

ED351 Educational Psychology

House–Tree–Person Practical Theory

Title: **House–Tree–Person Practical Theory**
Subtitle: John Buck's Model Continued by Donald Uhlin
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about the topic example:

As an inner-city Chaplain serving in felony recovery work in downtown Seattle, I have used this pencil-drawing concept as a practical tool to better understand and help those navigating difficult life circumstances. My first exposure to this approach came during my junior high years, when Dr. Donald Ulin demonstrated the concept in a small group setting at his home. The impact of that experience was profound. Even decades later, I can recall the details of his explanation and have continued to reflect on and apply those insights since 1978.

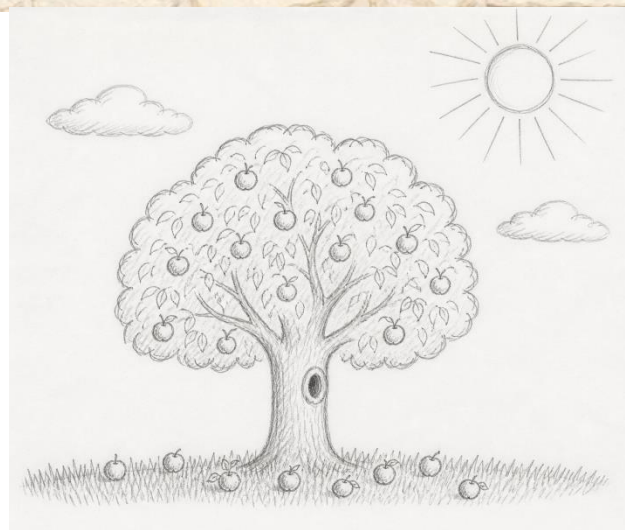
Recently, I obtained a copy of *Art for Exceptional Children*, and it confirmed the very principles I learned years ago. In this presentation, I aim to share this model in a clear and accessible way, demonstrating how simple drawings can serve as meaningful entry points for understanding, communication, and growth.

House–Tree–Person Practical Theory

A Creative Window into Learning & Experience

The House–Tree–Person model has roots reaching back into early projective drawing approaches of the late 19th century and was later formalized by John N. Buck in 1948. This method uses simple drawings as a way to explore inner experiences, particularly when individuals may struggle to express themselves verbally.

This is an AI version of what I drew in 1978. Being the youngest of three boys, I had a wide-eyed look at everything in life. When my oldest brother left home and moved across the country, it affected me in a devastating way. I thought that I was doing everything I could, but I saw that many things didn't work out. I didn't intend to explain all of that, it just showed in the way that I drew a tree.



Slide 2 – Purpose

- The purpose of HTP drawing method
- Explain its educational and counseling use
- Connect to art education and exceptional learners
- Apply insights to real-world teaching

Counseling is not used as a “Cheap Parlor Trick.”

Slide 3 – Background

- Developed by **John N. Buck (1948)**
- Projective drawing technique
- Used in psychology and counseling settings
- Encourages nonverbal expression
- Continued by **Dr. Donald Uhlin (1972)**

The H-T-P Theory stems from ample observation.

Slide 4 - Core Idea

- People express inner experiences through drawings
- Drawings may reflect perceptions, emotions, and relationships
- Especially helpful when words are difficult

It's not what you drew, it's how you drew it.

Slide 5 – The Three Drawings

- ☐ **House** – home life, security, relationships
- ☐ **Tree** – inner self, growth, emotional state
- ☐ **Person** – self-image, identity

Each sketch displays one's “style” of mindset.

Slide 6 – How It Works

- Draw a house, tree, and person
- Observe details and patterns
- Ask follow-up questions
- Discuss meaning with the learner

Dr. Uhlin started with prison inmates.

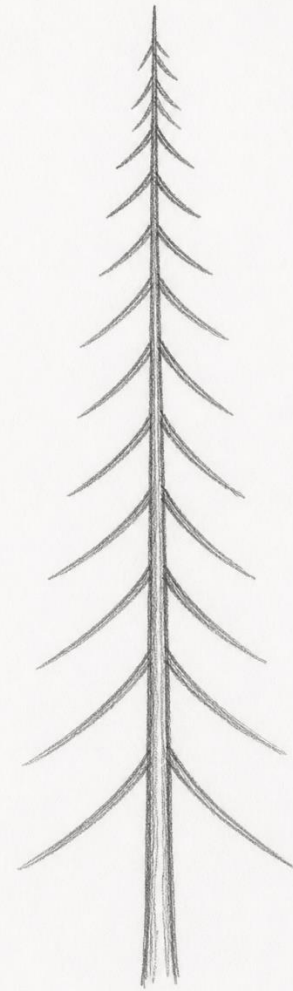
Slide 7 – Educational Value

- Encourages creative expression
- Supports students with learning difficulties
- Provides insight into emotional experience
- Builds communication pathways

Some inmates had no idea WHY they committed crimes, drawing it out opened the understanding.

This is an AI version of what my middle brother drew in 1978. As the middle child in our family, he developed a personality that has always been direct and straightforward. His thoughts are clear, and structured.

The tall, narrow form and minimal branching suggest a sense of purpose and focus rather than distraction.



