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# DETECTION OF MINIMIZATION OF PSYCHOPATHOLOGY ON THE RORSCHACH IN CLERIC AND NONCLERIC ALLEGED SEX OFFENDERS

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The assessment of response-bias is critical in forensic psychological evaluations of alleged sex offenders because sex offenders frequently minimize psychopathology or personal limitations. This study tested predictions based on prior research that minimization on the Rorschach would be reflected by higher P, D, A, Lambda, and PER, and lower R, Blends, and Zf. We divided a sample of cleric and noncleric alleged sex offenders according to (a) whether they showed minimization on the MMPI, and (b) whether they admitted to their charges. We then compared these groups on the purported Rorschach validity indices. Our results do not support the use of any of these Rorschach scores in the assessment of minimization. We recommend that in forensic psychological evaluations, the Rorschach should not be used to assess defensiveness and is best used in combination with other psychometric instruments more sensitive to response-bias.

*Keywords:* Rorschach, sex offenders, minimization, forensic, response-bias, malingering, clerics

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not minimization of psychopathology

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can be determined from the analysis of Rorschach test scores. In forensic psychological evaluations, the assessment of response bias is of paramount importance because the psychologist's conclusions may influence important legal and professional decisions regarding the client. Thus the client may

have a particular interest in appearing either psychologically disordered or free from psychological disturbance (Grossman & Wasyliw, 1988; Wasyliw, Grossman, Haywood, & Cavanaugh, 1988; Ziskin, 1995). For example, prior research has shown that alleged sex offenders are likely to minimize or deny any suggestion of psychopathology or deviance (Hall, 1989; Haywood & Grossman, 1994; Haywood, Grossman, & Hardy, 1993; Langevin, 1988; Lanyon, Dannenbaum, Wolf, & Brown, 1989; Lanyon & Lutz, 1984; Sewell & Salekin, 1997). In our own research we have found that alleged sex offenders frequently minimize psychopathology, whether or not they admit to the offenses alleged against them (Grossman & Cavanaugh, 1989, 1990; Haywood, Grossman, Kravitz, & Wasyliw, 1994). Thus research has consistently shown that alleged sex offenders are generally reluctant to admit to any problems that could potentially label them as disordered or deviant.

One of the most critical tools in the assessment of response-bias is psychometric testing (Rogers, 1997). Validity scales of the MMPI and MMPI-2, for example, have been shown to be effective in assessing minimization of psychopathology in a variety of forensic populations (Greene, 1988a,b; Grossman, Haywood, Ostrov, Wasyliw, & Cavanaugh, 1990; Grossman & Wasyliw, 1988), including sex offenders (Grossman & Cavanaugh, 1989, 1990; Grossman, Haywood, & Wasyliw, 1992; Haywood & Grossman, 1994). The current study was designed to explore whether or not similar quantitative indicators of response bias exist on the Rorschach. Such indicators could help determine if an alleged sex offender undergoing a forensic evaluation is attempting to minimize or deny psychological problems.

The Rorschach is one of the most frequently used personality tests (Piotrowski, 1984), and is widely used in forensic evaluations (Borum & Grisso, 1995; Lees-Haley, 1992; Rogers & Cavanaugh, 1983). However, the forensic use of the Rorschach has been subjected to specific criticisms on a variety of grounds, including its vulnerability to intentional exaggeration or minimization of psychopathology (Ziskin, 1995). Early

work on the Rorschach assumed that it was not possible to distort clinical characteristics on this instrument due to its ambiguity (Frank, 1939). This was based on two premises. First, since the Rorschach was believed to tap unconscious processes, it was considered to be immune to conscious manipulation. Secondly, individuals were believed to be ignorant of the critical response components reflecting either normality or genuine mental disorder. Several studies have examined the ability of the Rorschach to detect the presence of response-bias (e.g., Carp & Shavzin, 1950; Feldman & Graley, 1954; Fosberg, 1938, 1941). However, many of these earlier studies have been criticized on various methodological grounds, such as the use of subjective or unspecified interpretative strategies (Schretlen, 1988, 1997; Stermac, 1988).

Stermac (1988) noted that many studies of the Rorschach's sensitivity to response bias have used simulation models. This raises the further question of generalizability, that is, whether or not non-patient (and presumably mentally healthy) individuals instructed to fake-good produce the same Rorschach patterns as genuine patients motivated to deny distress or mental disorder (Rogers, 1984).

