

A Qualitative Comparative Study of Storytelling Through the Thematic Apperception Test Among Two Young Adults with a History of Substance Abuse in a Selected De-Addiction Centre in Delhi, India

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Abstract

Introduction: Substance use can deeply affect an individual's personality, relationships, and psychological functioning. The thematic apperception test (TAT), a projective psychological tool, helps uncover unconscious thoughts and emotions through storytelling. Objective: (i) To explore and compare the underlying personality dynamics of two young adult males with a history of substance use through TAT card analysis. Method: A qualitative comparative case study design was used. Ten standard TAT cards were presented to each participant, both with a known history of substance use. Participants narrated stories based on the cards. Narratives were thematically analyzed to identify psychological themes, emotions, and defense mechanisms. Results: Subject A (cannabis user) showed optimistic, imaginative stories with themes of ambition and independence, using denial and rationalization as defense mechanisms. Subject B (opioid user) revealed stories filled with guilt, rejection, and helplessness, showing signs of emotional distress and withdrawal defenses. Conclusion: TAT is a useful tool for exploring the inner emotional world of individuals with substance use histories. The contrasting storytelling patterns reflect different coping styles and personality profiles, providing insight into psychological support and therapeutic interventions.

Keywords: TAT, storytelling, personality assessment, substance use, projective test, psychology

INTRODUCTION

Substance use disorders are often intertwined with psychological challenges, such as altered perception, emotional instability, and impaired social functioning. Projective tools, such as the thematic apperception test (TAT), offer clinicians insights into an individual's internal world beyond explicit statements. This study investigated how two individuals with different substance-use histories expressed their inner thoughts and emotions through TAT-based storytelling.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Murray H.A. (1935) developed the TAT as a projective tool designed to reveal individuals' underlying motives, concerns, and perceptions of their social environment through storytelling [1]. Cramer (1996) highlighted the effectiveness of the TAT in evaluating defense mechanisms and personality growth, emphasizing its narrative-based approach to understanding psychology [2]. Greene and Weiner (2017) examined the application's role of the TAT in clinical settings, noting its effectiveness in uncovering emotional tendencies, coping strategies, and core attitudes [3]. Lilienfeld,

Wood, and Garb (2000) offered a critical review of projective methods, including the TAT, questioning their reliability and validity, yet recognizing their extensive use in clinical practice [4]. Dan (2013) investigated the neuropsychological basis of projective tests, proposing that responses on the TAT engage top-down processing and showcase intricate brain functions [5]. McGrew and Teglasi (1990) analyzed the formal aspects of children's TAT narratives as indicators of emotional issues, discovering noteworthy differences in storytelling behaviors [6]. Helwig (1972) conducted research using the TAT with drug users, finding distinct narrative themes that corresponded with substance abuse patterns [7]. Fehrman et al. (2015) applied the Five Factor Model to assess the risks of drug use, indicating the role of personality traits in influencing substance consumption behaviors [8]. Parker (2024) explored gender norms within TAT narratives, revealing how societal factors affect storytelling styles and self-image [9]. Warnken (1998) reviewed the work of Cramer on the TAT, underlining its detailed approach to exploring personality through narrative analysis [10].

METHODOLOGY

The research approach used in this study was qualitative. This study used a comparative research design.

The setting of the present study was a de-addiction centre in New Delhi. Caregivers were selected using purposive sampling. The population in the present study comprised substance abusers. Participants: Two male participants aged 26 years, both with a history of substance use. Subject A used cannabis, and Subject B used prescription opioids (tramadol) for over a year.

Tool Used

Standard TAT (Murray, 1935)—10 selected cards appropriate for young adults.

Procedure for Data Collection

The data collection process was carried out systematically using a structured, story-based assessment method. Initially, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical compliance. Participants were then presented with visual cards and asked to construct stories based on specific guiding points, including the background of the event, current situation, thoughts and feelings of characters, and possible outcomes. These narratives were carefully recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The detailed steps involved in the procedure are outlined in Table 1.

