

**“Show Me Your Family and I Will Show You Mine”:
An Activity for Immersing Students in Family Development Theory**

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes and assesses “Show me your family and I will show you mine,” an active learning technique used for engaging students with family development theory (FDT). Students draw pictures of their families at three different points in time: when they entered it, when they graduated from high school, and five years from now. After allowing time for interested students to share their drawings with the class, students are asked to reflect on a number of questions that help them apply theoretical assumptions and concepts to their own life experiences. Along with providing logistical details of the in-class activity, the authors assess the extent to which the activity helped students personally apply FDT theoretical concepts and assumptions in understanding their own families over time. Results suggest students are capable of analyzing their families at three points of time using an FDT theoretical lens and language, as well as reflecting on strengths and challenges of using the theory.

Keywords: teaching family theory, family development theory, scholarship of teaching and learning, family science pedagogy

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Family theories play a critical role in helping family science students better understand research and practice in the field. However, teaching and learning family theories can be dry and boring. Consequently, family science professors need to be creative in designing class content and activities that will engage students and help them grasp these essential lenses through which to examine relationships, families, and contexts in which they find themselves. Faculty should help motivate students learn, incorporate strategies to promote engagement, employ various learning modalities in relating information to enhance student learning, and regularly assess the extent to which such activities achieve desired learning objectives. This paper will describe one activity used for teaching family development theory (FDT). We also share evaluative data reflecting the extent to which the activity engaged students in applying theoretical concepts to their own experiences of family.

Faculty need to help motivate their students to learn. According to Kember, Ho, and Hong (2008), faculty must establish *relevance* of course material to motivate student learning. Students who cannot see relationships of the material to aspects of daily life and authentic career application will be less motivated to learn the information. In his book devoted to small research-based strategies to foster student learning, Lang (2016) realizes that students need to be inspired and sees motivation as a worthwhile goal. He suggests that “regular invocations for the larger purpose of individual exercises, class periods, and course units... are essential to creating a climate that fosters and rewards deep, intrinsic motivation” (p. 185). Barkley (2010) asserts that students will invest effort or be motivated if they anticipate being able to perform a task successfully (*expectancy*) and believe the task has *value*. Students must be confident they can succeed if they expend appropriate effort. So, too, students must intrinsically believe that the assignment is important. In this case, students need to be reminded of the relevance of their discipline and the role theory plays in understanding family processes. Theoretical concepts become particularly relevant when they are applied to one’s own life, as this activity demonstrates.

Engagement is another crucial element for learning. In fact, Shulman (2002) claims that “learning begins with student engagement” (p. 37). Fink (2013) notes the heavy reliance upon lecture as well as the “limited effectiveness” lecturing has with regard to helping students maintain information, shift knowledge to new contexts, skillfully solve problems, and be motivated to continue to learn. Lectures typify passive learning, where students receive knowledge and ideas. Active learning, on the other hand, requires students to do, observe, and reflect (Fink). Classroom activities increase student engagement since they necessitate student participation. According to Cavanagh (2011), the combination of lectures with student activity affords students opportunities to process material they are learning by engaging with the information in meaningful ways (Cavanagh). Activities that require students to think about, manipulate, and apply class concepts help facilitate deeper understanding. Barkley (2010) concludes that “student engagement is the product of motivation *and* active learning” (p.6). Both are necessary for student engagement.

