

# The Rorschach and Violent Crime

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# The Rorschach and Violent Crime

## A Literature Review and Case Illustration

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**Abstract:** Over the years, a significant number of Rorschach studies have been conducted with forensic adult and adolescent samples, partly motivated by the use of the test in forensic psychological evaluations. Could the Rorschach, as a performance-based personality assessment tool, provide unique information that is not as vulnerable to distortion on the part of the examinee as self-report measures are? This article provides a review of Rorschach studies on relevant Rorschach variables, including those with different forensic samples. Empirical findings are mixed; there is not a one-on-one relationship between certain Rorschach variables and forensically relevant traits, such as psychopathy or hostility. This does not mean the Rorschach cannot provide useful information in answering psychological questions before the court. A case illustration of a male college student, who committed a (first) violent offense, illustrates the unique contribution of the Rorschach for understanding the psychological dynamics behind a violent act that was seemingly out of character.

**Keywords:** Rorschach inkblot method, forensic assessment, aggression coding, incremental validity, case study

Hermann Rorschach's monograph *Psychodiagnostik* was first published in 1921 and included around 30 case examples, none of which involved patients with a "forensic profile" (Rorschach, 1942). Some of the coding categories he created were relevant to forensic populations, such as white Space-responses, which he related to oppositional tendencies (p. 39) and C-responses, which represented impulsiveness (p. 99), according to Rorschach (1942).

It would take until 1994 for the study of Rorschach responses in forensic patients to take a leap forward, with the publication of Gacono and Meloy's book, *The Rorschach Assessment of Aggressive and Psychopathic Personalities* (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). At that time, Exner's Comprehensive System had become the predominant coding and interpretation system, at least in Anglo-Saxon countries. Meloy and Gacono (1992) introduced four additional aggression scoring categories, developed from the work of Schafer (1954) and Rapaport (Rapaport et al., 1946/1948) among others. One of these four scoring categories, Aggressive Content (AgC), has been extensively studied over the past decades, resulting in the inclusion of this thematic code in the Rorschach Performance Assessment

System (R-PAS; Meyer et al., 2011) on grounds of good empirical support in the literature.<sup>1</sup> This review discusses studies that (1) examined the validity of specific Rorschach variables, such as Gacono and Meloy's aggression codes, which may be particularly relevant for use in forensic psychological assessment in criminal cases, and (2) applied the Rorschach to study forensic samples. A brief discussion of the value of performance-based personality assessment, including assessment using the Rorschach, in forensic evaluations is followed by a case illustration of the incremental validity of the Rorschach in forensic psychological assessment of a violent offender case.

## Forensic Psychological Assessment

Forensic psychological assessment is performed to assist the trier of fact in answering a legal question that has a psychological dimension. Examples of such questions are: criminal responsibility, termination of parental rights, and personal injury under worker's compensation (Heilbrun et al., 2009). A few notable differences between forensic and clinical assessment should be acknowledged. Most importantly, distorted response styles (both faking good and faking bad) are more common among forensic examinees, both as a consequence of the adversarial legal context and because of a higher prevalence of cluster B personality traits (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which may serve as a cause for defensive and distorted responding (De Ruiter & Kaser-Boyd, 2015). To control for problematic response styles, forensic assessors use self-report instruments containing response style scales, such as the MMPI or the PAI, and/or special symptom validity testing tools (Rogers, 2008). Performance-based personality tests, such as the Rorschach, can contribute uniquely to forensic assessment because they are somewhat less transparent to the examinee, although still not impervious to distortion (Sewell, 2008). For instance, it was shown that psychiatric outpatients instructed to fake good mental health on the Rorschach were unable to reduce perceptual and cognitive disturbances, but did successfully limit the level of aggressive and disturbing content (Hartmann & Hartmann, 2014). In addition, forensic psychological assessment requires use of collateral information, such as interviews with informants, medical and criminal records, and behavioral

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1 It should be noted that the Aggressive Content (AGC) variable in R-PAS differs slightly from the original AgC coding as well as from the Baity et al. (2000) list of aggressive contents (see Meyer et al., 2011, p. 138).

observation. Ideally, forensic psychological assessment is multimethod and evidence-based (Gacono et al., 2008; Hopwood & Bornstein, 2014).

## Research on Rorschach Aggression-Related Codes

Obviously, all Rorschach codes are of relevance in a forensic psychological evaluation, as they provide insight into the examinee's psychological functioning in many domains. Still, there are Rorschach variables that provide information on personality characteristics that are of particular importance in forensic assessment, such as aggression and impulsivity. We will briefly review validity research on the measurement of these personality traits using various Rorschach codes. This review will be limited to empirical studies published in English.

### Aggression Codes

Before Exner's Comprehensive System (CS) became the dominant coding and interpretation system in many countries (Exner, 2003), several scholars had developed criteria for coding aggression in Rorschach responses. Examples are Elizur's Hostility Scale and Holt's Primary (A1) and Secondary Process (A2) Aggression (Elizur, 1949; Holt, 1977). Exner did not include aggressive content codes in the CS, but only included a code for aggressive movement (AG, now AGM in the R-PAS system). This was seen as limiting the utility of the Rorschach with forensic clients (Meloy & Gacono, 1992) and resulted in the introduction of aggressive content scores, such as AgC, AgPot, and AgPast, which have been studied quite extensively (Baity & Hilsenroth, 2002; Baity et al., 2000; Mihura et al., 2003). Mihura and colleagues (2013) conducted meta-analyses of the criterion validity of CS variables and found a small but significant association ( $r = .10$ ) between AGM and criterion measures of anger and aggressive behavior, either expressed or experienced.

