

Editorial Note

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Science and Soul: Use and Misuse of Computerized Interpretation

Recently, I was contacted by a student who was working on his MA research in psychology: He explained that neither his research director nor he knew anything about the Rorschach but that he wanted to use it in his dissertation about cancer patients. Could I recommend someone who would be willing to score the Rorschach protocols he had collected so that he could process them through “one of these automated interpretation programs”? True, he was “only” a student, but his work was supervised by a colleague and a strident alarm bell went off in my mind.

Indeed, several software programs can be found on the market today, which generate instant interpretive statements for the Rorschach based on statistics mixed with a zest of speculation. The professional (as opposed to amateur) psychologist has to make up his or her mind as to the exact value of these programs and come to a decision: To use or not to use computerized interpretation. Needless to say, the temptation is great, as it substantially reduces the time and energy necessitated by the interpretation process. It also can convey a sense of confidence through the illusory beliefs that a computer cannot be wrong, that statistics make science, and that science determines truth. Whereas these beliefs, which blossomed in the hard (or exact) sciences during most of the past two centuries, are nowadays laughed at by serious scientists, the human sciences seem to be scrambling to acquire the status of “science” by laying claim to these so-called scientific criteria.

But let us for a moment assume there is some truth in those beliefs. Let us assume statistics do help the researcher in separating speculation

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from facts . . . For the Rorschach interpreter, the snag is that he or she is dealing with human beings, who are known to be complex and unique. Every single clinician has experienced the *fact* that each client to some degree escapes general rules and that identical protocols simply exist no more than identical life behaviors and life histories. Some people do bear a deficient chromosome but will never develop the disease attached to it. Some people display some known “psychotic” feature in the structural summary of their Rorschach protocol but function adaptively in real life, or a specific variable that purports to describe psychopaths but are aeons from delinquency, and so on and so forth.

The discrepancy between computer-produced statements and a custom-made individual interpretation has two reasons. First, a scientific reason: A statistical correlation is not a causal explanation and human behavior does not obey deterministic laws. The second reason has to do with the magic of the Rorschach: A given variable value, a given feature, changes in its interpretive significance as a function of other variable values. This interpretive significance in turn is modified by clinical reality (i.e., the real client).

I personally have put to test various computer interpretation programs and was at first impressed by their thoroughness in scanning the variable clusters but eventually saddened, when not appalled, by the result: A litany of impersonal statements comparing the subject to “most people,” sometimes contradictory, and, in some of the programs, wild interpretations apparently based on content features and other non-evidence-based elements. Some programs stray so far as to provide diagnostic statements (clinicians do know that not a single psychiatric diagnosis can be drawn directly from the Rorschach). The whole process and outcome reminded me of a long-standing astrology program which blurts out a complete description of your character and fate when fed with a single entry: Your date and place of birth. How many clinicians pay due attention to the honest and cautionary statements and disclaimers often included in the programs as to their use?

Interpreting a Rorschach protocol is a constantly renewed adventure of the mind, a task that can be earnestly and ethically fulfilled only if the psychologist can draw on all his or her scientific knowledge and go beyond anonymous general statements to reach the uniqueness and complexity of the real person he or she has agreed to assess. If professionals solely rely on computerized programs, then the question is not “what’s wrong with the Rorschach?” but “what’s wrong with the psychologists?” If psychologists rely exclusively or extensively on computer-gen-

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erated interpretive statements to formulate their final evaluation, the Rorschach test will be definitively discredited as a valuable tool in personality assessment. Let us remember the profound remark by François Rabelais*: “*Science sans conscience n’est que ruine de l’âme*,” which means “science without conscience is but destruction of the soul.”

Comment on “Science and Soul”

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Professor Andronikof has focused on an important timely issue in her brief discussion of computerized interpretations of the Rorschach. While computer programs can be of assistance to those using the Rorschach, the outputs from those programs can easily be abused if the user proceeds on the naive assumption that each statement generated by the interpretative segment of the program is valid and complete. Typically, most programs include disclaimers that give emphasis to the fact that interpretative statements are only empirically based hypotheses that must be reviewed and evaluated carefully by the user. These disclaimers are necessary because the computer cannot deviate from its assigned rounds. It cannot think, and it cannot integrate data at a level higher than that for which it has been programmed. The complexity and uniqueness of each human makes it essentially impossible for any program to be developed that would account for all of the idiosyncratic features that mark the individual, but the competent human interpreter can usually do this. As Andronikof points out, excessive reliance on interpretative programs is bad psychology and simply reflects a sort of naivety or carelessness by the program user and ultimately does a grave disservice to clients and the profession.

* French humanist and writer, first half of the 16th century.