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To cite this article: Hoa N. Nguyen, Erika L. Grafsky & Monica Munoz (2016) The Use of Ecomaps to Explore Sexual and Gender Diversity in Couples, *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 27:4, 308-314, DOI: [10.1080/08975353.2016.1235433](https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2016.1235433)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2016.1235433>



Published online: 07 Nov 2016.



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The Use of Ecomaps to Explore Sexual and Gender Diversity in Couples

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ABSTRACT

An ecomap, also called ecogram, is a tool that spans multiple disciplines, including social work, nursing, counseling, and other medical and mental health fields. They are a visual depiction of relationships, social networks, and social support (Crawford, Grant, & Crews, 2014). Ecomaps can be especially relevant for couples and families that have multiple layers of sexual and gender diversity, as they are facing homophobia, heterosexism, and cisgenderism. By conducting an ecomap with them, we further understand the strengths and support in their social context. In this article, we will describe this intervention, using an exemplar case.

KEYWORDS

Diversity in therapy; ecomaps; gender identity; intervention; sexual orientation

Ecomaps and cultural sensitivity

Though primarily used in clinical practice, ecomaps have also become research tools. In one study on family caregiving, researchers utilized interactive ecomaps to conduct qualitative research (Rempel, Neufeld, & Kushner, 2007). Crawford and colleagues (2014) employed ecomaps in their exploration of youth who form identity, relationships, and community through the creation of rap. In application, ecomaps are used in the nursing field to quickly obtain important information about their patients' social networks (Wright & Leahey, 1999). They have also been applied as school-community interventions for at-risk youth and their families (Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby, & Boyd, 2007).

Rooted in ecological and family systems theory, ecomaps can help empower clients and highlight strengths. They can be modified to become more culturally sensitive interventions in therapy. For instance, Hodge and Williams (2002) discussed the applicability of spiritual ecomaps with African Americans, showing how clinicians can tailor ecomap questions to be culturally and spiritually sensitive. Limb and Hodge (2011) continued to show how spiritual ecomaps can be used with Native American families and children in family therapy. Elliott (2012) found that the spiritual ecograms

are harmonious with Native American culture, and future research should explore its effectiveness as a family therapy intervention.

In regards to sexual orientation, ecomaps have been applied in a case example about an African American, gay male in his 70s struggling with depression (Meehan, 2015), in a case example about a same-sex couple wrestling with family rejection and adoption services (Grafsky & Nguyen, 2015), as an experiential activity to help gay and lesbian clients explore their coming-out process (Crooks-Yared, 2013), and offered as a creative therapy technique with diverse family structures (Caselman & Hill, 2014). There are fewer examples of using ecomaps with transgender clients. Using a transgender-affirming adaption of a cognitive behavioral therapy approach, Austin and Craig (2015) suggested that ecomaps can help clients meet transgender friends and supportive allies. The following case example centers on a couple navigating sexual orientation and gender identity.

Case vignette¹

Charlize (47) and Sam (45) are a Caucasian, middle-class couple living in a small Southern town that is largely rural and isolated. They describe their relationship as stable, healthy, and exceptionally loving, but they came to therapy to talk about Sam's transitioning. Sam identifies as a heterosexual, transgender man, and Charlize identifies as a lesbian and cisgender woman. Charlize owns a popular coffee shop, while Sam works as a vet technician at a small animal clinic. The hard-earned money he has been saving for more than a decade is going toward the medical procedures for his transition. He is not well-connected to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community and has only recently disclosed his gender identity to his parents, his partner Charlize, and two close friends.

Charlize, on the other hand, is an avid activist for LGBTQ+ rights in the small community where they live. She is well-connected in the community and sees being an advocate as a significant part of her identity. Both Charlize and Sam grew up in poor, working-class families, but they gradually worked their way up financially. They met before Sam started his transition, and Charlize has supported him throughout this process. She expresses how much she wants to be with Sam, regardless of his transition, but she notices that the further along Sam gets with his transition, the more concern she feels about how others will perceive her lesbian identity and their relationship. She feels uncomfortable thinking of themselves as a heterosexual couple, especially given her role as an activist in her local LGBTQ+ community.

Charlize and Sam is just one example of couples who are navigating the complex intersections of sexual and gender diversity in their relationship.

