

Transracial Adoption-Informed Genograms


Beyond the Broken Line

The family genogram is a commonly assigned activity in family and couple counseling courses in master's level counselor education programs. The genogram is based on euro- and biological-dominant historical norms of family. Scholar practitioners have modernized the genogram to better reflect the diversity of family experiences. Yet without proper introduction and instructor attunement, the assignment may continue to create a harmful and exclusive atmosphere for those students who identify as transracial adoptees. This practice brief introduces a more inclusive genogram assignment to support transracial adoptees, specifically, and all students with marginalized and minoritized identities.

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I have no known conflicts of interests to disclose.

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KEYWORDS

*genogram, transracial adoptees,
family systems, counselor education*

Transracial Adoption-Informed Genograms: Beyond the Broken Line

Bowen family systems theory and genogram instruction are common within counselor education, most frequently appearing in family and couple's counseling or group supervision courses (Lim, 2008; Magnuson & Shaw, 2003; Nichols & Davis, 2019). The genogram intervention applies commonly used patterns to denote demographics, such as gender identity, marital status, siblings, and extended family members cross generationally within an individual's family system (Butler, 2008; McGoldrick et al., 2008; Nichols & Davis, 2019). Textbooks, peer-reviewed articles, and popular genogram software programs provide genogram symbols to represent various demographics. The symbols have been gradually updated to capture the wide range of identities to promote inclusivity. However, the symbol for adoptees remains a broken dashed line, presumably to emphasize non-biological ties to adoptive family members (Genopro, n.d.). In addition, symbols to represent birth family members and include birth family members in genogram examples are limited if nonexistent. As a result, this practice brief asserts the possible harm to transracial adoptees inherent in the genogram assignment and offers culturally responsive revisions to the assignment to broaden inclusivity.

Transracial Adoption

Transracial adoption is defined as the legal adoption of a child who identifies as a different race than their adoptive parent(s) (Barn, 2013). Domestic transracial adoption practices in the United States began within a context of racism and White superiority as evidenced by the federally funded National Adoption Project (NAP) in the late 1950s through early 1960s (Palmiste, 2011). The NAP aimed to remove indigenous children from their birth families to assimilate them to White culture (Palmiste, 2011). Many scholars categorize the NAP as part of a federal campaign, including residential boarding schools, to annihilate indigenous and Native American culture. Ultimately, Native American activists and scholars worked to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a federal law mandating that tribally enrolled Native American children, who need to be removed from their birth families, remain within their cultural communities (Thibeault & Spencer, 2019).

Transracial adoption within the United States (U.S.) child welfare system rose in the early 1970s in response to increased numbers of children of color entering the system with limited numbers of families of color approved as foster and adoptive families as well as the decline of White children available for adoption, a consequence of increased access to birth control and the legalization of abortion (Marr et al., 2020). The practice was not without its

controversy. Specifically, the National Association of Black Social Workers issued a statement against transracial adoption practices and cited the harm created when Black children are raised outside of their communities with limited cultural socialization (1972). The 1993 federal Multiethnic Placement Act encouraged transracial adoption by removing race matching as a reason for delaying permanency (Marr, 2017). Children of color in the U.S. child welfare system remain disproportionately overrepresented. Roberts (2014), a prominent scholar in child welfare studies, outlined historical and current factors related to structural racism that led to overrepresentation of families of color in the welfare system.

The rise in transnational adoption took place around the same time as the NAP, in the late 1950s, post Korean War, when Korean orphaned children were adopted by U.S. adoptive families (Marr, 2017). The next wave of transnational adoptions, from Latin America, occurred in the late 1960s (Lovelock, 2000) with more countries, such as Ukraine, Russia, China, Vietnam, and Ethiopia following in the 1990s through the early 2000s (Selman, 2009). The most recent statistics available on transnational adoptive families indicate that up to 80% are also transracial (Vandivere et al., 2009) with most comprised of children of color with White-identifying adoptive families. Transnational adoption peaked in the mid 2000s in the United States and has since been on a decline (Baden, 2019). Problematic and illicit transnational adoption practices contributed to the worldwide decline including some countries temporarily halting transnational adoptions until more ethical practices can be assured (Molinero & Clemente-Martínez, 2021; Palacios et al., 2019).

