

Conducting spiritual assessments:

An overview of a complementary family of assessment instruments

by

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Increasingly, mental health professionals are being required to administer spiritual assessments. For example, the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) is perhaps the most prominent healthcare accrediting organization in the United States. It accredits most of the hospitals in the US as well as thousands of other healthcare organizations. In 2001, JCAHO revised its accreditation standards to require the administration of spiritual assessments in hospitals and many other settings (Hodge, in press).

Generally speaking, the goal of these requirements is two-fold: 1) to provide more culturally sensitive services and 2) to identify spiritual assets and strengths that can be operationalized to help clients cope with, or solve, problems. These are goals that many, if not most, helping professionals share. Consequently, interest in conducting spiritual assessments has grown significantly over the course of the past two decades (Plante & Sherman, 2001). In many ways, the new requirements reflect a growing consensus among all involved parties—mental health professionals, clients, administrators, and accrediting organizations—that a spiritual assessment is an essential part of service provision (Hodge, 2004b).

Despite growing professional interest in spiritual assessment, relatively few spiritual assessment instruments exist (Sherwood, 1998). Further, few, if any, complementary sets of instruments have been developed that are congruent with the JCAHO accreditation standards.

To address this need, I have developed a complementary family of spiritual assessment instruments which are designed to be compatible with the JCAHO standards. These six qualitative instruments consist of a brief assessment instrument and five comprehensive

instruments: one completely verbal approach—spiritual histories—and four pen-and-paper, diagrammatic approaches—spiritual lifemaps, spiritual genograms, spiritual eco-maps, and spiritual ecograms.

In this paper, I provide a brief overview of each of these instruments. Developing awareness of various options is the first step toward conducting spiritual assessments. Put differently, this paper provides some of the foundational knowledge that is a prerequisite for conducting spiritual assessments. If one doesn't know what tools exist for conducting spiritual assessments, then it difficult to conduct such an assessment. I conclude by underscoring the fact that a variety of assessment instrument provide mental health professionals with the necessary options with which to enhance their level of service provision to clients.

This overview consists of two components. First, a short conceptual overview of the instrument is sketched, intended to foster comprehension of the instrument. Second, a pictorial example of the instrument is provided to help readers understand the conceptual overview. In the case of the brief instrument and spiritual histories, the questions used to operationalize these two verbally based approaches are listed.

Readers interested in further information regarding any of the individual instruments may wish to obtain the original articles. These articles provide further depth and instruction regarding their use in healthcare settings. A book, which collects all this information under one set of covers, is also available at Amazon.com (Hodge, 2003). A second, expanded edition, will be forthcoming in either 2007 or 2008.

I begin below with the brief instrument. Although I reference the JCAHO standards, the rationale will be applicable in many settings. In other words, many mental health professionals in

non-JCAHO accredited settings will likely find this instrument and the underlying rationale to be of use in their own organizations.

Brief spiritual assessment instrument

According to the JCAHO standards, the brief assessment should determine the client's denomination, spiritual beliefs, and important spiritual practices, if any. Questions designed to tap these dimensions while eliciting information designed to fulfill the purpose of the brief assessment are listed in Table 1 (Hodge, 2004a).

[place Table 1 about here]

The purpose of the brief assessment is two-fold (Hodge, in press). First, the information is used to assist in determining the impact of spirituality, if any, on the care/services being provided. In some cases, client spirituality may be non-existent or irrelevant to service provision. In other cases, however, client spirituality may effect service provision.

The second reason for conducting a brief assessment is to determine if a further comprehensive assessment is needed. If client spirituality impacts service provision then a comprehensive assessment may be needed to explore possible barriers that might hinder service provision as well as to identify spiritual strengths that might be used to ameliorate problems or cope with difficulties. If the initial brief assessment indicates that a further comprehensive assessment is needed, then one of the following instruments can be used.

Spiritual histories

In keeping with the brief spiritual assessment discussed above, spiritual histories represent a non-diagrammatic approach to assessment. The administration of verbally-based spiritual histories is analogous to conducting a family history (Hodge, 2001a). The instrument consists of two question sets, which are used to help mental health professionals explore clients'

spiritual stories. The first question set, referred to as an *Initial narrative framework*, provides therapists with some possible questions to help clients tell their stories, typically moving from childhood to the present.

[place Table 2 about here]

The second question set, referred to as an *Interpretive anthropological framework*, is designed to elicit spiritual information as clients relate their stories. According to the *anthropological framework*, the three dimensions of personality—*affect*, *will*, and *cognition*—can be supplemented by three dimensions of the spirit—*communion*, *conscience*, and *intuition*.

