

Thematic Apperception Test: an original proposal for interaction analysis

Doriana Dipaola, Patrizia Meneghelli, Monica Prastaro, Daniela Morano

Department of Psychology, University of Turin
Rorschach Equipe

Email Corresponding author: dordipa@yahoo.it

Abstract: The TAT as projective technique gives the opportunity to explore the inner world and the intra-psychic functioning, as well as the objectual representations and the prevailing thinking processes. Our hypothesis is that the TAT could also be deployed as a valid tool in the analysis of inter-personal functioning, specifically within the couple. From this assumption originates our proposal for an original methodology of TAT deployment and reading, which integrates the classical individual TAT methodology with the Common Rorschach method suggested by Willi. The goal is to experiment a parallel utilisation of the test that could contribute to the understanding of personalities and of how these intertwine in couple interaction. “In the relationship with the partner, the personality takes new shapes, given personality and character traits are strengthened, while others lose importance”, (Theodore Lidz, in Willi, 1990). The couple TAT presupposes a sequence of pictures proposed following procedures identical to the Common Rorschach ones to the single individuals at first and then to the couple. From the initial individual task follows the one of building a commonly shared history starting from the stimulus.

The suggested methodology shall be exemplified through the presentation of clinical cases belonging to the research sample. The comprehension of the inter-personal dynamic, in a common task, could allow to explore the ways in which conflict expresses itself, the roles and prospects for collaboration, the “generativity” of the couple and the management of affects and anxieties in the interaction and could be successfully deployed as a tool in the context of couple counselling.

Keywords: Couple Thematic Apperception Test, couple interaction, original methodology

Introduction

Projective techniques such as Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) allow to explore the *inner* and *intra-personal* world, but lend themselves also to interesting applications and readings of the interpersonal couple, family or community functioning.

The simultaneous administration to two or more subjects has been developed by several Authors, especially since the 1950s, in parallel with the development of models on group and family dynamics. The most renowned and systematic application is probably the one of Jurg Willi's (1978) Joint Rorschach Testing of Partner Relationship, which suggests a standardised methodology for the *common* use of the Rorschach Test, a methodology that found broad applicability in the realm of couple analysis.

The couple dynamic entails a broad reorganisation of the individual personalities of the two partners, therefore representing a complex interaction field, suitable for the personality's growth and evolution. As affirmed by Theodore Lidz, in the couple “certain functions are performed by the partners together, others by one of the two separately, and in this way certain aspects of everyone's individuality are lost. Since in the relationship with the partner the personality takes on a new shape, given personality and character traits are strengthened, whilst others lose importance [In the optimal couple] the partner becomes a second Ego, whose wishes and needs and whose well being are assimilated to one's own Ego” (Theodore Lidz, in Willi, 1990, p. 78).

The attraction between partners itself and the intensity of the relationship are based, besides on expectations and shared plans, most of all on unconscious assumptions and needs, that Willi (1990) defines as *collusions* and on which the protection from anxiety and sense of guilt, conflicts and fear of change play out. If at first this *unconscious understanding* allows the two members of the couple to *recognise each other as compatible* and to intimately connect, subsequently, stimulated by events and life phases, precisely those collusions may result in fracture and deep estrangement from the other partner, if not recognised and integrated.

The research hypothesis which guided our work is based on the interest for couple dynamics, especially in relation to the need to offer couples an instrument for a better understanding of individual characteristics and of how these express themselves in intimate interaction, helping them to locate critical points, where *unconscious collusion* weakens the couple and generates conflict, but also the points of strength and of optimal understanding that are to be supported. In relation to these goals, the TAT as projective technique, results particularly rich since it offers the possibility to explore the inner world and the intra-psychic functioning, as well as the objectual representations and the prevailing thinking processes. The hypothesis is that it could lend itself also as a valid instrument in the analysis of interpersonal functioning, specifically in a couple situation.

Material and Methods

The proposal is of an original methodology for the use and reading of the TAT which integrates the classical methodology of the individual TAT with the one of Willi's Common Rorschach.

The couple TAT envisages a chosen sequence of 8 cards, administered with an analogous methodology to the Common Rorschach's one, first individually then as a couple. To the individual task follows the joint one to build a shared story, starting from the stimulus.

