A Narrative Review of the Application of Projective Drawing Techniques

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Abstract
Projective drawing techniques refer to the broadly utilised projective psychological tool designed to reveal emotions, personality through, and lived experiences the interpretation of drawings. These techniques have a unique ability to unearth subconscious thoughts, and feelings, establishing themselves as flexible resources across numerous settings. Given the extensive variety of projective drawing techniques, this study narrowly focused on the House-Tree-Person (H-T-P) technique, and its modified, and adapted versions such as Art Drawing-House Tree Person (AD-HTP), and Synthetic-House Tree Person (S-HTP). Therefore, this study reviewed several previous studies that related to the application of projective drawing techniques. The aim of this study is to reveal the utilisation of these techniques, specifically for assisting the clients in counselling interventions. However, the gaps in previous research regarding the H-T-P technique have limited the ability of researcher to explore its applications more deeply.
Keywords: House-Tree-Person, Art Drawing-House Tree Person, Synthetic-House Tree Person

Introduction
        Projective drawing techniques are the projective psychological tool that widely used to assess an individual's personality, emotional functioning, and developmental maturity (Lee, 2020; Lei et al., 2022). Among the various drawing-based projective techniques used internationally, the House–Tree–Person (HTP) technique is one of the most widely employed in psychological assessment, and counselling. According to a survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), H-T-P technique ranked 8th of 102 commonly used psychological tests (Guo et al., 2023). The H-T-P technique was introduced by John N. Buck in 1948 which the technique focused on the drawings of a house, a tree, and a person (Buck, 1948). Notably, the H-T-P technique and others such as the Draw-A-Person (D-A-P) and Kinetic Family Drawing (K-F-D) technique, allow individuals to express their thoughts and feelings in a non-verbal manner, making them particularly useful in settings where traditional verbal communication may be challenging.

In Malaysia, the application of the H-T-P technique is evolving rapidly in the last decade. In around 2015, Mohammad Aziz Shah Mohamed Arip, and Mohd Radhi Abu Shahim have collaborated to establish the Malaysia version of the H-T-P technique which is known as Art Drawing-House Tree Person (AD-HTP) technique. This technique was reconstructed and modified systematically based on the revised H-T-P technique developed by John N. Buck, and Emanuel Frederick Hammer in 1969 (Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a, 2025b). In addition, it drew on the kinetic approach of the Kinetic-House-Tree-Person (K-H-T-P) technique. The founders constructed AD-HTP technique on the cultural adaptation, explicitly emphasizing the influence of religious, and local daily practices.

Each drawing symbol of the AD-HTP technique carries unique meaning. The symbolism of house often represents the family interaction, and relationship, while the tree depicts individual's vision, dreams, determination, past experiences, and career (Bǎoquán & Xiù Nǚ, 2021; Hammer, 1997; Mohd Radhi et al, 2021; Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a, 2025b). Otherwise, the person reflects about personality, and self-concept. This triadic symbolism allows the therapist or counsellor to analyse various aspects of an individual's psyche, making it a valuable tool for understanding emotional, and psychological well-being. The non-verbal nature of the technique also makes it particularly accessible, allowing individuals of different ages, and backgrounds to engage with the assessment process without the barriers that verbal communication may present.

Although projective drawing techniques can be served as valuable tools for exploring an individual's psyche, they should not be used as stand-alone instruments for diagnosing mental health disorders (Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a, 2025b). These techniques possess inherent limitations in accurately assessing an individual's mental health disorders due to their inconsistent validity, and reliability for measuring psychological conditions (Guo et al., 2023). Consequently, the utilisation of projective drawing techniques in the therapeutic process should be integrated with comprehensive intervention to ensure their clinical efficacy.

The importance of studying projective drawing techniques lies not only in their historical significance but also in their potential to enhance our understanding of unconscious processes that shape behaviour and personality. As the challenges of mental health issues continue to rise globally, there is a need to explore and validate the effectiveness of projective drawing techniques across various populations. Current literature often overlooks the latent advantages of these techniques, notably in therapeutic contexts where understanding a client's inner world is crucial.

This study aims to bridge the gap by identifying and revealing the practical applications and outcomes that associated with projective drawing techniques. The findings of this research hold substantial implications for a diverse range of professionals, including counsellors, psychologists, art therapists, and educators. By utilising projective drawing techniques, these professionals can enhance their assessment strategies, leading to more effective interventions and improved client outcomes. Ultimately, this narrative review will highlight the applicability of projective drawing techniques and propose their integration into standard psychological assessments, emphasizing their role in fostering a deeper understanding of human behaviour.

