What are projective tests and what are their distinctive characteristics? How should we understand and interpret them? What do they add to assessment? The purpose of this chapter is to address these questions by providing the reader with a meaningful and comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding projective tests. This framework emphasizes a response process that includes both self-expressive and organizational components, that is, what the respondent says and how he or she structures the response. The framework’s implications for projective testing and the contributions of projective testing to assessment are addressed. In the course of this discussion, we hope to correct some common misperceptions about projective tests and to establish a more informed approach to projective testing to assessment are addressed. In the course of this discussion, we hope to correct some common misperceptions about projective tests and to establish a more informed approach to projective testing, projective testing, and assessment in general. Other related topics include implications of the model for interpretation, using projective tests as methods, controversies surrounding projective testing, response sets, response manipulation, and issues from a historical perspective.

It is clear that projective tests have value in the assessment process. This chapter addresses their value within a broad overview, incorporating projective tests and methods within a single domain. Encompassing all projective tests, as is the challenge of this chapter, necessitates this inclusive, global approach and precludes detailed, test-specific characterizations. In general, we have reserved our comments about specific tests to the Rorschach, Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), figure drawings, sentence completion tests, and the early memory tests. An evaluation of the specific strengths and weaknesses of these or any other individual projective measure awaits others’ initiatives.
are causally juxtaposed with so-called objective tests. Without pause, many American psychologists categorize tests according to the traditional projective-objective dichotomy. In thinking and communicating about assessment instruments, these psychologists treat the characteristics of each class of instrument as mutually exclusive or as polar opposites. For example, because objective tests are thought of as unbiased measures, projective tests, by default, are assumed to be subjective. As another example, because objective tests are seen as having standardized administration and scoring, projective tests are assumed to lack empirical rigor. There are a number of reasons that the projective-objective dichotomy leads to an oversimplified and biased understanding of projective tests. First, the projective-objective dichotomy often results in misleading reductionism. Instruments under the rubric of projective are assumed to be uniform in content, purpose, and methodology. For example, all projective instruments are often reduced and treated as equivalent to a classic exemplar such as the Rorschach. Reducing all projective instruments to the Rorschach ignores their incredible diversity. Not only do these tests target many different domains of functioning, but they also employ a great variety of methodologies for the purposes of inducing very different response processes. For example, early instruments included an indistinct speech interpretation, word association, cloud perception, hand-positioning perception, comic strip completion, and musical reverie tests (Anastasi & Urbina; Campbell, 1957; Frank, 1939/1962; Murray, 1938). Moreover, this great variety suggests that projective processes are ubiquitous and are involved in many real-life behaviors.

Second, the projective-objective dichotomy implies that there are characteristics unique to each class of test, but these supposed hallmarks are misleading. For example, test elements identified as projective, such as the flexible response format and ambiguous or incomplete stimuli, are employed by tests generally considered to be models of objectivity and quantification. Murstein (1963) notes from the flexible response format of some cognitive ability tests that “we learn a great deal about the person who, on the vocabulary subtests of the Wechsler Adult Scale of Intelligence, when asked to give the meaning of the word ‘sentence,’ proceeds to rattle off three or four definitions and is beginning to divulge the differences between the connotations and denotations of the word when he is stopped” (p. 3). E. Kaplan’s (1991) approach to neuropsychological testing focuses on process, similar to the response-process approach in projective testing. Similarly, Meehl points out the projective element of stimulus ambiguity in self-report personality tests. In his Basic Readings on the MMPI: A New Selection on Personality Measurement (1945/1980), Meehl notes that many Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) items, such as “Once in a while I laugh at a dirty joke,” contain ambiguities. At the most basic level, it is unclear whether “once in a while” refers to once a day, once a week, or once in a month.

Third, the stereotypic juxtaposition of objective and projective testing lends a pejorative connotation to projective tests that suggests they lack objectivity. This is misleading. Many projective tests are quantified and standardized in terms of administration, and more should be. If we take the example of cognitive tests, the style or process of the response can be systematically observed, quantified, and standardized. This qualitative-to-quantitative test development strategy is exactly the same procedure used in sophisticated quantification of projective tests, as in the Rorschach Comprehensive System (Exner, 1993) and the Washington Sentence Completion Test (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970). Such approaches can result in psychometrically sound quantification and standardization. For example, Joy, Fein, Kaplan, and Freedman (2001) utilized this procedure to standardize observation of the Block Design subtest from the Wechsler scales. Other research summarized by Stricker and Gold (1999) and Weiner (1999) indicates that behavioral observation within projective tests can be used to elaborate previously developed hypotheses and to synthesize inferences about the respondent. These same authors also demonstrated these tactics in case examples.

Of course, quantification and reducing examiner bias, that is variability introduced by examiners, are important goals in improving psychological assessment. Nonetheless, reducing examiner variability is not the only goal of assessment and is not equivalent to validity and utility. Indeed, further research should address the extent to which the examiner’s input is induced by the subject, as would be the case with reciprocal determinism, increasing the ecological validity of projective tests (Bandura, 1978; Viglione & Perry, 1991). Furthermore, one may speculate that overemphasis on eliminating examiner variability to achieve objectivity can increase test reliability at the expense of validity when it limits salient observations by the examiner.

Finally, projective and objective tests resemble each other in that they share the same goal: the description of personality, psychopathology, and problems in living. However, the dichotomy highlights the differences in method and overlooks fundamental differences in their approach to understanding personality. Later sections of this chapter will highlight some of these differences. As we shall see, the differences may be more in the philosophy of the psychologist using the tests rather than in the tests themselves.

The foregoing are only a few examples of the distortions involved in the unexamined use of the projective-objective
Problems with Common Metaphors and Models

Like the distinction between projective and objective tests, the common metaphors and models used to describe the projective response process can be grossly misleading. The two well-known metaphors of the projective response process are the blank screen and the X-ray machine. Each metaphor contains an implicit theoretical model of projective testing that shapes our understanding of the projective response process. In this section we critically examine both metaphors.

The Blank Screen Metaphor

The most common and stereotypic metaphor is that of the blank screen. In this metaphor, a projective test stimulus is portrayed as a blank screen or canvas upon which the respondent projects his or her inner world (Anastasi & Urbina, 1996). In the reductionistic application of this metaphor, response content is treated as a direct representation of the respondent’s inner life. For example, when a respondent projects his or her aggression onto the stimuli, the response content contains aggressive themes as a result. The examiner then equates these aggressive themes with the personality trait of aggression. When taken to the extreme, the blank screen metaphor has had two consequences on our approach to projective tests: an overemphasis on response content and an underappreciation for the role of the projective test stimulus and the examination context. By examination context we mean the various situational factors as experienced by the respondent. These include the demands on the respondent given the circumstances of the evaluation, the implicit and explicit consequences of the examination, and the interaction between the examiner and respondent.

The blank screen metaphor suggests that the only necessary components to projective test stimuli are ambiguity and a lack of structure. These components are thought to facilitate response content, that is, the free expression of the respondent’s internal world. The more ambiguous and unstructured the stimulus, the more it was presumed that the personality would be directly expressed in the response. Historically, this simplistic view has led to an emphasis on response content and to the interpretive viewpoint that the test was equivalent to or symbolized an internal response or reality (Murstein, 1963). Aspects of test responses are often seen as symbolic of and equivalent to personality and constituted the basis for grand interpretations. Figure 23.1 presents a schematic for this and other models.

However, increasing the blankness (so to speak) of the screen by increasing the ambiguity of the stimuli does not necessarily produce more useful or valid information. Research into the relationship among amount of ambiguity, structure of pictorial stimuli, and test validity has not led to consistent findings (Murstein, 1961, 1963, 1965). For example, the blank TAT card produces relatively conventional responses that are less revealing of the individual than are the rest of the cards, all of which include a picture of either a person, a group of people, or some other scene. Moreover, eliminating the more recognizable and salient visual aspects of the Rorschach stimuli (what Exner, 1996, called the critical bits) does not lead to more productivity. In fact, the available research supports the view that the suggestive aspects of the stimulus, rather than the lack thereof, are what is important. Empirical data clearly demonstrate that the physical stimulus is crucial (Exner, 1974, 1980; Murstein, 1961; Peterson & Schilling, 1983).

What we know about Herman Rorschach’s work in developing his test attests to the fact that it is not ambiguity or lack of structure that contributes to the test’s usefulness. It appears that each stimulus plate was designed to contain visually recognizable forms, or critical bits, along with some arbitrary components (Exner, 1996, 2000). Rorschach may have included the arbitrary contours to interfere with the processing of these suggestive, recognizable forms. The plates were
Another common metaphor is that of an X-ray machine. In this metaphor a projective test acts as an X-ray of the mind, so to speak, that allows the interpreter to observe directly the contents of the respondent’s mind (see Figure 23.1). Both Frank (1939/1962) and Murray (1938) mentioned this image in their seminal work so that it has historical precedents. However, like the blank screen metaphor, the X-ray metaphor leads to a focus on response content and the way in which the content directly represents personality. More importantly, the X-ray metaphor diminishes the role of the respondent in the response process.

