

# Brief Report

## The Husband-Wife Relationship as Reflected in the Drawings of Battering Husbands

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### Abstract

*This study examined the spousal relationship of 19 court-ordered battering husbands as reflected in drawings of themselves and their wives. Two types of drawing characteristics were assessed: (a) graphic indicators of the spousal relationship and (b) graphic indicators of violent or aggressive behavior. Results revealed that the figures drawn by battering husbands tended to be smaller and placed lower on the page relative to the female figure but, nevertheless, resembled the female figures. Male figures also possessed more indicators of violent aggressiveness than did female figures. Findings suggest that battering husbands perceive themselves as being violated by their wives.*

### Introduction

This study examined how the violent spousal relationship is reflected in battering husbands' drawings of themselves and their wives. A version of the Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD) (Burns & Kaufman, 1970), which focuses on the interactions among members of the individual's family, was used. The underlying assumption for the use of family drawings was that they enabled individuals to express their experiences and emotions in a socially acceptable manner, to communicate feelings and ideas, and to explore and work through problems and anxieties (Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997; Handler & Habenichet, 1994).

According to Hammer (1997), four emotional characteristics relating to family roles are reflected in family drawings: dominance, dependence, aggression, and isolation. These roles underlie the dimensions of family functioning typically elicited in such drawings and involve perceptions of self and other family members. Such perceptions include the degree of physical intimacy between family members,

the emotional tone of the relationships, who is closest or rejected by whom, who is dominant or subordinate, who is isolated or gregarious, the overt and covert messages among and between family members, and the degree of perceived pleasantness in the home setting. According to Di Leo (1973) and Abraham (1989), the placement, size, similarity, and proximity of figures in family drawings reveal information about these aspects of family interaction.

In general, the placement of the figure on the page shows roughly where the drawer places the person represented relative to others or to the environment (Goodenough, 1926; Naglieri & Pfeiffer, 1992). The size of a particular figure may express the importance attributed to the person represented (Di Leo, 1973). For instance, a figure of exaggerated size could indicate that the person depicted is perceived by the drawer as domineering, overwhelming, aggressive, or frightening. When figures of similar size are drawn, this usually indicates feelings of strong attachment (Di Leo, 1973). The degree to which figures are drawn close together is thought to indicate the drawer's perception of the extent to which there is emotional closeness or attraction between the two people (Abraham, 1989).

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have examined the extent to which violent or aggressive behavior or violent relationships may be reflected in drawings of human figures drawn by adults. Despite the paucity of empirical research on this topic, a recent study suggests that violence and aggression may be detected in the drawings of violent adults. The human figure drawings of violent male prisoners were compared with those of nonviolent prisoners using Machover's Draw-A-Person (DAP) (Lev-Wiesel & Hershkovitz, 2000). The results indicated that certain features were found more frequently in the human figure drawings of violent prisoners, and, therefore, may indicate aggressive and violent behavior. These features were hollowed, diagonal, shadowed, piercing, or omitted eyes; thick, shaded eyebrows; thick, shadowed moustache; disconnection of the neck from the body; large, pointed, stick-like, or talon-like fingers; a fierce posture; broad shoulders; and prominent nostrils.

In a study by Berecka and Culen (1996), the human figure and tree drawings of juvenile delinquents were com-

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pared with those of well-adjusted vocational high school students. Results revealed evidence of different characteristics in the drawings of the two groups, such as less integration of body parts, fierce figure posture, and smaller figure size in the juvenile delinquents' drawings.

In another study, Acton (1996) examined whether the individual features of human figure drawings were empirically valid as measures of specific forms of psychopathology in a sample of young sexual offenders. The results revealed high correlations between specific features and four constructs of psychopathology: anger-hostility, anxiety, social maladjustment, and thought disorder. These correlations were consistent for three independent measures of psychological functioning: the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the Jesness Inventory, and the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised.

