

Thematic Apperception Test

Administration and Interpretation of the TAT

Card Selection: There are 20 TAT cards, but it is common practice to administer 8-12 selected cards. It is advisable to use the same core battery of cards in a standardized sequence, with cards added based upon the specific referral question and the “pull” of the card. Organize the cards in numerical sequence before you begin to administer the test. Even though some of the cards are gender-specific, the following combination of cards is recommended as cards that yield the richest stories:

Female: 1, 2, 3BM, 4, 6GF, 7GF, 8BM, 12M, 13MF and 16

Male: 1, 2, 3BM, 4, 6BM, 7BM, 8BM, 12M, 13MF, and 16

Instructions: Instructions for adults are: (Murray, 1943)

“I am going to show you some pictures, one at a time, and your task will be to make up a story for each card. In your story, be sure to tell what has led up to the event shown in the picture, describe what is happening at the moment, what the characters are feeling and thinking, and then give the outcome. Tell a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end. Do you understand? I will write your stories verbatim as you tell them. Here’s the first card.”

These instructions can be modified for children or for adults with limited education/intelligence:

“I am going to show you some pictures, and I would like you to tell me a story for each one. In your story, please tell: What is happening in the picture? What happened before? What are people thinking and how are they feeling? How does it turn out in the end? So, I’d like you to tell a whole story with a beginning, middle, and ending. You can make up any story you want about the picture. Do you understand? I’ll write down your story. Here’s the first card.”

My recommendation is to present Card 16, the blank card, at the end of the battery, with the following instructions:

“Now I am going to ask you to do something different. This time the card has no picture on it, so you can make up any story that you’d like.”

It is important that the examinee understands that they are to tell a story and not merely describe the pictures. Stories should contain these four elements:

1. Current situation (What’s going on now in the picture?)
2. Thoughts and feelings of the characters. (What are they thinking/feeling?)
3. Preceding events (What happened before? What led up to this current situation?)
4. Outcome (How does the story end?)

Prompting is allowed if story elements are omitted, but prompt each of the story elements only once per story. Do not ask specific leading questions. It is better to phrase the prompting questions as noted above.

Administer each card individually and have the examinee tell each story out loud. The test administration can be tape-recorded, with the consent of the examinee, but it is good practice to write down their responses verbatim as well.

Interpretation: There are no formal, normative standards for the TAT. The simplest procedure for studying TAT responses is the inspection technique. Most clinicians interpret the TAT stories informally; repetitive patterns or themes become apparent by reading through a subject's stories.

It is useful to know the typical themes and stories that are elicited by each of the cards. Deviations from these may offer rich interpretive value. Typical themes are presented in Groth-Marnat (2003) Chapter 10, in Bellak (1997) Chapter 4, and in Teglasi, (2001). It is important to look for corroboration of patterns in other stories, other test results, or in background information. Bellak (1997) says "A repetitive pattern is the best assurance that one does not deal with an artifact".

One main thing to consider in the interpretation of the TAT is that the pictures are best seen psychologically as a series of social situations and interpersonal relations. Another way to consider them is that all characters in the stories are projected aspects of the self, keeping in mind that they may represent the ideal self, the real self, the feared self, etc.

Things to look for in card responses:

1. Following the task directions
2. Card pull: Manifest content (Descriptive)
 Latent content (Interpretive)
3. Initial reactions to cards and to themes presented: Card 1 may provide key issues; also note initial reaction to each card
4. Personality Conflicts: Interpersonal, Intrapersonal
5. Themes, plots introduced
6. Characters
7. Supportive figures – who is brought in to story?
8. Affect
9. Action
10. Final outcome or resolution
11. Intercard relationship
12. Ego functions - defenses
13. Language usage
14. Identification issues:
 Usually identify with same gender; if not, may indicate gender identity issues or may indicate vulnerability and need to project onto gender different person in order to distance the issue from self
15. Indicators for therapeutic progress and outcome
16. Personality structural analysis: id, ego, superego
17. Psycho-sexual development stage: oral, anal, phallic, latency, genital

More comprehensive, in-depth analysis can be attained through analyzing the 10 variables of Bellak's scoring system:

