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**Original Article**

# Using Spiritual Genograms in Family Therapies

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## Abstract

The genogram was developed by Bowen, a pioneer of the psychodynamic family theory, and has been used in therapies in different ways. Genogram types are named according to the area in which they are used, and spiritual genograms are one of these. Due to the increase in studies focusing on spirituality in family therapies, this research is conducted over the use of spiritual genograms as a therapeutic tool. Although Turkey has great potential for religiousness and spirituality, no study has yet been observed there on the use of spiritual genograms in the therapeutic process. This deficiency has led us to introduce spiritual genograms and provide a place for their use in therapy. This study also aims to provide information on the stages of spiritual genograms and how they should be used as a tool in therapy. Furthermore, results have been shared regarding the effect of using genograms in the therapeutic process based on sample cases employed by various researchers in therapy.

## Keywords

Spiritual genogram • Spirituality • Family therapies

## Aile Terapilerinde Manevi Genogram Kullanımı

## Öz

Psikodinamik aile kuramının öncülerinden Bowen'in geliştirmiş olduğu genogramın terapilerde farklı şekillerde kullanıldığı görülmektedir. Kullanıldıkları alana göre isimlendirilen bu genogram türlerinden birisi de manevi genogramdır. Aile terapilerinde maneviyata önem veren çalışmaların artması ile beraber manevi genogramın terapide terapötik bir araç olarak kullanılmasına dair araştırmalar yapılmıştır. Ülkemiz dindarlık ve maneviyat noktasında önemli bir potansiyel barındırduğu halde, terapötik süreçte manevi genogramın kullanıldığı çalışmalarla rastlanmamıştır. Buradaki eksiklikten hareketle, Türkiye'de manevi genogramın tanıtılması ve terapide kullanımı için alan oluşturulması yoluna gidilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı manevi genogramı tanıtmak, manevi genogramın oluşturulma aşamaları ve terapide bir araç olarak nasıl kullanılması gerektiği hakkında bilgi vermektir. Ayrıca farklı araştırmacılar tarafından terapide kullanılan vaka örneklerinden yararlanılarak genogram kullanımının terapötik süreçte etkisi hakkında sonuçlar paylaşılmıştır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Manevi genogram • Maneviyat • Aile terapileri

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Genograms were specifically developed for establishing the intergenerational communication therapists needed (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). Genogram refers to constructing a family tree using certain standard figures and symbols (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Sherman, 1993). The family genogram is one of the tools used for getting to know the family in Bowen's family system theory. It has a basic structure and collects information on the multigenerational history of the family system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Considering the fact that social learning plays an important role in individual learning and that a significant part of social learning takes place within the family, examining the problem-solving methods, behavior patterns, and interaction types within the family is thought to be able to reveal important clues about the problem while dealing with problems individuals and families face. According to Halevy (1998) who pointed out that genograms are versatile and practical tools for family therapists, therapists help clients who use genograms to assess their problems within the context of behaviors in the family of origin. According to Hodge (2001), who stressed behavior patterns in the family of origin, using a diagrammatic family tree helps both clients and therapists understand the intra-familial course of the patterns that have settled over time in the family of origin. Many family and marriage therapists have stated that drawing a genogram plays an effective role in establishing a therapeutic bond during the therapy process (Erlanger, 1990; Kuehl, 1995; Miehls, 1993; Wachtel 1982).

Examining the areas employed in therapies shows genograms to be used in areas that vary considerably. Some of these genograms are cultural genograms (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995), color-coded genograms (Lewis, 1989), sexual genograms (Hof & Berman, 1986), solution-oriented genograms (Kuehl, 1995), socially constructed genograms (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001), time-line genograms (Friedman, Rohrbaugh, & Krakauer, 1988), career genograms (Gibson, 2005), and spiritual genograms (Dunn & Dawes, 1999; Frame, 2001; Hodge, 2001; Willow, Tobin, & Toner, 2009). This study deals with the spiritual genogram approach, which therapeutically uses the spiritual dynamics in the family history during family therapy.

