

## PROJECTIONS OF WHO YOU ARE

Rorschach, H. (1942). *Psychodiagnostics: A diagnostic test based on perception*. New York: Grune & Stratton.

Picture yourself and a friend relaxing in a grassy meadow on a warm summer's day. The blue sky above is broken only by a few white puffy clouds. Pointing to one of the clouds, you say to your friend, "Look! That cloud looks like a woman in a wedding dress with a long veil." To this your friend replies, "Where? I don't see that. To me, that cloud is shaped like a volcano with a plume of smoke rising from the top." As you try to convince each other of your differing perceptions of the same shape, the air currents change and transform the cloud into something entirely different. But why such a difference in what the two of you saw? You were looking at the same shape, and yet interpreting it as two entirely unrelated objects.

Since everyone's perceptions are often influenced by psychological factors, perhaps the different objects found in the cloud formations revealed something about the personalities of the observers. In other words, you and your friend were projecting something about yourselves onto the shapes in the sky. This is the concept underlying Hermann Rorschach's (1884-1922) development of his "form interpretation test," better known as the *inkblot test*. This was one of the earliest versions of a type of psychological tool known as the *projective technique*.

The two most widely known and used projective tests are the Rorschach inkblot and the *Thematic Apperception Test*, or TAT (to be discussed in the next reading). Both of these instruments are pivotal in the history of clinical psychology. Since Rorschach's test, first described in 1922, involves direct comparisons among various groups of mental illnesses and is often associated with the diagnosis of psychological disorders, we will discuss it first.

A *projective test* presents a person with an ambiguous stimulus and assumes that the person will *project* his or her inner or unconscious psychological processes onto it. In the case of Rorschach's test, the stimulus is nothing more than a symmetrical inkblot that can be perceived to be virtually anything. Rorschach suggested that what a person sees in the inkblot often reveals a great deal about his or her true psychological nature. He called this the *interpretation of accidental forms*. An often-told story about Rorschach's inkblots tells of a psychotherapist who is administering the test to a client. With the first inkblot card the therapist asks, "What does this suggest to you?" The client replies, "Sex." The same question is asked of the second card, to which the client again replies, "Sex." When the same one-word answer is given to the first five cards, the therapist remarks, "Well, you certainly seem to be preoccupied with sex!" To this the surprised client responds, "Me? Doctor, you're the one showing all the dirty pictures!" Of course, this story oversimplifies Rorschach's test and, although the inkblots themselves are selected to be vaguely suggestive of objects in order to encourage active interpretation, sexual meanings should, on average, be no more likely than any other.

Rorschach believed that his projective technique could serve two main purposes. One was that it could be used as a research tool to reveal unconscious aspects of personality. The other purpose, claimed somewhat later by Rorschach, was that the test could be used to diagnose various types of psychopathology.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

The theory underlying Rorschach's technique was that in the course of interpreting a random inkblot, attention would be drawn away from the subject so that the person's usual psychological defenses would be weakened. This, in turn, would allow normally hidden aspects of the psyche to be revealed. When the stimulus being perceived is ambiguous (that is, having few clues as to what it really is), the interpretation of the stimulus has to come from inside the person doing the perceiving (see Murray's *Thematic Apperception Test*). In Rorschach's conceptualization, inkblots were about as ambiguous as you can get and, therefore, would allow for the greatest amount of projection from a person's unconscious.

## METHOD

An examination of Rorschach's formulation of his inkblot test can be divided into two broad sections: the process he used to develop the original forms and the methods suggested for interpreting and scoring the responses made by subjects or clients.

### Development of the Test

Rorschach's explanation of how the forms are made sounded very much like instructions for a fun children's art project: "The production of such accidental forms is very simple: A few large inkblots are thrown on a piece of paper, the paper folded, and the ink spread between the two halves of the sheet" (p. 15). However, the simplicity

stopped there. Rorschach went on to explain that only those designs that met certain conditions could be used effectively. For example, the inkblot should be relatively simple, symmetrical, and moderately suggestive of objects. He also suggested that the forms should be symmetrical, because asymmetrical inkblots are often rejected by subjects as impossible to interpret. After a great deal of testing, Rorschach finally arrived at a set of 10 forms that made up his original test. Of these, 5 were black on white, 2 used black and red, and 3 were multicolored. Figure 1 contains three figures of the type Rorschach used.



