

The Psychology of Drawing in Children

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Abstract:

This article serves as a simple gesture to unveil one of the most important modern clinical methods for exploring the psychological depths of a child. The study discusses the concept of drawing as a psychological tool for probing the child's personality, contributing to its development, formation, and diagnosis, and moving towards treatment through the psychological meaning of scribbles and colors. The article concludes by highlighting the clinical benefits of children's drawings, as they serve as an effective projective mechanism for understanding their inner lives in both normal and disturbed contexts.

Keywords: Child Drawing Psychology, Diagnostic Drawing Tests, Art Therapy.

Introduction:

Childhood is considered one of the most important stages in the psychological formation of an individual's personality. According to psychoanalytic theory, a person's character and the features of their mental health are shaped during the first five years. What a child experiences during this period can affect their psychological well-being and contribute to the onset of psychological disturbances.

Given the importance of this stage, the psychological life of the child has become the focus of numerous research studies. Today, the psychological heritage is enriched with a variety of research on the relationship between children's drawings and environmental, cultural, social, physical, motor, and mental factors. These studies also explore their use as a tool for measuring intelligence, delving into the child's personality, uncovering its hidden aspects, as well as being a means of psychological therapy and a way to express and develop creative potential (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 17).

The artistic production of a child, manifested in scribbles followed by colors, is an outlet for the unconscious that reflects the child's experiences and psychological life. The child

lacks the linguistic tools to express their emotions, feelings, and struggles. As a result, these lines and scribbles become the gateway to their psychological world, full of conflicts that may be mere patterns subject to change.

Drawing is one of the activities that holds an important place in the child's world. It goes beyond mere expression and becomes an attempt to solve the human problem with the world and with oneself. Through the projective function of drawing, the child can be freed from the burden of internal or relational crises and can provide answers to them by externalizing them in a reality they have created. This projective function is facilitated by the fusion of reality with imagination, the material with the subjective, and the rational with the emotional in drawing (Hamaidia, 2016, p. 79).

Thus, the clinical value of drawing emerges as a diagnostic tool with its various projective types and as an effective means of therapy for this age group. Drawing is considered a way to express oneself and serves as an artistic method for fulfilling the child's sensory-motor needs.

The Meaning of Children's Drawings :

Children's drawings refer to the free sketches they make on any surface from the time they first hold a pen or something similar, which usually happens around the age of ten months (Al-Hinidi, 2007, p. 21). Children's drawings, as an expressive language, involve conveying meanings and illustrative images. It also reflects the ability to communicate with others, serving as a meeting point between the self and the external world. It expresses the "I" and is a means through which a person aims to achieve psychological balance (Al-Safiti, 2019, p. 124).

These are the linear expressions of things made using different tools and materials. Free drawing is a deliberate attempt to express mental images the child derives during their self-activity on the available space of the paper without specifying a particular subject (Al-Qiq, 2012, p. 61). Through drawing, children can not only visualize their thoughts but also play around with those ideas and transform them into new ones. Drawing and mark-making are some of the child's initial efforts at abstraction and using a symbolic system (Brooks, n.d., p. 91).

Early Interest in Children's Drawings :

The interest in children's drawings began with researcher Cooke, who published a study in 1885 on drawing and its connection to psychological development in children. In 1887, the Italian historian G. Ricci published a booklet on children's art, containing the oldest collection of children's drawings in the world (Al-Hinidi, 2007, p. 30).

The real beginnings of scientific research into children's drawings occurred at the start of the 20th century, with three prominent research projects conducted by German universities. These were the studies of "Karl Lambercht," "George Kirshensteis," and "William Stern" (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 17).

The interest in children's drawings within the clinical psychological context grew with the emergence of what is known as the psychology of children's drawings. This branch of psychology explores the psychological aspects related to the appearance and development of children's drawings at different stages of growth. It highlights the various features and methods children use to express shapes at each stage, examining them from psychological, mental, and artistic perspectives.

Today, psychological heritage is rich in diverse research on the relationship between children's drawings and environmental, cultural, social, physical, motor, sensory, and cognitive factors. It also explores their use as a tool for measuring intelligence, delving into personality traits, revealing hidden aspects of the self, and serving as a psychological treatment tool. Additionally, it is a means for expressing and developing creative potential. With the growing body of research in the field of child drawing psychology, researchers have increasingly focused on precision, control, and objectivity. They have relied on scientific methods like organized observation and experimentation, and employed standardized tools for describing, analyzing, and classifying drawings (Al-Shazly, 2019, p. 194).

The Relationship Between Verbal and Visual Language in Children :

A child's expressive ability is not limited to using spoken language only. Although spoken and written languages are rich in expression due to their use of concrete forms, abstractions, and symbols (Faraj, 1992, p. 39), drawing, for a child, is a language—more than just a means to create something beautiful. Experiments have shown a strong connection between the methods used in children's drawings and the development of their artistic expressions, regardless of their different environments (Al-Dulaimi, 2011, p. 12).

Children's drawings are free sketches they use as a language to express themselves. Through these drawings, children convey many of the meanings and emotions they experience, communicating their inner feelings to those around them. Drawing becomes a means of connecting with others (Al-Safiti, 2019, p. 125).

A child's world may not be fully reflected in words, but it is captured through the lines and colors in their drawings, which represent their personal expressions of their psychological reality, especially considering the limitations of their language abilities.

Stages of Development in Children's Drawings :

Various classifications have been proposed regarding the stages of children's drawing development. Some of these include :

A) Lokye's Classification : According to him, the progression of children's drawings occurs in four stages, ranging from crawling-stage drawings to expressive drawings as follows :

Sensory-Motor Stage : Beginning from the fifth month, where the child makes random movements that leave marks on the paper.

First Symbol Stage : The child begins to form symbols as they perceive them.

Expression Stage : Occurs between the third and fourth year. In this stage, drawings are purposeful and reflect what is on the child's mind, including various indicators.

Realism Stage : The child's drawings begin to represent reality and tangible things, manifesting in two forms: mental realism and visual realism (Faraj, 1992, p. 43).

B) Asfour's Classification (2013, p. 35): She identified six stages in children's drawings:

Discovery of the pen and scribbling of simple shapes.

Simple symbolic drawing and mental realism.

Development of mental realism and strange coloring.

Mental drawing and visual coloring (appearance of visual realism).

Mental and visual drawing.

Decline of childish art and the emergence of realistic drawing, imitation, and reproduction.

Another classification linked sensory-motor abilities with age and expressive artistic production as follows :

Pre-Sketching Stage : From birth to age two.

Sketching Stage: From age two to age four.

Preparing the Form Perception Stage: From age four to age seven.

Form Perception Stage: From age seven to age nine.

Attempt at Realistic Expression Stage: From age eleven to age thirteen (Al-Hinidi, 2007, p. 13).

Based on the previous classifications, studies show differences in defining a unified classification for artistic progression in children's drawing. However, they all agree that the earliest stages of drawing begin during the first years of a child's life, where scribbles with psychological and social meanings emerge. These early drawings reflect the child's psychological experiences, emotions, and feelings.

Psychological Theories Explaining Drawing:

Psychoanalytic Theory: According to this theory, drawing is not simply a photographic projection of what children see in the external world, nor is it merely a mental activity reflecting complex cognitive factors. It is influenced by other emotional and motivational factors linked to the child's mood, personality, conflicts, emotions, desires, personal experiences, instincts, and needs. These variables act as unconscious stimuli for the child. Although these factors may be unknown, they affect the child's behavior, shape their personality, and are reflected in their drawings (Al-Safiti, 2019, p. 140).

Behaviorist Theory : From a behaviorist perspective, considering drawing as a learned behavior requires defining what the child should acquire and organizing the environmental conditions necessary for the learning process. The environment is responsible for shaping and reinforcing behavior. Consequently, drawing becomes an indicator of how well the child understands the task they have performed, and whether the previously set objectives have been achieved. The child's success or failure in accomplishing the desired outcome is measured based on predetermined criteria such as visual and cognitive skills, color coordination, and proportion recognition. This means that analyzing the final product (the drawing) requires breaking it down into several parts based on the observed development of planning and organizing processes, which may lead to a loss of the true meaning of expression (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 40).

Piaget's Cognitive Theory: Piaget views children's drawings as an expression of the level of their cognitive development. He emphasizes that perception blends with sensory-motor activity, and thus, the mental images formed by the child are based on their sensory-motor activities. Therefore, it is not expected that young children (4 or 5

years old) will create drawings based on a realistic perception of the external world, as sensory-motor stages are not fully developed to express mental images. Piaget considers early-stage children's drawings to be egocentric, centered around the child themselves (Faraj, 1992, p. 50).

Piaget's theory also represents a perspective on the relationship between a child's increasing artistic abilities and their adaptation during artistic practice (Al-Hinidi, 2007, p. 87). For Piaget, drawing was not a space for growth but merely a window into the child's mental development. He claimed that a child's drawing reflects their intellectual competence. According to this, children's drawing follows a progressive, universal, and sequential path with minimal adult influence, emphasizing the developmental trajectory of their cognitive skills through their drawings (Brooks, n.d., p. 92).

Gestalt Cognitive Theory: Rudolf Arnheim, a prominent Gestalt psychologist concerned with the psychology of art, proposed a different interpretation of children's drawings and their expressive qualities. He suggested that children draw what they see, but they do so relying on visual concepts. Arnheim argued that we cannot truly understand the nature of visual representation if we attempt to derive that understanding directly from the mere visual projections of perceived objects that make up our world (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 35).

Therefore, the value of drawing lies in its function as a projective mechanism or learned behavior influenced by the lived environment and a sign of the child's healthy cognitive development. The child's marks on paper, viewed collectively, reflect the child's reality and, when examined in detail, help interpret their experiences in relation to themselves and others.

Role of Drawing in Building and Interpreting the Child's Personality :

Children express their own world through their own means, and their drawings are a reflection of their personality. These drawings provide the child with a joyful, free childhood, fostering flexibility and the ability to adapt to new situations in their environment (Al-Hinidi, 2008, p. 25). Drawing plays a crucial role in shaping the child's personality through the following:

Development of creative behavior.

Growth of cognitive abilities.

Cultivation of artistic sensitivity and artistic taste.

Integration of the child's personality and affirmation of their self-identity.

Venting emotions and feelings.

Drawing as a language that aids communication (Al-Shazly, 2019, p. 198).

The importance of children's drawings lies in their ability to provide a qualitative image of a child's thinking characteristics. They are used in intelligence tests to understand a child's intellectual growth (Al-Dulaimi, 2011, p. 18).

Thus, when studying children's drawings as a tool for understanding personality, they serve as a means of projecting the child's self-concept, their attitudes towards others, their fears, and their internal experiences. It is a visual language through which the child expresses their struggles, needs, values, and perceptions of themselves and others. It also reflects their family and social relationships. Therefore, by interpreting a child's drawings, we can assess various aspects of their personality and identify any challenges or difficulties they may be facing, through psychological analysis of the symbolism within the drawings, whether obvious or more deeply hidden (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 194).

Diagnostic Value of Children's Drawings :

Some children and adolescents face difficulties in expressing their current emotions, past feelings, and the suffering they have gone through. In these cases, it is often appropriate to use projective tests and methods to uncover the deep emotional aspects of this age group (Al-Zahrani, 1441 AH, p. 29). For instance, the famous "Draw-a-Man" test, developed by "Judanov," was designed to measure children's intelligence based on the idea that children's drawings reflect their cognitive development, mental growth, and the formation of abstract concepts. A child who has a more complete and mature concept of a man will depict more detailed and spatially accurate representations than a child who has a less mature concept of the same subject (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 35).

