Figure Drawing as an Expression of Self-esteem

STANLEY COOPERSMITH, DILYS SAKAI, BETTY BEARDSLEE, and ALICE COOPERSMITH
University of California, Davis, Oakland University, Michigan, and Knolls Center, California

Summary: Figure drawings were obtained from 97 preadolescent males who differed in self and behavioral assessments of self-esteem. These subjects had been selected from a much larger sample and represented five different types of self-esteem. The figure drawings were scored for 15 variables, dealing with formal characteristics, content, and global-interpretative categories. Five significant differences were obtained, with the content and global-interpretative categories proving more differentiating between self-esteem groups than did the formal characteristics. Behavioral expressions of self-esteem were more associated with figure drawing characteristics than were subjective evaluations. Discussion focuses on the nature of self-concept and self-esteem in children as a sensorimotor rather than symbolic expression.

This paper examines the question of whether, and in what manner, figure drawings express self-esteem. There have been numerous speculations that figure drawings, as a projection of inner thoughts, feelings and personal style, reflect significant and persistent personality predispositions (Machover, 1949; Swensen, 1957). The underlying presumption is that a person will project salient aspects of his own self-image when asked to draw a person (Goodenough & Harris, 1950). Given that self-esteem is an important aspect of the self-image as well as significantly related to personal happiness and social effectiveness (Coopersmith, 1967), there is good reason to believe that self-esteem will be expressed in figure drawings. On theoretical grounds we can pose several aspects of figure drawing which may express self-esteem (Bodwin & Bruck, 1960; Machover, 1949; Sinha, 1972; Zuk, 1961). Among these are size of figure, affect displayed, sense of movement, and security of footing. The purpose of the present research was to empirically determine which characteristics of figure drawings specifically correlated with self-esteem.

Two of the major issues critical to this area of research are the procedures for assessing self-esteem by nonverbal measures, and the validity and significance of projective indices of self-esteem. As Perkins and Shannon (1965) point out, measures of self-concept and self-esteem have generally been of a verbal self-report type. The use of such verbal measures is understandable particularly since concepts and evaluations of all kinds are generally transmitted verbally. However, such verbal measures do suffer from social desirability of items, subject defensiveness and in the case of children, limited verbal skills of comprehension and expression. There have been several efforts to develop nonverbal measures of self-esteem (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; Ziller, 1969), but these efforts have been of limited focus and effectiveness (Wylie, 1968). In the present study groups were first established that differed markedly in verbal and behavioral indices of self-esteem and then sought to determine whether and how the figure drawings of these groups differed from each other (Coopersmith, 1967). This procedure provided us with validating indices of self-esteem and, at the same time, provided us with information about other personality, intellectual, and social characteristics of our subjects.

Procedure

Subjects
The subjects consisted of 97 middle-class boys enrolled in the fifth and sixth grade classes of urban and suburban
elementary schools. These children were selected from a group of 1,748 children on the basis of their responses to a self-report, self-evaluation instrument, the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), and a teacher’s rating of their self-esteem behavior as recorded on the Behavior Rating Form (BRF). Split-half reliability for the SEI was .90; SEI retest reliability over a five week interval was .88 (Taylor & Reitz, Note 1). Retest reliability for the BRF was .96 over a five-week interval; the correlation of BRF ratings of two independent observers was .73.

On the basis of SEI and BRF scores five types of self-esteem were formed. These were: High-Highs (HH), in the upper quartile of both distributions, Medium-Mediums (MM), in the semi-interquartile range of both distributions, and Low-Lows (LL), in the lower quartile of both distributions. There were two groups with marked discrepancies between self-reported and behavioral indices of self-esteem. There were: High-Lows (HL) with SEI scores in the upper quartile and BRF scores in the lower quartile; and Low-Highs (LH), with SEI scores in the lower quartile and BRF scores in the upper quartile. The personality, social and intellectual characteristics of these five groups have been presented in earlier works (Coopersmith, 1967). One benefit of devising these types of self-esteem is that we may study not only the types in and of themselves but are also provided with the full range of self-reported and behavioral indices of self-esteem. These 15 variables were then scored on our total sample of drawings.

