

**XVII INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF RORSCHACH
AND PROJECTIVE METHODS
Rome, September, 2002**

Title: Anxiety Elaboration Strategies in the Response Sequences of Scenes in the
"Once-Upon-A-Time..." Projective Technique

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ABSTRACT

In this study we proceed with the identification of four anxiety elaboration strategies in the response sequences to scenes in the "Once-upon-a-time..." projective technique. A strategy which corresponds to the denial of the anxiety emotion - Denial -, two strategies which represent different means of positively dealing with anxiety - Operational Adaptive Strategy and Emotional Equilibration Strategy -, and a fourth strategy which represents the failure to elaborate this emotion - Impossibility - were conceived.

The evolution of the four strategies was studied in a sample of 100 children, with ages ranging from six to ten years, without identified psychological difficulties, according to their age and expressiveness in each of the seven cards of the "Once-upon-a-time..." technique. The process of growing up implies an increased use of the adaptive strategies - Operational Adaptive Strategy and Emotional Equilibration Strategy - and a decreased use of the Denial and Impossibility strategies. These findings were theoretically expected and are supportive to the validation of the anxiety elaboration strategies that have been conceived.

When comparing these results with those of 30 neglected children, from the ages of six to ten years, whose emotional difficulties led to their consultation at a Psychology Unit, it was expected that, in this latter group of children, the adaptive strategies would be lower, and that Denial and Impossibility in dealing with anxiety would be higher. There are no meaningful differences in the results of the two groups, although the neglected children's group makes use of Denial slightly more than the other group. Limitations of this second study might have contributed to these results, partly due to the low number of subjects.

It is our belief that this study improves the interpretation process of the "Once-upon-a-time..." technique and may contribute to a new branch of studies regarding this technique.

THE "ONCE UPON A TIME..." PROJECTIVE TEST FOR CHILDREN

The "Once upon a time..." Test (Fagulha, 1992, 1993, 1997) is a projective technique which makes use of the completion of stories, is destined for children between the ages of 5 and 11 years, and describes the manner in which the children elaborate their emotions of anxiety and pleasure, affective states with an important adaptive function for psychological development (Freud, 1926/1978; Klein, 1932/1969).

The task proposed by the "Once upon a time..." Test was organized based on the theories about the expressive function of play (Winnicott, 1971/1975). The Test is composed of seven incomplete stories, presented in cartoon form, which illustrate common situations in the life of any child and that evoke emotions of anxiety and of pleasure. Five cards refer to anxiety provoking situations of a distinct nature - separation (Card I), illness (Card II), nightmares (Card IV), conflict between parents (Card VI) and scholastic difficulties (Card VII) - and two refer to pleasurable experiences, one of which is related to a trip to the beach (Card III) and the other which illustrates a birthday (Card V). For each card there are nine scenes that represent different possible ways of elaborating the emotional experience evoked by the card. The child is asked to complete the story drawn on the card by selecting and then placing three of these nine scenes in sequence. After selecting and organizing the scenes in sequence, the child tells the story that he/she just invented.

The nine scenes available for each card are grouped into three categories of three scenes each. Scenes that illustrate painful or harm associated events, and that reflect the distress resulting from the event proposed by the card represent the Distress category (A). The Fantasy category (F) includes the scenes in which the character is able to alleviate the tension provoked by the critical aspects of the stimulus, by means of resorting to the use of fantasy. The Reality category (R) is composed of scenes that

either represent the recognition of the reality (painful or pleasurable) of the card, or represent action strategies that aim to resolve of the situation proposed by the card.

It is important to note that the scenes that represent each one of the categories are purposefully not equivalent, in order to allow for a greater variety of expressions in the meanings of the answers (ex: the Fantasy category includes scenes of Possible Fantasy and scenes of Magical Fantasy).

The categories of the scenes chosen by the child and the sequences organized with these scenes identify the internal movement of integration and elaboration of anxiety and of pleasure, into a *transitional space* between fantasy and reality. (Winnicott, 1971/1975). This movement permits the understanding of whether the child can or cannot accept the emotion provoked by the card, if he/she searches for a fantasy solution in order to deal with that emotion, or if he/she is able to elaborate it making use of realistic solutions.

In the coding system for the answers to the "Once upon a time..."Test, the analysis of the category of the scenes chosen and their position in the sequence is fundamental and made the elaboration of norms for children from the ages of five to eleven years possible.

The stories verbalized by the child complement and can enrich the information obtained from the analysis of the category of scenes and their position in the sequence. The coding system for the answers to the "Once Upon a Time..." Test includes items concerning the verbalizations, and their relation with the previously invented story.

STRATEGIES OF ANXIETY ELABORATION IN THE RESPONSE SEQUENCE TO THE SCENES OF THE "ONCE UPON A TIME..." TEST

The majority of the studies done on the "Once upon a time..." test have been centered on the analysis of the chosen scenes, according to the respective category, Distress,

Fantasy and Reality, and their placement in sequence (in the first, second or third position).