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In an attempt to increase student motivation and move beyond overuse of lecture and other passive learning modalities, the first author frequently utilizes Howard Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences to think more creatively about multiple ways to make learning more active. Gardner's work includes nine different intelligences: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential. Verbal-linguistic focuses on language and meanings of words, often incorporating reading, writing, speaking, and discussing. Logical-mathematical intelligence involves numbers, abstractions, reasoning and logic. Analyzing problems, performing mathematical calculations, devising a process, and demonstrating relationships between cause and effect use this particular style. Visual-spatial intelligence incorporates images, space, and abstract thinking. Related teaching strategies include drawing, reading maps, watching multimedia, and examining pictures, charts, or graphs. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence engages the body in movement, handling objects, and making things. Faculty might consider how to use physical activity, role playing, and hands-on learning. Musical intelligence relies on music, rhythm and sound. These teaching techniques may include speaking or singing rhythmically, tapping out time, and using various musical instruments. Interpersonal intelligence includes the ability to relate well with others, interpret behavior and communication, and more accurately discern moods, motivations, and temperaments of others. Instructors might integrate group activities, dialogue, and communicating with others. Intrapersonal intelligence represents self-awareness and knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses and might employ activities such as journaling and self-reflection. Naturalistic intelligence values nature and the outdoor world, appreciating the opportunity to classify and categorize living things and the natural world. Existential intelligence focuses on human existence, pondering questions of life, death, truth, and the purpose of life. Lunenburg and Lunenburg (2014) argue that “classroom[s] should contain compelling activities that activate a range of intelligences” (p. 10). The “Show me your family and I'll show you mine” activity described in this paper incorporates spatial-visual, intrapersonal, and linguistic intelligences.

Family Development Theory

Theoretical frameworks offer critical intellectual lenses through which to view the world and examine objects of particular interest (Winton, 1995). Family development theory (FDT), one of the first family-focused theories to emerge from the family science field, helps practitioners and researchers in examining *families*. This perspective highlights transformations of families over time and throughout the life course. Evelyn Duvall and Reuben Hill (1948) asserted that families, as unique and dynamic social groups, encounter developmental processes as they expand and contract over the course of the family life cycle. Accordingly, family development progresses through eight stages: married couple, childbearing, preschool, school-aged children, teenagers, launching centers, empty nest, and the aging family. These stages can then be analyzed on an individual-psychological level, an interactional-associational level, and a societal-institutional level (Hill & Rodgers, 1964). Guided by norms and values, there are various developmental tasks for parents and children to accomplish during each stage. The theory also maintains several assumptions about the family group. They include (a) families change over time, (b) stress is greatest during transitions between developmental stages, (c) each

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developmental stage brings associated tasks, (d) norms regulate behavior, (d) development is reciprocal, and (e) families should be viewed over time and at multiple levels (Smith & Hamon, 2017).

For this paper we describe the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity used for teaching family development theory (FDT). Using student reflection questions and evaluative feedback we collected after the activity, we also assess students’ abilities to employ FDT concepts in describing their own families. More specifically, we address this question: In what ways is the activity an effective strategy for helping students apply FDT concepts and principles to their own experiences of family? By asking students to apply the theory to their own families, we hope to motivate and engage students in an activity of personal relevance.

Description of Activity

The “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity is used for introducing family development theory (FDT) to students enrolled in a 300-level family theories course. Capped at 30 students, the course is required for students in Human Development and Family Science and Family and Consumer Sciences majors and in the Pre-Counseling and Therapy minor at a college in the mid-Atlantic region. The course also fulfills the Internal Dynamics of Family content area for the National Council on Family Relations’ (n.d.) Certified Family Life Education designation. It further exposes students to eight of the most prominent family theories in the family science field. Classroom activities and course assignments are incorporated to foster opportunities to apply theories to real-life and fictitious families so that students are better able to experience the value of theories in their work with and research on families. After implementing this activity for many years with positive student responses, the instructor decided to more formally assess the extent to which students can successfully apply course concepts in context of the activity.

