Chapter 4: The Rorschach Inkblot Method: Theory

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Abstract

The chapter discusses the theoretical assumptions that responses to the Rorschach inkblots (a) reflect how people deal with decision-making and problem-solving tasks and (b) reveal underlying thoughts and feelings that are projected onto the external stimulus (the inkblot). In this regard, the chapter discusses four psychodynamic perspectives for interpreting Rorschach responses of adolescents: Ego Psychology, Object Relations, Self Psychology, ego psychology, object relations, self-psychology, and Relational Psychoanalysis, relational psychoanalysis.

Keywords

- Conceptual perspectives
- Ego psychology
- Interpretation
- Object relations
- Psychoanalytic perspectives
- Relational psychoanalysis
- Rorschach theory
- Self psychology

Rorschach interpretation is a complex and intriguing process. It requires a theoretically based conceptualization of how responses to the inkblots reflect mental states and personality traits. Weiner (1986) suggested that searching for a conceptual linkage between test findings and behaviors associated with them, which may not be readily apparent, is a substantial component of the interpretive process. As noted in Chap. 3, the phenomena occurring during Rorschach assessment provide considerable data that are not readily accessible in other methods of assessment. Particularly important in this regard is the utility of conceptually informed inferences that help clinicians translate referral questions and diagnostic criteria into personality dispositions and communicate their diagnostic impressions effectively. From an intellectual perspective, moreover, this approach offers practitioners the scholarly satisfaction of understanding why the test works as it does, beyond knowing only how it works on the basis of empirically supported inferences. In a broader sense, conceptually based inferences provide a framework for understanding human behavior and the etiology of psychological disorders.

The basic issues to be explored in conceptually informed assessment practice thus concern the nature of the Rorschach task and two main questions: Why a particular subject perceives the inkblots in a certain manner and how this manner can be translated into psychodynamic understanding of symptom formation. By posing these questions, practitioners can move beyond empirically based interpretations based on normative findings to conceptual formulations of personality structure and dynamics that are essential for arriving at meaningful diagnostic conclusions. The key to justifying inferences drawn from Rorschach responses becomes a
Theoretical construct that provides a link between an aspect of these responses to the inkblots and an aspect of personality functioning that these responses are presumed to measure. However, as discussed in Chap. 2, the interpretation of Rorschach findings in adolescents is particularly complicated and involves as well the application of developmental theory to distinguish between healthy and disturbed personality functioning.

<H1>Conceptual Perspectives on the Nature of the Rorschach Task</H1>

The most remarkable aspect of Rorschach literature is how little attention has been paid to theoretical perspectives on the nature of the task (Leichtman, 1996a, 1996b). Rorschach (1921/1942) described his conceptualization of the inkblot experiment as measuring a particular form of perception, while acknowledging that the theoretical foundations needed further exploration. The seemingly speculative nature of the interpretive process, in which responses to the inkblots are analyzed in terms of personality characteristics, dynamics, and subjective experience, has frequently raised question about how these elusive constructs and complex phenomena can be identified from a person’s responses to these ambiguous stimuli.

Weiner and Greene (2008) summarize conceptual perspectives on the nature of the Rorschach task in terms of three sources of information in the test data:

1. The Rorschach Inkblot Method is a perceptual task that provides information on how individuals perceive external reality. In this regard, the CS approach (Exner, 1974, 2003; Exner & Weiner, 1995) suggests that a perceptual act is at the core of each Rorschach response. Nevertheless, the task is to “misperceive” the blot, that is, to say that it looks like something when it is only an inkblot. Accordingly, inferences are drawn on the basis of (a) how much the Rorschach responses in a given protocol deviate from what is considered to be acceptable misperception, (b) which clues in the stimulus (the inkblot) contributed to the deviant perceptual impressions, and (c) what patterns of personality functioning are reflected in the use of these external clues.

2. The Rorschach presents an associational task that is conducted within an interpersonal context and generates content themes that provide clues to psychodynamic processes. This conceptualization, which invokes a psychoanalytic perspective in the understanding of the Rorschach task (e.g., Blatt, 1990; Leichtman, 1996a; Lerner, 1998; Rapaport, Gill, & Schafer, 1968; Schachtel, 2001, 2001, Schafer, 1954), suggests that the projection of internal representations and subjective experiences onto the external stimuli (the inkblots) has a crucial effect on what the blots look like and how much the reported percepts fit the external stimuli. The associative perspective illuminates the dynamic processes and subjective experience of personality functioning.

