

Experiential Qualities of the Rorschach Ink Blots¹

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It is a special pleasure for me to participate in this symposium because ever since I have thought and written about Rorschach's test it has seemed to me that *experiential data* are at the very center of what we study when we try to understand and interpret a Rorschach record. I believe that this is so whether the clinician interpreting a test is aware of it or not. The nature of the test data can be described as consisting primarily of experiences of the testee while taking the test and of his reactions to these experiences. As you know, Rorschach (1942) wrote that from his test, specifically from the experience type, one could see, not *what*, but *how* a person experiences. If we acknowledge any validity to this claim, we must assume that the test data and the abstractions from these data as represented by the score and the psychogram are based on certain qualities of the testee's way of experiencing. I believe, indeed, that not only the experience type in the technical sense of this term, that is, the relation of the movement to the color responses, but the entire test shows us something of the way in which the testee approaches, avoids or limits and in which he handles his experience of the ink blots in the context of the test task. I have attempted to demonstrate this in my book, *Experiential Foundations of Rorschach's Test* (Schachtel, 1966) and to show especially that the determinants: form, color, movement, shading represent and typically result from certain perceptual-experiential attitudes and that these attitudes furnish the rationale for the meaning of the determinants. This implies, of course, that such qualities as form, color, shading and those dynamic

factors of the blots which stimulate movement responses are not only different physical properties but also experiential qualities of the blots and that where the testee reacts or fails to react to them and where he reacts to them in one way rather than another, his reactions tell us something about the way he experiences or fails to experience these qualities.

Today I want to draw your attention to some experiential qualities of the Rorschach ink blots which are not reflected or caught in Rorschach's or other scoring systems but also give rise to significant reactions of the testee that can enrich our understanding of his personality. I shall distinguish qualities *common to all ten Rorschach blots* and qualities *particular to individual ink blots* but absent or less prominent in others. Since I cannot cover in the time allotted to me all of the material that has come to my attention, I must refer you for a more complete discussion to the book mentioned before.

When I use the terms experience or experiential, I refer not only to conscious experience, to experience taking place in focal awareness, but also to unconscious, peripheral and other marginal experience of which the testee is not consciously or not articulately aware. When I speak of experiential qualities of the ink blots, I refer to qualities that cannot be described adequately by measurements such as used in physics and mathematics, just as the experiential qualities of a landscape or a painting or a human face cannot thus be described. They can be described only from the perspective of human experience, the experience of a man looking at the landscape or at the ink blot. This implies that not all people will experience the landscape or the ink blot in the same

way. They will respond selectively, one to some, another to other qualities of the ink blots. Yet, all these qualities are aspects of the ink blots, and most of us can experience them all, if our attention is drawn to them even though spontaneously each one of us might experience one rather than the other quality.

I want to single out first two qualities that are common to all ten ink blots. One is the *unfamiliar structure* of the ink blots, the other their *ambiguity*, the many different ways in which they can be seen and interpreted. I believe that these two qualities have a strong experiential impact on the testee, the nature of which differs in different testees. It is often said that the Rorschach ink blots are unstructured. I do not think that this is true. But their structure, Gestalt, shading, coloration is *unfamiliar* to the testee. This quality has many important implications. One of them, as you know, is that the unfamiliarity and the ambiguity of the ink blots make it possible to see the *difference* in the way different people see, experience and respond to them, differences which would become not at all or much less readily apparent if we showed them a familiar object. While this furnishes the basis for the whole test, I want to draw your attention to another quality inherent in the unfamiliar structure of the ink blots, a quality that I can describe best as the *experiential impact of the unknown*. The significance of the encounter with the unknown is based on man's basic capacity of *openness toward the world*, which distinguishes his world from the much more closed world in which even the higher animals live. The encounter with the unknown, the new, the unfamiliar is apt to reveal how much of this openness, usually at its peak in childhood, man has maintained or how much he lives in a closed world, protecting himself from such encounters. These two possibilities are based on the fact that to man the unknown is both frightening, so that he wants to flee from it, and challenging, inviting exploration. Whether the anxiety aroused by the unknown

wins over the wish to expand one's relatedness in the encounter with the unfamiliar, or whether the anxiety is overcome by this wish decides the fate of man's basic openness toward the world (Schachtel, 1959). Similarly, the small "world" of the Rorschach ink blots invites exploration, and the test instruction: "What might this be?" asks for it. While practically all testees understand this explicit question, the unspoken invitation presented by the strange, unfamiliar, phantastic ink blots is heard and accepted by some, unheard or avoided by others. Some feel intrigued by the ink blots and welcome their challenge, others feel consciously or unconsciously frightened by them; they feel like a fish out of water when asked to leave the secure and "known" world of familiar objects² of their environment for the strange and ambiguous world of the ink blots.

