

## **Drug-addiction and boundaries of the Self A psychoanalytical reading through the Rorschach test**

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**Abstract:** The present research intends to analyse the phenomenon of drug addiction through the Rorschach test.

The protocols, analysed according to the French School Method, have been administered to a sample of 10 subjects. The data have been evaluated integrating quantitative and qualitative aspects, which have revealed the main dimensions of the drug addicted personality, mainly regarding the functioning modes of the narcissistic personality based on the over-investment of limits.

The results show an impoverished cognitive set where the capacity of the investment in the imaginary activity is absent and a certain rigidity of thinking is revealed. The investment in the formal aspects of the table provides justification of the emotional isolation where the attention to the external reality acts as a defence from an internal reality whose impoverishment is perceived as threatening and distressing. Interesting outcomes are evident in relation to the *emotional sphere* and the attempt of social adaptation from some indexes such as the quantity of human responses which result to be in the normative range.

The Rorschach test provided an important contribution in this evaluation/understanding of the drug addicted personality: if on the one hand it confirmed some basic traits of the functioning of these subjects, on the other hand it provided the possibility to research new and unexpected frontiers that, from the closure and the over investment of the boundaries of the Self (predominance of formal responses, of “reponses peau”), reaches an

attempt of psychic stimulation addressing a “primitive” emotional sphere, in the form of specular relations (reflection responses) or partial (Hd).

**Keywords:** Rorschach test, narcissistic functioning, drug-addiction, Self, mental boundaries, body-psychic boundaries.

## INTRODUCTION

The “inkblot” test, which was created in 1920 by Hermann Rorschach, who was trying to understand the creative capabilities of the individual and the way in which these become part of the dynamics of personality, is used to formulate a psychological personality assessment in the individual, and is still employed today in numerous and varied contexts. The sensitiveness, reliability and effectiveness of the test are systematically validated and updated. Covert “signs”, that imply specific processes and that are often overlooked by the professional evaluation, are revealed thanks to the efficacy of this tool. The Rorschach's test can be a useful and valuable tool to understand the psychological life in terms of functioning and is used to help understand aspects of the patient's personality, the way the patient relates to him/herself and the rest of the world, granting valid elements of guidance.

The test, according to Chabert (1998b), allows a “dynamic evaluation of the existing and latent resources of the subject, as well as of his/her vulnerabilities; elements thanks to which we can solidly formulate a psychological consult, a therapeutic indication, a prognosis of progress”.

Within this research, the Rorschach test has not been employed to validate a descriptive diagnosis, but rather to study in depth and to explore the psychological life of drug-addicted subjects, attempting to highlight the constant dimensions of the drug addiction, but also and especially the “healthy areas” which are reachable through psychotherapy, generally scarcely accessible in these subjects. The Rorschach test, in this case, given the difficulty in interviewing drug addicted patients, became a clinical tool as the Dream was to Freud: it was considered in fact “the Royal Road to the Unconscious“. Operating as an intermediary, the test made it possible to access a deeper and more intimate dimension in a psychic space, sometimes narrowed and constricted, that must constantly deal with the failing attempts of illusory reconstruction caused by the substances. If the test can be an

element of connection with the drug addict, the creation of a psychological-psychotherapeutic space should not be considered the goal, but the starting point.

#### Materials and methods

In our research the Rorschach test was administered to drug-addicted patients who were under the Ser.T clinical treatment -Servizio per le Tossicodipendenze- (Drug Addictions Treatment Facility) in the cities of Lanciano and Vasto (Province of Chieti, Abruzzo, Italy), during 2011. The study sample consisted of 10 individuals, 7 male and 3 female, of an age between 19 and 38 (average age: 27), with a history of drug addiction that varied for the substances consumed (even though almost all of them eventually made use of heroin as the final substance, from which they tried to recover as adults), the age they began using drugs and the type of drug replacement therapy they underwent. All have a junior high school diploma, one has a vocational school diploma as well and three dropped out of high school. The protocols were collected following the methodology suggested by the *French School of Université "René Descartes"* (Paris V), perfectly aligned with the main psychoanalytical Freudian theorisations assumed in our method of study.

