

# PROJECTIVE DRAWING AS A METHOD OF STUDYING A FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

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## **Abstract**

The present article deals with the author's original technique of studying social-communicative welfare and disability in family relationships by means of projective drawing. "The drawing of the family in flower images" belongs to the type of expressive methods based on psychological mechanism of projection, it has a metaphoric sense, actualizes imagination and the author's image of emotional and sensual interfamily relations.

The author's technique reveals new possibilities in the study of individuality of personality. The results of empirical research prove the effectiveness of "associative family image" in flower images in diagnostics and art-therapy of family situation.

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**Key words:** *projective drawing, "family in flower images", flower symbolism, emotional perception, family situation, family relationship, art-therapy.*

## **Introduction**

It is known that L. Frank introduced the concept of projection to designate a research method. Nowadays there are different classifications of projective methods. The aspect of "drawing" tests and techniques referring to the type of expressive methods that presuppose some visual activity on a given or free subject has been considered in this article and that puts them close to the analysis method of subject activity products and art-therapy from the therapeutic point of view.

Different variations of "The drawing of the family" ("My family", "Family in animal images", "Family in fairy-tale images") have been used in psychological diagnostics for a long time. Project tests like that were created by such famous specialists as K. Appel, 1937; W. Wolff, 1946; W. Hulse, 1951; R. Burns, 1972; S. Kaufman, 1972; J. DiLeo, 1973; L.Corman, 1964; G. Chomentauskas, 1983 and many others (Chomentauskas, 1985, Wolff, 1946).

Known project tests and techniques differ in diagnostic purposefulness and the detailed elaboration extent of the task. For example, in L. Corman's instruction it is suggested to draw one's conception of a family: "Draw a family as you imagine it"; other authors concretize: "Draw your family" (W. Hulse), "Do a drawing where each member of your family and you are doing something" (R. Burn's; S. Kaufman) (cit. Chomentauskas, 1985).

The emphasis of the projective accent is reached due to the group of techniques aimed at the creation of a family's "associative image". For example, a test person is suggested to draw his/her family in animal images, fairy-tale or mythological characters. Such kind of instruction stirs a person's imagination and associative thinking. The subjective content of the image reproduces deep, unconscious emotional experience which refers to each drawn (and not drawn) member of the family and also to the author's concept of the situation in his/her family. It is important how he/she interprets and appreciates the relationship in his/her family, what personal characteristics and motives he/she attributes to them, how he/she describes the behaviour of his/her close people (Chomentauskas, 1985).

However, the task to represent people or animals often brings about resistance. During the discussion the authors of the drawings mention such things as, for example: "I can't draw animals"; "I would like to draw a lion...but it turned out to be a cat" or "I have drawn only those animals that I learned to draw at school, but it doesn't correspond to the images of my relatives".

Obviously, the diagnostic potential of such drawings is reduced to a great extent, especially if the test person uses his/her own skills of drawing, stereotype images and habitual ways of representation (copying, etc.)

Formal elements of artistic material (size of a figure, its position on a piece of paper, extent of the drawing completion, colours, special features of the drawing – erasing, re-drawing, etc.) are traditionally accentuated in psychodiagnostics.

It is proved that project drawings have many-sided opportunities in personality's research and contribute to the expression of the person's pent-up feelings and emotional experience.

**Relevance of the problem.** The specialists in the field of family relationship have been interested in projective drawing in psychology and psychotherapy for a long time.

According to the mechanism of projection, a person is inclined to attribute his/her subjective ideas to visual objects. He/she endows them with his/her own features in accordance with his/her needs, ideas, motives and the structure of his/her own experience.

N. Rogers mentions that many things in creative work are introduced from the unconscious, from emotional experience and intuition (Rogers, 1995).

Project testing based on the creation of an experimental situation that admits multiplicity of possible interpretations is widely used in psychodiagnostics just because the results of spontaneous visual activity are less subject to the control of the consciousness.

**Object** – emotional perception of family situation in the process of projective drawing.

**Aim** – to investigate diagnostic possibilities of the author's projective technique "The drawing of the family in flower images" in the context of studying emotional perception of family situation in the groups of the respondents of various age.

