

## Exploring Depth: Utilizing Inquiry Questions Through Positivist, Constructivist, and Mixed Methods in the House-Tree-Person

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### ABSTRACT

This action research study explores the different inquiry questions within the House-Tree-Person (HTP) personality assessment test and examines how these questions function across positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods approaches. While previous studies have focused on the HTP technique and its interpretive potential, little attention has been given to the specific inquiry questions in drawing out meaningful insights from participants. The assessment was conducted on 9 participants aged 25-35 years. Through qualitative analysis, we assess the strengths and limitations of various question types in uncovering the personal meanings within HTP drawings. Our findings recommend that practitioners tailor inquiry questions to optimize the interpretive and therapeutic value of HTP assessments and their inquiry questions. The study contributes to psychological assessments, particularly the HTP test and inquiry questions.

**Keywords:** *House-Tree-Person, Enquiry questions, Personality Assessment, positivist, constructivist, mixed methods, Inquiry Questions*

Projective techniques have long been invaluable tools in psychology, market research, and other fields, offering indirect insights into human cognition, emotion, and behaviour (Waiswol, 1995). By presenting ambiguous stimuli such as images, words, or scenarios, these techniques prompt individuals to project their thoughts and emotions, revealing deeper, often subconscious aspects of personality and motivation.

The core principle of projective techniques lies in this projection of internal states onto external stimuli, which allows for insights that might remain hidden through more direct methods like self-reporting. Widely used in personality assessments and qualitative research (Boddy et al., 2011), they offer a unique vantage point for understanding human complexity. Examples such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) exemplify the utility and scope of such tools. However, despite their widespread use, these methods are not without limitations, including subjective interpretation and varying levels of standardization (Lilienfeld et al., 2000; Raskin, 2001).

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In this context, the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test emerges as a distinctive projective tool developed by John Buck in 1948, designed to uncover personality traits by analyzing individuals' drawings of a house, tree, and person (Lodha, 2019). This study aims to look into the application of the HTP test within diverse psychological paradigms—positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods (P'Simer, 1960)—to explore its potential and limitations in both clinical practice and research.

Through this exploration, we seek to deepen our understanding about the use on inquiry questions in HTP and how it can contribute to psychological assessment methodologies, highlighting their value and challenges in different assessment contexts.

### *House-Tree-Person (HTP) Test: A Specific Projective Technique*

Projective techniques, including art therapy assessment tools, plays an important role in psychological evaluation, offering avenues to explore individuals' subconscious thoughts and emotions indirectly. Among these techniques, the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test stands out as a method to assess personality aspects through drawings of houses, trees, and persons. Developed by John Buck, the HTP test offers unique insights into individuals' self-perceptions and attitudes, making it a significant tool in art therapy assessment (Lodha, 2019; Bieliauskas & Moens, 1961).

Research on the HTP test has focused on its validity and utilization across different theoretical paradigms, including positivist and constructivist approaches. Bieliauskas & Moens (1961) validates as an intelligence test for children, highlighting its applicability in quantitative assessments within a positivist framework. Meanwhile, qualitative studies, such as those by Lopez & Carolan (2001), have explored the interpretative of HTP drawings in the context of sex offenders by noting that the “Unusually large” trees were found 11% more often in the sex offenders' drawings of trees than in the tree drawn by a controlled group.

Quantitative analyses of the HTP test have provided insights into its reliability and validity as an art therapy assessment tool. Groth-Marnat & Roberts (1998) explored composite ratings derived from HTP drawings to assess psychological health, contributing to our understanding of its quantitative assessment capabilities within a positivist framework. Like, in the analysis of the K-H-T-P (kinetic house-tree-person) suggests the house represents the physical aspects of our life. The tree symbolizes the life energy and direction of energy. The person symbolizes the director (Burns, 1987).

