

Review Article

# The Rorschach Test: An Investigative Tool for Assessing Parenting Skills in Narcissistic Personality Disorder

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## Abstract

In the Italian legislative system, the technical assessment by an expert appointed by the court is conceived as a psychological and psychodiagnostic investigation aimed at exploring the relational situation between the various members of the family, in particular between parents and children, and assessing the parental suitability for providing the judge with useful indications for the protection of the child's welfare. Given the increasing importance attached to the quality of the parent-child relationship, a wide debate has opened in the scientific literature regarding the concept of parenting skills. These are seen in the light of evolving development processes, necessarily influenced by the personological style of the subject. The complexity of mental processes has led psychology to use increasingly refined techniques in order to expand the cognitive data related to the study of personality development. These techniques certainly include the Projective Tests, with the Rorschach Test in particular being recognized as the most accurate and "reliable" scientific tool for assessing personality as well as cognitive, affective-adaptive, and relational functions of the individual. The purpose of the research study discussed in this presentation is to observe, investigate and demonstrate through the Rorschach Test how narcissistic personality disorder specifically, negatively affects parenting skills.

## Keywords

Forensic Psychology, Psychodiagnostics, Rorschach, Personality, Narcissism, Parenting, Minors

## 1. Introduction

In the Italian legislative framework, the Court-Appointed Expert Assessment is structured as a psychological and psychodiagnostic investigation aimed at exploring the relational situation among family members, particularly between parents and children, and evaluating the parental suitability of each parent [1, 2]. The objective is to provide the judge with useful insights, through answers to specific questions, to facilitate the most appropriate custody decision for the well-being of the minor.

Given the increasing importance attributed to the quality of the parent-child relationship, a broad debate has emerged in

the scientific literature concerning the concept of parenting skills, viewed as processual functions necessarily influenced by the individual's personality style [1, 3].

The complexity of mental processes has led psychology to employ increasingly sophisticated techniques to expand knowledge about personality development. Among these techniques, Projective Tests are notable, with the Rorschach test specifically recognized as the most accurate and "reliable" scientific tool for evaluating personality, as well as an individual's cognitive, affective-adaptive, and relational functions [1].

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The aim of the research study discussed in this presentation is to observe, analyze, and demonstrate, through the Rorschach test, how narcissistic personality functioning, in particular, negatively impacts parenting abilities [4-6].

## 2. Materials and Methods

The following observations represent an initial, primarily descriptive analysis, enriched with some preliminary statistical data, of the numerous Rorschach protocols collected from 2005 to the present through expert consultation activities at the Italian Association of Legal Psychology in the context of child custody and psychodiagnostic evaluation [7].

This study aims to verify whether, in individuals with a personality profile associated with the narcissistic spectrum, Rorschach indices indicating good parenting skills show dif-

ferences compared to individuals without narcissistic issues. In other words, the objective is to assess whether Rorschach indices, which detect personality aspects related to parental function (operationalized through the construct of 'interpersonal availability' described by Weiner), differ significantly between "narcissists" and "non-narcissists" [8].

The purpose is to provide insights for further detailed statistical analyses, offering general indications on the parental profiles of narcissists and clinical reflections.

An impaired area of interpersonal availability negatively impacts parenting through a compromise in object relations.

The indices listed below were derived from the specialized literature on the Rorschach and identified within protocols of parents deemed suitable in the context of expert consultation regarding parenting competencies [5].

Funzioni legate alla genitorialità	Indici Rorschach <sup>1</sup>
Disponibilità interpersonale	Presenza di FC $FC > CF + C$ Assenza di C Presenza di Ind. Affettività adeguato Presenza di F(c)+ $F(c)+ \gg F(c)\pm$ Assenza di F(c)- Presenza di Fc $Fc \gg cF$ Assenza di c H% medio $H \gg Hd$ Presenza di MC+ TVI e tvi ambiguo o extratensivo su base ambiguo Assenza di Hs Assenza di Manifestazioni Particolari: Rispecchio, Autoriferimento, Doppio Assenza di Colore Improprio Assenza di Colore bianco

**Figure 1.** Rorschach indices, which detect personality aspects related to parental function. Reference notation: Capri P., Lanotte A., Mariani S., *Il Metodo Rorschach*, EUR Roma, 2011.

### 2.1. Study Sample

For this study, a statistical design was constructed by comparing an "experimental group" of narcissistic subjects with a control group of non-narcissistic subjects. The selected protocols represent an initial approach to a larger collection of approximately 150 tests and were chosen based on a clinical evaluation of the subjects who underwent the psychodiagnostic examination.

