USING PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES WITH CHILDREN

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A Guide to Clinical Assessment

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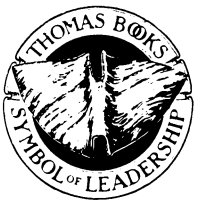

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INTRODUCTION

In any domain of human expression, be it verbal, graphic, or motoric, the resulting productions inevitably reflect something of the personality of the individuals who produce them. Henry Murray, the distinguished personality theorist, said it well when commenting on the analysis of spontaneously produced stories. Murray spoke of: "... the tendency of people to interpret an ambiguous human situation in conformity with their past experiences and present wants, and the tendency of those who write stories to do likewise." It is this human tendency that lies at the heart of the methods that we are presenting here.

The roots of the psychological study of man's expressive creations can be found in the history of art. Literary and art critics have pointed out that the piece of art tells us at least as much about the artist himself as it does about his vision of the world. Some have argued that such products can be remarkably accurate reflections of the self, while others maintain that the image is inevitably distorted, at best a faint image seen as through a glass darkly.

Nevertheless, if man's productions reflect his inner self as well as his view of the world, then the systematic examination of those productions should help us to learn something of the individual's hopes and desires, his needs and wants, his fears and anxieties, as well as his perceptions of the significant others in his world. It is our contention that such an examination is possible and more than that, that it can be a valuable enterprise, particularly when carried out in the context of the psychological study of the child.

It may be true that we can never experience the world through the eyes of another. And it may be equally true that once grown up we can never return to the lost world of childhood. Yet the analysis of expressive productions may allow us a brief glimpse of the world as seen through the eyes of the child. By such indirect means inferences about the child's personality may be drawn.

Our purpose here is to demonstrate that a content analysis of expres-

sive productions, systematically carried out, can contribute to the ultimate purpose of clinical assessment—a better understanding of the individual. Only from a reasonable understanding of the child in his situation can we make informed decisions about the best ways to help him to cope.

At the outset, we should offer a word to the reader about what this book is not; and what it is. It is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of personality assessment or the theoretical or methodological issues involved in that endeavor. It is not an attempt to provide an overview of the field, or to survey the various approaches to the study of personality. Nor is it a critical analysis of the methods and techniques used in that study.

Rather, our purpose is to provide a concise, clear account of a few selected techniques. We have tried to suggest ways in which those techniques might be used most effectively in assessing and understanding children.

In writing such a book, questions of the reliability and validity of the methods being discussed will inevitably be raised. The validity of these methods is based, in the first instance, on the hypothesis that a child's expressive productions can tell us something of his personality. If the reader accepts the premise at the outset, then the value of what follows will be self-evident.

Reliability is another matter. In some ways reliability is even more important than validity since a system that is unreliable cannot be valid. If the validity question is: Does this technique do what we want it to do?; then the reliability question is: Does it do so consistently?

In the study of children's expressive productions, especially as they are elicited through projective techniques, this means that two observers will tend to report similar findings, or that findings will be relatively stable over time. To test this we need to find systematic ways of analyzing these productions. We have tried to suggest some methods of analysis which lend themselves to reliability testing.

Ultimately the value of any system of assessment lies in its ability to be able to predict behavior, but such predictions are grounded in an understanding of the individual. It is our contention that the methods presented here can do much to deepen that understanding.

Finally, a word should be said about the use of projective techniques with children in general. While such methods remain popular with those who work with children, fundamental questions regarding how best to

use the information derived from them remain unanswered. To some extent this reflects differing opinion as to the nature of that information, and an understanding of what appropriate expectations might be when using these techniques. We have chosen to view projective techniques as opportunities designed to elicit expressive productions. A content analysis of those productions may then be made based on developmental and psychological considerations. What the methods presented here provide is a means of expression that is structured in such a way that reliable results are possible, results which can be used with some confidence in clinical assessment.

Of the many methods and techniques used in personality assessment with children, we have selected only a few major techniques to present here because they represent various modalities of expression. Table 1 lists the techniques we will focus on along with the age ranges we recommend, and the types of information typically derived.

Table 1. Selected Personality Assessment Techniques

Expressive Techniques	*Recommended Ages (in years)*	*Best Used Sources of Information on*
Thematic Apperception Test	10–14	• Current concerns • Motivation (Needs/Threats) • Perception of significant others • World view
Children's Apperception Test	5–9	• Current concerns • Motivation (Needs/Threats) • Perception of significant others • World view
Sentence Completion Task	12–18	• Developmental aspects • Interpersonal relations • Needs/Threats
Creative Drawings	5–12	• Self-image • Interpersonal relations • Overall level of adjustment

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Chapter 1

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN

Any systematic study must be guided by some conceptual understanding of the subject under investigation. The theoretical underpinnings provide the framework for investigation pointing to the most appropriate questions to ask, the relevant data to collect, and the interpretations that might be made. In this context, psychological theory infuses and guides the systematic analysis of children's expressive productions. Certain theoretical formulations, drawn from developmental and psychodynamic psychologies, seem especially relevant. And they form the perspective taken in the pages which follow.