The “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity is conducted at the beginning of class on the first day devoted to Family Development theory. Students are asked to read the relevant chapter from the course text (Smith & Hamon, 2017) before class, but no formal instruction on FDT has been provided. I (the first author) bring one sheet of 8.5 x 11 white, unlined paper for each student along with boxes of colored pencils to class. After distributing paper, I ask students to divide their sheets into three sections, as they would if they were folding a letter to place it into a #10 envelope. I distribute colored pencils, asking students to select a few colors and share with their neighbors. When students have their supplies, I display the following instructions through the PowerPoint projector: 1.) Draw a picture of your family at the time you entered it (in the top third of the paper), 2.) Draw your family as it was when you graduated high school (in the center third of the paper), and 3.) Draw your family as you expect it to be five years from now (in the bottom third of the paper). Typically, I allow 15-20 minutes for students to complete this activity. Students frequently use stick figures or other simplistic forms to represent family members and other information. (See sample drawings in the Appendix.)

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Once most of the students have finished their drawings, I invite interested students to share their drawings with the class via the document camera. I do not insist that particular students share their drawings; only those who wish to do so are invited to the front to place their drawings on the document camera for the class to see. My experience has been that many students are eager to share their drawings and describe the composition of their families at each of the three points in time.

After students have seen several of their classmates' drawings, I introduce a number of reflection questions on a new PowerPoint slide. For purposes of this research, I asked students to *write* responses to these questions and collected their written responses so we could analyze them later. Usually, however, I give students time to make notes on their responses to the questions; then, we discuss the items, either in small groups followed by the entire class or as an entire class. I used these reflection questions to try to assess student engagement with and understanding of the material.

- How did you define family?
- How did your family change over time?
- Using your text (Smith & Hamon, 2017, p. 73), in what stage of the family life cycle is your family in each drawing?
- Name one important family developmental task that your family encountered during each of the three time periods.
- Reflect on your family's *timing* (Smith & Hamon, pp. 82-83). Was your family “on time” or “off time”? Did events and stages of your family happen in the order prescribed? Were there any ramifications for your family if things did not happen according to prescribed timing or sequence?
- What norms (Smith & Hamon, p. 82) have your family encountered? Are norms affecting what you expect your family to look like five years from now? If so, how?
- List the concepts you see evident in your family diagram from family development theory.
- Compare and contrast your drawings and reflections with others in class.
- List any additional concepts from the theory that you see evident in your classmate's drawings.
- As you are comparing and contrasting, delineate shortcomings or weaknesses of family development theory in addressing all types of families.
- What are the strengths or benefits of the theory?

After students have ample time to reflect on these questions individually and/or in small groups, I lead class discussion on the questions.

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Methods

I have incorporated the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity for many years and have found that students seem to enjoy it. However, during the 2015-16 academic year, I decided to assess the activity’s effectiveness for helping students apply theoretical concepts to real-life families: their own. We collected the student-written responses to the 11 questions outlined on the PowerPoint slide and reviewed them for evidence of understanding, particularly the ability to make connections between theoretical constructs and their own families. We also asked students to rate “how helpful ... the family development theory is to professionals who conduct family research or provide services to families” using a Likert scale. Students were asked to write a number between 0 (“not at all helpful”) to 10 (“extremely helpful”). Students were also asked to respond to two open-ended questions: “List one advantage of family development theory for family researchers and practitioners” and “List one criticism of family development theory.” We received IRB approval (protocol # 2015-040) for this assessment project.

Results

Forty-four students in two sections of the HDFS 339 Dynamics of Family Interaction class participated in the activity and its assessment. One section of the course was offered in the fall of 2015; the other was offered during the spring of 2016. All students were female and traditional-aged college students, with one post-traditional student.

At the beginning of class, the instructor introduced the activity and her desire to collect information that would help assess effectiveness of the activity. Students received consent forms; all agreed to participate. After the activity, students responded to a series of reflection questions. At the end of the activity, anonymous written responses were collected for analysis.

Student responses to a series of open-ended, reflection questions suggest a strong ability to apply FDT theoretical concepts to their own family’s development as depicted in their drawings. Students were cognizant of a range of definitions of “family.” For instance, 13 defined family as those you love and have a bond with (whether blood-related or not). Eleven defined family as immediate family (parents and siblings), while eight included immediate and extended family. Many even included family pets within their definitions of family.