Miller (1996) also examined human figure drawings by aggressive adolescents. Miller sought to determine whether the KFD could be used to identify male juvenile sexual offenders. The findings indicated that the family drawings of this group were significantly different from those of normal males. Offenders often omitted facial features on the father; omitted the body, arms, hands, and feet on both the mother and father figures; omitted the father and mother from their drawings; drew barriers between the mother and father figures; drew a long neck on the mother figure; drew a mother figure that showed lack of nurturance, such as omission of hands or turning away from the self-figure; drew the self at a distance from the parental figures; drew slanting figures; and drew unpleasant situations, dangerous objects, and dangerous activities. It seems there are similarities among the findings of the above studies; that is, indicators such as the size and placement of figures, distance between figures, and specific shapes or omission of body parts distinguished violent offenders from normal men.

In light of the research indicating that specific characteristics of human figure drawings are found in the art of violent adolescent and adult males, the present study sought to determine whether indicators of a violent spousal relationship would be apparent in the drawings of court-referred battering husbands. More specifically, this study investigated whether the husbands' drawings of themselves and their wives displayed characteristics previously found using the DAP (Lev-Wiesel & Hershkovitz, 2000).

### Attachment Perspective and Spousal Relationships

According to Bowlby (1969), prolonged separation from the primary caregiver, or a series of such experiences during infancy, can lead to emotional detachment in the individual, which later in adulthood may be transferred to the spousal relationship with the wife. The detached infant becomes unable to bond appropriately with others, becomes increasingly self-absorbed and preoccupied with non-human objects, and has difficulty displaying emotion. This interferes with the developmental process of separation-individuation that is critical for developing a sense of self (Mahler, 1968). The ensuing superficial sociability and de-

tachment may be a prelude to the development of an anti-social pattern of behavior (Ainsworth, 1962) and psychopathy (Meloy, 1997). It should be noted, however, that other types of attachments that do not satisfy sometimes become, paradoxically, the reason why battering husbands and wives stay together.

Studies supporting the link between husbands' violent behavior and childhood attachment issues (Dutton, 1995; Hofer, 1987) indicate that batterers who are more dependent on their wives exhibit more unresolved attachment strategies—such as domineering and controlling behavior—than nonviolent husbands. In addition, when violent men are presented with attachment conflicts such as abandonment or rejection by the wife, they report feeling greater levels of anger and produce less competent responses than nonviolent men (Dutton & Starzomski, 1994).

Kacen (2000) qualitatively analyzed 11 stories by violent husbands and battered wives. She proposed that control, possessiveness, contamination, and a self-centered type of attachment orientation are ways of extending the batterer's own sense of self. In this manner, the self of the perpetrator is expanded by swallowing up the self of his victim. According to Kacen, the battering husband suffers from desertion anxiety and fears that separation will take place. If this should occur, he feels he would no longer have an identity or a "source of oxygen," which means he would become emotionally extinguished.

Kacen's (2000) research also suggests that husbands may physically abuse their wives because they perceive their wives as a threat to their sense of wholeness. It is conceivable that, in situations of marital conflict, the husband's personal identity is shaken, leading him to feel as if he is being violated. When the wife expresses her own needs and ideas in a conflict situation, the husband's sense of self is threatened. As a result he reacts by physically attempting to force the woman to act in a way that will support his own ego.

### The Profile of the Battering Husband

Efforts to identify key demographic, psychological, and criminal characteristics of men who batter have led some researchers to propose batterer profiles and typologies. The objective of such efforts is to help professionals in criminal justice and intervention programs to predict batterers' potential for reoffending, as well as to match batterers with specific interventions. One line of current research has attempted to delineate the profile of the typical battering husband. Findings suggest that physically abusive husbands are usually men in their late 20s to early 30s who are underemployed laborers and who often have drinking problems, prior records of arrest, and diagnoses of personality disorders (Dutton & Golant, 1995; Eisikovits & Edelson, 1989; Tolman & Bennett, 1990).

Alongside work in this direction, there has been increasing interest in the different psychological typologies of batterers. The research carried out to date has suggested that there are several categories of batterers (Gondolf, 1999a; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Saunders, 1992).

Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994), for instance, suggested that there are three main categories of battering husbands. The first category includes men who are highly jealous, controlling, and reactive; the second, men who display not only these traits, but also tend to be impulsive and dependent on their partners; and the third, men who are generally antisocial, negativistic, defiant, and sadistic.

