

## **Integrating Cultural and Contextual Issues into the Interview:**

### **The Community Genogram**

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The individualistic base of traditional counseling theory so emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual that a new stereotype has arisen—that of the person who exists without context, without history, without a cultural base. Whether person-centered, cognitive-behavioral, or psychodynamic, the tendency of counseling theory is to ignore the wide array of individual backgrounds that so affect who and how we are human beings.

Each of us exists in connection. The Stone Center at Wellesley College, the leading feminist theory and research program, speaks of “being-in-relation.” We are not alone and only can be human by recognizing our connections with others. The self-in-relation is a major challenge to the autonomous “self” of traditional counseling theory. Family theory and practice clearly indicates that our personhood is highly dependent on our past and present family relations. Ogbonnaya (1994), writing from an Afrocentric perspective, talks of the person-in-community. As humans, who and what we are is not just the traditional “me,” but also the sum of past experience in the human community and broad culture.

Being raised in an individualistic culture, our clients often tend to think to think of their problems as “their problems.” As we move to a culture-centered perspective, you will find that the self-in-relation concept frequently helps clients to see themselves in new ways and helps them find strengths through connection. The family genogram enables us to see how family issues are worked through over time. The community genogram (Ivey, A. 1994; Ivey, M., 1999; Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan, 1997) was devised as a strategy to bring cultural issues into the interview. Its focus on positive resources enables inclusion of family issues and multiple dimensions of cultural experience.

The community genogram was generated as a way to help counselors see their clients in a broader context as multicultural beings. We learn our cultural background within our families in a community context. We post the community genogram in each interview to remind clients that they exist in social context and have many potential family and community support systems.

Allen's community of origin genogram is illustrated in Box 1 and is drawn as a map. But, we recommend that clients find their own ways to draw their communities. Some use the star diagram of Box 2, but most people seem to find their own special way to summarize their community. And, sometimes clients prefer to focus on present communities, some to compare changes from the community of origin with the present community. And, some use the model to design their ideas for change and action in a community of the future, realizing that they can design their own culture as well as be influenced by it.

Tamara, one of Mary's elementary students drew a circle to represent her community (see Box 3). Deeply involved spiritually in her church, her community circle of relation included family, school, peer groups, and sports. Her racial/ethnic background was Hispanic, but she chose to focus on the family and the church as her main support systems. The community genogram turns out to be a useful strategy enabling children, adolescents, and adults to discuss spiritual issues if they wish. We find that many clients gain considerable strength from spiritual connection and we also believe that spiritual beliefs underlie many issues of ethnic and racial understanding.

You can learn a considerable amount from a client and her or his cultural background just by viewing the community genogram. For example, note the small area represented by Allen's family and the grandparents' farms just down the road and the two-room schoolhouse down the road "apiece." His only contact in the small town was the church. Janet's community genogram tells us much about her problems growing up, but we also note important areas of strength.

We urge those who use the community genogram to focus on stories of strength rather than on problems in the community genogram. With a little (or a lot in some cases) searching, we can find positive stories and strengths that can be used to help clients overcome problems. Often as we listen to positive stories from the community, we discover partially-forgotten strategies from the past that the individual already knows that can help them solve current issues.

Narrative and story telling have become a central part of the community genogram strategy. The object is to draw out positive stories from the community, both past and present. Developmental counseling and therapy (DCT) questioning strategies are used to facilitate positive story telling from multiple perspectives. In this process images of strength are particularly important. (Ivey, A., 1986; 1991; Ivey, M., 1999).

Specific questioning processes emphasizing positives follow:

1. "Could you tell me a positive story from your community genogram?" Draw out the story via the microskills basic listening sequence (BLS). Narratives of community are endlessly fascinating in individual therapy, groupwork, and as classroom exercises.

Janet, for example, told a story of her Mother working hard to make ends meet. In some ways, it was a sad story of economic deprivation, but one could not help but note Janet's pride as she told of her mother's strength. Allen focused on the times as a child he sang the song, "Jesus loves the little children, red and yellow, Black, and white." He recalled how reassuring the song was to him even at the age of five.

