

Extra

Hermann Rorschach (c. 1884–1922): pioneer of inkblot personality tests

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Psychoanalytical diagnostic testing remains an essential component of modern neuropsychiatry, and yet results obtained from specific methods such as ‘The Rorschach Test’ still divides contemporary opinion. The use of ‘inkblots’ to research individual psychology was conceived in 1895 by Alfred Binet and Victor Henri. Upon noticing varying interpretations of the asymmetrical drawings, they established a new technique in the field of psychometrics. However, the capability of ‘inkblots’ in psychological research was yet to be validated until 1921 when a young Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Hermann Rorschach, devised the ‘Rorschach Test’.

Hermann Rorschach was born on 8 November 1884, in Zurich, Switzerland and from early accounts of his childhood he possessed a keen interest in art and creativity. During adolescence, Rorschach gained the nickname ‘Klex’ or ‘inkblot’ from his school peers owing to exuberance with klecksography (i.e. the art of constructing images from inkblots as pioneered by Justinus Kerner). He graduated from medical school at the University of Zurich in 1909. While working as the first assistant at a mental hospital, he received his titular Doctor of Medicine on the study of ‘Reflex Hallucinations and Symbolism’ in 1912 under the supervision of psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler. Rorschach was granted psychiatric specialisation in 1914, and between 1915 and 1922 he served as principal physician and assistant director at the Regional Psychiatric Hospital in Herisau, Switzerland. During this time, he founded the Zurich Psychoanalysis Society alongside his colleague, Otto Biswanger and was elected vice president of the Swiss Psychoanalytic Society on its inception (1919).

Upon discovering Syzman Hens’ studies on individual fantasies via ‘inkblots’ in 1917, Rorschach, with the assistance of Hans Behn-Eschenburg, began experimenting with 15 newly accidental inkblots with increased diversity in colour combinations (i.e. black with white, black with red, etc.); the template later referred to as the ‘Behn–Rorschach Test’. By 1918, the test was employed mostly by all doctoral staff, nurses, undergraduate medical students and in-patients (of whom 288 psychiatric patients were recorded) at Rorschach’s workplace and responses were recorded following his impromptu asking: ‘What might this be?’. As a result of the high subjectivity in participant responses, Rorschach distinguished his results based on intelligence, emotional functioning and perceptive ability allowing for a clear representation of different patient cohorts (for example, patients with schizophrenia) and the potential hypothesised association between visual stimuli processing and individual mental state.

Rorschach published his findings in a 174-page monograph entitled *Psychodiagnostik* in 1921; however, he only featured 10 of his 15 accidental inkblots because of publisher printing demands. Tragically, Rorschach died the following year from peritonitis, believed to result from a ruptured appendix. His work and the validation of inkblots in psychological research continually assists psychiatrists in exploring individual imagination and diagnoses pertaining to cognitive disorders. Even though his methods were deemed pseudoscience and unreliable owing to the extent of subjectivity in patient responses, his impact and legacy are widely noticed throughout psychological research today, generating more published research than any other psychometric test (excluding the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory).

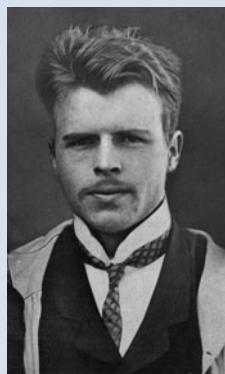


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