## Spiritual Genogram in Family Therapies

A spiritual genogram is a map that shows family members' religious and spiritual conflicts, bonds, relationships, and events over many generations (Frame, 2000). According to Hodge (2003), spiritual genograms are an assessment tool specifically designed for defining and functionalizing the spiritual and religious powers existing in the client's family system. Spiritual genograms were designed as a facilitating tool in family therapy in order to help clients understand the spiritual and religious experiences of their family roots and how these experiences have affected the current problems between client and the spouse (Brody, 2003). Examining spiritual genograms shows

their structure and function to resemble other traditional genograms. Like traditional genograms, spiritual genograms enable practitioners to make a tangible graph out of complex spiritual statements over three generations (Hodge, 2001). A genogram examines the relationship between family members' current relations with their past spiritual and religious experiences while telling the family history chronologically. Genograms that deal with religious and spiritual experiences offer the therapist a different point of view during therapy (Hodge, 2000). Spiritual genograms also offer an assessment method that emphasizes the spiritual and religious strengths that may be present in the client's family that show how the spiritual dynamics in those past experiences affect current spiritual life (Hodge, 2001). Wiggins (2008) suggested that an individual's spiritual and religious history must not be told merely as a story. Instead, spiritual genograms that tell the spiritual and religious beliefs, lives, and experiences of the individual's extended family should be used. Examining the family structures of society and family dynamics in Turkey related to past generations shows family structure to value family history and grandparents. Furthermore, great importance is attached to families' spiritual life and spiritual values. From this point of view, using spiritual genograms as a therapy tool for family therapy in society is considered to be able to make a significant contribution to the therapy process.

Frame (2000) divided the spiritual genogram process into four categories: (a) creation of the spiritual genogram, (b) questions for further reflection, (c) connection with one's family of origin, and (d) integration into the global therapeutic endeavor.

**Creating the spiritual genogram.** In the spiritual genogram process, therapists first inform clients on how to draw a genogram that includes as much information as possible about family members and on how to explain their family structures. Clients draw a genogram that includes significant events such as births, marriages, divorces, and deaths as well as their dates using the symbols offered by McGoldrick, Gerson, and Shellenberger (1999). Information about parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, nieces, and nephews are included in the genogram (Hodge, 2001). Furthermore, the genogram contains information about the sex of each individual, adoption status, abortions, stillbirths, twin status, unmarried couples, and the quality of family relationships (Frame, 2001). In addition, some therapists may attach importance to conflict, closeness, quality of relationships, and distance, finding it useful to represent these (Hodge, 2001).

The aim of constructing a spiritual genogram is to reveal the spiritual dynamics in family members, which can raise awareness in the individual. According to Hodge (2001), family members are not the only actors in an individual's spiritual history. People who are not an individual's family member but who play a significant role in the individual's spiritual life just like family members can be included in the spiritual genogram (Bullis, 1990; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Those people who



are in individuals' inner circles and play an effective role in their spiritual life are represented by a triangle in the genogram ([Hodge, 2001](#)).

Another method that can be used while constructing a genogram is color coding. According to [Hardy and Laszloffy \(1995\)](#), a genogram can be constructed by coloring each individual based on their cultural identity in the family system. A colored cultural genogram offers various hypotheses about the family system to the person examining the genogram. For example, a genogram with only one dominant color reveals a highly homogeneous family structure in terms of culture. Genograms with different colors show the presence of different cultures within the family structure ([Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995](#)).

Spiritual genograms, just like cultural genograms, can use color coding to provide the therapist and others examining the genogram with a visual opinion. For example, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, or Atheists in the family can be respectively colored green, gray, red, blue, or orange. Such color coding can enable the therapist to immediately determine similarities and differences between a couple's spiritual lives when drawing their spiritual genograms for therapy. [Hodge \(2001\)](#) made use of color coding in the spiritual genogram constructed in his research.

Therapists must respect the clients' spiritual point of view when using spiritual genograms as a therapeutic tool. Religious and spiritual issues must be handled within the framework of the client's mentality. A therapist must know that clients' spirituality is related to their world-view and represents them ([Dunn & Dawes, 1999](#)). Therefore, therapists must deal with a client's spiritual point of view instead of assessing from their own spiritual viewpoint. The therapist must consistently respect the client's spiritual world and belief system ([Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994](#)).

**Questions for further reflection.** Spiritual genograms are formed, and a more detailed assessment is initiated about the couple whose genogram has been drawn after determining important issues such as religious and spiritual beliefs, affiliations, marital status, abjuration, and participation in a faith. According to [Frame \(2000\)](#), the therapist improves the contents of the genogram with probing questions about the role and function of religion and spirituality in families and couples after this stage. Frame suggests the following questions to be able to help assess in detail the spiritual and religious beliefs in families and couples:

- ▶ In your early years, did you feel any effect of religion/spirituality in your life. Can you describe it, if it plays any role now?
- ▶ According to you, which specific religious/spiritual beliefs appear most valuable to you? Do these beliefs cause a connection or conflict between you and your family members?

