REVIEW ARTICLE

Establishing a Child's Personality via the Projective Assessment Triad within the Four Levels of Mind

Chong Lee, WONG

Private Practice
Registered Educational Therapist

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.64663/aet.62

Author's email: willingspirit2000@yahoo.com.sg

ABSTRACT

In this short article, the author explained the theoretical basis for the need to establish a child's personality using projective assessment triad within the context of the four mental levels of mind in terms of (i) conscious, (ii) preconscious, (iii) subconscious, and (iv) unconscious. The term projective assessment triad (PTA for short) used by the author refers to three different projective tests (e.g., projective drawing tests, incomplete sentence tests and word association tests) of personality, which according to Friedman and Schustack (2001), may involve some degree of ambiguity in the test instructions or stimuli in order to create opportunities for an examinee to structure his/her responses in terms of his/her individual personality characteristics. In this way, the examinee can provide authentic information about the nature of these characteristics.

Keywords: Mental Levels of Mind, Personality, Projective Assessment Triad

1. INTRODUCTION

Who am I? A frequently asked question especially so when we are in different situations in life and sometimes even puzzled why we think and act in a certain way. I am unique, I am special, I am me. This is but a very common statement often put forward by anyone in the street when the question on "Who am I?" is asked. Having self-knowledge makes one assured of himself. By knowing oneself and what stand in life gives us a strong sense of self-confidence. In view of this, knowing self is important. However, knowing oneself is *really* tough.

The Cambridge Dictionary Online (2021) defines the term *personality* as "the type of person you are, shown by the way you behave, feel and think" (para. 1). The next question must be: Why should anyone care? In a professional office environment, it is more vital than ever to understand the work environment and how one can fit into that community. Different personalities can be far more suited to certain positions than others. Some employers even administer personality tests to job applicants in order to see how they would

fit into the company and meet its particular needs. For instance, human resource professionals require to be effective communication skills, excellent stakeholders' management skills and an organized way to deal with tasks in a structured and systematic way. Implementing inclusion and diversity requires the knowledge of how to help different personalities of people work effectively together, or understand why some do not. Hence, knowing one's personality is important since it gives insight into one's own nature and how one can fit into the current office or future employment.

Personality assessments are a means to measure personality traits and characteristics of the individual (Akee at el., 2018). Knowing an individual's personality does help to better understand oneself, social interactions and relationships and thus used to create stable working relationships with the surrounding people. In work place, personality assessments are used to obtain useful insights on how potential employees behave in a work context and thus can predict job performance and assess if an employee fits the company's culture. With the data obtained from these assessments, companies can then decide to hire the right candidate that will help to contribute positively in the working place.

There are numerous ways to find out the personality of an individual or a person, for example through the use of psychological tests or as proposed in this paper, the author would suggest the use of projective method as a means of knowing one's personality. There are many methods used to assess personality. The direct measures would include observations, interviews, rating scales, behavioral data and situational tests. The indirect measure would include projective assessment (e.g., projective drawing tests, incomplete sentence tests, word association tests) which is the main focus of this short paper.

In a projective test, it involves a person (examinee) responding to a certain kind of stimuli and thereby get to know the hidden emotions and personal conflicts that are revealed during the test.

According to Patra and Sharma (2020), unlike self-report tests where one is presented with structured test stimuli, projective techniques are indirect and unstructured ways to find out the personality of a person. The term *projection* means that since the stimuli are unstructured, chances that a person may project his/her own undesirable traits, ideas, feelings and motives on the given ambiguous stimulus. As in the psychological testing of an individual's personality, a projective assessment can also be, a general sense, an approach for an examiner to gather from an examinee (or interviewee) different life experience, how the person may perceive, organize and interpret issues very differently and there is more to the list of information to be collected. Hence, it does give a perception into the individual's personality. In addition, the use of projective assessment depends largely on the psychoanalytic perspective which goes deeply into an individual's unconscious mental state of mind, thereby revealing the real nature of the person's personality (Patra & Sharma, 2020). The person may either be caught off guard or not even aware of his true personality while doing the projective assessment tasks. Thus, projective testing proves to be more effective in assessing the personality of the individual, child or adult.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Much has been talked about personality, especially of an adult. The next question that the author of this paper will be interested is: Does a child have a personality? If so, when does the personality develop?

