

Breaking the Card Boundary (BCB) Coding Criteria

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Overview

Netter (1990) and Netter and Viglione (1994) considered several behaviors that nonpatients malingering schizophrenia might employ while completing the Rorschach in order to appear crazy or like a person with schizophrenia. The most promising variable they studied, which they called Card Alive, consisted of instances when the respondent talked to the inkblot, acted as if they heard something said by the inkblot, or gave some live action to the card image that was independent of the card.

We label this behavior Breaking the Card Boundary (BCB) and elaborate the Netter and Viglione (1994; Netter, 1990) definition so that BCB encompasses instances when there is a transgression, crossing, or breaking of the typical boundary or barrier between the respondent and the objects residing in their inkblot percept. This transgression can go in both directions, such that the respondent gets into the response with the other objects residing there or the objects in the response transcend the card. More specifically, BCB occurs when the respondent puts themselves into the percept, links themselves to the percept in some odd or preposterous fashion, or links the card or response object to themselves in a manner that indicates the card or percept is an agent that can interact with the respondent. The respondent breaking the boundary to get into the card encompasses instances when the respondent refers to something in them or in their experience that is or is like something in the card and that also makes them sound like they are or may be delusional, hallucinating, disturbed, impaired, strange, or bizarre. The response object breaking the boundary to get off the card includes instances when the respondent says that the card or response object is watching them, attempting to harm them, knows them or their thoughts in some fashion, or has influenced or is trying to or will influence them.

Unlike typical responding, where the focus is on the objects seen in the card and their features, attributes, and relationships, all of which stay bound within the confines of a percept residing on the card, with BCB the focus shifts to encompass an interplay between the card and the respondent. The phenomena are analogous to what in TV, movies, or theater is called “breaking the fourth wall,” such that the set on the stage or screen has three walls (a back and two sides) and the fourth is the invisible one between the actors and viewer. Conventionally, the audience sees through this wall but respects its boundary, while the actors behave as if they cannot see through the wall and remain focused on the “as if” world in which they reside. When the fourth wall is broken, a character is no longer acting in their realm with other actors and the props on set, but rather is breaking through the invisible barrier between them and the audience to interact with the viewer. With Rorschach responding, the breach can also go in the other direction. In addition to a card object reaching out to interact with the viewer, figuratively the viewer can put themselves on stage with the response object(s) in some odd or preposterous manner.

Thus, with BCB, the respondent breaches the typical invisible barrier between the percept residing on the card and its creator in the service of sounding crazy or insane. The respondent enacts that breach by getting on to the card in an odd or preposterous fashion or by having the response object get off the card in some fashion. Respondents get onto the card by oddly or preposterously placing themselves into the card setting or by linking themselves to a response object in an odd or preposterous fashion. They have the response object get off the card by allowing the card or an object in the card to transcend that setting and interact with the viewer, which is odd and preposterous.

Several superficially similar seeming behaviors do not qualify for BCB classification. Behavioral demonstrations of what the response object looks like do not qualify for BCB. This includes behaviors that mimic what the response object appears to be doing, such as facial expressions, arm movements, or posturing. In addition, three-dimensional response objects coming toward the respondent that remain an object “in” or “on” the card do not qualify (e.g., Card I, “a wolf face with his snout coming out toward me”). Similarly, when the respondent refers to themselves in relation to the inkblot to explain perspective or situate the percept it is not a manifestation of BCB, including when the respondent locates themselves on or in the card to communicate how the assessor should view the percept. In addition, determinant-based explanations about the inkblot features that make an object look the way it does do not qualify for BCB. Personal reactions to the inkblot or percept also do not qualify for the code, even if they are strongly positive or strongly negative, so long as the reaction is to the card or to their percept of what resides in the card rather than an interaction with an object that is transcending the card. Finally, some respondents see aspects of themselves or their possessions in the inkblot or link themselves to the response in some fashion without being odd or preposterous or suggesting the self is bizarre or impaired (e.g., “That looks sort of like a rabbit my neighbor owns”). These kinds of responses may include instances when the card reminds the respondent of a traumatizing event or reminds the respondent of some other person (not the self) who possesses negative or impaired attributes. These kinds of responses do not qualify for the BCB code.

Thus, BCB occurs when the respondent puts themselves into the response by drawing a bizarre or preposterous link between them and the response content. Alternatively, the respondent interacts with their percept in some fashion as if it was real, alive, or capable of influencing, knowing, or communicating with the respondent, rather than treating it as an image or percept residing on or in the card. In either case, they break the conventional card barrier in the service of sounding strange, weird, crazy, odd, or like a non-professional attempting to appear psychotic, delusional, hallucinatory, or schizophrenic.

