Thematic Apperception Test

The Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT, is a projective psychological test. Historically, it has been among the most widely researched, taught, and used of such tests. Its adherents assert that the TAT taps a subject's unconscious to reveal repressed aspects of personality, motives and needs for achievement, power and intimacy, and problem-solving abilities.

Procedure

The TAT is popularly known as the picture interpretation technique because it uses a standard series of provocative yet ambiguous pictures about which the subject is asked to tell a story. The subject is asked to tell as dramatic a story as they can for each picture presented, including the following:

- What has led up to the event shown
- What is happening at the moment
- What the characters are feeling and thinking
- What the outcome of the story was

If these elements are omitted, particularly for children or individuals of low cognitive abilities, the evaluator may ask the subject about them directly.

There are 31 picture cards in the standard form of the TAT. Some of the cards show male figures, some female, some both male and female figures, some of ambiguous gender, some adults, some children, and some show no human figures at all. One card is completely blank. Although the cards were originally designed to be matched to the subject in terms of age and gender, any card may be used with any subject. Most practitioners choose a set of approximately ten cards, either using cards that they feel are generally useful, or that they believe will encourage the subject's expression of emotional conflicts relevant to their specific history and situation.
In the TAT, the test subject (the boy shown here) examines a set of cards that portray human figures in a variety of settings and situations, and is asked to tell a story about each card. The story includes the event shown in the picture, preceding events, emotions and thoughts of those portrayed, and the outcome of the event shown. The story content and structure are thought to reveal the subject's attitudes, inner conflicts, and views.

Scoring Systems

The TAT is a projective test in that, like the Rorschach test, its assessment of the subject is based on what he or she projects onto the ambiguous images. Therefore, to complete the assessment, each narrative created by a subject must be carefully recorded and analyzed to uncover underlying needs, attitudes, and patterns of reaction. Although most clinical practitioners do not use formal scoring systems, several formal scoring systems have been developed for analyzing TAT stories systematically and consistently. Two common methods that are currently used in research are the:

- Defense Mechanisms Manual DMM.\(^2\) This assesses three defense mechanisms: denial (least mature), projection (intermediate), and identification (most mature). A person's thoughts/feelings are projected in stories involved.

- Social Cognition and Object Relations SCOR\(^3\) scale. This assesses four different dimensions of object relations: Complexity of Representations of People, Affect-Tone of Relationship Paradigms, Capacity for Emotional Investment in Relationships and Moral Standards, and Understanding of Social Causality.