

## **WHY DO WE USE THEMATIC APPERCEPTION TESTS IN CHILD ASSESSMENT? SHOULD WE?**

**by**

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When a child's development goes awry, a clinician may be called in to conduct a psychological assessment. Child assessment generally entails the use of various kinds of psychological instruments. Questionnaires and checklists, behavioral ratings, and interviews are all considered valid instruments for an assessment of the child's social and emotional development.

Each of these methods has certain limitations. Questionnaires and checklists must be filled in by an adult, usually a parent or teacher. Adults generally focus on observable behavior, which is linked to the social contexts in which they see the child. Therefore, these instruments may not give a valid indication of the child's emotional functioning. Questionnaires and checklists often include rating scales, and the distinguishing characteristic of rating scales is that they involve a social judgment on the part of the rater (Cairns & Green, 1979). Another drawback to questionnaires and checklists is that reports by adults on a child's emotional functioning are inferential, and adults generally tend to underestimate the intensity and breadth of the child's subjective experience, especially for negative emotional states (Cantwell, 1990; Flanery, 1990; Routh, 1990). With depressive symptoms, for instance, correlations between parent or teacher ratings and self-reports by children and young adolescents are low (Lewis, 1990).

There are other means available to assess a child's emotional functioning. The child may be addressed directly, either through an interview or by way of a self-report questionnaire. However, these methods also have important

limitations. Self-report does not always provide an accurate picture of the child's emotional development because children may disguise certain problems or report an ideal self (LaGreca, 1990). Moreover, the validity of self-report questionnaires is limited because of developmental and cognitive issues, such as the child's self-understanding and sense of selfhood, understanding of emotions, and language skills (Gerber & Strassberg, 1991; Stone & Lemanek, 1990). Child interviews have similar impediments, compounded by the effect of the child's interaction with the adult during the interview (Barnett & Macmann, 1990; Gresham, 1984).

Another instrument that is commonly used in child assessment is the thematic apperception test. The child is shown a series of picture cards and asked to tell a story about each card. The interpretation of the child's responses to the cards is based on the assumption that people tend to view and interpret their world in terms of their own experience. It is assumed that the responses to the picture cards will help to reveal the child's "inner world," providing insight into his or her emotional functioning (Chandler, 1990).

The use of thematic apperception tests in child assessment has been a bone of contention ever since the first instrument was published over 50 years ago. The validity and reliability of thematic apperception tests have been seriously questioned over the years (e.g., Anastasi, 1968; Klein, 1978, 1986; Meehl, 1959). After a period of initial enthusiasm, in which numerous instruments were developed, research with thematic apperception tests declined sharply in the 1960s (Polyson, Norris, & Ott, 1985). Meehl's (1954) seminal work on clinical and statistical prediction initiated a debate that contrasted clinical methods with objective, psychometric tests. This dichotomization was unfortunate insofar as it only served to enlarge the breach between two opposing factions in psychological assessment. Nevertheless, thematic apperception tests did not disappear entirely from the clinical scene and they continued to be popular instruments with practicing psychologists, particularly

among those who conduct child assessment (Goh & Fuller, 1983). Various new instruments appeared in the 1980's and 1990's, and today a variety of thematic apperception tests is available for child and adolescent assessment.

But the controversy regarding the validity of this instrument continues. Clinicians often justify its use in child assessment by designating the thematic apperception test as a clinical tool or method that serves to generate hypotheses only, and not as a test instrument that should comply with the standard requirements of validity and reliability. I consider this approach highly unsatisfactory. Calling the thematic apperception test a tool instead of a test obscures the important role that the instrument may play in diagnosis and decision-making when used alongside psychometrically reliable instruments in child assessment.

My dissatisfaction with the long-standing ambivalence over the instrument led me to undertake a study of the validity of the thematic apperception test.<sup>1</sup> In a series of papers, I hoped to address some of the misconceptions that abound in clinical practice, as well as the prejudices and stereotypes that are generally voiced on the psychometric front. The central question that this study aims to answer is whether the thematic apperception test may be viewed as a valid instrument for child assessment. This question has been approached in two ways. First, I have endeavored to clarify the nature of the instrument in the following chapters: *A Historical Overview of Projective Testing, A Review of Current Thematic Apperception Tests for Child and Adolescent Assessment, The Projective Hypothesis and Theories of Projection, and Four Common Assumptions about Thematic Apperception Tests*. Secondly, I have examined the instrument in terms of standard test requirements of validity and reliability, as discussed in the chapters titled *How*

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<sup>1</sup> *This study was originally published as the doctoral thesis for my PhD in psychology at Utrecht University (Kroon, 1999).*

*Reliable are Thematic Apperception Tests? and Are Thematic Apperception Tests Valid Instruments?* General conclusions are presented in the final chapter: *Ten Implications for Child Assessment*.

In summary, my overall aim has been to provide a comprehensive view of the thematic apperception test as an instrument for child assessment -- one that not only tackles the various clinical assumptions that have fostered the unabated use of this instrument, but also addresses questions of test reliability and validity. My goal was *not* to uphold the thematic apperception test in general, nor any instrument in particular. In this respect, Cronbach (1988) has provided a guiding principle: *Ideally, validators will prepare as debaters do. Studying a topic from all angles, a debater grasps the arguments pro and con so well that he or she could speak for either side* (p. 3). I hope I have been true to his words.

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