



Original article

Drawing to Communicate: Projective Tests in Autism. A Pilot Study

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RESUMEN

Introducción: Este estudio piloto explora el valor de las pruebas proyectivas gráficas como mediadores simbólicos en niños y adolescentes con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA), ante la escasa investigación existente y el predominio de enfoques centrados en el lenguaje verbal. **Método:** Se realizó un estudio cualitativo descriptivo-interpretativo con diseño de casos múltiples en una muestra de 20 participantes con diagnóstico confirmado mediante ADOS-2, de entre 5 y 19 años. Se emplearon las técnicas Casa-Árbol-Persona (HTP) y Persona bajo la Lluvia como dispositivos expresivos, registrándose producciones gráficas y verbalizaciones asociadas. Se realizó un análisis temático reflexivo complementado con análisis descriptivos y pruebas exactas de Fisher para explorar asociaciones entre variables clínicas y patrones de simbolización. **Resultados:** Se identificaron cuatro temas principales: simbolización literal (60%), malestar relacional (73%), construcción identitaria (20%) y diferencias en el estilo expresivo (40%). **Conclusión:** Los resultados sugieren que el dibujo constituye un canal relevante de expresión emocional y relacional y una herramienta útil para orientar la intervención psicológica en población infantojuvenil con TEA.

Palabras clave: Trastorno del Espectro Autista, técnicas proyectivas gráficas

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This pilot study explores the value of graphic projective techniques as symbolic mediators in children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), in the context of limited existing research and the predominance of approaches focused on verbal language. **Method:** A qualitative descriptive-interpretative study with a multiple case design was conducted with a sample of 20 participants aged between 6 and 19 years, all with ASD diagnoses confirmed using the ADOS-2. The House-Tree-Person (HTP) and Person-in-the-Rain techniques were used as expressive devices, and both graphic productions and associated verbalizations were recorded. A reflexive thematic analysis was carried out, complemented by descriptive analyses and Fisher's exact tests to explore associations between clinical variables and patterns of symbolisation.

Results: Four main themes were identified: literal symbolisation (60%), relational distress (73%), identity construction (20%), and differences in expressive style (40%).

Conclusion: The findings suggest that drawing constitutes a meaningful channel for emotional and relational expression and a

useful tool for guiding psychological intervention in individuals with ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; graphic projective techniques

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction: Cette étude pilote explore l'intérêt des tests projectifs graphiques en tant que médiateurs symboliques chez les enfants et les adolescents atteints de troubles du spectre autistique (TSA), compte tenu du manque de recherches existantes et de la prédominance des approches centrées sur le langage verbal. **Méthode:** Une étude qualitative descriptive-interprétative avec un plan d'étude à cas multiples a été menée auprès d'un échantillon de 20 participants âgés de 5 à 19 ans, dont le diagnostic avait été confirmé par l'ADOS-2. Les techniques Maison-Arbre-Personne (HTP) et Personne sous la pluie ont été utilisées comme dispositifs d'expression, et les productions

graphiques ainsi que les verbalisations associées ont été consignées. Une analyse thématique réflexive, complétée par des analyses descriptives et des tests exacts de Fisher, a été réalisée afin d'explorer les associations entre les variables cliniques et les schémas de symbolisation. **Résultats:** Quatre thèmes principaux ont été identifiés: la symbolisation littérale (60 %), le malaise relationnel (73 %), la construction identitaire (20 %) et les différences de style expressif (40 %). **Conclusion:** Les résultats suggèrent que le dessin constitue un canal d'expression émotionnelle et relationnelle pertinent et un outil utile pour orienter l'intervention psychologique auprès de la population infantile et juvénile atteinte de TSA.

Mots-clés: Trouble du spectre autistique, techniques projectives graphiques

INTRODUCTION

In the field of psychological assessment and intervention, so-called projective tests have historically occupied an ambiguous position. Research on projective tests is particularly limited in the field of disability in general, and specifically regarding individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is very scarce. The lack of research on these qualitative techniques and methodologies stems both from methodological issues and a deeper bias: the implicit association between certain forms of cognitive, communicative, or linguistic functioning and a supposed reduced capacity for symbolic, creative, or narrative expression of internal experience.

In the case of autism, this bias has frequently resulted in an underrepresentation of tools that do not rely primarily on verbal language, under the premise that difficulties in social communication or cognitive flexibility would limit access to complex symbolic processes. Based on this logic, graphic,

narrative, or metaphorical production has been interpreted more as a sign of a deficit than as a legitimate means of subjective expression. However, this conception ignores the fact that many people with ASD develop their own modes of symbolization. These forms of symbolization do not always manifest according to neurotypical standards, but they are highly significant in emotional and relational terms. The reduced capacity for symbolic play has also led to under-research of these types of techniques in this population; however, it is important to note that once the various initial phases of play (motor play, sensory play, functional play), symbolic play becomes a key indicator for intervention (Castillo Segura, 2022). This lack of ability in autism to represent social situations often leads them to represent their internal experiences.

