

# SELF-PROJECTION ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER THROUGH THE DRAW-A-PERSON TEST BASED ON MACHOVER'S THEORY

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## Abstract

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological disorder that arises from traumatic experiences and is characterized by symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal. In clinical psychology practice, assessment of individuals with PTSD can be conducted not only through interviews but also through projective approaches that emphasize nonverbal expression. One relevant instrument is the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP), developed based on the projection theory by Machover (1949). This test assesses the emotional and personality aspects of an individual through the interpretation of human figure drawings. Hammer (1958) added a clinical dimension to the application of graphic projective tests by emphasizing the importance of the emotional context of the drawing's creator. This article discusses the application of Machover's theory and Hammer's perspective in revealing the psychological aspects of PTSD survivors, as well as reviewing two recent studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of graphic tests in understanding the emotional dynamics of trauma survivors. The review results indicate that the DAP can serve as an effective nonverbal communication bridge in identifying intrapsychic conflicts and repressed feelings in individuals with PTSD.

**Keywords:** Draw-A-Person Test; Machover; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; Projective Test.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of human life that influences individuals' emotional, social, and behavioral functioning. In recent decades, awareness of mental health issues in Indonesia has increased significantly, particularly following growing reports on the psychological consequences of traumatic experiences such as natural disasters, violence, and loss. One psychological disorder that frequently emerges in response to such experiences is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), PTSD is characterized by intrusive traumatic memories, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, negative alterations in mood and cognition, and heightened physiological arousal.

In Indonesia, PTSD has been commonly identified among survivors of natural disasters, including earthquakes and floods, as well as among victims of domestic violence and childhood abuse (Zakiah, Rosalinda, & Mauna, 2021). The impact of PTSD extends beyond emotional distress, affecting social relationships, occupational functioning, and academic performance. These broad consequences highlight the

need for comprehensive psychological assessment approaches that are sensitive to the complex emotional dynamics experienced by trauma survivors.

Within the field of clinical psychology, understanding the psychological condition of individuals with PTSD cannot rely solely on verbal self-report measures. Trauma survivors often experience difficulty articulating their experiences due to avoidance, repression, or emotional numbing. As a result, projective techniques have been widely used to explore unconscious psychological processes through symbolic expression. Hammer (1958) emphasized that projective tests function as expressive media capable of penetrating defense mechanisms, thereby allowing access to underlying emotional conflicts that may not be consciously expressed.

Among various graphic projective techniques, the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP) has been recognized as a simple yet meaningful tool for exploring self-representation and emotional dynamics. Previous studies have shown that individuals who have experienced trauma often express emotional tension, fear, and altered self-perception through specific visual characteristics in their human figure drawings (Imanina & Surjaningrum, 2022; Zakiah et al., 2021). These findings suggest that graphic expression may provide valuable insight into the internal experiences of individuals with PTSD, particularly in contexts where verbal expression is limited.

However, despite the continued use of projective drawing techniques in clinical practice, there remains a need for a clearer conceptual understanding of how the Draw-A-Person Test can be applied to identify self-projection and emotional dynamics in individuals with PTSD. Therefore, this article aims to examine theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to the use of the Draw-A-Person Test in understanding self-projection among individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through a qualitative literature-based analysis.

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## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a literature review method. This approach was selected because it aligns with the research objective, which focuses on examining theoretical perspectives and previous research findings related to the use of the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP) in identifying self-projection among individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), based on Machover's theory (1949) and Hammer's perspective (1958). The research design involved an in-depth review of relevant scholarly sources to obtain both conceptual and applied insights into the relationship between symbolic representations in human figure drawings and the emotional dynamics of individuals who have experienced trauma.

The study did not involve direct participation from human subjects. Instead, secondary data were obtained from scientific literature. The analyzed sources consisted of three books and two journal articles that were directly relevant to the research topic. The books included Machover's work (1949), which serves as the foundational theory of self-projection through human figure drawings; Hammer's work

(1958), which elaborates on the clinical application of graphic projective tests; and Handler and Thomas's work (2014), which discusses research aspects and therapeutic applications of drawing-based assessments. The journal articles reviewed were a study by Zakiah, Rosalinda, and Mauna (2021) concerning PTSD among flood survivors, and a study by Imanina and Surjaningrum (2022) examining the relationship between childhood traumatic experiences and post-traumatic stress disorder in adult women. All selected literature was chosen based on its direct relevance to the research theme and its contribution to the theoretical framework employed in this study.

The research procedure involved searching for and selecting literature from credible academic sources, including psychology textbooks, online scholarly journals, and published clinical psychology research. The selection of literature was based on thematic relevance, year of publication, and contribution to the development of projective theory and PTSD studies. Once selected, the literature was carefully reviewed, and relevant sections related to self-projection concepts, psychological defense mechanisms, and symbolic interpretation within the Draw-A-Person Test were systematically recorded. The collected sources were then analyzed thematically to identify similarities and differences among authors' perspectives, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the application of the DAP in the context of individuals with PTSD.