- ▶ As a child/adolescent, in what type of religious/spiritual rituals did you participate? Can you express their significance in your family of origin? Which have you continued? Which have you quit? As an adult, have you gained any new rituals?
- ▶ In the process of conducting research for your genogram, what kinds of behaviors and relationships have arisen as an outcome of religion/spirituality? In what ways do you direct or draw from those patterns?
- ▶ How does your religious/spiritual past relate to your current distress or problem you expressed for therapy? Have the discoveries you made through the genogram facilitated any understandings or resolutions?

Families or couples share their opinions on these questions with the therapist in the next session. The answers they give help families and couples notice their connections to the problems that are caused by their religious and spiritual beliefs ([Frame, 2000](#)). Taking into account the spiritual and religious lives as well as the family bonds in Turkish society, genograms can be said to act as a societal facilitator for families to notice the connection or disconnection between their spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of their parents.

We came across a number of questions in [Hodge's \(2001\)](#) study that can help those seeking therapy form a connection with their family of origin, as well as for conducting a detailed assessment. [Hodge \(2001, p. 42\)](#) listed the possible questions that can help construct genograms as:

- ▶ What type of religious affiliation characterizes each member of your family, going back to your grandparents? How meaningful is their relationship with their denomination/faith? Their church (house of worship)? To what extent are their personal beliefs and those of their church/denomination congruent? What is their level of participation? To what extent do they enjoy religious fellowship? Their spiritual lives?
- ▶ How do they express their spiritual and religious beliefs? What particular rituals or sayings are commonly evidenced? How are spirituality and religion assets in their lives? How has their spirituality intersected with the difficulties they've encountered in life? How has their faith helped them cope with trials?
- ▶ What spiritually significant events (transitions/conversions/changes in affiliations or encounters with transpersonal beings) have occurred in the family? How have these events affected the individuals involved? How have other members reacted to these changes?
- ▶ What are the differences (and similarities) among various family members in their beliefs (practices)? How are differences and conflicts managed? Who is the spiritual leader in your family? What role have your grandparents played in your spiritual journey?
- ▶ What spiritual relationships stand out in your childhood years? What are your earliest religious memories? Does your family hold regular devotional times? What types of spiritually based practices occur at home? Which members of your family have had the most influence on your spiritual journey? Who do you feel spiritually closest to?



**Connection with one's family of origin (History).** Constructing a genogram generally leads clients to connect with their family of origin (Frame, 2000). In many cases, such connections with the family history enable clients to retrieve vital information from the past and renegotiate current relationships (Bowen, 1978; Williamson, 1981). Clients are asked to obtain information from family members (parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings) face to face in order to understand the family's religious/spiritual experiences (Hof & Berman, 1986).

Clients who would like to discover the religious and spiritual issues in their family history can obtain information about the spiritual history of their families with the help of the following questions:

- ▶ How have you perceived the significance of religion/ spirituality in your family?
- ▶ How do you perceive the similarities/dissimilarities between the religious/spiritual conditions you experience and the ones I do?
- ▶ Who in your extended family is considered to be the most powerful in terms of religion/spirituality? Who do you think is the least?
- ▶ How difficult do you think it is to diverge from the spiritual or religious ways of your family members you grew up with? In your family, who might support your decision and who might not? Why?
- ▶ What roles do you think religion/spirituality has in overcoming familial problems? What effects does it create in your family relationships? (Frame, 2000)

**Integration into the global therapeutic endeavor.** After the spiritual or religious genogram has been fully constructed, the therapist asks the clients some questions: "How has this process provided insight into your current problem? What have you learned about yourselves and each other that can be used to address your marital or family difficulties?" At this stage of the therapy process, the therapist enables clients to connect current problems to similar problems in the family of origin, past beliefs, and experiences. This way the clients can develop objective approaches to their problems due to the effect of spirituality and religion in their families. This enables them to move past blaming each other to seeking solutions to the problems (Frame, 2000). As can be understood, questions aimed at coping with the problem are asked at this stage. This can pave the way for intervention when the clients notice a connection between the beliefs and experiences in their history, their families' history, and their current issues, as well as for gaining insight into how this connection, if there is one, can contribute to solving the problem.

