Changes in Attachment Representations Over the First Year of Adoptive Placement: Narratives of Maltreated Children

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ABSTRACT

Children who develop their ‘internal working models’ of attachment in situations of neglect or abuse, carry the effects of these models into new placements if they are then adopted or fostered. This article reports on the assessment of these effects using the story stem technique, which provides children with a way of displaying their expectations and perceptions of attachment figures using both verbal and non-verbal means of representation. An outline of the story stem assessment technique is given, and the ‘Little Pig’ stems and a summary of the rating system are presented. The article then reports preliminary findings from a larger ongoing research project, comparing themes in the stories of previously maltreated children placed for adoption with those of a group of children adopted in the first year of life, and using the technique to track changes in the children’s attachment representations, and some other aspects of their ‘internal working models’, over the first year of placement in their new families.

KEYWORDS

abuse and neglect, adoption, attachment, internal working models, narrative assessments, permanent placement

Introduction

This article reports preliminary findings from a larger ongoing research project, the Thomas Coram Adoption Project. The project as a whole examines changes in children’s behaviour and adjustment in relation to numerous variables, including the
adoptive parents' attachment organization and the child's maltreatment history, over the first two years of placement. The project also compares these previously maltreated adopted children with a group of children adopted in the first year of life.

In this article we outline the story stem assessment technique, which provides children with a way of displaying their expectations and perceptions of attachment figures, without any direct questioning which may be anxiety-provoking for the child, and allowing children both verbal and non-verbal means of representation. We report on changes in the children's attachment representations, and some other aspects of their 'internal working models', over the first year of placement in their new families.

**Narratives and experience**

Children's play narratives are neither autobiographical reports on their experiences, nor feelings and fantasies 'rather' than realities. We see children's narrative responses as displaying aspects of their most basic scripts for human relationships, particularly those between young children and their caregivers. Each child's individual script derives from their generalized representations of expectable interactions with others, which in turn are based upon their history of repeated experiences with their attachment figures. These representations guide the child's perceptions and expectations of present and future interactions; in attachment theory terms, they are the child's 'internal working models' of relationships (Bowlby, 1969). As internal working models of caregivers and caregiving develop they become automatic, operating increasingly outside conscious awareness. New experiences tend to be assimilated into existing models, which produces relative stability in information-processing terms, but at the cost of some distortion of perception.

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if external conditions have altered (Bretherton, 1985). Such models can thus have a powerful effect on how the individual perceives and reacts to new situations and relationships, and Crittenden (1988) and others have emphasized how attachment models which are adaptive in one situation may become maladaptive if conditions change.

A abusing children may give behavioural evidence of their fearful or aversive expectations of their parents, without necessarily being able, let alone willing, to recall specific events. Crittenden (1994) notes that if children routinely experience abuse, these abusive experiences may no longer be represented as occasion-specific episodes but instead become a part of children's 'unscrutinized, taken-for-granted understanding of the nature of relationships'. In such cases, the clearest evidence of a history of abuse may be how these 'taken-for-granted' expectations guide behaviour in the present. Not only painful experiences, but also the defensive strategies which children develop in self-protection against them, affect their understanding of self, others and relationships. Play narrative assessments, because they provide for a non-verbal as well as a verbal narrative, allow the display of these kinds of non-conscious expectations in displaced form.

It is common clinical knowledge that play can give us access to memories and feelings which could not be expressed by verbal means alone.

