Spiritual Lifemaps: A Client-Centered Pictorial Instrument for Spiritual Assessment, Planning, and Intervention

David R. Hodge

Although some consumers desire to integrate spirituality into the clinical dialogue, few resources have appeared in the literature to help practitioners operationalize spiritual strengths. This article introduces and orients practitioners to a new pictorial instrument—the spiritual lifemap—that can be used for spiritual assessment. The instrument facilitates a smooth transition from assessment to exploring and planning interventions. The author provides a case study and suggestions on how to use the instrument in clinical settings. A number of common spiritual interventions, drawn from a wide variety of theoretical approaches, are highlighted. The author discusses several applications and possible value conflicts that may arise when assessing spirituality.

KEY WORDS: assessment; religion; spiritual lifemaps; spirituality; strengths

As Thayne (1998) observed, consumers’ spiritual cosmologies can be a powerful resource in helping consumers deal with life’s challenges. Indeed, major reviews on spirituality and religion have found a generally positive association between these two constructs and a wide array of salutary characteristics (Johnson, 2002; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Pargament, 1997). Furthermore, many consumers desire to integrate their spiritual belief systems into the therapeutic dialogue. Gallup data reported by Bart (1998), for instance, indicated that 81 percent of respondents wanted to have their spiritual values and beliefs integrated into the counseling process.

Although these developments have helped spark an interest in reintegrating spirituality into clinical settings, surveys have repeatedly found that most social workers have received little training on how to assess or operationalize consumers’ spiritual strengths (Canda & Furman, 1999; Murdock, 2004). Without instruction on spiritual assessment, social workers are unlikely to tap consumers’ spiritual strengths (Ronnau & Poertner, 1993). Accordingly, this article introduces practitioners to a new pictorial instrument for spiritual assessment—the spiritual lifemap.

Although spirituality and religion have been defined in a number of ways, they are generally understood to be overlapping although distinct constructs (Canda, 1997; Carroll, 1997). For the purposes of this article, spirituality is defined as an existential relationship with God (or perceived Transcendence) that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose, and mission in life. In turn this relationship produces salutary change, such as an increased sense of other-centered love, which has a discernible effect on an individual’s relationship to self, others, and God (Hodge, 2000a).

Conversely, religion flows from spirituality, expressing the existential spiritual relationship in particular forms, rituals, beliefs, and practices that have been developed in community with other individuals who share similar phenomenological experiences of Transcendence (Hodge, 2000a). Although many exceptions exist, for most consumers spirituality is expressed through religion (Pargament, 1997).

SPIRITUAL LIFEMAPS: PHILOSOPHY AND ADVANTAGES

As a client-constructed pictorial narrative of a spiritual journey, spiritual lifemaps are animated by what
Spiritual lifemaps are a pictorial delineation of consumers' spiritual journeys.

Hoyt (1998) refers to spirituallifemaps as a pictorial delineation of consumers' spiritual journeys. At its most basic level, a drawing pencil is used to sketch spiritually significant life events on paper. Thus, much like road maps, spiritual lifemaps tell us where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going. The method is analogous to approaches drawn from art and family therapy in which a client's history is depicted on a “lifeline” (Tracz & Gehart-Brooks, 1999). However, as in the Confessions, the narrative is based on the consumer's spiritual pilgrimage and associated events. Put simply, a spiritual lifemap is an illustrated account of the consumer's relationship with God over time—a map of his or her spiritual life.

Building on the strengths of the constructivist perspective, spiritual lifemaps offer users a number of advantages. By placing a client-constructed medium at the center of assessment, consumers are involved in the therapeutic process in a significant way from the beginning of therapy. Through the creation of a lifemap, the message is implicitly communicated that the client is a proactive, self-directed, fully engaged participant in the therapeutic process. Resistance and anxiety may also be ameliorated through the use of a nonverbal, pictorial medium. Given the highly personal nature of spirituality for many clients, and workers' limited training regarding spiritual cosmologies (Canda & Furman, 1999), practitioners may inadvertently offend clients, jeopardizing the therapeutic relationship, when using verbally based spiritual assessment approaches. The pictorial instrument affords practitioners the opportunity to focus on building therapeutic rapport by providing an atmosphere that is accepting, nonjudgmental, and supportive during the initial assessment (Kahn, 1999).

