
GUIDELINES EDITORIAL

Advancing Personality Assessment Terminology: Time to Retire “Objective” and “Projective” As Personality Test Descriptors

Gregory J. Meyer

*Department of Psychology
University of Toledo*

John E. Kurtz

*Department of Psychology
Villanova University*

For decades psychologists have classified personality tests dichotomously as *objective* or *projective*. These terms appear in scientific articles and textbooks and have become so entrenched that it is common to see separate courses in graduate clinical programs using these labels in course titles (e.g., “Objective Assessment,” “Projectives”). In the interest of advancing the science of personality assessment, we believe it is time to end this historical practice and retire these terms from our formal lexicon and general discourse describing the methods of personality assessment.

For personality tests, the term *objective* typically refers to instruments in which the stimulus is an adjective, proposition, or question that is presented to a person who is required to indicate how accurately it describes his or her personality using a limited set of externally provided response options (true vs. false, yes vs. no, Likert scale, etc.). What is *objective* about such a procedure is that the psychologist administering the test does not need to rely on judgment to classify or interpret the test-taker’s response; the intended response is clearly indicated and scored according to a pre-existing key. As a result, however, the necessity for judgment is passed on to the test taker. She must interpret the question, consider her personal characteristics, evaluate herself relative to others as best she can, decide the extent to which the characteristic fits her personality, and then choose whether to honestly convey this information in her response.

On the other hand, the term *projective* typically refers to instruments in which the stimulus is a task or activity that is presented to a person who is required to generate a response with minimal external guidance or constraints imposed on the nature of that response. What is *projective* in a test like this is the requirement to generate a response in the face of

ambiguity; in so doing, the person projects or puts forward elements of her personal characteristics.

Unfortunately, the terms *objective* and *projective* carry multiple, often unclear, meanings, including some connotations that are very misleading when applied to personality assessment instruments and methods. For instance, the term *objective* implies accuracy and precision that is impervious to biasing influences. These are desirable and positive connotations. One problem is that these positive connotations are not fully warranted for the inventories to which they typically refer. Scoring errors are certainly one potential concern (e.g., Allard & Faust, 2000). More substantively, however, if the kind of self-report scales that are classified as *objective* actually were “objective” in a meaningful sense of that word, then there would not be such a huge literature examining the various response styles and biases that affect scores derived from these instruments. In fact, the literature addressing the topic of response styles, malingering, and test bias in these measures appears larger than the literature on any other focused issue concerning their validity or application. Beyond bias and frank distortion, Meehl (1945) pointed out more than half a century ago that the processes influencing a test-taker’s response include ambiguity inherent in the test items, limitations in self-knowledge or self-perception, personal dynamics, and even projections. Another serious issue that results from applying the term *objective* to certain personality instruments is that those so labeled will tend to be viewed positively simply by virtue of the term’s positive connotations. Tests that are not so categorized will tend to be viewed less positively, regardless of psychometric data, because they are, after all, not *objective*. Accordingly, an unintended consequence of this terminology is that it may encourage or per-

petuate prejudices regarding the many alternative methods of assessment that do not carry the objective label.

At the same time, the connotations of the term projective also do not always apply when considering the instruments typically classified as projective. For instance, responses to the Rorschach inkblots often have more to do with stimulus classification and problem solving styles than to projection in a classical Freudian sense of the term, where undesirable personal feelings or impulses are seen as residing outside the self (see Exner, 1989). Similar difficulties emerge when considering the expanded definition of the term projective as Frank (1939) first defined it in reference to types of personality tests. Frank considered a projective test one that would

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. ... The important and determining process is the subject's personality which operates upon the stimulus-situation as if it had a wholly private significance for him alone or an entirely plastic character which made it yield to the subject's control. (italics in the original; pp. 402–403)

This conceptualization of a projective test implies that stimulus features or task requirements are essentially immaterial; personality characteristics will shine through with force and clarity regardless of the medium. Although desirable, this view is clearly incorrect. For instance, it is well documented that the largest source of variability in Rorschach scores is the number and complexity of responses given (e.g., Meyer, 1993, 1997). The personality characteristics associated with this style of responding are interpretively quite important in their own right. However, the presence of this response complexity confounds efforts to interpret the test scores that psychologists are most interested in interpreting (e.g., Exner, 2003).¹ The situation is similar with thematic storytelling techniques, in which the number of words given and the specific stimulus pictures selected for use exert a powerful influence on the final scores obtained (e.g., Blankenship et al., 2006; Hibbard et al., 1994; Pang & Schultheiss, 2005).

