Assessing, Defining the Problem, and Counseling

A Case Study of a Single Father

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IMPORTANT: The following case study is a response to an assignment. NO CONFIDENTIALITY HAS BEEN VIOLATED
Jeff is a 40-year-old single father with one 13-year-old child, Roger. Jeff’s wife abandoned the family when Roger was only 6. She is a drug user and has serious financial problems. Further, she might even have bipolar disorder since it seems to correspond to her behavior. Also, her mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Recently, Roger has not been focusing at school, is scoring low academically, and is withdrawing emotionally from everyone. He is also asking his father many questions about his mother. Jeff has informed Roger that his mother is “no good,” and that Roger had better begin to do better in school or he is not going to leave the house except to go to school, as he will be grounded indefinitely.

When he is at home, Roger rarely leaves his room and spends many hours playing video games, some of which contain violent content. Further, his personal hygiene has diminished. Jeff is an engineer and considers himself to be “the only stable force in Roger’s life.” He prides himself in trying to teach Roger about “a strong work ethic and traditional values.” Recently Jeff has started dating Sherry, a 32-year-old co-worker with whom he is spending an increasing amount of time.
Abstract

It is estimated that more than 50% of marriages end in divorce. In addition, couples are having children out of wedlock. Gay men are either, parenting a child of their own or have been adopting. This trend has created the increase of single fathers. Despite the rise in single fathers, it is not very well researched. A case study of Jeff and Roger is analyzed. The paper is divided into three parts. Part one looks at assessment using genograms, eco-maps, and family mapping. It is shown how these tools help create a GARF score. Part two within the paper looks at five questions aimed to define the problem in the context of extended family lifecycle. The first two questions deal with three coupling lifecycle. The third question examines the single parent lifecycle. The fourth question looks at the men and adolescent lifecycle. The fifth question looks at the men and single parent lifecycle. The third part within the paper examines how Jeff and Roger can be counseled to improve Jeff’s parenting skills. Finally, how Jeff and Roger can improve their communication is also explored.
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The following case study represents one of the growing trends that is grossly under researched. That is how to counsel effectively a single father family. This case study offers ways to assess the needs of single fathers, help them define the problem, and counsel them according to their needs.

Three tools can help a therapist assess the family and put the identified problem in perspective. These tools include the genogram, eco-mapping and family mapping or the GEF tools.

**Part One GEF Tools and Assessment**

The GEF tools can help a therapist generate a tentative hypothesis of what is going on within the family and individual. This can be done by assessing the context in which the horizontal and vertical stressors lie (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). Which helps the therapist think systematically of how events and relationships within the family and community are related. These variables may be either the source of or the sustaining force of the problem or both. The GEF tools are also a good way for a therapist to join with the family, helps creates a new refrain of the problem, and normalizes it. They can also show the family how a solution may have become the problem (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). In short, the GEF tools help a therapist and family see the bigger picture and their resource, which may contain possible solutions from many different perspectives such as the family’s functioning and organization around their children and their concerns, priorities, and resources (McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, & Rous, 2008).
Question A-Assessing Family History

Genograms and Assessment of Family History. A genogram is a diagram of the family tree. However, it is much more than a family tree created by websites such as ancestry.com. A genogram looks for patterns in the family tree that are ongoing and significant throughout generations (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). Thus, a genogram looks for roles, rituals, and rules (the 3R’s) handed down from one generation to the next, which are of therapeutic value. Genograms are therefore, useful because they can help a therapist and a client understand and develop a timeline of events and connect these events to the different 3R’s carried down or transmitted from one generation to the next (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). They also can show how a traumatic event that maybe not be conscience maybe the root and reinforcement of a problem (Nichols, 2010a). Genograms also can show how the 3R’s may also be sustaining the problem such as triangles, subsystems, sibling, or reciprocal relationships; For example, showing that Roger has a genetic risk for developing an addiction problem, possibly depression, or any other Axis I disorders. In regards to Jeff, the father, and Roger, his son, a genogram may show how the male figures in each generation has lived with the challenges within the male lifecycle.