3. The Rorschach is a decision-making and problem-solving task conducted within an interpersonal context. This conceptual perspective suggests that, by integrating perception and association, the individual being tested restructures the stimulus and decides on a solution for the problem of saying what the inkblot might be, which is then communicated to the examiner. To communicate the selected response, the individual uses verbal language. In this respect, Rorschach responses reflect a dual coding (Bucci, 1985) process in which nonverbal, image representations are integrated with verbal, linguistic features. Furthermore, being conducted within an interpersonal context, the Rorschach task makes it likely that interventions of the examiner are experienced as having an interpersonal meaning and may influence response content (Gill, 1995). Hence the decision-making aspects of the Rorschach task are particularly helpful in providing clues to the person’s behavioral patterns in interpersonal situations.

These three conceptual perspectives on the nature of the Rorschach task are complementary and, as such, should be used jointly in the interpretive process. The basic assumption in Rorschach assessment
is that the inkblot stimuli are assimilated into an organizational scheme shaped by a person’s unique experience. When the objective external properties of a stimulus are reduced, as in the case of an inkblot, subjective aspects of perception become increasingly prominent and likely to identify elements of personality structure and dynamics. Recent neurobiological research conducted with advanced technology appears to provide some basis for understanding how the visual stimulus properties of the Rorschach inkblots reflect internal representations. What this means is that the Rorschach stimuli, which are assumed to be emotionally arousing, tap into implicit schemas about one’s experiential world (e.g., self and other representations) that in some people are quite different from their explicit, conscious conceptions.

This research relating neuroscience findings to performance on the Rorschach task is only in its initial stage, but there are already studies showing a link between brain activity and Rorschach percepts, including percepts involving feeling of movement (e.g., Giromini, Porcelli, Viglione, Parolin, & Pineda, 2010) or affective responsiveness (e.g., Asari et al., 2010; Jimura, Konishi, Asari, & Miyashita, 2009). These findings add important information about differences between the verbal stimulus of self-report inventories for assessing personality functioning, in which left hemisphere functions are activated and the visual stimulus of performance-based methods.

In general, the inkblot stimuli and the nature of the Rorschach instructions present a task that calls for a dialectal process involving both internal and external experiences. In this process, the blots are simultaneously perceived and misperceived, created and discovered, involving the mental processes of both perception and projection. Some people may have difficulty providing responses to the inkblots. They may begin their responses by insisting that the stimulus is just an inkblot, or they may deny responses they have already given. Their explanations during the inquiry may be limited to cataloguing which parts of the percept are present or not present. They operate as keen observers who will note, for example, what should be added to Card I to make it look like a real bat (Smith, 1990). These responders do not adapt to the basic task of the test, which is to “misperceive” the stimulus. They have limited capacity of coping with reality beyond the threshold where perception as recognition becomes perception as interpretation (Leitchman, 1996a, 1996b).

From the point of view of thought organization, the fluctuating psychic levels from perception to projection appear to involve shifts between reality and fantasy. Each Rorschach response is not a creation from scratch, but instead combines finding meaning and giving meaning (Schafer, 1954). Accordingly, Rorschach responses reflect the dynamic process of thinking as it moves across various content areas and different levels of thought organization (Blatt, 1990). The interpretations drawn from Rorschach data are therefore of two different kinds: representative and symbolic. Representative interpretations are based on perceptual processes (e.g., accurate perception) that tend to be closely related to observed behaviors. Symbolic interpretations, on the other hand, are based on projective processes (e.g., seeing human or animal figures in movement or describing their emotional state), are more speculative than representative interpretations, and are better suited for generating hypotheses than predicting specific behaviors (Weiner, 2003).

**<H1> Applying Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Personality Functions in the Interpretation of Adolescent Rorschach Data**

Traditionally, models for describing the aspects of personality functioning that Rorschach responses reflect have involved two approaches. An empirically based approach has focused on cognitive-behavioral aspects of how people deal with outer reality (the inkblot stimulus), whereas a psychodynamic approach has focused more on the experiential aspects of inner reality and on underlying thoughts and feelings that are reflected in response content. The most prominent example of an
Rorschach model has been the Comprehensive System (CS; Exner, 1974, 2003; Exner & Weiner, 1995). Some Rorschach theorists concluded from Exner’s description of creating the CS (see Chap. 1) that it represents an “atheoretical” approach (e.g., Sugarman, 1991) and fails to apply a conceptual linkage between test findings and personality functioning. This criticism has proved unjustified, at least for the majority of CS variables (Kleiger, 1992). In this regard, Weiner’s paradigm for interpretation (e.g., Weiner, 1986, 2003; Weiner & Greene, 2008) demonstrates the advantages of integrating the empirically based CS with psychodynamic conceptualizations.