In the presentation of the test, Fagulha (1992) pointed out the need and the interest in studying the sequence with the inclusion of the nine available scenes, and not only the three categories. The analysis of the specificity of each scene, in relation to the other scenes of the sequence and in function of the particular theme of each card, is fundamental for the understanding of the internal movement of elaboration of the emotions brought about by the stories that compose the "Once upon a time..." Test. The present work consists of developing and validating a coding system for the response sequences to the scenes of the "Once upon a time..." Test, which includes the analysis of the sequences organized based on the nine scenes available for each card.

Based on the theoretical assumptions underlying the "Once upon a time..." Test and on the clinical practice, four response categories were developed concerning the different possible ways of facing anxiety and elaborating it. Even though the "Once upon a time..." Test presents anxiety provoking situations and pleasure situations, it is due to the experience of anxiety that the force of adaptation / elaboration becomes urgent. Therefore, the categories created only refer to the confrontation and elaboration of the anxiety experience.

Definition of the strategies of anxiety elaboration

A modality was defined to represent the non-recognition of the painful affect -**Denial**-, and three strategies that involve the recognition of this disturbing affect, corresponding to two distinct ways of elaborating it - **Operational Adaptive Strategy and Emotional Equilibration Strategy** - and to one other that proves to be inefficient as a definitive elaboration - **Impossibility**. **Denial** represents an internal movement that

does not allow for becoming conscious of the disturbing aspects of the situation, defending the ego from the anxiety experience (Freud, 1911/1978, 1923/1978; Cramer, 1991, 1996). Denial includes all the sequences of scenes in which fantasy is used as a means of escaping from a painful situation, allowing for the non recognition of the disturbing affect (e.g. FFF, RFF, AFF). The **Operational Adaptive Strategy** represents an internal movement of anxiety recognition and an attempt to resolve the anxiety provoking situation by resorting to the use of action strategies. As a modality of confronting anxiety, it is similar to the coping strategies described by Haan (1977), involving purposeful reality oriented choices made by the subject, that aim for a pragmatic and efficient resolution of the situations (e.g. RRR, ARR, AAR). The **Emotional Equilibration Strategy** represents an internal movement of anxiety recognition, seeing that fantasy is used to equilibrate the painful experience, in a flexible and creative manner. In light of Winnicott's conceptualization (1971/1975), the anxiety elaboration is facilitated by the use of fantasy, in a transitional area of experience, in which the fantasy and the reality are integrated to provide a creative experience (e.g. ARF, AFR). **Impossibility** corresponds to an elaboration of the anxiety brought about by the situation presented in the card, that fails in its possibility to lead to an adaptive resolution (e.g. AAA, AFA).

Operationalization of the anxiety elaboration strategies in each one of the cards of the "Once upon a time..." Test

- 504 possible response sequences were identified for each card, taking into account the nine available scenes, with a total of 3528 sequences in the seven cards of the test.

- According to the general criterion for defining the four anxiety elaboration strategies, we proceed with the distribution of each one of the 3528 sequences to each one of the categories.
- We created two samples of children considered distinct according to their psychological adaptation capacities:
 - A sample of 100 children, from 6 to 10 years of age (20 children per age level), with no identified psychological problems, that attend private and public schools in the Lisbon area (**Group A**).
 - A sample of 30 children, from 6 to 10 years of age, patients of the Psychology Department of a Minor Protection Commission, that present signs of emotional disturbance, resulting from situations of physical and/or psychological violence associated with serious family dysfunction (**Group B**). Group B is not homogeneous, from a psychological diagnosis point of view, nor are the participants equally distributed amongst the considered age levels.
- 910 sequences of scenes were registered corresponding to the 130 protocols of Groups A and B and were categorized according to the established criterion.
- We proceeded with the validation of the anxiety elaboration strategies in accordance with two criterion: their evolution with age (**STUDY 1**) and their capacity to discriminate between groups of children with and without identified psychological problems (**STUDY 2**).

STUDY 1

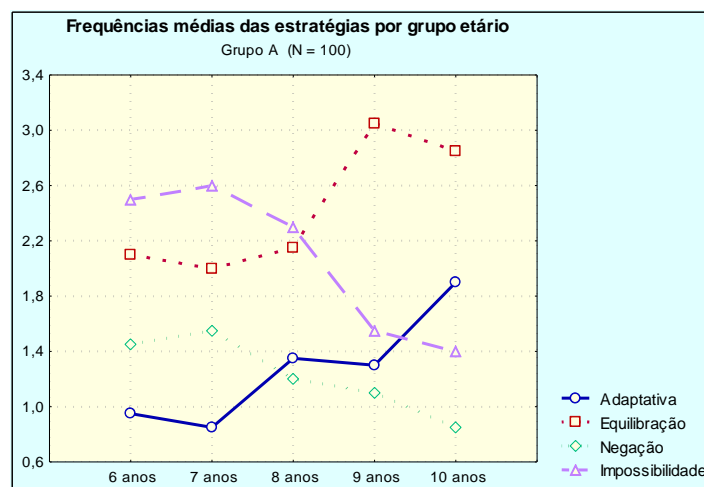
Describes the utilization frequency of each anxiety elaboration strategy and it's evolution with age, in the totality of the test and in each one of the seven cards, in children without identified psychological problems (Group A).

