

The Rorschach Tested

Psychologists battle over the effectiveness of the inkblot test, in use almost 50 years

by Patricia McBroom

In 1921 a young Swiss-German psychiatrist, Hermann Rorschach, published his inkblot method of personality testing and then died, only 37 years old. Generations of psychologists since have been pondering the relationship of his 10 ink smudges to human personality.

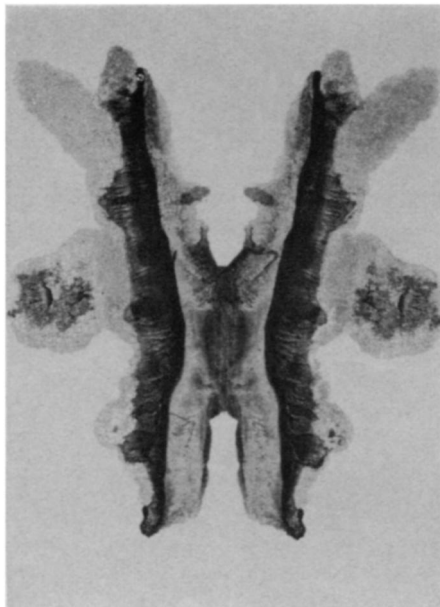
For some 46 years, behavioral scientists have probed the inkblots for evidence that they can indeed measure mental health. More than 3,000 publications—strictly devoted to the Rorschach test—have come from this massive research effort.

The Rorschach series has claimed twice the attention of any other personality test for a number of reasons. It's as esoteric, mysterious, imaginative, provocative as a dream, fits neatly into Freudian psychoanalytic concepts and for years led all tests in clinical use.

Each year, a million persons take the Rorschach at a cost of \$25 million and 5 million clinical man-hours, or 571 years. Before a student of psychology or psychiatry is qualified to administer the test, he needs three semesters of specialized Rorschach training.

But the test remains controversial.

"The Rorschach is not just another test, it's a whole culture," says Dr. Arthur R. Jensen, a University of California psychologist. Dr. Jensen is one of a large group of reputable behavioral scientists who would like to see the Rorschach abandoned. He reviews the evidence in the latest edition of "Mental Measurements Yearbook," the bible of psychological testing, and declares it a very poor test.



Using the Rorschach is like reading tea leaves, he says. The reader produces telling insights about the client sitting across from her, but her clues don't come from the leaves.

Another, equally large group of reputable clinicians feels exactly the opposite. "I find the test quite useful for diagnosing the kinds of conflicts people have," says Dr. Ernest G. Schachtel, a training analyst at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology in New York.

In his experience the Rorschach predictions have hit close to the mark. There is usually "pretty good agreement" between the test data and what the patient turned out to be in the long run, Dr. Schachtel maintains.

The Rorschach test used today is the same 10 inkblots made in 1921—some black and white, some colored—though innumerable variations on the inkblot theme are also in use. According to Rorschach's original theories, the important thing is not what an individual sees in the inkblot, but how he sees it. The two are difficult to separate; however, Rorschach theorized that the patient's perception of form, color and motion (called "determinants") were better clues to personality than content.

Roughly speaking, color relates to emotions, form to mental control and motion to creativity, and the "inner life," in Rorschach analysis.

If, for example, someone should see color at the expense of form, he would tend to be the impulsive type; if form at the expense of color, he would fall into the pedantic, or possibly depressive, category. Seeing human movement in the inkblots is wholly positive, indicating such qualities as creative ability, individualism and a developed inner life.

Some testers turn this entire structure around, ignore the determinants and use thematic content as the index of mental health and illness.

One of the weapons Dr. Jensen uses against the Rorschach is the fact that scientists, including Nobel Laureates, have usually made low scores on the movement index. Artists offer ambiguous evidence—some score well, some don't, which means either that some artists are not creative, or the Rorschach does not measure their creativity.

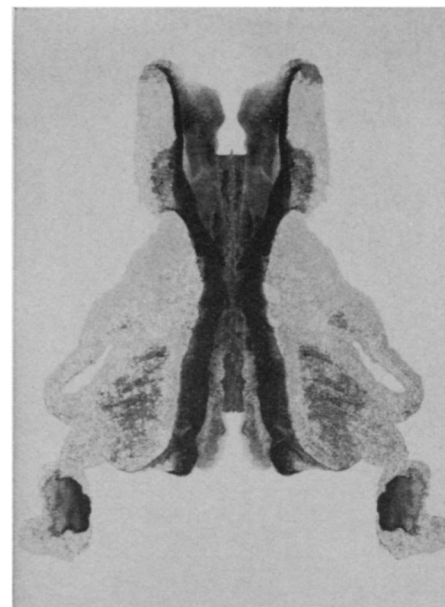
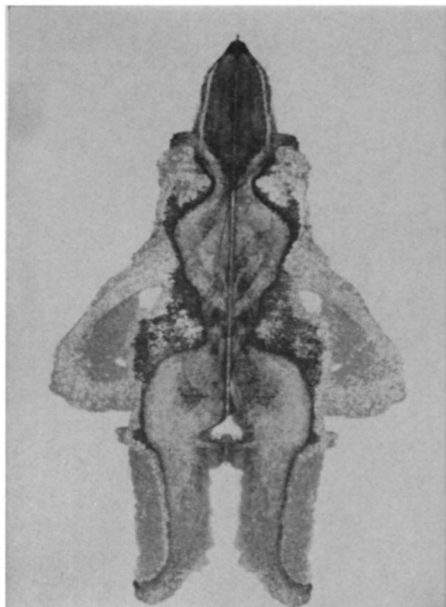
But psychologists, who can be expected to be familiar with the test, see much human movement in the blots.

