Wachtel, 1982).

A genogram is a map of many generations of a family. This map includes the composition and structure of the family and the emotional and interactive processes in the family, and it employs symbols to indicate family membership and legal relationships (McGoldrick et al., 1996). Demographic information such as marriages, births, divorces, and deaths are depicted. Family members' notions about the nature of their relationships with one another are also noted. For example, alliances, conflicts, enmeshment, or disengagement may be recorded to give richness to the family blueprint (Friedman, Rohrbaugh, & Krakauer, 1988). One of the primary purposes for using the genogram is to assist clients in recognizing family patterns transmitted across generations and to reduce emotional reactivity among members during counseling (Kuehl, 1995). The spiritual genogram, developed through clinical experience specifically to identify spiritual and religious issues, provides clinicians with a mechanism for addressing an area of family life that is rarely broached in counseling. The spiritual genogram invites clients to gain fresh perspectives on how their religious or spiritual history continues to affect their current family functioning.¹ The purpose of this

article is to describe the spiritual genogram and to suggest ways in which it may be used in counselor training and supervision.

DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL GENOGRAM

Rationale

The vast majority of individuals in the United States report they are spiritual or religious (Richards & Bergin, 1997). According to a 1991 Gallup poll, 94% of adult Americans believe in God or a universal spirit. In addition, 68% of adult Americans are members of a church, synagogue, or place of worship, and 58% of the same population rate religion as being very important in their lives (Gallup, 1993). Despite these statistics, many couple and family counselors feel ill-equipped to deal with clients' spiritual or religious beliefs and practices. Some counselors have not been trained in working with clients' religious and spiritual issues (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1994; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Others are skeptical about religion and spirituality, and they perceive it as either unscientific, pathological, or both (Butler, 1990; Prest & Keller, 1993). Still others believe that religion and spirituality are best discussed within an ecclesiastical setting (Thayne, 1997). Marriage and family counselors' personal experiences with religion or spirituality and their assumptions about it also affect the way they work with clients' religious/spiritual concerns (Frame, 1996; Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994). Because some counselors may feel uncomfortable or wary about working with religious and spiritual issues, the spiritual genogram provides a familiar device with which to delve into this arena of clients' lives and relationships.

Constructing the Spiritual Genogram

First, counselors instruct clients about how to depict the family structure by drawing a three-generational genogram, including as much information as possible about family members. Using the symbols offered by McGoldrick et al. (1996), significant events and their dates such as births, marriages, divorces, remarriages, and deaths are included. Gen-

der of each person is indicated, as well as information about adoption, stillbirth, abortion, twins, unmarried couples, and the quality of family relationships.

Lewis (1989) suggested adding color coding to the standard genogram to indicate specific traits or characteristics of family members related to clinical issues. In the spiritual genogram, religious/spiritual traditions are indicated by a variety of colors. For example, Roman Catholics may be drawn in red, Protestants in orange, Jews in blue, Muslims in black, Mormons in gray, Buddhists in yellow, Unitarians in purple, agnostic or atheist in pink, personal spirituality in green, and no religious/spiritual affiliation in brown. If religious/spiritual heritage is unknown, no color is added. It is important to realize that there is much diversity within religions and even the same denominations. For example, Irish Catholics and American Catholics, though having much in common in their religion, also experience differences related to culture and region. Such similarities and differences should be explored in counseling.


The color coding on the spiritual genogram indicates interreligious marriages and reveals the multiplicity of religious backgrounds that affect clients. In fact, some couple or family conflicts previously outside the clients' awareness come into full view when the religious/spiritual history is depicted in full color on the genogram. Sources of attitudes, morals, values, and beliefs are also uncovered and can be addressed within the full scope of therapy.

Important events occurring in the religious life of family members should be noted on the genogram. For example, baptisms, first communions, confirmations, bar and bat mitzvahs, and other rituals and rites of passage may be included. If family members were highly involved in their religious congregations, significant events in the religious community can be added. These events could include building projects; death of a well-loved priest; a congregational relocation; sexual misconduct of a clergy member leading to dismissal; the closing of a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious center; changing racial/ethnic/class composition in the congregation; or other important events.