However, the association between the aggressive content scores (e.g., those developed by Gacono and Meloy, and by Holt) and real-life aggression and experienced anger, appears to be stronger than associations with AGM. Baity and Hilsenroth (1999) were the first to examine the relation between seven different Rorschach aggression variables (AGM, MOR, AgC, AgPast, AgPot, and Holt's A1 and A2) in a sample of 78 patients with mixed personality disorders. Stepwise regression analyses revealed that AgC was a positive predictor of the number of Antisocial Personality Disorder criteria these patients met and AgC also predicted patients' scores on the Antisocial Practices (ASP) Scale of the MMPI. AgPast was a significant predictor of scores on the MMPI Anger (ANG) scale. Interestingly,

MOR was a significant predictor of the number of Borderline Personality Disorder criteria (Baity & Hilsenroth, 1999). In a subsequent study, Baity and Hilsenroth (2002) evaluated the relation between AgC, MOR, and AGM and real-world aggressive behavior, as derived from chart material of 94 psychiatric patients. Real-world aggressiveness was predicted by all three variables, but AgC was the only nonredundant predictor of aggressiveness.

Mihura and colleagues examined the associations between AGM, AgC, AgPot, AgPast, and self-reported aggression as measured by several scales of the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) in a sample of 70 college students (Mihura et al., 2003). Note that AGM was unrelated to self-reported physical aggression in this study. Self-reported physical aggression potential was significantly associated with AgC ( $r = .26$ ), AgPot ( $r = .29$ ), and AgPast ( $r = .24$ ); self-reported self-destructive behaviors were significantly related to AgPast ( $r = .30$ ). A recent study failed to find significant correlations between self-reports of three possible anger responses to stress and AgC ( $r = -.006$ ) and AgPast ( $r = -.013$ ) in a sample of 416 medical students (Meyer et al., 2018).

AgPast responses are believed to represent internal representations of past victimization (Gacono & Meloy, 1994). Kamphuis and colleagues (2000) hypothesized that AgPast would be able to differentiate between three groups of psychiatric outpatients: those with histories of (a) definite sexual abuse ( $n = 22$ ), (b) suspected but unconfirmed sexual abuse ( $n = 13$ ), or (c) no sexual abuse ( $n = 43$ ), but this hypothesis was not supported. In a post hoc analysis, they found a significant association between AgPast and sexual abuse that was violent or sadistic.

By means of principal components analysis, the structure of nine Rorschach variables related to aggression (AGM, MOR, A1, A2, AgC, AgPast, and Elizur's Strong and Lesser Hostility) was examined in a sample of 225 medical students. The first component was defined by AgC, A2, and Lesser Hostility; the second component included AgPast, MOR, A1, and Stronger Hostility (Katko et al., 2010). Katko and colleagues (2010) conclude that to simplify Rorschach coding of aggression, assessors could limit themselves to AgC and AgPast. A recent study by Joubert and Webster (2017) examined the latent structure of Rorschach aggression scores in a sample of 108 children and adolescents who had been placed in foster care because of maltreatment from caregivers. Three classes were distinguishable: The first latent class showed little evidence of aggression on the Rorschach, except for one AgC response. The other two were characterized by aggression directed at others (AgC, AGM) and at the self (AgPast, MOR). Interestingly, the authors did not find isomorphic associations between these classes and psychological symptoms (internalizing or externalizing symptoms) in abused children (Joubert & Webster, 2017).

In an experimental study, Benjestorf and colleagues (2013) instructed participants (half were violent offenders; half were nonoffenders) to either suppress or not suppress aggressive content on the Rorschach. Findings indicate that both subgroups gave significantly fewer aggression responses in the suppression condition, with a large effect size (ES) for AgC and a small ES for AgPast. AG did not show a difference, probably due to a low prevalence of AG. The suppression instruction was meant to simulate the context of forensic evaluations, in which an offender may wish to convince the examiner or court that he or she is no longer dangerous. As such, the study provides evidence that offenders and nonoffenders alike are able to screen out aggressive content when motivated to do so (Benjestorf et al., 2013).

Although there has been a substantial amount of research on the different Rorschach aggression codes, the findings presented above do not provide a clear picture. Research into the interpretive meaning of the different aggression codes is compounded by the confluence of victimization/trauma and aggressive behaviors in the same subjects (Lang et al., 2002; Weiler & Widom, 1996). It is unclear to what extent elevations in aggression scores on the Rorschach are indicative of actual aggressive and antisocial behaviors or are reflecting a preoccupation with or fear of violent victimization (Baity & Hilsenroth, 2002; Liebman et al., 2005).

### White Space (S) Response

Hermann Rorschach (1921/1942) already mentioned a theoretical link between stubbornness and oppositionality and S responses. However, in their meta-analyses, Mihura et al. (2013) found no evidence ( $r = .01$ ) for an association between S and oppositionality, neither as an outward behavior nor as an internally experienced emotion. In a subsequent, exploratory study (Rosso et al., 2015), three different subtypes of S responses (reversal, figure-ground integration, and figure-ground fusion) were related to self-reported feelings and expressions of anger in a sample of 50 students. The authors did not find associations in the expected direction between subtypes of S responses and self-reported feelings of wanting to express anger verbally or physically (Rosso et al., 2015).

