Rorschach Fact or Fiction: A Commentary on the R-PAS and CS/CS-R

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The use of psychological instruments prior to them being fully validated is never justified. The consequences can be serious in terms of psychometric credibility. The push to utilize a new Rorschach scoring system, the Rorschach Performance Assessment System (R-PAS; Meyer, Viglione, Mihura, Erard, and Erdberg, 2011), is worth examining from this perspective. Is its use scientifically justified, or, even necessary? We informally polled several colleagues regarding frequently asked questions when comparing the CS/CS-R and the R-PAS (Gacono and Smith, 2021a). This article explores practitioners' responses to 10 of those questions.

Introduction:

The use of psychological instruments prior to them being fully validated is never justified. The consequences for both practice and research can be serious. For example, the Psychopathic Personality Inventory-Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005) is a self-report measure normed primarily on college populations. It has only low to moderate correlations with the PCL-R (only Factor 2). Yet, after its introduction it was used almost immediately in studies as an independent measure for forming "psychopathy" groups, when it should have continued as a dependent measure related to assessing its validity. This impacted research results, created confusion in the psychopathy literature, and eventually, the PPI-R found its way into applied usage with some forensic cases where it was misused for "diagnosing" and/or making inferences about psychopathy (a problematic leap; Gacono, 2016).

Scrutiny is needed before clinicians apply what they read in journals or what is offered by test developers. Bias does exist in journal editors and reviewers. They tend to be employed in academia and/or influenced by academic research where their conceptual knowledge may stem from a few recent studies (rather than a historically established line of theory). Many studies are also informed by a perspective that lacks Step 1 of the scientific method (direct observation or relevant exposure [active applied work] to the population studied; Cunliffe, Gacono, and Smith, 2021). This glaring omission can create a partial understanding of conceptual issues. Note a statement from the website of the late PPI-R developer:

Please note that (despite my interests in psychopathic personality) I do not accept graduate students whose principal interests lie in criminal justice, criminology, or psychology-law given that the focus on our lab is on basic personality/psychopathology research rather than on **applied** criminal justice or forensic work. Nevertheless, students with secondary interests in these applied areas are certainly more than welcome to apply. (psychology.emory.edu/home/ people/faculty/Lilienfeld-scott.html., retrieved August 6, 2020; our emphasis added).

Once in print, findings from poorly designed studies are interpreted as valid and inform future studies. Consequently, theoretical offerings from these sources can represent a seemingly plausible house of cards that rests on a foundation of bias and flawed methodology.

This partial conceptual understanding also translates to how instruments are discussed and used. Counterintuitive findings from these conceptually limited studies create apparent controversies where none exist (Gacono, 2019, 2021) and have contributed to what Bob Hare has termed an "armchair" quality to the literature. Unchallenged, the obvious is often ignored. How can one offer opinions about psychopathy without having spent enough time working with actual psychopaths? How can one offer opinions about the Rorschach without having utilized the instrument enough times in an applied context?

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A push to utilize the new Rorschach scoring system, the Rorschach Performance Assessment System (R-PAS; Meyer, Viglione, Mihura, Erard, and Erdberg, 2011), is worth examining from this same perspective. Is its use scientifically justified, or, even necessary? We informally polled several colleagues and received questions from LinkedIn members regarding comparative issues with the CS/CS-R and R-PAS (Gacono and Smith, 2021a). A few key references were also provided to serve as guides for more in-depth analysis. Many of these articles can be found on our Research Gate or LinkedIn pages.

1) Has the Comprehensive System "been frozen in time" and by inference in need of replacement? Answer: **NO**. It is alive, well, and evolving. Andrea Priddy (Director of Rorschach Workshops and John Exner's daughter) in partnership with the International Rorschach Institute (IRI) will be providing the Comprehensive System-Revised in 2022 (CS-R; Fontan & Andronikof, 2022). This has been discussed in recent videos[1] by the IRI (2022). An erratum is also offered here—Gacono has never thought that the CS was frozen in time (Kivisto, Gacono, & Medoff, 2013).