In contrast, qualitative analyses have delved into specific indicators within HTP drawings, offering insights relevant to therapeutic interventions and clinical diagnosis, consistent with a constructivist perspective as shown in Jolles (1964) – Trees, frequently represent specific persons. If the trees seem to shelter the house in the drawing, is it interpreted as a strong needs for dependency and/or feelings of parental domination. Another interpretation from Jolles (1964) is dependent children or someone who desires to have children usually draw an apple tree.

Cultural considerations are essential when employing art therapy assessment tools like the HTP test, as individuals' cultural backgrounds influence their artistic expressions and perceptions. Lodha (2019) emphasizes the importance of incorporating cultural norms and interpretive standards in clinical practice, aligning with a mixed methods approach that integrates both positivist and constructivist perspective. Lodha (2019) also states that

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“Sometimes farmlands and cattle may be also be drawn as part of the house, especially so by either those who are folks from the countryside or are immigrants from rural areas. This may be normative in the rural Indian background”.

The House-Tree-Person (HTP) test serves as a valuable art therapy assessment tool for exploring personality aspects and psychopathology. Through a comparative study utilizing positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods approaches, researchers can explain the strengths and limitations of the HTP test in different theoretical paradigms and cultural contexts. This exploration will contribute to a deeper understanding of art therapy assessment tools and their applications in psychological evaluation.

In this study, we therefore conduct the house-tree-person assessment with three different sets of inquire questions on the participant. Our aim is to determine the most effective and appropriate method for administering the HTP test with the right enquiry questions. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do participants respond to the inquiry questions within each paradigm, and which questions explores more effective or meaningful responses?
2. What are the subjective and objective meanings and interpretations embedded within HTP drawings and the inquiry questions, and how do these vary across constructivist, positivist and mixed method perspectives?

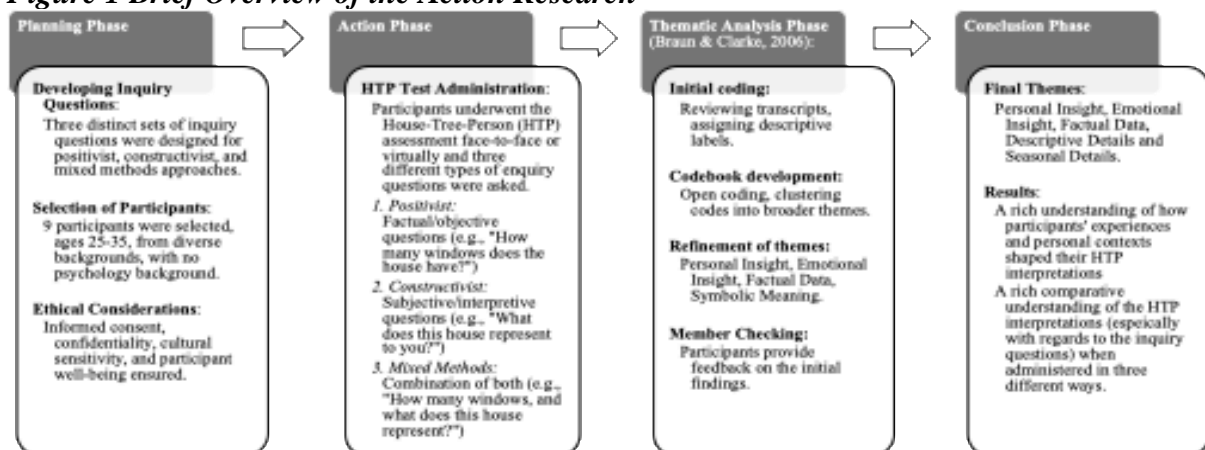
To answer the research questions, we implemented a "post-assessment inquiry approach" (Buck & Hammer, 1969). This is a process-oriented oriented, emphasizing the integration of qualitative inquiry questions after the administration of the House-Tree-Person (HTP) assessment to enhance the understanding of participants' subjective experiences. By employing inquiry questions that align with both constructivist and positivist paradigms, we aim to capture the diverse meanings embedded within the HTP drawings (Creswell, 2013).

