Spiritual Ecograms: A New Assessment Instrument for Identifying Clients' Strengths in Space and Across Time

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ABSTRACT

Increasing recognition exists for the vital role of spirituality in the lives of many clients, yet relatively few assessment instruments have been developed. This article presents a new assessment instrument—the spiritual ecogram—that taps information in space and across time. In addition to combining the assessment strengths of spiritual ecomaps and genograms in a single diagrammatic instrument, ecograms depict the connections between past and present functioning. Historical influences on current systems can be seen as well as current relationships to historical influences. This article also includes a case example, information on conducting a spiritually competent assessment, and a discussion of some spiritual interventions that flow from ecograms.

Spirituality influences many beliefs and practices of interest to social workers (Rey, 1997). In addition, a growing body of research indicates that spirituality and religion are important assets that enable many people to cope with life challenges (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Pargament, 1997). For example, Koenig (1998) found that, among a sample of 455 hospitalized elderly persons, 40% spontaneously reported that their religious faith was the most important factor that enabled them to cope with their physical illnesses and other problems.

In keeping with the central role of spirituality for many clients, most practitioners believe that a spiritual assessment should be conducted (Canda & Furman, 1999; Gilbert, 2000). Indeed, the assessment and utilization of client strengths are widely acknowledged to be central facets of the helping process (Cowger, 1994; Hwang & Cowger, 1998; Ronnau & Poertner, 1993; Saleebey, 2000). Unfortunately, relatively few spiritual assessment models have been developed (Bullis, 1996; Sherwood, 1998), and training in spiritual assessment has been lacking (Canda & Furman, 1999; Derezotes, 1995; Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999).

Assessment can be understood as the process of gathering and organizing data into a coherent format that provides the basis for interventions (Rauch, 1993). As Hartman (1995) observes, information exists through or across time as well as in present life space. In addition to being immersed in a network of existential relationships in the here and now, each individual is also part of a family story that stretches across a number of generations.

These intergenerational linkages frequently form an integral component of an individual's spiritual journey. Each generation tends to shape the spiritual beliefs and practices of successive generations (Wuthnow, 1999). To

depict this historical influence across time, spiritual genograms are commonly used (Bullis, 1990; Hodge, 2001b; Rey, 1997; Roberts, 1999b).

Concurrently, an array of spiritual assets frequently exists in people's ecological environments. Individuals draw from strengths that exist in life space to help them overcome current obstacles. Spiritual ecological maps, or ecomaps, can be used to portray these extant spiritual strengths in diagrammatic format (Hodge, 2000; Hodge & Williams, 2002).

Ideally, assessment should include both time and space dimensions. Accordingly, in this article, I present a new instrument, the spiritual ecogram, that integrates both dimensions in a single pencil-and-paper assessment tool. The mechanics of constructing a spiritual ecogram along with the areas that should be explored in the assessment process are profiled first and illustrated with a case example. Information is then presented on the steps that can be taken to conduct a spiritually competent assessment followed by a discussion of some spiritual interventions that flow from an ecogram. I conclude with a brief discussion of the advantages of and alternatives to spiritual ecograms. Before proceeding, however, the terms *spirituality* and *religion* are defined.

> Respecting clients' spiritual autonomy is difficult, if not impossible, if practitioners have little understanding of clients' beliefs and values.

In keeping with what appears to be an emerging consensus, I define spirituality and religion as distinct but overlapping constructs (Canda, 1997; Carroll, 1997). More specifically, spirituality is conceptualized as an individual's existential relationship with God (or perceived transcendence), whereas religion refers to a particular set of beliefs, forms, and practices that have been developed in community by people who share similar experiences of transcendent reality (Hodge, 2001a).

Constructing a Spiritual Ecogram

Constructing spiritual ecograms is similar to fabricating traditional genograms and ecomaps. The client is drawn in the center of the paper. By convention, a circle commonly represents a female and a square depicts a male. Working up from the client, the top half of the page is used to chart a family tree and associated social data. Typically, the basic family structure over three generations is delineated in keeping with standard genogram conventions (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999; Stanion, Papadopoulos, & Bor, 1997).

