Field Theory and Projective Techniques
Morton Deutsch
Research Center for Human Relations, New York University

Few things evade our attention so persistently as that which is taken for granted. The stranger, the visitor from another society, is often able to perceive things which we ourselves as members of the society do not notice. As Ichheiser (6) has pointed out “obvious facts tend to remain invisible.” One of the functions of systematic theory is to make the obvious visible. My purpose here is to consider some of the rather far-reaching implications of obvious, but neglected, aspects of projective situations.

From the “field theory” point of view one of the most obvious and important things that can be said about most human situations, and certainly this is true of the projective test situation, is that it is a social situation. In the literature of projective techniques, apart from a few notable exceptions—e.g., by Schachtel (18), Miller (10), Hult (8, pp. 181-229), Hult (4), and a few others, this has rarely been stated with sufficient emphasis. Now I know that clinicians who utilize projective techniques certainly are aware that social influences operate in the projective situation. However, the statement I am making has considerably more radical implications for the theory of projective techniques than is commonly realized. It is no incidental consideration that the projective test situation is a social situation; it is, to plagiarize Graham Greene, “The Heart of the Matter.”

To give a peripheral place to the social nature of the projective situation in building a theory of projective techniques is analogous to constructing a skyscraper without an adequate framework or foundation. The behavior of a subject in a projective testing situation occurs within a social framework and explicit theoretical concern with the nature of this framework is a necessary condition for a meaningful theoretical basis for making predictions from the subject’s behavior.

A second related and important but frequently neglected consideration is that the observable behavior of a subject is mediated by and largely determined by his perception or subjective definition of the situation rather than by personality tendencies considered without regard to situation or by the “objective” situation, without regard to personality tendencies.

I shall attempt to spell out the implications of the points I have just made in some detail but before I do I would like to briefly characterize the main features of the theoretical approach which leads to a focus on such considerations as I have just mentioned.

The Characteristics of Field Theory

There are three core notions in the “field-theoretical” approach. The most central notion is that all psychological events (perceiving, thinking, recalling, dreaming, doing, hoping, etc.) are conceived to be a function of the person and the environment viewed as one constellation of interdependent factors. Lewin has termed this constellation of interdependent factors the life space. In other words, all
psychological events are conceived to be determined not by isolated properties of the person or of his environment but by the mutual relationships among the totality of co-existing facts which comprise the life space. Individual psychological processes are, in Levin's words, "always to be derived from the relation of the concrete individual to the concrete situation." The concrete projective situation not only refers to the stimulus material of the test itself but also to the interpersonal situation composed by the examiner and the subject, the institutional setting of the examination, the cultural definitions with respect to the testing situation, as well as to the immediate physical conditions under which the test is taken. The concrete individual not only refers to the perceptual-motor apparatus, the tension system, cognitive structures but also to the more immediate at and expectations of which the individual has with regard to the projective situation. It is the interrelation of the various aspects of the concrete individual and of the concrete situation which produce the psychological processes which manifest themselves in the subject's behavior. In other words, to make statements about a person's defense mechanisms without regard to the situation in which they are likely to occur is, in my view, a sort of verbal "hocus-pocus."

A second notion is that psychological events have to be explained in psychological terms. One has to avoid using "achievement concepts" (that is, concepts which deal simply with what much is physically or socially accomplished) or other simple external criteria to identify or define, in a one-to-one manner, a psychological state or process.

In essence, this means that one has to deal with what exists psychologically, with what is real for the person being studied and not merely with situations seen through an objectively viewed. Thus, to understand an individual's behavior in a situation of reward, we have to be concerned with the psychological impact of the reward—e.g., whether it is perceived as a "bribe" or as a sign of acceptable rather than simply with the external situation of reward. Similarly, to understand a subject's behavior in a testing situation, we have to be concerned with the subject's definition of it—e.g., whether it is achievement-oriented or whether it is play-oriented rather than only with the situation the examiner tries to create.

The third basic notion is that psychological events have to be explained in terms of the properties of the psychological field in which at least at events occur. Even though a past event can create a certain condition which carries over into the present, it is nevertheless, the present condition which is influential in the present. Events do not trace back to the past circumstance but are present without working through a series of intervening psychological fields and without their significance, for the present, being very much influenced by the other factors which comprise the present psychological field. The emphasis on present determinants is not meant to deny the significance of a developmental approach. Quite to the contrary, as Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry (16) has shown, the developmental approach may be considerably aided by a field-theoretical orientation.

However, I think it can be said that a field theoretical approach, unlike some developmental approaches, does not assume that adult behavior can only be comprehended in terms of infantile motives and techniques. Issues arise in the adult life which have importance in their own right; action and thinking are directed in terms of present forces which reflect the structural conditions in the immediate social field—forces which are more than indirect expressions of childhood attitudes. Furthermore, with the increase in cognitive capacities, with the extension of time perspective, the adult is not merely an enlarged child, he is transformed into a social being whose actions take place in an enlarging context wherein his actions and the actions of others have mutual relevance.

