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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Minnie Lynne Douglas entitled "Embeddedness and Family Knowledge: A Comparison of Foster Children and Children at High Risk For Foster Care." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

Anne McIntyre, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
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# EMBEDDEDNESS AND FAMILY KNOWLEDGE: A COMPARISON OF FOSTER CHILDREN AND CHILDREN AT HIGH RISK FOR FOSTER CARE

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Minne Lynne Douglas
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# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of my family,
With deep appreciation for their continuing support,
encouragement and love.

But most especially:
To John Robinson and Mike Trabalka;
For always being there.

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# ABSTRACT

Previous research (Flynn, 1992) has shown that foster children manifest marked confusion about the composition of their families of residence and show no relationship between amount of perceived embeddedness within the family of residence and the placement of a biological sibling in the same residence.

This study was designed to determine whether the foster children are more confused about family composition and feel less embedded within the family than a group of children from low-income families. The study also compared differences between the groups on measures of Verbal Intelligence, Problem Behaviors and Psychosocial Maturity.

The subjects were forty-four 6 to 12 year old foster children and a matched group of thirty-four home-reared children. The home-reared children were all at high risk for foster care due to poverty and family instability.

There were no differences between the groups on Knowledge of Family Composition, Verbal Intelligence, Problem Behaviors or Psychosocial Maturity. The home-reared children were reported by their parents as manifesting Problem Behaviors at approximately five times the rate of the non-referred population. Foster children represented themselves as more

Embedded within their foster families than the home-reared children. Significant disordinal correlations were found between age groups on Problem Behaviors.

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# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Children enter the foster care system under a variety of individual conditions. These conditions may include abuse or neglect by the biological parents; parental illness, incapacitation or incarceration; or the behavioral or health problems of the child. Regardless of the conditions surrounding entrance into the system, all children in the foster care system have in common the fact that their primary caregiver is either unable or unwilling to meet a minimum standard of care. Children who have been removed from their biological homes not only undergo the stressors of removal from the original home and adaptation to a new one, they also experience disruption in school setting, neighborhood, and peer relations (Marcus, 1991).

Considering that the family of origin for children in foster care may have been inadequate, abusive, or chaotic, it is not surprising that foster children experience problems in intellectual development (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978); psychosocial development (McIntyre, Lounsbury, Berentson & Steel, 1988); peer relations (Erikson & Egeland, 1987; McIntyre, 1991); and Behavior Problems (McIntyre & Keesler, 1986). On a measure of family experiences, foster children showed anomalous conceptions of embeddedness within the foster families and great confusion as to the composition of the family of residence (Flynn, 1994).

The question of secure family relationships in foster children takes on added dimensions when considering the stated purpose of foster care - providing interim care until such time as the biological parents can provide adequate care. For the children to recuperate from the effects of disrupted relationships, they must form secure relationships with alternate caregivers. Concurrently, the original relationships with biological family members should be maintained, and in some cases remedied, so that the original family may eventually be reunited. While it is possible for children to maintain separate relationships with multiple caregiving figures (Wallerstein, 1983) it is also possible that attempts to maintain multiple relationships may lead to confusion and loyalty conflicts for the children (Poulin, 1985). The establishment and maintenance of multiple relationships may be particularly difficult for foster children who have limited or no contact with their biological parents (Eagle, 1994). What contact there is between biological parents and children who have been placed in care may be fraught with tension due to the psychological, physical or substance abuse problems of the parents, the behavioral or emotional problems of the child in care, or the interventions by agency workers and foster parents (Kates, Johnson, Rader, & Strieder, 1991).

In addition to the loyalty conflicts experienced by the child in care, the development of a sense of embeddedness

within the foster home may also be impeded by the dynamics of the foster home. Foster families are not normal nuclear families; the boundaries of the family are much more fluid. Other children may enter or exit the home suddenly and senselessly from the child's point of view. The composition of the foster home is also unique. A child in care may be sharing a residence with their own biological siblings, with other non-related foster children and with the biological children of the foster parents.

