The Story Stem Assessment

Gabrielle Lees
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The story stem assessment

- Designed at Great Ormond Street Hospital in 1990’s for assessment tool for clinical teams, (Expert Witness work for the Courts) by Dr Jill Hodges et al.
- nonthreatening and child-based
- retains clinical richness of individual play
- displays mental representations of attachment relationships
- verbal and nonverbal channels
- displacement reduces inhibition - and avoids leading questions
- clinical and research uses
Clinical assessment with maltreated children

- Parents potentially unreliable as informants
- New carers may be unfamiliar with the child.
- Children are often in a situation of conflict or fear.
- Long-term maltreatment may lead children to perceive and report their experiences as normal.
- Children may lack verbal means for self-expression.
The Story Stem Assessment Profile

- Children are presented with the beginnings of a sequence of stories, both spoken and played out with doll and animal figures, in a dramatic way so as to activate the attachment system. Then they are invited to complete the story in their own way

“show me and tell me what happens now?”
The SSAP battery and procedure

- 13 stems
- Age range approximately 4-8 years
- Administration takes about 1 hour.
- Interview recorded
- Manual for rating (Hodges, Hillman, Steele and Henderson, 2004)
Children’s SSAP narratives

- Videotaped
- Transcribed – nonverbal and verbal narratives
- Rated according to manual (good reliability)
- Ratings can be aggregated into construct scores (eg indicators of security)
- Comparison of groups, and standardisation sample.
Stories

Little Pig
Stamping
Elephant
Picture from School
Crying Outside
Bikes
Spilt Juice

Mum’s Headache
3’s a Crowd
Burnt Hand
Lost Keys
Bathroom Shelf
Monster in the dark
Exclusion
Little Pig Story

This is a story about this little pig. It lived over here with all the other pigs, big ones and little ones: and one day it went for a long walk. It went past the cows, and past the camels, and past the crocodile, and past the lions and tigers – it went a long way, and then it said “Oh! I’m lost! I can’t see the other pigs! I don’t know how to get back!”

• Show me and tell me what happens now…
Displacement

• In most children, duplicating the child’s own family produces more identificatory themes.
• But in some children, explicitly suggesting such identification inhibits play.
• We use a standard doll family, and animals in two stories.
Verbal and non-verbal narratives

• Society generally privileges verbal discourse over nonverbal.
• The different narratives can represent different aspects of experience and different systems of memory.
• The two narratives may be congruent or in conflict.
• The Story Stem assessment gives equal weight to both.....
The nonverbal narrative may be a crucial part of the story:

The verbal narrative:
Rosie the hen went for a walk across the yard....around the pond.....
Rosie the hen went for a walk
across the yard
around the pond
Verbally retrievable, but consciously withheld

- Children may be unwilling to speak about their abuse, out of loyalty, fear - of consequences or of losing the parent, or out of shame because they feel that the maltreatment indicates their own badness.
- The nonverbal narrative can sometimes give access to memories which the child is unwilling or unable to put into words.
Types of memory retrievable through verbal narratives

- **Semantic** memories - generalisations from repeated experience
- Specific **autobiographical** memories of particular events
Types of memory which are not verbally retrievable

• **Procedural** ("habit") memory - “rules” governing behaviour and interaction with the world; ‘information that underlies a skill but need not be represented in consciousness in order for an individual to manifest the skill’
  
• Relatively slow to establish
• Very resistant to change
• Not represented verbally

• **Some traumatic memories** - Individuals may show repetitive traumatic memories through behaviour and interpersonal interactions, of which they are not conscious, or which they do not connect to an original traumatic context.
Verbal and non-verbal channels

“Verbally stored material (a result for example of a family narrative of what the mother’s role is in the family) and material coded at the sensorimotor level (how the mother actually treats her children) may conflict.”

Internal working model of an attachment relationship

John Bowlby’s “internal working models of attachment” reflect caregiver responses to the child and to the child’s attachment behaviours.

- Non-conscious, habitual, ‘procedural’ knowledge
- Generalised ‘semantic’ memories
- Specific ‘episodic’ memories of discrete events
Internal working models

- Once internal working models become established, they operate increasingly outside consciousness, and guide how further experiences are perceived. New experience is assimilated to existing models where possible.
- This makes for simpler processing and greater stability, but also potential distortion if conditions change.
What do play narratives represent?

• Not simple imitative copies of reality
• Not feelings and fantasies, ‘rather’ than realities
• They bear systematic relationships to the child’s reality – a window into the child’s basic scripts for human relationships.
The little girl is at school, while the rest of the family are at home. The girl makes a drawing at school. She says “This is really good, this picture I made! I’m going to take it home when I finish school”. So, when school finishes, she takes her picture and she goes home and knocks at the door…

• Show me and tell me what happens now.
“Irene” (7)

- Irene showed the child immediately climbing on the parents’ laps and saying “Mum! Dad! I got a picture for you”, to which the mother responds “Wow” with admiration. The child sits on her Daddy’s lap and watches TV with the parents.
“Irene”

- This narrative shows child approaching parent without hesitation—expecting appropriate response, which is shown- and some everyday pleasurable domestic life –
- So this is positive, considered “secure.”
“Jane” (5½)

No-one answers the door. The child comes in and puts the picture on the Mum’s' lap, saying "there". No comment from the parents.