To indicate that particular family members left a religious/spiritual organization or movement, brackets [] are placed around these persons on the genogram. If family members converted to other religions or joined other types of churches, synagogues, or mosques, clients add another layer of color around the family member's symbol, indicating the

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nature of the change. Dates for leaving and joining religious organizations should be indicated. This aspect of the genograms reveals the stability or fluidity of religious/spiritual affiliation.

The symbol  illustrates religious or spiritual closeness between family members. For example, a Pentecostal family that attends church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, as well as Wednesday evening prayer meetings could be represented in this way. For this family, religion provides a bond that connects family members across generations. In addition, the spiritual genogram may reveal patterns of religious zealotry in a family. The counselor is then provided an opportunity to address a family's devotion to its religion and the implications it has for the members of the family. Or, on the other hand, perhaps the absence of an identified religion or spiritual practice is the hallmark of a family in which rationality, independence, and self-sufficiency are important. Such a family may have made deliberate choices not to raise their children in a particular religious or spiritual tradition, preferring to allow them to make such choices as adults.

Regardless of the circumstances, both the presence and absence of spiritual or religious practices can give counselors a glimpse of the meaning systems that organize the family.

Conflict between family members, which has religious or spiritual roots, is depicted by the symbol . Perhaps there is conflict between a father and son that occurred when the son married outside of his religion. Or perhaps a daughter and her husband have disagreements over the new baby's baptism because of differing traditions around this religious practice. Representation of religious conflicts on the genogram often reveals that other more obvious discord is grounded in religious or spiritual friction or disagreement. Counselors ask clients to describe the nature of religious/spiritual antagonism or conflict and to note the specifics on their genograms. When a divergence of beliefs or moral values is the source of the problem, those are recorded as well. Counselors then inquire about the extent to which these conflicts are being maintained in their current couple or family relationships.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL ISSUES IN TRAINING

Historically, spiritual and religious concerns rarely have been addressed in counselor training (Burke et al., 1999).

Some counselors consider them to be important topics for training, but they have not necessarily incorporated their beliefs into their curricula (Kelly, 1994; Pate & Bondi, 1992). Indeed, religion and spirituality appear to receive moderate to mixed attention in counselor training programs. Kelly (1994) surveyed 341 accredited and nonaccredited counselor education programs and found that only 25% included spiritual and religious issues as components in their courses. Pate and High (1995) found that of 60 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited programs surveyed, 60% addressed religion and spirituality in their social and cultural foundations area of study. In Kelly's (1997) survey of 48 programs accredited only by CACREP (i.e., those without multiple accreditations), religion and spirituality were included in a few more than half of these programs. Thus, although some attention is being given to religion and spirituality in counselor training, inclusion of these topics is far from universal.

Some counselor educators, however, are offering entire courses focused on spiritual and religious issues in counseling (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997; Ingersoll, 1997). Some of the course objectives included (a) having students recognize countertransference reactions to spiritual practices, (b) using basic counseling skills to learn about clients' religious or spiritual beliefs and experiences, (c) understanding religion and spirituality as connected to clients' cultural background, and (d) supporting students' own exploration of their spiritual journeys (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997; Ingersoll, 1997). Efforts to include religion and spirituality in counselor training involve both an infusion model (Burke et al., 1999), in which these topics are integrated into existing coursework, and stand-alone courses (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997; Ingersoll, 1997) that focus specifically on students' learning to work with clients for whom religion and spirituality are important.

THE SPIRITUAL GENOGRAM AS A TRAINING TOOL

Counselors and counseling students may avoid addressing clients' religious and spiritual concerns in part because of discomfort related to their own unresolved personal struggles with these issues (Frame, 1996). In addition, counselor educators and their students may worry about value conflicts that may arise between themselves and their clients (Thayne, 1997). The spiritual genogram, when used in a training setting, can assist educators and students in increasing self-awareness. Students are asked to construct a spiritual genogram (as described above) based on the religious or spiritual traditions of their family of origin across three generations.