**Objectives** – to distinguish in a drawing graphical indicators (projective features) allowing to evaluate the peculiarities of emotional perception of family situation; to identify relations between art object and the respondent's narrative story; to work out the criteria for qualitative evaluation of the drawing of the family in flower images.

**Hypothesis** – in the process of investigation the presumption was verified that in the drawing of the family in flower images the peculiarities of the respondent's emotional attitude towards his/her family situation and a family as such are reflected.

### Research sample

In the years of 2006-2011 587 adults of the age of 18-65 (11% were men, 89% were women), living in the cities of Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Byelorussia, Moldova took part in the experiment.

Experimental sample of the respondents of school age consisted of: 25 children of the age of 7-10; 37 junior adolescents of the age of 11-14; 55 senior adolescents of the age of 15-17.

### **Method**

Main quantitative methods of the present empirical research of phenomenological type were a projective drawing and narrative interview.

Wide approbation of the author's projective technique that belongs to the group of validated expressive methods on the basis of projective drawing on given or free topic in the context of different variations of "The drawing of the family" ("My family", "Family in animal images", "Family in fairytale characters' images", etc.) was conducted.

Projective drawing was followed by the elements of narrative interview and conversation about the respondent's attitude towards his/her own family situation and his/her role in the family.

In the participants' art-therapeutic drawings there are often flowers, the images of which are very symbolic. In connection with it there appeared an idea to carry out the following research – "The drawing of the family in flower images" – in projective and art-therapeutic aspects.

During the inquiry the respondents were asked to draw their families. Then they were asked to choose the images, in which they would like to do that work, from the given list.

The majority of the respondents (more than 75%) chose the word "flower", which proved the hypothesis that "flower" should really be regarded as a stimulus word for the depiction of a family in images.

The experience of drama-therapy and symbol-drama is known where the method of a person's identification with a flower image is used as a metaphor of the "Self-image". A verbal metaphor can also become a corroboration of the universality of the flower language.

Thus, a flower is a universal symbol which has a lot of various and deep semantic potentialities on different levels of psychosemantic space. Multiplicity of meanings of the flower symbol is explained in science with the help of hierarchy – regulation of material, social and spiritual aspects of reality.

It is known that drawing instructions in projective techniques are a kind of an appeal to the client's unconscious and they make certain strata of his/her inner life actual. For example, the instruction "Draw your family" often makes actual the "outer", social image of a particular family.

Comparing to this, the content of the "message to the unconscious" in the author's technique "The drawing of the family in flower images" has a metaphorical meaning and makes actual the author's conception of emotional and sensual interfamily relations.

The instruction to depict the family in flower images actualizes certain aspects of one's internal life. In the meantime the graphic product becomes the base for introspection, self-perception in a family situation. One reflects his/her own vision of life collisions in accordance with one's own individuality, associative links, previous experience and beliefs. The authors inadvertently express real feelings related to the family situation.

### **Content and results of the research**

The present research was carried out in different age groups.

In the process of approbation it was found out that the task to draw the family in flower images was easily accepted and done by the examinees of any age, beginning from 7. Younger children were not involved in the research.

The participants of the scientific research were offered to do a drawing of their family using any graphic means on a paper sheet of format A 3 or A 4 (at will).

**Instruction:** “Please, draw the family in flower images”.

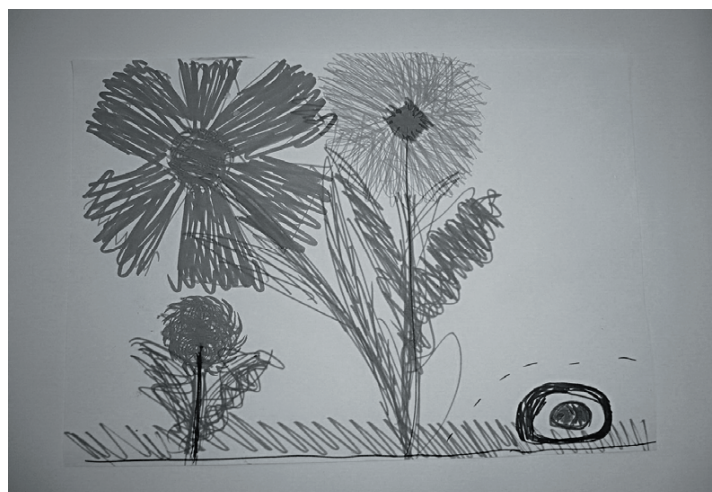
After finishing the drawing the participants were asked to comment upon their drawings.