- 1) The "narcissist" group includes 18 subjects (balanced in terms of male-female composition) aged between 18 and 65 years. These subjects displayed narcissistic components of varying intensity along the narcissistic spectrum, but not necessarily corresponding to a clinical diagnosis of personality disorder. Cultural level was not evaluated at this stage, although it is not theoretically considered

strictly relevant to parenting skills.

- 2) The "non-narcissist" group includes 23 subjects, balanced in terms of male-female composition and with an average age between 18 and 65, randomly selected from the same population evaluated in our study, excluding psychotic disorders. Both groups were balanced concerning the average number of responses provided.

### 2.2. Instruments

The administration and scoring of the Rorschach tests were conducted by experienced psychologists trained at the Centro Studi Psicologia Applicata Istituto di Formazione e Ricerca Scientifica (CEIPA), Training and Research Institute, following the Rorschach Method (administration by D. Rapaport; scoring by C. Rizzo; CEIPA scoring module). This tool was chosen for its ability to extensively and intensively investigate

all aspects and traits of personality, allowing comparisons between parenting traits, narcissism at various levels of severity, and test indices [9-17].

Due to the limited sample size, a preliminary analysis was performed using the weighted average on a limited number of participants divided into two groups: one of subjects with a narcissism diagnosis and one without, considering the presence of parenting skill indices. The study evaluated whether the presence of each Rorschach index (such as Presence of FC,  $FC >> CF+C$ , Absence of C, Presence of  $F(c)+$ ,  $F(c)+ >> F(c) \pm$ , Absence of  $F(c)-$ , Presence of Fc,  $Fc >> cF$ , Absence of c, D in Perception Type, Average V%, Reality Index 5-7, Average H%,  $H >> Hd$ , Presence of MC+, TVI and ambiequal or extratensive tvi on an ambiequal basis, Absence of Hs, Absence of Reflection, Absence of Self-Reference, Absence of Double, Absence of Improper Color, Absence of White Color, Absence of  $G >> M$ ), descriptors of personality characteristics related to good parenting skills, differs between the two groups by chance or represents an effect of narcissistic traits.

### 3. Results

An initial description of the Rorschach indices obtained from the two groups, based solely on the observation of the scores obtained in each group, shows a difference in the average of the G% (Global) responses.

**Table 1.** G%.

Narcissistic group	53
Non-narcissistic group	40

This places the Perception Type of narcissistic subjects within a range of predominant use of the theoretical-abstract components of thought, as represented in the literature.

The reduction of D% (Detail) responses in the sample of narcissistic subjects should be read in relation to the increase in G responses, as the limited access to practical-concrete aspects, appearing as a deficit, seems linked to the tendency to focus on abstractions and personal ambitions.

**Table 2.** D%.

Narcissistic group	40
Non-narcissistic group	50

From the perspective of Proposed Content, a difference is observed in the average Botanical (Bot%) and Geographic (Geog%) content between narcissists and non-narcissists:

**Table 3.** Bot%.

Narcissistic group	1
Non-narcissistic group	9,5

**Table 4.** Geog%.

Narcissistic group	10
Non-narcissistic group	1

The recorded difference directly reflects the difficulties narcissistic personalities encounter in managing free and spontaneous affectivity, which is kept at a distance (Geog%), as well as a reduced sensitivity among narcissists (Bot%).

Regarding the index  $FC > CF+C$  (Form/Color responses > Color/Form responses + Color responses), the difference between the groups was statistically significant. Narcissistic subjects show a lesser ability to express their affectivity positively, primarily focusing on their internal emotional states, with limited control and difficulty in establishing a stable relationship with relational objects.

**Table 5.**  $FC > CF+C$ .

Narcissistic group	5
Non-narcissistic group	40

The MC+ (Movement/Color responses) index was absent in the narcissistic group, in contrast to the non-narcissists, with a statistically significant difference. Related to the instability in affective expression and identification difficulties, narcissists show limited integration of projective-identificative aspects with emotionality.

**Table 6.** MC+.

Narcissistic group	0
Non-narcissistic group	20

The Interior Life Type (TVI) index, ambiequal or extratensive based on ambiequal, was more prevalent in the non-narcissist group, with a difference tending toward statistical significance. In other words, there are fewer narcissistic subjects with an ambiequal or extratensive TVI based on ambiequal compared to non-narcissists. This indicates a lesser balance among narcissists between inter- and intra-psychic dynamics.

