

# Defending the indefensible

In the May issue John Donnelly spoke out in favour of the Rorschach test, but **ROBERT FORDE** thinks psychologists could face legal action if they follow his advice.

**J**OHN Donnelly suggests that the Rorschach is 'as valid as other personality tests'. He also ascribes the widespread criticisms of the Rorschach in the US to a 'vocal minority', giving the impression that they are hardly worth bothering with. Nothing could be further from the truth. In their latest work Wood *et al.* (2003) ask 'What's wrong with the Rorschach?' The answer, apparently, is 'everything'. I don't have space to examine everything, but I would draw your attention to the following.

Donnelly admits that the Rorschach as originally used (in a more or less unstructured clinical fashion) was subject to varying interpretation. In particular, he mentions that it was used differently in the US and Europe. However, the advent of the Comprehensive System (CS) (Exner, 1974) is supposed to have changed all that by giving the Rorschach the psychometric respectability it previously lacked. As we shall see, it hasn't.

For a start (as Donnelly admits, but glosses over) the CS has an unfortunate tendency to assess healthy people as mentally disordered. For example, Giacono and Meloy (1994) assessed prisoners diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder on the Rorschach, scored by the CS. They found they were high in narcissism, with problems in relationships, emotional control, anxiety, thought disorder

and reality testing. As these characteristics were expected in such individuals, this was hailed as evidence for the validity of the Rorschach. However, Wood *et al.* (2001) found the same characteristics in 32 Rorschach studies of 'normal' Americans, and cited several replications. It is not generally accepted that the entire American adult population suffers from antisocial personality disorder.

This problem is not confined to adults. Even gifted children appear to be maladjusted on the CS (Wideman, 1998), and Kelly and Ben-Meir (1993) found similar results for a group of non-patient children, concluding:

*...the potential for overpathologizing children on the basis of their Rorschach responses gives cause for concern. Moreover, since most clinicians and researchers do not use control groups, they do not have a self-correction mechanism in place; that is, they will never know that they are overpathologizing.* (p.112)

The dangers of stigmatising young children are obvious.

Leaving validity aside, Donnelly believes the Rorschach is nonetheless useful in clinical practice. He describes a patient whose scores on other measures were inconclusive, but was shown by the

Rorschach to have various pathological problems that other measures had failed to identify. These included findings 'indicative of a schizophrenic process'. He sees this as evidence of the Rorschach's sensitivity, despite having himself cited Lilienfeld *et al.* (2001), who found that the

**'Thousands of Rorschachs affecting the lives of thousands of people were invalid'**

CS produced excessive indications of schizophrenia in a non-patient sample. Similar clinical 'utility' was reported by Finn (1996) and Weiner (1999). However, the supposed utility is based on the fact that the Rorschach reports pathology where other tests do not – the apparent sensitivity is exactly what one would expect in a test which overpathologises. Indeed, the case described by Donnelly exemplifies well the fears about overpathologising expressed by Kelly and Ben-Meir.

Donnelly cites crucial evidence from Lilienfeld *et al.* (2000) and Garb (1999) that the Rorschach is not reliable, but fails to comment further upon it. This seems extraordinary, given that a test which is not reliable cannot be valid even in principle.

## References

- Aronov, E. (2001). CS norms, psychometrics, and possibilities for the Rorschach technique. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 8, 383–385.
- Exner, J.E. (1974). *The Rorschach: A comprehensive system* (Vol. 1). New York: Wiley.
- Exner, J.E. (2001). *A Rorschach workbook for the Comprehensive System* (5th edn). Asheville, NC: Rorschach Workshops.
- Finn, S.E. (1996). Assessment feedback integrating MMPI-2 and Rorschach findings. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 67, 543–557.
- Garb, H.N. (1999). Call for a moratorium on the use of the Rorschach ink blot test in clinical and forensic settings. *Assessment*, 6, 313–315.
- Giacono, C.B. & Meloy, J.R. (1994). The Rorschach assessment of aggressive and psychopathic personalities. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 48, 393–406.
- Kelly, R.J. & Ben-Meir, S. (1993). Emotional effects. In J. Waterman, R.J. Kelly, M.K. Oliveri & J. McCord (Eds.) *Behind the playground walls: Sexual abuse in preschools* (pp.106–119). New York: Guilford Press.
- Lilienfeld, S.O., Wood, J.M. & Garb, H.N. (2000). The scientific status of projective techniques. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 1, 27–66.
- Lilienfeld, S.O., Wood, J.M. & Garb, H.N. (2001, May). What's wrong with this picture? *Scientific American*, pp.81–87.
- Weiner, I.B. (1999). What the Rorschach can do for you: Incremental validity in clinical applications. *Assessment*, 6, 327–339.
- Wideman, B.G. (1998). Rorschach responses in gifted and non-gifted children: A comparison study (Doctoral dissertation, Georgia State University). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59, 905B.
- Wood, J.M., Nezworski, M.T., Garb, H.N. & Lilienfeld, S.O. (2001). The misperception of psychopathology: Problems with norms of the Comprehensive System for the Rorschach. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 8, 350–373.
- Wood, J.M., Nezworski, M.T., Lilienfeld, S.O. & Garb, H.N. (2003). *What's wrong with the Rorschach?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Wiley