To indicate individuals' religious orientations, colored drawing pencils can be used to shade in the circles and squares (Hodge, 2001b). Color coding provides a graphic "color snapshot" of the overall spiritual composition of the family system (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Various colors can be used to signify religious preference (e.g., Christian, none, New Age, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu) or, more specifically when the information in known, denomination (e.g., Catholic, Southern Baptist, Presbyterian). For example, a circle representing a female Southern Baptist could be colored red, a member of the Assemblies of God orange, and a Muslim brown. An individual whose affiliation and beliefs are unknown would remain uncolored. A change in an adult's religious orientation can be signified by listing the date of the change beside a circle, which is drawn outside the figure, and filling in the space between the circle and the figure with the appropriate color, a procedure that indicates the stability–fluidity of the person's beliefs over time. Using a similar approach, changes in orientation might also be noted by coloring the vertical segment connecting the child with the parents.

If needed, the color scheme can also be used to incorporate information on commitment (devout, nominal) and theology (conservative, liberal). For example, yellow might be use to signify a devout conservative Methodist, whereas gray could be used for a nominal Methodist. Alternatively, symbols, which are placed beside the appropriate circle or square, could be used to indicate the degree of commitment or theological orientation. An open set of scriptures, for instance, might be used to indicate a devout person. Ideally, social workers might explain the various options to clients and allow them to select the colors and symbols that clients perceive best express their worldviews.

Spiritually meaningful events should also be incorporated, such as water and spirit baptisms, confirmations, church memberships, and bar and bat mitzvahs. Symbols drawn from the client's spiritual cosmology can be used to signify these events. For instance, a cross might be used by a Christian to indicate reaching a point of conversion or a deeper level of surrender, whereas a Muslim might use a small structure to symbolize the importance of a new mosque to the community of believers. In addition, short summary statements can be used to denote significant events.

Whereas the top half of the page depicts the client's spiritual history through time, the bottom half emphasizes the client's spirituality in space. Consistent with standard ecomap conventions (Hartman, 1995), this portion of the ecogram is used to portray the client's extant relationships with spiritual systems. Important spiritual

systems, such as God, rituals, and faith communities, are represented as circles on the outskirts of the paper in a radius around the client (Hodge, 2000; Hodge & Williams, 2002). The names of the respective systems are written inside of the circles or domains.

Lines drawn between the client and the various systems symbolize the nature or character of the relationships. The strength of a given relationship is indicated by the thickness of the line, with a thin dashed line representing the most tenuous relationship. Spiritual conflict can be symbolized with a jagged line. Symbols and brief descriptions can also be added to provide further information about the nature of the relationships. Arrows, for instance, are commonly used to indicate the direction in which energy or resources flow.

The family history, discussed previously, can also be seen as a spiritual system. Many of the people and events associated with the delineated history continue to exhibit a strong influence. Consequently, in addition to sketching relationships between the client and the various spiritual systems discussed previously, lines are also drawn connecting the client to various aspects of the family history.

This represents the basic framework for constructing an ecogram. It is important to note, however, that the guidelines and suggestions discussed previously should be tailored to reflect the needs and interests of clients. Put differently, the construction of a spiritual genogram should be as client directed as possible. Clients are the experts of their own spirituality. Practitioners should act as facilitators to help clients express their expertise in a clinically meaningful manner.

Areas That Might Be Explored During Assessment

To assist social workers in the facilitation process, it may be helpful to be aware of some common themes and strengths. Although it is important to guard against stereotyping or generalizing (M. E. Griffith, 1999), developing an awareness of prevalent patterns can help social workers in eliciting clients' spirituality. These areas can then be explored together by the social worker and the client. Although the following information is highly interconnected, data that may be useful in fleshing out the history is reviewed next followed by a discussion of widespread spiritual systems.