Aspects of BCB overlap with the Deviant Response (DR) code as defined in the Rorschach Performance Assessment System (R-PAS; Meyer et al., 2011), with DRs being one subtype of the Cognitive Codes that indicate disordered thought processes and flawed conceptualization. Specifically, BCB overlaps with what R-PAS classified as the DR subtype of “treating a response as if it was real.” The brief definition of this behavior in the R-PAS manual focuses on instances when the respondent treats the response object as an agent with harm potential or instances when the respondent has overly strong emotional reactions to the inkblot. The rationale for coding both behaviors as DRs is that they distort the Rorschach task by treating the stimuli as something more than just inkblots. BCB as we have defined it here for the malingering context has a narrower scope than the DR subcategory in the R-PAS manual because strong emotional reactions on their own do not qualify for the BCB code. BCB is also broader in scope than the subcategory in the manual because BCB explicitly includes some instances when the respondent makes a preposterous personal link to the response object.

Assign the BCB code dichotomously, as either absent or present on each response. However, when coding BCB, responses must qualify clearly and unambiguously. People using this strategy to mangle often do so multiple times in a protocol so setting a clear and unambiguous standard should not hinder detection.

At least in English, there is a difference between objects interacting with a *you* and a *me*. Technically, you is the second-person perspective and me is the first-person. However, some people say you when

they really mean in general or them, which is a third-person perspective, while other people say you when they really mean me. Given this ambiguity, code responses more tentatively and conservatively when the respondent identifies a *you* in the context of explaining action in the response. Unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, consider a response like “A monster coming to get you” as equivalent to “A monster going after something” rather than as equivalent to “A monster attacking me right now.” Clear evidence to the contrary could be another response that unambiguously meets BCB criteria.

BCB examples given by Netter (1990) include the following.

“The pig on the card doesn't want me to say what I saw.”

“It's a monster and it's going to come out and kill me.”

“These eyes are looking at me, and they're reading my thoughts.”

Additional BCB Examples (with qualifying phrases underlined)

Odd or Preposterous Personalization

(Card I) “It looks like the airplane that's been following me.”

(Card IV) “This looks like the darkness that surrounds me all the time.” (CP: ARR) “Mhm, I can't really explain it any better than that. I feel like there's some kind of darkness around me, some evil entity that wants me to do bad things. (What there makes it look like darkness?) The color of it.”

(Card IV) RP: “Also it kind of looks like the bats that keep flying around my head.” (CP: ARR) “Mhm, pretty much. There's its wings (D4) and there's its head (D3). I can't sleep at night I can't keep focused. It drives me crazy, sometimes I try to kill them with the fly swatter, but they always get away.”

(Card I) “It kind of looks like the thing that I see crawling in my skin a little bit.” (CP: ARR) “Mhmm, umm it has kind of like legs too, and these are the pincers. (D1). Often, I can see the pincers move, it's really prickly.

(Card II) “To me it feels like uh, the thing that's coming out of my body, I can't really explain it.” (CP: ARR) “So here's my eyes (Dd30) and I feel like it's coming out of my eyes, and here's my mouth (D5) I feel like it's coming out of my mouth and leaking out. It feels like an entity or an alien. (What there makes it look like your eyes?) The shape right here kind of looks like my eye sockets.”

(Card IX) “It kind of reminds me of a thing that's coming out of me.” (CP: ARR) “Like, this is me right here, this green thing (D11), and it's coming out, like this is the front side of me (points to Dd35) and this is the back side of me (points to D8). And like, eventually it's all gonna come out and form one thing, and I'll do what I came here to do.”

(Card VI) “And I also see a cross.” (CP: ARR) “Oh yeah, I'm really religious and I see the cross as what Jesus rides on. I see the cross as Jesus's spaceship and he's an alien just like me. I often think he's going to come and take us back to his planet on his cross, just like his spaceship. (What makes it look like a cross?) It's T-shaped kind of. These things right here and the long thing. The cross also looks like it has little guns, at least four of them. It's probably what Jesus uses to protect himself when he goes back to his planet.”

Percept as Interactive Agent

(Card II) v ^ (looks at side of card, pauses for 30 sec) “It's staring right at me. I don't know what it is though, I see its eyes. Maybe a cat, they're red but they're happy eyes. It's kind of sad.”

(Card III) (R gestures and points at the card. Breathes deeply) “It’s looking right at me, IT’S LOOKING RIGHT AT ME. It’s like a bug or something. I don’t know, I don’t know I don’t want to do this one. It’s a bug.”