The analysis of the results was both quantitative, by calculating the statistical average of the main indexes, and qualitative by analysing the content of the responses.

#### Results

##### *Perceptual Sets*

The expression "perceptual sets" refers to the *locations*: the perceptual frame through which the responses are processed.

Generally, the analysis of the perceptual sets is part of the so called "intellectual" approach, that relates to the way in which an individual uses his/her skills, or rather his/her cognitive behaviour at the same time in terms of: logical thinking and reasoning, management of his/her own creative potential, consideration they have regarding the obligations implied by the adaptation to external reality. The intellectual approach relates to the

thinking processes inside the psychic functioning, to the connection with the psychological condition of the subject, to his/her affectivity and his/her phantasms (Chabert, 1998b).

The clinical analysis of our subjects' protocols shows that the predominant perceptual set is that of G simple responses (sample average 42%, norm reference range 20%-30% ) which prove the existence of a basic perceptive adaptation that assures a connection with reality. However, the G responses are not the result of a coordination among the different parts, but rather the result of an alignment with the predominant perception, without any contribution of personal elaboration or construction. The predominance of G responses, at the expense of the other locations, may be indicative of a rigid thinking that reveals a defensive behaviour, that justifies the emotional isolation which means not being open to a deeper or more personal research. In this case, the absence of curiosity towards the external object, consisting in the research material, may also indicate the absence of curiosity towards the subject's internal reality, or at least indicates the will not to surrender and reveal oneself to the other through a deeper involvement.

In reference to the defensive behaviour, G responses can refer both to the suppression, when the original representation is rejected and replaced with a banal global content (example: response: *the bat*, Tab. 1), and to an extreme distrust in relationships, when only the globality is considered, as it is believed to be more neutral (Chabert, 1983).

The G operates as a defensive mechanism through the socialisation, the neutralisation of the reactions as well as the reluctance to involve more personal or more active elements and to face the situation from a more concrete and analytical point of view; these behaviours may correspond to a refusal of commitment (Rausch de Traubenberg, 1970).

At the same time, a low number of D responses (sample average 47%, norm reference range 60% - 70%) may be indicative of poor adapting capabilities due specifically to a lack of contact with reality.

For what concerns the image of the Self, the predominance of G responses can characterise the actual acknowledgement of the individual's integrity, and can as well refer, as in this case, to an extreme fragility, trying to globalise at any cost, does not allow any selection of details, as this would result in a break or a fragmentation (Chabert, 1983).

The quantitative analysis of the psychogram also indicates an average of 18 responses in total (norm reference range: 15 – 30) suggesting already a certain “narrowness” and poverty of the protocols. This low productivity can reflect a creative block where the capacity to invest in the imaginative

activity is lacking. The poor protocols report the extreme hardship these individuals encounter in placing themselves in an area of transitional functioning, in the intermediate space, formulated by Winnicott and demonstrates the incapability of the individual to merge deeper into the illusions and paradoxes of this area.

However, it is important to emphasise that in the last three tables, the pastel tables (VIII-IX-X), there is a sensible increment of responses (RC sample average 39%, norm reference range 30% - 40%), most likely connected to the sensory characteristics of the tables, that prompt regressive movements in relation to the mood of these faded colours, and to the progressive inflections related to the administration of the test material.

### *Determinants*

“The moments of shape, kinesthesia, colour and the progress of the perceptive process” are the elements that, according to Rorschach, determine the responses. The introduction and the discussion of these elements precede, in the volume *Psychodiagnostik* (1921), the section regarding the perception modes, and constitute the majority of his work - the very core of the method.

Undoubtedly, the determinants are the most original and creative elements of the Rorschach test, but also the most challenging to comprehend theoretically and to code in the subsequent phase of the test.

### *The formal determinants and the over-investment of boundaries*

The attention given to the shape, to the contour of the blots, is the result of the application of a visual perception mode towards an unfamiliar stimulus. The choice of this perceptive mode aims at “dominating the chaos”: the choice is made focusing on the contours and on the perceptive elements submitted, as an attempt of rational organisation, but also of adaptation to the stimulus (Rausch de Traubenberg, 1970).