Recently, a number of studies have been published using the Rorschach Comprehensive System to explore potential indicators of response bias on the Rorschach (Exner, 1978). For example, one study (Ganellen, Wasyliw, Haywood, & Grossman 1996) found that Exner variables are not effective in assessing exaggeration in criminal defendants. In regard to indicators of minimization, Exner (1978) suggested that intentional minimizers are likely to produce protocols with low R and safe, obvious determinants and content, that is, high Lambda, high D%, and high A%. Investigating the sensitivity of these and other Rorschach indicators of minimization, Ganellen (1994) hypothesized a defensive response set consisting of low R, high P, high Lambda, few Blends, low Zf, and increased PER. He compared a sample of airline pilots being assessed for fitness to return to work after psychiatric leaves of absence to Exner's normative sample. The pilots were expected to fake good

because they wanted to return to work. This assumption was supported by the finding that they produced a minimized response set on the MMPI. The only major differences in the predicted directions were that pilots had a higher number of protocols with Lambda greater than .99, and pilots provided approximately three times the number of PER responses compared with Exner's normative sample. There were no differences in Ganellen's study on R, P, Blends, Zf, and average Lambda scores.

The current study examined both cleric and non-cleric alleged sex offenders undergoing forensic psychological evaluations. In recent years, allegations of sexual misconduct against members of the clergy have become increasingly frequent (Berry, 1992; Sipes, 1990). Offenses attributed to clerics are of particular concern because these individuals are typically held in high esteem by members of their religious community and are expected to be trustworthy moral leaders (Rossetti, 1995). Since cleric alleged sex offenders, like their noncleric counterparts, tend to minimize psychopathology (Grossman & Cavanaugh, 1989, 1990; Grossman et al., 1992; Haywood & Grossman, 1994) and show significant differences in clinical and psychometric characteristics (Haywood, Kravitz, Grossman, Wasyliv, & Hardy, 1996; Haywood, Kravitz, Wasyliv, Goldberg, & Cavanaugh, 1996), it is important to know whether or not clerics show any specialized patterns of minimization on the Rorschach.

The sample was divided on two criteria. First, participants were classified as nonminimizing or minimizing responders on the basis of MMPI or MMPI-2 validity scales (Greene, 1991). These scales are the best psychometric method currently available for assessing client honesty (Bagby, Rogers, Buis, & Kalemba, 1994; Ziskin, 1995). Second, the sample was divided into those who admitted versus those who denied their alleged offenses. Our research question is: Does minimization produce any characteristic patterns of scores on the Rorschach? In accord with previous research (Exner, 1978; Ganellen, 1994), we hypothesized that minimizers would show increased P, D,

A, Lambda, and PER, and decreased R, Blends, and Zf, as compared with nonminimizers.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 60 males who were undergoing forensic psychological evaluations because of alleged sexual offenses. Thirty-three of these males were clergymen, referred by various diocese and religious orders. The other 27 males were non-cleric individuals who were referred by attorneys, state regulatory boards, and through self-referral. In view of these circumstances, participants were expected to have genuine environmental motivation to appear normal.

Forty-eight of the participants (80%) faced allegations of sexual behaviors with children under 18 years old. Cleric and the noncleric subjects did not differ in regard to the victims' age or sex. Specifically, 13 participants were alleged to have molested children 10 years of age or younger, 18 participants were alleged to have molested children 11 to 14 years old, 14 participants were alleged to have molested children 15 to 17 years old, and 3 participants were alleged to have molested victims 18 years old. The remaining 12 participants faced allegations of sexual misbehavior with adults (i.e., over 18 years old). This included unwanted sexual behaviors by doctors toward their patients ( $n = 3$ ) and a teacher toward his student ( $n = 1$ ), exhibitionism ( $n = 1$ ), rape ( $n = 1$ ), and sexual misconduct by clerics who had taken vows of celibacy ( $n = 6$ ). Of the 33 clerics, 22 admitted to the allegations against them, while 11 denied them. Of the 27 noncleric participants, 17 admitted to charges while 10 denied them. Approximately half the victims were male and half were female.

The mean age of the participants was 46.9 years with a range of 20 to 78 years. Participants had completed a mean of 16.7 years of school (ranging from 8 to 20 years). Fifty-one (85%) were white, 8 (13%) were black, and one participant (2%) was of Hispanic background. Clerics and nonclerics did not differ in race, but cleric participants were significantly older

( $t = 4.11$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and more highly educated ( $t = 2.99$ ,  $df = 57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than nonclerics. The difference in educational level was expected, since all clerics had completed advanced religious education, such as seminary. All evaluations were conducted on a fee-for-service basis, and the current sample comprises a predominantly white, middle class group.

