

## ASSESSMENT or UNDERSTANDING?

### The Rorschach method in psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** The Rorschach method has been submitted to a teenager who was threatening suicide. The case is examined by experts who meet regularly. From the seminary works emerge some diagnostic elements which can facilitate the therapeutic relationship.

**Keywords:** Clinical psychology, diagnosis, therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

*“We refuse the critics upon the relativity of the phenomenological examination; different perspectives can highlight various aspects and different meanings, even one in opposition to the other, of that great fluent sea of the existence”*  
Ferdinando Barison

For many years, a group of psychologists have been attending a supervisory seminar in projective psycho-diagnostic assessment coordinated by Professor D. Passi Tognazzo<sup>1</sup>. In these meetings, which always provide new *stimuli* that can also be applied in the field of psychotherapy, consideration is mainly given to the Rorschach protective method.

In order to follow the methodology proposed by Professor Barison, each meeting begins with the protocol of a clinical patient, about whom any information is unknown except age, gender and level of education. The protocol is first scored “blindly”, without knowing the case history or the behavioural data of the subject in question. Subsequently, the numerical indices obtained are compared with the normative data relating to the age group and level of schooling.

The result is a provisional diagnosis that is then refined by the observations of the various members of the group and compared with the case history data, with aspects that concern the interaction between the examined and the examiner.<sup>2</sup> The assessment is gradually enhanced with the reflections of

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1 It is important to remember that until 1997 this seminar was led in collaboration with Professor Ferdinando Barison, former Director of the Psychiatric Hospital of the Province of Padua

2 Catherine Chabert writes that one must “highlight the necessarily relational and personalised character of the test situation. This latter includes three terms: the subject, the test and the therapist. The relationship will be established between the two people through the mediation of a third object, which only finds its meaning in the self-expression of one and the listening of the other, in an exchange that is specific and particular every time.( Chabert in Rorschach in the Adult Clinic, 1983)

each participant, which may derive from specific and diverse theoretical knowledge.

At the end of the discussion the members of the group are aware that they have not reached a diagnostic certainty, but a deeper understanding of the person they are dealing with.

Actually, even the stage defined as “scoring” consists of a progressive assessment of the “style” of the subject, the ways in which he faces the task, organising an unstructured perceptive datum into a response that corresponds to his internal world.

The therapeutic relationship is facilitated by the confrontation that has taken place between professionals.

The protocol subject to attention here concerns a 14 year-old adolescent, Alberto, to whom the test was administered at the beginning of psychotherapy.

**Card I \_ 2”**

This seems to be a mixture between a flying creature...

A bat because of the wings and

I see two eyes, two front legs. of the black colour, no doubt

It’s not exactly a bat, it’s “like” a bat; with four holes.

These look like human hands clutching

In the first card, Alberto gives the banal interpretation (thereby implying adequate cognitive adaptation) after having lingered to underline an incongruity (“a mixture”) out of excessive precision or perhaps to ward off a crowd of different images. He then dwells to specify and enumerate, almost as if seeking to distance himself from the emotional strain. He critiques the shape, emphasising the missing part (holes). He captures a detail (the hands), which expresses a subjective, troubling impression (“clutching”).

**Card II - 4”**

In the middle I see a bird with a long beak (*black point, upper centre*) or a fighter plane. (*white centre*)

It could be both.

Then these here look like two lungs (*red upper part*)

Now that I see them better, the lungs look like two eyes with a mouth (*white*)



with a first sign of sadism  
and some blood is coming out  
These (*upper red*) look like drops of blood  
from the temples  
coming from the head.  
A slightly evil face

From the third card, Alberto detects the symmetry, especially in correspondence with the bilateral tables, denying the relationship. The banal response is followed by the “face” interpretation, to which a “sadistic” intention is attributed, after having pointed out the eyes. The aggressive tone seems accentuated in the interpretation of the “drops of blood”.

Again, the white allows a figure-background oscillation and causes profound anxieties to emerge. Transformation and link persist in the same time.

**Card IV - 2”**

Here I see an animal from behind,  
it looks like an alligator, with four legs  
Also a small dinosaur.  
It’s about to spring, to leap  
Here, in the distance, I see  
horns (*side appendices*)  
the outline of a deer, the horns  
then the body. This is a rather  
An enlarged insect  
hazardous response..

The animal interpreted in Card IV is threatening and not anthropomorphic. It is located in a distant reality, in space (seen from behind) and in time: “dinosaur”. This latter image is also preceded by a diminutive that limits its potential to offend.