In addition, individuals who are not verbally oriented may find pictorial expression more conducive to their personal communication styles (McNiff, 1992). Furthermore, consumers may find it less threatening having a concrete object that functions as the focus of subsequent conversation rather than the client (Moon, 1994).

Finally, given the amorphous, subjective nature of spirituality, physical depiction may help concretize consumers' extant strengths (Hodge, 2000a). The process of conceptualizing and depicting an individual's spiritual journey may help focus and objectify spiritual assets, which can then be discussed and marshaled to address problems.

Broaching the Topic of Spirituality with Clients

Because many consumers desire to incorporate their spirituality with therapeutic concerns, clients often spontaneously mention spiritual resources (for example, God, church, prayer, and so forth) during initial sessions. Practitioners can acknowledge and validate these statements and briefly explore the salience of spirituality in the client's life (for example, “How important is spirituality or religion to you?”). If it appears that a spiritual assessment might be appropriate, the worker should explain the basic concept of a lifemap to the consumer, highlighting how it might be used to operationalize spiritual strengths to overcome presenting difficulties.

Alternatively, workers can ask at the start of therapy, or at a later junction, if spirituality or religion serves as a resource in the client's life. If working in a mental health setting accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare
Organizations (JCAHO), workers may wish to consider the brief assessment model developed by Hodge (2004), which was designed to satisfy the JCAHO requirements for conducting an initial exploratory spiritual assessment. If an initial exploration suggests that a more in-depth assessment is warranted, the instrument can be explained. In either case, it is important to procure consumers' consent before proceeding with a spiritual assessment and the drawing of the lifemap (Doherty, 1999).

Creating the Lifemaps

In keeping with evidence that suggests information is stored and organized narratively in the mind (Strickland, 1994), events are usually depicted chronologically, from birth to the present and usually continuing on to death and the client's transition to the afterlife. More specifically, a path, a roadway, or a single line is commonly used to represent the spiritual sojourn. One way to proceed is to draw this path on the paper first, break the path into years or decades, and then fill in events along the path, a method that ensures that equal space is allotted to all points along the lifecycle. Conversely, others might prefer a more freeform approach in which their path and life events are sketched together. Among the advantages of this approach is the opportunity to devote more space to significant time periods during the spiritual walk.

Symbols drawn from the client's spiritual cosmology are typically used to mark key events along the journey. For instance, a cross might be used by a Christian to portray a spiritual conversion, whereas a depiction of the Lingam and Yoni might be used by a Hindu to represent her relationship to Siva. Similarly, a stick figure in a meditative pose enveloped in a sunbeam might signify a time of enlightenment for a New Age adherent.

Concurrently, because most spiritual cosmologies conceive material existence to be an extension of the sacred reality (Richards & Bergin, 1997), important "secular" incidents are usually included. Both positive (for example, marriage and the birth of a child) and particularly negative events (for example, death, loss of a job, and other trials) may be portrayed. The ultimate goal is depiction of all events perceived to be of spiritual significance by the client on the lifemap.

To fully operationalize the potential of the instrument, it is important to ask consumers to highlight the trials they have encountered and the spiritual resources they have used to cope in the course of their journey. As noted earlier, symbolic depictions can be effectively used. Hills, bumps and potholes, rain, clouds, lightning, and other items might be used to portray difficult waystations along the spiritual sojourn, and symbols might also be developed to represent spiritual assets that have facilitated coping. Finally, although the social worker can provide general guidelines and, if necessary, specific tips for the construction of lifemaps, client creativity and self-expression should be encouraged.

To assist consumers in the creative expression of their spiritual journeys, it is important to have a good supply of media readily available (Horovitz-Darby, 1994). Drawing instruments might include drawing pencils (specifically no. 1) and erasers (Mars Staedler and gum), colored drawing pencils (a 12-color set), fine and broad-nibbed colored markers (an eight-color set), and large and small crayons (at least 16 colors). It is also helpful to provide a choice of white and manila paper (sizes 8.5" x 11" to 24" x 36"), as well as colored construction paper (sizes 8.5" x 11" and 12" x 18"). Practitioners may also wish to make available scissors, glue sticks, and rulers, as well as a variety of magazines and newspapers. Consumers may decide to clip items from the latter media (for example, "AUTO ACCIDENT") and paste them onto the lifemap to illustrate events that hold meaningful places in their spiritual walk. Because of the amount of data lifemaps elicit, it is usually best to use a large sheet of paper on which to sketch the map.