### Procedures

All participants were administered the MMPI or MMPI-2 and the Rorschach. For the MMPI and MMPI-2, the full 566- or 567-item test was presented in standard booklet-form (Hathaway & McKinley, 1967, 1989). For our initial analyses, we used the *L*, *K*, and sum of Obvious-Minus-Subtle *T* scores (*O-S* index) as measures of minimization. Although a variety of additional scales are available that are sensitive to impression management, we chose the traditional MMPI validity scales because they have changed the least in the item conversion from the original MMPI to the MMPI-2 (Bagby, Buis, & Nicholson, 1995; Bagby, Rogers, & Buis, 1994; Nichols & Greene, 1997). For the sake of brevity, throughout the remainder of this paper, we will use the term "MMPI" to refer to both the MMPI and MMPI-2.

As a preliminary analysis, we compared participants score distributions on the *K*, *L*, *F-K*, and *O-S*. We developed cutoff scores following the guidelines suggested by Greene (1991), who used the 75th percentile to separate honest from at least marginally minimizing subjects. We used the same percentile for both the MMPI and the MMPI-2 in order to produce comparable categorizations. The results indicated that nearly identical proportions of participants were classified as minimizers and as nonminimizers. Specifically, 68% showed minimization on the *K* Scale, 70% on the *L* Scale, and 72% on the *O-S* index. Furthermore, we expected more participants who denied the allegations to minimize on the MMPI than those who admitted to the allegations. We found that the majority of deniers were classified as minimizers by each of the MMPI validity scales (81% on *K*, 76% on *L*, and 90% on *O-S*). We also compared participant score distributions on the *F-K* (Gough Dissimulation Index) and found that 58% were classified

as minimizers. This lower percentage was not surprising, given the widespread criticism of this scale as a measure of minimization (Greene, 1991). However, we did find that *F-K* classified 76% of deniers as minimizers. Because the results for the *L*, *K*, and *O-S* were so similar, we selected one MMPI validity measure (the *O-S* index) as the minimization criterion for our subsequent group comparisons. We chose the *O-S* index because prior research has demonstrated its sensitivity to minimization in a variety of psychiatric and forensic populations (Brems & Johnson, 1991; Grossman et al., 1990, 1992; Grossman & Wasyliw, 1988). Also, the *O-S* index identified the largest proportion of the participants who denied the charges against them.

Rorschach protocols were administered according to the standard instructions of the Exner (1978) Rorschach Comprehensive System by an experienced licensed clinical psychologist. As required by the Comprehensive System, protocols with fewer than 14 responses were not included in the study. Only four protocols were eliminated for this reason. To assure inter-rater reliability, we followed Weiner's (1991) recommendation to rescore all Rorschach protocols with three senior clinical psychologists, all of whom had advanced training on the Rorschach Comprehensive System. These psychologists independently scored each of the protocols and initially agreed on 92% of the structural summary scores. Thus inter-rater reliability was considered adequate. The remaining 8% of scores were discussed until a consensus was reached. In all cases, raters were blind to the participants' identities.

To examine the Rorschach's sensitivity to minimization, we divided the participants into groups according to the presence of minimization on the MMPI and according to whether or not they admitted to their allegations. We compared these groups on Rorschach variables suggested by prior researchers to be the most likely to be sensitive to minimization (Exner, 1978; Ganellen, 1994). Our hypothesis was that minimizers and deniers would show increased *P*, *D*, *A*, *Lambda*, and *PER*, and decreased *R*, *Blends*, and *Zf*.

## Results

### Sensitivity of the Rorschach to Minimization and Denial

Our first analysis of Rorschach data was a comparison of participants who showed evidence of minimization on the MMPI (minimizers) to those who showed no evidence of minimization on the MMPI (nonminimizers). The results indicated that there were no significant differences between minimizers and nonminimizers on any of the Rorschach variables (see Table 1). It should be noted that the lack of differences on R between minimizers and nonminimizers and between cleric and noncleric participants allowed us to make direct comparisons on the other Rorschach variables (Exner, 1988; Lipgar, 1992). Thus in the current sample, the purported Rorschach validity variables did not demonstrate the kind of minimization shown by the participants' MMPI scores.