It has been decided to administer only a given number of TAT cards since, albeit the individual and joint administration of all cards (envisaged in the classical utilisation pursuant to the French School) offers a more exhaustive picture of the individual and couple's functioning, proved to take too long and too tiring to bear. The basic idea consists in the creation of a simplified methodology, usable in all contexts that involve couple analysis, from psychotherapy to counselling.

The cards have been selected according to criteria that would allow to explore the basic themes of the individual personality's functioning and the objectual representations, the identifications of masculinity and femininity, the defensive processes which influence couple's interaction and the quality of the relationships in relation to the elaboration of the loss and the management of conflict.

The 8 cards that have been selected are the following:

- *card 1* offers information on processes of identity and identification and refers to the theme of castration in the acceptance of a condition of immaturity and to the possibility to free oneself from it through an identificative project. The issue of castration is not only dealt with in terms of power/impotence, but also in terms of the possibility to access to the wish;
- *card 2* reactivates the Oedipus conflict, in which the differentiation of the subjects and their relationship offers information concerning the quality of objectual relationships and processes of individuation and separation;
- *card 4* refers to instinctual conflict, to the taking on responsibility of aggressive and libido movements within the heterosexual relationship;
- *card 6BM* offers information on separation-individuation processes in the Oedipal relationship and on the management of the loss;
- *card 7GF* reawakens issues related to the mother-daughter relationship and opens the way to the feminine identification which offers information on the quality of premature relationship;
- *card 11* refers to the management of archaic anxiety and to the possibility of facing it turning to a stable psychic holding;
- *card 13B* refers to the management of depressive aspects, specifically related to solitude in a context of insecurity of the maternal holding. It therefore tests the ability to elaborate depressive aspects and to evoke solid internal objects;
- *card 16* refers to the way in which the subject structures his preferred objects and to the relations which she/he establishes with them. Moreover, it informs on the management and elaboration of past deficient depressive experiences evoked by the white.

The administration of the couple TAT takes place during a single session, as the ROC and after individual administration follows the joint one. The proposed cards are the same ones during the individual and joint administration and the order of cards must be respected.

The task of the individual TAT is the classical one i.e. to "imagine a story taking the cue from the proposed card". Clearly, the task changes in the

joint administration in which the couple is requested to perform a joint task i.e. to formulate for each presented TAT card a common story. The assignment of the common task is the following: “Now I will propose to you the cards again. I am asking you to fulfil a common task, that is to formulate a story you both agree on”.

Each card is administered to both members of the couple simultaneously, laid on the table at equal distance between the partners (the act of picking up the card first is one of the behavioural variables that will be measured).

It is necessary to take note of the whole of the stories, that is to say of the subject’s argument, since the interpretation work of the TAT relies on the formal analysis of the interconnections that shed a light on the thought’s prevalent processes. The use of a video or audio recorder has been crucial in this research phase since it has allowed to observe and take note of couples’ interactions (which is another goal of joint administration).

The clinician does not intervene much during the administration, but she/he may do so to favour the individual and couple’s associative process or to clearly identify the shared solution. By and large, she/he shall take note of the impact of these participations during the test’s interpretation.

The analysis of the protocols follows the French School model and the scoring of ROC behavioural variables is added to the couple’s protocol to analyse interaction processes.

Specifically, the methodology of the French School entails the qualitative analysis card by card, which highlights the main issues in relation to the latent content and the use of a scrutiny sheet for the scoring and for the analysis of the thought’s prevalent processes

In this pilot study a simplified scrutiny sheet has been used (on the basis of the new version published in the new TAT manual of Brelet, Chabert, 2005) so to allow an easier scoring. This scoring, applied to the narratives of individual and couple’s protocols allows to identify the argument’s elaboration processes in the narratives which subtend defence mechanisms and psychic conducts, both individual and of the couple’s functioning.