Recently, Berns, Jacobson, and Gottman (1999) identified two types of battering husbands on the basis of their behavior during violent interactions with their wives. Type I consists of violent men who actually calm down physiologically as the argument with their spouse begins. They strike quickly and fiercely and display belligerent, defensive, and contemptuous behavior. Type II husbands display their anger in a slower, more gradual build-up. As the interaction progresses, they increase their domineering and threatening behaviors. These two types of men, according to Christensen and Heavey (1990), have been found to differ in terms of their patterns of demand and withdrawal—the degree to which one partner, the pursuer, tries to get the partner to change while the other partner avoids change through withdrawal, passive inaction, or stonewalling. Berns, Jacobson, and Gottman (1999), for instance, found that battering husbands could be differentiated from their wives by their high levels of demand and withdrawal, in addition to pressuring their wives for change. There are batterers who become dangerous if their wives oppose them, whereas others are impulsive, want their needs met immediately, and are both actively and passively resistant to any pressure to change.

Other research has suggested that the personality characteristics of batterers who are ordered by the court to enter treatment differ from those who enter treatment on their own. In a study by Dutton and Starzomski (1994) that compared the personality characteristics of court-ordered and self-referred batterers, it was found that self-referred males had significantly higher scores than did court-ordered batterers on the Debasement, Avoidant, Compulsive, Self-Defeating, Borderline, Anxiety, and Dysthymia scales of the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (Millon, Millon, & Davis, 1994). Court-ordered men scored higher on the Histrionic scale.

Buzawa and Buzawa (1996) found that the family backgrounds of both court-ordered and incarcerated battering husbands were similar to those of offenders convicted of assaults against strangers and acquaintances. In both groups, half of the individuals had grown up living with both parents; 12% had lived in a foster home; 22% had been physically or sexually abused; 31% were the children of substance abusers; and 35% had a family member who had been incarcerated. Less is known about the demographic characteristics of infrequent batterers. However, data obtained from program staff and probation officers have emphasized the cultural and economic diversity of these offenders (Meloy, 1997). Thus, it appears that these background variables may be less able to differentiate among types of batterers than psychological variables.

Preliminary results from a four-site study directed by Gondolf (1999a) have yielded a few clues regarding the

psychological characteristics of battering husbands. For example, in that study 25% of the battering men were found to have major or severe psychological syndromes, including paranoia, borderline tendencies, thought disorder, and major depression. In terms of personality traits, 25% had elevated narcissism scores; 15% were antisocial, and 10% were clinically compulsive. The other 50% fell into a broad array of personality types. Nevertheless, Gondolf (1999b) stressed that no “uniform or simplistic typologies” had emerged from his data.

In light of findings indicating that court-ordered batterers display a unique psychological profile, the present study sought to determine the extent to which projective drawings of the marital relationship would display similar characteristics for this group.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of two groups: Group BH consisted of 19 court-referred battering husbands; Group NV, used as a comparison group, consisted of 19 court-referred nonviolent felons. Participants in both groups were matched according to age, education, employment status, and number of prior arrests, and were recruited through the Probation Authority in Israel. The mean age of these men was 27.33 years ( $SD = 3.45$ ). Regarding education, 35.4% were high school graduates, and 74.6% had less than 12 years of education. Eighteen percent were unemployed and 82% worked occasionally. Twenty-three percent had been arrested for alcohol or drug use and 38% for violent behavior. For 40% of the men, this was the first court referral to treatment.

### Procedure

Twenty-two court-referred batterer husbands matched to 22 court-referred felons were asked to participate in the study. Only 19 of the batterer husbands agreed to participate; therefore, three participants from Group NV were dropped from the study. After signing a letter of consent, participants were asked to draw themselves and their spouses with a pencil on a white sheet of A4-size paper. No other instructions were given.

### Human-Figure Characteristics Examined

Two types of figure characteristics were selected for examination. The first type was comprised of characteristics previously found to indicate aggressive and violent behavior (Lev-Wiesel & Hershkovitz, 2000). These characteristics were hollowed, diagonal, shadowed, piercing, or omitted eyes; thick, shaded eyebrows; thick, shadowed moustache; disconnection of the neck from the body; large, emphasized arms and hands; large, pointed, stick-like, or talon-like fingers; a fierce posture; broad shoulders; and prominent nostrils.

The second category of characteristics comprised indicators of the types of relationships between themselves and

their wives. These indicators included the size of the figures relative to each other (length, width, total size), the placement of the two figures on the page, the degree of similarity between the male and female figures, and the distance between the figures.

