

## Early Childhood Recollections—an Integrative Technique of Personality Test Data

ASYA L. KADIS

JANET S. GREENE

NORBERT FREEDMAN

### *Introduction*

The report given by a person about his past life lends itself to an approach from various angles. One might be: What effect did the stated event have upon his later development? Another question might doubt the actuality of the reported happenings. (The recollection might have been preferred as a cloak under which the person sought to hide.) A third approach, the one used in this paper, is to regard the recollections as a perceptual act, a selective view taken from the vantage point of the person's life situation at the present, upon the acts and roles of himself and those with whom he early associated.

From this point of view, episodes in which a person remembers himself acting—perhaps succeeding, failing, breaking rules, or obeying—are perceptions which are likely to be consistent with his other views regarding himself and others. As such they may be looked upon as important data relating to his conduct in his present life situation.

This approach was first formulated by Alfred Adler (2):

“Early recollections,” Adler said, “are most helpful in revealing what one regards as values to be aimed for, and what one senses as dangers to be avoided. They help us to see the kind of world which a particular person feels he is living in, and the ways he early found of meeting that world. The basic attitudes which have guided an individual throughout his life, and which prevail likewise in his present situation, are reflected in these fragments . . .” (1).

The purpose of the present study is to show how “early childhood recollections,” henceforth called ECR, are data which will aid the examiner in integrating and making more meaningful the information derived from projective material. Projective material may present the examiner with a highly diverse set of attitudes, needs, and anxieties. A general problem arises: in defining which of these attitudes is relevant in terms of the subject's conduct or functioning. Thus, a distinc-

tion here used is between functioning traits to be observed in the subject's conduct and latent traits which may be projected in a test which, however, are not directly accessible to observation of behavior.

In clinical experience, we found that "early childhood recollections" make possible the prediction of functioning traits; they thus act as a point of relevance to organized projective material. Some of the theoretical reasons for this supposition will be outlined.

(1) The subject of a recollection is always the self, and the attitudes expressed are likely to bear an intimate relation to the "I." In much projective material the perplexing questions are raised: Does the individual's attitude aim at himself, a peer, or an elder? Does he refer to a real or ideal image? On the other hand, the problem of defining the subject of identification usually does not occur with recollections. It thus appears that as an image relating to the self, we are dealing with an image *focal* to the *subject's perceptual* field.

(2) In content ECR deals with a person's primary group, his parents, parent substitutes, and siblings, and the way he early responded to challenging situations in this group. If we accept the notion that family attitudes tend to generalize as to other human relationships, childhood recollections should permit specific *predictions* of the way a person pursues his goals and relates to others.

An assumption underlying the present study, then, is that childhood recollections represent a *focal image* of the individual's perceptual field which is *predictive* of the way he pursues his goals and relates to others. This assumption leads us to expect better prediction of functioning traits when a knowledge of ECR is added to other projective material. Our major hypothesis, therefore, is that a knowledge of ECR improves prediction of functioning traits specifically in two areas of the subject's activities:

- (a) pursuing a task, to be called *approach* category;
- (b) relating to elders, to be called *authority* category.

### *Procedure*

The raw data consists of three sets of material for each of twenty female high school (private) students, aged 14 to 17.

(1) Summary descriptions by two teachers (one home-room teacher) both well acquainted with the students. These were drawn up at the end of the school year. Each teacher was instructed to describe the

students' (a) manner of approach to school tasks, and (b) the relationship to staff with whom there was also a good deal of extra-curricular contact.

(2) Ten stories, written by the students in response to ten Thematic Apperception Test cards, which were projected on a screen.

(3) Finally, students were asked to write the earliest episode they could remember when they were little girls and the earliest episodes relating to their mothers and fathers.

Three judges were then asked to rate on both the *approach* and *authority* categories, the teachers' conduct descriptions, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) data without a knowledge of ECR, and finally ECR which was then added to the TAT protocol.

This procedure of adding ECR to TAT was employed (a) to make the method consistent with clinical practice, where ECR is never used alone as integrative technique, (b) to emphasize that ECR and TAT are not independent of each other. (c) This procedure also seems appropriate to provide an answer to the general question of this paper: "What does ECR contribute to the prediction of functioning traits, not already predicted by other projective tests, such as the TAT."

