

# THE HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING PROJECTIVE TEST IN REVEALING ANXIETY AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOSCENTS

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## Abstract

Projective tests, specifically the Human Figure Drawing Test (HFDT), serve as psychological assessment tools designed to evaluate the cognitive, emotional, and personality dimensions of an individual through the medium of drawing. This study examines the efficacy of human figure drawings in identifying anxiety among children and adolescents by integrating the theoretical frameworks of Goodenough-Harris, Koppitz, and Machover. The Goodenough-Harris theory elucidates the correlation between cognitive maturity and visual perception through drawing, while the Koppitz approach emphasizes emotional indicators such as line pressure, figure placement, and facial expressions. Furthermore, Machover posits that human figure drawings act as a self-projection, reflecting an individual's internal conflicts and psychological state. A synthesis of three journal articles reveals that the capacity to draw a human figure functions not only as a marker of cognitive development but also as a vehicle for emotional expression that symbolically uncovers anxiety. Consequently, projective human figure drawings hold significant clinical value in mental health contexts, particularly for the non-verbal and empathic detection of anxiety in younger populations.

**Keywords:** Human Figure Drawing Test (HFDT), Projective Test, Anxiety, Children, Adolescents, Psychological Assessment, Emotional Expression.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human development is a holistic process involving various dimensions, ranging from cognitive and emotional aspects to the social environment. During childhood and adolescence, cognitive and emotional development are two crucial aspects as they form the foundation of an individual's personality in adulthood. However, identifying psychological conditions such as anxiety in these age groups often faces unique challenges, primarily because children and adolescents tend to express and manage their feelings through non-verbal symbols rather than direct verbal communication. This underlines the urgency of using projective assessment tools like the Human Figure Drawing Test (HFDT), which serves as a medium for emotional expression that can reveal anxiety symbolically and empathically.

Historically, human figure drawing tests were first introduced by Florence Goodenough (1926) through the Draw-A-Man Test, which aimed to assess a child's intelligence level based on the complexity and detail of the drawing. This theory was further developed by Goodenough-Harris (1963), who viewed drawing ability as a reflection of cognitive development levels and visual perception. Over time, psychological practitioners began to find that drawing results do not only reflect

intellectual ability but also contain deep emotional elements. Elizabeth Koppitz (1968) made a significant contribution through the development of Emotional Indicators (EI), where visual elements such as line pressure, figure placement, and facial expressions are interpreted as manifestations of emotional conditions such as anxiety, tension, or insecurity. In a parallel perspective, Karen Machover (1949) expanded the function of this test by emphasizing that the human figure is a projection of self-image reflecting internal conflicts and individual defense mechanisms.

The importance of integrating these projective theories is further strengthened by recent research findings in Indonesia. A study by Fadillah and Medianta Tarigan (2022) confirms that human figure drawing tests remain relevant as objective measurement tools for assessing children's cognitive maturity and visual perception. Meanwhile, research by Ariyantika et al. (2023) shows that expression through non-verbal symbols like drawings is closely related to a child's ability to recognize and manage their feelings. Furthermore, drawing activities have also been found to have significant therapeutic value, as evidenced in research by Farah Fairuz and Sendi Satriadi (2024), which demonstrates the effectiveness of drawing in reducing anxiety levels in adolescents. Thus, this study is crucial for examining how projective human figure drawing tests can bridge the understanding between cognitive and emotional aspects, allowing for the early detection of anxiety non-confrontationally to support individual psychological well-being.

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## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research utilizes a literature study approach through a descriptive analysis method. This procedure is designed to examine theories and research results relevant to projective human figure drawing, particularly those founded on the perspectives of Goodenough-Harris (1963), Koppitz (1968), and Machover (1949). By integrating these classical frameworks, the study explores how visual expressions reveal anxiety in children and adolescents. The data analyzed consists of three national scientific journals and several classic psychological projection books that serve as the primary references. The systematic process involves reading, identifying, and interpreting the contents of these journals to find meaningful connections between empirical research and the established theoretical foundations. Additionally, a comparative analysis is conducted to review the consistency between the specific research methods used in each journal ranging from quantitative correlational to qualitative descriptive designs and the underlying projective theories. Through this comprehensive analytical approach, the study achieves a holistic understanding of how human figure drawing serves as both a cognitive assessment tool and a medium for emotional exploration and therapy.

**Table 1. Methodological Framework Summary**

Component	Description	Reference
Research Design	Literature study with a descriptive analysis method to synthesize theoretical and empirical data	Prayoga Mahardika (2026)
Theoretical Integration	Combination of cognitive maturity (Goodenough-Harris), emotional indicators (Koppitz), and self-projection/inner conflict (Machover)	(Goodenough-Harris, 1963; Koppitz, 1968; Machover, 1949).
Data Sources	Three National scientific Journals and primary classic projection psychology texts.	(Fadillah & Tarigan, 2022; Fairuz & Satriadi, 2024; Ariyantika et al., 2023).
Analytical Procedure	Systematic Identification and Comparative review to link empirical findings with theoretical constructs.	Prayoga Mahardika (2026).