**FIGURE 1** Examples of accidental forms similar to the type used in Rorschach's Form Interpretation test. (From Archiv Medizinischer Verlag Hans Huber, Bern und Stuttgart.)

### Administration and Scoring

Rorschach's form interpretation test is administered simply by handing a subject each figure, one at a time, and asking, "What might this be?" Subjects are free to turn the card in any direction and to hold it as close to or as far from their eyes as they wish. The researcher or therapist administering the test notes down all the responses for each figure without suggestions to the subjects. There is no imposed time limit.

Rorschach pointed out that subjects almost always think the test is designed to study imagination. However, he is very careful to explain that it is not a test of imagination, and the creativity of a person's imagination does not significantly alter the result. It is, Rorschach claimed, a test of perception involving the processes of sensation, memory, and unconscious and conscious associations between the stimulus forms and other psychological forces within the individual.

Rorschach listed the following guidelines for scoring the subjects' responses to the 10 inkblots (p. 19):

1. How many responses were made? What was the reaction time; that is, how long did the subject look at the figure before responding? How often did the subject refuse to interpret a figure?
2. Was the subject's interpretation only determined by the shape of the figure, or were color or movement included in the perception?
3. Was the figure seen as a whole or in separate parts? Which parts were separated, and how were they interpreted?

#### 4. What did the subject see?

Interestingly, Rorschach considered the content of the subject's interpretation the *least* important factor in the responses given to the inkblots. The following section summarizes Rorschach's observations, related to these four guidelines, of numerous subjects with a variety of psychological symptoms.

## RESULTS

To discover how various groups of people might perform differently on the inkblot test, Rorschach and his associates administered it to subjects from several psychological groups. These included, but were not limited to, normal individuals with varying amounts of education, schizophrenic patients, and individuals diagnosed as manic-depressive.

Table 1 presents typical responses reported by Rorschach for the 10 inkblot figures. These, of course, vary from person to person and among different psychological groups, but the answers given in the table serve as examples.

**TABLE 1 Typical Responses to Rorschach's Inkblot Figures for an Average Normal Subject**

FIGURE NUMBER	RESPONSE
I.	Two Santa Clauses with brooms under their arms
II.	A butterfly
III.	Two marionette figures
IV.	An ornament on a piece of furniture
V.	A bat
VI.	A moth or a tree
VII.	Two human heads or two animal heads
VIII.	Two bears
IX.	Two clowns or darting flames
X.	A rabbit's head, two caterpillars, or two spiders

(Adaped from pp. 126–127.)

Rorschach found that subjects generally gave between 15 and 30 total responses to the 10 figures. Depressed subjects generally gave fewer answers; happy subjects gave more; and among schizophrenics the number of answers varied a great deal from person to person. The entire test usually took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete, with schizophrenics taking much less time on average. Normal subjects almost never failed to respond to all the figures, but schizophrenics would frequently refuse to answer.

Rorschach believed that the portion of the form interpreted by the subject, whether movement was part of the interpretation, and to what degree color entered into the response were all very important in analyzing the subject's performance on the test. His suggestions for scoring those factors were quite complex and required training and experience to analyze a person's responses properly. However, a useful and brief overall summary has been provided by Gleitman (1991):

Using the entire inkblot is said to indicate integrative, conceptual thinking, whereas the use of a high proportion of small details suggests compulsive rigidity. A relatively frequent use of white space is supposed to be a sign of rebelliousness and negativism. Responses that describe humans in movement are said to indicate imagination and a rich inner life; responses that are dominated by color suggest emotionality and impulsivity. (p. 684)

Finally, Rorschach addressed the final guideline for analyzing responses: what the subject actually sees in the inkblot. The most common category of responses involved animals and insects. The percentage of animal responses ranged from 25% to 50%. Interestingly, depressed subjects were among those giving the greatest percentage of animal answers, while artists were reported as giving the fewest.

Another category proposed by Rorschach was that of *original responses*. These were answers that occurred fewer than once in 100 tests. Original responses were found most often among subjects who were diagnosed as schizophrenic and least often among normal subjects of average intelligence.