All, if not most, preschool years literature is always associated with major developments in young children's socialization phase. Preschoolers begin their fragile to becoming adept at functioning on their own progressively. It is during the early childhood phase between ages 2 and 6 years old that children start to gain some sense of being separate and independent from their parents. According to Erikson (1950), preschoolers will start to develop autonomy, or self-direction, (ages 1 to 3), as well as initiative, or enterprise (ages 3 to 6) as they grow and mature gradually.

Eysenck (2018) takes personality to include those stable psychological characteristics that makes each human being as a unique individual. Children just like mini-adults possess personality traits (long-term characteristics, e.g., temperament) and states (changeable characteristics, e.g., moodiness). While there are a number of theories about the development of childhood personalities as well as several different

trajectories it takes, invariably it boils down to an individual's personality, stating that it will highly be solidly established by the end of early childhood (Entwisle, 1995)

According to Freud (1950), the second year of childhood phase is the anal stage of psychosexual development. This is where most parents will face many new challenges. One such challenge concerns toilet training their children. Any fixations at this stage may give rise to characteristic personality traits that may eventually lead to its uncalled negative emergence in adulthood. These personality traits include anal retention (i.e., excessive neatness, organization, and withholding), or anal expulsion (i.e., messiness and altruism). Freud (1950) believes that at any point in development, any conflicts that a child encounters must actually be resolved first so before s/he can move on successfully to the next stage. Hence, past conflicts that are not either properly resolved or amicably settled may impact the child in the future formation of his/her personality during the adulthood phase. Failing to successfully complete a stage, Freud (1950) warned, would cause that individual to remain essentially "stuck." He or she would become fixated at that point in his/her lifespan development. Freud also believed that such a fixation could result if a particular stage has left a dominant impression on an individual's personality.

A group of personality theorists had also explained on early childhood personality development. Several renowned learning theorists have clearly stated that personality can develop in terms of the following: e.g., the classical conditioning as postulated by Ivan Pavlov (b.1849-d.1936) in his learning theory by association; the operant conditioning put forth by B. F. Skinner (b.1904-d.1990) in his theory of learning by reinforcement and punishment, and also the observational learning as proposed by Albert Bandura (b.1925-d.-) in his theory of learning by imitation. This third or latter theory involves the identification or internalization, whereby children observe and adopt the values, ideas, and standards of their significant others. Cognitive psychologists, on the other hand, have stated that personality arises, in part, from the attitudes and biases expressed by the adults around them. Gender theorists have argued that personality is developed from what they have termed as "gender identification" and "gender socialization". Geneticists speculate that personality arises from *wired-in* genetic and biochemical influences rather than psychosocial ones.

Apart from the above varied explanations that deal with the complexities of the various processes of personality development, there are also other combinations involving psychosocial, parental, and biological influences factors that are responsible for the ultimate determination of the personality of a child (who will eventually turn into an adult). Hence, personalities are formed as a result of these experiences.

3. NATURE OF PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES IN PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

Having understood that children do and can form their own individual personalities, projective assessment methods offer a very useful approach in order to establish a better profile in understanding them; especially those who express difficulties in their emotions or show resistance or defense in managing their feelings. Hence, knowing and understanding the nature of such projective testing approach and how it impacts the minds of either children or adults will be very useful.

