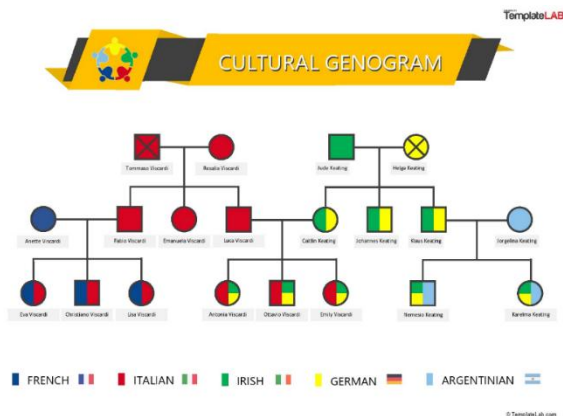


Practitioner Briefing: Cultural Genograms



What is a cultural genogram?

A basic genogram with names, ages, separations and deaths within a family and used to build an understanding of the context in which relationships take place. For example, depicting cultures of origin, ethnic or religious identities (Hodge, 2015). We can use an agreed set of symbols and lines to represent factors such as cohabitants, relationships that are particularly problematic or strong sources of support, and colours to indicate substance use, mental health difficulties, or emerging risks and strengths, etc. A genogram can be used to explore the cultural influences and experiences of a child, young person and their family, a visual representation of their history that maps out important cultural factors such as ethnicity, language, religion, traditions, beliefs, and values. Identify strengths and challenges in a child, young person and their family's' cultural identity and help them develop a deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage. Cultural genograms can help them better understand how their cultural background has influenced their behaviour, relationships, and overall well-being. See this [video](#) for more details (1m17s).

While there are [standard symbols](#) that can be used, practitioners are often encouraged to be creative and co-create a "unique key" with the child to reflect their personal perception of their world. To make it a cultural genogram, you add layers that highlight identity and background. Always include a clear key on the page so other practitioners can interpret the child's chosen symbols and colours. Please see the further reading links for examples of these.

Cultural genograms can help identifying hidden support networks/ extra-familial relationships such as elders in religious community or a godparent figure who isn't a biological relative but provides significant emotional safety for family members. Cultural genograms also help you understand parenting differences and explore how each parents culture of origin influences their views on discipline, education and gender roles. This can reveal if what appears to be disengagement is actually a different cultural expectation of professional boundaries. This additional knowledge can help make assessments and any resulting support plans more person centred.

Why is being culturally competent important when working with families?

Cultural competence is being respectful of and responsive to the beliefs, practices and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse communities both from a practitioner and agency perspective. Practitioners **should not make assumptions** about a family, child or young person and as part of 'informed practice' should be confident to ask about what their life experiences are to meet their needs and to provide the best service. National and Local case reviews have shown that practitioners can make the wrong stereotypical assumptions and not check out all available avenues of information.

Case examples:

Surrey SCP Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review for [Sara Sharif](#): This review found that there was a notable lack of consideration given to Sara's race and culture and how her dual heritage may have impacted at various stages of her life. This lack of professional curiosity and understanding became particularly relevant when she started wearing the hijab at a young age in a family where this was not the norm.

Coventry SCP Serious Case Review for [Daniel Pelka](#): This review found that Daniel was believed to not speak English, as this was recorded as his 'second language', even though his older sister could speak English and would translate Daniel's interactions to staff. In Daniel's case the reason for him not speaking English could have been attributed to developmental delay or from the abuse he was suffering from his mother and her partner. The Children Act 1989 is clear that the welfare of the child is paramount and should remain the focus of any practitioner intervention. Whilst an understanding of cultural context is necessary, this should not get in the way of measures to protect the child from significant harm.

Why are cultural genograms needed?



The absence of cultural consciousness may lead to inaccurate assessments and poor decision making. Listening to the children/young people/families' perspective and understanding their journey can help to support professional judgement where other sources of information are missing for example asylum seeking families.

The following could be used when drawing a genogram to illicit information and help in the assessment of risks and concerns:

- Acknowledgement/understanding of the intersectional aspects and how language, cultural identity and belief systems impact on the children/young people/adults within the family.

- Analysis of how cultural, personal, and social identity impacts on the family's ability to safeguard their children.
- Explicit links between the family's cultural beliefs and the safeguarding concerns.
- Analysis of the family's engagement with services and the degree of recognition of agency concerns and their response to agency involvement, taking into consideration for example gender and cultural factors.
- Consideration of the extent that any presenting behaviour or problem relates to the impact of social transition such as migration, lack of extended family support, discrimination, trauma etc.
- Everyone communicates differently so practitioners need to make sure they are clear, consistent, transparent, accessible and inclusive. Approved and independent Interpretation/translation services should be used where required. Children/young people and other relatives or friends must not be used to translate or interpret.
- Consideration of whether any difficulties in the family a result of lack of access to or knowledge of appropriate services or resources; and
- Exploration of any cultural conflict within the family around identity, values, or relationships of the individual members.

- Is there evidence that the safeguarding concerns are illegal or outside of UK legal parameters? • Are the family demonstrating a willingness to change practices?
- Does the child/young person/family see the safeguarding concerns as a cultural norm?
- Does the child/young person/family want things to change?
- Are there organisations and or people in the community trying to affect change in the family?

Note: In relations to consent and capacity, consider reference to [Fraser Guidelines](#), [Gillick Competence](#) and the [Mental Capacity Act](#).

Understanding what family means for the people you are working with

It is also important to acknowledge that the meaning of family changes over time and that family ties can be contested, hidden or unacknowledged. Family terms like ‘mother’ or ‘aunty’ can be used as ‘honorific’ titles in many cultures – conferring respect and acknowledging familial roles taken by women. The term marriage may refer to a legally sanctioned union, but the definition of marriage (and indeed of ‘legal’) varies across cultures. Over recent years the UK and many other (but not all) nations have come to recognise the equal rights of gay and lesbian parents and their families. Lived relationships within families often do not directly reflect biological connections. Biological descent may be a closely kept secret, covered up by families. The rise in home DNA testing kits can reveal previously unknown relatives or that a father is not in fact a biological father. ‘Blended’ or ‘step’ families bring children from various adult relationships into brother/sister relationships and shared parenting arrangements. Children themselves may well share the perspective that ‘it doesn’t really matter whether it’s ‘full’ or ‘half’. It is important that practitioners do not take terms like ‘family’ for granted but think about the language and understand that it is culturally understood and interpreted. The [Social GRRRAACCEEESSS](#) provide a framework for exploring a person’s culture, experiences and identity to be considered within a cultural genogram, and by a practitioner themselves. Rather than bringing a fixed understanding of what family means to making a genogram, practitioners need to be open to the complex and interesting realities of people’s lives and family relationships

Gender Identity	Geography	Race	Religion
Age	Ability	Appearance	Class
Culture	Caste	Education	Ethnicity
Economics	Spirituality	Sexuality	Sexual orientation

Further reading

- [Top tips: genograms by the PET “Practice Excellence Team” at Leicestershire County Council](#)
- [Using Genograms in Practice, Research in Practice: Practice Tool](#)
- [Norfolk SCP Genograms and Ecomaps Practice Guide](#)



Thank you to Pan Bedfordshire SCP who kindly gave permission for their briefing on Cultural Genograms to be adapted for local use.