

Coding Criteria for Self-Critical and Helpless Behavior (SCHB)

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Writers from diverse theoretical perspectives have posited two dimensions of psychological development that differentially contribute to depressive experiences (Blatt, 2004, 2008; Luyten & Blatt, 2013, 2016). One dimension focuses on issues of interpersonal relatedness and contributes to dependency-based depressive experiences from feelings of loneliness or abandonment by an important other, as well as helplessness, weakness, and depletion. Authors have also called this dimension sociotropy or anaclitic depression (e.g., Beck et al., 1983; Bieling et al., 2000). The other dimension focuses on issues of self-definition and contributes to self-critical-based depressive experiences from feelings of failure, worthlessness, or imperfection. Authors have also called this dimension autonomy or introjective depression.

Not only is self-criticism common in certain types of depressed people (Blatt et al., 1982; Dinger et al., 2015; Klein et al., 1988; Luyten et al., 2007; Mousavi et al., 2016), it also leads to subsequent depression (McIntyre et al., 2018). Self-criticism is present in other disorders as well, including social phobia, eating disorder, substance use, and post-traumatic stress (e.g., Shahar, 2015). Self-criticism is manifest by strong feelings of inferiority, guiltiness, blameworthiness, indignity, worthlessness, or a sense of failing to fulfill standards or expectations. People may express it as a negative attitude towards themselves and constant comparison with idealized or unrealistic standards. People who are highly self-critical also tend to see themselves as incompetent (Blatt et al., 1982; Mousavi et al., 2016; Smart et al., 2016; Zuroff et al., 2015). Problems with self-concept, goal attainment, achievement, mastery, or identity prompt depressive episodes.

Dependency based depressive experiences embody an anxious attachment accompanied by fears of abandonment and a need for nurturing reassurance to ward off feelings of being unloved, uncared for, and unprotected (e.g., Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Without a supporting other, the person is left feeling lonely, depleted, weak, and helpless. The need for a supporting other leads to reassurance seeking and a desire to be gratifying to important others. Problems with relationships, loss, abandonment, or the lack of significant interpersonal connection prompt depressive episodes.

The scale of depressive behavior illustrated below assesses manifestations of self-criticism and weakness or helplessness that are evident during the administration of the Rorschach task. In some ways, the task is ideal for this purpose. As a task of typical performance, as opposed to maximal performance, it does not have a correct solution and provides wide latitude for responding. At the same time, it provides several overt expectations but also sufficient leeway for respondents to envision or enact their own personal expectations. The scale builds on these features by largely characterizing how people respond to its stated standards or the respondent's own inferred expectations. The scale consists of three levels, with Level 0 indicating the absence of self-criticism or helplessness, Level 1 indicating potential or mild self-

criticalness or helplessness, and Level 2 indicating clear or substantial self-criticism or helplessness.

The scale attempts to identify instances where comments, questions, or nonverbal expressions suggest self-criticalness or helplessness. Self-critical expressions include instances when the respondent is or feels unable to meet expected standards; is dissatisfied in some way with their performance; is striving to do well or as expected according to some internal standard, but cannot; or feels guilty, blameworthy, hopeless, or imperfect. Helpless expressions include instances when the respondent seeks guidance, assistance, or approval from the assessor; is concerned about satisfying the assessor's wishes or not offending them; pulls for caretaking responses from the assessor; or feels sad, tearful, alone, inept, incompetent, helpless, or weak. These processes could take the form of apologizing for one's performance, expressing an inability to do something, worrying that one's performance might not be desirable or ideal, seeking confirmation about what the assessor wants, expressing concern over what most people do during the task, or directly criticizing themselves or their response content. Although affects are listed above in the descriptions of each type of depression (e.g., guilty, hopeless, sad, alone), it is very rare to encounter direct evidence for those affective states in communications related to the Rorschach task.

Because depression is an internalizing disorder in which personal flaws, inadequacies, or helplessness are of central importance, placing blame for a problem on someone else or something else is counter to the behaviors this scale is attempting to assess. Thus, coded communications should reflect an internalization of responsibility (e.g., *"I just can't find anything in this card"*) rather than an externalization of responsibility (e.g., *"How can anyone find something in this card?"*).

When presenting the Rorschach task, assessors provide the respondent with relatively little instruction about what is expected. Most people take this as implicit permission to complete the task as they see fit. However, some respondents formulate questions about what the assessor expects of them, or they react to stated, implied, or likely expectations. These questions or reactions can be of two types, with each type having different coding implications. One type addresses stated and explicit guidelines for completing the task and the other addresses unstated expectations for task completion.

