

THE WETC PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

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Subjectively Interpreted Projective Psychological Tests**

In March's WETC Psychology Newsletter I talked about the Common Flaws in Psych Reports and pointed out that there are many possible psychological testing flaws to be found in psych reports. This month I'll talk about subjectively interpreted projective psychological tests, pointing out that they are sufficiently flawed to render them incapable of providing any information about an applicant's or plaintiff's psychological status at any point in time.

Projective tests all share a single common feature. They present the person being tested with an ambiguous or unstructured stimulus or task such as an inkblot; a photograph of people engaged in an uncertain task; the beginning of a sentence that is to be completed; or simply a piece of paper with instructions to draw a person or an object. The basic assumption behind all of these tests is that the person, in the process of "projecting" themselves into the task, will reveal information about their motivations, emotions, needs, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and psychopathology. To name just a few, frequently used projective tests are the sentence completion tests, the Draw-A-Person Test, the House-Tree-Person Test, the Thematic Apperception Test and inkblot tests, including the famous Rorschach Test.

Administering a projective test is typically a very simple and objective procedure. However, the rub comes in interpreting the results. Unfortunately, with the possible exception of a single method for interpreting the Rorschach Test, there are no standards for drawing credible conclusions from the patient's projections or productions (Exner, J. E. 2002. *The Rorschach: Basic foundations and principles of interpretation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley). Instead, the doctor simply subjectively interprets the examinee's responses.

The "normal" procedure for interpreting the results of a projective test is for the doctor to use their clinical experience to subjectively interpret or intuit the meaning of the test-taker's productions. Without a doubt, in a general clinical practice, projective techniques can be used to generate theories or

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hypotheses about the patient that can be checked out during the course of therapy. In these contexts, one can make a reasonable argument for the common belief among mental health professionals, that in the hands of a knowledgeable practitioner, projective tests can provide insightful information about the inner life of a person's mind. But as a definitive evaluative technique that is capable of yielding credible objective data that can be relied upon and presented to the court to demonstrate anything in a medical-legal context, they are worthless. The reason for their worthlessness is the absence of accepted standards of interpretation that are firmly based on quality research. In short, no one can truly say, with any reasonable medical probability, what any response or pattern of responses means!

Consider for a moment a sentence completion test in which the individual is given the first part of a sentence and asked to complete it in any way they deem appropriate. Unlike tests that typically provide individuals with items or questions with a limited number of possible answers, such as the MMPI, and that yield objective easily reported upon scores, sentence completion tasks give the examinee a virtually unlimited number of possible responses. When the doctor "interprets," intuitively, or as some would have it, "guesses" at the meaning of the examinee's productions, this may be more revealing about the doctor than the test-taker!

Imagine for a moment that during a deposition or at a trial the examining doctor is presented with the patient's answer sheet, or what is sometimes called their clinical protocol, and asked to provide a narrative of their interpretation of the patient's responses. Regardless of what the doctor may say, they will ultimately have to concede that there is no support for their interpretation in the psychological testing research literature. Under these circumstances probably the best

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the doctor can do is to take refuge behind their experience and clinical judgment. However, this is simply the intellectual equivalent of the physician saying, "Trust me, I'm a doctor." But, if we truly trusted medical-legal evaluators, all of their reports would be one page long and provide nothing but conclusions. Obviously, the courts have no such faith in physicians.

The bottom line here is that when an informed attorney takes a doctor's deposition or trial testimony about the results of a projective test it is relatively simple for the attorney to successfully question the doctor's subjective opinion. Essentially, all the attorney has to do is point out to the court that the doctor's interpretation is their unsupported subjective opinion, not objective fact, for the credibility of their interpretation to be shattered.

Quite simply, the presentation of projective test data to the court is ultimately indefensible and incapable of supporting the doctor's diagnostic conclusions. Then, once the diagnosis is successfully challenged, all of the conclusions flowing from that diagnosis fall like the proverbial house of cards. In short, projective tests are a report's weakness, not a strength, and it is a wise doctor who avoids this trap that seriously questions the doctor's credibility.

**This is the fifth of a series of monthly newsletters aimed at providing information about psychological evaluations and treatment that may be of interest to attorneys and insurance adjusters working in the area of workers' compensation and personal injury. If you have not received any of our past newsletters, and would like a copy, send us an email requesting the newsletter(s) that you would like forwarded to you.

2009 Newsletters

February, 2009 –Litigation problems with the GAF

March, 2009 – Common flaws in psych reports

April, 2009 – The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

May, 2009 – Apportioning psychiatric disability in workers' compensation cases and assessing aggravation in personal injury cases