**Card V - 2”**

Here I definitely see a creature  
similar to a butterfly.  
A flying creature in general

**Card VI - 7”**

Here it’s a bit more complicated.  
To begin, the figure is symmetrical.  
Two identical figures

< From here, it looks like  
 a slab of ice in the middle of the Antarctic,  
 reflected in the water.  
 Then here I see a snake's head, two small heads.  
*(upper point)*  
 V Thinking about it, there's also a leaf, a dry leaf.

Clear discomfort emerges with Card VI, the reaction to which is blocked by the stress on the symmetry. The card is immediately turned and the "slab of ice" interpretation emphasises the chill, the vagueness, the distance and the denial of drive urge.

### **Card VII**

V ^ This one's more complicated  
 And it is also symmetrical.  
 20"  
 Here I see the face of an animal, *(white)*  
 an imaginary animal,  
 but the central part of the forehead is cut.  
 On the lower part I see the result of an *(axis Dd lower third)*  
 X-ray of its backbone.

The disturbance persists in Card VII, where the "face" interpretation is perseverated. The fact that it is specified that it is an imaginary animal does not lessen the observation regarding the cut in the forehead.

The attention to detail of sexual symbolism produces an incongruous response with regard to the overall interpretation: the symbolism is rejected.

### **Card VIII 3"**

This one's symmetrical too.  
 + 10"  
 Here I see two tigers. *(pink side.)*  
 They could also be two bears.  
 Two crocodiles climbing on the axis of symmetry. *(grey)*  
 They are climbing and  
 As if they were trying to climb  
 smash into the imaginary wall  
 a wall that separates them.  
 that divides the drawing in two

In Card VIII the immediate stress on the symmetry precedes the banal response, which becomes explicit in the inquiry, but as extremely aggressive (“tigers”, “smashing into”). The refusal of the relationship is reinforced by the presence of a “wall”. This content will be perseverated in card X, and will also be associated with banal interpretations of animals perceived in motion.

The relationship, which could be invoked by emotional and affective elicitation, is decisively rejected, because aggressive aspects may prevail in it.

**Card IX - 5"**

A slightly fantastical face. *(intramacular)*

skull

Three unidentified things

and in the middle two eyes and part of a skull.

That's what it looks like.

The other things look like clouds in different colours

In Card IX, the “slightly fantastical face” interpreted in the white becomes “a skull” in the inquiry.

**Card X - 2"**

There's a lot to see here.

+ 5"

Here I see a wall that divides these two mice. *(upper grey)*

This picture is also symmetrical.

Here I would see a hierarchy:

the two mice are above,

then there are these things (*blue side*) like spiders

Above the spiders there are goats (*gr. side*)

that want to jump over the two mice,

they want to be at the same level as the mice.

Then I see two pink barriers, like two walls that prevent these other animals (*grey side*) from jumping within the order.

Here at the bottom...

Here there are two small orange objects

that don't make any sense to me.

*(orange centre)*

Here (*blue centre*) is an element I can't identify, but I see it as the centre of this whole system.

Then, lower down, there are two imaginary animals *(green lower)*  
slightly strange

and one of their eyes can be seen  
The darker ball  
is the eye.

little worms.

The fragmentation of Card X leads Alberto to resort to an expedient, an attempt to grasp a rational pattern that connects the various elements: “the hierarchy”.

The scoring of the protocol resulted in the following **numerical indices**

R	30		
G	12	40%	
<b>G+</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>66%</b>	(1 DGbi, 1Gbi)
D	13	58%	(4Dbi+ 2Dbi*)
Dbi	<b>4 + 2*</b>		
F	18	60%	
<b>F+</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>61%</b>	

FC	1
CF	2
FCho	1
ChoF	1
F(C)	1
M	2
FM	4
A	13
Ad	3
U	1
Ud	4
Ban	5

Importance of symmetry I, III, VI, VII, VIII

Perseveration of “face” III, VII, IX

Importance of “eyes” I, II, III, IX, X

**Comparison of the results with the statistical standards** shows that the percentages of the indices G+ and F+ are slightly lower than the norm.



Other elements make it possible to establish the emergence of persecutory experiences despite the constant efforts to control the response rationally<sup>3</sup>

The determining colour and chiaroscuro are not associated with an adequate formal component, as if Alberto seemed exposed and defenceless against the affective and emotional stresses.