In recent years, neuroaffirmative approaches and contributions from art therapy have begun to

challenge these reductionist views, emphasizing that the difficulty in verbally expressing certain experiences does not imply the absence of an inner world. It is particularly important to start from the premise that a lack of linguistic skills does not imply the absence of individual needs; therefore, not speaking does not mean having nothing to say. The need for alternative channels of expression is particularly relevant in ASD, where linguistic limitations can hinder the expression of complex subjective experiences, without implying the absence of an inner world (Muiño Tato & Arrillaga Imaz, 2024). The use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication Systems (AACs) provides means of expression regardless of the linguistic ability of the person using them (Muiño & López-Bueno, 2026). Therefore, projective tests should consider different alternative channels for their creation and communication. In this sense, drawing, spatial organization, repetition of shapes, narrative literalism, or the specific use of materials can constitute ways of “expressing” that do not rely on spoken language but offer information for understanding and therapeutic support.

The research focused on the graphic and narrative process, on the meaning each participant attributed to their production, and on how these expressions could guide subsequent clinical intervention. This study has the following objectives: (1) To analyze modes of graphic symbolization in children and adolescents with ASD. (2) To explore the relationship between verbal level, age, and type of symbolization. (3) To examine the clinical value of graphic productions as mediators in understanding subjective experience

METHOD

Study Design

A descriptive-interpretive qualitative study with a multiple-case study design, employing a clinical-narrative and practice-oriented approach. Quantitative analyses were incorporated on an

exploratory basis, without the intention of statistical inference, given the qualitative nature of the design.

Participants

The sample consisted of 20 children and adolescents with a prior diagnosis of ASD. All participants had a diagnosis confirmed through the administration of the ADOS-2 (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, Second Edition) by qualified professionals in specialized clinical settings. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were: (1) **Diagnosis:** Formal diagnosis of ASD confirmed by the ADOS-2. (2) **Age of participants:** Between 6 and 20 years old. (3) **Comorbidity:** Absence of severe intellectual disability that would prevent basic understanding of simple instructions. (4) **Motor development:** Minimum motor ability to produce spontaneous drawings or reproduce simple models. (5) **Consent:** Possession of informed consent signed by parents or legal guardians, and assent from the minor participant when their age and level of understanding permitted it. The exclusion criteria for the study were: (1) Presence of severe motor impairments that would prevent the creation of graphic productions (absence of cerebral palsy and/or any severe motor limitation). (2) Acute clinical conditions (severe behavioral crises or intense emotional dysregulation) at the time of administration. (3) Primary diagnosis other than ASD without confirmation within the spectrum. (4) Express refusal by the child to participate in the drawing activity. The main characteristics of the study participants are summarized below (see Table 1).

Instruments

The tools used were not employed for diagnostic purposes or with normative scoring criteria, but rather as symbolic mediators within the therapeutic process. (1) House-Tree-Person (HTP) (Buck, 2008): The HTP is a drawing technique that asks the participant to draw a house, a tree, and a person. Traditionally, it has been used as a projective tool to

explore aspects of self-concept, perception of the environment, and bodily experience. In the present study, it was used as an expressive tool to observe spatial organization, self-representation, boundaries, the figure-environment relationship, and the elements that the participant themselves highlighted as significant. (2) Person in the Rain (Machover, 1949; Querol & Chaves Paz, 2005): The Person in the Rain technique involves asking the participant to draw a human figure exposed to rain. In its classic form, it has been associated with the analysis of coping mechanisms.

Procedure

The techniques were administered in the context of individual psychological intervention, in a clinical setting familiar to the participants. The application was carried out flexibly, respecting the pace, sensory needs, and level of emotional regulation of each child or adolescent.

No rigid order of administration was followed; the selection and sequence of the techniques were adapted to each participant's developmental and communicative profile. In all cases, both graphic

productions and spontaneous verbalizations were recorded, as well as responses to open-ended questions such as: "What is happening here?", "What is this person feeling?", "Why did you draw it that way?".