Review of Study

The primary goal of this literature review is to explore the existing literature regarding the societal implementation of projective drawing techniques by both researchers, and clinicians. This study observes the utilisation of projective drawing techniques within the contexts of multicultural, clinical (mental health), self-structure as well as its efficacy for Persons with Disabilities (PWD).

The Application of Projective Drawing Techniques in Multicultural Context

The projective drawing techniques like AD-HTP, and H-T-P technique have been adapted for use in different cultural settings to ensure its relevance, and accuracy. The study indicates that individuals are inclined to be shaped by local cultural values, lived experiences, and sociocultural environment. For instance, in Malaysia, the local influences, and adaptations of AD-HTP technique could be seen via the local drawings which they tend to draw the symbols like coconut trees, chickens, rice fields, mountains, and traditional wooden houses (Mohd Radhi et al., 2021; Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a). An example of a Malaysian AD-HTP drawing is shown in Fig. 1.

Figure 1: A typical Malaysian drawing featuring local cultural symbols (Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a)

Besides, there is a need for local scoring, and interpretive norms to better understand the clinical, and psychopathological underpinnings of Indian patients in India (Lodha & De Sousa, 2022). Similarly, the H-T-P technique was culturally adapted for Haitian children to assess their adjustment to trauma, demonstrating its flexibility, and applicability across diverse cultural backgrounds (Roysircar et al., 2019). In China, this technique has also undergone significant adaptation to align with the more conservative, and moderation norm among the Chinese (Bǎoquán & Xiù Nǚ, 2021; Sheng et al., 2019). Likewise, in Iran, and Indonesia, the local traditions, and family structures shape both content, and meaning of the drawn symbols (Boogar et al., 2016; Rudy & Meidy, 2022). These adaptations highlight the importance of considering cultural context in the interpretation of projective drawing techniques to ensure that every exploration made is accurate, and appropriate.

The Application of Projective Drawing Techniques in Clinical Settings

Projective Drawing Techniques are widely used in clinical settings to assess mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This technique has been employed for screening, and classifying mental disorders, whereby a meta-analysis revealing that certain drawing characteristics can significantly predict mental disorders (Guo et al., 2023). Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of previous studies of the techniques in clinical settings. Hence, it also been used to assess anxiety, and depression in cancer patients, thus showing a positive correlation with the established psychological scales (Sheng et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019). In addition, projective drawing technique demonstrates efficacious utility in exploring the long-term psychological impact of significant loss specifically regarding sibling bereavement (de andrade et al., 2018).

However, the validity of the projective drawing technique especially the H-T-P technique in facilitating mental health problems remains controversial, with some studies questioning its reliability (Laird & Mulvihill, 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Soll et al., 2019). In contrast, a study by Muhammad Aziz Shah et al. (2018) suggests that projective drawing technique is suitable for enabling a client's exploration, and recovery process. Despite these controversies, these projective psychological tools continue to be valuable tools in clinical settings, particularly when combined with artificial intelligence to enhance accuracy, and reduce subjectivity (Salar et al., 2023; Wan & Zou, 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

Table 1

The previous studies of projective drawing techniques in clinical settings

Citation	Projective Drawing Technique	Detailed Information
Sidra et al. (2025)	H-T-P	Explored trauma in a 16-year-old client; identified hypervigilance, and emotional stuntedness. Noted that while H-T-P aids exploration, continuous counselling is needed for recovery.
Mendoza et al. (2025)	H-T-P	Explored self-esteem in children undergoing maxillofacial orthopedics; found that small drawings, and low-quality human figures indicated low self-esteem, and anxiety.
Mohammad Naveed et al. (2025)	H-T-P	Case study of a 16-year-old with MDD; indicators of emotional instability, and psychological stress were clearly visible, though clinical intervention remained necessary for recovery.
Brennan (2024)	H-T-P	Investigated PTSD in youth; found graphic indicators less effective for measuring specific PTSD symptoms but highly useful for identifying depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and aggression.
Wei-ming et al. (2021)	H-T-P	Combined H-T-P with Mental Health Tests (MHT) for primary students; suggested that H-T-P should

