Doing a Cultural Genogram in Supervision

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The authors take the genogram, a classic supervision method used to address the self-of-the-therapist, and tweak it by highlighting the cultural influences on supervisees. (See Chapter 10 in the accompanying book for the initial development and purposes of the genogram and Chapter 3 for ways it is now used to assess cultural equity.) After illustrating the value of the cultural genogram for supervisees in understanding themselves, they provide step-by-step guidelines for implementing the method in group supervision. Since this original article, other supervisors have similarly modified the genogram to highlight spirituality, sexuality, and even supervision experiences.

—Editors’ introduction

How do I help my supervisees, especially nonminorities, talk about cultural issues in supervision and therapy? How important is it for supervisees to explore their cultural identities before they can deal effectively with cultural issues with their clients? And, how do I assist my supervisees in transferring the exploration of cultural issues in supervision to their work as therapists? Questions such as these

are recurring queries for many supervisors as they struggle with finding concrete ways to facilitate the integration of cultural issues into clinical supervision.

The cultural genogram is a tool that you can use to explore culture in the context of supervision and ultimately therapy. The cultural genogram process promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity by helping supervisees to understand their cultural identities. Through this process supervisees gain greater insight into, and appreciation for, the ways in which culture impacts their personal and professional lives, as well as the lives of their clients. Due to limitations of space, we discuss the cultural genogram within the context of team supervision only.

The cultural genogram process is divided into three stages: (1) preparation and construction, (2) presentation and interpretation, and (3) synthesis. For a detailed discussion of the stages and steps of the cultural genogram process, the reader is referred to Hardy and Laszloffy (1995).

**Stage One: Preparation and Construction**

During this stage, supervisees are required/encouraged to research their culture of origin and prepare a cultural genogram that will be presented in supervision. A copy of How to Prepare a Cultural Genogram located later in the resource should be available to supervisees to help facilitate completion of this stage. This document outlines each step in stage one, and defines all essential terminology.

**Stage Two: Presentation and Interpretation**

This stage involves the presentation of the cultural genogram. During the presentation, the supervisee begins by presenting the Cultural Framework Chart(s) (CFC) s/he has constructed for her/his culture of origin. Specifically, the supervisee briefly introduces and explains each of the organizing principles and pride/shame issues on her/his chart(s). When referring to each pride/shame issue, the supervisee should make corresponding references to the genogram as a way of demonstrating where each of the issues is manifest in her/his family. Thus the CFC(s) and the genogram are presented in a complementary and integrated manner. Following the presentation, the supervisee should have the opportunity to respond to observations or questions that might have been generated for the supervisor and/or members of the supervision team. The purpose here is to identify significant culturally based patterns, themes, or dynamics that might emerge for the supervisee, and for members of the supervision team as well.

It is helpful to have a designated facilitator during the actual presentation. Depending on your theoretical orientation, you may prefer to assume the role of facilitator, assign it to another supervisee, or encourage the team to select
How to Prepare a Cultural Genogram

Culture of Origin
We define culture of origin as the group(s) from which an individual has descended over several generations. Identify the groups that comprise your culture of origin. Research each group you have identified as part of your culture of origin. Your research should culminate in the creation of a Cultural Framework Chart(s) or CFC.

Cultural Framework Chart
A CFC comprises organizing principles, pride/shame issues, and pride/shame symbols. Create one chart for each group that comprises your culture of origin. Each chart should consist of the following:
- Organizing principles: These are fundamental constructs, which shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of members of a group. These should be listed in the chart.
- Pride/shame issues: These originate and derive their meaning from organizing principles. They are aspects of a culture that are sanctioned as distinctly positive or negative. These should be listed on the chart.
- Pride/shame symbols: These are used to visually depict each pride/shame issue. They should be placed directly on the chart beside each corresponding pride/shame issue.

Genogram:
The genogram is a graphic depiction of one’s family of origin. Through the use of colors and the placement of pride/shame symbols, the genogram reveals the cultural identities of each individual, as well as occurrence of specific pride/shame issues throughout the family system. Construct at least a three-generation genogram of your family of origin. The following should appear on the genogram:
- Colors: Select a color to represent each group in your culture of origin. Next, color-code the circles and squares on the genogram accordingly to depict the cultural identities of each individual.
- Pride/shame symbols: Place the symbols on the genogram to identify where various pride/shame issues are manifest.

one. Regardless of the methodology employed for selecting a facilitator, you are ultimately responsible for the supervision session. However, the individual(s) functioning as the facilitator actually directs the cultural genogram process.

