

Return to the Source: Rorschach's *Psychodiagnostics*

Marvin W. Acklin and Jill Oliveira-Berry

*Clinical Studies Program
University of Hawaii at Manoa*

Recent research has examined graduate teaching methods in the Rorschach Test (Hilsenroth & Handler, 1995). One should not be surprised to find that instruction in the theory and technique of the test varies widely. It seems unlikely that Rorschach's book, *Psychodiagnostics* (Rorschach, 1942), is even read. To orient the modern reader to Rorschach's seminal volume, this review examines Rorschach's intellectual milieu, outlines the book's content, elucidates and appraises some of the central ideas of the work, and assesses them in terms of contemporary Rorschach psychology. A much fuller scholarly appraisal of Rorschach's thought and work remains to be written.

Numerous obstacles stand in the way of assimilating and appreciating Rorschach's *Psychodiagnostics*. Rorschach's thought developed and *Psychodiagnostics* was written in another era, in a foreign language, and absent of the assumptions that organize the modern reader's sensibilities. Contemporary critics in most every field seem to have lost a sense of historicity in examining works, events, or actions of the past—as if the past could or should be viewed strictly in modern categories. To better understand Rorschach's thought, it is necessary to penetrate his context, identify the sources of his ideas, and the contemporaries who influenced him.

Rorschach (1884–1992) wrote in a theoretical idiom that is not immediately recognizable to the modern reader. His *zeitgeist* was founded, not on the social behaviorism and positivism that characterizes contemporary American clinical psychology (Loevinger, 1994), but on the rich philosophical, medical, and natural science traditions of the 19th century. He was educated in a period of revolutionary cultural transition. Rorschach was a brilliant student and the recipient of an excellent education. He was a talented artist and aesthete. His medical school education and psychiatric training, during the decade of 1910–1920, exposed him to the early “depth psychologies” of Freud, Bleuler (1916), and Jung. Swiss psychiatry, in particular, was dominated by forceful, ascendant thinkers. Referring to the sort of men who “discovered the unconscious,” Ellenberger (1970) wrote that,

Freud belonged to a group of men of the same mold including Kraepelin, Forel [Bleuler's predecessor at the Burgholzli Clinic], and Bleuler, who had gone through long training in intellectual and emotional discipline. They were men of high culture, puritanical mores, boundless energy, and strong convictions, which they vigorously asserted. (p. 468)

Psychodiagnostics is aptly called a monograph. It is a densely written piece couched in dry, scientific terminology. The English translation of the book (Rorschach, 1942) reads in a wooden, perhaps overly literal rendering. The book is not so easy to obtain, either. There is a paucity of German language scholarship concerning the Rorschach, in part it seems, due to the fact that the book received a very poor reception in Switzerland and Germany. None of the early German-language scholarship has been translated and published in the English-language Rorschach literature. The contemporary reader attempting to generate a background relies inevitably on Ellenberger (1954, 1970) and commentaries on *Psychodiagnostics* by the various Rorschach systematizers (Exner, 1968). Finally, the attempt to approach and assimilate Rorschach's seminal work, in light of the sometimes gifted scholarly commentaries of the earlier generations of Rorschach scholars—Ernest Schachtel and David Rapaport—among them, creates a daunting attitude of humility.

The layout of *Psychodiagnostics* is plain and simple. *Psychodiagnostics* is a scientific document written in terse language lacking literary elegance. *Psychodiagnostics* has been regarded as atheoretical in outlook, a point that we question. It is, certainly, written in a theoretical language that is unfamiliar to the modern reader. Rorschach's debt to associationist theory is obvious. The most obvious debt he pays to another thinker's ideas, in his discussion of perception and apperception, is found in his famous quote of Bleuler:

Perceptions arise from the fact that sensations, or groups of sensations, ecphorize memory pictures of former groups of sensations within us. This produces in us a complex of memories of sensations, the elements of which, by virtue of their simultaneous occurrence in former experiences, have a particularly fine coherence and are differentiated from other groups of sensations. In perception, therefore, we have three processes: sensation, memory, and association. This identification of a homogeneous group of sensations with previously acquired analogous complexes, together with all their connections, we designate as apperception. (Rorschach, 1942, pp. 16–17)

Rorschach, in several places in the book, indicates that “visual memories” and “engrams” are centrally involved in responding to the cards. This approach to the response process, based on associationist and schematic properties, expresses notions similar to contemporary information processing ideas of distributed processing and schema theory (Acklin & Wu-Holt, 1995).