Some evidence indicates that the importance of spirituality tends to increase with age (Argue, Johnson, & White, 1999). This finding suggests that elders' spiritual beliefs and practices can play a significant role in a family's spirituality. For example, Wuthnow's (1999) ethnographic study (N = 200) found that grandparents shape religious perceptions directly thorough interpersonal contact and indirectly through the memories they evoke. In particular, grandmothers and mothers often play a decisive role in shaping formative childhood religious experiences. The memories and experiences often have a profound effect on current spiritual perceptions.

In most cases, families seem to successfully transmit their basic values from one generation to the next (Babchuk & Whitt, 1990; Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994). For instance, O'Connor, Alexander, Hoge, Parikh, and Grunder's (1999) 24-year follow-up study (N = 206) of religious behaviors and attitudes found that 68% of respondents still self-identified as members of their original denomination. More than 75% became inactive during some point of their lives. The average period of inactivity began around age 21 and lasted 7 years. Because important life decisions frequently occur during the 20s, decisions that run contrary to the norms of one's faith can cause difficulties later in life when individuals seek to reconnect with their spiritual roots.

Spirituality can also be a significant source of intergenerational conflict. Analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Generations data file (N = 1,137) found that "religious beliefs were often mentioned as areas of conflict" (Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengtson, 1999, p. 267). An adult child may join a new denomination after having a spiritual awakening, for example, and abandon his parents' denomination that was perceived to be spiritually lifeless.

Transpersonal encounters with angels, demons, and other spiritual entities can have a significant effect on the family system. Studies suggest that encounters with such beings are frequently life changing and continue to inform one's actions indefinitely (Fitchett, 1993; Lindstrom, 1995; Morse & Perry, 1994). For instance, individuals may perceive that God allows them to experience the presence of a recently departed family member to assuage their grief (Lindstrom, 1995).

Major life challenges (e.g., divorce, physical illness) frequently enhance the personal salience of spirituality (Pargament, 1997). Difficulties often function to shift individuals' perspective from the temporal to the eternal. Although crises can cause people to turn away from God because of a perceived lack of assistance in times of felt need, the reverse occurs more frequently as individuals turn toward a transcendent perspective that is able to provide support and meaning during a crisis (Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2000).

Consequently, including a spiritual system in the ecogram that depicts the client's relationship with God–transcendence is usually appropriate. One's relationship with God is widely regarded as an important strength. As alluded to previously, it can foster coping, alleviate loneliness, enhance personal worth and value, promote a sense of mission and purpose, and engender hope (Ellison, 1993; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Pargament, 1997; Perry, 1998).

Rituals, such as devotional reading, meditation, prayer, scripture study, and worship, are another important spiritual system that can be explored. Rituals can be thought of as codified spiritual practices that are performed individually, in isolation with God, or corporately with others present. Rituals, which exist in most spiritual traditions, have been associated with a number of positive outcomes, including the alleviation of isolation, anxiety, and dread

and the promotion of a sense of being loved, appreciated, and secure (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Jacobs, 1992; Koenig et al., 2001; Perry, 1998; Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996).

Faith communities are often a critical spiritual system. Church services, fellowship groups, Bible studies, youth groups, singles associations, and temple meetings, for example, are common expressions of faith-based associations. Participation in various faith communities has been linked to a wide number of salutary characteristics, including elevated levels of coping, empowerment, resiliency, self-confidence, and sense of belonging (Ellison & George, 1994; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Haight, 1998; Kark et al., 1996; Maton & Salem, 1995).

As mentioned, letting the client's experience shape the construction of the ecogram is appropriate. For instance, although one individual may feel that a significant transpersonal encounter belongs in the family history section, another may feel that it should be listed as a discrete spiritual system because the encounter represents a spiritual strength in present life space. Similarly, if a person participates in a number of different faith communities and feels her relationship with each one differs, it is appropriate to incorporate different circles for each meaningful spiritual system. The ultimate goal should be to delineate a client's perception of his or her spiritual worldview on the ecogram.