Some clients, when faced with a large blank sheet of paper, may experience "stage fright" and have difficulty beginning or, later on in the process, may feel inadequate to express a certain event or concept. In such cases, it is generally appropriate to encourage individuals to plunge ahead and draw (McNiff, 1992), noting that there is no correct way to draw a lifemap. It may also help to stress that the central function of lifemaps is to express and communicate a spiritual reality rather than to assess someone's artistic talent (Kahn, 1999). A drawing using stick figures is just as valid as one with more elaborate portrayals.

As implied in the preceding section, during the creation of a lifemap, practitioners adopt a secondary, supportive role, assisting and encouraging the client as needed. The goal is to help consumers tell
their stories while nurturing an affirming, empathetic relationship. For example, workers might offer to clip out material from magazines if clients elect to use such media.

**Conducting an Assessment with Lifemaps**

On completion of the lifemap, the worker should generally ask the consumer to explain his or her creation ("Would you tell me about your spiritual lifemap?"). As clients express their spiritual journeys, it is critical that workers demonstrate interest, curiosity, and even fascination with their clients' narratives. Minimal verbal prompts ("but?" "and?" "yes"), accent responses (in which a word or short phrase is repeated in a questioning tone), in conjunction with typical emphatic responses should be used during this stage of the assessment (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 2002). Workers should attempt to place their own beliefs on the shelf and seek to understand consumers' phenomenological spiritual reality.

Social workers should be aware that many consumers may be hesitant to trust practitioners because of concerns that workers will not honor that which they hold to be sacred (Furman, Perry, & Goldale, 1996). To a great extent, this apprehension can be alleviated by expressing genuine emphatic support. Furthermore, respecting consumers' spiritual reality as an equally valid construction of reality on a par with the dominant materialistic framework helps to foster an environment in which spiritual interventions can be more productively explored.

**Case Example**

Figure 1 indicates what a completed lifemap might look like on a smaller scale. The client, a 42-year-old black man referred to as Darrin, grew up as an only child in a two-parent middle-class home. His formative years were characterized by heavy involvement in sports and warm, caring relationships. However, on leaving home at 18, it was as if he entered a different, more tumultuous, reality. Seemingly aimless wandering, a stormy relationship, and an inability to break out of repetitive, often-unhealthy patterns marked his life during his early to mid-20s. After breaking off the relationship, he experienced a series of forks, wrong turns, and dead ends, which led him to cry out to God in desperation. His life continued to spiral out of control until
he ended up at the foot of the cross, figuratively, “dead on arrival.”

At 29, Darrin experienced a spiritual awakening that resulted in his entering another reality. This experience marked a sharp turning point in his life. A year later he joined a Pentecostal church and experienced a new infilling of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove, which opened an additional dimension of the spiritual world. In addition to his relationship with Jesus, he lists his spiritual strengths as prayer, church fellowship, worship, and Bible study.

Although being fired from his job was a difficult experience, his church fellowship played an instrumental role in helping him through the situation. More difficult to deal with was the sudden death of his parents when he was 32, which hit him like an emotional lightning bolt.

Over the next few years, other difficulties emerged, such as friction with some church members, close friends moving away, and fewer spiritually vibrant times of prayer and Bible study. Eventually, the sense of God’s presence slowly left him. As he reached the point of questioning his relationship with God, his existence, and the validity of his own life, Darrin experienced a series of events that altered the course of his life. Through these events, which he saw as providential, he realized that God had not abandoned him. Soon after that, his “dark night” of the soul ended as he fully realized God’s love for him.

At 36, Darrin married a woman from his church. A couple of years later, he was presented with a mentoring award on behalf of his efforts with troubled youths. Although he finds the relationships draining at times, his friendships with the other men and the youths are also invigorating. Similarly, he also draws strength from the male intimacy he finds in his Promise Keepers group, which he joined about the same time. He enjoys the opportunity the group provides for black men to share their experiences with racism with a receptive audience of white people, in addition to the encouragement he receives to be a better husband. Finally, in addition to these and the resources mentioned earlier, Darrin has recently found a significant source of spiritual strength meditating on meaningful Bible verses.

Planning Interventions

As the case example implies, spiritual lifemaps are designed to unfold consumers’ orienting framework to practitioners. Spiritual cosmologies, like all orienting systems, provide adherents with a general framework for interpreting the world. Similarly, during times of stress, situations in which individuals are more likely to encounter social workers, these frameworks help clients understand the challenges they face. As a result, it is important that workers have some understanding of these frameworks so that they are aware of how clients approach the difficulties they encounter.