The following illustration shows how CS based interpretations can involve conceptually based assumptions about psychodynamic processes. Suppose an adolescent produces a protocol with a relatively elevated number of form-dominated color responses compared to the number of less structured color responses (FC > CF + C), which is interpreted to suggest a reserved pattern of emotional discharge, regardless of the age of the individual being tested (e.g., Weiner & Greene, 2008). This type of interpretation assumes a linkage between color and affective functioning (e.g., Shapiro, 1956), as well as the use of form (F) as indicating cognitive control over emotional discharge (e.g., Schachtel, 1967). A developmental perspective (e.g., Leichtman, 1996a) would further enrich this interpretation by conceptualizing how a normally developed adolescent is likely to respond to the Rorschach task. That is, normative data would be used to confirm the expectation that young people who produce Rorschach protocols with an elevation in form-dominated color responses tend to be less impulsive and more emotionally reserved than their peers who give more numerous color-dominated responses (Exner & Weiner, 1995; Exner & Erdberg, 2005).

Conceptualization of personality functioning as reflected in Rorschach data has commonly been based on a variety of psychodynamic formulations. However, this does not mean that the interpretation of a Rorschach protocol must necessarily follow directly any particular psychoanalytic perspective. Rather, Rorschach-based inferences can be translated into any theoretical model, their only necessity being consistency with findings that validate them. Deciding which theoretical concepts to select for understanding a specific case depends on the clinician’s preferred approach and also on the nature of the referral question and the goals of the assessment.

As in therapy, however, defining goals is itself a challenging task. As elaborated in Chap. 10, we suggest that defining the goals of assessment in a psychoanalytic-oriented practice begins with the premise that any assessment process can and should be essentially therapeutic. Hence the process would be conceptualized as being primarily person oriented near while preserving, with any necessary adaptations, the standardized guidelines for test administration and an adequate balance of asymmetry–mutuality between the two persons involved in the encounter.

As noted in Chap. 1, psychoanalytic approaches for interpreting the Rorschach were elaborated in particular by Rapaport (1967a, 1967b), who pioneered in applying principles of ego psychology to diagnostic testing. However, significant shifts toward variety in psychoanalytic perspectives on personality functioning influenced Rorschach theorists to begin applying newly emerging psychoanalytic concepts as well. These new concepts complemented and were not incompatible with Rapaport’s approach, and they expanded the contribution of psychoanalytic formulations to the understanding of Rorschach responses.

Similarly to Pine (1988), who combined elements of diverse psychoanalytic theories to create a set of guidelines that can be used flexibly to construct a well-rounded picture of an individual’s personality functioning, we accordingly suggest that applying multiple theoretical perspectives in interpreting a Rorschach protocol can broaden the clinician’s understanding of a respondent’s personality organization.
and dynamics. The discussion that follows presents four major psychoanalytic perspectives for interpreting Rorschach data: Ego Psychology, Object Relations, Self Psychology, ego psychology, object relations, self-psychology, and Relational Psychoanalysis, relational psychoanalysis. For each of these perspectives, we briefly explore its major concepts, relate these concepts to developmental issues in adolescents, and delineate its terms of reference for providing a psychodynamic diagnosis. The discussion also identifies selected Rorschach variables that have particular implications for these perspectives would be discussed.

**Ego Psychology**

The Ego Psychology model, with its focus on adaptation to external reality, fostered the psychoanalytic investigation of key processes in normal development (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Although the concept of adaptation was initially elaborated by Hartmann (1939) in his essay *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, classical Freudian theory also included an implicit adaptational point of view. Nevertheless, Hartman’s conception of the individual as being born with potentiality to adapt to the external environment is consistent with structural psychoanalytic theory, in which the ego is conceived as the major means by which the psyche adapts to external reality. According to the Ego Psychology model, adaptation is evaluated by assessing the maturational level of an individual’s ego functions, including thought processes, reality testing, judgment, affect regulation, defenses, impulse control, object relations, and integration or synthesis. Additionally, the adaptive adequacy of a specific behavior must be identified in terms both of the current level of functioning as reflected in this behavior and its developmental origins. Not uncommonly, the maturational level of a person’s ego functioning may change from time to time to serve some adaptive purpose and quite different or even totally unrelated to the developmental level originally obtained (Noam & Malti, 2010). Two types of relationship between adaptive ego functioning and developmental processes are central to Ego Psychology conceptualizations: progressive adaptation, which occurs along expected developmental lines, and regressive adaptation, which can be a temporary detour “in the service of the ego” (Kris, 1934) and runs counter to expected developmental advance.