The analysis focused on the process of symbolization and the clinical implications derived from the productions, avoiding closed interpretations or psychopathological inferences. The analysis focused on symbolic content, the formal characteristics of the drawing, and the meaning attributed by the participants. To enhance the analysis's credibility, an iterative review of the emerging categories was conducted by comparing them with the original drawings and the participants' verbalizations. The analysis of the drawings and associated verbalizations was performed using **reflective thematic analysis**, following the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed for the identification of relevant patterns of meaning in relation to symbolization processes and their clinical utility in children and adolescents with ASD.

Table 1. *Sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of the participants*

Age	Gender	Verbal Level	Tests Administered
5	Female	No verbal impairment	HTP
6	Male	No verbal impairment, noticeable difficulties in language comprehension	HTP
6	Male	Significant verbal impairment	HTP
6	Male	Functional, sentences with more than 4 elements	HTP
6	Feminine	Functional, sentences with more than 4 elements	HTP, Person in the Rain
6	Masculine	Functional, sentences with more than 4 elements	HTP, Person in the Rain
9	Female	Good verbal skills. Difficulty recalling some terms	Person in the Rain
10	Male	Good verbal skills, slight difficulty correctly ordering the syntactic structure of sentences	HTP, Person in the Rain

11	Male	Good verbal skills, slight difficulty in correctly ordering the syntactic structure of sentences	HTP, Person in the Rain
12	Female	Good verbal skills, slight difficulty expressing emotions	Person in the Rain, HTP,
12	Male	Good verbal skills, difficulty staying on topic in conversations unrelated to his interests, slight difficulty in narrating daily experiences in a coherent manner	Person in the Rain, HTP,
12	Male	Good verbal skills, difficulty staying on topic in conversations unrelated to his interests, slight difficulty in providing a coherent narrative account of daily experiences	Person in the Rain, HTP
15	Female	Good verbal skills, difficulty expressing emotions	Person in the Rain, HTP,
16	Male	Good verbal skills, difficulty staying on topic in conversations unrelated to his interests, slight difficulty in narrating and coherently describing daily experiences	Person in the Rain, HTP,
16	Male	Good verbal skills, difficulty staying on topic in conversations unrelated to his interests, slight difficulty in providing a coherent narrative account of daily experiences	Person in the Rain, HTP,
16	Male	Good verbal skills, difficulty staying on topic in conversations unrelated to his interests, slight difficulty in providing a coherent narrative account of daily experiences	Person in the Rain, HTP,
17	Male	Conversational fluency in highly restricted interests	Person in the Rain, HTP,
17	Male	Conversational fluency in highly restricted interests	Person in the Rain, HTP,
18	Male	Conversational fluency in highly restricted interests	Person in the rain, HTP,
19	Male	Conversational fluency in highly restricted interests	Person in the Rain, HTP,

Note: All participants had a confirmed diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder using the ADOS-2. The selection of instruments was flexible, taking into account the chronological age, verbal level, and communication profile of each participant. The sample consisted mainly of male participants (73%), with 27% female, aged between 6 and 19 years ($M = 11.7$; $SD = 4.3$).

In an initial phase, an **intensive familiarization with the data** was conducted through repeated review of the graphic productions, spontaneous verbalizations, and responses to open-ended questions asked during the administration of the tasks. Initial observations were recorded regarding both formal aspects of the drawing (spatial organization, size of figures, continuity of the line, use of color) and the

narrative and emotional content expressed by the participants.

Subsequently, **initial codes** were **generated**, identifying relevant units of meaning in relation to modes of symbolization, emotional expression, and the construction of subjective experience. The codes included both graphic elements (e.g., isolation of figures, literal representation of the environment, presence of protective or threatening elements) and narrative

aspects derived from the participants' verbalizations (e.g., experiences of rejection, search for protection, identification with the represented figure).

In a third phase, **the codes were grouped into preliminary categories**, based on the conceptual similarity among the various identified indicators. This process allowed for the progressive organization of the data into broader thematic clusters related to symbolization processes in autism.

Next, an iterative process of **reviewing and refining the themes** was carried out, comparing the emerging categories with the original graphic productions and the associated verbalizations. This procedure ensured the internal consistency of each theme and the

conceptual differentiation between them.

The analysis was **inductive** in nature, allowing themes to emerge from the data without relying on pre-established interpretive categories. In addition to the qualitative thematic analysis, descriptive analyses of frequencies and percentages were conducted to describe the distribution of the identified symbolization patterns. Likewise, associations between clinical variables (age, verbal level, and technique used) and the emerging themes were explored using Fisher's exact tests, due to the small sample size. The 2×2 contingency tables used for the exploratory analyses are presented in Table 2, to facilitate the interpretation of the results obtained through Fisher's exact tests.