Students were easily able to outline ways their families changed over the three periods delineated in their diagrams. Parents divorced, parents remarried, siblings moved out, a parent or grandparent died or moved in, children gained greater autonomy, families expanded and contracted, and so forth. Using the table on family developmental stages and associated tasks, students were clearly able to identify the three family stages depicted in their drawings and associated developmental tasks that their families encountered. For instance, in the first diagram (when they entered their families), many students identified the childbearing stage. They recognized their families needed to accomplish developmental tasks including (a) adjusting to infants, (b) adapting to the needs of infants and young children, (c) establishing a satisfying

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home for parents and infants, (d) staying connected with both families (grandparents), (e) coping with a lack of privacy for the parents, and (f) adjusting to the promise of parenting. The second diagram frequently represented the teenage years or launching stage. Students identified tasks like (a) releasing young adults to college, (b) encouraging children's educational achievement, (c) balancing freedom and responsibility, (d) forming adult-adult relationships, (e) differentiation of self in relation to family, and (f) maintaining a supportive home base. In the final picture in which they projected five years out, students noted more complex family diagrams. These diagrams often had multiple groupings of smaller family units within larger family systems. For instance, many students imagined themselves in the married couple stage with its associated stage-sensitive tasks while others saw their parents in an empty nest, refocusing on the marriage relationship and maintaining kin ties with older and younger generations. Some parents were on their own after a divorce or in new family contexts.

Students also reflected on the timing of their families' events. Students who lost a parent while still a child or teenager or whose family adopted a child later in life recognized that these situations were a bit “off time.” Students also identified the following as “off-time:” “My...parents [had] me before they even finished high school,” “My parents conceived two... then were married...[and] separated not long after having me,” “My brother was born before my parents were married, and moved out before he graduated high school,” and “My mother was older and not planning on having kids; she was also not married. My mother from that time on has never been able to ‘catch up.’” Students effectively compared their family experiences with the experience outlined as normative in the original FDT theory.

Students pondered the effect of norms on their projection of family in five years from now. While most see their own families as modeling process or sequencing norms relative to what needs to come first, that was not always the case. One student noted: “The norm of my family is to have children before marriage and marriage isn't very significant. I'm going against the norm by getting married and then having kids.” Typically, however, most students anticipated completing their education before getting married and getting married before having children. Some also suggested the need to be “established” before buying a house. Students made observations about static norms. For instance, they noted norms of going to college, staying close to the family, going home for birthday and holiday celebrations, helping others, and doing what is right. One student also very explicitly delineated how her family life cycle would be affected by norms of filial responsibility. She noted: “One norm would be that parents provide until the children are financially and mentally able to be independent. When that happens, children give back. Yes, in 5 years I expect my siblings and I to give back to our parents by providing for them and giving ‘monthly allowances.’” Some diversity surrounded norms regarding gender roles, with students reflecting a range of experiences and projections relative to roles that men and women should assume within marriage. A few students wrote about more traditional gender role norms in their families, with fathers as primary breadwinners and mothers as homemakers who also may work outside the home. Others reflect more flexible norms, as with this student: “...my mom was an owner of multiple businesses and her role was totally different from ordinary domestic women.” In any event, the activity helped students think about norms that affected their experience of family to this point, as well as norms that will guide their own pursuit of family.

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Students were also asked to consider how norms shape their expectations of their future families. Clearly, students were impacted by expectations of their families, friends and others around them. They also based their projections on “what is happening now in relationships;” “what has happened to others;” what their families have “taught” them; personal/individual “dreams,” “hopes,” and “desires”: and what they “learned in class.”

