



## Thematic Apperception Test Use in Psychotherapy Evaluation

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### ABSTRACT

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) is a projective construction technique used to identify individual responses to ambiguous stimuli. The TAT may also be used to assess one's object relations and to understand how one uses object representations to interpret interpersonal situations illustrated on TAT cards. While the TAT has not been widely used in assessing psychopathology, a few studies have investigated its use in identifying psychopathic traits.

A review of available studies indicated the TAT has only been used minimally in the assessment of psychopathology, and even less so in the evaluation of psychopathy. To date, use of the Westen's SCORS scoring system has provided varied results, with the greatest support for valid use of the TAT in assessing psychopathy found in borderline personality disorder evaluation (Garb et al., 2002).

**Keywords:** Thematic Apperception Test, psychopathy evaluation

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### How to cite this article:

Kelly J. Walk, Suchika Siotia. Thematic Apperception Test Use in Psychotherapy Evaluation. International Journal of Psychological Research and Reviews, 2023, 6:70.



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## The Thematic Apperception Test

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was developed by Henry Murray and Christiana Morgan to aid in assessing personal responses to ambiguous stimuli (Lilienfield et al., 2000). The projective construction assessment samples individuals' attitudes in theoretical situations (Lilienfield et al., 2000; Teglassi, 2010); its purpose is to help find meaning in individuals' narratives. This premise is based on the supposition that meaning derived from narratives is neither false nor true but is subject to the interpretative motivations of each person (Cramer, 1999a). The TAT allows storytellers to express their own narrative and thus reveal their perception or orientation toward information (Cramer, 1999a; Hibbard et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2012). While interpreting the TAT, assessors should note that narrative constructions are influenced by the intentions of both the person assessed and the interpreter; context, order, intention, and implicit meaning should all be considered as the interpretation is given. Though the TAT has been discounted and overlooked by psychologists that subscribe to a scientific or experimental psychology orientation (Winter, 1998), it remains a fundamental personality assessment tool.

The TAT can be used to discover object relations for assessed individuals, as the tool was developed a tool to assess one's object relation developmental level in TAT scores (Westen & Ruffins, 1990). This assessment proved useful to detect object relation distortions in patients with borderline personality disorder (BPD; Cramer, 1999a). The TAT showed utility in this assessment as individuals use internal object representations (mental representations of other people) as they examine and interpret ambiguous interpersonal situations on each TAT card (Cramer, 1999a). Westen's coding structure, a framework to interpret assessment results, drew upon theory, clinical observation, and research. He determined that understanding one's object relations involved four psychological functions: understanding one's

personal psychic representations of their significant others; understanding affect quality in relationships; knowing one's ability to invest emotionally in relationships, values, or moral standards; and assessing the individual's capacity to comprehend interpersonal motivation (Cramer, 1999a). Westen created a coding scheme titled the Social Cognition and Object Relations Scales (SCORS). This scheme rated individuals on five levels (primitive to mature) within four domains: the complexity of representations of people; the affect tone of relationship schemas; the capacity for emotional investment in relationships; and the understanding of social causality (Cramer, 1999a; Hibbard et al., 2010; Stein et al., 2012). The use of the SCORS system provided a systematic procedure to assess clients' developmental level or relative pathology (Cramer 1999a; Stein et al., 2012).

## Use of the TAT to Assess Psychopathology

Empirical support has not been consistently found in use of the TAT for assessing psychopathology (Garb et al., 2002). Significant differences in scores between varied populations (e.g. psychotic, depressed, normal) have not been steadily obtained. The SCORS system, developed by Westen to assess object relations, has also received mixed reviews, with varied levels of support shown for its use in assessing aggression and different personality disorders (e.g., borderline and antisocial). As adequate norms are not available for the SCORS system, cutoff scores are not easily applied by clinicians, and limited support for subjective TAT interpretations exist, psychologists may prefer to rely more heavily on interview and client history data when interpreting TAT protocols (Garb et al, 2002).

It is important, however, to consider that emphases on validity and reliability are not as straightforward, pertinent, or useful when considering subjective assessments, such as the TAT (Arzul, 2005). Content analysis provides a heuristic value to projective assessment and is useful in determining not only structural

personality dimensions but also individual themes that further elucidate one's personality (Arzul, 2005).

### **Use of the TAT to Assess Psychopathy**

Psychopathy is a disorder that a lack of sensitivity and emotionality; it can be seen as a form of antisocial behavior which develops and informs one's personality (Malik et al., 2018). A reliance on immature projection and denial (defense mechanisms) as well as severe object relations pathology are noted in individuals diagnosed with psychopathy (Porcelli et al., 2001). Individuals with psychopathic traits may experience conduct and interpersonal relational challenges in various living settings; thus, use of the TAT to understand the origin of needs and presses (as revealed by the assessment) may assist in understanding the psychological origins of psychopathic behaviors (Malik et al., 2018).