## Using the Spiritual Genogram as a Tool in Therapy

Studies on spiritual genograms have revealed them to be usually used as a healing tool in therapy. In order to use the spiritual genogram successfully in therapy, the therapist must know what kind of information in the genogram can help the client. For example, the spiritual genogram directly relates to a client seeking to cope with spiritual issues or seeking the meaning of life (Dunn & Dawes, 1999). Furthermore, using a spiritually based genogram for therapeutic matters that include issues related to family dynamics and personal development can help the client discover spiritual and religious components. According to Dunn and Dawes (1999), the spiritual genogram is a useful tool that lets a client become aware of one's religious and spiritual issues and how they affect one's life. Using the spiritual genogram helps individuals discover spiritual and religious resources they had not noticed before. Discovering their religious and spiritual resources can help individuals to solve individual and familial problems and to cope with difficult conditions (Dunn & Dawes, 1999). Similarly, Haug (1998) suggested that the spiritual genogram can be used as a tool for increasing students' self-awareness of the spiritual and religious aspects of their lives, as well as for helping them reflect upon its effect on therapeutic relationships.

The spiritual genogram is an effective tool for revealing differences, potential conflicts, and spiritual barriers to the therapeutic process (Hodge, 2001). For example, Heller and Wood (2000) suggested that serious barriers to spiritually-based intimacy exist in couples with an inter-faith marriage. Couples with different beliefs need to gain awareness about these differences in order to increase intimacy. The spiritual genogram can also be used to increase the intimacy levels of couples with similar beliefs. In this case, the spiritual genogram is used as a tool for revealing a couple's similar characteristics, thus increasing the level of intimacy (Heller & Wood, 2000; Hodge, 2001).

**Case example of the spiritual genogram.** In his study, Hodge (2001) showed a case example the spiritual genogram of Mark and Beth, who had been married for three years and were having troubles in their marriage (see Figure 1). The religious and spiritual status in their families, as well as incidents such as apostasy, active involvement in religious activities, and more, are shown using various symbols. Normally, colors are used in a spiritual genogram. However, different patterns (such as dots, diagonals, waves, etc.) have been used in the genogram to depict different denominations instead of colors (Hodge, 2001).



Mark's family system defines everyone except his grandmother as a member of the Southern Baptist Church. His grandmother, Stacy, is a Protestant. Although the values shared in the family helped the family members form close relationships with each other, Mark was more attached to his maternal grandfather. Mark felt more attached to his grandfather David, particularly because his grandfather had helped him stop using illegal drugs, which he had used in defiance of family values when he was young. Thanks to the recommendations of his grandfather, Mark attended his first baptismal ceremony at the age of 19, and later he was actively involved in church activities.

Beth's family system is more spiritually diverse. Her grandmother, Carol, was raised as an Episcopalian. At the age of 17, she was filled with the Holy Spirit at the International Pentecostal Youth Meeting. Afterwards, she left the Episcopalian church, attended the Assemblies of God where she met her husband, and raised her four children under the influence of that church. The oldest daughter of Reggie and Carol abandoned their beliefs due to an obscurity she experienced when young. This caused great sorrow in the family. Beth's parents were Christians in the sense particularly stated in the Bible. Little is known about Beth's grandmother, and nothing is known about her maternal grandfather. Beth's mother, Karen, had a turbulent period when she was in her twenties. She experienced a spiritual transformation at the age of 28. The guidance she received from Carol, her husband's mother, greatly affected the transformation. Beth's parents are actively involved in church activities and have been honored several times for their activities. Beth attended an international