Often, the construction of a genogram leads students to connect with their families of origin. In many instances, such contacts enable students to retrieve vital information from the past and to renegotiate relationships in the present (Bowen,

1978; Framo, 1976; Williamson, 1981). Students may request information from parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins to gain insight into religious or spiritual events and meanings construed by the family. If feasible, a face-to-face meeting between students and their family members is recommended (Hof & Berman, 1986).

After they have color coded the genograms to reflect their particular religious or spiritual heritage, students are asked to respond to the following questions regarding their genogram:

1. What role, if any, did religion/spirituality play in your life when you were growing up? What role does it play now?
2. What specific religious/spiritual beliefs do you consider most important for you now? How are those beliefs a source of connection or conflict between you and other family members?
3. What religious/spiritual rituals did you participate in as a child or adolescent? How important were they in your family of origin? Which ones do you still engage in? Which ones have you let go? What new rituals have you adopted as an adult? How do these rituals connect to your religious/spiritual belief system?
4. What view did/does your religious/spiritual tradition hold about gender? About ethnicity? About sexual orientation? How have these beliefs affected you and your extended family?
5. What patterns of behavior and relationship resulting from religion/spirituality emerge for you as you study your genogram? How are you currently maintaining or diverting from those patterns?
6. How does your religious/spiritual history connect with your attitudes toward working with clients' religious or spiritual issues? What new insights or concerns occur to you based on the discoveries made through the genogram?

Students are invited to share their insights with classmates and to solicit input from the instructor and their peers regarding their posture toward working with religious or spiritually oriented clients. As a result of this exercise, participants often gain a deeper understanding of their own spiritual or religious path and are able to see the assets and liabilities they bring to the counseling enterprise.

CASE EXAMPLE

Rob, a 28-year-old family counseling student, completed a genogram regarding his family's religious and spiritual traditions. Rob indicated to the instructor that completing the genogram would be difficult because his family was agnostic. Rob stated, "In my family, we pride ourselves in being liberal intellectuals. We don't go for that hocus-pocus stuff of religion or spirituality." After consulting with his parents, grandparents, and siblings, Rob returned with his genogram (see Figure 1). None of Rob's family members indicated any involvement with religion or spirituality. However, in his paper, Rob reported discovering that his paternal great-grandfather Rudolph once had been a Lutheran minister.