In a standard administration following the guidelines of the Rorschach Performance Assessment System (R-PAS; Meyer et al., 2011), the assessor states three clear expectations at the outset before beginning the Response Phase. Specifically, seating will be side by side, the task is to answer the question "What might this be?," and two or three responses are expected for each card. Subsequently, the assessor introduces the Clarification Phase and states three additional expectations, which are to resolve potential ambiguities about what it is, where it is located, and what in the inkblot made it look like the object perceived. If a respondent raises questions or makes comments about whether they are doing as expected in relation to these clearly stated standards, assessors should code this as a clear instance of self-critical or reassurance seeking behavior that receives a score at Level 2.

Questions, reactions, or self-criticisms that emerge around unstated expectations are less clear-cut indicators of depressive behavior. For instance, respondents may wonder if they can turn the card, set it on a table, or hold it at arm's length, or they may apologize or express self-criticism for failing to use the whole card, for turning it without asking first, or for identifying certain types of content. Questions or comments about what is acceptable or permitted in relation to unstated expectations suggest the respondent has a concern with standards and acceptability that *may* reflect self-critical propensities or a need for reassurance. However, because such questions may also reflect a desire for clarity or a discomfort with ambiguity, assessors should code them at Level 1.

The Oral Dependent Language (ODL) variable that is part of R-PAS (Meyer et al., 2011) conceptually overlaps with the depressive markers quantified by the current scale in that it classifies many manifestations of helplessness and dependency. However, ODL does not classify behavioral manifestations of reassurance seeking in the testing context, which are the behaviors classified with this depression scale.

The R-PAS Morbid content (MOR) variable also conceptually overlaps with the current scale with respect to depressed and dysphoric affect. Assessors assign MOR when an *object in a response* embodies states of sadness or depression, while the current scale assigns a score when the *respondent* expresses their experience of sadness, guilt, or dysphoria.

In English, the phrase "I don't know" can be challenging to code because respondents may use that phrase in many different ways. When a respondent says, "I don't know" and conveys a lack of efficacy, the response receives a score of 1 or 2, depending on whether the person persisted spontaneously or gave up. Most often, the lack of efficacy is evident because the respondent states the phrase as a stand-alone sentence; that is, an assertion. At times, the lack of efficacy is evident in the respondent's non-verbal behavior (e.g., pausing or setting down the card after making the statement, defeated tone of voice).

However, there are other ways respondents may use the phrase that do not imply inefficacy. If the respondent says, "I don't know" as a statement that reflects their active pondering (e.g., "I don't know, let me see...") or curiosity about the inkblot (e.g., "Hmm. That's interesting. I don't know, but it looks like ..."), the response should receive a score of 0. Similarly, if the statement is a placeholder clause that the respondent uses as part of a sentence while pausing to think (e.g., "Oh, it's ... I don't know, it's ... I'd say it's a bat), the response should receive a score of 0. Finally, if the statement is used to exclude parts of the inkblot from a percept (e.g., Card VI, "Up here (D3) it looks like a totem pole, but I don't know about the rest of it (D1), it doesn't really fit"), it is not an indication of inefficacy and the response should receive a score of 0.

Another challenge concerns instances when the respondent asks if the assessor can see their percept. Assign a code of 0 when the respondent explains how they see the percept or how they are looking at the inkblot and then seeks confirmation that the assessor understands what they just said. The latter is most common when the question concerns an understanding of

perspective (e.g., “That’s a bat. It’s flying and I’m looking at it from above; like it’s below me. Do you know what I mean?”). In addition, assign a code of 0 in other instances when the respondent is clearly ensuring the assessor understands what they are communicating (e.g., “I’m using this part here; do you see where I’m pointing?” or “Right here. See?” or “Do you follow what I’m saying?”).

However, if the respondent’s question reflects insecurity about the percept or its acceptability, assign a code of 1 or 2. Typically, these responses take one of two forms. First, code instances when the respondent expresses uncertainty or discomfort verbally (e.g., “It sort of ...” or “Maybe it’s...” or “I’m not sure I want to say it, but it looks like...”) or nonverbally (e.g., with an anxious expression or mannerism) in conjunction with the question (e.g., “Do you see that?” or “Can you see what I see?”). Second, code instances when the respondent does not explain their vantage point but instead states their percept and then asks if the assessor also sees it (e.g., “It’s a moth, one with horns. Can you see that?”).