Table 2. Contingency tables used in the exploratory analyses

Variable	Presence of the theme	Group 1	Group 2
Age (<12 years)	Literal symbolization	5	1
Age (≥12 years)	Literal symbolization	4	5
Preserved verbal level	Complex symbolization	7	4
Significant verbal impairment	Complex symbolization	1	3
Female	Identity formation	2	2
Male	Identity construction	1	10
Age (<12 years)	Use of color	3	3
Age (≥12 years)	Use of color	1	8

The results of the contingency tables used for exploratory analyses via Fisher's exact tests are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Exploratory associations between clinical variables and symbolization patterns*

	Topic analyzed	Group 1 n (%)	Group 2 n (%)	p	OR	95% CI
Age (<12 vs ≥12 years)	Literal symbolization	5/6 (83%)	4/9 (44%)	.08	6.00	0.78–46.10
Verbal level (significant impairment vs. preserved verbal skills)	Complex symbolization	1/4 (25%)	7/11 (64%)	.18	3.20	0.41–24.60
Gender (female vs. male)	Identity construction	2/4 (50%)	1/11 (9%)	.07	10.00	0.90–110.80
Age (<12 vs. ≥12 years)	Use of color	3/6 (50%)	1/9 (11%)	.11	8.00	0.63–101.20

Note. The analyses are interpreted in an exploratory manner due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the design.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, in addition to Fisher's exact tests, odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals were calculated to estimate the magnitude of the observed associations, beyond statistical significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles of research involving minors and individuals diagnosed with ASD. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, as well as assent from participants when their age and level of understanding permitted.

Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing all data and graphic productions. The techniques used were part of routine clinical practice and therefore did not impose an additional burden on the participants.

Furthermore, a respectful and neuroaffirmative approach was adopted, avoiding deficit-based or pathologizing interpretations of symbolic productions and always prioritizing the voice and subjective experience of each child or adolescent.

RESULTS

The analysis of the graphic and narrative productions allowed for the identification of different patterns of symbolization that guided clinical understanding and therapeutic intervention. The results are organized around emerging thematic axes related to representational style, the expression of relational distress, identity construction, and differences in modes of symbolization. In addition to descriptive analyses, effect sizes were calculated using odds ratios (OR) and 95%

confidence intervals to estimate the magnitude of the observed associations. The thematic analysis identified four main themes and eight associated subthemes (see Table 4). The thematic analysis identified **recurring patterns in the modes of symbolization** present in the participants' graphic and narrative productions. The identified themes represent **clinically relevant configurations of meaning**, integrating both formal aspects of the drawing and

the narrative content associated with each production. The analytical process identified **four main themes** that organize the different forms of symbolization observed in the sample: literal symbolization, symbolization of relational distress, identity construction, and differences in expressive style.

A tendency toward greater literal symbolization was observed in younger participants (83%) compared to older ones (44%), although the results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and the wide confidence intervals (see Table 3)

Symbolization of Experiences of Relational Distress

Table 4. *Symbolization themes identified in the sample*

Theme	Subthemes	Description	Examples	Number of participants (%)
Literal symbolization	Autobiographical representation / Familiar settings	Direct representation of personal experiences	drawing of oneself, real house, park	9 (60%)
Relational distress	Interpersonal rejection / Social isolation / Aggressive transformation	Externalization of rejection or conflict	murderer following bullying, isolated tree	11 (73%)
Identity formation	Body image / Gender identity	Exploration of the body or self-image	Sexualized body image	3 (20%)
Emotional regulation / Expressive style	Emotional vulnerability / Artistic style	Differences in emotional tone and execution	gray figure, positive scenes gray figure, positive scenes	6 (40%)

Figure 1 shows a 12-year-old participant who created a narrative around a figure that was initially “good” but turned into a murderer after being treated negatively by others, describing desires to harm others as a consequence of the suffering experienced.

In another drawing by the same participant (see Figure 2), they depicted a tree as a mask that enabled this

transformation, highlighting the symbolic construction of relational harm.

Another 12-year-old participant depicted a tree isolated among other, different trees, explaining that “it felt lonely because it was different” (see Figure 4). The same participant expressed concerns related to body image and described restrictive eating behaviors

associated with experiences of criticism and rejection.

The same was true for another participant of the same age, both in the drawing of the tree and in the drawing of the person in the rain (see Figures 5 and 6).

In the drawing of the tree, the participant described it as “a tree that stands alone,” which he characterized as very shy and

having difficulty interacting with others. He explained that the other trees “treat it badly” and that, although it wants to talk to them, “it finds it hard to do so.” The drawing was accompanied by verbal comments that revealed experiences of interpersonal rejection and difficulties with social initiative.