Within the past several decades, transracial adoptee-identifying scholars have emerged as prominent voices within the field of critical adoption studies (McGinnis et al., 2019). Transracial adoptee counternarratives shed light on the impact of transracial adoption on the lives of the adoptees themselves spotlighting issues, such as identity development challenges (Lee, 2003), racism and microaggressions (Miller et al., 2020), search and reunion (Kirton et al., 2000), and limited or no cultural socialization (Montgomery & Jordan, 2018). Baden et al.'s Reculturation Model (2012) delineated the cultural outcomes of transracial adoptee identity development exploration: (a) adoptee, (b) reclaimed, (c) bicultural, (d) assimilated, and (e) combined. Adoptee consciousness describes the process by which adoptees become aware of oppressive systems within adoption. The Adoptee Consciousness Model (Branco et al., 2022) outlined five touchstones of consciousness an adoptee may experience throughout their lifespan: (a) status quo, (b) rupture, (c) dissonance, (d) expansiveness, and (d) forgiveness and activism. Students who identify as transracial adoptees are increasingly represented in counselor education as evidenced by affinity groups for transracial adoptees like the Multiracial, Multiethnic, and Transracial Adoptee Concerns (MMTAC) group, formerly the Multi-Ethnic Concerns group, of the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development division (n.d.). In 2021 and 2022, the MMTAC offered several transracial adoption-focused and well-attended webinars featuring transracial adoptee-identifying counselor educators and scholars. It is crucial for counselor educators to be aware of and attentive to inclusion of transracial adoptee students represented in counseling programs.

RATIONALE

It is highly likely that professional counselors will work with adopted populations at some point during their practice (Branco, 2019; Janus 1997; Penny et al., 2007). Adoptees are more likely than non-adopted persons to seek mental health and or substance use services in their lifetimes (Behle & Pinquart, 2016; Brodzinsky, 2013). Alarming, research findings suggest adopted persons have an increased risk of suicidality as compared to non-adoptees (Keyes et al., 2013; Hjern et al., 2020). Adoption-related knowledge, in general, and dynamics of transracial adoption, specifically, are rarely addressed in counselor education curriculum (Branco, 2019) despite evidence of counseling students completing field placements and obtaining postgraduate employment in child welfare settings (Weir et al., 2008). The knowledge gap extends to counselor educators who may not be aware of or practicing those recommendations identified in the Competencies for Working with Transracial Adoptees and their Families (Baden et al., 2015) approved by the American Counseling Association (ACA). Lack of transracial adoption-informed knowledge can limit culturally sensitive instruction and assignments and increase the possibility for transracial adoption-related microaggressions (Baden, 2016). Adoption-related microaggressions can include insensitive questions about one's adoption story, racial-ethnic heritage, and or country of origin, making assumptions adoptees are fortunate or lucky to be adopted, and stereotypical negative beliefs about birth parents and relinquishment circumstances (Baden, 2016).

GENOGRAMS

The genogram is a tool to support client exploration of family systems (Nichols & Davis, 2019). Bowen's family systems theory initially utilized family diagrams to create maps of family relationships to highlight concepts, such as emotional cutoffs, triangulation, and coalitions (Butler, 2008). Eventually diagrams morphed to the name genogram (Butler, 2008) and became an increasingly popular tool for training and supervision purposes. Students are encouraged to apply family genograms to themselves to support reflexivity, self-insight, and countertransference in their clinical work (Lim, 2008). Cultural (Keiley et al., 2002) transgenerational trauma and resilience (Goodman, 2013) and non-heterodominant genograms (Barsky, 2022) have emerged in scholarship and practice to offer more inclusive options for clients and students in training to conceptualize their family systems. These culturally responsive genograms moved from the euro-dominant notions of family to a more comprehensive understanding of family constellations.

Limitations for Transracial Adoptees

Insensitive and culturally exclusive assignments plague adoptees from early education (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2021; Fishman & Harrington, 2007). For example, the frequently assigned "family tree" or "all about me" assignments, without cultural sensitivity, can unintentionally be harmful to adoptive children who may be unprepared to consider adoption-related questions and or respond to peer questions to families who appear physically dissimilar to the adoptee (Branco & Brott, 2017; Park-Taylor & Wing, 2020). Despite gains in culturally responsive genograms,

