

Projective Techniques in the Counseling Process

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Projective techniques have a lengthy and vital history in personality assessment, but they have evoked a minimal degree of interest on the part of counselors. Psychometric limitations, lack of training opportunities, and the obscure qualities of the instruments have restricted their use among practitioners. The author proposes a method to stimulate the use of projectives as an integral part of the counseling process and provides justification for the expanded use of the technique as a counseling tool.

Almost 50 years ago, Harold Pepinsky, a pioneer in the counseling profession (Claiborn, 1985), urged counselors to use informal projective techniques in counseling as a means to advance the counseling relationship and to increase an understanding of clients (Pepinsky, 1947). Despite the greatly expanded role of the counselor, the increasing diversity of clients served, and the escalating challenge and complexity of issues facing the counselor, Pepinsky's early call has largely gone unheeded. Projective techniques in the counseling profession today are more commonly known for caution and prohibitions in using the instruments than for the potential benefits the devices offer as therapeutic tools (Anastasi, 1988; Hood & Johnson, 1990). Given the urgency of equipping the counselor with as broad a repertoire of skills as possible, it is time to revisit Pepinsky's recommendation and to consider the role of projective methods in counseling. The purpose of this article is to review the qualities and practices of projective techniques, describe the value of projectives in counseling, suggest procedures for using the techniques in counseling, and illustrate applications of the methods with selected projective devices.

Distinguishing features of projective techniques include ambiguous directions, relatively unstructured tasks, and virtually unlimited client responses (Anastasi, 1988). These same open-ended characteristics contribute to a continuing controversy about the relative merit of the instruments. Projectives may be perceived as esoteric devices with subjectively determined evaluation procedures, particularly by counselors who seek empirically precise appraisal standards (Anastasi, 1988). A fundamental assumption of projective techniques is that the client expresses or "projects" his or her personality characteristics through the completion of relatively unstructured and ambiguous tasks (Rabin, 1981). A large number of projective instruments are available, including association (e.g., Rorschach tests), construction (e.g., Thematic Apperception Test), completion (e.g., sentence completion), expressive (e.g., human figure drawings), and choice or ordering (e.g., Picture Arrangement Test) (Lindzey, 1961).

The use of projective instruments assumes prerequisite psychological knowledge (Anastasi, 1988), with formal training and supervision (Drummond, 1992). Advanced course work is essential for some devices, including the Rorschach and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Hood & Johnson, 1990), and computer-assisted and computer-adaptive testing (Drummond, 1988) is becoming more common. Training for counselors in projective techniques at the master's degree level is infrequent, with a clear majority of programs surveyed (Piotrowski & Keller, 1984) offering no courses in projectives, although most of the training directors indicated that counseling students should be familiar with the Rorschach and the TAT. A recent study of community-based counselors suggests that licensed coun-

selors are not frequent test users of either an objective or projective type (Bubbenzer, Zimpfer, & Mahrle, 1990). Counseling psychologists in private practice, community mental health centers, and counselors in hospital settings used projectives with relative frequency, but those in university and college counseling centers generally used objective assessments, with minimal employment of projectives (Watkins & Campbell, 1989).

VALUE OF PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES IN COUNSELING

Although reservations about projective techniques may be recognized by researchers and practitioners (e.g., questionable psychometric qualities, a multitude of various types of devices, and considerable training required for most techniques), such issues are of less concern if projectives are used as informal, hypotheses-generating tools in counseling. This position will be amplified after examining how the skilled use of projective techniques may advance the counseling experience in ways that are both substantive and economical.

Enhancing the Counseling Relationship

As a component of the counseling process, projective techniques offer a means other than direct verbal disclosure for the client to express him- or herself. The projectives may be administered after a discussion about the purpose and application of the techniques. The client is asked to draw human figures, complete sentence stems, describe early memories, or partake in related approaches. The focus immediately shifts from the client's oral expression to the completion of a task, and interaction between the client and counselor occurs through an intermediate activity that elicits the involvement of the person. The instruments themselves are interesting to most individuals, and they offer a multimodal freedom of expression (Anastasi, 1988). While the client is completing the devices, the counselor is able to observe the person, make supportive comments, and offer encouragement. As a client responds to the ambiguous and relatively nonthreatening projective methods, his or her defensiveness often diminishes because of the participatory and absorbing nature of the tasks (Clark, 1991; Korner, 1965). Pepinsky wrote about the projective effort by individuals: "The counselor has been able to employ these materials informally in the counseling interview, without making the client suspicious or hostile to what he might otherwise regard as an intrusion into his private world" (1947, p. 139).

