

## THE SPIRITUAL GENOGRAM IN FAMILY THERAPY

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*Spiritual and religious issues often surface during marital and family therapy. In this article, I describe a spiritual genogram that is a multigenerational map of family members' religious and spiritual affiliations, events, and conflicts. Used as a tool in family therapy, the spiritual genogram enables clients to make sense of their families' religious/spiritual heritage and to explore the ways in which their experiences impact present couple or family issues.*

The genogram has long been a popular tool used by therapists to gather information about families over many generations. Although much early writing about genograms was approached from a Bowenian theoretical perspective (Carter & Orfanidis, 1976; Guerin & Pendagast, 1976; Pendagast & Sherman, 1977), currently, family therapists schooled in a variety of theories employ the genogram in their work with different populations (Carter & McGoldrick, 1998; Doherty & Baird, 1983; Garcia Preto, 1996; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Kuehl, 1995, 1996; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999; Magnuson, Norem, & Skinner, 1995; Wachtel, 1982).

A genogram is a blueprint of multiple generations of a family. It includes family structure and composition, using symbols to depict family membership, biological, emotional, and legal relationships, and nodal events (McGoldrick et al., 1999). Family members' perceptions of the nature of their relationships, such as cutoffs, conflict, and alliances, are also included (Friedman, Rohrbaugh, & Krakauer, 1988). The genogram has been particularly useful in helping clients learn about the transmission of family patterns across generations and to reduce emotional reactivity in therapy (Kuehl, 1995). Used specifically to identify spiritual and religious issues, the spiritual genogram provides clinicians with a tool for approaching an aspect of family life that is rarely addressed in therapy. The spiritual genogram enables clients to gain a new perspective on ways in which their religious/spiritual heritage continues to affect their current beliefs and practices. The purpose of this article is to describe how to construct a spiritual genogram for use with families.

### THE SPIRITUAL GENOGRAM PROCESS

#### *Rationale*

Despite the fact that most Americans report that they believe in God and 75% call themselves religious (Cadwallader, 1991), many marriage and family therapists feel challenged to deal with clients' religious/spiritual beliefs and practices and lack training in this area (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1994; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Others mistrust religion and spirituality and view it as either unscientific or pathological (Butler, 1990; Prest & Keller, 1993). Marriage and family therapists' personal experiences with religion/spirituality and their assumptions about it also shape their approach to working with clients' concerns (Frame, 1996; Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994).

Despite some therapists' discomfort in working with religious or spiritual issues, this aspect of clients'

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lives is a dimension that affects the way they function. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in and demand for attention to spiritual issues in therapy (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Walsh, 1999). Some writers even suggest that many clients can be treated successfully only if their spiritual issues are addressed (Bergin, 1991; Kelly, 1995; Shafranske, 1996; Worthington, Kuru, McCullough, & Sanders, 1996). Therefore, in the same way that therapists are obligated to develop skills and sensitivity to issues such as race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and class, there is an ethical duty to develop expertise in addressing religious and spiritual concerns with their clients (Shafranske, 1996). The spiritual genogram provides a familiar tool with which to explore this important area in clients' lives and relationships.

### *Introduction*

The spiritual genogram can be introduced at any time in the therapy process and can be made a standard part of gathering data regarding clients and their families of origin. It is particularly useful after religious or spiritual issues have been raised by the couple or family. A climate of trust needs to be established, and clients must indicate a willingness to delve into religious or spiritual concerns that are connected to the issues of therapy. Using the spiritual genogram involves four steps: (1) creation of the spiritual genogram, (2) questions for further reflection, (3) connection with one's family of origin, and (4) integration into the global therapeutic endeavor.

### *Creation of the Spiritual Genogram*

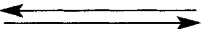
First, therapists instruct clients about how to map the family structure by drawing a three-generational genogram, including as much information as possible about family members. Using the symbols offered by McGoldrick, Gerson, and Shellenberger (1999), significant events, such as births, marriages, divorces, remarriages, and deaths, and their dates are noted, as well as information about adoption, stillbirth, abortion, 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, agnostics or atheists in pink, personal spirituality in green, and no religious/spiritual affiliation in brown. If religious/spiritual heritage is unknown, no color is added.