A small handful of studies have investigated the use of the TAT to assess psychopathy. An earlier study by Silver (1963) sought to learn if the TAT could significantly differentiate individuals with psychopathy from those without the disorder. The TAT demonstrated psychopathy as distinctly different, statistically significantly dissimilar from the comparison groups (reform school students, orphan home participants, and high school subjects), but only in terms of press rejection and sexual needs. Sexual needs were expressed more openly by those with psychopathy, but these individuals less often expressed needs for achievement, want for recognition, retentive strivings, and guilt feelings. It is important to note that limited fantasy, at times observed in those with psychopathy, may cause such projective constructive techniques (such as the TAT) to be somewhat less useful in assessments (Silver, 1963).

Cramer (1999a) shared additional research by Blatt and Ford (1994) which investigated projective test data of patients with a diagnosis of either BPD or psychopathy. The TAT was used to describe group differences and demonstrate changes that occurred after 15

months of treatment. Results from the study indicated that the sample of patients with psychopathy scored higher on primitive defense use and denial than did BPD patients. Interestingly, the patients with psychopathy showed TAT scores suggesting a significant decrease among total defense use after treatment, suggesting treatment may have been effective.

Another study by Cramer (1999b) used the TAT in assessing 91 young adults to determine the presence of various personality features found in psychopathic syndromes. Results demonstrated that psychopathic personality elements were related to individuals' use of denial and projection, especially regarding immature presentations of such defenses (Cramer, 1999b). Study authors further suggested that study findings indicated that personality features may overlap between personality syndromes or prototypes (e.g., histrionic, psychopathic, and narcissistic), an increased likelihood existed that individuals with elements of one syndrome would also possess features of related syndromes.

Research by Arzul (2005) analyzed four object relations dimensions measured by the SCORS in a sample of eight juvenile male offenders incarcerated in South Africa; dimensions included understanding social causality, capacity for emotional investment in relationships, affect tone of relationships in paradigms, and complexity of object representations. The study results demonstrated that while individuals showed high levels of maturity in the complexity of representations and social causality (suggesting insight into personal motivations and consequences), low scores in the affective dimensions (affect tone and emotional investment) demonstrate how intelligent, insightful individuals may commit callous and sometimes violent acts resulting in incarceration. Cognitive structures seem to be overwhelmed when these individuals become distressed, hyper-aroused, or provoked. Findings suggested that the use of projective

methods to identify underlying personality characteristics in adolescents may prove useful in determining the risk of psychopathy development in future life stages (Arzul, 2005).

A study by Heinze (2017) sought to further understand the psychodynamic properties of psychopathy. The exploration of attachment's influence on unconscious shame development and psychopathic behaviors was investigated. The study suggested attachment dynamics may improve psychopathy conceptualization, especially regarding behavior traits, etiology, assessment, and treatment. Use of the TAT SCORS Q-Sort was recommended as a useful method to access unconscious shame, which has been shown in a previous study to be usefully differentiated via this approach (Conklin, 1999, as cited in Heinze, 2017). These few studies demonstrate how the TAT has been used in research to assess psychopathy, though the validity, reliability, and utility of such an approach has not been entirely settled.

### **Validity and Reliability of the TAT**

Regarding reliability, internal consistency (how test items correlate with each other), while typically assessed when evaluating the utility of a measure, is a problematic construct to consider in determining the reliability of the TAT (Cramer, 1999a). TAT Cards were developed to assess differing psychological function aspects and conflicts, so assessing reliability between test items on this instrument appears fruitless. Test-retest reliability is also compromised due to card familiarity from the storytellers' experiences, and due to the propensity of psychological characteristics to change over time. This change can occur with defense mechanisms, a key feature in object relations and psychopathy (Cramer, 1999a). Assessing the reliability of such projective instruments may be best achieved via observational and interpretive methods. One type of reliability testing that may also prove useful is interrater reliability, which may be easily and usefully applied to the TAT. Challenges also exist in evaluating the validity of the TAT (Cramer, 1999a). Cramer recommends

that confirmation of theoretical predictions, suggested by the test, and respecting the narrative features of the TAT, may offer the only useful and applicable measure of reliability. Interestingly, computer analysis and empirical study have shown that one may simultaneously achieve high validity and low internal consistency reliability on the TAT; this contradicts the supposition that validity cannot exceed reliability (Cramer, 1999a). As shown in this discussion, validity and reliability must be informed by theory and approached thoughtfully to provide useful insight into effective use of the TAT.

### **Conclusion**

The TAT has been used sparsely in the assessment of psychopathology generally, and specifically less so in psychopathy evaluation. Additionally, the use of Westen's SCORS objective scoring system has provided mixed results in the application of this test. While generally, the assessment of object relations achieved through TAT administration and the SCORS method could be useful in understanding an individual's psychopathic traits, the most robust support found for use of the TAT in assessment exists solely for BPD (Garb et al., 2002). Future studies may seek to determine if the utility of this assessment and a different scoring method may offer more useful identification and interpretation for psychopathy assessment.

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