Thus, the old and familiar terminology of objective and projective personality tests has misleading connotations that will not serve the field well as we seek to have a more differentiated

understanding of assessment methods. A relevant question then becomes: What is better alternative terminology?

It is fairly easy to identify reasonable alternatives to supplant the term objective. Almost exclusively, this term has been applied to structured questionnaires that are completed by the target person him or herself. Consequently, a reasonable alternative is to refer to these tests as “self-report inventories” or “patient-rated questionnaires.” Moreover, to advance the science of assessment, it is equally important to differentiate self-report inventories from inventories completed by knowledgeable informants. Given that sources of information in personality assessment are far from interchangeable (e.g., Achenbach, Krukowski, Dumenci, & Ivanova, 2005; Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Costa & McCrae, 1992; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kraemer, Measelle, Ablow, Essex, Boyce, & Kupfer, 2003; Meyer, 2002; Meyer et al., 2001), it would be optimal to further differentiate all questionnaire methods by specifying the type of informant providing judgments. Thus, peer ratings would be labeled as such and differentiated from spouse-report scales, parent-rated questionnaires, and so forth.

It is not as easy to identify a single term or phrase that could supplant the term projective. In fact, when discussing this issue with colleagues, disagreements about a suitable substitute appear to be one of the greatest obstacles to change. No single term seems fully adequate. The instruments that are typically subsumed under the projective label include the Rorschach (1921/1942) and other inkblot tests (e.g., Holtzman, Thorpe, Swartz, & Herron, 1961), Murray's (1943) Thematic Apperception Test and the subsequently developed Picture Story Exercise stimuli (e.g., Smith, 1992), sentence completion measures, and various figure drawing tasks (e.g., Naglieri & Pfeiffer, 1992). The wide differences among these tasks makes it challenging to find a suitable alternative term that accommodates all of their diverse features. Some possibilities include “performance tasks,” “behavioral tasks,” “constructive methods,” “free response measures,” “expressive personality tests,” “implicit methods,” or even “attributive tests.” It is unlikely that any one of these labels would satisfy all experts. However, it is the very difficulty of finding a suitable alternative that speaks to the inadvisability of using a global term to characterize the essence of all these measures. In turn, this highlights the need to drop the term projective from the assessment method lexicon.

One of the initial steps to advance the scientific understanding of any phenomenon is to name and classify its components in a meaningful way. The unsuitable and primitive nature of the term projective is revealed when trying to arrive at an umbrella label to characterize tasks as diverse as drawing one's family, telling stories in response to pictures, and stating what an inkblot looks like. Applying a global and undifferentiated term to such a diverse array of assessment tasks seems akin to physicians classifying medical tests as either “visual tests” or “nonvisual tests,” with the visual category including tasks ranging from observing reflexes to endoscopy to MRI, and the nonvisual category including tasks ranging from palpation

¹The confounding influence of this so called “first factor” variance is pervasive with other instruments as well. An excellent discussion of the problem and of a sophisticated effort to mitigate its influence on the MMPI-2 can be found in the recently published Special Issue of the *Journal of Personality Assessment* (Meyer, 2006) dealing with the MMPI-2 Restructured Clinical Scales (Tellegen et al., 2003).

methods (e.g., abdominal tenderness) to olfactory methods (e.g., odors indicative of infection) to auditory methods (e.g., detecting wheezes with a stethoscope).

Just as it would be regressive to apply such a simplistic categorization to medical tests, the field of personality assessment will not advance by relying on crude terminology to globally characterize all the tasks that are not self-report questionnaires or informant rating scales. Thus, if one of the substitute terms noted above does not seem suitable to replace projective, it would be most optimal for clinicians, researchers, and teachers to simply refer to assessment tasks by their specific name, for example, the Rorschach Inkblot Method, Holtzman Inkblot Task, Murray's TAT, Loewinger's SCT. The *Journal of Personality Assessment* will facilitate the transition to more adequately differentiated assessment terminology by asking authors to avoid referring to categories of personality tests as objective or projective. We hope other assessment journals will join this effort and adopt a similar position.

This editorial guideline is not meant to imply that the words objective and projective cannot be used in the context of referring to specific data from personality instruments. It is certainly true that all personality tests can provide more or less objective data. It is also the case that instruments like the Rorschach or TAT can capture projected personality characteristics, whether defined narrowly as by Freud or more broadly as by Frank, and this can also occur when patients complete self-report inventories (Meehl, 1945). There is no problem if authors carefully and deliberately choose these terms to further scientific communication (e.g., when one is describing aspects of inkblot responses that are truly believed to indicate projected dynamics). Rather, our objection is with the reflexive use of historically ingrained terms that poorly describe the complex and distinctive methods used to assess personality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thoughts on this topic have benefited from helpful and insightful input from many people. Those who commented on this document included Robert Bornstein, Anita Boss, Virginia Brabender, Philip Caracena, Robert Erard, Barton Evans, Leonard Handler, Radhika Krishnamurthy, Robert McGrath, Joni Mihura, David Nichols, Bruce Smith, Donald Viglione, Irving Weiner, and Jed Yalof.