Narrative research with maltreated children
Previous research using the story stem technique has established patterns of findings relevant to young children who have suffered maltreatment. Buchsbaum, Toth, Clyman, Cicchetti, and Emde (1992) reported more themes of aggression, neglect and sexualized play in maltreated than in non-maltreated four- and five-year-old children. McCrane, Egeland, Kalkoske, and Carlson (1994) noted the prevalence of negative representations, particularly aggression, in the stories of maltreated children. Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, and Emde (1997) found more negative parental representations in the narratives of maltreated children. Mcfie et al. (1999) reported that maltreated preschool children were less likely than non-maltreated children to show parents and children responding to relieve distress in children, and in general 'neglect, without abuse, was associated with relative omission of acts to relieve distress, while abuse, especially physical abuse, was characterised by anomalous acts of commission.' Comparing children entering the present study with non-maltreated children and with a clinical series of children recently removed from abusive situations, similar patterns emerged in our own data, in that themes of injury and death were most common in the recently abused group, and maltreated children, especially those more recently removed from abusing families, more often showed adults as unaware of children's needs or distress, when they could be expected to respond (Hodges & Steele, 2000). Using data from an earlier stage of the present study, Zavala (2000) and Pecceo (2000) showed that maltreated children's narratives contained more avoidance and aggressive themes and fewer themes of adults helping children and of pleasurable/realistic domestic life than did the narratives of classmate comparisons, and that more severely maltreated children's narratives contained more avoidance, aggressive themes, and bizarre and catastrophic material than maltreated children whose experiences had been less severe.

The story stems do not ask children directly about their experiences or their own parents, but allow the child to represent these in displaced form. Investigations of doll play techniques conducted in the 1940s showed that using doll families which duplicated the child's own generally produced more identificatory themes, but that in some children play became inhibited if the experimenter explicitly suggested these identifications (Woolgar, 1999). Thus, it is helpful, and probably particularly so with maltreated children, to use a standard doll family rather than trying to replicate the child's own family configuration.
Maltreated children sometimes seem to experience even dilemmas portrayed with the doll figures as too ‘near the bone’ and anxiety-provoking, and two of the story stems use animal figures, providing a further step of displacement from the child’s personal experience. Children often show enjoyment and great involvement in the task, and even initially reluctant children usually get drawn in and tolerate it without great anxiety.

The narrative stem battery

Five of the stems (the LP or ‘Little Pig’ stems, so nicknamed after one of the stems) were originally devised with a preliminary rating scheme (Hodges, Hillman, Steele, & Henderson, 2002) on the basis of clinical experience in the assessment of abused children. The protocol for these stems is given in Appendix 1. Eight additional stems were selected from the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB), which was devised for much wider research use, and has been employed primarily with non-clinical populations (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990; Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997). Brief summaries of the MSSB stems are given in Appendix 2.

As a whole, the assessment battery is designed to elicit themes concerned with the child’s expectations of relationships between parents and children, including those most central to the construct of security of attachment, namely, whether the child displays an expectation that parents will be aware when children need protection or comfort, and will respond appropriately to this need. Besides indicators of attachment and of representations of maltreatment, it covers such areas of parent–child interactions as giving affection and setting boundaries. It also elicits indicators of other important aspects of the child’s functioning such as the modulation of aggression, and certain defensive manoeuvres, such as avoidance and denial.

Administration

The series of stems is always administered in the same order, LP stems followed by the MSSB stems, and uses the standard MSSB doll ‘family’ of child (same sex as the child being interviewed), younger sibling (same sex), mother and father. Two of the LP stories use animal figures. Story ‘props’ are used, but are kept to the minimum necessary. The interview is designed for use with children between the ages of four and eight, and generally takes about one hour to complete.

Interviews are videotaped and the tapes transcribed, producing a verbal ‘script’ consisting of what the child says and what the interviewer says, and ‘stage directions’ describing what the child does – that is, the non-verbal narrative.

The LP rating system

Each story completion is rated separately for 32 themes or characteristics. For every narrative, each theme is scored on a 3-point rating from 0 (not present) to 2 (definite/markedly present). The rating manual (Hodges et al., 2002) provides detailed criteria and benchmark examples; raters trained on this system for research purposes achieve good levels of reliability. The coding system can be roughly organized under six general headings, as follows:

- Quality of engagement;
- Disorganization;
- Aggression;
- Child representation;
- Adult representation;
- Positive adaptation.
The individual themes under each general heading are defined briefly in the later section on Findings. In addition, some categories of the MacArthur rating system are also used, including resolution of conflict, and codes concerning the child’s affective response in the task.

