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Cookie Friendships: School Counselors Use of Genograms as an Assessment Tool in the Digital Age

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Abstract
Professional school counselors play a vital role in addressing the needs of diverse populations experiencing varying degrees of crises. This article suggests best practices for utilizing genograms in the digital age to identify *cookie friendships* and to address varying degrees of crisis experiences of school-aged children. The use of genograms in the school counseling setting can be an easily adoptable approach and technique for use with a wide variety of students that can be implemented in various situations.

The role of the professional school counselor (PSC) has evolved dramatically since its inception (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Many of these changes are designed to address the evolving challenges including economic and social changes of students' lived experiences that are manifested in the school setting (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Recent attention to an increasing incidence of school violence has created a heightened awareness for the need for crisis intervention in public schools (Allen, et al., 2002; Cunningham & Sandhu, 2000). Crisis events in school settings lead to a state of disequilibrium (Henning, 2011). This sense of imbalance will impact social and academic outcomes of students thus demonstrating the need for immediate support in order to facilitate recovery (Poland, 1994).

The authors completed a comprehensive literature review and noted a paucity of research on the use of genograms in schools. With little or no budget, high caseloads, and increasing demands, school counselors require easily accessible tools designed to intervene quickly within the unique social structure of schools. Genograms may prove to be a tool used in a proactive manner rather than a tool used exclusively in moment of crisis and reaction. Additionally, because genograms may be generated and explained by the student-client, genograms may breakdown the inherent power hierarchy in place in schools and in the counseling relationship and encourage a greater sense of collaboration in the therapeutic process.

Defining Genograms

Bowen (1980) encouraged the use of the genogram initially in a family therapy interview. A genogram is a convenient, graphic depiction of how a family is related to one another and is most often used in delineating parental and family influence across three generations (Okiishi, 1987). Originally designed as a useful assessment tool when conducting family therapy interviews, the genogram has historically been a three-generational graphic model of a

family of origin (Bowen, 1980; Okiishi, 1987). However, mental health professionals have expanded the use of genograms beyond the family therapy interview and have broadened its application in various ways including multicultural, spiritual, genetic, and career counseling (Brott, 2005; Frame, 2001; Gibson, 2005; Işık, Akbaş, Kırdök, Avcı, & Çakır, 2012; Sueyoshi, Rivera, & Ponterotto, 2001; Willer, Tobin, & Toner, 2009). Understanding the structure of families may encourage discussion and the facilitation of change within the family dynamic. Hence, the use of genograms may allow for a more effective school-based intervention because of clearer understanding of the familial and social structure of students.

Expanding the usefulness of genograms into schools may encourage discussion around family dynamics, generational patterns (e.g. relational violence, substance abuse), career history, and communication patterns to name a few uses. Genograms allow for school counselors to engage students in conversations within a legacy structure. Further, genograms provide school counselors an opportunity to collaborate with their client and to engage in a conversation on a variety of issues from multiple perspectives.

Friendships in the Digital Age

Arnett (1995) was among the first to note adolescent use of media (e.g., television, music) to cope, for identity development, and to connect to larger peer networks through shared interests. Today's social networking has allowed school-aged children to connect to larger, international networks with peers they may never meet face-to-face, while simultaneously sharing information to a much larger audience. In the past, friendships may have used monikers denoting duration or level of intimacy to define the friendship in a vertical structure (e.g., acquaintance, buddy, girlfriend, friend, best friend) (see Table 1 graphic). However, we suggest the increasing use of social media has created the need for a new metaphorical term to describe friendships and we propose the use of the term *cookie friendships*.

The word *cookies* can have two meanings. One can define a cookie as being a flat, sweet, and seemingly delicious dessert or treat. However, despite being enticing, cookies are often filled with unhealthy ingredients (e.g., butter, sugar) and excessive calories that may lead to undesirable results (e.g., increased weight, spikes in blood sugar, and cavities). From a technological standpoint, cookies are digital packets of data found in a computer's browser history. These cookies can make online searches easier and conveniently store online passwords, but can also be troublesome in that some viruses and malware can be disguised as cookies as well (Symantec, 2017). In addition, unless they are cleared from a browser history, cookies can show exactly where the use has been thereby inadvertently revealing confidential or private information without the user's implicit consent (Whitman, Perez, & Beise, 2001).

In the digital age, *cookie friendships* have several metaphorical similarities. From the outside a new friend may be attractive, share similar interests, and open up new social possibilities. However, these relationships can also exhibit behaviors that are unhealthy (e.g., bullying, judgment, distrust, relational violence. Further, digital friendships can also lead to compromising

situations (e.g., sexting, public shaming, trolling) and have the potential to create social crises in the lives of students that can be very traumatic and public in nature.

