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**THE USE OF THE "ONCE-UPON-A-TIME..." TEST  
IN TREATMENT OUTCOME ASSESSMENT**

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This paper intends to illustrate the potentialities of the “**Once upon a time...**” **Projective Technique** (Fagulha,1992,1997) when evaluating results of psychotherapeutic interventions.

This paper results, on the one hand, from the importance given to the **evaluation of treatment results** in present and future organization of mental health services and, on the other, from the recognition of the **potential of projective techniques** in the diagnosis, planning and evaluation of these results.



We intend to demonstrate how the “**Once upon a time...**” Test can be used to characterize important aspects of the child’s personality functioning at the moment of the diagnosis and planning of psychotherapeutic intervention as well as in the evaluation of intervention results.

**Psychological assessment** aims at the understanding of the child's cognitive and personality functioning.

The “**Once upon a time...**” Test describes the way children deal with anxiety and pleasure, affection states which have an important adaptive function in psychological development (Freud, 1926/1978; Klein, 1932/1969).

✳ Traditionally, psychological assessment takes on an important role at the beginning of the treatment process, by intervening essentially at **diagnosis level**, but also in the **planning of interventions**, particularly in the identification of functioning aspects which make the establishing of the therapeutic relationship more or less demanding.

✳ Recently, we have perceived an enlargement of the application fields of psychological assessment which has also embraced **the evaluation of the results of psychotherapeutic interventions**.



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Maruish (2003), by approaching **the role of psychological assessment in the outcome assessment** does not, however, refer to the usefulness of projective tests neither in the diagnosis and planning stage, nor in the period of the outcome assessment.

This omission seems incomprehensible to us...

- \* Projective tests grant access to the personality structure and personality dynamics and the information they yield is hardly seized by self-report measures (Russ, 1998).
- \* Rorschach Test, but also Thematic Apperception Test, TAT, are some of the psychological assessment tools clinical psychologists use the most and the recognition of this fact has stimulated the development of its empirical foundations (Weiner, 1996).
- \* The potential of the Rorschach Test in the planning and evaluation of psychotherapeutic interventions results has been widely approached and developed (Weiner & Exner, 1991; Silva, 1999).

## Outcome Assessment in the “Once upon a time...” Test

The “Once upon a time...” Test allows an objective evaluation of the treatment results through the analysis of the answer patterns **category of scenes / its position in the sequence** and **scene sequences** obtained at different moments of the therapeutic process.

### **Category of scenes / its position in the sequence**

In the various age groups there can be seen differences in this pattern of answers (Fagulha, 1992,1997). As they grow, children show more capacity to deal with anxiety and a bigger flexibility towards reality’s demands.

✳ This manifests itself in the answers to the anxiety-related cards by an increase in the choice of Anxiety or Reality scenes in the first position of the sequence and by an increase in the frequency of choice of Reality or Fantasy scenes to finalize the sequence. With maturity, the choice of Fantasy scenes for the first position in the sequence decreases.

✳ As far as the cards representing pleasurable situations are concerned, we notice, as the children develop, they acquire better adjusted strategies to face pleasant events, which translates in an increase of choosing Reality and Fantasy and a decrease in choosing Anxiety.



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## Scene sequences

Although most of the studies about the “Once upon a time...” test are centred on the analysis of scenes chosen according to the respective category and on its sequence placement, a complementary system of analysis and interpretation of the answers to the “Once upon a time...” test was later developed. This includes the study of the sequences comprising the nine available scenes, and not only the three categories (Pires & Fagulha, 2001).

According to this system, the sequences of scenes organized with the nine scenes of each card in the “Once upon a time...” test correspond to four different possibilities of confrontation with anxiety and its elaboration:

- \* **Negation**
- \* **Operational Adaptive Strategy**
- \* **Emotional Equilibration Strategy**
- \* **Impossibility**



## \* Negation

Negation translates an internal movement which prevents the awareness of the troubling aspects of the situation, by shielding the ego from the anxiety experience (Freud, 1923/1978; Cramer, 1991,1996).

Negation embraces all of the scene sequences in which fantasy is used as a means of escaping from a painful situation, by allowing the non-recognition of the troubling affection (e.g. FFF, RFF, AFF).

## \* Operational Adaptive Strategy

The Operational Adaptive Strategy translates an internal movement that recognizes the anxiety and attempts to solve the anxiety-related situation by resorting to action strategies (e.g. RRR, ARR, AAR).