Each judge thus had three separate checks for each subject: one derived from teachers' conduct notes, one from TAT and one from ECR. The checks derived from teachers' reports served as criteria for the prediction of functioning traits. TAT checks were matched against conduct checks, as were ECR checks, and it was determined whether the latter significantly increases prediction of conduct or the functioning trait.

### *Method of Scoring*

Seven items were contained in the approach category, and will be cited as examples:

1. Pursuing a goal with initiative
2. Pursuing a goal by setting own rules, disregarding barriers
3. Pursuing a goal by employing evasive, fictitious or gratuitous means
4. Pursuing a goal compliantly; doing no more than situation demands
5. Passive resistance, complies using a minimum of effort, begrudgingly and with hostility

6. Works without confidence in own aspiration, doubt, depression, inner resignation
7. Unscorable\*

The first three items in the list relate to an active approach, the second three to a passive approach. Similar items were established for the *authority* category (see appendix). Rules for scoring were arranged, so that there could only be one check per subject for each of the three groups of data. Sample responses for TAT and ECR taken from an exploratory pilot study were selected to guide the scorers in their decisions (see appendix).

For the TAT, each card was scored separately and the judges were asked to assign one master check to the total protocol. (Thus we had ten card checks and one master check for each TAT protocol.) The master check was not necessarily in the category of highest frequency of checks, but was based on scorer's clinical judgment. It was guided by factors such as mood, outcome of plot, and degree of affective involvement. Only actions emanating from the hero (who was defined for each card), were considered to contribute to at least one of the items in the categories (appendix).

For ECR, inferences were made similar to those made for TAT. Each of the judges, all of whom were experienced clinicians, had at least one year of practice in making ECR interpretations. Judges were asked to focus on type of action, which subject remembers himself as *doing*, beginning and outcome of episode, affect associated. A sample interpretation will be given. One of the girls reported, "When I was four, I made a terrible racket on Sunday morning, when I wanted to try out my new bike and my parents wanted to sleep." The inference was drawn that the girl maintained an image in which she did what she wanted to do, irrespective of parental sanctions. It is predictive of item two in the *approach* category: "Pursuing a goal according to ones own rules." A response that would represent the corresponding item for the TAT would be, "The boy is supposed to play the violin, but doesn't feel like it when he sees the gang play baseball—he's disgusted and breaks the bow."

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\* "Unscorable" checks only appeared for single TAT cards (see below), but never for TAT master checks, ECR or criterion checks.

## Results

Basic data of the study consist of three ratings on each subject made by the three judges independently.

1. Rating on teacher's report
2. Rating of TAT only
3. Rating of ECR

An answer to the problem of the present study may be approached by comparing correct matchings between ratings based on TAT on the one hand and teachers' reports on the other. An analysis of the *approach* category in Table 1, shows that of the 20 cases there was correct matching between the scores from TAT and criterion (teachers' reports) to the extent of 10, 8 and 8 cases for each of the three judges. This was increased to 17, 16 and 16 cases when ECR was added. All Chi Squares, used\* here as a measure of change, showed values larger than the .05 level of significance.

TABLE 1: CORRECT MATCHING WITH CRITERIA FOR APPROACH AND AUTHORITY CATEGORIES  
Judges 1, 2, 3 — (based on sample of 20 cases)

| Judge | <i>Approach</i> |     |                   | <i>Authority</i> |     |                   |
|-------|-----------------|-----|-------------------|------------------|-----|-------------------|
|       | TAT             | ECR | X <sup>2</sup> ** | TAT              | ECR | X <sup>2</sup> ** |
| 1     | 10              | 17  | <u>5.14</u>       | 10               | 14  | 1.6               |
| 2     | 8               | 16  | <u>4.08</u>       | 8                | 15  | 4.0               |
| 3     | 8               | 16  | <u>6.13</u>       | 9                | 15  | <u>3.13</u>       |

Table 1 also presents the corresponding data for the *authority* category. Correct matching between TAT and the criterion was 10, 8, and 9 cases for each of the three judges. This was increased to 14, 15, and 15 when ECR was added. One of the Chi Squares here reached a level

\*The formula used: 
$$Chi\ Square = \frac{[(A - D) - 1]^2}{(A + D)}$$
, No. 86a McNemar (4);

'A', representing the number of cases where *ECR only* matched correctly with criterion, and 'D', the number of cases where *TAT only* matched correctly. Recognizing that TAT and ECR (used with knowledge of TAT) are not independent of each other, we seek here to eliminate those cases where *both or neither* ECR and TAT matched correctly.

