

## Projective Techniques Usage Worldwide: A Review of Applied Settings 1995-2015

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Projective techniques have been the target of extensive criticism, from both clinicians and academicians, since the 1940s. However, the last two decades have witnessed a steady stream of rather reviled and condescending commentary directed largely on the lack of psychometric credibility of individual projective methods. The intent of the current study is to determine whether this collective movement, evident in the scholarly literature, against projective techniques has had a deleterious impact on test usage worldwide. To that end, the author identified, through an extensive literature review, published survey research that reported on test usage patterns from 1995-2015. The 28 identified studies served as the data pool to ascertain the extent of use of projective instruments within the context of psychological tests available to mental health practitioners. Around 70% of the sample was from the USA, but other countries (e.g., Africa, UK, Hong Kong, Belgium, and Brazil) were also represented. The analysis showed that at least one projective technique was ranked among the top 5 tests, in terms of usage, in 14 of the 28 studies. Moreover, human-figure-drawings, sentence completion measures, and the TAT were ranked among the top 15 tests in all but three of these studies. These findings confirm continued use (albeit to a lesser degree than 50 years ago) of projective tests among mental health practitioners worldwide, despite the onslaught of perennial criticism in the research literature.

**Keywords:** Projective Techniques, Psychological Assessment, TAT, Rorschach, Mental Health.

Copious survey data, from the 1940s through the 1980s, attest to the clinical popularity of projective techniques in mental health settings worldwide, particularly in the USA (chronologically: Louttit & Browne, 1947; Frank, 1948; Burton, 1949; Sundberg, 1961; Hinkle, Nelson, & Miller, 1968; Lubin et al., 1971; Brown & McGuire, 1976; Wade & Baker, 1977; Piotrowski & Keller, 1978, 1989; Sell & Torres-Henry, 1979; Fee, Elkins, & Boyd, 1982; Tuma & Pratt, 1982; Lubin, Larsen, & Matarazzo, 1984; Piotrowski, 1985; Sweeney, Clarkin, & Fitzgibbon, 1987; Harrison et al., 1988; Bubbenzer, Zimpher, & Mahrle, 1990; Archer et al., 1991). Thus, over these years, projective techniques were found to be popular in adult settings, used frequently in child and adolescent assessment (Cashel, 2002), relied upon by school psychologists (Hutton, Dubes, & Muir, 1992; Miller & Nickerson, 2007), and applied in forensic settings (Hamel, Gallagher,

& Soares, 2001). Interestingly, the Rorschach and TAT have been accepted in the assessment armamentarium by clinicians harboring a behavioral orientation (see Piotrowski & Keller, 1984). Furthermore, applications of projective testing to culturally-diverse populations and ethnic groups have been evident in the research literature (e.g., Dana, 1998; Lindzey, 1961; Retief, 1987).

Few survey-based studies on test usage outside the USA appeared in the 1970s; for example in Canada (La Pointe, 1974), in South America (Gonzalez, 1977), and in Germany (Schober, 1977). In the 1980s, test usage patterns were noted in a survey of the British Psychological Society (Tyler, 1986). Later, Piotrowski, Keller, & Ogawa (1992) reported on projective test usage patterns in four countries during the 1980s, i.e., USA, Japan, Netherlands, and China (Hong Kong). The analysis showed

that projective tests were quite popular in clinical assessments across all these geographical regions. However, it must be noted that during these decades, the sentiment toward projective techniques was quite unfavorable across Europe (see Mahmood, 1988; Poortinga et al., 1982; Porteous, 1986; Rausch de Traubenberg, 1976). However, survey data from the early 1990s found that projective measures were quite popular in Japan (Ogawa & Piotrowski, 1992). Unfortunately, some published reports on test use internationally tend to omit discussion of projective tests (e.g., Cheung, 2004; Evers et al., 2012; Oakland, 2004; Paterson & Uys, 2005).