Reports of secure relationships between children and foster families are often based primarily on foster parent and caseworker ratings or case file reviews (Marcus, 1991). Although the information supplied by foster parents and caseworkers may well be valid, it does not take into account the subjective experience of the child in care. Foster parents and caseworkers may have their own subjective agendas (e.g., loss of income from caring for the child, or increased work in finding a new placement) possibly coloring their perceptions of the child's relationships with both biological family members and foster family members.

All of the foster children have experienced a drastic disruption of the family and inconsistencies in care. These disruptions and inconsistencies in care, however, do not necessarily begin with the interventions of child welfare agencies. Slaght (1993) identified ten factors that put children at risk for foster care. These factors are: teen

or single parenthood of the primary caregiver; incarceration or institutionalization of the primary caregiver; mental illness, physical illness, or substance abuse of the primary caregiver; inadequate income; inadequate housing; a history of domestic abuse or violence; and special needs of the child. Although reluctant to place a child in foster care due to poverty, the family's income is often the key factor in the agency workers' decision to remove the child, regardless of conditions of abuse or neglect (Berry, 1991).

Children in single-parent households are arguably exposed to the most risk, as these children have access to the resources of only one parent. Any change in the physical, emotional, or employment status of that parent can result in disastrous changes for the child.

Low income families also have more fluid boundaries than middle class nuclear families. Economic conditions which necessitate multigenerational or multifamily households, or the consequences of divorce and subsequent remarriage of the custodial parent can result in a household whose composition is nearly as confusing as that of a foster home. Children in low-income families may be residing with first-order family members (biological parents and siblings) second-order family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins) unrelated persons, step-parents, step-siblings, and half-siblings. Children in these high risk environments have probably already experienced many of the same

disruptions in family relationships and inconsistencies in care common to foster children with the exception of removal from the family of origin.

Brief Overview of the Design of Current Study

The current study arose from Flynn's (1992) findings that foster children manifested marked confusion about their families of residence and showed no relationship between perceived embeddedness within the family and the presence of a birth sibling in the family of residence. The study was designed to determine whether the foster children are more confused about the composition of the family and feel less embedded than home-reared children. Home-reared children are defined for this study as children who reside with at least one biological parent.

The home-reared children in the comparison group were all from low socioeconomic status families. Previous research has shown these children and children in foster care are similar on many psychosocial characteristics (McIntyre, Lounsbury, Berentson & Steel, 1988; McIntyre, 1991).

The primary independent variable in this study was the rearing condition (placement in foster care or with biological family) of the child. Other independent variables that were considered where the age, race and gender of the child. For the foster children, time in care

and number of placement changes were also considered. Dependent variables were the measure of Embeddedness within the family, the measure of Knowledge of Family Composition, and the control measures of verbal intelligence, behavior problems and psychosocial maturity.

# CHAPTER 2 METHOD

## Subjects

Foster children data included archival information on 44 foster children between the ages of 6 years, 0 months and 12 years, 11 months (M = 8.4 years, SD = 1.9) who had been placed in foster homes in Knox County. Of these foster children, 23 were male and 23 were female. Eleven of the boys were African-American and twelve were Euro-American. Six of the girls were African-American and fifteen were Euro-American. All of the children had been in foster care at least one year at the time of the interviews and one child had been in care virtually all of his life. Mean time in foster care was 49.5 months. All of the children had been in the placement at the time of the interviews for at least eight months (M = 41.1 months, SD = 25.91). The number of placements that each child had experienced ranged from 1 to 7 (M = 2.5 months, SD = 1.5). Forty-three of the foster children had at least one biological sibling also in foster care, for 64% of them, a biological sibling shared the same foster placement.

Home-reared children Data were also collected on 14 age-matched children (M = 8.8 years, SD = 1.8) who resided with at least one biological parent. These children had

never been admitted to foster care nor any type or protective services with child welfare agencies. There were 17 male and 17 female home-reared children. Seven of the boys were African-American and ten were Euro-American. Eleven of the girls were African-American and six were Euro-American. Thirty-three of the home-reared children had siblings, 94% had a biological sibling also living in the household. The majority of these families (86%) received some type of government subsidy (e.g., housing subsidies, Aid to Families With Dependent Children, Food Stamps, or other nutritional assurance programs).