Citation	Projective Drawing Technique	Detailed Information
		be followed by MHT to ensure empirical accuracy, and better clinical reference.
Lei et al. (2019)	H-T-P	Analysed clients with depression; characterized by shallow strokes, and a human figure that conveys a sense of hopelessness.
Lu-han et al. (2016)	H-T-P	Assisted clients with depression; identified characteristics such as small sizes, faint lines, incomplete shapes, lack of detail, and messy/disorganized compositions.
Chiat (2021)	AD-HTP	Analysed psychological patterns of detainees under POCA 1959; identified that criminal tendencies stem from conflicts in thought, behaviour, and self-control.
Bredekamp & Theron (2025)	House-Tree-Fire-Water-Person (H-T-F-W-P)	Used in sand-play therapy for GAD; found the method strengthened the psychologist-parent relationship, and improved parental understanding of the child's recovery.
Lee (2020)	S-HTP	Examined the drawing characteristics produced by smokers; found that individuals with nicotine addiction tend to draw disproportionate tree elements, simplified 1D body parts, and a lack of facial or decorative detail.
Lee (2019)	S-HTP	Explored depression in South Korean adults; found that depressed individuals often drew unbalanced houses, non-rectangular walls, and asymmetrical human figures.
Sheng et al. (2019)	S-HTP	Screened anxiety in cancer patients; indicators included strong or weak line pressure, very large symbols, and the frequent use of shadows.
Yang et al. (2019)	S-HTP	Screened depression in cancer patients; characterized by weak line pressure, small symbols, and very simplistic/brief drawings.

The Application of Projective Drawing Techniques Self-Structure Evaluations

The projective drawing techniques provide insights into an individual's self-structure, and personality traits. For example, Mohd Radhi (2016) applied the AD-HTP technique to explore the self-concept of effeminate male students at a Malaysian science college, thus finding that their self-concept issues were closely linked to family relationships, especially the relationship with their fathers. Moreover, Yunmei et al. (2024) used the H-T-P technique

alongside a Five-Factor Personality Inventory to study college students' personalities, and identified a predominance of balanced Yin, and Yang traits. Extroverted individuals tend to draw large, detailed images with strong, straight lines, while introverts produce smaller drawings with short, and broken lines (Lu-han et al., 2018). Conversely, Soll et al. (2019) exploring the transgender youth via the H-T-P technique indicated that these individuals tend to draw a human figure based on their experienced gender. Fig 2 displays a drawing by a young man assigned female at birth, reflecting the 'embracing' phase of his gender trajectory.

Figure 2: A drawing representing a gender trajectory (Soll et al., 2019)

The Synthetic House-Tree-Person (S-HTP) technique has also been used to assess personality traits in Japanese adolescents. The study shown that openness, and agreeableness positively correlate with larger drawing sizes reflecting positive self-image, whereas high neuroticism is associated with drawings containing symbols of negative emotions like anxiety, and shame (Kato & Suzuki, 2017). Similarly, Lee (2019) applied the S-HTP to analyse Korean adults and yielded comparable results. These findings suggest that projective drawing techniques can be useful tools for understanding self-structure, and personality traits (Kato & Suzuki, 2015).

The Efficacy of Projective Drawing Techniques for Persons with Disabilities
Projective drawing techniques have been effectively applied to assist person with disabilities (PWD) across various conditions. Ettinger et al. (2023) developed a modified version H-T-P scale (HTP-PDS) by combining qualitative, and quantitative methods to assist Parkinson's patients, finding improvements in talents, practices, and maturity through group interventions. Hence, Zhang Ning, and Yi Ping (2022) applied the H-T-P technique to deaf vocational students, demonstrating its suitability for exploring mental health issues where verbal communication is limited, with sign language facilitating the process. The H-T-P technique has also been used to evaluate individuals with Prader-Willi syndrome, revealing behavioural, and emotional characteristics that are difficult to express verbally (Gonzalez-Ruiz et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Guanghui et al. (2025) used H-T-P interventions over nine weeks with the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) children, reporting improvements in drawing ability, emotional expression, cognitive skills, socialization, and self-identity. Given the non-verbal nature of implementation, projective drawing techniques are particularly advantageous for diverse populations including PWD.

Conclusion
This study highlights the significant role of projective drawing techniques in psychological assessment, particularly in understanding subconscious thoughts, and feelings.

While these techniques are not intended for diagnostic purposes, they remain highly relevant for enabling the clients to express their emotions and explore their lived experiences. Referring to the past studies, the projective drawing techniques are simply accepted by the societies across the countries. However, some countries have modified these techniques to fit in their local cultural context. In Malaysia, previous researchers introduced the AD-HTP technique, which was modified from the original H-T-P technique (Mohd Radhi et al, 2021; Mohd Radhi & Mohammad Aziz Shah, 2025a), similar to countries like China and Iran that adapted the H-T-P technique according to their respective country's adaptations (Bǎoquán & Xiù Nǚ, 2021; Boogar et al, 2016). Despite focusing on exploration utility, some researchers who used projective drawing techniques in their studies to identify clients' self-structures and personality concluded that this technique is suitable for examining these aspects. Regarding application to clients with disabilities, this study suggests a need for further research, as significant findings involving this population have yet to be uncovered.

Acknowledgement

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