Projective techniques involve asking subjects to interpret or fill in visual stimuli, complete sentences, or report what associations particular words bring to mind. Because of the leeway provided by the tests, subjects project their own personalities onto the stimulus, often revealing personal conflicts, motivations, coping styles, and other characteristics.

The best known projective test is the Rorschach test, created in the 1920s by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922). It consists of a series of 10 cards, each containing a complicated inkblot. Some are in black and white, some in color. Subjects are asked to describe what they see in each card. Test scores are based on several parameters: 1) what part of the blot a person focuses on; 2) what particular details determine the response; 3) the content of the responses (what objects, persons, or situations they involve); and 4) the frequency with which a particular response has been given by previous test takers. A number of different scoring methods have been devised for the Rorschach test, some aimed at providing greater objectivity and validity for this highly impressionistic form of assessment. However, many psychologists still interpret the test freely according to their subjective impressions. Some also take into account the subject's demeanor while taking the test (cooperative, anxious, defensive, etc.).

Another widely used projective test is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) introduced at Harvard University in 1935 by Henry Murray. Test takers look at a series of up to 20 pictures of people in a variety of recognizable settings and construct a story about what is happening in each one. They are asked to describe not only what is happening at the moment shown in the picture but also what events led up to the present situation and what the characters are thinking and feeling. They are encouraged to interpret the pictures as freely and imaginatively as they want and to be completely open and honest in their responses. As with the Rorschach test, the psychologist often interprets the test results subjectively, focusing on any recurring themes in responses to the different pictures. However, scoring methods have also been developed that focus on specific aspects of the subjects' responses, including aggression, expression of needs, and perceptions of reality.

Still another type of projective technique is the sentence completion test. Many tests of this type have been developed, some of which investigate particular personality features. Others are designed specifically for children or adolescents. Subjects are asked to complete sentences with such open-ended beginnings as “I wish . . .” or “My mother . . .” Although the same sentence beginnings are shown to different test takers, there are no norms for comparing their answers to those of previous subjects. Still other types of projective tests have been developed, including some that ask the subject to create drawings or complete a story.

Compared to the more objective questionnaire-type personality assessments, projective tests are difficult to score, and questions are often raised about their degree of reliability and validity. In most cases, not enough research has been done on such tests to determine scientifically how effective they actually are in assessing personality. Results of the Thematic Apperception Test obtained by different scorers have proven relatively reliable when specific features (such as aggression) are measured. However, the reliability of the Rorschach test, which has also been researched, has generally proven unsatisfactory because test results are dependent on the psychologist's judgment. Different interpretations of the same set of responses may vary significantly. Although newer scoring systems—including one that allows for computer scoring—may yield greater reliability, free interpretation of the test is valuable to clinicians.

In addition to their weaknesses in terms of reliability and validation, projective tests also require more time and skill to administer than more objective testing methods. However, they continue to be employed because of their usefulness in helping psychologists obtain a comprehensive picture of an individual's personality. The results are most useful when combined with information obtained from personal observation, other test scores, and familiarity with a client’s previous history. In addition, projective tests make it especially difficult for subjects to skew their answers in a particular direction as they sometimes attempt to do with other types of assessment.

Further Reading
Psyche
In psychology, an individual’s consciousness.

The term psyche actually takes its meaning from ancient myth. In Roman mythology, Psyche represented the human spirit and was portrayed as a beautiful girl with butterfly wings. Psyche was a beautiful mortal desired by Cupid, to the dismay of Cupid’s mother Venus. Venus demanded that her son order Psyche to fall in love with the ugliest man in the world. Cupid refused and loved Psyche himself, visiting her only by night and commanding that she not look at him. Eventually, Psyche broke Cupid’s rule and lit a lamp to look upon his face. For this disloyalty, Cupid abandoned her and Psyche wandered through the world in search of her lover. Eventually she was reunited with Cupid and made immortal by Jupiter.

The modern day use of the concept of psyche still incorporates the meaning of the human soul or spirit. It can also refer to the mind. Many different branches of science may have an interest in studying matters of the psyche. An online academic journal titled Psyche illustrates the wide range of study around the concept of psyche; participants come from the fields of cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, physics, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence. The magazine refers to its mission as an “interdisciplinary exploration of the nature of consciousness and its relation to the brain.” Topics discussed regarding psyche in this diverse forum have included animal consciousness, the visual brain, and the triangular circuit of attention.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875–1961) believed that the psyche was self regulating, and that it became more defined as a person went through the process of “individuation.” Jung’s theories, which he called analytical psychology, also included recognition and exploration of a “collective unconsciousness.”

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