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PRINCIPLES OF RORSCHACH INTERPRETATION

SECOND EDITION

IRVING B. WEINER

Principles of Rorschach Interpretation

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To the Rorschach pioneers

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Preface

This second edition of *Principles of Rorschach Interpretation* was prepared for two reasons. First, since the publication of the first edition in 1988, some significant changes have been made in the Comprehensive System on which the book is based. These changes, which were introduced in a new *Interpretation Primer* (Exner, 2000) and a revised *Workbook* (Exner, 2001), are fully incorporated in the discussion of interpretive principles and the presentation of case material in the present text. Second, there have been substantial additions to the Rorschach literature since the manuscript for the first edition was completed in 1997. Much of this recent literature is concerned with evidence for the validity and other psychometric strengths of Rorschach assessment and examines the controversy about the adequacy of this evidence. This revision of *Principles of Rorschach Interpretation* updates the nature and implications of the available evidence bearing on the soundness and utility of Rorschach assessment.

Principles of Rorschach Interpretation is a comprehensive textbook for clinicians who use the Rorschach Inkblot Method in assessing personality functioning. Intended as a manual of principles for effective application of Rorschach findings in professional practice, the text integrates structural, thematic, behavioral, and sequential Rorschach data into systematic guidelines for describing personality characteristics and their clinical significance.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I addresses basic considerations in Rorschach testing. It comprises chapters dealing with conceptual and empirical foundations of the inkblot method and with critical issues in formulating and justifying Rorschach inferences. Chapter 1 discusses the nature of the Rorschach as an instrument that contains both objective and

subjective features, measures both perceptual and associational processes, and assesses both structural and dynamic aspects of personality. This chapter also discusses the advantages of considering the Rorschach as a multifaceted method of collecting data, rather than merely as a test, and it concludes with an overview of research findings that have demonstrated the sound psychometric foundations on which Rorschach assessment rests.

Chapter 2 discusses key considerations in approaching the interpretation of Rorschach data. These include (a) distinguishing between respectable ways of justifying interpretations, which are defined as empirical and conceptual approaches, and inadequate ways of justifying interpretations, which are designated as “Ouija board” and “authoritative” approaches; (b) formulating interpretations on the basis of strategies involving attention to structural, thematic, behavioral, and sequential features of the data; and (c) modifying the significance attached to interpretations in light of considerations related to respondents’ age, gender, and sociocultural context.

Part II consists of six chapters examining the elements of interpretation that contribute to thorough utilization of the data in a Rorschach protocol. Chapter 3 describes the Comprehensive System search strategy. It discusses the conceptual and practical benefits of grouping Rorschach variables into clusters related to discrete personality functions and of determining a particular order in which to examine these clusters. These benefits include (a) ensuring a thorough, efficient, and person-centered rather than test-centered manner of approaching the data; (b) promoting a flexible and clinically relevant approach to Rorschach interpretation; and (c) facilitating differentiation between adaptive and maladaptive functioning and between symptomatic and characterological patterns of psychopathology.

Chapter 4 elaborates the complementary roles of projection and card pull in determining the characteristics of Rorschach responses. The text illustrates ways in which the response process is jointly shaped by projection (properties that respondents attribute to the blots) and card pull (stimulus properties that are inherent in the blots). This chapter concludes with a review of the objects, themes, and affects most commonly suggested by each of the 10 cards.

Chapter 5 delineates the significance of Rorschach structural variables in relation to their implications for six dimensions of psychological adaptation: attending to experience, using ideation, modulating affect, managing stress, viewing oneself, and relating to others. Specific guidelines are presented for utilizing various Rorschach scores, indices, and percentages as a basis for identifying personality strengths and weaknesses in each of these dimensions of adaptation.

Chapter 6 provides systematic guidelines for conducting content analysis of the thematic imagery in Rorschach protocols. Procedures are outlined and illustrated for identifying which responses in a record are likely

to contain particularly rich content themes; for generating associations to these themes and using them to formulate interpretive hypotheses; and for judging the plausibility of the thematic interpretations thus formulated. The chapter concludes with consideration of particular symbolic meanings that are likely to be associated with certain types of content themes.

Chapter 7 turns to the interpretive significance of test behaviors that yield valuable information about respondents' personality styles and their attitudes about being examined. The text categorizes and illustrates several such aspects of how subjects handle and turn the cards, what they reveal through personal comments and asides, and how they generally express and conduct themselves in the examination situation.