Students reported meaningful benefits from the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity. Many students reflected on the ways in which the drawings helped them provide a “visual for the concepts.” The activity also allowed them to “visualize our own experiences in ways that we could apply the concepts to our own lives.” As another student noted, “It was more tangible to see where my family started and how much my family has expanded through the years. It was helpful to see the stages through the different drawings.” Students appreciated how the diagrams illustrated an “evolution of the family over time,” and prompted them to “think more about changes” in families. Students valued seeing the ways in which others defined “family” and diversity of family experience among peers. Students were also pleased with their ability to employ theoretical concepts like family, norms, stages, developmental tasks, change, transitions, and timing when describing what they experienced and what they anticipate years from now.

The activity also involved opportunity to critique the theory. When asked to pinpoint advantages or strengths of family development theory (FDT), students shared insightful observations. Many students noted that FDT helps them understand and anticipate change. They reported that FDT “recognizes where a family *will* be going,” “understand[s] and predict[s] transitions,” “anticipate[s] change and see[s] how change affects family,” “predict[s] what a family might go through in the future,” “helps to identify places of vulnerability because of change,” and “better understand[s] the changes and resilience of families as they grow and contract.” Students also appreciated the “longitudinal understanding” of FDT and “that families should be viewed over a period of time because families do change and develop.” Students recognized that FDT “regulates [and] provide[s] norms for families” and “gives general guidelines” so that families might “identify [their] own norms and expectations.” Students thought that FDT would be useful for family practitioners since it “looks at the whole family,” reveals “how families can change over time,” “can help assess families at a particular time in their life if they are having difficulty,” and “helps practitioners understand family development tasks and patterns to empathize with families and help them through transitions.”

When asked to identify any criticisms of FDT that they have, students saw FDT as problematic because it “focuses on the nuclear family” and “not all families are nuclear.” FDT is most applicable to “traditional families, “is difficult to use for families with nontraditional structures and timings” because it is “not wholly inclusive,” is “not culturally diverse,” and “doesn’t look at divorce, death, or gay/lesbian relationships in the family.” Clearly, “not all families are the same” and “the term ‘family’ can mean many different things in this day and age... [making it] hard to apply to all family circumstances.” As one student put it: “There are so many more types of families. Most families are more messy than this theory.” FDT “assumes too much about how families are supposed to be” and “does not account for different norms that

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families might hold.” Other students noted that “every family is different and ‘norms’ don’t work for everyone;” “some families do not fit the norms,” and the theory is “not as helpful for families who don’t follow the norms.” Similarly, a few students “do not like the concept of timing and that there is a right way or order things should happen.” “Not all families will have the same kind of timing” and FDT does not take “off-time” events into consideration. Other shortcomings identified include the perception that FDT “does not address ways to help [during] transitions” and does not address “how gender affects development” within families.

Using a Likert scale, students were asked to rate “How helpful is family development theory to professionals who conduct family research or provide services to families?” Response choices ranged from 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (extremely helpful). On the pre-test, the mean was 7.69 (range 5-10) and on the post-test the mean was 7.86 (range 3-10). Thus, after the activity, most students’ perception of the utility of FDT increased, though the range expanded, suggesting that a few students were more concerned about the limitations of the theory.

Discussion

Teaching is a deliberate activity in which faculty need to motivate and energize students to learn. Students are more engaged when classes include experiential activities they can achieve successfully and deem to have value, particularly in terms of professional relevance. Educators and students benefit when instructors assess student learning as a result of particular practices. This paper provides an overview of one active learning activity used to teach FDT. Using participant feedback, it also reports assessment work that the instructor and student co-inquirer conducted.

For this paper, we describe an activity used in Dynamics of Family Interaction, a course that includes instruction on FDT and employs Gardner’s (2006) spatial-visual, linguistic, and intrapersonal intelligences. Historically, students have enjoyed the activity, but we wanted to assess the extent to which students are able to apply the FDT theoretical lens and concepts to their own family experiences over time.