Furthermore, during acute trials, these frameworks for understanding reality frequently become more salient (Pargament, 1997). Put differently, problems often serve to reorient individuals toward their metaphysical reality and increase its level of personal importance—the “no atheists in foxholes” effect. Consequently, spiritually based coping provides individuals with another resource to address difficulties (Pargament). However, it is also true that clients can become so mired in present, often chronic, challenges that they overlook potential resources that may solve current obstacles (Saleebey, 1997), hence, the need for assessment and intervention that can increase the operative salience of spiritual strengths.

Thus, when considering interventions based on clients’ spiritual lifemaps, two questions are of particular interest to workers. First, how have clients culled various resources from their frameworks during past difficulties to ameliorate problems? Second, what unaccessed resources are available in this framework that can be marshaled to address current problems?

In practice settings, this means that therapists make a smooth transition from general inquiry to exploring how consumers have dealt with past trials as well as the strengths that exist in the consumer’s spirituality. Thus, practitioners might ask clients to elaborate on the trials they have delineated on their lifemaps and to identify assets that can be used to address current obstacles. In the case example, a practitioner might wish to explore in more detail how Darrin’s spiritual strengths helped him deal with his past trials and how they might be used to address his present difficulties. “How” questions (for example, How did you cope with that event?) and embedded questions (for example, I’m interested in knowing more about what you consider to be your spiritual strengths?) can often be effectively used to elicit further information.

Hodge (2000b) delineated a number of pathways through which spirituality may engender
Paraphrased pathways that may be of particular importance are the individual’s relationship to God (or perceived Transcendence), spiritual beliefs, spiritual rituals or practices, and church-based (or other faith community) social support. These pathways, which are empirically based and found in most faith traditions, provide guidance for eliciting spiritual strengths. (Table 1 provides a list of common questions that might be asked to help operationalize clients’ spiritual assets.)

The questions delineated in Table 1 are not meant to be asked in any specific order, nor should workers necessarily retain their exact wording. Rather, workers should be familiar with the questions and interface them with clients’ lifemaps in the natural flow of conversation. It is probable that consumers will depict a number of the four pathways on their lifemaps in some form. The questions should be adapted to facilitate the exploration of key events and themes with the lifemap serving as the focal point of the discussion.

In instances where some of the four pathways do not appear on the lifemap, or in subsequent discussion, workers should consider inquiring about their salience. As mentioned earlier, these pathways are found in most traditions. Thus, it is likely that they have played some role in consumers’ spiritual journeys. In such cases, tentative praising should be used (for example, I was wondering if there are particular rituals that have nurtured your spirituality in some instances during your spiritual journey?). In light of subsequent inquiry, consumers may wish to adapt their lifemap.

Finally, when asking questions, and in general when interacting with consumers, practitioners should allow clients to fill in their terminology. For example, although the questions delineated use the term “God” in keeping with the beliefs of most clients in the United States (Canda & Furman, 1999), this and other terminology should be adapted to reflect the terms of the client’s spiritual cosmology. More specifically, a worker would not use the term “God” when working with adherents of Buddhist traditions who generally do not affirm God as an expression of the Transcendent. As implied in the preceding section, during assessment practitioners should attempt to understand consumers’ spiritual cosmologies and incorporate the resulting terms and concepts into subsequent discussion.

Table 1: Exploratory Questions for Clarifying Spiritual Assets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with God</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;How did your relationship with God help you to address that problem?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;What did God teach you about that situation?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you been able to apply those lessons in other situations?</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;How has God supported you in times of crises?&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;What are the spiritual strengths of your relationship with God?&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;How does God view you/feel about you?&quot;</td>
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<th>Spiritual Beliefs</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;What does your faith teach about trials?&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Is there a metaphysical reason for life’s challenges?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;What are your favorite scriptures?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Are there certain scriptures that really speak to you during times of stress?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;What spiritual principles have you learned from life’s experiences?&quot;</td>
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<th>Spiritual Rituals</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Are there certain rituals or regular spiritual practices that help you cope with life’s trials?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Are some rituals particularly effective in certain situations?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Are there particular rituals that strengthen your relationship with God?&quot;</td>
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<th>Church-Based Social Support</th>
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<td>&quot;What role has your church or faith community played during the crisis?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Are there relationships in your church that are particularly supportive?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Has there been a spiritual mentor in your life that has been particularly significant?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;How have these individuals assisted you in coping with trials?&quot;</td>
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POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

To a large degree, the interventions that are mutually decided on depend on the consumer’s spirituality and the theoretical orientation of the practitioner. There are, however, several interventions of which workers may wish to be cognizant.