Rorschach referred to his inkblot test as a "form interpretation test." Rorschach's monograph is posed as an experimental report. He readily admits that his findings and ideas are preliminary and in need of further development. The outline of the work is in traditional scientific format: apparatus, procedure (Section I), and description of scoring system as applied to a group of 45 participants (Section II). He deals with the stimulus requirements of the blots (Section III). The heart of the work (Section IV) elaborates Rorschach's notion of *kinesthesia*, a construct that has little in common with contemporary psychological ideas and the extension of kinesthesia into the notion of the experience type (*Erlebnistypus* [EB]). In a brief discussion (Section V), he notes that the applicability of the inkblots to diagnostic considerations was discovered quite secondarily and discusses the test's use in the clinical situation. He concludes his monograph with one of the first examples of personality assessment: 28 Rorschach case studies, including normals, neurotics, psychotics, manic-depressives, epileptics, and organic psychoses, creating an enduring prototype for Rorschach case studies (cf. Beck, Klopfer, Schafer). His posthumous paper, "The Application of the Form Interpretation Test," written in collaboration with Emil Oberholzer, is appended to *Psychodiagnostics*. This paper is an intensive case study of a psychoanalytic case, comparing the findings of the two methods.

Ellenberger's writings are indispensable in appreciating Rorschach's personality, his contemporaries, and his work. "The Life and Work of Hermann Rorschach" (Ellenberger, 1954) described who Rorschach was and the development of his ideas. Ellenberger's eulogizing tone is easily dismissed as hagiography. Only after penetrating into Rorschach's work does Ellenberger's description of the magnitude of Rorschach's genius take shape. Ellenberger described young Rorschach, the son of an artist and art teacher, as living "in an atmosphere of extraordinary intellectual, artistic, and cultural concentration" (p. 175). Rorschach seems to have been the sort of person who developed his ideas intensely, if not being actually possessed by them. His early work on the psychological and social pathology of Swiss cults (1913-1919), and later his inkblot test, stand as examples. Swiss psychiatry, at the time that Rorschach trained and practiced, was very well developed and bred a number of singular theorists and clinicians, including Bleuler, Jung, Pfister, Minkowski, and Binswanger. The Swiss psychoanalytic group, to which Rorschach belonged, comprised a veritable psychiatric hall of fame. These brilliant psychiatrists developed influential phenomenological and depth psychologies. Freud's work, of course, was intensely debated and had been rapidly assimilated into contemporary clinical practice. Jung (1875-1961), Rorschach's senior by 9 years, had been at the Burgholzli Clinic since 1900 (Rorschach obtained his medical degree from the University of Zurich in 1912) and had fully established himself by 1910 with his word association studies (Ellenberger, 1970). Rorschach used Jung's word association test in his own clinical work, comparing the results with his inkblot method. Jung's stature and influence on Rorschach cannot have been insignificant.

A great deal of speculation has focused on Rorschach's "theory" and where his thinking would have gone if he had not died so early in his life (Rorschach was 9 years younger than Jung and Jung lived until 1961!). Many have assumed he would have developed his thought along psychoanalytic lines. They often cite the posthumous paper, "The Application of the Form Interpretation Test," as proof. Our reading of Rorschach does not necessarily support this. Freud's highly influential work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was published in 1900. His ideas about the unconscious had become pervasive. Rorschach had been exposed to Freud's thought long before he developed his inkblot test and wrote *Psychodiagnostics*. He had the opportunity to express Freudian ideas in his monograph had that been his intention. His posthumous paper, written in collaboration with a psychoanalyst, seems to be just as he titled it, an application of the test to psychoanalytic issues. It is our contention that Rorschach was developing his own theory of personality based on his test. Ellenberger (1970), in chapter 10 of *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, makes an unreferenced statement concerning the direction that Rorschach's thinking seemed to be taking: "but when Rorschach gave his last communication to the Swiss Psychoanalytic Society on February 18, 1922, it was clear that he was developing his method of test interpretation in the direction of phenomenology" (p. 842). We have been unable to locate the source of Ellenberger's reference. Rorschach, in our opinion, was a radical innovator and his ideas about kinesthesia and the *EB* form the theoretical core of *Psychodiagnostics*.