Next, we compared the participants who denied the allegations ( $n = 21$ ) with those who admitted to the allegations ( $n = 39$ ) on the same Rorschach variables. The results indicated no significant differences between admitters and deniers (see Table 2). There was a trend for admitters to have more PER responses than deniers ( $t = 1.86, df = 58, p = .068$ ). Deniers showed significantly more minimization on the MMPI than did admitters ( $t = 2.06, df = 58, p < .05$ ). Interestingly, we found that

the scores for 2 participants in our study fell in the exaggerated range on the *O-S* index. Both of these participants were nonclerics who admitted to the charges against them.

Next, we compared clerics to nonclerics. The only significant differences were that clerics had significantly lower Lambda scores than nonclerics ( $t = 2.41, df = 58, p < .02$ ), and significantly more Blends ( $t = 3.38, df = 58, p < .001$ ). Also, clerics showed significantly more minimization on the MMPI than the nonclerics ( $t = 2.92, df = 58, p < .005$ ).

### Associations Between Rorschach and MMPI Validity Indices

To provide information about the associational patterns between Rorschach defensiveness variables and MMPI minimization, we planned a series of partial correlations between the Rorschach variables and the MMPI validity scales. However, prior to this analysis, we conducted a stepwise multiple regression analysis to determine whether there was any need to control for age, education, clerical status, and proportion of admitters to deniers. The results indicated that higher education and denial of allegations, and not age or cleric status, were significant predictors of MMPI minimization (see Table 3). Because of this relationship between education and admit/deny status with MMPI minimization, we controlled for these variables in our partial correlation analyses.

Table 1  
Rorschach Validity Index Scores for Minimizers and Nonminimizers

Variable	Minimizers <sup>a</sup>		Nonminimizers <sup>b</sup>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>P</i>	5.5	2.5	5.3	2.2
<i>D</i>	10.2	6.3	10.9	3.7
<i>A</i>	7.9	2.3	8.6	2.4
Lambda	0.8	0.8	1.2	0.6
PER	2.2	2.6	1.3	1.1
<i>R</i>	24.0	8.7	21.2	6.5
Blends	4.9	4.1	3.7	3.2
<i>Zf</i>	13.4	6.0	11.7	3.6

Note. Independent *T* tests revealed no significant differences between minimizers and nonminimizers at the  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>a</sup> $n = 43$ , <sup>b</sup> $n = 17$ .

Table 2  
Rorschach Validity Index Scores for Admitters and Deniers

Variable	Admitters <sup>a</sup>		Deniers <sup>b</sup>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>P</i>	5.3	2.3	5.9	2.5
<i>D</i>	10.9	5.6	9.4	5.0
<i>A</i>	8.1	2.5	8.0	1.9
Lambda	1.0	0.86	0.08	0.19
PER	2.3	2.7	1.2	1.2
<i>R</i>	24.2	9.3	21.4	5.4
Blends	4.2	3.5	5.3	4.5
<i>Zf</i>	12.4	5.6	14.0	5.2

Note. Independent *T* tests revealed no significant differences between admitters and deniers at the  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>a</sup> $n = 39$ , <sup>b</sup> $n = 21$ .

Table 3  
*Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis of Participant Characteristics to Predict Minimization on the MMPI Obvious-Minus-Subtle Index*

	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Change in <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Change in <i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1 <sup>a</sup>	25.5	1, 58	.001	.309				
Step 2 <sup>b</sup>	15.7	2, 58	.001	.360	.051	4.47	1, 56	.039

<sup>a</sup>Independent variables for Step 1 include age, education, cleric status, and admit/deny status.

<sup>b</sup>Independent variables for Step 2 include education and admit/deny status.

The partial correlation analyses included the *L*, *K*, *F-K*, and *O-S* indices. Rorschach defensiveness variables were *R*, *P*, *D*, *A*, *Lambda*, *Per*, *Blends*, and *Zf*. The results of the partial correlations indicated no significant associations between Rorschach measures and MMPI minimization when we controlled for differences in demographic and admit/deny status. The one exception was a significant correlation between *L* and *Lambda* ( $r = .36, p = .005$ ).

## Discussion

We undertook this study to assess whether the Rorschach is able to detect attempts at minimization of psychopathology by alleged sex offenders. In our sample, a majority of alleged sex offenders minimized on each of the major MMPI validity scales (*L*, *K*, and *O-S*). Based on previous research, we tested the hypothesis that minimizers would show simpler and safer responses than nonminimizers by giving fewer responses, generating fewer *Blends*, and lower *Zf*, and higher *P*, *D*, *A*, *Lambda*, and *PER*. Our results indicated no significant differences in support of the original hypothesis.