Written responses to discussion questions and open-ended questions after the activity suggest the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity helped students engage with the FDT theoretical material in a way not possible through lecture alone. In fact, students were able to analyze their own family trajectories while successfully employing FDT theoretical concepts. Students were able to assume an FDT theoretical lens as they identified stages depicted in their drawings, developmental tasks likely to be central to their families at each of the three points in time, and the impact of timing and norms on their changing families. By asking students to imagine what their families would look like in 5 years, we also encouraged students to use *prediction*, another small teaching strategy suggested by Lang (2016) that will, we hope, urge students to pay attention to what transpires over the next few years, reinforcing retention of learned material.

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After doing the activity, students were also able to articulate strengths and weaknesses of FDT theory. Students saw much value in the theory and its concepts, assigning a mean value of 7.86 out of 10 on the helpfulness of the theory to professionals who conduct family research or provide services to families. At the same time, students were able to identify several shortcomings of the theory, particularly as related to its applicability to diverse families more broadly defined than the traditional nuclear family. This student-generated critique resulting from the exercise laid the groundwork for the instructor to introduce Laszloffy's (2002) systemic family development model (SFD), which addresses two fundamental shortcomings of FDT: 1) the assumption that the outlined stages are universally experienced by all families and 2) the bias toward the experience of a single generation (e.g., preschool stage), as often denoted by the labeling of the stage. Laszloffy's image of the family as a layer cake, with each layer representing a different generation in the family, helped students see how her model addressed several criticisms of FDT theory. At the same time, it illustrated how family scholars and practitioners might continue to refine theory to better represent lived experience.

Using student feedback and our experience with having employed the activity on multiple occasions, we make several observations about the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity. First, it is ideal if students read the chapter on FDT before coming to class, but the activity can still be very effective if students have not done their reading. For instance, if students have their texts with them, discussion questions can cite specific page references for various concepts students are asked to consider. Students could also be placed in groups to facilitate discussion and application of ideas before sharing with the larger class. Another observation is that the instructor needs to monitor the pacing and timing of the activity. While we suggest students be given about 10-15 minutes to create their drawings, the instructor should provide updates on time remaining every few minutes to help students to pace themselves. Students drawing more detailed pictures might need prodding to keep things simple enough to complete within the time allocation. It is also helpful to have some students share their family diagrams with classmates in order to see a variety of families. While we would not endorse mandating that individual students share their diagrams with others, we have found that many students are eager to share their diagrams. Instructors should have a plan in case students are reluctant to share. Perhaps instructors could share their own family diagrams or include drawings of various celebrity or fictitious families at different points over time. Our classrooms are also equipped with document cameras, which make it very easy to project drawings on a large screen. If such equipment is not available, an instructor might use other technology to project drawings. Faculty might also consider if they prefer students to work individually, in smaller groups, or as a large group in responding to the discussion questions. While we asked students to write responses to the discussion questions for evaluative purposes on these two occasions, the instructor typically just uses reflection questions as prompts for discussion with the full class. Writing responses to reflection questions takes much more time.

Next time, this instructor intends to make a couple of modifications to the activity. First, for the third point in time, she will ask students to project what their family will look like 15 years from now (rather than 5 years from now). By doing so, we think students will be challenged to imagine a bit more. The modification will likely move the family in the third

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drawing to a uniquely different stage, exposing students to various new developmental tasks and changes. Second, the activity took a good portion of the class time when students wrote responses to discussion questions. Depending on time constraints, the instructor will need to determine in advance how much class time can be devoted to the completion of the activity and answering related reflection questions. This may require allowing fewer students to share their pictures, trimming discussion questions, or limiting discussion time allocated to each reflection question.

In conclusion, the “Show me your family and I will show you mine” activity has successfully engaged Dynamics of Family Interaction students for years. While students appreciate the opportunity to be artistic and visual, the instructor is affirmed by the way in which the activity makes course content personally relevant and facilitates application of theoretical material. It affords a powerful demonstration of an FDT lens, helping students apply theoretical concepts to their own families and to recognize the theory’s strengths and challenges. Future SoTL might consider ways the family diagrams themselves could be used for assessment purposes.