European philosophy and psychiatry were preoccupied with dream psychology in the latter half of the 18th century, in part due to the influence of Romanticism. Dream research was focused on the origins of dream images, stimulation of dream images in various sensory modalities, and philosophical speculation about the relation of dreams to the "soul" (psyche). Ellenberger (1970) asserted that Rorschach was heavily influenced by the dream research of J. Mourly-Vold (1850–1907), a Norwegian philosopher. Vold had discovered that people tended to dream more vividly, with accompanying physical sensations, when their limbs were restrained during sleep. Vold's notions are adapted to Rorschach's notion of kinesthesia. Rorschach's interest seems to have been about the fundamental psychophysical processes and experiences that produce dream images. This was not solely the preoccupation of Rorschach, of course. Psychiatry at the time was fascinated by the notions of dream psychology, the "unconscious psyche," and their role in mental functioning and psychopathology (Ellenberger, 1970). Morgenthaler, Rorschach's senior colleague during his years at the Waldau asylum (1914–1915), was intensely interested in the artistic productions of psychotics (Ellenberger, 1954). Jung had, during the first decade of the century, elaborated his association test and had, following his break from Freud, begun to explore the source and structure of primordial images and the architecture of the unconscious. By 1913 Jung had broken with Freud over notions of the unconscious psyche, feeling that Freud's notion was unduly limiting and too focused on sexuality. Jung

preoccupied with psychic images (complexes and archetypes) in the years prior to Rorschach's inkblot investigations. Rorschach was aware of, and integrated the theory of complexes ("feeling-toned groups of representations"), a concept introduced by Bleuler but developed by Jung. Rorschach published a case study in which he attempted to cure amnesia using free associations, Jung's Association Test, and hypnosis, indicating that he was well aware of the available treatment modalities. The year after Rorschach died, Ellenberger noted that Binswanger read a paper introducing phenomenological psychiatry. In summary, many contemporaries of Rorschach were preoccupied with the role of the experiential foundations of unconscious psychic life. Rorschach's synthesis and integration of these ideas seem to have ripened and burst forth in a 3-year period before his death, in which he developed his "form interpretation experiment," tested a sizable sample of participants ($N = 405$), and published his *Psychodiagnostics* in June 1921. He died suddenly the following Spring (April 2, 1922).

In Section IV, Rorschach elaborates his notions about kinesthesia, the arising of psychic images from life processes, into a core concept and foundational personality principle—the *EB*. The *EB* represents a ratio between the sum of human movement (*M*) responses and the weighted sum of chromatic color (*C*) responses. *M* responses reflect the capacity to produce or evince images of human movement. They are based, in Rorschach's words, on form and kinesthetic factors. Kinesthesia indicates a capacity for "inner creation." Rorschach (1942), in his discussion of *M* responses, wrote that "This component of intelligence can be nothing other than the ability to create new, individual productions, the capacity for inner creation. In its finest development we call this artistic inspiration, religious experience, etc." (p. 65). Kinesthesia reflects introversion, denoting the capacity to attune and resonate to one's inner life. Rorschach's definition for kinesthetic responses required that they be felt, not merely named, the basis, in Schachtel's thinking, for empathy (Schachtel, 1966, p. 196). Schachtel noted that kinesthesias "have a particularly intimate and deeply rooted connection with the core personality" (p. 196). Reflecting the influence of Mourly-Vold, kinesthesia is related to inhibited motility. Kinesthesias seem to be drive-conditioned psychomotor impulses that are projected and objectified in the response. Color responses (*C*) on the other hand, reflects extraversion, representing affectivity and the feeling-based adaptation to the external world. Rorschach did not see these dimensions as static or opposed, per se, but as independent aspects of the individual's capacity for experiencing and adaptation. They coexist in specific proportions. He noted that the relation of *M* to *C* changed as a result of psychoanalytic treatment, in particular, demonstrating an "equalization of introversive and extratensive features" (p. 124). Rorschach further developed the notion of dilation (p. 84; open and available), based on "many *M* and many *C*" and coartation (p. 84; narrow and shut down), an absence of *M* and *C*, to describe the scope of capacity for experiencing a rudimentary, phenomenological theory of defenses. A person could be seen as leaning in one direction or the other, as

introverted or extroverted, or balanced (ambiequal, p. 84). Rorschach believed that ambiequality, in the context of ample *M*, color responses balanced with form (both *FC* and *CF*), and good form visualization represented psychological health and integration. Although it is clear that Rorschach's ideas were in their initial stage of development, the notions of kinesthesia and *EB* are innovative and fundamental in his view of human nature.

