

Thematic Apperception Test Narrative Archive Overview
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Abstract

We describe the development and contents of an archive of narratives collected in response to the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), to be shared with psychology researchers, teachers, and students. This archive holds demographic data of respondents as well as the complete text of the narratives themselves. Some of the included narratives are historical, archived from previously published sources and from the records of clinicians; others will be newly collected from introductory psychology students at Middle Tennessee State University. We discuss possible uses and the strengths and weaknesses of the archive.

keywords: open science, archival data, Thematic Apperception Test, narratives

This document describes the creation of an open-data archive of narratives collected in response to the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and illustrates some of the archive's potential uses for researchers, teachers, and students.

Development of the Archive

The TAT is a projective test in which subjects are shown a series of ambiguous pictures (the TAT “cards”) and asked to construct narratives based upon them (Murray, 1943). Developed by Dr. Henry Murray in the 1930s, the TAT was used extensively by psychologists between the 1930s and the 1970s (Morgan, 2002). While the clinical usage of this original TAT has declined in recent years due to concerns with validity and reliability stemming from the subjectivity of its interpretation (Lilienfeld et al, 2000), the test is still of interest to researchers and students. Several researchers have expressed a desire to find and access collections of TAT narratives in order to apply more objective, standardized, and contemporary interpretive techniques to them (Joy, 2015). Given the long-running usage of the test, historians of psychology may also find TAT narratives to be of interest. Furthermore, interest in projective testing among students remains high among psychology graduate students, and projective techniques are still frequently covered as part of the general assessment curriculum (Piotrowski, 2015). All of these factors make the TAT a suitable focus for an open data archive.

Given that the TAT has been administered extensively for decades, many TAT narratives are in existence. Some of these have been previously published in books (see Arnold, 1962; Aronow et al, 2013; Schneidman, 1951; Stein, 1955; and Tomkins, 1955) or on the internet (Davis, nda; Davis, ndb). Others can be found in the papers and records of clinicians and researchers, some of which are included in larger collections, such as the History of Psychology Archives at the University of Akron or the Murray Research Archive Dataverse at Harvard.

However, prior to our efforts, no comprehensive collection of TAT narratives from these multiple sources had ever been archived in a convenient repository for researchers, teachers, and students to access. A seed grant from the Walker Library Digital Scholarships Initiatives (DSI) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) has enabled us to take on this important task by providing funding for needed software and for a research assistant to help locate, transcribe, and organize TAT narratives.

In addition to the compiling of extant TAT narratives, another major component of our work will be collecting new ones. These new responses will be drawn from students in MTSU's psychology research pool. This research pool is made up of students from introductory psychology classes who receive descriptions of research studies they may choose to participate in for course credit (Brinthaupt & Pennington, 2005). In the case of the newly collected narratives in our archive, the students who chose to participate in our project will be asked to consent to have their responses collected and made available for future research. For both the extant/historical narratives and the newly collected ones, efforts have been or will be made to include information potentially of interest to future researchers and teachers, and to put this information in a format that will be easy for them to use.

Archive Characteristics

In creating the TAT narrative archive, our goal has been to allow our scholars from any institution convenient access to the data we have compiled. The Walker Library provides hosting for the archive through JEWLScholar, MTSU's digital repository. In addition to the complete text of the TAT narratives themselves (and information about which TAT card each narrative is a response to), the database contains demographic information about the respondents' sex, age, race or ethnicity, and psychiatric diagnoses. When possible, we have included information about

the circumstances under which the test was administered (date of administration, method of administration, whether or not the test was part of a clinical assessment, etc.).

The data files in the archive are stored in Excel® format; we chose this format because the program is widely available and used and Excel® files can be easily imported into SPSS and SAS for analysis. No personally identifiable information about the participants is included. Descriptions of the TAT cards are included later in this document. Due to copyright restrictions, we do not reproduce the TAT card images themselves. The test (Murray, 1943) can be obtained from its publisher, the Harvard University Press.

Archive Contents

At present, the archive contains 665 TAT narratives, collected from 303 subjects. Additional narratives have been collected, but not yet added to the archive. It is our hope to update the archive with these additional narratives in the summer of 2023. Each narrative in the archive is associated with a subject identification number; a statement of permission to include the narrative in the archive, along with information about the source of the narrative; demographic information about the subject (age, sex, and race or ethnicity); the date the test was administered; the TAT card to which the narrative is a response; the psychiatric diagnosis of the subject (if any); notes about the circumstances under which the TAT was administered to the subject; and any other notes the researchers deemed to be of interest.