Examining Frank’s (1939/1962) original work allows one to achieve a more adequate understanding of his purpose for using the X-ray metaphor. When Frank first used it, he compared learning about personality to the then-current technologies in medical and physical science that allowed one to study internal anatomical structures through noninvasive techniques. However, Frank included a critical distinction between projective tests and medical tools, a distinction that is typically excluded from today’s common understanding of the X-ray metaphor. Frank noted that personality, unlike the target of an X-ray machine, is not a passive recipient of attention. In responding to projective test stimuli, personality does not simply cast a shadow of its nature onto a plate. Rather, Frank contended that personality is an active organizing process.

Despite having been written more than 60 years ago, Frank’s ideas reveal a complex and informed perspective on personality, one that is especially relevant to understanding the nature of projective testing:

Personality is approachable as a process or operation of an individual who organizes experience and reacts affectively to situations. This process is dynamic in the sense that the individual personality imposes upon the common public world of events (what we call nature), his meanings and significances, his organization and patterns, and he invests the situations thus structured with an affective meaning to which he responds idiomatically. (1939/1962, p. 34)

Frank went on to describe personality as a “dynamic organizing process.” He contrasted this subjective, synthetic, dynamic process of personality to the objective, external, concrete reality of the world, including the host culture’s shared conventional experiences. In Frank’s view, the world of culture also influences the personality and its understanding of the external world but cannot account for personality processes and behavior.

Later in the same paper, Frank described projective techniques as essentially inducing the activity and processing of the personality:

In similar fashion we may approach the personality and induce the individual to reveal his way of organizing experience by giving him a field (objects, materials, experiences) with relatively little structure and cultural patterning so that the personality can project upon that plastic field his way of seeing life, his meanings, significances, patterns, and especially his feelings. Thus, we elicit a projection of the individual personality’s private world because he has to organize the field, interpret the material and react affectively to it. More specifically, a projection method for study of personality involves the presentation of a stimulus-situation designed or chosen because it will mean to the subject, not what the experimenter has arbitrarily decided it should mean (as in most psychological experiments using standardized stimuli in order to be “objective”), but rather whatever it must mean to the personality who gives it, or imposes it, his private, idiosyncratic meaning and organization. (1939/1962, p. 43)

These quotes make it clear that the respondent’s organizational style and affect are critical to the projective testing process, and that the process involves more than simply adding content to a stimulus field. Moreover, unlike self-report tests, projective test stimuli give respondents an opportunity to express their organizational styles and affect. Thus, a projective test allows the examiner to observe personality in action with cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and meaning-making activities.
The Need for an Informed Conceptual Framework

This critical review of traditional metaphors and models for projective testing points to their serious shortcomings and oversimplifications. In contrast to a blank screen, projective stimuli are more like problem-solving tasks. In contrast to a passive personality that unknowingly projects itself onto a blank screen or that is examined with X-ray vision, personality in projective testing is seen as a much more active, organizing, and selective process. Perhaps the most accurate portrayal of projection is that the personality does not project light onto the blank screen of the test, but rather, the test projects itself through the active organizing process of the personality to the response. In other words, the individual’s personal characteristics are observable in the refracted light—that is, the manner in which the person responds to the test. In sum, there is a need for a broader and more informed conceptual framework for understanding projective testing.

From comparisons between the overt stimuli and response, the interpreter infers the covert personality process. This input-processing-output sequence is the essence of our model for projective testing and is presented in the next section. Such a framework goes beyond projection and response content by embracing a problem-solving perspective.

THE BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE PROCESS MODEL

A problem-solving model leads us to approach personality as a processor of information. Rather than interpreting a response as a symbolic representation of personality, we interpret it in the context of the stimulus situation and used that interpretation to build a model of the respondent’s processing and problem-solving styles. Rather than using a static conceptualization of personality, our understanding incorporates a model of personality as a problem-solving processor of life’s ongoing challenges.

The projective test response can be seen as the development and formulation of a solution to a problem, the structure and content of which reveals something about the individual. Every projective test involves a task, which we can understand as a problem to be solved. For example, the TAT demands the creation of a story that reconciles the suggestive elements of the pictures with ambiguous and missing cues. As another example, the early memory test involves constructing, typically without a complete sense of certainty, a memory dating back to the beginning of one’s life. The self-expressive quality and the adequacy of these solutions can be the object of the interpretive system (e.g., for the TAT, see Ronan, Colavito, & Hammontree, 1993).

The history of projective testing and misuses in current practice reveal that we have drifted from the focus on input-processing-output as first described by Frank (1939/1962). This drift has led to two gross oversimplifications of projective testing: (a) Projective test responses are inappropriately equated with personality, and (b) verbal and motor behaviors within projective test responses are thought to symbolize large patterns of life behavior. In contrast, an informed response process approach entails inferring a model of an individual’s personality and behavior from projective test output based on a thorough understanding of the stimuli, task demands, and processing involved. The future of projective assessment depends on advancing this response process and problem-solving approach.

The Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association [APA], & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999) incorporate this interest in the response process. According to the standards, evidence based on examination of the response process, including eye movements and self-descriptions of the respondent’s experience, should be used to validate tests inferences. Response process research is extremely valuable as a basis for clinical inference (e.g., Exner, Armbruster, & Mittman, 1978). The response characteristics of each commonly used projective test should be researched and delineated. Each projective test differs in its response process so that each test must be addressed and mastered separately, even if these tests share some common processes and principles.

Self-Expressive and Organizational Components

Within the response process in projective testing, two components have traditionally been identified: (a) a content or self-expressive component and (b) a formal or organizational component. Often these components are referred to as the projective and problem-solving components of projective tests, but these terms are subject to misinterpretation. This chapter refers to them as the self-expressive and organizational components of projective testing.

To oversimplify, the self-expressive component largely involves content features of the response—that is, what the subject says, writes, or draws and what associations the individual brings to the task. Self-expression occurs because projective stimuli provoke the imagination, acting as a stimulus to fantasy (Exner & Weiner, 1995; Goldfried, Sticker, & Weiner, 1971). Thus, respondents react to content suggestions in a task (a sentence stem, a picture, or a recognizable form or critical bit of a Rorschach plate) and rely on themselves to go beyond that content to access and express...
information from their own stores of images, experiences, feelings, and thoughts.

In contrast, the organizational component involves the formal or structural features of the response: how the individual answers the questions, solves the task, structures the response, and makes decisions. For example, the organizational component includes how the stimulus details are incorporated into TAT or Rorschach responses and whether the stimulus features are accurately perceived. Use of detail and the accuracy of the response are organizational features, which can be applied to almost all projective tests. Projective tests all pose problems to solve; the adequacy, style, and structure of the solutions to the problems are encompassed by the organizational component.

The common oversimplification in conceptualizing projective testing is to limit the scope of projective testing to the self-expressive component. Doing so leads one to interpret only response content themes. Even if the organizational component of a projective test is recognized, it is often conceptualized as separate from the content component.

We believe that separating the self-expressive and organizational components is another misconception that should be corrected. If one examines the projective test respondent’s real-time processing while solving the task and developing a response, one observes that self-expressive and organizational aspects are simultaneous and interconnected. One solves the problem not only by organizing the input and the output, but also by selecting one’s own self-expression to add to the response. From another perspective, including self-expression is not merely a projection of a trait, need, or perception. Thus, we are making an important distinction here: Problem-solving within projective tests encompasses both content and formal, and both self-expressive and organizational facets. What are conventionally considered projective or content/self-expressive components are actually best understood as part of a single problem-solving process. Thus, the respondent’s way of problem-solving may involve, for example, invoking dependent themes. A respondent’s adding in certain thematic interpretations, motives, interests, or fantasies to projective test responses thus is part of the problem-solving component of these tests.

Moreover, there may be individual differences, both within an assessment and in one’s everyday life, in terms of how much content is projected. Some people may project more personalized content than others. Others who express less personalized content might be characterized as stereotyped, overtly conventional (Schafer, 1954), or, alternatively, as efficient and economical (Exner, 1993). We will elaborate this problem-solving process as the centerpiece of this chapter.