RIGIDITY
B1 –Describes the simple and common mechanisms of the analytical descriptive narration concerning the external world (place, time space)

B2 – It is the core of slightly obsessive mentalised functioning with regards to thinking, believing, supporting, reflecting specifically on two or more hypotheses that bear elements of the intra-psychic conflict.
B3 – Clearly obsessive defensive mechanism (isolation, undoing, reaction-formation etc) that hamper the narration

UNSTEADINESS
B1 – Simple and common mechanisms which subtend the investment of the relationship with the other (dialogue, simple affects, nomination of the characters)
B2 – Strongly affective narration with aslightly hysterical investment on the movement
B3 – Herotisation, unsteadiness, clearly hysterical strong affects

CONFLICT AVOIDANCE
CF- Over-investment in external reality
Opaque description, affectless, concrete, which signals mentalisation defects
CI-Inhibition
Inhibition in the contents and in the narrative in support of phobic processes or of conflict avoidance
CL-Instability of the limits

Confusion, porosity or limits iper-invested in signalling an identity disorder
CN-Narcissistic investment
Subjective feelings, idealisations + or - , frames, flash , specularity in support of the investment on the idealised representation of the Self
CM-Anti-depressive modality
Hypomanic verbosity, anaclitic-persecutory relation, idealisation + o – of the object in support of a border-lineproblem

EMERGENCE OF THE PRIMARY PROCESS
Psychotic appearances of a paranoid type, false perceptions, confused narration, identity confusion etc.

Tab.1 The simplified scrutiny sheet

This classical scoring is paired, in the couple protocol, with the Joint Rorschach scoring which makes use of Willi's behavioural variables for the analysis of the interaction. With the phrase "couple's interaction modality" we refer to decisional abilities, management of power roles, cooperation, ability of problem solving.

The Joint Rorschach variables deployed are behavioural ones, which include the Dynamic of rank, the Style of affective relation and Cooperation.

The first group includes behaviours linked to power management:

- *Holding the card* (marked with *) measures the practical commitment or disengagement in the relationship;
- *Penetrance* i.e. the recognition of the partner, whose proposals becomes the shared solution;

- *Decision* i.e. who between the two partners ultimately comes to define the shared solution, expression of directivity and of an active role in the dynamic. Considering the interaction between Penetrance and Decision may highlight interesting power and supremacy mechanisms, in which for example apparently one of the two partners decides (Decision), but at a deep level it is the other who retains power (Penetrance).

We did not take into consideration the variable Number of proposals because of the difference in terms of assigned task between Rorschach and TAT.

The style of affective relationship is measured with the Judgements related to the proposals of the other partner. Judgements may be positive, negative or ambivalent, but are exclusively related to the content of the answers and not to the task or to the partner. The presence of judgements suggests a lively affective and sharing dynamic, while on the contrary lack of judgements refers to a confrontation and aggression inhibition or to rigidity of roles.

As for Cooperation variables, these latter ones measure the quality of the result achieved by the couple, specifically:

- the *Quality of the product*, i.e. the construction of a good shared story, from the point of view of processes, which is therefore scored through the scrutiny sheet described above and which expresses the functioning modality of that specific couple and which can be related to the two individual functioning mechanisms.

- the *Quality of the decision*, i.e. the processes through which the couple reaches the shared decision. A good decision is the one in which the partners evaluate each others' proposals, abandon their own, willingly accepting a compromise that is good and functional for both, or even if necessary they agree to disagree.

We have decided not consider the Number of common solutions also in relation to the Cooperation variables:

Holding the card	* Hold s	→* Passe s on	*← Passes on	* _ * Hold together	*↓ Puts down
The passes from one hand to the other are scored with a, b, c...					

Penetrance	1	0	
-------------------	----------	----------	--

Decision	1	0	
-----------------	----------	----------	--

Judgements				
	Positi ve	Negativ e	Ambivalen t	

Quality				
Of the Product	1	0		
Of the Decision	1	0		

Tab. 2 Behavioural and Cooperation variables of J. Willi

Results and Discussions

The data obtained with the overall analysis of the individual and couple TAT allows to formulate inferences on the functioning of the individual personality and on how it deploys in the couple interaction. Specifically, the interpretation is not anymore exclusively linked, as in the individual TAT, to the subjectivity and personal past experiences, but results tightly and inextricably connected to the presence of the partner and to the dynamic that this presence contributes to generate.

The peculiarity of the common task may be observed in the presence of communicative dynamics where needs, identifications, anxieties and defence mechanisms of each member of the couple are expressed in the interpretation with the partner.

The interpretation of individual and couple narratives, with the integration of the behavioural variables, allows to draw a comparison between the individual personality and the personality during the interaction process. Specifically, we may examine the following themes: roles associated to processes of identification; the possibility to express intra and interpersonal conflict; the management of affects, instincts and anxieties in the couple; the cooperation which stimulates the generativity of the couple; the rigidity which stimulates immobility.