### **Critical Appraisal of Projective Techniques**

Nevertheless, there were perennial concerns and critiques of projective techniques over the last 50 years (see Butcher, 2006; Piotrowski, 1984; Reynolds, 1979). It was not until the early 1990s that an onslaught of hardened opposition to use most projective techniques was evident from many quarters (Garb 1999; Garb, Wood, Lilienfeld, & Nezworski, 2002; Hunsley & Bailey, 1999; Medoff, 2010; Wood, Nezworski, & Stejskal, 1996; Ziskin, 1995). In support of these rather reviled appraisals, extensive reviews of the literature concluded that validity evidence for projective techniques has been very limited (see Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000; Mihura, Meyer, Dumitrascu, & Bombel, 2013; Motta, Little, & Tobin, 1993; Smith & Dumont, 1995), including reviews by European researchers (e.g., Wittkowski, 1996). However, other researchers, in reviewing meta-analytic studies, have reported positive differential diagnostic outcomes regarding several projective tests (e.g., Kahill, 1984; Kubiszyn et al., 2000; Piotrowski, 1999). In psychometric theory, the central contention regarding assessment instruments rests on 'validity' metrics that reflect psychological and behavioral tendencies (see Abell, Wood, & Liebman, 2001; Bornstein, 1999; Messick, 1995). With regard to projective tests, the focus of criticism was predominantly targeted at the lack of validity per se. Based on this dramatic shift (commencing around 25 years ago) to expunge projective techniques from both training emphasis and clinical practice, it would be of interest to examine extant published data

**Table1. Major Investigatory Aspects of Journal Articles on Projective Techniques (1990-2015)**

	N
<b>Topical focus</b>	
Test validity	548
Personality measures	412
Test reliability	334
Psychometrics	306
<b>Methodology</b>	
Empirical analysis	1,771
Quantitative approach	666
Interviews	71
Clinical case study	66
Qualitative design	53
Literature review	47
Longitudinal design	43
Meta-Analysis	16
<b>Age Group</b>	
Adult (18+ yrs. of age)	1,553
Adolescents (13-17 yrs. of age)	450
Children (1-12 yrs. of age)	307
Aged (65+ yrs. of age)	268

on clinical use of projective techniques in clinical and other applied settings since 1990. Moreover, it would be revealing to investigate recent usage trends with regard to individual projective tests worldwide.

In order to appreciate historical trends on the role of projective testing in applied clinical settings, the author utilized bibliometric analysis of the extant literature to: a) identify the extent of research emphasis on various topics of investigatory interest, and b) identify data-based survey studies on usage of projective techniques. To that end, a systematic search of the database PsycINFO (published by the American Psychological Association) was conducted, as this research repository is considered the leading scholarly file of research in the social and behavioral sciences worldwide. Table 1 presents areas of topical focus by researchers regarding projective tests since 1990. Psychometric credibility, empirical-quantitative approaches seem to predominate

this area of research, perhaps highlighted by meta-analysis methods in more recent years. Moreover, samples that reflect all age groups appear to be representative of this body of research. Table 2 summarizes survey findings on usage of projective techniques since 1995. This analysis includes the 28 published studies that appear in journals, based on clinician/practitioner samples worldwide. A brief discussion of general conclusions on projective test use, over the last two decades, follows below.

### Findings

This section discusses the findings on projective test usage reported in the 28 survey-type studies of either practicing psychologists/mental health practitioners or in mental health settings worldwide since 1995. Table 2 presents a summary of the country of origin, samples surveyed, and degree of test use on specific projective tests. In general, the overall analysis indicates that projective tests have continued to be used (to some degree) in the majority of countries surveyed over the past 20 years. In 50% of these studies (n=14), at least one projective technique was ranked within the top five tests in terms of usage. The Rorschach seems to be the most popular projective test, evident by being ranked among the top five tests in 12 of these 14 studies. This corroborates research-based findings (Piotrowski, 1996). Human figure drawings, sentence completion methods, and the TAT ranked among the top 15 tests in 25 of the 28 surveys in the current analysis. Validation research on these instruments show modest support (e.g., Yama, 1990). In the aggregate, a general conclusion can be confidently offered that projective tests continue to be relied upon across diverse psychological practitioner groups, in various clinical settings, for all age groups (children, adolescents, adults), across many countries worldwide, over the last two decades (1995-2015). These results support the continued popularity of and interest in projective assessment, as evidenced in scholarly books on these select instruments (Aronow, Weiss, & Reznikoff, 2013; Dana, 2014; Frick, Barry, & Kamphaus, 2010; Groth-Marnat, 2009; Harwood, Beutler, & Groth-Marnat, 2011; Rabin, 1986).