The drawings were given to four judges for separate assessment. Two were social workers, who were also trained art therapists, and two were clinical psychologists, who were experienced in using the rating instrument. None had any knowledge of the subjects' personal histories. The judges were asked to assess the extent to which a certain feature in each of the two categories was apparent on a 4-point scale ranging from "very obvious" to "not obvious at all." The features were rated for the male and the female figures separately and for the two figures as a single unit. A total score was determined by averaging the three assessments. Mean interjudge reliability correlation coefficients between each pair of judges was calculated using the Pearson correlation statistic. Since the obtained correlation of each judge with the remaining judges' scores were found to be substantially high and significant, a mean interjudge reliability was calculated for each of the indicators (ranged between .73 - .92). Accordingly, the mean scores for each characteristic was as follows: (a) figure similarity = .74; (b) figure placement = .80; (c) proximity = .82 (c) figure size = .79; (d) eyes = .92; (e) nostrils = .76; (f) hands and/or arms = .81; (g) fingers = .73; and (h) stance = .80. Because the internal reliability for the characteristics of moustache, neck, eyebrows, and shoulders was lower than .60, those indicators were dropped from the analyses.

## Results

### Indicators of Relationship

#### Figure size

The figure size was determined based on the area filled by each figure in centimeters. The total area of a given figure was measured by dividing the paper into square centimeters and counting the number of squares covered by the figure. A frequency distribution indicated that in Group BH's drawings the male figure was smaller than the female figure in 72.6% of the drawings, whereas in Group NV's drawings the male figure was smaller only in 36.4% of the drawings.

#### Placement

A frequency distribution indicated that for Group BH, the female figure was placed higher than the male in 62.2% of the drawings, the male figure was placed higher than the female in 26.3% of the drawings, and the figures were placed at the same height in 10.5% of the drawings. For Group NV, the female figure was placed higher than the male in 23.5% of the drawings, the male figure was placed higher than the female in 67.3% of the drawings, and the figures were placed at the same height in 9.2% of the drawings.

### Similarity

In 73.7% of Group BH's drawings and 23.5% of Group NV's drawings, there was a high degree of resemblance between male and female figures (sexless figures or similarity of body parts). In 21.1% of Group BH's drawings and 34.6% Group NV's drawings, there was some resemblance, and in 5.3% and 41.9%, respectively, there was no apparent resemblance between the figures.

### Proximity

The distance between the male and female figures was assessed according to three categories. In the first, the figures had physical contact. In the second, the figures were placed close together but were not physically touching. In the third, the figures were placed far apart (more than 5 cm). A frequency distribution indicated that 86.4% of Group BH's drawings as compared to 43.5% of Group NV's drawings placed in the first category; 10.3%, as compared to 23.7%, in the second; and 3.3%, as compared to 32.8%, in the third. Figures 1-4 present illustrative examples of figure drawings by batterer's and nonviolent husbands.

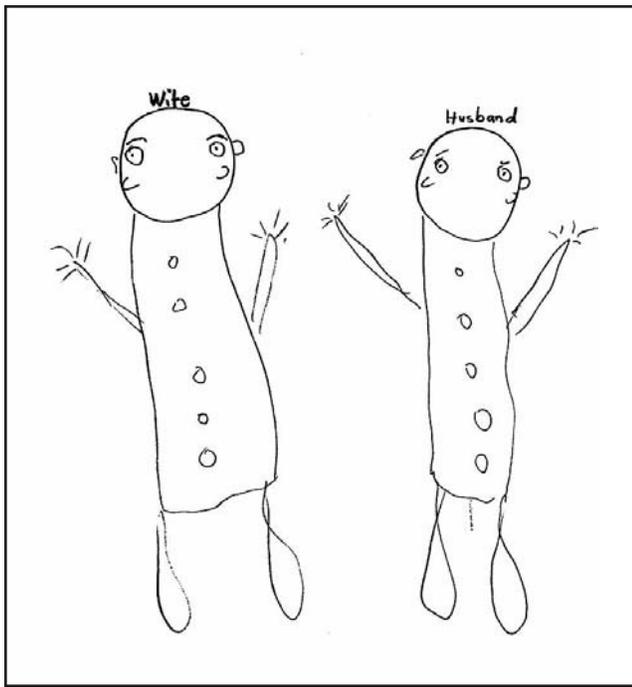
### Indicators of Violence and Aggression

