

Machover Draw-a-Person

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Machover Draw-a-Person Test

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Psychodiagnostics

1. Core Definition

The **Machover Draw-a-Person Test** (DAP) is a widely recognized **projective psychological assessment** tool designed to evaluate an individual's personality, emotional state, and cognitive functioning, primarily through the analysis of human figure drawings. Conceived by American psychologist Karen Machover in 1949, the test originated in Sweden and was initially developed for the psychodynamic evaluation and diagnostic assessment of children. As a projective technique, the DAP operates on the premise that an individual's drawing of a human figure reflects their self-image, perceptions of others, and unconscious psychological conflicts, projecting internal feelings and experiences onto the external medium of the drawing. Unlike objective tests that rely on structured responses, the DAP provides a less structured stimulus, allowing for a broader range of subjective interpretations that are believed to reveal deeper aspects of the personality.

At its core, the test involves a straightforward instruction: the subject is asked to draw a person. After completing the first drawing, they are typically instructed to draw a person of the opposite sex. The subsequent analysis extends beyond mere artistic skill, delving into a myriad of details such as the figure's size, posture, facial expression, clothing, and the presence or absence of specific body parts or accessories. These elements are then interpreted within a comprehensive psychodynamic framework, integrating principles from various theoretical schools of thought to construct a holistic psychological profile of the individual. The DAP remains in regular use within clinical settings, serving as a valuable adjunct to other assessment methods, particularly in pediatric and adolescent psychology.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The Machover Draw-a-Person Test derives its name from its originator, **Karen Machover**, a distinguished American psychologist who introduced this influential projective technique in 1949. Although an American, her initial work on the test took place in Sweden, suggesting an international collaboration or influence in its early development. The DAP emerged during a period of significant growth and refinement in psychological assessment, especially within the psychodynamic tradition. This era witnessed the proliferation of various projective tests, such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), all designed to tap into unconscious processes and provide insights into personality structure that might not be accessible through direct questioning or objective inventories.

Machover's contribution was to formalize and systematize the interpretation of human figure

drawings, which had been informally used by clinicians for decades. Prior to Machover, rudimentary forms of drawing analysis existed, but her seminal work, *Personality Projection in the Drawing of the Human Figure* (1949), provided a comprehensive framework, detailed interpretive guidelines, and theoretical justifications that elevated the Draw-a-Person test to a scientifically recognized assessment tool. Her approach outlined specific correlations between drawing characteristics and personality traits, thereby establishing a standardized method for interpretation. This formalization ensured the test's widespread adoption and integration into clinical practice, particularly for diagnostic assessments of children and adolescents, where verbal expression of internal states might be limited.

Over the decades, the Machover DAP has undergone various adaptations and inspired numerous other figure drawing tests, such as the House-Tree-Person Test (HTP) and the Kinetic Family Drawing (KFD), each building upon Machover's foundational principles. Despite advancements in psychometric testing and debates regarding its empirical validity, the Machover DAP has maintained its presence in clinical psychology due to its perceived clinical utility, ease of administration, and capacity to elicit rich qualitative data. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to offer a non-threatening and engaging medium for individuals, especially children, to express their inner world.

3. Key Characteristics and Administration

The administration of the Machover Draw-a-Person Test is remarkably simple, contributing to its broad applicability across various age groups and clinical settings. The core instruction given to the subject is usually, "Draw a person." After the first drawing is completed, the subject is typically asked to draw a person of the opposite sex. This two-drawing sequence allows for comparisons between self-perception and perception of the opposite gender, or for insights into identification and gender role issues. The test is non-verbal, requiring minimal instruction, which makes it particularly suitable for individuals with communication difficulties, young children, or those experiencing severe anxiety or from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The materials required are basic: a pencil and a blank sheet of paper.

Once the drawing or drawings are completed, the intricate process of analysis begins. The interpretation focuses not on artistic merit but on the projective content conveyed through a multitude of details and omissions. Key characteristics scrutinized include the overall size and placement of the figure on the page, the quality of the line (e.g., strong, faint, broken), and the presence or absence of specific body parts such as eyes, mouth, nose, ears, hands, and feet. Beyond basic anatomy, the analysis extends to elements like clothing, accessories (e.g., hats, jewelry, weapons), and any additional objects or background elements the subject might include. The posture, activity level, and facial expression of the drawn figure are also vital interpretive points, offering clues about the individual's emotional state, self-esteem, and interpersonal

dynamics.