**Method**

**Design**
This is a prospective longitudinal study, which includes interviews and questionnaire measures with the adoptive parents prior to placement. As soon as practicable after placement, videotaped narrative assessments and other assessments were carried out with the child. At the same time, the parents were interviewed, and other data were collected via questionnaire from the parents. This ‘Year 1’ assessment (Y1) was repeated (with minor modifications) one and two years later, in the ‘Year 2’ and ‘Year 3’ assessments (Y2 and Y3 respectively). Here, we describe the findings for a sub-sample of 33 children in this ‘late-placed’ group on whom Year 1 and Year 2 narrative assessments are available. We also compare the Year 1 assessment with a group of children adopted in infancy. Data collection was similar for this (‘infancy’) group, except that the data collected in pre-placement interviews with the parents was collected instead at the ‘Year 1’ stage. This comparison group provides as good a baseline as possible against which to examine the narratives of the later-adopted children, in that it takes account of adoptive status and allows one to focus on the differences between the groups. Children in the infancy group had not experienced the abuse and discontinuities of care which characterized the earlier lives of the prospective group, and had lived with their adoptive families for all but a small part of their lives, whereas the late-adopted children had only recently joined their families.

**Participants**
Families were recruited through the Coram Family Adoption Service and other adoption agencies, mainly independent.

The late-placed group consisted of 33 children in 25 different families. Ten children were placed alone, 25 as part of a sibling group; 19 were girls and 14 were boys.

They had been placed at a mean age of 6 years 1 month (ranging from 4 years to 8 years 8 months), and had been in placement an average of 4.2 months when the Year 1 assessment took place.

The children had sometimes experienced multiple changes of caregiver before their adoption placement. The average number of placements prior to adoption was 5.3, ranging from 2 to 18.

Most children had suffered multiple forms of abuse before coming into care. From the background histories, the social workers reported all 33 as having experienced emotional abuse; 30 had suffered neglect, 22 had been exposed to domestic violence, 17 had been physically abused, and 8 were thought to have suffered sexual abuse.

The infancy-adopted group consisted of 31 children, 15 boys and 16 girls, placed in their adoptive families below the age of 12 months. The mean age at placement was 3.73 months, ranging from a child placed at birth to one placed at 11 months. The mean age at first assessment was 5 years 9 months.

**Findings**
The mean score on each theme across all narratives was calculated for each child, and the group comparisons reported are based on these scores.
We give below two sets of comparisons for each of a number of different areas of the children’s mental representations. The first is a comparison of infancy-adopted and later-adopted children at the first (Y1) assessment. The second is a comparison of the Y1 and Y2 assessments in the late-placed group, showing changes in their narrative representations over the first year of adoptive placement, as these previously maltreated children began to settle and adjust in their new families.

The Mann–Whitney test was used for comparison of the infancy-adopted and late-placed Y1 assessments, and the Wilcoxon signed ranks test for comparison of the Y1 and Y2 assessments in the late-placed group. It was hypothesized that any differences between the groups would be in the direction of more negative themes for the late-placed group compared with the infancy group, and more positive themes for the Y2 assessment than for the Y1 assessment in the late-placed group. Results are reported as statistically significant where $p$ (1-tailed) = .05 or less. Where a non-significant trend is reported, $.15 > p > .051$.

Findings are reported under the general themes described in the rating system; quality of engagement, disorganization, aggression, child representation, adult representation and positive adaptation.

Engagement vs. avoidance manoeuvres  Engagement vs. avoidance manoeuvres looks at how far the child can engage with the task of story completion, rather than avoiding it or avoiding particular dilemmas or constraints within the stories. There are five categories relevant here. Brief definitions, drawn from Hodges et al. (2002), are given in Appendix 3.