In accord with this theoretical perspective, ego-related concepts became a major topic in developmental psychoanalysis. Some authors suggested that, instead of viewing character formation as beginning at birth, it is more useful to define this process as a developmental step that normally starts during latency and continues through adolescence (e.g., Baudry, 1995). Ego development has generally been utilized as a broad theoretical construct that describes the changing organization of an individual’s management of psychosocial developmental tasks (Noam & Malti, 2010). Clinical evidence suggests that a considerable level of ego development, including capacities for neutralization, identification, internalization, self-object differentiation, and formation of ideals, is necessary for the formation of a stable and integrated character. There is also general agreement that character formation cannot be completed until before the various conflicts of adolescence have been resolved. Clinicians and theorists who use concepts derived from Ego Psychology for understanding personality functioning in adolescence stress the development of elements of decision-making, problem-solving, and competence as playing a major role in character formation.

These concepts have constituted a framework for distinguishing between healthy and psychopathological functioning in adolescents and for exploring continuities and changes from adolescence to adulthood (Weiner, 1986). As has been noted, Rapaport’s (1967a, 1967b) work originated the application of theoretical constructs derived from Ego Psychology to exploring data of psychological testing. With the inception of the empirically based Rorschach CS, clinicians commonly utilized this interpretive paradigm, which organizes and integrates test data around concepts derived from Ego Psychology, by examining the extent to
which CS variables show adaptive ego functioning. Researchers have also developed new Rorschach CS indices based on Ego Psychology, a valuable example of which is the Ego Impairment Index (EII-2; Viglione, Perry, & Meyer, 2003), which has consistently proved valid in distinguishing non-patients from patients with psychological disorders (Diener et al., 2010).

Applying Ego Psychology concepts to the interpretation of adolescents’ responses to the Rorschach task provides clinicians with theoretically based guidelines for organizing the findings around the notion of ego functions. This theoretical approach can be used to arrive at a psychodynamic diagnosis in terms of personality structure, which would fit into the profile of Mental Functioning for Children and Adolescents (MCA axis) of the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM Task Force, 2006). Concepts related to ego development can be helpful in distinguishing between healthy and psychopathological functioning. Moreover, an observed ego dysfunction that is reflected in Rorschach findings (e.g., impaired ideation) can be explored with respect to its etiological source (e.g., schizophrenic-spectrum disorder or exposure to severe trauma) and accordingly be interpreted as demonstrating developmental fixation or adaptive regression (Viglione, 1990). These concepts can be particularly useful for evaluating continuities and change from adolescence to adulthood (Tibon-Czopp, 2012).

**<H2> Object Relations**

Interest in assessing object relations and their impact on psychopathological functioning has substantially increased since the construct first appeared on the psychoanalytic scene and became a major psychoanalytic term used for understanding personality functioning (Huprich & Greenberg, 2003). The original ideas of Klein (1930) and Fairbairn (1952) about the internal object world and the importance of symbol formation were further developed by numerous psychoanalytic theorists (e.g., Kernberg, 1976; Ogden, 1989; Winnicott, 1971) into a vast array of complex and elusive constructs such as object representations, transitional object, and autistic object. Some of these constructs are derived from a mixed theoretical model (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), but all of them preserve the classical psychoanalytic understanding of the nature of drive (Gill, 1995).

Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) define Object Relations as “an individual’s interactions with external and internal (real and imagined) other people, and the relationship between their internal and external object worlds” (pp. 13–14). With the increasing recognition of the distinction between external and internalized object relations, Object Relations has received growing attention as a key factor in the personality picture of adolescents, even though there have been methodological problems in translating the construct into measurable indices. This growing attention has been striking, given the breadth and complexity of the construct (Huprich & Greenberg, 2003).

Self-representations and object representations have become major concepts in the Rorschach psychoanalytic literature dealing with developing personality organization in adolescents. Cognitive capacities, affective experience, self-images, and interpersonal relationships are all viewed as being related to a child’s earliest experiences with significant objects. Furthermore, vulnerability to regression to earlier modes of relating, which usually arises when conflicts from previous phases of development reemerge, is considered particularly characteristic of adolescents, who normatively show exacerbated dependency needs, resistance against these needs, and resulting conflicts concerning independence. However, there are some conceptual issues involved in transporting this theoretical construct to clinical practice that should be addressed in assessing object relations in adolescents. For example, it is unclear to what extent object relations represent fixed cognitive structures that might be subjected to modification and, if not fixed, the conditions under which they can be changed or modified (Huprich & Greenberg, 2003). What is clear, on the other hand, is that object relations and...
their representations are not fully accessible to consciousness and therefore cannot be assessed solely by self-report measures; instead, such assessments require as well the use of implicit performance-based methods (e.g., Blatt et al., 1988; Kelly, 1995; Stricker & Healey, 1990; Westen, 1991).