The Projective Test Stimulus Situation

In our view, the projective-testing stimulus encompasses a complex of factors. The stimulus in a projective test is more than the concrete stimulus itself, that is, more than merely a picture, a sentence stem, a Rorschach plate, or an invitation to remember. Masling’s (1960) work with the Rorschach and a variety of studies with the TAT (Murstein, 1961, 1963) reveal that situational, contextual, and interpersonal stimuli influence the response process. Extrapolating from these findings, we propose that the actual stimulus for a projective test is the entire situation, or what we call the stimulus situation. Rather than merely being concrete stimuli, the stimulus situation encompasses the interpersonal interaction with the examiner, what the respondent is asked to do with the stimulus, and contextual issues such as the reason for referral. For example, the TAT stimulus situation involves the fact that the respondent is being called on to tell a story to reveal something about him- or herself in front of another person, typically a stranger with some authority and power, about whom the respondent knows very little. Accordingly, when the stimulus is administered individually there is also a strong interpersonal component to the stimulus situation. Furthermore, this interpersonal component is implicit in paper-and-pencil projective tests. It is also present in self-report tests of personality, although it is often ignored.

A critical component of the stimulus situation is the respondent’s awareness of the obvious potential for the response to reveal something of him- or herself. Reactions to the pressure to self-disclose are invoked by the stimulus situation. Accordingly, response sets, defensiveness, expression of social desirability, and response manipulation are fundamental to the response process. As will be addressed later, these are more than impediments or moderators of test validity.

Processing the Stimulus Situation

Taking all of these issues into consideration suggests that the respondent reacts to an overall situation, including both concrete and experiential components, as a pattern or field. Such patterning is a well-known fact in the study of human perception. The respondent organizes that field into figure and ground, responding more distinctly to the figural components of the stimulus situation. This figure-ground patterning exists not only within the processing of the concrete projective test stimulus, but also with the entire stimulus situation. Accurate
interpretation depends on considering the concrete stimuli element in terms of, for example, Rorschach card pull, sentence-stem characteristics, and salient stimuli components for individual cards from storytelling tasks (Exner, 1996, 2000; Murstein, 1961, 1963; Watson, 1978). These prominent, recognizable aspects of the concrete stimulus elicit common or popular responses. Peterson and Schilling (1983) have written an informative, conceptual article that frames these issues for the Rorschach. Knowing the test and its input, processing, and output characteristics provide a context within which to understand the implications of responses for personality. Standardization data and empirical descriptions, the examiner’s experience with the stimulus situation, recognition of the response pull for individual test stimuli, and knowledge of conventional and common responses all contribute to optimally valid interpretation.

The Free-Response Format

**Freedom in the Stimulus Situation**

Freedom and lack of direction are crucial characteristics of the projective test stimulus situation. The individualistic idiosyncratic feature of the projective test response process starts with the individual differences in the perception of the stimulus situation (Colligan & Exner, 1985; Exner, 1980; Perry, Felger, & Braff, 1998). The individual can choose to attend to different components of the stimulus situation, focusing on, for example, a particular element of the physical stimulus, a demand within the task, or some interpersonal aspect related to the task. The individual may offer an overall gestalt, or may focus on a single element or on inconsistencies between stimulus subcomponents. Accordingly, self-regulation through stimulus control can be assessed through projective testing, in terms of what an individual attributes to a stimulus, when one identifies what the individual responds to in the stimulus situation.

Another important, related feature of the processing of the stimulus situation is decision making. For example, respondents must decide what to reveal or focus on within the story, image, early memory, or sentence completion item. Decision making also requires reconciling contradicting elements and completing unfinished information. The projective test stimulus situation does not provide much information to assist the respondent in evaluating the appropriateness and adequacy of a response. In contrast to ability tests, there are no obvious right answers. The lack of information in the stimulus situation interacts with the free-response format to impede attempts at self-evaluation of the appropriateness of the response. Thus, decision making and processing in the face of minimal external guidance with concomitant insecurity is also a major component of the response process and projective test task. In other words, coping with insecurity and uncertainty without sufficient information about the adequacy of one’s response is part of the response process.

**Response Characteristics**

With self-report tests, the interpretive dimensions (e.g., depression for Scale 2 of the MMPI) are predetermined. In contrast with projective tests, interpretive dimensions are implicit in the test behavior. The interpreter observes the respondent’s behavioral patterns in order to construct the dimensions to be described. For example, implicit motives organize pictures into stories (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989), and the interpreter describes these dimensions within the interpretation. As noted earlier in this chapter, a crucial aspect of the projective test stimulus situation is the lack of information regarding the adequacy of the response. As suggested by Campbell, projective tests are “typically open-ended, free, unstructured, and have the virtue of allowing the respondent to project his own organization on the material” (1957, p. 208). In other words, it is the respondent who accounts for a great majority of the variation in the test responses in terms of their self-expressive and organizational components (Viglione & Perry, 1991). The fact that the response is wholly formed and created by the respondent has been referred to by Beck (1960) as the gold of the Rorschach.

Compared to self-report tests, the fixed test stimuli in self-report tests and limited response options themselves account for a much greater part of the variation among test responses or behaviors. Test developers predetermine structured test behaviors and, as a result, limit the freedom of response. In other words, there is much less variation in true versus false than there is in TAT responses or earlier memories. Historically, this fixed item and response format was typical of the personality and attitude measurement devices that dominated during the mental testing period from 1920 to 1935, and against which projective testers rebelled. On the other hand, free responses are not essential for a test to be projective because multiple-choice or rating-scale response formats have been used (Campbell, 1957). Nevertheless, the dominant projective tests in clinical practice use a free-response format. Multiple-choice and rating-scale formats have been primarily used for research on test validity and the response process (e.g., Exner et al., 1978).

Within the free-response format the respondent creates or organizes a response and expresses him- or herself through the content of the response. The response content is neither
preselected nor prestructured by the test developer, but is an expression of the given individual in the context of the exam. In an article introducing a conceptual model for psychopathology and the Rorschach, Viglione and Perry (1991) couched this in terms of the limited environmental influence on Rorschach responses. This argument can be extended, in some degree, to all projective testing. As described in this article, projective test behaviors are largely influenced by the internal world rather than by the test environment and stimuli. The content, structure, and adequacy (and the evaluation of that adequacy) of the response come from the individual. The interpretive system accompanying the projective test is an aid in directly learning about the individual through analyzing the self-expressive and organizational aspects of these behavioral productions.

The free-response format maximizes the expression of individual variance. The population of possible answers is unbounded in free-response tasks, so that the response itself can capture much more individual variation than can an item in a self-report personality test. In this way projective tests maximize salience and relevance of the response to the individual, a characteristic that has been referred to as the *idiographic focus* of projective testing. Indeed, the complexity and variety of these responses have made it difficult to create comprehensive scoring systems. From a psychometric perspective, this complexity and variety may translate to less reliability and more interpreter bias but, nevertheless, more validity.

**Interpretive Implications**

What has been called *expressive style* is an example of the organizational component of a projective test response (Bellak, 1944). The free-response component of the projective test stimulus situation allows expressive style to emerge. It can be characterized by the following questions: “Does he talk very fast or stammer badly? Is he verbose or terse? Does he respond quickly or slowly . . . ” (Murstein, 1963, p. 3). Expressive style is also captured in nonverbal ways, which are important to understanding an individual’s functioning and interpersonal relationships. Does the respondent use space in drawing and sentence completion blanks neatly? Is the respondent overly concerned with wasting space and time, or sure to involve elaborated and elegant use of symbolic flair in his or her presentations? Indeed, the nonverbal mode of functioning and being in the world is accessed by the projective tests. In support of this importance of nonverbal functioning, neuropsychological research would suggest that aspects of interpersonal and emotional functioning are differentially related to visual-spatial, kinesthetic, and tactile modes in comparison to verbal modes. Future research might attempt to investigate the relative contributions of expressive style and nonverbal modes to validity and utility.

The multimodal characteristic of the projective test response greatly multiplies its informational value. For example, a behavioral observation of (a) tearfulness at a particular point in an early memory procedure, (b) a man’s self-critical humor during a TAT response that describes stereotypic male behavior, (c) fits and starts in telling a story with sexual content, (d) a seemingly sadistic chuckle with “a pelt, it’s road kill” Rorschach response, (e) rubbing a Rorschach plate to produce a response, or (f) a lack of positive, playful affect throughout an early memory testing are all critical empirical data subject to interpretation. Such test behaviors can lead to important hypotheses and allow one to synthesize various components of the test results by placing them in the context of the individual’s life. These insights are not readily available or subject to systematic observation through other means in an assessment session. These are examples of the fundamental purpose of projective tests: to gather an otherwise unavailable sample of behavior to illuminate referral issues and questions emerging during the exam.