The formal responses F to the Rorschach test are the most numerous. The F% indicates the capability of the subject to adapt to the external reality by means of the regulatory activity of reason and thought. A remarkable increase of F responses is observed in the analysis of the protocols of our drug addicted subjects (F% sample: 71%, norm reference range: 50% – 60%); the high predominance of F responses, as in this case, indicates a suppression of affective and personal life, the lack of spontaneous and

immediate contact with their surroundings and themselves. A high F% in our subjects denotes a lack of spontaneity or the fear to manifest it: they strongly relate to the objective characteristics of the tables, trying to control their involvement, appearing constraint.

In terms of defensive organisation, we can state, in agreement with Chabert, that the specific defences of this kind of functioning aim above all at managing a satisfactory adaptation to external reality. In the Rorschach test the F% allows to evaluate by what extent the subject is capable of giving the objects a contour that he/she considers firm boundaries between the *inside* and the *outside*. This demarcation emerges when the subject is capable to depict an object inside a perceptive shell (a shape), that represents a wall or a barrier and indicates the actual distinction between the subject and the rest of the world. The recurring increment of F% indicates the existence of strongly invested inside/outside barriers; at the same time, it suggests that in order to remove the interference of the imagination and phantasmic elements and remain within the state of “pure” perception, they operate an objectification.

F responses retain their defensive purpose since they block the representations inhibiting the impulses (“framing” the responses with still images). In particular, repressing the drives and avoiding to express them within the representation of relationships constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the narcissistic defence, expressed through the specific quality of F responses (Chabert, 1998a).

The shape is not at all times effective as such, because responses determined by the shape do not necessarily correspond to the stimulus. The positive formal response, indicated by F+, corresponds to sharpness of perception, effectiveness in the attention and good selection of memory images.

Examples:

*Table I*

- “A butterfly”

- “A bat”

*Table II*

- A butterfly (Red detail below)

In the current perspective, F+ is interpreted within the theories of the *Strength of the Id*, where this determinant operates as the capacity of regulation that reflects the level of development of the Id and its balance. The expression “Strength of the Id” is to be interpreted as the capacity to organise, plan and control the behaviour depending on the perceptions and real life experiences. Hence, the F+% varies depending on the intellectual capabilities of the individual as well as on his/her emotional state. The optimal value of F+% ranges within 80% - 85%; in our study sample the average F+% value is 62%, clearly lower compared to the norming values. When F+% ,Extended F+% is calculated every time data are insufficient in order to accurately evaluate the relation of the subject with reality. This is useful to learn about the capability of the subject of controlling her/herself when he/she is functioning in a state that is not that of “pure” perception (Chabert, 1988).d is also used, the percentage remains low: 75%. This means that although there is an over-investment in formal responses, the figure appears lower when we also evaluate the “quality” of the responses. A prevalence of F- suggests maladjustment or no adaptation to the real world, highlighting a non-socialised approach, even disintegrated, to the test material. The “*defaillances*” of perception underline the disinvestment of the objective reality and of the surrounding, thus, of the object relations. In our case, F- responses refer most often to body parts and anatomy (*kidneys, pelvis, rib cage*) that uncover the vulnerability of the body image and of the identity, and manifest the distress connected to the fear of disintegration.

#### *Kinaesthetic determinants*

While the formal responses refer to the dimension of perception, those of movement relate to the projection where the subject brings this dynamic dimension to perception, disclosing a greater creative capacity. Movement responses recall the inner being, the expression of impulses and psychic vitality (Sola, 2006).

The scarcity of K responses to our protocols could denote the difficulty in accessing the inner world, revealing poor capacity of imagination and creativity, a certain (unconscious) “denial of commitment” in this activity of projection. As if the extreme over-investment of the boundaries (determined by the exclusive presence of formal responses, at the expense of those of movement) denies some level of “permeability” towards the exterior. These mechanisms of “demarcation” are actually ineffective, and rather reveal a fragile, permeable and inconsistent identity.