Case Example

Within the limitations proscribed by the current black and white forum, Figure 1 provides an idea of what one person's ecogram might look like. The father's side of Karen's family is characterized by Roman Catholic affiliation. Similarly, with the exception of her maternal grandmother, who left her Methodist affiliation for Catholicism at age 21 when she married her husband, the other side is also Catholic. Karen's mother, Kate, died at age 52. Kate experienced a dramatic outpouring of God's love in her early 30s, which is denoted by the heart and the dove representing the work of the Holy Spirit. As a result of this outpouring, at age 35, Kate left her more traditional Catholic church and started going to a charismatic Catholic church that emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. Karen's brother, Karl, had a spiritual awakening at an interdenominational summer camp at age 14, which eventually led him into a Calvary Chapel fellowship.

Although Karen's father, Harry, and her sister, Rachel, are not particularly devout, they are both firm believers in the importance of remaining in the Catholic fold. This has led to some tension between them and Karen, who experienced a spiritual awakening of her own at age 19 and is now a member of the Assemblies of God. Karen feels that her father tends toward legalism and finds interaction with him to be somewhat of a strain partly because of repeated suggestions that she should return to her Catholic roots. The tension is a little stronger with her sister, Rachel, who, seeing both her siblings leave the fold, feels a particular obligation to maintain the family's Catholic identity.

In contrast to her relationship with her father, Karen's relationship with her mother was quite positive, particularly after Karen's spiritual awakening. Karen's paternal grandmother has also been a significant source of strength to both Karen and her mother. As signified by the open Bible and the presence of the dove, Mary was a particularly committed Christian who allowed the Holy Spirit to operate deeply in her life.

When Karen's mother died, Mary was a particular source of encouragement, as was a vision she received from God assuring her of her mother's well-being in heaven. Karen also feels that angels have intervened in her life on a regular basis. The most important strength in Karen's life, represented by the heavy line, is her relationship with Jesus. As is the case with her mother and paternal grandmother, the dove symbolizes a deep work of the Holy Spirit, who has progressively deepened her level of intimacy with Jesus. God is perceived as being personally involved with her life and actively working through various events with Karen's best interest at heart.

Rituals that nurture this relationship are also a significant asset. Music that helps her to focus on her relationship with God is an especially rich source of strength. Although Bible study and prayer are important, Christian music and worship help her to regain perspective and reorder her priorities when she becomes overwhelmed with life's obstacles.

