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Personality Appraisal and the Paranormal

GARDNER MURPHY

Many of the problems investigated in psychical research relate to conditions which favor the paranormal, with no direct interest in individual differences. When, for example, Pratt and Woodruff¹ report that novelty of stimulus material appears to favor good scoring—the scores declining as the newness wears off—they properly mass the data from all subjects and state their findings in terms of a generalization. When both the Duke University experimenters² and the A.S.P.R. experimenters³ find evidence of "decline effects" (Midas Touch) in ESP results, they report on the entire work of all participating subjects. Indeed, individual scores in such experiments are not as a rule independently significant. The whole approach is different when the focus of attention is upon the individual. It is safe to say that nearly everything that is known concerning paranormal gifts from the standpoint of experimental work is in terms of general working principles, rather than in terms of individual differences.

With spontaneous cases, and with special sensitives, however, the case is somewhat different. To be sure, some attempts have been made to discover the general psychology of readiness for mediumship and for spontaneous experiences—indeed, we have made our own attempts along this line.⁴ But in both cases there must of course be careful preliminary studies of individuals if much is to be accomplished: in some well-known instances, such as Mrs. Sidgwick's study of Mrs. Piper⁵ and Gerald Balfour's study of Mrs. Willett,⁶ attention is focused upon personal factors, and, indeed, upon those personal idiosyncrasies which are uniquely present in an individual.

¹ Pratt, J. G., and Woodruff, J. L., "Size of Stimulus Symbols in Extra-Sensory Perception," *Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. 3, December, 1939, pp. 121-158.

² See *Extra-Sensory Perception After Sixty Years*, by Pratt, J. G., et al, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1940, pp. 284 ff.

³ Taves, Ernest, and Dale, L. A., "The Midas Touch in Psychical Research," *JOURNAL A.S.P.R.*, Vol. XXXVII, April, 1943, pp. 57-83.

⁴ Murphy, Gardner, "Psychical Phenomena and Human Needs," *JOURNAL A.S.P.R.*, Vol. XXXVII, October, 1943, pp. 163-191.

⁵ Sidgwick, Mrs. Henry, "A Contribution to the Study of the Psychology of Mrs. Piper's Trance Phenomena," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXVIII (1915), pp. 1-652.

⁶ Balfour, Gerald W., "A Study of the Psychological Aspects of Mrs. Willett's Mediumship, and of the Statements of the Communicators Concerning Process," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLIII (1935), pp. 43-318.

Today we are witnessing a rapid and striking shift in research interest, in the fact that this concern for individual personality, long restricted to special cases, is spreading rapidly into experimental studies with groups, so that the question about "favorable or unfavorable conditions for the paranormal" is supplemented by the question of "conditions favorable or unfavorable for this or that *kind of person*," or indeed, "conditions favorable for *Miss Smith*, unfavorable for *Mr. Jones*."

This trend is, of course, completely dependent upon the development of adequate methods of appraising personalities. It does not help us to say that cheerful people succeed and gloomy people fail in a task, unless we have a fairly objective and dependable method of determining who is cheerful and who is gloomy. Our subject may have gotten out of the wrong side of the bed today; or, indeed, your standards of what it takes to be "cheerful" may be different from mine. Psychologists and psychiatrists concerned with the assessment of personality have learned this the hard way, and in the last two decades have found that it is imperative to develop objective and dependable tests for personality assessment. They require that a test be "reliable" (by this they mean that it must give comparable results when applied on different occasions), and "valid" (that is, it must agree with an independent, objective criterion; for example, if the test purports to test punctuality, its results must agree well with actual records of arrival on time for appointments). Such tests do not achieve the reliability and validity of physical measurements, partly because personality remains, in some degree, hidden and inaccessible to all existing approaches, partly because it has a flexibility or plasticity which makes any rigid or absolute determination meaningless. Such tests have, however, achieved a reliability and validity sufficient to make them useful in psychiatric practice, in industrial personnel work, and in the guidance of college students.

When, therefore, a need is felt for personality appraisal in relation to paranormal abilities, it is to these personality tests that we turn. This does not mean that every personal trait of every person is necessarily better appraised by a test than it could be by some other method (such as the testimony of a friend, for example). It means, rather, that in an experimental study of a group we need a uniform method applicable to all members of the group, and a method whose known reliability and validity can be counted on to prevent arbitrary judgments. There remains a very large place for other methods when unique attributes of a single person are the focus of attention, or when we encounter personality traits for which no suitable test has been devised.