*Sensory determinants: colour responses*

Sensory determinants demonstrate whether the subject is capable or not of perceiving certain objective characteristics in the Rorschach test material, in particular their chromatic qualities. The responses to chromatic tables are relevant in order to evaluate how the subject interacts with the surrounding reality and what level of emotional response he/she is capable of. The sensory processing integrates emotional elements (colour, pastel tables) and drives (red, tables II and III).

A low number of Colour responses in the protocols can refer, as further proof of what has been considered so far, to an extreme rigidity of the barriers between inside and outside, and indicates a strong protection towards both the external stimuli and the internal responses to such stimuli. The missing integration of the colour red on tables II and III reveals the absence of a connection between the red and its libidinal representatives, even when, in the test of the limits, Klopfer (1946) introduced the test of the limits with the intention of provoking guided reaction toward those specific issues otherwise avoided by the subject; this is a much more important goal especially when the free association protocol is limited or insufficient. attention to the red elements is solicited, there is nevertheless a strong denial of the libidinal impact of the colour:

Example:

*Table II*

Coloured also?!

- "two people giving each other high five"

- [Inquiry: "men or women?"]

- Two men.

- [Inquiry: "do the red [blots] tell you anything?"]

- No



Although R. suddenly spots, much to his/her own surprise, a coloured element in the test material, when the tester explicitly solicits him/her towards the red element on the table, he/she completely excludes the impulses and their symbolic representatives, making no compromise of any integration of the libidinal aspects.

#### *Analysis of the Content of responses*

The analysis of the contents in our protocols indicates a 21% of H responses (responses based on all human contents, partial as well); this percentage falls in the norm reference range. The human responses reflect the capacity of the individual to identify himself/herself with a human image and to represent himself/herself within a well defined system of relationships. Nonetheless, the responses of human details Hd (“feet”, “two legs”, “mouth of something”, “two thumbs”), indicate it is almost impossible for these subjects to perceive the human body in its integrity.

The animal responses result in an average value of 50%, at its upper limit, and in some single cases, higher than the norm reference range. An excess of animal responses indicates a specific stereotyped thinking, where the dimension of automatised mental mechanisms prevail, with no intervention of reasoning, determining an impoverishment of the thinking itself.

#### *The “Reponses peau”*

“Reponses peau” are responses that refer to a shell or a container; they can be H, A, object or other, but whatever the content is, the focus is on the fact that they recall a layer between the inside and the outside (Chabert, 1998a).

All the responses considered relevant by Fisher and Cleveland “barrier/penetration” index (1958) fall under this category in the Rorschach test. Being part of the psychoanalytical theory, Fisher and Cleveland's work states that the image of the human body affects the perception of the world and the interactions with others and that such perceptions can be detected objectively (through projective tests, for example.)

Responses that recall shelled animals, such as “turtle”, “beetle”, “shellfish”, “crocodile”, “scorpion”, are an example of the animal responses that refer to the barrier/penetration index; and among the object responses, “clothes” is a significant response.

In summary, the “reponses peau” refer to psychological body shells which represent either the barrier functions or the gaps they attempt to fill. “The

importance given to the boundaries and the need to appear as a shiny shell without flaws conceal the “permeable texture” which characterises the narcissistic psyche” (Chabert, 1998a).

#### *Intimate Resonance Type: TRI*

The intimate resonance type (TRI) is an expression that renders the conflicting relationship between introvert and extrovert behaviours in the subjects, in terms of potential tendencies and not in behavioural terms. It is the ratio between the sum of the large human kinaesthesia responses and the weighted sum of the colour responses.

In our protocols the predominant TRI fluctuates between the mixed extroversive (4 subjects) and the coerced (4 subjects), whereas two subjects show a introversive TRI. The mixed extroversive type is characterised by a certain instability of emotions and drives. Fragility makes them unstable and easily influenced.

The coerced type is a type in which none of the components manifest adequately; therefore the two modes are diminished, nullified. The coarctation is the effect of a blockage and the expression of a certain cognitive poverty or of an inadequacy in managing the symbols. The coerced types, who in our case seem to manifest some of the typical drug addicted characteristics, can be considered, in a way, more vulnerable than the others since the barrier and the blockage imposed to the manifestations reduce the possibility of adapting to different situations, scarcely tolerating psychological stress situations due to the rigidity of their defence mechanisms.