Hypotheses

- The frequency of utilization of the adaptive strategies – Operational Adaptive Strategy and Emotional Equilibration Strategy – increases with age.
- The frequency of utilization of the defensive Denial strategy and of the strategy referred to as Impossibility decreases with age.

Presentation and Discussion of the Results

In Graph 1 the mean frequencies of each strategy per age group are presented.



- The adaptive strategies – Emotional Equilibration and Operational – increase with age, while a progressive decrease in the use of Denial and Impossibility is verified.
- The Emotional Equilibration Strategy is more frequent in older children. The younger children mainly make use of Impossibility. This pattern characterizes the answers to cards II, III, IV, V and VI.
- In Cards I and VII, the older children make more use of the Operational Adaptive Strategies, while with the younger children the use of Impossibility or Denial is predominant.

STUDY 2

Comparatively analyses the strategies used by two groups considered to be distinct in view of their psychological adaptation capacities: the group of children without identified psychological problems (Group A) and the group of children which are victims of physical and psychological neglect (Group B).

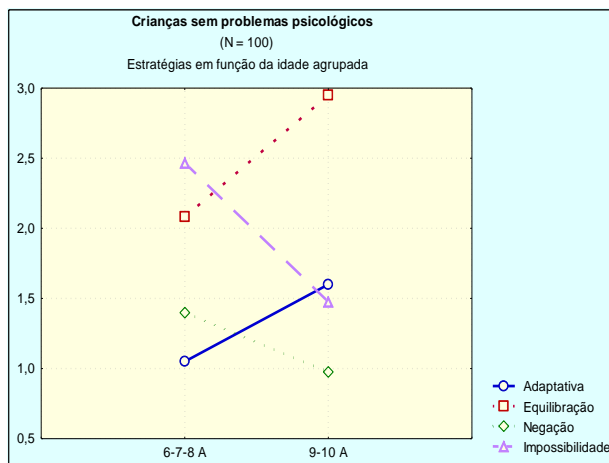
Hypotheses

- The children of Group B use the strategies of Denial and Impossibility with greater frequency, when compared with the children of Group A.
- The children of Group B use the adaptive strategies – Operational Adaptive and Emotional Equilibration – less frequently, when compared to the children from Group A.

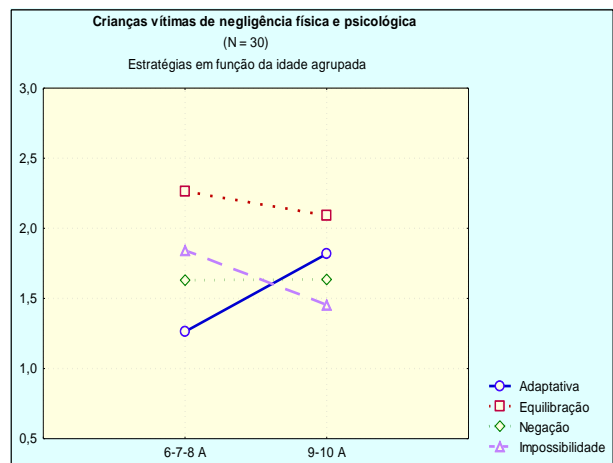
Presentation and discussion of the results

In Graphs 2 and 3 the mean frequencies of each strategy are presented, based on the grouped ages for Groups A and B.

Graph 2
Grupo A



Graph3
Grupo B



On a statistical level, there are no significant differences in the answers of groups A and B.

Nevertheless...

- The evolution of the answers with age allows for the identification of a tendency for differentiation between groups A e B.
- A worsening of emotional elaboration difficulties was verified in the older children of Group B, which is reflected by an increase in responses of Denial or of Impossibility, or in an increase of Operational Adaptive Strategies as a result of exposure to particularly difficult life situations.

CONCLUSIONS

- The strategies defined present some consistency: the hypotheses of STUDY 1 were confirmed and the response pattern of the children who were victims of physical and psychological neglect suggests a worsening of their emotional difficulties with age.
- The conditions are set for a facilitation of the answer interpretation process for the "Once upon a Time..." Test and for the initiation of a new path of investigation regarding the test.