

Reversing Rorschach

Ink-blot tests might be able to tell us more about creativity than personality.

Richard Gregory

The Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach (1884–1922) died only a year after the publication of his famous ink-blot test. Making ink blots to elicit weird and wonderful perceptions was a children's game — *Klecksographie* — that he probably knew well, for he was nicknamed “Klex” as a child. Rorschach produced only one major publication, *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception* (Huber, Berne, 1921), but it launched just about the largest literature in psychology.

He found that some ink blots were better than others at eliciting strange perceptions that might be used clinically: “In the first place, the forms must be relatively simple; complicated pictures make the acquisitions of the factors of the experiment too difficult. Furthermore, the distribution of the blots on the plate must fulfil certain requirements of composition or they will not be suggestive, with the result that many subjects will reject them as ‘simply an ink blot’ without consideration of other possible interpretations.”

He used symmetrical patterns: “It has a disadvantage in that it tends to make answers somewhat stereotyped. On the other hand, symmetry makes the conditions the same for right- and left-handed subjects; furthermore, it facilitates interpretation in certain inhibited and blocked subjects. Finally, symmetry makes possible the interpretation of whole scenes.”

Some plates evoked responses to details, others to the whole pattern. Colours evoked kinaesthetic movement responses. Some blots were ‘harder’ than others, and for some ‘whole’ answers were almost impossible. He classified answers according to whether the subject saw a fixed form, movement or colour. The type of response was seen as important for psychological assessment and diagnosing mental illnesses.

Most significant were the reported forms, seen most clearly by “pedants and depressives” (academics?): “Most interpretations are determined by the form of the blot alone, both in normal and abnormal subjects. The subject searches among his visual memories for that one which in form, especially in outline, most closely resembles the entire figure or one of its details. In accomplishing this, he does not visualize the object ‘seen’ as moving, but as a fixed form.” Animals were seen most frequently, and seeing oneself was most common in schizophrenics.

Rorschach used just ten ink blots. This launched a major industry in clinical psy-

chology that has only recently begun to decline. I am not competent to assess its reliability for assessing individuals; but I suggest that reversing the test — from kinds of people to kinds of patterns — might show what stimulates creativity. This is a clear experimental question: which kinds of pattern evoke the richest variety of perceptions and ideas?

This Reversed Rorschach should reveal principles of creativity. For a start, one may think of realistic pictures as representing external objects, whereas ink blots and abstract paintings evoke internal creations. Which patterns or pictures are most evocative should tell us what switches us on most powerfully to create new perceptions and ideas. It should reveal the creative nature of mind, for generating perceptions and conceptions for art and perhaps also science.

The refrigerator in my kitchen sports ‘magnetic poetry’. This has words or phrases as units which can be moved around. These are far more evocative than individual letters. Perhaps much the same applies to concepts for teaching science: too ‘atomic’ facts will not suggest connections or concepts; too ‘molecular’ will inhibit originality. It seems that there is an optimal degree of structure for the seeds of creativity to grow into perceptions and ideas. Teaching should start with optimal molecules rather than atoms. This mental chemistry of creation might be developed by experiments with Reversed Rorschach ink blots, and perhaps generalized to language and thinking.

What of creation by painters? Do their partially completed paintings change before their eyes? Do phantasms — to be nurtured



A scowling, mustachioed man? A walrus? A chinese dragon mask?

or exorcised — suggest the next move of the brush? Perhaps much of this applies to writers and scientists; for as ink-blot fantasies show, conceptual and perceptual processes are entwined in an intimate dance.

This may be too close for comfort to the predicament of train drivers: it is reported that, in Britain, about two trains pass a red signal every day. The driver is looking for long periods at muddled, quite symmetrical structures — rather like staring at an unfolding ink blot. Does the scene change form and meaning in his sight? Can red lights merge or disappear?

It seems to be profoundly true that all perceptions are loosely controlled hallucinations. Thus colours, triggered by wavelengths of light, are created by brain processes and psychologically projected into the external world. No doubt there is something out there, though as science advances how this is described departs ever more from any appearances. Whatever is out there, perception's mental worlds can kill and maim when crucially mismatched to physical reality.

Although their clinical validity may be dubious, ink blots might evoke creativity in controlled ways, allowing us to understand and perhaps tame the danger lurking behind our fanciful eyes. ■

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