
Assisting Youth with Disclosing Their Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity Using an Ecomap

Richard A. Brandon-Friedman, PhD, LCSW, LCAC and M. Killian. Kinney, MSW, LSW

Indiana University School of Social Work
Section: Section VII: Homework, Handouts, and Activities for Specific Presenting Concerns

Type of Contribution: Activity/Homework

Objective:

This activity is designed to help youth visualize their social environment in order to assist them with managing the disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others. Through this exercise, youth and therapists will be able to identify individuals within youths’ environments to whom the youth would like to come out and to whom they do not feel comfortable doing so. It will also assist youth and therapists with understanding the interactions between the myriad parties involved in youths’ lives.

Rationale for Use:

Ecomaps are a way for individuals to diagram the systems and people within those systems that are involved in their lives. Through dynamic representation, individuals can picture themselves as the center of a complex web of relationships, each of which is unique yet interdependent on the others (Hartman, 1978; Ray & Street, 2005). Ecomaps can also demonstrate the strength or conflict-ladenness of relationships and interactions, allowing individuals and professionals to explore relationship patterns (Hartman, 1978). As co-created products, ecomaps enhance collaboration between clients and therapists and provide clients with feelings of empowerment since they are able to depict their social environments as they experience them (Hartman, 1978; Ray & Street, 2005). Ecomaps can also be used to monitor changes in relationships over time, thereby allowing for exploration of these changes (Ray & Street, 2005).

When used with sexual and/or gender minority individuals, ecomaps provide a baseline for discussion of relational processes, disruptions in family and social relationships, experiences
of homophobia and discrimination tied to specific individuals, and the relationship individuals and their families have with other social systems (Grafsky & Nguyen, 2015). Ecomaps also provide a greater understanding of the context of sexual and/or gender minority youths’ lives and thus allow for a multi-level assessment of the supports available to the individuals and the areas in which intervention may be desired (Nguyen, Grafsky, & Munoz, 2016). Perhaps most important, the feelings of empowerment can be beneficial to youth navigating the complex coming out process as they can translate this therapeutic experience to feeling control over disclosing their sexual and/or gender minority identities to others (Matthews & Salazar, 2012).

With the number of interacting systems and the myriad people involved in youths’ lives, it can be difficult for the youth and professionals working with them to determine which individuals know the youths’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In order to reduce the confusion that can occur and to help both the youth and professionals manage this situation, this activity involves the completion of an ecomap that can be used as a reference during discussion of the youths’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The activity will also help the youth to systematically examine their relationships with others and how their sexual orientation and/or gender identity may be affecting those relationships.

Within this exercise, additional information regarding the degree to which youth have disclosed their sexual orientation and/or gender identity will also be collected. This is a novel extension of ecomap use, intentionally taking advantage of the ecomap’s ability to assessing where interventions or changes may be best directed. With this information, the youth and their therapists will be able to examine patterns in the youths’ disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, the youths’ desires regarding disclosure in the future, and the youths’ relationships that may be significantly affected by others’ reactions to this disclosure.
The healthy development youths’ sexual and/or gender minority identities is crucial for their well-being. Positive development of these identities has been closely tied to the amount and quality of social, familial, and professional supports youth receive, and both are related to improved psychosocial functioning, increased school attendance and performance, reduced self-harm, reduced risk behaviors, and enhanced overall well-being (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016; Higa et al., 2014; Roe, 2015). Alternatively, hiding these identities has been linked with increased mental health concerns, substance abuse and risk behavior concerns (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011).

These supports may be especially important to sexual and/or gender minority youth that are also racial and/or ethnic minorities. Beliefs about and support for sexual and/or gender minority individuals varies significantly among racial and ethnic groups, and research has suggested variations in participation in gay-related social activities, level of disclosure of sexual orientation, mental health concerns, familial and peer acceptance, and prevalence of bullying, assault, and homelessness among youth from different racial and ethnic groups (Bostwick et al., 2014; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Racial and/or ethnic minorities may also feel excluded from the predominantly White mainstream gay culture while also being stigmatized by others within the same racial and/or ethnic category owing to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which can lead to further feelings of isolation (Gray, Mendelsohn, & Omoto, 2015; Han, 2006; Hunter, 2010). To work with these youth effectively, professionals must be attuned to how individuals’ experience the intersectionality of their identities and how this affects their relationships with others.