Figure 1

HTP-Person - 12-year-old boy



Figure 2

HTP-Tree - 12-year-old boy

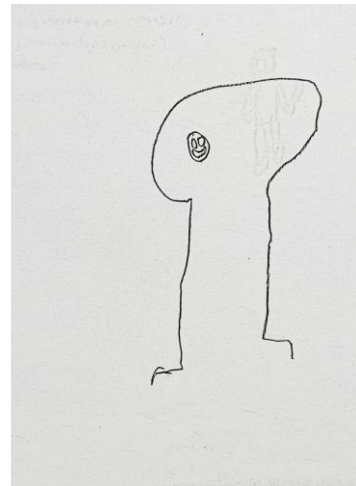


Figure 4. *HTP-Tree – 12-year-old girl*



Figure 5

HTP Tree – 12-year-old boy



Figure 6

Person in the Rain – 12-year-old boy



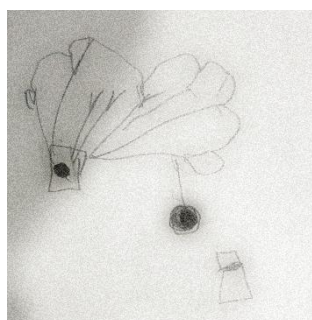
In the “person in the rain” task, the participant drew a figure who “enjoys the rain” and prefers to be alone, although he explicitly stated that he would like to have friends. He described the figure as a person with a “good heart,” suggesting the coexistence of experiences of isolation with a desire for social connection.

In another case, a 6-year-old participant drew a tree that he described as “*the tree of death*,” explaining that children should help it because “*you have to be good to go to heaven*.” The drawing was

accompanied by verbalizations that revealed a high level of self-demand and a rigid moral understanding of behavior, suggesting the presence of concerns related to behavioral control and external evaluation; this was the child’s drawing (see Figure 7). Likewise, another 12-year-old participant depicted his home as a space with a high level of noise that interfered with his nighttime rest, while in other drawings he included significant family figures, especially his mother and brother, to whom he attributed various emotional meanings (see Figure 8).

Figure 7 Figure 8

HTP – Tree – 6-year-old boy HTP – House – 12-year-old boy



A tendency toward greater literal symbolization was observed in the

younger participants (83%) compared to the older ones (44%), although the results

should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and the wide confidence intervals (see Table 3)

Symbolic Construction of Identity

The drawings also reflected processes related to personal and bodily identity; identity exploration appeared exclusively in participants over 11 years of age. A 19-year-old adolescent participant depicted

bodily figures with pronounced secondary sexual characteristics, describing elements associated with femininity in the context of a process of identity questioning. The patient reported feeling confused about their gender identity during that therapeutic process (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

HTP – Male, 19 years old



Figure 10

HTP – Person – 12-year-old female



In other cases, the productions reflected concerns related to self-image and body perception, linked to experiences of external criticism or family pressure (see Figure 10).

Identity exploration was observed more frequently in female participants (50%) than in male participants (9%), although the wide confidence intervals suggest that these results should be interpreted with caution due to low statistical precision (see Table 3).

Literalism and Direct Representation of Experience

One of the most consistent findings was the tendency toward literal representation of everyday reality. Most participants drew elements directly linked to their immediate experience, with little abstract metaphorical elaboration. Regarding verbal ability, participants with significant verbal impairment showed a predominance of literal representations, while participants with better verbal skills exhibited greater diversity in modes of symbolization.

Figure 11

Person in the rain – 7-year-old girl



Figure 12

HTP – Person – 6-year-old boy

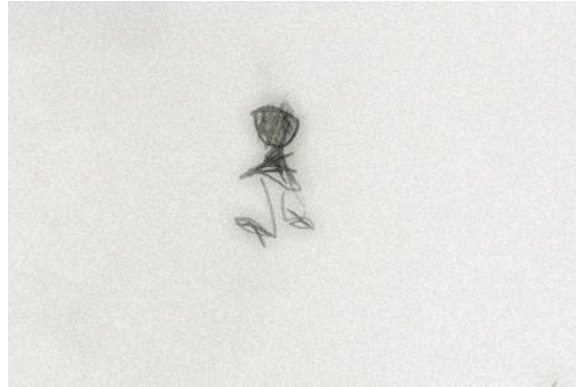


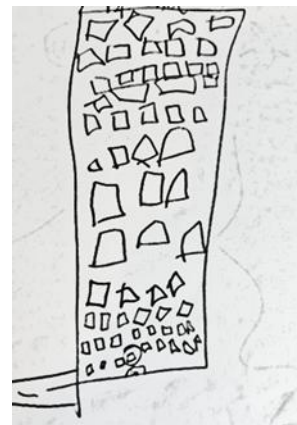
Figure 13

Person in the rain – 11-year-old boy



Figure 14

HTP – House – 8-year-old girl



In the “person in the rain” task, an 11-year-old participant depicted his mother as the central figure, describing her as the primary source of protection (see Figure 13). This drawing suggests the importance of attachment figures as

organizing elements of emotional experience.