There were no significant differences in the ages of the two groups. Although gender and race were not significantly different between the two groups overall, there were significantly more Euro-American females in the foster sample ($\underline{X}^2 = 4.96$, $\underline{df} = 1$, $\underline{p} < .03$).

There were also differences in the composition of the two types of families. Twenty-five of the home-reared children had one biological parent who did not reside in the home. Fifteen of these resided in single parent (mother only) households, as compared to eight of the foster children ($\underline{X}^2 = 6.2$, $\underline{df} = 1$, $\underline{p} < .01$). There were also more children living in the foster households ($\underline{t} = 2.79$, $\underline{df} = 71.6$, $\underline{p} < .007$) than in the households of the home-reared children.

## Procedures

Recruitment The foster children volunteered to participate in the research activities during the annual screening for foster children during the Spring and Summer of 1992. Home-reared children were recruited through notices sent home from the Boy's and Girl's Clubs of America in Knox County. The Boy's and Girl's Clubs are non-profit organizations that provide children from low-income families with after-school and summer recreational programs. All children who returned a signed information form received a candy bar, regardless of whether or not the parents gave permission for the family to be contacted. Of 800 forms distributed, 245 forms (127 negative responses and 118 positive responses) were signed and returned. Of the positive responses, 84 of the parents could not be contacted or declined to participate once they were contacted.

Data Collection The families of the home-reared children who agreed to participate were invited to the University to take part in the research. In most cases this was not possible, so the principle investigator and an assistant interviewed the families in their homes. Child and parent interviews were conducted separately and concurrently. Each child was given an opportunity to participate in each of the measures. All of the children

completed some of the measures, although some children did not complete or declined to participate in certain of the measures. Children who completed any of the research activities were given an award certificate for their participation.

## Measures

1. Embeddedness. An adaptation of a family sculpting technique called the Family Circle Game was used to assess how Embedded the child feels within the family unit. The child was given a form on which is printed a circle approximately four inches in diameter, with a dot in the center. The child was instructed to imagine him or herself as the dot in the center. The child was then asked to draw and label a dot within the circle for each family member, placing the dot(s) for the family member(s) that the child likes the best closest to the center dot and the dot(s) for the family member(s) that the child dislikes or argues with the most farther away. For all of the children, "family" was defined as all of the people who lived in the household where the child was currently residing. The mean distance of the dots representing the family members from the center dot represents the child's perception of the degree of nonembeddedness within the family (Lemieux, 1984: Flynn,

1994). Thus, higher mean distance scores indicate less Embeddedness within the family unit.

2. Knowledge of Family Composition. The total number of errors (extraneous people included and actual family members excluded) on the Family Circle was used to assess the child's knowledge of the composition of the family. The more errors the child made on the Family Circle, the less accurate his or her knowledge of the actual family composition is considered to be.

Control Measures

Previous research has shown that the foster care population has lower verbal intelligence (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978) inordinately high levels of Behavior Problems (McIntyre & Keesler, 1986) and lower psychosocial maturity (McIntyre, Lounsbury, Berentson & Steel, 1988) than the population at large. Since such variables could conceivably influence performance on the dependent variables of interest, three control measures were administered to each child.

1. Verbal Intelligence. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - Revised (PPVT-R) is a simple vocabulary test in which the child is presented with a series of cards, each with four pictures. The administrator pronounces a word for the

child, who then indicates the corresponding picture on the card. The standardized score from the PPVT-R provides a measure of verbal ability that corresponds with verbal intelligence as measured by the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children - Revised (Dunn & Dunn, 1980).

2. Behavior Problems. The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) is a list of 113 problem behaviors. The CBCL was administered verbally in order to compensate for the possible limited reading abilities of some of the parents. The parent ranks the child as performing the behavior frequently, sometimes, or never. The responses are scored by the administrator as 2, 1, or 0, respectively. A sum T score and T scores for internalizing and externalizing behaviors are obtained. The T scores are age and gender normed. T scores above the 90th percentile have been shown to discriminate clinically disorder children from non-clinically disordered (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983).