Constructs of Object Relations theory and Rorschach markers that are assumed to reflect them include representations of self and other and the cognitive and affective phenomena associated with them. These representations may involve a focus on several different aspects, including separateness of the self from the object, affective links between self-representations and object representations, the cognitive level of the mental representations and the level of ego functioning they reflect, and various functional features of the representations (Lerner, 1998). Developmental aspects of object relations that can be assessed by using the Rorschach have also been explored (e.g., Blatt et al., 1997). As an important recent example, neuropsychological studies (e.g., Schore, 2009) have suggested that early attachment experiences influence critical areas of brain development and that the right hemisphere is dominant for processing attachment and affective experiences and the resulting object representations.

Indeed, empirical research and accumulated clinical experience have demonstrated the utility of several Rorschach CS variables, especially those included in the interpersonal cluster of variables, and of such non-CS scales as the Mutuality of Autonomy Scale (MOA; Urist, 1977) for providing clinicians a glimpse into a person’s object relations. For example, individuals whose inner world is populated by fragmented part objects tend on the Rorschach to give numerous fragmented percepts that are notable for their discontinuity and suggestion of dissociation.

**<H2> Self-Psychology**

The major concepts of Self-Psychology evolved as a paradigm shift in the then prevailing psychoanalytic models. By the 1960s, practitioners were reporting that the existing models failed to describe the main complaints of some of their patients. Rather than showing difficulties related to inadequate adaptation or separation-individuation conflict that could be explained in terms of Ego Psychology and Object Relations, respectively, these patients lacked a sense of inner direction and self-confidence despite being apparently well adapted and even demonstrating impressive personality functioning. They were observed to be constantly searching for reassurance, acceptance, and admiration, as if seeking compensation for an empty and depleted internal experience. With their chronic need for mirroring from outside sources, these patients were regarded by psychoanalytically oriented practitioners as essentially narcissistic and lacking a sense of authentic, subjective experience (McWilliams, 1994).

In response to this new type of difficulty seen in a growing group of patients, Kohut (1971) reconceptualized personality disorders as disturbances of self-cohesion and established the theoretical paradigm of Self-Psychology, which postulates a psychoanalytic psychology predicated on the primacy of deficit rather than the centrality of psychic conflicts. The Self-Psychology paradigm focuses on the three normal needs of mirroring, idealizing, and twinship. In the absence of a responsive and empathic Selfobject who can meet these three needs during childhood and adolescence, people are vulnerable to experiencing severe threat to their self-cohesion, to which they tend to respond by various maladaptive pathways for sustaining self-esteem, forestalling fragmentation, and preserving a buoyant self (Silverstein, 2006).

This conceptualization of self-developmental processes and their possible distortions has been applied in assessing adolescents’ susceptibility to developing personality disorders in adulthood also in diagnosing severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia during the adolescent years. In this latter regard,
schizophrenia-spectrum disorders in adolescents involve an impaired reflexive self-awareness in which confusion and perplexity prevail, as if a sense of identity were lacking altogether. Among adolescents with borderline-spectrum disorders, by contrast, a sense of identity exists but is usually unstable and highly reactive to changes in mood (Kohut & Elson, 1987). Such differences in psychopathological manifestations, which have crucial implications in clinical practice with adolescents, are usually quite evident in Rorschach configurational analysis involving behavioral observations, CS structural variables, response content, content, and sequence analysis (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002; Weiner, 2003).

The new Self-Psychology language has been gradually integrated into psychodynamically oriented Rorschach assessment and has added a substantial component to experientially oriented approaches in evaluating personality functioning (Lerner, 1998). Practitioners began to recognize that dynamic processes oriented toward supporting self-cohesion can be observed even in adolescents who are not notable for their overall level of narcissism. Furthermore, some DSM diagnostic categories, particularly those delineating faltering personality development, can be reconceptualized in terms of disorders of the self (Silverstein, 2006) by implementing Self-Psychology concepts in Rorschach work.

In this regard, the contents of Rorschach responses can be particularly illuminating with respect to the subjective experience of the self (Lerner, 1998; Silverstein, 1999). Percepts like a dry leaf and a broken glass, when interpreted within the conceptual paradigm of Self-Psychology, can be considered to reflect an internal experience of a devitalized or fragmented self, respectively. Elaborations or response embellishments can also have a revealing narrative quality, even when they are not so unusual as to be coded as a deviant response (DR). Sequence analysis (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002; Weiner, 2003) can further illuminate psychodynamic processes by indicating the experience of an injured self (e.g., a wounded butterfly) together with the compensatory efforts employed to ease this experience. These qualitative data complement and expand on what is learned from the structural summary about a person’s experience of self.