Chapter 8 calls attention to how the structural, thematic, and behavioral characteristics of responses can be analyzed conjointly or in sequence to amplify the implications of Rorschach data for personality dynamics. The text presents a model for sequence analysis in which monitoring changes in response quality can be used to identify respondents' sources of concern, the impact of these concerns on them, and the nature and adequacy of the ways in which they seek to ward off or defend themselves against distressing experience.

The guidelines presented in chapters 3 through 8 for translating Rorschach findings into descriptions of structural and dynamic aspects of personality functioning are grounded as much as possible in available research data. Because of their immediate relevance in clinical decision-making, normative criteria are identified in detail in Part II of the book and cited regularly in case illustrations that follow in Part III. Occasionally in the text, reference is also made to specific research studies that bear on the validity of a particular point being made. For the most part, however, this is not so much a book about the Rorschach (i.e., what the research shows) as it is a book about how to use the Rorschach (i.e., what to do with the data in attempting to answer a referral question).

Accordingly, the text in Parts II and III does not regularly cite or describe relevant research. Research support for most of what is said can be found in the basic volumes of the Rorschach Comprehensive System (Exner, 1991, 2003; Exner & Weiner, 1995) and in the contemporary journal literature. However, empirical data are not the only road to truth. Clearly formulated concepts and logical reasoning concerning their implications can also yield conclusions that serve useful purposes and stand the test of time. With this in mind, and without ever stating as fact something known to be false, I have not hesitated to base interpretive guidelines on concepts as well as data, while being careful to distinguish speculation from certainty and tentative possibility from probable likelihood.

Part III is devoted to case illustrations of how the interpretive principles delineated in Part II can be used to identify adaptive strengths and

weaknesses in personality functioning and apply this information in clinical practice. Chapter 9 provides an introduction to these case illustrations. Chapters 10 through 14 then present and discuss 10 Rorschach protocols. As elaborated in Chapter 9, these 10 protocols were given by persons from diverse demographic backgrounds and demonstrate a broad range of personality styles and clinical issues. Discussion of these cases touches on numerous critical concerns in arriving at differential diagnoses, formulating treatment plans, and elucidating structural and dynamic determinants of behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The information presented in this book builds on the previous contributions of Rorschach clinicians and scholars who have labored fruitfully over the years to generate creative ideas and sound research concerning the utility of the Rorschach Inkblot Method in assessing personality functioning. Without their work, this book could not have been written, and their creativity, clinical wisdom, and scientific sophistication are gratefully acknowledged. In particular, for the invaluable contribution of the Comprehensive System to the science and practice of Rorschach assessment, I pay special respect to my good friend and long-time colleague, John E. Exner, Jr. I am also grateful to another good friend and colleague, Anthony Sciarra, who assisted me in the preparation of this revision by reviewing the coding of the Rorschach protocols, for which I am grateful. I would finally like to thank Psychological Assessment Resources for their permission to use material from the Rorschach Interpretation Assistance Program (RIAP) in the presentation of the case material.

—Irving B. Weiner

P A R T

I

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS IN RORSCHACH TESTING

The Nature of the Rorschach

The centennial of Hermann Rorschach's birth was observed in 1984, and more than 85 years have passed since he began in earnest to show inkblots to patients being treated in the Krombach Mental Hospital in Herisau, Switzerland. His "psychological experiment," which he called it, led to the publication in 1921 of his monograph, *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception* (1921/1942), and eventually to the standardization of a personality assessment instrument that has been administered to hundreds of thousands of people, generated thousands of research studies, and become widely familiar to professional persons and the general public around the world. Despite its high visibility and broad recognition as an assessment technique, however, the Rorschach has not always been adequately conceptualized with respect to the kind of instrument it is and how its data can best be interpreted. Accordingly, this presentation of principles of Rorschach interpretation begins with two introductory chapters on basic considerations in Rorschach testing, one concerning the nature of the Rorschach as a measuring instrument and the other addressing approaches to Rorschach interpretation. The following five aspects of Rorschach assessment, each of which has received considerable attention in the literature, define the basic nature of this instrument:

1. Rorschach assessment is both an objective and a subjective procedure.
2. The Rorschach measures both perceptual and associational processes.
3. The Rorschach assesses both structural and dynamic aspects of personality functioning.

4. Rorschach testing constitutes a multifaceted method of data collection.
5. Rorschach assessment rests on a sound psychometric foundation.