3. Psychosocial Maturity. For the Tasks of Emotional Development (TED) (Cohen & Weil, 1971) the child is shown a series of 13 photographs depicting age and gender appropriate children engaged in everyday activities such as playing, studying, and fighting. Each photograph is designed to depict an Eriksonian milestone, such as Trust or

Industry. The child is asked to tell the administrator what the people in the picture are doing, what they are thinking and feeling, and what will happen next. The stories of the children were recorded and later transcribed. Scores on the outcome of the stories were not available for some of the foster children, therefore, the stories were scored for whether or not the child correctly described the situation. The stories were scored independently by two judges, and interrater reliability was 100%. Six of the foster children and two of the home-reared children attempted less than 6 of the cards. These children were considered to have not made a valid attempt, and their scores on the TED were omitted from analysis. Other children completed more than six cards but did not complete the measure. Scores on the TED were pro-rated, and expressed as the number correct out of the number of cards attempted.

Other Measures.

The parents of the home-reared children were asked to supply some demographic information, including the approximate annual income and whether or not the family received any government subsidies. This information was used to ascertain that there were no major differences in socioeconomic status between the two types of families. All of the parents were asked to supply the names, ages, and

relationship to the child of all persons residing in the household. This information was used to score the accuracy of the child's responses on the Family Circle.

# CHAPTER 3 RESULTS

Distributions of scores on dependent variables were examined for deviations from normalcy. None showed substantial departures that would require the use of nonparametric statistics.

## Group Differences

### Embeddedness and Knowledge of Family Composition

The foster children represented themselves as significantly more Embedded within their foster families than the home-reared children did within their biological families ($t$ = 2.92, $df$ = 52.6, $p < .01$). A linear multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate possible effects on the measure of Nonembeddedness by demographic variables. The independent variables used were the child's age, gender, race, number of parents residing in the home, and rearing conditions (model $F$ = 5.29, $df$ = 5, $p < .01$). Age and rearing conditions were the only significant variables (age $F$ = 9.81, $df$ = 1, $p < .003$); rearing condition $F$ = 15.57, $df$ = 1, $p < .002$). The $R^2$ for the model was .28.

A second linear multiple regression analysis was performed using only the scores of the foster children. The independent variables used were the total amount of time the

child had spent in foster care, the number of placement changes the child had experienced, and the amount of time spent in the current placement. None of these variables showed any significant effects.

There were no significant differences between the foster and home-reared children on either the number or type of error (omission of actual family members or inclusion of extraneous people) on the Family Circle Game.

Control Measures

There was no significant difference between the foster children and the home-reared children on the measure of verbal intelligence. Standardized scores on the PPVT-R ranged from the extremely low (54) to high average (112) for the foster children ($M$ = 84.63, $SD$ = 14.38). Scores for home-reared children ranged from the extremely low (60) to the extremely high (170) ($M$ = 89.8, $SD$ = 19.98).

There was no difference between the foster care group and the home-reared group on the number of clinical level Behavior Problems. This cohort of foster care children was not significantly different on the number of clinical level Behavior Problems than that reported by McIntyre and Keesler (1986), ($X^2$ = 2.3, $df$ = 1, $p$ < .10). However, the clinical level for the home-reared children was much higher than that

of the non-referred general population ($X^2$ = 33.54, df = 1, p < .01) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983).

There was also no significant difference between the groups on the measure of Psychosocial Maturity. The group means on the control variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
MEANS ON CONTROL VARIABLES FOR TWO REARING CONDITIONS

| | FOSTER | HOME-REARED | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| VARIABLES | M<br>SD | M<br>SD | df | t | p |
| Verbal IQ | 84.63<br>14.38 | 89.79<br>19.98 | 54.4 | 1.15 | <.26 |
| Behavior Problems | 60.34<br>12.29 | 61.62<br>9.79 | 76 | .50 | <.62 |
| Psychosocial Maturity | .63<br>.20 | .82<br>.76 | 73 | 1.56 | <.12 |

Correlations Between Independent and Dependent Variables

For all of the children, more children living in the home was associated with parental report of fewer general Behavior Problems (r = -.44, df =76, p < .01), fewer Internalizing Behavior Problems (r = -.43, df = 76, p < .01) and fewer Externalizing Behavior Problems (r = -.36, df = 76, p < .01).