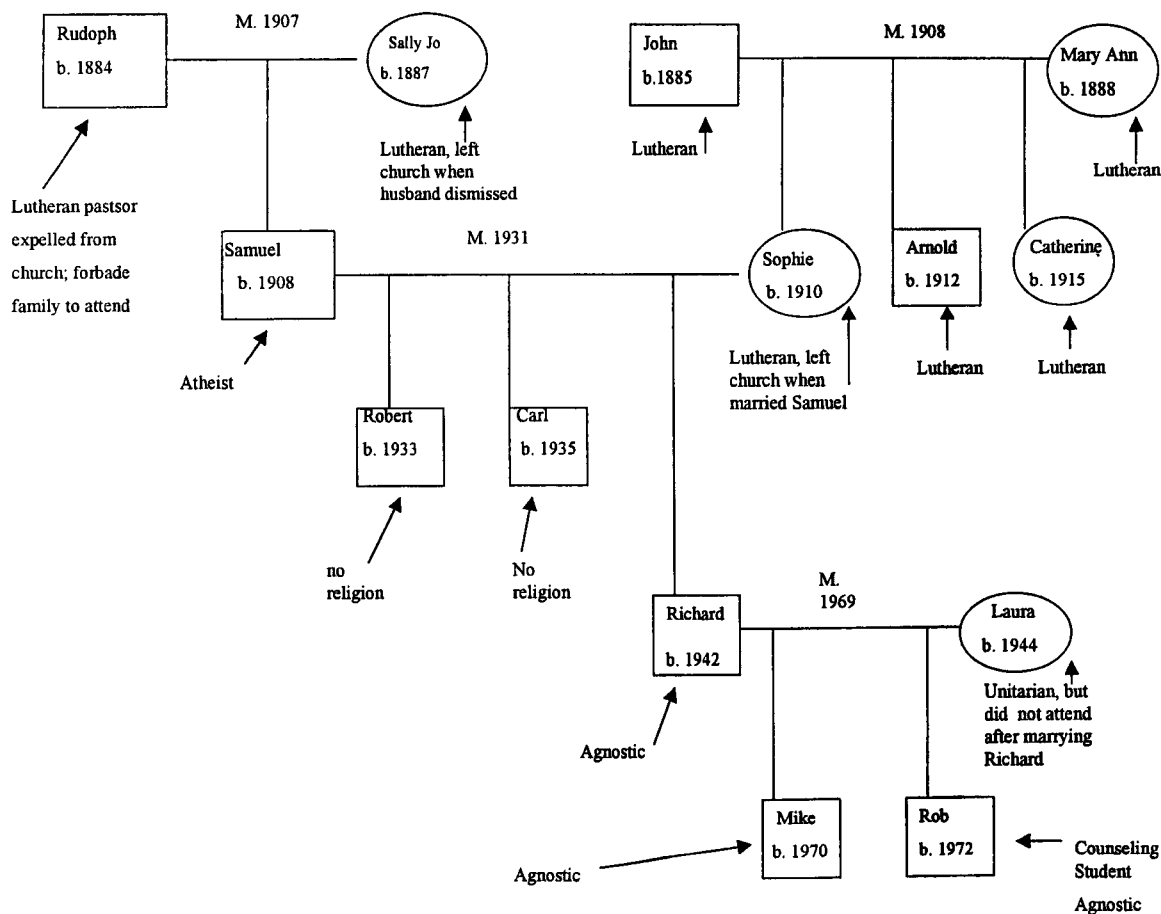


FIGURE 1: Rob's Spiritual Genogram

According to Rob's grandfather, Rudolph was dismissed from his post because of what church officials called "heretical preaching." As a result, Rudolph forbade his children from attending church or practicing any kind of religion—a pattern that persisted into the fourth generation.

After reflecting on his experience growing up in an environment hostile to religion and spirituality, Rob revealed that the thought of engaging clients in conversation regarding their spirituality created an inner conflict for him. He stated, "If I were to go there [to explore spirituality or religion] with a client, I'd feel like I was betraying my family." Rob's family had construed themselves as people who did not need a religion or a higher power. This family story served to keep successive generations loyal to Rudolph, who was mistreated by his church.

Once Rob understood the roots of his family's abhorrence of religion, he reported that he did not feel as defensive about the issue as he had prior to constructing his genogram. In addition, Rob indicated that despite his skepticism he was ready to learn about the ways in which clients and others perceived religion and spirituality to be positive forces in their lives.

THE SPIRITUAL GENOGRAM IN SUPERVISION

A counselor is both a person and a professional. In the training of family counselors, debate has centered on which of these aspects of the trainee to emphasize (Deacon, 1996). Psychoanalysis was one of the first fields of therapy to use the person of the therapist in training (Aponte & Winter, 1987). Therapists such as Satir and Bowen expected trainees to complete some family-of-origin work as part of their educational and supervisory experiences (Aponte & Winter, 1987; Bowen, 1972; Liddle, 1982). Other training approaches, such as those of Haley and Minuchin, focused on technical skills, therapist behaviors, and responses (Deacon, 1996).

