

# Psychology essays - children neurological test



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## **Children Neurological Test**

### **House-Tree-Person Test**

Anguish engulfs life in many forms - lurking behind secret emotion. Bitter pain grips hearts, strangling breath; vague cries gnaw darkness. Each year countless amounts of children are physically or emotionally abused or neglected. Unfortunately, the number of battered children who remain buried among shadow continues rising as liberation fails.

These children, as well as many others hiding different underlying emotions, fall through obscurity undetected, awaiting rescue - continuously holding hope. Therefore, through recent years, a new attempt at personality interpretation and child abuse recognition has been developed -the House-Tree-Person test. Can today ensure tomorrow?

### **What is it?**

This specific projective personality test was developed by John N. Buck, in 1948 and updated in 1969. The test was published by Western Psychological Services located in Los Angeles, California. The House-Tree-Person test (HTP) is a projective personality test in which the participant simply reacts to or presents ambiguous, abstract, or unstructured stimuli -typically in the form of pictures or drawings (Fahmy, 2007, p. 1). Usually, it is administered to anyone over the age of three.

Yet, because the HTP requires its participants to draw, it is normally dispensed to children or adolescents, which could be a significant factor in why it is used in aiding child maltreatment detection. According to Buck (1977), " The House-Tree-Person is a technique designed to aid the clinician

in obtaining information concerning an individual's sensitivity, maturity, flexibility, efficiency, degree of personality integration, and interaction with the environment, specifically and generally" (p. 1). The HTP is very useful due to its simplicity, which assists in delving among individual's personalities, making it a very popular technique used today, especially among children.

The basic aim of the HTP is to "measure aspects of a person's personality through interpretation of drawings and responses to questions" (Fahmy, 2007, p. 1). Yet, the test has also been reported to have helped evaluate brain damage or general neurological performance. Essentially, through requiring the drawings of houses, trees, and people, Buck believed that these could provide relevant information about the functioning of a test taker's personality through a sense of familiarity (Faymy, 2007, p. 1).

Therefore, the HTP has been a widely used tool in association with determining child abuse as well as through its encouragement of hidden self-perceptions and awareness.

### **Interpreting Images**

On average, the HTP takes about 150 minutes to finish, which merely adds to the test's popularity. However, this can change according to whether the individual's particular personality operates among the "normal" scale range, which would take less time to administer, or if the test taker is neurologically harmed, which could take much more time to complete. The test has two basic phases: drawing and questions/interpretation.

Essentially, the first part of the test is to draw a house, a tree, and a person, each on a separate piece of paper with only the label of the drawing at the top of each page, using a pencil. The test taker has the opportunity to be as creative as they see fit throughout this completely non-verbal step. However, the examinee is allowed to only represent the particular picture with which they are asked to sketch and to only use the drawing utensil which is given.

From this point, the examinee is allowed the opportunity to describe, in a sense, exactly what they have drawn - defining their artwork in association with themselves. Obviously, this is the phase during the test where the examiner can start to assess participant's personality aspects through their responses toward each drawing. During the second phase, basically the same step taken in phase one occurs. The test taker is again asked to depict a house, a tree, and a person, but this time using crayons.

Then, the individual is again asked to explain what they have drawn as well as how it pertains to them in particular. During both of the individual's explanations, the administrator is given the chance to ask the test taker questions in relation to their drawings. Sample test questions range from, "Is it a happy house?", "What is the house made of?", "Is the tree alive?" or "How does that person feel?" depending on which particular drawing the questions are directed towards (Faymy, 2007, p. 2).

Depending on their answers to these questions and how they relate them to their pictures can definitely bring out different personality interpretations for the administrator. Of course, there are different variations to the test

consisting of more or less phases, which include different writing utensils.

However, this is the most basic and preferred form of the HTP administered.

According to Buck (1977), " The objects of House, Tree, and Person were chosen because they (1) were familiar items or concepts even to very young children; (2) were more willingly accepted for drawing by Ss of all ages and types than were other suggested objects; and (3) appeared to stimulate more frank and free verbalization than did other items" (p. 1). Therefore, it is through these drawings that the psychologist can further analyze an individual's private perceptions and personal outlooks among their lives.

