

The origins of inkblots

FROM at least the time of Leonardo da Vinci, artists and scholars have described the imaginative interpretation of naturally occurring phenomena such as rocks or cloud formations. Many early psychologists devised their own materials to investigate these processes in the form of inkblots. The use of inkblots is often associated with the psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, but its origins lie in children's games, experiments on visual perception, studies of the effects of hashish, the testing of immigrants at Ellis Island and the work of Frederic Bartlett.

In the latter part of the 19th century, games involving the construction and imaginative interpretation of inkblots were played by children on both sides of the Atlantic. In continental Europe these were known as 'Klecksography', a name that probably originated in the title of a book containing inkblots and their interpretations that was published by Justinus Kerner in Tübingen in 1854 (see Ellenberger, 1954). In North America a similar game was described in 1896 by Ruth McEnery Stuart and Albert Bigelow Paine in *Gobolinks, or Shadow Pictures for Young and Old*. This



Following recent articles in *The Psychologist* on the Rorschach test, **JOHN T. E. RICHARDSON** looks at its prehistory.

book provided about 100 examples of how to construct inkblots and use them as prompts for making up imaginative verse (Poppstone & McPherson, 1994).

The first suggestion that inkblots might be used in psychological research was made by Binet and Henri (1896), who suggested that the interpretation of inkblots could be used to study variations in 'involuntary imagination'. Binet himself went on to use the description of inkblots as a projective test. It was probably through Binet's influence that the American psychologist Edmund Delabarre compiled a collection of 100 inkblots around the turn of the century for use in his own research on the effects of hashish (Poppstone & McPherson, 1994). In Moscow, Binet's work led Theodor Rybakov to include inkblots in an 'atlas' of procedures for

clinical and educational investigations of personality published in 1910 (Baumgarten-Tramer, 1943).

Meanwhile, a parallel line of inquiry was being followed in the United States. Dearborn (1897) recommended inkblots for use in experiments on perception, memory and imagination, and he presented results from a study in which 16 participants had given interpretations for 10 inkblots (Dearborn, 1898). Similar studies were carried out by Sharp (1899) and Kirkpatrick (1900). Seashore (1908) produced an early manual of psychology experiments, one of which used the presentation of inkblots to demonstrate the interpretative nature of perception.

One problem with these early studies was the lack of standardised material, which made it hard to compare the results obtained by different researchers. Whipple referred to this difficulty in his *Manual of Mental and Physical Tests* (1910), and he published a standard series of 20 inkblots. Pyle (1913) wrote a similar volume for teachers, and this too included an 'Imagination or Ink-Blot Test'. Pyle argued that this procedure was not so much a test of the imagination as a measure of 'the quickness of the association processes'. He used his own materials in studies of children from different backgrounds.

Further use of inkblots was made by Knox (1914), a physician based at the Ellis Island immigration station in New York. To respond to criticisms that they were failing to detect (and thus deport) potential immigrants who were mentally deficient, Knox and the other physicians developed their own intelligence tests. In particular,

For centuries there has been imaginative interpretation of clouds

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Knox developed an 'Ink-Blot Imagination Test' and found that people who had been classified as mentally deficient took longer to give interpretations of inkblots and tended to give impoverished interpretations.

The first British research involving inkblots was carried out by Bartlett (1916). He reported an experimental study of perceiving and imaging that included the presentation of 36 coloured inkblots to 36 participants. The responses once again demonstrated the interpretative nature of perception, or what Bartlett called the 'effort after meaning'. Parsons (1917) reported a very similar study of 97 children in Wales; she confirmed the kinds of responses obtained by Bartlett, except that some interpretations reflected the children's awareness of the world war.

Rorschach initially experimented with inkblots in 1911, when his interest was to study whether gifted children gave richer interpretations than less gifted children. He did not publish the results, and he abandoned this work in favour of psychoanalytically oriented research.

It was only the publication of a dissertation by Szymon Hens in 1917 that prompted Rorschach to carry out serious research on the diagnostic significance of inkblots in clinical patients, and the first detailed account of this work did not appear until 1921 (Ellenberger, 1954). It is not clear whether Rorschach knew of the work on inkblots that had been published in France, the United States and Britain. Ellenberger (1954) considered this to be doubtful, but Rorschach worked in Moscow in 1913–1914 and may well have come across Rybakov's atlas.

Whatever the source of his ideas, Rorschach's original contribution was to propose that the imaginative interpretation of inkblots could provide a basis for the diagnostic assessment of personality and psychological functioning. For many years the reputation of this approach was uncertain, but it was revived following the publication of John Exner's *Comprehensive System* in the 1970s (see Donnelly, 2003). Nevertheless, Rorschach's method is premised on the value of inkblots in demonstrating the interpretative nature of perception and in studying individual variation in imaginative capacities – something that had previously been established in the investigations of experimental and educational psychologists.

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WEBLINKS

Archives of the History of American Psychology: www3.uakron.edu/ahap

International Rorschach Society: www.rorschach.com

Articles on the Rorschach test from *The Psychologist*: tinyurl.com/2al6e and tinyurl.com/2un5p

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