Understanding the Client

As individually administered assessment devices, projectives allow for a relatively standardized observation period of the client while he or she completes the tasks (Cummings, 1986; Korner, 1965). Samples

of behavior, such as the client's hostility, cooperation, impulsivity, and dependence may be noted by the counselor. The content of the client's projective responses may also be contrasted with his or her actions. As an example, an individual may verbally express positive feelings towards his or her mother that are contradicted with the sentence completion, "My mother . . . is a spiteful person." Personality dynamics are revealed through the indirect methods of projectives, as individual differences are ascertained through the unique constructions by the person. Potential information gained from the projectives includes the dynamics of client needs, values, conflicts, defenses, and capabilities (Murstein, 1965).

Treatment Planning

Treatment plans for the process of counseling may be clarified with information derived from projectives (Korchin & Schulberg, 1981; Rabin, 1981). A decision can be made as to whether the counselor should continue to work with the client, consider a more extensive evaluation, or refer the client to another counselor or related resource (Drummond, 1992). Perspectives developed through the instruments, when combined with collateral information from various other sources, may be used to establish goals and objectives for the counseling process. Hypotheses about the client's personality dynamics may be incorporated into a therapeutic treatment plan (Oster & Gould, 1987). In numerous instances, the delineation of pertinent client issues early in the counseling relationship can save time and accelerate the counseling process (Duckworth, 1990; Pepinsky, 1947).

PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES AS A TOOL IN COUNSELING

How is it possible to reconcile the concerns about projective methods with their potential as a measure to enhance the counseling process? Once again, it is enlightening to consider Pepinsky's balanced perspective in integrating projectives in counseling. He viewed projective techniques more as informal assessment methods than as precise, empirically established appraisal instruments. Pepinsky stated: "The hypothesis is advanced that responses to such materials need not be standardized since they form a part of the dynamic interview process and they vary from client to client" (1947, p. 135). Information obtained through projectives can be evaluated from an idiosyncratic perspective that focuses directly on the client as a person.

Hypotheses Development

As individualized procedures, projective techniques are based on a client's unique frame of reference for the development of hypotheses. This information is tentative, providing leads or indications about a client's behavior that may be later confirmed or invalidated. Anastasi supported this position when she wrote about projectives: "These techniques serve best in sequential decisions by suggesting leads for further exploration or hypotheses about the individual for subsequent verification" (1988, p. 623).

For counseling purposes, the hypotheses generated are continuously tested and modified as new information and insights are gained. Material about the client is a part of the working notes of the counselor rather than data to be included in a formal written report. In no instance should a particular hypothesis be used singularly or as a final observation. It must be supported by substantiating information; even then, leads should be open to further inquiry and modification (Anastasi, 1988). This approach is supported in the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, in reference to projective tech-

niques as one of the methods that "yields multiple hypotheses regarding the behavior of the subject in various situations as they arise, with each hypothesis modifiable on the basis of further information" (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1985, p. 45).

Collateral Information

A single means of evaluating an individual always has potential for distortion and misrepresentation in any appraisal, and even the most reasonable hypothesis generated through projective devices requires substantiation from multiple sources (Anastasi, 1988). A "counseling perspective" derived from projectives employs a blend of "developmental, health-oriented, conscious factors with clinical, dynamic, and unconscious factors to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the client" (Watkins, Campbell, Hollifield, & Duckworth, 1989, p. 512). Corroborating information may be obtained from other projectives, behavioral observations, expressed statements of the client, school or employment records, interviews with parents, spouses, or other individuals, objective tests, and related resources (Drummond, 1992; Hart, 1986). Once counseling has begun, the most important means of assessing hypotheses is the client's behavior in the counseling process.

APPLICATIONS OF SELECTED PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Considering the busy work schedule of most counselors, most prefer appraisal methods that are more economical in terms of administration and interpretation. The instruments should also yield a maximum amount of information to be of value in counseling (Koppitz, 1982). Of the numerous projective techniques available, three will be examined that can be integrated in a single counseling session, and each contributes to building rapport, understanding clients, and planning treatment. Counselors trained in projectives are likely to be familiar with human figure drawings, sentence completion devices, and early recollections. When more extensive information is necessary, the Rorschach, the TAT, and related assessments may be used by a qualified counselor or completed through a referral to another professional.