By elaborating each of these aspects of Rorschach assessment, the present chapter provides a conceptual overview of the nature of this method as a measuring instrument.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE ASPECTS OF RORSCHACH ASSESSMENT

Hermann Rorschach (1921/1942, p. 13) undertook his psychological experiment as an objective way of sampling, codifying, and drawing inferences from individual differences in styles of cognitive structuring. To this end, he developed a single set of inkblots to be used with every respondent;¹ he formulated a standard procedure for asking respondents what the inkblots might be; he delineated specific criteria for categorizing respondents' responses in terms of such features as location, determinants, and content; and, on the basis of differences he observed among patient and nonpatient groups of various kinds, he proposed interpretive guidelines for inferring personality characteristics from such summary scores as *W%* (percent of Whole responses), *Erlebnistypis (EB; M:SumC)*, and *A%* (percent of Animal responses).

Rorschach's codification of responses was addressed to how respondents solve the problem of having to say what the inkblots might be while recognizing that they are in fact merely inkblots. To accomplish this task, respondents must choose what portions of the blots to consider, which involves focusing their attention in certain ways; they must decide what these portions of the blot look like, which involves forming perceptual impressions of blot characteristics such as shape and color and comparing these impressions with object impressions stored in memory; and they must ponder what interrelationships, if any, exist among the impressions they form. In contemporary language, these elements of producing Rorschach responses identify the instrument as a cognitive structuring task involving processes of attention, perception, memory, decision making, and logical analysis.

As a cognitive structuring task comprising uniform stimuli, standard administration, formal coding, and specific interpretive guidelines, the Rorschach is in many ways an objective assessment technique. To be sure, most Rorschach responses cannot be coded with as much certainty as a

¹As described by Exner (2003, chap. 1), Rorschach experimented with a large number of inkblots, out of which 15 were used most frequently. Of these 15 inkblots, 10 were included in the *Psychodiagnostics*. After some modifications during the process of printing the monograph, these 10 inkblots became the standard set of plates that has been used worldwide since 1921.

true-or-false answer on a self-report inventory. Yet there is ample evidence that Rorschach coding can proceed in a reliable and largely objective manner. Empirical studies indicate that examiners trained in the Rorschach Comprehensive System can be expected to achieve better than 90% agreement on codes for Location Choice, Pair, Popular (*P*), and Organizational Activity (*Z*); more than 80% agreement on determinants, form quality, content category, and Special Scores; and an overall mean percentage interrater agreement of just under 90% (Exner, 1991, pp. 459–460; 1993, p. 138; McDowell & Acklin, 1996; Meyer, 1997a).

Some critics of Rorschach assessment have questioned whether percentage agreement is an adequate measure of intercoder reliability for the Rorschach and other multidimensional instruments, and have recommended instead using kappa or intraclass correlation coefficients, which are statistics that correct for chance agreements (Wood, Nezworski, & Stejskal, 1996, 1997). However, Rorschach intercoder reliability has proved substantial no matter how it is measured. Meta-analytic reviews and studies with patient and nonpatient samples have found mean kappa coefficients ranging from .79 to .88 across various Comprehensive System coding categories, which for kappa coefficients are generally regarded as being in the good to excellent range (Acklin, McDowell, Verschell, & Chan, 2000; Meyer, 1997a, 1997b). As for intraclass correlation coefficients, Meyer and colleagues (2002) have reported the following results of two independent ratings of 219 clinical protocols containing 4,761 responses. The median and mean interrater reliability coefficients were .92 and .90, respectively, over 164 structural summary variables. None of the variables showed poor reliability, and 95% were classified by their intraclass correlation as having excellent reliability. Cumulative evidence thus demonstrates that Rorschach responses can be reliably coded using the Comprehensive System.

Reliable coding by conscientious examiners who hew strictly to well-established coding criteria for basic structural variables should not be unexpected. Whether Rorschach responses include the entire blot, articulate color, or identify human figures are objective facts. Likewise, the corollaries of *W* emphasis, low *SumC*, and infrequent *H* can be investigated as objectively as the corollaries of variables drawn from any other test, including those commonly described as objective instruments. For example, coding *W* for a whole response, tallying the total number or percentage of *W* in a record, and comparing the result with some behavioral index of preference for a global approach to experience is an entirely objective process. Hence, there can be considerable objectivity in identifying personality and behavioral correlates of formally scored dimensions of the cognitive structuring style that respondents bring to bear in saying what the Rorschach inkblots might be.

On the other hand, in the years after Rorschach's death in 1922, scholars came gradually to recognize that the inkblot method could assess many more