## Results

The review of the selected literature reveals that the human figure drawing test serves as a multifaceted instrument for psychological assessment, bridging the gap between cognitive development and emotional expression. The first major finding, based on the research by Fadillah and Medianta Tarigan (2022), confirms a significant correlation between visual perception skills and children's intellectual maturity. This study reinforces the Goodenough-Harris theory, suggesting that as a child's visual perception improves, their ability to represent the human figure with detail and complexity also matures, making the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test (GHDT) a still relevant and objective non-verbal tool in Indonesia. Moving into the emotional domain, the study by Farah Fairuz and Sendi Satriadi (2024) demonstrates that drawing activities function effectively as art therapy to reduce anxiety levels significantly among adolescents living in orphanages. Their results indicate that drawing provides a symbolic space for individuals to release inner conflicts and tension, achieving emotional balance through a process of catharsis. This aligns with Machover's (1949) perspective that human drawings are a projection of the self and reflect deep-seated personality dynamics and internal psychological states. Furthermore, the work of Ariyantika et al. (2023) highlights that elementary school students utilize non-verbal symbols, such as drawings and shapes, to recognize, understand, and manage their feelings. Their findings support Koppitz's (1968) theory regarding emotional indicators, where specific elements like line pressure, figure positioning, or facial expressions act as markers for emotional stability or imbalance. Collectively, these results signify that

human figure drawings are not merely indicators of cognitive development but also vital tools for revealing hidden anxieties and supporting mental health through a non-verbal and empathetic approach.

**Table 2. Summary of Research Findings**

Research Focus	Key Findings	Primary Reference
Cognitive maturity	Positive Correlation between visual perception skills and intellectual maturity reflected in drawing complexity.	Fadillah & Tarigan (2022)
Anxiety Reduction	Art therapy through drawing significantly lowers anxiety and serves as a medium for emotional catharsis.	Fairuz & Satriadi (2024)
Emotional Expression	Children use non-verbal symbols in drawings to communicate and manage complex emotions.	Ariyantika et al.,(2023)
Projective analysis	Specific drawing elements (line pressure, posture,expressions) reveal inner conflicts and self-image.	Machover (1949); Koppitz (1968)

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Findings

The synthesis of the selected studies reveals objective data regarding the functionality of the Human Figure Drawing Test (HFDT) across different psychological dimensions. First, the quantitative correlational analysis by Fadillah and Medianta Tarigan (2022) identifies a significant statistical relationship between visual perception skills and intellectual maturity scores obtained through the Goodenough-Harris Drawing Test (GHDT). Their data indicates that higher visual-motor integration directly corresponds to more complex and detailed human figure representations in children. Second, the experimental research conducted by Farah Fairuz and Sendi Satriadi (2024) utilizing a pre-test and post-test design demonstrates a statistically significant decrease in anxiety levels among adolescents following art therapy interventions. Finally, qualitative observations by Ariyantika et al. (2023) show that elementary-aged children consistently utilize non-verbal symbols such as specific shapes, line pressures, and figure sizes to represent emotional states they cannot yet articulate. These findings are summarized in Table 1 below..

**Table 3. Summary of Empirical Research Outcomes**

Research Focus	Key Objective Findings	Source
Cognitive Assessment	Confirmed Correlation between visual perception and GDHT complexity scores.	Fadillah & Tarigan (2022)
Therapeutik Impact	Significant reduction in adolescent anxiety scores post-drawing intervention.	Fairuz & Satriadi (2024)
Emotional Expression	Identification of specific non-verbal symbols as primary emotional outlets.	Ariyantika et al., (2023).

Source : Processed Secondary Data (2026)

### 3.2 Discussion

The findings suggest that the human figure drawing is more than a creative exercise; it is a profound intersection of cognitive and emotional health. The correlation between perception and intelligence (Goodenough-Harris theory) implies that a child's cognitive maturity serves as the underlying framework for how they perceive and reconstruct their social reality. When this framework is combined with the "Emotional Indicators" defined by Koppitz (1968), researchers can interpret the "why" behind visual anomalies. For example, the significant anxiety reduction observed in adolescents can be explained through the concept of catharsis; drawing provides a symbolic, safe space for the individual to externalize inner conflicts that they may find too threatening to discuss verbally.

Furthermore, as posited by Machover (1949), the drawing acts as a "self-projection" where the figure represents the individual's own body image and defense mechanisms. This explains why non-verbal symbols are so effective in elementary students it allows them to bypass the cognitive limitations of language to express subconscious fears. The implication for psychological practice is that HFDT remains a vital, non-confrontational assessment tool. While it is limited by its projective nature and requires professional interpretation, its ability to bridge cognitive and emotional understanding makes it an essential bridge for early mental health intervention in younger populations.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the synthesis of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, this study concludes that the human figure drawing projective test is a highly significant tool for understanding the psychological dynamics of children and adolescents, particularly in revealing underlying anxiety. The integration of theories from Goodenough-Harris (1963), Koppitz (1968), and Machover (1949) provides a comprehensive lens through which human drawings can be analyzed not only as

markers of cognitive maturity but also as profound symbolic expressions of emotional states and inner conflicts.

The research findings demonstrate that when children or adolescents lack the verbal capacity to communicate their distress, drawing serves as a non-confrontational and empathetic medium for assessment. Beyond its diagnostic utility, the act of drawing itself offers significant therapeutic potential, facilitating emotional catharsis, reducing stress, and fostering self-awareness. Therefore, the application of the Human Figure Drawing Test (HFDT) should be further integrated into clinical, educational, and mental health practices to support early intervention and the overall psychological well-being of younger populations.

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