The affirmation on projective test use, based on this extensive analysis of the literature seems to counter several highly-cited studies (e.g., Lilienfeld et al., 2000; Wood et al., 2000) and research compendiums (e.g., Ziskin, 1995) that contend (the unsupported position) that projective techniques are moribund in clinical practice, lack psychometric credibility, and should be excised from graduate education and internship training. This perennial degradation of projective techniques can be aptly summarized by the comments in Ziskin (1995).

“Of all the criticisms to which projective techniques have been subject to, perhaps, the potentially most devastating one is when the examiner may engage in as much projection and subjectivity in the interpretation of responses as did the examinee in generating the responses.... may be primarily biased by clinical impression.” (p. 824).

What is particularly alarming regarding such derisive commentary from critics is that these drawbacks can be readily applied to objective tests and even behavioral assessment techniques. Unfortunately, it appears that terms like ‘Moratorium’ is leveled solely on projective techniques (Garb, 1999). Yet, interestingly, opponents of projective tests conveniently neglect to apply their stringent evaluative standards to non-projective instruments.

The current analysis shows that based on the self-report data from practicing clinicians, projective techniques continue to be an appropriate ‘instrument of choice’ in the available clinical assessment protocol of tests. Although, the extent of projective test use has been tempered over the past 50 years, based on survey data over the decades (Piotrowski & Colleagues, 1984, 1985, 1992, 1998), it appears that such techniques continue to provide rich clinical data for a sizeable segment of mental health practitioners worldwide (Blatt, 1976; Keddy & Piotrowski, 1992; Kennedy et al., 1994). Perhaps, as evidence for the high level of interest in select projective measures, research teams continue to explore creative adaptations to the Rorschach method and Human Figure Drawing applications. It should be noted that projective

techniques should not be immune from intense criticism from both clinical and research scholars - the assessment enterprise can prosper from thought-provoking challenges. However, cynical attacks on the future of projective methods would best be framed on hard data. Irv Weiner (1983), in his award presentation exclaimed that despite severe criticisms leveled against projective techniques (some 50 years ago), published survey data clearly showed that these assessment approaches were held in high regard by practicing clinicians, both in practice and academic settings. The current findings, based on objective survey data worldwide, indicate that although there has been a tepid decrease in use of projective tests over the last two decades, Weiner's contention has not been invalidated - to the dismay of opponents of projective techniques.

### Conclusion

Critical appraisal is a fundamental, and welcomed, aspect of scholarship, which clearly applies to projective methods (Butcher, 2006; Porto-Noronha, 2002). However, reviews of the recent literature confirm that projective techniques have been unfairly targeted by what can only be characterized as reviled criticism from a select group of detractors. Psychometric theory, supported in recent years by advancements in statistical modeling, posits that all assessment methods have drawbacks with regard to validity issues (Messick, 1995; Meyer et al., 2001). Thoughtful, scholarly rebuttals to attacks on the viability of projective tests, in recent years, have been scant (see Weiner, 1996, 1997, for a review). Thus, the current study was designed to adhere to