**Table 7.** TVI.

Narcissistic group	10
Non-narcissistic group	35

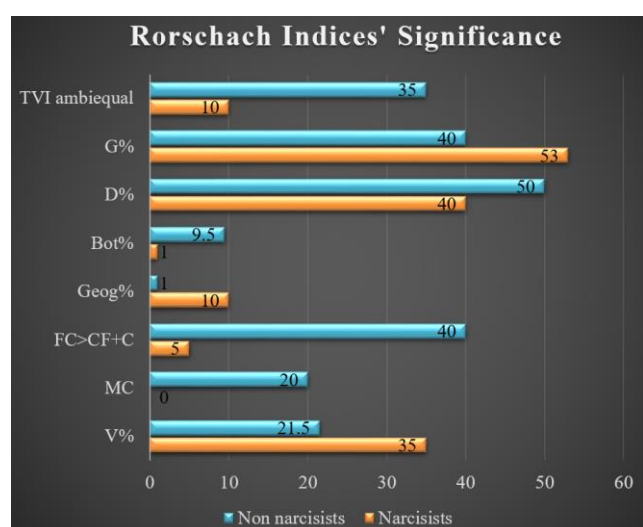
The following index shows the opposite effect: it is significantly higher in narcissists than in non-narcissists.

The average V% (common responses) index was more prevalent and outside the average range in the narcissist group, unlike the non-narcissists, with a statistically significant difference. Compared to non-narcissists, narcissists appear more attached to aspects of social conformity; this is contrary to the literature, not only because it shows greater adherence to norms compared to non-narcissists, but more generally as it signals an alignment with conventional thinking unusual for these personalities. This could derive from the attempt to conform to norms, demonstrating good adaptability in the specific evaluation context. It can also be hypothesized that overt manifestations of nonconformity are more commonly associated with clearly psychopathological functioning (personality disorders).

**Table 8.** V%.

Narcissistic group	35
Non-narcissistic group	21,5

The statistical analysis highlights that all dimensions, except the average V%, go in the desired direction; that is, narcissists show lower values than non-narcissists in the Rorschach indices that measure parenting skills.

**Figure 2.** Statistical analysis highlights.

## 4. Discussion

The results obtained confirm the hypothesis of a reduction in personality aspects related to parenting function, as measured through the Rorschach Test indices that operationalize them, in narcissistic personalities. The emerging data support the notion that narcissistically oriented personality profiles represent a kind of "risk factor" for parenting, as they predispose individuals to a reduction in personality traits that support parenting functions.

However, it should be noted that parenting skills, even when analyzed through a powerful and in-depth tool like the Rorschach, cannot be considered as independent indices. Consequently, the positive results obtained from our analysis must consider that, taking into account various levels of severity, insufficient parenting competence cannot be inferred from the absence of a single index. A more detailed statistical model will be developed in which index variation will be correlated to verify this clinical assumption.

It is also necessary to clarify that, as mentioned, parenting is a vast and complex dimension that relies on a variety of psychic functions, attitudes, and behaviors. It cannot be examined with a single tool. In fact, the investigative methodology requires the integration of information from different sources (interviews, tests, direct observations, etc.).

In this context, the Rorschach is a valuable tool for exploring and investigating parenting, as it allows for a deeper understanding of personality aspects, particularly emotional-affective ones, that are essential from a psychological perspective for fulfilling the parental role, which it inevitably influences.

The limitations of the research are as follows:

- 1) Small sample size: this is only a preliminary study (it will be expanded).
- 2) The type of analysis does not capture different levels of index variation, only their presence/absence (it will be further examined with parametric statistics).
- 3) Control group: control groups will be set up for each clinical-diagnostic category, including a control of "healthy" subjects.

Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider these aspects in future research.

## 5. Conclusions

The comparison between the Rorschach indices of the two groups ("narcissists" and "non-narcissists") reveals some significant differences and shows that all indices in the "narcissist" group confirm our hypothesis, namely the presence of deficiencies in the abilities of "narcissists".

In summary, it can be considered that significant narcissistic personality traits represent an individual vulnerability factor, especially in terms of limited emotional-affective resources, which reduce the ability to adequately perform the parental role.

In light of the above, considering the decrease in affective aspects found in narcissistically oriented personalities and the consequences on parenting skills, the crucial point in Technical Consultations in the evaluation of parenting abilities is not only a diagnostic matter. Equally important is the design of interventions aimed at improving parental weaknesses, within paths oriented towards personal care or parental support. Such interventions are often necessary to guarantee the child's right to have a parent capable of responding to their needs and growth requirements.