### FC: CF + C or Form Color Ratio

The degree to which Rorschach responses that contain Chromatic color are not form-dominated is thought to reflect an examinee's degree of emotional impulsivity. This construct is termed "Form Color Ratio" (Mihura et al., 2013) or "Color Form Level" (Mihura et al., 2003), calculated using the formula:  $(FC \times 0.5) - (CF \times 1.0) - (C \times 1.5) - (Cn \times 1.5)$ . In the Mihura et al. (2013) meta-analyses,

the Form Color ratio was significantly related to emotional impulsivity ( $r = .32$ ). What was striking about this finding is that the 14 studies on which this finding was based used external criterion measures for impulsivity, such as acute stress reactions, child-abusing fathers [substantiated], and violent offending (Mihura et al., 2013).

## Rorschach Research in Forensic Samples

Gacono and Meloy's (1994) work served as an impetus for studies that used the Rorschach in forensic samples. This review aims to shed light on the question of incremental validity of the Rorschach in forensic psychological assessment. In other words: Can the Rorschach provide insights into forensically relevant psychological traits of the examinee that other psychological tools cannot? Can the Rorschach add to the evidence base in a forensic evaluation by providing data that strengthen the evaluator's conclusions?

The Rorschach is not a diagnostic test in a strict sense; its outcome is not a psychiatric diagnosis, but rather a multifaceted picture of an examinee's personality, including (Weiner & Greene, 2008):

Adaptive strengths and weaknesses in how people manage stress, how they attend to and perceive their surroundings, how they form concepts and ideas, how they experience and express feelings, how they view themselves, and how they relate to other people. (p. 347)

Attempts to validate the Rorschach as a tool to discriminate between certain types of diagnostic categories (e.g., psychopathic offenders vs. nonpsychopathic offenders) have largely failed, likely for the simple reason that the Rorschach is not fit for this purpose. For example, in persons with the same diagnostic label (e.g., borderline personality disorder), we will find different ways of coping with stress and different views of self and others. Still, studies on different subgroups of forensic patients can provide insights into structural and thematic features of their Rorschach profiles.

Since the early 1990s, a number of studies examined the ability of the Rorschach to detect psychopathy as defined by the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL, PCL-R; Hare, 2003). This research was summarized in a meta-analytic review (Wood et al., 2010) of 22 studies including 780 forensic subjects. All these studies used the CS (Exner, 2003) for Rorschach coding and the PCL(-R) (Hare, 2003) to categorize psychopathy. The only medium-sized ( $r = .23$ ) association was found for psychopathy and Aggressive Potential (AgPot) responses. Smaller but still significant associations were found for COP = 0, SumT, and PER. Many



Rorschach variables for which associations with psychopathy have been hypothesized (Gacono & Meloy, 2009), such as Reflections, pure H, SumV, Space, and AgC, did not yield significant findings. The authors conclude that the Rorschach is not a useful instrument for discriminating psychopaths from nonpsychopaths in forensic settings, which does not preclude the possibility that, “the greatest value of the Rorschach in criminal assessments is not to discriminate psychopaths from nonpsychopaths but to provide a richer picture of personality dynamics” (Wood et al., 2010; p. 346).

Weizmann-Henelius and colleagues (2006) compared a Finnish sample of incarcerated violent female offenders with a sample of female nonoffenders on nine CS (Exner, 2003) variables and three of the aggressive content variables developed by Gacono and Meloy (1994). Female offenders had significantly higher scores on the Coping Deficit Index (CDI) and on other indicators of coping difficulties (low EA, high F%). Unexpectedly, the offender sample did not show higher scores on any of the aggressive content variables. In an exploratory analysis, the authors found significant and medium-sized correlations between AgC and physical abuse in childhood, sexual abuse in childhood, and violence in the family of origin for the total sample. The authors hypothesize that AgC scores may point at identification with the aggressor in response to victimization experiences (Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2006), but this interpretation needs to be investigated further.

A high percentage (72%) of positive CDIs was also found in a sample ( $N = 63$ ) of male adjudicated youth (Talkington et al., 2013). In general, the Rorschach CS records obtained from these youth reflected cognitive and emotional impoverishment (e.g., mean Lambda = 1.77; 75% COP = 0), which can perhaps at least partially be linked to their low average IQ (mean IQ = 77). Another study examined five Rorschach aggression variables (AGM, A1, A2, AgC, and AgPast) in relation to a measure of aggressive potential (measured with a self-report scale) and real-world aggression/violence (the Violence Rating Scale-Revised [VRS-R], rated from intake forensic reports) in 150 adjudicated adolescents (75 M, 75F; Liebman et al., 2005). Interestingly, there were no gender differences in mean number of aggression variables. AgC was the only variable that was significantly related to both the self-report aggressive potential scale and the clinician-rated VRS-R. Liebman et al. (2005) caution against interpreting the meaning of AgC responses as an indicator of violence potential:

The AgC response may in part reflect the day-to-day experience of violence in the lives of these adolescents. (p. 38)

Like any Rorschach finding, it should be reviewed in the context of other diagnostic information (interview, self-report, collateral data; Baity & Hilsenroth, 2002).



A descriptive study of 45 violent prisoners with a PCL-R score of 30 or higher echoed a number of the aforementioned findings (Franks et al., 2009). Overall, 61% of their sample had a positive CDI, mean Lambda was 1.45, mean EA = 3.4, 73% had COP = 0, and 86% had AGM = 0. Interestingly, Franks et al. (2009) noted the similarity between the avoidant and constricted Rorschach profiles of these psychopathic prisoners and the Banality profile developed to describe the Rorschach responses of Nazi War criminals (Zillmer et al., 1995).