Drawings, particularly before children learn to read and write and even before they acquire verbal skills, serve as a bridge between reality and their internal life. They provide a psychoanalyst with a record of the child's life history, offering insights into diagnosing any psychological issues the child may be experiencing. This allows for an understanding of the underlying causes, leading to the proposal of appropriate therapeutic solutions. Children's drawings not only reflect their personalities but also serve as a living model of their mental, psychological, and physical state, which is expressed during their creative process (Al-Hinidi, 2008, p. 20).

Psychological studies of children's drawings involve revealing the nature of these drawings through purposeful observational techniques. This is done by tracking the child's work and documenting each drawing, including the date, topic, and the child's

comments associated with each drawing. The time spent on each drawing is also recorded (Mustafa, 2010, p. 141).

Children's drawings are a form of psychological performance with various characteristics, whether in the cognitive (intellectual) or affective (emotional) domains. These drawings can be analyzed scientifically to make assessments, evaluations, and measurements, aiming to improve our understanding of the child's behavior and formulate the psychological laws governing their development. Drawings can be used to measure intelligence, abilities, personality traits, conflicts, values, and attitudes (Faraj, 1992, p. 6). Psychologists recommend using drawing with children who are academically delayed, those with social and emotional adjustment problems, and children with special needs, as they may require more artistic expression than non-disabled children, particularly those with language difficulties. Thus, drawing can be a valuable tool for understanding their conditions, provided it is focused and not random. When looking at children's drawings, we should carefully examine the content, inquire about the meaning of each drawing, analyze the colors and lines, and explore the type of drawings they prefer (Hamaidiya, 2016, p. 78).

In studying personality and diagnosing its features through drawing, different types of drawings can be used, classified based on the context in which they are produced. These categories include :

Controlled or standardized drawings.

Free drawings.

School-related drawings. (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 194)

The clinician or researcher may favor a particular approach depending on their objectives or the extent to which they believe the method will reveal the child's personality traits. For example, those focused on family interactions might prefer the active family drawing method. Those concerned with issues related to gender identity, sexual differentiation, or homosexuality might opt for drawings that include both male and female figures. Meanwhile, those who believe in the symbolic meaning of drawings may request representations of homes, trees, or people. Researchers who accept multiple theoretical perspectives may ask children to draw a person, using this as a prompt to stimulate the child's cooperation at the beginning of the clinical process to facilitate the assessment of their performance (Faraj, 1992, p. 31).

Psychological Significance of Children's Drawings :

The meaning of a piece of art can be understood through its colors, shapes, or other compositional elements. These elements represent the intended purpose of the artwork

through tangible representation, often conveying an abstract idea or concept (Al-Dulaimi, 2011, p. 19). Children's drawings can be interpreted from multiple perspectives, and each viewpoint plays a critical role in understanding the child's psychological state. However, two main aspects stand out in clinical interpretation :

A) Formal Interpretation :

Scholars focus on analyzing children's drawings of the human form, looking at aspects like size, detail, drawing lines, facial expressions, and whether the figure is drawn from the side or front. The placement of the figure within the space of the paper is also analyzed.

Size : Highlights the child's self-perception and their sense of reality in evaluating their own identity.

Details : A measure of the child's awareness and interest in their environment.

Pressure : Indicates excessive muscular tension and impulsiveness (Al-Hinidi, 2007, p. 103).

B) Symbolic Meaning of Colors :

Children's perception of colors differs from that of adults. They do not see color merely for its functional use but rather for the emotional and symbolic qualities that the color represents (Al-Dulaimi, 2011, p. 26). A child's difficulty in selecting colors may indicate psychological distress, and the use of violent or dissonant colors suggests inner turmoil or conflict. A minimal use of color in a child's drawing can indicate an inability to form close relationships with others, whereas an excessive use of color might reflect an inability to regulate emotional impulses (Mustafa, 2010, p. 155).