The stress on symmetry is repeated multiple times. The relationship with the other seems difficult, linked to aggressiveness (“smashed”) and therefore prevented (repetition of “wall”).

The image of the “face” seems to be incessant, charged with negative associations (“evil”, “sadistic”...) or accompanied by indices of deterioration (“cut forehead”, “skull”).

It should be noted that Alberto reacts to white in a singular manner. While he fights the emergence of anxiety-producing elements by resorting to the persistent search for anchorage to perception, he understands white as emptiness, an undefined background that exposes him to experiencing anxiety-producing persecutory contents.

The limited variety of contents and the adherence of thought to precise terms (face, gaze) that take on persecutory values lead to the supposition of emotional disturbances that affect attention, judgement and adaptability (F+ and G+ lower than the standard).

### **Diagnostic Hypotheses**

Needless to say, the motivation that drives Alberto to ask for the help of a therapist becomes an element of concern also for the latter: Alberto is compelled to consult the computer frequently to find out about the methods used by adolescents to commit suicide. His compulsive behaviour has never translated to self-harming.

The fact that he can exert control over his impulses seems to guarantee the hold of the Ego. Nevertheless, the statistics on the serious risk of suicide among adolescents is alarming.

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3 C. Chabert (1983) highlights the psychopathological significance of projection in a paranoid context in which the phantasmatic and drive encroachment “marks the inconsistency of an Ego that no longer fulfils its regulatory functions”. “The distinction between imaginary and real is constantly undermined by the confusion, the burden of the projective mechanisms and the lack of anchorage in reality”.

Catherine Chabert (“*Projective tests in adolescence*”,1994), reports the outcome of a research conducted on responses to Rorschach provided by subjects that had attempted suicide. These were subdivided by the author into three groups according to the personality structure that emerged from the data collected. In terms of some of its elements, Alberto’s protocol could be compared to the production of individuals presenting “**borderline conditions**”. His protocol also contains:

- human representations maintained in an archaic, often persecutory register... (the threatening faces),
- partial confusion of realms (“a mixture”, flying animal-plane)

However, the main characteristic of Alberto’s Rorschach protocol is the intensity of the persecutory projective mechanisms.

### **Case History** (summarised below)

#### **Precariousness of therapeutic relationship**

Alberto had already been in psychotherapy at the age of 7, when he was affected by a difficult family situation: his father suffered from schizophrenic psychosis.

The child’s psychotherapy had only lasted a few months and the interruption had been motivated by the coincidence of the school holidays and the partial calmness that his relatives claimed to find in Alberto.

At the time of the first consultation, the child’s teachers reported that he seemed to be “immersed in his thoughts” at school. Though he had always been drawn to arithmetic, he now showed an aversion to the subject, and in this regard it should be mentioned that his father’s profession required mathematical skills.

His mother stated that Alberto had been a reflective and relatively peaceful child. Now, when playing games and drawing pictures he would depict *tornados*, dramatizing their destructiveness. On the other hand, he kept saying that he wanted to be a construction worker when he grew up. (An attempt to repair or stop aggression considered dangerous?)

During his few therapy sessions, Alberto dramatized scenes in which aggressiveness and destructiveness prevailed. His drawings would only depict swords or arrows, the “*tornado that destroys the hut*”.<sup>4</sup>

At age 7, Alberto appeared to be an intelligent child who was sufficiently well adjusted in his social manifestations, despite living in such an unstable family situation. He began to communicate this condition within the therapeutic relationship when his parents chose to give priority to their own personal therapy, which they considered to be urgent.

Years later, the boy, now fourteen, suddenly requested an “*urgent*” meeting. It was immediately evident that Alberto was frightened above all. In any case, it is flattering that he remembered his therapist and felt the need her help.

He could not ward off the phantasy of suicide, but rather welcomed it as a connection with a situation, the possibility of death, which suddenly appeared in the evolved mind of the adolescent.

The therapist made herself available to receive a patient who was willing to talk about himself and very careful to describe his feelings. She was aware that Alberto seemed to consult the expert in a way not dissimilar to the way he consulted the internet.<sup>5</sup>

His suffering then became the object of inquiry, and the relationship contained a narcissistic aspect.

The proposal to use the Rorschach test arose within this manner of interaction between patient and therapist. The therapist remained concerned that the fragility of the family context may have heavily affected Alberto’s on-going separation-identification process. It was probably also affected by the structural fragility that the child had shown in his first consultation. At that time his good intellectual level and the behavioural standards he had assimilated seemed to partially control the impetuosity of his communication.