A few studies have investigated female forensic examinees' Rorschachs. Smith and colleagues (2020) studied Rorschach aggression codes in a sample of female psychopathic ( $n = 84$ ) and nonpsychopathic offenders ( $n = 39$ ). They found that female psychopathic offenders had significantly more AgC, AgPot, and AgPast in their Rorschachs compared with the nonpsychopathic female offenders, although the ESs were relatively small. No differences were found for AG. The authors speculate that the female psychopathic offender identifies both with the victim (AgPast) as well as the aggressor (AgPot), and aggressive behavior (AgC; Smith, Gacono, & Cunliffe, 2020). In another study, Smith et al. (2018) compared female ( $n = 46$ ) and male ( $n = 44$ ) psychopathic offenders on a selected set of Rorschach CS variables. The authors hypothesized that male psychopathic offenders would have significantly more Fr + rF and PER, while their female counterparts would produce more Pairs, MOR, SumV, SumT, and SumY. Most of these hypotheses received no support, but female psychopathic offenders did produce more SumT than their male counterparts (Smith et al., 2018).

Huprich and colleagues (2004) examined Rorschach Oral Dependency (ROD) scores and Gacono and Meloy's (1994) aggressive content scores, and their co-occurrence, in psychopathic violent offenders, sexual homicide perpetrators, and nonviolent sexual offenders against children (Huprich et al., 2004). ROD scores, expressed as a percentage of R, were significantly lower in psychopathic offenders compared with the other two offender groups. For sexual homicide perpetrators, almost 50% of ROD scores were accompanied by an aggression score. There were no meaningful differences between the three groups on AgC; however, sexual homicide perpetrators consistently gave the highest number of AgPast and AgPot scores of the three groups. The authors conclude that the ROD scale provides an implicit assessment of dependency needs that allows evaluators to better understand the underlying dynamics of offending behavior (Huprich et al., 2004).

In summary, the empirical research literature on the use of the Rorschach in forensic populations and forensically relevant Rorschach codes provides a mixed picture. The most consistent finding appears to be the high prevalence of Rorschach protocols with high Lambda and positive CDI, illustrating the maladaptive problem-solving style of individuals who are in conflict with the law. The aggression codes (AgC, AgPot, and AgPast) proposed by Meloy and

Gacono (1992) show inconsistent results, and it remains unclear whether these three codes indicate different intrapsychic mechanisms. In some studies, the three codes show high correlations, in others not at all. Additionally, the correlations with external criteria (e.g., behavioral aggression ratings, self-reported aggression, victimization) are inconsistent. Likely, all three codes indicate a preoccupation with aggressive imagery, but the manner in which this preoccupation plays a role in the individual's life (e.g., extreme fear of aggression, violent victimization, violence perpetration, denial of aggression) will have to be gauged from a thorough investigation of the individual's life history, other psychological test data, and collateral information.

As already mentioned, all Rorschach codes can provide meaningful information in a forensic evaluation. A pertinent example is the Rorschach's ability to provide information about a person's perception and thinking that is indicative of an underlying psychotic process, even before actual symptoms of psychosis have surfaced (Ilonen et al., 2010; Metsanen et al., 2004). The Rorschach, more specifically the Perceptual Thinking Index (PTI), is a highly sensitive measure of the presence of perceptual and thought disturbance, which makes it useful in the forensic assessment of psychosis, which may be relevant for both assessment of legal insanity and competency to stand trial (Acklin, 2008; Gray & Acklin, 2008). The meta-analyses by Mihura et al. (2013) found that the PTI had one of the highest validity coefficients of all Rorschach CS variables ( $r = .39$ ) as an indicator of disturbed thinking and distorted perception. A recent study found that the PTI is unaffected by antipsychotic medication in a sample of 114 psychotic patients (Biagiarelli et al., 2017), which again suggests the PTI measures the underlying perceptual and thought processes, and not the symptoms of psychosis. Rorschach responses of patients with schizophrenia could be successfully simulated using a neural network model, which proposed lack of context integration, caused by an altered noise-to-signal ratio at the level of the single neuron, as the cause of distorted perception and thinking on the Rorschach (Peled & Geva, 2000). The following case example illustrates how the R-PAS coding system was used in a criminal responsibility evaluation. A number of studies and a meta-analysis have demonstrated that R-PAS keeps the response process of the Rorschach task, as reflected in coded variables, similar to that found in the CS, while optimizing interpretability by controlling R (Hosseinasab et al., 2019; Pianowski et al., 2021).

## Forensic Criminal Case Example

Criminal responsibility assessment aims to assess a defendant's mental state at the time of the offense (MSO; Melton et al., 2007). By its nature, it is a task of

retrospective reconstruction of the defendant's behavior and mental state leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of the offense. Various tools may help the assessor with this reconstruction: interviews with the defendant, eyewitness observations, reports of other informants, police reports, reports of treating mental health professionals, but also psychological tests (Acklin, 2008).

Peter has just turned 20 and has been in jail for nearly 2 months on a charge of attempted manslaughter against a female student, Melanie. He and the victim were living in the same student house. Peter is described by his student friends as shy and unassertive; he does not talk about his feelings. When he has had a few bottles of beer, he loosens up, but they also say he can become "annoying." On several occasions, Peter and Melanie have kissed and had sex after a long night of drinking and partying. Melanie stated before the police that about 3 weeks prior to the offense, she told Peter that she liked him, but not enough for her to want a relationship with him. Peter, on the other hand, told her he did want a relationship with her. On the following day, they talked about this again, and Melanie had the impression he was hiding his true feelings behind a veneer of coolness. Melanie says he went to see her in her room twice, but she sent him away. They did not have sexual intercourse during these 3 weeks.