The sequential nature of this approach allows us to explore the subjective interpretations from different participants, while also facilitating a comparative analysis of their responses. Following the data collection phase, preliminary analysis of the HTP drawings will inform subsequent inquiry questions, enhancing the depth and richness of data gathered.

## METHODOLOGY

### Brief Overview of Process Oriented Design

Figure 1 Brief Overview of the Action Research



Note. Figure 1 gives a brief overview of the research action – process oriented for the research.

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This is an action research study. First, participants underwent the House-Tree-Person (HTP) assessment, after which inquiry questions in three different paradigms – positivist, constructivist and mixed method (Buck & Hammer, 1969) were administered to gather their reflective responses. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify relevant themes from the responses of the participants, allowing the researcher to further investigate how participants' personal contexts and experiences shaped their interpretations of the HTP assessment. This process continued, with additional rounds of thematic analysis conducted after each phase of inquiry, which help in evolving patterns and psychological narratives. The approach also facilitated member checking, as participants were invited to give feedback on the assessment, helping to refine themes and ensure the credibility of the interpretations. The process-oriented approach captures the dynamic interplay between participants' experiences and their engagement with the HTP test, providing a comprehensive understanding of the psychological constructs reflected in their drawings and in the responses.

### *Participants*

A total of 9 participants were selected for this study, with ages ranging from 25 to 35 years. Participants were purposively selected from diverse backgrounds and of different genders, to ensure a comprehensive representation of experiences with the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test. The participants were selected depending on their availability in the city and with no psychology background. Participants were grouped at random – on who will get which type of inquiry questions (positivist, constructivist or mixed). Each group had a female and a male participant.

The decision to terminate was based on the concept of data saturation, following the model of information power as described by Heltné et al. (2021b). The participant selection was stopped once the diversity of participants' backgrounds (e.g., education, location, and mental health service exposure) provided sufficient variation for rich and relevant data. This approach ensured the final sample size was adequate to answer the study's research questions. Initial thematic analysis of interviews from each group confirmed the data's richness and quality, further justifying the decision to conclude recruitment.

### *Material*

In this study, three distinct sets of inquiry questions were designed to align with the positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods approaches, each developed using guidelines from various research papers and manuals focused on the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test (Burns, 1987; House-Tree-Person Projective Drawing Technique Manual, 1981; Betts, 2006).

For the positivist approach, the questions were structured to be objective, such as, "How many windows and doors does the house have?" or "What type of tree is this?" These questions aimed to draw-out concrete and measurable data from the participants' drawings, focusing on observable features (Fujii et al., 2016).

The constructivist approach introduced subjective, interpretive questions, like, "What does this house represent to you?" or "How does this tree relate to your life?" These questions were designed to explore the participants' personal meanings, reflective and deeper psychological insights associated with the drawings (Guo et al., 2023).

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In the mixed methods approach, a combination of objective and subjective questions was used. For example, "How many windows and doors does the house have, and what does this house represent to you?" This approach aimed to capture both the factual elements of the drawings and the personal, reflective meanings participants ascribe to them (Li et al., 2011; P'Simer, 1960).

For each drawing—house, tree, and person—a tailored set of questions was developed, drawing from established HTP manuals and guidelines (Kato & Suzuki, 2016). These inquiry frameworks provided a comprehensive view, encouraging participants to share both detailed descriptions and personal reflections.

### *Procedure*

All assessment for this study were conducted between June and September 2023. The initial set of assessment was carried out face-to-face, while subsequent assessment took place virtually via Zoom, due to ongoing considerations regarding participant convenience and flexibility. Prior to each assessment, participants were provided with a brief overview of the research project's objectives and were given a brief about what the assessment.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the start of the assessment. All interviews were audio-recorded using an encrypted device to ensure data security. The recordings were securely stored on an encrypted research server. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were completed by the author. These transcripts were also stored on the secure research server.