In addition, projective tests allow a rare opportunity to observe idiographic issues interacting with the instrumental dimension of behavior. Levy (1963) defined the *instrumental dimension of behavior* as the adequacy or effectiveness of the response in reaching some goal. In cognitive ability testing this dimension could be simplified to whether a response is right or wrong. Like respondents on ability, cognitive, or neuropsychological tests, projective test respondents perform a task. To varying degrees, all projective test responses can be evaluated along a number of instrumental dimensions including accuracy, synthesis, meaningfulness, relevance, consistency, conciseness, and communicability. For example, the instrumental dimension relates to the quality, organization, and understandability of a TAT story or early memory as explained to the examiner. In ability tests, we concern ourselves mostly with the adequacy of the respondent’s outcome, answer, or product. In contrast, in projective tests we are concerned with not only the adequacy of the outcome, but also the process and behavior involved in producing the outcome. In our nomenclature, projective tests allow one to observe the interaction between the self-expressive and instrumental components of behavior—in other words, how adequate a response is in light of how one solves a problem. Extending this interaction, projective test behavior also allows the examiner to observe the impact of emotional and interpersonal pressures on the adequacy and approach to solving problems. This is a crucial contribution of projective tests to assessment, providing an interpretive link between findings from self-report tests and ability tests.
A Behavioral Approach to Validity

Behavioral Characteristics

Problem solving in projective testing entails a behavioral view of the response process. This behavioral approach is consistent with Anastasi and Urbina’s definition of psychological tests as “essentially objective and standardized measure of a sample of behavior” (1963, p. 23). Psychological tests are undertaken when we cannot directly access behaviors important to assessment goals (Levy, 1963; Meehl, 1945/1980). In performance tests we induce and observe a sample of behavior that is similar to the behaviors of interest in real life. In this respect, projective tests are performance tests.

Projective tests are attempts to bring aspects of relevant behavior, associations, perceptions, organizations, and effective and interpersonal components into the consulting room to be observed. Such a tactic is eloquently describe by Levy (1963):

We will be better able to predict this person’s behavior in a given situation if we can bring a different frame of reference into play. We feel that in order to do this we will have to draw a different sample of behavior from that available to us now. Specifically, we want a sample of behavior that is amenable to description in our frame of reference, one that was designed with our particular language system in mind. (pp. 6–7)

Thus, projective tests induce a behavioral sample that we can observe and explore so as to synthesize a more valid picture of the life predicament of the respondent. From this behavioral perspective, a test response or behavior is not a chance event, but a behavior sample collected under controlled conditions, subject to behavioral laws.

In the earlier section on free-response format, we established that variety is a hallmark of projective test responses. They are also distinguished by their richness. The overall complexity of the stimulus situation elicits rich responses. Complex stimulus situations produce complex real-life, in vivo behaviors, which generalize to complex nonetest behaviors in complete situations (Viglione, 1999). By design in projective tests, meaningful behavior is mediated by personality processes and invoked by the stimulus situation.

One might elucidate these ideas by contrasting projective and self-report testing. The test behavior involved in self-report personality tests differs greatly from projective test behavior in terms of richness and variety. Typically, self-report test behavior is merely an endorsement of true or false, or a rating of an opinion or sentiment along some dimension. The variety and richness of projective test responses allow the potential for generalizability to meaningful and salient real-life behavior. In contrast, for example, within self-report testing there is no inherent similarity between (a) the act of responding true to aggressive risk items and (b) real-life aggressive risk.

Generalizability and Interpretation

In interpreting projective tests we observe test behavior and then generalize it to similar behavior in other situations. When considering a projective test as a behavioral problem-solving task, the question of validity; according to Foster and Cone (1995), is one of topographic similarity and functional equivalency. Topographic similarity refers to the degree to which the test behavior resembles the nonetest behavior in concrete, physical, and descriptive terms. Functional equivalence refers to the degree to which the antecedents and consequences of a test behavior correspond to the antecedent and consequences of real-life behavior. Topographically, an aggressive attribution on a TAT response is similar to an aggressive attribution in real life.

To understand topographical similarity within projective tests, one must examine the behavior induced by projective test demands. Projective tests incorporate complex stimulus situations and induce rich and complex behaviors that vary greatly from person to person. Projective test behaviors, such as explaining what one sees and how one sees it (i.e., Rorschach; Viglione, 1999), creating a story to understand a suggestive interaction (TAT), recalling and explaining a personally salient memory (early memories), and interpreting or finishing a fragment of a sentence (sentence completion), are all topographically similar to important and familiar life tasks. They are all aspects of what one frequently does in real life—expressions of one’s “way of seeing and feeling and reacting to life, i.e. personality” (Frank, 1939/1962). For example, it would not take much empirical support to justify the generalization of thought-disordered communication on the Rorschach or TAT to thought-disordered behavior in other contexts. The test behavior and target or in vivo behaviors are topographically and experientially quite similar and thus behaviorally equivalent. It is not surprising, then, that there is a great amount of empirical support for thought-disorder indices on the Rorschach (Acklin, 1999; Holzman et al., 1974; Kleiger, 1999; Perry & Braff, 1994; Perry, Geyer, & Braff, 1999; Perry, Viglione, & Braff, 1992; Viglione, 1999; Weiner, 1966).

Projective tests collect standardized samples of real-life behavior—the problem-solving of the personality operations in real life. This view of personality would incorporate thought organization and disorder as the problem-solving of the personality manifest in behavior. Moreover, the behavioral
In considering topographical similarity and generalizability, one must also consider the examination context and the stimulus situation. In this context, projective test activities, such as a child’s ripping apart stimulus materials or an felon’s expressing obvious pleasure in describing malevolent acts, are exceptional behaviors. Such behaviors that (a) oppose the social demands of the projective test interpersonal context and (b) possess obvious clinical implications may be understood as corresponding to salient nontest behaviors of interest. They are very low-probability events that are much more likely to spring from the individual rather than from situational factors. Thus, they are generalizable events, even if infrequent.

**Experiential Interpretation**

In projective testing we extend the behavioral notion of topographic similarity to incorporate *experiential* elements. These include subjective and covert problem-solving elements such as self-expressive and internal phenomena associated with the response process. Schachtel (1966) with the Rorschach, and Riethmiller and Handler (1997) with the figure drawing, demonstrated the value of this approach. For the Rorschach, it would mean asking what processes are involved in avoiding the complexity and contradictions of a blot so as to give simplistic, uninvolved answers. For the figure drawing, the *experience-near approach* would take into consideration not only the product (i.e., the drawing), but also the process of creating it. Experiential interpretation of a figure drawing might also require such questions as, “What experiences or covert processes might accompany drawing this frightening person? What would it be like to meet or have a conversation with this frightening person?” Answers to these questions are more likely to have nontest referents than are the nonexperiential, detail-oriented questions that have dominated some approaches to drawings (e.g., “How long are the arms? Are the hands represented? Did the respondent mention the head? Was shading involved?”). Answers to experience-near questions are the real behavioral patterns to be generalized from projective tests to real-life behavior. Given this stimulus situation, identifying experience-near components involves being in an interpersonal relationship with the respondent and empathizing with the respondent’s process and experience (Riethmiller & Handler). As research has demonstrated, this interpersonal component is a strength of projective tests given that it is an essential ingredient of the stimulus situation (Stricker & Healy, 1990).

Examining the three-dimensional *vista response* on the Rorschach might elucidate the experiential and contextual components of interpretation. These three-dimensional, shading responses might mean very different things in different contexts. From an experiential problem-solving perspective, the vista response involves a more precise way of dealing with the blots in which one experiences the self as stepping back and evaluating. Within the context of an inpatient’s depression, such an activity might generalize to negative evaluation of the self, others, and the future that compromises adaptation. In the case of a passive but largely successful executive in a nonclinical examination, the vista response may be related to an analytic, evaluative ability to step back and gain perspective, and an ability to evaluate the self. Under stress, this capacity may be associated with self-criticism that, although painful, may lead to adjustments and improved functioning. In the context of an assessment of an incarcerated murderer, the vista responses may generalize to situationally induced self-criticism, possible guilt, or alternatively, an analytic approach to crime. Accordingly, test behaviors that are identical along overt, topographical parameters may correspond to different covert experience and in vivo behaviors. These distinctions, in turn, are based on the context of the exam and base-rate factors. Research on psychological assessment and on clinical judgment and decision theory has not addressed these ecologically valid interpretive inferences.

**Functional Equivalence and Generalization**

This interaction among interpretation, examination contexts, and topographical and experiential phenomena relates to functional equivalence and generalization. As noted earlier, *functional equivalence* refers to the degree to which the antecedents and consequences of a test behavior correspond to the antecedents and consequences of real-life behavior. The antecedents and consequences of test behaviors are encompassed by the projective stimulus situation. Projective stimulus situations or test environments vary to some extent from test to test and occasion to occasion. However, from the broadest and most inclusive point of view, projective tests involve new and unfamiliar situations in which one organizes incomplete, contradictory, and ambiguous material without any direct feedback from observers or authorities. They also involve little implicit feedback from the task about adequacy of performance within an interaction with another individual. Applying the principle of functional equivalence, we are
safer when we generalize projective test behaviors to situations with similar characteristics. Thus, to some degree, interpretations may be context dependent rather than pervasive. Test interpretation may apply to situations with more individual control and less environmental control. More colloquially, these are situations in which the respondent has to make his or her own way and fend for him- or herself.