The Saturday before the offense, the students in the house went out on the town and Peter saw Melanie kissing another guy. Peter left the group. One of the friends called him up and Peter said he was on the train, going home. The next day, his friends found Peter at around 5 p.m., sitting by himself in front of the student house, clearly drunk, a set of beer cans beside his chair. Around 5:30 p.m. Melanie, Peter, and another housemate went out to buy groceries for dinner and Peter bought a bottle of wine just for himself. The three watched a movie and Peter kept on drinking wine. After the movie, Melanie asked him why he left the previous night, which resulted in an argument. Melanie told the police she went to sleep around midnight.

## Childhood

Peter grew up as the oldest son in a middle-class family with two sisters. His parents describe him as a reticent child, who cried a lot as a baby and had severe separation anxiety. Up until age 4 he had difficulty going to sleep in his own bed and he cried when his mother left him at daycare or with his grandparents. He played soccer in his free time and finished high school without much difficulty. However, his adjustment to college life did not run smoothly; he felt belittled and taken advantage of by his fraternity brothers to such an extent that he wanted to quit the fraternity. When one of the brothers found out about this, he started a

conversation with Peter, who shared his experiences and dislikes. This cleared the air for a while and Peter got a set of new responsibilities in the fraternity.

Peter drank his first beer when he was 12, although the legal drinking age at the time was 16. He says he drank at parties because everyone did so but also to muster up the courage to talk to a girl. He says he mostly drinks when he goes out with his friends, sometimes to a point that he does not know his whereabouts anymore and friends have to take him home. During the last weeks before the offense, he also started to drink during the day, to forget about everything. On the day before the offense, he drank continually between 2 in the afternoon and 10 at night, added up it was around 500 ml of pure alcohol within 8 hr. He says this was the only day that he consciously tried to drown out his feelings by drinking alcohol. Peter does not use drugs.

## The Offense

Before the offense, Peter wanted to kill himself. He took the stairs to the rooftop: "I wanted this misery to stop." The assessor asked him what he means by "this misery"? He said he did not feel happy, a kind of blockage inside, which started around age 14. He said it came out of the blue, nothing in particular triggered it. This is when he started to have a lot of conflicts with his parents, he felt disadvantaged, "a feeling that life is no longer for you." Peter said he had always tried to deny this feeling and to not let himself get distracted by it: "I find it hard to accept that there may be something wrong with me. I blame others, I blame myself. I want to change that but I cannot. At some point, it just goes away again."

His father said he recognizes Peter's depressive moods. Similar to Peter, he failed at college and felt he had disappointed his parents, and wished he was dead. This depressive period lasted for a number of years; sometimes it returns in the form of rumination, but he can deal with it nowadays by jogging. He also has compulsive behaviors, such as walking the stairs in a fixed way; he says Peter told him he also has to do things like that. His father noticed Peter's depressed mood for the first time, about 6 months before the offense, when Peter told him he had failed an exam. His father has worried that Peter might attempt suicide, but he never thought his son would hurt someone else. Both parents describe their son as "closed as an oyster," as someone who does not share his feelings with anyone else.

Peter says he could not fall asleep after his quibble with Melanie: "I felt awful, I started to walk up and down the hallway, with my phone and a knife in my hands. I was going to end my own life. That Sunday, when I woke up, I felt: 'This is my last day.' I had already started writing a farewell letter." He says he wanted to take Melanie with him, to have her for himself. The wish to kill himself was stronger

than ever before and he thinks the alcohol made him go from thinking to acting. He went up to Melanie who was sleeping in her bed and caused serious injuries in her neck. He remembers her screaming: "I don't want to die, Peter," which led him to stop and to say he was sorry. He went to the rooftop, called the emergency services, and wanted to jump off the roof, but he was afraid to. In a state of frenzy, he crossed rooftops, and ran to the train station to go to his parents. He saw that it would take another hour before the first train would arrive. He was in his underwear and with blood on his hands; he was arrested by two policemen.

Clinically, Peter impresses the assessor as tense and much younger than his actual age. Quite remarkably, Peter does not show much emotion when the offense, and everything that led up to it, are discussed. The MMPI-2 validity scales reveal consistent responding without over- or underreporting of symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Peter is experiencing psychological distress. This distress is chronic and relates to issues with identity and self-efficacy. Instead of dealing with his problems, he denies and avoids them. Peter's MMPI-2 is a 07-profile, with scales 8 and 5 also clinically elevated. His self-esteem is so low that it causes confusion, guilt, and extreme tension. His sense of inadequacy results in obsessive rumination and compulsive behaviors. Rumination gives rise to sleep problems and suicidal ideation. Peter feels extremely uncomfortable around women. Excessive alcohol use is the result of an inadequate attempt to relax and manage the problems he feels. Suicide risk is still elevated at the time of testing.

The Rorschach was administered using R-Optimized administration and yielded 20 responses, which were coded using R-PAS (Meyer et al., 2011). The Engagement and Cognitive Complexity cluster (Page 1 Summary Scores) yielded highly normative scores, the only exception being a somewhat low F% (25%). The most remarkable findings on Page 1 are in the Perceptual and Thinking domain: Ego Impairment Index, Thought & Perception Composite (similar to PTI in the CS), WSumCognitive codes and SevereCognitive codes and WD-% are all elevated by one or two standard deviations above the mean T-score. He gives only three Popular responses. Thus, Peter's Rorschach reveals a lot of perceptual and thought distortion, a somewhat unexpected finding, given the lack of obvious psychotic symptoms in his clinical presentation or his MMPI-2.