The term "Projective Test" as formed by Lawrence K Frank (1948). According to Frank (1948), the aim of such tests was to look into an individual's mental process, focusing on the various pieces of unobservable psychological thinking that are running in the mind of an individual. Subsequently, the first projective test was devised in 1879 by Sir Francis Galton. This projective test was meant to measure word association; a test where several items were presented with a set of words and participants were supposed to give responses to the words. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and Sigmund Freud enhanced the word association test in line with blood pressure indices. The purpose is to find out the group of feelings and thoughts which revolved on the numerous emotional issues and thereby giving information on the complexity of psychological condition of the individual.

The conventional personality tests consist of standard structured test stimuli that are useful to measure the characteristic patterns of traits that people would show in various situations. However, in projective tests

the individual has to respond to unstructured or ambiguous stimuli. This works on the basis that the person doing the projective assessment would be unconscious of his feelings, needs, emotions, motives etc. on to the ambiguous stimulus ((Patra & Sharma, 2020). Projective assessments are particularly useful in addressing the mental health in children. According to Josephs et al., (2021), knowing the techniques on how to assess, formulate and treat a variety of presentations seen in children and young people using the various projective assessment tools and models are important since it helps to address specific problems encountered in children, young people and their families from different cultural backgrounds. It uncovers the inner feelings, desires and fighting conflicts that are all either hidden knowingly or unconscious from their awareness. It is precisely because of various ambiguous cues that counselors and therapists are able to take cues from the data of the assessments and uncover unconscious feelings that might be causing problems in the child's life.

According to Rabin (1981), projective techniques involve tasks that come with unstructured set of stimuli and the participant is given a list of open-ended questions. The various tasks involve participants to draw do not come with stimulus. When the tasks are done, the therapist would focus on the interpretation of perception of the stimuli given and the way the response is presented. Since projective assessment is a set of unstructured or ambiguous stimuli, it can be subjective in its interpretation. This is where the skills of a trained therapist are called for in order to interpret the work done by the participant correctly. Rabin (1981) argues that the stimuli presented in projective assessments can be interpreted in different forms. The extent of the ways in which the interpretation can make sense can be addressed in different ways. Hence, there will be a need to have a step-by-step guide or training in making meaning on the responses based on the stimuli.

In order for all projective assessment to be a fully meaningful activity, the participants need to input ideas, own drawings, colorings or images so as to have eidetic or iconic as well as verbal responses. As more and more stimuli are given or more drawings are required to be done, it will generate more open-ended questions so as to clarify the work done. Bellak (1975) added that it is important that the interpreter has skills and an approach in order to evaluate on the various pieces that the drawer has given. The interpretation, according to Wallendorf and Brucks (1993), requires it to be consistent when analyzing other unstructured tasks. Interpretation work to those projective tasks is often challenging. The whole process can very complicated and often consist of interrelated processes where the drawer's conscious and unconscious motivations and attitudes are often revealed. In addition, analysis of the projective assessments will also reveal aspects of emotion, desires and cognition that the drawer does not wish to be expose. These unconscious revelations of the responses may be associated with one's privacy. Making known of such privacy can be seen as a form of invasion and thus can cause embarrassment. Roger (2008) pointed out that the issue on faking and malingering by the drawer could actually happen during personality assessment though it will be lesser of a chance to happen in projective assessment since the drawer may not be aware of what is going on during the drawing process. Nevertheless, it is lesser of a problem in projective assessment since the drawer does not really know much of the reason behind these projective tests. The "fakeability" of projective tests, nevertheless, remains inadequately researched upon (Roger, 2008).

The use of projective assessment can be challenging since elicitation of the drawer's responses has have to contain specific information in order to produce a sufficient story content for meaningful interpretation (Teglasi, 1993). Another challenge for projective assessment is the skills needed for interpretation on the various pieces of work done by the drawer. Although guidelines can be given for understanding on the given drawings, Ballack and Hersen (1998) argue that it requires the interpreter to have certain level of trained inference while doing the interpretation of responses on the projective test to the point where the evidence gathered from the drawings need to be informative and giving sound evaluation on the pieces of work done by the drawer. Moreover, in order to have meaningful interpretation of the pieces of drawing, the interpreter needs to link the various respond elements in the drawing collectively rather than relying on isolated parts of the drawing and do a piecemeal meaning making of the drawer's messages. The latter approach is often inaccurate since it is but a mere speculation process of interpretation. During the interpretation process, apart from doing the interpretation, inferences are needed so as to understand the

drawings even better based on the drawer's behavior during the drawing process as well as the drawing piece used for analysis. Any changes in the drawer's behavior or emotional reactions are always noted and used as part of the whole interpretation process.