<H2> Relational Psychoanalysis</H2>

The tradition that has come to be known as Relational Psychoanalysis (Mitchell, 1988, 1991, 2000; Mitchell & Aron, 1999) reflects a blending of diverse theories into a broad, multidimensional model of understanding personality functioning. Conceptually, it includes concepts derived from intersubjective, object relations, and self-psychology theories that commonly depart from the classical psychoanalytic vision of mind by applying a dialectical model of relational configurations for understanding human experiences specifically within an interpersonal context. This model takes into account both experiential and innate factors probably more equally in practice than in theory: The experiential contributes to shaping the innate and the innate to shaping the experiential (Gill, 1995). Because of the varied approaches by which Relational Psychoanalysis has been inspired, it does not constitute a separate psychoanalytic school, in the traditional meaning of the term. However, this problem of definition has made the relational model useful in molding a professional and intellectual experience free of the constraining impact of a specific school of thought (Berman, 2001).

The relational vision suggests that all psychological phenomena, concepts, categories, and activities should be conceptualized as being dialectical rather than discrete and dichotomous. In line with this conceptualization, apparently clear dichotomized phenomena such as reality and fantasy, me and not me, and self and object are not at odds with each other, but are rather involved in a constant dialectical tension that promotes healthy personality functioning. Mitchell (2000) states that fantasy and reality are usually understood as incompatible. However, separating fantasy and reality is only one way to
construct and organize experience. For experience to be meaningful, vital, and robust, fantasy and reality cannot be fully distinguished from each other.

Fantasy cut adrift from reality becomes threatening. Reality cut adrift from fantasy becomes vapid. Meaning in human experience is generated by a mutual, dialectical, and enriching tension between reality and fantasy. Accordingly, healthy functioning would be demonstrated in individuals who manage to separate their own psychic reality from that of other people while adequately maintaining an intermediate, transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) where reality and fantasy are perceived as separate yet interrelated.

The *Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual* (PDM Task Force, 2006) describes the capacity for differentiation and integration as one of the crucial areas to be assessed while exploring the profile of mental functioning for children and adolescents (MCA Axis). This capacity has usually been explored in terms of the relational model (e.g., Fonagy & Target, 1996; Greenspan & Shanker, 2007). As noted in Chap. 2, adolescence brings with it a clear recognition of the divergences between inner self and outer appearance, together with a developing capacity for differentiating and integrating these divergent and even contradictory aspects of the self (e.g., internal affect states and overt behavior). With psychological development the adolescent’s representational world becomes increasingly differentiated and integrated, as a reflection of a growing appreciation of mutual relatedness.

Applying a relational model enables practitioners to identify adolescents who are able to create bridges between internal experiences of self and non-self; self and others; reality and fantasy; past, present, and future; and a range of affective for those adolescents whose internal experience is fragmented most of the time and who consequently show severe impairment in ego strength, self-cohesion, and reality testing. In Rorschach terms, both a literal and concrete approach to the task and an overwhelmed approach loaded with fantasy demonstrate substantially impaired personality functioning. In contrast, playfulness shown in Rorschach responses is likely to indicate healthy functioning (Handler, 1999).

Smith (1990) applied Winnicott’s (1971) construct of potential or transitional space between reality and fantasy and Ogden’s (1986) description of psychopathological states in terms of collapse of potential space in the interpretation of Rorschach findings. The Rorschach Reality Fantasy Scale, Reality–Fantasy Scale Version 2 (RFS-2; Tibon-Czopp, Appel, & Zeligman, 2015) operationalizes Smith’s conceptualization of diagnosing psychopathological states with the Rorschach and is particularly applicable in assessing adolescents’ patterns of functioning in terms of the *PDM* criteria of differentiation and integration.

Another example of Rorschach interpretation applying a contemporary relational approach that is consistent with the empirical features of the CS has been provided by Overton (2000), who focused specifically on color determinants and the $FC:CF+C$ ratio. This approach traces back to Schachtel (1959), who argued that how one perceives other people reveals the quality of relatedness between oneself and others. Accordingly, it is assumed that a developmental sequence of relatedness (perceptual-relatedness modes) is linked to the Rorschach color determinants and defines the expected or normative course of relatedness. Relatedness levels and the developmental transitions between them are described in Piaget’s (1952) terms as the underlying assimilation and accommodation processes. Within this general approach, the $FC:CF + C$ ratio is defined as reflecting four fundamental styles of relating to one’s interpersonal environment: healthy, egocentric, veneered egocentric, and defensive.