REFERENCES

- Achenbach, T. M., Krukowski, R. A., Dumenci, L., & Ivanova, M. Y. (2005). Assessment of adult psychopathology: Meta-analyses and implications of cross-informant correlations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 361–382.
- Achenbach, T. M., McConaughy, S. H., & Howell, C. T. (1987). Child/adolescent behavioral and emotional problems: Implications of cross-informant correlations for situational specificity. *Psychological Bulletin*, 101, 213–232.
- Allard, G., & Faust, D. (2000). Errors in scoring objective personality tests. *Assessment*, 7, 119–129.
- Blankenship, V., Vega, C. M., Ramos, E., Romero, K., Warren, K., Keenan, K., et al. (2006). Using the multifaceted Rasch model to improve the TAT/PSE measure of need for achievement. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 86, 100–114.
- Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- De Los Reyes, A., & Kazdin, A. E. (2005). Informant discrepancies in the assessment of childhood psychopathology: A critical review, theoretical framework, and recommendations for further study. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 483–509.
- Exner, J. E. (1989). Searching for projection in the Rorschach. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 53, 520–536.
- Exner, J. E. (2003). *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Frank, L. K. (1939). Projective methods for the study of personality. *Journal of Psychology*, 8, 389–413.
- Hibbard, S., Farmer, L., Wells, C., Difillipo, E., Barry, W., Korman, R., & Sloan, P. (1994). Validation of Cramer's Defense Mechanism Manual for the TAT. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 63, 197–210.
- Holtzman, W. H., Thorpe, J. S., Swartz, J. D., & Herron, E. W. (1961). *Inkblot perception and personality*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Kraemer, H. C., Measelle, J. R., Ablow, J. C., Essex, M. J., Boyce, W. T., & Kupfer, D. J. (2003). A new approach to integrating data from multiple informants in psychiatric assessment and research: Mixing and matching contexts and perspectives. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 160, 1566–1577.
- Meehl, P. E. (1945). The dynamics of "structured" personality tests. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 1, 296–303.
- Meyer, G. J. (1993). The impact of response frequency on the Rorschach constellation indices and on their validity with diagnostic and MMPI-2 criteria. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 60, 153–180.
- Meyer, G. J. (1997). On the integration of personality assessment methods: The Rorschach and MMPI. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 68, 297–330.
- Meyer, G. J. (2002). Implications of information-gathering methods for a refined taxonomy of psychopathology. In L. E. Beutler & M. Malik (Eds.), *Rethinking the DSM: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 69–105). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Meyer, G. J. (Ed.). (2006). The MMPI-2 Restructured Clinical Scales [Special Issue]. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 87(2).
- Meyer, G. J., Finn, S. E., Eyde, L., Kay, G. G., Moreland, K. L., Dies, R. R., et al. (2001). Psychological testing and psychological assessment: A review of evidence and issues. *American Psychologist*, 56, 128–165.
- Murray, H. A. (1943). *Thematic Apperception Test manual*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Naglieri, J. A., & Pfeiffer, S. I. (1992). Validity of the Draw A Person: Screening Procedure For Emotional Disturbance with a socially-emotionally disturbed sample. *Psychological Assessment*, 4, 156–159.
- Pang, J. S., & Schultheiss, O. C. (2005). Assessing implicit motives in U.S. college students: Effects of picture type and position, gender and ethnicity, and cross-cultural comparisons. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 85, 280–294.
- Rorschach, H. (1942). *Psychodiagnostics* (5th ed.). Berne, Switzerland: Verlag Hans Huber. (Original work published 1921)
- Smith, C. P. (Ed.). (1992). *Motivation and personality: Handbook of thematic content analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tellegen, A., Ben-Porath, Y. S., McNulty, J. L., Arbisi, P. A., Graham, J. R., & Kaemmer, B. (2003). *The MMPI-2 Restructured Clinical Scales: Development, validation, and interpretation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gregory J. Meyer
 Department of Psychology
 Mail Stop 948
 University of Toledo
 2801 Bancroft Street
 Toledo, OH 43606
 Email: gmeyer@utnet.utoledo.edu

Copyright of Journal of Personality Assessment is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.