## DISCUSSION

In his discussion of his form interpretation test, Rorschach pointed out that originally it had been designed to study theoretical questions about the unconscious workings of the human mind and psyche. The discovery that the test had the potential to serve as a diagnostic tool was made accidentally. Rorschach claimed that his test was often able to indicate schizophrenic tendencies, hidden neuroses, potential for depression, characteristics of introversion versus extroversion, and intelligence. He did not, however, propose that the inkblot test should substitute for the usual practices of clinical diagnosis, but rather could aid in this process. Rorschach also warned that while the test can indicate certain unconscious tendencies, it cannot be used to probe the contents of the unconscious in detail. He allowed that the other common practices at the time, such as dream interpretation and free association, were superior methods for such purposes.

## CRITICISMS AND SUBSEQUENT RESEARCH

Numerous studies over the decades since Rorschach developed his test have drawn many of his conclusions into question. One of the most important criticisms relates to the validity of the test—whether it actually measures what Rorschach claimed it measured, that is, underlying personality characteristics. Research has demonstrated that many of the response differences attributed by Rorschach to personality factors can be more easily explained by such things as verbal ability, age of the subject, intellectual level, amount of education, and even the characteristics of the person administering the test. (See Anastasi & Urbina, 1996, for a detailed discussion of these criticisms.)

Taken as a whole, the scientific research on Rorschach's test does not provide an optimistic view of its reliability or validity as a personality test or diagnostic tool. Nevertheless, the test remains in common use among clinical psychologists and psychotherapists. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the fact that in actual use, Rorschach's inkblot technique is used not as a formal test, but rather as a means of increasing a therapist's understanding of individual clients. It is, in essence, an extension of the verbal interaction that normally occurs between a therapist and a client. In this less rigid interpretation of the responses on the test, it appears to offer helpful insights for effective psychotherapy.

One interesting application of the Rorschach test has been to present the figures for interpretation by more than one person, such as couples, families, coworkers, gang members, and so on. Participants are asked to reach a consensus about what the figures represent. This use of the test has shown promise as a method for studying and improving human interaction (Aronow & Reznikoff, 1976).

## RECENT APPLICATIONS

A review of recent psychological and related literature shows that the validity of the Rorschach assessment scale continues to be studied and debated. Several hopeful studies from the psychoanalytic front have indicated that newer methods of administration and scoring may increase the scale's interscorer reliability and its ability to diagnose and discriminate between various psychological disturbances. For example, Arenella and Ornduff (2000) employed the Rorschach Inkblot Method to study differences in body image of sexually abused girls compared to nonabused girls from otherwise stressful environments. The researchers found that sexually abused girls responded to the Rorschach Test in ways that indicated a greater concern about their bodies than did their nonabused counterparts. In a similar vein, researchers obtained Rorschach scores for a group of 66 male psychopathic youth criminal offenders between the ages of 14 and 17 (Loving & Russell, 2000). This study found that at least some of the standard Rorschach variables were significantly associated with various levels of psychopathology. The authors suggest that the Rorschach may provide a valuable means of predicting which teens are at highest risk of violently criminal behaviors and enhance intervention strategies.

Another recent application of the Rorschach Inkblot Test was an examination of the potential psychological damage from membership in cults (Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinowski, 2000). This study, using responses to the Rorschach and other measures, found that new cult members did not appear to be suffering from any specific psychological disorders, and current members appeared to be generally well adjusted psychologically. However, the researchers did find evidence of significant post-membership social and psychological adjustment difficulties.

Finally, an intriguing development in the validity debate stems from a study comparing the Rorschach to a commonly used *objective* psychological test called the MMPI (for *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory*) in evaluating sex offenders (Grossman et al., 2002). A common problem in testing sex offenders for psychological disorders is that they often deny having, or minimize the severity of, any such problems. This study found that

sex offenders who were able to "fake good" on the MMPI and score normal psychological profiles, were exposed as psychopaths by the Rorschach. "These findings indicate that the Rorschach is resilient to attempts at faking good and may therefore provide valuable information in forensic settings where intentional distortion is common" (p. 484).

Of course, the validity of this use of the Rorschach is equally open to questions about validity as is the original test on which it is based. However, these studies, along with many others, demonstrate the enduring influence and use of Rorschach's work and the potential for the development and application of projective tests that may have greater validity and therapeutic value.

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