Since the instruction contains no specific clarifications, everyone finds images that are suitable for him/her. For someone it would be an image of the parents’ family, where the author of the image grew up or lives now; of the perfect family that one would like to have. There are also the drawings where a field of flowers can be seen as a state of life in the society which replaces one’s own family. Adults who do not have full families frequently depict the images of the past and future, and they also include symbolic images of the missing family members into the drawing of the real families. That is probably caused by the peculiarities of the stimulus word. The flower as a primary image and an archetype symbol is a perfect object on which inner psychological conflicts, unconscious suppressed or superseded psychological experience are projected.

Judging by the comments, the authors are wondering what made them depict such a family (real, parents’ or images (fantasies) of an ideal family). Why was one or another flower spontaneously chosen to depict oneself and a completely different flower to depict some of the relatives? How are the flowers positioned? Why are they depicted as living in soil in some drawings, whereas in others they are cut and gathered into a bouquet of living plants or immortelles? If the flowers are put into a pot or grow on one stalk, it is important to clarify what this close positioning of the flowers means to the author. Can it be a pictorial attempt to unite the people who are separated in real life with the help of external circumstances?

Pictures with the distantly positioned flowers lacking in the image of one of the family members may mean a tense relationship.

Example 1



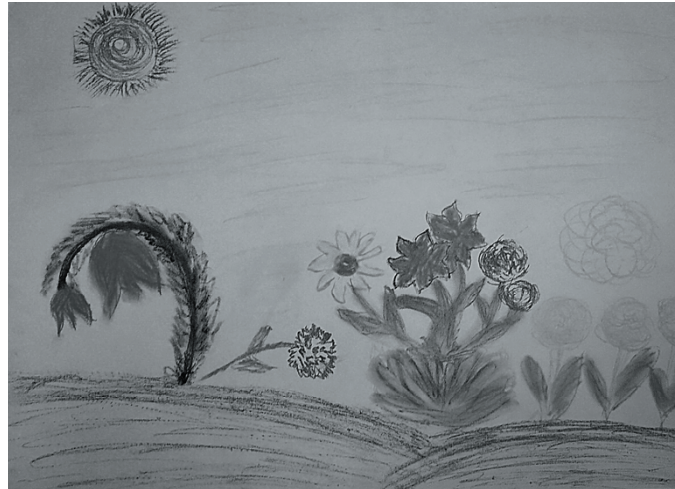
The drawing presented in the article is drawn by the psychologist, a young woman of 28. The drawing reflects affectively marked experiences related to interfamily relations and family situation.

The drawing has a distinctive peculiarity because the author depicted a family member who is missing (dead), the emotional relation with whom had determined the patterns of her behaviour and interrelations in her family in the past.

In the drawing the author depicted herself as a small red flower (bottom left), her father is above her flower (a big red flower top left), he overprotects his daughter and suppresses her

freedom and independence. Their external looks are similar. The flower that reflects mother's figure is placed in the drawing on the right side separately from the daughter's. They have conflict and tense relations. In the drawing there is an image of the brother who is depicted as a seed and who was killed in an accident. The author of the drawing had the strongest emotional relation with her brother.

Example 2



Picture 2 reflects emotional experiences related to disease. Complicated mechanisms of breast cancer pathogenesis accentuate a psychoemotional component of this disease that is clearly reflected in projective drawings. In the centre of the drawing performed by the woman of 42 the flower is depicted leaning to the ground and losing its support. That is the way this woman feels. In the image of a thorn flower above the image of her mother, who died of the same disease, is present.

In art-therapy introspective context is important. A person subconsciously reflects on the paper his/her own view on a life situation according to his/her individuality, past experience, attitudes and beliefs. Awareness and changing the attitude towards actual and past events, taking responsibility for one's own life induces the search for a resource image as a type of a marker of the progress in therapeutic work.