providing an objective, data-based approach in determining whether the perennial weight of criticism against projective techniques, over the last two decades, has impacted usage of this group of assessment instruments in applied settings worldwide. The findings of the analysis clearly indicate that a sizeable minority of mental health practitioners, from over 10 countries, continue to rely on the Rorschach, Thematic measures, Human-Figure-Drawings, and Sentence Completion tests as part of the clinical assessment armamentarium. Such usage is evident across various patient age groups (e.g., Kamphaus, Petoskey, & Rowe, 2000; Palmiter, 2004) and in a host of treatment settings, in addition to court-related evaluations (Gava & Dell'Aglio, 2013; Lally, 2001; Meloy, Hansen, & Weiner, 1997; Weiner, Exner, Sciara, 1996). These robust findings suggest that the clarion-call to abandon projective methods has largely fallen on deaf ears. Perhaps, this reflects the science-practice divide noted so keenly in the literature (Beutler, Williams, Wakefield, & Entwistle, 1995; Hogan & Rengert, 2008; Piotrowski, 2012). At the same time, the evidence suggests that practitioners view the merits of projective testing as a diagnostic tool, as an indicator or direction for progress in therapy, and as a compliment to the overall assessment enterprise (Basu, 2014). Future research should address the potential impact of evidence-based psychological assessment guidelines on overall projective test usage (Jensen-Doss & Hawley, 2011; Youngstrom, 2013). Finally, studies on test use patterns in countries not represented in the current analysis would provide a more accurate appraisal on the current status of projective testing worldwide (see Bartram & Coyne, 1998; Boucherat-Hue, 2001; Datu, 2013).

**Table 2. Summary and Findings on Use of Projective Techniques across 28 Studies (1995-2015)**

Study	Country	Sample	Findings
Chan & Lee (1995)	Hong Kong	50 practicing psychologists in 1993	H-T-P ranked 2 <sup>nd</sup> ; DAP 7 <sup>th</sup> ; SCT 8 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 12 <sup>th</sup> ; MAPS Test 16 <sup>th</sup> ; CAT 18 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 29 <sup>th</sup>
Kennedy et al. (1994)	USA	School psychologists	HFDs ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup> ; SCT 4 <sup>th</sup> ; H-T-P 5 <sup>th</sup> ; KFDs 7 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 9 <sup>th</sup> ; CAT 12 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 13 <sup>th</sup>

Watkins et al. (1995)	USA	412 clinical psychologists	SCT ranked 4 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 5 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 6 <sup>th</sup> ; H-F-Ds 8 <sup>th</sup> ; CAT 16 <sup>th</sup>
Borum & Grisso (1995)	USA	102 forensic psychologists/psychiatrists	33% of practitioners, in court-mandated competency evaluations, use projective tests; 30% rely on the Rorschach; other PT used infrequently
Lees-Haley et al. (1996)	USA	100 forensic neuropsychology experts	SCT ranked 10 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 23 <sup>rd</sup> ; Figure drawings 26 <sup>th</sup>
Ackermann & Ackermann (1997)	USA	Practitioners in court-related settings	Rorschach ranked #2; TAT #4; SCT 5 <sup>th</sup>
Frauenhoffer et al. (1998)	USA	Surveyed 487 mental health practitioners (psychologists, counselors, social workers)	SCT ranked 5 <sup>th</sup> ; H-F-Ds 6 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 9 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 12 <sup>th</sup>
Piotrowski et al. (1998)	USA	137 practitioners in National Register of Health Service providers in Psychology	Tests considered most important to practice: Rorschach ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup> ; TAT 5 <sup>th</sup> ; HFDs 12 <sup>th</sup> . Also, 20% of respondents felt that the Rorschach & TAT are no longer used
Muniz et al. (1999)	Spain, Portugal, & Latin America	Test use by practicing psychologists	Rorschach ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup> ; DAP 8 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 10 <sup>th</sup>
Boccaccini & Brodsky (1999)	USA	80 practicing forensic psychologists	40% of sample use the Rorschach-ranked 5 <sup>th</sup> ; only 10% use TAT-ranked 11 <sup>th</sup>
Camara et al. (2000)	USA	179 practitioners, mostly clinical psychologists	Rorschach ranked 4 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 6 <sup>th</sup> ; SCT 15 <sup>th</sup> ; CAT 16 <sup>th</sup>
Archer & Newsom (2000)	USA	346 psychologists, working with adolescents	Rorschach ranked 2 <sup>nd</sup> ; SCT 3 <sup>rd</sup> ; TAT 4 <sup>th</sup> ; H-T-P 7 <sup>th</sup> ; KFDs 11 <sup>th</sup> ; Roberts Apperception Test 19 <sup>th</sup>
Boothby & Clements (2000)	USA	Correctional (prison) psychologists	Rorschach ranked 5 <sup>th</sup> ; Projective drawings 6 <sup>th</sup>
Muniz et al. (2001)	European (Spain, UK, Holland, Slovenia, Croatia, Belgium)	3,455 professional psychologists use psychological tests	Objective psychometric tests predominate; Rorschach listed among Top 10 in Spain, Belgium, & Slovenia; TAT & CAT popular in Belgium.
Bow et al. (2002)	USA	84 psychologists, assessment practices with parents in child custody disputes	Rorschach ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup> ; TAT 6 <sup>th</sup> ; SCT 8 <sup>th</sup> . Projective drawings were used most with children.
Lally (2003)	USA	64 Diplomate-status forensic psychologists, test use in court-related evaluations	Tests considered 'unacceptable' by at least 50% of sample: Projective drawings; Rorschach; TAT; SCT
Foxcroft et al. (2004)	South Africa	Practitioners in psychological assessment	Both objective and projective tests are acceptable clinical instruments
Bekhit et al. (2005)	England	158 British clinical psychologists	50% of sample use projective drawings, but only informally in the assessment process.