The subjects selected for inclusion in this study were individually administered a test battery, one part of which was a request for a Figure Drawing. The subjects were presented with a blank sheet of 8½" x 11" paper and asked to "Draw a person." The administrator made standard comments to the effect that the subject was not expected to be an artist and that any drawing he made would be acceptable. For reasons of time only one figure was requested. If the completed drawing represented only part of a person this was noted on the record and the subject was asked for a drawing of a whole person. The drawings were number-coded so that scoring and interpretation proceeded in the absence of information about the subject’s self-esteem. To determine which characteristics of the drawings should be scored we conducted a search of the literature and selected those variables related to self-esteem and which offered promise of discriminating between groups. On the basis of these procedures we selected 20 variables which were then utilized to score a sample of drawings of children not included in this study and a sample of coded drawings of 20 of our subjects. On 15 of these variables we were able to develop sufficiently explicit scoring criteria to achieve at least 70% agreement in the ratings of two independent raters. These 15 variables were then scored on our total sample of drawings. These 15 variables are divided into formal content and global-interpretative categories. The eight formal variables include: horizontal and vertical placement on paper, eyes, body extension, footing stability, hands, size, and clothing. The five content variables include: (appropriate) social role, playfulness, affect, (positive, intermediate, negative) movement (activity and tension levels), and compensation (through exaggerated size, skill or power). The two global-interpretative variables involve ratings of pathology, and whether the child who executed the drawing was personally likeable. The Figure Drawings were also scored to obtain an index of intellectual capacity. Two analyses of the data were performed. The differences between group scores was computed by the Mood-Likelihood Ratio test while chi square analyses were performed to compare the percentages of individuals in each group who fell within specific scoring categories. Since all drawings did not include all of the fifteen characteristics we scored, there are unequal numbers of respondents in some of the analyses.

1 A detailed copy of the scoring manual may be obtained from the authors.
Figure Drawing as an Expression of Self-Esteem

Results

Of the 15 variables on which the self-esteem groups were compared there were 5 significant differences and 3 others in which the findings were suggestive but did not reach conventional levels of significance. Considered in terms of the type of variable scored, only 1 of the 8 formal variables differentiated between self-esteem groups, 2 of the 5 content variables also differentiated, while analysis of both global-interpretative variables revealed significant differences. In general the formal characteristics of these drawings were less likely to be associated with assessments of esteem than were characteristics associated with their content and overall configuration.

Turning first to the content variables we find that the variable of hands is the only one to differentiate, while analysis of the scores of the other formal variables (vertical and horizontal placement, eyes, body body extension, footing, size and clothing) yielded no significant results. In viewing hands our scale gives highest scores to clear, explicit hands in which all fingers are present and the conception is realistic. In this category the groups with high and medium behavioral esteem (HH, LH, MM) have the highest scores while those with low behavioral esteem (LL, HL) are significantly lower \( \chi^2 = 9.85, p < .05 \). It thus appears that hands, which are an important avenue for dealing with the world, are more accurately depicted by persons whose behavior is confident and assured than by persons who are apprehensive and unsure. At the same time we should note that such other formal attributes of our drawings that are widely presumed to differentiate between persons who differ in esteem fail to do so. Among these we list body size, footing, and body extension.

The second set of variables considers several different dimensions of self-revealing content of these figure drawings. Of these five variables, significant differences were found for affect and social role while the three other variables (playfulness, movement and compensation) were nondifferentiating. The social role scale
Table 2
Global-Interpretative Variables Associated with Self-Esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Likeability</th>
<th>Pathology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likeable</td>
<td>Not Likeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-High</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Low</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-Medium</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-High</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Low</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 9.66, n = 68$
$df = 4, p < .05$

assesses the use of social role and social supports to give meaning and context to a given drawing. In this category we again find that it is the groups with high and medium behavioral expressions of esteem that score highest (HH, LH, MM) while those groups rated as fearful and lacking in poise (HL, LL) score lowest ($\chi^2 = 9.47, p < .06$). When we examine affect we find significant differences between the self-esteem groups in the expression of negative feelings and failure to express any feelings. The two groups with lower behavioral esteem (HL, LL) and much more likely to express neutral or no affect and are also more likely to express such negative emotions as sadness, fright, and hostility ($\chi^2 = 16.21, p < .05$) than are groups with high or medium behavioral esteem.