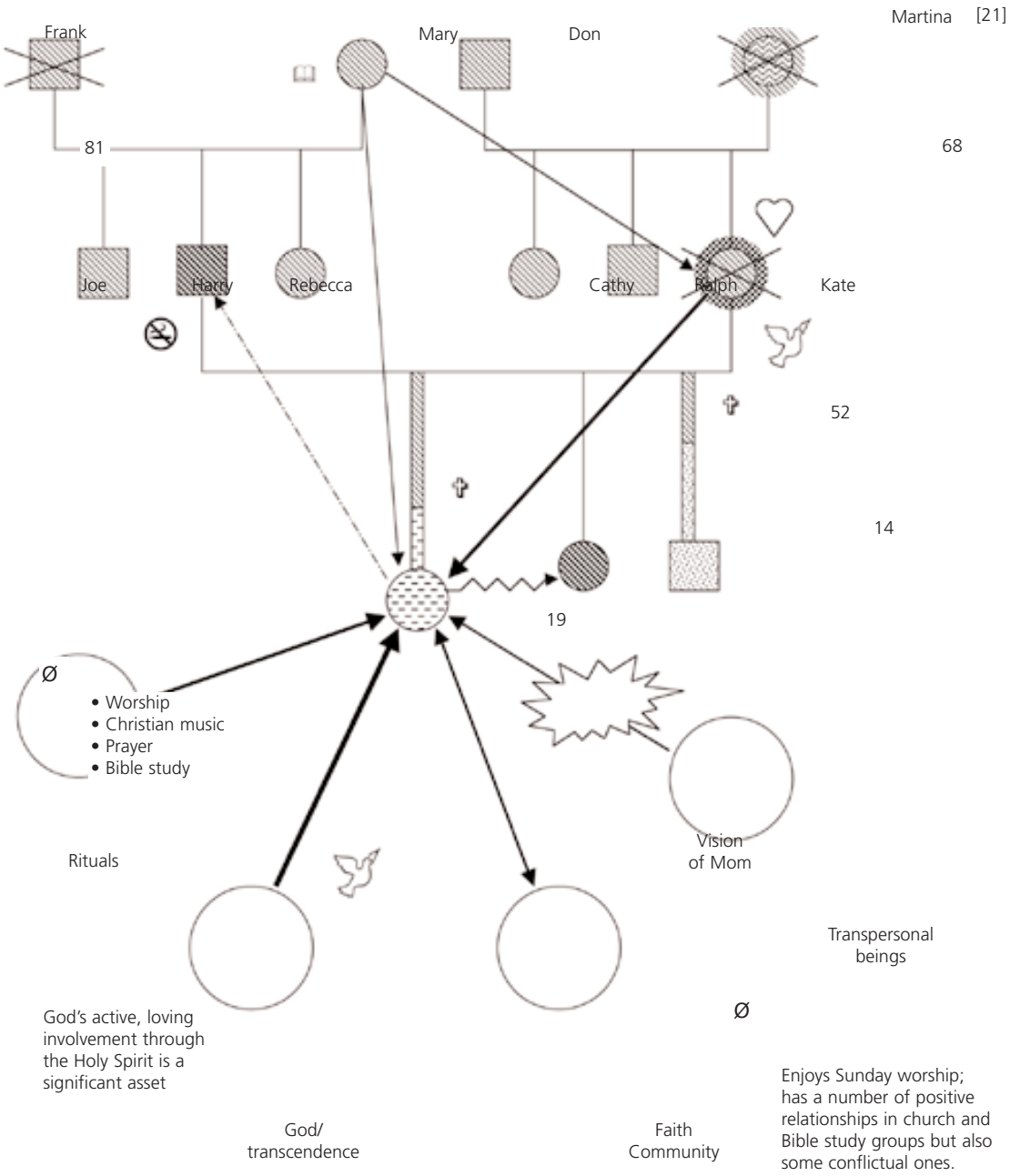
Karen's relationship with her faith community is more mixed. Her involvement in Bible study and other church functions are generally perceived to be a source of strength, particularly the Sunday morning worship service. Concurrently, a number of individuals in her church body tend to drain her emotional batteries.

Steps Toward Spiritually Competent Assessment

Perhaps the first step toward conducting spiritually competent assessments is undertaking a spiritual self-assessment (Fitchett & Handzo, 1998). In other words, social workers should seek to understand their own spiritual beliefs and formative religious experiences. Spirituality is a highly sensitive, personal dimension of existence for many clients. Because of the sensitive nature of spirituality for many individuals, it is especially important to create a safe environment in which clients sense that their spiritual autonomy is respected (Gilbert, 2000). By developing their understanding of their own spiritual beliefs and how they differ from those of various client populations, social workers are better equipped to facilitate a safe, respectful environment (Hodge, 2003a).

Although each social worker's spiritual narrative will be unique, it may be helpful to be aware of some general patterns. In contrast with the general public (Canda & Furman, 1999; Gallup & Castelli, 1989), most social workers appear to hold liberal (Jensen & Bergin, 1988),

Figure 1. *Sample ecogram.*



nontheistic (Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin, & Miller, 1992; Sheridan, Wilmer, & Atcheson, 1994) belief systems. Additionally, a study of 108 clinical social workers found that 44% were no longer affiliated with the religion of their youth, with the shift occurring primarily away from Christianity to "none" or "other" (Sheridan et al., 1992). Thirty-six percent of respondents reported ambivalent to negative feelings toward their religious backgrounds (Sheridan et al., 1992). Genia (2000) suggested that, unless practitioners work through these negative sentiments, countertransference biases can result in implicit and explicit attempts to impose spiritual values on clients.

Many theistic clients for whom spirituality is especially salient are aware that social workers, as a group, tend to affirm spiritual worldviews that differ from their own (Furman, Perry, & Goldale, 1996; Richards & Bergin, 2000). The difference in spiritual worldviews, in conjunction with

the power differential innate in the therapeutic encounter, appears to foster widespread concern that social workers will either disparage or attempt to change their spiritual value system (Richards & Bergin, 2000). Because many clients are sensitive to autonomy issues, practitioners' self-assessment should be particularly thorough and social workers should ensure that they have worked through any incipient biases that may exist.