Human Figure Drawings

For most clients, the counselor's request to draw a picture of a person is a relatively nonthreatening starting point for fostering the counseling relationship (Bender, 1952; Cummings, 1986). For many individuals, particularly children, drawing has a pleasant association (Drummond, 1992), and the effort is typically completed with a reasonable degree of interest (Anastasi, 1988). Drawings may also be administered with relative ease and in a brief period of time (Swensen, 1957).

Karen Machover's (1949) *Personality Projection in the Drawing of the Human Figure: A Method of Personality Investigation* is one resource for understanding human figure drawings. Koppitz (1968, 1984) has written more recent volumes that are useful for evaluating child and early adolescent human figure drawings. Urban's manual (1963) is a compiled index for interpreting the "Draw-A-Person" (DAP) technique, and a recently published screening procedure using the DAP assists in identifying children and adolescents who have emotional problems (Naglieri, McNeish, & Bardos, 1991). General references on projective drawings are also pertinent (Cummings, 1986; Swensen, 1957, 1968), and Oster and Gould (1987) related

drawings to assessment and therapy. Of particular interest to counselors are findings about human figure drawings related to self-concept (Bennett, 1966; Dalby & Vale, 1977; Prytula & Thompson, 1973), anxiety (Engle & Suppes, 1970; Sims, Dana, & Bolton, 1983; Prytula & Hiland, 1975), stress (Sturmer, Rothbaum, Visintainer, & Wolfer, 1980), learning problems (Eno, Elliot, & Woehlke, 1981), overall adjustment (Yama, 1990), and cross-cultural considerations (Holtzman, 1980; Lindzey, 1961).

In spite of numerous attempts by researchers to lend precision to what essentially is an art form, the interpretation of human figure drawings continues to result in a limited number of clearly established personality indicators (Anastasi, 1988). Furthermore, any single characteristic, such as figure size, must be considered cautiously to avoid overgeneralizations and inaccurate judgments. (Cummings, 1986). A more conservative method of interpretation is to consider the personality indicators as "soft signs" in combination with collateral information to discern patterns or themes.

The quality of the client-counselor relationship and an understanding of the client, at least in preliminary terms, are essential factors in considering plans and goals for counseling. Personality indicators from human figure drawings are useful in preparing for the continuation of the counseling process (Oster & Gould, 1987). For example, profile and stick figures relate to evasion and guardedness (Urban, 1963), significant issues that influence establishment of the counseling relationship. One factor to consider in evaluating the human figure drawings is the client's cognitive level of development and the possibility of neurological impairment (Protinsky, 1978). Stick figures, for example, are frequently drawn by children in early childhood.

Early Recollections

Requesting a client to provide several early memories lends relationship-building continuity to the human figure drawings, as most people respond positively to recalling at least three memories from their early childhood. Individuals often are intrigued and challenged by the counselor's request (Watkins, 1985), and the procedure promotes a nonthreatening, empathic relationship (Allers, White, & Hornbuckle, 1990). Although there are variations on directions for the early recollections, simplicity and clarity are important features: "I would like you to think back to a long time ago, when you were little. Try to recall one of your earliest memories, one of the first things that you can remember." The memory should be visualized, described as a specific single event, and have occurred before the person was 8 years of age (Mosak, 1958).

No definitive volume exists for interpreting early recollections; an edited edition (Olson, 1979) covers a variety of topics, and a more current publication (Bruhn, 1990) relates to clinical practice. Various attempts have been made to develop a scoring system for early memories, but none have been widely accepted (Bruhn, 1985; Langs, Rothenberg, Fishman, & Reiser, 1960; Last & Bruhn, 1983; Levy, 1965; Manaster & Perryman, 1974; Mayman, 1968). A recently published manual, *The Early Memories Procedure* (Bruhn, 1989), includes a comprehensive scoring system. The high number of potential variables, possible scoring categories, and differences in theoretical orientations has resulted in methodological difficulties in developing coding procedures (Bruhn & Schiffman, 1982a). Specific findings for early recollections are of particular interest to counselors for lifestyle (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1975; Sweeney, 1990), self-disclosure and interpersonal style (Barrett, 1983), locus of control (Bruhn & Schiffman, 1982b), depression (Acklin, Sauer,

Alexander, & Dugoni, 1989; Allers, White, & Hornbuckle, 1990), suicide (Monahan, 1983), delinquency (Davidow & Bruhn, 1990), and career counseling (Holmes & Watson, 1965; Manaster & Perryman, 1974; McKelvie, 1979).