Unlike traditional friendships based on mutual experiences, shared interests, and personal investments of time and energy, online "friendships" are defined in much looser terms. Being "friends" in the digital age might mean a large quantity of online acquaintances that may or may not have ever met in person, however who are aware of one anothers' posted opinions and daily happenings via online posted photos and comments. *Cookie friendships* are developed in social media and may not be for the development of an intimate friendship characterized by frequent face-to-face interactions, but instead formed to develop social capital. As such there is no characterization of them on a vertical structure (see Table 1) to indicate duration of friendships, shared interests or values.

The Use of Genogram to Support Responsive Counseling Services

Genograms can be a very effective and easily accessible tool to aid school counselors in assessing a student's social and familial network in times of crisis. Creating a genogram serves to (1) engage the client, (2) organize the student's thoughts, (3) detect patterns, (4) present complex material in a concise manner, (5) allows student to creatively engage presenting problem, (6) allows the school counselor to look for patterns (e.g. strengths, weaknesses), and (7) provide points of intervention and discovery for the school counselor.

School counselors are uniquely positioned to play a "vital" role in addressing the needs of students in crisis through individual and group counseling (American School Counselor Association, 2013, p. 50). In 2014, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) introduced *ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success* and using these same mindsets as school counselors we can approach crisis events using creative approaches (see B-LS2) and critical thinking to make informed choices to systematically address crisis (see B-LS1). Crises events include suicide, homicide, natural disasters, medical emergencies, grief, abuse, and loss experiences (Sandoval, 2013). Crisis in a school setting has unique challenges because of the social structure and community within a community structure inherent to schools. A crisis in the larger external community may impact the day-to-day operations of the school community itself affecting both staff and students alike within the walls of the school building.

The impact of crises may become more widespread in a school setting due to overlapping social networks in a single location as well as the use of social media (Allen, et al., 2002). Social media is "an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites" (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010). During crises, social media usage increases leading experts to conclude that communicating through social media is the new norm in crises (Baron, 2010). Students who actively use social media or become active during crises assign a higher level of credibility to social media coverage than to traditional mass media coverage (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Additionally, social media users indicate social media provides

emotional support by sharing information and forming virtual support groups that are instantaneous and easily accessible (Choi & Lin, 2009).

Providing an Invitation to the Genogram

The use of a genograms is an affordable and engaging tool that provides the school counselor with an effective method to connect with students while collecting pertinent information. Genograms are a mutually developed, process-oriented map and school counselors may introduce the use of the genogram when the student begins to talk about their family and /or friends. School counselors may introduce the genogram as a way to gather a lot of information in a short amount of time and allowing for the client to visualize the presenting issue and the contextual impact. Genograms also acknowledge the uniqueness of each client's family and social networks. Genograms will help identify and better articulate a student's system of influence both in and outside of school. These systems may provide the school counselor with some direction as to where to take the conversation without limiting the content of the counseling session to the presenting issue that is generating a crisis response. Utilizing a graphic form of their support system may aid in the identification of support systems, as well as sources of chaos that allow for points for counseling intervention by the school counselor (Chrzastowski, 2011).

Recognizing there are layers of chaos leading to a crisis response allows for the school counselor to use a genogram to identify the system at play in order to direct intervention (Anderson, 1994). The school counselor may guide the student through the genogram exercise by providing a blank piece of paper and drawing three rings on the page. The school counselor explains that the concept of the genogram serves as a representation of their family/friendship system, of which the student is the center. The student places themselves on the center of the page. The student is then asked to rate who she/he considers to be closest family/friend relations and place them on the closest surrounding rings. Those relationships that are not as close are placed on outer rings of the genogram. Students may then use standard genogram symbols (i.e., squares and circles) to indicate gender. The school counselor may direct the student to color who lives in the same home as a means of understanding the family dynamic. Students are invited to add as many rings as necessary to create a visual representation of their family/friendship system.

After obtaining consent to develop a genogram, school counselors may use the following questions to collect information in a written format and incorporate into the genogram structure. What family members may be involved? Are their half-or step-siblings involved? Divorced parents? Who lives in the home? What social circles, friends, club/team members may be impacted? Are there authentic friendships (e.g., face-to-face interaction, long-term personal relationships) or *cookie friendships* (i.e., those developed and limited to social media interactions) involved? Are there siblings at other schools? What other schools need to be engaged? What school-based stakeholders may assist? What school-based staff may be impacted? Is there a faith-based youth group that may be impacted? What community-based organizations or members may be able to assist or are impacted (e.g., churches/youth groups, hospice, law enforcement/emergency management)?