While representing the individual and collective unconscious, the symbols of flowers are remarkable for their polysemy and multitude of meanings. Interpretations of flowers' connection to human relations have become so widespread that such phrases as "the talk of flowers", "the language of flowers" have appeared. Maybe that is the reason why the metaphor of the family in flower images is perceived as authentic both by grown-ups and children.

In scientific world a flower as a concept is characterized by the following attributes: "belonging to a family, species", "is a reproduction organ", "has inflorescence", "has a cycle of development", which has to do with a family and the continuation of generation. Positive images of flower buds and open flowers in the drawings of people of different nationalities and cultures are interpreted as a symbol of "healthy sexuality". The beauty of a terrestrial flower generates the figurative parallel "flower – family" as a blessing, a value.

Therefore, flowers in drawings and other products of creativity bear a special symbolic and emotional load.

It is important to stress that the drawing of the family in flower images reflects an emotional feeling of the author, his/her idea of the place and role in the family, self-perception



of the family situation and a relationship between family members.

The drawing of the family in flower images is aimed at creating the situation that facilitates an opportunity of telling about the family with the help of the metaphor language by using the symbolism of “male” and “female” plants. An iris, narcissus, adonis and hyacinth are considered to be in the first group.

The brightest representatives of the “female” semantic group are an azalea, aster, mallow and chrysanthemum.

In archaic symbolic systems a lotus is classified as perfect. Its leaves, flowers and fruit form a circle. Furthermore, each plant has buds, flowers and seeds at the same time, which is associated with the unity of the past, present and future. A lotus is the flower that forms a bowl that symbolizes perceiving a female image. The root of lotus represents insolubility, the stalk represents the cord that ties one to one’s source, a flower has a shape of sunbeams, the pod with the seeds symbolizes the fertile power of creation. It is interesting that the pods full of seeds are marked with the same hieroglyph as a “child” in Chinese.

Ambivalence of male and female principal is sometimes attributed to a rose and peony. In accordance with C. G. Jung’s (Юнг, Фон Франц, Хендерсон, Якоби, Яффе, 1997) opinion, a rose symbolizes an individual’s integrity, a balance between conscience and subconsciousness.

Due to ambivalence and polysemy flower images can be easily projected on male and female figures and used in depicting a family.

Being archetypal, the flower image corresponds to such main human existences as birth, life and death.

It must be stressed that during the approbation up to 20% of drawings have been metaphorically or symbolically related to death, unlike the drawings made in the frameworks of other project drawing tests (techniques). Supposedly, such a flower attribute as “withering” facilitates the depicting of physical trouble and age, while “fragility” spontaneously “provokes” incorporating the images of the family members who have already passed away or are seriously ill.

### **Conclusion**

The research in question with the further approbation of the author’s technique in educational and clients’ groups of adults gives reason to come to the following conclusions:

- a flower image is authentic to symbolically depict a family;
- the instruction does not bring about resistance, the task is of interest to both males and females;
- the art product and the content of verbal feedback is of paramount importance to both diagnostics and hypothesis making in art-therapy;
- flower images in pictures, their position, environment reflect a true family relationship and help the author to realize it.

There is a weak correlation between the data received due to the application of other expressive tests. It is proved that a family depiction with the help of human figures is more controlled by our conscience than the one in flower images, which enhances the effect of protective mechanisms and, consequently, lowers the validity of results.

The drawing of the family in flower images is correlated with the resource type of drawings actualizing the search for positive problem solving inside the family in comparison with “The drawing of the family in animal images” which is regarded as disputed.

Furthermore, the humanistic potential of the technique given above is that all kinds of people including persons with disabilities find it easier to use the metaphorical depiction of their image using an esthetically attractive flower image.

According to the diagnostic potential, “The drawing of the family in flower images” can be seen as an expressive project technique based on drawing on a free or a given subject. While interpreting the drawing it is important to rely on the author’s comments of this drawing. Moreover, the art product, its content and symbolism are the base for introspection and the search for a positive solution in a particular family situation.

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