

Book Review

Kinetic-House-Tree-Person Drawings (K-H-T-P): An Interpretative Manual.
by Robert C. Burns. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1987, 232 pages,
\$27.50.

The clinical interpretation of human figure drawings has become an increasingly popular projective device. Our journals include many articles on the application of this technique, which is simple to administer and, especially in the case of children who have difficulty putting their feelings into words, promises to convey valuable information to the astute observer. Unfortunately, it is precisely the intuitive appeal of this test that has led psychologists to disregard the rules of the scientific method. Such is the case with Robert Burns's latest book, *Kinetic-House-Tree-Person Drawings (K-H-T-P): An Interpretative Manual*. As Louise Bates Ames comments in her foreword to the volume:

The proposed method is in some ways, perhaps, as much of a projective test for the reader-practitioner as for his or her subject. There are many who will be stimulated by this book to immediately add this manner of testing to their own battery. Many of the author's unsubstantiated interpretations may be reacted to by others with wonder or even disbelief. (p. xv)

Machover's 1949 work, *Personality Projection in the Drawings of the Human Figure*, remains the inspiration for almost all of the research on the clinical significance of human figure drawings, including Burns's K-H-T-P interpretive manual. In this pioneering study, she advances what has been referred to as the "body-image hypothesis":

... the human figure drawn by an individual who is directed to "draw a person" relates intimately to the impulses, anxieties, conflicts, and compensation characteristic of that individual. In some sense, the figure drawn is the person, and the paper corresponds to the environment. (p. 35)

The K-H-T-P test introduced by Burns is a revision of the House-Tree-Person test (Buck, 1948). Whereas Buck had his subjects draw three separate drawings—of a house, tree, and person, respectively—Burns's instructions call for the drawing of the three items on a single page, with the added re-

quests to avoid stick figures and portray "some kind of action." Burns argues that the dynamics revealed in seeing the House, Tree, and Person as "a whole" increases the value of this tool. The following premises inform his interpretive tactics:

Perhaps the most frequent and universal metaphor for depicting human development is the tree. . . . In drawing a tree, the drawer reflects his or her individual transformation process. In creating a person, the drawer reflects the self or ego functions interacting with the tree to create a larger metaphor. The house reflects the physical aspect of the drama. Thus the interaction and relationship between the house, the tree and the person reflect a visual metaphor created by the drawer, free from the limiting world of words. (p. 3)

Projective tests are often interpreted according to a psychoanalytic framework, which Burns considers limiting. He therefore turns to Maslow's "need hierarchy," which, he says, provides us with a better developmental model for "defining levels of growth" (Burns, 1987, p. 53). Burns interprets Maslow's description of his hierarchy of needs as comprising the following five levels: (1) belonging to life, (2) belonging to body, (3) belonging to society, (4) belonging to self and not-self, and (5) belonging to all living things. Burns suggests that the drawing of each "symbol" (i.e., the house, tree, and person) can be located hierarchically at one of these five developmental levels. If placed by Burns in one of the first three developmental levels, the symbol is supposed to indicate whether the drawer is an "approacher" or "avoider." Thus, Charlie's drawing of a house, which Burns thinks looks like a "prison fortress," suggests that he is a Level 1 approacher, preoccupied with the question of survival on this earth. But his tree, which has "a narrowing trunk," is apparently typical of those with a "narrowing range of interests," and would presumably be scored as a Level 1 avoider example. We may be faced with giving the same person a diagnosis of approacher and avoider, an issue Burns does not address.

Although Burns provides us with a manual for scoring houses, trees, and people according to his summary of Maslow's need hierarchy, he does not include any information about construct validity, or whether this scoring system shows interjudge or test-retest reliability. Nor does he explain from whence his coding system is generated. Thus, we are simply informed that talon-roots symbolize Level 1 approachers, whereas big trunks and small branch systems connote Level 3 avoiders. Moreover, although he includes K-H-T-Ps drawn by children, we are not provided with an account of developmental norms that as a matter of course ought to be included, followed by a carefully stated comparison of normative and clinical data.