(Card IV) “It’s just, not good. They all have eyes, why do they all? They all have eyes.” (CP: ARR) “Because, here’s his eyes (Dd99 inside D1), and here’s really small ones (Dd99 inside D3). (*What makes it look like eyes?*) They’re ... I mean it’s just there. Their eyes just look like eyes. (*Could you help me to see it as you do?*) There’s the eyes, it’s like they blend in with them. I know they’re there, I know he has eyes. That’s why he’s bad. You don’t even know when he’s looking at you. I see you, I see you.”

(Card X) “An alien watching me.”

(Card VII) “Seems like an alien trying to catch me, to eat me. > v That’s all I see.”

(Card I) “It seems like a demon that is trying to get me.”

(Card VII) RP: “It’s like, two thumbs up, like it’s telling me everything’s alright.” (CP: ARR) “Yeah, I feel that right here’s the hands (D9) and here’s the thumbs (D5). And there’s also a smile connected to it like whatever I’m here to do, it’s gonna be okay. I feel like I’m here to change the planet.”

(Card VII) RP: “Also it could be like a thumbs down like whatever I’m doing is not right yet.” (CP: ARR) “Yeah, like uh, I guess I should have worded it differently. I feel like the thumbs down is pretty much a warning like people are trying to stop me. The thumbs down pretty much means beware. (*Where is the thumbs down?*) “v Right here, here is the hands (D9) and here is the thumbs (D5).”

(Card VIII) RP: “It looks like you are in Hell and there are two lions about to attack you.” (CP: ARR) “These 2 look like animals and I just picture myself there (points to upper green) being trapped with nowhere to go and they are about to get me. (What there makes it look like Hell?) The colors of red and orange.”

(Card IV) RP: “A dominating man. Powerlessness.” (CP: ARR) “So it looks like there’s a head here (D3), 2 arms here (D4), and 2 legs here (D2). It looks like he’s standing over me. (What there makes it look dominating?) The way it’s perceived that I’m below him, it makes me feel like I’m being put in a situation against my will. Looks like the person is in a position of power over me, and it almost feels like rape, or something where I’m in a place of weakness, and he’s in a place of power.”

(Card IV, Loc W) RP: “It looks like a dragon, probably like a dragon.” (CP: ARR) “Yeah, his wings (D6), he’s flying. Yeah, you don’t scare me [talking to card]. He thinks he can [talking to A].”

Rationale: The underlined part shows the R is treating the response as if it was real, talking directly to the dragon and talking about the dragon as if it was real to the assessor. If the respondent had said, “it doesn’t scare me” and not said anything to the assessor, the response would not be coded as BCB.

Below Threshold (Not Coded BCB)

Behavioral Demonstrations

(Card V) “This looks like a bat flying (moves the card to represent flying).”

(Card VI) “It is a giant (R holds the card up high and over their head).”

(Card VI) “It’s a valley; here’s the sides and you can see down into the bottom of it (motions behind the card to indicate depth).”

3-D Response Objects

(Card I) "It's the head of a fox." (CP: ARR) "Yeah, you can see eyes, ears, mouth, and it looks like his snout is sticking out this way (motions toward self) toward [me / you / us]."

(Card IV) "Here's a giant. Like he's lumbering away from [me / you / us] with his tail dragging behind."

Explaining Perspective

(Card I) "This is a bat, like flying." (CP: ARR) "Yeah, head and wings, flying this way (points to top of card), like [I'm / you're / we're] looking at it from above."

(Card IV) "A giant monster-like creature." (CP: ARR) "Head here, weird arms, legs. Like I'm looking at it from below; I'm down here (points below D1) like on the ground and his head is way up here (D3)."

(Card IV) "A person on a motorcycle." (CP: ARR) "Yeah, so to me, I'm mostly looking up at him from on the ground. Here's the feet part (D2), the wheel is right here (D1). His hands are on the handlebars (D4) and it's almost like I'm looking up at him like I'm on the ground and he's running over me or something."

Rationale: This person goes further than most respondents explaining perspective, particularly with the last phrase "he's running over me or something." Everything the respondent says up to that point is in the service of explaining perspective to the assessor and that behavior is below threshold for coding BCB. Considering those parts of the response from the fourth wall analogy, the assessor can view the respondent as putting themselves in the front row but still not on stage. The key uncertainty, however, is that last phrase. Does the respondent clearly go from the front row to the stage or, framed the other way, is the response object acting as an agent transcending the conventional card barrier? Although it is ambiguous, given the criterion that responses must be unequivocal to receive the BCB code, consider this below threshold as one linked statement expressing the perspective one must use to see the response. That is, unless there is other evidence of clear BCB behavior in this protocol, treat "like I'm on the ground and he's running over me" as one idea that explains perspective rather than two separate ideas, one relating to perspective ("like I'm on the ground") and the other relating to the motorcyclist's transgressing interaction with the respondent ("he's running over me"). Other evidence of clear BCB behavior in this protocol means the protocol has at least one response that unambiguously meets criteria. That kind of evidence shifts the degree of ambiguity in this communication to make it more recognizable as another instance of BCB. [In fact, the respondent who provided this response was attempting to malingering psychosis and had other clear BCB behaviors in their protocol.]