Similarly, an 8-year-old participant depicted her own residential building in the HTP, describing in detail features of her everyday environment, which reinforces the predominance of concrete

representations linked to direct experience (see Figure 14).

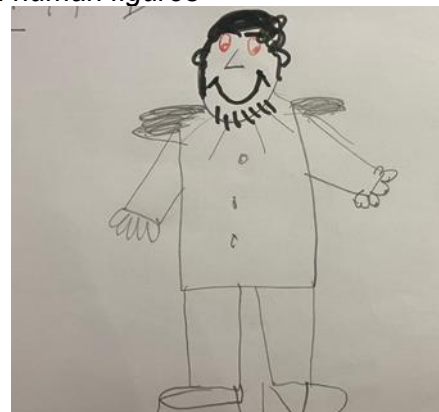
Differences in Expressive Style

Regarding the use of color, only four participants employed chromatic elements in their drawings, while the majority of the sample produced black-and-white drawings, suggesting differences in the level of expressive elaboration and in the mode of emotional representation. A younger participant depicted a very small human figure with uniform shading, while others showed a preference for simple, repetitive

structures. The use of color was more frequent among younger participants (50%) than among older ones (11%) (see Table 3). Along these lines, some drawings reflected spatial configurations suggesting relational dynamics with the environment marked by distance or difficulty in integration. Figure 15 shows a participant's drawing depicting a large tree with multiple branches extending outward, while the human figures appear shifted toward the base and in the background.

Figure 15

HTP – Tree and Social Environment. Representation of a central tree with multiple branches and peripheral human figures



This graphic organization was accompanied by verbalizations focused on interaction with others, as well as on the presence of elements of the environment (animals, human figures),

suggesting a representation of the self in relation to a context perceived as broad but potentially inaccessible from a central position.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the value of graphic production as a means of accessing symbolization processes in children and adolescents with ASD. The results suggest that drawing constitutes a relevant channel for the expression of internal content that does not always emerge in verbal discourse, especially in a population with difficulties in socio-emotional communication. The absence of statistical significance reinforces the need to interpret the results from a comprehensive rather than inferential approach

Symbolization of emotional and relational distress

Various productions reflected the externalization of experiences of emotional distress through specific graphic elements. In several participants, indicators associated with insecurity, withdrawal, or difficulties in emotional regulation were observed, such as small human figures, weak lines, or minimal graphic elaboration. According to interpretive models of graphic projective techniques, small drawings have been linked to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and self-deprecation (Lijntjens, 2021). This same author indicates that, from a psychodynamic perspective, these manifestations can be understood as unique attempts to organize subjective experience when emotional symbolization or verbal mediation are limited. In this sense, the observed graphic productions can be interpreted as attempts at subjective elaboration that allow the individual to organize their

emotional and relational experience through nonverbal channels.

In autism, difficulty with the symbolic inscription of language can lead to particular ways of structuring reality, the body, and the relationship with the environment, giving rise to idiosyncratic modes of expression and regulation of distress.

Likewise, some participants depicted contexts of environmental or interpersonal distress. In the case of the participant who described their home as a space with a high level of noise, the drawing of the house reflected the presence of elements of external discomfort without explicit reference to internal conflict, suggesting a tendency to attribute distress to external factors. This pattern could be interpreted as an environment-focused coping style, consistent with studies describing difficulties in identifying and expressing internal emotional states in the ASD population. In some drawings, elements associated with aggression or threat were observed, such as the depiction of weapons or potentially harmful figures. From a projective perspective, the inclusion of this type of element can be interpreted as a symbolic externalization of internal tension, experiences of perceived threat, or difficulties in emotional regulation, rather than as direct indicators of actual aggressive behavior (Ponce de León, 2018). In children, such content often reflects relational conflicts, experiences of vulnerability, or defensive mechanisms in response to distress (Buck, 2008). In the

context of autism, the graphic expression of aggressive content may be linked to difficulties in identifying and communicating emotional states, with the drawing serving as an alternative channel for symbolizing internal conflict. In this case, the depiction of the weapon was accompanied by verbalizations related to protection or defense, suggesting a symbolic elaboration of environmental control or the need for security in the face of situations perceived as threatening (Romé & Piro, 2022). When the representation is associated with narratives of harm toward others, it can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of experiences of rejection, frustration, or interpersonal exclusion—aspects frequently described in child projective analysis (Buck, 2008). In other cases, indicators of relational conflict or emotional vulnerability associated with the perception of one's own body and personal identity were observed, as was the case with the participant who had concerns related to body image and low self-esteem.