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the extent to which violence and aggression was apparent in the male and female figures in the drawings of the NV group compared to the BH group. Analysis of variance was carried out for the characteristics of the eyes, hand/arms, fingers, nostrils, and stance. The results indicated that only Group BH yielded stronger signs of violence and aggression for both the male,  $F(1, 18) = 2.28, p < .05$  ( $M = 3.30, SD = .51$ ), and female figures,  $F(1, 18) = 2.26, p < .05$  ( $M = 3.15, SD = .56$ ), compared to male and female figures in Group NV ( $M = 2.22, SD = .32$  and  $M = 2.18, SD = .31$ , respectively).

## Discussion

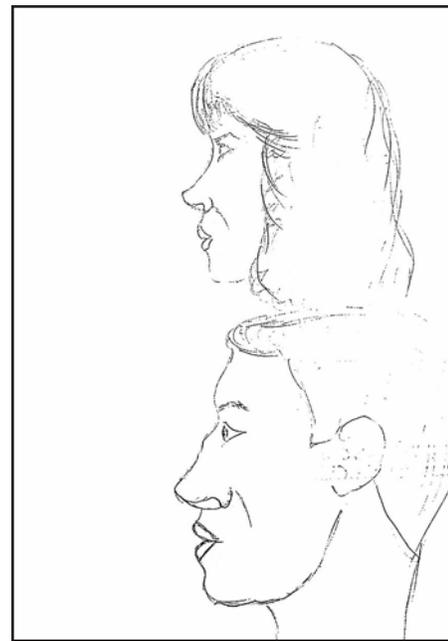
The present study explored how violent spousal relationships are reflected in the battering husbands' drawings of themselves and their wives compared to a group of nonviolent felons' drawings. Two categories of human-figure characteristics were examined: characteristics indicative of aggression and violence, and characteristics indicative of the quality of the relationship between husband and wife. The results for the first category, indicators of aggression and violence, revealed that the figures of the battering husbands, as well as the figures of their wives, displayed stronger indicators than the figures of the nonviolent group. This finding is in line with previous work by Lev-Wiesel and Hershkovitz (2000); yet, unlike the former study, fewer characteristics were consistently prominent.

The results regarding the second category of characteristics revealed that in the majority of the battering husbands' drawings, the female figure was larger and placed higher on the page than the male figure, in contrast to the



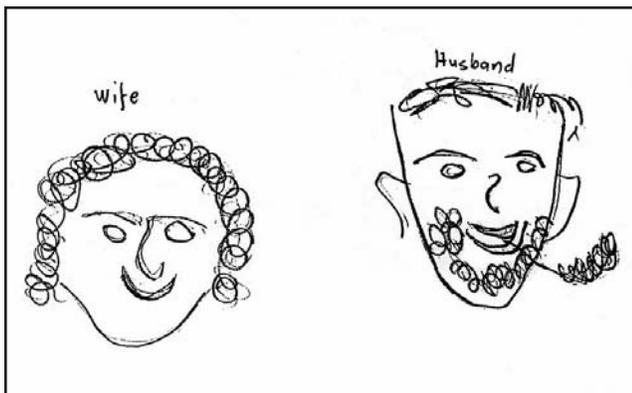
**Figure 1**

Illustration of a battering husband's drawing. A, aged 27, married, a father of a baby, and a former drug user, was arrested for battering his wife.



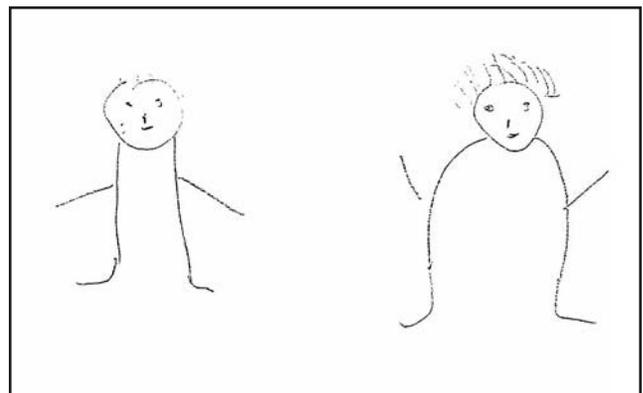
**Figure 3**

Illustration of a battering husband's drawing. C, aged 31, married and a father of two children, has been arrested for severely battering his wife and children.