Question B-Exploring Jeff and Roger’s Relationship

Family Mapping. Thus what a family therapist would want to know about Jeff and Roger’s relationship is contained in the global assessment of relational functioning (GARF) score recorded on the axis V of the DSM IV tr. Family maps look at hierarchies and boundaries. Boundaries are described as rigid, clear, or diffuse boundaries. Clear boundaries consist of clear 3R’s, hierarchies, communication, and overall structure within the family. Each family member gives and receives corrective feedback, negotiation, and accommodations are made. Everyone within the family feels as if they belong and yet are individuals (Gladding, 2007). Rigid boundaries are flexible; family
members tend to stay away from one another and experience difficulty relating in an intimate way to one another. Thus, individuals are emotionally cut off or disengaged from one another. Diffuse boundaries there is not enough separation between family members and is fused to one another instead of creating independence and autonomy, they encourage dependence on one another (Gladding, 2007).

**The GARF Score.** The GARF score looks at the family's overall ability to; problem solve, organize, and their emotional climate, which governs all interpersonal relationships. Problem solving includes negotiating goals, rules, and routines adaptive ability to stress, communication, and the ability to resolve conflict. Organization includes maintenance of interpersonal rules and subsystem boundaries, hierarchal functioning coalitions, and distribution of power of control and responsibility. Emotional climate refers to tone and range of feelings, quality of caring, empathy, involvement and attachment/commitment sharing of values, mutual affect, responsiveness, respect, and regard quality of sexual function (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The answer to this question directs the therapist's interventions. A family who was disengaged would not benefit from the Bowen's concept of self-differentiation. However, a family or subsystem that has too much togetherness would not benefit from the therapy that tries to bring the family closer together.

Both genograms and family mapping can also answer another question that a family therapist would want to know because it would change the direction of therapy. This question is who is in the household. The answer to this question will help the therapist decide who should be in therapy and discover positive and negative feedback loops that is controlling Jeff and Roger’s interactions. This will also help a therapist determine how Jeff and Roger’s relationship is affecting the system and how the system affects Jeff and Roger's relationship. If the therapist only looks at Jeff and Roger’s relationship when others are present in the house than the therapist may
not discover how the problems are being sustained. There are three other questions that are important to answer. The first question is; what was their relationship like before Sherry, Jeff’s girlfriend, entered the picture? The answer to this question would make a family therapist see Roger's behavior as the consequence of the family entering into the re-coupling stage of the extended lifecycle (McGoldrick & Carter, 2011). Thus, the therapist would try to help the family create a narrative that normalizes Roger’s behavior. Another important question that a family therapist would want to know is; how do they perceive their relationship? The answer to this question would also help a therapist to either confirm or refrain from any of Jeff and Roger’s cognitive distortions they have about their relationship. The most important question that the family therapist would want to know is; if there are signs of abuse or neglect in their relationship? The answer to this question would radically change the course of therapy, as the therapist would be obligated to report this to the proper authorities.

Discussion of the GEF Tools and Assessment

The GEF tools have many positives in their use. However, there are some drawbacks of using these. These questions have the potential to allow the client to see themselves as a victim of their upbringing giving the client an excuse not to take responsibility for their actions. Secondly, these tools may appear to a client as non-important and does not have to do anything with counseling, as most people are linear thinkers. Many clients have the attitude that here is the problem or child now fix them and expects the therapist to waive his magic wand. These tools do not play into the quick fix, take a pill, and the problems will be solved. This appears to be one of the greatest challenges that the therapist would probably face with Jeff. However, this would also be a non-threatening way to get the background information needed to help him, which he probably is reluctant to face.
McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, and Rous (2008) while referring to eco-maps give other benefits to using GFE tools. They work with the diverse backgrounds, cultures, and can be applied to all family sizes. These tools are practical and simple. These tools can also help a family therapist and his clients identify conflicting or stressful relationships. Lastly, these tools can also help a therapist get a sense of client and family's culture and values before deciding the best school of therapy to use.

