



# The Review of Family Assessment in Counseling

A.Ghanbaripناه; M. Sharif Mustaffa

Counseling Centre, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), 81310 Skudai, Johor, Malaysia

Email: [gpafsaneh2@live.utm.my](mailto:gpafsaneh2@live.utm.my), [af\\_ghanbary@yahoo.com](mailto:af_ghanbary@yahoo.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Assessment has played a major role in family systems work. Assessment methods can apply as a guide in order to understand of functioning patterns in family unit by family counselors. The assessment process is an essential step in guiding decisions regarding the suitable interventions strategies. This paper reviews the different literature of assessment methods in family counseling, consequently explained, and compared the various models of marriage, couple and family assessments.

**Key words:** Assessment; Family; Counseling

## INTRODUCTION

Assessment in counseling is methods of collecting important information about person and his family. According to Kline (2000) assessment used to help understand and predict behavior. Usually assessment involves multiple methods, such as history interviews of person and family, behavioral observations, and formal tests, for gathering information about family (McIntire & Miller, 2006). Family counseling without assessment is like to a car trip without a map. The counselor needs to know where are has been family? Where is now? The next what direction they want to go? (Deacon & Piercy, 2001).

Clients come to couples and family counselors for a diversity of reasons. Some may seek premarital counseling to help prepare for an upcoming marriage. Other may want to find ways to deal more effectively with a child who is acting out. Still others may seek couples counseling to understand why they feel distanced from each other after years of marriage. In each of these cases, professional counselors can use assessment techniques effectively for to gather information, develop hypotheses, evaluate treatment progress and outcomes, and facilitate change.

Therefore accurate assessment of family relationships and functioning is a significant matter in treatment interventions

for couples, families and children. However in family interventions as individual psychotherapy, the success of treatment plan often depends on careful assessment of the nature of the problem and potential for solution (Bray, 2009). Generally in pervious several decades the assessment methods were typically designed as individually, not an entire family. While the assessing couples and families differ in a number of ways from assessing individuals. Rather than assessing individual constructs, family counselors focus on assessing the family system. On the other word family relationships, patterns, structure and level of functioning are the primary areas of focus. The counselors evaluate dynamic systems, so this process can be more challenging than individual assessment (Erford, 2006). Bray (2009) pointed that family assessment is a systematic method that provides a strong source of information. This information can be used to grow initial hypotheses about the nature of the problem, the causes of the problem, family members' perceptions of the problem, and potential areas of strength. In addition assessment in counseling can be applied to evaluate the family's progress. Finally it can be used for evaluate outcomes at the end of counseling (Hawley, 1994).

In the other word to providing information, measuring progress, and evaluating outcomes, the assessment process can facilitate change. Counselors can use assessment to help

join with families, provide feedback and support, validate concerns, and engender hope. McPhatter (1991) suggested that as assessment is both a product and a process. It is a guide and rationale for work and an intervention in and of itself. He listed the following goals for assessment:

1. To clarify the nature of the family problems.
2. To understand how the family members perceive their problems.
3. To create an obvious picture of the structure, functioning and impacts family dynamics.

According to Meyer (2001) usually assessment to identify the areas of family functioning that need to be strengthened or addressed as well as stressors within the environment. Problematic communication patterns, lack of effective parenting skills, unresolved family conflicts and isolation from potential sources of community support represent several areas that can need strengthening. Community violence, lack of educational opportunities, and high levels of unemployment represent community stressors.

On the other hand, some scholars suggested that there are some challenges in family assessment. For instance; Eppler and Weir (2009) pointed that the family members have different view and different perspectives, thus it may be difficult for them that to make sense of the varying information gathered. In addition some empirically family practitioners believed that structured methods of assessment are as static measures. Thus they do not capture the dynamic process of the family interactions. Many of the variables assessed such as family roles, communication styles and levels of cohesion are fluid and likely to fluctuate (Bray, 1995).

### AREAS OF FAMILY ASSESSMENT

Generally the most of scholars believed to following information in family assessments.

1. Family process refers to the behaviors and interactions that show the family functioning. For examples the ways of conflict management and problem solving in family. Also the constructs of differentiation, individuation, communication, and control among family members is illustrated by the family process.

2. Family affect refers to the manner in which emotion is expressed and received in the family. The degree of emotionally closeness or separateness among family members.