Certain psychological variables are discernible in early recollections that serve to generate hypotheses about the dynamics of an individual's personality (Clark, 1994; Sweeney, 1990; Watkins, 1985). For example, in a series of memories, the activity or passivity of a client suggests how the person responds to life experiences. A client who passively accepts unfavorable circumstances, in memories, rather than acts to improve conditions, likely responds in the same way to actual life situations. The psychological variables are expressed as questions about a person's functioning in memories, as adapted from Sweeney (1990):

- Active or passive?
- Giving or taking?
- Participant or observer?
- Alone or with others?
- Inferior or superior in relationship to others?
- Existence or absence of significant others?
- Themes, details, and colors?
- Feeling tone attached to the event and outcome?

The psychological variables may be applied to clarify goals and plans for counseling. A hypothesis, for example, about a client's qualitative involvement in counseling may be derived from a combination of the psychological variables of active/passive, participant/observer, and inferior/superior in relationship to others. Further clarification may be added by considering a client's self-disclosure and interpersonal style (Barrett, 1983), and locus of control (Bruhn & Schiffman, 1982b). Goals in counseling for understanding the client may be linked to the lifestyle (Kopp & Dinkmeyer, 1975) based on the uniqueness and idiosyncratic quality of the early memories (Adler, 1931/1980).

Sentence Completion

Incomplete sentences provide a concrete task for a person and an opportunity for the counselor to observe the client in a writing effort. Interaction between the client and the counselor occur once again with this projective method, and individuals respond with varying degrees of interest. Koppitz (1982) viewed the incomplete sentence technique as a useful "icebreaker" with reluctant and unspontaneous adolescents. Directions for completing sentences usually require the client to "complete each sentence by giving your real feelings." The sentence stems include a variety of personally referenced topics, such as, "I like . . .," "People are . . .," and, "My father . . ."

The Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank (Rotter & Rafferty, 1950) is the most well known of the interpretive systems for the sentence completion, with forms for high school, college, and adult populations. The Forer Structured Sentence Completion Test (Forer, 1957) is also published in a manual format with a structured scoring procedure. Hart (1986) has developed a sentence completion test for children. The content of the sentence stems, number of stems provided, and scoring procedure vary with each of the systems. A review of the sentence completion methods in personality assessment (Goldberg, 1965) and more current research findings (Rabin & Zlotogorski, 1985) are available. Specific issues of interest to counselors have been examined for scholastic achievement (Kimball, 1952), attitudes towards peers and parents (Harris & Tseng, 1957), classroom social behavior (Feldhusen, Thurston, & Benning, 1965), careers (Dole,

1958), egocentricity (Exner, 1973), safety and esteem (Wilson & Aronoff, 1973), self-actualization (McKinney, 1967), and defense mechanisms (Clark, 1991).

Sentence completion devices may also be constructed by counselors and tailored to the needs of various populations (Hood & Johnson, 1990). As an example, a school counselor in a middle school could develop a device that focuses on topics specifically related to early adolescence. Hypotheses may be derived directly from responses of the sentence stems. An obvious example is a student who has conflicts with learning and school and responds to the sentence stems: "I like . . . to get in trouble." "Teachers are . . . a pain." "School . . . is for losers." Appendix A lists the sentence stems used by the author in counseling children and adolescents.

Goals and plans for counseling are also directly related to the content of responses to the sentence completion technique, and specific issues introduced by the client often produce productive leads for exploration in counseling. Goals are suggested by patterns of responses in which the client indicates clear needs. A person in late adulthood, for instance, depicts strongly manifested isolation and abandonment issues with the following sentence stems: "I feel . . . very lonely." "What bothers me . . . is the constant time by myself." "I am afraid . . . of dying alone." The pattern and number of client issues may also be clarified, which assists in judging the estimated length of counseling and predictions about continuation (Hiler, 1959).

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Tim, a 12-year-old middle-school student, entered the counseling office in a quiet and hesitant way. He had been referred to the school counselor by two of his teachers because of "withdrawn" behavior. Tim's school records indicated that he received below average to average grades, with similar ratings on his standardized tests. He had moved to the town late in his previous school year, and the counselor had observed Tim walking alone to class and eating by himself in the cafeteria. In addressing Tim's withdrawn behavior, the counselor was understanding about a sensitive topic. Tim responded that, "It doesn't bother me to be alone," but his pained facial expression contradicted his words. In a supportive tone, the counselor probed further about Tim's discomfort in school. Tim appeared to become even more tense with this discussion, and the counselor diverted the subject to Tim's life before coming to the town.

