

CCNY psychologist offers guide to utilizing projective tests

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Professor Steven Tuber

(Medical Xpress) -- “If I hold up a coffee mug and ask you to tell me what it is, it is easy for you to give me the correct answer, but you haven’t revealed anything about yourself,” says City College of New York Professor of Psychology Steven Tuber. “But if I ask you to describe something that is ambiguous I am giving you a problem, and how you make sense of it tells me something about yourself.”

Projective tests, such as the Rorschach test, can help make sense of how a patient deals with ambiguity when clinicians follow a standardized process to administer them and interpret the results. In his third book, *Understanding Personality Through Project Testing* (Jason Aronson Inc., 2012) Professor Tuber shows how to link six core domains of personality to the responses adults and children give to projective tests.

The book draws upon his experience teaching a class on projective testing at City College, where he has been a member of the faculty of the CUNY doctoral program in clinical psychology for 27 years.

To make a diagnosis, [psychologists](#) rely on their patients to be truthful, Professor Tuber explains. However, because most want to “appear to be as together as they can” they often consciously or unconsciously withhold helpful information.

In most cases, a clinician can sufficiently diagnose a patient through interviewing. However, for some patients, projective tests are useful to make sense of what they are unwilling or unable to tell their therapist.

“The tests by themselves are not meaningful,” he says. “They only become meaningful when the responses are related to underlying theories of human personality.”

Evaluating test results is both an art and a science, he says, with a “whole series of criteria to assess the quality of responses.” The aim is to explore the many sides of the human personality – aggressive and dominating versus caring and loving, for example – to see which will prevail in a given setting, he explains.

However, he cautions that clinicians run the risk of putting a person in a diagnostic category solely because their responses are similar to others already in the group. He likens this to a physician diagnosing a patient with prostate cancer based solely on the results of a PSA test, which sometimes produces a false positive reading.

Rather, clinicians need to look at the whole person, Professor Tuber says. “You have to look at all the domains of personality in relation to one another in order to derive a diagnosis that holistically captures a person’s strengths and weaknesses.”

Someone strong on the playful dimension thrives on creativity and access to joy, for example, while someone who is emotionally flexible won't get overwhelmed by tough situations. These positive resources must be focused upon in addition to the psychological vulnerabilities, and projective testing can assess emotional strengths as well as frailties.

Projective testing, he adds, can help predict clinical situations as varied as how someone will respond in stressful situations to whether they can be empathetic when a loved one is in crisis. Yet it is important for clinicians to be humble when attempting to make sense of the enormous complexity of the human spirit. This is particularly true when one has to provide feedback to patients about what the projective testing results reveal.

The feedback must first and foremost be presented in a way that speaks to the patient and not at him, Professor Tuber emphasizes: "It is important to be truthful and not just show how smart you are. You need to use the information to be helpful."

Provided by City College of New York

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