With respect to the interpersonal context of the assessment encounter, the relational tradition has replaced the classical authoritative, neutral, and objective stance of the practitioner with more mutual even though still asymmetric relationships (Aron, 1992; Mitchell, 1993, 1997). In psychoanalysis the clinical encounter is viewed as a Meeting meeting of MInds minds (Aron, 1996) in which the analyst
explores personality functioning by applying a Two-Person Psychology model. Corresponding to this perspective, a Rorschach model portrays interaction and enactment as unavoidable features of the assessment process.

This does not mean that classical and relational psychoanalytic theories are incompatible in either psychotherapy or personality assessment. Although some theorists would argue that the relational view of the practitioner as a Participant Observer (Sullivan, 1953) is very different from the image of an objective interpreter, the richness of the classical tradition can certainly be preserved by reformulating its clinical contributions within an interactive, relational theory of mind and moving toward an integrated complementary perspective (Gill, 1995).

As discussed in Chap. 3, interpersonal factors play an important part in fostering cooperation in adolescents who are referred to assessment. Moreover, adolescents’ behavior within the interpersonal context of the assessment encounter, and not only the structural data and content of their responses, provide information about the quality of their mode of coping with reality, maladaptive immersion in fantasy, and object relations. Furthermore, applying a relational model to Rorschach assessment with adolescents illuminates the issues explored by Rorschach theorists concerning the interpersonal factor involved in the nature of the task, which should be considered while interpreting the data. The interpersonal factor includes but transcends what is known as behavioral observation by taking into account that the respondent’s behavior in the test occurs in a particular interpersonal context. This interpersonal matrix enables clinicians to use the assessment alliance as a screen test.

Emphasis on the centrality of the development of mental representation in personality organization, on the one hand, and on psychoanalytic object-relations theory, attachment theory, and developmental psychology, on the other, has enhanced the use of the Rorschach in presenting case studies of adolescents (Bram, 2010; Exner & Erdberg, 2005; Exner & Weiner, 1995; Tibon & Rothschild, 2007). Analyses of these case studies are based on the theoretical assumption that psychological development moves toward the emergence of a consolidated, integrated, and individuated sense of self-definition and empathically attuned, mutual relatedness with significant figures (Aron, 1996; Blatt, 1991; Mitchell, 1988; Stern, 1985). From this perspective, differentiation and relatedness are viewed as interactive dimensions. The dialectical interaction between these two developmental dimensions facilitates the emergence and consolidation of increasingly mature levels of both self-organization and intersubjectively attuned, empathic relatedness.

We have presented four different psychoanalytic perspectives (Ego Psychology, Object Relations, Self-Psychology, relational psychoanalysis) that, although sometimes being viewed as essentially contradictory, can be used jointly in the interpretation of adolescent Rorschach data. To illustrate this joint approach, consider the following response of a 14-year-old boy to Card X: “Looks like all kinds of things... clothes, toys in many colors that are being thrown all over the place by an angry little boy who got a chocolate candy shaped like a bird...he wanted a lion...he’s not seen in the picture. I can imagine he’s sitting here in the middle throwing things all over the room... What a mess...” The main theme of this response—a child’s outburst of rage suggesting unregulated affect—appears at odds with its CS coding of W+ mp.FCo (A) Sc, Cg, Fd AG, DRI 5.5, in which the form-dominated color (FC) indicates capacity for mature modulation of affect. The conflict between the stormy response to frustration (throwing things all over the room) and the apparent disposition to modulate affect modulation, as inferred from the contrast between the structural scoring and the content of this response, may well have caused internal tension, which is reflected in the passive inanimate movement coding (mp).

How can each of the four theoretical perspectives enrich our understanding of the affective functioning of this adolescent? From an Ego Psychology perspective, we can see an...
uneven maturational level of this boy’s affective ego function, which is consistent with developmental expectation in a 14-year-old adolescent. It is nevertheless reasonable to hypothesize that the unregulated affect in the response is secondary to some intrapsychic conflict and that his lapse in ego functioning (as shown by some dissociated thinking coded as DR1) is related to particular stimulus characteristics (such as the color in the blot) or specific dynamic themes (e.g., concerns around aggression or dependency). From an Object Relations perspective, the content of this response definitely raises questions about the possible role in his adjustment difficulties of unmet dependency needs, as indicated by the emphasized and disappointing food (Fd) content (he wanted a chocolate candy shaped like a lion, and he got one shaped like a bird) and the attendant experience of frustrating object relations.