Another essential area to consider is the degree to which religion and spirituality play a role in youths’ lives or the lives of those with whom they have close relationships. Conflict
between youths’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity and their religious convictions or between their identities and the religious and/or spiritual convictions of others in their lives is related to heightened psychosocial difficulties and relationship dysfunction and increased prevalence of running away and entrance into the child welfare system (Bozard & Sanders, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Alternatively, youth who are able to integrate their religious and/or spiritual beliefs with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity may experience improved overall well-being (Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013). Thus, professionals should inquire about the place of religion and spirituality in the lives of these youth and others with whom they are close and how this affects their relationships and their level of disclosure.

Given the complex interactions among youths’ disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, their psychosocial functioning, and their interpersonal relationships, professionals must encourage youth to determine the extent to which they wish to reveal their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others and should work with youth to ensure this disclosure occurs in a safe and healthy manner (Matthews & Salazar, 2012). Doing so not only involves assessing the various environments in which youth live, but also the youths’ relationships with others and the effects their racial and/or ethnic identity and/or their religious and/or spiritual beliefs may have on their experiences.

Using an ecomap to assist with this process is consistent with ethical practice as delineated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), and the American Mental Health Counseling Association (AMHCA). The Code of Ethics of the NASW (2008) emphasizes the importance of human relationships and obligates social workers to seek to enhance relationships among individuals and their surrounding social systems. Youths’ roles in the construction of the ecomap
and their determination of upon which relationships to focus enhances their self-determination (NASW, 2008, 1.02) and ensures them autonomy in decision making (AAMFT, 2015, 1.8; AMHCA, 2015, A1a), while the usage of ecomaps to monitor progress assists with practice evaluation (AMHCA, 2015, B1b; NASW, 2008, 5.02).

**Instructions for Use:**

**Part 1:** This activity can be completed using the provided template or on a separate sheet of paper. When using the template, have the youth follow these steps to develop the ecomap:

1. Write their name in the middle circle.
2. Identify relevant individuals within each of the categories noted in the four quadrants (family, peers, professionals, and others). Professionals can include service providers, teachers, mentors, or others with whom the youth interact within a formal relationship.
3. Write the names of these individuals within an oval in the appropriate quadrant. The names of those who have a closer relationship with the youth should be written in the ovals closer to the center, whereas the names of those with more distant relationships should be written in the outer ovals. There may be some leftover ovals depending on the number of relationships the youth currently has. If additional ovals are needed, they can be drawn in.
4. Identify which individuals are already aware of the youths’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The ovals containing these individuals’ names should be colored green. The ovals containing the names of individuals who do not know the youths’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity should be colored red. If the youth is unsure if an individual knows or not, that circle should be colored yellow.
5. Using a scale from 1 (extremely important) to 5 (not very important), the youth should rate how important it is to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to each
individual whose name appears in a red or yellow oval.

6. Using the simplified ecomap key shown below, indicate the direction of communication between the youth and each individual and the strength of that relationship.

| Bidirectional communication | ←→ |
| Unidirectional communication | ←→ |
| Strong relationship          |   |
| Weak relationship            |   |
| Stressful relationship       | / / / |

7. Ensure that there is a line connecting the youth to each oval, that the direction of communication is noted for each relationship, and that all individuals written in a yellow or red oval have a number on the scale of importance of disclosure associated with them.

Note: If there is a desire to not use the provided template, the same steps should be followed, with an oval drawn for each person noted. There are two advantages to drawing an individualized ecomap: There can be additional variance in the distance between the youth’s center circle and the ovals that contains individuals’ names and that there will not be any empty circles.