\*\*Values exceeding the .05 level of significance underlined.

larger than the .05 level of significance, while the other two improvements, though small, were in the expected direction.

The effect of adding ECR may be shown in another way—more specifically as to the degree which judges agreed with themselves on the various ratings made in the study. (Table 2) For the *approach* and *authority* categories, in 9 and 8 cases out of the 20 (40% and 45%), all three judges agreed with reference to TAT checks. Addition of ECR raised the agreement to 13 cases or 65% of the sample for both categories. Further investigation of the agreement for the criterion ratings, teachers' reports, revealed that in 16 and 15 cases, 80% and 75% of the sample for *approach* and *authority* categories, the checks for all three judges coincided.

TABLE 2: NUMBER AND PERCENT OF AGREEMENT FOR ALL THREE JUDGES, FOR ECR, TAT, AND CONDUCT RATINGS, APPROACH AND AUTHORITY CATEGORIES\*

|                  | TAT |    | ECR |    | CONDUCT |    |
|------------------|-----|----|-----|----|---------|----|
|                  | N   | %  | N   | %  | N       | %  |
| <i>Approach</i>  | 9   | 45 | 13  | 65 | 16      | 80 |
| <i>Authority</i> | 8   | 40 | 13  | 65 | 15      | 75 |

### Discussion

The results then support the hypothesis that recollections lead to more accurate prediction of functioning traits. Our observation that much of the projective material is not directly expressed in conduct is quite consistent with other studies, for example, those found in Sanford's *Harvard Growth Study* (7). Also, to our knowledge, the authors of the TAT never intended stresses, needs, or themes to have direct reflection in the individual's conduct (5).

In this particular study, ECR aims to clarify and integrate TAT material. For instance, a qualitative examination of our cases, in which judges failed to predict the criterion on the TAT but succeeded with the ECR, illuminates the relationship between ECR and TAT. Five out of six judgments on the *approach* category over-estimated an

\*Based on sample of twenty cases.

anxiety reaction. They showed doubt, resignation, and depression where the functioning attitudes were compliance, or even rebellion. The girl whose first memory was reported earlier as disturbing her parents by wanting to try out her new bike brings out themes in her TAT such as loneliness, desolation, weakness, and frustration—all passive in content. Her behavior reports, on the other hand show her to be a good organizer, with insistence on handling decisions her own way. Her key word, say her teachers, is "I object"—all active in behavior.

The girl then presents the picture of rebellious functioning, as revealed by behavior and recollections, with an underlying depressive tone. Without denying the importance of such latent feelings, we may ask—How does she handle them? The functioning traits define this for us. The point may be clarified if we think of functioning and latent traits as having a relation of figure and ground. The meaning of the ground or latent trait is dependent on the figure or functioning trait. A depressive tone subordinated to the life style—the aggressive pursuit of a goal and human relationships, has a meaning very different from depressive tone subordinated to a life style of fright and immobilization. A specific value of ECR is that when it is integrated with other test material, it clarifies for the observer the way in which the subject acts upon his latent trends.

The theoretical relationship between ECR and TAT is further clarified if we note that in 9 out of 11 cases in which a judge's master score failed to correspond with the criterion, the functioning trait was checked on at least one of the ten TAT cards. The difficulty for a judge to select the correct category out of ten cards is revealed if we focus on the disagreement among the TAT cards; that is, the scatter of checks over a number of categories ranged from 2 to 5 per subject out of a possible 6 categories relating to "approach." The mean was 3.78.