The findings are summarized in Table 1. Late-placed children were very much more likely than the infancy-placed group to try to avoid the story task or particular features within the story. By the Y2 assessment, this had decreased markedly. Indeed, further analysis showed no significant differences in any of these areas between the infancy-placed group at Y1 and the late-placed group at the Y2 assessment.

Disorganization within narrative  Three categories are relevant here, as shown in Table 2. The late-placed group showed significantly higher levels of catastrophic fantasy and of bizarre/atypical responses than the infancy-placed group. A year later, there were no significant changes, although bizarre-atypical responses decreased somewhat.

Aggression  Aggressive themes (Table 3) within the narratives are categorized either as coherent, which would be an expectable part of representations, or as extreme, which appears to be a marker for disorganization; see Appendix 3 for definitions.

The late-placed group showed a significantly higher level of extreme aggression than the group placed in infancy. For instance, in the ‘Stamping Elephant’ story, a late-placed child completed the stem by showing the elephant stamping hard on the people and the other animals. He said it was ‘banging all the animals down’, and that all the animals and people died. Rates of extreme aggression did not decrease by the Y2 assessment, although it is interesting that these were sometimes embedded in much more complex stories which could also contain positive elements. For instance, the child whose story is cited above, a year later, gave a much longer and more elaborated story completion, which none the less still contained extreme aggression. The crocodile and elephant fought violently, the elephant died, and the story went on to show the ‘dangerous crocodile’ killing and eating the little pigs before finally being killed first by the father and then by the lion. Beside these representations of others as acting in protective as well as aggressive ways, the child also explicitly ascribed some motives for the aggression shown, unlike in the first assessment.
This is a key area in examining the effects of maltreatment by former attachment figures, and how such effects can be modified by placement in an adoptive family. The eight rating categories included here are designed to cover wider areas of parent–child interaction, beside key areas of attachment representations. Comparisons are summarized in Table 4.

Compared to the infancy-placed children, the late-placed children at the first assessment were significantly less likely to show adults helping children and showing them affection, and significantly more likely to show adults as aggressive and as rejecting children and being unaware of their needs. A year later, there had been some positive

### Table 1. Engagement/avoidance manoeuvres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Infant-y vs. late-placed Y1</th>
<th>Late-placed Y1 vs. Y2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No engagement</td>
<td>(trend – L-p Y1 higher)</td>
<td>Y1 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial aversion</td>
<td>(trend – L-p Y1 higher)</td>
<td>Y1 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>Y1 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosure</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>Y1 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alter constraints</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>Y1 higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Disorganization within narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Infant-y vs. late-placed Y1</th>
<th>Late-placed Y1 vs. Y2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catostrophic fantasy</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bizarre/atypical responses</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>(ns trend – Y1 higher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad↔Good shift</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Aggressive themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Infant-y vs. late-placed Y1</th>
<th>Late-placed Y1 vs. Y2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coherent aggression</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme aggression</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Representation of parents/adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Infant-y vs. late-placed Y1</th>
<th>Late-placed Y1 vs. Y2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult helps</td>
<td>Infant-y higher</td>
<td>Y2 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult affectionate</td>
<td>Infant-y higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit setting</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>Y2 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult aggresses</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical punishment</td>
<td>Infant-y higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult rejects</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult unaware</td>
<td>L-p Y1 higher</td>
<td>Y2 lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult injured/dead</td>
<td>(trend – L-p Y1 higher)</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
changes; the children's narratives showed parents more often helping children, and more often aware of children's needs. Their narratives also showed an increase in representations of limit setting. In these respects there were no longer significant differences between the infancy (Y1) assessment and the Y2 assessment of the late-placed group. However, there was no significant increase in representations of adults as affectionate, and they were just as often shown as aggressive and as rejecting as in the earlier assessment.