Qualities Calling for Appraisal

What are the sorts of personal qualities which we might want to test in psychical research? In accordance with the theory of the paranormal which we have sketched in recent papers⁷ we should want to know *first* about the individual's *need* for paranormal experience in general; and his specific needs for information as to what is happening, or will happen, to himself or to those emotionally close to him. *Secondly*, we should want to inquire about the barriers which he himself is setting up against receipt of paranormal impressions. *Thirdly*, we should be interested in the devices available to him for permitting paranormally received impressions to circumvent barriers and find a means of expression, as in dreams, visions, automatic writing, etc.⁸

Corresponding to these three kinds of attributes we might expect to find usefulness, *first*, in tests that help us to understand the individual's psychological needs, including those unconscious needs about which the subject can tell us nothing; *second*, in tests which show the specific techniques by which the individual keeps himself in ignorance of his own needs and activities; *third*, in tests that throw light on individual proneness to automatisms (*i.e.*, tests of the capacity to carry out sensory or motor acts automatically while giving primary attention to something else). Naturally, the personality tests which have arisen in recent years have not been devised primarily for use in parapsychology. Yet there are tests which, without too much difficulty, may be used to serve all three purposes indicated.

The Available Personality Tests

Three main kinds of tests meet our requirements: questionnaires, behavior tests, and projective tests. The projective tests are by far the most important. The questionnaire, being dependent on the individual's testimony about himself, is seldom satisfactory. C. E. Stuart⁹ has ingeniously used a questionnaire dealing with the intensity of the individual's *likes* and *dislikes* as a clue to his paranormal abilities, and certainly there is a large field here to be explored; but in general, the questionnaire allows for too much self-deception. The term "behavior tests" is used here to include all those tests which, by showing the manner in which a subject carries out a *standardized experimental task*, predict how he will carry out a real task in a life situation. An

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ Murphy, Gardner, "Removal of Impediments to the Paranormal," *JOURNAL A.S.P.R.*, Vol. XXXVIII, January, 1944, pp. 2-23.

⁹ Stuart, C. E., "An Interest Inventory Relation to ESP Scores," *Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. 10, September, 1946, pp. 154-161.

example is the successful test program of the Office of Strategic Services¹⁰ which, by presenting very grilling tasks, fairly accurately predicted how men would behave in difficult overseas assignments. In psychical research we may, in time, expect good results from behavior tests—for example, from tests of ability to carry on two activities at once without interference, since this ability may be related to the automatisms which express the paranormal. At this writing, however, neither the questionnaire nor the behavior test has anything at all comparable to what the projective tests have already offered; so we shall examine these more closely.

A projective test is any test in which the individual records his *outlook upon life* in a free situation permitting him to proceed in his own way; in L. K. Frank's words, the projective test reveals the "private world" of the individual. Thus children in nursery school, dabbling in finger paints, or playing with toys, show by choice of color or by the form of their play activity, how they feel about their environment. A timid child, for example, usually paints with subdued colors in a corner of the sheet of paper, not "venturing out" into the great unknown. He arranges and plays with doll house furniture and miniature life toys in such a way as to reveal clearly what it is that he fears, and how he finds his way to love and safety. So, too, the way in which a picture is interpreted by a subject, whether adult or child, is a clue to his fears and hopes, the scope and richness of his imagination. His *expressive movements*, as in his spontaneous drawings, have proved highly valuable as clues to his impulsive and creative life. Everyone sees in his friend's drawings—quite aside from all question of artistic merit—something characteristic of the individual. The problem of the projective test is to study these self-revealing qualities so as to throw the greatest possible light upon the way in which personality discloses itself.

It is in this last area, that of free drawings, that the first systematic and extensive use of personality tests in relation to the paranormal has been published: the work of B. M. Humphrey at Duke University.¹¹ A large amount of material was made available to her by C. E. Stuart, also of Duke University, in the form of drawings which Stanford University students had made for him during his experiments there. His subjects, that is, had attempted to reproduce drawings and other picture material concealed in opaque envelopes

¹⁰ Murray, H. A., and MacKinnon, D. W., "Assessment of OSS Personnel," *Journal Consulting Psychol.*, Vol. 10, 1946, pp. 76-80.

¹¹ Humphrey, B. M., "Success in ESP as Related to Form of Response Drawings: I. Clairvoyance Experiments," and "Success in ESP as Related to Form of Response Drawings: II. GESP Experiments," *Journal of Parapsychology*, issues of June and September, 1946.

or to reproduce such material being looked at by an "agent"; these tests had been evaluated by his "preferential matching" technique.¹²

The question arose: can the *form of the drawings* executed by individual subjects tell us whether they are likely to be good or poor subjects at a clairvoyance or GESP task? The theory of the projective tests would lead us to expect an affirmative answer: we should expect people to show in their drawings something about their conscious or unconscious needs, and their habitual way of coping with the problem which their needs present.