Author Note:

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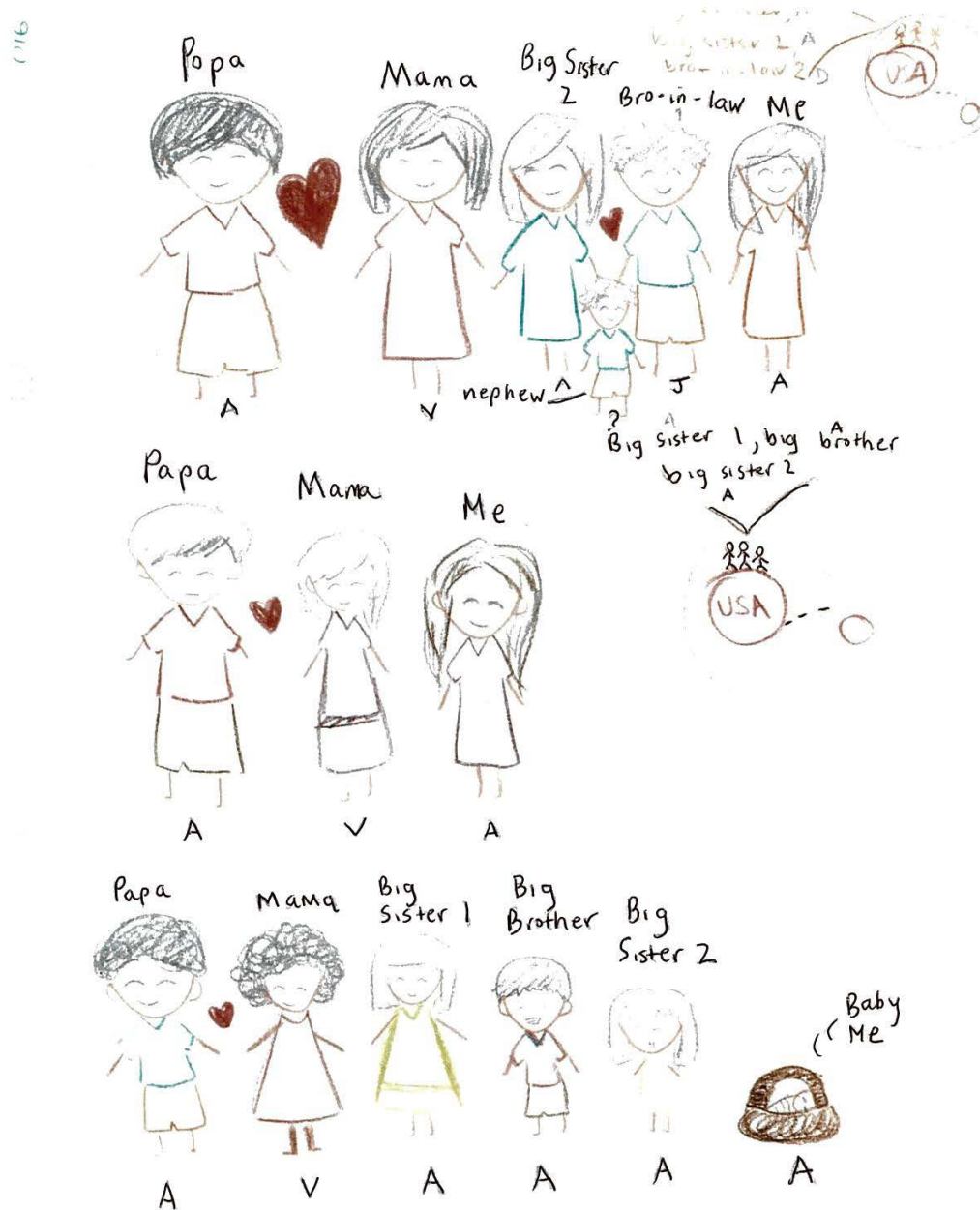
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Appendix

Sample Drawings
(Consent received from students to use their drawings)



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