Slide 8 – Connection to Art Education

- Encourages creative expression
- Supports students with learning difficulties
- Provides insight into emotional experience
- Builds communication pathways

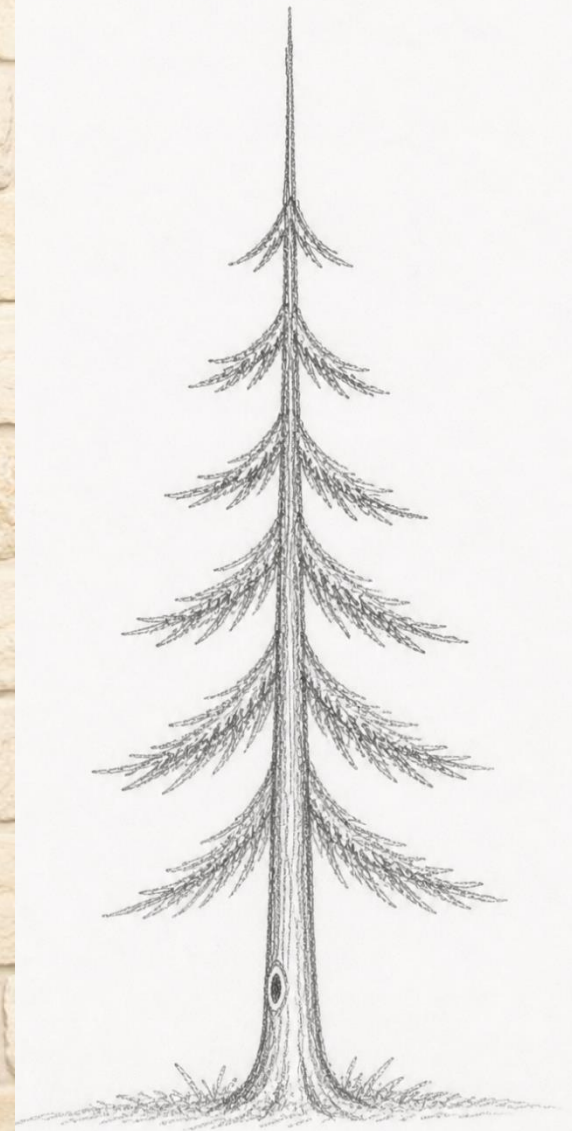
This is not therapy as much as it is clarifying personal history.

Slide 9 – Uhlin's Contribution

- Emphasis on **art for exceptional learners**
- Focus on expression rather than perfection
- Encourages confidence and participation
- Aligns with relational teaching methods

It was 1978 and I was a Jr. High kid listening to Dr. Uhlin for the first time. Every idea stuck in my mind.

This is an AI example of the drawing a 72-year-old felon provided. I spoke with this older inmate, and after seeing his drawing, I immediately had to ask him about his painful childhood. I was curious and inquired if his mother knew that he was being molested as an elementary age kid. He immediately confirmed that it happened and it was extremely painful. He followed up by saying, “but no one wants to hear about it.” My first response was, would you like to get some coffee? I'll buy.



Slide 10 – Practical Application

- Use drawings to start conversations
- Ask open-ended questions
- Listen without assuming
- Build trust through engagement

We drew a house and people next to the house. My house had a long driveway and a fence.

Slide 11 – Example Questions

- “Tell me about your tree...”
- “Who lives in this house?”
- “What is happening in this picture?”
- “How does this represent you?”

My drawing of a chimney with smoke showed a confidence in my own personality. Helpful

Slide 12 – Strengths

- Accessible to all learners
- Encourages participation
- Reveals emotional themes
- Supports relational teaching

It was hard to accept that my tree had fruit on the ground showing failed efforts.

Slide 13 – Limitations

- Interpretations are subjective
- Perceived as a “Cheap Parlor Trick”
- Requires careful, ethical use
- Must be paired with conversation

Some of the deaf folks at the meeting just denied the explanation. They were not ready.

Slide 14 – Comparison to Behaviorism

- **Skinner:** observable behavior, reinforcement
- **HTP:** internal expression, meaning
- Both valuable in different contexts

I began to use this HTP method in difficult counseling and at felony recover housing.

This is an AI example of the drawing a bride-to-be had drawn. She had a great testimony for the Lord and wanted to be transparent about their past problems. After she drew a tree that leaned to the left, I asked her if she did not get along with her dad at this time. She leveled with her future husband and me saying that she couldn't stand him at all. He was mean and overbearing to an extreme degree. She could not wait to get away from him. It was something that she didn't know how to deal with, and she did not want to bring this into her marriage.



Slide 15 – Biblical Integration

- ☐ **God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7)**
- ☐ **Communication beyond words (Psalm 19:1)**
- ☐ **Listening with understanding (James 1:19)**

...Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground. John 8:6 WOW, what did he draw?

Slide 16 – Ministry Application

- Helps individuals express hidden struggles
- Encourages safe dialogue
- Supports emotional and spiritual growth
- Builds trust and relationship

Counseling begins with gaining comfortable trust.

Slide 17 – Personal Reflection

- Learning through relationship
- Expression reveals deeper understanding
- Art can open doors words cannot

When that 72 inmate was able to discuss his past, he began a long and steady healing process.

Slide 18 – Key Insight

- Drawings are not answers...
They are invitations to understanding.

When applied to the counselor's understanding, it is possible to provide a better focus of helpful conversations that leads to recovery and healing.

Slide 19 – Conclusion

- HTP is a helpful exploratory tool
- Art provides access to internal experience
- Best used with care, humility, and conversation

God gives wisdom and understanding

Slide 20 – References

- Buck, J. N. (1948). *House–Tree–Person Technique*
- Uhlin, D. H. *Art for Exceptional Children*
- The Holy Bible, KJV