2) Is altering the CS administration procedures, in any significant way, desirable or warranted? Answer: **NO**. A large body of social science research establishes the impact of such things as instructions, response style and so forth on test performance (Gacono & Smith, 2021b). This is a critical issue related to both test construction and admissibility. The Mihura, Meyer, Dumitrascu, and Bombel (2013) meta-analyses excluded studies that deviated from standard CS procedures. Yet, this issue is ignored when attempting to justify the validity of the R-PAS based on CS studies.

What did Rorschach say about administration procedures? He stated, "An attempt is made to get at least one answer to every plate, thought suggestion in any form is, of course, avoided." (1921/1942; p. 16). Compare this to the R-PAS instructions, "Try to give two responses ... or maybe three, to each card. That is, for each card try to see two different things; possibly three" (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 8) ***The CS-R procedures are consistent with Rorschach's intentions/cautions, the R-PAS procedures are not***. R-PAS instructions are not based on any sound conceptual premise but rather on a statistical based choice to control R (Gacono & Smith, 2021b, 2022).

Pure and simple, the alteration in administration procedures has created a "new" test which differs from Rorschach's intent (the CS/CS-R instructions follow Rorschach's intent; Tibon-Czopp & Weiner, 2016). The R-PAS requires validation with protocols administered with these new instructions (Gacono & Smith, 2021a). Statistically manipulated CS administered protocols used to develop comparative data for a new system are not sufficient. This is not to say that some inferences from the CS are not appropriate.

3) Is it desirable to control Responses (R) beyond what CS or CS-R guidelines already do? Answer: **NO**. Variations in R are useful clinically and in research (Gacono & Gacono, 2008; Young, Erdberg, & Justice, 2008). R can elevate or constrict related to the personality of the individual. In certain populations (some sex offender groups [Gacono, Meloy, & Bridges, 2000, 2008]) internal press can result in elevated R. Decreased R can result from characterological constriction. Even a 13 response protocol may be interpretively useful (Gacono, 1997; Gacono & Gacono, 2008; Gacono & Meloy, 1994, p. 5;). While a one-to-one interpretation of the constellation cut-off score may be questionable, the data may otherwise be accurate and adequate for describing the individual and contributing to the personality formulation (Gacono & Smith, 2021b, 2022). Envision a rich 13 response protocol, with 8 DRs, a Lambda less than .50, 4 reflections, an elevated WSum6, etc., when compared to a 20 response protocol with a Lambda over 2.00. In either case, the frequency of R should be **interpreted not controlled** (Tibon-Czopp & Weiner, 2016).

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[1]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eFF-kf0Ejg& https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2gTntClQ7I

Most importantly is a study by one of the R-PAS originators (Young, Erdberg, & Justice, 2008) that compared Lambda, X-% and WSum6 between psychiatric inmates with < 14 and > 13 protocols. These variables were not significantly different (these were the only variables statistically compared). A comparison of the group data also suggests that many other essential variables would not be significantly different (i.e., M means, 2.61, 2.79; EA means, 4.86, 4.57). While the rate for low R protocols (even after re-administration) was fairly high (38 out of 240) here is what Young et al. (2008, p. 419) stated,

… at least for this group of psychiatrically hospitalized inmates, Rorschach records with R < 14 can be useful for clinical interpretation, a finding also suggested by Gacono and Gacono … It is also noteworthy that inmates with low response Rorschach records were significantly more likely to demonstrate low intellectual functioning ($p = .001$) and impaired executive functioning ($p = .01$).

The reduced R, as in so many cases, in this study is an accurate reflection of the patient's personality functioning (Gacono & Gacono, 2008).

Meyer (1992) has written about controlling R for over 30 years. His arguments are based on a statistical approach to the Rorschach without a conceptual acknowledgement or research established validation of the actual pros and cons when the test is used in actual assessment (clinically relevant). This line of reasoning does not include careful consideration for what is interpretively lost in sequence analysis and interpreting the variation in R.