Definition of Scale Levels and Examples

The following definitions and examples form the guidelines for identifying potential types of self-critical or helpless reassurance seeking comments and behavior. We provide a short definition for each level (0, 1, or 2) followed by examples, some of which are organized into subcategories.

Level 0:

Level 0 indicates a response that has an absence of self-criticism or helpless depressive behaviors. Obviously, many types of responses would qualify as illustrating an absence of depressive behaviors. We selected the statements or questions listed here to contrast them with somewhat similar verbalizations that qualify for a higher score. These include communications to signal that the respondent has finished looking at the card, task-relevant questions about parameters that do not relate to performance expectations, or other general comments that do not indicate self-critical or helpless behavior (e.g., externalization of responsibilities, embellishments).

Administration Comments:

“That’s all I can see on this card (said declaratively after a prompt or after giving at least 2 responses).”

“All done.”

“I’m finished.”

“I don’t see anything else (said declaratively after a prompt or after giving at least two responses)”

“Just one [response]; that’s it (said assertively and declaratively).”

"I can't see anything; whoever made these didn't know what they were doing." [Although the respondent asserts an inability to meet expectations, the respondent places responsibility for the problem on the card creator, not on the self.]

Task-Related Questions Unrelated to Performance Expectations:

"Does everyone get the same cards?"

"Will this take long?"

"Do you practice so you can type as fast as people talk?"

"It's like a really tall bigfoot. The feet are down here and it's like the head is small because it's way up here. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Is that upside down?"

Card I, R1, "A bat." CP: "(ERR) R: *Did you want me to change my answer?*" [As the first response in the Clarification Phase, the respondent appears confused about what he is supposed to do at this point.]

General Comments and Questions:

"How do you make anything out of responses to these images?"

"Do you like your work?"

"How were these made?"

"It's harder for you to write than for me to say all this, huh?"

Card III, *"These two (D9) are people. I don't know about the rest of it; it's not really part of the people."*

Card X, *"Oh, I don't know, I see a couple of canaries, sitting in a tree."*

Card VII, *"Looks like the hide from a skinned animal, though [it's hard to tell / it's not clear] what kind."*

Card I, *"This is a butterfly, I think."*

Card I, *"This is a butterfly, here are its feelers or whatever they're called."*

Card V, *"I'm pretty sure that's a bat."*

Card VIII, *"This is a tree. Some kind of a fir maybe."*

Level 1:

Level 1 indicates either somewhat ambiguous or mild manifestations of self-criticism or helplessness-based needs for reassurance. At this level, the respondent may express concern about meeting unstated standards for the task, indicate mild difficulty completing the task, pull for the assessor to provide mild levels of reassurance, or indicate an inability to express thoughts or generate adequate perceptions. At this level, respondents may make parenthetical comments related to inability, failure, or helplessness, but they persist with the task without the assessor intervening.

If the respondent's self-critical or helpless expressions only emerge after an assessor's question rather than spontaneously, assign a Level 1 classification. Assessor questions may provoke or elicit negative self-reflection or self-evaluation, which is important to quantify. However, those

prompted evaluations or reactions are milder than those that the respondent expresses spontaneously. That said, there also are times when an assessor asks multiple clarification questions. If these include unnecessary questions that do not directly relate to a coding uncertainly and they prompt the respondent to reply with an exasperated statement of “I don’t know,” consider that reply provoked by the assessor and assign a score of 0.

Concern with or Reassurance Seeking in Relation to Unstated Standards

“Can I turn it?”

“Can I just use part of it?”

“Do you want one-word answers?”

“Do I need to keep it in that position, or can I hold it in different angles?”

Following a prompt: *“But I have to look at the whole thing, right? I can’t take half of it (motions with hands)?”*

“Am I supposed to see something other than an animal? (E: Up to you.) Still up to me, huh? (E: Yep.)”

“Should I tell you the first thing that comes to my mind?”

“Can you see that?”

“Should I find certain things?”

“What do most people see?”

“What should I do if I am seeing something but don’t want to say it?”

“I guess I went too far on this one.”

“It’s sort of a weak [i.e., not very precise or good] bat, but that’s what it looks like.”

“Do I have to give three responses?”; “Can I just say two responses?”; “Are two responses enough?” [For these examples, even though the instructions clearly say two *maybe* three, at times respondents do not clearly register this information and seek clarification of the guidelines. If the respondent asked a question like one of these a second time, or after receiving a reminder from a Prompt or Pull, code Level 2.]