Spiritual Holding Environment

For practitioners familiar with self-psychology, this theoretical framework, with its concept of self-objects and holding environments offers what could be considered the ideal mirroring intervention (Elson, 1986). In many spiritual traditions, God can be understood as the ideal self-object—a caring, loving, benevolent, and compassionate Being. As
implied, for instance, in the Christian framework, God is held to have so deeply loved individuals that the life of his Son was sacrificed on their behalf.

If assessment indicates that such a view of God is held, problems can be ameliorated by encouraging consumers to enter into a nurturing holding environment through increased prayer and meditation on God’s traits that are similar to those of ideal self-objects. Such holding environments can foster increased ego cohesion, integration, and mastery (Elson, 1986) and may be particularly effective with disadvantaged populations, such as African Americans, who often experience relatively fewer positive affirmations in the wider culture (Ellison, 1993).

**Spiritual Reframing**

Spiritual reframing can be a powerful intervention. As suggested earlier, in the midst of material difficulties, consumers often forget the superseding metaphysical reality. In a forest of troubles, clients can lose sight of the spiritual truth that gives them hope and meaning and helps them endure trials and persevere through hardship.

As Pargament (1997) suggested, practitioners can explore alternative frames that accentuate the consumer’s spiritual reality. By altering the meanings consumers attach to events, the significance of the event can be changed. A situation that once seemed unfathomable and unbearable, by changing the attributions, can be endured, explained, and even become a valuable experience.

Spiritual lifemaps and subsequent exploration can be used to identify spiritual beliefs that help clients re-envision their current circumstances through a spiritual lens. Indeed, as illustrated above, this belief is often implicitly highlighted by spiritual lifemaps. During Darrin’s dark night of the soul period, his realization that God, in His sovereignty, had a plan for his life and had allowed the difficult events he experienced to touch his life for an underlying purpose dramatically altered his perceptions. Although it is important to acknowledge the affective component of the present troublesome event, by reframing it as an opportunity for spiritual growth, a more salutary outlook can be fostered (Pargament, 1997).

**Cognitive Reframing**

A related intervention is cognitive reframing. In this approach, unhealthy beliefs are identified in keeping with the tenets of standard cognitive therapy. Salutary beliefs drawn from the individual’s spiritual cosmology are then substituted for the deleterious beliefs. For example, with Muslims, unproductive beliefs may be modified or replaced with beliefs derived from the Quran. Some research suggests that this approach may be effective in addressing anxiety disorders, bereavement, and depression with Muslims, and depression with both Christians and Mormons (Hodge, in press).

**Solution-Focused Rituals**

Rituals that are spiritual strengths can be interfaced with solution-focused approaches to address problems. For example, in the case example, exceptions to problems may occur after participation in a particular church function, devotional activity, or Promise Keepers meeting. Participation in these events can be substituted for the problem-causing activity, facilitating the adoption of new, more beneficial patterns of interaction (Hodge, 2000a).

Many rituals have been associated with positive mental health outcomes (Johnson, 2002; Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997). For example, Jacobs (1992) noted that the regular gathering of the Plains Ojibwa to publicly confess their sins fosters lower levels of anxiety and greater social bonding. Accordingly, enhancing the significance of rituals in clients’ lives may foster positive ripple effects. Thus, independent of any existing therapeutic approach, the adoption of rituals can be considered an intervention.

**Leveraging Church-Based Social Support**

The social support obtained in faith-based settings can be qualitatively and quantitatively superior to that found in other settings, and may be particularly efficacious among disadvantaged populations that may have fewer resources to draw upon (Ellison & George, 1994; Haight, 1998; Perry, 1998). Churches and allied organizations frequently provide a network of unique faith-based services and programs to assist individuals.

Practitioners can help consumers explore the options that may exist in this area. In addition to exploring current resources, lifemaps may reveal assets that clients had not accessed because of the overwhelming nature of their current situations. It may also be possible to leverage existing or past assets to address present problems. For example, in the context of the case example, a worker might explore the possibility of leveraging church
resources, which were so effective in helping Darrin cope with his employment loss, to address present difficulties.