instructions for completing them often presuppose clients and students have access to inter-generational familial information. Such assumptions are especially harmful to adoptees who may be limited by several factors: (a) original birth certificate (OBC) laws; (b) closed, missing, or falsified birth or adoption records (c) adoptive parent withholding information; and (d) deoxyribonucleic (DNA) testing. At present, only persons adopted in states with original birth certificate laws may legally access their original birth certificates holding the names and other identifying information of their birth parents (Bastard Nation, n.d.). Thirteen states have legalized OBC access (Bastard Nation, n.d.). Adoptees born in non-OBC states have no legal right or remedy to access their original birth certificate and, consequently, are unable to learn birth family information. Similarly, transnational adoptees were often adopted within closed systems, meaning all birth family information was concealed. For some transnational adoptees, accessing birth family information requires perseverance, navigating bureaucratic hurdles, investing financially, and preparing for the likelihood of not finding any birth family information (Branco, 2021). Research on adoptee search and reunion revealed that some adoptees faced barriers to accessing their adoption documentation withheld from them by their adoptive parents (Branco & Cloonan, 2022). To address the lack of information, some transracial adoptees have sought DNA testing to determine their racial and ethnic makeup. Sometimes the DNA findings are opposite to what a transracial adoptee has identified as and or create more questions than answers (Suter & Docan-Morgan, 2022).

GENOGRAMS AS TOOLS FOR INCLUSION

Culturally responsive instructions support a paradigm shift to create more inclusive genogram assignments. While an instructor cannot address every transracial adoptee student's unique circumstance, reculturation outcomes (Baden et al., 2012), or adoptee consciousness touchstone (Branco et al., 2022), they can create a welcoming, normalizing, and inclusive atmosphere to promote student reflexivity, self-awareness, and insight. In so doing, transracial adoptee microaggressions and harmful assumptions may be avoided. The following will outline instructional strategies.

Instructional Strategies

From the outset of the assignment introduction, a broad statement should be issued directly addressing and normalizing the spectrum of access students may or may not possess regarding their family histories in acknowledgment that not everyone will be able to identify several generations of data. Such a statement counteracts assumptions that all students are privileged with the knowledge of their full family history. Next, the genogram assignment should be introduced to students in a manner similar to the way a counselor would introduce any intervention with a client: reviewing the risks and benefits. The assignment requires

students to explore their family systems and the impact their experiences with their families have on their development and as a counselor-in-training. The benefits of the assignment are to support their professional growth and alert them to potential countertransference when working with clients. The risks must be outlined to prepare students to gather their supportive strategies for wellness as they engage in the assignment. The risks may include discomfort, unease, stress, sadness, and or a range of emotions as students consider their family systems, as well as the emotional labor the assignment requires. The instructor may share their own wellness strategies to model how they manage emotionally laborious tasks.

ASSIGNMENT

Students are required to visually depict their family genogram showing two-to-three generations, depending on information available to them. The assignment is couched within an overview of Bowen Family Systems theory paired with a brief history of the genogram intervention to include visual examples and commonly used symbols. Instructors may implement any or all of the following strategies:

- Provide a historical overview to include discussion on the mostly cisgender- male-dominant theorists who shaped concepts of what constitutes families, with an emphasis on missing marginalized voices.
- Facilitate discussion on those historical structural factors, such as enslavement, immigration, war/institutional violence, incarceration, anti-miscegenation and LGBTQIA+ laws, and intergenerational trauma, in addition to adoption-related laws and policy, that influenced how families were formed and maintained.
- Normalize and validate missing and or unknown family generational data.
- Offer optional family data collection methods, such as storytelling, narrative or photo, histories, DNA testing results, etc.
- Relay additional information on the history of adoption and transracial adoption specifically in the US to highlight adoption industry and child welfare systemic inequalities and foster considerations of intersectional identities to include transracial adoptee status as examples of structural influences on family systems.
- Discuss biologicalism, or biological superiority, specifically related to adoptees, as well as other reproductive options, such as surrogacy, donor egg conception, etc.
- Recommend empowering options for adoptees and other students in blended, step, multi-racial, or kinship families to include birth and adoptive family member information whether known or unknown (Goodwach, 2003).
- Provide more inclusive genograms examples that address intergenerational trauma as well as non-heterodominant concepts.
- Review commonly used genogram symbols and encourage students to create their own symbols that represent their family systems.

- Support students to include at least two salient identities within their family system as outlined in the RESPECTFUL Model (D’Andrea & Daniels, 2001), thus affording transracial adoptees the option to identify differing racial or ethnic identities from adoptive family members or not.
- Assist students to identify structural factors (i.e., institutionalized racism, family separation and or immigration policies, adoption and child welfare laws, legal system,) that both positively and negatively impacted their family systems.

Student Reflection

Frequent wellness check-ins and discussions may happen throughout the course and especially as the assignment due date draws near. Students will respond to the following reflection questions before, during, and post assignment, many of which are directly from the Ancestral Integration Model (Mitchell & Shillingford, 2017).