The core characteristic that defines the DAP as a projective test is its reliance on the assumption that individuals project their internal psychological states, conflicts, anxieties, and aspirations onto the ambiguous stimulus of drawing a human figure. The lack of specific guidelines for what or how to draw encourages subjects to externalize their inner world, allowing their unconscious processes to shape the output. The drawn person is often seen as a representation of the self, an ideal self, or a significant other, and the characteristics attributed to the figure are interpreted as symbolic expressions of the subject's own personality dynamics. Therefore, the drawing becomes a rich source of symbolic information, providing a window into the individual's subjective experiences and psychological organization.

4. Theoretical Underpinnings

Accurate and insightful interpretation of the Machover Draw-a-Person Test necessitates a sophisticated integration of several foundational psychological theories, predominantly those rooted in the psychodynamic tradition. Machover herself emphasized that the meaning derived from a drawing is not isolated but rather emerges from a synthesis of principles from **drive psychology**, **ego psychology**, **object relations theory**, and other theoretical perspectives that pertain to the development of the self. This multidisciplinary approach allows clinicians to construct a nuanced understanding of the individual's inner world, moving beyond superficial observations to deep-seated psychological dynamics.

Drive psychology, often associated with Sigmund Freud's classical psychoanalysis, contributes to the interpretation by focusing on the representation of basic instincts and unconscious impulses. For instance, the exaggeration or omission of certain body parts might be interpreted in terms of underlying drives, conflicts, or anxieties related to sexuality, aggression, or dependency. The energy level conveyed in the drawing, the assertiveness of the lines, or the presence of aggressive elements could be analyzed through this lens. This theoretical framework helps in understanding how repressed desires or unresolved conflicts might manifest symbolically within the drawn figure, influencing its form and content.

Ego psychology, developed by thinkers like Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann, shifts the focus to the ego's adaptive capacities, defense mechanisms, and its role in mediating between internal drives and external reality. From an ego psychology perspective, the drawing might reveal the individual's sense of self-control, their coping styles, and the strength of their ego boundaries. For example, a figure with strong, intact boundaries might suggest a well-integrated ego, whereas fragmented or transparent figures could indicate a fragile ego or defensive struggles. The presence of specific defenses, such as denial (e.g., omitting threatening body parts) or intellectualization (e.g., overly schematic drawings), can be inferred through a careful analysis informed by ego

psychology.

Object relations theory, pioneered by Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and others, provides a framework for understanding how early relationships with significant others (objects) shape an individual's personality and their capacity for interpersonal connection. In the context of the DAP, the drawn figure's interaction with its environment, its perceived emotional availability, and the characteristics attributed to it can reflect internalized object relations. A figure that appears isolated, withdrawn, or hostile might suggest difficulties in forming secure attachments, while a warm, engaging figure could indicate positive internalized object representations. The comparison between the first and second drawings (male and female figures) can offer further insights into perceptions of parental figures and internal representations of gender roles.

Furthermore, other theories relating to the **self's development**, including aspects of self-psychology and developmental psychology, are integral to a complete interpretation. These theories help clinicians understand how the drawn figure reflects the individual's sense of identity, self-esteem, body image, and their stage of psychosocial development. Discrepancies between the ideal self and the perceived self, feelings of inferiority, or struggles with identity formation can all be projected onto the human figure. Thus, the Machover DAP, through its reliance on these intertwined theoretical perspectives, offers a rich, multidimensional pathway to understanding the complexities of the human psyche.

5. Interpretation Principles

The interpretation of the Machover Draw-a-Person Test is a nuanced and intricate process that moves beyond superficial observations, relying heavily on a systematic analysis of various graphic details and their symbolic meanings within a psychodynamic framework. Machover's methodology provides a comprehensive guide for clinicians, emphasizing that no single sign is definitive, but rather a constellation of signs, contextualized within the individual's history and overall clinical picture, yields meaningful insights. The interpretive principles categorize observations into several key areas, each offering specific clues about the subject's internal state.