Applying Self Psychology concepts would further illuminate the narcissistic injury (I can imagine he’s sitting here in the middle), the experience of being invisible (he’s not seen), and the ineffectiveness of using devaluation and idealization (a bird and a lion) as defensive strategies, in terms of a deficit and empathic failure resulting in narcissistic rage. Looking at the response from a Relational perspective would provide a glimpse of the style of this adolescent’s relatedness to his interpersonal environment and, most importantly, how a suitable therapeutic alliance might enable the emergence of more mature levels of personality organization.

Clinical practice usually requires movement beyond the strictly empirical evidence into a theoretical inference. The main complaints of this adolescent on referral were consistent with a DSM diagnosis of depression. This diagnosis would be sufficient for a clinician who takes a unitary etiologic and therapeutic stance toward all adolescent patients. However, more sophisticated assessment would take into consideration that there are many sources of depression and that the subjective experience of adolescents who meet the DSM criteria for diagnosis of depression is likely to vary from one young person to the next. In keeping with this multi-model approach to assessment, analyzing the adolescent’s response to Card X from four perspectives has generated the hypothesis that, in this particular case, the depression was a manifestation of an underlying narcissistic disorder.

In summary, we have presented this brief case excerpt to illustrate an integrative theoretical paradigm for interpreting Rorschach data. In this multi-model approach the protocol is analyzed within the framework of a conceptual understanding of psychopathology and personality functioning in adolescence from four psychoanalytic perspectives that are sometimes held to be contradictory. Our recommendation for integrating diverse conceptual perspectives derives from the clinical purpose of this book and from our observation that most clinicians search to assimilate a diversity of approaches and concepts.

**Conclusion**

Rorschach theory consists of conceptual formulations that seek to account for how and why the Rorschach works. Formulations of how the Rorschach works regard the Rorschach responses as a representative sample of behavior and as a stimulus to fantasy. As a representative sample of behavior, the way people respond in the Rorschach situation provides information about their response style in similar ambiguous, affect arousing, and decision-making situations. For example, people who perceive the blots accurately are likely to perceive objects and events accurately in their daily lives as well. As a stimulus to fantasy, the Rorschach evokes imagery that can reveal a person’s underlying needs, attitudes, and concerns. For example, respondents who frequently report percepts of people helping each other may have pressing dependent needs.

Formulations of why the Rorschach works link personality and behavioral characteristics indicated by
Rorschach findings to personality and behavioral characteristics that have implications for differential diagnosis and treatment planning. Thus, frequent inaccurate perceptions of the Rorschach blots can indicate the impaired reality testing that is characteristic of psychotic disorder, and prominent-dependent imagery may signal the particular importance of providing support in a treatment relationship.

Theoretical notions of how and why the Rorschach works are complemented by information about whether it works. Information about whether the Rorschach works comes from empirical evidence of its validity for the purposes it is intended to serve. Such validation is the province of Rorschach research, which is the topic of the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that theoretical formulations, no matter how well and reasonably conceived, remain hypothetical until relevant research confirms their dependability and utility. Inferences drawn from Rorschach imagery are particularly likely to be speculative and to suggest alternative possibilities rather than definite conclusions. On the other hand, theoretical formulations often suggest lines of research not yet pursued and fruitful study designs to employ, and they are more likely than strict empiricism to foster new ideas and methods. A case in point is Winnicott’s conceptualization of a “space” between reality and fantasy, as described in this chapter, which led to the development and validation of the Reality–Fantasy Scale. Such conceptualization represents the creative side of science, which is a necessary prelude to its confirmation side.

Rorschach scholars have developed both conceptually-based and empirically-based approaches to interpretation that together encompass both the discovery and the confirmation components of science. Rorschach interpretation should accordingly integrate sound conceptualization and adequate empirical verification. For the Rorschach, as for other measuring instruments, relevant empirical evidence includes normative reference data against which obtained scores can be compared to show concordance with or deviance from expected scores on variables conceptually related to certain personality characteristics.

Of further note with respect to Rorschach theory is the distinction between theories and models. Theories can be proved true or false by evidence that substantiates or disconfirms their premises. Models, on the other hand, are neither true nor false. They are perspectives on phenomena and are more or less useful in helping to understand these phenomena, but they cannot be right or wrong. The present chapter describes four models of psychodynamically oriented Rorschach interpretation: ego psychology, object relations, self-psychology, and relational psychoanalysis. Each of these models adds useful perspectives on the nature of people, why they behave as they do, and what may cause them to have psychological adjustment problems. It requires that Rorschach clinicians would be familiar with each of these models and to draw on them jointly in arriving at inferences and reporting their conclusions and recommendations.

References