A subject identification number was assigned to each unique individual who contributed one or more TAT narratives to the archive. Some subjects contributed only one narrative, others contributed several, and still others contributed an entire set of 20 narratives (for clinical testing, subjects typically responded to 20 out of a possible 31 TAT “cards”). When it was unclear from the source material whether a narrative came from a new individual or from the same individual

as a prior already included narrative, we defaulted to assuming a unique identity and assigning a new subject identification number. In some cases, such as the case of subject number 30, the TAT was administered twice, so there are two complete sets of TAT narratives for this individual. In this case, narratives from the first test are associated with “30a” in the “Subject ID #” column. And narratives from the second test are associated with “30b.”

Narratives currently in the archive come from three sources: the books *Story Sequence Analysis*, by Magda Arnold; *The Thematic Apperception Test: An Introductory Manual for Its Clinical Use with Adults*, by Morris Stein; and *The Thematic Apperception Test: The Theory and Technique of Interpretation*, by Silvan Tompkins. The researchers have collected additional narratives from the University of Akron History of Psychology Archives. The majority of these are in handwritten form; we hope to have these transcribed and included in the archive by the summer of 2023. We hope also to be able to include more narratives from published, online, and archival sources at that time.

Whenever possible, we have included demographic information (age, sex, and race or ethnicity, psychiatric diagnosis) about the subject who contributed the TAT narrative. However, not all demographic information is available for all responses. For instance, while it is standard practice now for researchers to record the race or ethnicity of participants, in previous decades, this was not always the case. This seems particularly true for narratives collected during research between the 1930s and 1960s. Often, racial data was not recorded, or recorded only when the subject was not White. Where racial information was not specified in the source material, we have coded this category as “unknown.” That said, it is probably a safe assumption that the vast majority of those subjects with race listed as “unknown” are White. Additionally, some demographic concepts have not always been defined the same way over time, so it is best to read

these demographic descriptors in the context of the date on which the TAT was administered, information which we have also included when possible.

Each narrative is associated with the TAT card to which it is a response, when this information is known. There are 31 TAT cards, with descriptions as follows:

- Card 1: A boy looking at a violin
- Card 2: A young woman holding books in the foreground, with another woman standing and a man working in a field in the background
- Card 3BM: A young person seated on the floor with head down on a couch, with an ambiguous object on the floor next to the figure
- Card 3GF: A woman opening a door with one hand; her other hand covers her face
- Card 4: A man turning away from a woman who is grabbing his shoulders
- Card 5: A woman looking through a doorway into a furnished room
- Card 6BM: A man standing and holding his hat in the foreground, with an older woman looking out a window in the background
- Card 6GF: A woman sitting on a couch, looking back at a man with a pipe leaning over the back of the couch
- Card 7BM: Close-up of a younger man looking to the side, while an older man looks at him
- Card 7GF: A girl sitting on a couch holding a doll, and a woman sitting with her reading from a book
- Card 8BM: A boy or young man looking straight ahead in the foreground, with doctors operating on a patient in the background

- Card 8GF: A woman sitting in a chair, with her elbow on the arm of the chair, and her chin resting in her hand
- Card 9BM: Four men dressed in work clothes lying in a field
- Card 9GF: A woman standing behind a tree, looking at another woman running alongside a shoreline
- Card 10: Close-up of two people embracing
- Card 11: Ambiguous figures on a cliff, with what may be a dragon above them
- Card 12M: A boy lying on a bed, with a man standing with his hand over the boy
- Card 12F: The face of a younger woman looking ahead, with the face of an older woman, also looking ahead, behind her
- Card 12BG: A tree and a rowboat in a field
- Card 13MF: An unclothed woman lying in a bed in the background, with a clothed man standing and covering his face in the foreground
- Card 13B: A boy sitting in the doorway of a log cabin
- Card 13G: A girl climbing a long flight of stairs
- Card 14: Silhouette of a figure sitting in an open window
- Card 15: An older man standing with hands clasped in a cemetery
- Card 16: A blank image
- Card 17BM: A man climbing a rope
- Card 17GF: A woman standing on a bridge, looking down at a body of water
- Card 18BM: A man wearing a long coat, being grabbed by hands of unseen figures
- Card 18GF: A woman grasping another person by the throat near a staircase

- Card 19: A surreal/abstract image of a house, possibly covered in snow
- Card 20: A hazy image of a man leaning against a lamppost at night

Cards that do not have a letter designation, but only a number, were designed to be administered to all subjects, regardless of age or sex; the ones with letter designations were designed to be used with only certain subjects; “B” stands for “boy,” “G” for “girl,” “M” stands for “male” and indicates that the card was designed for use with adult male subjects, and “F” stands for female and indicates that the card was designed for use with adult female subjects. The researchers have noted that sometimes cards designed for use with males were nonetheless administered to female subjects.

