

AAPL Newsletter

American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law



from the issue of January 2002 • Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 24-27

Proverb interpretation in forensic evaluations

William H. Campbell MD, MBA and A. Jocelyn Ritchie JD, PhD

Proverb interpretation has long been a standard component of the mental status examination and is typically elicited during forensic evaluations. Many of our legal colleagues have questioned the utility of this test. How does it contribute to the assessment in a meaningful way? This article will endeavor to answer the question of what value, if any, proverb interpretation has in forensic evaluations.

The popularity of proverb interpretations rests on their usefulness in indicating where the individual's thinking lies on an abstract-concrete dimension specifically and, more generally, as a indicator of conceptual dysfunction. The accurate interpretation of proverbs requires an intact fund of knowledge, the ability to apply this knowledge to unfamiliar situations, and the ability to engage in abstract thinking. Frequently used proverbs include, "Don't cry over spilled milk," "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," and "A rolling stone gathers no moss." However, it is important to note that proverbs vary in their level of difficulty and clinicians often do not use the same set of proverbs when conducting their evaluations. Moreover, many evaluators are unaware that proverb interpretation has, in fact, been standardized.

The WAIS, Stanford-Binet, and most standardized mental status examinations (a notable exception being the Folstein Mini-Mental State

Examination) include proverb interpretation items. For example, the WAIS-R had three proverbs as the final items on the Comprehension subtest, two of which were preserved in the newer third edition (WAIS-III). A new instrument from the publishers of the WAIS (Dellis-Kaplan Executive Functioning Test, PsychCorp, 2001) includes a subtest devoted to the interpretation of proverbs. This test has not yet been widely distributed as this article goes to press, but it will hopefully include norms stratified by age, education, and IQ (for reasons discussed below).

One standardized approach was developed by Gorham (Psychological Test Specialists, 1956). The examinee is required to write interpretations to twelve proverbs on one of three alternate forms. If the person has any difficulties with these items, forty similar items can then be presented in a multiple choice format. The multiple choice version (or "Best Answer" recognition test) has been found to be much easier than the open-ended format, particularly for patients with schizophrenia. The test yields an abstract score and a concrete score that was found to differentiate between Air Force basic airmen and hospitalized VA patients with schizophrenia in research conducted in the 1950's.

The clinical manual includes norms for Veterans' Administration samples of "normals and schizophrenics" for both the

open-ended forms and the multiple choice form, grouped according to intelligence stanines based on the Word Knowledge Test of the Airman Classification Battery. The manual also included norms collected in a counseling center which include educational level equivalents for test scores ranging from Grade 5 through college juniors and seniors. The multiple choice form begins with two samples to help the examinee get in "set" for the task and requires the individual to choose the best answer. Sample items include:

1. Don't cry over spilled milk.
 - a. It won't do any good to cry.
 - b. Don't be concerned about mistakes of the past.
 - c. Stop crying and clean it up.
 - d. It is better to laugh than to cry.

Rome wasn't built in a day.

- a. It takes some things longer to happen than others.
- b. It took a number of years.
- c. Great things come about slowly.
- d. You can't do certain things in a day.

A drowning man will clutch a straw.

- a. When a person is drowning, he'll grab the person nearest to him.
- b. No one will ever actually give up on anything.
- c. A desperate person will try

anything.

- d. Don't ever let go.

A golden hammer breaks an iron door.

- a. Virtue conquers all.
- b. You have to use what tools you have to work with.
- c. The stronger a thing is, the harder to break it.
- d. Gold is more powerful than iron.

The hot coal burns; the cold one blackens.

- a. Impetuous actions may hurt your reputation.
- b. The burned child avoids the fire.
- c. Extremes of anything are bad.
- d. Leave dangerous things alone.

Scoring interpretations

These five items were included in another standardized approach: the three-point scoring system outlined in Strub and Black's monograph, *The Mental Status Examination in Neurology*¹. The client is told, "I am going to read you a saying that you may or may not have heard before. Explain in your own words what the saying means." A series of five proverbs are then presented in order of increasing difficulty.

1. Don't cry over spilled milk.
2. Rome wasn't built in a day.
3. A drowning man will clutch at a straw.
4. A golden hammer breaks an iron door.
5. The hot coal burns; the cold one blackens.

The examiner reads each proverb exactly as written, avoiding any attempt to paraphrase or otherwise explain the proverb. The process continues until the client fails on two successive proverbs. If the client's response to the first proverb is concrete (i.e., nonabstract), or if they

are unable to interpret it, the examiner supplies the correct answer and explains that this is the expected type of response. The primary scoring criterion for proverb interpretation is the degree of abstraction that is demonstrated by the client in explaining the proverb. A standardized approach to scoring is provided to rate the quality of the client's response to each proverb. Strub and Black have provided examples of abstract (2 points), semiabstract (1 point), and concrete (0 points) responses to each proverb as shown below. The total score for this section of the mental status examination is 10 points.

Don't cry over spilled milk.

0-Concrete: "The milk's all over the floor;" "When the milk is on the floor, you can't use it."

1-Semiabstract: "It's gone; don't worry about it;" "Don't cry when something goes wrong."

2-Abstract: "Once something is over, don't worry about it."

Rome wasn't built in a day.

0-Concrete: "It took a long time to build Rome;" "You can't build cities overnight."

1-Semiabstract: "Don't do things too fast;" "You have to be patient and careful."