Throughout his discussion of this material, Rorschach accepts as a given the notions of psychological type (e.g., p. 182 and Section IV), perhaps the result of Jung's work that was published in 1921. Ellenberger (1970) noted that typology was of great interest to the younger psychiatric generation of the time and its relation to various kinds of mental illness. Jung, Kretschmer, and Rorschach published "almost simultaneously, descriptions of systems centered around the distinction of two types" (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 840). Rorschach attempted to apply typological theory to the *EB*. Rorschach referred to "apperceptive types" and the "experience type" as they relate to intelligence, imagery and talents: "In the discussion above it has been shown that personality and talents, perceptive and, probably, imagery type, and significant elements of affect and intelligence, are all direct outgrowths of the experience type of an individual" (Rorschach, 1942, p. 115). The experience type in Rorschach's thinking is at bottom the "capacity to experience" (p. 183), a notion that has strong phenomenological leanings. Rorschach's fundamental notions, despite their similarity and innovation, seem at their basis to share strong affinities with Jungian ideas about psychic functioning. His ideas, apart from the dry prose of the *Psychodiagnostics*, are organismic, phenomenological, and focused on the psychobiological processes that produce primordial images (Jung's archetypes).

The reader brought up with the Comprehensive System will have already noted significant differences between Rorschach's and Exner's notions regarding *EB*. For Exner, *EB* is representative of a "problem-solving or coping style." Rorschach's notions of "ambiequality" stand in sharp contrast to the generally negative picture of "ambitendency" as a vacillating and ineffective style (Exner, 1993, pp. 412-413) that is overrepresented in clinical groups. (We have wondered if the adaptive problems of ambitendency are not more the result of Experience Actual or other factors than ambitendency itself.) Rorschach noted that "a dilated experience type is fundamental for most talents" (p. 108) and "the normal ambiequal represents the ideal result of the development of the experience type" (p. 119).

Rorschach's test is almost entirely lacking the forest of determinants, ratios, indices, and constellations that characterize the Comprehensive System. The only determinants that Rorschach used were *M*, *C*, and form (*F*). Rorschach's test had no formal inquiry (though he suggested that one may inquire to clarify), no shading distinctions (*C'*, *Y*, *V*, or *T*, though he belatedly discovered shading ["chiaroscuro"] by virtue of a printer's error), a small number of contents, no active-passive movement, no *DQ*, *FD*, *pairs*, or *Fr*, and no *blends*. His thinking about the so-called

special scores, reflecting structural problems in thought organization, was in the early stage of development (p. 38). But Rorschach's test, simple as it is by comparison, is no less profound. It was and remains a unique and incomparable method for tapping into the primary "capacity for experiencing" (p. 183).

It seems to us that *Psychodiagnostics* is likely to be most compelling for mature Rorschachers. His dry, impenetrable prose, and the unfamiliarity of his language and conceptual framework are likely to leave the contemporary American reader, steeped in empiricism, operationalism, and behaviorism, unimpressed. Rorschach seems to have been oriented, like his contemporaries, to a "depth" understanding of personality functioning. Rorschach's genius in developing the inkblots seems to have been based on his fundamentally artistic temperament, linked to the influence of his context and contemporaries. Rorschach's chief and enduring contribution is his simple but profound method for articulating the psyche and the life of the mind in its aboriginal language is visual imagery. This is the core of the method or technique that lies beneath the various systems, innovations, and controversies. This is the fundamental strength and foundation of the test and represents the enduring value of *Psychodiagnostics* for the contemporary Rorschach clinician who seeks a deeper understanding and facility with the inkblots.

REFERENCES

- Acklin, M. W., & Wu-Holt, P. (1995). *Contributions of cognitive science to the Rorschach technique: Cognitive and neuropsychological correlates of the response process*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Bleuler, E. (1916). *Textbook of psychiatry*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Ellenberger, H. F. (1954). The life and work of Hermann Rorschach (1884–1922). *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 18(5), 173–213.
- Ellenberger, H. F. (1970). *The discovery of the unconscious: The history and evolution of dynamic psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books.
- Exner, J. E. (1968). *The Rorschach systems*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Exner, J. E. (1993). *The Rorschach: A comprehensive system: Volume 1. Basic foundations* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Hilsenroth, M. J., & Handler, L. (1995). A survey of graduate students' experiences, interests, and attitudes about learning the Rorschach. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 64, 243–257.
- Loevinger, J. (1994). Has psychology lost its conscience? *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 62, 2–8.
- Rorschach, H. (1942). *Psychodiagnostics: A diagnostic test based on perception* (P. Lemkau & B. Kronenberg, Trans.). Berne, Switzerland: Hans Huber.
- Schachtei, E. G. (1966). *Experiential foundations of Rorschach's test*. London: Tavistock.

Marvin W. Acklin
 Aina Haina Professional Building
 850 West Hind Drive, Suite 209
 Honolulu, HI 96821