One primary area of focus is the **overall impression** of the drawing, including the size and placement of the figure on the page. A very large figure might suggest expansiveness, grandiosity, or a need for recognition, while a small figure could indicate feelings of inadequacy, withdrawal, or low self-esteem. Placement on the top of the page might suggest intellectual focus or a striving for achievement, whereas placement at the bottom could imply feelings of insecurity or a connection to concrete realities. The quality of the line -- firm, tentative, broken, or heavily reinforced -- can provide insights into the individual's energy levels, anxiety, impulsivity, or defensive rigidity.

Detailed analysis of **body parts and their features** is central to interpretation. The head, often considered the center of intellect and social communication, might be exaggerated (suggesting

intellectual striving or egocentricity) or minimized (indicating feelings of inadequacy). Facial features like eyes, mouth, and nose are scrutinized for expressions of emotion and modes of relating. Large, staring eyes might indicate paranoia or vigilance, while omitted eyes could suggest a desire to avoid contact or difficulties with reality. A broad, smiling mouth might mask underlying aggression, while a tiny, thin mouth could imply dependency or oral deprivation. The neck, connecting the head and body, may signify the control of impulses; a long, thin neck might suggest a struggle for control, while a short, thick one could imply impulsivity. Arms and hands are often associated with reaching out, mastery, and aggression; large, powerful hands might suggest aggressive tendencies or a need for control, while omitted or tiny hands could indicate feelings of helplessness or inadequacy. Legs and feet represent stability, autonomy, and movement; their depiction can reflect feelings of security or insecurity, groundedness, or a desire to escape.

Furthermore, attention is given to **clothing and accessories**. The presence or absence of clothing, the style, and the amount of detail can convey information about body image, modesty, exhibitionism, social conformity, and sexual identity. For example, excessive adornment might suggest narcissistic tendencies or a need for external validation, whereas a lack of clothing could indicate a disregard for social conventions or feelings of vulnerability. Objects included with the figure, such as weapons, cigarettes, or tools, are interpreted symbolically, representing latent aggression, oral fixations, or occupational identification. The overall integration of the drawing, its symmetry, proportion, and the presence of erasures or transparencies (e.g., drawing organs visible through clothing) also provide critical interpretive data, reflecting psychological integration, conflict, anxiety, or thought disturbance. The comparative analysis between the male and female figures drawn by the subject further enriches the interpretation, shedding light on the individual's identification with their own gender, their perceptions of the opposite gender, and their struggles with gender roles and sexual identity.

6. Applications

The Machover Draw-a-Person Test finds its primary application within the realm of clinical psychology, serving as a versatile tool for **psychodynamic evaluations** and **diagnostic assessments**, particularly with children and adolescents. Its non-verbal nature makes it exceptionally useful for populations that may struggle with verbal expression, such as very young children, individuals with communication disorders, those experiencing severe anxiety, or individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds where language barriers might exist. In these contexts, the DAP provides a non-threatening and accessible medium through which internal conflicts, emotional states, and perceptions can be externalized and subsequently analyzed.

For children, the test is invaluable in assessing various developmental and emotional issues. Clinicians frequently use the DAP to gain insights into a child's self-concept, body image, and their perception of their own emotional and physical well-being. It can reveal underlying anxieties, fears,

conflicts within the family, and feelings of inadequacy or aggression. For example, a child drawing a small, isolated figure might be experiencing feelings of neglect or social withdrawal, while a figure with exaggerated aggressive features could indicate suppressed anger or a need for control. The test can also aid in identifying potential indicators of abuse, trauma, or significant emotional distress, prompting further investigation and targeted therapeutic interventions.

Beyond children, the DAP has been utilized, though less frequently as a primary diagnostic tool, with adults in various clinical and forensic settings. In these contexts, it can complement other assessment instruments by providing additional qualitative data regarding personality functioning, emotional regulation, and self-perception. It can be particularly useful in exploring unconscious dynamics, defense mechanisms, and deeply ingrained patterns of relating that might be difficult to articulate verbally. While not a standalone diagnostic instrument, the Machover DAP's ability to elicit rich projective material makes it a valuable component of a comprehensive psychological battery, contributing to a more holistic understanding of an individual's psychological landscape.

