

The Invariant Organizing Principle in Your Life

In the 1930's Henry A. Murray and Christiana D. Morgan of Harvard University developed the *Thematic Apperception Test* (TAT), a projective psychological test. It is one of the most widely used and supported tests of this type. George E. Atwood of Rutgers University developed a modified version of the TAT that individuals can use to find their *Invariant Organizing Principle*, an underlying dominant theme which runs through their lives. This utilizes Henry Murray's principles of Personology and the theory of inter-subjectivity developed by Professor Atwood and Robert Stolorow.

Anyone can do this. It does not require enormous amounts of time, but the time is invested over the course of two or three months. It can be a profoundly revealing and rewarding exercise in self-knowledge and self-understanding. The goal is to find the underlying (unconscious) theme (or themes) which are fundamental motivators in your life. Here is a version prepared by Professor Atwood for use in a class at Rutgers. It is slightly edited to remove course specific references and has comments in *Italics*.

Note: some people may find this unbearably painful. If so, do not continue.

Here is the deal. Proceed on this as follows:

1. Select ten photographs from any source (magazines, newspapers, internet, etc.). Just make sure they are maximally different from each other. Do not get ten pictures all showing lovers walking on a beach for example. *No XXX rated pictures. Some should have people but not all require it. Ten is an arbitrary, minimum number but the number must be chosen in advance and once chosen fixed. The TAT uses thirty-one, but ten is used in general practice.*

2. Take these pictures one at a time, stare at them, and make up a story, right off the top of your head, that tells what is happening in the picture, the *thoughts and feelings* of anyone present there, what led up to the situation shown, and how it turns out later. Each of your stories then should contain something about the *present* in the picture, the *past*, and the *future*. Each story should be 150-200 words long, and no more. The first draft is the final one - do not revise once you finish. *All ten should take forty-five minutes to an hour.*

3. When you have ten stories, the work begins. Read over your stories. Reread them. Read them 100 times (*exaggeration*). Search for the repeating themes that are going to be present, the patterns that you can find showing commonalities across most or all of them. Assume there are going to be profound resemblances and parallels between the different stories, and find them. Show the stories to roommates, friends, and relatives. Ask them what themes or patterns can they see. Take a long time on this. *Do it over the course of weeks*

4. Put into words your understanding of the themes/patterns found. The term "invariant organizing principle" can be applied to the central theme you discover. Formulate your invariant organizing principle, for it is the recurrent melody of your life.

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5. Offer, in a few paragraphs, an account of your understanding of the history of experiences you have had that have played a role in crystallizing and magnifying your particular life theme or themes, your invariant organizing principle. This theme does not come out of nowhere; it arises organically from the things that have shaped our development. What were those formative events and situations that you think were involved in shaping/crystallizing your central life theme?