Card	TAT			Holding the card		Penetrance		Decision		Judgements		Quality	
	♀	♂	Common	♀	♂	♀	♂	♀	♂	♀	♂	Product	Decision
1													
2													
4													
6BM													
7GF													
11													
13B													
16													
Overall	—	—	—										

Tab. 3 Synthesis of TAT data

Card 4 of Vittorio and Giuliana's protocol will now be presented, alongside its analysis, as illustrative example of the proposed methodology:

TAT VITTORIO	Scoring	TAT GIULIANA	Scoring
<i>a scene from a 1930s, 1940s, 1950s movie ... a man with a very ... very cold look ... a handsome man, a beautiful woman ... cold, I mean both of them, calculating ... as if she had ulterior motives, I mean even a bit of perfidy ... an attempt at, at, at dominating him ... I really see him as inclined to leave [..]</i>	C/N B2 C/M	<i>two lovers ... he with the face of a layabout ... he does not even look that much in love with the girl ... who lives for him ... a bit of a damned relationship</i>	B1 C/M
			Scoring

- V: me too
- V: I don't
- V: but I see two cold looks, both of them, he and she and I see her too as if she was trying to stop him, because he is anyway leaving, but not by force, but in this way, with an interested look, but she's not really in love, she is interested in him from a material point of view I mean
- V: running away, it's not that he is running away, yes, he is leaving or maybe he is interested in something else
- V: because in him I see a very ... very cold look, yes perhaps before I didn't say it, maybe even a bit of a pained look, not ... I mean probably like that, I mean a look that shows inner suffering too really, so ... while she is much more present, much more rational, so she knows what she wants, I mean I see him as more lost, so she is stopping him, she is interested in him, but more of a material interest than ...
- V: ... she doesn't look very engaged ... I mean I saw it set in ... I don't know, 1950s, 1960s, 1940s, 1930s, I don't know, I thought it was a film scene, and ... I mean I saw it se in the 1930s, Bonnie and Clyde ... but now we have got to agree here, so on him we agree, as for her I don't see, I don't see sentiment, I see coldness instead, ulterior motives
- V: but I don't mean that she has an interest in him ... I mean, in him, but not in a sentimental way, there we go, I see a bit of ... I mean she is very, I see her as a sly person,
- G: yes, me too ... I see it as the photo of two people, I mean I see ... two lovers more than two spouses
- G: I see him very ... almost detached, with his mind elsewhere really, and she very much in love instead, you really see she relies on him ...
- G: .. and he really with his mind elsewhere, he is not in love, he is not involved in, in the sentiment really, I see her as being in love
- G: you see her as a person who holds the person who is running away
- G: She is holding him
- G: which is not love
- G: I might have confused ... the type of gaze ... but when one looks in this way in the face another person, I mean one does it also ... well, when there is a feeling, in this case it could also be done to cold him
- B2
CN
CM2

G: so she could be the boss' woman who finally ... I mean this sentiment is born which she never felt because dating people for profit she found this man she madly fell in love with and she wants him at all costs.

ROC BEHAVIOURAL VARIABLES

Penetrance: Giuliana

Decision: Giuliana

No judgements are expressed.

The quality of the product raises and the quality of the decision is only apparently positive (more than agreement we see him giving up in the face of her certainty).

Tab. 4 Card 4 of Vittorio and Giuliana Protocol

In Vittorio's story there is a mechanism of instinctual abrasion and a representation of the femininity as a dominant, perfidious, calculating individual. There clearly emerges the fear to find himself at the mercy of an archaic maternal relationship that would influence him and in which he would feel manipulated which seems to determine a narcissistic solution, a withdrawal from the relationship.

Giulia understands the passional dimension (*lovers*). There emerges a representation of the masculinity as uninterested, unreliable and of the femininity as needy and dependent (anaclitic dimension). The sentimental relationship is not the source of reciprocal pleasure, but of torment. Erotisation of this feeling of unreliability in the relationship?

It is Giuliana who summarises the shared story. She does not give up on the idea of a woman *madly in love* (i.e. of a totalising investment on the sentimental relationship, entirely beyond the domain of rationality). It is he who partially gives up, allowing himself to be convinced by the idea that there may be an intense and unselfish sentiment. She accepts the idea that one may function in a cold mode (*dating people for profit*) following one's own interest. She relies on the boss (power from a narcissistic point of view) and satisfies in this way her anaclitic needs. He accepts this solution because it satisfies his need to be dominant, rather than to be subjected to domination (beyond the narcissistic need to feel desired at all costs?).

