

The Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test

Michael Griffin

David, aged twelve, is seated comfortably at a long desk. Arrayed in front of him, within easy reach, are twelve outline drawings of people attached to little cardboard boxes, which serve as bases and have slots at the top for the 'posting' of message cards. David has chosen the figures from a larger range that I set out before him at the start of our session, to represent the members of his family. The drawings vary in size, shape, clothing, and hairstyle, but the faces are empty of other features. David found it easy to recognise the figures as adult males and females, plus boys and girls of various ages. The empty faces allowed him to choose figures for each family member, without needing to search for a photographic likeness. The same set of figures used by David can thus be employed by other children to represent their own unique set of family members. David is about to enter the world of the Family Relations Test.

The Family Relations Test (FRT) was initially published by psychologist Eva Bene and psychiatrist James Anthony in 1957, as a 'technique for the objective assessment of the child's family relations' (Anthony & Bene, 1957; Bene & Anthony, 1957). It attempted to overcome the limitations of seeing the child as the identified problem, in isolation from their family. The new approach was to develop a projective method for assessing the emotional aspects of family relationships from the child's perspective. As a projective test, the FRT attempts to provide a structured way of capturing these perspectives, but it remains an interpretive endeavour rather than a standardised psychometric instrument (Semeonoff, 1976). When David assigns a series of message cards to the various figures and boxes we have set up, a scoring system is used to reveal the pattern of his choices. However, the therapist is still required to interpret these results, very much in psychodynamic terms, complete with 'egocentric' and 'ambivalent' responses plus an array of 'defence mechanisms'. Let us see how David fares with the task ahead of him, and what sense we can make of his choices.

The test we are using is the 1985 revision (Bene, 1985), which involves only a few minor changes to the original version. The small amendments to test administration and to the wording of message cards will not really alter the way David proceeds. He has grouped the family figures in a fashion that makes sense to him. He first chooses a figure to represent himself, followed by figures for Mum and Dad and his sister. David lives with his mother and sister and stepfather, so there is another figure to select. David sees Dad on access visits, in a household which includes Dad's

new partner and her two children. Mum has a sister living close by, and there are a few other relatives on both sides whom David knows well enough to include in the FRT. David finds figures to suit all these people, but we are not quite ready to begin. I remove another figure from the test case and unfold the attached posting box from the flattened form it takes when not in use. This figure depicts a man in an overcoat with his back turned to us. He is called Mister Nobody, and I explain to David that he is also part of the 'game' (the FRT manual refers to the testing process as 'a game of pretence').

Once David has selected a suitable spot for Mr Nobody, I give him the pile of message cards that contain statements which may describe in some way his relationship with the family members he has chosen, or their relationship to him. Before sitting down with David, I have shuffled the cards as directed in the manual, to ensure two positive messages at either end plus a good distribution of the various kinds of messages throughout the stack. I have also checked his reading skills and know that he can read without need of assistance. With younger children, I may need to read out the cards for them, or at least ask them to read aloud. As David now goes through the pack of cards, he reads each one to himself and decides which person it fits best. The test instructions summarise David's task well: 'If what a card says fits one person best, you put the card into that person. If it doesn't fit anybody, you put it into Nobody's box. If it fits several people, you give the card to me' (Bene, 1985). I will make a note of the multiple choices for any cards handed to me, and score those on the answer sheet when the other cards are removed from their boxes. The cards given to Mr Nobody are also scored. This allows me to get a sense of defensive manoeuvres such as denial and idealisation.

The *valence* of each card is either positive ('This person in the family is kind to me') or negative ('This person in the family is never satisfied'). The *strength* of those examples is mild: there are also strong positive messages ('This person in the family cares more for me than for anybody



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else') and strong negative messages ('Sometimes I hate this person in the family'). *Direction* is either outgoing (feelings coming from the child, e.g. 'I like to hug this person in the family') or incoming (feelings going towards the child, e.g. 'This person in the family is mean to me'). David thus has eight different kinds of messages before him (two by two by two), plus a series of maternal overprotection statements ('Mother worries that this person in the family might get hurt') and parental overindulgence cards ('This is the person in the family father/mother spoils too much').

David certainly has a task on his hands in processing such an array of material. As the manual puts it: A test situation of this nature — a 'miniature life situation' — may be considered to make *almost* unreasonable demands on the interactive capacity of the individual (*italics in original*.) David finishes well, though, and is happy to unwind by helping me remove the cards from the boxes and read out their individual numbers so I can more easily fill out the record form. David can see that this is just a lot of ticks scattered across a grid: it will not make any sense to other people who might see it accidentally, so it really is confidential information. Before I interpret the results and pass on this distillation to parents or teachers, I will meet with David to work out an acceptable way of doing this. Fortunately for me, David is quick to work out the implications of his card choices, and he wants me to pass on the central message about his Dad.

I once worked for the Department for Community Welfare (DCW) in South Australia, an organisation known since then as FACS, FAYS, and now CYFS. The name changes have not altered the fact that many clients of 'the welfare' are children in foster care. Many of these children have huge attachment issues, and the professionals who work with them face a daunting task in developing therapeutic ways to repair the damage (see Howe, Brandon, Hinings & Schofield, 1999). I remember a particular girl, Rose, whom I saw over many years in my role as DCW psychologist. I was asked to assess her relationship with her mother, from whom she had been removed. Regular contact occurred but the DCW social workers were puzzled by the seeming lack of any spark in the relationship between the two.