As mentioned above, projective assessment is an indirect method of assessing the feelings and intentions of a person (Jeong et al., 2019). Through the use of several stimuli, it allows the person to reveal his/her feelings, desires and needs that the person is currently facing. Contrasting to the test thinking attitudes, during the process of doing the projective assessment, the person thinks, feels and acts that is according to the unconscious mind. Since projective assessment relies so much on the unconscious mind to reveal information on the person, understanding the mind on how it operates will be very useful.

4. PROJECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIND

The online Cambridge Dictionary Online (2021) defines *mind* as "part of a person that makes it possible for him or her to think, fee emotions and understand things" (para. 1). Having the ability to think, feel emotions and understand things are extremely important in a person's daily living. Unless a person is suffering from brain fog or momentary blank out, psychological mindedness enables a person's ability to look around his/her surroundings and reflect on his/her internal life. Vaidyanathan et al. (2018) cited from Hall (1992) who has defined psychological mindedness as "capacity for self-examination, self- reflection, introspection and personal insight" (p. 131). That would mean a person has the ability to understand the different types and levels of emotions and meaning of words as well as relating to the person's past and present experiences. It also includes higher levels of knowing one's personal and others' motives and intentions.

A person's psychological mindedness can affect a person's mental well-being in terms of what the person does, behaves, his/her reasons for performing certain actions and in certain ways. Except for Preconscious and Subconscious which Chia and Lee (2017) argued that they are different from each other, all these four mental levels of mind are operating within the psyche of a person: (i) Conscious, (ii) Preconscious, (iii) Subconscious, and (iv) Unconscious. In order to understand how projective assessment is linked to this psychological mindedness, the author has attempted to describe it within the context of the four mental levels of mind in the following section of the paper.

4.1 The Conscious Mind

According to the Loar (1999), the conscious mind is one that is aware of the surrounding and has the ability to react or respond to the different stimuli. It has all the thoughts, memories and feelings that a human is aware of at any time. It is a time when we can think and give our thoughts in a logical fashion since our minds are able to do the mental processing very well. At this point, a person can actually use his or her memory to recollect past incidents and now brought into awareness. An example of a conscious mind at work is when a person is hungry, he or she will go and look for food to solve his hunger. According to Chia and Lim (2017), when the conscious mind is at work, a person will be defensive state when he or she is in a disadvantage position. As the goal of a projective assessment is to uncover the hidden conflicts that are trapped in a person, trying to use such assessment on a person with a conscious mind may not be reaped much useful information for psychotherapy treatment since the person may control his or her thoughts and feelings without doing a full disclosure on the presenting issues.

4.2 The Preconscious Mind

The preconscious mind, according to Chia and Lee (2017) as the "threshold level of mindfulness just below the level of conscious awareness, from which consciously suppressed memories emotions can be recalled." According to Freud (1900), in the preconscious mind, all things stored in that level can actually be pull into the conscious level of awareness. An example of the preconscious mind at work are memories from childhood. The person may not be thinking of it all the time. But it can be evoked when call upon to awareness. The person can talk about it when asked about those childhood incidents. The preconscious also acts as something of a guard, controlling the information that is allowed to enter into the

conscious awareness state.

