

Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)

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PG- Semester- 3

CC – 14

Thematic Apperception Test – (Part – 1)

The **Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)** is one of the most well-known and widely used projective psychological tests. It was developed in the 1930s by **Henry Murray** and **Christiana Morgan** at Harvard University. The test was designed to explore the underlying thoughts, feelings, and motives of an individual by presenting them with a set of ambiguous images. The individual is asked to construct a narrative based on the images, and these stories are analyzed to gain insight into their psychological functioning. It has been used for a variety of purposes, including clinical diagnosis, personality assessment, and even research into human behavior.

Theoretical Foundations of the TAT

The Thematic Apperception Test is deeply rooted in **psychoanalytic theory** and **Murray's need-pressure theory**.

Murray was influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concepts, which emphasize the role of the unconscious in shaping thoughts and behavior. According to Freud, people's hidden desires and conflicts manifest in dreams, fantasies, and other forms of expression. The TAT was developed as a way of tapping into these unconscious thoughts, providing a window into the subject's deeper, sometimes hidden, psychological processes.

Murray's **need-press theory** suggests that people are motivated by both internal drives (needs) and external forces (presses). These needs—such as the need for achievement, affiliation, or power—are projected onto external stimuli. In the case of the TAT, the ambiguous images serve as these "presses," with the subject projecting their internal needs and drives onto the situation depicted in the pictures. The test is based on the idea that by interpreting these images, individuals reveal aspects of their personality, emotional state, and unconscious conflicts.

History

The **Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)** is a projective psychological test developed during the 1930s by Henry A. Murray and Christiana D. Morgan at Harvard University. Proponents of the technique assert that subjects' responses, in the narratives they make up about ambiguous pictures of people, reveal their underlying motives, concerns, and the way they see the social world. Historically, the test has been among the most widely researched, taught, and used of such techniques.

The TAT was developed by American psychologist Murray and lay psychoanalyst Morgan at the Harvard Clinic at Harvard University during the 1930s. Anecdotally, the idea for the TAT emerged from a question asked by one of Murray's undergraduate students, Cecilia Roberts. She reported that when her son was ill, he spent the day making up stories about images in magazines and she asked Murray if pictures could be employed in a clinical setting to explore the underlying dynamics of personality.

Murray wanted to use a measure that would reveal information about the whole person but found the contemporary tests of his time lacking in this regard. Therefore, he created the TAT. The rationale behind the technique is that people tend to interpret ambiguous situations in accordance with their own past experiences and current motivations, which may be conscious or unconscious. Murray reasoned that by asking people to tell a story about a picture, their defenses to the examiner would be lowered as they would not realize the sensitive personal information they were divulging by creating the story.

Murray and Morgan spent the 1930s selecting pictures from illustrative magazines and developing the test. After 3 versions of the test (Series A, Series B, and Series C), Morgan and Murray decided on the final set of pictures, Series D, which remains in use today. Although she was given first authorship on the first published paper about the TAT in 1935, Morgan did not receive authorship credit on the final published instrument. Reportedly, her role in the creation of the TAT was primarily in the selection and editing of the images, but due to the primacy of the name on the original publication the

majority of written inquiries about the TAT were addressed to her; since most of these letters included questions that she could not answer, she requested that her name be removed from future authorship.

During the time Murray was developing the TAT he was also involved in Herman Melville studies. The therapeutic technique originally came to him from the "Doubloon chapter" in *Moby Dick*. In this chapter, multiple characters inspect the same image (a Doubloon), but each character has vastly different interpretations of the imagery—Ahab sees symbols of himself in the coin, while the religiously devout Starbuck sees the Christian Trinity. Other characters provide interpretations of the image that give more insight into the characters themselves based on their interpretations of the imagery. Crew members, including Ahab, project their self-perceptions onto the coin which was nailed to the mast. Murray, a lifelong Melvillist, often maintained that all of Melville's oeuvre was for him a TAT.

After World War II, the TAT was adopted more broadly by psychoanalysts and clinicians to evaluate emotionally disturbed patients. Later, in the 1970s, the Human Potential Movement encouraged psychologists to use the TAT to help their clients understand themselves better and stimulate personal growth. In the 1950s the TAT was widely used to support assessment of needs and motives.