Due to the amount of flexibility provided through the HTP test, a number of valuable considerations in favor of this particular assessment have been observed. According to Blain, Bergner, Lewis and Goldstein (1981), the test is an important apparatus because it is disguised and unobtrusive, there are minimal intellectual demands, and it does not rely on conscious report (p. 668). Hence, individual's who are normally withdrawn, unrefined, or who typically unconsciously encumber repressed thoughts, such as young children in particular, will be likely to become much more adept at " coming out of their shell" in this particular testing situation due to the extremely non threatening environment presented.

The HTP could be thought of as a nice ice-breaker, in a way, for clinician and participant to get to know each other and invite a more relaxing atmosphere. Drawing allows the freedom of open expression, which does not intimidate, especially children. However, difficulty can often approach during the

questioning part of the phases, which could develop participant's anxiety and withdrawal.

### **Scoring**

In scoring the HTP, projective qualities are blatantly surfaced. Basically, the HTP is assessed using an objective quantitative manner and a subjective qualitative manner. Quantitative items are judged on a particular scale, which gives a numbered score, and qualitative items are marked projectively if they could not be assessed using the quantitative tabulation scales. However, different details provided within the test takers drawings exhibit very dissimilar standpoints.

Diverse details can apply differential value from the perspective of the intellectual level of function only when they appear in the drawings as well as when they are not present; similarly, some details provide no significant quantitative importance as far as the intellectual level of function is concerned, and some details have differential value only when considered in relation to other details (Buck, 1977, p. 35).

Some examples of these characteristics could include missing windows, smoke issuing from the chimney, and only drawing one ear of a person - each of these examples could possibly represent imperative regressed thoughts, which the psychologist tries interpreting.

However, quantitative items are judged also according to a " good" and " flaw" scoring system. " Flaw" items were essentially those details which appeared in about 50 or more of the drawings of those which exhibit lower

intelligence, and “ good” items were those which emerged in at least 50% of the drawings of those of borderline intelligence or higher (Buck, 1964, p. 20).

All in all, depending on what and how a test taker draws could provide extremely significant cues into their subconscious perceptions, as well as their answers to the questions provided. For example, Buck explains that an examiner who is insecure is likely to be found drawing symmetrical objects such as two windows or two chimneys, and maladjusted individuals sometimes draw sequentially such as using extreme details without little consideration for the relationship of the fine points together or as a whole (Buck, 1977, p. 84).

The fact that certain characteristic attributes of drawings can be associated with assured personality traits, can perhaps provide safe assumption that the HTP may bring out certain unconsciously hidden thoughts, which would not otherwise surface, especially among children. Therefore, ideas related to neglect, abuse, anger, hurt, sadness and several other emotions could rise and give face to many acts which children engage, like fights or depression, yet do not realize as to why they have acted in this particular way due to their inability to understand this very concept. Hence, the HTP provides means of possibly allowing children as well as adults to “ escape” turmoil’s of their own minds and bring light to regressed thoughts through drawing simple pictures and interpretation.

Also, administrators of the HTP must be very well educated in the scoring of this particular projective test. In fact, the test publishers have provided a very detailed 350-page administration and scoring manual, which requires

proper training to oversee. Basically, you cannot simply look at the picture and determine whether this person has a “ normal” background or not, extensive training must take place beforehand. Therefore, scoring of the HTP can be very difficult indeed due to the amount of preparation and knowledge which the test examiner must undergo and attain.

### **Norms**

This test grants many ways of interpreting an individual’s inner emotions and thoughts as well as aiding in strengthening the relationship between counselor and children or adults. However, the analysis hugely lacks validity and reliability proof, which has made the HTP subject to significant criticism due to its shortness of dependability.

However, the Goodenough-Harris Draw-a-Man test has reportedly been a very good projective personality test to administer in terms of psychometric properties, which when placed in conjunction with the HTP could aid in providing a better range of reliability and validity for the House-Tree-Person.

One of the reasons for the tests absence of validity and reliability can be seen through its subjectivity. This bias can take place simply because the examiner merely sees what is drawn on a piece of paper and hears what the child or adult tells them about the particular drawing, rather than understanding the entirety of the individual’s background and circumstances. Groth-Marnat (1990) relates, “ It has been suggested that interpreters often use their intuitive judgments when interpreting the drawings of children rather than using proven scoring methods, even when



they are available such as the D-A-P scoring method to assess cognitive development” (as cited in Deffenbaugh, 2003, p. 8).