The Developmental Imperative

In psychological terms one of the most important tasks of human development is the development of the ego. The notion of the developing ego as central to understanding children comes to us from Freud and those of his followers who developed his ideas regarding the mental life of children. This rich psychoanalytic tradition has provided us with several concepts that are useful in understanding both normal and deviant development.

One formulation of Freudian theory holds that there are two powerful instincts, one aggressive and one sexual, which underlie and motivate all human activity. These primary drives are concerned with assuring the survival of the self, and the perpetuation of the species. Freud maintained that civilization brought with it certain restraints which meant that these instinctual drives could no longer be allowed unbridled expression. Rather, they had to be channeled or controlled in some way: repressed, supressed, or sublimated. And that, in turn, meant that some mechanism of control had to be developed. That mechanism is the ego.

Freud liked to describe the ego as a relatively weak, embattled figure, caught between powerful instinctual drives on the one hand, and the demands of reality on the other. Much of the struggle as the individual

grows up has to do with achieving that delicate balance between these competing interests.

Children must gradually come to terms with adult reality and this means repressing instinctual demands so that they can function effectively with their family, their peers, and at some point, with the demands of school. All of this requires an active, healthy ego.

As the child grows older the ego takes on an increasingly larger role subsuming more and more of the mental processes. However, the instinctual drives are not diminished by the expanding ego. Although they are repressed more often now, they remain powerful forces to be reckoned with.

Because children do not have the relatively well-developed ego of adults, they are more vulnerable to the influence of these instinctual forces, forces that can be overwhelming and frightening. This fear of being overwhelmed may well lie at the core of many of those childhood fears we still vividly recall as adults. The pervasiveness and persistence of such fears can be seen, for example, in the "dark at the top of the stairs."

Adults sometimes find, much to their dismay, that the child who fears that darkness remains anxious even when the adult has taken steps to "prove" to the child that his fears are groundless, such as by turning on a light. Such fears may still persist as the, by now, exasperated adult points out that the child should "know" better.

Obviously, from the adult's point of view, such fears are irrational (which, of course, they are, in the most literal sense). However, the child, with his less-developed ego, does not experience the world as the adult does. Children live lives closer to the instinctual level as witnessed by the relative ease with which they can slip into fantasy, a shift that, for adults, requires the willing suspension of disbelief. Because they live so much closer to those instincts, they are nearer to being overwhelmed by them, and ultimately the instinctual power of childhood fears is derived from the fear of being overwhelmed, annihilated, in a way similar to the adult concept of death. As in death, the child feels threatened by the possibility of annihilation of the ego.

While the child's fragile ego is being strengthened, adults, particularly parents, play a key role as surrogate egos, helping the child to manage the world, providing support and comfort, standing in to shelter and protect the child. From the child's point of view, the nurturance and protection of mother and father are crucial to sustaining life and quieting

those fears which, if left unchecked might overwhelm and terrorize the child. Because of the key role parents play, events which threaten parental loss, like divorce or death, can be quite traumatic for children. Parental, and especially maternal, abandonment is equated by the child with the threat of annihilation. At the base of the loss of the parent is the fear of death itself. Scott's case provides an example of the fear of parental loss.

Scott

Scott was almost two years old when his mother took an unexpected trip. Her sister had been rushed to the hospital and was to remain hospitalized for more than two weeks. During that time Scott's mother went to help in caring for her sister's family, leaving Scott in the care of his father and various babysitters. Scott had a great deal of difficulty coping with his mother's absence. He cried frequently, and had trouble sleeping. This early event came to light later when Scott, now in the second grade, was referred for psychological evaluation because of poor school performance. In addition to his school problems, Scott had difficulty making friends and was still wetting his bed at home. Personality assessment showed evidence of strong needs for security and concomitant threats of insecurity. A content analysis of Scott's thematic productions showed that those concerns were linked to the absence of parental figures. It appeared that from his point of view, his mother's departure was seen as a sort of punishment for his being bad: a punishment that was equated with abandonment. It was hypothesized that the early childhood separation incident had been traumatic for Scott, and that the underlying insecurity which was affecting his school and social functioning could be traced to that event.

Attachment and Separation

The attachment bond between mother and child establishes the first human relationship and thus lays the groundwork for all subsequent human relationships and for the developing personality. Thus the protection and nurturance of the infant is crucial to the formation of the love bond.

While children need and desire adult protection and nurturance, they also need to free themselves from the entangling alliance with the parent if they are to gain a measure of independence and to be able to approach