Our final two variables involve global-interpretative ratings of pathology and likeability. The general clinical rating of pathology which we developed was reduced from a six point scale to a single plus, i.e., nonpathological, or minus, i.e., pathological, rating. The positive end of the scale is defined as “well organized, anxiety (if present) well controlled, resourceful, purposeful, ability to cope with task, no evidence of major disturbance”; the negative end as “diffuse, disorganized, poor, confused or distorted body-image, overwhelming anxiety, extensive overemphasis on some features to the neglect of others; grotesque fantasy.” On this variable we find that the drawings of the two groups with low behavioral esteem (LL, HL) are more likely to be rated as pathological while the two groups with the highest behavioral ratings of esteem (HH, LH) are least likely to be rated as pathological ($\chi^2 = 8.33, p < .07$).

The variable of likeability represents a judgment by the rater as to whether the child who made the drawing would be liked by his classroom teacher. These judgments are either “likeable,” i.e., organized, socially oriented, relatively docile docile and generally agreeable; “not likeable,” i.e., unorganized, overanxious, hostile or extreme in any characteristic; and “uncertain,” i.e., where the rater is uncertain or mixed in his opinions. The analyses revealed that the drawings of those groups with high behavioral esteem (HH, LH) are rated as most likeable while those
who are less assured in their demeanor (LL, HL) are more likely to be rated unlikeable ($\chi^2 = 9.66, p < .05$).

In summary it appears that the most differentiating features of figure drawings produced by individuals differing in self-esteem involve the portrayal of hands, feelings, and social role. Utilizing those drawings as a totality, clinicians make global interpretations in which persons in low behavioral esteem are rated as more pathological and less likeable than are children with greater poise and assurance. It is significant that the drawings are much more differentiating between groups that differ in self-esteem behaviors than between groups that differ in their subjective evaluations.

Discussion

There are two findings in this study that merit further examination and discussion. The first is that there are several features of figure drawings that enable us to differentiate between children who differ in self-esteem. The second is that these differentiating features are associated with behavioral expressions of esteem rather than with self-appraisals of personal worth. Together these findings indicate that figure drawings are indeed associated with esteem but that this association is not as simple or direct as is generally believed. In its own way the finding that so many overt characteristics of figure drawings that have been theoretically related to self-esteem fail to differentiate is as important as the positive results we have obtained.

Turning to the results, we have noted that five variables differentiate between groups that differ in self-esteem (hands, social role, affect, likeability and pathology). Three of these variables deal with characteristics that have relatively explicit behavioral expressions (hands, social role and likeability), while the other two have both subjective and behavioral components (affect and pathology). Taken as a whole it appears that children whose behaviors are confident and assured are likely to draw figures with realistic, well formed hands, depicting a supportive and appropriate relation with the environment and manifesting social and personal characteristics that teachers are apt to find likeable. These high behavioral esteem children also draw figures with fewer indications of negative affect and what clinicians are likely to regard as pathology. Those children with lesser behavioral esteem are likely to depict figures with less accurate and appropriate hands and social role and are also more likely to express negative affect, and characteristics that are rated as unlikeable and/or pathological. These findings led us to propose that “a child draws how he sees himself acting, and how he believes others see him.” This generalization is different from that proposed by Goodenough and Harris (1950) which stated that “a child draws what he feels, rather than what he sees or knows to be true.” That generalization of 1950 superseded the earlier generalization that “a child draws what he knows, rather than what he sees.”

To the question of what is projected in a figure drawing we propose that children express their action patterns and how they believe they influence their environments. In making this proposal we are led to conclude that preadolescent children (such as those we are studying) generally function at a level of concrete operations and sensorimotor activity and generally have an ambiguous or vaguely formed self-concept. There is no theoretical or empirical reason to believe that the concept of self is any better formed than are other concepts. If anything, it is likely that the concept of self is likely to be less developed than are concepts of objects and experiences that have clear and manipulable external referents. The question of whether the figure drawings of adolescents and adults also reflect projected personal behavior deserves careful study. There are certainly enough indications that expressions of anxiety and adjustment are manifest in the figure drawings of children to suggest that such tendencies would persist in later years (Fox, Davidson, Lighthall, Waite, & Sarason, 1958; Perkins & Shannon, 1965). The possibility that personal perceptions of one’s own behavior are reflected in a
S. COOPERSMITH, D. SAKAI, B. BEARDSLEE, and A. COOPERSMITH 375
draw-a-person figures appears as tenable as the possibility that perceptions of one's thoughts and feelings are reflected in such drawings.

Reference Note

References