The fact that ECR would select from these three or four possible responses reinforces the original assumption of ECR as a focal image, which organizes data with references to functioning level. The increased agreement among judges when ECR is added is consistent with this view, if agreement is used as an index of understanding. We may say that ECR makes accessible to the external observer the structure of the subject's perceptual field.

From a practical point of view, there may be developed many other tests using different concepts to achieve similar ends. Aside from being test data, ECR has important theoretical attributes. As an instance of

memory, ECR involves time (6) and is likely to be a persistent focal image. It is this persistence over time that led to the assumption by Adler that recollections are a signpost of life style.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

This is an exploratory study and we are aware of important gaps in the data; but the same propositions regarding recollections can be tested by still other methods. A few of the many questions that suggest themselves may be stated.

Basic to the idea of a persistent focal image is continuity over time. Will recollections from the same subject, representing different periods of his childhood result in identical inferences? Furthermore, is it possible to spell out more precisely the cues that lead to interpretation and prediction of a recollection in this or another category? Finally, in what areas of functioning is prediction by ECR most adequate?

(1) To restate some of the major conclusions, we noted that recollections, viewed as perceptions of the past, are predictions of present conduct, specifically in the way a subject pursues a goal and relates to others.

(2) Finally, by predicting conduct, recollections enable the observer to distinguish between characteristics which are functioning and those which are latent, thus organizing projective material around a point of relevance.

As such, ECR presents itself to be of value both in a practical testing situation and with reference to personality theory.

### APPENDIX

Prior to presentation of the three sets of raw data, each judge was presented with the following instructions:

#### INSTRUCTION TO JUDGES

##### A. *Rating Criterion*

Attached are summary descriptions of the conduct of 20 high school girls as given by two teachers (one home-room) at the end of the school year. In terms of these descriptions, ask yourself, "How would she handle a challenging task?" Then, try to place her in one of the six categories under "approach." Next, ask yourself, "How would this girl relate to an elder or superior?" Try to place her in one of the four categories under "authority." If none of the categories seem to apply, place her in an



unscorable category. Use the examples cited in Column II to guide you in your decisions.

### B. TAT Ratings

Attached are 20 TAT protocols, each consisting of the stories of 10 TAT cards. For each TAT card ask yourself, "How would this girl handle a challenging task?" Try to place her under one of the six categories under "approach." Next, ask yourself, "How would this girl relate to an elder or superior?" Try to place her into one of the four categories under "authority." If none of the categories apply place her in an unscorable category. Use the examples cited in Column III to guide you in your decisions.

*Note:* (i) For each card only actions emanating from hero are scorable responses. Heroes are arbitrarily defined as follows:

#### TAT CARDS

|            |                     |
|------------|---------------------|
| 1. Boy     | 7GF. Child          |
| 2. Girl    | 9GF. Woman at right |
| 3BM. Boy   | 11. _____           |
| 3GF. Woman | 12F. Young woman    |
| 4. Woman   | 16. _____           |

- (ii) After you finish scoring all ten cards in the protocol, assign a master score by placing a circle in the category of your choice. These factors will determine a master score:
- Frequency of checks
  - Emphasis of affect
  - Emphasis and ending of plot

### C. ECR Ratings

Attached to each TAT protocol, you will find a statement by the 20 girls (a) relating to the earliest recollections of themselves and (b) their mothers and fathers. Ask yourself for each statement, "How would this girl handle a challenging task?" Try to place her into one of the six categories under "approach." Next, ask yourself, "How would this girl handle a relationship to an elder or superior?" Try to place her into one of the four categories under "authority." If none of the categories apply, place her into an unscorable category. Use examples cited in Column IV to guide your decisions.

*Note:* These factors should be considered in your scoring:

- Only consider actions emanating from the subject as she remembers herself.
- Focus on the beginning and outcome of the episode recalled.
- Affect associated with it.