Using the spiritual genogram in supervision requires that clinical supervisors ascribe to the notion that counselors must not only learn how to do counseling but how to be a counselor and a person (Whitaker & Keith, 1981). The assumption is that family counselors grow up in families and tend to repeat the same patterns of interacting in different systems. Counselors bring their life experiences, their worldviews, and their personal relationships into the counseling process (Aponte &

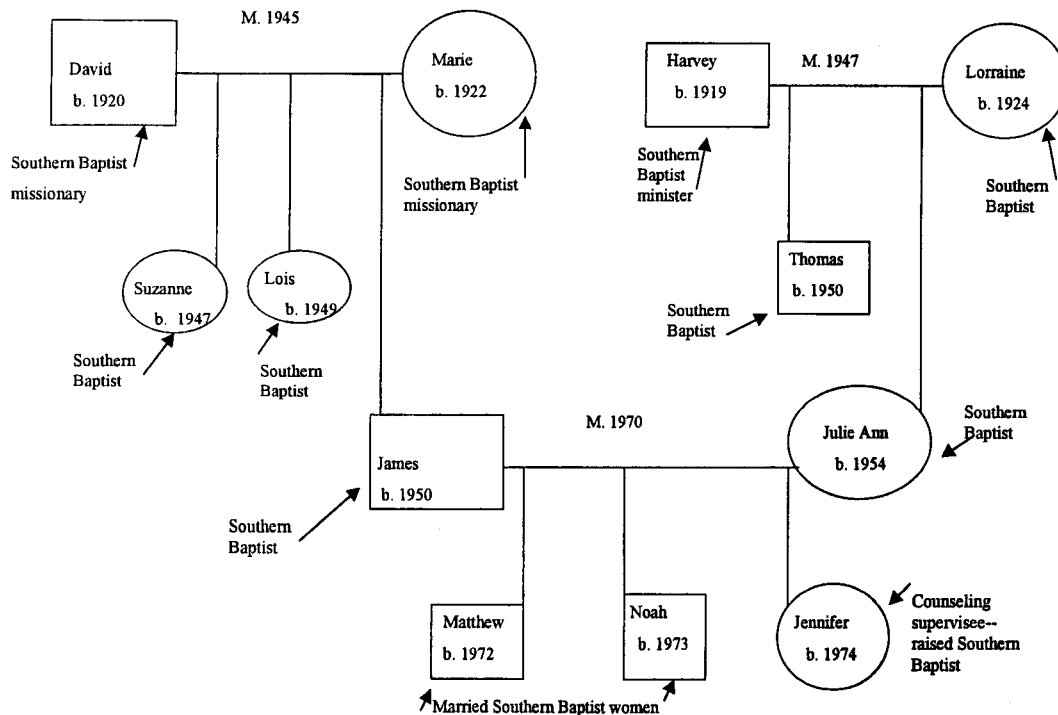


FIGURE 2: Jennifer's Spiritual Genogram

Winter, 1987). One of the opportunities available to clinical supervisors is to assist counselors in resolving issues from their families of origin to improve their work with clients.

Using the spiritual genogram with supervisees is especially helpful in their response to what Guerin and Hubbard (1987) called "clinical triggers." "Trigger families" (Deacon, 1996, p. 174) enter counseling with issues similar to those that the counselor had with his or her family of origin. When this interaction occurs, it makes the counselor more vulnerable to being inducted into the client's system (Kramer, 1985). Having supervisees construct spiritual genograms may increase their awareness of how religious and spiritual issues in their families may affect their effectiveness in working with their clients.

In addition to having supervisees respond to the questions about their religious and spiritual history outlined above, the following questions may aid supervisees in detecting connections between their own issues and those of their clients:

1. In what ways are your family traditions similar to or different from those of your clients? How do you expect that these similarities or differences will affect your clinical work with your clients?
2. What religious or spiritual issues raised by your clients' "trigger" concerns you, based on your family of origin? How do these triggers support or impede your effectiveness with your clients?
3. What ethical concerns are raised for you based on the results of your spiritual genogram and the issues raised by your clients?