**Part 2:** Once the ecomap is complete, open a dialogue with the youth regarding what has been drawn in the following order:

1. Ask the youth to describe their emotions while constructing the ecomap. Questions to consider may include:
   a. What was it like to write out the names of those important to you and then classify your relationship with them?
   b. Are the number of individuals in each quadrant approximately equal? If not, where are
the majority of individuals clustered? What might be the reasons for this?

c. Did you find yourself questioning who knows your sexual orientation and/or gender identity and who does not? If so, how do you feel about that? If not, what made it so easy to know who is aware of your sexual orientation and/or gender identity?

d. Are there more people who know your sexual orientation and/or gender identity or who do not know? What does the level of your disclosure mean to you?

e. What are your relationships like with the people who fall into each category? Is there a connection between those who know and the type of relationship you have with them?

2. Focus the youth on those who they indicated are aware of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (shaded green). Ask them to consider how the individuals learned about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, whether this disclosure had been desired, and what effects, if any, the disclosure had on the relationship between the youth and those individuals. Pay particular attention to the ways in which the relationship between the youth and the individuals discussed are classified and the direction of communication between them. If most of these relationships are distant, weak, or strenuous, this may be an indication of conflict regarding the youth’s sexual orientation.

Those who are knowledgeable of the youth’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and with whom a strong bidirectional relationship has been maintained are supports that can be used during future disclosures, while the characteristics of the individuals or relationship types of those who had a negative reaction can guide future decision-making. Those with whom the youth have strong relationships but to whom they have not disclosed their sexual orientation and/or gender identity are ideal targets to consider for future disclosure, as they may become important supports for the youth as they come to further
understand their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Similarly, identifying those with whom the youth has tenuous relationships may provide guidance on to whom the youth may not wish to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Finally, by comparing ecomaps created over several months, the youth will be able to see how the disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity affects their relationships, which can provide further guidance in determining with whom they wish to build relationships as they age and gain more control over their environment.

3. Focus the youth on those who are not aware of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (shaded red). Ask them what these relationships are like – are they mostly tenuous, distant relationships of minor importance to the youth (labeled 4 or 5)? Are there some located nearer to the youth and with whom they have a strong relationship? If so, did the youth indicate a desire to disclose to these individuals or not? Those who are near the youth but whose ovals are shaded red should be noted for the next step regardless of the level of desire to disclose. Also note any individuals whose ovals are shaded red but to whom it is important to the youth to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

**Part 3:** Explain to the youth that in this part of the exercise the discussion will focus on those noted as important to consider in the previous step. This may be the most therapeutically intense part of the activity, as the youth will be challenged to articulate the reasons the noted individuals were labeled as they were and what the classifications of various individuals reveals about the youth’s relationships with others in their life.

1. Ask the youth to consider those labeled 1 or 2. What makes disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to each of these individuals so important? What do they see as the likely outcome of disclosure to each of the individuals? Are the relationships
likely to be affected in a positive or negative manner?

2. Prompt the youth to consider any individuals who are close to the center of the ecomap but to whom they do not wish to disclose. Work with the youth to explore the reasons behind this desire. What emotions are raised when considering these relationships? Is the youth fearful of the possible response? Are there indications that disclosure may lead to an unsafe situation? Is the youth reacting to a previous situation with the individual and making decisions based on those interactions?

3. Are there any individuals to whom the youth feels it is not safe to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity? If so, the youth must determine how to prevent them from learning this information. This may include discussion with others of the importance of not disclosing to these individuals. A safety plan may need to be written in case disclosure does occur.

4. Ask the youth to consider how individuals in the different quadrants are classified. Is there a pattern regarding to whom the youth wishes to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity? Is the youth avoiding more intimate, personal relationships and focusing only on those that are more temporary? If so, what are the reasons behind such decisions?

5. Ask the youth if this discussion has changed their mind regarding how the relationships with individuals were labeled or if changes to the level of importance of disclosure to any individuals is needed. Adjustments should be made before moving on to Part 4.

**Part 4:** At this time, the youth should develop a plan for the disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to those identified as to whom it is important to disclose.

1. Based on the previous discussion, develop a list of those to whom the youth wishes to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The list should be ordered in terms
of importance of the disclosure to the youth. If the youth is unsure of themselves and does not feel ready to fully disclose to anyone who does not know yet, it may be useful to begin with those who were shaded yellow, as these communicating the youth’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity to these individuals may be easier.