The color coding on the spiritual genogram can indicate interfaith marriages and reveal 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, weddings, funerals, and other rituals and rites of passage may be included. If family members are 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, square 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 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 large extended Roman Catholic family in which all members attend Mass together daily

could be represented in this way. For this family, religion provides a bond that connects family members across generations. Or perhaps the absence of any identified religion or spiritual practice is the foundation of a family whose beliefs include independence and self-sufficiency.

 Conflict between family members that has religious or spiritual roots is depicted by the symbol . Perhaps such a conflict between a mother and daughter when the daughter married outside of her religion. Or perhaps a son and his wife have disagreements over the new baby's baptism because of differing traditions around this practice. Representation of religious conflicts on the genogram often reveals that other more obvious discord is grounded in religious or spiritual friction or disagreement. Therapists 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. Therapists then inquire about the extent to which these conflicts are being maintained in their current couple or family relationships.

### *Questions for Further Client Reflection*

When the standard genogram has been constructed, the therapist is now ready to probe further into the role and function of religion and spirituality in couples and families. Such exploration may be accomplished through a homework assignment in which both partners or an entire family answers the questions below. Responses may enable clients to discover ways in which religious or spiritual beliefs, experiences, rituals, and practices are connected to their therapeutic issues. In addition, the following questions may help clients "externalize" religious issues and thus reduce emotional reactivity in their relationships:

1. When you were growing up, what role, if any, did religion/spirituality play in your life? 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 did/does your religious/spiritual tradition say 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 current distress or with the problem you presented for therapy? What new insights or solutions may occur to you based on the discoveries made through the genogram?

When clients return for the following session, they are invited to share their insights with the therapist and the other partner or family members. Occasionally, symbols, lines, and colors may be modified to reflect new information that emerged during the reflection process. Sometimes clients discover that they are unable to answer the questions without consulting extended family members. When more information is needed clients proceed to step three, "Connecting with One's Family of Origin."

### *Connecting with One's Family of Origin*

Often the construction of a genogram leads clients to connect with their families of origin. In many instances, such contacts enable clients to retrieve vital information from the past and to renegotiate relationships in the present (Bowen, 1978; Framo, 1976; Williamson, 1981). In this step, clients request information from parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins in order to clarify religious or spiritual events and meanings construed by the family. A private face-to-face contact between clients and their family members is recommended (Hof & Berman, 1986). When the clients reassemble for another therapy session,

insights, observations, and new information are added to the genogram.

The following questions may be helpful to clients wishing to explore religious or spiritual issues in their families of origin:

1. How did you perceive the importance of religion/spirituality in our family?
2. How do you think your experience of the religious/spiritual climate was similar to or different from mine?
3. Which members of our extended family seem to have had the most power when it came to religion/spirituality? Which ones had the least? How do you think the use of power vis à vis religion impacted our family and our relationships with one another?
4. How difficult do you think it has been or would be for family members to seek a different spiritual or religious path than the one with which we were raised? Who in our family would be supportive and why? Who would not be supportive and why?
5. How do you think religion/spirituality has been a source of strength and coping for our family? How do you think it has interfered in our family's relationships?

#### *Integration into the Global Therapeutic Endeavor*

When the religious/spiritual genogram is fully constructed, the therapist asks the clients questions such as, "How has this process provided insight into your current problem?" and, "What have you learned about yourselves and each other that can be used to address your marital or family difficulties?" At this stage in the therapeutic process, the therapist enables clients to make connections between past beliefs, experiences, and family-of-origin issues and their presenting problems. One result is that clients often develop a greater objectivity and appreciation for the ways in which they have been shaped (consciously or not) by the role of religion and spirituality in their families. They are often able to move beyond blaming each other into seeking solutions for current dilemmas.

### CLINICAL CASE ILLUSTRATION

Richard and Mary Margaret, a middle-aged couple married for 18 years, presented with difficulties surrounding their 15-year-old daughter's recent involvement with a Protestant youth group in their community. Although they described their marriage as "happy with little conflict," the couple was at odds over how to handle their daughter's new religious interest. Richard, who was raised in a Roman Catholic home, had given up religious practices during high school and had not been involved in any religious services or affiliations since then. He believed that their daughter, Nicole, should have the freedom to explore a variety of belief systems and to adopt one that met her needs. Mary Margaret, disagreed vehemently with Richard. Although she, too, had been raised in a Roman Catholic family and had renounced Catholicism on the grounds that it was patriarchal and sexist, she believed that if Nicole wanted a religious experience it should be within the Catholic Church. When Nicole was born, both Richard's and Mary Margaret's parents expected them to raise her in the Catholic Church. However, neither Richard nor Mary Margaret intended to do so. At the time, they both agreed that Nicole could make her own choices. From time to time they took Nicole to Catholic weddings or funerals held for extended family members. Occasionally they attended Mass on Christmas Eve or Easter. Richard and Mary Margaret sought therapy because they were unable to resolve this disagreement on their own. According to Mary Margaret, "it seems to be creating a wedge between us."