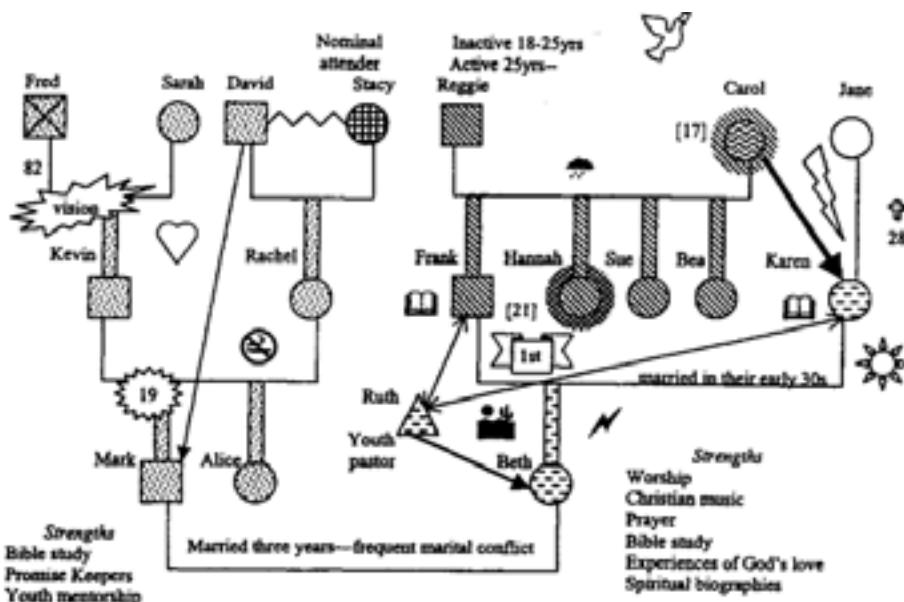


Figure 1. Example of the spiritual genogram from Hodge's (2001) study.

campaign to help the poor who had been deprived of their rights. After the campaign, she became more sensitive to justice issues. Ruth, a youth pastor, had an important spiritual effect on Beth's life.

The shaded areas in the form of dots and dashes in the figures of the genogram were used instead of colors in order to indicate different beliefs. The squares and circles represent males and females respectively. Triangles represent friends of family members who have had a significant effect on their spiritual lives. Many spiritual life elements such as individuals' strengths, their involvement in religious activities, spiritual breakdowns, their spiritual effects on each other, and more are shown using various symbols.

### **Sample Applications of the Spiritual Genogram in Therapy**

Dunn and Dawes (1999) applied the spiritual genogram over African Americans with different belief systems so that the clients could discover spiritual and religious life elements in the multidimensional context of cultural life, family influence, and other significant life events.

Sherry was a 28-year-old Afro-American woman who was feeling alone while dealing with an issue concerning her first child, Tommy. Sherry, who defined herself as a Baptist, sang in the church choir, dealt with church announcements, and actively participated in church activities (Dunn & Dawes, 1999).

While discussing her child's developmental history, Sherry stated that her first child, Tommy, had been born before she married her husband, Barry. Her Baptist parents were upset about it. Sherry felt ashamed and guilty, as she thought she had embarrassed her family. Sherry and her fiancée decided to see the church priest in order to cope with the situation. The priest helped the family understand and cope with their problems by reading some passages from the Bible. Sherry and Barry had considered that meeting in the past to be a therapeutic and healing process (Dunn & Dawes, 1999).

The therapist asked Sherry if her spiritual and religious experiences affected how she coped with the problem. Sherry said both the meeting with the priest and prayers were effective. She said that prayers kept her relation with God strong and played a very effective role in her life. Sherry said she had not gotten any help from the church nor prayed about the problem with her son because she didn't know how it could help her (Dunn & Dawes, 1999).

Taking into account the use of spiritual resources while coping with the previous problem, the therapist and Sherry decided that preparing a spiritually-based genogram could serve as a useful source for understanding and solving the current problem. Sherry's genogram revealed that her parents, who had criticized her for



getting pregnant before marriage, had had a child themselves that way. Thanks to the genogram, she noticed that she had been keeping her problems from her family, not sharing her problems with them. After she gained awareness, she started to solve the unsolved pregnancy issues with her family. She could now get help from her family in order to cope with the problem about Tommy ([Dunn & Dawes, 1999](#)).

In this genogram example, Sherry realized that her religious beliefs had caused a breakdown within the family. Sherry did not share her problem with her family, as she thought they would cast her out because of their religious beliefs. As she believed in the power of prayer, she got support from prayer and help from a priest. The spiritual genogram helped Sherry get to know the spiritual and religious resources she had used in the past and to use them again as a powerful tool for solving her current problems ([Dunn & Dawes, 1999](#)).

[Brody \(2003\)](#), for her doctoral dissertation, constructed a premarital therapy model for a Jewish/Christian couple. The therapy consisted of eight sessions, each lasting two hours, and the spiritual genogram was used in two sessions. According to Brody, the number of Jewish-Christian inter-faith marriages had increased. The fact that the divorce rate in couples with different beliefs was higher than couples with the same beliefs made the study necessary ([Brody, 2003](#)). The premarital therapy model consisted of the following stages: preparation, Relational Ethics Scale, Family Forgiveness Scale, and the spiritual genogram. In her model, the problems in the couple's families of origin were handled within the context of therapy. The genogram was constructed after giving a presentation on how to construct a spiritual genogram during the model's spiritual genogram stage. The couples were able to discover significant religious events in their families through the spiritual genogram. The possibility that ethical and cultural features of religions could be a potential cause for conflict between couples was discussed. After the spiritual genogram construction stage, the couples were given a handout of their genograms and asked to answer the questions listed in this study under the heading of Questions for Further Reflection for further assessment. These questions were stated as able to help the couples express religious and spiritual matters and decrease stress in their relationships ([Brody, 2003](#)).