1. The Main Theme
 1. Descriptive Level: State the summarized meaning of the story, a finding of the common trend restated in an abbreviated form and simple words.
 2. Interpretive Level: State the general meaning of the story.
 3. Diagnostic Level: State possibly expressed psychological problems.
 4. Symbolic Level: State possible symbols with psychological meanings.
 5. Elaborative Level: State any free associations to story elements.
2. The Main Hero
3. Main Needs and Drives of Hero
4. Conception of the Environment (World)
5. Figures Seen as.....
6. Significant Conflicts
7. Nature of Anxieties
8. Main Defenses against Conflicts and Fears
9. Adequacy of Superego as Manifested by "Punishment" for "Crime"
10. Integration of the Ego
 - I. Reality Testing
 - II. Judgment
 - III. Sense of Reality of the World and the Self
 - IV. Regulation and Control of Drives, Affects, and Impulses
 - V. Object Relations
 - VI. Thought Processes
 - VII. ARISE: Adaptive Regression in the Service of the Ego
 - VIII. Defensive Functioning
 - IX. Stimulus Barrier
 - X. Autonomous Functioning
 - XI. Synthetic-Integration Functioning
 - XII. Mastery-Competence

Integration of the Ego: Assessment of adaptive capacity (based on Bellak)

- I. Reality Testing
 - a. Distinction between inner and outer stimuli.
 - b. Accuracy of perception (includes orientation to time and place and interpretation of external events).
 - c. Accuracy of inner reality testing (psychological mindedness and awareness of inner states).

- II. Judgment
 - a. Awareness of likely consequences of intended behavior (anticipated probable dangers, legal culpabilities, social censure, disapproval, or inappropriateness).
 - b. Extent to which manifest behavior reflects the awareness of these likely consequences.

- III. Sense of Reality of the World and the Self
 - a. The extent to which external events are experienced as real and as being embedded in a familiar context (degree of derealization, deja vu, trance-like states).
 - b. The extent to which the body (or parts of it) and its functioning and one's behavior are experienced as familiar, unobtrusive, and as belonging to (or emanating from) the individual.
 - c. The degree to which the person has developed individuality, uniqueness, and a sense of self and self-esteem.
 - d. The degree to which the person's self-representations are separated from his or her object representation.

- IV. Regulation and Control of Drives, Affects, and Impulses
 - a. The directness of impulse expression (ranging from primitive acting out through neurotic acting out to relatively indirect forms of behavioral expression).
 - b. The effectiveness of delay and control, the degree of frustration tolerance, and the extent to which drive derivatives are channeled through ideation, effective expression, and manifest behavior.
 - c.

- V. Object (or Interpersonal) Relations
 - a. The degree and kind of relatedness to others and investment in them (taking account of withdrawal trends, narcissistic self-concern, narcissistic object choice or mutuality).
 - b. The extent to which present relationships are adaptively or maladaptively influenced by or patterned on older ones and serve present, mature aims rather than past immature aims.
 - c. The degree to which the person perceives others as separate entities rather than as extensions of himself or herself.
 - d. The extent to which he or she can maintain object constancy (sustain relationships over long periods of time and tolerate both the physical absence of the object and frustration, anxiety, and hostility related to the object).

- VI. Thought Processes
 - a. The adequacy of processes that adaptively guide and sustain thought (attention, concentration, anticipation, concept formation, memory, language)
 - b. The relative primary-secondary process influences on thought (extent to which thinking is unrealistic, illogical, and/or loose).

- VII. ARISE: Adaptive Regression in the Service of the Ego
 - a. First phase of an oscillating process: relation of preceptual and conceptual acuity (another ego controls) with a concomitant increase in awareness of previously preconscious and unconscious contents.
 - b. Second phase of oscillating process: the induction of new configurations which increase adaptive potentials as a result of creative integrations.

- VIII. Defensive Functioning
 - a. Degree to which defensive components adaptively or maladaptively affect ideation and behavior.
 - b. Extent to which these defenses have succeeded or failed (degree of emergence of anxiety, depression, and/or other dysphoric affects, indicating weakness of defensive operations).

- IX. Stimulus Barrier
 - a. Threshold for, sensitivity to, or awareness of stimuli impinging upon various sensory modalities (primarily external, but including pain).
 - b. Nature of response to various levels of sensory stimulation in terms of the extent of disorganization, avoidance, withdrawal, or active coping mechanisms employed to deal with them.

- X. Autonomous Functioning
 - a. Degree of freedom from impairment of apparatuses of primary autonomy (functional disturbances of sight, hearing, intention, language, memory, learning, or motor function).
 - b. Degree of or freedom from impairment of secondary autonomy (disturbances in habit patterns, learned complex skills, work routines, hobbies, and interests).

- XI. Synthetic-Integration Functioning
 - a. Degree of reconciliation or integration of discrepancies or potentially contradictory attitudes, values, affects, behavior, and self representations.
 - b. Degree of active relating together and integrating of psychic and behavioral events, whether contradictory or not.

- XII. Mastery-Competence
 - a. Competence, the person's performance in relation to his existing capacity to interact with and master his environment.
 - b. Sense of competence, the person's expectation of success, or their subjective side of actual performance (how well he believes he can do).