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ABSTRACT

Analysis of the Kinetic Family Drawings (KFD) of black children offers counselors insight into children's perceptions of the black family that do not support traditional views. The KFD is a drawing of the child's family, including the counselee, doing something together. The child then explains the drawing and identifies each of the family members. Interpretation is based on the following elements: (1) style; (2) size and placement; (3) individual characteristics; (4) actions; and (5) symbols. The KFDs of a sample of 420 Midwestern black students between the ages of 6 and 12 were analyzed for the following traditional characteristics of black families: (1) extended kinship and closeness; (2) fluid family roles; (3) strong religious orientation; (4) low self-esteem; and (5) early sexualization. The following findings are reported: (1) generally, the children drew happy-looking families; (2) family cohesion and closeness and an extended family support network were not apparent; (3) symbols of religious influence or early sexualization were not evident; (4) the mother did not appear to be the dominant family figure; and (5) the father appeared to be the most influential family figure. A list of 34 references is attached. (FMW)

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Black Children Draw

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Black Children Draw Their Families: Some Surprises

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Black Children Draw Their Families: Some Surprises

The Black Family

When one discusses the Black family, one must be aware of the danger of oversimplification. The Black family has a rich and colorful tradition with antecedents on the African continent. Historically, the African family was a strong unit (Roberts, 1980). According to a study commissioned by the Urban League, as recently as 1940 only 15% of Black births were from single mothers. Until the 1950s almost 80% of Black families were two-parent families. (Comer, 1989).

The literature on Black families shows two distinctly different points of view. The deficit-deficiency (White, 1984), or the pathological, model (Fine, Schwebel, & James-Myers, 1987) which appeared in the late 1800s after the abolition of slavery, and the strength-resiliency (White, 1984), or the structural-functional model (Fine et al., 1987), which appeared in the late 1960s following the Black awareness movement.

The deficit-deficiency or pathological model labels the Black family as an unstable, deficient, and pathological institution suffering from the destructive legacy of slavery (Fine et al., 1987). The writings of Bruce (1889), DuBois (1908), and Myrdal (1944) support this model. The study of Moynihan (1965), however, produced the most data which supported the deficit-deficiency model and created the most controversy by its findings. Moynihan said that the sickness of the

Black family was the cause of the deterioration of the Black community.

The strength-resiliency model (Billingsley, 1968) or structural-functional model (Fine et al., 1987) emerged as a rebuttal to the deficit-deficiency model. The strength-resiliency or structural-functional model assumes that the Black family has successfully overcome difficult conditions and has become a successful counterpart to the White family (Fine et al., 1987). Billingsley (1968), Ladner (1971), Hill (1972), Willie (1982), and McAdoo and McAdoo (1981, 1985) support the strength-resiliency point of view.

To assume that there is just one Black family type is a gross generalization. Yet, some disturbing trends emerge. In 1987, only 42% of Black families had both parents present in the home. Forty-four percent of Black families are without a father in the home. Black families making \$50,000 or more comprise about 7% of the Black population. Families who bring in between \$25,000 and \$49,000 represent 26.1% of the Black population. The income of working class Black families, receiving less than \$10,000, represents 30.6% of the Black population (United States Bureau of the Census, 1987).

White (1984) and Staples (1986) suggested that because of the different classes, income levels, and other factors, there is no typical Black family. Wide varieties of family forms and characteristics can be identified even within a given class or income level.

Role of Extended Family

There are, however, some characteristics which can be viewed in the Black family at all income levels. The first considers the role of kinship and the extended family.

The tradition of tight kinship networks has remained strong in the contemporary Black family as evidenced by the larger proportion of extended families among Blacks than Whites, the presence of larger proportions of relatives in Black households than White households, and the greater willingness of Black families than White families to informally and formally adopt children (Foster, 1983).