RESULTS

Card Interpretations and Participant Narratives

Card 1 (*Boy with Violin*)

- *Subject A:* Narrated the story of a boy aspiring to become a musician, reflecting themes of ambition and self-expression.
- *Subject B:* Described the boy as overwhelmed by expectations, indicating feelings of pressure and inadequacy.

Table 1. Procedure for data collection using a story-based assessment technique.

S.N.	Procedure
1.	Informed consent was obtained.
2.	Participants were shown each card and asked to create a story covering.
	• What led up to the event shown?
	• What is happening at the moment?
	• What are the characters' feelings and thinking?
	• The outcome of the story?
3.	Stories were recorded and transcribed.

Card 2 (Young Woman Looking at Picture)

- *Subject A:* Portrayed the woman reminiscing about happy memories, suggesting nostalgia and longing.
- *Subject B:* Depicted her as mourning a lost relationship, highlighting the themes of grief and isolation.

Card 3 (Two Men in Laboratory)

- *Subject A:* Interpreted the scene as collaborative work, emphasizing teamwork and shared goals.
- *Subject B:* Saw conflict between the men, reflecting distrust and competition.

Card 4 (Man and Woman in Room)

- *Subject A:* Narrated a romantic encounter, indicating desires for intimacy and connection.
- *Subject B:* Described a confrontation, revealing fears of betrayal and abandonment.

Card 5 (Boy with Older Woman)

- *Subject A:* Portrayed a supportive grandmother figure, suggesting comfort and guidance.
- *Subject B:* Depicted the woman as controlling, indicating struggles with authority figures.

Card 6 (Man and Woman in Rural Setting)

- *Subject A:* Narrated a story of shared responsibilities, highlighting cooperation and familial bonds.
- *Subject B:* Described the man feeling burdened, reflecting themes of entrapment and resentment.

Card 7 (Girl Facing Away from Woman)

- *Subject A:* Saw the girl seeking independence, indicating growth and self-discovery.
- *Subject B:* Interpreted the scene as a fallout, revealing feelings of rejection and misunderstanding.

Card 8 (Man with Hands on Head)

- *Subject A:* Described a man contemplating life choices, suggesting introspection and decision-making.
- *Subject B:* Portrayed him as overwhelmed by guilt, indicating remorse and despair.

Card 9 (Girl with Head Down)

- *Subject A:* Narrated a story of a girl overcoming challenges, reflecting resilience and hope.
- *Subject B:* Described her as succumbing to pressure, highlighting vulnerability and helplessness.

Card 10 (Man Standing in Doorway)

- *Subject A:* Interpreted the man as returning home, suggesting reconciliation and closure.
- *Subject B:* Saw him leaving, indicating escape and avoidance.

Overall Themes

- *Subject A (Cannabis user):* The stories exhibited an optimistic tone with themes of personal growth and reconciliation. The self-image appeared confident but slightly detached from reality. Expressed the need for freedom and creativity. Relationships were depicted as distant but idealized. The defense mechanisms included denial and rationalization.
- *Subject B (Opioid user):* The stories reflected isolation, guilt, and emotional pain. Frequent depictions of loss, helplessness, and broken relationships. There is a strong need for acceptance and security. Characters are often portrayed as victims or withdrawn individuals. The defense mechanisms included projection and withdrawal.

DISCUSSION

Subject A's narratives suggest an idealistic outlook, possibly as a coping mechanism for maintaining personal control and identity. In contrast, Subject B's stories indicated depressive and avoidant features, reflecting deeper emotional conflicts and unresolved trauma. The TAT effectively highlights both surface-level concerns and deeper unconscious material, proving useful for psychotherapeutic interventions.

CONCLUSION

TAT storytelling provided rich insights into the psychological makeup of two individuals with a history of substance use. Despite their similar backgrounds, their internal experiences and coping mechanisms varied significantly. The TAT emerges as a powerful tool for mental health professionals to assess and plan interventions for clients dealing with substance use disorders.

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