Brevity of Life Reflection

Spiritual lifemaps are also well suited for interventions innovated in existential therapeutic traditions that focus on the brevity of life. By promoting a realistic appraisal of the brevity of life, the available opportunities, and the identification of achievable goals, significant change can be fostered. Similarly, by guiding consumers into a positive confrontation with death, a new appreciation for life and an awareness of the preciousness of present and future time can be engendered, which in turn helps clients accept the challenge of solving present problems, setting new goals, and deciding to experience life in all its tumultuous fullness (Ellerman, 1999).

It is important to note that caution should be exercised when using brevity of life interventions. Workers should ensure that consumers’ affective state is compatible with such interventions. This being said, lifemaps are ideally suited for existential interventions as they intrinsically highlight the transitory nature of life and the inevitability of death, especially in systematic portrayals of the full life cycle. As was illustrated in the case example, in freeform maps, clients may neglect to depict their future. Practitioners can move into this area by highlighting the proportion of life lived compared with the client’s remaining time given current life expectancy rates. Similarly, heightening awareness of death and impending accountability in the afterlife can increase motivation to change existing patterns.

Workers may also be able to foster an increased willingness to accept the existential anxiety of life, a greater willingness to accept life’s experiences, both positive and negative, by focusing on the providential care of God. As in the case example, in many instances lifemaps reveal that consumers believe that life is lived under the care of God and that nothing happens to them apart from God’s will. Belief in this reality can provide an added incentive to abandon the self to the existential fullness of life.

LIFEMAPS AS AN INTERVENTION

It is important to note that the process of creating a spiritual lifemap, in addition to delineating material that can be used for planning interventions, is itself an intervention. As mentioned earlier, Augustine’s Confessions, the animating concept of lifemaps, can be understood as “an act of therapy” (Clark, 1993). Hence the concept’s widespread use in spiritual direction, an approach that shares many similarities with psychotherapy (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1991). Therefore, I present a number of therapeutically beneficial traits that lifemaps may engender in this article.

Being asked to create, to visually depict a spiritual lifemap, may promote self-esteem and enhance self-image (Burke, 1985). By requesting that the consumer construct an important therapeutic module, the social worker sends the message that the client is capable, important, and has a significant role to play. It is empowering in the sense that it implicitly calls on clients to take responsibility for their personal growth by taking an active part in the therapeutic process. In addition, constructing a lifemap sets in place a pattern of successfully tackling and completing tasks from the beginning of therapy.

The depiction of life events can foster significant reappraisal of earlier events that had been evaluated in a negative light. Physically illustrating situations can help reframe unconscious attributions that shape current actions (Weishaar, 1999). For instance, Darrin may have internalized parental messages believing he was a failure for “wasting” his youth and not obtaining a college degree. Yet, after viewing his spiritual walk he may change his perceptions and see himself as a successful individual who has achieved a number of accomplishments (for example, leadership roles in church activities, the mentoring program, Promise Keepers’ groups, and so forth).

Furthermore, viewing past events through the lens of one’s spiritual journey can help engender hope for the future. For example, reflecting on past failures as part of God’s plan often enables individuals to discern the Divine’s underlying reason for allowing the “failures” to occur. On delineating his sojourn, Darrin may realize his “dazed and confused” period was instrumental to his later work in the mentoring program because it allowed him to form stronger bonds with the youths. Knowing that past difficult events had a discernible purpose gives consumers confidence that current events also have a reason, which frequently reduces the perceived size of the present difficulty and fosters motivation to address the present situation.

Similarly, spiritual lifemaps can help shrink consumers’ existential vacuum. Emotional symptoms
and problems can flourish when consumers feel an absence of meaning and purpose (Lantz, 1998). Helping the client remember, recover, and become fully aware of past meaningful events helps to reduce the sense of existential meaninglessness.

Lifemaps, by taking a subjective, mysterious, elusive reality, a reality that may even be inaccessible through traditional verbal forms of communication, and transforming them into a concrete observable depiction, are an especially effective means of recovering meanings that may have been obscured (Moon, 1994). Furthermore, focusing on the spiritual nature of life is likely to increase perceptions of purpose and meaning (Pargament, 1997).

Lifemaps can also help free consumers from the dominant discourses that restrict their choices (Ricbert, 1999). By depicting an alternative, strengths-based spiritual discourse, a new reality is fostered which, in turn, allows for new, previously unseen options to be accessed. As clients chart their spiritual narratives, old disempowering stories can seem less attractive and may be discarded for the new empowering stories they depict.