Role of Family Members

A second characteristic of the Black family can be viewed in the roles of father, mother, and children. These roles may differ somewhat, depending upon whether it is a working class or middle class family. A characteristic of the Black family is what Staples (1976) termed as fluid interchanging roles. Men are reported to take over the domestic responsibilities if the women work. Children also parent younger children of the family when necessary. Hill (1972) stated that men and women seem to share equally in making many decisions of the family. Additionally, while the woman has been needed to be strong for family survival, she has not necessarily been dominant.

Black fathers from the working class and poor families may be absent from the home due to economic problems, illness, death, or divorce. However, one-parent homes are not without a male figure. A boyfriend may visit, support the mother, and be attentive to the

children (Willie, 1982). Motherhood is seen as highly important for Black women and is even more meaningful than their role as wives (Shaw, 1989). To the Black mother, children represent the continuation of life (Staples, 1986).

Role of Religion

A third characteristic of the Black family is its strong religious orientation. Hill (1972) and McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano (1982) suggested that this is partly due to the various functions the church serves for the Black family.

Thompson (1974) characterized the Black church as the only powerful national organization including Blacks on all socioeconomic levels, developed and controlled solely by Blacks for themselves. He saw the church as the nucleus of Black unity and survival through slavery and post-slavery years, and the core of the civil rights movement. The Black preacher, a charismatic personality, represented a symbol of stability and continuity through the hardships experienced by Black families (Staples, 1976). The Black church has given the Black family a sense of identity and belonging. This sense of self and belonging may have an impact upon the Black child's self-esteem.

Self-esteem

The Black child has the reputation of negative self-identity according to numerous research studies. However, other researchers have cited opposite results. McCarthy and Yancy (1971) found that Blacks are less likely to suffer from low self-esteem because they sense belonging to a group with an ideology that explains their lowly

position. Researchers reported that the present emphasis on Black culture has led to a marked change in the characteristics of Black children's drawings. When asked to draw features they most admired, they drew figures which resembled Black people (Staples, 1976). It was also discovered that "Black children from a separated or never-married family did not have a lower self-esteem than Black children from other families" (Staples, 1976, p. 134).

Sexualization

A final characteristic which is often attributed to the Black family is early sexualization among its members. Most research studies seem to indicate that Black young people engage in earlier sexualization than their White counterparts. This practice, however, may be more typical among lower class Blacks. The absence of parental supervision and the lack of privacy for adult sexual relations may lead the lower-class Black female child into a sexual involvement at a much earlier age than her white counterpart (Staples, 1978). However, sexual promiscuity seems to correspond with educational level. Black women ages 35 to 44 with fewer than 8 years of school, had 4.6 children, as compared to 3.8 children for women of other races. On the other hand, Black women with graduate training had 1.9 children as compared with 2.2 children born to women with similar education from other races (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1981).

In summary, unique characteristics which can be observed in the Black family include: (1) kinship and closeness, (2) fluid family roles, (3) religious orientation, and (4) early sexualization.

Researchers have identified these characteristics, but do the children perceive their families as the literature suggests? When Black children draw their families some surprising findings are revealed.

The Kinetic Family Drawing

Everything a person does makes a statement about the self--talking, writing, walking, and other movements. Drawings are one of the ways an individual makes an unconscious personal statement. They are considered projective measures because the task is predominantly unstructured and the person is free to impose whatever type of organization he or she wishes to complete the task, thereby introducing unconscious feelings.

All personality assessment is somewhat subjective in nature, with projective measures the most subjective. Interpretations must never be made outside of the context of the total person, especially when working with children. The child's age, sex, maturational level, emotional status, sociocultural background, and other assessment data must all be considered. Drawings serve to generate hypotheses about the child, which must be confirmed by behavioral observations or inquiry to complete the picture. Drawings, however, may introduce hypotheses about the child's feelings which might not surface through other assessment or counseling techniques. A thorough understanding of developmental and personality theory is necessary to make in depth interpretations.