Finally, any information about the circumstances of the administration of the test or other notes deemed to be of interest by the researchers, have also been included in the archive with the narratives. We have tried to note whether the test was administered in a research or clinical context when possible, as well as the manner of administration, and also any anomalies.

Potential Uses

It is our hope that the archive will be used extensively, both in research and in the classroom. Two studies using the archived data are already planned by the research team. The first of these studies is an exploration of whether or not computerized linguistic analysis can yield useful interpretations of projective tests. In order to explore this question, the researchers will utilize the TAT narratives from the archive. Each narrative will be interpreted using Murray’s original guidelines (1943) and again with the aid of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software, a program that “reads” writing samples and counts words reflecting different emotional and thought patterns (Pennebaker et al., 2015). A comparison of the results of the two interpretive schemas should yield interesting insights. The second project involves comparing the

narratives generated by males with those generated by females, in order to explore gendered differences in language use.

There are quite a few additional projects that could be taken on by future researchers using the archived data. One fruitful area might involve analyzing the narratives using any of the many extant TAT interpretive schemas (e.g., Arnold, 1962; Aron, 1949; Bellack, 1954; Cramer, 1996; Holt, 1978; McAdams, 1980; McClelland, 1955; Schneidman, 1951; Stein, 1955; Thomas & Dudek, 1985; Tomkins, 1955). New schemas could be developed and tested using the collected narratives. Since the archive will contain both older narratives (dating back as far as pre-1947) and newly collected ones from 2022, an interesting analysis of how societal change over time has affected the responses could be undertaken.

It is our hope that the archive will be of use to both established and beginning researchers, and we can imagine it forming the basis of multiple doctoral dissertations, masters' theses, and undergraduate research projects. The archive can also be used at the classroom education level. Instructors introducing the TAT to students learning about projective assessment techniques will be able to do so using authentic TAT narratives. In a broader sense, students will be able to learn about research using archival data, a method that has proven highly effective in the classroom (Lutzky, 1986).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Archive

One weakness with many publicly available open-data archives, such as government census data, is that they are broad in scope and unlikely to contain information of interest to psychologists. Even when they are broadly focused on psychology, larger archives, such as the University of Akron's History of Psychology Archives, are so extensive that they are difficult to sort through in order to pick out the information most pertinent to one's scholarly needs. On the

other end of the spectrum, smaller data archives originally created with a single research project in mind are often limited in that future researchers accessing them find that the data have inconvenient omissions or are otherwise unsuited to their needs (Zaitzow & Fields, 2006). Subject-specific archives, such as the TAT Narrative Archive, can offset these disadvantages by being both smaller in scope and more focused than unwieldy general archives, and therefore easier to search through in order to locate pertinent information. Such archives can also be created with the needs of future scholars in mind, so they are not as limited as datasets collected for a single study.

That said, one weakness of our archive is that not all demographic information is available for all responses, as the older narratives were all collected from sources in which some information was not available. Another weakness resulting from the broad time span our database covers is that some demographic concepts (such as race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and certain psychiatric diagnoses) may not have been defined the same way over time, which has a negative effect on the comparability of the data between individual records (Zaitzow & Fields, 2006). We have tried to mitigate this issue by transparently including the date of test administration for each record in our dataset and by adding notes on context whenever possible, while ultimately leaving it up to future researchers to determine the degree to which such concept drift affects their analyses of the data.

As for the contemporary narratives in the archive, they will all be collected from beginning undergraduate psychology students at a single institution, MTSU, so the usual limitations apply. Many researchers have noted that college students may not be representative of the general population (see Gordon et al., 1986, for a comprehensive discussion of this issue). Our particular sample is likely to be mostly young, mostly female, and mostly from the southern

part of the United States. It is also worth noting that the student sample is not a clinical sample, whereas many of the older narratives in our archive were collected in a clinical setting, from patients with psychiatric diagnoses.

Despite these limitations, we believe our archive to be potentially of great value to the scholarly community. We are hopeful that it will generate fruitful research and instructive classroom exercises. Further, we encourage others to create subject-specific open data archives to share with other scholars within their fields of interest. While there is some effort and expense involved in establishing such archives, we believe the payoffs to be greater than the costs. When existing data is analyzed in order to address new research questions, “the economics of doing research are improved... both for the original investigator (because information is not wasted) and for the secondary analyst (because the costs of data collection are decreased or avoided)” (Zaitzow & Fields, 2006, pp. 328). With the creation of this archive, we hope to have contributed to the advancement of scholarship on the TAT and to the practice of open science.

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Permission was sought and approved to use the TAT narratives included in the archive and referenced in this paper, as indicated below:

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