**Figure 2**

Illustration of a husband's (felon) drawing. B, aged 27, married and a father of a 2-year old, has been arrested for drug use.



**Figure 4**

Illustration of a husband's (felon) drawing. D, aged 31, married and a father of three children, has been arrested for drug abuse.

nonviolent husbands' drawings. In addition, a high degree of similarity between female and male figures was found between the male and female figures in most of the drawings of the batterer husbands. These characteristics may indicate that the battering husbands perceive their wives as having higher status than they have (Lev-Wiesel & Drori, 2000). Finally, their drawings also seem to ignore sex differences between themselves and their spouses.

Another interpretation of these results is that they are associated with the men's early dysfunctional attachment relationships. As mentioned earlier, the ensuing superficial sociability and detachment may have been a prelude to the development of an antisocial pattern of behavior (Ains-

worth, 1962) and psychopathy (Meloy, 1997). Based on this view, it may be that individuals who have undergone disruption in the early attachment experience crave intimacy yet lack the ability and skills to achieve and maintain this state. This conjecture is consistent with the findings of Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) indicating that men who are ambivalently attached to, or preoccupied with, their wives experience pathological levels of dependency, jealousy, and fear of rejection. Consequently, they are at risk of engaging in marital violence when threatened with the loss of their spousal relationship. This sense of being violated on one hand, yet being emotionally dependent on the violator (the wife) on the other, may result in

anxiety and active aggression. The fact that the drawers' self-figures were similar to the figures of their wives, yet smaller, seems to strengthen this line of thought. This is also consistent with Kacen's (2000) findings, suggesting that because the husbands' process of individuation was not complete, they see their wives as extensions of themselves. The state of being symbolically subjected to aggression could evoke a response of actual physical aggression, which, in turn, might be expressed by the similarity and placement of the drawn figures.

Nevertheless, further studies examining spousal relationships through drawings could shed light on this issue. Our current understanding may also benefit from examining and comparing wives' drawings of the spousal relationship with those of their battering husbands. In addition, use of spousal drawings may heighten spouses' awareness of their relationship, thus assisting them in dealing with their mutual difficulties.

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## C a l l   f o r   P a p e r s

*Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association (Art Therapy)* is seeking submissions for the VIEWPOINTS section of the journal that are:

### **Life Stories of Art Therapists of Color**

Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Native Americans are invited to submit brief autobiographical stories of their experiences as art therapists. We are particularly interested in accounts by pioneer art therapists of color and those with 8-10 years experience or more. These articles should portray the authors' cultural differences and ethnic viewpoints and how these cultural differences influenced and contributed to their work. Authors may also include cultural sensitivities necessary for conducting art therapy with their particular ethnic group. An additional page should list the author's choices of "Pertinent Bibliography" of interest to art therapists. A photo of the author is welcome as is a photo of her/his artwork. We anticipate publishing a total of eight (8) articles, two (2) in the Viewpoints section of each issue of the 2006 journal. An editorial on the historical significance of chronicling the histories of art therapists of color will introduce the series, and a concluding article will use the storied narratives as a lens for a thematic analysis that focuses on art therapists of colors' racial/ethnic identities and experiences.

The Guest Editor for the series will be Maxine Borowsky Junge, PhD, ATR, HLM, LCSW, the Guest Associate Editor will be Janice Hoshino, PhD, ATR-BC. As a model, the editors suggest that authors look at the life stories in the beginning of Ponterotto, J., Casas, J., Suzuki, L., & Alexander, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Questions should be addressed to Maxine Junge via e-mail at [MBJunge@Whidbey.net](mailto:MBJunge@Whidbey.net).

**The deadline for submissions is March 1, 2005.**

Please refer to the "Guidelines for Submissions" and "Attention Authors" pages published in every issue of the journal for specific requirements regarding style and format of VIEWPOINT submissions. Send submissions to: *Art Therapy* Editor, c/o AATA, 1202 Allanson Road, Mundelein, Illinois 60060-3808.