## Abbreviations

CEIPA	Centro Studi Psicologia Applicata Istituto di Formazione e Ricerca Scientifica
G	Global Responses
D	Detail Responses
BOT	Botanical Responses
GEOG	Geographic Responses
FC	Form/Color Responses
CF	Color/Form Responses
C	Color Responses
MC	Movement/Color Responses
TVI	Interior Life Type
V	Common Responses

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## Author Contributions

**Chiara Giannini:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation

**Francesca Marielli:** Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision

**Sofia Marini Balestra:** Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

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## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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## Biography



**Chiara Giannini** Graduated in Clinical Psychology from the European University of Rome, she is currently specializing in Constructivist-based Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy at the APC in Rome. She serves as a Family Mediator and is the Psychological Area Coordinator for the APS "In Medias Res" Association in Albano Laziale. She is an expert in Legal Psychology and Clinical-Forensic Psychodiagnostics, now an Ordinary Member of the Italian Association of Legal Psychology (AIPG - Scientific Society), as well as experienced in ABA-VB (Applied Behavior Analysis) intervention. She lectures as an adjunct professor on "Behavior Observation Techniques and Parental Competency Assessment" at the European University of Rome, Department of Human Sciences, and also

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**Francesca Marielli** Graduated in Clinical Psychology from the European University of Rome, she is currently pursuing her four-year training in Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy at the PTS Psychotherapy Training School in Rome. She is an expert in Forensic Psychology, having completed specialized training in forensic psychology and psychopathology with the Italian Association of Forensic Psychology. Her expertise extends to the psychodiagnostic assessment of adults. From 2021 to 2023, she was a member of the operational didactic organization of the Italian Association of Forensic Psychology and is now a full member. She also serves as a subject expert in Forensic Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology, Department of Human Sciences, European University of Rome. She holds

teaching positions at the European University of Rome in Forensic Psychology and Criminology, delivering courses in Victimology, as well as Practical Evaluation Internship (TPV) in the areas of evaluation and assessment for both undergraduate and graduate psychology programs. Additionally, she teaches at Niccolò Cusano University's Level II Master's program in Forensic Psychology, covering topics such as "The Role and Functions of Court-Appointed Experts and Consultants" and "Psychodiagnostics in Forensic Settings." Within the field of Forensic Psychology, she collaborates on court-appointed technical consultations and serves as a Consultant for Parties in cases involving child custody and personal injury. She also maintains a private practice, providing psychological consultation and support to adolescents, adults, couples, and families. In the educational field, she is actively involved in presenting projects on affective, sexual, and nutritional education, among others.



**Sofia Marini Balestra** graduated with highest honors in Clinical Psychology from the European University of Rome and is currently pursuing her four-year training in Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy at APC – Associazione di Psicologia Cognitiva. Additionally, she holds specialized certification in Legal Psychology from the Italian Association of Legal Psychology. From 2020 to 2023, she was an active member of the educational and operational organization at the Italian Association of Legal Psychology, and she now maintains regular membership status. Her expertise extends to Adult Psychodiagnostic Assessment. She currently serves as an adjunct professor at the European University of Rome, where she teaches "Behavior Observation Techniques and Parental Competency Assessment" in Legal Psychology and Criminology. Additionally, she teaches Practical Evaluative Internship (TPV) courses for both the Master's Degree in Psychology - LM-51 - and the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology - L-24, focusing on the area of assessment. She also holds

the role of subject expert in Legal Psychology and Criminology in the Faculty of Psychology, Department of Human Sciences, at the European University of Rome. Her teaching extends to Niccolò Cusano University, where she is an adjunct professor in the Second-Level Master's in Legal and Forensic Psychology program. Her courses there include "Court-Appointed and Party-Appointed Consultancy: Roles and Functions" and "Psychodiagnostics in Legal and Forensic Contexts." Within the realm of Legal Psychology, she actively collaborates on Court-Appointed Expert Evaluations and works as a Party-Appointed Consultant in cases involving child custody and personal injury.

## Research Field

**Chiara Giannini:** National and International research in Legal Psychology, specifically within Criminal and Civil domains, Rorschach Test' application in forensic settings, National and International research in Clinical Psychology, National and International research in Psychodiagnostics, National and International research in Neuropsychology, National/International research in cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy.

**Francesca Marielli:** National and International research in Legal Psychology, specifically within Criminal and Civil domains, Rorschach Test' application in forensic settings, Psychodiagnostics, Clinical Neuropsychology.

**Sofia Marini Balestra:** National and International research in Legal Psychology, specifically within Criminal and Civil domains, Rorschach Test' application in forensic settings, Psychodiagnostics, Clinical Neuropsychology.