The girl sits by her sister and they watch TV. Asked if the Mum or Dad said anything about the picture, Jane showed them saying "It’s a very good picture, well done" (flat tone, lacking appropriate affect).
“Jane”

- Emphasis in narratives on parents being fatigued or asleep, especially mother.
- Shows some appropriate responsiveness from parents but frequently shows parents unresponsive, not providing help or comfort when expected (e.g., when child is hurt and goes to parents upset).
- Mother shown as moderately cross/punitive in response to mishaps or misdemeanors.
- After prompt, Jane sometimes provided socially expectable response from parents, but in flat tone lacking appropriate affect.
Kim added “and she showed mum and dad” Parent says “come in”. [Long pause.] The child dropped her picture and it fell in the mud. Then she washes it off, puts it on top of TV. Child asks “where can I sit? Move up mum, I’m squashed”. All fall off sofa, except dad who stretches out. [prompt; Picture?] K responds “Now, mums sitting on the sofa, and (the child) says, where can I sit”. Younger child gets lost; “where am I, I need mum, help”.
Kim added “and she showed mum and dad”. Parent says “come in”. [Long pause.]
Kim says the child dropped her picture and it fell in the mud. Washes it off, puts it on top of TV. Child asks “where can I sit? Move up mum, I’m squashed”. All fall off sofa, except dad who stretches out.
[prompt; Picture?] K responds “Now, mums sitting on the sofa, and (the child) says, where can I sit”.
Younger child gets lost; “where am I, I need mum, help”.

- Spontaneous wish to show parents - then conflict
- Can’t show picture
- Another attempt, but no direct approach to parent
- (no room for child)
- Kim completely avoids the subject when the interviewer asks about the picture
- We take representation of any child as indicating self
The Dad answers the door and asks “what’s that stupid picture?”, then throws it away. The child runs away. The dad “rips up his picture”. [Prompt;Picture?] Steven said that no-one else said anything about the picture, or noticed it.

The rest of the family goes on a picnic, leaving the boy behind. They hide from the boy, who looks for them but cannot find them. He goes to his room at the top of the house and throws himself out - he “cracked his head”.

The Dad is very angry with him, calling him “stupid” and locking him in the room. The boy then calls the police who say “stupid kid”.
“Steven”

- Other story completions equally overtly angry, and child also shown as aggressive to adults.

History:
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Maternal mental health problems
- Maternal drug use,
- Disrupted care,
- Neglect
- Emotional abuse
What do play narratives represent?

- Not simple imitative copies of reality
- Not feelings and fantasies ‘rather’ than realities
- They bear systematic relationships to the child's reality - a window into the child's basic scripts for human relationships.
Rating the SSAP

• Rated according to manual of criteria
• 39 ratings, on each story.
• Indicators of security of attachment, insecurity, defensive avoidance, disorganisation.
Security construct

- Child seeks help
- Sibling/Peers Help
- Realistic mastery
- Adult provides comfort
- Adult provides practical help
- Adult affectionate
- Limit setting
- “Secure” aggression
- Acknowledgement of distress (Child)
- Acknowledgement of distress (Adult)
- Realistic/pleasurable domestic life
Insecurity construct

- Child Endangered
- Child Injured/Dead
- Adult Unaware
- Adult Actively Rejects
- Excessive Compliance
- Extreme Aggression
- Neutralisation
- Throwing Out, Throwing Away
Disorganisation construct

- Catastrophic Fantasy
- Bizarre/Atypical Material
- Bad to Good Shift
- Child Parents/Controls
- Extreme Aggression
- Magic/Omnipotence
Defensive avoidance construct

- No engagement
- Disengagement
- Initial aversion
- Premature foreclosure of narrative
- Changes narrative constraints
- Avoidance within narrative frame
- Denial of distress
- Neutralisation
First SSAP assessment (T1)

Previously maltreated group higher on

- Insecure construct
  including
  - Adult unaware
  - Self Blame
- Defensive avoidance construct
- disorganisation construct
  including
  - Catastrophic fantasy
  - Bizarre/atypical material
First SSAP assessment (T1)

- Previously maltreated children lower on

  - Secure construct
    Including
    - Adult Provides Help
    - Adult Affectionate
    - Realistic Domestic Life
    - Acknowledgement of Child Distress
    - Sibling/peer helps
    - Realistic mastery
First SSAP assessment
– construct scores

Previously maltreated

Infancy adopted

Security
Insecurity
Disorganisation
Defensive avoidance
Storystem changes after two years - late placed group

Composite scores

- **Increase** in: Secure, Positive Adult, Positive Child
- **Decrease** in: Defensive Avoidance
- **No change** in: Insecure, Disorganised.
impact of adoption on composite scores of previously maltreated group

![Bar chart showing composite scores over years for different attachment types: Secure, Insecure, Disorganised, Avoid/def.](chart)

- Year 1
- Year 2
- Year 3
• children made significant progress in terms of their underlying expectations and perceptions of family relationships,
• and still displayed significant, lasting damage.

Change in children's attachment representations after adoption is complicated, uneven and heterogenous.
Competition not erosion

• New and more positive sets of mental representations develop in competition with existing negative ones, rather than replacing them.

• The job of adopters is active disconfirmation of existing negative models, and building up of competing ones.
• Expectations and perceptions based on earlier experience remain as vulnerabilities, easily triggered by events and interactions which seem to confirm their validity.

• Parents can very easily provide such triggers unknowingly
Thank you!

gabrielle.lees@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk