



THE USE OF DRAWING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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ABSTRACT

Drawing, its potential and its use have not yet exhausted psychological debate. Graphic activity has long been seen as a supple tool for understanding intellection maturation and the individual's personality, thus contributing to the development both of intelligence tests and projective methods. Nevertheless, despite the many attempts to identify precise diagnostic indicators, empirical research has documented its lack of success in an extensive literature. In this connection, Boncori maintains that graphic techniques, however much popularity they may now enjoy, cannot properly be termed tests.

In short, there appears to be no positive connection between the particular features of drawing and psychological characteristics. With their modest reliability, drawings seem to be an inadequate means of legitimizing individual evaluations: emotional, cognitive, developmental and pedagogical factor all interfere too much for indicators to be validated.

This paper will demonstrate that drawing can be employed in a variety of ways and for a number of purposes, since – like any play activity – it has multiple functions.

And like play, drawings have a sole source: the imagination, or the capacity for fantasy. Accordingly, what we are dealing with here is not a question of uncovering hidden meanings, but of assessing the creative ability that the child, through drawing, can deploy. The idea of ferreting out elements from the inner world must be replaced by the idea that drawing can help the child use play to process his relationship with the outer world. Reality, in fact, takes on *meaning* when it can be ideally transferred into the realm of fantasy, and this takes place through the innate capacity that the human being has for self illusion, in the etymological sense of *in-ludere*, or “entering into play”.

Keywords: Children's drawings, Projective test, Psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to speak of the use of drawings in psychotherapy, due to the diversity of the values attributed to it, but also because of the lack of a defined, common theory to use as reference.



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While drawing is considered as an activity which reflects a child's cognitive development that progressively forms and enriches itself with details of 'other' individuals, it is also studied as a means through which an individual communicates his interior world. The attempts however, to use drawing as an appropriate instrument in the comprehension of an individual's intellectual maturity and personality go back to the beginnings of psychology, and such interest has not diminished in time. Drawing has thus contributed to the creation of both intelligence tests and projective methods, and it is also significant that the first graphic theme used, with references to both perspectives was the drawing of the human figure.

In 1926, Florence Goodenough created her test (*Draw a Man Test*) based on the supposition that there exists a positive link between the evolution of drawings of the human figure and the mental development of the child: this test was again taken up in 1963 by D.B.Harris. In 1949 Karen Machover proposed the drawing of the human figure as a projective method in the study of personality. It is to be underlined that none of the attempts to integrate these two aspects, as Adriana Lis (1998) notes, has ever been accomplished, and still today, drawing seems to give a dual perception of itself.

All the same, though limiting the discussion to projective methods based on drawings, the problems seem unending. While on one hand, such techniques have become popular among psychologists, and are widely used in many consultation centres, on the other hand, the interpretations formulated are essentially based on clinical intuitions. There have been many attempts to identify precise diagnostic indicators, transforming the projective methods into authentic tests; however empirical researchers have documented their own failures with a lot of literature. In this regard Boncori writes: "At the present state, despite the popularity they enjoy (drawing techniques), it is inappropriate to define them as tests" (Boncori, 1993, 813)

A great part of the reviews on research regard the validity of graphic techniques, refer to the drawing of human figures, but the results can also be extended to other arguments. Research strongly underlines doubts about the use of such instruments: there is no correspondence between the evaluations and there are no existing valid proofs to sustain an interpretative method linking marks and lines to personality traits. In short, therefore, there is no positive connection between the particularity of a drawing and psychological characteristics. Drawings, therefore, due to their modest index of reliability, appear to be inadequate in legitimizing individual evaluation: emotive factors, along with cognitive, evolving, pedagogic ones, heavily interfere with one another in the significative validation of the indicators..

TESTS AND METHODS

The *American Psychological Association* (APA) distinguishes between «objective tests», administered in standardized forms and examined on the basis of pre-established criteria so as to furnish quantified results, and «projective methods», which provide a vaster margin to the evaluator's subjective judgement. In further differentiating the two, with the subdivision between tests and methods, tests would be defined as techniques that evaluate the aspects which can be generalized among people. Methods would be defined as techniques, the underlying theories of which, being of the psychodynamic type, are certainly acceptable, though the evaluations given to justify them are considered unacceptable. In fact, on the basis of such evaluations the tests should be reliable, inasmuch as they are supported by empirical data, while the methods would not be reliable, since their validity and reliability have not been commonly acknowledged and accepted. Defining the projective techniques as psychometrically invalid signifies a rigid attachment to the concept of an instrument's validity on the basis of its ability to measure. The reduction of projective techniques to observance



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of traditional psychometric prerequisites implies the overturning of their structure and their characteristics. Compared to objective tests that measure traits and quantify the dimensions of personality, projective methods set forth aims that are related to content or to invisible structures. Adriana Lis and her partners specify: «The patient presents many characteristics which are often intricate, hidden, very difficult to observe and which interact between themselves, and form that which is the characteristic uniqueness of that precise patient. The projective methods have the exact aim of evaluating this psychological complexity of the patient, his peculiarity, a task which appears to us as the primary objective.» (Lis *et al.* 2002, 338).

It would be anachronistic today to continue the debate, which, sad to say, is not too intense, among the believers of objective tests and the advocates of the usefulness of projective methods. What remains to be acquired in psychology is the concept that people cannot be measured the way any other object in the physical world is measured, nor does the objectivity of a test necessarily represent a known truth. Projective methods are different from tests with personality objectives, not only for their underlying theoretical meaning, but also due to the various premises and finalities. Projective methods can effectively be useful, on the same level as objective techniques, in diagnostic examinations, more so because their specificity and expressive value, can turn out to be useful in the psychotherapeutic process.

WHY CHILDREN DRAW

Many theories have been formulated on the origins of the motivations behind children's drawings, and each one of them refers to a different theoretical approach. Some scholars apply to drawing the same theories applied to play: among which the theory of surplus energy discharge. (Schiller, 1875) or a discharging of primitive instincts, in line with the theory of recapitulation (Hall, 1906), or finally, the theory of pre-activity (Grogos, 1901). According to this last perspective, through graphic activity the child finds the opportunity to engage in activities and to perfect abilities useful and important for adult life (Levy, 1978; Bruner, 1972). Arnheim himself (1972) correlates an early graphic activity to the successive development of drawing-painting activities, both with the successive acquisition of the various representation systems in all the learning fields. Rhoda Kellogg (1970) put the accent on "visual pleasure" that the child experiences when he stops to examine the intrinsically attractive forms his drawing activity has produced. Others have also pointed to emotional experiences as the main reason behind graphic behaviour, (Lowenfeld and Britain, 1975); also Gardner (1980) sees in the expression of sentiments a valid reason for drawing. Why children draw is therefore a question still awaiting a definite answer; and we could conclude along with Bombi and Pinto, that : «different kinds of children at different moments draw for different reasons» (2000, 35). In all ways, this unique pleasure is common to all children in the production of their painting representations, and it is the nature of this pleasure which continues to elude us.

We can however define drawing to be at the same level as play, a necessity of the mind (Quaglia, 2006), and as in play, three primary behavioural systems appear also in drawing: *imitation, exploration, daydreaming*. These three patterns often conceptually linked to play, are characterized by an aspect of playfulness, or, pleasure. Therefore, like in play, drawing also embraces a variety of behavioural patterns and, as Berlyne (1960) suggests in reference to play, it is unthinkable that drawing activity contains in its whole, only one function.

The child is naturally prepared to activate these behavioural systems, even if they appear in successive moments: they emerge, in fact, spontaneously in a corresponding environment, and what's more are intrinsically gratifying and therefore motivating. In the beginning these behavioural patterns are active in relation to the parental figures, progressively they will characterize the child's behaviour in a world of objects..



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The first phase begins when the child imitates the actions of a parent who is writing. In this phase the child imitates the gesture but not the product of the gesture, the child is “acting out the other”, that is, ideally substituting the parent.

With the next phase, when the child imitates the parent’s drawing, that is, the graphic product, the child “acts like the other”, giving life to a new activity of graphic exploration. It is the phase when lines begin to appear on the sheet. The child explores the lines, their movements and their various speeds, the forms and spaces; above all discovers affective qualities of the lines which can be sad, happy, good, aggressive.

With the affirmation of the activity of daydreaming, during the second year of life, lines from gestures turn into actions, producing representative or onomatopoeic scribbling: the child associates to a line in movement, for example, an onomatopoeic sound of a motorbike or a car. The symbol enters into the child’s mind, even though expressed through dynamic qualities and not formal qualities of objects. In a short time the onomatopoeic line is transformed into a “framework” or “outline” of some other figure. In the intertwining and evolution of these three behaviours, self-motivating due to their playful characteristic, it is therefore possible to describe the whole itinerary of infantile drawings. From this perspective the possible use of drawing in psychotherapy varies: from an evaluation of the drawing of the human figure through methods that use scales that are statistically always more precise and sophisticated in measuring the various aspects of the components, be they affective or cognitive (v. Koppitz, 1968), evaluation results which are immediately re-dimensioned (Chase, 2005), or invalidated (Feyh and Holmes 1994), it is possible to propose a long list of uses of drawing for the single objects, even by using the various scales of indicators for affective-emotional development, for the aspects of maturation, and distinctive personality traits, evaluating both their persistence in time and their transformations.

DRAWING AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

Though direct observation of behaviour represents an immediate way of getting to know a child, especially in the first phases of development (Campioni et al. 1980), as the child’s intentions, in time, become less explicit, it will be necessary to turn to other instruments to obtain a deeper penetration into the domain of his sentiments and his conceptions regarding his interpersonal relationships.

Verbal instruments have often revealed to be limited, due to difficulties in communication, or the inability of a child in expressing his own thoughts, and in such cases, drawing can validly lead the way to a more complete knowledge of children in the evolutionary phase.

Drawing is an opening towards the child’s internal world, allowing a first evaluation of the way he lives and sees himself in his relations with his parents, with his brothers and sisters, with his peers, with those representing an authority, with himself. However, in order to evaluate the efficiency of its use, it is important to define the child’s activities and their meanings. The cognitive perspective is not of much help since it considers such activities as the solution to a problem, thus reducing the child’s intentions to an efficient representation of reality (v. Thomas and Silk, 1998). Not even the psychoanalytic paradigm, in a vision of conflicts and defences (Freud, 1916-17), is able to furnish a complete measure of drawing, most often ignoring the circumstances in which they are produced, and particularly, the truly cognitive aspects involved in the production of drawings.

Children can show minimal interest towards their drawings, so as to ignore them immediately after producing them, or else they can also obtain great satisfaction in their drawings (Thomas and Silk 1990). Inducing a child to draw can provoke the same answers seen from the types of reactions observed in the clinical examination of Piaget (1926). Therefore, when a child is annoyed by a question and is provoked to give an uncaring response of ‘*n’importequisme*’, the child’s corresponding answer could be a drawing, produced to eliminate the undesired situation. The act of drawing in this



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case, is done in the absence of any effort of adaptation or playful attitude. The analogy could go on, equalizing *fabulation* to a *narrated* drawing, result of which is verified in the elaboration of a drawing without any emotive involvement. The drawing that was *prompted*, could instead reveal on the part of the child, an effort to please the person asking for it. Drawing that is *provoked* and drawing that is *spontaneous*, could represent designs from which original aspects of graphic composition emerge. *Prompted* design in respect to the others would no longer be a product created exclusively in response to an external request, but where the theme requested activates an evident invitation to play which is able to stimulate in the child mental images, movement patterns, organized reasoning in view of a satisfying interaction with the environment. The last two forms of drawing (*prompted* and *spontaneous*) can be object of attentive observation and accurate analysis. To identify the “right” theme at the moment in which the child strongly feels the desire to express that particular theme could result as a happy combination, but it is never an association to be taken for granted.

Drawing is surely an instrument for communication but that which the subject communicates not necessarily is a communication addressed to the external world. The first communication in fact is addressed to the people drawn: at times it could deal with a dialogue between the subject and the person represented, at times it is a dialogue between all the people represented. The analyst must know how to choose the most opportune moments and the themes of which the child is ready to talk about, but above all must find the way to make the subject enter into his own drawing, also by explaining it to him. We all are used to highlighting possible distortions or corrections present in the drawing, comparing the latter with real models; however the true comparison must be effected between what the child has drawn, and to what the child relays in the contents of his drawing, that is, between the graphic narration and the verbal narration. The *consistencies* and *inconsistencies* between the two narrations, more than distortions or corrections can furnish the analyst with confirmations on affective trends, whether positive or negative, of the subject.

DRAWINGS IN CLINICAL PRACTISE

Drawings of the human figure and of the family are among the most widely used projective methods in the field of diagnosis, and in that of research. The interest shown towards these instruments, or better, towards drawings in general, has undergone alternating vicissitudes determined by the approvals related to the criteria of interpretative reliability. However, what emerges from the research carried out, despite the fact that reliability diminishes when measurement is calculated on samples of drawing, it becomes satisfying when it evaluates single drawings, or drawings of a single child with the help of anamnestic data. It is in this light that it becomes possible to think of drawing as «an object of study in itself» (Freeman, 1993).

On the other hand, within the field of the theory of attachment, the theme of the interiorization of family relationships has always increasingly been affirmed, or the way in which the family is configured in the mind of the child. The transition from the theory of drives towards the theory of object relations has placed the comprehension of the procedures with which relationship experiences are subjectively interiorized and elaborated on, at the heart of research. In short, through the child's interaction with his own environment and on the basis of the answers obtained, internal representations of parental figures are created, necessary to the construction of both the child's ego, and of his social relationships. This mental structure or internal image of the family certainly constitutes the internal model which is the child's reference point when he is called to action by a “stimulus” to draw a person, or a family. The drawing of the family, in particular, becomes an excellent instrument for researching on the relationships which the subject “maintains” with the other members of the family nucleus. The risk consists in thinking that one can *objectively* evaluate through a drawing,



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through an obsessive definition of operational indicators, the relationships that the subject has really established with the members of his own family. No code system, however accurate and elaborated, allows us to see what type of relationship exists between the subject and the people drawn, inasmuch as the drawing is not a literal translation of reality, therefore what we can gather is always a reconstruction of a dynamically lived reality. No scoring method can adequately identify the various shades of meaning that a graphic indicator is able, in various cases, to assume, neither can it furnish a reliable measure of the dynamic aspects that inspired a drawing, aspects that only an accurate knowledge of the child can bring to light.

Even if, within a psychoanalytical paradigm, a symbolic interpretation of drawing can on one hand, be overcome, on the other hand, the concept of a drawing that represents in some way, a reality which can objectively be measured, leads to the concept of drawing in which, all the figures represented refer to parts of themselves, that is, to the internal representations of the relationship maintained by the subject with real people. The child draws himself with the figure of his mother, however not representing the qualitative traits of his relationship with his mother, a relationship which can be measured by the graphic quality of the figures, their nearness, or distance, their similarities, etc., but they offer us the possibility to study, referring to the two figures, both the internal representation of the relationship with his mother, and the internal representation of the relationship with his own self, representations that do not necessarily coincide with the relationships as they are in real life. A drawing therefore is not a photograph, of either an external reality, or of an internal reality, but is a composition in which many elements concur; and only the ability of an expert analyst could identify, above all, the affective elements, and in particular the operative elements. And so, a child that draws himself beside an authoritative figure is not necessarily a sign of a good relationship between the subject and the person represented (Bombi, Pinto, 2000), but could be the expression of a behaviour of attachment arising from a situation of uneasiness, or simply the expression of a desire. As a result only a deep analysis of the drawings, in the light of all the information received about the subject and also that which the subject himself relays in his drawings, is it possible to identify the various components of a graphic workout. The dimensions of the drawings, the details, their positions on the sheet, etc., all acquire value only for that person, and only in that precise moment. In short, the drawings are components that graphically express affective dynamics in evolution.

We are not denying here, the results of empirical research, obtained on the basis of graphic productions; certainly children "with attachments to a secure base" draw and create for example, a coherent and detailed picture of their own family, highlighting with great care the roles, the proportions, and details; on the contrary, the "evasive" and "ambivalent" children are prone to draw figures without faces and without hands respectively, or figures very different from one another. (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985) The psychotherapist's interest doesn't lie in that which makes the drawings similar to one another, but above all that which is specific; in fact it is the *particularity* that reveals the child to us, and above all of how that particularity graphically evolves in time, also with the help of the psychotherapist.

CONCLUSION

Drawings, like play, have but one source: imagination or ability to daydream. Through these three expressive forms of imagination which involve imitations and explorations, the child governs the external world, or better, he interiorizes it. Such activities are not the deformations of a known language (Freud 1900) nor are they manifestations of a language still to be known (Jung 1969), but are the activities of normal psychic functions. They are therefore the imitations of relationships, explored and dreamed about, which suggest the contents of every playful activity and in particular,



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graphic activity, so that, starting from drawings it also possible to trace the relational qualities the child has with the figures he represented.

It is not a matter of discovering hidden meanings, but of evaluating the creative abilities that a child through drawings is able to put in practise. If drawing therefore reflects relational experiences, it is therefore possible to help the child, through drawings, to “correct” and improve his relational experiences. A child is able to make an experience of the external world only if he is able to elaborate on it through play. Reality to him acquires significance when he ideally transfers it to the reign of fantasy, and this comes about through the innate ability human beings have to create “illusions”, in the sense of “*in ludere*” that means “entering into the game”.

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