The primary instrument examined in this study was the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP), developed by Machover (1949). In this literature-based study, the DAP was not administered directly to participants but was examined through existing theories and previous research findings. Based on the reviewed literature, the DAP is regarded as a projective instrument capable of revealing self-image, unconscious dynamics, and intrapsychic conflicts through visual elements such as figure size, spatial position, line pressure, and the inclusion or omission of body details. The validity and reliability of the DAP as a psychological assessment instrument have been discussed by Handler and Thomas (2014), who emphasized that the effectiveness of the test depends on interpretation within the individual's emotional and cultural context.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative thematic analysis approach by examining patterns and key themes emerging from the reviewed literature. The analysis stages included source collection, identification of key concepts, categorization of relevant themes, and drawing conclusions based on relationships among theoretical perspectives. The results of the analysis were then synthesized to explain how the Draw-A-Person Test functions as a medium of projection in understanding personality characteristics and traumatic experiences among individuals with PTSD. The entire analysis process was conducted manually to ensure interpretive accuracy and theoretical consistency. Academic integrity was maintained by citing all sources in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA)

7th edition guidelines and ensuring originality and clarity of citation throughout the manuscript.

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### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on a review of relevant literature, the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP) occupies an important position as a graphic projective instrument in clinical psychological assessment, particularly for understanding the emotional dynamics of individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The findings indicate that DAP is capable of representing personality characteristics and unconscious conflicts through symbolic expressions in human figure drawings, making it a valuable medium for accessing nonverbal aspects of psychological functioning in trauma survivors.

Machover's projection theory (1949) provides a fundamental framework for interpreting the projective meaning of human figure drawings. According to this perspective, the human figure drawn by an individual reflects self-perception and perceptions of the surrounding environment. Visual elements such as figure size, spatial placement on the page, line pressure, and the presence or absence of specific body parts offer insights into emotional conditions and defense mechanisms. For example, small or faintly drawn figures often suggest feelings of helplessness or low self-esteem, whereas strong line pressure may indicate an effort to maintain control over internal anxiety. These patterns are particularly relevant in individuals with PTSD, whose drawings frequently reflect unresolved traumatic experiences and altered self-representation.

Hammer (1958) expanded the application of the DAP by emphasizing its clinical dimension, particularly the importance of emotional context, nonverbal expression, and the drawing process itself. From this viewpoint, accurate interpretation should not be limited to the final product of the drawing but should also consider how the drawing is created. This approach deepens the understanding of trauma survivors' personality dynamics, which are often characterized by emotional tension and repression. In the context of PTSD, the act of drawing may serve as an indirect channel for expressing emotions that are difficult to articulate verbally.

Empirical findings from more recent studies further support the relevance of the DAP in understanding the psychological condition of trauma survivors. Zakiah, Rosalinda, and Mauna (2021) reported that flood survivors tended to display restrained emotional expression and negative self-image in their human figure drawings. Similarly, Imanina and Surjaningrum (2022) observed that individuals who experienced childhood abuse frequently depicted human figures with minimal detail and absent facial expressions, indicating emotional repression, fear, and social withdrawal. These findings are consistent with classical projective theories and demonstrate the continued applicability of the DAP across different traumatic contexts.

In addition to illustrating emotional dynamics, the findings also highlight the conceptual strength of the Draw-A-Person Test as an integrative assessment tool. The

convergence between classical projection theory and contemporary empirical evidence suggests that the symbolic elements expressed in human figure drawings function as a bridge between unconscious processes and observable behavior. This integrative capacity positions the DAP not merely as a supplementary technique, but as a meaningful framework for understanding how traumatic experiences are internalized and represented symbolically. From a psychodynamic perspective, such representations offer insight into how individuals with PTSD negotiate identity, emotional regulation, and self-perception in the aftermath of trauma.

Furthermore, the applicability of the Draw-A-Person Test extends beyond its theoretical foundation to practical clinical contexts, particularly within culturally diverse settings. The nonverbal nature of graphic projective tests makes the DAP especially valuable for individuals who experience difficulty articulating traumatic memories verbally. In trauma-informed practice, drawing activities may reduce psychological resistance and facilitate emotional expression in a less confrontational manner. This characteristic is particularly relevant in contexts where cultural norms discourage direct verbal disclosure of emotional distress. Consequently, the DAP offers clinicians a culturally sensitive and psychologically safe medium for accessing trauma-related material while respecting individual coping mechanisms.

Overall, the synthesis of classical theories and contemporary research demonstrates that the Draw-A-Person Test serves a dual function in the assessment of individuals with PTSD. Beyond its diagnostic value, the DAP also holds therapeutic potential by facilitating the expression of emotions that are otherwise difficult to convey verbally. In clinical settings, the use of the DAP enables psychologists to identify unconscious conflicts while simultaneously providing a safe and constructive medium for emotional release. Consequently, the application of the Draw-A-Person Test offers deeper insight into the psychodynamic aspects of trauma survivors and contributes meaningfully to psychological assessment and recovery processes.

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#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of a literature review, the Draw-A-Person Test (DAP) has proven to have important value in understanding emotional dynamics and intrapsychic conflict in individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Through a graphic projective approach, DAP provides space for individuals to express traumatic experiences symbolically and nonverbally, thereby assisting psychologists in identifying self-image, emotional tension, and hidden defense mechanisms.

Machover's theory (1949) and development by Hammer (1958) remain relevant in explaining the relationship between image symbols and individual psychological states, as well as reinforcing the understanding that drawing activities can serve as therapeutic means. Thus, DAP is not only useful as a clinical assessment tool, but also

as an expressive medium that supports the psychological recovery process of trauma survivors

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