Similar results occurred when we compared Rorschach protocols of participants who admitted to the allegations and those who denied them. There were no significant differences in purported Rorschach validity measures in any of these comparisons. Thus the results of earlier studies, suggesting that minimizers give simpler and safer responses on the Rorschach than do honest responders, were not supported in this study of actual forensic patients. The contrast between our findings and those of prior studies

using instructional sets suggests that normal participants asked to “look good” on the Rorschach respond differently than forensic patients who have a vested interest in appearing as normal as possible, and who may have something to hide. Thus our study supports criticisms of the generalizability of simulation studies to actual forensic populations (e.g., Rogers & Cruise, 1998).

The participants in the cleric sample were older and more educated than the nonclerics, but did not differ with regard to victims’ age or gender. Our stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated that higher education and denial of allegations, though not age or cleric status, were significant predictors of MMPI minimization. Minimization has been shown to be correlated with education on some MMPI validity scales (Greene, 1991). However, when we controlled for education and admit/deny status, we found only one significant correlation between hypothesized Rorschach validity variables and MMPI validity scales, that is, between *L* and *Lambda*. Greene (1991, p. 107) states that individuals with college educations or those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds rarely produce high raw *L* scale scores. The classic interpretation of high *L* Scale scores is that they indicate very blunt, obtuse, and naive minimization or denial, including denial of common human faults or limitations. Exner (1993) describes high *Lambda* scores as reflecting an immature defensive process more commonly found in people of lower intellectual efficiency and less cognitive flexibility. Consistent with Exner (1993), Ganellen (1996) described two alternative implications of *Lambda*. He proposed that high *Lambda* scores would reflect (a) efforts to

avoid self-disclosure or (b) attempts to simplify the stimulus field and disregard complexity. In our study, nonclerics had significantly higher Lambda scores than clerics. However, minimizers (both clerics and nonclerics) had lower Lambda scores than nonminimizers. If the first hypothesis is correct, that Lambda reflects defensiveness about self-disclosure, then we would expect minimizers to have higher Lambda scores. However, our results indicated the opposite, because nonminimizers had higher Lambda scores than minimizers. Therefore our data support the second hypothesis in suggesting that for sex offenders, high Lambda scores do not indicate minimization, but rather reflect simplification as a basic coping style.

It is noteworthy that two participants appeared to exaggerate psychopathology. Both admitted to the charges against them. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that only forensic clients who admit to their offenses have any reason to exaggerate psychopathology (Wasyliv, Grossman, & Haywood, 1994). We hypothesize that some admiters may intentionally fabricate or exaggerate symptoms of psychopathology in order to displace responsibility for their actions by claiming to have been under the influence of a mental disorder.

The present findings apply to the Rorschach's sensitivity to minimization in general without regard to possible subtypes of minimization. In future research, it may be worthwhile to explore the possibility that certain Rorschach measures may be differentially sensitive to intentional dissimulation versus self-deception (e.g., Paulhus, 1984, 1986). This could be done, for example, by comparing Rorschach scores to experimental MMPI-2 validity scales such as the Wiggins Social Desirability Scale (Wiggins, 1959) and the Positive Malingering Scale (Cofer, Chance, & Judson, 1949), which have been theoretically linked to self-deception (Nichols & Greene, 1997). These scales have also shown relatively large effect sizes in research using the original MMPI (Baer, Wetter, & Berry, 1992; Baer, Wetter, Nichols, Greene, & Berry, 1995).

In our study, the hypothesized Rorschach measures of minimization either failed to detect minimization, or were not sensitive to the same type of response bias as are MMPI validity scales. Our

data thus do not support drawing conclusions about minimization based on Rorschach scores alone. Instead, clinicians should rely on established, validated procedures for the assessment of response bias, rather than on Rorschach variables. It is possible that the lack of sensitivity of Rorschach variables may be an important strength of this test. That is, our findings may serve to support the possibility that, because of its non-obvious nature, the Rorschach may be relatively impervious to attempts at impressions management. If this is the case, the Rorschach could be an important asset in forensic situations where attempts to fake-good or fake-bad are ubiquitous (Rogers, 1997).

Thus, we found no support for the Rorschach variables we examined as potential indicators of positive impression management. Our data are consistent with those of two recent studies examining Exner variables in forensic clinical groups expected to exaggerate or minimize psychopathology (Ganellen, 1994; Ganellen et al., 1996). In each of these studies, the Rorschach proved insensitive to impression management. We are currently conducting further analyses to explore the sensitivity of Rorschach scores to specific emotional and characterological vulnerabilities in sex offenders who minimize.

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