Genograms as a Source of Information in Schools

Genograms are a visual representation of an individual's family used to assess the impact of family and friendship networks (Chrzastowski, 2011). The use of genograms in a school counseling setting can be useful in communicating a student's important and dynamic relationships. Recognizing there is no one definition of "friend" or family demonstrates the need for a genogram. This method allows for school counselors to discover and more easily understand whom students assign importance, familial titles to, including non-blood relatives or fictive kin (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001; Sussman, 1976). The practice of extending familial titles is especially common in non-White students who define family as those individuals that nurture and promote the general well-being of the individual (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001). Therefore, the use of genograms may be particularly useful in working with minority school populations (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001; Vernon, 2009).

Genograms create an opportunity for the professional school counselor and student to develop a collaborative language designed to account for family members, authentic friendships and *cookie friendships* using a culturally sensitive tool. Specifically, augmented genograms create opportunities for the use of collaborative language in order to create a space to facilitate crisis counseling and to aid the school counselor's understanding of the socially constructed meaning of family (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Fictive kin refer to relatives not genetically tied to the child, but still considered family (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001). For example, when a child says they are sad or appear tearful because their "auntie" is in the hospital, rather than ask more questions a school counselor could use a genogram to explore the relationship further.

An augmented genogram may ask student-clients to list those they consider to be family members by their relationship to the student-client and not by their formal name (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001). School counselors may ask the student to put themselves in the center of a sheet of paper and arrange their family members in the home closer to the diagram of the student and place other family members around the periphery. Another method may be to color code those family members that live in the home one color and the fictive kin outside of the home another color (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001; Taylor, Clement, & Ledet, Vernon, 2009). Both methods allow for an understanding of the relationships between themselves and their family members.

Expanding the use of genograms to friendship circles in moments of crisis will allow the school counselor to identify yet undiscovered students in need of counseling services, especially those defined as *cookie friends*, "cousin", "sister", and "brother". Using the example above, a student may place self at the center of the page and arrange friends/*cookie friends* and fictive kin around self on the page. Next, the school counselor could ask the student to color code those defined as *cookie friends* as one color and those with familial titles another. Therefore, identifying the spatial relationship between the student and their social network will allow school counselors to expand the way they conceptualize a friend system in order to provide counseling services. Additionally, the use of a genogram generates more places to

intervene in a system of support (Allen, et al., 2002; Milewski-Hertlein, 2001).

Implications for Future Research

The use of the word "friend" describes a wide range of relationship with varying degrees of purpose, shared interests, level of intimacy, and duration. Previously we suggested a hierarchal approach to defining non-digital friendships (see Table 1). The advent of digital media and specifically, Facebook, has complicated matters because intimacy is being redefined. Additionally, Facebook's use of the term "friend" to define an established digital connection has created an overuse of the term and further clouds how to define the word "friend". Further, what value is placed on the varying uses of the terms friend and friendship when comparing face-to-face to digital-based interactions.

Smart (1999) suggested friendships may be a tool for people and in an age where digital connections lay the groundwork for social capital friendships may be connections to others and opportunities. Future research may focus on the use of the term "friend" in both face-to-face interactions and in the digital context. Because no one attribute defines "friend," examining differences in how school-aged children define "friend" will advance the research in this area by examining the impact of digital platforms. Additionally, comparing how they view friends they see regularly and the relationships they continue on-line and what attributes define these varying friendships. Further, comparing this data to data of adults at different stages of adulthood may enrich the body of research by examining their use of digital media and how "friend" is defined later in life.

Finally, as educators, parents, and caregivers seek to understand friendships and the use of the term "friend" the development of assessment to measure "friendships" based on influence, shared values, and emotional proximity may operationalize the use of "friend" to define friendships established and maintained virtually. Understanding the use of "friend" provides educators and other adults a window into the world of school-aged children and their peer relations, exposure to trauma and grief, and provide an opportunity to strategically intervene through counseling services.

Final Thoughts for Application

A counselor's need to respond quickly may be facilitated through the use of genograms in identifying and locating impacted students quickly in order to provide the necessary services through the delivery component of a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) (Baker & Gerler, 2008; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). With increasing caseloads school counselors will need accessible, effective, and affordable interventions and tools, like genograms, to facilitate responsive services in a comprehensive manner (ASCA, 2016). Additionally, adopting the use of a genogram as a school counseling tool does not require the need for extra funding since it is an easily adoptable method requiring only a piece of paper and writing instrument. Further, developing a genogram provides students an opportunity to identify themselves within a system of support and simultaneously identify sources of imbalance in their lives. Identifying these sources of crisis provides a school counselor an opportunity to intervene utilizing individual counseling, peer mediation, and/or group counseling to mediate the crisis

and therefore, re-establish balance in the student's life.

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Table 1
Traditional (non-digital) Structure of Friendships