Garb also noted that the Rorschach did not correlate with other indices of mental health. Again, this is exactly what one would expect from a test which overpathologises – if it makes everyone look disordered, it cannot distinguish the healthy from the unhealthy.

Donnelly suggests that even critics like Wood *et al.* (2001) concede the usefulness of the Rorschach. On the contrary, Wood *et al.* were clear that renorming was the minimum requirement, and they proposed a moratorium on the use of the Rorschach except for research purposes until the critical flaws in the CS could be corrected. Even Aronov (2001), a proponent of the Rorschach, admitted that 'Wood *et al.*'s general point on the CS norms appears to be justified'.

It gets worse. The reliability of the CS depends totally upon the work done by Exner in establishing norms for the Rorschach. Clearly, without norms no test can tell us much, because we will not know whether a given response is common, rare, or plain deviant. Exner established norms on a group of 700 people. Except that he didn't. It has only recently been fully admitted (Exner, 2001) that there was

a serious error in Exner's work, and that 221 of the CS protocols were counted twice! In other words, the group was 32 per cent smaller than supposed, and the duplications would, of course, make it appear more homogeneous than it really was. In short, the norms are hopelessly compromised, which is fatal to the CS as it has been used for the last 30 years. Thousands of Rorschachs affecting the lives of thousands of people were invalid. It remains to be seen how many committed patients and prisoners, and parents who failed to get custody of their children, will sue.

Even this snapshot of the evidence is enough to show that using the Rorschach and CS is indefensible – on psychometric, clinical, and ethical grounds. Its usefulness is illusory, and if we insist on using it in the teeth of overwhelming evidence we might as well call that 'delusional'. We cannot in all conscience inflict a demonstrably invalid instrument on people and take decisions about them with its help. If we nonetheless do so, a lawsuit is the least that we deserve.

■ *Robert Forde is a Chartered Forensic Psychologist in private practice. E-mail: [psycholegal@rafofde.plus.com](mailto:psycholegal@rafofde.plus.com).*

### **John Donnelly replies:**

I READ with interest Robert Forde's response to my feature on the Rorschach. His article appears to summarise the main opinions expressed within the book *What's Wrong with the Rorschach?* (Wood *et al.*, 2003) and to ignore the favourable aspects of existing research. Sadly, it brings nothing new to the debate and raises the same old tired objections (validity, reliability, etc.) covered in my original piece. I have also commented on some of the same points already raised in a feature about this book in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (11 April 2003).

Forde's opinion lends support to the 'vocal minority' who opine that the Rorschach is 'a demonstrably invalid instrument' – despite research confirming an acceptable validity and reliability on a par with well-established measures, including the MMPI and Wechsler scales.

I previously outlined my concern over the Rorschach norms but I would disagree with Forde's suggestion that Exner's norms are 'hopelessly compromised' because of a small sample size (e.g. only 479 here): a larger sample does not necessarily mean a greater representation of 'normal'. Indeed, smaller, regularly updated, normal samples – free from well-defined pathology – are the order of the day. The Wechsler scales, for example, derive their norms from groups of between 75 and 200 participants.

The claim that individuals have lost their liberty following assessment with the Rorschach is alarmist. Such a claim seems wholly unfounded and naive of the role of the clinical practitioner. No psychological test can be justifiably used as the sole means of depriving any individual of liberty or custody and I have no reason to believe that any Chartered Psychologist could defensibly use a stand-alone psychological measure in isolation from other material in any clinical or forensic setting.

It is possible that some of the dialogue surrounding the Rorschach's validity may be neglecting pertinent information and so I welcome further research in the UK. However, I would caution that Forde's suggestion of a 'lawsuit' to determine the issues is unlikely to conform to the scientist-practitioner school of advancing psychology.