Communion refers to the ability to bond or relate to God (or the client's perception of a Creator, Higher Power, Supreme Being, or a Great Spirit). *Conscience* relates to one's ability to sense right and wrong. *Intuition* refers to the ability to know—to come up with insights that bypass normal cognitive channels. Questions are provided to explore client's spiritual realities in each of these six dimensions (see Table 2).

As clients relate their spiritual narratives (prompted as necessary by questions drawn from the *Initial narrative framework*), they will tend to touch upon some of the six dimensions in the anthropological framework. Mental health professionals can interface questions drawn from the anthropological framework into the dialogue to more fully explore clients' spiritual reality in the natural ebb and flow of conversation. In short, the narrative questions help clients tell their own stories while the anthropological questions assist mental health professionals in eliciting important spiritual information as the stories unfold.

Spiritual lifemaps

Spiritual lifemaps are a pictorial portrayal of a client's spiritual journey (Hodge, 2005c). Put differently, spiritual lifemaps are an illustrated account of clients' relationship with God (or

the Creator) over time—a map of their spiritual life. Much like road maps, spiritual lifemaps tell clients where they have come from, where they are now, and where they are going to. Figure 1 illustrates how a spiritual lifemap might be drawn.

[place Figure 1 about here]

At its most basic level, drawing instruments are used to sketch various spiritually significant life events on paper. In addition to a variety of pens and markers; scissors, glue sticks, construction paper, and popular periodicals can be used to map the spiritual journey. The idea is to provide clients with the media they need to map their spiritual stories on a large sheet of paper. Client creativity in the expression of their spiritual journey is encouraged.

Spiritually significant events are typically depicted on a path, roadway, or a single line that represents clients' spiritual walk. Trials or difficulties might be portrayed as hills, bumps, clouds, etc. Successful spiritual strategies that have been used to deal with past problems can be listed on the lifemap as well.

Spiritual genograms

In a manner analogous to traditional genograms, spiritual genograms illustrate the flow of spiritual patterns across at least three generations (Hodge, 2001b). Through the use a modified family tree, spiritual genograms depict the flow of historically rooted patterns through time. In short, spiritual genograms represent a blueprint of intergenerational spiritual interactions. Figure 2 illustrates what a spiritual genogram might look like, within the confines of a non-color medium.

[place Figure 2 about here]

The basic family system is delineated in keeping with standard genogram conventions. Color coding is used to provide a graphic “color snapshot” of the overall spiritual composition of

the family system. Colored drawing pencils can be used to shade in the circles and squares, which depict women and men, to indicate clients' spiritual tradition (e.g., red might symbolize Catholic, yellow might symbolize the Native American church, etc.).

A change in spiritual tradition can be signified by drawing a larger circle outside the figure representing the woman or man, filling in the space between the circle and the figure with the appropriate color, and listing the date of the change in affiliation outside the larger circle. This procedure indicates the stability/fluidity of the person's beliefs over time.

In addition, spiritually meaningful events can be incorporated into the genogram by using symbols drawn from the client's worldview (e.g., an open set of scriptures might be used to indicate a devoutly religious person). Short summary statements can also be used to denote significant events, personal strengths, etc.

Spiritual eco-maps

Spiritual eco-maps focus on clients' current spiritual relationships (Hodge, 2000; Hodge & Williams, 2002). Put differently, this instrument highlights clients' present, existential relationships to spiritual systems. Rather than focusing on what has happened in the past, spiritual eco-maps focus on the here-and-now. Figure 3 provides an illustration.

[place Figure 3 about here]

In keeping with traditional eco-gram construction, the immediate family system (or alternatively, a single person) is portrayed as a circle, in the center of a piece of paper. Spiritual systems deemed significant by clients are depicted on the outskirts of the paper, surrounding the family system.

The heart of the spiritual eco-map is the relationships between the family system and the spiritual systems, which are represented by various types of sketched lines (summarized in Table

3). These lines depict the state of clients' current relationships with various spiritual assets, resources, or systems. As is the case with the other diagrammatic approaches, short, descriptive encapsulations, significant dates, or other creative depictions, can also be incorporated into the eco-map to provide additional information about relational dynamics.