These three basic notions, which I have briefly summarized, have provided the theoretical orientation for a great number of research investigations in individual and social psychology. I shall try to outline the implications of these studies for projective techniques. First, I shall discuss the projective test situation as a social situation and then, later, I shall consider some of the implicit social psychological notions in current projective interpretation.

The Projective Test Situation as a Social Situation

In my introductory remarks, I have indicated that one of the basic things that can be said about the projective test situation (or, more generally, most human situations) is that it is a social situation. The distinguishing fact about social, as contrasted to non-social situations, is that they are psychologically represented in each of the participants. In a non-social situation—as, for example, in our relation to an innate object—expecting, perceiving, and intending take place on one side, whereas in relations between people these processes take place on both sides and mutually influence each other. To put it in another way, the participants in a social situation experience the fact that the others in the situation have life spaces and that they themselves are represented in the life spaces of the others.

Moreover, since the success of attaining one's goal in a social situation is contingent on the actions and reactions of the others, as well as upon one's own actions, one becomes oriented to the expectations and predispositions that the others have relative to actions that have mutual relevance. For cooperation to take place, the orientations to the expectations of the others, among the various participants, must be reciprocal or complementary. The establishment of what Parsons (11) has termed the "complementarity" supposes that the participants in a social situation are able to communicate with each other through a common set of symbols and that a set of norms exists which will define a range of appropriate reactions on the part of any participant to each of a range of possible actions on the part of any other participant.

Let me attempt to spell out some of the implications of these abstract notions for projective tests. First of all, the basic conditions for the administration of any test are that the examiner be able to communicate to the subject an understanding of what he is expected or allowed to do and that the subject be motivated and competent to conform to these expectations; in a complementary fashion, the subject must be able to communicate
he examiner what he does and examiner must be motivated to record what object does. Anyone who has added to a diagnostic test very young children, with the ability to the test for the severely pathological patients, with resistive jects, or with people having stage barriers will know that ability and motivation of the ject to enter into a minimal interactive relationship is a prime elements for the administration test. While we may not learn in detail about a patient who unable to enter the social scene of a diagnostic test, the fact of inability to enter it is not with significance. Thus, Zubin, in a ily of the prognostic values of a psychological test (17), has on that the worst prognosis for patients who weren't suffi sufficiently cooperative to test quasim, for most subjects do not have our elements to whether or not sufficient cooperation was obtained to be adequate testing. Instead can offer a reasonable insight how the subject's origins and prescriptive structures the social situation and how he bonds to a task with certain characteristics under the influence his intentions and expectations in regard to the social situation. The of the unique values of the called structured or "projective" tests lies in the fact that they the subject a considerable range of possibilities as to what to in relation to the task with which is confronted and they require the subject to commnicate in his own manner what is doing. His manner of commnication as well as what he commnicates provide the basis for diagnosing both his orientation to the situation of testing and his tendencies to respond to given types of tasks in situations which are similarly structured.

The subject's orientation to the projective test situation will be determined by the interaction of his own disposition with the objective characteristics of the situation. Recent research, investigations, particularly with the Rorschach, are beginning to clarify some of the characteristics of the projective test situation. Thus, research by Stein (19), using the tachistoscopic exposure of Rorschach cards, and by Sipola and Taylor (14), contrasting responses under conditions of time pressure and lack of time pressure, indicate that the social pressure of giving responses with time for delay and selection interferes with the expression of those particular personal realities as proved by the age. Such social pressure, in other words, limits the individual's opportunity to control his behavior consciously. The general significance of this research view it is that it clearly points out that the personality characteristics as revealed by a projective test (in this case, the Rorschach) are not independent of the characteristics of the test situation. Hence, interpretation of responses have been made in terms of the situational context.

There has been a good deal of research recently to demonstrate other situational influences which may operate to define a subject's orientation to the projective test situation. Hutt, Gibby, Milton and Potthast (5) have demonstrated that if subjects are oriented by the experimenter's instructions to view certain types of responses as more appropriate, significant shifts will occur in the direction induced by the experimenter. A number of recent investigations by such people as Guilford (2), Foer (7), Lord (9), Sanders and Cleveland (12), Baughman (1), etc., have indicated that the personality of the examiner is a significant influence on the subject's responses to the test situation. If public opinion interviewing experience is a reliable guide, there is every reason to believe that the social characteristics of the examiner and subject their relative class position, their sex, age, etc. are not negligible influences in determining the subject's orientation to the situation.

