
COMMENT

Some Reflections On *What's Wrong
With the Rorschach?*

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I have followed the most recent controversies concerning the Rorschach with a myriad of feelings such as curiosity, annoyance, delight, and occasional trepidation. One of the most recurrent emotions I have felt was admiration at the statistical knowledge of some of the participants in this academic debate, a level of understanding I would like to eventually achieve.

My decision to not engage in this debate has most recently dissolved with a professional experience that I wish to share, one that may shed some light on a limited aspect of the controversy. I was retained as a Rorschach expert in a forensic matter involving the civil commitment of a “sexually violent predator” in the State of Washington (*In Re the Detention of John Robinson*, Yakima County Superior Court No. 97–2–03149–3). I subsequently gave a deposition in the case. My role was quite circumscribed, relatively straightforward, and focused on the strength and limitations of the use of the Rorschach to understand the personality and psychology of the individual. Neither prosecution nor defense were advancing the belief that the Rorschach was designed as a risk assessment instrument or that the test could determine whether the individual was a sexually violent predator. No competent professional would make such a claim.

In my preparation for both deposition and testimony, I submerged myself in the scientific articles relevant to the current controversies surrounding the reliability, validity, and norms of the test. A summary of the findings and opinions of these authors are widely available and do not warrant repetition here and are likely well known to members of the Society for Personality Assessment and other psychologists who follow the literature. It was also suggested by the retaining attorney that I be familiar with a book he vaguely referred to as *The Trouble With the Rorschach*. My search for this book led me to *What's Wrong with the Rorschach?* by Wood, Nezworski, Lilienfeld, and Garb (2003). I purchased it and began to read.

When I open a technical or professional book for the first time, I test it in two ways: I read to see if I will learn some-

thing new, and I read to see if the authors accurately convey knowledge I already possess. The first question posed no difficulty because I immediately learned something about the personality and psychology of Wood, the first author, through a “blind analysis” of his own Rorschach in the first chapter. The only trouble with this new knowledge—which actually seemed a bit too private and somewhat bizarre—was its veracity: How could Wood “who was recently given the test” (p. 2) by an unidentified person produce a valid protocol when he arguably knows the test in exquisite detail, including all the structural ratios and indexes?

However, I did learn some new facts concerning the Rorschach's history if I continued to cast aside the trivialization in Wood et al.'s choice of words, for example, “with impeccable timing, Klopfer launched his sales efforts in a market that was just beginning to expand” (p. 52). I was also a bit troubled by some factual errors such as the statement that David Levy was an “American psychologist” (p. 49). Levy was actually a psychiatrist. I was also continuously reminded of the bold red title of the book whenever I set it down or picked it up: *What's Wrong with the Rorschach?* I found the title quite ironic given Wood et al.'s important reminder that we all be sensitive to confirmatory bias: “the door to subjectivity, bias, and the common human tendency to find what one is expecting” (p. 45). It was clear that Wood et al.'s book title advocated a certain point of view rather than setting forth a balanced look at the Rorschach. Could this be commercial advocacy in the guise of science? Could I expect to find what's right with the Rorschach in a book with such a title? I read on, more certain of a likely motive to devalue on the part of the authors but uncertain of their reasons to do so.

As the book's material became more contemporary, I began my second test: Could Wood et al. accurately convey knowledge to me that I already possessed? My first surprise came in this book on p. 244: “Exner's former student Don Viglione argued that the Rorschach was useful for predicting new crimes by murderers and rapists.” I personally know

Viglione. I could not imagine him saying this. My shock prompted me to search for the footnote on p. 369, which led me to the actual reference on p. 410. I then looked at the referenced article. Here is what Viglione (1999) actually wrote:

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Rorschach aggressive content within simplistic records from forensic evaluations may be a specific but not a very sensitive indicator of the potential for behavioral dyscontrol. Such was the case in a very impressive longitudinal, predictive field study (Rose & Bitter, 1980). The Palo Alto Destructive Content Scale, a scale encompassing general aggression but emphasizing the notion of victim and attack, predicted with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.7, p < .002$) reoffense after release from prison in a group of rapists and murderers. Certainly, any extra tool to predict reoffense might be very useful. (p. 258)

I did not suspect deliberate exaggeration, but I found it. This tremor, however, did not prepare me for the emotional jolt I was to experience when I read Wood et al.'s narrative concerning the research Gacono and I conducted on various samples of antisocial children, adolescents, and adults beginning in 1985, much of it captured in our book *The Rorschach Assessment of Aggressive and Psychopathic Personalities* (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). Wood et al. critiqued the Gacono and Meloy work by selecting, "for example," the relation between reflection responses and psychopathy to illustrate "a pattern distressingly common for the Rorschach," a lack of replication studies (p. 251). Wood et al. then stated that "ten replication studies examined the relationship between reflection responses and psychopathy. Nine of the ten found no significant relationship" (p. 251).