de Oliveira et al. (2005)	Brazil	35 professional psychologists	TAT ranked #1; CAT-Human 4 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 5 <sup>th</sup> ; CAT-Animal 7 <sup>th</sup> ; HFDs 15 <sup>th</sup>
Hojnoski et al. (2006)	USA	170 school psychologists reported use of projective tests	About one-third (38%) use projective assessment; (in rank order) sentence completion tests, H-T-P, Kinetic Family Drawing, DAP, TAT, Rorschach, and CAT
Archer et al. (2006)	USA	152 forensic psychologists' use of projective techniques in court-related assessments	About 30% of respondents use the Rorschach; about 20% use the TAT, SCT, and projective drawings.
Herzberg & Mattar (2008)	Brazil	Clinical psychology faculty use of projective tests in practice, University of Sao Paulo	Overall, 87% of sample use projective techniques, a decrease from a decade earlier; TAT used most frequently, whereas the CAT-A usage has diminished.
Musewicz et al. (2009)	USA	215 psychologists, members of the APA or Society for Personality Assessment (SPA) views on the Rorschach (RIM)	SPA members held more favorable views toward the Rorschach; Moreover, the RIM continues to be used despite continuing criticism levels against this test.
Smith et al. (2010)	USA	404 members of the International Neuropsychological Society or National Academy of Neuropsychology surveyed on personality assessment practices	The TAT and Rorschach were used (to some degree) by about 32% of the respondents.
Vaskinn et al. (2010)	Norway	Members of the Norwegian Psychological Association (n=6246) surveyed on use & opinions on psychological tests	Older psychologists use fewer tests than younger cohorts; Psychometric credibility of individual tests is a major concern.
Donoso et al. (2010)	USA	150 professionals who conduct vocational rehabilitation evaluations	Overall, projective techniques were seldom used; Projective drawings ranked 13 <sup>th</sup> ; Rorschach 15 <sup>th</sup> ; TAT 18 <sup>th</sup>
Ackermann & Pritzl (2011)	USA	213 forensic psychologists surveyed on tests used with parents in child custody evaluations	50% of sample use the Rorschach, ranked 4 <sup>th</sup> ; 40% use SCT, 5 <sup>th</sup> ; 30% use TAT, 8 <sup>th</sup> ; 27% use H-F-Ds, 10 <sup>th</sup>
Peterson et al. (2014)	USA	926 counselors (clinical mental health, school, occupational) rated tests of all types regarding usage	H-T-P ranked 17 <sup>th</sup> , H-F-Ds 21 <sup>st</sup> , DAP 35 <sup>th</sup> , TAT 40 <sup>th</sup> , KFD 47 <sup>th</sup> , Rotter ISB 54 <sup>th</sup> , & Rorschach 57 <sup>th</sup>

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