Responses with Cognitive Special scores were examined. The first one is to Card III and relatively benign: "A frog with a red bowtie on" [smiling]. His smile shows Peter is aware of the incongruence. The next Cognitive Special score comes in his first response to Card VIII, where he sees a cross section of a volcano and a lake in

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2 Peter's MMPI-2 profile was interpreted using: Friedman, A., Lewak, R., Nicholls, D., & Webb, D. (2001). *Psychological assessment with the MMPI-2*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

front of it, revealing boundary diffusion. Similar boundary diffusion occurs in his last response to the test where he sees both the spine (inside the body), the neck, and a face on top of it. The Stress and Distress cluster does not reveal elevations; on the contrary, his scores tend to be below the mean on these variables. Peter's representations of others are immature and maladaptive (PHR/GHR = 64% and M- = 1). On the other hand, his AgC, COP, and H are normative. On Page 2 Summary Scores, Peter's R-PAS demonstrates an extremely high Dd percentage (50%), which could relate to his obsessive-compulsiveness. He has 1 Vista and 2 FD responses, revealing painful introspection. His emotion regulation is poor (pure C = 2) and he may try to run from his problems by passive daydreaming (Mp/Ma + Mp = 75%). Again, the Stress and Distress cluster does not show problematic functioning, although he experiences above average irritability because of holding back negative feelings (C' = 3). Finally, in the Self/Other Representations cluster, he has three AGM responses, which is remarkably high. Given the violence in his offense, we examined the responses in which either AGM and/or AgC were present:

Card III: "A crab because of the claws" (AgC)

Card IV: "A bull with horns. It also has something dark, a bit menacing, as if it is snarling at you." (AgC, AGM)

Card VIII: "A tiger, he is leaning forward, like the head of a tiger, sneaking through the jungle with its head facing forward." (AgC, AGM)

Card IX: "Two male deer, walking in on each other, with the antlers into each other." (AGM)

Interestingly, in the response to Card IV, Peter projects himself as the victim of the bull's threat, which appears to align with his real-life tendency to experience others as rejecting of him.

## Diagnostic Conclusion

The life history, as stated by Peter's parents and Peter himself, indicates he had a difficult temperament, that is, a high level of emotional reactivity. Highly emotionally reactive children experience elevated levels of anxiety, frustration, anger, and sadness, and they are at risk of developing internalizing and externalizing behavioral disorders (Morris et al., 2007; Stifter & Spinrad, 2002). Because these children experience strong emotions, they need effective emotion regulation strategies to cope with internal tensions. They need parents who can help them

contain their emotions (Goldsmith et al., 2004), including cognitive strategies to think differently about their feelings. Adolescence is the period when emotion regulation becomes of paramount importance, because this is when strong feelings related to loss of romantic relationships and sexual experiences arise for the first time. To get a grip on these emotions and experiences, adolescents need parents who are warm and responsive (Gottman et al., 1996). In contrast with this, some parents feel uncomfortable when their child expresses strong emotions and fail to use these moments as opportunities for intimacy and teaching problem-solving with their child.

Peter tends to deny and suppress negative emotions; his parents have been unable to help him develop more effective emotion-coping skills. Peter is still very dependent on his parents for his emotion regulation: When he failed his first exam, he immediately called his father. He also thought of calling his parents on the Sunday before the offense. In fact, he dialed his parents' number just before he dialed the emergency services for Melanie. Adolescents low in emotional autonomy are vulnerable to developing depressive and anxiety disorder symptoms, as we see in Peter (Allen et al., 1994). The (extreme) alcohol intoxication in the 24 hr before the offense appears to have been motivated by an attempt to numb his feelings. Most collateral informants (his student-friends, his parents) note Peter's young emotional age, even though he is 20 years old.

Peter's clinical presentation and his MMPI-2 results indicate serious depressive and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, as well as suicidal ideation. In addition, his Rorschach results indicate a possible underlying vulnerability for psychotic symptoms. The attack on Melanie was motivated by a wish to be with her in suicide, which could be seen as both a wish for fusion and a failure of his reality testing. When she tells him during the attack that she wants to live, the "spell" is broken and he helps her call the emergency services.

On the basis of the findings of this evaluation, I advised the court to apply juvenile law, because Peter's personality and emotional autonomy are comparable to that of an adolescent.<sup>3</sup> Application of juvenile law has a pedagogical basis and provides a lot more opportunities to assist Peter in his future development towards

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3 On April 1, 2014, so-called adolescent criminal law was implemented in The Netherlands. One of the important changes is that adolescents between the age of 18 and 23 may now be tried under juvenile law, instead of adult criminal law, if deemed appropriate. The Netherlands Institute for Forensic Psychology and Psychiatry developed a set of criteria for forensic psychologists: [https://www.nifp.nl/binaries/implementatie-van-de-wegingslijst-adolescentenstrafrecht-bij-het-nifp\\_tcm106-275345.pdf](https://www.nifp.nl/binaries/implementatie-van-de-wegingslijst-adolescentenstrafrecht-bij-het-nifp_tcm106-275345.pdf)



becoming a socially and emotionally stable adult. Adjudication according to adult criminal law would merely serve a punitive purpose.

