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Robert P. Archer

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## INTRODUCTION TO A SPECIAL SECTION: PERSPECTIVES ON THE RORSCHACH

Robert P. Archer  
Eastern Virginia Medical School

An extraordinary symposium occurred during the 1999 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association conducted in Boston, Massachusetts. This assessment-related symposium was entitled, "A Critical Look at the Rorschach" and was sponsored by the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology (Section III of Division 12 of the American Psychological Association). It was my privilege and honor to serve as the Chair of that symposium, which was held over a 2-hour period before a standing room only audience in excess of 200 psychologists. The symposium attempted to achieve a balance in perspectives on the usefulness of the Rorschach. Two speakers were invited who were closely identified with the advocacy of the Rorschach through their numerous presentations and publications on this topic. These contributors were Dr. Irving Weiner from the University of South Florida and Dr. Marvin Acklin from the University of Hawaii at Honolulu.

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This article is based in part on a symposium presented at the 1999 American Psychological Association meeting in Boston.

Correspondence concerning this article and requests for offprints should be addressed to Robert P. Archer, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Eastern Virginia Medical School, 825 Fairfax Avenue, (Hofheimer Hall 730), Norfolk, VA 23507.

To round out the discussion, the symposium also included two of the most thoughtful and provocative critics of the Rorschach. These latter presenters were Dr. Howard Garb from the Pittsburgh Veterans Administration Health Care System and Dr. James Wood from the University of Texas at El Paso. In order to adopt a presentation format that was reasonably fair to all speakers and perspectives, an initial presentation time of 17 minutes each was allotted for each of the presenters, followed by an opportunity for each of the presenters to take up to 2 minutes for follow-up comments. Following my brief discussion of the presentations, a spirited and thoughtful audience discussion occurred and very few individuals left the symposium session until we were finally required to break to make room for the next symposium topic.

It was my feeling that this was a particularly valuable and thoughtful discussion and one that might well be of interest to many of the readers of our journal. Therefore, I have invited each of the presenters to submit a manuscript form of their presentations to *Assessment* for publication as a special section of this issue. I have taken the liberty of including my discussion comments as an introduction into this special section in the hope that it will provide a useful framework through which to view the following papers.



## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DEBATE CURRENTLY SURROUNDING THE RORSCHACH

Over the past several years, the debate surrounding the reliability and validity of the Rorschach has become increasingly contentious and public. For example, two special sections of *Psychological Assessment*, guest edited by Greg Meyer, will be devoted to the strengths and weaknesses of the Rorschach in a manner that reflects the spirit of today's exchange. The *Journal of Personality Assessment* has also published several exchanges over recent years on specific aspects of this topic area (e.g., Archer & Krishnamurthy, 1997, in press; Meyer, 1999). One could argue that the criticisms and defenses of the Rorschach have become a major growth area in the psychological assessment literature. With the increasing number of publications devoted to this topic, I am reminded of the old story of an Irishman (possibly from Boston) who passed by a riotous barroom fight and declared, "Is this a private fight, or can anyone get into it?"

The tone and intensity of the debate concerning the Rorschach has been reflected in this morning's presentations. Irv Weiner, a soft-spoken and gentle individual, speaks of the attacks on the Rorschach as "unwarranted and unscholarly" and Marv Acklin notes that Rorschach adherents are often dismayed at the "ignorance of the Rorschach literature" shown by critics. Howard Garb offers the provocative proposal that a "moratorium" be declared on the clinical and forensic use of the Rorschach until we have determined valid from invalid indices and variables. James Wood makes one of his major points (legitimately, in my opinion) the issue of the accessibility of Rorschach research data which, by necessity, leads to a focus on particular individuals tied to specific research projects.

The debate is heated because it concerns the most basic assumptions regarding the Rorschach. While at least part of the 1960s attacks on the Rorschach developed from a behavioral perspective and were relatively generic in nature (e.g., if one challenges the utility of a concept like personality, it is not surprising that one would challenge the usefulness

of personality assessment). By contrast, the current debate surrounding the Rorschach is both specific and fundamental. The issues of controversy include: (a) the adequacy of the Rorschach normative sample; (b) the scientific credibility of studies underscoring the Rorschach Inkblot Method (Rorschach, 1921) and Comprehensive System (Exner, 1993); (c) the reliability that can be realistically obtained for the coding of Rorschach variables and indices, and how that reliability should be calculated or computed; and last, and perhaps most importantly, (d) the ability or inability of the Rorschach to demonstrate reasonable levels of concurrent and predictive validity. This latter focus on validity has also included a redefinition of what are appropriate external criteria for the Rorschach. Psychiatric diagnosis? Scores from objective personality measures? How about ratings of therapeutic improvement? Both the critics and proponents of the Rorschach method have devoted much time and energy to this debate because all parties sense that we are looking at the most basic issues concerning the clinical usefulness of this widely used instrument.

