Pessimism and failure in 6-part stories: indicators of borderline personality disorder?[☆]

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The 6-part story method (6PSM)

The 6PSM is a dramatherapy tool that is frequently mentioned in the literature (Landy, Luck, Conner, & McMullian, 2003; Pendzik, 2003) and is taught in many dramatherapy training programmes. It has been described fully by its originators (Lahad, 1992; Lahad & Ayalon, 1993), but in brief it is a projective tool in which the client creates a fictional story following structured instructions from the therapist. The six parts of the story are:

1. A main character (who need not be human) in his or her setting
2. A task for the main character
3. Things that hinder the main character
4. Things that help the main character
5. The main action or climax of the story
6. What follows from the main action

The participant draws simple images on a sheet of paper as the instructions are given, to act as a prompt when the story is told. Once the six pictures are drawn the participant is asked to tell the story, without interruption or questions. They are to tell it in as full and detailed a way as possible, adding detail and inventing new descriptions as they go. Finally,

the clinician or researcher asks questions about each picture and the story in general, to elaborate the story and check any points that are not clear.

The two publications by Lahad make implicit claims about the validity of the method in several places: "My assumption is that by telling a projected story based on the elements of fairytale or myth, I may be able to see the way the self projects itself in organised reality in order to meet the world." (Lahad, 1992, p. 157); "So, it seems that with the aid of the structured story, a person's coping resources and conflict areas can be located relatively quickly." (Lahad & Ayalon, 1993, p. 18).

Lahad notes the many criticisms levelled against projective techniques, listing seven areas of concern including the lack of standardised administration instructions and the concerns about low validity and reliability. However, he says: "Most of the above [concerns] are less evident in the 6PSM because of its nature and the way it is administered. Reliability is problematic, whether inter-measurement (i.e. between projective techniques of other kinds) or with different judges." (Lahad & Ayalon, 1993, p. 24).

Since the publication of these descriptions of the 6PSM, the method has become one of the standard methods of assessment in dramatherapy, often referred to in the professional literature. For example, Landy et al. (2003) make reference to the 6PSM in their literature review of dramatherapy assessment instruments, as does Pendzik (2003). However, neither author, nor Lahad himself, makes any reference to studies of the reliability and validity of the method.

Subsequent published accounts of the use of the 6PSM (Dent-Brown, 1999a, 1999b, 2001b) have described its use in a National Health Service (NHS) personality disorder service. These articles take for granted that the data produced by the 6PSM can be relied upon as a replicable and valid indicator of the storyteller's personality. This assumption may be necessary in the building of a technique, which must be developed and found to be clinically feasible and useful in the first place. But although necessary, this assumption alone cannot be sufficient if a technique is to be regularly used for clinical decision making. It was for this reason that this reliability and validity study of the 6PSM was planned.

Historical development of the 6PSM

The 6PSM has its roots in the early 20th century morphological study of fairy tales and the later semiological studies that followed. The morphological studies followed a tradition stemming from folklore studies or anthropology, in simply listing and classifying story elements. The later semiological studies concentrated on the study of human communication using formal sign systems such as spoken or written words. Their focus was on how meaning emerges, and on how the "signifiers" (such as vocal sounds or marks on paper) are connected to the "signified" (the objects or concepts referred to). In both disciplines the search was for general, universal factors that were common to particular, individual stories.

Early in the 20th century the greatest contribution came from Vladimir Propp (1968), whose study *The Morphology of the Folktale* was originally published in Russian in 1928. Propp was interested in common themes running through the extensive canon of Russian fairy tales, and he produced a list of *dramatis personae* such as the hero, the dispatcher (who gives the hero the task), the villain (who opposes the hero) and the provider (who