Functional equivalence helps us to interpret the contradictory information so often produced during assessment. Let us say that we observe evidence of depression and distortion of incoming information in a seemingly content, psychologically healthy individual. With such an individual, these data are likely to be related to circumscribed rather than pervasive problems. Functional equivalence and the projective test stimulus situation guide the interpretation and generalization of these test behaviors. With a healthy individual, one could safely attribute the depression and distortion to his or her occasional vulnerability to self-doubt, mistakes in judgment, or distress in new and unfamiliar situations. Alternatively, such negative information might be used to describe worst-case scenarios or self-defeating patterns or potentials. In the context of an exam with a psychiatric inpatient, these same data would suggest much more pervasive difficulties. Thus, the stimulus situation and functional equivalency guide the generalization of projective test behaviors along a situation-specific (vs. pervasive) dimension. As interpretation becomes more specific, it should be confined to situations that more closely resemble the projective test stimulus situation.

Conclusion

In any event, the current approach to projective testing needs to adopt this experience-near perspective to identify problem-solving correlates of test behaviors. In addition, interpreters and researchers must recognize that these test behaviors have different implications in different situations. Technically, this approach can use differential base rates, conditional probabilities, statistical interactions, or moderator variables to investigate this phenomenon. Thus, the problem-solving approach to projective testing challenges the notion that test behaviors are always generalizable to personality at large. This may be true much of the time, but the nature of behavior and contextual factors influence the pervasiveness and situational specificity of generalizations. Current, dominant interpretations (e.g., those with the Rorschach Comprehensive System) often are based on research and formulations with clinically compromised individuals. Accordingly, many of these interpretations overemphasize the more pathological or problematic correlates of the test behavior. This fact probably contributes to the error of overly negative interpretations of projective tests related to the neglect of base rates (Finn & Kamphuis, 1995; Murstein & Mathes, 1996; Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press).

INTERPRETIVE AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

This chapter highlights important characteristics of the projective stimulus situation and the integration of organizational and self-expressive components in the response process. In turn, these factors induce characteristic patterns and methods of interpretation. Projective test responses emphasize synthetic and individualistic approaches to interpretation (Rabin, 1981). In practice, those psychologists who are more inclined to emphasize the complexities of the individual are probably more inclined to use projective tests. The section on free-response format outlined the individual or idiographic component of projective test responses. This characteristic of the projective test data induces a similar focus on individual or idiographic approaches to interpretation.

Synthetic, Configurational Interpretation

As established in discussing the projective test stimulus situation and the response process, projective testing accesses multiple dimensions and allows one to elaborate on hypotheses derived earlier in the interpretive process. These factors induce the interpreter to adopt a synthetic or configurational approach in formulating interpretations (Stricker & Gold, 1999). Projective test data present connections and associations among various characteristics from different domains. In the TAT, for example, we can associate a cognitive slip or a problem-solving failure with the sexual or intimate themes stimulated by a particular card when such themes are mentioned in (but not meaningfully integrated into) a jumbled and unrealistic story. In terms used earlier in this chapter, projective test results bridge self-expressive, organizational, and response-set domains. One score or response parameter is analyzed in its relationship to another or in relationship to moderator variables and collateral, non-test variables. Temporal, spatial, and language factors—that is, when and how behaviors occur—allow interpreters to identify how various content and organizational aspects of an individual work together, how they interrelate, and how they may interact with different environmental conditions. Advocates of projective testing are not interested in isolated bits of behavior but study how it comes together in a whole person within a life predicament (Stricker & Gold; Viglione, 1999; Viglione & Perry, 1991; Weiner, 1999; Weiner, in press.) Projective test data
assist us in putting the person in his or her life context and help us to understand the relationship between internal issues and the individual’s biography and background. Murstein (1963) called this “configurational dominance” (p. 4). This synthetic or configurational approach can be attributed to Gestalt psychology, field theory, and psychodynamic influences on projective testing (Frank, 1939/1962).

Among the connections made possible by projective tests are those between personality factors and cognitive functions. Looking at projective tasks as problems to be solved allows the integration of nonintellectual with intellectual issues. From a configurational point of view, the relationships of abilities to affects, interests, motivations, and discriminative stimuli are addressed. A related advantage of projective tests is that they allow the examiner to make inferences about motivation. Other performance tests (i.e., ability tests) assume and attempt to induce optimal motivation. In real life, however, motivational variation is crucial to understanding personality and behavior.

We can conclude then that part of the utility of projective assessment—or in more concrete terms, its added value relative to self-report tests—is that it provides meaningful connections among different characteristics to enable an understanding of the whole person. Because the individual respondent produces the constructs and their interrelationships with the responses to the projective test in the free-response format, we know that the configurational information is relevant and possibly unique to the individual being assessed.

In synthesizing the picture of the individual from a projective-testing perspective, one constructs or builds an integrated picture of the person within a situation. Extrapolating from Kaufman’s work on *Intelligent Testing with the WISC-R* (1979), each construction, each person’s theory, is different in terms of concepts and relationships among concepts. Reflecting this uniqueness of each individual, projective testing can produce a different theory for each respondent. Along these lines, an important phenomenon is that projective testing often reveals remarkable aspects or concerns that become important hallmarks or organizing features in understanding an individual. Accordingly, assessment-report writers often excerpt quotes from sentence-completion responses or responses from other tests to communicate vividly the respondent’s experience in the respondent’s own words (Holaday, Smith, & Sherry, 2000). Invariably, this synthetic and constructive approach leads to discovering contradictions among test data. Resolving these contradictions often provides added insight into the individual. Recognition of contradictions (e.g., depressed but overly impressed with the self) is based on nomothetic notions. In other words, we see depression and self-importance as being contradictory when we conceive of them as abstract concepts. Within a single individual, these characteristics need not be contradictory. We find that real people appear to possess both overly negative and overly positive views of the self. Positive views may ward off negative views. Positive views may arise in one situation but not another; among children, for example, positive views may arise in academic situations but not at home. It follows then that the inevitable contradictions among projective test data indicate, if not necessitate, a dynamic view of individuals. This dynamic view entails opposing forces operating in the behavior, affect, motivation, and cognition in a way that reflects the opposing excitatory and inhibitory organization of the nervous system.

**Psychological Testing, Not Psychological Tests**

As suggested by the early leaders in assessment (Frank, 1939/1962; Meehl, 1945/1980), the difference between projective and so-called objective tests is not so much in the tests themselves but in the interpretive approach. This difference in approach is induced by the data—by their complexity and richness and their relevance to the individual. Projective tests induce an individualistic, synthetic, and configurational, and constructive approach to interpretation that incorporates a view of the individual as embodying contradictions that might be explained dynamically. This approach also involves affects and interpersonal issues. In turn, those holding such a view of interpretation are probably more inclined to use projective tests. The interpreter is involved directly in the assessment administration process, because the individualistic and configurational issues are best known and explored by an active interpreter in a relationship with the respondent. In summary, one’s preference for projective tests may largely reflect a philosophical approach to human nature so that it may be more appropriate to talk about projective testing rather than projective tests.

**Self-Disclosure and Response Sets**

“It would be very unsafe, unwise, and incorrect to assume that a patient either can or wants to present all aspects of his or her personality fully to the examiner” (W. G. Klopfer, 1981, p. 259). Indeed, this is a central problem that clinicians have struggled with in the practice of assessment over the years. Surveys on assessment practice have not explored the extent to which this unsafe assumption is made implicit in the interpretation of self-report personality tests. In the early part of the twentieth century, projective testing grew out of the practical need to access what the individual may be unwilling or unable to communicate directly (Frank, 1939/1962; Murray, 1938;
**Interpretive and Conceptual Issues**  

Murstein, 1961). This is the fundamental challenge or paradox in assessment: What is most important to know is often what the person is least willing or able to divulge. To uncover what the respondent may be unwilling or unable to divulge, projective tests go about the task of accessing behavior and problem solving indirectly. Task instructions (e.g., “Tell a story,” “Explain what this might be,” “Complete the sentence”) distract the respondent from the interpretive goals of the examination. Projective tests are attempts to access the private world of the individual, to get to it more efficiently than through other means (Frank, 1939/1962; Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press; Viglione & Perry, 1991).

The reactions to pressures to self-disclose in an indirect stimulus situation are not captured neatly within individual scales on any test. Operating in every individual, idiosyncratically, is a conflict between pressures for self-disclosure versus those for self-protection. This conflict involves (a) a willingness and an ability to be self-revealing versus (b) rational and irrational concerns about negative consequence to self-disclosure, accompanied by (c) a motivation to create a favorable impression. Examination of the nuances of self-revealing behaviors and attitudes to testing in the context of the relationship with the examiner allows us to examine this struggle over self-disclosure.