Now, as it happened, there was available an excellent study of the possibilities of free-drawing as a projective technique, by Paula Elkisch,¹³ who had shown, among other things, that "expansion" and "compression" in free drawings can be gauged with fair reliability. Accordingly, Humphrey studied the criteria of expansion and compression and learned to score the drawings in these terms. She was then able to show that *expansive subjects*, according to these criteria, scored significantly higher on the *clairvoyance* tests than did *compressive subjects*. The *compressive* subjects had a curious tendency to score not on the target at which they were consciously aiming at the time, but on the target used in the test just preceding. We have here a suggestion that the expansive people may reach out more freely to make clairvoyant contact. The compressive people may, perhaps, be fighting against making a response which would indicate successful clairvoyant contact; but their significant scores on the just-preceding target seem to betray the fact that they did actually function paranormally, though in such a way that it would never have been known if the data had not been carefully studied. In both groups, then, the technique is helpful in showing the operation of needs (the need to reach out and make contact, the need to avoid contact), and of the devices by which the unconscious paranormal contact with the target gets into *direct* or *indirect* expression. A great deal can reasonably be expected from further use of this approach, which we hope will be repeated and confirmed by other workers.

In a later experiment, Humphrey applied the "expansive-compressive" procedure to the results of GESP tests—tests in which there is a possibility for telepathy to operate—and found that here it was the *compressive* subjects who scored significantly higher than the

¹² In this technique, each drawing by a subject is ranked, both by the subject and by the experimenter, in terms of its degree of association with each of four target drawings; and each of four target drawings is ranked in terms of its degree of association with each drawing made by the subject (the judges not knowing which target had been used at each one of the four trials).

¹³ Elkisch, Paula, "Children's Drawings in a Projective Technique," *Psychol. Monogr.*, 1945, 58, pp. 1-31.

expansive subjects. She points out that "this reversal of relationship raises a problem that has to be left unsolved for the present." One possible hypothesis would be that in the GESP situation the expansive subjects are resistant—negativistic—as is suggested by the fact that five out of six of the sub-groups tested scored not only below the compressive subjects but below "chance expectation." But many hypotheses are possible, and a wide vista of research problems is opened up.

In the meantime, other projective studies are in progress. During her years of ESP research at Harvard, and her more recent work at the A.S.P.R., G. R. Schmeidler made numerous exploratory studies with projective techniques, three of which may be briefly noted here; her own report will be made in due time. (1) She has made use of the series of pictures devised by Morgan and Murray¹⁴ and used at the Harvard Psychological Clinic: the subject is asked to "make up a story" about each picture. Since each story expresses a preoccupation, or *thema*, of the subject, and shows how each such thema molds his apperception, or way of understanding the pictures, it is called the Thematic Apperception Test. Schmeidler has studied the varying moods and attitudes of her subjects in relation to their varying interpretations and has sought to find the relation of such moods and attitudes to ESP scoring levels. The problem of a suitable procedure has not yet been solved. (2) She has also used a picture test devised by Rosenzweig, known as the "Picture Frustration Test," in which cartoons depict a man or woman in a frustrating situation and the subject must indicate what the man or woman said. The test may be scored in terms of the tendency of the subject, as he identifies himself with the person in the difficult situation, (a) to blame the other fellow who caused the trouble, or (b) to take the blame upon himself, or (c) to avoid all reference to blame. The individual's "adjustment status" is the degree of his tendency to respond as other people of the same sex and the same cultural group respond, *i.e.*, his tendency to blame others, or himself, or no one, in those situations in which most people (as discovered in earlier research) blame others, or themselves, or no one. Scored in this way, Schmeidler's preliminary data, published briefly in the course of the report of her ESP work at Harvard,¹⁵ suggest that the taking of the Rosenzweig test results in a rise in ESP scoring level more or less proportional to the adjustment status of the individual; thus

¹⁴ See Murray, H. A., *et al*, *Explorations in Personality*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1938, pp. 530-545.

¹⁵ Schmeidler, G. R., and Murphy, Gardner, "The Influence of Belief and Disbelief in ESP upon Individual Scoring Levels," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Vol. 36, June, 1946, pp. 271-276.

a well-adjusted person will tend to go up in ESP level in consequence of taking the Rosenzweig test, while a poorly adjusted person will tend to go down. The Rosenzweig test was scored by Schmeidler herself, and was later independently scored by another clinical worker. This result, while suggestive, is based on a small group, and Schmeidler has preferred to draw no confident conclusions until further data are at hand.