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## Summary

Forensic psychological assessment in criminal cases is performed to assist the trier of fact in answering legal questions that have a psychological dimension. Examples are criminal responsibility, violence risk assessment, and need for treatment. Performance-based personality tests, such as the Rorschach, can contribute uniquely to forensic assessment because they are somewhat less transparent to the examinee than self-report measures are. This paper reviews Rorschach studies on forensically relevant Rorschach variables, including those with different forensic samples. Empirical findings are mixed; there is not a one-on-one relationship between certain Rorschach variables, such as aggression codes, and forensically relevant traits, such as psychopathy, hostility,

or aggressive behavior. Likely, all aggression codes indicate a preoccupation with aggressive imagery, but the manner in which this preoccupation plays a role in the examinee's life (e.g., extreme fear of aggression, violent victimization, violence perpetration, denial of aggression) needs to be determined on the basis of other data. A large number of Rorschach protocols with high Lambda and positive Coping Deficit Index, demonstrating coping and problem-solving difficulties, characterizes many offender samples.

Rorschach codes can provide meaningful and unique information in a forensic evaluation. A pertinent example is the Rorschach's ability to provide information about a person's perception and thinking that is indicative of an underlying psychotic process, even before actual symptoms of psychosis have surfaced. The incremental validity of the Rorschach is illustrated with a case example of a 20-year-old male college student, who committed a (first) violent offense, an assault with a knife on a female student, who had recently refused to have an intimate relationship with him. Data obtained from the defendant, his parents, his friends, and the victim were used to reconstruct the mental state at the time of the offense. Psychological test data, including the MMPI-2, but especially the Rorschach, provided insight into the psychological dynamics that motivated the attack, which was very much out of character for this timid and emotionally immature young adult.

## Samenvatting

Forensisch psychologisch onderzoek in strafzaken wordt uitgevoerd om de rechter te helpen bij het beantwoorden van rechtsvragen die een psychologische dimensie hebben. Voorbeelden zijn strafrechtelijke verantwoordelijkheid, geweldsrisico-inschatting en behoefte aan behandeling. Prestatie-gebaseerde persoonlijkheidstests, zoals de Rorschach, kunnen een unieke bijdrage leveren aan forensisch onderzoek omdat ze minder transparant zijn voor de onderzochte dan zelfrapportage instrumenten. Dit artikel geeft een overzicht van Rorschach onderzoek naar forensisch relevante Rorschach variabelen, inclusief die met verschillende forensische steekproeven. De empirische bevindingen zijn gemengd; er is geen één-op-één relatie tussen bepaalde Rorschach variabelen, zoals agressiecodes, en forensisch relevante kenmerken, zoals psychopathie, vijandigheid, of agressief gedrag. Waarschijnlijk wijzen alle agressiecodes op een preoccupatie met agressie, maar de manier waarop deze preoccupatie een rol speelt in het leven van de onderzochte (b.v. extreme angst voor agressie, gewelddadig slachtofferschap, geweldpleging, ontkenning van agressie) moet worden vastgesteld op basis van andere gegevens. Een groot aantal Rorschach-protocolen met een hoge Lambda en een positieve Coping Deficit Index, waaruit blijkt dat er problemen zijn met coping en probleemoplossing, is kenmerkend voor veel dadersteekproeven.

Rorschach-codes kunnen zinvolle en unieke informatie opleveren in een forensische evaluatie. Een relevant voorbeeld is het vermogen van de Rorschach om informatie te verschaffen over de perceptie en het denken van een persoon die indicatief is voor een onderliggend psychotisch proces, zelfs voordat de echte symptomen van de psychose aan de oppervlakte zijn gekomen. De incrementale validiteit van de Rorschach wordt geïllustreerd aan de hand van een casus van een 20-jarige mannelijke student, die een (eerste) geweldsdelict pleegde, een aanval met een mes op een mede-studente, die kort daarvoor had geweigerd een intieme relatie met hem aan te gaan. Gegevens verkregen van de verdachte, zijn ouders, zijn vrienden en het slachtoffer werden gebruikt om de mentale toestand ten tijde van het delict te reconstrueren. Psychologische testgegevens, waaronder de MMPI-2, maar vooral de Rorschach, verschaften inzicht in de psychologische dynamiek die ten grondslag lag aan de aanval, die zeer ongewoon was voor deze timide en emotioneel onrijpe jongvolwassene.

## Résumé

L'évaluation psychologique médico-légale dans les affaires pénales est effectuée pour aider le juge des faits à répondre aux questions juridiques qui ont une dimension psychologique. Il s'agit par exemple de la responsabilité pénale, de l'évaluation du risque de violence et de la nécessité d'un traitement. Les tests de personnalité basés sur les performances, tels que le Rorschach, peuvent contribuer de manière unique à l'évaluation médico-légale car ils sont un peu moins transparents pour la personne que les mesures d'auto-évaluation. Cet article passe en revue les études de Rorschach sur les variables de Rorschach pertinentes sur le plan médico-légal, y compris celles qui concernent différents échantillons médico-légaux. Les résultats empiriques sont mitigés ; il n'y a pas de relation individuelle entre certaines variables de Rorschach, telles que les codes d'agression, et des traits pertinents sur le plan médico-légal, tels que la psychopathie, l'hostilité ou le comportement agressif. Il est probable que tous les codes d'agressivité indiquent une préoccupation pour l'image de l'agressivité, mais la manière dont cette préoccupation joue un rôle dans la vie de la personne (par exemple, peur extrême de l'agression, victimisation violente, perpétration de violence, déni de l'agressivité) doit être déterminée sur la base d'autres données. Un grand nombre de protocoles de Rorschach avec un indice Lambda élevé et un indice positif de déficit d'adaptation (CDI), démontrant des difficultés d'adaptation et de résolution de problèmes, caractérise de nombreux Rorschachs de délinquants.