Burns illustrates his method by discussing over 50 K-H-T-P drawings, an endeavor that comprises the bulk of the publication. Unfortunately, just as he does not tell us how he compiled his list of standard interpretations, he does not describe how the present sample of drawings was selected. Fur-

thermore, he does not account for the source of information about the artists shared in his interpretations of the K-H-T-Ps. The interpretations accompanying each drawing consist of both biographical information and of inferences made on the basis of the drawings themselves. For example, he explains:

K-H-T-P 24 is by 39-year-old Marilyn. When Marilyn was seven, she found the body of her mother who had committed suicide in a field. Marilyn has never recovered from the shock of finding her dead mother and the image and feeling of horror are still with her. She is a workaholic. Marilyn's tiny tree is attached to her big house. Notice the closed shutters on the windows and the knobless door. Marilyn is a "private person," a tormented person unable to detach her tree from the house which is so full of memories. (p. 96)

Similarly, he comments:

K-H-T-P Drawing 15A is by 28-year-old Ralph. Ralph was extremely successful in his musical career. He was a very creative person and put all his energy into his creative musical efforts, reflected on the right side of the tree. However, the other side of the tree where the house is located shows two tiny, long-necked figures at the window. The musician was still extremely dependent on his family. Long necks are associated with dependency. Ralph had not separated himself from his family. On the other hand, the self is kicking the tree as if obsessed with making this part of his life go. This type of drawing is found in many creative people. If we think in terms of right-brain, left-brain, his right-brain is involved with his creative and intuitive process in the music world. His left brain, where the practicalities of life lie, is undeveloped and he is a small child hiding in the house. (p. 50)

Burns's interpretive procedure borders on the tautological. The projective test is not used as an independent measure of personality; instead, Burns approaches the drawings with a great deal of privileged information about the artist, which he then suggests is revealed by the picture.

This review began with a quote from Louise Bates Ames's foreword, in which she observes that the book itself can be viewed as a projective test, since some readers will be enchanted by Burn's imagination and others perturbed by his practice of wild analysis. As my remarks concerning Burns's disregard for methodological issues indicate, however, one's reservations about this book may not simply stem from differences in personality styles. Indeed, the conclusions of three comprehensive and separate reviews of the myriad studies on the clinical interpretation of human figure drawings (Klopper and Taulbee, 1976; Roback, 1968; Swensen, 1968) have shown that, by and large, the data do not support the numerous hypotheses generated by Machover and those following in her footsteps (hypotheses along the lines of long necks associated with dependency). As Swensen points out, the reliability ratings of structural and content variables of human figure drawings, for example, are "probably too low for making reasonably reliable clinical judgements" (Swensen, 1968, p. 40). Swensen therefore suggests that clinicians ought rather to depend on global ratings, which are necessarily more reliable, since they

include all of the drawing behavior. Unfortunately, global judgments of health and pathology are affected by the artistic quality of the drawing, which confounds the clinician's much vaunted intuition (Roback, 1968).

At the present level of analysis, a more fundamental problem must be faced if one wants to use drawings as a projective test. Psychologists have adopted the "realistic" or "naturalistic" depiction of an object as their standard for what a representation ought to look like. Interpreting a drawing becomes a hunt for omissions and distortions. For example, Burns' manual includes a lengthy appendix with entries about the implications of omissions and/or misplacements, the disregard for objective sizes and proportions of figures, the use of shading as well as other graphic techniques, and the psychodynamic significance of emphasizing the head, hair, ears, nose, neck, Adam's apple etc. When viewing a drawing, Burns fails to consider the constraints placed on the artist by the drawing medium. What visual-graphic logic enables the artist to establish equivalences between the three dimensionality of the object in the real world, and the lines and dashes on the paper? Most adults as well as children are graphically naive and lack the practice and competency to portray action, a problem that needs to be addressed. Graphic strategies should not only be conceived of as expressions of internal psychological states. At the very least, drawing styles reflect the difficulty of representing, on a two-dimensional plane, the three dimensions of an object, as well as such spatial relations as above-below, in front-behind, near-far, inside-outside. Figures placed high on the page *may* indicate a high level of aspiration, just as figures placed low on the page may reflect feelings of insecurity, but such speculations need to be tempered by an understanding of the constraints imposed and the freedoms allowed by the drawing medium. Drawings are not simply x-rays of the heart or printouts of the mind.

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