Family drawings offer the counselor a window into the child's perception of his or her family which an interview alone rarely gives.

With a few exceptions, art is a natural communication medium for most children. Through their family drawings children tell the counselor about the subtleties of their family relationships, what they wish their families were like, and how they really feel about their families. The Kinetic Family Drawing is especially useful because children must produce a drawing of their family in action, thus opening the window on parent and sibling interactions.

Administering the KFD

The KFD is very easy to administer. Seat the child comfortably at a table with a blank sheet of white paper (8 1/2 x 11 in.) and a pencil with an eraser. Ask the child to "Draw a picture of everyone in your family, including you, DOING something. Try to draw whole people, not cartoon or stick people. Remember, make everyone DOING something--some kind of action." (Burns & Kaufman, 1972)

Leave the child alone to complete the drawing, but casually observe how the child goes about the task. Answer all questions nondirectively. After the drawing is completed, smile warmly and say, "Now tell me about your family drawing." Inconspicuously make notes ("I might forget what you tell me and I want to remember") while the child talks. Be sure each person in the drawing is identified with an explanation of what he or she is doing. Talking about the KFD may lead to much useful information through further inquiry. (For example, What do you like to do with that person? What do you like best about that person? What do you like least about that person?) Knoff and Prout (1985) outline a very useful inquiry system.

Interpreting the KFD

The KFD is generally interpreted on five different levels (Burns & Kaufman, 1972): (1) style, (2) size and placement, (3) characteristics of individuals, (4) actions, and (5) symbols. The first level (style) is the most reliable and valid, with each succeeding level decreasing in reliability and validity. Although they can provide much useful information, symbols must be interpreted cautiously. Details about interpretation may be found in Burns and Kaufman (1972) and Knoff and Prout (1985).

Interpretation of the KFD must always have a solid base in normal child development. The child's sociocultural background is extremely important, also. In our work with children from different racial and ethnic groups we have noted characteristic actions and symbols, as well as family portrayals, specific to certain groups (Cho, 1988; Monttinen, 1988; Shaw, 1989). Interpretation should always be made in the context of these differences.

The primary function of the KFD is to provide the counselor with insights for developing hypotheses about the child's relation to his or her family and the effect this may have on the presenting problem. The KFD can also provide useful information about the child's self-concept. The child's KFD may provide a different view of the family from that provided by an interview with the parents. The child draws the family as she perceives it, not as the parents describe it. As counselors we are well advised to remember that we are usually most

effective in working with the child when working from the child's view.

The KFD appears to reveal how the child presently feels about his family and himself, rather than deep-seated personality traits. Thus, it provides a useful tool for exploring concerns as counseling progresses. A series of KFDs over a period of months will reveal, however, some basic characteristics which keep appearing consistently (such as self-concept issues or relationship to family members), along with more transient concerns.

The counselor working with Black children needs information about the family drawings of nonclinic children to understand the usual characteristics of family drawings from this population. Using this information about the normal developmental family drawing patterns of Black children, the counselor can more readily recognize concerns of the child referred for special services.

KFDs of Black Children

In order to provide a reference point from which counselors might work in interpreting the KFDs of Black children, 420 Black children, ages 6 to 12, were randomly selected from students in five Midwestern school districts. Each child completed a Kinetic Family Drawing, a semantic differential family scale, and a brief demographic questionnaire (Shaw, 1989). The drawings were analyzed using the scoring system developed by Burns (1982), with modifications by Cho (1988). Observations were made regarding the following characteristics of the Black family, as suggested in the research

literature: (1) role of family and family relationships, (2) role of father, (3) role of mother, (4) self-concept, (5) role of the Black extended family, (6) role of religion, and (7) early sexualization.

Role of Family and Family Relationships

In spite of the dismal picture being painted on the crisis of the Black family with all its deficiencies, the family drawings of the children in this study generally portrayed a positive impression of the family. They did not frequently picture themselves as needing to reject other individuals or isolate themselves from the family. They did not usually view their families as unstable and anxiety or stress producing. They did not feel a need to strive for dominance or attention within the family. In general, these children portrayed themselves as comfortable within their family situations.

Counselors should accordingly seek to highlight the factors which seem positive to the child, using this in therapy rather than succumbing to the possible temptation of either conveying sympathy for the child's believed less-than-perfect family situation or attempting to precipitously remove the child from the family. On the other hand, since most Black children drew families which appeared happy, when a child in counseling draws a very unhappy or anxious family situation, the counselor would be well advised to pay particular attention to the child's perception of her family.

The KFDs of the sample children portrayed the father, mother, and self figures as working and playing more independently than cooperatively. This may be seen as a lack of cohesion and closeness

within the Black family system. On the other hand, the definition of cooperation and cohesion for Blacks might not involve working or playing together in a given physical space, but more on the order of contributing to the promotion of the family welfare by engaging in separate but related tasks.

Since the Black child's perception of an abundance or a sparcity of cohesion and closeness in the family might be one of the keys to successful treatment, the counselor should give the child an opportunity to describe his perceptions of cooperation, closeness, and support within the family. These perceptions could serve to develop appropriate counseling strategies for the child within the family system.

Role of Father

Although the role of the father in the traditional family has been clearly recognized, the role of the father in the Black family has been viewed with some confusion (Hippler, 1969). In this study, 50.5% of the children reported no father living in the home; however, 71% included a father figure in their KFD. This would suggest that, although the father might be physically absent from the home, a male figure still exerts an important influence and is regarded as part of the family. Father-figures in a significant number of the drawings were depicted as nurturing and assisting in child rearing and household tasks. Those children who experienced some support and acceptance from the father-figure tended to exhibit a stronger self-concept.

The child's perception of the father-figure, whether he is present or absent from the home, is a valuable clinical clue in treating the Black child. Generally, counselors using the KFD with White children have assumed that a father-figure included in the drawing when there was no father living in the home was the result of the child's fantasies about family reunion. However, when working with Black children, the counselor needs to clarify with the child what might be the role of the father depicted in the KFD. It is essential to ascertain whether the child included a father in the drawing because there is a relationship with the father or because a relationship is desired. Using the father-figure in the treatment of the child could prove to be very effective.

Role of Mother

Findings of this study on the role of the mother in the Black family have tapped into the controversy between those who believe in the Black matriarchy and the dominance of women and those who support the idea that an equalitarian pattern typifies most Black families. The KFDs of the children in this study generally did not portray mother as the dominant figure in the family. Mother was depicted as being with and among the children, rather than distant or above them. In addition, mother was not presented as rejecting, threatening, or stifling. She was portrayed as preoccupied with providing for the family, not playing with the children, but still conveying some warmth and nurturing. Mother was also presented as influencing the religious

values and the relationship between family members, as well as a positive attitude of the child toward the father.

Undoubtedly, mother plays an important role in the life of the Black child. However, counselors should ascertain the child's perception of the power and role of the mother within the family and whether the child is in competition or alignment with the mother's role. The mother's nurturing warmth can be an important element in helping the child.

Self-concept

Although the literature has been controversial regarding the self-concept of the Black child (White, 1984), the portrayal of the self figure by most of the children in this study suggests that they have a positive self-concept. The child's self-concept was related to his or her perception of closeness to a mother who is not rejecting or dominant, a father who seemed to give attention to the family, parents who portrayed some togetherness, a family with some religious values, and a larger family.

The Black child's portrayal of the family can provide the counselor with valuable information about his or her self-concept. The treatment of low self-esteem in a Black child could be related to working with the parents and family, as well as helping the child perceive the positive aspects of the family.

Role of the Extended Family

The importance of the Black extended family (Martin & Martin, 1978) was not depicted in the KFDs as often as expected. The children

generally did not draw relatives or other persons who were not living with them, except for father-figures. A relatively small number of extended family members were included in the demographic responses. Some children drew grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins.