In addition to coming to terms with their own spiritual worldviews, social workers should also develop an understanding of the spiritual worldviews their clients commonly affirm. Respecting clients' spiritual autonomy is difficult, if not impossible, if practitioners have little understanding of clients' beliefs and values. Because most social workers report receiving little or no training in religious diversity during their graduate educations (Canda & Furman, 1999; Derezotes, 1995; Sheridan & Amato-Von Hemert, 1999), practitioners must take steps to equip themselves. As with other areas of diversity, social workers should seek to achieve an empathetic, strengths-based understanding that allows them to see reality through the eyes of their clients (Hodge, 2004).

This understanding should extend to developing an awareness of the bias that people of faith often encounter in the dominant secular culture (Roberts, 1999b). For instance, popular media frequently delegitimize devout Christians and other people of faith by either eliminating them from popular culture or framing them in a negative light (Lindsey & Heeren, 1992; Perkins, 1984; Skill & Robinson, 1994; Skill, Robinson, Lyons, & Larson, 1994). Clients are likely to be more willing to share their spiritual narratives if social workers demonstrate understanding and sensitivity regarding the discrimination committed believers often encounter in the dominant culture. As is common practice, learning about various worldviews by exposing oneself to material written by individuals, preferably social workers, who affirm the worldview themselves is critical. Reading material on faith-based worldviews written by members of the dominant secular culture may be counterproductive because such material tends to reflect the biases associated with dominant cultural status (Hodge, Baughman, & Cummings, in press).

As an expression of respect for clients' spiritual autonomy, it is appropriate to secure consent before conducting a spiritual assessment. As rapport is established with the client, the importance of spirituality can be affirmed, followed by an invitation to explore the subject (Maugans, 1996). For example, a practitioner might say, "For many people, spirituality is an important strength. Consequently, I was wondering if you would be interested in exploring how spiritual strengths might be used to address some of the problems you have mentioned." If the client expresses an interest, the ecogram can be explained; if the client agrees, a personalized ecogram can be constructed (Hodge, 2004).

During the assessment, adopting an attitude of interest and curiosity toward the client's belief system is advisable (Patterson, Hayworth, Turner, & Raskin, 2000). As implied previously, the focus should not be on determining whether clients' spiritual beliefs are right or wrong but rather on how their values assist them in coping with difficulties. The social worker's job is not to accept or reject clients' spiritual values but to help them use their beliefs and practices to assist them in overcoming their problems (Fitchett & Handzo, 1998).

In some cases, however, social workers may feel that clients' spiritual beliefs are unproductive. In such situations, social workers should not attempt to change clients' values in an area that lies outside the realm of their professional competence. Rather, practitioners should collaborate with or refer such clients to clergy (Johnson, Ridley, & Nielsen, 2000). Given that this is clergy's area of professional competency, pastors, priests, and other spiritual specialists are better equipped to ascertain the appropriateness of a given set of beliefs and practices. It is critical, however, that practitioners respect clients' spiritual autonomy by forming collaborations with clergy who share the same denominational and theological orientation as the client.

Interventions That May Flow From Ecograms

As noted early in this article, assessment consists of more than just gathering information about a client's spiritual history and strengths on an ecogram. The point of delineating this material is to ascertain the existence of spiritual resources that can be used to solve problems. A critical component of assessment is working together with clients to decide how their spiritual assets might be used to address the various challenges they face.

Next I review a number of spiritual interventions. Contingent on the practitioner's theoretical orientation and the unique life context of the client, social workers can explore the utility of these interventions with clients. Yet, to reiterate a central point of the preceding section, social workers should attempt to explore interventions that are congruent with clients' spiritual beliefs and values. Also notable is the fact that the interventions discussed here can be understood to flow from ecograms. Consequently, when gathering information, it may be useful to bear these interventions in mind to better integrate this information into the assessment process.