What have been the effects of this debate thus far on the development of the Rorschach? It would seem to me that the assumption that the Rorschach Comprehensive System rests solidly and uniformly on an empirical foundation has been forced to undergo a significant reexamination. The recent creation of a "Rorschach Research Council" involving Donald Viglione, John Exner, Greg Meyer, Bill Perry, Phil Erdberg, Mark Hilsenroth, and others, seems, at least in part, to be an implicit acknowledgement of the need to nurture and guide systematic research in the Rorschach area. Having been a member of the Society for Personality Assessment for many years, I can also report that there has clearly been a new influx of energy into this group as numerous researchers and theorists have rallied to the defense of the Rorschach as a valid assessment measure. Feelings have been hurt, tempers have flared, but a substantial amount of research attention has also been devoted, perhaps the most attention in

recent years, to the assumptional underpinnings of the Rorschach Comprehensive System. Does the Rorschach correlate with the MMPI (Hathaway & McKinley, 1943) or the MCMI (Millon, 1983) and should it? Should Rorschach indices bear a significant relationship to diagnostic criteria? In what ways should the Rorschach normative data be utilized, or not utilized, in systematic research investigations? All of these areas and more have been infused with a new energy as the process of scientific analysis and debate has focused on each of these issues. In my thinking about this area, it seems to me that the question should not be whether the Rorschach should have been subjected to this kind of intense scientific scrutiny, but rather why all personality assessment instruments have not been subjected to similar "trials by fire."

Finally, before I sound too pollyannaish, I would like to note that there may be some dangers in the current debate and I would like to point out one danger for Rorschach proponents to consider, and one danger for critics. In terms of proponents of the Rorschach method, I sense that some Rorschach defenders have become significantly aggravated or frustrated by the nature of the scientific debate concerning the reliability and validity of the Rorschach. In response to repeated criticisms of the Rorschach's weaknesses when measured in terms of traditional indices as inter-rater reliability and concurrent validity, some proponents (I may note that none are presenters at today's symposium) seem too willing to back away from these standard indices and to move the battleground to what they perceive as more defensible areas. Thus, we find arguments that the Rorschach should not be held accountable to one or more of the traditional measures of reliability or validity because such standards are really not applicable to this projective technique. This argument is inherently flawed and dangerous in that it moves the Rorschach out of the realm of scientific psychology and the principles of evaluation of psychological instruments that have been successfully used across most of this century. The Rorschach Inkblot Technique or method is not in need of some newly developed reliability or validity criterion, but rather of more systematic evidence of the ability of the test to meet traditional standards.

Now for a potential danger related to criticisms of the Rorschach. While the critics of the Rorschach method have undoubtedly made a major contribution in understanding the relative limitations and weaknesses of the test instrument, they have perhaps been obsessed with this particular instrument without adequately recognizing that the type of criticisms they have leveled at the Rorschach could also be successfully directed at many other psychological instruments including objective measures such as the Millon inventories or, may the University of Minnesota forgive me, the MMPI. In the absence of broader applications of these methodological criticisms, many Rorschach defenders might be forgiven for believing that their instrument has been singled out for a unique amount of criticism and condemnation. Problems in reliability and validity are certainly not the unique province of the Rorschach. Interestingly, while the MMPI, and particularly the MMPI-2 (Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989), have been subjected to substantial criticisms concerning the adequacy of various aspects of the revision effort, these criticisms have typically, but not always, stopped short of questioning the overall utility of the instrument or its appropriateness for clinical assessment. However, I am reminded of an excellent critical review of the MacAndrew Alcoholism Scale (MAC; MacAndrew, 1965) by Gottesman and Prescott in 1989 that led those authors to conclude the MAC Scale should not be clinically applied until more supportive validity data was provided for this scale. While we watch the Rorschach debate unfold, perhaps it is well to remember the applicability of many of these methodological issues to your "instrument of choice" and to view the perceived weakness of the Rorschach within a comprehensive and balanced perspective.

In summary, we have all had an opportunity this morning to listen to four quite creative and thoughtful critiques of the Rorschach method. It is a basic tenant of science that this type of critical analysis will lead to refinements and improvements in approach, and this is an underlying conviction that I believe is shared by all of us on hearing this debate.

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