2. Sensorimotor narrative: "What positive image representing that story comes to mind? What are you seeing, hearing, feeling?" Develop a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic representation of the positive story. Quietly, allow the image to build and note the positive bodily feelings that occur. These anchored body experiences are positive strengths that can be drawn on to help clients deal with difficult issues in therapy and in life.

Janet developed a strong visual image of her mother and was able to note strengths in her own arms and chest as she visualized her mother handling a difficult situation. Allen's visualization was oriented to spirituality and the feeling of comfort and trust in his heart with the song. Tamara also focused on the spiritual, but eventually decided on an image of her family gathered around the table at dinner time. She talks of a warmth in her heart. A particular strength of the community genogram is that it allows family exploration, but from a strength orientation, rather than pathology. And, if the family strengths are minimal, one can always turn to other aspects of the community. We have always found, even in the most difficult cases, that the community genogram provides us with positive resources for future development. All these are positive resources that can be drawn on at any time in the future to enable clients to cope with the many stresses and strains of everyday life.

3. Concrete narrative: "Could you tell me another positive story about your community? Be as concrete and specific as possible." Ask the client to tell the concrete story of the image in more detail- or ask for another story from the community. Search for concreteness and specificity via the BLS.

Tamara talked with great enthusiasm of her successes in sports and in school. These concrete stories helped Mary, the counselor, find strengths that could be transferred to new situations. Similar approaches were used with Allen and Janet.

4. Formal operational/reflective narrative: "How do these positive stories and images represent a pattern in your present life? How could you draw these strengths to deal with current issues?" These reflective questions seek to help clients generalize from the past to resolve their concerns through known strengths.

If we listen to client concrete strengths carefully, we can begin to note patterns of strength that will enable them to act more effectively, comfortably, and even forcefully in the future. All three- Tamara, Janet, and Allen- were able to use the positive images and stories as a foundation for building their own self-concept-in-

relation. All three through the community genogram gained increased realizations of their strengths, ability to cope, and a new awareness of themselves as persons-in-community.

5. Dialectic/systemic narrative: "As you reflect back on your community genogram as a whole, how do these systems (family, church, culture) affect your development? How are you part of a living community? How have you been changed by history and how will you change history?" These and other reflective questions lead clients to think about the self-in-relation.

Also critical at this phase is seeking new action and behavior. The positive stories and images provide a basis for action- "Given all this, what stands out for you and what are you going to do about it? It is here that the individual client really begins to understand the self-in-relation concepts. We are all part of our family, community, and cultural history. There are many strengths from which we can draw. Armed with these positive images, stories, and reflections, the client is better prepared to deal with the issues they face in everyday life. We are the result of history.

Finally, hand-wringing and focus on problems takes too much time. A problem-focused counseling and therapy negates client strengths and ability to solve their own issues and concerns. Finding strengths as a person-in-relation makes a difference.

Once you have worked through a community genogram, the richness of the person-in-context comes through. Not too surprisingly, individual uniqueness is enhanced as we see the immense variety of personal experience. A issue in counseling a person different from yourself is the possibility of exploiting them as they explain their cultural background. The community genogram enables us to learn about the client's culture, but in a way that is useful and potentially therapeutic to the client. The specific strengths of the culture have been identified and respected and can be called on throughout the interview.

You will find the community genogram a useful classroom or group counseling exercise. For example, we have run groups in which

each member draws their community genogram and shares one positive story. The community genograms are hung around the room to remind the group members of their specialness. Periodically, the members may refer to their community genogram to help others in the group understand the context of their stories, issues, and problems. A class in counseling theory of multicultural counseling can benefit from a similar sharing of community genograms. We have found that elementary children work as effectively with the community genogram as older people.

We endorse to you a flexible strategy which you can adapt for individual clients, group counseling, classroom work. The focus on strengths, rather than problems and pathology, is important. We all build on our positive strengths from our communities and culture. Once these strengths are clearly identified, it is much easier and safer for us to cope with the inevitable negatives and problems we all experience.

## References

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Boxes 1 and 2 by permission of Brooks/Cole, Pacific Grove, California. The diagrams are by Allen and Mary Ivey and included in Intentional Interviewing and Counseling: Facilitating Client Developmental in Multicultural Society (1999), 4th Edition on pages 238-239. The case of Tamara is a composite of multiple elementary clients with whom Mary Ivey has worked.

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