Bridging the Gap
Quantitative Rorschach Approaches to Psychodynamic Constructs

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Abstract. In recent years, a number of researchers have developed Rorschach coding approaches that attempt to quantify psychodynamic constructs. This article describes four such approaches: the Rorschach Defense Scales, Primitive Interpersonal Modes, the Mutuality of Autonomy Scale, and the Rorschach Reality-Fantasy Scale. These four seemingly different approaches have a common goal: creating quantitative Rorschach systems for describing psychodynamic constructs (defense mechanisms, primitive interpersonal modes, self- and object-representations) and the use of potential space.

Keywords: Rorschach, psychodynamic, quantitative systems, object relations

In a recent article, Wallerstein (2009) made a plea for transcending the arbitrary distinction between qualitative and quantitative research in psychoanalysis. Instead, he suggested that research methods, “...however varyingly quantitative and/or qualitative, each to the extent that is appropriate separately or in conjunction” (p. 130), be applied as a way of evaluating psychoanalytic theories. One area in which Wallerstein’s suggestions can be actualized is the Rorschach. Within the last few decades, a number of researchers have developed approaches that bring quantitative methodology to the Rorschach assessment of psychodynamic constructs. This article describes four of these approaches.

Rorschach Defense Scales

One of the most basic psychodynamic constructs is the concept that individuals employ a variety of defensive operations to protect them-
selves from difficult or intolerable experiences (Freud, 1937). A number of theorists (Kernberg, 1967; Ogden, 1979) proposed that different levels of personality organization are characterized by specific defense mechanisms. For instance, Kernberg (1967) suggested that splitting as well as the accompanying defenses of projective identification, denial, idealization, devaluation, and omnipotence are the defining features of borderline level personality organization.

Cooper and colleagues (Cooper, Perry, & Arnow, 1988; Cooper, Perry, & O’Connell, 1991) reasoned that an individual’s preferred defensive operations would inform their Rorschach responses. So they developed a series of scales, the Rorschach Defense Scales, to document these defensive operations. Interestingly, the title of their 1988 article was “An Empirical Approach to the Study of Defense Mechanisms,” highlighting their attempt to bring quantitative methodology to the assessment of a psychodynamic construct.

The Rorschach Defense Scales focus primarily on content as opposed to determinants or psychometric indices. Specific imagery, verbal and affective articulation, personal comments, and remarks about the examiner and the details of the testing situation are among the various aspects of content for which the authors developed codes. Ultimately, they identified 15 defenses, each defined by 6 to 14 different criteria, including higher level denial, isolation, intellectualization, reaction formation, rationalization, pollyannish denial, repression, devaluation, primitive idealization, projective identification, splitting, omnipotence, projection, massive denial, and hypomanic denial.

In a preliminary validity study, Cooper and colleagues (Cooper et al., 1988) demonstrated good interrater reliability in identifying each of these defenses, with intraclass correlation coefficients ranging from .45 to .80 with a median score of .62. They went on to group their 15 defense scores into three theoretically informed categories: neurotic, borderline, and psychotic. The neurotic group included neurotic denial, intellectualization, isolation, reaction formation, repression, rationalization, and pollyannish denial; the borderline group included splitting, primitive idealization, devaluation, omnipotence, projective identification, and projection; the psychotic defenses included massive denial and hypomanic denial. Interrater reliability was .82 for the borderline defenses and .71 for both the neurotic and psychotic groups of defenses.
**Primitive Interpersonal Modes**

Kwawer (1979) found that Rorschachs from individuals operating at the borderline level of personality function were typically characterized by at least one percept, and frequently more, that suggested conflict in separation and differentiation. He also noted that many of these percepts demonstrated evidence of significant boundary disturbance. In a 1980 study, he developed several categories to describe the Rorschach percepts he identified as unique to borderline level function.

Kwawer’s (1980) categorization of these primitive interpersonal modes included engulfment, symbiotic merger, violent symbiosis, malignant internal processes, birth and rebirth, metamorphosis and transformation, and narcissistic mirroring. He also developed codes for boundary disturbance and womb imagery. Gacono and Meloy (1994) reported that 94% of their male antisocial personality disorder sample give at least one of Kwawer’s primitive interpersonal modes in their Rorschachs, with a mean of 3.44. The most common findings were for violent symbiosis (50%), narcissistic mirroring (35%), and boundary disturbance (33%).

**Mutuality of Autonomy Scale**

Urist (1977) noted that an individual’s Rorschach percepts frequently provided information about his or her representation of interpersonal relationships. Utilizing concepts from object relations theory, he created a scale designed to provide an understanding of the complex interactions between self and others. The Mutuality of Autonomy Scale (MOA; Urist, 1977) is an implicit measure of object relations with significant clinical utility in its ability to identify potential therapeutic conflicts and transference enactments.

The MOA provides a structure for describing the individual’s typical expectations for relationships and that person’s most and least adaptive levels of interpersonal function. The scale evaluates the individual’s developmental progression of separation-individuation, from engulfing/fused representations to well-differentiated self-other descriptions. The scale also assesses the level of malevolent control and destructiveness the individual reports in asymmetrical relationships, allowing for a description of his or her view of interactions as safe and mutually enrich-
ing versus dangerous and potentially destructive. Intercoder agreement and construct validity levels for the MOA are excellent (Bombel, Mihura, & Meyer, 2009).

The MOA assesses the thematic content of stated or implied relationships between human, animal, and inanimate objects on the Rorschach. Relationships are coded on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1–7, with lower scores indicative of productive interpersonal function and higher scores suggesting levels of relationship imbalance that result in malevolent destructiveness. As an example, a scale-point 1 response would be “Two people doing a dance together in a ceremony of celebration,” while a scale-point 7 percept would be “Here’s a man struggling as he’s sinking into quicksand.” Interestingly, scale-point 7 scores are predictive of patients who self-mutilate and who have a greater likelihood of psychotic symptoms (Fowler, Hilsenroth, & Nolan, 2000).

