
A Classroom Demonstration of Potential Biases in the Subjective Interpretation of Projective Tests

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Instructors teaching psychological assessment can use this demonstration to illustrate potential biases when subjectively interpreting responses to projective stimuli. Specifically, the demonstration illustrates how prior expectancies often lead the interpreter to focus on responses that "fit" with the initial impression (i.e., the tendency to collect confirmatory data). The demonstration utilizes active student participation, holds student interest, stimulates subsequent class discussion, and results in generally positive feedback from students.

Many psychology courses involving assessment or clinical psychology include coverage of projective tests or techniques (Cohen, Swerdlik, & Phillips, 1996; Newmark, 1996). Although clinicians frequently use projectives, the subjective interpretation of responses to projective stimuli is problematic with regard to reliability and validity (Beutler, 1995; Dawes, 1994). Accordingly, recent refinements in scoring the Rorschach inkblots have focused on quantifying responses and comparing them to established norms (Exner, 1993), with resulting improvement in reliability and validity (Shontz & Green, 1992; Weiner, 1996).

It seems imperative that users score responses to projective tests objectively if adequate reliability and validity are to result. Without such objective scoring, critics warn that the door is left open to biased interpretation. For example, if one believes the respondent is aggressive, one may tend to note responses that support such an impression and pay less attention to responses that do not fit as well (Dawes, 1994). I find the following classroom activity useful in communicating the potential for bias when subjectively interpreting responses to projective tests, thereby emphasizing the importance of objective scoring of projectives.

Classroom Demonstration

After providing a general introduction to the nature of projective techniques and the assumptions on which they rest, I typically describe methods for administration of commonly used projectives. Subsequently, I introduce the classroom demonstration by explaining that it is helpful to have some firsthand exposure to test data and the process of subjective interpretation. I explain that I will provide the students with a brief description of a hypothetical client, Jeff, followed by his responses to a couple of widely used projective stimuli. The students are to listen carefully to Jeff's responses and jot down the one or two they believe are most revealing or useful in understanding Jeff's personality and concerns. Unbeknownst to the students, those sitting in half the room

receive a description of Jeff A. and the remaining students receive a description of Jeff B.

Description of Jeff A.

Jeff A., a 17-year-old boy, was brought to the psychologist by his mother, who was concerned about his mood. He had always been somewhat shy and reserved, but over the past several months Jeff became even more quiet and socially isolated. His teachers had not noticed anything wrong, but Jeff currently spends much of his free time in his room, separated from the rest of the family. His grades have not changed and he generally maintains a "B" average. However, Jeff rarely smiles anymore, and his mother believes he is depressed.

Description of Jeff B.

Jeff B., a 17-year-old boy, was brought to the psychologist at the recommendation of the school counselor. He had always been somewhat outgoing and restless, but over the past several months Jeff became even more outspoken and defiant in his behavior at school. His grades have not changed and he generally maintains a "C" average. However, Jeff has been getting into more trouble at school and the usual punishments do not seem to affect his behavior. Jeff does not seem to believe that there is a problem.

After the students read the brief description, I orally present to them Jeff's responses to Rorschach Card 3 and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943) Card 1 (boy looking pensively at a violin). As I read Jeff's responses, I simultaneously present the stimulus to the class using an overhead projector. Some clinicians may object to exposing undergraduates to stimuli from actual projective tests because of concern over test security. However, the demonstration involves only two stimuli (each from a different test) and does not involve discussion of typical, appropriate, or "healthy" responses to each stimulus. Clinicians frequently use the TAT and Rorschach cards over multiple trials with the same client, so apparently prior exposure per se does not invalidate subsequent responses.

Response to Rorschach Card 3:

It looks like two guys facing each other. They appear to be fighting over something on the ground between them. Each guy has hold of it and is trying to pull it away from the other guy. Both of the guys are the same size so it's a pretty even match—they keep struggling but neither seems to budge. The more I look at it, though, these don't look like men—they look more like aliens.

Yeah, they don't look human. Look at their pointed heads and faces, and their pointed feet. [Giggles] These two look like they have hard-ons. [Pause] I don't think this has anything to do with the two aliens, but these red things in the center look like kidneys filled with blood. You know, like when a boxer delivers a good kidney punch and bruises the other guy's kidneys. [Pause] These two red things out to the sides remind me of electric guitars like you would see in a rock video.

Response to TAT Card 1:

This little boy has been taking violin lessons for several years. He has always worked very hard and practiced every day. Today, however, he is wondering whether it was all worth it. He is confused. His parents were never excited about his playing and refused to go to any of his performances at school concerts. He keeps thinking about all of the work and effort up to this point and is beginning to realize that he will never be a great musician. He has to decide whether to continue and is upset about the decision. If he asks his parents he knows they will say, "Do whatever you want." If he asks his music teacher, he will say, "You should keep trying." But the little boy is discouraged about not being that good even after all the practice. He just wants someone to help him figure out what he should do.
[How does it end?]