4. What, if any, personal therapy is indicated by the patterns revealed in your spiritual genogram?

CLINICAL SUPERVISION EXAMPLE

Jennifer, a counselor trainee, was providing couples counseling to Elaine and Mark. In the first session, Elaine and Mark reported that they were having difficulty deciding whether to get married, having lived together for 3 years. Jennifer established rapport easily with both Elaine and Mark, encouraged each to voice his or her feelings regarding the decision to marry or not, and invited each partner to express his or her concerns about marriage. In the second session, Elaine revealed that she was reluctant to marry Mark because he was not Jewish. Elaine said that her parents had "always expected me to marry a Jew" and that although she loved Mark, she was concerned about whether her parents and extended family "would ever accept him." In responding to Elaine, Mark minimized the importance of religion and said, "Religion hasn't been very important to either of us. I'm sure we can overcome whatever problem might develop."

Despite her skill at facilitating Elaine and Mark's communication and helping them clarify the issues interfering with a decision to marry, Jennifer encouraged Elaine to "hold her ground" and supported Elaine's "desire to carry on a tradition." Jennifer's supervisor, Marlene, raised with Jennifer the issue of her apparent alliance with Elaine. Jennifer responded by saying she did not feel any more aligned with Elaine than with Mark.

During the intervening week, Marlene asked Jennifer to complete a spiritual genogram of her family of origin in order for Jennifer to explore family patterns that might be connected to her work with Elaine and Mark. Jennifer brought her spiritual genogram to the next supervision session (see Figure 2). Jennifer's spiritual genogram revealed that every member of her immediate and extended family was Southern Baptist. Her paternal grandfather was a Southern Baptist missionary, her maternal grandfather was a Southern Baptist minister, and both of Jennifer's older brothers had married Southern Baptist women. Marlene asked Jennifer how the patterns in her spiritual genogram were connected to Elaine and Mark's dilemma. Jennifer responded, "I guess Elaine reminds me of myself. I am dating a man who is not a Southern Baptist, and by completing this genogram, I realized that I probably cannot marry him. If I did, I'd be the only person in three generations or more who didn't marry within the faith." By employing the spiritual genogram in supervision, Marlene helped Jennifer see her overidentification with her client and helped Jennifer separate her personal issues from Elaine and Mark's.

POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS

The spiritual genogram is a tool that helps clients, trainees, and supervisees organize their religious and spiritual genealogy across several generations. Using the genogram in training and supervision is beneficial because it enables educators and supervisors to deal with religious or spiritual issues that arise in counseling, training, and supervision. This instrument assists supervisors and supervisees in seeing the links between their family-of-origin issues and the couple or family problems that arise among their clients. On occasion, the information uncovered by constructing a spiritual genogram becomes a metaphor for students' therapeutic issues.

The pitfalls associated with using the spiritual genogram center around supervisor and supervisee comfort with religious and spiritual issues in therapy. If all of the participants (clients, counselors, and supervisors) are not open to discussing religious or spiritual concerns in the therapeutic setting, then the procedure may be contraindicated. Also, if counselor educators feel unprepared to address religious or spiritual issues in the context of treatment or training, consultation with colleagues or with clergy may be warranted before the spiritual genogram can be used effectively.

The spiritual genogram's usefulness is directly related to the goal of better serving clients' needs. Therefore, issues related to religious doctrines, or a trainee's spiritual disciplines such as meditation, fasting, or purification rites, are better addressed by religious or spiritual leaders. As with any counseling approach or technique, it is critical to recognize

the boundaries of our competence as counselors and counselor educators.

CONCLUSION

The spiritual genogram process enables people to gather intergenerational data about their religious and spiritual traditions, practices, beliefs, and experiences. It enhances the standard genogram (McGoldrick et al., 1996) on which clients record basic family-of-origin information. The spiritual genogram provides a method for students and supervisees to become aware of the ways in which their religious or spiritual heritage impacts therapeutic work with their clients.

NOTE

1. The terms *spirituality* and *religion* are not used interchangeably within this article. Instead, spirituality refers to "a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension, and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be Ultimate" (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988, p. 10). Religion, on the other hand, refers to the institutionalization of spirituality in the tradition of a particular church, synagogue, sect, or community.

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