The examiner’s strict adherence to his or her own training and to test administration principles, along with careful observation of the respondent and of the respondent’s own self-observations, are necessary to manage and observe the respondent’s struggle over self-disclosure. For example, in constructing the Rorschach Comprehensive System and in its most recent modification, Exner has gone to great lengths to minimize and to systematize examiner and contextual influences (Exner, 1974, 1993; Exner et al., 2001). Moreover, being sensitive to and evaluating these influences can help one assess their impact on the test findings and inferences (Schafer, 1954). However, the influence of conflicts about self-disclosure and response sets cannot be eliminated. Projective tests offer an opportunity to observe, identify, and characterize these conflicts as a part of the ongoing interaction between the personality and the stimulus situation.

**Interpretive Implications of the Pressure to Self-Disclose**

The pressure to self-disclose within the projective test stimulus situation leads to a number of interpretive issues. Accordingly, studying and characterizing the response style of the individual is a crucial interpretive goal in all assessment. Response set is an important and complex moderator variable that should be scrutinized in each assessment through observation and analysis of all test data and collateral information. Test findings should be interpreted differently as a function or response set so that the response set acts as a moderator variable for interpretive purposes and validity (Meyer, 1999).

More explicitly, within the interpretive process, results from projective testing can be characterized along the dimension of self-protection versus self-disclosure. Stereotypic, brief test protocols, or poorly or quickly executed productions with insufficient effort (e.g., in drawings) can be seen as attempts to suppress or resist pressure from the examiner to reveal the self. Thus, some test findings may have more to do with how the respondent protects him- or herself or suppresses, defends against, or avoids self-disclosure. Looking at these efforts as a moderator variable, such self-protective test protocols may lead to an underestimate of personality tendencies and weaknesses and to false-negative findings. From a behavioral perspective, this response set can be seen as an attempt to suppress or defend against self-disclosure. In such cases, the test findings do not survey the full array of personality processes and features, so that they may not reveal the personality as a whole. Moreover, these self-protective or suppressive response sets can result in inconsistencies among projective test data, self-report findings, and collateral information (Meyer, 1999).

On the other hand, longer, complex test responses may represent an effort to self-disclose or to express or engage fully in the examination. Such records survey the personality more fully. Alternatively, some overly long and involved test records may represent an effort to present the self in a positive light by demonstrating to the examiner one’s talents and problem-solving skills (Viglione, 1996). Nevertheless, too much productivity on any projective test may be associated with overestimation of pathology and false-positive results (Meyer, 1993; Murstein & Mathes, 1996).

It has been well established that response sets vary along this self-protection/self-disclosure or suppressive-expressive continuum, and that this continuum acts as an important moderator variable in assessment interpretation. Self-report instruments such as the MMPI and the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) contain response-set measures such as validity scales and moderator variables. These scales are most useful in measuring the quantitative dimensions of response set. Projective test data are instrumental in individualizing and identifying nuances and complexities in that response set. For example, sentence-completion methods illuminate individual styles, worries, motives, and interests in presenting one’s self in an overly positive or negative manner. In that sense, projective testing adds content to what we might learn from the validity scales of an MMPI.

Response sets have implications beyond the interpretation of a given test protocol. Attitudes toward self-disclosure/
self-protection are fundamental issues in any change process, be it within a clinical, forensic, or organizational setting. Accordingly, the respondent’s engagement in testing has implications for motivation to self-disclose in response to interventions in the real world. Similar issues emerge in assessment of the risk of dangerousness. In these contexts, respondents’ attitudes toward assessment may also resemble attitudes toward cooperation with management of their risk. Accordingly, these attitudes as a component of the response set are critical assessment targets, and need to be observed closely in assessments. Response set is important, not only as a mediator and discriminative stimulus for test validity, but as a target of assessment in and of itself.

Extreme response sets sometimes emerge as malingering and feigned presentations. For respondents to projective tests, adopting such a response set is quite challenging because of the complexity of the stimulus situation, the active role of the examiner, and the freedom allowed within the test responses. In general, malingering or faking successfully may be more difficult to achieve in projective testing than in self-report testing. A study by Shedler, Mayman, and Manis (1993) reveals that in self-report a substantial portion of respondents may incorporate this false-positive bias in their response styles so as to obscure these tests’ sensitivity to problems. These data suggest that projective tests may more accurately describe these individuals’ functioning. As for individual tests, research suggests that in some respects Rorschach is more resistant than self-report to response manipulation (Bornstein, Rossner, Hill, & Stepanian 1994; Viglione, 1999).

Nevertheless, the broad claim that the respondent has no control over the content of projective tests is a myth that does not withstand logical and empirical scrutiny. Accumulated research on faking and experimentally induced response sets suggests that a respondent can control content to some extent on many projective tests, including the Rorschach. For example, aggression and sexual content themes, but not dependent and many other themes, are routinely subject to considerable control (Exner, 1993; Viglione, 1999). On the TAT many themes are relatively easily controlled (Holmes, 1974; Murstein, 1961).

**Test or Method?**

Another long-standing controversy concerns whether projective instruments are actually tests or merely methods or techniques. A *psychological test* can be defined as a standardized administration with an interpretive system that is quantified and subjected to scientific validation. In contrast, a *method* is defined as a systematic way of collecting behavioral observations. Both a test and a method may produce valid interpretations. Within a method, the techniques and strategies of interpretation, rather than quantities produced by scales, would be subject to scientific verification. An example of the use of a projective instrument as a method would be the recognition that completing the sentence stem “I was bothered by” with the written phrase “the way you looked at me when I was putting the blocks together” may have special interpretive significance for the interpretation of Block Design and interpersonal performances. Asking a respondent what he or she had in mind when endorsing “I have two personalities inside of me” would be an example of using a self-report test as a method. Thus, both self-report and projective instruments could be used as methods. In fact, one might argue that using either of them as a method enhances interpretation.

**The Method Argument**

These issues have been addressed in the literature. For example, Weiner (1994) published an article on the Rorschach that restimulated considerable controversy about its status as a test versus a method. He suggested that the Rorschach was foremost a method because the instrument is a means of collecting information about how people structure their experiences, express themselves, and interact affectively and interpersonally. It could not be reduced to a single quantification of any specific dimension (i.e., to a test). Similarly, B. Klopfer, Ainsworth, Klopfer, and Holt (1954) advocated for calling the test a *technique*, so that individualistic processing could be emphasized. From a more extreme, but current, viewpoint, Aronow, Reznikoff, and Moreland (1994) focus on response content and regard the Rorschach as a *structured interview*. Most practitioners do not score the TAT, and Little and Schneidman (1955) described it as a “sample of verbal behavior.” Earlier, Tomkins (1947) had declared that the TAT was a systematic methodology for personality study—not a test itself. Finally, early memory, sentence, and drawing tasks are routinely used as methods without scoring to collect behavioral observations and personal productions.

Advocates and critics use the term “method” for different reasons. Some advocates of projective testing support the term *method* for these projective procedures. Beyond precision of language, they are concerned that essential qualitative and descriptive information will be excluded from consideration if this information is not captured in formal scoring. Critics of projective testing endorse the term *method*, claiming that the nonquantified components are not worthy of consideration. This extremist view excludes from consideration response nuances and connotations, test behaviors, and emotional expressions, as well as the interaction between examiner and the respondent. These characteristics constitute important empirical and objective observations. They are the essence of behavioral assessment and are not captured within
the reductionistic view that only test quantities be considered. In cases in which they are relevant (i.e., related to other hypotheses firmly grounded in test-based inferences), these behavioral and empirical data derived from using projective instruments as methods must be included in the interpretive process.

Methods, Clinical Utility, and the N-of-1 Problem in Assessment

How does one fit a group or statistical concept, such as depression or aggressive risk, to an individual and describe its idiosyncratic experience and function within that individual? From a statistical viewpoint, if it is highly likely that a person is depressed based on a score, how do we confirm the presence of depression in the particular individual we are evaluating? These questions reflect the N-of-1 problem in assessment—that is, the challenge of applying abstract, group-derived constructs and measurements to a single individual. Within individuals, constructs such as aggression or depression exist only in idiosyncratic forms. Accordingly, within a projective test protocol, idiosyncratic evidence of depression may serve to confirm and individualize a person’s expression of depression. In this way, using projective instruments as a method helps address the N-of-1 problem in assessment by contextualizing and individualizing abstract concepts and group data.