By far the most valuable of the existing projective tests, from the writer's viewpoint, is the Rorschach test with ink-blots, published over twenty years ago by the Swiss psychiatrist, Hermann Rorschach. He early noticed how each person sees different things in the same blots. Working experimentally with many kinds of ink-blots, interpreted by hundreds of people, normal and abnormal, he devised a standard set of ten blots, some black on white, some including color, which, in eliciting personally significant responses, have proved extraordinarily useful in psychiatric diagnosis, in evaluation of rate of recovery from mental disorders, in assessment of fatigue, anxiety, and emotional conflict in normal people, and in vocational and scholastic guidance. Ruth Munroe¹⁶ has, for example, recently shown that the Rorschach test can, in general, predict academic achievement better than an intelligence test can, because it shows the emotional blockages which keep a student from effective use of his intelligence.

Now it occurred to Schmeidler as early as 1943 to try to define the role of the Rorschach in ESP research, and the research begun at Harvard has continued on a large scale since she has been with the A.S.P.R. An assistant scores the ESP runs, keeping her in ignorance of them until the Rorschach is scored by Schmeidler. Continuing to separate her subjects into "sheep" (those who accept the theoretical possibility that clairvoyance exists) and "goats" (those who reject this possibility), she has sought to find by means of the Rorschach those personality characteristics which enable the sheep to get their above-chance scores, and those which enable the goats to "miss the target" so as to continue to give sub-chance scores. The results, consistent so far through two large experiments, await the results of a third experiment, after which they can properly be reported in full. In the meantime it is permissible to note that the Rorschach seems to be contributing to an understanding of the problems with which we began our inquiry: it has something to say about the conscious and especially the *unconscious needs* of the subject; it suggests a variety of ways in which he struggles to prevent his unconscious needs and his resulting perceptual and other

¹⁶ Munroe, Ruth L., "Prediction of the Adjustment and Academic Performance of College Students by a Modification of the Rorschach Method," *Applied Psychology Monographs*, No. 7, September, 1945.

activities from breaking into consciousness; and it affords opportunities for a mild degree of splitting of personality, by which material functioning at an unconscious level may force its way into the pattern that the subject sees in the ink-blot, often without his being aware of what is happening.

It is indeed quite possible that a way will be found in which the Rorschach test itself will function, so to speak, as a crystal; *i.e.*, so that paranormally received material may directly influence what is seen in the ink-blot. Even without this use of the test it is possible to get light on the characteristic personal ways in which the subject's unconscious responses fight their way up into his consciousness, and this may prove a highroad to the understanding of the ways in which some individuals circumvent the struggle against their own paranormal activity.

It is quite possible that in time we shall find a way to combine projective tests routinely with tests of the paranormal. The studies of Stuart and Humphrey show that one can get satisfactory and scorable free-drawing material while doing a clairvoyance test; the same procedure could be used with many other projective tests. It is even possible that the procedure could be turned the other way around, getting clairvoyance (or telepathy, etc.) material while gathering projective data. It is true that the ESP experiment depends, as a rule, upon volition, so that the subject would, generally, have to know that he was doing an ESP test; but this would simply mean in practice that the "game" one plays in the ESP test would be the "game" of taking a personality test, hoping that some responses would conform to a concealed target, so that it could be scored in both ways, as a personality test and as an ESP test.

This conception of tests for two things at once prompts a suggestion regarding Humphrey's method. She showed, among other things, that the successful hits made by the subjects appeared both when the target item itself was "expansive" and when it was "compressive." But this leaves open the question whether the individual's responses were more *expansive* when they were *relatively* correct. It is conceivable that with highly gifted subjects one may, throughout the course of a combined projective-clairvoyance test, watch the ebb and flow of the paranormal as the projective response varies, and thus come much closer to catching its psychological nature. (Why might not this apply to PK as well as to ESP? We might watch the ebb and flow of PK in accordance with changes in mood, volition, etc.) Indeed, at this point one finds oneself thinking of the projective tests as an indicator not only of *personality factors*, but of *favorable states for particular personalities*, along the lines formulated by Schmeidler's first exploratory work with the Thematic Apperception Test.

One of the greatest tasks emerging from such analysis is the study of special sensitives by all those projective methods which offer any promise of making their unusual gifts more intelligible, and of explaining the fluctuations in sensitiveness which characterize even the greatest of this group. In view of the cooperative spirit of those sensitives who have permitted intensive studies to be made of their psychology, it is to be hoped that the newly devised methods will bring a rich harvest.

Summary

A sketch has been offered of a few problems in the study of individual differences which may help us to understand the nature of paranormal gifts; and a few methods of personality appraisal have been mentioned which may help in evaluation of these personality traits. The projective tests, such as free-drawing, picture interpretation, and the Rorschach ink-blot test have been especially stressed. The work of Humphrey and Schmeidler in introducing these approaches has been cited as pioneer research surely destined to bring a large yield in the study of personalities gifted in these respects, and of the most favorable states for their work.