Representation of child

Six rating categories are included, covering salient areas of the self-representation as well as representation of attachment relationships. Findings are given in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation of Child</th>
<th>Infancy- vs. late-placed Y1</th>
<th>Late-placed Y1 vs. Y2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child seeks help</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>(trend - Y2 higher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child helps</td>
<td>Infancy higher</td>
<td>Y2 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child endangered</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child injured/dead</td>
<td>(trend L-p Y1 higher)</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning on self</td>
<td>ns difference</td>
<td>Y2 lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic mastery</td>
<td>Infancy higher</td>
<td>Y2 higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive adaptation

Of course, all of the categories described above can also indicate positive adaptations; this category covers particular ratings which are less related to particular representations of child or parent or to the aggressive and other themes described (Table 6).

The decrease in magical/omnipotent responses may be seen as another facet of the increase in realistic mastery, noted above, and also relates to the decreased avoidance of conflicts or dilemmas within the narrative stems; a magic/omnipotent response tends to be a 'quick fix' which avoids difficulty or conflict.
The late-placed children had suffered multiple forms of maltreatment, and often many discontinuities of care, before they joined their adoptive families. It is not surprising that a few months after placement, the narrative assessments showed them to be a much more troubled group than the children adopted as infants.

From the narrative assessment, it seemed clear that the dilemmas or conflicts presented in the stems elicited more avoidance manoeuvres from these children, and their own continuations of the stories sometimes led to further anxiety and avoidance because they tended to involve more frightening or negative content. They also showed much more disorganized characteristics, with extreme aggression and catastrophes erupting into their narratives and also bizarre, unrelated material, sometimes reminiscent of displacement activities in the face of competing or conflicting demands. These characteristics strongly recall the two types of responses of disorganized children described by Solomon and George (1999). They describe on the one hand ‘frightening and explosively angry’ themes in which the representational process itself is disorganized, and on the other a marked constriction and inhibition of content and play, ‘as if the child is struggling to “flee” mentally from the situation as quickly as possible.’ In the former, the child appears flooded by affect and images, related to the fear and rage resulting when the attachment system is strongly activated but its needs are then left unmet. In the latter, extreme constriction is the only way of preventing themselves being overwhelmed in this way. Inevitably, children often veer from one alternative to the other.

The ‘Picture from School’ narratives provide an interesting illustration. This stem is the only one designed specifically to elicit positive representations of parental responses. Apparently paradoxically, in using these stems with clinical samples of maltreated children, we find that bizarre, catastrophic and extreme-aggressive responses are common, although children also sometimes provide the expectable positive ‘script’ but with flat or otherwise inappropriate affect. Our sense has been that these children know the desirable ‘script’ (praise, admiration, etc.) but that their effort to show the wished-for positive parental reaction is disrupted by a more negative or ambivalent generic representation of likely patterns of parental response, producing rage and disorganization.

In sharp contrast, we have previously found that this stem, in particular, elicits the theme of ‘realistic/positive domestic play’, in non-maltreated, and specifically in securely attached children, compared with maltreated groups (Hodges & Steele, 2000). In the present study, the narratives for the ‘Picture from School’ stem showed significantly higher levels of realistic/positive domestic play in the infancy-placed children, whereas the later-placed children showed significantly higher levels both of avoidance and of catastrophic fantasy and extreme aggression, and also more often showed children aggressing and adults injured or dead.

In comparison with the avoidance and disorganization shown by the later-placed group, the infancy-placed children did not avoid dealing with the dilemma or conflict in the stems, and could maintain organized functioning in the face of this stress, as shown also in their higher levels of ‘realistic mastery’.