Let me note two further characteristics of test situations which, for the most part, tend to be neglected. My hunch is that they are rather important determinants of how a subject orients himself to the testing situation. The dramatical setting and function of the test are likely to be significant aspects of the total social situation. On the face of it, a test administered in a private room with legal proceeding would provide a rather different social context than a test administered in a public home by a psychologist in connection with a patient's treatment by a psychoanalyst. Let me advance the somewhat cynical notion that much of the "success" of projective tests has been due to the fact that the large measure of the practical projective tests have been administered in settings which are similar to the settings in which the valid behavior is observed. Thus, the patient is tested in a hospital by a psychologist and is interviewed in a hospital by a psychiatrist rather than observed interacting with other patients in a different social context.

Another important but some neglected consideration is the cultural definitions which exist among various sub-cultures with respect to the testing situation. Some ethnic groups are more likely than others to define a projective test situation as a situation of achievement, others as a playful situation, still others as a situation of acquiescence to authority, etc. There is little doubt that certain sub-cultural definitions of what is expected of one in a testing situation are not similar to the ones held by individuals who belong to the urbanized, school-experienced, middle-class of Western culture. In Western culture, as Schachetel (13) has pointed out, tests have close affinities to authority, status, competition, and "the market." Hence, for the school-experienced urbanite, the projective test is likely to be of particular value in giving insight into his modes of reaction in those situations which are relevant to achievement and authority. In subcultures where a projective test is more likely to be defined in terms of its amusement value, and the playful possibilities, the projective test is less likely to reveal the individual's modes of reactions to situations involving achievement.

SOME IMPLICIT SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL NOTIONS IN PROJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

At this point, I would like to indicate briefly some of the implicit social psychological notions which are the basis for much of the interpretation that is made of projective data. These notions are part of the framework of any theory of projective tests.

As I have stated previously, the projective test situation, as a social situation, presupposes that the
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as a basis of comparison. The congruence or deviance of the subject's pattern of value-orientation with standard patterns of comparison is the basis of diagnostic classification.

This brief sketch of how social psychological concepts form part of the theoretical framework of projective test interpretation has necessarily been rather condensed and abstract. Let me illustrate the relationship of what I have said to the customary interpretation of projective data. Let us suppose a patient gives, as his initial response to the first Rorschach card, the word "bat" and he responds within three seconds. How do we interpret this response? It seems to me that we ask a response on a projective test to provide information relevant to such questions as: (a) How does the subject perceive the testing situation? (b) What are his interests and preoccupations? (c) What cognitive resources and motivational dispositions determine the range of possible responses of the subject? And (d) What value-orientations guide the subject in selecting among alternative possible responses and in communicating his responses to the examiner.

The pattern of value-orientations of an individual, as revealed in his responses to the projective test, can be considered "fitting" of course, does not of and in itself provide the answer to such questions. A series of responses are necessary for reliable and valid answers. Nevertheless, even one response does provide information that is relevant to some of the possible answers that might be made. Thus, the fact that the response was given quickly, is relatively easy to make, is common, and is to the whole blot are not inconsistent with the hypothesis that the subject perceives the situation as one of social pressure in which an uncertain reaction from the examiner would be accorded to originality or initiative on his part. Further, the response is not inconsistent with the hypothesis that in such a situation, the subject is attempting to conform or acquiesce to the social pressure by "playing it safe" and by not spontaneously revealing himself by expressive communica-

The nature and speed of the response is not inconsistent with certain hypotheses about the speed or retardation of cognitive processes, about the ability to make responses that are congruent with reality, and about the subject's aspiration level in certain social situations. Lastly, the response is not inconsistent with the hypothesis that the subject has certain value-orientations with respect to how closely his ideas must be bound to a consensually-validated reality, with respect to the appropriateness of expressing affective reactions under certain social conditions, etc. It is apparent as I speak that much of the meaning or significance of the response comes from comparing it with standards for response... standards which are relevant to the society to which the individual belongs.

Let me sum up the thesis that I have been advancing. It boils down to this: The projective test situation is a social situation in which the responses or behavior of the subject reflect his perception or subjective definition of the situation, his intentions in the situation, and his tendencies to behave in situations which are subjectively defined in the way that he has subjectively defined the test situation. The subject's perception of the testing situation will be determined not only by his personality but also by such situational factors as, the following: the characteristics of the task with which he is confronted.
the interpersonal setting created by the personality and implicit expectations of the examiner, the social statuses of the examiner and the subject, the institutional setting and function of the test, and the cultural definitions of appropriate behavior in the testing situation. The ability to make meaningful predictions from a subject's responses requires knowledge of the definition of the situation which has existed for the subject as he responded and knowledge of the circumstances which are likely to produce similar subjective definitions of social situations. Too often, interpretations of projective tests are faulty because they do not take into consideration the social context in terms of which the subject is responding or they are meaningless because they do not specify the implications of the test results for the subject's behavior in specified social situations.

REFERENCES


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