The pilot study at issue has highlighted criticalities and resources pertinent to this parallel application of the TAT. Specifically, the criticalities appear to be the length of the administration quantifiable in approximately an hour and a half, despite the reduction of the proposed cards, and the complexity of collecting and organising such rich quantity of data related to narrations and to the interaction variables. Concerning this latter aspect, we are working on refining and simplifying the methodology. This study has however also highlighted considerable resources. The interaction phase that follows the individual administration is frequently experienced with surprise by the partners, who unexpectedly find themselves, in the here and now of the testing situation, to face different perceptions on the part of the other partner and with differences and analogies that may be acted on and elaborated through different interaction modalities. The common task offers to the couple the possibility to combine diverging ideas of reality, of their own roles and of the individualities for the joint creation of a lively and satisfying relationship.

An added value of the suggested methodology relates to the restitution, a fundamental moment in every iter diagnostic. The couple TAT offers the possibility to *report* the data which emerged from the individual and couple's tests through the sharing and further understanding of the dynamics in the clinical relationship. This moment may become already in itself a transformative space, of opening to consciousness and understanding of oneself and of the alterity, of resources and limits, of one's own roles and of how they intersect in a web of needs, conflicts and wishes. The restitution may therefore be considered a "third area" that relaunches vitality or determines, in some cases, the consciousness related to discomfort in the couple, favouring the linking for a therapeutic support. The parallel application of the TAT lends itself to various contexts of application pertinent to counselling and couple support, both in suffering and "crisis" situations and in phases or life events that force the couple to changes or transitions (i.e. support to parenting skills and adoption processes). It must however be pointed out that such application of the test, due to its complexity and richness presupposes a solid knowledge of projective techniques and specifically of the TAT.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Rorschach Equipe, study and research group on the clinic and projective tests that crucially helped the development and continuity of this research.

References

Brelet, F. (1986). *Il TAT. Fantasma e Situazione Proiettiva*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1994.

Brelet, F. & Chabert, C. (2005). *Nouveau manuel du TAT: approche psychanalytique*, Paris: DUNOD 2e Édition.

Chabert, C. (1998). *Psicoanalisi e metodi proiettivi*. Firenze: Borla, 2006.
Cigoli, V. & Tamanza, G. (1998). Come valutare la terapia familiare? Una proposta teorico-metodologica. In S. Di Nuovo, G. Lo Verso, M. Di Blasi, F. Giannone (Ed.), *Valutare le psicoterapie* (pp. 111-125). Milano: Franco Angeli.

Cuffaro, M. (1998). *Il TAT nella diagnosi psicologica e clinica*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Fioravanti, M., Carlone, O., Bonello, M. (2008). *Modello Relazionale nella interpretazione del Test di Appercezione Tematica, TAT: analisi della struttura e delle modalità di descrizione*. Roma: Nuova Cultura.

Gandino, G. (2014). *Il Rorschach di coppia. Analisi delle interazioni a due fra tradizione e nuove proposte*. Torino: Utet.

Imbasciati, A. & Ghilardi, A. (1998). *Manuale Clinico del TAT: la diagnosi psicoanalitica*. Firenze: Giunti.

Murray, H. (1992). *T.A.T. test di appercezione tematica: manuale*". Firenze: O.S.

Rapaport, D., Gill, M., Schafer, R. (1985). *Reattivi Psicodiagnostici*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Shentoub, V. (1995). *Manuale di Utilizzo del TAT. Un approccio psicoanalitico*. Torino: Centro Scientifico Editore.

Vica Shentoub: une approche psychanalytique du TAT. *Psychologie clinique et projective, Soc. du Rorschach et des Méthodes Projectives de Langue Française*, vol. 8.

Willi, J. (1969). Joint Rorschach Testing of Partner Relationship. *Family Process*, vol. 8, 64-78.

Willi, J. (1978). *Il Rorschach comune. Diagnostica delle relazioni di coppia e di gruppo*. Padova: Piccin Editore.

Willi, J. (1990). *La collusione di coppia*. Milano: Franco Angeli.