For instance, ecograms can be used to foster the adoption of new narratives. Experiencing a series of difficulties can result in the formation of disempowering narratives (Richert, 1999). Clients can feel trapped or overwhelmed by problems, with little hope of overcoming their present circumstances. Ecograms can help promote empowering narratives in at least two ways. First, the physical depiction of clients' subjective strengths can help bring their assets into focus, enhancing their salience through concrete depiction (Moon, 1994). As clients actually see themselves

surrounded by strengths, they tend to envision themselves differently, as people with resources and capabilities (Saleebey, 2000). Second, ecograms can help alleviate the sense of hopelessness and purposelessness in which problems flourish. As noted previously, spirituality tends to engender hope, purpose, and meaning. Thus, in addition to highlighting clients' strengths, the specific set of strengths that are elicited tend to shrink the existential concerns that underlie many problems (Lantz, 1998). Practitioners can help clients adopt new narratives by emphasizing pertinent aspects of clients' spiritual worldviews (Pargament, 1997).

Encouraging clients to develop their spiritual life can be an effective intervention (Kisthardt, 1997). Strengths in one area may naturally be leveraged to address obstacles in other areas (Sullivan, 1997). For example, a prospective study of clients in India wrestling with schizophrenia ($N = 386$) found that increased religiousness was related to better outcomes at the 2-year follow-up (Verghese et al., 1989). Conversely, clients who reported a decrease in their religious activities experienced deteriorating health outcomes.

Ecograms can help alleviate the sense of hopelessness and purposelessness in which problems flourish. As noted previously, spirituality tends to engender hope, purpose, and meaning.

Although the following empirical evidence is best classified as exploratory, a number of studies have found that spiritual practices can ameliorate problems. Spiritual mourning, a ritual characterized by praying, fasting, and seeking God, has been shown to alleviate psychological distress (Griffith, Mahy, & Young, 1986). Spiritual pilgrimages have been associated with reduced levels of anxiety and depression (Morris, 1982). Prayer has been shown to enhance the recovery of hospitalized patients (Byrd, 1988).

Similarly, various forms of meditation have been associated with well-being (Ellison, 1993; Keefe, 1996). Christian devotional meditation has been associated with reduced levels of stress (Carlson, Bacaseta, & Simanton, 1988). Vipassana Buddhist meditation has been demonstrated to reduce ego-defense mechanisms (Emavardhana & Tori, 1997). In short, spiritual practices drawn from clients' frames of reference can be explored as a means of addressing these and possibly other life challenges.

Rituals can also be interfaced with solution-focused approaches (Kuehl, 1995, 1996). For instance, rituals often represent times when exceptions from difficulties are experienced. In addition to identifying current rituals, ecograms might be used to identify traditional family rituals that have fallen into disuse that might be used to address problems (Roberts, 1999a).

Ecograms can be used to elicit health-promotive beliefs for use in spiritually based cognitive therapy. In this form of therapy, spiritual beliefs that are congruent with the precepts of cognitive therapy are integrated into standard therapeutic techniques. In other words, salutary tenets from the client's spiritual worldview, which hold an added measure of significance to the client, are incorporated into traditional forms of cognitive therapy.

For instance, with Muslims, standard secular cognitive therapy precepts may be replaced with health-promotive precepts taken from the Koran. When used with Muslim clients, this spiritually modified form of cognitive therapy was found to be at least as effective as traditional forms of therapy for anxiety disorders (Azhar, Varma, & Dharap, 1994), bereavement (Azhar & Varma, 1995a), and depression (Azhar & Varma, 1995b) while tending to ameliorate problems at a faster rate. Similarly promising outcomes have been found among Christians with depression (Hawkins, Tan & Turk, 1999; Propst, 1996) and Mormons with perfectionism (Richards, Owen, & Stein, 1993).

Albert Ellis (2000), widely considered to be one the founders of cognitive therapy, has translated a number of his precepts into theistic language. Similarly, Backus (1985) provides a book-length treatment of the subject that may be particularly helpful when working with Christian clients.