Comments on Inability, Failure, or Helplessness Accompanied by Spontaneous Persistence

“Can you tell me the directions again?”

“I can’t see anything (else).” [The phrase *“I can’t…”* reflects an inability on the respondent’s part that makes this response differ from the otherwise somewhat similar Level 0 assertion

“I don’t see anything else.”]

“Nothing comes to my mind.”

“Right now, I can’t think about nothing.”

After giving two responses to a card: *“Can I just give two [responses]? It’s impossible to see something else.”* [The respondent complied with the task demands and is saying now that they cannot do more; had this been said after the first response, it would be coded Level 2.]

“I don’t know anymore.”

“It was a struggle for me to find a second one.”

“Wow! This is harder than they show on TV. Wow.” [The respondent is primarily expressing surprise rather than inability. If the respondent had focused more on the difficulty of giving a response, it would qualify as a Level 2 score.]

"I don't know."

"Gosh, what is it (asked in a non-rhetorical perplexed way)?"

"I can't explain this."

"I don't know how to explain this."

Card VII, *"Looks like the hide from a skinned animal, though [I don't know / I can't tell] what kind."* [The slightly different wording in this example from the similar Level 0 example qualifies these verbalizations for a code of 1.]

"A man; I don't know what he's doing." [The phrase "I don't know what he is doing" should reflect an inefficacy on the respondent's part, not simply a comment on ambiguity about the stimulus or a comment as the respondent goes on to describe possible behaviors.]

Card X, with awareness it is the last card: *"Too bad there are not more. I'm starting to get better at this."* [This is coded for the implied self-criticism that up to now the respondent has not been doing well.]

"Just so you know, I'm not too good on abstract things, I'm not that creative" [This response encompasses tempered self-criticism with "not too good" and "not that creative." Had the respondent said, "I'm not good at this" or "I'm not creative" it would qualify for a Level 2 code.]

Card VII, *"Maybe some pieces of shrimp. I'll tell you, sure got me stymied."*

Card I, *"This is a butterfly. I [don't know / can't tell you] what these parts are called."*

Card I, *"This is a butterfly. Here's the wings. What do you call these parts?"*

Card VIII, *"This is a tree up here. I don't know what kind though."*

Level 2:

Classify responses as Level 2 when the respondent expresses clear self-criticism or clearly seeks reassurance or expresses helplessness in other ways. Although not exhaustive, in general, qualifying responses fall into three subcategories: Concern with Standards or Reassurance Seeking; Inability, Failure, or Helplessness; and Overt Self-Criticism. Although rare, Depressive Affective Expressions also qualify at this level. The latter encompass expressed states of sadness, guilt, helplessness, and neediness, but not states of fear. Unlike Level 1, the respondent clearly perceives themselves as having difficulties meeting expectations and this is expressed as apologizing for one's performance; seeking affirmation or reassurance in relation to explicit standards; or inadequacy, failure, inability, or worthlessness in relation to standards, including completing the task or explaining a percept. At this level, when respondents make comments related to inability, failure, or helplessness, they also give up or attempt to give up, or they are more global or extreme in their comments than at Level 1 (e.g., they cannot complete the task as opposed to cannot fully explain their percept). However, repeatedly making statements such as "I don't know" or "I can't explain" also contributes to certainty that inefficacy is present.

At times, during the clarification phase a respondent is unable to find the object(s) reported during the response phase. Although these instances are rare and several factors can contribute to that problem (e.g., repressive or dissociative propensities), the general coding guidelines

apply. Code a 0 if the respondent is unable to find their initially reported percept during the clarification phase and communicates this without a sense of inefficacy or helplessness (e.g., “Well, it no longer looks that way to me,” “I’m not seeing it anymore”). However, given the stated expectation during this phase is to revisit the previously reported percept, if the respondent expresses inefficacy or helplessness in relation to this standard, assign a code of 2 (e.g., “I can’t find it,” “I don’t know where it is anymore,” “Can you help me find it?”)

Concern with or Reassurance Seeking in Relation to Stated Standards

Card V, 1st response: *“Another butterfly. Am I supposed to make myself see something? I’m sorry. Um, I’m sorry; I don’t see anything besides that.”*

“Do people see more things than that (referring to the number of responses given)?”

“What if I don’t see anything?”

“I’m sorry (after a prompt or pull).” [Code this because it reflects the respondent apologizing for transgressing the task expectations. Had the respondent said something like, *“Oh, right, my bad”* to acknowledge and take responsibility for the lapse without apologizing, the assessor would not assign a Level 2 code.]