3. Family organization comprises the roles, rules, expectations, boundaries surrounding of the family and its subsystems. Also the levels of hierarchy within family that show the family functioning.

4. Problems refer to history of the problem, definitions of problems, intensity across time, past solutions and clients' motivation to solve the problem.

5. Family strengths and resources refer to family's ability to self-repair and family masters for challenging with situations. Also resources refer to tangible or intangible

support within the family, community and extended environment.

In addition the other areas of families that assessment by counselors and psychologists included: goals for change, parental/caregiver collaboration, extended family relationships, family communication, family conflict, family role appropriateness, family safety, family organizational patterns, residential stability, family characteristics, adequate leadership, self-efficacy, positive interactions, humor, trust, coping skills, problem-solving, appropriate support systems in the wider community. Also risk factors such as poverty, community disorganization, violence, educational opportunities and lack of economic can be evaluated in family assessment process.

### ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The counselor or psychologists can be use a variety of strategies of assessment process, such as formal assessment tools, visual devices, an interview format, behavior observation. Counselors based on theory framework apply the assessment methods that reflect the risk and protective factors among the family members.

According to Fraser and Galinsky (2004) the following skills and principles are important in using assessment process.

- Assess the risk and protective factors in the family, the community, and the larger social contextual relationship.
- Illustrate respect to clients as possessing strengths and potential resources.
- Help to clients for recognize their strengths.
- Engage the family members in the assessment process.
- Identify the risk and protective factors that can be changed.
- Engage the family in the selection of the interventions.
- Aware of practice intervention that can address the risk factors and support their protective factors.

Fraser and Galinsky (2004) emphasized the family and social situation are important causal factors and can be changed through an intervention. Recognizing the factors that are both causal and subject to change enable the social worker and the family to address the problem in an effective manner. Families bring to counseling sessions a variety of problems. To identify where we can begin is one of the important tasks for help to family members. What are the areas that are amenable to change and if changed would have an important impact on the family (and frequently on some of the other problems as well)? The concept of keystone risk factors can be helpful in answering this question. Effort directed toward these factors can help create additional positive change because positive changes reverberate throughout the family system and thus encourage families to believe that they can make a difference.

### ASSESSMENT METHODS

Several assessment methods are used in couple and family therapy, such as observational methods, interviews, self-reports of family interaction, graphic representations of relationships.

The various methods can be characterized by the extent to which the data collected are subjective (based on the therapist's or the clients' perception of the relationship) or objective (based on observable data), and the degree to which it represents an internal or external view of the relationship.

Usually no single method provides a complete picture. The more comprehensive assessment of the relationship may be obtained by a multidimensional assessment that involves each partner's perception together with the therapist's view (Lavee & Avisar, 2006).

Suzuki and Ponterotto (2008) categorized the assessment methods of family systems into three principal instruments.

- Self-report
- Observational
- Diagrammatic method

Overall based on the different literatures, the important methods in family assessments consist:

### FORMAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS

One of the instruments has been developed to evaluate couples and families are formal assessment tools. A variety of standardized instruments measuring various aspects of family functioning such as parenting stress, informal support, coping strategies, family cohesion, marital satisfaction. These instruments can be to provide effective, reliable and valid measures of various aspects of the family interaction. They can serve an adjunct to the therapist's subjective judgment. The self-report questionnaires were obtained the clients' perceptions of their relationship.

They can provide the therapist, within a relatively short time, with information about similarities and differences in the partners' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions regarding various aspects of the relationship, allowing the therapist to evaluate to severity of relationship problems, to set therapeutic goals, and to assess improvement in couple functioning achieved in therapy. These tools allow the couples to express their feeling and perceptions more freely in situations where one or both partners are uncomfortable disclosing their perception to their spouse. On the other hand the selection of instruments is affected by the programmatic orientation of the service setting, the time, energy and costs associated with different assessment protocols, and the skills and training of the programs staff. (Krauss, 2000; Lavee & Avisar, 2006)

Formal assessment is always a challenge because of the press of time to develop and execute a treatment plan. The studies of Touliatos and his colleagues (2001) showed that there were approximately 1300 quantitative instruments. However the most of these tools were developed initially for research rather than clinical purposes. The survey of marriage and family counselors revealed that less than 40 percent of them used standardized instruments on a regular basis and more than eight percent of the sample used no single assessment instrument. Sixty percent of therapists believed that the use of standardized tools was not important for their clinical work (Boughner, Hayes, Bubenzer, & West, 1994).