Before starting the assignment ask:

- “What does ancestry [and family] mean to you?” (p. 67)
- “What are your feelings about the level of information you currently have about your ancestry [family]?”

During the assignment, while gathering family historical information, ask:

- “What are your thoughts about this new [or not] information?” (p. 67)
- What wellness strategies are you implementing for self-care?

After the genogram is completed ask:

- “What does the new [or not new] information mean to you?” (p. 67)
- What emotions did you experience while completing the assignment?
- “Have your findings been consistent with your previous narrative?” (p. 67)
 - “If so, what are your thoughts and feelings on maintaining the same narrative?” (p. 67)
 - “If not, how have your thoughts and feelings of self-changed?” (p. 67).
 - How will this knowledge impact you personally and as a counselor-in-training?

Counselor Educator Support

Counselor educators may employ multiple strategies to support transracial adoptees and all students during the genogram assignment. The opening statement normalizing missing or nonexistent family information paired with the risks and benefits overview supports a nonjudgmental space for all students. Instructors may model broaching (Day-Vines et al., 2021) by sharing their own salient identities to set the stage for students to feel welcome to explore their own. Counselor educators may also describe how they manage personal and professional boundaries and wellness when engaged in the emotional labor of counseling and offer practical guidance on ways students can maintain wellness during the assignment

(Mitchell & Binkley, 2021). Further, instructors may share their own genograms to serve the dual purpose of an assignment example and modeling continued broaching of salient identities (Magnusen & Shaw, 2003). It is helpful for instructors to offer liberal office hours to support individual student meetings to answer questions about how students may craft their genograms that showcase their unique family situations. The genogram assignment may uncover new areas worth exploring in individual or family counseling. Counselor educators need to be prepared to offer mental health resources to students who may need additional counseling support.

APPLICATION TO COUNSELOR EDUCATION

The popularity of the genogram assignment in counselor education creates opportunities to cultivate more inclusive environments for all students and transracial adoptees, specifically those who are an, often, unacknowledged yet growing group of counselors-in-training. Normalization and validation of all family constellations is the crux of the assignment and can apply to a broad array of family types including multi-racial, blended, step, and kinship. Discussion surrounding institutional and structural factors impacting families support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students and others with marginalized identities; these discussions should be a focus. Instructional strategies dispel common adoption-related assumptions and microaggressions and pave the way for student self-exploration. Culturally inclusive genogram strategies also support several Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs ([CACREP] 2015) standards, including the following found in Section 2:

- 2.d the impact of heritage on attitudes, beliefs, understandings, and acculturative experiences on an individual's views of others (p. 10).
- 2.h strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination (p. 10).

ETHICAL AND COMPETENCY CONSIDERATIONS

Multiple ethical principles and counseling competencies are relevant to the successful instruction of the genogram assignment. Several parts of ACA ethical codes (2014) apply to counselor educators facilitating the genogram assignment:

- A.4.b. Personal Values. "Counselors are aware of and avoid imposing their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors." (p. 5). Counselor educators must examine their own biases and stereotypes about transracial adoption to remain nonjudgmental.
- F.7.a. Counselor Educators. "Whether in traditional, hybrid, and/or online formats, counselor educators conduct counselor education and training programs in an ethical manner and serve as role models for professional behavior" (p. 14). Modeling broaching,

sharing their own genograms, and transparently engaging in wellness are important components of the assignment.

- F.7.c. Infusing Multicultural Issues/Diversity. “Counselor educators infuse material related to multiculturalism/diversity into all courses and workshops for the development of professional counselors” (p. 14). The assignment itself seamlessly weaves attention to diverse backgrounds as evidenced by applying the RESPECTFUL Model (D’Andrea & Daniels, 2001) and group discussions on the impact of structural factors to families.

In addition to attending to ACA professional ethics, the assignment also addresses the counseling competency to “Remedy the lack of adoption-sensitive training for working with members of the transracial adoption kinship network within counselor education programs by incorporating adoption-related information, skills, and training within core curriculum coursework” (Baden et al., 2015, p. 31).