7. Significance and Impact

The Machover Draw-a-Person Test holds significant historical and contemporary importance within the field of psychological assessment, largely due to its pioneering role in formalizing human figure drawing analysis as a projective technique. Its introduction by Karen Machover provided a structured, albeit qualitatively rich, method for exploring the deeper layers of personality, complementing other psychodynamic assessment tools of its time. The test's enduring presence in clinical practice, particularly its continued regular use in psychodynamic evaluations and diagnostic assessments of children, underscores its perceived utility and accessibility.

Its impact is multifold. Firstly, the DAP made projective assessment more accessible. Requiring only a pencil and paper, it bypassed the need for specialized equipment or extensive verbal interaction, making it suitable for a wide range of populations and clinical settings. This simplicity in administration belies the depth of psychological information it aims to uncover, making it a powerful initial screening tool or an adjunct for more comprehensive evaluations. Secondly, it significantly contributed to the understanding of symbolic representation in psychological assessment, reinforcing the idea that unconscious processes can be externalized through creative expression. Machover's detailed interpretive guidelines provided a foundational text that influenced subsequent generations of clinicians and researchers in projective testing.

Finally, the Machover DAP's emphasis on integrating multiple psychodynamic theories for interpretation has fostered a more holistic and integrated approach to personality assessment. By requiring clinicians to draw upon drive psychology, ego psychology, and object relations theory, it encourages a comprehensive understanding of the individual's psyche rather than a reductionist view. While modern psychology increasingly favors empirically validated, objective measures, the

Machover DAP retains its value in specific clinical contexts where qualitative, idiographic insights into an individual's subjective experience are paramount. It serves as a reminder of the rich tapestry of human expression and the complex interplay between inner experience and external manifestation.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its widespread use and perceived clinical utility, the Machover Draw-a-Person Test, like many other projective tests, has been subjected to extensive debates and significant criticisms regarding its psychometric properties. The primary areas of concern revolve around issues of **reliability**, **validity**, and the inherent **subjectivity of interpretation**, which collectively cast doubt on its scientific rigor compared to standardized, objective psychological instruments.

A major criticism pertains to its **reliability**, particularly inter-rater reliability. Because the interpretation of drawings relies heavily on the clinician's theoretical orientation, experience, and subjective judgment, different clinicians may arrive at vastly different conclusions from the same drawing. This lack of consistency across interpreters makes it difficult to replicate findings and build a robust evidence base. Furthermore, test-retest reliability can also be problematic; an individual's drawing might change significantly over time due to transient emotional states, artistic skill development, or therapeutic interventions, making it challenging to ascertain the stability of the underlying personality traits being measured.

The issue of **validity** is perhaps the most prominent criticism. Critics argue that there is insufficient empirical evidence to consistently link specific drawing characteristics to definitive personality traits or diagnostic categories. Research attempting to correlate Machover DAP indicators with other established measures of psychopathology or personality has yielded mixed and often inconsistent results. It is challenging to establish whether the drawing truly measures what it purports to measure (e.g., aggression, anxiety, self-esteem) or if it simply reflects artistic ability, cultural influences, or transient situational factors. Some critics also point to potential **cultural biases**, as interpretations derived from a Western psychodynamic framework may not be universally applicable or accurate across diverse cultural contexts.

Moreover, the inherent **subjectivity of interpretation** opens the door to potential confirmation bias, where clinicians might interpret ambiguous signs in a way that confirms pre-existing hypotheses about the client. The extensive reliance on symbolic interpretation, while a cornerstone of psychodynamic thought, makes it difficult to verify or falsify specific hypotheses empirically. While proponents emphasize its value in generating rich hypotheses for further exploration, critics contend that such hypotheses often lack sufficient empirical grounding. Consequently, while the Machover DAP can be a useful tool for generating qualitative insights and fostering therapeutic rapport, its diagnostic and predictive power remains a subject of considerable academic and

clinical debate, urging clinicians to use it cautiously and always in conjunction with other, more empirically validated assessment methods.

Further Reading

[Draw-a-person test - Wikipedia](#)

[Projective test - Wikipedia](#)

[Karen Machover - Wikipedia](#)

[Psychodynamic psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Ego psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Object relations theory - Wikipedia](#)

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