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John E. Exner, Jr.

Citation

“For extensive contributions to the knowledge of psychological assessment. In the 23 years since publication of *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System*, John E. Exner, Jr.’s name has become synonymous with this test. Through his ongoing research, publications, collaborative efforts, and rigorous training of psychologists, Exner has created a common methodology, language, and literature base to help ensure the usefulness of this instrument. Over the past 30 years, his research contributions and his willingness to share his knowledge with psychologists around the world have almost single-handedly given respectability to one of the most widely used assessment methods—the Rorschach. His insistence on a solid research base for interpretation of the structural aspects of the test exemplifies the best of the scientist-practitioner tradition.”

Biography

John E. Exner, Jr.’s contributions to knowledge in the area of psychological assessment have been extensive. For almost 30 years, he has focused his professional life on the Rorschach, and his system for interpretation has become the standard. His research is ongoing and has involved collaborative efforts in countries around the world. He has published hundreds of articles, revised the volumes that began his efforts, and never ceased to continue to learn and share the information obtained through his research. Through his Rorschach Workshops, he has trained thousands of psychologists. Exner has created a network for teaching basic skills and enhancing the knowledge of experienced clinicians as new data emerge. The rigor that he demands of himself and others who use his system reflects psychology at its best.

The first volume of his series, *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System*, was published in 1974. In this book and those following in 1978 and 1982, he reported research that sought to consolidate the five Rorschach systems that had developed in America since the test’s introduction in 1925 and laid the groundwork for a common methodology, language, and literature base. A primary contribution, now sometimes taken for granted, was Exner’s insistence that sound psychometric methods be used as criteria for the interpretation of the structural aspects of the system. This integration of a rigorous research base with the projective aspects of the test helped

to ensure its usefulness in assessment batteries to the present.

John E. Exner, Jr. was born in Syracuse, New York. He received his BS and MS in psychology from Trinity University and was awarded a PhD in clinical psychology from Cornell University in 1958. His early years were spent on faculties at DePauw University and Bowling Green State University. From 1968 to 1969, he took a leave of absence from Bowling Green State University to serve as director of the East Asia/Pacific and North Africa, Near East, South Asia Regions for the Office of Selection, Peace Corps of the United States.

During much of the period of Exner’s work on the Rorschach, he was on the faculty at Long Island University. He served as director of clinical training from 1969 to 1979 and became professor emeritus in 1984. At that point, Exner moved Rorschach Workshops to Asheville, North Carolina, where it remains, and he continues to serve as executive director.

Exner is a diplomate in clinical psychology and the recipient of the Distinguished Contributions Award from the Society of Personality Assessment. He is the author of 14 books and more than 60 articles that focus on the Rorschach and personality assessment.

Exner notes that one of the origins for the idea of a single system for the Rorschach came when David Rapaport, one of the five original systematizers, cautioned him to “know *all* of the Rorschach” (Exner, 1974, p. ix). Exner was also encouraged by Bruno Klopfer, who after reading Exner’s comprehensive analysis of the five basic Rorschach systems, suggested the possibility of a well-coordinated and extensive project to research each of the approaches to the test. These original systematizers provided Exner with suggestions, criticism, and support, all of which were powerful motivators to persist at the task. He credits these systematizers with being major influences in his decision to seek out a new system for the Rorschach. A second major source of encouragement for Exner was provided by his students. He described being “impressed with the eagerness with which students approach the subject matter and the persistent questions that arise concerning differences in approach or interpretive postulates” (Exner, 1974, p. x).

From 1962 to 1968, while compiling data for *The Rorschach Systems* (Exner, 1969), Exner reported that he was privileged to have many close contacts with most of the systematizers and came to regard them with great affection. Although David Rapaport had died by that time, Exner was able to interview Beck, Klopfer, Hertz, and Piotrowski. He noted that at times he felt the project could not be completed because of their substantial differences, yet each encouraged him to continue his work, and all encouraged objectivity as the project moved forward. Both Klopfer and Beck endorsed a project to research the empirical sturdiness of their respective approaches to the test, and the first of a series of investigations began in 1968.

Exner’s early work showed that each system had considerable merit but that all were also seriously flawed.



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The comprehensive system is the result of addressing these concerns. Exner has almost single-handedly rescued the Rorschach and brought it back to life. The result is the resurrection of perhaps the single most powerful psychometric instrument ever envisioned.

In the preface to his 1974 publication, *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System*, Exner noted that “the goal of his work is to present, in a single format, the Best of the Rorschach” (p. x). This system draws from each of the original five systems, incorporating those features that, under careful scrutiny, offer the greatest yield, and adds to them other components based on more recent work with the test.

Rorschach Workshops was originally established to test the merits of the several Rorschach systems that were developed between 1935 and 1957. Once the system was developed, a clear objective was the expansion of knowledge concerning its applicability. Rorschach Workshops added a continuing education component as a means to present the system as widely as possible, and it also provided important feedback from those putting the system to use. This component has trained thousands of clinicians around the globe.

In 1986, Exner noted in the preface to *The Rorschach: A Comprehensive System: Volume I. Basic Foundation* (2nd ed.):

If anyone present in 1970, during the assemblage of the first pieces of the *Comprehensive System*, which involved decisions concerning seating and instructions, had predicted that the project would still be ongoing more than 15 years later, they would not have been taken seriously. The task seemed straightforward, namely to merge the empirically defensible features of other approaches into a standard format. But, as it turns out, much of the “best” was yet to come. (p. ix)

Exner noted in 1993 that there is “no apparent end in sight to the continuing research questions posed by this awesome test” (p. x). Thus, his work continues.

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Jack G. Wiggins, Jr.

Citation

“For fundamental contributions to the professional practice of psychology. Jack G. Wiggins, Jr. has been a leader