The therapist asked Richard and Mary Margaret to bring Nicole with them to the next therapy session. When the family was assembled, the spiritual genogram process was utilized. Richard discovered in his genogram a strong history of Roman Catholic involvement. His older brother had become a priest. He himself had attended parochial school and served as an altar boy in his local parish. Richard reported that his decision to leave the church was based on his "desire to be independent and to break away from my family." Richard indicated that he had felt an emptiness where his religious rituals and traditions had once

been, but he had ignored these feelings in order not to upset Mary Margaret, who had developed philosophical differences with the Church. After examining his genogram, Richard realized that he was supportive of Nicole's spiritual journey because he wanted her to have some of what he himself was missing (See Figure 1).

Mary Margaret was surprised by what her spiritual genogram revealed. Her family of origin, too, had strong ties to the Roman Catholic Church. She and her four siblings attended parochial school until Mary Margaret was a freshman in high school. At that time, her father left the Church because of an argument with the parish priest. He forbade his family to attend Mass and yet would not permit his children to date outside the faith. What she discovered was a family history of mixed messages about the importance of being Catholic. In the third session, Mary Margaret told the therapist, "I am continuing this pattern of mixed messages with Nicole. While I have rejected many Catholic beliefs, deep in my heart I still want her to be a Catholic."

When Nicole spoke about her genogram, she reported that it revealed her as a person torn between her parents' different positions on religion: her father's reverence for spirituality and her mother's scorn for it as embodied in the Roman Catholic Church. She spoke of herself as a person with a strong family connection to Catholicism but without any access to it herself. For Nicole, to explore another religion raised conflicting feelings of loyalty and betrayal, compounded by her adolescent need for independence from her family.

Through the use of the spiritual genogram, Richard and Mary Margaret realized that Nicole's interest in religion had opened up issues that each secretly thought had been put to rest at the time of their marriage. However, they learned that they were using their daughter to work on their own unresolved religious and spiritual concerns. Moreover, they realized that though previously not articulated, their cutoff from the Church had caused a rift between them and their now aging parents.

In further work with the therapist, Richard and Mary Margaret began exploring their feelings about religion and their pattern of forbidding themselves, each other, and Nicole to experience the traditions that had been sacred in their families. The spiritual genogram and its accompanying work helped this couple uncover other ways in which their relationship was dulled by surface verbal agreement combined with deeper inner turmoil. They realized that such internal unspoken conflict led them to a pattern of sending mixed messages to each other and their daughter. They resolved to invite Nicole to explore freely her own Roman Catholic tradition, as well as others. Although it was difficult, they were able to give her their blessing when she chose to join a Protestant church.

## CONCLUSIONS

The spiritual genogram is a tool that helps clients organize their religious and spiritual histories across multiple generations. Applying the genogram process in therapy is beneficial in enabling the therapist to legitimate religious or spiritual issues that arise in therapy. This instrument assists therapists and clients in seeing the links between their family-of-origin issues and other couple or family problems. On occasion, the information uncovered by constructing a spiritual genogram becomes a metaphor for other therapeutic issues.

Concerns associated with using the spiritual genogram center around client and therapist comfort with religious and spiritual issues in therapy. If clients are not open to discussing religious or spiritual concerns in the therapeutic setting, then the procedure may be contraindicated. Also, if the therapist feels unprepared to address religious or spiritual issues in the context of treatment, consultation with clergy or supervision addressing person-of-the-therapist issues (Aponte, 1992) may be warranted for the spiritual genogram to be used effectively.

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 on which clients record basic family-of-origin information. The spiritual genogram provides a method for clients to gain understanding of the ways in which their religious or spiritual heritage affects present couple or family issues.

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