

Integrative Rorschach Interpretation

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Aronow, Reznikoff, and Moreland (this issue) have written a thoughtful contribution to the debate on the status of nomothetic and idiographic approaches to the Rorschach test. One of the interesting and attractive features of the current Rorschach era is—as the Rorschach has experienced a resurgence of interest—the continuing interest in the foundations of the test and the historic antecedents to contemporary thought about the Rorschach (cf. Handler, 1994). One cannot consider Rorschach's seminal insights or those of the first and second generation and not deepen one's contemporary understanding and practice. In other words, the more you know about the test, the better "Rorschacher" you will be. This is witness to the test's utility and profundity. For this we may be grateful for the thought-provoking contribution of Aronow and his colleagues.

Aronow and colleagues' suggestion placing interpretive approaches to the test on idiographic–nomothetic and perceptual–content axes is useful in expanding the conceptual foundations of the test. Unfortunately, they, like many commentators about the Rorschach, insist that the test is best thought of in an "either/or" framework (witness the title of their article). It is no longer a secret that the heavily empirical approach to the test promulgated by John Exner has developed a number of thoughtful critics (myself among them). As early as the International Rorschach Congress in Paris, the possibilities of integrating the rich idiographic and nomothetic traditions were openly discussed. As a test, defined in strict terms, few would question the notion that the Rorschach is psychometrically anomalous. Reflecting this idea, Weiner (1994) recently proposed that the term *test* be replaced by *method*, not a new idea certainly, but compelling from one of the senior Rorschach clinicians of our time and a cofounder of the Comprehensive System. The strength of the Rorschach is found in the tension between the idiographic–nomothetic and perceptual–content frames of reference. Schafer's approach to the test forms a most useful middle approach, integrating score (perceptual) and content (associative) interpretive approaches.

Another strength of the test is witnessed in its capacity to reflect the current theoretical zeitgeist in psychology (Acklin, 1994; Weiner, 1994). The test is able to accommodate various conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Rorschach's monograph was founded largely on the atheoretical and taxonomic approach of Kraepelinian psychiatry of the late 19th century. Later conceptualizations have been framed in terms of psychoanalytic ego psychology, self psychology, and more lately, object-relations theory. Acklin (1994) investigated the possibility of understanding the response process in terms of cognitive science and parallel distributed processing models of cognition. It is only a matter of time before neuropsychology and brain imaging further elucidates the test's richness. None of these frameworks, I submit, will exhaust the test's depth and utility.

Aronow and colleagues' statement that the fourth permutation of their interpretive taxonomy—the perceptual–idiographic approach—has never come about would come as a surprise to a number of contemporary Rorschachers. Precedents for this type of integration are not lacking, most notably in the work of Roy Schafer (1946, 1954). Neither have they apparently been reading the *Journal of Personality Assessment* or attending Society for Personality Assessment meetings for the past several years. A series of symposia with the express purpose of demonstrating the superiority of an integrative perceptual–idiographic approach to the test, with the Comprehensive System as the foundation, has yielded a number of clinical case presentations (Acklin, 1992, 1993) and is the basis for a book in progress (Meloy, Gacono, Acklin, Peterson, & Murray, in press). It should not be forgotten that scoring plays a central role in the Rapaport–Schafer Rorschach tradition along with heavy focus on content. Perhaps the most sophisticated integration of perceptual and content approaches to the Rorschach can be found in the recently published works of Reid Meloy and Carl Gacono, dealing with psychopathy and the personality disorders, with the Comprehensive System as the foundation.

Aronow and colleagues' criticism of the conceptual foundations of Exner's Comprehensive System are interesting and for the most part valid. Several weaknesses are noted, however, in their comments. First and foremost, Rorschach approaches relying strictly on content tended to fragment the test into a veritable Tower of Babel. One can read the early reviews of the Rorschach in Buros' *Mental Measurements Yearbooks* to get an impression of the savage academic criticism that predominated during the pre-Comprehensive System era. Exner's Comprehensive System has the merit of pulling the previously scattered traditions into a unified framework. At a minimum, Exner standardized the test instructions. A return to an exclusively idiographic approach to the test is an invitation to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to continue to call the Rorschach a test, despite the valid reasons presented for ceasing to do so, is the import-

ance of *data* as the basis for inference. In one of his most seminal notions, Schafer (1954) provided a powerful case for the role of scoring, along with the other dimensions of the response, in the superb chapter "Criteria for Judging the Adequacy of Interpretations" (pp. 140–159). He wrote,

The security with which we may formulate an interpretation is a function of the extent to which there is a convergence of the imagery themes, *the formal scores*, and the patient's attitudes—considered singly, in relation to each other, and in sequence. (p. 142, italics added)

Scores play a central role in the interpretation of the single response, when considered in relation to all the other data available, objective and subjective, at the moment of the response. Data grounds inferences and disciplines wild or arbitrary interpretation.

Second, in spite of the generally poor performance of the Rorschach in the research arena, a recent statistical power analysis of the Rorschach literature for the past 15 years indicated that Comprehensive System research was more powerful than non-Comprehensive System research (Acklin, McDowell, & Orndoff, 1992). That is, the research as a whole, when relying on a Comprehensive System methodology, was more able to detect differences of interest where they truly existed! Exner's conservatism and single-minded dedication to empiricism have surely helped put the test where it is today.

In short, an empirically derived scoring system has the merit of standardizing the administration of the test, especially the inquiry phase, provides fundamental clinical information in its own right, grounds inferences, and strengthens the test empirically.

Finally, Aronow and colleagues' claim that the future of Rorschach psychology is psychoanalytic and the notion that the "Rorschach Technique may live on more as a psychotherapeutic tool than as an assessment device per se" (p. 225) should give the Rorschach clinician serious pause. There is no doubt whatsoever that the test is a useful tool in psychotherapy, especially when used in the manner espoused by Aronow and his colleagues. There is a significant concern, at least outside of New York, whether either psychoanalysis or dynamic psychotherapy maintains a hegemony or even has much of a place in the culture and economics of managed care. The Rorschach test and the assessment community have a great deal to lose by reducing the Rorschach to a clinical "technique." As a forensic psychologist, my ability to use the test in court testimony is entirely founded on the sturdiness of the Comprehensive System. The Comprehensive System approach to the Rorschach, whether or not one wishes to continue calling it a test or something else, enriched by disciplined and integrated idiographic–content interpretive approaches, is a guarantee that the test will not be relegated to the irrelevancy the authors predict.

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Received June 30, 1994