The role of facilitator during the presentation process involves guiding the interaction between the presenting supervisee and the team. In this way, the facilitator remains “meta” to the process and helps to facilitate in a way that challenges and supports all members’ exploration of their culturally based beliefs, suppositions, and assumptions. In other words, this is not a linear process whereby only the presenting supervisee is challenged to think and learn about her/himself culturally. Rather, the process is intended to be interactive and systemic such that all
members of the group are encouraged to identify and explore their culturally based beliefs, suppositions, and assumptions.

The presenting supervisee, Alan began by defining his culture-of-origin as German. He presented his CFC for German culture and explained each organizing principle. Next Alan described each German pride issue and referred to his genogram to demonstrate where each of these were manifest in his family system. However, with regard to German shame issues, Alan had drawn a picture of a grayish “blob” which he said depicted a generalized but unidentifiable kind of shame that’s “just sort of all around but it can’t be linked to anything in particular.”

Members of the observing team asked Alan what his theory was about, why he was so adept at defining pride issues and yet was so inept at identifying shame issues? Alan suspected it was because he had not devoted enough time to preparing his genogram. However, one supervisee, Elana, explained to Alan that she believed the Holocaust constituted a significant German shame issue, and as a Jew, she felt offended that he had failed to acknowledge this. Alan became sullen and said, “But what do you want me to do about that? I often feel like you want something from me but I don’t know what. It makes it really hard for me to be around you.” Elana answered by saying, “For starters what I want from you is for you to own the shameful parts of who you are ... I often feel this sense of anger toward you that I’ve never understood, but now I realize it’s because I’ve always seen you as trying to show how perfect you are and you never own the ugly parts of yourself... and culturally-speaking, that really threatens me.”

In this example, the cultural genogram process was a catalyst for promoting an exchange between two supervisees who were struggling with culturally based issues. Alan, with regard to his German ancestry, was struggling with his shame, and Elana, in relation to her Jewish identity, was struggling with her fear and anger regarding the Holocaust. The cultural legacies of Germans and Jews in relation to the Holocaust linked and yet divided both individuals; although it had been between them for months, it had never been acknowledged. The facilitator used this interaction to help the two supervisees consider the implications their cultural legacies had in supervision and on their work as therapists.

The most critical dimension of this stage of the process involves helping supervisees make connections between their cultural legacies and identities, and their roles as members of the supervision team and as therapists. Thus, they should be encouraged to consider the ways in which their cultural selves shape how they interact in supervision and therapy.

Critical Tasks for Facilitators

There are several critical tasks for the facilitator to consider during the cultural genogram process. In situations where you assume the role of the facilitator, you therefore incur direct responsibility for attending to these tasks. When another member of the team assumes the role of the facilitator, you incur indirect responsibility for these tasks in the sense that you observe, and/or if deemed necessary, assist the facilitator.
First, it is important for you to be alert to helping supervisees distinguish between their family of origin and culture of origin. It is common for supervisees to blur the two; however, since the purpose of the exercise is to focus on cultural issues, it is important to keep family of origin and culture of origin clearly differentiated. Second, it is useful for you to attend to shame issues closely. Supervisees often struggle with identifying, and discussing shame issues because of the pain and discomfort this typically generates. Moreover, how supervisees respond to and communicate shame issues also may have cultural underpinnings. Relatedly, it is helpful for you to be sensitive to culturally based reasons for the differences in how supervisees respond to and participate in the process. While differences may be attributable to family-of-origin variables, there also may be cultural explanations for particular differences.

It is further recommended that you manage your anxiety and reactivity. The degree to which you have explored your culturally based pride/shame issues will enhance your ability to manage your anxiety and reactivity effectively with supervisees. Moreover, it is critical that you help supervisees to stay with the emotional intensity that often is generated during a cultural genogram presentation. Supervisors who have dealt with their cultural selves are better positioned to help supervisees work through their cultural issues.

**Stage Three: Synthesis**

In the third and final stage of the cultural genogram process, the presenting supervisee synthesizes what s/he has learned about her/himself culturally. Specific emphasis should be placed upon requiring the supervisee to explore the implications for their role as therapist. It is ultimately your responsibility to help supervisees make critical connections between what they discover during the cultural genogram process and therapy.

**Summary**

The preparation, presentation, and synthesis of a cultural genogram can be quite useful in helping supervisees and supervisors negotiate the cultural dimensions of supervision and ultimately therapy. When used effectively in supervision, the cultural genogram process can give direction to all those pragmatic, “how to” questions that often are asked regarding the integration and exploration of culture in supervision and therapy.

**Reference**