One year after their first assessment in their new families, the late-placed children had become significantly less likely than before to use various avoidance manoeuvres, and their narratives were more likely than before to display ‘realistic mastery’. This may suggest that the situations in the stems or narratives were perceived as less threatening and evoked less anxiety than before; or that the children’s capacity to continue the play...
narrative, acknowledge conflicts within it, and to show some more organized functioning in the face of stress had increased. It may be that the finding that catastrophic fantasy, extreme aggression, and bizarre/atypical responses did not decrease significantly by this one-year assessment, supports the latter view; that is, children are still struggling with disorganizing emotional responses, but have become rather more able to represent them in the narrative and thus to continue functioning. Given the importance of play as a way in which young children can safely explore feelings and cognitions about counterfactual possibilities, this may be of considerable developmental importance. Wolf (1990) pointed to how children’s notion of self is expanded through the construction of new scenarios out of existing elements of content. The late-placed children may be becoming more able to use representational means to expand and perhaps to adjust their understanding of relationships between the self and attachment figures. In the Strange Situation it is securely attached infants who have the freedom to engage in physical exploration of their surroundings (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). With permanency and an increasing sense of the availability of the attachment figure, it may become more possible for these older children to turn their attention to this ‘representational’ form of exploration. With more confidence that attachment needs can be met, they are able to relinquish the massive inhibition or constriction of content which had guarded them against being overwhelmed by angry or fearful feelings.

The later-adopted group at first assessment also showed many more negative representations of parents and parent–child relationships than the infancy-adopted group. Their narratives showed fewer themes of parents helping the child, or offering affection, admiration or other positive interactions, or being aware when children were in need of help or attention; they also showed parents as more aggressive, and more rejecting towards the child. Their narratives also showed parents as less often physically punishing the child, perhaps because anything other than very mild punishment was rated instead under aggression, and perhaps because they avoided representing this theme if it was too anxiety-provoking (half the sample had been physically abused).

A year later, there were some positive changes, though it was clear that the children’s internal working models of attachment relationships were far from transformed. One might see the pattern of changes as essentially showing that, on the whole, positive adult characteristics increased, but negative ones did not significantly decrease. Thus the second assessment showed increased representations of adults helping, and limit setting, and being aware when children needed them, but no decrease in representations of adults as aggressive, or rejecting. It appears that aspects of new and more positive representations develop but they do not automatically transform the already established representations.

One might understand these findings in several ways. One is that maltreated children’s parents are generally not consistently maltreating; there are times when they respond as children wish and need. Internal working models based on this experience of an adult would imply the expectation that appearances are not to be trusted; that however positively a new adoptive parent may behave, at some point, and probably unpredictably, that new parent will become rejecting or aggressive. Such a model would be very resistant to disconfirmation; behaviourists may think here of how long it takes for an operant response to extinguish once learned on an intermittent reinforcement schedule.

A second possibility is that as their existing internal working models predict rejection and the non-fulfilment of attachment needs, children avoid the possibility of laying themselves open to further such experiences wherever possible. This robs the new parents of the opportunity to respond in a different way, and the child of the chance to experience
this and develop new and happier expectations. For instance, children who avoid showing distress because they expect rejection rather than comfort in response, do not give new parents opportunities to comfort them and thus help them develop a different set of expectations.

A third possibility is that since the child enters the new adoptive family with internal working models which govern not only expectation and prediction, but also the perception of current experience, the new parents’ behaviour will inevitably be perceived at times as repeating past experiences with abusing or rejecting attachment figures, thus confirming and strengthening the child’s existing model.

Rustin (1999) has described ways in which children’s internal realities are affected by the very complex familial structures created by adoption and fostering, encompassing birth parents, extended birth family and previous carers, as well as the child’s adoptive or foster family. All of these earlier relationships have an effect on the new relationship and how it can be perceived and taken in by the child. As we complete this study, and can examine the children’s narratives after a second year in their families, we aim to chart further the changes in their internal representations of attachment. We hope this will allow us to look ‘from the inside out’ (Brinich, 1990) at the ways in which aspects of these representations may sometimes remain as enduring vulnerabilities, despite the efforts of the new families, while in other ways children may show remarkable developmental recovery.

References


Brinich, P.M. (1990). A doption from the inside out; A psychoanalytic perspective. In D.M. Brodzinsky & M.D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption (pp. 42–61). New York: Oxford University Press.