The assessment lengths ranged from approximately twenty minutes to fourth minutes. Ethical considerations were central to the study, prioritizing participant rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring voluntary participation, while confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing data. Assessments were conducted in private settings to promote open sharing, with debriefing sessions provided for emotional support. Participants' mental well-being was carefully monitored, and cultural sensitivity was observed throughout. This study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of Christ University (Deemed to Be).

### *Analysis*

The thematic analysis approach is considered to examine the House-Tree-Person (HTP) drawings, which also follow the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled us to identify and interpret patterns and underlying themes within the enquiry questions posed to participants.

Initially, each transcript was review to gain an understanding of the content especially with regard to the type of enquiry questions asked. This process involved immersing in the data and noting initial impressions. Following this, open coding was used to assign descriptive labels to salient elements and recurring patterns across the transcripts.

The process includes an open coding, creating a codebook that included codes and sub-codes, definitions, and illustrative examples. This coding process involved analysing the data from all nine participants, with three participants representing each method used. As initial codes were developed, the codebook was iteratively refined through discussion with co-author.

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Once initial codes were established, they were grouped according to thematic similarity, considering both the consistency of content within themes and their uniqueness from one another. This step involved careful consideration of how codes clustered into broader themes. The thematic categories were organized to capture emotional, factual, personal, and objective insights from the participants' responses to the enquiry questions.

Sub-themes were developed and named based on the meanings derived from the grouped codes. This phase focused on creating a coherent narrative around each theme, ensuring they accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences.

The final themes, supported by representative examples from participants, were summarized to illustrate the richness of the data. Our analysis revealed four main themes: Personal Insight, Emotional Insight, Factual Data, and Symbolic Meaning, each containing specific sub-themes that captured diverse aspects of participants' thoughts and feelings expressed through their drawings.

To enhance the credibility of our findings, triangulation and member-checking were utilized. Triangulation involved cross-verifying data through multiple sources, while member-checking allowed participants to review and validate the findings based on their perspectives. In conclusion, the thematic analysis provided an understanding of the diverse ways in which participants expressed their thoughts, emotions, and personal meanings through their HTP drawings. The following section presents the qualitative study results, organized into the identified themes and sub-theme.

### RESULTS

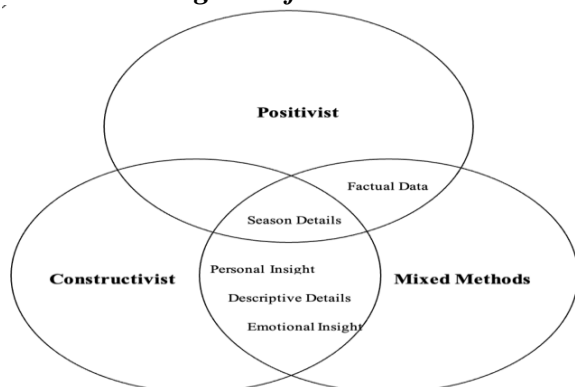
*Table 1 Overview of Themes and Subtheme*

Theme	Sub-Themes
Personal Insight	Personal Meaning Emotional Insight
Factual Data	Specific Detail
Descriptive Data	Descriptive Detail Seasonal Detail

*Note. Table 1 represent the qualitative findings from the assessment conducted.*

Table 1 is organized into four primary themes and their respective sub-themes. Each theme explains the application of the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test within the positivist, constructivist, and mixed method paradigms.

*Figure 2 Venn Diagram of Themes in HTP Assessment Across Paradigms*



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Note. Figure 2 shows a Venn diagram illustrating overlaps of themes in HTP assessment across positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods approaches.

In the results section PP is positivist participant, CP is Constructivist Participant and MP is mixed method participant.

### Theme 1: Personal Insight

#### *Personal Meaning*

Participants often represented the house, tree, and person in their drawings with deep personal significance, reflecting their life experiences and values. One of the participants who was asked a constructivist question about the tree said that -

MP: “It's so yeah, I mean maybe if I have to refer to it as one specific kind of tree then it will be a banyan tree.”