A familiar object is easily disposed of unless one tries to see it from a perspective different from that which has made it familiar. The unfamiliar object is potentially capable of renewing and bringing to the fore man's basic situation: of being in the wide open, the pathless, with few innate patterns to guide him, of having countless possibilities of finding *his* way in and to the world open to him. This situation is both his glory and his predicament; it constitutes his potential richness, his freedom, as well as it threatens him with anxiety, from which he may try to escape by protecting himself in a closed, but stagnant world of a repertoire of familiar pathways. I believe that the sensitivity of Rorschach's test to anxiety reactions is based mainly on the combined effect of the phantastic, unfamiliar quality of the ink blots and the non-directive struc-

²Of course the "familiarity" of even the most familiar object is due only to the fact that usually we approach it from the same inner perspective, hence do not discover the inexhaustible depth and variety of unfamiliar aspects under which it may be seen. To discover these other aspects is the work of creative experience such as is found among the great painters, poets, scientists, but also among all those others who have preserved and expanded the child's capacity for wonder and discovery.

¹Parts of this paper are based on material since published in a book (Schachtel, 1966).

ture of the Rorschach test situation, and only secondarily on the specific stimulus of the pronounced shading of cards IV, VI and VII which the Rorschach literature usually treats as the main catalyst of anxiety reactions. It is the impact of the unknown, the unfamiliar, which may lead to what I have called orientation shock in card I and to a predominantly defensive handling of the test task.

Not only are the ink blots unfamiliar to the testee (even if he should have seen them before), but their ambiguity allows for very many *possibilities* of perceiving them and, in responding, giving definite form to one or another of these possibilities. In this respect they confront the testee with a freedom of choice and with the predicament of this very freedom. This touches upon a basic condition of human existence which has been a major subject of Kierkegaard's (1844) thought. He wrote that anxiety is the dizziness of freedom arising when freedom looks into the abyss of its own possibilities and grasps at finiteness in order to find a hold in it. But in trying to find a hold in the finite, freedom loses itself (Kierkegaard, 1844, pp. 56-57). Man is confronted throughout his life with many possibilities of how and what he could or might be or do. He can play with some of these possibilities; indeed he has to play with them as most children do, in order to arrive at choices. But if he does not go beyond this, his play becomes idle as it often does in our day dreams. This may arouse the anxiety of by-passing life. If we do make choices and act on them, we give up part of the freedom of unlimited possibility. And if the choice becomes a protection against the ever renewed challenge of the freedom of being able to live, think, act in ways other than the accustomed ones of social role, habit, custom, routine, then we may experience the anxiety of un-lived life, of being dead while we are still living.

In some respects, the miniature world of the unfamiliar, ambiguous ink blots resembles this situation in that the test task poses a question to which there is no "correct" answer although there are

a thousand answers. And even after the testee has given a response to the question, it still remains open because it is possible to give innumerable other "answers." The testee, confronted with the "abyss" of the possibilities of the ink blot, has to decide which of the possible answers he will give and at which point he feels that he has met the task to his satisfaction even though he may be aware of the fact—not all testees are—that there remain other possibilities. For quite a few people this decision is practically impossible to make, at least without the—real or imagined—approval of the tester.

There are still other qualities which all the Rorschach ink blots have in common and which have a significant bearing on the way in which they are experienced by the perceiver. They have a *phantastic* quality. Their *size*, while not exactly alike in terms of geometric measurement, remains within a certain *scale*. If they were significantly smaller or larger, the quality of their impact would be changed. As Rorschach pointed out, they have a *picture-like* quality and a certain *spatial rhythm* (Schachtel, 1966, pp. 25-30). Instead of discussing these qualities, however, I want to turn to some experiential qualities characteristic of *individual ink blots* or shared by some and not by others. Rorschach has discussed briefly some of the different qualities of the various blots; but most of his observations concern the degree to which the different blots stimulate or make difficult the giving of Whole, Detail, Space, Form and Movement responses; the presence or absence of color; and the differing degree of difficulty of finding responses to the different blots. But he also mentions that card IV is generally considered as "beautiful" but difficult to interpret, and that card VIII is harmonious in color and form, card IX unharmonious (Rorschach, 1942, p. 52). These last observations refer to the aesthetic appeal of the blots, a significant type of experiential quality, but only one among many such different qualities in the individual ink blots. These qualities can

be described best by pointing out a variety of *perceptual themes* some of which are more likely to be evoked by certain ink blots while others are more characteristic of others. I shall give a few examples of such themes and then discuss briefly methodological problems of interpreting responses to the experiential qualities inherent in these themes.