Consequently the research of Lavee and Avisar (2006) indicated just 28 percent of marital therapists applied standardized tools for assessment. The results showed that some reasons of less use of these instruments included;

negative attitudes of therapists to this assessment modality, lack of academic training in used of these tools. Therefore the research recommended the more training of assessment tools for family therapists.

### INTERVIEW

The interview is an essential assessment strategy for the family counselor. The assessment interview is guided for identify of risk and protective factors and to provide the context for understanding the distress of the family and potential sources of healing. This search is carried out by asking key questions, requesting family members to enact family events, and by observing the family members in action. Thus the interview process includes both a directed conversation and observations of nonverbal behavior.

Erford (2006) suggested the following questions as guideline to assess the presenting problems in family:

- What is the problem as the family outlooks it?
- Who has defined the problems?
- Who is more involved in the problem than other?
- Who is uninvolved and why?
- How do different definitions (views and perceptions) of the problem agree or disagree?
- What experience and discussions have led the family to define the problem in the way they do?
- What unresolved questions remain?
- What expectations for the future does the family have those are relevant to the present problem?
- Is there any unresolved mourning or grief left over from the past?

### VISUAL DEVICES

The ecogram and genogram are two visual tools that used widely in family assessment. They are useful in identifying patterns within the families and the family's relationships. These tools provide mechanisms by which the family counselor and the family can collaborate to identify sources of strain, distress and important resources for the family.

1. Ecogram is a visual illustration of the family's transactions with the wider environment. These proceedings include those of individual family members as well as the family as a system. Families can be shown by the maps of their relationships with important aspects of their external world. Some of the important dimensions that are typically included are schools (for families with school age children), extended family members, health systems, employment, and other social services that are part of the family life. The ecograms have some benefits such as to making visible the sources of support (external resources) and strains within the family in terms of its transaction with the wider world. While people often experience distress or feel nourished by other interactions, seeing such patterns on paper can be quite powerful in identifying the nature of them in their lives. The ecogram to create the sets the stage for discussion about what might possibly be done to reduce the stresses and to enhance the resources in ways that can promote the resiliency of the family.

2. *Genograms* is a pictorial representation similar to a family tree with hereditary patterns and tracing physiological and psychological patterns across generations. Genograms can be showing the health risks and behavior patterns that may predispose a person to certain conduct or emotions. This method as a family assessment tool, may trace divorce rate, child's abuse, infidelity, gambling and other predilections that harm family dynamics and disintegrate the unit. The therapist with apply of genograms can see the interpersonal impact of events across times.

### THEMATIC DIMENSIONS

In addition to verbal and nonverbal messages, two major thematic dimensions relate to *content* and *process* family interactions. Content refers to the specific topic or events being discussed. Family can be talking about a curfew for their teenage daughter, financial difficulties decisions regarding job and a multitude of other specific topics. Process refers to the ways in which the family interacts in terms of communication, family roles, and issues related to family organization. While family members typically discussion about terms of content, understanding process in identifying the repetitive patterns that occur among family is critical. Family members might be discussing about curfew, but this matter manifest the ways in which parents attempt to exert control over their growing children, how parents deal with their own relationship, how parents and children communicate their differences. These process themes are probably to exceed specific topics in the family condition and reflect family system characteristics.

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### ROLE PLAYING

This method help to therapist for enact family interactions. Therapist can collect more information about family roles, communication patterns, rituals and problems. To assess the perceptions of different members of the other family members as actors to reenact the event and show the therapist what they believes actually happens. Role playing may provide a window into the dynamics of the family for therapist. Consequently they are able to assess how the family communicates, how members attract or repel each other, who maintains the power, who gets the attention, how problems begin, and what meaning the family attaches to various interactions (Deacon & Piercy, 2001).

### CONCLUSION

Assessment techniques help the counselors for collection information about family problems, family organization, family functioning, family strengths and goals of changes among family members. The reviews of different literature show the counselors and therapists need to training about apply of assessment. Also discussion of assessment and selection of intervention approaches must recognize. This is an ongoing process subject to revision based on new information and developments within the life space of the family. This review will hopefully encourage family counselors to used assessment methods and facilitate the implementation of research on family process into practice setting.

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