Les codes Rorschach peuvent fournir des informations significatives et uniques dans une évaluation médico-légale. Un exemple pertinent est la capacité du Rorschach à fournir des informations sur la perception et la pensée d'une personne, qui sont révélatrices d'un processus psychotique sous-jacent, avant même que les symptômes réels de la psychose n'apparaissent. La validité progressive du Rorschach est illustrée par le cas d'un étudiant de 20 ans, qui a commis un (premier) délit violent, une agression au couteau sur une étudiante, qui avait récemment refusé d'avoir une relation intime avec lui. L'information obtenues de l'accusé, de ses parents, de ses amis et de la victime ont été utilisées pour reconstruire l'état mental au moment de l'infraction. Les résultats des tests psychologiques, y compris le MMPI-2, mais surtout le Rorschach, ont permis de comprendre la dynamique psychologique qui a motivé l'attaque, ce qui était tout à fait inhabituel pour ce jeune adulte timide et émotionnellement immature.

## Resumen

La evaluación psicológica forense en los casos penales se lleva a cabo para ayudar al juez a responder a las preguntas legales que tienen una dimensión psicológica. Algunos ejemplos son la responsabilidad penal, la evaluación del riesgo de violencia y la necesidad de tratamiento. Los tests de personalidad basados en el rendimiento, como el Rorschach, pueden contribuir de forma única a la evaluación forense porque son algo menos transparentes para el examinado que las medidas de autoinforme. Este artículo revisa los estudios de Rorschach sobre las variables de Rorschach de relevancia forense, incluyendo aquellos con diferentes muestras forenses. Los hallazgos empíricos son mixtos; no existe una relación de uno a uno entre ciertas variables de Rorschach, como los códigos de agresión, y los rasgos forenses relevantes, como la psicopatía, la hostilidad o el comportamiento agresivo. Es probable que todos los códigos de agresión indiquen una preocupación por las imágenes agresivas, pero la forma en que esta preocupación desempeña un papel en la vida del examinado (por ejemplo, miedo extremo a la agresión, victimización violenta, perpetración de violencia, negación de la agresión) debe determinarse sobre la base de otros datos. Un elevado número de protocolos de Rorschach con un Lambda alto y un índice de déficit de afrontamiento

(CDI) positivo, que demuestran dificultades de afrontamiento y de resolución de problemas, caracteriza a muchas protocolos de Rorschachs de delinquentes.

Los códigos de Rorschach pueden proporcionar información significativa y única en una evaluación forense. Un ejemplo pertinente es la capacidad del Rorschach para proporcionar información sobre la percepción y el pensamiento de una persona que es indicativa de un proceso psicótico subyacente, incluso antes de que los síntomas reales de la psicosis hayan aflorado. La validez incremental del Rorschach se ilustra con un ejemplo de caso de un estudiante universitario de 20 años, que cometió un (primer) delito violento, una agresión con un cuchillo a una estudiante, que recientemente se había negado a tener una relación íntima con él. Los datos obtenidos del acusado, sus padres, sus amigos y la víctima se utilizaron para reconstruir el estado mental en el momento del delito. Los datos de las pruebas psicológicas, entre ellas el MMPI-2, pero sobre todo el Rorschach, permitieron conocer la dinámica psicológica que motivó el ataque, muy fuera de lo habitual en este joven adulto tímido y emocionalmente inmaduro.

## 要約

刑事事件における法医学的な心理学的評価は、心理学的側面を持つ法的質問に答える際に、事実を求める裁判官を支援するために実行される。例としては、刑事責任、暴力リスク評価、治療の必要性などがある。ロールシャッハのようなパフォーマンススペースのパーソナリティ検査は、自記式の検査と比べて受検者に対する透明性がやや低いため、法医学の評価に独自の貢献をすることができる。本論文では、法医学的に関連性のあるロールシャッハ変数に関するロールシャッハ研究を異なる法医学的サンプルを用いたものも含めてレビューする。経験的な知見はまちまちである。例えば、攻撃性のコードのような特定のロールシャッハ変数と、サイコパシー、敵意、攻撃的行動のような法医学的に関連性のある特性との間に一对一の関係は存在しない。

おそらく、すべての攻撃性のコードは、攻撃的なイメージの先入観を示しているが、この先入観が被検者の生活の中でどのような役割を果たしているか（例えば、極端な攻撃性への恐怖、暴力的な犠牲、暴力の加害、攻撃性の否定など）については、他のデータに基づいて判断する必要がある。コーピングや問題解決の困難さを示す高いラムダと対処力不全指標がチェックされている多くのロールシャッハプロトコルは、犯罪者サンプルを特徴づけている。

ロールシャッハコードは、法医学的評価において、意味のあるユニークな情報を提供することができる。適切な例として、精神病の症状が実際に表面化する前であっても、ロールシャッハは、その人の知覚や思考に関する情報を提供する力がある。ロールシャッハのさらなる有効性は、20歳の男子大学生の例で示されている。この学生の（最初の）暴力的な犯罪の内容は、犯罪の直近で親密な関係を持つことを拒否した女子学生へのナイフによる暴行であった。被告人、彼の両親、友人、および被害者から得られたデータは、犯罪時の精神状態を再構築するために使用された。MMPI-2と特にロールシャッハを含む心理テストデータによって、この臆病で感情的に未熟な若者の性格からはかけ離れた、攻撃の動機となった心理的ダイナミクスについての洞察が得られた。