4.3 The Subconscious Mind

Chia and Lee (2017) as the "threshold level of mindfulness where it stays right below the preconscious mind. It can be impactful in that it can influence a person's actions and feelings when brought to the level of consciousness. It is a storage where it retrieves a person's beliefs, past experiences, memories, things that were done or seen. The conscious mind acts rationally and sends out the instructions while the subconscious mind will execute the instructions accordingly. In this way, there is a synchronized way of working between the person's behavior and emotional thoughts and feelings.

4.4 The Unconscious Mind

Unlike the rest of the minds mentioned above, the unconscious mind is a pool of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are out of the scope of a person's conscious awareness. Freud (1900, 1905) had stated that the unconscious mind is largely inaccessible, and that it can, at times, out of a sudden, appear in dreams or spoken views in a form of feelings especially in slips of tongue. Moreover, the unconscious mind has a higher possibility to reveal feelings of pain, anxiety or conflict. Weston (1999) added on by stating that the unconscious mind shows repressed feelings, automatic skills, subliminal perceptions, thoughts, habits and automatic reactions, as well as complexes, hidden phobias and desires. The projective assessment is developed in such a way that it is an indirect method to assess personality; one that assess the unconscious motives, feelings and conflicts (Jeong et al., 2019). The assessment works well with the unconscious mind because projective techniques interpret an examinee's responses according to the ambiguous cues, which can yield a wealth of information to an examiner (e.g., psychoanalyst or counselor) who aims to uncover those unconscious feelings that is causing the problems in the person's life.

The mental state of a human mind is complex. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go on and describing the 4 states of mind and how the mind affects a person's behavior, actions, thinking, moods and feelings. There is still a lot more awaiting to be explored in how the state of mind s operation affecting the process of a projective assessment that reveals a person's true feelings, thinking and intentions.

5. LIMITATIONS OF PROJECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Projective assessment, by nature of its assessing method, is very subjective (Patra & Sharma, 2020). Projective tests have a weakness in that it lacks standardization. It requires a great deal of experiences of the assessor to administer and interpret. Different ways of interpretation may yield different results. However, some tests, such as the Rorschach and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), have more standardized methods of interpretation than others, such as the House-Tree- Person test or techniques such as free association and dream interpretation. Nevertheless, projective tests are generally considered less reliable than other standardized, objective, psychological tests.

According to Harder (1979), projective tests have always been asked for their validity or accuracy of measure. Projective tests can be challenging to interpret since it connects to the individual's most recent experiences, rather than their deepest subconscious desires. The latter can be obtained unless it comes with proper techniques of interpretation. Another criticism on projective techniques is that the test makes poor diagnostic measures as it may focus solely at an individual's behavior, rather than symptoms. Since behaviors can be very different, even for people with the same diagnosis, they may not give an accurate diagnostic assessment.

6. CONCLUSION

No assessment methods are perfect. In the case of projective assessment, this method of drawing can be a very enriching tool in order to find out the inner world of an individual; be it from the social and emotional aspect or the perspective of that individual. The drawn piece of work is not just another piece but instead

when interpreted with care and proper guidance, it can actually reveal rich information on what is actually happening in the individual's world without the individual's knowing. It is precisely this nature of projective assessment on how it works makes the entire assessment unique and to some ways a mysterious way to unravel the hidden truths, which otherwise will go unnoticed.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

None.

8. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

9. FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

There is no funding obtained.

10. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISCLOSURE

No generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

Akee, R., Copeland, W., Costello, E. J., & Simeonova, E. (2018). How does household income affect child personality traits and behaviors? *American Economic Review*, *108*(3), 775-827. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20160133

Bellak, L. (1975). *The TAT, CTA and SAT in clinical use*. New York, NY: Grune & Stratton. https://www.amazon.com/T-T-C-Clinical-Use/dp/B001Y2QHDW

Bellack, A. S., & Hersen, M. (Eds.). (1998). Comprehensive clinical psychology. New York, NY: Pergamon. https://shop.elsevier.com/books/comprehensive-clinical-psychology/bellack/978-0-08-042707-2

Bellak, L., Hurvich, M., & Gediman, H.K. (1973). Ego functions in schizophrenics, neurotics, and normals. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons. https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2109411

Cambridge University Press (2021). Personality. In Cambridge English Dictionary. Retrieved from: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/personality.