¹The case example is fictional.

This complexity reflects how the development of sexual and gender identity is shaped and constructed in an intricate web of individual, dyadic, and group processes. To help couples navigate these processes, we propose tailoring the use of ecomaps to explore their social context and support in family therapy.

Therapeutic approach

Our approach entails: (1) taking an affirmative stance; (2) assessing their family life cycle and salient ecological systems; (3) making use of our expertise as scholars and therapists while privileging clients' expertise; (4) navigating disclosure processes; and (5) deconstructing what it means to live an authentic life.

Taking an affirming stance. Charlize and Sam are uncertain about how to label their relationship. Does their gender status define them as a heterosexual relationship? Does the interaction between their sexual and gender identities define them as a queer relationship? We explore this further, once again encouraging them to define their relationship for themselves—as gay, heterosexual, queer, or perhaps another label altogether that is outside these more conventional terms (e.g., free-form lovers, companions in love). We also discuss the purpose of labels and in what ways these labels help or do not help them. From our affirmative stance, our goal with Charlize and Sam is to affirm and validate not only their identities, but the uncertainty they may feel in the process of navigating those identities.

To do so, we talk about the diversity of LGBTQ+ families and encourage them to focus on the ways in which their relationship is not just different, but is uniquely extraordinary, branching beyond sexual and gender binaries (Grafsky & Nguyen, 2015). We reflect on our biases from living in a hetero-normative and gender-normative society, and are mindful of the binary traps of viewing Sam as a woman or a man and Charlize as lesbian or straight. Our clients define their identities for themselves, and it's our role to remain open and flexible when helping Charlize and Sam work through these complex processes.

Assessing family life cycle and ecological systems. From a family life cycle perspective, Charlize and Sam are both in an adjustment period of their relationship formation. We want to help Charlize make sense of her sexual identity as Sam transitions, without assuming that her sexual identity has “changed,” process her experience as a lesbian cisgender woman in a relationship with a heterosexual transgender man. We also explore more in-depth Sam's identity, beyond the physical aspects of his transition.

Part of our systemic assessment their family cycle is to consider all aspects of the transgender experience. Family, friends, media, and society as whole often focus on the physical transition of transgender life, and this can feel

intrusive. Focusing on the physical transformation also dilutes and reduces transgender experiences to the quantity of pills, examinations, surgeries, and doctor’s appointments that they experience and negates the significant, qualitative aspects of identity development including, but not limited to, coming out as a transgender person in different contexts and the physical and emotional violence many transgender individuals experience.

At this time, we ask about the larger systems in their lives and how this transition is embedded in these contexts, by co-creating an ecomap with them. An ecomap with them likely includes the local LGBTQ+ community and their interactions with the health care and legal system as Sam transitions, but we hope to uncover other social networks they may have. This ecomap addresses the social networks of both Sam and Charlize (see Figure 1).

Balancing therapist knowledge and privileging client’s expertise. Ecomaps can help identify resources that are available to transgender individuals in their community. They sometimes have to travel far and pay expensive fees to access a doctor that is knowledgeable in transgender health and transition care. In rural communities, resources for transgender individuals are likely