2. Once the list has been created, work with the youth to develop a plan for disclosing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to each individual. If the youth works best with well-defined plans, help them to identify a specific time, location, and method of disclosure for each individual. Setting a “deadline” may be useful if the youth is feeling pressure to make a disclosure to that individual, but the youth should not be admonished if they do not meet the deadline. Instead, the reasons for the delay should be explored with the youth.

3. Work with the youth to implement their plan one step at a time. Disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity can be a difficult step and the youth may need support during the process.

4. While the youth should initially begin speaking with those who probably be supportive, they must be prepared to deal with any possible reaction. Individuals may react to the youth’s disclosure in unexpected ways and the youth needs to understand this. Strategies should be developed for how to deal with poor reactions should they occur.

**Brief Vignette:**

Chris, a 14-year-old White able-bodied cisgender male, began therapy nine months ago as part of this placement into treatment foster care as a result of legal difficulties. Chris has been in foster care since age 12, when he was removed from his mother’s custody because of substantiated physical abuse. At the time of his removal, Chris’s father was unable to care for Chris owing to financial struggles. Chris maintains a strong, positive relationship with his father,
but has a strained and problematic relationship with his mother. He has a positive but more distant relationship with his foster parents, with whom he has been living for two years. Chris’ father is working to regain custody of Chris, which will probably happen within the next six months.

Chris disclosed his sexual orientation to his therapist and Department of Child Services (DCS) case manager three weeks ago and has since expressed concerns about who knows that he is gay and how he should proceed with telling others. He noted that he has told some friends and family but is worried about how others will react. Given the number of people in Chris’ life and the complexity of his relationships with those individuals, his therapist felt an ecomap would help him visualize his relationships with others and determine how to proceed.

Working with his therapist, Chris developed an ecomap. He described strong positive relationships with his sister Rachel; two friends, Alisha and Robert; his therapist; his father; and a neighbor, James. To denote the strength of these relationships he drew bold lines to these individuals. He described positive but weak relationships with his foster parents, his mentor, and Robert’s mother. He drew a thin line between himself and these individuals to represent these relationships. Since all these relationships were positive and bidirectional, he added arrows to both ends of the connecting lines. Chris then listed strained relationships with his grandma, his biological mother, and his DCS worker. He indicated these difficulties with slashed lines and added arrows to represent the direction of the conflict.

Chris’ therapist asked him to consider who he knew was aware of his sexual orientation, those who might be aware, and those he felt did not know. Those he knew were aware were shaded green (shown in the sample ecomap as diagonal lines running downward to the left to right), those who possibly knew yellow (shown in the sample ecomap as diagonal lines running
upward left to right), and those who did not know red (shown in the sample ecomap as dotted with asterisks). Chris also indicated how important it felt to tell each of the people listed using a scale from 1 – 5.

Chris’ therapist noted that those close to Chris were mostly shaded green or yellow, indicating that there has been some disclosure by him directly or that he felt that they may know his sexual orientation. Those who are close to him and shaded yellow were categorized as 1s or 2s, showing that he has a desire to ensure those with whom he has a close relationship know his sexual orientation. The therapist also recognized that the individuals shaded red were mostly on the periphery and labeled with lower numbers.

The one exception to this pattern was Chris’s relationship with Robert. Chris marked this relationship as strong and bidirectional, but shaded the oval red and labeled his desire to disclose to Robert a 5. The therapist prompted Chris to consider the reasons for him not wanting to disclose his sexual orientation to Robert given the strength of their relationship. As Chris considered this, the therapist also observed that Chris had indicated that he did want to disclose his sexual orientation to Robert’s mother.

Chris reported that he and Robert had grown up together and Robert is his best friend. He stated that he would like to tell Robert, but has heard Robert make disparaging comments about “gays” before and he does not want to lose his friendship as a result of disclosing his sexual orientation. He noted this is his biggest struggle, but he had not mentioned it to the therapist before out of concern the therapist would focus on that relationship only. He reported he wanted to tell Robert’s mother first, as she might be able to assist him with talking to Robert.