This N-of-1 problem is often framed in terms of the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic science and knowledge (Murstein, 1963). Nomothetic science addresses laws and abstractions applicable across circumstances and individuals. Within psychology, it would be associated with group psychological principles, constructs, and data across individuals and situations. These abstractions may not actually exist in any individual case but are hypothetical constructs created for the purpose of explaining and summarizing relationships among groups of individuals. In contrast, idiographic science is concerned with understanding a particular event, such what led to a particular historical event or decision—in other words, how and why something happened. The aim of assessment, to characterize a unique individual within a life context, is an idiographic goal. Certainly, nomothetic science, methods, and comparisons are critical and necessary to address this goal, but not sufficient to achieve it fully. Idiographic and configurational information from a method perspective is necessary to address the uniqueness of each case. Thus, projective test data and observations are helpful in translating group, nomothetic, or actuarial data to the individual N-of-1 case.

In terms of clinical utility, using an instrument as a method offers considerable advantages over using instruments strictly as tests. Observations and inquiries can be adapted to address any purpose. One cannot imagine all of the questions that will come up in an assessment. Thus, one method might replace many tests, offering considerable efficiency and cost savings. The superior status of tests in terms of the validity of a specific interpretation relies on stringent research validation of the test for that particular purpose. On the other hand, it is impossible to develop, research, and master a test for every purpose. Accordingly, projective methods, interviews, and observations are always necessary for a comprehensive assessment, lest we give up all idiographic assessment goals.

At the broadest level, research supporting the validity of a method addresses whether a projective procedure can produce valid and useful information when projective instruments are used in the standard ways. The research clearly supports the conclusion that the major projective instruments (inkblot perception and representation, storytelling, sentence completion, early recollection, and figure drawing) can yield valid and useful information. On the other hand, the limits of these methods and the limits of data they produce are not fully appreciated by some projective-test advocates. Further research needs to identify the types of inferences and generalizations that can be made about particular personality processes and from which types of data.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Tests and Methods

Projective instruments, like all psychological tests, can function both as methods and as tests. In both roles, they should be administered in a standardized fashion. When they are used as tests, one relies on quantification, measurement against comparison-group data, and preestablished criterion validity. These factors lead to a strong scientific foundation for the interpretation of tests. Because of the less sturdy support for inferences based only on using the instruments as methods, inferences derived from methods need additional support from other sources. Within a given assessment, this support can be accomplished in terms of addressing hypotheses that have derived initial support form data encountered earlier in the assessment process. For example, in established cases of depression, the TAT may yield important information about the idiographic experience of that depression and its interpersonal correlates. Early memories may provide subjective and experiential patterning associated with this depression. If we establish from a self-report test that the respondent is describing him- or herself in an overly positive and defensive fashion, an examination of sentence-completion results and observations about the examiner-respondent interaction may lead to important information about the character and motivation associated with that defensiveness. If new hypotheses emerge from method data, they must be supported by other data from other observations and findings, in a way that we would not require
for an interpretation from an instrument used as a test. Thus, when these procedures are used as methods and not tests, they should generally be used as ancillary, or elaborative, procedures.

Rorschach Comprehensive System interpretation is a good example of using an instrument as both a test and a method. One first interprets structural quantitative data, then modifies these foundational interpretations with the Rorschach used as a method (i.e., through response verbalizations and behavioral observations). In this way, method findings are used to refine, elaborate, and qualify previously formulated general hypotheses.

Contribution to Assessment Relative to Self-Report Tests

One way to address the question of what projective testing contributes to assessment is to identify situations in which self-report tests do not yield clear and definitive findings. This approach is consistent with the current concerns about incremental validity. Many have noted that projective tests contribute most in contexts in which the person may be unwilling or unable to provide the sought-after information through more direct means (Bagby, Nicholson, Buis, & Radovanovic, 1999; Bathurst, Gottfried, & Gottfried, 1997; Bornstein, 1999; Viglione, 1999). Some might contend that, to some degree, no respondent is able to fully reveal critical information about the self in an efficient manner.

The traditional view, as first elaborated by Frank (1939/1962), is that projective testing goes beyond socially conventional meanings and roles. From this perspective, self-report items, typically a sentence or phrase, presume a conventional, widely shared understanding of their meaning. In these conventional contexts, individual behavior is best explained by situational phenomena as interpreted with shared cultural norms. Frank contrasted these conventional contexts to situations in which behavior is explained by the individual’s unique ways of (a) ascribing meaning to the world and (b) organizing the world. In fact, one’s unique ways of ascribing meaning to and organizing the world is the fundamental component of personality, according to Frank. Moreover, they correspond to the self-expressive and organizational components of projective tests addressed earlier in this chapter. Projective tests are designed to access these individualistic functions and thus reveal personality activity directly.

This linking of self-report tests to conventional contexts and projective tests to individualistic ones has led some to speculate about the relative contributions of these tests. For example, Hutt (1945) speculated that self-report tests may be valid only when the respondent is willing and able to self-rate on a known dimension. Meehl (1945/1980) disagreed by objecting that although respondents may understand self-report test items differently, such differences are not relevant to validity. He claimed that the validity of a self-report test is not a function of a conventionally, socially prescribed understanding of the test items. Rather, it is a function of empirical relationships with external criteria. This empirical keying approach assumes that the content of the item really does not matter, only its empirical relationship with meaningful criteria.

Despite Meehl’s (1945/1980) assertions, evidence suggests that what the item means to the respondent does make a difference in the validity of a self-report personality test. On the MMPI, it is well established that obvious items are more valid than subtle items (Graham, 2000; Greene, 2000; Gynther & Burkhart, 1983). In other words, when an item’s content is semantically related to the scale on which it resides or the construct it measures, it works better. Also, the largely rationally derived content scales on the MMPI-2 rival the empirically keyed clinical scales in terms of validity (Graham; Greene), again suggesting that item content matters. The current test-development practice is to pick the item pool for content validity (i.e., what the item means to the respondent; American Educational Research Association et al., 1999; Anastasi & Urbina 1996; Morey, 1996). Again, the validity of these scales is partly based on an unequivocal meaning of the item to the respondent. As Frank (1939/1962) asserted theoretically and McClelland et al. (1989) and Bornstein et al. (1994) demonstrated with data, self-report personality tests reveal information about relevant but conventional, culturally prescribed dimensions.

The interpretive implication of all of these data is that self-report personality tests tell us the most about social role–related behavior, how one behaves in the role of a father or in the role of a rebellious adolescent in our society. These tests work best when the examinee translates individual items in conventional ways and when the examinee’s response set reflects the host culture’s norms. Psychometrically, this occurs when validity scales (e.g., L, F, and K with the MMPI) are near average values. Atypical, unconventional response sets, in terms of excessive defensiveness or exaggeration, reflect unconventional approaches to the tests; and atypical translation of test items, in turn, limits the validity of self-report personality tests (Meyer, 1999). Conversely, projective tests have the most to offer in understanding and predicting behavior outside prescribed social roles and demands across situation and time, as well as for issues that are idiographic, idiosyncratic, or implicit (see Bornstein, 1999; Shedler et al., 1993; Viglione, 1999). These would include environmental contexts or patterns of behavior that are structured by individual personality rather than by social roles and conventions.
PROJECTIVE TEST CONTROVERSY FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter attempts to clarify many misunderstandings about projective testing. These misunderstandings can also be seen in a historical perspective. Undeniably, historical developments have influenced our understanding of focal psychological constructs, even when we believe that these constructs are grounded in empirical science. For example, as a result of the Wechsler and Stanford-Binet scales, our implicit and conventional understanding of intelligence emphasizes the quantitative perspective at the expense of the conceptual and developmental aspects as articulated within the Piagetian approach. Self-report personality assessment has led us to simplify adult personality into an aggregate of traits demonstrated by subgroups of individuals. Response set or response manipulation has been reduced to quantitative notions about exaggeration and defensiveness (e.g., as defined through the L, F, and K scales on the MMPI). Thus, history and our experience have shaped our views, constructs, and what we consider to be science.

Emerging Clinical Needs versus Scientific Aspirations

Our current views of assessment and the relative values of projective and self-report tests of personality are shaped not only by metaphors and models, but by historical traditions as well. Misunderstandings about projective testing have shaped the ongoing and lengthy controversy about projective tests. It is surprising to learn that the current controversy about the utility of projective tests surrounding the use of these tests has existed since their introduction (Hirt, 1962; Murstein, 1965; Rabin, 1981). The popular academic-scientific position dating back to the 1920s is that projective tests are flawed. Periodically, this view has been a rallying cry of academic psychologists. In the 1920s and 1930s, American academic psychology focused on distinguishing psychology by making it a science with mathematical foundations much like those of physics. It is not surprising that it produced few concepts, facts, and methods applicable to clinical work. At that time, applied work in clinical psychology was largely diagnostic and descriptive in support of psychiatrists’ work with individuals with mental disorders. These clinical and practical demands opposed the academic interests in developing the discipline and science of psychology.

