

Thematic Apperception Test: Unlocking Your Hidden Self

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The Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT, is a projective psychological test. Historically, it has been among the most widely researched, taught, and used of such tests. Its adherents assert that the TAT taps a subject's unconscious to reveal repressed aspects of personality, motives and needs for achievement, power and intimacy, and problem-solving abilities.

Procedure

The TAT is popularly known as the picture interpretation technique because it uses a standard series of provocative yet ambiguous pictures about which the subject is asked to tell a story. The subject is asked to tell as dramatic a story as they can for each picture presented, including the following:

- what has led up to the event shown
- what is happening at the moment
- what the characters are feeling and thinking
- what the outcome of the story was

If these elements are omitted, particularly for children or individuals of low cognitive abilities, the evaluator may ask the subject about them directly.

There are 31 picture cards in the standard form of the TAT. Some of the cards show male figures, some female, some both male and female figures, some of ambiguous gender, some adults, some children, and some show no human figures at all. One card is completely blank. Although the cards were originally designed to be matched to the subject in terms of age and gender, any card may be used with any subject. Most practitioners choose a set of approximately ten cards, either using cards that they feel are generally useful, or that they believe will encourage the subject's expression of emotional conflicts relevant to their specific history and situation.

Scoring Systems

The TAT is a projective test in that, like the Rorschach test, its assessment of the subject is based on what he or she projects onto the ambiguous images. Therefore, to complete the assessment, each narrative created by a subject must be carefully recorded and analyzed to uncover underlying needs, attitudes, and patterns of reaction. Although most clinical practitioners do not use formal scoring systems, several formal scoring systems have been developed for analyzing TAT stories systematically and consistently. Two common methods that are currently used in research are the:

Defense Mechanisms Manual DMM. This assesses three defense mechanisms: denial (least mature), projection (intermediate), and identification (most mature). A person's thoughts/feelings are projected in stories involved.

Social Cognition and Object Relations SCOR scale. This assesses four different dimensions of object relations: Complexity of Representations of People, Affect-Tone of Relationship Paradigms, Capacity for Emotional Investment in Relationships and Moral Standards, and Understanding of Social Causality.

History

TAT was developed by the American psychologist Henry A. Murray and Christiana D. Morgan at Harvard during the 1930s to explore the underlying dynamics of personality, such as internal conflicts, dominant drives, interests, and motives.

Howard P Vincent was a noted scholar of Herman Melville, the American author best known for his novel Moby-Dick. According to Vincent, the TAT was inspired by the lesson implicit in Moby-Dick Chapter XCIX - THE DOUBLOON: that morality is not what users think it may be. Vincent writes that the TAT

"... came into being when Dr. Henry A. Murray, psychologist and Melvillist, adapted the implicit lesson of Melville's "Doubloon" chapter to a new and larger creative, therapeutic purpose."

After World War II, the TAT was adopted more broadly by psychoanalysts and clinicians to evaluate emotionally disturbed patients. An Indian adaptation was developed in 1960 by Mrs. Uma Choudhary (Uma Choudhary. (1960). Indian Adaptation of TAT. New Delhi: Manasayan.) Later, in the 1970s, the Human Potential Movement encouraged psychologists to use the TAT to help their clients understand themselves better and stimulate personal growth.

Criticisms

Declining adherence to the Freudian principle of repression on which the test is based has caused the TAT to be criticized as false or outdated by some professional psychologists. Their criticisms are that the TAT is unscientific because it cannot be proved to be valid (that it actually measures what it claims to measure), or reliable (that it gives consistent results over time, due to the challenge of standardizing interpretations of the narratives provided by subjects).

Some critics of the TAT cards have observed that the characters and environments are dated, even 'old-fashioned,' creating a 'cultural or psycho-social distance' between the patients and the stimuli that makes identifying with them less likely. Also, in researching the responses of subjects given photographs versus the TAT, researchers found that the TAT cards evoked more 'deviant' stories (i.e., more negative) than photographs, leading researchers to conclude that the difference was due to the differences in the characteristics of the images used as stimuli.

In a 2005 dissertation, Matthew Narron, Psy.D. attempted to address these issues by reproducing

a Leopold Bellak 10 card set photographically and performing an outcome study. The results concluded that the old TAT elicited answers that included many more specific time references than the new TAT.

Contemporary applications of TAT

Despite criticisms, the TAT remains widely used as a tool for research into areas of psychology such as dreams, fantasies, mate selection and what motivates people to choose their occupation. Sometimes it is used in a psychiatric or psychological context to assess personality disorders, thought disorders, in forensic examinations to evaluate crime suspects, or to screen candidates for high-stress occupations. It is also commonly used in routine psychological evaluations, typically without a formal scoring system, as a way to explore emotional conflicts and object relations.

TAT is widely used in France and Argentina using a psychodynamic approach.

The Israeli army uses the test for evaluating potential officers.

It is also used by the Services Selection Board of India.

David McClelland and Ruth Jacobs conducted a 12 year longitudinal study of leadership using TAT and found no gender differences motivational predictors of attained management level. The content analysis, however, "revealed 2 distinct styles of power-related themes that distinguished the successful men from the successful women. The successful male managers were more likely to use reactive power themes while the successful female managers were more likely to use resourceful power themes. Differences between the sexes in the power themes were less pronounced among the managers who had remained in lower levels of management"

TAT in popular culture

Thomas Harris' novel Red Dragon includes a scene where the imprisoned psychiatrist and serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter mocks a previous attempt to administer the test to him.

Michael Crichton included the TAT in the battery of tests given to the disturbed patient and main character Harry Benson in his novel, The Terminal Man.

In the novel Sphere, the protagonist Norman Johnson, a psychologist himself, mentions the Thematic Apperception Test while in the underwater deep-sea habitat.

In the MTV cartoon Daria, Daria and her sister Quinn are given a test that appears to be the TAT by the school psychologist on their first day at their new school. Daria and Quinn are shown a picture of two people. Quinn makes up a story about the two people having a discussion about popularity and dating. Daria states that she sees "a herd of beautiful wild ponies running free across the plains." The psychologist tells her the picture is of two people, not ponies. Daria states, "last time I took one of these tests they told me they were clouds. They said they could be whatever I wanted." The psychologist explains, "That's a different test, dear. In this test, they're

people and you tell me what they're discussing." To which Daria characteristically replies, "Oh... I see. All right, then. It's a guy and a girl and they're discussing... a herd of beautiful wild ponies running free across the plains." (Cf. the Rorschach test administered to Charlie Gordon in *Flowers for Algernon*, during which Drs. Nemur and Strauss ask him what he "sees" on a card, he replies that he sees an inkblot, they ask him to pretend that it is something else, and he replies "I pretend a bottle of ink spilled all over a white card".)

The TAT is administered to Alex, the main character of *A Clockwork Orange*.

Charlie Gordon, the protagonist in Daniel Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, notes in his "progress report 4" on March 6 that he was given a "Thematic Apperception Test." As he says, "I don't know the first 2 words but I know what test means. You got to pass it or you get bad marks"

Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti wrote a collection of poetry called T.A.T (1966-1968) that refers to the Test.