Clarifying the source of anxiety in the patient’s personality involves consideration of the patient’s underlying conflicts. To illuminate the fundamental conflicts within the personality, it is necessary to examine the impulses that strive for expression along with the efforts toward control that both oppose and attempt to manage such expression. This dynamic opposition amounts to an ongoing but variable struggle that is reflected in the presence, manifestations, and nature of the patient’s anxiety. Thus, in the psychodiagnostic report, it is logical to have a section dealing with impulse versus control follow the section that analyzes anxiety—especially since anxiety is frequently a particular derivative of underlying anger.

The Interplay Between Impulses and Controls

In individuals with adaptive personality functioning, a natural and relatively comfortable fluctuation occurs in the interplay between impulse and control factors. This interplay of impulse and control is generally flexible and smooth so that a state of equilibrium is more or less maintained in spite of the shifts that occur either toward impulse or control as a result of changes in external circumstances or internal concerns. As positive functioning diminishes, the interplay between impulse and control becomes more erratic or more rigid and restricted. Either reduced stability or stereotyped patterns may emerge. Inflexible control or loss of control may occur, and an unsettled or distressed feeling may arise as a subjectively uncomfortable level of tension develops.

Inappropriate and maladaptive behavior may follow the experience of tension or anxiety that is generated by awkward or uncontrollable shifts in the interaction of impulse and control. In a similar manner, inappropriate behavior may be immediately initiated and engaged in to prevent the development of tension that would occur were impulses not transformed into action. When a flexible balance between impulse and control cannot be maintained, rigid patterns of personality functioning develop that are inadequately suited to ongoing reality circumstances. Such rigid and poorly adaptive modes of dealing with the conflict that is emerging between impulse and control may take two forms. There may be an overemphasis on
controlling mechanisms of the personality, or there may be an overemphasis on the impulses. Thus, the departure from a flexible, adaptive interplay between impulses and controls can result in personality styles that are characteristically impulse or control dominated.

Dimensions in the Analysis of Impulses and Controls

The analysis of impulse versus control may proceed on several levels. One level focuses on the nature of the interplay between the two forces, such as its equilibrium, lability, variability, flexibility, rigidity, adaptiveness, and stability. Another level considers the maturity or immaturity inherent in the interplay of these impulse and control forces. The maturational level of the individual correlates with various adaptive behaviors. These behaviors can optimally include adaptive reliance on verbal expression or appropriate inhibition of impulses. Another level in the analysis of impulse versus control involves the delineation of the relative and persisting dominance of one aspect of the interplay over the other, as in the discussion of dominance of impulses over controlling mechanisms or of controls over impulses. The nature of personality functioning and pathology is clarified as being either impulse dominated or tending toward an overemphasis on control in the personality.

The psychologist can focus on the individual who is being tested in terms of impulse and control features in personality functioning. The presence of an impulse-control imbalance and the anticipation of such an imbalance suggests that anxiety and symptom formation may relate to this imbalance. Analyzing the nature of the impulse-control disequilibrium that is involved in the genesis of anxiety and its corresponding symptom formation also reveals diagnostic implications inherent in the underlying conflict.

Just as the individual being evaluated can be considered from the point of view of the interplay between impulse and control features, much of the test data can be similarly analyzed. From a broad perspective, the test data can be grouped into the responses that correlate with impulse features of the personality and those associated with control features.

The balance strived for, as well as the balance that is achieved by the patient in the struggle between impulses and controlling mechanisms, define essential qualities of the patient’s personality and social and behavioral functioning. Consequently, an important dimension of the person’s basic psychological structure relates to this issue of impulse versus control and also reflects its vicissitudes. The individual’s behavioral disposition is also based on the nature of the relationship between impulse and control. Behavioral disposition, or the operation of a person’s typical behavioral pattern, is particularly significant because it is invariably linked to the patient’s presenting problem or to the behaviors and events that necessitated the testing referral.

It will be helpful at this point to describe more specifically the impulse side of the personality and associated protocol findings. Control aspects of the personality