## Use of Spiritual Genograms in Counselor Education

Spiritual genograms have been observed used in counselor education in addition to family therapy. [Willow, Tobin, and Toner \(2009\)](#) examined the contribution of spiritual genograms to counselor education and development in their research *Assessment of the Use of Spiritual Genograms in Counselor Education*. A group consisting of 32 students from different belief groups was assigned with applying a spiritual genogram. The students were asked to answer the following questions, in writing, after the genogram application.

- ▶ What did you learn about yourself?
- ▶ What did you learn about your family?
- ▶ What impressions did you obtain about religious/spiritual practices?
- ▶ What did you learn about others?
- ▶ What did you learn about being a counselor?

The following five themes were determined in relation to the effect of the spiritual genogram exercise on counselors by dividing the students' answers to these questions into categories according to content.

- ▶ Extension of the individual's world view through discovery of family values.
- ▶ Extension of the individual's world view through discovery of the spiritual path.
- ▶ Understanding others' world view.
- ▶ Effects expected from the counselor role.
- ▶ Reflections on the spiritual genogram process.

This spiritual genogram exercise conducted over counselors revealed many results related to the changes in counselors as well as the awareness they gained. [Willow et al. \(2009\)](#) listed the results as follows.

The exercise made the students start to investigate how the spiritual and religious dimensions were intertwined with their own lives and the lives of their families. They learned to notice their own and others' spiritual and religious development. They realized the importance of individuals' spiritual dimensions in therapeutic relationships. The students also realized the need to improve their skills in order to become more sensitive and competent counselors in a spiritual/religious sense so that they can better understand their clients' spiritual worlds.

The study revealed the counselors who had participated in the spiritual genogram exercise to have improved themselves in terms of knowledge, skills, and awareness. The cultural dimension was also emphasized. The counselors were stated to have found the opportunity to assess their spiritual and religious lives according to the culture of the society they live in. Another significant development about gaining awareness is that the ability to be open to others' world views and to have a better understanding of the cultural, spiritual, and religious opinions of others is gained over time ([Willow et al., 2009](#)). The spiritual genogram helped students and counselors gain more awareness about the effect of spirituality on their clients' therapeutic processes due to the effect



of their religious and spiritual legacies. The spiritual genogram can help educators and students raise self-awareness when used in an educational setting (Frame, 2001).

### Conclusion

With the increase of spiritually-based approaches in family therapy has come the inclusion of individuals' family and spiritual dynamics in the therapy process. One result of this change in family therapy is the spiritual genogram has been brought into therapy. The spiritual genogram is used as a healing tool in the therapy process during family therapy. It helps individuals discover the spiritual dynamics in their family of origin and develop a strategy for coping with their issues. The results of using the spiritual genogram in therapy and counselor education have been shared alongside application examples in this study, which reflects an assessment process related to constructing spiritual genograms as well as their use in therapy. In the genogram exercise conducted by Dunn and Dawes (1999), the clients noticed the spiritual and religious resources they had used in the past and learned to use their previous coping method as a powerful tool in their current problems. Furthermore, using spiritual genograms in counselor education helps counselors gain awareness about themselves and their clients' spiritual worlds (Willow et al., 2009).

Although no studies have been conducted previously in Turkey on using spiritual genograms, there are some studies on the use of genograms. Işık, Akbaş, Kirdök, Avcı, and Çakır's (2012) study conducted over Turkish families revealed significant results about the use of genograms. The families on which the genograms were applied were very eager to talk about their extended families. This eagerness helped the process be client-oriented and enabled the clients to open up. Furthermore, issues in the family of origin were usually the reason for most of the current problems. Therefore, the clients started to realize how the problems in their family history had affected the problems and processes in their current family structure.

Due to the importance attached to family in Islam, the spiritual and cultural structure of Turkey has brought about a society with strong family ties and spiritual dynamics. When considered from this point of view, individuals are thought to value spiritual life in their family history and to try and keep their connection with them intact. The use of spiritual genograms can make a significant contribution to the therapy process in Turkey.

The absence of any study on spiritual genograms in Turkey makes the results of this study important. This study is expected to fill a gap in family therapy as well as in the literature. As a result, this study is necessary in the field of family therapy and is expected to simplify researchers' future studies.

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