The boy throws the violin on the ground and stomps on it. His attitude seems to be "to hell with it all."

After reading Jeff's responses to the projective stimuli, I ask for observations regarding the most important responses or those that the students believe revealed the most about Jeff. Typically, the students sitting in the half of the class who received a description of Jeff A. volunteer that the most salient responses involved alienation, frustration, confusion about the future, and a lack of social support. These students frequently refer to the depressive and nihilistic content in the response to the TAT card. Students sitting in the other half of the class typically express some surprise as their classmates emphasize the depression and alienation; they are more prone to emphasize the aggressive content. The students who read the description of Jeff B. typically find the references to fighting, blood, and property destruction the most salient. Either or both groups of students typically make reference to penile erections, although the interpretations of what the erections "mean" about Jeff frequently differ.

Usually at some point in the discussion students become suspicious as to why many of their classmates focused on different aspects of Jeff's responses than they did. At that point, I reveal that, in fact, the class was interpreting responses for two different individuals, and I ask one student from each half of the room to read aloud the description they received. Here, many of the students seem to become keenly aware of the purpose of the demonstration and how their own interpretations of Jeff's responses were biased by their prior (although scant) knowledge about Jeff. This revelation frequently results in a lively discussion about the potential problems with subjective interpretation of responses to projectives and issues of interrater reliability.

The primary advantage of this classroom demonstration is that it actively involves students in a task many find interesting and similar to what they expect to do as clinical psychologists. Subsequently, many receive firsthand knowledge of how subjective interpretation of responses to projective stimuli may be biased. The illustration seems to leave a marked impression on students, and I have used it in both undergraduate and graduate courses. On subsequent essay exams, many students make reference to the demonstration when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of projective techniques.

Sometimes students note that they (or some of their classmates) emphasized responses that did not fit with the bias intended by the demonstration. In other words, not everyone with the description of Jeff A. emphasizes depressive themes. One can use this observation to discuss how different subjective interpreters may be more or less prone to bias and how these individual differences can further lower reliability regarding what is gleaned from the test responses. Similarly, one can use this observation to stimulate discussion of the individual or theoretical differences among interpreters and how these might lead to differences in what are considered the most salient responses as well as what those responses might mean.

In a recent Survey of Clinical Psychology class, 35 students were in attendance on the day of the demonstration. I asked students to write directly on the descriptions of the adolescent the one or two most salient responses by the client as they listened to Jeff's responses to the projective stimuli. On completion of the demonstration, I collected the slips and distributed forms for anonymous ratings of the usefulness of the demonstration. Students rated "How useful do you think the exercise was in demonstrating the potential biases that may be involved in subjective interpretation of projective tests?" using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all useful*) to 7 (*very useful*). Also, students responded to "Would you recommend using this demonstration in future classes?" using a similar 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 7 (*definitely yes*).

I had a graduate assistant transcribe the response from each slip. Two other graduate assistants in a clinical psychology program subsequently and independently evaluated each of the 35 transcribed responses. Specifically, the raters indicated whether the phrase or phrases provided by each student reflected (a) "depressive themes," and (b) "aggressive themes." The raters provided a yes-no response for each question and were blind as to the purpose of the rating task. The two raters demonstrated high agreement with regard to the presence of aggressive themes ($K = .81$) and relatively less agreement on the presence of depressive themes ($K = .57$). We resolved discrepancies between the two sets of ratings through discussion.

Did the students actually differ in the nature of the responses they emphasized as a function of which description of Jeff they received? Of those who received the description of Jeff B. ($n = 19$), 94.7% emphasized aggressive content compared to 37.5% of the students who received the description of Jeff A., $\chi^2(1, N = 35) = 13.20, p < .001$. Similarly, of those who received the description of Jeff A. ($n = 16$), 56.3% em-

phasized depressive content as important compared to 15.8% of the students who received the description of Jeff B., $\chi^2(1, N = 35) = 6.31, p < .02$. Clearly, the initial impression students had about Jeff influenced which responses to projective stimuli they attended to and emphasized.

With regard to usefulness of the demonstration, the student ratings ranged from 1 to 7 with a mean of 5.71 ($SD = 1.01$). Similarly, the ratings with regard to whether the demonstration should be used in future classes ranged from 1 to 7 with a mean of 6.09 ($SD = .89$).

In conclusion, I find this classroom demonstration to be effective in communicating important issues involving subjective versus objective scoring when using projective techniques in psychological assessment. The demonstration adds life to an otherwise dry topic, stimulates subsequent class discussion, and leaves a lasting impression on many students.

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Note

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