4) <u>Is controlling R beyond the CS-R instructions necessary?</u> Answer: **NO**. When experienced clinicians establish rapport and administer the test as part of a battery the rate of low R protocols (R < 14) or having to re-administer the test is less than 4% (Gacono & Meloy, 1994, p. 5). Gacono recalls only 2 protocols that required re-administration during three decades of adult Rorschach administration. Dr. Barton Evan's shared, "In 20 years of forensic child custody evaluations, I cannot remember the need to re-administer the CS because of R< 13" (Personal Communication, March 4, 2022).

In a study of re-administration in 3 samples (clinical, forensic, & students) looking for R< 14 on the first administration, the rate of < 14 was found to be less than 5% (Exner, Fontan, & Andronikof, 2022). High percentages of R< 14 protocols can occur in certain samples administered by skilled clinicians, but when these do, the low R coincides with the personality functioning of the subjects (Gacono & Gacono, 2008; Young et al., 2008).

Quoting a 10% rate creates a straw person fallacy where one does not exist (Cunliffe et al., 2021; Gacono & Smith, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). ***A 10% "rejection rate" is not factual.***

5) <u>Do the validity findings from the CS/CS-R translate directly to the R-PAS?</u> Answer: **Unknown**, likely some do, some do not. Further study is warranted. What we do <u>know</u> is that the CS/CS-R has been utilized in many clinical and nonclinical populations and found to accurately represent the patients or nonpatients evaluated. ***This cannot be confirmed for the R-PAS*** (Gacono & Smith, 2021a).

6) <u>Does the main Mihura et al. (2013) meta-analyses used to support the R-PAS justify its conclusions?</u> Answer: **NO.** See Smith et al. (2018) and Smith, Gacono, Fontan, Cunliffe, and Andronikof (2020) for an in-depth analysis of the problems with these meta-analyses. Of additional concern is that when Smith et al. requested that the data from the study be offered for several Rorschach examiners to review and subject our own analysis, we were told thatdatawere no longer available in "their original format."One must consider that this reference to unavailable data is one of the primary sources used to support R-PAS validity.

7) <u>Are all the variables eliminated based on the meta-analyses' desirable?</u> Answer: **NO**. Consider that the CS-R determinants, variables, etc. have a robust conceptual basis. Some of these may be produced infrequently in non-clinical populations; however, this does not negate their usefulness in certain

clinical groups. For example, the Hx content was eliminated from the R-PAS based on their analysis of non-patient protocols (statistically manipulated CS protocols). Yet we found this to be a signature coding with female psychopaths in supporting the presence of their malignant hysterical style (Smith, Gacono, & Cunliffe, 2021). Using a statistical chopping block with non-clinical protocols (as opposed to a wide range of clinical and non-clinical protocols) for eliminating Rorschach variables is neither valid science nor does it create a better Rorschach system.

8) <u>Are there adequate normative, clinical, or forensic R-PAS administered samples to justify its usage?</u> Answer: **NO**. The R-PAS has been available for 11 years and still does not have R-PAS normative data. It relies on statistical manipulated CS data for its normative sample. R-PAS newsletters for years have asked for help in collecting normative data in the USA and other countries, but no data have been presented as of Spring 2022. The R-PAS manual reports a mixed adolescent and adult forensic sample of 45 persons. The only substantial R-PAS forensic norms with actual R-PAS administration were presented in Erard, Singer, and Viglione (2017) with 376 child custody litigants from several US states. Compare this to the over 4000 nonpatient, clinical, and forensic protocols available with the CS/CS-R.

9) <u>Were the developers of the R-PAS and/or the Rorschach Council anointed or endorsed by John Exner</u>? Answer: **NO**. In fact, quite the contrary. John Exner's daughter and CEO of Rorschach Workshops, Andrea Priddy, stated:

> In 2006 [John Exner] had planned on discontinuing his Rorschach Research Council … he felt it was less productive than he wanted …he was frustrated with the Council and he said more often than not were interested in their own projects rather than furthering the Comprehensive System and the tasks at hand that he had presented to them … upon his death he didn't make any arrangements to continue the Council … he did not feel that would be a productive move" (IRI, 2022).