The need for personnel selection in the military and evaluation and treatment of consequences of the two world wars further stimulated the practical needs of applied psychologists. More generally, clinicians thought that the individual was lost in the techniques of the so-called mental testers. They wished to recognize the interaction between individual characteristics and “the total life situation which could lead to an adequate description of the person as a functioning human being” (Murstein, 1963, p. 4).

As it has been in the past, projective testing continues to be a rallying symbol for those wishing to move beyond the response manipulation in self-report tests so as to understand the individual. Thus, clinical and applied interest and questions that outstrip scientific and academic developments in the field have marked the whole history of assessment. As society changes, this pressure to address advanced and complex questions in everyday practice will certainly persist. Nonclinical psychologists who criticize projective tests may not fully understand the demand society justifiably places on our clinicians and the interpretive usefulness and validity of the behaviors collected and observed by using projective tests.

The Polarized and Moralistic Debate Continues

The controversy about the value of projective persists to this day. The result is that too much of the attention given to projective tests in the literature are polemical and editorial rather than scientific (APA, 1999; Dumont & Smith, 1996; Garb, 1998, 1999; Garb, Florio, & Grove, 1998, 1999; Garb, Wood, Nezworski, Grove, & Stejskal, 2001; Grove & Barden, 1999; Joiner & Schmidt, 1997; Wood & Lilienfeld, 1999; Wood, Lilienfeld, Garb, & Nezworski, 2000; Wood, Nezworski, & Stejskal, 1996, 1997). The end result is that projective and self-report tests are pitted against one another as adversaries. The most recent manifestation of this rivalry is the current application of incremental validity with the unqualified and simplistic assumption that projective tests should increment above self-report tests in regression equations (Hunsley & Bailey, 1999). This position grossly oversimplifies the clinical endeavor (Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press) while ignoring research demonstrating incremental validity for projective tests (e.g., for the Rorschach; Archer & Gordon, 1988; Archer & Krishnamurthy, 1997; Blais, Hilsenroth, Castlebury, Fowler, & Baiti, 2001; Bornstein, Bowers, & Robinson, 1997; Cooper, Perry, & O’Connell, 1991; Holzman et al., 1974; Meyer, 2000a; O’Connell, Cooper, Perry, & Hoke, 1989; Perry & Braff, 1994; Perry & Viglione, 1991; Russ, 1980, 1981; Shapiro, Leifer, Martone, & Kassem, 1990; Skelton, Boik, & Madero, 1995; Viglione, 1999; Weiner, in press).

The very name projective is subject to these politics and polemics. The persistence of the nomenclature of objective for self-report tests, in juxtaposition with projective, further distorts the data and viewpoints of psychologists. This dichotomy implies that the virtues of objectivity and psychometric
discipline are reserved for the self-report tests. Moreover, projective is associated with subjective and the cardinal sin of bias when it is juxtaposed against objective. Research demonstrations of the incremental validity of projective tests support the view that extra validity is accessed through involving the examiner in the interpretive processes with projective tests. This added validity is obtained even if there is more examiner variability or examiner unreliability with these procedures.

The most vexing problem in this debate is that the views are drenched in ethical and moralistic language, so that the polarized positions are experienced as moral imperatives. This moralism from the academic side has to do with claims of the righteousness of science and empirical foundations. On the other hand, there is some validity to the claim that clinicians using projective tests have historically shown a tendency to overpathologize (Murstein & Mathes, 1996; Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press).

The advocates of projective testing are not immune to similar criticisms. Murstein (1963) correctly pointed out that the seminal articles (e.g., Frank, 1939/1962; Rosenzweig, 1951) have a moralistic tone, with the hero being the idiographic clinician using projective testing to describe and understand the individual in all his or her complexity. The idea that clinical interpretation is an art was described by Levy (1963) as “a romanticism with which some are afflicted that seems to render its victims either insensitive or antagonistic to any attempt at rational analysis... [T]hey (proponents of projective testing) rely on ‘moralism.’ To criticize the ‘mental testers,’ they use epithets such as ‘atomistic,’ ‘mechanistic,’ and ‘superficial’” (p. 3).

A. Kaplan (1964) has given a slightly different slant to these polemics in his description of seductive and reductive fallacies. Projective test advocates seduce themselves and others into believing there is always something else, subtle or otherwise, that can be gleaned from the data and applied to useful purposes. Kaplan refers to this belief as the seductive fallacy. On the other hand, projective tests critics embrace a reductive fallacy, which incorporates the view that science requires that test data incorporate a very limited number of key elements. Furthermore, this belief requires that automated techniques must be involved because clinicians cannot reliably identify these key elements.

As an example of this bias against projective tests, Masling (1997) questioned whether the data supporting the Rorschach would change the minds of the critics, given the persistent history of bias against projective tests. He attributes some of this rigidity, politicization, and bias to the fact that former students, emboldened by their teachers, have become critics of projective tests. Unfortunately, some students of psychology are socialized to believe in simplistic models, such as the blank screen, or in the supposedly unscientific foundation of projective techniques in order to continue the conflict (Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press). Weiner (1996) also observed that the critics had ignored 20 years of empirical support for the test. One can only conclude that these speculations were correct, as the recent debate about the Rorschach has demonstrated. Data and experience suggest that these critics continue to ignore the research supporting projective testing in general and the Rorschach in particular (e.g., Meyer, 1997a, 1997b, 2000a, 2000b; Meyer & Archer, in press; Riethmiller & Handler, 1997; Shedler et al., 1993; Stricker & Healy, 1990; Viglione, 1999; Viglione & Hilsenroth; Weiner, in press).

**Recognition of Differences and a Resolution?**

The rivalry and controversy about projective and objective personality tests may merely be a manifestation of the conflicts and misunderstandings between clinical and academic psychologists or between practice and science in psychology. A great deal of psychology’s time, energy, and intellectual effort have been wasted within this war. Sadly, American psychology has not been able to resolve this dilemma, most likely because it is a basic philosophical and moral disagreement rather than a scientific one. American psychology perseveres under the goal of integration of science and practice, yet those who embrace this vision often hold very different perceptions of this integration. This science-versus-practice debate continues with little understanding or appreciation of the other’s point of view, and with little hope for reconciliation and advancement of assessment psychology.

Our goal should be to diffuse this conflict and integrate the strengths of projective and self-report approaches to assessment. As Levy (1963) points out when he calls for systematic empirical and rational evaluations of clinical interpretation, “to this writer’s way of thinking, rationality and human dignity are not antithetical to each other; nor are science and art for that matter” (p. 3). Each type of test has strengths and weaknesses. We are lucky that cognitive, projective, and self-report tests complement each other so well.

Meehl (1945/1980), an advocate of self-report personality testing and scientific psychology, asserted that “there is assuredly no reason for us to place self-report and unstructured types of instruments in battle order against one another, although it is admitted that when time is limited they come inevitably into a very real clinical ‘competition’ for use” (p. 302). He maintained that all personality tests can be seen on a continuum and can be interpreted with the same principles. As described earlier in this chapter, he placed the difference
between projective and self-report within the interpreters and their own philosophies rather than within the instruments.

Historically, advocates of projective and self-report personality testing have presented the arguments of the opposing side as being seriously flawed. This destructive rivalry could be replaced with reconciliation and is opposed by the argument that all tests incorporate so-called projective and objective features, as well as empirical characteristics. The basic premises, goals, and activities are different but potentially complementary (Masling, 1997; Meehl, 1945/1980). As Masling concludes his paper on projective testing,

Psychology is fortunate to have available two such different means of assessing human behavior, each placing different emphasis on the importance of motive, rational thinking, fantasy, self-reflection, and defense. A wise discipline would value and embrace such differences rather than find fault and lack of respectability in either one. (p. 266)

Adopting some of the perspectives described in this chapter may assist in integrating projective and other approaches for more effective assessment. Most important among them may be adopting the response-process approach, including both problem-solving and behavioral components.

One challenge in writing this chapter has been to encompass the great diversity of projective tests under one umbrella. The extant research data and the response-process model itself would suggest that the next step would be to adapt the model to individual tests. This would include developing paradigms to address topographical and experiential similarity, functional equivalence, and personality as problem-solving in real life. The challenge in this research is to access the idiographic characteristics of the individual as validity criteria. This is not a simple manner and may require incorporating qualitative research with more traditional quantitative work. Research should also tackle the international and cross-cultural challenges, since projective testing has great potential in these applications. Every effort should be made to standardize administrations and coding of responses, with the Rorschach Comprehensive System as the model. It is unclear whether we can progress much further by lumping these tests together. Rather, the response process and generalization characteristics for each test can be researched and developed separately. Research in projective testing should address the interpretive process itself. Much more sophisticated clinical-judgment studies are needed to make them relevant to clinical practice (Karon, 2000; Levine, 1981; Viglione & Hilsenroth, in press). Such research should include investigations of these instruments as methods.

REFERENCES