Chia, K. H., & Lee, B. M. (2017, Fall). Understanding why people behave the way they behave. Unlimited Human! 5-7.

Chia, K. H., & Lim, B. H. (2017, Summer). Social–emotional behavioral reactions/responses in psychosocial complexes. Unlimited Human! 5-7.

Entwisle, D. R. (1995). The role of schools in sustaining early childhood program benefits. The Future of Children, 5(2), 133-144. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ej523967

Erikson, E. H. (1950). Childhood and society. New York, NY: Norton. https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393310689

Eysenck, H. (2018). Dimensions of personality. New York, NY: Routledge. Frank, L. K. (1948). Projective Methods. Springfield, IL: Thomas. https://www.amazon.sg/Dimensions-Personality-H-J-Eysenck/dp/0710013515

Freud, S. (1900). The interpretation of dreams. Standard Editions, 5 (p. 4-5). London, UK: Hogarth Press. https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2873853

Freud, S. (1905). Three essays on the theory of sexuality. Standard Editions, 7 (pp. 123-246). London, UK: Hogarth Press. https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2779917

Friedman, H. S., & Schustack, M. W. (2001). Readings in personality: Classic theories and modern research. Needham, MA: Pearson Education Company. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/544407.Readings_in_Personality

Hall, J. A. (1992). Psychological-mindedness: A conceptual model. American Journal of Psychotherapy, 46, 131-40. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1992.46.1.131

Harder, D. W. (1979). The assessment of ambitious-narcissistic character style with three projective tests: The early memories, TAT, and Rorschach. Journal of Personality Assessment, 43(1), 23-32. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1979-26043-001

Jeong, M., Zo, H., Lee, C. H., & Ceran, Y. (2019). Feeling displeasure from online social media postings: A study using cognitive dissonance theory. Computers in Human Behavior, 97, 231-240. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.02.021

Josephs, M., House, E., Holden, S., & Foskett, L. (2021). Creative Therapies (Art and Play). In Child and Adolescent Mental Health (pp. 411-420). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003083139-62/creative-therapies-art-play-margaret-josephs-emma-house-sarah-holden-loz-foskett

Loar, B. (1999). David Chalmers's The Conscious Mind. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, LIX(2), 465-472. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2653684

Patra, S., & Sharma, R. (2020). Unit-2: Assessment of personality. New Delhi, India: Indira Gandhi National Open University,

Rabin, A.I. (1981). Assessment with projective techniques: A concise introduction. New York, NY: Springer. https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1971712334795243910

Roger, R. E. (2008). Research dissimulation. In R. E. Rogers (Ed.), Clinical assessment of malingering and deception (2nd ed., pp. 309-327): New York, NY: Guilford Press. https://www.amazon.com/Clinical-Assessment-Malingering-Deception-Second/dp/1572301732

Teglasi, H. (2013). The scientific status of projective techniques as performance measures of personality. In D. H. Saklofske, C. R. Reynolds, & V. L. Schwean (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of child psychological assessment* (pp. 113–128). Oxford University Press. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-01008-005

Vaidyanathan S, Menon V, Sarkar S. Identifying patient profiles suitable for cognitive behavior Therapy: The role of psychological mindedness. J Neurosci Rural Pract. 2018 Oct-Dec;9(4):654-655. https://doi.org/10.4103/jnrp.jnrp_100_18. PMID: 30271073; PMCID: PMC6126311.

Wallendorf, M., & Brucks, M. (1993). Introspection in consumer research: Implementation and implications. Journal of Consumer Research, 20(3), 339-359. https://doi.org/10.1086/209354

Weston, D. (1999). The scientific status of unconscious processes: Is Freud really dead? Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 47(4), 1061-1106. https://doi.org/10.1177/000306519904700404