Identity Construction and Exploration of the Self

Graphic projective techniques provided access to content related to self-image, the self, and emotional experience that would have been difficult to elicit through verbal assessment alone, reinforcing their clinical utility as a tool for symbolic exploration. In the ASD population, where difficulties in emotional expression and communication can limit direct access to subjective experience, the use of adapted assessment strategies is particularly relevant.

One of the most notable cases involved an adolescent participant who produced

visual representations related to the exploration of gender identity, featuring sexualized bodily elements and identity questioning. This finding is consistent with recent literature describing a higher prevalence of gender diversity and complex identity exploration processes among individuals with ASD. In particular, systematic reviews have noted a higher prevalence of non-conforming gender identity, gender dysphoria, and non-heterosexual sexual orientation in the autistic population compared to the general population (González-García et al., 2023). Likewise, recent studies confirm the existence of a significant association between autism and gender dysphoria, highlighting the need for a clinical assessment sensitive to identity processes and the specific needs of this population (De la Fuente-Ruiz et al., 2025).

Descriptive analyses indicated that identity exploration was more frequent among female participants (50%) than among male participants (9), with a trend approaching statistical significance. Although these results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, they suggest possible gender differences in modes of symbolization and in the expression of subjective experience. These findings are consistent with research describing more internalizing profiles in girls and adolescents with ASD, as well as a greater presence of concerns related to self-image, identity, and emotional regulation (Cedano et al., 2020). In this regard, graphic productions could constitute a particularly relevant channel for identity exploration in the female population within the spectrum. In this

vein, recent clinical studies underscore the importance of individualized interventions that address the specific emotional and communicative characteristics of individuals with ASD, highlighting the need for comprehensive approaches that allow for the identification of underlying distress and guide therapeutic intervention (Martínez-de Castro et al., 2025). In this regard, drawing served as a privileged means of symbolizing subjective distress, allowing access to emotional content that is difficult to verbalize.

Psychological Defenses and Coping Strategies

The results obtained in the “person in the rain” test suggest the activation of defensive mechanisms in response to situations perceived as stressful. This technique aims to explore the subject’s body image under adverse conditions, where rain acts as a disruptive factor and allows for the observation of the defenses employed in response to stress.

In some cases, indicators of emotional dependence or a search for protection were observed, such as the depiction of caregiver figures or protective elements against the rain. This centrality of the caregiver figure is consistent with research highlighting the relevance of the caregiver-child bond in socio-emotional development in ASD, emphasizing the role of caregivers’ sensitivity as an organizer of the child’s emotional and relational experience (Armas Arboleda et al., 2020). In other participants, differences were evident in the organization of the stroke, the continuity of lines, or elements associated with emotional vulnerability, which could reflect difficulties in affective regulation

or in the integration of emotional experience.

However, as projective interpretation models indicate, no single indicator allows for diagnostic conclusions; rather, the integration of multiple sources of information and the clinical context is necessary (Romé & Piro, 2022).

In some cases, indicators of emotional dependence or a search for protection were observed, such as the depiction of caregiver figures or elements offering protection from the rain. In other participants, differences were evident in stroke organization, line continuity, or elements associated with emotional vulnerability, which could reflect difficulties in affective regulation or in the integration of emotional experience.

However, as projective interpretation models indicate, no single indicator allows for diagnostic conclusions; rather, the integration of multiple sources of information and the clinical context is necessary. In this regard, the clinical literature has highlighted the importance of interventions that promote progressive symbolization through nonverbal, relational, and sensory resources, fostering the gradual development of representational processes and emotional regulation in children with autism (Ponce de León, 2018).

Symbolization and Literalism in Autism

The results showed that participants with significant verbal impairment exhibited a predominance of literal representations, while participants with better verbal skills showed greater diversity in modes of symbolization. Although the differences did not reach statistical significance, this trend suggests a possible relationship between language development and the

symbolic complexity of graphic productions.

This finding is consistent with clinical perspectives that highlight the close relationship between symbolic development and the capacity for language-mediated representation, especially in the ASD population (Tendlarz, 2022). In this sense, language could act as a facilitator of more complex symbolization processes, without implying that the absence of language limits subjective expression. These results are also consistent with recent research on graphic production in ASD, which has identified specific patterns in the drawing of the human figure that differ from the typical developmental sequences of childhood, as well as variations depending on the participants' clinical and cognitive profiles (Garrido & Ferreira, 2023). These authors note that drawings made by children with ASD exhibit particular characteristics of graphic organization that may reflect unique modes of representation rather than strict developmental deficits.