To clarify the nature of these experiential qualities and the method of interpreting responses to them, I want to contrast them with the frequent use or misuse of two themes often ascribed to cards IV and VII and the equally frequent fallacies that occur when responses to these cards are interpreted in the light of these themes. I am referring to the very widespread teaching according to which card IV is the "father" card and VII the "mother" card (Brown, 1953; Rosen, 1951; Sims, 1960) and to the even more reckless proposition that the testee's perception of the two dominant figures in cards II and III reveals his unconscious (II) and conscious (III) perception of the relation between his parents and that the testees react to card V "as to themselves or their concepts of themselves" (Richards, 1958). While none of these authors claim that cards IV and VII always are the "father" and "mother" cards, respectively, the belief that this meaning can be assumed regularly is very widespread. In many years of teaching advanced students of Rorschach, I have been told by a great number of them that they have been taught this. I do not know to what extent these reports are reliable and to what extent the student's need for a fixed meaning may lead to a distortion of what he has been taught.

If the implications of such teachings were valid, they would constitute important experiential qualities of cards IV and VII. However, they are mistaken on several grounds. First, they confuse *specific content* with *perceptual-experiential quality* of a blot which may or may not be related, in the testee's experience, to such specific content. Second, where the testee does not see a man or such equivalent of a man as a power-

ful animal, a monster, a giant, etc., in card IV, the assumption is often made that, nevertheless, his response refers to "father," possibly in the form of denial. Such fixed assumptions would certainly simplify the task of interpretation if they were valid. However, it is misleading to believe that any specific content can be assigned to any particular card and to use such a belief as the basis for the further assumption that, whatever the testee's response to that card may be, it will have some relation to the assumed meaning of the card. Instead, it is more fruitful and relevant to examine the perceptual-experiential qualities of the different cards and the reaction, or absence of it, to these qualities. Card IV, for example, may be experienced as something massive and dark but also as mysterious or, according to Rorschach's observation, as beautiful. If it is experienced as massive and dark, this may arouse anxiety or it may arouse feelings of identification with something powerful. Where it arouses anxiety we have no way of knowing, without further data, whether the testee's proneness to anxiety originates in his relation to his father or whether the most significant, powerful and anxiety-arousing person in his life was his mother and his proneness to anxiety derives from his relation to her or from what other source it may stem. Similarly, such experiential qualities as lightness, softness, gracefulness, precariousness, openness which may be seen and often are seen in card VII, are by no means always related to the testee's experience of his mother, or of women in general. What is significant is to what experiential qualities of the various blots the testee is selectively attentive or inattentive and what the quality of his reaction to them is.

I have just mentioned a few experiential qualities such as massiveness, darkness, lightness, softness, precariousness, openness. I want now to illustrate in more detail what I mean by experiential qualities of, or as we might also call them, perceptual themes typically evoked by some of the blots. A whole

cluster of such themes is intimately related to man's experience of himself in the gravitational field of the earth. These themes are manifested, literally, in man's stance, posture, gait, and other expressive components of his movements; figuratively, in the whole conduct of his life. They are reflected and play a significant role in his experience of himself and feeling about himself: how firmly or shakily, how rigidly or flexibly, how balanced or precarious he stands and moves on the ground and in his life. Language testifies to the ubiquitousness and significance of this theme in man's life with such expressions as to stand one's ground, to be an upright person, to take a stand, to be steadfast, and their opposites, such as to waver, to falter, and so forth. Erwin Straus, in an illuminating essay, analyzes the implications of man's upright posture which is central to the many problems inherent in the theme of man's relation to the ground he stands on (Straus, 1949). The experiments of Witkin and his associates on the perception of the upright and of the position of one's body and on the maintenance of the upright posture throw interesting lights on and raise many relevant questions concerning this theme (Witkin, 1949; Witkin, Lewis, Hertzman, Machover, Meissner, & Wapner, 1954).