**Part Two Defining the Problem**

Most of the questions needed to assess the family and any barriers to becoming healthier are dealt with using the GFE tools. As McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, and Rous (2008) repeat the words that Hartman & Laird wrote in 1995, "The usefulness of this simple diagram becomes dramatically clear if one considers the volume of words it would take to describe the family with words alone" (As cited by (McCormick, Stricklin, Nowak, & Rous, 2008, p. 27)). These tools, however, are just parts of defining the problem. There are at least five other questions that a family therapist would be interested in having answered to help define the problem. These five questions are:

1. Has Roger met Sherry? If not, what is keeping you back from introducing her to him? If so, how do they get along?
2. Have you dated since Roger’s mother left? If so, how many times and has Roger met them? If not, why start to date now?
3. Do you see parenting as an option or a duty?
4. When did you first notice Roger’s behavior?
5. What does it mean to be a man and single father?

**Question C-The Five Questions**
**The First Two Questions.** All five of these questions are rooted in the extended family lifecycle. The first two questions mostly deal with the re-coupling stage as these questions look at how Jeff’s relationship with Sherry maybe affecting Roger’s behavior. These two questions speak of Roger's dilemmas of loyalty. Can he accept his father's new partner and still be loyal to his mother? Is Jeff allowing Roger to express his thoughts and feelings about his father's relationship with Sherry properly (McGoldrick & Carter, 2011)? They also base these two questions on the research of Kirby (2006), which looks at the stress perspective? This perspective implies that the trauma of family disruption and moving to different family types can cause adverse effect in children more than socialization. This idea along with the statistic that men marry much more rapidly than women after a divorce or separation suggests that Roger’s problem is due to the change of structure, however, the question is; is this a change that is frequent or is Sherry the first woman whom Jeff has dated since Roger's mother left? This question determines how Structural Therapy is used and if it would be enough to help Jeff and Roger solve their problem.

**Question Three.** This question is rooted in single parent families extended lifecycle and the works of Coles (2003). She performed the case study on ten black single fathers with residential custody to find out why these men had custody and discovered a few themes. The first theme is that it is their fatherly duty or because the mother is incompetent. Two men in the study, however, stated that they would prefer not having sole custody. There were also nobler reasons such as wanting to provide a good role model for their kids, wanting to break the cycle of bad dads, and wanting to continue the bond they have established with their children. The reason for the phrasing of the question in this manner is due to one of the statements made by a study subject whom stated what people who believe the comment of taking on the responsibility of fatherhood is actually an insult because he sees fatherhood is a duty that he should be doing. The fact that
people point out that he has taken custody infers that only mothers are fit to raise children, and a father does not have the right to have custody of the children except if the mother does not want them, is incapacitated, or incompetent. Thus, the question, whether he sees parenting as a duty or choice tries to avoid this insult. The answer to this question can serve to assess how Jeff feels about being a single father and his relationship with Roger. This also may bring up whether he feels confident as a father, which may also be a factor in Roger’s behavior. As Slagt, Dekovic, de Haan, van den Akker, and Prinzie (2012) who has shown that external behavior is linked to the parent’s confidence in parenting.

**The Fourth Question.** This question extends from the many lifecycle, transforms, and adolescent’s lifecycle. As Roger's behavior may be due to normal adolescents as Mock (2011) points out that aggression and social withdrawal are part of male adolescents and rebel against authority. Gender values are strong and are represented in the music, television, movies, and video games they play. The image of toughness and being rough are looked upon favorably and seen as success (Mock, 2011). However, Beata & Lene (2007) found that adolescents in single father families are at higher risk for victimization and mental distress.

**The Fifth Question.** This question is also rooted in the male lifecycle it is also extending from the single parent lifecycle. This question is designed to help Jeff realize that it is okay to ask for help and support. As men are more likely to be depressed, which culture looks down on and is more likely to be more unhealthy then women (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 2008: Janzen, Green, & Muhajarine, 2006). Hook & Chalasani (2008) add that single fathers are more likely to work then single mothers and have more money than them, however; they still do not make as much money as a two parent home. Men are expected not to have any conflict at work. This question is
designed to aid Jeff in developing the congruence between being a single father and needing support. Allowing him to unburden himself from the expectation's society puts on men.

