

WHEN A TEST IS NOT A TEST

Tests Without Forensic Validity

Tests such as the Thematic Apperception Test, the House-Tree-Person (HTP), Human Figure Drawing (HFD) and the Draw-A-Person (DAP) “tests” are inappropriate for use in a forensic context. [These are not really tests, but for the ease of discussion, this word will be used.] Weiner (1998) suggests that the

“psychometric soundness of a measuring instrument is judged by whether (a) trained examiners can reach reasonable agreement concerning their scoring and its variables; (b) estimates of its reliability indicate that it provides reasonably accurate information...; (c) its demonstrated corollaries identify purposes for which it is reasonably valid; and (d) and there are adequate normative data concerning its descriptive statistics among various populations.”

APA’s Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology (2/13/05) outline the psychologist’s responsibility when using test instruments. Specifically:

12.02 Appropriate Use of Assessment Techniques

“Forensic psychologists administer, adapt, score, interpret, or use assessment techniques, interviews, tests, or instruments in a manner and for purposes that are appropriate in light of research on or evidence of the usefulness and proper application of the techniques. Forensic psychologists ordinarily use assessment instruments whose validity and reliability has been established for use with members of the population tested or other representative populations. When such validity or reliability has not been adequately established in the forensic context or with this population, psychologists describe the strengths and limitations of any test results and interpretation, and explain the extrapolation of this data to the forensic context.”

It would appear that APA does not support the use of these tests due to their very lack of validity, reliability and normative data.

There are numerous articles written cautioning against the use of these tests, which have no normative base, no empirical research, no validity and no reliability. To the best of my knowledge, they have no adult norms that can be referenced and that interpretation is speculative and subjective. In the article *The Kinetic Family Drawing Technique: A Review of the Literature* by **Handler and Habenich** written in 1994 (*Journal of Personality Assessment*), the abstract states: “The review is critical of studies that emphasize single KFD signs and the use of a single interpretation for each of a series of signs. Instead, the authors emphasize the need for more sophisticated studies that utilize a holistic, integrative approach to interpretation. The article also discusses the existence of significant age, race, and culturally related differences in KFD performance and stresses the need for more detailed normative data in these areas. The authors go on to state, “the KFD technique has not been subjected adequate critical research and evaluation.” “... the KFD still remains primarily a clinical instrument with inadequate norms and questionable

validity. The KFD has been criticized for imprecision and “sometimes arbitrary interpretations of drawing variables, based upon factors that have not been empirically validated.” The authors cite a 1976 study by **McPhee and Wegner**, which “found significantly higher psychopathology scores in the KFDs of normal children than in those of poorly adjusted children.” Thus, one might surmise that the findings of psychopathology in KFD drawings are very misleading.

On the specific matter of sexual abuse, **Palmer** in 2000 (An Investigation of the Clinical Use of the House-Tree-Person Projective Drawings in the Psychological Evaluation of Child Sexual Abuse. *Child Maltreatment*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 169-175) found that:

*“Identification and evaluation of child sexual abuse is an integral task for clinicians. To aid these processes, it is necessary to have reliable and valid psychological measures. This is an investigation of the clinical validity and use of the House-Tree-Person (HTP) projective drawing, a widely used diagnostic tool, in the assessment of child sexual abuse. HTP drawings were collected archivally from a sample of sexually abused children (n = 47) and a nonabused comparison sample (n = 82). The two samples were grossly matched for gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. The protocols were scored using a quantitative scoring system. The data were analyzed using a discriminant function analysis. **Group membership could not be predicted based on a total HTP score.** (Emphasis added.)”*

Another article, published in the *Journal Of Clinical Psychology* in 1998, (volume 54, No. 2, 219-222), entitled *Human Figure Drawings and House Tree-Person Drawings as Indicators of Self-Esteem: A Quantitative Approach* authored by **Gary Groth-Marnat and Lynne Roberts**, states in its abstract, “Results indicated that neither be HFD (Human Figure Drawing) nor the HTP (House- Tree –Person) quantitative composite ratings of psychological health related to the formal measures of self-esteem.”

An article published in 1984 in *Canadian Psychology* entitled *Human Figure Drawing in Adults: An Update of the Empirical Evidence, 1967-1982*, authored by **Kahill** suggests that a number of studies have reached “unfavorable conclusions” about these instruments. The author states, “establishing what it is they mean [drawings and their elements] with any precision or predictability is difficult. It may well be impossible when meaning is inconsistent and idiosyncratic.”

Lilienfeld et al¹ (2000) in *The Scientific Status of Projective Techniques* derides both the drawing tests and TAT citing both the lack of reliability, validity and norms as well as the lack of evidence to ensure that interpretation of the TAT is not biased against one or more cultural groups. **Dorfman and Hersen** (2001)² state the projective drawing tests “lack empirical research and have poor psychometrics. The use of projective drawing techniques in psychological assessment has been cited as unethical on the grounds that they are not valid instruments.” In an article written by **Lally** and published in 2003 entitled *What Tests Are Acceptable to Use in Forensic Evaluations? A Survey of Experts*, projective drawing tests such as human figure drawings were

¹ Lilienfeld, Scott O. et al (2000). *The scientific status of projective techniques. Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 1,(2), 27-66.

² Dorman, W.I. & Hersen, M (2001). *Understanding Psychological Assessment*. New York:Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. (page 276)

repeatedly found unacceptable by 90% of the psychologists surveyed. The Thematic Apperception Test was also found unacceptable by 82% of psychologists.

It is my opinion that at the very least, information and conclusions drawn from the TAT and projective drawings be stricken from any psychological report submitted to any court due to the lack of reliability, validity and normative data.

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