Among the foster children, age was positively correlated with the amount of time spent in foster care ($r$ = .31, $df$ = 42, $p$ <.04).

Two of the dependent variables correlated with the age of the child. These results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
CORRELATIONS WITH AGE

| | r | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|
| PSYCHOSOCIAL MATURITY | .32 | 75 | .005 |
| (NON)EMBEDDEDNESS | -.32 | 72 | .01 |

There were significant disordinal correlations between the T scores from the CBCL and the ages of the children. Fewer general Behavior Problems, Externalizing Behavior Problems, and Internalizing Behavior Problems were associated with greater age of the children in the foster care group, while the older children in the home-reared group manifested more Behavior Problems.

In order to compare the correlations between the groups, scores were standardized and the standardized regression coefficient was used to test for significance. The results of the comparison between correlations appear in Table 3 below, with the standardized regression analysis at the far right of the table.

Table 3
COMPARISON OF CORRELATIONS BETWEEN AGE
AND Behavior Problems

| | ALL | FOSTER | HOME-REARED | COMPARISON |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUM T & AGE | NS | r = -.39<br>df = 42<br>p < .01 | r = .43<br>df = 32<br>p < .01 | F = 16.34<br>df = 1<br>p < .01 |
| EXTERNAL T & AGE | NS | r = -.46<br>df = 42<br>p < .01 | r = .38<br>df = 32<br>p < .025 | F = 16.16<br>df = 1<br>p < .01 |
| INTERNAL T & AGE | NS | r = -.41<br>df = 42<br>p < .02 | r = .32<br>df = 32<br>p < .07 | F = 9.71<br>df = 1<br>p < .03 |

# CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

Many of the children in the home-reared group had experienced some of the same situations and life changes as the children in the foster care group. Twenty-five of the thirty-four home-reared children had experienced the separation or divorce of their parents. Although the mothers of the home-reared children were not directly asked how many marriages and divorces they had experienced, several volunteered the information that this was neither their first marriage, nor their first divorce. In some cases, the family boundaries of the home-reared children seemed to be as fluid as the boundaries of the foster families.

The most surprising difference between the groups was that the foster children represented themselves as significantly more Embedded in their foster placements than the home-reared children represented themselves in their biological homes. This may mean that the disrupted relationships of the foster children with abusive, neglectful, or inconsistent caregivers may have been replaced with more strongly secure relationships with the alternate parenting figures in the foster care settings (Poulin, 1986; Marcus, 1991). For the home-reared children, residence in extremely stressful environments (i.e., chronic poverty, poor

housing, single parent households) may result in relationships that appear to be insecure (Gaensbauer & Harmon, 1984).

Findings from the Family Circle Game need to be considered judiciously, as the measure presented several problems during the process of scoring and analysis. Although the children were instructed to include only the people who were living in the household at the time, many of the children included extraneous people. Since these non-residents were not excluded from the overall mean distance, the use of the Family Circle Game may be more representative of the child's conception of his or her social network rather than his or her conception of the family of residence.

Levitt (1991) used a similar family sculpting technique which conceptualizes the family structure within concentric rings. Although Levitt's research is not with foster children, it suggests that by using the mean distance of all the dots from the center point, closer relationships may be obscured by more distant relationships.

There was also some disagreement between the parents and the home-reared children on the composition of the family which may have inflated the error scores on the Family Circle Game for this group. Several of the home-reared children who lived in single-parent

households represented their mothers' boyfriends as family members, while in a separate interview, their mothers did not list their boyfriends as residing within the household. Although it is probably beneficial to the children in these single-parent families for the mothers' boyfriends to command the psychological presence necessary to be considered family members, it also serves to underline the fluidity of the boundaries of these families.