The Rorschach controversy very much resembles the ever-lasting battle over Freudian concepts and their validity.

To scientifically minded experimentalists, Rorschach is more poetry than science. To clinicians, who work with human problems, Rorschach is a subtle instrument for probing beneath surface personality. Its validity, they claim, has been established through years of actual use and millions of case histories.

The problem is that, like the reader of tea leaves, the clinician can't help contaminating his test data with his own perceptions of the patient. As one critic points out, a good therapist will take signals from almost any source—the way a man walks, talks or ties his shoelaces. As a source of signals, he says, the Rorschach is no better and no worse than a dream.

Experimentalists relegated the Rorschach to the junkpile about five years ago after a series of sophisticated evaluations of the test. Rorschach experts, working only from test data, were measured against comprehensive psychiatric case histories and came off badly. Their rate of success was no better than chance, says Dr. Jensen.



In addition, the Rorschach is biased toward the pathological, so that psychiatrically normal people come out looking somewhat sick, he points out.

"Put frankly, the consensus of qualified judgment is that the Rorschach is a very poor test and has no practical worth for any of the purposes for which it is recommended by its devotees . . . the rate of scientific progress in clinical psychology might well be measured by the speed and thoroughness with which it gets over the Rorschach," Dr. Jensen concluded in his MMY review.

A good number of universities oriented toward research rather than practice have followed such advice and dropped Rorschach training altogether. At Stanford University, for example, educational psychologist Lee J. Cronbach says the Rorschach is a dead issue. "It seems to have wandered off into the bush," says Dr. Cronbach.

The experimentalists are apt to heap scorn upon Rorschach variations as well. The most widely accepted of these is a more precise test developed in the last decade by Wayne H. Holtzman, a Texas psychologist.

The Holtzman Inkblot Test, attempting to build on the Rorschach, while weeding out the therapist's personal impressions, offers 2 series of 45 cards each instead of 10. The patient simply names what he sees and passes on to the next. His interpretations are then matched against those given by normal, and various neurotic and psychotic groups. Since the Holtzman, unlike the Rorschach, is highly standardized, almost everyone who administers it comes up with the same diagnosis.

But does the test really tune in on basic personality traits? Dr. H. J. Eysenck, well-known critic of psychoanalysis at the Maudsley Hospital in

London, says no. The Holtzman test "demonstrates pretty conclusively that the underlying notion of the Rorschach is at fault," he says.

There is no evidence to show that the Holtzman test is "anything like as good as a simple 10-minute questionnaire."

But if the Rorschach is dead, as its critics claim, its death is a strangely active one. The inkblots have faded in many places, but they are still widely used in hospitals, clinics, guidance centers and schools.

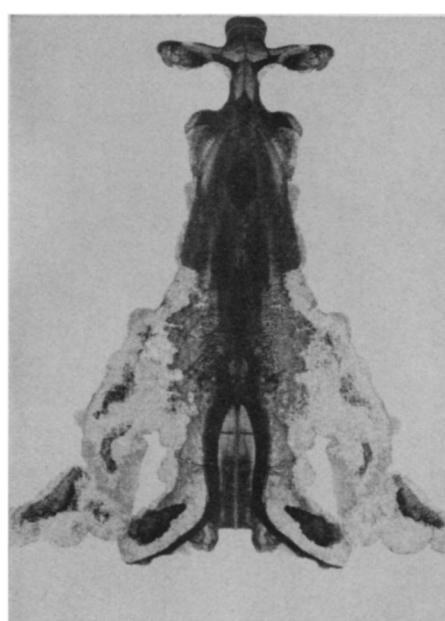
And in the past three years, the test seems to have taken a place among the many psychological studies of the poor. Some five different Rorschach experiments have been run on Job Corps trainees, says University of Wyoming psychologist, Dr. Richard H. Dana, once a critic, now an advocate.

Recently, he says, there has been a lot of new research, most of it favorable. "The surprising thing," says Dr. Dana, is that the "Rorschach turns out to be more and more right as time goes on."

Dr. Dana is now collecting all the material on delinquents and the lower classes and maintains that it reveals a pathology peculiar to these people.

If the movement index relates to an "inner life," the poor have less of it, since they don't see much human movement in the inkblots compared to the middle classes.

Dr. Dana singles out "time sense" as the major difference between social classes. He explains that the poor individual often has a restricted sense of time—in other words he lives with little awareness of past and future, and is likely to see relatively few possibilities for his behavior. "He sees himself as doing less," says Dr. Dana, who be-



lieves the Rorschach human movement score measures this capacity.

Since all 40 years of the Rorschach research was done on the middle class, this new material from the deprived could wrench open the inkblot riddle again.

"But I would be rather dubious about it," says Dr. Jensen. "I just think there are better ways of assessing personality."

None of them, however, are by existing personality tests. If the Rorschach and other "non-objective" tests fail to tap human complexity, the popular "paper-and-pencil" tests are not tremendously better.

As Dr. Oscar Krisen Buros, editor of the Mental Measurements Yearbook and professor emeritus of Rutgers University, points out: "Personality is the area we know least about."