Now suspicious of the accuracy and motivation of Wood et al., I once again searched the footnotes cited and the references. Here is what I found:

1. Of the 10 studies, 8 were doctoral dissertations that had never been peer reviewed and published in a scientific journal.
2. Not having immediate access to most of these dissertations, I did know one quite well. I had served on the dissertation committee of Murphy-Peaslee (1995) whom Wood et al. cite as one of the studies that found no significant relationship between psychopathic and nonpsychopathic individuals and their reflection responses. Murphy-Peaslee had only female inmates in her study and did not have sufficient participants that were psychopathic (Psychopathic Checklist-Revised [Hare, 1991] > 30) to make such a comparison.
3. Wood et al. do acknowledge in a footnote (number 136) that one study did find a significant difference (Loving & Russell, 2000). Wood et al. failed to mention, however, that this was the only study that was submitted for publication, withstood peer review, and was published.

4. The 10th study appeared in a book chapter (Young, Justice, Erdberg & Gacono, 2000). Again, Wood et al. cite this as a nonsignificant finding. Knowing the authors, the study, and the book, I was dubious once again. My suspicions were well founded. Young et al. (2000) did not find a significant difference in the reflection responses of their psychopathic and nonpsychopathic participants—the p value was nearly significant at .07—but they did find that the psychopaths produced three times as many reflection responses as the nonpsychopaths. Wood et al. do not mention this.

Wood et al. then write, "similar negative findings were reported for the other 'psychopathic' Rorschach indicators identified by Gacono and Meloy" (p. 251). Gacono and I, in fact, have never advocated the position that we had identified the Rorschach indicators of psychopathy or a psychopathic constellation of scores and have strongly cautioned against this. The sign approach to the Rorschach is not something Gacono and I endorse, although Wood et al. seem to and by inference suggest that we do too. Concerning my and my colleagues' work with the reflection response, Gacono, Meloy, and Heaven wrote in 1990

The mean (reflection) score for the severe psychopaths exceeded both the Exner nonpatient adults and outpatient character disordered groups, and the mean egocentricity score for the moderate psychopaths fell below all groups. Although this trend is consistent with our predictions, we suggest a conservative interpretation of this finding. Previous findings have failed to correlate level of psychopathy with the egocentricity ratio or degree of narcissism within an antisocial sample. (p. 275)

Gacono and Meloy further wrote in 1994

When interpreted within the context of the entire protocol, analysis of reflections provides information concerning the self-focusing process, the nature of the libidinal drive, internalized object relations, and the defensive use of grandiosity and withdrawal. We emphasize the context of the entire protocol since reflections should never be interpreted in isolation from other structural data, determinants, content, form quality, or psychodynamic content analysis. (p. 252).

In a similar vein, no one would interpret the Bizarre Sensory Experiences Scale as an indicator of schizophrenia in isolation from the other numerous relevant scales on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). Wood et al. finish their attack on the Gacono and Meloy (1994) work by writing, "in any case, it now seems clear that Gacono and Meloy's findings are not replicable and that decisions made in forensic settings should not be informed by results from the Comprehensive System [CS]" (p. 252). They damn with

distortions of detail, false imputation, and the construction of a straw man (Reflections indicate psychopathy!), which they then impale (No they don't!) to generally condemn the use of the entire CS system in a forensic setting.

Wood et al. appear to be quite familiar with our work, at least evident by the 12 citations to it in their book. I would have expected them to mention the CS Rorschach data that we generated on over 400 antisocial individuals—conduct disordered children, conduct disordered adolescents, antisocial personality disordered adult males and females, psychopathic adult males, sexual homicide perpetrators, antisocial schizophrenic males, and pedophiles—to be an important contribution toward the establishment of forensic norms for the instrument, something they desperately want to see. Not a word of these samples is mentioned in Wood et al.'s book.

My selection of brief passages and references to explore in this book was not random and was both personally and professionally motivated. I have not meant this to be a comprehensive book review. What I found, however, was quite disturbing. This is a tricky and crafty book that unfortunately sullies the scientific credibility of its authors. We generally trust scientists to accurately portray the findings on which they base their opinions and conclusions. Wood et al. sacrificed this trust at the altar of commercialism and confirmatory bias. I urge those who use the Rorschach in forensic evaluations and know the research, however, to be familiar with this book. The devil dwells in the details.

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