2-Abstract: "If something is worth doing, it is worth doing it carefully;" "It takes time to do things well."

A drowning man will clutch a straw.

0-Concrete: "Don't let go when you're in the water;" "He's trying to save himself."

1-Semiabstract: "Self-preservation is important;" "It's a last resort."

2-Abstract: "A person in trouble will try anything to get out of it;" "If sufficiently desperate, a person will try anything."

A golden hammer breaks an iron door.

0-Concrete: "Gold can't break iron;" "Gold is too soft to break a door."

1-Semiabstract: "Gold's worth more than iron;" "The harder something is, the more you have to work to get it."

2-Abstract: "Virtue conquers all;" "If

you have sufficient knowledge, you can accomplish even the most difficult task."

The hot coal burns; the cold one blackens.

0-Concrete: "Hot coals will burn you and leave it black;" "Hot coals get black when they're cold."

1-Semiabstract: "Coal can have many uses;" "Getting burned and dirty are both bad."

2-Abstract: "Extremes of anything can be detrimental;" "There may be bad aspects to things that appear good."

Findings

Concrete responses to proverbs are pathologic in all but the retarded or illiterate client. The average client should be able to provide abstract interpretations to at least the first three proverbs and minimally semiabstract responses to the remaining ones. Frequently, uneducated clients will initially give a concrete response but are able to give abstract interpretations when specifically asked if there is another way of explaining the proverb. Cued responses should be scored as a semiabstract response. While a total score of less than 5 on proverb interpretation is suspicious, a concrete response or an absence of any abstract responses suggests an impairment of abstract ability.

Performance on proverb interpretation remains stable across all ages. There is a high standard deviation within the normal population, however, and it is correlated with educational attainment and IQ. Accordingly, the examiner must be cautious in interpreting a low score on this task. Clients with

early Alzheimer's disease score only slightly lower on average than normal individuals do. As the dementia progresses, their performance drops rapidly. According to Strub and Black, a score of 2 or 3 on proverb interpretation in educated individuals is indicative of impairment.

Evidence of concrete thinking or impulsivity can frequently be revealed in the interpretation of proverbs.

However, it is important to bear in mind that some individuals with compromised neuropsychological status may be able to give adequate responses in the abstract, but this will not necessarily translate into appropriate judgment or behavior in a naturalistic setting. Although hard data are lacking, clinical experience suggests that concrete or literal choices on proverb interpretation tend to increase in the elderly, and are more characteristic of individuals with right frontal system pathology².

The individual's familiarity with a proverb can be important in obscuring conceptual deficits, particularly among the elderly. Two or more generations ago, proverbs were a part of common conversation. Accordingly, many elderly individuals can express suitable meanings for familiar proverbs, likely based on memory, while being unable to think abstractly interpreting unfamiliar items. On the other hand, proverbs really test abstract verbal reasoning in young people or people from different cultures who have had little interest in or exposure to the ways of older generations of the mainstream American culture. Thus, what makes a proverb difficult for any given individual may be that it is unfamiliar, not that it is necessarily more abstract³.

Some evaluators prefer to use familiar proverbs while others may prefer novel proverbs, and certain evaluators take note of whether the client says he or she is familiar with

the phrase as an aid to interpretation of the client's answer. One mental status evaluation form we are familiar with suggests substituting the proverbs "Tell me who you walk with and I'll tell you who you are" and "Even birds fall from the sky" when evaluating Latino clients, presumably because these are proverbs used in at least some Hispanic communities.

Discussion

So, where does this leave us? It seems reasonable to conclude that the usefulness of the interpretation of proverbs may lie with the individual forensic examiner. Even those who use a non-standardized administration may gain valuable qualitative information about the manner in which the examinee thinks. Given enough time, most examiners will develop a personal reference against which the examinee's responses and response style can be compared. A person who is familiar with the proverb in question or has a high premorbid intellectual functioning or educational attainment, who is nonetheless impaired on proverb interpretation may be demonstrating more pathology than the individual with the same performance who has low education or low IQ. Moreover, a person who does not improve their performance after being given an example of abstract interpretation or after being given a multiple choice recognition task may not necessarily improve their ability to abstract in the context of a trial and may require significant supports to effectively function in that environment.

In conclusion, proverb interpretations are neither necessary nor sufficient for a mental status examination but their inclusion is not without merit. Taken alone, proverb interpretations typically do not lead to a definitive conclusion regarding the individual's higher cognitive capacities, but they can add to the overall clinical picture by providing a sample of the person's abilities on the abstract-concrete dimension. The diagnostic utility of proverb interpretation

may be enhanced by using a standardized approach, inquiring if the individual being tested is familiar with the proverbs before being asked to interpret them, providing the opportunity to interpret both familiar and unfamiliar proverbs, and interpreting the results in light of the individual's highest level of premorbid functioning. The use of a multiple choice format after the opportunity to give open-ended responses may shed further light into the nature of the individual's abstraction functioning.

References

1. Strub RL, Black FW: The Mental Status Examination in Neurology. Third Edition. Philadelphia. F.A. Davis Company, 1993.
2. Groth-Marnat G (Ed.): Neuropsychological Assessment in Clinical Practice. New York. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.
3. Lezak MD: Neuropsychological Assessment. Third Edition. New York. Oxford University Press, 1995.
4. Gorham DR: Clinical Manual for Proverbs Test. Missoula, MT. Psychological Test Specialists, 1956.

Dr. Campbell is a resident in the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. Dr. Ritchie is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.