A Characterization of Gestational Carriers Using the Thematic Apperception Test
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A number of studies have reported on various objective personality measures used to assess gestational carriers (GCs) (4, 5, 10, 18), but the MMPI-2 and the PAI have become the most widely utilized objective measures used in the psychological screening of GC candidates. Recent studies seeking to create norms for this population using standardized objective personality tests have concluded that GCs show a consistent tendency to underreport and deny problems as well as to attempt to portray themselves in an overly favorable light (defensiveness) (14,18).

Projective assessment techniques such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) are thought to bypass typical psychological defenses, but at present they are not routinely utilized in screening potential GC candidates. A handful of studies have reported on projective measures and GCs (4,7), but none have reported on TAT data that has been scoring using validated scoring systems in order to characterize GCs or reported on the utility of including projective measures in the psychological screening of GCs.

OBJECTIVE

This study was designed as exempt by the IRB of The Pennsylvania State University. This study was a retrospective chart review of GC candidates (n = 39) seen in private practice who had been administered a brief protocol of the TAT (Cards 1, 2, 3GF, and 13MF) as part of their psychological screening. TAT protocols were scored using 3 different standardized scoring systems for the purpose of this research study. Current scores presented here did not impact acceptance or rejection of current sample. Clinical decisions on GCs were made at the time of their evaluation.

Scoring systems used were Rosenneuweg and Fleming’s Apperceptive Norms (17), Eriq’s Rating Scales for Emotional Tone and Outcome (8), and Eriq’s Scoring Scheme for the TAT (19). Scoring systems were selected based on their objectivity in order to score TAT responses in a standardized way. These systems also had high inter-rater reliability and none required subjective interpretations of content. Scores of women Accepted as GCs (n = 31) were compared to those not Accepted as GCs (n = 8) and the normative sample.

TAT CARDS USED IN GC PROTOCOL:

CARD 1: Shows a young boy sitting at a table with a violin placed in front of him. It is thought to depict self-image, conflicts between autonomy and compliance with authority, and relationships with parents and parental figures (2,11).
CARD 2: This card depicts a young girl holding a book, a man working in the field and a woman leaning against a tree. Responses on this card are thought to reflect family dynamics (2).
CARD 3GF: Shows a young boy sitting at a table with a violin placed in front of him. It is thought to depict self-image, conflicts between autonomy and compliance with authority, and relationships with parents and parental figures (2,11).
CARD 13MF: A Characterization of Gestational Carriers Using the Thematic Apperception Test

APPRECIATIVE NORMS

Rosenneuweg and Fleming’s Apperceptive Norms (17) look at common responses given by normal men and women. Cards are analyzed for human figures, objects, and story content (problems and outcomes.)

Card 1: GCs endorsed that the boy who resists playing the violin has his desires frustrated and practices at a significantly lower rate than the normative sample (p < .001). Card 2: When compared to the normative sample, significantly more GCs noted that the woman in the card is pregnant (p < .001) and more contented in her state. GCs also were more likely to note the books that the girl is carrying (p < .005). The GCs also endorsed her desire to leave the farm at a significantly lower rate (p < .001) than the normative sample. Card 3GF: GCs noted the woman’s ability to recover from the grief she is experiencing at a significantly lower rate (p < .001) than the normative sample.

Card 13MF: GCs were less likely to endorse illicit sexual activity (p < .05) and more likely to see the people in the card as a traditional husband and wife. They were also more likely to see the woman as sleeping when deceased (p <.001).

RESULTS

Accepted vs. Not Accepted.

Comparisons were made within the sample between GCs who were Accepted (n = 31) against those who were Not Accepted (n = 8) on Eriq’s Scoring Scheme for the TAT. Trends were noted.

Emotional range (9 of 10 emotions endorsed) was less for GCs who were Not Accepted in that fewer emotions were endorsed on Cards 2, 3GF, and 13MF by 50% or more. Outcomes that were Unfavorable or Indeterminate were endorsed at a higher rate on all cards by GCs who were Not Accepted. Additionally, GCs who were Not Accepted were more likely to reject a card than those women who were Accepted as GCs.

DISCUSSION

On Card 1 of the TAT, Accepted GCs endorsed compliance with the violin at a significantly lower rate (p < .001). This non-compliance is consistent with other studies finding that GCs may embrace non-traditional gender roles and unconventional life choices (14). More GCs noted that the woman in Card 2 is pregnant (p < .001) and noted contentment in her state, consistent with research suggesting that GCs embrace motherhood and enjoy pregnancy (3,8,12,16,19). Accepted GCs noted the schoolbooks that the girl is carrying in Card 2 at a higher rate (p < .05), which may reflect their need for achievement (3,6). GCs endorsed the girl’s desire to leave the farm at a significantly lower rate (p <.001), which may reflect the importance they place on family. On Card 3GF, GCs were less likely to note the more typically endorsed illicit sexual activity (p < .05) and more likely to see the people in the card as a traditional husband and wife.

Sad themes endorsed for Emotional Tone and Outcome on Card 1 reflect low self-image which is consistent with previous research suggesting that GCs are lower in self-esteem (2). In addition, GCs endorsed Inferiority at the highest rate on the summary scores of Eriq’s Scoring Scheme for the TAT. When comparisons were made within the sample, GCs who were Not Accepted showed a restricted range of emotion and endorsed more outcomes that were Indeterminate or who Rejected the card. In sum, the information gleaned from the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) shares some similarities to previous research and makes a unique contribution as well. GCs’ self-esteem may be lower or they may have greater levels of inferiority than other women, but see pregnancy as a time of contentment and pleasure. They may be fragile in their feelings of self-efficacy, but also view surrogacy as an opportunity for personal achievement. They may be somewhat unconventional in their approach to life and reject traditional gender roles. However, they also endorse a traditional worldview by endorsing themes of home and family. Findings of the present study suggest that projective measures can help validate findings on objective measures/clinical interview, and also contribute to unique content information.

LIMITATIONS:

TAT protocols were scored retrospectively. The collection of data on GCs who were Not Accepted has only recently begun making the present sample size is too small to generalize outside of this study. GCs who were Not Accepted were rejected for a number of reasons and not just for psychological reasons. Lastly, statistical analyses were based on the theoretical assumption that published norms represented the general population.

REFERENCES