Descriptive analyses showed a higher frequency of literal symbolization among younger participants (83%) compared to older participants (44%), with a trend approaching statistical significance. Although these differences should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size, the results suggest a possible developmental effect on modes of symbolization.

This trend is consistent with models of symbolic development that describe a progressive transition from concrete forms of representation toward more elaborate modes of symbolization with increasing age and relational experience

(Viloca & Alcácer, 2014). In this sense, the results suggest that symbolization in autism is an evolutionary process capable of development through appropriate mediators. These results are consistent with research highlighting the value of children's stories as a tool for symbolic and linguistic mediation in children with ASD. The use of visual and structured narratives facilitates the understanding of personal experiences and promotes the development of communication, especially when the materials are adapted to the cognitive and sensory characteristics of the participants (Guanoluisa et al., 2021). In this sense, both drawing and storytelling can be understood as complementary tools that allow for the organization of subjective experience and foster symbolic expression beyond conventional verbal language.

In this vein, the results of the present study suggest that graphic projective techniques can function as symbolic mediators that facilitate emotional expression and the development of mentalization processes in children and adolescents with ASD, especially when supported by visual, relational, and narrative resources adapted to their cognitive and communicative characteristics.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account. First, the small sample size and the clinical nature of the sample limit the generalizability of the results. The heterogeneity of the sample is not considered solely a limitation but rather a characteristic inherent to the phenotypic variability of ASD, allowing for the exploration of

diverse modes of symbolization rather than the establishment of homogeneous patterns. Although all participants had a diagnosis confirmed by the ADOS-2, no formal categorization by support levels (DSM-5-TR) was performed. However, verbal level was used as a rough clinical proxy for communicative functioning. Second, the analysis was based on utterances obtained in a routine therapeutic context, which implies variability in the administration of the instruments. Nevertheless, this flexibility also constitutes a strength by allowing for an ecological approach centered on the individual characteristics of each participant.

Furthermore, the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study implies that the results should be understood as comprehensive, clinically oriented approximations rather than generalizable diagnostic conclusions.

Clinical Implications

The results of the present study suggest that graphic projective techniques may be clinically useful tools in the psychological assessment and intervention with children and adolescents diagnosed with ASD. The graphic productions provided access to emotional and relational content that does not always emerge in verbal discourse, which is particularly relevant in a population with difficulties in socio-emotional communication.

From a clinical perspective, the use of graphic devices such as the HTP or the “person in the rain” technique can facilitate the exploration of subjective

experience and guide therapeutic intervention based on the meanings attributed by the participants themselves. In this sense, drawing can function as a symbolic mediator that allows for the progressive elaboration of complex emotional experiences, especially when accompanied by narrative support and open-ended questions that encourage reflection on the represented experience.

Likewise, the results suggest that these techniques may be particularly sensitive to developmental and communicative variables. The greater presence of literal symbolization among younger participants with lower verbal skills suggests the need for interventions supported by concrete visual and narrative resources, while older participants showed a greater tendency toward identity exploration and more complex forms of symbolization, allowing the intervention to be oriented toward aspects related to self-image, identity, and interpersonal relationships.

Based on the results obtained, three lines of clinical intervention based on the use of graphic production are proposed:

1. Facilitating emotional symbolization: use of drawing as a pre-language mediator, guided open-ended questions
2. Work on relational experiences: narrative reinterpretation of the drawing
Identification of significant figures
3. Intervention regarding identity and self-image
Integration of graphic productions into narrative therapy
Use in adolescence for self-exploration

CONCLUSIONS

The results show that drawing can serve as a relevant channel for expressing emotional, relational, and identity-related experiences that cannot always be communicated through verbal language. The graphic productions provided access to content related to experiences of rejection, isolation, self-image, and emotional regulation, offering clinically significant information for the subjective understanding of children and adolescents with ASD.

Likewise, exploratory analyses suggest possible associations between certain clinical variables and the observed patterns of symbolization, although these results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and the wide confidence intervals obtained.

In this regard, future research could benefit from the use of more standardized procedures for the collection and categorization of graphic productions, as well as from an expanded sample size, in order to increase statistical power and deepen the understanding of symbolization processes in the autistic population.

Finally, the findings support the clinical utility of incorporating graphic and narrative tools into psychological assessment and intervention with individuals with ASD, using a flexible, contextualized approach that respects the diversity of forms of emotional and symbolic expression.

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