In responding to the Rorschach blots many people project their conscious and unconscious feelings concerning this cluster of themes onto the blots. One of these themes can be described as that of the *solid base* versus the *precarious base*. This theme is most frequently evoked by blots VI, VII and IX, in which the lower D area (in the case of VI scored as W by Klopfer) can be perceived readily as the base for the rest of the figure. Card VII is of special interest in this context. In the frequent perception of the bottom D of VII as the base for the rest of the figure, most people consider this base as solid. This percept changes when the base is seen as a cloud. It changes also when the perceiver focuses on the fact that the bottom edge of this base detail curves upward from its center and, thus, does

not seem to them to rest firmly on the ground. This relatively infrequent percept, because of the unusual focus of attention, is a rather clear indication of some preoccupation with the security of the base. So is the more frequent one in which the focus is on the narrow links between the bottom D and the four upper D of Card VII with the feeling that the connection of the upper figures with the base is precarious. Sometimes the theme of the base occurs also in card IV; here some testees may remark that the feet of the human or human-like figures often seen in this blot do not stand on the ground but, in relation to the bottom center D, are up in the air. Some of them will account for this by seeing the figure as seated on the bottom center D, with feet dangling, while others will emphasize more the lack of something to stand on. Even those who see the figure as seated with feet dangling express in such a response the feeling that the feet are up in the air. This contrasts with the more usual perception in which the figure is seen as standing, walking or jumping up and down. The contrast is significant since the latter percepts lack the preoccupation with the ground to stand on while the former may be due to such a concern. Even more striking is the search for a base or ground where the structure of the blot does not suggest a base. I have observed this in a few records in card V where some testees expressed the feeling that the animal or person seen in the whole or in the center D of V had nothing to stand on? The theme of the base may appear in the form of a selective attention to the reassuring presence of a firm base or in the form of doubts in its stability or solidity, of percepts concerning the secure or precarious way in which figures stand or rest on the base, or in the form of concern or fear about the absence of a firm base. A marked appearance of these themes usually points to the testee's feelings of insecurity

²This percept is, of course, very different from the frequent one in which a bat, bird or butterfly is seen as flying.

which takes the form of concern whether he has a firm ground to stand on or whether he can stand firmly on his own feet, figuratively or sometimes also literally. He may or may not be aware of these feelings.

Another important experiential theme concerns the *central axis* or the median detail (mD) of the blots and its explicit or implicit relation to the lateral parts of the blot. This perceptual theme often relates to the testee's feelings of inner strength or weakness, wholeness or dividedness, reliance on self or on protective defenses or on others. Insofar as the central axis is seen as giving or failing to give central, inner stability, hold and support to the surrounding figure, it is also related to another aspect of the just discussed themes of man's experience of himself in his upright posture in the gravitational field of the earth. The theme is evoked usually by those blots in which either the central axis or the median detail are pronounced. This is the case in cards IV, VI, VIII, IX which have a more or less marked central axis extending throughout the blot, and in card I which has a prominent median Detail, the frequently seen person in the center. The central axis together with the symmetry of the blots creates a semblance of many of the blots to organic forms, especially to vertebrate anatomy. Many testees actually perceive a spinal cord in the central axis of some of the blots; both they and many others often identify with the central axis. They may do so by identifying their whole person or only their inner core, their—figurative or literal—backbone with the axis of the ink blot. Where a spinal column or a pole is seen in the central axis, the testee may nevertheless identify his whole person with this percept in the pars-pro-toto mode frequent in primary process thought. These identifications are usually not in clear awareness and often they are unconscious. When there is reason to assume that such an identification plays a role in an axial percept, two questions have to be raised. First, how is the quality of the axis

perceived? Second, what is the quality of the relation between the axis and the lateral areas of the blot?

The axis may be perceived as solid, as a backbone or a pole. Its relation to the lateral parts of the blot, consciously or unconsciously, may be that it gives hold and firmness to them, holds them upright. But it may also be seen as hollow or weak rather than firm and strong, or as indicating a rift or a split between the two lateral parts, or it may have both dividing and uniting functions as, for example, a zipper. Or it may be perceived as a solid object used to sever the two parts, often with aggressive or destructive implications such as a knife, a dagger, the path of a bullet (sometimes seen in the center axis of card VI).

In relation to the lateral parts, the mD may be seen as shielded and protected or as oppressed or caught by the lateral parts rather than as supporting them and being the source of strength and stability. The perception of a soft, vulnerable, weak or fragile center shielded or held together by a tougher or stronger outside (sometimes seen in card VIII) may represent a defensive armour and a body image which resembles the structure of a shellfish or crustacean more than a vertebrate! In still other percepts the testee may see the lateral parts of the blot clinging for support to the center and he may identify with the lateral parts rather than with the center as did Oberholzer's patient in Rorschach's posthumously published case study.