Impacts on the Classroom

The introduction to the assignment, to include risks and benefits, creates a starting point by which counselor educators may facilitate respectful dialogue amongst students. The emotional labor of the assignment is conducive to building group cohesion and can aid to foster intra-student support of one another. Weekly classroom check-ins surrounding the assignment progress and experience builds upon the cohesion. Such support is important to provide a buffer from the potential discomfort some may encounter when examining family histories and discussing aspects of privilege, power, and structural inequities impacting families.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

There are multiple peer-reviewed journal articles of benefit to the assignment. Mitchell and Shillingfords’ Ancestry Identity Model (2017) serves as a helpful template in which to consider the unique circumstances of transracial adoptees as it pertains to genograms. Other resources to support the assignment include software assisted genograms, such as genopro.com. A helpful website to explore Bowen Family Systems in current clinical practice can be found at the Georgetown University Bowen Center for the Study of the Family (<https://www.thebowncenter.org/>). Specific resources for adoptee legal advocacy include Bastard Nation (<http://bastards.org>) Adoptee Rights Law (<https://adopteerightslaw.com>); and Adoptees for Justice (<https://www.adopteesforjustice.org/>). Information on adoptee and transracial adoptee specific issues of concern can be found on the Adoptees On podcast (<https://www.adopteeson.com>). Adoptee-identifying mental health providers, including transracial adoptees, are located in the Adoptee Therapist Directory (https://growbeyondwords.com/adoptee-therapist-directory/?fbclid=IwAR2sdU54t0pxLiJb17GtXXO3FP7y6EL_dVw9-eJCiQgmeFrhfxvj5mSswHY).

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Teaching Innovation/Instructional Strategy

Multiple strategies can be utilized to evaluate counselor educator effectiveness. Instructors who share aspects of their own identities can enhance student engagement and receptiveness (Considine et al., 2017). However, some caution, “This approach may be risky, as the lines of authority between professor and student may erode” (Considine et al., 2017, p. 177). Therefore, instructor evaluation may include peer observation, either live or via online recordings, to provide feedback and support instructor boundaries. Counselor educators themselves must also engage in wellness and self-care strategies to model for their students as well as cultivate an anti-racist learning environment (Branco & Patton-Scott, 2020; Mitchell & Binkley, 2021).

ASSESSMENT TOOLS TO ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

Lim (2008) utilized student reports on the utility and value of genogram work in a practicum course as well as in-depth interviews to assess student learning. Similar outcome measures can be implemented with brief post-assignment student surveys on their experiences. A pass/fail grading system that relies on student self-evaluation and reports on their experiences limits the potential for skewed grading based on instructor bias. It also affords students more freedom to explore their family systems more intensely without the additional burden of letter grading. Several assessments may be utilized to collect learning outcomes related to the Bowen family system theory. These include knowledge checks to ensure main concepts are understood and asynchronous discussion questions related to the application of Bowenian concepts in counseling. Finally, the embedded reflection questions modeled after the Ancestral Integration Model (Mitchell & Shillingford, 2017) aid to cultivate a welcoming learning environment and deepen the insight-oriented aspect of the assignment.

Implications

The transracial adoption-informed genogram assignment broadens inclusivity for transracially adopted students who are an increasingly emergent and marginalized group within counselor education. In addition, the assignment opens the door for validation and normalization of a wide range of family constellations to include multi-racial, blended, step, kinship, and other marginalized groups. Emphasis on structural factors impacting families, such as transracial adoption history in the United States, enables students to identify dominant narratives that have informed family theories and genograms and offer opportunities for counternarratives

to be shared. The inclusive genogram assignment is a template modeling how counselors-in-training may implement culturally responsive genograms with transracial adoptees, specifically, and a wide array of other family constellations, in general.

LIMITATIONS

The transracial adoption-informed genogram addresses a gap in instructional strategies to promote inclusivity for transracially adopted persons in counselor education; however, the overall number of students who identify as transracial adoptees remains unknown. The instructional strategy requires counselor educators to examine their own biases about transracial adoption, to share their own genograms, and to disclose their own wellness strategies with their students. Those counselor educators who are not willing or capable of enacting those areas may inadvertently limit the inclusiveness of the assignment. Finally, a focus exclusively on transracial adoptees may unintentionally be “othering”; therefore, counselor educators must strive to also apply instructional strategies to encompass other groups as well.

Future research

Qualitative data on the experiences of transracial adoptees who completed the transracial adoption-informed genogram assignment could inform instructional guidelines and illuminate perceived supportive counselor educator strategies. Likewise, experiences of counselor educators who implement a transracial adoption-informed genogram assignment would aid in identifying refinements and weaknesses to the instructions. Future genogram assignments can also incorporate more expressive modalities, such as play or photo-based genograms (Cook & Poulsen, 2011) to capture unique family constellations as well.

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