



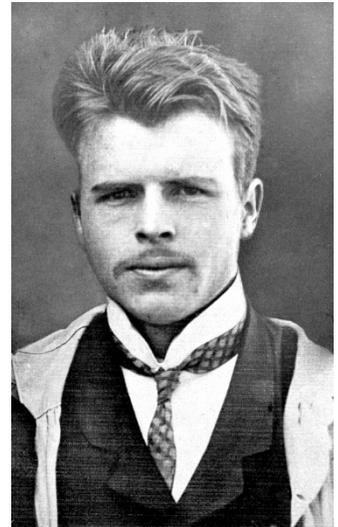
## Do Rorschach Inkblots Fit Into Psychology Today?

by Ben Morsa, Psy.D.

This summer marks the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Rorschach inkblots. No test has fascinated psychologists and laypeople alike quite like the Rorschach. The task is deceptively simple, requiring the ten inkblots, still in use today. The examinee is asked, "What might this be?" and then provides an account of what they see.

"What," many wonder, "could this possibly say about a person's personality?" The history of the Rorschach reflects the tensions and aspirations that are part and parcel with the profession of psychology. Should individuals be studied with quantitative tools and models, compared to bell curves of their peers, and assigned a rank among them? Or should psychologists instead attempt to understand the nuances and idiosyncrasies that make each person unique?

There is merit to both perspectives, but the conflict between them says something about the enduring importance of the Rorschach. What's more, it captures something of the dilemma many parents experience when they bring their child for psychological assessment.



### Origination

**Herman Rorschach**, born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1884 (and a **Brad Pitt** doppelganger), was known to be a gifted artist and clinician. He spent much of his career in asylums, treating patients whose prospects were bleak. But his diaries and others' accounts of him, as captured in his biography *The Inkblots*, also emphasize Rorschach's unique capacity to care for, connect with, and appreciate each of his patients as individuals.

Contrary to popular belief, the blots are not random. They were designed through a painstaking process with one goal in mind—to present people with an ambiguous but evocative situation and ask them to make sense of it. This, Rorschachers believe, provides irreplaceable insight into how individuals structure and make meaning of the world around them. In the conflict between tests that compare individuals to groups and tests that attempt to understand the individual in their own right, the Rorschach leans toward the latter.

## Evolution

Early uses of the test in the United States were far-reaching and inconsistent, leading to advances in the test's use and interpretation. In the years after World War II, systems of interpreting responses to the Rorschach proliferated—some more accurate and ethical than others. This led **John Exner** to conduct psychometric research and integrate the many systems under one umbrella: The **Comprehensive System**, first introduced in 1974. More recently, Bay Area psychologists built on this work to create the **Rorschach Performance Assessment System**. The same ten inkblots remain, as does their purpose: to understand an individual's personality and way of making meaning in the world. But the newer systems offer consistency and a common language for interpreting the test, which have made it even more useful as a result.

Testing can help to clarify complex questions about a child's functioning and can provide a platform for advocating for needed services and accommodations. This process inevitably requires that a psychologist compare the child's performance to their peers'. Many parents find this daunting and may, understandably, fear their child will be seen as a point on a bell curve, rather than the beautiful being parents know their child to be. Here the Rorschach can be most helpful, for it illuminates, in a way other tests cannot, the uniqueness of each personality. Alongside more quantitative measures, the Rorschach can provide a holistic view of a child's inner world and the resourceful ways they use it to make sense of the world around them.