**Rorschach Reality-Fantasy Scale**

In 1971, Winnicott presented his concept of potential space, the space between a person and the outside world, between internal fantasy and external reality. At best, this borderland between inner and outer worlds can become a productive space where symbolic thought and creativity can occur, where fantasy and reality inform each other. But Ogden (1985) noted that there can be problems when the interaction between fantasy and reality becomes extremely skewed, leading to the collapse of potential space. External reality can collapse into fantasy, as in the psychoses, or fantasy can collapse into reality, as in obsessional states. As one group of researchers put it, “Fantasy cut adrift from reality becomes threatening. Reality cut adrift from fantasy becomes vapid. Meaning in human experience is generated in the mutual, dialectical, enriching tension between fantasy and reality” (Tibon, Weinberger, Handelzalts, & Porcelli, 2005, p. 510).

The psychodynamic construct of potential space and its pathological variants would seem to be a useful one to include in psychological assessment. Smith (1990) suggested that the Rorschach invites people to operate in this potential space between external and internal reality. He noted that the blots are not totally ambiguous and thus must be reconciled with their stimulus features, but they are not totally realistic either, allowing respondents to incorporate their inner world into their percepts.
as well. And he suggested that if the person is having difficulty using potential space to integrate fantasy and reality productively, those difficulties are likely to show up on the Rorschach.

Tibon and colleagues (Tibon et al., 2005) developed the Rorschach Reality-Fantasy Scale (RFS) as a way of assessing an individual’s use of potential space: Whether the person is able to use the interaction between reality and fantasy productively or whether it tends to collapse, either toward the side of fantasy or the side of reality. The RFS is an 11-point scale ranging from –5 through 0 and up to +5. Percepts toward the minus end are those based on the individual’s internal material, while percepts toward the plus end are based on reality, objects with which the individual has had direct experience. Every Rorschach percept is coded on this scale, and the person’s average score and range of variation allow interpretation of his or her use of potential space. Tibon and her colleagues (Tibon & Rothschild, 2009; Tibon et al., 2005; Zeligman, Smith, & Tibon, in press) have studied the RFS with clinical groups including alexithymics, eating disordered patients, and those with dissociative disorders. Information about the RFS and a computer program for coding Rorschach percepts is available at http://www.rps-rfs.com.

Conclusion

What links these four seemingly different approaches is their common goal: To take psychodynamic constructs – defense mechanisms, primitive interpersonal modes, self and object representations, the use of potential space – and develop a quantitative Rorschach measure for their assessment. In the process, these approaches demonstrate the Rorschach’s ability to operationalize psychodynamic constructs in ways that make them increasingly accessible for working clinicians.

References


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Summary

During the last decades, several researchers have developed Rorschach coding methods as a way of quantifying psychodynamic constructs. These approaches attempt to specify guidelines to aid in the identification of elaborations that can be understood from a psychodynamic perspective. As an example, a sequence in which the first response from a respondent was “a stealth bomber” and the next response was “the face of Jesus Christ” can be coded as “splitting,” identifying the dramatic change in the tone of one response to the next. This article describes four approaches of this type: the Rorschach Defense Scales, Primitive interpersonal modes, Mutuality of Autonomy Scale, and the Rorschach Reality-Fantasy Scale. These four seemingly different approaches have a common goal: the creation of ways to describe important psychodynamic constructs (defense mechanisms, primitive interpersonal modes, object relations) and the use of potential space.

Résumé

Durante las últimas décadas, varios investigadores han desarrollado métodos de codificación de Rorschach como una forma de cuantificar las construcciones psicodinámicas. Estos enfoques pretenden especificar las directrices que ayudan en la identificación de las elaboraciones que se pueden entender desde un punto de vista psicodinámico. A modo de ejemplo, una secuencia en la que la primera respuesta de un encuestado fue "un bombardero Stealth" y la respuesta siguiente fue "el rostro de Jesucristo" puede ser codificado como "splitting" identificando el cambio dramático en el tono de una respuesta a la siguiente. En este artículo se describen cuatro enfoques de este tipo: las Escalas de Defensa de Rorschach, primitivos modos interpersonales, la Mutualidad de la Escala de Autonomía, y la Escala de Rorschach Realidad-fantasía. Estos cuatro enfoques aparentemente diferentes tienen un objetivo común: la creación de formas para describir importantes construcciones psicodinámicas: mecanismos de defensa, los primitivos modos interpersonales, las relaciones de objeto, y el uso del espacio potencial.

ギャップを埋める：精神力動的構成概念に対する数値的ロールシャッハ・アプローチ

ここ数十年、精神力動的構成概念を数値化するためのロールシャッハ法のコーディングの方法が何人かの研究者により開発されている。これらのアプローチは精神力動的観点から理解することができる詳細化を可能にするのに役立つガイドラインを規定しようと試みてきた。例えばひとつの例として、最初の反応が“ステルス爆撃機”であり、その後の反応が“イエス・キリストの顔”という経過は“分裂”とコードでき、ひとつの反応から次の反応への劇的な変容を定義している。本論文はこのタイプの4つのアプローチについて記述している：ロールシャッハ防衛スケール、原始的対人関係様式、相互自律性スケール、そして、ロールシャッハ現実・空想スケールである。この4つの見かけ上は異なっているアプローチは共通した目的をもっているようである：重要な精神力動的構成概念を記述する方法を作りだすこと：その概念は、防衛機制、原始的対人関係様式、対象関係、可能性空間の利用である。