Seven years later, Alberto’s adolescent Rorschach protocol confirms the fragility of his structure and the inadequacy of his defence mechanism. It

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4 The provisional constructions made with the play material were quickly destroyed and the child then stated, as if to control his own destructiveness: “the best thing when you build is destroying”. At the same time he seemed to need to control the interlocutor’s feared opinion.

5 Alberto claims he was driven to research on internet the various ways used by young people to commit suicide. His curiosity is accompanied by a painful state of anxiety.

exacts greater attention to the complexity of the therapeutic relationship and to the specific request for help.

In any case, I consider it to be of fundamental interest that the confrontation between professionals, which takes place in the supervision groups led by Professor Passi Tognazzo, encourages openness to consider the clinical approach as “an intersubjective experience of the disorder”, as the psychiatrist Ludovico Patarnello (2000) suggests. Condemning the “ever greater credit that the standardisations in psychiatry acquire”, he states, among other things: “We can say with a joke that these ways of dealing with the psychiatric clinic (in the descriptive-statistical method) have the responsibility to make us enter into a relationship with the mentally ill patient (especially if psychotic) “by washing our hands of them””.<sup>6</sup>

During the therapy sessions, Alberto expresses himself with clarity and uses appropriate terms. His attitude can easily be equated to that of an educated boy who is not awkward nor inhibited.

He talks a lot, but around specific themes. He maintains an active a directive attitude within the relationship, so that it is difficult to keep the sessions into the agreed time frame. Can the flow of reflections, all of which are pertinent, be justified by the need to fill a void that would otherwise be occupied by persecutory ideas? How can Alberto’s preference for what he defines as “*blunt, not melodic, music*” be read other than as a sort of exasperation of his sensibility that seeks to maintain a kind of envelope of excitement?

Does all this have anything to do with the **lack of cohesion of the self** that emerges from the test?

By applying the Rorschach test, the therapist obtained indications that produce a greater sensitivity to the patient’s specific manifestations. To obtain this, it is important that the attention to the other that characterises the clinical sensitivity of the psychologist is respected. As such, “the scoring of the protocol, the study of the psychogram or other correlated to the content-type protocol data and the clinical data, makes it possible to grasp an aspect of the subject’s Dasein that is revealed in the Rorschach situation, which, as an essentially exceptional situation, has every chance of being very important. The phenomenological attitude is supported and

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6 The use of Rorschach exclusively to guarantee an “objective” assessment is also at risk of this.

accompanied by reflexive verbal thought, the connective fabric that allows the phenomenological live tips to intuitively penetrate the protocol” (Phenomenological Rorschach, F. Barison - D. Passi Tognazzo, 1982).

The recovery of the therapeutic relationship took place in accordance with the situation created during the application of Rorschach, because some observations taken from the responses lend themselves to being shared, thereby fostering a progressive “self-revelation” and “self-recognition” loaded with meaning for the patient’s existence.

Within therapy, Alberto seems to have found an opportunity to express the feelings that could be intuited from the Rorschach protocol. Among these, what can be taken from the following statements is particularly significant:

13

*“I see the world as a dark, cold forest, a hostile climate that’s against me. I don’t have yet the weapons to stay inside it”, “It’s as if I’m not able to manage my thoughts. When I feel superior, I react better.”* This justifies his difficulties with fitting into his peer group.

Now the anxiety in the face of emptiness that manifested itself in the test can be verbalised, the feared relationship seems to be possible within the therapeutic relationship. The communication also adopts a reflexive moment. *“I feel a terror inside... like the death of my identity... I’m afraid of being a dead identity...”*. The narcissistic defences are verbalised: *“...I’m afraid of being discovered, that’s the truth: the scaffolding is falling down”*. Alberto refers to the value that *“head-banger”* music has for him: *“It’s a voice. As if I was shouting to the world...it’s a non-violent method, it’s not offensive and doesn’t insult anyone...”*

The patient-therapist relationship seems to have now achieved sufficient coherence to facilitate a pathway aimed at the progressive consolidation of the fragile structure of this adolescent.

The Rorschach test, and above all the constructive confrontation with the colleagues, have allowed for a prudent and alert undertaking in relation to a condition of suffering that Alberto’s apparent self-confidence would perhaps have prevented being recognised.

His superficial adaptation to the family and school context, which corresponds to the assessing gaze that has been directed at him and continues to be directed at him by adults, has hidden suffering and a structural fragility that only the Rorschach test was able to reveal.

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