Finally, it should be noted that workers can enhance the intrinsic benefits of lifemaps through specific interventions. For example, with the case study, practitioners might heighten the sense of meaning and coherence in Darrin’s life by asking if his “dazed and confused” period is now being used by God in his mentoring ministry. Indeed, many of the interventions delineated earlier in this article dovetail with the material presented in this section. In short, practitioners are encouraged to incorporate interventions from their own theoretical orientations that are congruent with the strengths of the instrument to enhance its effectiveness as an intervention.

Other Applications

Other applications should be briefly mentioned. In situations where conserving therapeutic time is crucial, some practitioners may wish to assign the creation of a lifemap as a homework assignment. The completed lifemap could then be discussed in the next therapeutic session. Alternatively, some workers may wish to conduct spiritual assessments using other instruments, such as a spiritual eco-map (Hodge, 2000a), which may offer a faster assessment approach while highlighting relationships to present spiritual domains; to construct a spiritual genogram (Hodge, 2001b), which underscores the generational flow of spirituality in the family system; or to conduct a spiritual history (Hodge, 2001a), a nondiagrammatic approach that may appeal to more verbally oriented clients.

An important tenet in solution-focused therapeutic modalities is to reinforce salutary changes that occur (Kok & Leskela, 1996). Lifemaps can be used to track changes that occur during therapy. For instance, the current section of the spiritual journey can be blown up off to one side, like voice captions in cartoons, so that the present therapeutic endeavor can be sketched in greater detail. Proposed interventions can be drawn on the lifemap along with their completion. Used in this way, lifemaps can serve as pictorial chronology of the therapeutic process.

Consequently, in the termination phase of therapy, lifemaps can then be used to conclude the sessions on a positive note by documenting the changes that have occurred during therapy. Furthermore, they can be used for relapse prevention. Consumers could, for example, be asked to periodically review their lifemaps to reinforce the gains they have made during counseling.

VALUE CONFLICTS

When discussing spirituality, it is imperative that consumers’ autonomy be respected. Social workers should carefully monitor their own and client responses to ensure that self-determination is preserved. Workers must be particularly sensitive when interacting with clients from faith traditions that differ from their own.

Genia (2000) highlighted the issue of religious countertransference. Consistent with other samples of helping professionals, 44 percent of Sheridan and associates’ (1992) sample of clinical social workers (N = 109) no longer participated in the religious affiliation of their childhood, with the change in religious affiliation occurring predominantly in a shift from Christianity, to “none” or “other.” In addition, more than one in three (36 percent) of the social workers in this Virginia sample reported ambivalent to negative feelings about their religious backgrounds (Sheridan et al., 1992). Since, as noted at the beginning of this article, graduate educational programs are unlikely to have addressed the need to work through negative feelings that may exist before interacting with Christians, Genia suggested that such social workers may be susceptible to religious countertransference biases that can
imperil the therapeutic relationship. Similarly, gay, lesbian, feminist, and other practitioners who believe that traditional Christian values are morally wrong, should consider their ability to work with devout Christians in a constructive fashion, as should the latter population when the seating at the therapeutic table is reversed.

Concern is also warranted when the value systems of practitioner and consumer are similar. As noted previously, the philosophy animating the lifemap is derived from the spiritual direction tradition, hence the instrument's ability to foster a large amount of clinically salient spiritual data. Yet, although there is a high degree of congruency between therapy and spiritual direction (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1991), it is important to remain focused on solving consumers' problems and to avoid falling into spiritual direction, in which the goal is to help individuals deepen their intimacy with God rather than ameliorate problems. This temptation may be particularly strong when the practitioner and the consumer are from the same spiritual tradition and the worker has an interest in spirituality.

CONCLUSION

Spiritual lifemaps offer practitioners several ways to integrate consumers' spirituality into the therapeutic dialogue. Lifemaps can be used as an assessment tool, to plan spiritually based interventions, and they can stand alone as an intervention. They may be used in clinical settings or assigned as homework. They provide insight into how consumers construct their reality while providing a method to operationalize clients' spiritual strengths. Perhaps most important, spiritual lifemaps may help practitioners provide more client-centered services. SW

REFERENCES


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Original manuscript received April 19, 2000
Final revision received August 18, 2000
Accepted September 26, 2000

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