PP: “I drew a pine tree because, you know, pine trees are good, but also other trees are pretty nice also”

CP: “I went for like an apple tree with like a couple of apples hanging down”

“I like the concept of the coconut trees because... the banyan tree would be one which is like really strong, but in strong winds, it can get unearthed really easily. Whereas the coconut tree is very slim, but when strong winds come, it just sways and moves in place.”

According to Jolles (1964) a frequently drawn apple tree is by dependent children. But according to this participant apple tree reminded him of his childhood. Lodha (2019) mentions that its very common for the Indian to draw a mango, peepal, coconut or palm tree is common as these are common references of trees for Indian patients. It is also interesting to note how which is common changes from state to state depending upon the topographical regions.

When the inquiry question was asked about which tree and why this tree. We noticed that the constructivist participants gave a personal insight on why they wanted this tree and what is meant to them – helping the author understand their personal as well as the symbolic meaning behind why that tree.

#### *Emotional Insight.*

Emotional responses from participants highlighted the process of drawing/ the assessment of HTP.

MP: “Initially, I felt like I was being judged... but once I got into it, I was like, okay, this is just me doing a drawing... it's reminding me of my childhood days.”

CP: “felt intimidated. Right at the start a little intimidated because I haven't drawn in a while. But as I started drawing, I actually didn't like all of that like the intimidation bit went away”

“I was smiling. I was very happy”

PP: I was feeling happy because as I said, it is like a dream come true. So you thought about it.

According to Jolles (1964) when you ask a question – “would you like to own a house like that”; a positive reply reveals a positive feeling towards the house, a negative answer tells there is some sort of rejection towards the house in question.

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Here participants from all the three types (positivist, constructivist and mixed methods) have a positive feeling towards the drawing especially the house they drew. The participants related it to either their dream house or a childhood house.

### Theme 2: Factual Data

#### *Specific Detail*

The drawings contained specific details that reflected participants' perspectives and preferences. Here the author is using the example of doors.

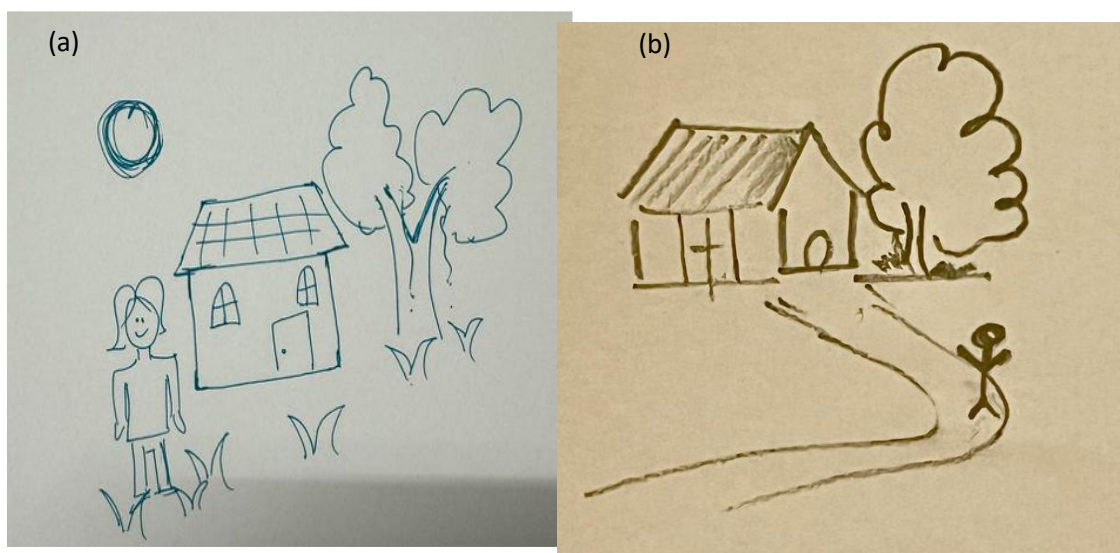
PP: "I want it to be made of bricks and slabs. Cement."

