

THEORIES OF PERSONALITY

II

Psychodynamic Assessment

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SESSION 6

PSYCHODYNAMIC ASSESSMENT

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Psychodynamic Assessment

Assessing the specific aspects of personality can be as controversial and complex as the theories themselves. Because the majority of our actions are dictated by the unconscious, a bigger struggle was faced by psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theorists: How to find out what even the patient himself doesn't know.

The following two sections describe the theory behind psychodynamic assessment as well as specific techniques used. Keep in mind as you read this chapter that many other types of assessment exist. In fact, of the major types of personality assessment techniques, projective techniques remain the most controversial and the most open to interpretation.

The Basis for Projective Techniques

Freudian and Neo-Freudian psychology emphasized the importance of understanding unconscious information and bypassing strong defense mechanisms in order to help a person heal. Treatment is often focused in insight, or creating a deeper understanding of motives, beliefs, and drives.

If you remember from previous sections, Freud believed that there were only two distinct drives that motivate every person: sex and aggression. These drives, often buried deep in the unconscious, direct the majority of our everyday behavior. If we are to change these behaviors, according to psychoanalytic and dynamic thought, we must understand not only what they are but where they come from as well.

The problem, however, is that this information is hidden even from the individual. Even if he or she wants to access it, there are defenses in the way that seem to function beyond the conscious will of the person. No matter how much they want to remember something, no matter how hard they try to

access this hidden information, it remains buried.

One of Freud's main defense mechanisms is called projection: the projecting of one's own unconscious and often anxiety provoking impulses onto a less threatening person or object. In other words, a person who has an unconscious need for aggression may become actively involved in crime prevention and may criticize violence. What they are really doing, according to Freud and others, is seeing this tendency in the self, acknowledging it and the associated anxiety and then throwing it outside the self to relieve anxiety. The person can now criticize or attack the self without the associated anxiety.

The idea of projection prompted many psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theorists to devise ways of accessing the buried information by allowing the patient to project it somewhere else. This resulted in the birth of the projective techniques of assessment.

The basic idea is to provide neutral and non-threatening stimuli to a patient and then ask them to interpret ambiguous pictures, fill in the blanks, make associations, or tell stories. If the theory of projection is true, then the clients will project their own unconscious impulses onto the non-threatening stimuli, allowing the assessor to interpret and move the patient toward increased insight. The next section provides a description of the main types of projective techniques.

Specific Tests used in Psychodynamic Assessment

There are several commonly used projective techniques that were derived from Freudian and Neo-Freudian Theories. These projective techniques are gaining more and more research support as they become more standardized and researched, but they are still open to a lot of different interpretations. Ideally, most psychologists see these tests as a way to gain information about an individual although they recommend they be used in conjunction with other assessment techniques.

Rorschach Inkblot Test

The Rorschach is the most commonly used projective technique. The test

consists of ten white cards with blots of ink on them in either black, black and red, or multi colored. These inkblots were originally random in design and these have been maintained although much research has gone into each card.



If you've ever looked to the sky and saw images in the clouds, then you can appreciate the idea behind the Rorschach. If the cards have no specific shape (see example to the left), just like the clouds, the shapes we see are projections from our unconsciousness. In other words, it is not uncommon for children to see bunny rabbits, kitty cats and monsters in the clouds. These images represent their needs for life and love as well as their underlying fears about death and aggression.

The research that has taken place with the Rorschach cards has produced a standardized protocol, eliminating the biggest criticism of projective tests. They have also helped us develop standardized interpretation which allows for more congruency between evaluators. The standardization allows us to compare the results of one person's Rorschach to another's, and while it is the most accepted projective technique, it continues to lag far behind more commonly used assessment devices such as the MMPI.

Thematic Apperception Test

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was developed by [Henry Murray](#), a student of psychoanalytic thought. The TAT consists of numerous cards with black and white and grayscale pictures. These pictures were chosen for two reasons. First, they are ambiguous to some extent and portray emotion and thought without specifying details. An example would be a silhouette of a man looking off into the distance. While there is obvious emotional and intellectual activity, the details are not revealed.

Second, they correspond to the major themes of psychoanalytic thought, such as the oedipal complex, where the son develops an attraction for the mother and then identifies with the father. There are relationship cards and several that portray both sexual and aggressive undertones without depicted actual

violence, aggression, or sexual activity.

The TAT probably comes in second after the Rorschach in terms of its use and research as a projective test. Individuals being tested are asked to tell a story about each card, including what led up to the picture, what is happening in the present, and how the story will end. The basic premise is that unconscious themes will begin to develop relating to specific types of cards or to the test in general. These themes can then be interpreted and used for further exploration.

House-Tree-Person

The House-Tree-Person test (H-T-P) requires no specific materials and is not standardized at all. The assessor tells the individual to draw a picture of a house, a tree, and a person. Once completed, he may ask the individual to tell a story related to each picture, including the who, what, where, how, and why's of each.

Different methods of interpretation are utilized, and depending on the assessor's training and theoretical approach, different interpretations can arise. Like most projective techniques, its strength lies in weakening the defenses and getting a clearer picture of the unconscious.

Free Association

This was one of Freud's favorite techniques and on the surface sounds quite simple to use. Freud would sit in his chair behind the patient so as not to allow any projection to occur. He would then allow the patient to talk, without interruption or guidance, for an extended period. Freud would take notes, analyze themes, and piece together aspects of the unconscious that peak out.

Others might provide a topic for this free association, such as 'mother' or 'anger' and then sit back to allow the patient to freely associate. Without pressures, anxiety, or fears, the aspects of the unconscious are more free to show themselves. Interrupting or guiding the patient would therefore strengthen the

defenses and push the unconscious impulses back down.

Dream Analysis

Another favorite of Psychoanalytic therapists, dream interpretation allows the assessor to find themes and hidden meaning in the patients dreams. Freud believed that all dreams consist of manifest, or obvious content, and latent, or hidden content.

The manifest content of dreams are the story like details that we share with others. For example, dreaming of flying would include details of how it came about, who was there, where the person flew, how fast, how high, etc. The latent content consists of bits and pieces of the unconscious that seep out while we are asleep and our defense mechanisms are their weakest. The dream of flying may represent a deeper unconscious need for freedom, a fear becoming too grounded or stuck, or perhaps even an expression of one's sexual impulses. The interpretation afforded a specific dream can vary dramatically and most agree that using this technique in conjunction with other information is its only ethical use.

Word Association

Word Association tests can take many forms as there is no single accepted list of words. Simply put, when using this type of test, the assessor would read a list of words, asking the participant to write down the very first thing that comes to mind after each. The object is to bypass defense mechanisms that are at play and get to the unconscious before these defenses have a chance to work.

As you might guess, there are some words that are common on such a test, mother, father, and sex being at the top of this list. There is research on word association tests but since there is no standard form, the efficacy of such has not been determined. Like many of the projective techniques, it may be that this assessment provides some quality information that, in the very least, can inspire further investigation.

Incomplete Sentences

This assessment can take numerous form but the main idea behind it is the completion of partially completed sentences. Items on such a test might look like the following:

1. A best friend _____.
2. Mothers _____.
3. My worse childhood experience was
_____.

Obviously a test such as this is somewhat simple to manipulate, and that is a recognized negative. However, many see this assessment as a means to get information that may not be at the surface level or to prompt an individual to think about something that he may have forgotten or suppressed. The Incomplete Sentences tests also work well with children, some say even better, because they tend to be more honest and less wise as to the purpose of the assessment.