

# Projective Tests: Unlocking the Secrets of the Unconscious

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In psychology, a projective test is a personality test designed to let a person respond to ambiguous stimuli, presumably revealing hidden emotions and internal conflicts. This is different from an "objective test" in which responses are analyzed according to a universal standard (for example, a multiple choice exam). The responses to projective tests are content analyzed for meaning rather than being based on presuppositions about meaning, as is the case with objective tests. Some criticisms of projective tests include that they rely heavily on clinical judgement, lack reliability and validity and many have no standardized criteria to which results may be compared, however this is not always the case. These tests are used frequently, though the scientific evidence is sometimes debated. There have been many empirical studies based on projective tests (including the use of standardized norms and samples), particularly more established tests. The criticism of lack of scientific evidence to support them and their continued popularity has been referred to as the "projective paradox". Projective tests have their origins in psychoanalytic psychology, which argues that humans have conscious and unconscious attitudes and motivations that are beyond or hidden from conscious awareness.

The terms "objective test" and "projective test" have recently come under criticism in the Journal of Personality Assessment. The more descriptive "rating scale or self-report measures" and "free response measures" are suggested, rather than the terms "objective tests" and "projective tests," respectively.

## **Theory**

The general theoretical position behind projective tests is that whenever a specific question is asked, the response will be consciously-formulated and socially determined. These responses do not reflect the respondent's unconscious or implicit attitudes or motivations. The respondent's deep-seated motivations may not be consciously recognized by the respondent or the respondent may not be able to verbally express them in the form demanded by the questioner. Advocates of projective tests stress that the ambiguity of the stimuli presented within the tests allow subjects to express thoughts that originate on a deeper level than tapped by explicit questions. Projective tests lost some of their popularity during the 1980s and 1990s in part because of the overall loss of popularity of the psychoanalytic method and theories. Despite this, they are still used quite frequently.

## **Common variants**

### **Rorschach**

The best known and most frequently used projective test is the Rorschach inkblot test, in which a subject is shown a series of ten irregular but symmetrical inkblots, and asked to explain what they see. The subject's responses are then analyzed in various ways, noting not only what was said,

but the time taken to respond, which aspect of the drawing was focused on, and how single responses compared to other responses for the same drawing. For example, if someone consistently sees the images as threatening and frightening, the tester might infer that the subject may suffer from paranoia.

### **Thematic apperception test**

Another popular projective test is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) in which an individual views ambiguous scenes of people, and is asked to describe various aspects of the scene; for example, the subject may be asked to describe what led up to this scene, the emotions of the characters, and what might happen afterwards. The examiner then evaluates these descriptions, attempting to discover the conflicts, motivations and attitudes of the respondent. In the answers, the respondent "projects" their unconscious attitudes and motivations into the picture, which is why these are referred to as "projective tests."

### **Draw-A-Person test**

The Draw-A-Person test requires the subject to draw a person. The results are based on a psychodynamic interpretation of the details of the drawing, such as the size, shape and complexity of the facial features, clothing and background of the figure. As with other projective tests, the approach has very little demonstrated validity and there is evidence that therapists may attribute pathology to individuals who are merely poor artists. A similar class of techniques is kinetic family drawing.

### **Sentence completion test**

Sentence completion tests require the subject complete sentence "stems" with their own words. The subject's response is considered to be a projection of their conscious and/or unconscious attitudes, personality characteristics, motivations, and beliefs.

### **Uses in marketing**

Projective techniques, including TATs, are used in qualitative marketing research, for example to help identify potential associations between brand images and the emotions they may provoke. In advertising, projective tests are used to evaluate responses to advertisements. The tests have also been used in management to assess achievement motivation and other drives, in sociology to assess the adoption of innovations, and in anthropology to study cultural meaning. The application of responses is different in these disciplines than in psychology, because the responses of multiple respondents are grouped together for analysis by the organisation commissioning the research,

rather than interpreting the meaning of the responses given by a single subject.

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