#### *The Representation of the Self*

One of the most important goals of the narcissistic investment for every individual is the accomplishment of a stable identity. The representation of the Self, when it is part of an adequately balanced mental functioning, is defined within a system of object relations whose structure is guaranteed by an efficient balance between narcissistic investments and objective investments. A consistent awareness of being depends on the realisation of a differentiated Ego, that enables oneself to fit into the environment from which it is however completely distinguished. In this regard, the narcissistic defences allow a positive realisation because they guarantee the presence of barriers between the subject and the object. However, if this basic

organisation seems to be acquired through an excessive and defensive formalism, it actually results in being unstable and ineffective. Its fragility emerges even when the processes regarding sexual identity are stimulated, which demand confrontation with the difference and with the libidinal conflict. Within this issue, the narcissistic organisation inhibits and blocks the processing of the libidinal conflict through the denial of difference, which expresses in non-identifying the male and/or female elements of the characters in the tables (in Table III: “two people looking at each other”, “two people giving each other high five”, “two people playing the bongo”, “two people on a small table”, “two people shaking hands”), where the suppression of the drives and the denial of the difference implies the denial of the desire for the other.

*The representations of relations: the double at the mirror*

In the narcissistic personality functioning, the *doubling* constitutes the basic assumption that the focus on the specular aspect of the relationship prevents the conflict between the desire and the defence. In the Rorschach test the doubling is rendered through specular relations, in our case expressed directly as representations of relations in the mirror.

Examples:

*Table III*

- “I see two people looking at each other”
  
- “Two dancers”
  
- “Two people looking at each other, they're talking, they're happy and sharing something in the middle, as if they're holding hands”

In these cases, the kinaesthetics reveals the identity of the human representations in which one is the other's double; the focus is on the way they look at each other that helps define the quality of the narcissistic relationship more accurately.

Regardless of the human responses the doubling may also appear in the recurrence of the “*reflection*” responses.

Examples:

*Table VIII:*

- "> Then other animals, bugs. They look like reflections in the mirror".
- "Two animals reflect as if they were > as if they walk on water and their images reflect".
- "> Seen this way, rocks that reflect in water".
- "And some animals on top... but which animal?... a cheetah... tiger... as if it reflects down in the river".

In this case also the double has a defensive value allowing again the avoidance of confrontation with the other, with the difference and with the libidinal conflict.

*Discussion*

In view of all the above, on a theoretical and methodological level, we can summarise the main factors that are at the base of certain psychological dimensions, essential to comprehend the individual psychological functioning. The analysis of these factors through the Rorschach test implies, therefore, the consideration of the intellectual behaviours, of the affectivity dynamics, of the socialising factors and/or the interaction with reality.

Following a scheme of this kind, we can say that on an *intellectual dimension* level, the low number of responses within the protocols suggest a quite impoverished cognitive frame where the capacity of investment in the imaginary activity appears absent. The predominance of G responses and the reference to banalities denote a certain schematisation and rigidity in the thinking that results incapable of a more elaborate interpretation of reality.

The defensive organisation of the thinking and the investment in the formal aspects of the tables (high F%) provide a proof of the *emotional* isolation. The libidinal dynamic is absent and/or controlled by an excessive use of formalism, in favour of a desired objective reality, against the emergence of distressing representations and against the emergence of connected affectivity. The preferential reference to the external reality serves as a

defence from an internal reality whose impoverishment is perceived as terrifying and threatening.

In reference to the *relational sphere* and the related social adaptation, interesting results emerge from certain indexes, for example the quantity of the human responses ( $\Sigma H\%$ ) that result normal: it is possible, therefore, to deduce that the drug addict has a sufficient interest towards the human sphere.

If what Bergeret states regarding the absence of a deep and solid mental structure typical of the addicted behaviour is accurate, it is equally accurate that they would also fall under the secondary *functioning* of the deep structure which can be neurotic, psychotic or borderline.

The *toxic functioning* serves as a regulator of affectivity and relationships. It builds defensive barriers to protect identity gaps that originate from the first object relationship, and gives the reassuring illusion of the possibility of putting the shattered pieces of the Self back together again.

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