Appendix 1

Protocol for 'Little Pig' narrative stems

1. In the protocol, every time Child 1, Child 2 or Child 3 is referred to, this should be replaced with the name(s) that the child wants to use (or names given by the examiner if the child gives none).

   Child 1 = older brother/sister, protagonist
   Child 2 = younger same-sex brother/sister
   Child 3 = same sex friend

2. The examiner should enlist the child’s involvement and cooperation in setting up the stories, especially in the stories involving more props (e.g. bathroom shelf, spilled juice). The child should also be involved in the clearing away of props between stories.

3. The examiner must use his/her discretion for closing a child’s narratives. Where appropriate, an examiner should ask ‘is that the end of the story?’ or ‘does anything else happen?’, but only once a story seems to have been resolved, or if the child is very stuck or becoming distressed.
4. Non-directive prompts should be used at the examiner’s discretion for clarification. If anything seems unclear or a child is predominantly relating the story non-verbally using actions rather than words, the examiner should ask ‘what is happening here?’.

5. For transcription purposes, the examiner should try to repeat a child’s narrative as s/he tells the story, especially if the child’s diction is poor. Try to repeat sentences/segments rather than short phrases or else it will interrupt the flow.

6. The prompts for each narrative should be adhered to. In some stories (Headache, Three’s a Crowd), the prompts are more of an intervention in the subject’s narrative, and need to come as soon as the subject seems to have ignored the stem constraint. Other prompts can come at the end.

7. If a child’s story does not address the main issue, ask about this – e.g. story 1: ‘Child 1 was crying, what happened?’ story 2: ‘The little pig was lost, he couldn’t see how to get back, what happened?’, etc.

Introduction

Let me tell you a bit about what we are going to do. I am going to tell you the first bit of a story and I want you to tell me what happens next. (If necessary, reassure anxious children further, that there are no right or wrong answers.)

So, I’ll start off the story and after that, it’s your story and you show me and tell me what happens next.

This story is about this little girl/boy, what shall we call her/him?

Here is little sister/brother, what’s her/his name?

(Note: if the child has difficulty naming the child figures, the examiner should give them names, avoiding the child’s own name and those of family members.)

And here’s a mum and dad.

Story 1 - Crying Outside

Characters: Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad.

Props: Sofa, TV, side of house.

Layout: All 4 characters sitting on sofa.

Here is (Child 1) and s/he lived in a house with his/her mum and his/her dad, and little brother/sister. One day they were all sitting in their house and this little boy/girl (Child 1) went out and she went right round the back of the house - we cannot see him/her anymore but now listen (make crying sounds).

What’s happening?

If child does say s/he is crying, acknowledge and then say ‘Now, show me and tell me what happens now?’

If child does not say s/he is crying, then say ‘s/he’s crying, show me and tell me what happens now?’

If nobody does anything in the story, ask ‘Does anyone know s/he has gone?’ (if necessary, then ask who).

Link to next story

Now, in this next story, we don’t need the people, but we need the animals, so help me put the people away and now let’s get the animals out. (Ask child to help set out the animals in their groups.)
Story 2 - Little Pig

Characters: Pigs, cows, lions/tigers, crocodile, camels.
Props: None.
Layout: Animals in groups of same species.

[Do not refer to ‘families’ in administering this story stem.]

In arranging animals, the animals should be in the bottom left hand of the table nearest to the child with the pig family in the corner.

Now, let me start off the story. Once there was a little pig and it lived here with all the other pigs, big ones and little ones. And the cows lived here, the lions lived here, the crocodile lived here, and the camels lived here.

One day, the little pig went for a long walk. He went a long way, past the cows, past the lions/tigers, past the crocodile, past the camels. (Show little pig as far away as possible from all the other animals – in the top right hand corner of the table.)

Then he said ‘oh!, 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?

Prompts
(If little pig rejoins other pigs) Did the other pigs say anything?