One belief that is widely shared by many faith traditions is the importance of forgiveness (McCullough, Weaver, Larson, & Aay, 2000). A growing body of work on forgiveness in clinical settings exists (McCullough et al., 2000). In addition to delineating spiritual assets that might be used to facilitate forgiveness, ecograms can be used to chart relationships in which forgiveness is needed. For a discussion of decision-based forgiveness interventions, see DiBlasio (1998).

Finally, ecograms may suggest that social workers explore the potentialities that exist for clients in local fellowships, church bodies, small groups, and other faith-based communities. In addition to offering a wide array of services, church groups and other faith-based fellowships often foster an enhanced sense of psychological resources (e.g., control over life's circumstances, life direction, and social support; Ellison & George, 1994; Haight, 1998; Maton & Salem, 1995). Practitioners can explore opportunities for further involvement, such as the existence of programs and support groups or even opportunities to start new programs that directly address the issues with which clients are struggling.

Advantages of and Alternatives to Ecograms

Ecograms offer essentially all the assessment advantages provided by traditional spiritual ecomaps and genograms. In addition, however, ecograms allow social workers and clients to see the connections between past and present functioning. Historical influences on current systems and present relationships with historical influences can be seen on an ecogram.

The ability to depict these connections is a unique feature of ecograms. Consequently, ecograms may allow clients to see relationships in a manner that offers fresh insights into their current situation. Resources associated with the past may take on new meaning when individuals see connections to their present reality.

Nevertheless, in some situations, it may be advisable to use alternative assessment approaches. For example, some clients may feel that the exploration of the past has little to do with present problems (Kuehl, 1995). For such individuals, assessment approaches that focus on present functioning, such as traditional spiritual ecomaps (Hodge, 2000; Hodge & Williams, 2002), may better suit clients' needs. Conversely, spiritual genograms (Hodge, 2001b) may be more appropriate in contexts that involve just the immediate family system, such as a couple attempting to work through differing spiritual traditions. Other assessment approaches have also been developed. For instance, spiritual life maps (Hodge, 2005) may appeal to more artistically oriented clients, whereas verbal spiritual histories may provide a better fit for more verbally oriented clients who are uninterested in diagrammatic approaches (Hodge, 2001a). Hodge (in press) provides a summary of these approaches along with a discussion of their respective strengths and limitations.

In addition, it should also be noted that quantitative assessment approaches also exist. For instance, the Intrinsic Spirituality Scale is a brief six-item measure that can be used to assess levels of spirituality independent of whether clients express their spirituality in religious or nonreligious settings (Hodge, 2003b). Readers interested in quantitative measures may wish to obtain Hill and Hood's (1999) text, which provides an extensive review of various instruments.

Ecograms were developed specifically for spiritual assessment, particularly those cases in which spirituality plays a predominant role in the family system. Ecograms can, however, be adapted for use with individuals for whom spirituality is a less salient concern. Indeed, for many clients, spirituality is one important life dimension among many others. For other clients, spirituality may not be a relevant concern at all.

Ecograms can readily be adapted to meet the needs of such clients. This is accomplished by replacing the spiritual systems discussed previously (e.g., God, rituals) with traditional ecomap systems (e.g., work, recreation, and school; Hartman, 1995). Alternatively, spirituality could be incorporated as one system alongside the other traditional systems. This allows practitioners to conduct a holistic assessment that incorporates information across time and in space on a single diagrammatic instrument. As already implied, the ability to depict the connections between time and space dimensions is an important assessment asset that practitioners may wish to use in general assessment.

Conclusion

A number of authors have suggested that assessment is an underdeveloped area in social work (Mattaini & Kirk, 1991), with the lack of maturation being particularly evident in the realm of spiritual assessment (Bullis, 1996; Sherwood, 1998). Ecograms provide social workers with a new tool for conducting a comprehensive assessment. Clients are able to see their spiritual resources in existential space and across time. Further, they can see the connections between past and present functioning on a single diagrammatic instrument. As such, ecograms represent a conceptual advance in assessment that should be of interest for both spiritual and general assessment.

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