10) <u>Is the R-PAS admissible in court</u>? Answer: **NO**. Review the above as well as McCann and Evans (2008). The R-PAS lacks sufficient comparative data, the meta-analyses are not adequate for its conclusions nor are the data from it still available in its "original format." The R-PAS lacks the longitudinal test-retest reliability that has been determined with the CS for certain variables and determinants (EB, Y, etc.). These speak to its "validity." Additionally, as noted by McCann and Evans (2008)[2]:

The presence of a standard method in administering, scoring, and interpreting data for a psychometric instrument is one of the main criteria that has been set forth in the professional guidelines for forensic use of psychological tests …The most widely used system is Exner's Comprehensive System … Moreover, there are clinical norms available for a variety of diagnostic groups as well as nonpatient adults, adolescents, and children (p. 63).

The need for administration procedures to be linked directly to comparative data and validity studies are the key issues. Additionally, the R-PAS is not widely "accepted" by Rorschach users. In fact, as contrasted with the CS Rorschach that was challenged primarily by a group of individuals who did not use the test, did not conduct original research with the instrument, and were not assessment experts, critics of the R-PAS have been uniformly Rorschach experts (Gacono & Smith, 2021a; CSIRA) whose criticisms of the system remain unaddressed.

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[2] See McCann and Evans (2008) *Admissibility of the Rorschach* for a detailed analysis of these issues. Also see *The Handbook of Forensic Rorschach Assessment* Section I (Scientific and Legal Foundations) as a guide to understanding these issues (Gacono & Evans, 2008).

One final issue involves the question of the extent to which each system over or under assesses psychopathology (Tibon-Czopp & Weiner, 2016). While an in-depth discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this commentary, the following provides a context.

1) It is proven that the CS Rorschach, when interpreted properly, accurately describes an individual's personality functioning. Additionally, in many cases the CS-R now offers an examiner the option to compare the examinee's data with their corresponding national norms (e.g., an Algerian citizen can be compared to Algerian norms). This cannot be said for the R-PAS.

2) Reasonable discussion about this issue cannot be couched within a "sign" approach to Rorschach interpretation. For example, believing Fr equals psychopathy or an X-% score equals schizophrenia is, at best, naïve. It is akin to suggesting that one would diagnose schizophrenia based solely on a MMPI elevated Scale 8. Attempting to reduce the Rorschach yield in this manner (sign approach), as opposed to interpreting the test by comparing patterns of variables within an individual protocol have been vigorously challenged since the test's inceptions (Gacono & Meloy, 1994; Gacono & Smith, 2021b, 2022; Lindner, 1946).

Once adequate R-PAS comparative data are obtained (with R-PAS administered procedures) a more fruitful line of research is to determine what is lost and what is gained with the newer system. In this commentary we have provided one specific example (Hx) of what is lost when variables are cut on a statistical chopping block using non-clinical protocols, and mentioned other areas, such as sequence analysis and R as a dependent measure (where variations need interpretation, not control), for which the impact has yet to be fully assessed. Examiners know what they have with the CS and the CS-R (see Piotrowski, 1996). The CS and CS-R are proven, useful, and admissible in court, not in need of replacement. Until the R-PAS has adequate comparative data generated with its administration procedures and additional validity research with R-PAS administered protocols the same cannot be said for this version of the Rorschach. Despite the claims of several of the R-PAS proponents, the R-PAS does not meet the criteria for admissibility in court and can be easily challenged.

The Rorschach has survived the Wood et al. era where true criticisms have been addressed and false ones debunked (Gacono & Evans, 2008; Khadivi & Evans, 2012; Piotrowski, 2015), to find itself facing the challenges outlined in this commentary. Likely it will survive this new challenge. Ultimately solid research will determine the answer to questions that arise. However, truly the buyer must beware and in no other times than the present have Exner's ominous words----"a huge number of published investigations … are clearly marked by errors in design, implementation, and/or analysis" (1995, p. 3)—been more relevant. The issues with the R-PAS have not been addressed to date and is not fully validated. As always, we encourage Rorschachers to read the original sources, review the facts, and analyze the data. In this regard, consultation is offered through maverickpsychology.com to aid in sorting out and examining these issues.

Disclosure statement: While Jason Smith is part of a company (IRI) that sells CS-R manuals, CHESSSS-2®, and associated products, most importantly, Carl Gacono is not.

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