Therefore, critics can suggest that HTP test administrators are not fully able to manage this particular test and may not ever acquire this opportunity. Unfortunately, due to the nonexistence of reliability and validity presented by this test, undeniable proof cannot be offered by examiner’s, which has been known to cause slight controversy in the direction of actually taking the HTP seriously. Groth-Marnat (1990) expands through stating, “ The age, relative drawing skill and ability, testing situation, intelligence, and the child’s experience with previous projective drawing tests must all be taken into consideration and standardized to begin to make reliable conclusions” (as cited in Deffenbaugh, 2003, p. 9).

Essentially, the examiner cannot underestimate the test taker’s prior experience or life situation; they must take into account these characteristics beforehand and realize that just because something is aloof in a drawing, this may not necessarily cue problem areas.

### **Target Areas**

However, on a different note, the HTP has attempted to prove itself to play a significant role in suggesting child abuse detection, which is a very important factor among today’s society for many different reasons from the increasing child’s blatant denials to parents’ excuses. For instance, Von Hutton (1994) produced a scoring system for the HTP, pertaining to target children with personality and emotional characteristics, which may be present among those who are battered.

The system was composed of four scoring scales, which were preoccupation with sexually relevant concepts (SRC), aggression and hostility (AH), withdrawal and guarded accessibility (WGA), and alertness for danger, suspiciousness, and lack of trust (ADST) (as cited in Deffenbaugh, 2003, p. 10). Essentially, the basic focus of this study was to find means of determining children who hold maltreatment characteristics and learn how to distinguish them from other kids.

The study consisted of 145 children, both male and female, who were chosen from rural areas. The HTP was given to each of the children, much the same way as typical House-Tree-Person administration. The supervisors took several notes as the children made their drawings. Yet, the only difference of this presentation of the HTP was when the administrators scored the children's drawings, asking them questions which pertained to Hutton's newly developed scale.

According to Hutton (1994), " Children with scores in the 84-94%ile were judged borderline with possible abuse and those in the 95-98%ile were determined significant scores and considered in the probable range of being sexually abused" (as cited in Deffenbaugh, 2003, p. 10). Therefore, from Hutton's standpoint, this novel scale provided the means possible to accurately determine child maltreatment.

After Hutton's study was completed, a spark of interest of HTP in determining child neglect overwhelmed many psychologists. Other studies were made, featuring known children of child abuse, to test the reliability of Hutton's scale. Unfortunately, although Hutton's scoring system was found

as successful in the small study it pertained to, it has yet to be successfully duplicated, which means that it has not yet been judged as valid or reliable (Deffenbaugh, 2003, p. 12).

Therefore, the HTP could provide systematic leads towards speculation of mistreatment towards children; unfortunately, psychologists still cannot solidify this evidence due to the tests subjectivity. Yet, aside from absolute proof, the HTP provides many well-equipped means of offering relaxing avenues of associating clinician and participant and can assist many psychologists among several personality possibilities correlated with individuals.

### **Tangled Perceptions - Believed or Dismissed?**

My opinion of the House-Tree-Person test is that, although it cannot be taken completely seriously, due to the fact that no evidence of reliability or validity stands, it is still a nice test to administer for young children. I think that it is an exceptional way for counselor and patient to basically, get to know each other and learn that they are in a relaxed and open atmosphere, which could essentially open doors of opportunity for perceiving characteristics further along counseling sessions.

As far as interpreting drawings in relation to personality traits, I think speculation is all that is possible. I have worked at a daycare center for two years -kids love drawing, especially scribbling exotic exaggerations.

Therefore, I find it difficult to believe that anything other than a child's creativity, not home life, could possibly be found among the colorful depths of an 8X11 piece of paper.

However, I do believe that it is possible to use the drawings as a starting technique to allow children the freedom needed to relinquish fear and begin talking about themselves as well as emotional events. Unfortunately, I think that in order to provide a clear interpretation of the drawings in association with personality traits, more knowledge is needed about the patient in general before a solid conclusion can establish.

On the other hand, I think that using the HTP as a means of determining child abuse is a great technique used because, although it does not completely prove maltreatment, it does help to arouse suspicion as well as give the child the opportunity to come forth, which is a rare occurrence in other situations. The HTP forces awareness and allows relief. Redemption.

My mom has been a foster parent since I was a freshman in high school. Many memories of children reside among silent corners of my home, each providing their own unique whispers. I have seen first hand the difficulties children face each day amid hurt's flaming fringes. I believe that any step towards improving this destruction is a stride among guaranteeing tomorrow. Therefore, I think the HTP is, although unstable, a wonderful addition to our world of psychology.

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