Research suggests that :

Red and yellow are often linked to spontaneity.

Blue and green reflect controlled behavior.

Black and brown are more common in situations of repression, inhibition, or regression.

The combination of certain colors can also indicate specific clinical traits. For instance, combining blue and black in a drawing of a person could suggest symptoms of schizophrenia (Hegazi, 2009, p. 231).

Clinical Insights from Children's Drawings :

Spontaneous Drawings : These reflect the inner world of children, especially those with acute emotional difficulties.

Inconsistent Size and Proportions : This indicates growing emotional intensity in relation to the subject being drawn.

Absence of Color : Some elements lacking color may suggest emotional emptiness or even an anti-social attitude (Mustafa, 2010, p. 143).

Small, Over-Pressed Drawings : A tendency to make overly small drawings with light, unnatural pressure on pencils, coupled with a lack of details, may point toward depression. Children with depression might also restrict their drawing to only a third of the page, avoid using characteristic colors, and prefer geometric shapes or animals instead of human figures (Asfour, 2009, p. 238).

Drawing as a Therapeutic Tool for Children :

Drawing therapy is considered a form of psychological treatment that facilitates communication with the patient. Through discussing and interpreting the drawings, the patient gains insights into their inner emotions (Nasir, 2019, p. 255). Both free and structured drawings assist in diagnosing difficulties and disorders in children, adolescents, and adults. Drawing, particularly as an artistic expression, plays a critical role in restoring emotional balance and fostering personal and social harmony. As such, drawing therapy is a vital method for emotional and psychological rehabilitation (Mustafa, 2010, p. 237).

Studies have shown that free drawing can uncover unconscious behavior and emotions, allowing clinicians to identify unresolved issues, as well as the child's inclinations, attitudes, and perceptions of their environment. Drawing also provides a means of understanding a child's relationships with family, friends, and adults, as well as how they express their emotions and feelings. It becomes a tool for understanding their repressed thoughts, desires, dreams, and even their view of the future (Hamaidiya, 2016, p. 84).

Clinical Importance of Children's Drawings :

Understanding Development : Artistic expressions, especially drawings, provide valuable insights into a child's development. For children under 10, differences in artistic development help us understand emotional experiences and the integration of sensory and cognitive abilities (Maljoudi & Saleh, no year, p. 2).

Diagnostic and Therapeutic Foundation : Drawing helps strengthen psychological defenses, allowing the patient to develop new defense mechanisms and behaviors. This can lead to the establishment of healthy social relationships (Nasir, 2019, p. 255).

Diagnosing Emotional Issues : Drawing can reveal emotional and behavioral disorders in preschool children, such as fear, withdrawal, aggression, or selfishness, through symbolic representation of shapes, lines, colors, and layouts (Al-Shazly, 2019, p. 197).

Therapeutic Use in Communication : Psychotherapists use drawing as a method for linking symbolic meanings with deep psychological issues. This method allows for non-verbal communication, particularly for children who struggle with verbal expression. It becomes a form of emotional release, allowing individuals to convey feelings toward themselves and others (Al-Qiq, 2012, p. 62).

Compensatory Function : Drawing can act as a compensatory tool for children who feel emotionally or physically inadequate. It helps fulfill unmet desires, express suppressed wishes, and depict idealized futures. Through drawing, children can communicate their hopes for the world they wish to exist in (Al-Quraiti, 1995, p. 244).

Freedom of Expression : Drawing offers a unique opportunity for children to express unconscious emotions and thoughts. Unlike structured tests like inkblot images, children's drawings allow for more freedom, providing a rich emotional and cognitive insight that goes beyond mere developmental concepts (Faraj, 1992, p. 16).

In conclusion, children's drawings are a powerful diagnostic and therapeutic tool that offers a window into the child's inner world, helping therapists and clinicians to better understand and treat emotional and psychological challenges.

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