[place Table 3 about here]

Spiritual ecograms

Ecograms tap information that exists in existential space—much like a traditional spiritual eco-map—as well as tapping information that exists across time—like a traditional spiritual genogram (Hodge, 2005b). In short, ecograms tap information that exists in space and across time. Ecograms also depict the connections between past and present functioning. Historical influences on current systems can be seen as well as present relationships with historical influences.

The client or family system is drawn in the center of the paper. The top half of the page is used to chart the client's spiritual history through time as discussed in the section on spiritual genograms. The bottom half of the page is used to chart the client's current relationships to spiritual resources as discussed in the preceding ecomap section.

[place Figure 4 about here]

Unique to ecograms, however, is the incorporation of the family history as a spiritual system(s). In other words, the family history can also be seen as a spiritual system(s) alongside other spiritual systems such as God, rituals, faith communities, etc. This allows clients and mental health professionals to see the various connections between past and present functioning on one diagrammatic assessment.

Conclusion

This paper introduces readers to a complementary set of assessment instruments that were developed to meet the growing need for such tools. To summarize, the brief instrument is for conducting a short, initial assessment. If the brief assessment reveals that a more in-depth assessment is warranted, the five comprehensive instruments provide mental health practitioners with a number of options that highlight different aspects of client spirituality.

The verbally-based spiritual histories explore clients' personal spiritual history. Spiritual lifemaps chart or map clients' spiritual life story. Spiritual genograms illustrate the flow of spirituality across at least three generations. Spiritual eco-maps depict clients' present relationships to current environmental spiritual systems. Finally, spiritual ecograms depict both the flow of spirituality across three generations and present environmental systems on a single diagrammatic instrument.

No single, universal comprehensive assessment instrument suits every situation. Some clients are more verbal (suggesting the use of spiritual histories), while others prefer to express themselves non-verbally (which suggests the use of a diagrammatic instrument). Some are more artistic (suggesting the use of spiritual lifemaps). Others, however, are inclined toward more structured approaches (a feature of spiritual genograms, eco-maps and ecograms).

In some situations, mental health professionals will believe that an exploration of clients' present spiritual assets is sufficient (suggesting the use of a spiritual eco-map). In other contexts, an understanding of generational factors are essential (suggesting the use of spiritual genogram or ecogram).

The various instruments overviewed in this paper provide mental health professionals with options to assess client spirituality in a manner that serves both their interests and those of

their clients. As such, they provide foundational tools with which to provide more effective, culturally sensitive services.

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Table 1

Questions to operationalize a brief spiritual assessment

1. I was wondering if you consider spirituality or religion to be a personal strength?
 2. In what ways does your spirituality help you cope with the difficulties you encounter?
 3. Are there certain spiritual beliefs and practices that you find particularly helpful in dealing with problems?
 4. I was also wondering if you attend a church or some other type of spiritual community?
 5. Do resources exist in your spiritual community that might be helpful to you?
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Adapted from (Hodge, 2004a).

Table 2

Question sets for conducting a spiritual history*Dimensions of the personality*

1. *Affect*: What aspects of your spiritual life give you pleasure? What role does your spirituality play in handling life's sorrows? Enhancing life's joys? Coping with life's pain? How does your spirituality give you hope for the future? What do you wish to accomplish in the future?

2. *Behavior*: Are there particular spiritual rituals, ceremonies, or practices that help you deal with life's obstacles? What is your level of involvement in spiritual communities, such as church, spiritual groups, etc.? How are they supportive? Are there spiritually encouraging individuals that you maintain contact with?

3. *Cognition*: What are your current spiritual/religious beliefs? What are they based upon? What beliefs do you find particularly meaningful? What does your faith say about personal trials? How does this belief help you overcome obstacles? How do your beliefs affect your health practices?

Dimensions of the spirit

1. *Communion*: Describe your relationship with God (or the Creator, etc.). What has been your experience of God? How does God communicate with you? How have these experiences encouraged you? Have there been times of deep spiritual intimacy? How does your relationship help you face life challenges? How would God describe you?

2. *Conscience*: How do you determine right and wrong? What are your key values? How does your spirituality help you deal with wrongdoings or guilt? What role does forgiveness play in your life?

3. *Intuition*: To what extent do you experience intuitive hunches (flashes of creative insight, premonitions, spiritual insights)? Have these insights been a strength in your life? If so, how?

Adapted from (Hodge, 2001a).

Table 3

Depicting relational information in diagrammatic form

	Tenuous relationship
	Weak relationship
	Normal relationship
	Strong relationship
	Conflicted relationship
	Flow of energy or resources
	Bi-directional flow of energy

Adapted from (Hodge, 2005a).