"For entry and exit, no. Only two."

MP: "It has two doors. but one set of windows"

Jolles (1964) manual says that if the house is occupied, strong need to receive warmth; If the house is unoccupied, feeling of lack of ego defence. If the door is large, they are over dependent, but if the small the feel inadequate.

**Figure 3 (a) HTP Drawing by Subjective Participant and (b) HTP drawing by Positivity Participant**



*Note.* Figure 3 in (a) and (b) you can see how the windows sizes are of different.

With this drawing interpretation that Jolles (1964) has mentioned you can see that a few participants have drawn big door but have also mentioned that they want specific numbers of door for easy maintenance. This detail only came from positivist and mixed approach participants, but not the constructivist. This question can be useful to check the interpretation that the manual gives.

### Theme 3: Descriptive Data

#### *Descriptive Detail*

Detailed descriptions of objects added depth to the visual data, allowing for a richer understanding of participants' perspectives.

CP: "Lots of windows, long windows. I love natural sunlight coming in."

CP: "I was looking at materials which are not... they provide the basic functions of insulation in both cold and hot weather."

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MP: “if you within the boundary of the house if you're entering into that space as a guest as a family member or as a friend, then you will be safe and you will not be judged in that space, and you can be at ease with your own self”

**Figure 4 HTP Drawing of a Mixed Method Participant**



*Note.* Figure 4 shows the fence that a mixed method participant drew.

According to Jolles (1964), each of the details that the participants draw gives a different significant. For example, when the participant drew a fence, the interpretation is need for protection from threat of environment; it may also represent a need to keep others from learning about subject’s inner feelings and attitudes.

But in this case the participant who drew the fence wants to make the guest/friends/family that enter the compound feel safe. Its giving the author more than what the HTP manual interprets. We could only see such responses from the constructivist participant and the mixed method participants.

### **Seasonal Detail**

The inclusion of seasonal elements provided insights into participants' preferences for specific times of day or the seasons.

MP: “I like sunsets... I like how the sky changes colors.”

10 to 11am. Okay, yeah, because it's Kerala after it gets really hot. And grandma would not be smiling if it's after 11 and she's out.

I was mostly imagining summer because I drew the coconuts on there too because I was thinking about summer [..]

PP: “I like sunsets because I can see them. I like... I like nice sunny days where it's cool enough to actually go out.”

“Maybe during sunset, around 5.40. Okay. Around March”

CP: “Definitely like a sunny setting, but like temperature wise like mild weather where I would find comfortable being in that space without like being very warm or sweaty or like very uncomfortable basically”

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“but i've always liked winter season quite a bit and especially night time so um i would prefer it to be a little bit not too chilly but a little bit chilly on the outside so you know i feel like the house gives me warmth but it's the atmosphere outside that gives me the cold [..]”

Jolles (1964) states that "Cold" or "Winter" generally indicate a lack of warmth experienced in interpersonal relationships. "Warm" or "Sunny" indicate a feeling of warmth associated with people in general or in relationship with someone.

With the interpretation of the drawing, you can see that participants also give in a little more detail on why they like which weather. This helps the author with rapport building with the client and knowing more of them that can help in the future.

### *Summary and Interpretation*

These results emphasize the richness of data collected through various inquiry questions, affirming the HTP test's effectiveness in exploring both factual and subjective insights. Also, within the themes there is comparison of only one element that has been done, but through the research you can see that with different elements it was very similar in each theme. The findings address the research objectives by illustrating how tailored inquiry questions facilitate meaningful exploration even after being compared to the interpretation of the HTP manual (Jolles, 1964). It also shows which inquiry questions are better suited. I also explored the psychological constructs and personal narratives, providing valuable recommendations for psychological assessment inquiry questions.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study looks into the effectiveness of different types of enquiry questions within the House-Tree-Person (HTP) Assessment, focusing on Positivist, Constructivist, and Mixed Methods approaches. The primary goal is to identify which type of inquiry questions give the most insightful information about the participant and provide recommendations for the same. It also validates the interpretations mentioned in the HTP manual (Jolles, 1964).