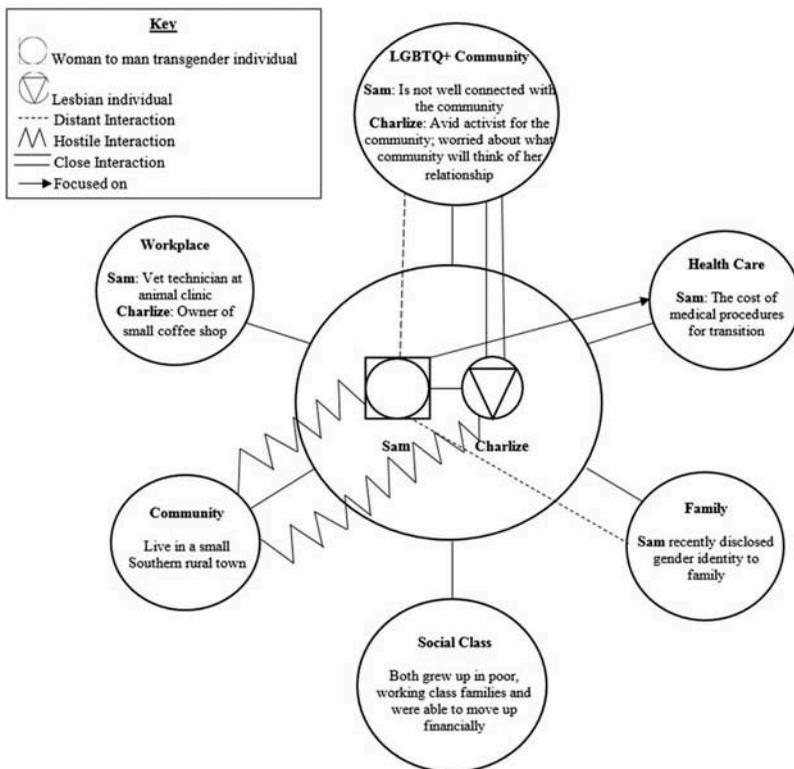


Figure 1. An example of Charlize and Sam’s ecomap.

limited. We also educate ourselves about the rights that are given to transgender individuals and their families. As cisgender therapists, we want to do our part in seeking this knowledge to increase our own competence, because LGBTQ+ individuals are often given the responsibility to educate others about gender and sexual identity issues. At the same time, we should privilege the clients' expertise on their life and identities, by asking questions about how they uniquely experience the transitioning process and suspending our assumptions.

Navigating second-hand disclosure. When using the ecomap to identify clients' social support and network, we also visit issues related to second-hand disclosure. We help the couple negotiate the parameters of disclosure and second-hand disclosure about their identities and relationship. Second hand disclosure refers to when a person discloses another person's sexual and/or gender identity. It can be done unintentionally or intentionally, with or without the other person's consent; the latter risks jeopardizing a relationship's trust and boundaries. Thus, we want to help clients clearly negotiate how they will handle decisions related to disclosure. How does Sam prefer to identify himself in different contexts and with various people? What is the decision-making process for them, individually and together? Who has the right to disclose their partner's sexual and gender identity?

Deconstructing authenticity. Sam and Charlize may wonder what it means to lead an authentic life. For Sam, he is navigating his process of coming out. For Charlize, there may be a pressure to be visibly present in the community as a lesbian advocate. Her experiences of identifying as part of a marginalized population is now juxtaposed with the experience of others potentially perceiving their relationship as heterosexual. She has spent most of her life striving to be visible and validated in her lesbian identity. She may also anticipate people challenging her sexual orientation and feel added pressure to correct their misconception by disclosing Sam's gender identity. At the same time, she respects Sam's disclosure process and does not want to take away his decision. In therapy, we further explore the nuanced differences between choosing to disclose to as a response to defend one's sexual and/or gender identity versus choosing to disclose as a part of living a more genuine, authentic life.

Other uses for ecomaps

Though our example focuses on sexual orientation and gender identity, ecomaps are applicable to other cases as well. For instance, ecomaps can be used with polyamorous relationships to discuss their strengths, support systems, and issues of monogamism and mononormativity. It can be used with clients in diverse family structures, such as grandparent-headed families, blended families, and so forth. It

can be particularly useful for clients with multiple minority identities who are facing various, intersectional experiences of marginalization.

Contraindications

Our case example is limiting in that we did not address other facets of cultural diversity such as race, ethnicity, religion, ability/disability status, and so forth. Therapists using this intervention can mold it to the clients' unique, diverse context. Another issue is that ecomaps have not been empirically validated for use with every type of population. Therapists should anticipate the possibility that an ecomap is incompatible in certain cases and be ready to maneuver the tool in a different therapeutic direction as necessary.

Conclusion

One of our steps is help clients deconstruct what an authentic life means to them, what it feels like, and what conditions are necessary to live authentically. This is part of why we emphasize the importance of social support from other, sometimes larger (macro-level), systems outside of therapy, as these contexts facilitate growth and help sustain our clients' positive changes. We believe it is important to cultivate space for Charlize and Sam to define their own idea of authenticity and create family the way they want. The actual process of doing so is empowering and honors their significant contributions to constructing their extraordinary family.

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