## \* Emotional Equilibration Strategy

The Emotional Equilibration Strategy translates an internal movement that recognizes the anxiety and uses fantasy to balance the painful experience in a flexible and creative manner (e.g. ARF, AFR).

In the light of the Winnicott conceptualisation (1971/1975), the anxiety elaboration is facilitated by resorting to fantasy, in a transitional area of experience, in which fantasy and reality are integrated in order to allow a creative experience

## \* Impossibility

Impossibility corresponds to a failure in the capability of finding an adaptive solution for the anxiety triggered by the situation depicted on the card. (e.g. AAA, AFA).



The studies carried out with the pattern of answers **scene sequences** are consistent with Fagulha's studies.

✳ Younger children present a higher level of difficulty in dealing with the critical situations suggested on the cards and tend to organize answers which convey their inability to find an adaptive resolution to the situation, that is, they resort more frequently to the use of Negation and Impossibility.

✳ With age, an increase in the use of adaptive strategies for problem resolution occurs – Emotional Equilibration or Operational – which translate new and more effective ways in the elaboration of anxiety suggested by the cards.

The answers of a child, Ana, to Card I of the “Once upon a time...” test obtained during two stages of psychotherapy, show how the answer patterns **category of scenes / its position in the sequence** and **scene sequences** may be used to identify difficulties in anxiety elaboration which are no longer expected in the development stage the child finds itself in and also to make decisions about the psychotherapeutic intervention process.



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# Card I

Ana - 6 years old



R,R,F

1,8,7 - Negation

She would tell the police, then she would call her mother, then the fairy would solve the problem and would take her to her mother. The fairy said: "Don't call, I will handle this, I'm going to take you to your mother because I know where she is."



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✳ Ana does not choose any anxiety scene. In the first and second position, she chooses reality scenes as if she could live with the painful emotion or find strategies to deal with it. Her choice of reality scenes in the first and second positions seems to put her close to the patterned choices of the older children. However, Ana neither trust in herself to solve the situation nor can she rely on the adult figure whose help is not good. Then in the third position, Ana takes refuge in an omnipotent fantasy which represents her way of dealing with a pain that can not be recognized.

✳ At the age of six, the resource to Negation is frequent (Cramer, 1991,1996; Pires & Fagulha, 2001). It is the rigid and systematic use of this modality to the detriment of strategies revealing much more adapted ways of dealing with anxiety, which, together with other indicators, may constitute a sign of psychological sufferance which calls for an answer.

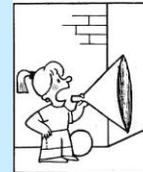
The knowledge of the development pattern of the “Once upon a time...” test answers allows us to appreciate the non-normative nature of the answer organized by Ana to Card I, at the moment of re-evaluation, at the age of 9.



## Card I

Ana - 9 years old

Scene 4



R,R,F

6,1,3 - Negation

It's no good crying! Not this (scene 4)!

She got lost as we know and then she went looking for her mother, she didn't find her, went around and found a police officer who understood everything and said that it was better if she phoned from his cell phone. But because the police officer didn't have money in his cell phone, she said: "Mr. police officer, could you lend me a funnel?" "Yes I can, what for?" "You'll see" "Mum! Hey mum! Mum, I'm here! At the same place where we were."



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\* Ana rejects an anxiety scene which depicts a helpless child crying and in the first and second position she chooses reality scenes. However, Ana neither can find a personal resolution to the critical situation presented nor can she count on the adult figure who is not seen as dependable. The third scene, a fantasy one, reveals the need to escape the conflict and deny pain.

\* This answer could be understood as the reflex of specific difficulties in elaborating the theme of separation, or broader difficulties in dealing with emotions.

\* The seriousness of the situation will be determined by the frequency of using inadequate strategies – Negation or Impossibility – to deal with the emotions triggered by the cards in the wholeness of the protocol and obviously by the analysis of external indicators such as the absence or presence of the symptoms, which motivated the request for help.

\* As a result of this reflection it will be possible to make a decision regarding the conclusion of the psychotherapeutic intervention process or maintenance, with or without changes at the intervention plan level.



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In this paper we hope to have been able to convey the idea that psychological assessment has an important role in the field of the evaluation of treatment results. This new function does not serve economic interests only, as it is fundamental to the clinical psychologist who, in a responsible manner, may evaluate his/her intervention, based on objective indicators of psychological change or its absence.

From the point of view of Psychology as a science, we think that this pressure may have positive consequences, triggering the empirical development of psychological assessment tools and psychotherapeutic intervention programmes. This is what we tried to illustrate with the “Once upon a time...” test.