Through thematic analysis, it has been observed that questions aimed at exploring symbolic meaning and personal meaning (the two different themes) provide the most detailed and meaningful insights into the participants' drawings. These themes predominantly emerged from Constructivist and Mixed Methods questions. In contrast, Positivist questions tended to generate straightforward, factual responses, offering clear information about the participants' drawings.

Thus, the selection of inquiry questions should therefore be tailored to the participant's level of openness, their willingness to share, and the specific goals of the researcher. For more resistant participants or situations where a deeper understanding is required, Constructivist and Mixed Methods questions are recommended. In cases where the researcher seeks direct answers or is dealing with resistant participants, Positivist questions may be more appropriate.

This discussion will further explore the different themes, how can a psychologist use this assessment in their practices and hopefully recommend the different types of questions that can be asked while administering the test.

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### *Limitation and Strengths*

A key strength of this study lies in its examination of the House-Tree-Person (HTP). Assessment across multiple paradigms, including positivist, constructivist, and mixed methods approaches. By incorporating different inquiry questions, the study effectively captured a broad range of participant insights, thus enhancing the depth of understanding regarding the psychological constructs represented in their drawings. The sample included participants from various backgrounds, which contributed to the richness of the data and allowed for a nuanced exploration of personal and emotional meanings embedded in their artwork.

Moreover, the thematic analysis provided a systematic framework for identifying key themes, such as personal meaning, emotional insight, and symbolic representation. This approach not only highlights the complexities of individual experiences but also informs best practices for administering the HTP assessment in clinical settings. The findings the importance of tailoring inquiry questions to align with participants' openness and willingness to share, thereby maximizing the potential for meaningful engagement.

However, the study is not without limitations. Participants with prior drawing experience may have relied on learned techniques, potentially compromising the authenticity of their representations. This could skew the results, leading to interpretations that reflect technical skills rather than genuine emotional expression.

Additionally, familiarity with the HTP assessment may have led some participants to overthink their responses, aiming for perceived perfection, which can diminish the richness of the insights gathered.

Furthermore, the variability in participants' willingness to engage with the inquiry questions introduces a potential bias in the data quality. This inconsistency may complicate the analysis and interpretation of findings. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable contributions to the field by providing practical recommendations for clinicians on the most effective types of inquiry questions to use, based on specific contexts and participant characteristics. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the HTP assessment across different cultural contexts and with diverse populations, further validating the effectiveness of inquiry questions in eliciting rich psychological insights.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study provides significant insights into the application of the House-Tree-Person (HTP) Assessment across different inquiry paradigms, revealing the ways in which various inquiry questions can give meaningful psychological insights from participants. The findings indicate that Constructivist and Mixed Methods approaches, particularly focuses on personal meaning, emotional insight, and symbolic representation, offer the richest data, enhancing our understanding of participants' inner worlds.

By systematically analysing the effectiveness of inquiry questions, this research is necessity for psychologists to tailor their questioning techniques based on participants' openness and specific therapeutic goals. The recommendations derived from this study aim to optimize the administration of the HTP assessment, improving assessment outcomes and enriching the therapeutic process.

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While the study acknowledges certain limitations, including the influence of prior drawing experience and participants' familiarity with the HTP assessment, it lays the groundwork for future research in this area. Subsequent studies could further explore the HTP assessment in diverse cultural contexts and with varied populations, thus broadening our understanding of its applicability and efficacy.

Overall, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding projective techniques in psychological assessment, highlighting the importance of inquiry questions in unlocking deeper insights into individuals' experiences, emotions, and identities.

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## Exploring Depth: Utilizing Inquiry Questions Through Positivist, Constructivist, and Mixed Methods in the House-Tree-Person

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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