Flynn (1994) suggested that the large number of mistakes on Family Composition made by the foster children is indicative of pre-operational thinking. Children who are functioning at a pre-operational level do not have a clear internal picture of either the composition or the mechanics of the family unit. The present study presents some evidence to support this explanation. While there was no significant difference between the groups of foster and home-reared children on either the type (omission of family members or addition of extraneous people) of error on the Family Circle, older children of both groups represented themselves as significantly more Embedded than did the younger children. There was also a tendency for the older children of both groups to have better Knowledge of Family Composition than the younger children. It is therefore plausible that the younger children in this

study do not have a solid internal representation of the family and are functioning at a pre-operational level. As the children mature, they shift toward a more concrete level of thought and a stronger ability to produce a representation of their family.

Although there were no significant differences between the groups on the number of Problem Behaviors assessed by the CBCL, this cohort of home-reared children was reported to manifest Problem Behaviors at a rate of five times that of the general non-referred population. Hulsey and White (1989) found no significant difference on the CBCL scores of four to eight year old foster and nonfoster children, once certain family factors had been controlled. These factors included the marital status and stability of the parents, legal history of the family, sibling rank, number of siblings, and the educational level attained by the mother. Family instability and legal problems were implicated as being as influential in the development of Problem Behaviors as actual abuse and neglect. Thus, the factors which place children at high risk for foster care are the same factors which may place them at high risk for the development of Problem Behaviors.

The disordinal correlations between Age and Problem Behaviors was quite remarkable, as the CBCL is

age-normed. Problem Behaviors increased among older home-reared children, but decreased among older foster children. There are several possible explanations for these findings. One is that the differences could indicate that foster care is having the desired effect, and that the older foster children have learned to adapt their behavior to the standards of the foster parents. Whether this is due to the replacement of undesirable behaviors with more acceptable behaviors, or to simple suppression of undesirable behaviors on the part of the foster children is not readily apparent. The older home-reared children may be beginning the process of individuation from the family, a period of time marked by identification with the peer group and the adoption of the behaviors of peers (Ainsworth, 1982).

Other explanations hinge on the fact that the behaviors were reported by the parenting figures. Quite often, both foster and biological parents had the misconception that the researchers were from the Department of Human Services, and that the presence of the research team indicated either that the home-reared children were at imminent risk of placement in foster care, or that the placements of the foster children were about to be changed. This misconception persisted despite repeated correction by members of the research

team, and could have made the parents more guarded in their responses.

Another possibility is that the foster parents and the biological parents may have different standards of behavior for the children. Biological parents may expect more mature behavior from their children and may therefore be over-reporting Problem Behaviors. In turn, more children living in the home was negatively correlated with the number of Problem Behaviors, and the foster families tended to have more children in residence. The foster parents may be under-reporting Problem Behaviors due to an inability to pay as much attention to the behaviors of any individual or they may have a more jaded definition of how intense a behavior must be in order to qualify as a problem. Future research should utilize multiple sources of information about the Behavior Problems of the children in order to correct for the possibility of different standards among the parents. A longitudinal study of Embeddedness, Family Knowledge, and Behavior Problems, as well as a middle-class comparison group would allow researchers to determine if the unexpected results from this study were due more to foster status or to the conditions which precipitate entrance into the foster care system.

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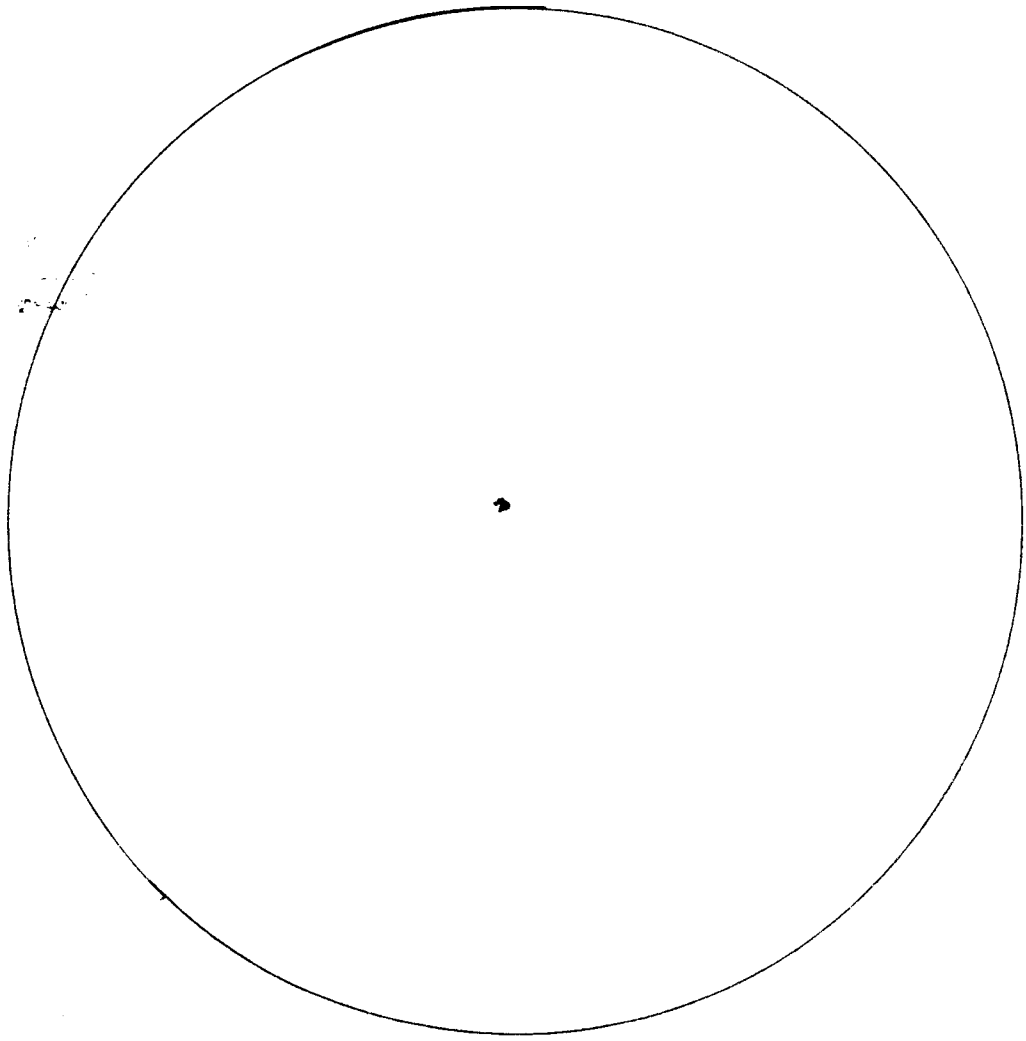
# APPENDIX

Date: _____
Code No.: _____
Examiner: _____

# FAMILY CIRCLE

## Directions

Pretend that you are standing at the dot at the center of the circle. Using a pencil, make a dot for each person in your family (you may include pets if you like). Put the people you get along with the best, feel closest to, or like the most nearest to you. Put the people you fight with a lot or don't like to be alone with the farthest away from you. Be sure to label all the dots.



# VITA

Minnie Lynne Douglas was born in Gatlinburg, Tennessee on September 28, 1962. She attended parochial and public schools in Bount County, Loudon County, Anderson County, and Sevier County. She graduated from Sevier County High School in December, 1979. She attended Walters State Community College in Morristown, Tennessee on a part-time basis from August, 1981 until transferring to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August, 1985. She withdrew from the University in November, 1987, due to ill health. In June, 1990, she returned to the University and received the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology on December 15, 1991. She entered the Graduate Program in Experimental Psychology in August, 1992, and completed the work for her Master's degree in June of 1996, officially receiving the degree in August, 1996.

She is presently working with children in foster care while continuing to work toward the Doctorate.