Respecting Chris’ desires to focus on other relationships first, the therapist worked with him to develop a plan for disclosing his sexual orientation to those identified as important to him.
When ranking the desired timeframe of disclosure to others, Chris listed his biological father, his foster parents, and Robert’s mother, in that order. His therapist noted that given that Chris’ sister is already aware of his sexual orientation, she may be able to assist him with disclosing to his father. Chris and his therapist also developed a plan to speak with Chris’ DCS caseworker together to ask her help in facilitating the disclosure to Chris’ foster parents. Chris indicated that once this plan was completed, he would consider if and how to disclose to Robert.

**Suggestions for Follow-up:**

As therapy progresses, the ecomap should be used to guide interventions relating to the disclosure of the youth’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity. As disclosure plans are completed, the ecomap should be updated. Additional individuals may be added to the ecomap over time and relationships between the youth and others may change, which would require a revision.

Given that the ecomap also provides a snapshot of the youth’s interpretations of their relationships with others, it can also be used to guide therapeutic interventions focused on improving tenuous or stressful relationships, regardless of their connection to the youth’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Since the ecomap will change over time, it can be used to monitor the stability of the youth’s relationships with others and to note when significant changes occur. These meanings of these changes can be addressed in therapy.

The ecomap can also be used as a reference document by professionals working with the youth to monitor who knows the youth’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and who does not. Those who know should be made aware of who does not so that they can safeguard the youth’s privacy. If the youth has a goal of disclosing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to everyone listed, the ecomap can serve as a checklist to track progress toward that goal.
**Contraindications for Use:**

This activity has no specific contraindications. For youth who have a disability, the therapist can make accommodations such as reading or writing for them. One caution is that this activity foregrounds youths’ sexual orientations and/or gender identities and their disclosure to others. Many youth who present for therapy may be there for concerns completely unrelated to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. While the professional literature suggests that disclosing individuals’ sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others is beneficial to psychosocial functioning, it must also be recognized that sexual orientation and/or gender identity is but one aspect of an individuals’ identities and should not be a primary focus of therapeutic services if there are no indications of concerns regarding this aspect of their lives.

It is also imperative that therapists work with the youth to realistically appraise the likely consequences of disclosing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others. Negative reactions to this kind of disclosure are one of the largest contributors to youth homelessness, and many youth report suffering abuse after disclosures (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015). Unfortunately, these negative experiences also occur within professional systems (Mountz, 2011), which highlights the all too real concerns that sexual and/or gender minority youth have. Both therapists and youth should be aware of the possible repercussions of disclosure and plans should be made accordingly. Therapists should also ensure that any reports of abuse or harassment by individuals that are revealed during this exercise are reported to the appropriate authorities.

**Professional Readings and Resources:**

Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and

doi:10.1002/ss.171


doi:10.1177/1948550611411929


**Resources for Clients:**


Vignette Ecomap Worksheet

Family

- Pat (grandma) 3
- Rachel (sister)
- Jeffrey (father) 1
- Foster parents 2
- Sam (mother) 5

Peers

- Carsen 4
- Alisha
- Robert 5

Professionals

- James (neighbor) 2
- Sarah (DCS)
- David (mentor) 3
- Ry (therapist)
- Karen (Robert's mom)

Others

- Chris (15)

Bidirectional communication
Unidirectional communication
Strong relationship
Weak relationship
Stressful relationship

Importance to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity
1 = extremely important
2 = very important
3 = moderately important
4 = slightly important
5 = not very important

Awareness of sexual orientation and/or gender identity
* * * * * Red = Not aware
Yellow = Unsure if aware
Green = Aware

Designed by
R. A. Brandon-Friedman, MSW, LCSW, LCAC
and M. K Kinney, MSW, LSW
(2017)
Ecomap Worksheet

Bidirectional communication
Unidirectional communication
Strong relationship
Weak relationship
Stressful relationship

Importance to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity
1 = extremely important
2 = very important
3 = moderately important
4 = slightly important
5 = not very important

Awareness of sexual orientation and/or gender identity
Red = Not aware
Yellow = Unsure if aware
Green = Aware

Designed by
R. A. Brandon-Friedman, MSW, LCSW, LCAC
and M. K. Kinney, MSW, LSW
(2017)
References


Hunter, M. A. (2010). All the gays are white and all the blacks are straight: Black gay men, identity, and community. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 7*(2), 81-92. doi:10.1007/s13178-010-0011-4