The session ended with a minimal degree of involvement on Tim's part, and the counselor needed to learn more about him. In a meeting arranged with Tim's mother, she related that his father had left the family years ago, and Tim was just like him: "quiet and slow." A more thorough review of Tim's cumulative records indicated that his previous teachers had also been concerned about the amount of time he spent by himself and the teasing that he received from other students. The counselor was concerned that she had not learned more about Tim that would assist her in the next counseling session, and she decided to administer several projective instruments to Tim in order to increase her understanding of his personality dynamics. The counselor also hoped that interacting with the instruments would lessen the tension that Tim demonstrated as he talked about himself.

Soon after Tim began his second counseling session, the counselor explained how the assessment would assist her in learning more about him, and she briefly described the three instruments that would be used. She observed Tim as he completed the human figure drawing in a deliberate but precise way. Tim's figure was less than 2 inches in length, high on the page, with arms reaching in the air. Tim com-

mented that he liked to draw, but "I'm not very good at it." Next, the counselor asked Tim about his earliest memory, and he stated: "I'm standing on a street corner and people are walking by just looking at me. I don't know what to do." Tim provided two more memories, including: "Kids are pushing me around on the playground, and nobody is helping me. I don't know what to do. I feel scared and sad." The counselor next asked Tim to respond to the sentence completion, and his tension was evident while he worked on the task. Tim's responses to several sentence stems were far more revealing than his expressed statements in the first counseling session: "I feel . . . sad." "Other people . . . are mean." "My father . . . doesn't call anymore." "I suffer . . . but nobody knows." "I wish . . . I had one friend." "What pains me is . . . other kids."

After Tim left, the counselor was struck by his sense of isolation and futility as she looked over the projective material. At the same time, the counselor was hopeful because she finally had more of an understanding of Tim—information that could be used in counseling. From the human figure drawing, the counselor hypothesized: Tim has a lowered self concept (small size of drawing); he desires social interaction (arms up in the air); conditions in his life are uncertain (figure high on the page); and he has an interest in drawing (expressed statement). In the early memories Tim's reduced self-concept ("I'm lost, pushed around") was also evident as well as the uncertain quality of his life ("I don't know what to do"). Tim's recollections also clarified his attitude towards other people ("ignore me, hurt me") and his feelings towards experiences ("scared, sad").

Tim's sentence completion provided further hypotheses about his behavior. His statement in the first counseling session about not minding being alone was contradicted by: "I need . . . someone to hang around with." Tim's history of being rejected was confirmed by several sentences: "Other people . . . are mean" and "What pains me . . . is other kids." Tim's reference about his father not calling anymore could be construed in various ways, but it could provide a starting point to talk about his father.

In her third meeting with Tim, the counselor felt more prepared. She decided to provide a highly supportive and nurturing climate that would be encouraging to Tim. She also considered placing Tim in a counseling group, after an appropriate number of individual sessions, that would provide him with a structured and supportive social experience.

SUMMARY

Although projective techniques are enduring and provocative methods of personality assessment, the methods have been underused by counselors. Questionable psychometric qualities, infrequent training experiences, and the obscure characteristics of the devices has limited their use by counselors. A hypotheses-generating procedure supported by collateral client information is endorsed. Projective techniques could be an integral part of the counseling process for purposes of enhancing the client-counselor relationship, understanding the client from a phenomenological perspective, and clarifying the goals and course of counseling. Leads derived from projectives are instrumental in the counseling experience, and specific topics appraised through the devices are pertinent to a broad range of client issues.

Although developing the skills of the counselor in projectives may well require some changes in the counseling curriculum (and this is an issue with which we have yet to deal), it is clear that projective techniques can be viably used in the counseling process. Almost half a century ago, Pepinsky recommended that the time was right for a

match between counselors and projective methods; his counsel is just as relevant and compelling today.

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APPENDIX A

Sentence Completion Stems

1. I feel . . .
2. I regret . . .
3. Other people . . .
4. I am best when . . .
5. What bothers me is . . .
6. The happiest time . . .
7. I am afraid of . . .
8. My father . . .
9. I dislike to . . .
10. I failed . . .
11. At home . . .
12. Boys . . .
13. My mother . . .
14. I suffer . . .
15. The future . . .
16. Other kids . . .
17. My nerves are . . .
18. Girls . . .
19. My greatest worry is . . .
20. School . . .
21. I need . . .
22. What pains me is . . .
23. I hate . . .
24. I wish . . .
25. Whenever I have to study, I . . .

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