Black children seem to perceive themselves as more isolated from the extended family, living in more nuclear family settings with fewer influential and significant others. Although the counselor should not rule out the possible influence of extended family members on the Black child, identifying a support network within the extended family might prove difficult. The counselor should, consequently, investigate the role of the extended family in the perception of each child and other family members.

Role of Religion

Contrary to Thompson's (1974) description of the church as the center of Black family life, only 3.3% of the children included religious symbols or activities in their family drawings. Monttinen (1988), in a study of White children from religious backgrounds, found only 11.6% of their KFDs included religious symbols or activities. Children from religious backgrounds may not necessarily include religious symbols or activities in their KFDs. The small number in the KFDs of the Black children might also reflect what Tatum (1987) described as the shift of Black families away from ritualized religion. However, in the present study, the children who included religious symbols and actions in their drawings tended to also show a higher concept of self and of mother.

Based on these findings, the counselor might conclude that, although religion may play a role in Black family life, the child client might not perceive this influence as part of her individual world. Religion could be a family strength which might be helpful in building the child's self-concept and relationship with the mother. The counselor may want to inquire about the role religion plays in the family and address its therapeutic implications.

Early Sexualization

The KFDs of 14% of the children in this study included at least one sexuality symbol. Because of the scarcity of KFD studies using nonclinic children, there is no firm data to describe the usual number of sexuality symbols present in children's drawings. In Monttinen's (1988) study of 172 White children in grades 4 - 6, 20.8% of the KFDs included sexuality symbols. Jacobson (1973) found a bed (one sexuality symbol) in only 7.4% of the KFDs of children ages 6 to 9, while Sims (1974) reported a bed in 16% of the KFDs of 1,090 children.

Comparing the above studies suggests that Black children draw approximately the same or fewer sexuality symbols as other children. More studies are needed to determine whether these results reflect the lack of early sexualization of Black children or not. Early sexualization may be considered normal and thus not traumatic or pathological for Black children. They may not become preoccupied with sexuality and therefore do not include sexual symbols in their drawings.

Whether or not Black children experience early sexualization, the counselor should be constantly reminded that sexual knowledge does not insulate children from sexual traumas, such as rape or incest. The counselor should continue to adhere to the practice of treating each child as an individual with unique experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities.

Developmental Issues

The significant developmental differences found in this study centered mostly around the self-concept of the Black child. Girls tended to show a more positive self-concept than boys. As the children became older, the self-concept of boys tended to decrease and the self-concept of girls increased.

Developmental differences also showed in how children perceive their mothers. Girls, more than boys, tended to identify the mother as the dominant figure in the household. Younger children more than older ones identified the mother as the dominant person in the family.

Counselors need to be particularly aware that Black boys may be more vulnerable to decreasing self-concept as they get older and seek ways to help boys view themselves more positively as they approach adolescence.

Summary and Conclusions

In the past counselors have used family drawings with Black children without the needed research base to guide their conclusions. To help fill this gap, Kinetic Family Drawings were gathered from 420 Black children, ages 6 to 12, randomly selected from students in five

Midwestern school districts. The results of this study were in some ways surprising. These children do not always perceive their families as the literature describes the Black family. Generally the children drew happy-looking families. The cohesion and closeness of the Black family and the extended family supporting network were not apparent in the drawings. Early sexualization and a strong religious influence did not appear either. The mother did not appear as the dominant family figure, and the father appears to be more influential than predicted. He often appeared as the most important authority figure.

The KFD can provide a rich exploration of the Black child's perception of self and family. The counselor viewing the KFD of the Black child which contains unmistakable sexuality symbols, religious symbols or actions, an abundance of extended family members, evidence of low self-concept, and lack of warmth and nurturance between parent and child has identified potentially significant counseling issues and is in a stronger position to help the Black child.

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