“Do people really see things on this (said anxiously, not disdainfully)?”

“Have you ever seen someone doing as bad as me?”

“Is this supposed to be that hard?”

“Can you see what I’m seeing? [said anxiously]”

“I’m a little apprehensive of saying it and I end up talking a lot of bullshit.”

“That’s not very good, but that’s the best I got.”

“It’s a really bad bat [i.e., poor fit], but that’s what it looks like.” [Note the degree of self-criticism is more pronounced here than on the somewhat similar Level 1 example.]

“The center part could remind me of a person but with no head and with hands up. See that sounds terrible, person with no head, but that’s what it looks like.” [Score this response for the self-critical statement in this sentence, not the missing head.]

“A pelvis there... internal organs there. That’s sick [the act of seeing that percept], what am I saying? Let’s get out of this one...”

Card III, *“I see uh...swimmers. Swimmers in a bikini (D1). Am I doing all right?”*

Card I, after the first response: *“What else might it be? (Sighs) Can I say an alien? Is that legitimate?”*

Card VI, *“A stingray... that’s it. A stingray. There is no other creature with this form but a stingray. And it is by far not a perfect stingray (laughs)* [indicating the form is far from a perfect fit].”

In the CP: *“It’s just the shape. I’m sorry. I keep saying that and I feel like it is not very helpful.”*

“It’s a rabbit, right?”

Enacted Inability, Failure, or Helplessness (Respondent disengages from the task or tries to)

“This is (too) difficult.”

“It’s impossible for me to see something.”

“I don’t know what it is (attempts to hand card back before giving a response).”

“I can’t do it.” [The respondent refers to their inability to complete the task.]

“I can’t see anything, I tried, but I can’t.”

"Gosh, I can't do it." [The respondent is expressing disappointment in themselves or frustration in meeting standards.]

"Can I just give one [response]? It's impossible to see something else."

"That's enough; I really can't see anything else."

"One [response] was already too difficult, you want more?"

"I can't look at that anymore [i.e., repulsed by what they had seen on the card]..."

"I wish I could give you a better response."

"I have no idea what it is."

"Wow, I have no idea what it is."

Card I, *"And here's a little lamb."* CP: *"I said that? (searches the card ... v > v < ^ ...) I can't see that. I don't know where it was."*

Inability, Failure, or Helplessness (Repeated statements; qualifying language in bold)

Card I, *"Looks like a sex part on a woman. A vagina. Uh, it's dark. **Can't see** anything else except that."* CP: (Assessor repeats response.) *"Looks like opening of vagina. **I don't know** how to say it, **can't point** on picture. I've seen one before, I guess I have, it's black and white being open."* (What about it makes it look open?) *"**I don't know**, that's what I perceive it to be. **Don't know what else** it could be."*

Card IV, *"Inside a cave. That's all."* CP: (Assessor repeats response.) *"Uh, **I don't know how to explain it**, let me see. **Don't know how to explain**. I see it all around, the whole idea of it, I see it as being a whole thing, a whole inkspot."* (And what about the inkblot makes it look like a cave?) *"It looks different from other ones."* (How do you mean?) *"Because it's uh, **I don't know how to inquire** that, **I don't know**, I could have seen something else I guess, but it looks closer to one than me."*

Overt Self-Criticism (Coded even when the respondent persists with the task)

"I'm terrible at this test."

"I'm useless."

"I feel so stupid doing this."

"I'm not very good at this, never have been."

Card VII, *"Geez! You are going from bad to worse here... An island formation, like a reef. Maybe about it. That's it. Something must be wrong with my eyes today, with my hesitancy, I don't see anything in it."*

Card VII inverted, *"Head of a dick."* CP: *"(ERR) R: Looks like mine anyway, except mine ain't that big."*

Depressive Affective Expressions

Card II, *"Two hamsters. I had two hamsters, and when they locked me up nobody came to my house and they starved to death. I loved them you know; they were my pets. I'm still sad because of that."* [Note that it is very rare for respondents to express specific feelings, like sadness, guilt, or helplessness.]

Card II, RP: *"And there's a kiss from my wife right at the bottom (D3)." CP: (ERR) Yeah, bottom looks like kiss, and I related that to my wife. (What makes it look like a kiss?) Because of the color red. Lipstick, and I miss her. Maybe I was hoping it was a kiss from my wife. I'd*

like to see her put one right here, really, on my forehead.” [Coded because the respondent sounds dependently in need of a soothing kiss on his forehead.]

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