APPROACH—*Sample responses drawn from:*

| I. Category  | II. Teacher's Reports<br>(Conduct Notes)  | III. TAT  | IV. ECR   |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Pursuing goal with initiative.                                | She has reading difficulties, but persists in trying to read—has made great improvements. She won't take no for an answer.                          | (3BM) The boy lost his home, but he'll help build a new one that's even prettier.   | It was a stormy day. It was my first hike. I walked all the way and we went swimming.   |
| 2. Pursuing goal regardless of barriers.                         | She decides what the homework will be. When she couldn't change the class plan, she decided to carry on alone.                                      | (16) They had a fine time: a feast of venison; when they're through they will rob a rich bishop and maybe give the money to the poor.             | I remember I put my fist through my grandfather's newspaper when I wanted him to see my new doll.   |
| 3. Pursuing goal by fictitious gratuitous means—"scheming."      | She plays one against the other to get what she wants. She takes her material from obscure and obsolete books and presents it as her own.           | (1) He hated this practicing. Then he got an idea. 'Mom, can I go to the store for you?' 'Why, you sweet boy.'                                    | I had some candy and Dad wanted to buy it from me for a dollar; I decided to sell it because I knew Dad would give me the candy anyway.                                   |
| 4. Pursuing goals as means of security.                          | Does good work, but quotes me verbatim. She recopies work at least three times so that it is as perfect as any paper can be.                        | (2) She clutches her books and goes off to school. She knows she will be able to help her parents if she studies hard.                            | I broke the dish, cried and asked Mother to pardon me. She told me she still loved me and I stopped crying. I would sit on Ma's lap while she was reading.                |
| 5. Complies, by doing minimum under protest. Passive opposition. | She says 'yes' but I always feel she does 'no.' She does her work in the last minute, or when she expects a reprimand, or is practically forced to. | (1) His mother told him to go on practicing, or else. He's now practicing, and every so often doodles on his paper—then goes on again.            | I hated carrots; I just could not swallow them, and stored them in the side of my mouth. Dad was a good horseman. But he's pushed riding on to me and so I don't like it. |
| 6. Depression, resignation, doubt.                               | I do this because that's all I can do. Refused to go to prom saying, "I never have any fun anyway."   | (12F) The woman has been wanting to go to work. No food for 7 days. With her son killed, she will aimlessly work in the walls she calls her home. | Standing at the end of the deck looking into the water. Then I fell in, and I remember feeling the bubbles going up and down. I was thinking...                           |

... was lying in the crib on the porch; it was un...

AUTHORITY — Sample responses drawn from:

| I. Category   | II. Teacher's Reports<br>(Conduct Notes)  | III. TAT  | IV. ECR  |
|---|---|---|--|
| 1. Complete acceptance of authority relationship; empathy and positive identification.  | She does what I want even before I ask her to do it.  | (7GF) She wanted to listen to what her tutor was saying. How else could she grow up to be Daddy's little lady?    | Father used to swing me around by the hands and I loved it. Mother told me I should not sleep with my head dug into the pillow. I turned my head, it was uncomfortable, but I do not recall since then having slept the other way. |
| 2. Denying a relationship by indirection. (Ridicule, derogation, suspicion, criticism.) | She would bring in bits of information and offer them to correct me, to show where I made an error.   | (7GF) Mother is reading the Bible, and she is closing her eyes to take the wisdom in small measure.               | I remember lying in bed with my mother, wondering why she said 'Yes' for 'Yes.'  |
| 3. Denying a relationship by open break.  | 'I won't let you mess into my business.' Refused to write her autobiography because she felt 'the teacher had no right to personal and family information.' | (I) His mother wants him to practice. But he sees the boys downstairs and breaks the bow, and smashes the violin. | My father used to punish me when all my friends were around. Mother and I got into the subway and it was very crowded. She told me to get off at 86th St. She did—I didn't, and I waved to her as the train left the station.      |
| 4. Denying a relationship by aloofness; the avoidance of involvement.                   | She is holding all the teachers at arm's length. She goes from advisor to advisor, but hardly ever listens to what they have to say.                        | (12F) The voice of the old woman warned her not to marry. She smiled to herself, stared and gave no answer.       | I was careful with the new china. Though I tried not to, I broke the cup. Father punished me, and I felt it was very unfair. I didn't cry or say anything. I can't remember my mother's face when she was bending over my crib.    |

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\*All examples have been abbreviated.

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