Time does not permit me to describe in detail other perceptual themes of experiential significance. To indicate their wide and varied range let me just mention some of them: unity and dispersal; connectedness and separateness; solidity and fragility; directedness and diffusion;

³Of course, a vertebrate body image does not preclude the concern with the protective or vulnerable boundaries of the body and the self. Thus both, the concern with the strength or weakness of the central axis and the strength or weakness of the protective body boundaries may also find symbolic expression in the same percept.

definiteness and vagueness, formlessness, elusiveness; smoothness and raggedness or jaggedness; fluid and angular lines; openness and closedness; viable space, freedom to move and crowdedness, collision. In addition to these experiential qualities relating to form and structure, there are others relating to color, shading and texture, such as warmth and coldness; softness and hardness; dryness and wetness; smoothness and sliminess; lightness and darkness, and so forth.

In order to interpret the reactions of the testee, it is necessary first to keep the different experiential qualities in mind and to find those responses which refer explicitly or implicitly to them. In some of these responses it is important to find out with which area or quality of the blot the testee identifies himself and, if there are multiple identifications, which is more likely to be conscious and which unconscious, and which is of more basic importance for the structure of his personality. As a rule of thumb one may assume that the recurrence of a similar perceptual quality and of similar dynamic relations points to the importance of the trend expressed in these percepts. Similarly, a sensitivity to very slight structural or other qualities of the blot often is more significant than the more popular reactions to very obvious qualities. Of particular significance is the kind of originality which reverses a commonly or frequently perceived quality of the blot.

Let me conclude with an example of various degrees of such a reversal. Card V probably is the card with most unity, offering the most compelling and easily seen W, in the popular bat, butterfly or bird responses. Usually there is no special articulation of the central axis which, in these responses, is implicitly assumed to be the body of the flying creature, sometimes with explicitly mentioned antennae or ears at the top and legs or a tail at the bottom center. If the wings are seen as disproportionately large, the percept shifts in the direction of less unity and, possibly, an im-

plicit strain on the center axis which becomes explicit if the wings are perceived as too heavy for the body. If, however, this blot is seen as split in the center, or falling apart, this runs counter to the structure of the blot, hence indicates a very significant and strong trend in the testee to experience himself as torn apart or falling apart and finding no central support in himself.

The interpretation of a testee's reactions to the various experiential qualities of the ink blots which are not caught by the usual scores should be made, of course, only in the context and the light of the overall picture emerging from the test material.

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Whose Experience?

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If we have learned anything at all from the years of work by modern clinicians, it is this: that all that anyone has to go on is his own experience. On this fact—that each one of us has immediate access to nothing else than, or in addition to, what he experiences—I think everyone would agree: our panelists, their listeners, and even those who would not come here today because they suspect us of arguing either a lost cause or a foolish question.

But if this is so, as we would all agree, then it is reasonable to ask the question: how in the world do I ever know that what I am experiencing is "mine?" The quotation marks are necessary, because we have still not established that "my" experience is "mine" in the way that, let us say, my automobile is, or my job, or my right arm, or my wife. A related question, and one that is even more central for a clinical discipline, is this: how in the world do I ever know what part of my experience is mine and what part is yours? For example, when I am in a situation with you, I have some experiences, and they are, of course, immediately and necessarily "mine"—but if they pertain to you and to "your" experiences, as of course they necessarily do, what is mine and what is yours? Do I know my own experience in the same sense that I know yours?

Well, fortunately for our topic, the answer to this question at least is quite clear. As we would all agree, I know my own experience in the sense that, to me, it is immediate; and I know yours in quite another way, in the sense that it is once removed. This is how I can easily tell the difference. There will

be extreme cases, of course, in which a person may not be able to make the distinction: he will confuse what *he* thinks or believes or fears or wishes with what properly belongs to some other person. Indeed, clinicians have names for such states, and so we teach our students how to recognize and label the states—even if as yet we know little about how to alter them for the better. But even though we may not know too much about what causes the failure to distinguish an experience of "mine" from an experience of "yours," we are, I think, fairly clear about the difference. Indeed, it is simple enough to imagine a continuum that we might label Mine-Not Mine, and then to think of examples of experiences that belong at either end of the continuum. A very good example of an experience that is clearly, evidently, immediately Mine, is the experience of sudden pain. When this occurs to me, and at the moment that it occurs to me, there is no possibility that I could mistake it for an experience that is happening to you or to him or to no one at all. You may recall the little anecdote about the Zen master who answered his disciple's plea for a revelation of the truth by beating him soundly with a stick. Whatever this may signify in the Zen mystique, to me it makes precisely the point that I am making here: that the experience of sudden pain is immediately, unmistakably, and if I may say so, *truly* Mine, without any doubt; it has the very ring of truth that the Zen disciple might have been vainly seeking in a world of false or misleading communications.

Just as clear an example of what is Not-Mine, at the other end of our continuum, is my experience of the content of a mathematical formula. If I am

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