I first used the FRT with Rose when she was six years old. The FRT has a second set of cards for younger children, with fewer items and lacking the strength parameter. Bene (1985) notes that 'feelings of like and love or dislike and hate overflow into each other more easily' for younger children, so the attitude areas explored with them are less differentiated than is the case for older children. As Parkin (2001) has shown in a recent survey of test users, there is considerable variation in the cut-off age chosen for use of the cards designated for 'younger' versus 'older' children. One or two years either side of age six seems to apply to the younger set of cards (I used these with Rose for our first two assessments, a year apart). The older set generally applies to quite an extended age span, from six or seven

through to adolescence. I switched to the older set with Rose for later assessments.

Over many years, and using both sets of cards, Rose would allocate cards to every relative except her mother. There were negative messages for some, positive messages for others, and a mixture (ambivalent) for a few. Yet Mum, with whom Rose had regular supervised contact, rarely scored more than a card or two, and sometimes none at all. Surely this is a defence mechanism at work, we all thought. Rose just cannot deal emotionally with the issues her mother represents for her. As time went by, and I watched Rose and her Mum together, I began to wonder if I could in fact take Rose's message at face value: there was no obvious attachment to her mother at all. Such an unusual finding was also suggested by later assessors, and by subsequent events. Any interpretation of the FRT results thus needs to be weighed carefully against other sources of evidence. In complex cases, repeat assessments over time may be required. Sometimes, as with Rose, strange patterns may need to be accepted at face value; with other children, defensive manoeuvres are involved. Such is the case with David.

David's mother always contended that she and David's father were on good speaking terms, but he was never available for a session and never seen at school. When asked about him, she would respond in neutral terms, giving very little useful information and seeking to change the subject after a brief period. In contrast, David was always talking about his Dad, in glowing terms. He had monthly access visits with his father and I expected lots of detail about things they did together, but surprisingly little was forthcoming. David's mother tended to label David as lacking in empathy, saying that the only person he cared about was his dog, but she once amended that somewhat by adding that David talked about his father as if he were God!

David's FRT pattern was striking. He overlooked almost everyone except for his sister and father. Mum received four cards, three of which were negative. His sister was given twenty cards, all negative, while Dad received 21 cards, all positive. Mr Nobody received a modest number of cards, balanced between positive and negative (nothing untoward about that). David allocated all of the overindulgence and overprotection cards to himself, often speaking in a babyish voice as he did so. David was tempted to blame Mum for his plight but sister was a safer target. Dad was indeed seen as God, an idealised view. It also looked as though David wanted to turn back the clock to a time when his family was intact and he saw himself as wanted and cared for. The tragedy for David was that his huge emotional investment in Dad seemed misplaced, as Dad's efforts on David's behalf were often difficult to discern. Dad's new family represented a further threat to David's dream, and probably occupied too much of Dad's time in David's eyes. Yet David was still idealising Dad, and he was prepared to blame his sister in some way rather than turning on other obvious contenders for the position of villain. David hoped the FRT results would help get Dad back.

Perhaps for Rose there really was no attachment. In David's case, the FRT showed a rather tangled attachment picture, blurred by defensive manoeuvres but rich in clinical possibilities. For both children, their view of family relations added considerably to the information available from other sources. Eva Bene always saw the FRT as providing a 'special study of family relationships and family tensions as they are directly experienced by the child', and suggested that this was a more objective approach than relying on 'subjective hunches' derived from clinical impressions and unreliable information (Bene, 1985: 4).

The FRT was well received on publication in 1957, and it soon gained an entry in that 'bible' of test reviews, the *Buros mental measurement yearbook* (Jensen, 1959). Jensen pointed to early difficulties in establishing test validity and reliability. As the recent review by Parkin (2001) has shown, carrying out sound research with the FRT proved to be quite a difficult endeavour, because of its status as a projective technique and the considerable degree of uncertainty in definition and interpretation this entails. Parkin notes that:

The items in the test are heterogeneous, arbitrarily defined, and not categorised according to a definable schema, and the validity and reliability ... are in doubt (342).

Nevertheless, his survey suggests that many test users remain enthusiastic about the FRT, especially in clinical practice (rather than as a research tool). It seems to be the only instrument available that can explore the perceived emotional context of family relations, and it has provided a useful way of engaging with children early on in assessment, or when they find verbal expression difficult.

In my days working for DCW, I often used the FRT with abused and neglected children. Others have done the same, viewing it as a useful first look at family dynamics and as an extra source of evidence (see Geddis, Turner & Eardby, 1977). I still have the extra set of 14 cards (source unknown to me) that DCW psychologists used to augment the standard FRT cards for older children. The 14 cards provided a series of statements thought likely to convey abuse messages, (e.g. 'This person won't let me talk about the things they do to me'; 'This person touches me all over my body'). Problems of interpretation arise for these cards, as they do for cards in the standard set. Once again, the FRT can be a powerful clinical tool, but it should not be used alone, and interpretation needs confirming evidence to be used with confidence. I no longer employ the abuse cards but their existence does remind me of the test's popularity and perceived adaptability a decade or two ago. Users have often felt the need over the years to alter instructions

and procedures to suit varying circumstances and client populations (e.g. cultural background, abused children).

Perhaps the last word should be given to Andrew Parkin, who has thought a lot about the FRT. He does not want its limitations to wash away our awareness of its strengths, noting that it could be adapted and improved as a computerised assessment device (Parkin, 2000). Maybe we will soon see a new generation family relations test that is standardised, well researched, and attractive for all children to use. Meanwhile, I will keep the FRT handy, just in case!

Test User Details

The Family Relations Test (Children's Version) is available from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), at the cost of \$715 for a complete set. The user qualification requirement specified by ACER is category P: 'professionals who are registered as psychologists or hold qualifications that would allow registration (plus) psychology students under supervision'.

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