(Card X) "(v) Umm, a bug's face staring at me." (CP: ARR) "Yes, little antennae (both D4s), two eyes (both D2s), the bridge of the nose (D6). And the head (D9) connecting it with the chin (D11). I said this because the way the two eye circles look, it could be a face looking at me. The eyes are placed with enough space to look like eyes."

Rationale: If the response was limited to just the RP this would qualify as BCB. However, in the CP the person explains the "staring at me" just in terms of the orientation of the object on the card. The respondent is not treating the percept as real, but rather as a conventional response object defined by form features in visual space.

(Card IV) [Holds card as far away from body as possible.] "I can't think of the culture, but it look like somebody with boots on, picture taken from the bottom. This one for real, I see that (covers half of card with hand). Yeah, that's what I see. > v (CP: ARR) "Yeah, that's what it looks like. Somebody up under them, I'm on the rug laying down and they standing over me and I am taking the picture. There is the boot, this is like an Eskimo jacket and they have their hands put up and these are some feet right here standing up over me."

Rationale: This person starts the RP with a behavioral demonstration of the FD, which is then described as a “picture taken from the bottom.” In the CP, “somebody” is now in that location, which then becomes the respondent himself. Although the respondent is clearly “in the picture,” he is there in the service of explaining his perspective to the assessor.

Determinant Explanation

(Card X) “An underwater scene.” (CP: ARR) “The whole thing, there’s coral, crabs, and other creatures. It’s all very colorful. Really, the colors made me see it like that.”

Personal Reactions

(Card VIII) “Oh, that’s beautiful. I’d love to have that framed and on my wall at home!”

(Card VIII) “Mice on the sides though (points to D1s). EWW! This one gets on my nerves. Are we about through with this one (drops card on table)? Thank you! (as examiner takes card)” (CP: ARR) “They do to me, they look just like mice. That’s why I’m saying, I can’t look at this or I will have a nervous breakdown (pushes card across table to examiner).”

(Card VI) “Spiders mouth there with the fangs, it’s scary right there (points). This is like a light catches through here, and right here is like a bun or butthole and it has overlapping skin all the way to his fang right here. Ahh, I don’t want to touch it, and here’s the horn and the soft one right here, and the lead shape, I don’t know if it has any spots but it is a terror sign. (A terror sign?) Yeah, one, two, three, four, five, six.” (CP: ARR) “Right here. (What makes it look like that?) The light grey, it comes up. Wow. Goes all the way to the top, one two three four of these things (turns card to side to read back).”

(Card X) “Caterpillar and worms. Can you take it please? [Respondent pushes the card across table to the assessor and turns her head away.] It makes my flesh crawl.” (CP: ARR) “And the caterpillar (traces shape at D10 and then quickly pushes card away). These last three right here is the worst part of the test. The way it’s made, if you ain’t strong, it make you scream.”

Personal References

(Card IX) v “That looks like me when I was dressed up to go to the prom. I was the prettiest girl at the prom that night.”

(Card I) “Coyotes, here and here (D7s).” (CP: ARR) “These are my coyote sentinels on either side.”

(Card VIII) “A pretty sunset. That’s my favorite time of day.”

(Card IX) “That looks like ice cream. I must be getting hungry.”

(Card II) “Looks like the space shuttle. If I were in there, I’d be driving it.”

(Card II) “Also like the inside of a dead person’s lungs. All I’ve got.” (CP: ARR) “As a child I witnessed my mother kill my father and this is how his lungs looked. (What makes it look like lungs?) Anatomically it’s the shape of someone’s lungs and I’m just familiar with it.”

Miscellaneous

(Card VIII) “I have no idea what that is. This looks like something they did to me. (...30 seconds). This here, is something that I went through then I do this gesture and put my arms like this, it’s like blood went upward. Like somebody did something to me.” (CP: ARR) “When I was in Wayne County Jail Prison, I was squeezed, and the blood came out of me, and they gave me 2 pads and

put me in a pink cell. I know it's vulgar but it felt like the blood was rushing up through me. I'm bleeding right now. (What makes it look like blood?) It don't look like blood."

Rationale: This response is from an inpatient adjudicated incompetent to stand trial secondary to her psychotic disturbance. Her focus is on what is in the inkblot ("... what that is. This looks like... This here..."), not what the inkblot is doing with her or to her. Her vague and shifting perception triggers a highly digressive and trauma infused set of recollections and associations to the card. However, she is not asserting that the object in the card is doing these things to her, or that her blood is in the card.

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