**Part 3 Counseling**

In parts one and two; the intake, referrals, and assessments were discussed questions one through five of the second part began the counseling process. This last part of the paper looks at the counsel process and how it can be applied to Jeff and Roger. Question D looks at improving Jeff’s parenting skills and question E explores how to build a communication between Jeff and Roger.

**Question D-How to Improve Jeff's Parenting Skills**

To answer this question the type of parent that he is needed to be explored and assessed. This can be done during therapy sessions by observing his parenting style with the tools that help a therapist arrive at a GARF score. As these parenting styles involve helping parents problem solved, organize and create an emotional climate for their children. Bronte-Tinkew, Scott, and Lilja (2010) refer to four types of parenting styles: permissive, authoritarian, authoritative, and uninvolved parents. Uninvolved and permissive parents do not have much control over their children. They disengage with their children and parenting responsibilities. They are also unresponsive to their children's behavior or desires. Permissive parents are responsive to their children but let them regulate themselves. Authoritarian parents hold their children an absolute standard and use punitive measures to make them conform to the standards. Authoritative parents watch over their children and are responsive to them, allowing them to exert their will but is also not afraid to discipline when the child needs it. Thus depending on Jeff's GARF score, his relationship with Sherry, and who is in the household a Strategic and Behavioral approach may work on this family.
One of the behavioral approaches that would be useful regardless of these factors is setting up a token economy, which is a form of operant conditioning. When the correct response is made, a token is given (Nichols, 2010b). After Roger receives, the amount of tokens agreed upon he can cash them in for a reward of his choosing. A second technique would be contingency contracting. Using this intervention, Jeff agrees to make a certain change such as telling him more about his mother in a non-degrading way if he begins to get better grades (Nichols, 2010b). Both techniques have been shown to increase the chances that an adolescent will self discloses to the parent and lower levels of delinquency (Padilla-Walker, Harper, & Bean, 2011). These methods, however, depend on Jeff's commitment to keeping his word. As if these rewards are not given has agreed then Roger will not change his behavior. He may view this as his father's old patterns of being lied too thus discouraging both Jeff and Roger from changing the system and Roger’s behavior.

**Question E - How to Improve Communication Between Jeff and Roger**

The study by Padilla-Walker, Harper, and Bean (2011) leads to the last question of how to increase communication. This paper has presented at least two ways to increase communication. The first way is using a genogram. As this may open the door for Jeff to talk about Roger’s mother when looking at addiction, mental health, divorce and separation, or any other type pattern that comes out using this tool. The second way was through shared decision-making. Other ways that might increase communication is family sculpting and role-playing. Sculpting in this case would be having Roger position Jeff in a way that represents how Roger sees his relationship to Jeff and vice versa. Another method is role-playing, here Jeff and Roger, switch roles; in an individual session with Jeff, the therapist can play Roger and coach him on how to talk to Roger about his mother. The therapist could also do the same with Roger coaching him how to speak to his father about his fears, concerns, and other issues. Both sculpting and role-play can also be fun and
getting them to laugh together. They also could help Jeff and Roger to discover some of the unspoken rules and rituals of the relationship.

One of biggest potential downfalls of using this technique is that either one of them could take this personally or they may not be motivated to do it. This may also open up wounds that Jeff is not ready to deal with. Opening these wounds could make Jeff become more depressed or experience others symptoms that may interfere with his functioning as an employee, man, as a single parent or Sherry's potential mate. To conclude being a single parent with an adolescent has many challenges. The case study of Jeff and Roger is very complex and has many variables seen with the GFE tools, the counseling process has very little research that has been done on single fathers and therefore very little evidence-based procedures to aid the single father. The therapist therefore must learn to become sensitive to these issues to ensure that relationships such as Jeff and Roger has are nurtured and promoted rather than unintentionally destroyed.
References