Link to next story
Now in the next story, we have the people and the animals. (Get the child to help set the family up having a picnic in the garden outside the house.)

Story 3 - Stamping Elephant

Characters: Elephant, all the animals, Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad.
Props: Side of house.
Layout: Same as for last story with family sitting on the ground (backs to the side of the house). Hold elephant out of sight as story stem begins.

The people are having a picnic in the garden and all the animals are there too. And there’s a big elephant. (Bring elephant onto table.) The elephant sometimes gets fierce and it goes stamp, stamp, stamp (showing elephant stamping). The children and the animals get a bit scared of the elephant when it is going stamp, stamp, stamp (repeat the stamping).
Show me and tell me what happens now in the story?

Link to next story
We don’t need the animals now, so would you help me put them away. In the next story, we just need the people.

Story 4 - Picture from School

Characters: Child 1, Child 2, mum, dad.
Props: Sofa, side of house.
Layout: Mum, dad and Child 2 sitting on sofa at home. Child 1 is separate (at school).

So, here’s mum and dad and Child 2 are at home and Child 1 is at school (show Child 1 separate at a distance).

And while he/she was at school s/he has made a really good picture.
And s/he thought - ‘this is a really good picture I’ve made, I like this picture. I’m going to take this home when I go home from school’.
So, then school ended and s/he took her/his picture and went home, it was just round the corner – and s/he knocked at the door (show child standing, knock on table for sound effect). Show me and tell me what happens now?

Prompts
If nothing happens:
Does anyone say anything about his/her picture?
What do they say/do?
If no mention of picture in child’s response,
What about his/her picture?

Story 5 - Bikes
Characters: Child 1, Child 3 (same-sex friend), mum, dad, Child 2.
Props: Sofa, side of house.
Layout: Family at home. (Examiner has Child 3 in hand.)

For the story, we need Child 1’s friend, what shall we call him/her?
In the next story, Child 1 is at home. There’s a knock at the door. Child 1 answers it, and it’s Child 1’s friend (Child 3).

Child 3 says ‘let’s go and play on our bikes!’
Child 1 says ‘ok, I’ll go and ask my mum’.

So, s/he went and asked her/his mum. (Child 1 and Child 3 go to mum).
Child 1: ‘Mum, can we go and play outside on our bikes?’
Mum says – ‘yes, but be careful!’

We have to pretend the bikes. They went really fast on their bikes and they went ‘wheeeeee’ (dramatize Child 1 and Child 3 riding fast and somewhat wildly), but oh! (show Child 1 fallen on ground with friend standing next to him/her) – what happened?
Show me and tell me what happens now?
The MacArthur battery stems follow on directly, using the same characters.

Appendix 2
Summaries of the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) narrative stems

Spilt Juice. Family seated at the table drinking juice, child reaches across the table for more and spills the jug of juice over the floor.

Mum’s Headache. Mum and child watching TV, Mum says she has a headache and must turn the TV off and lie down for a while, asks child to do something quietly meanwhile. Friend comes to door and wants to come in to watch TV programme with child.

Three’s a Crowd. Child and friend are playing ball in garden, while parents are talking to neighbours over fence. Little sib wants to play too but friend refuses, saying s/he won’t be child’s friend any more if s/he lets sib play.

Burnt Hand. Family are waiting for dinner, Mum is cooking at stove and warns child to be careful, pan is hot. Child can’t wait, reaches for pan, spills the dinner on the floor and burning hand.

Lost Keys. Child enters room to find parents angrily quarrelling over who lost the keys.

Bathroom Shelf. Mother briefly goes next door to neighbour, warning children not to touch anything on the bathroom shelf while she is gone; younger sib cuts finger and needs a plaster.
Appendix 3

Brief definitions of rating categories, drawn from Hodges et al. (2002)

Engagement vs. avoidance manoeuvres

No engagement. The child avoids becoming engaged in a story from the start. This may be an explicit refusal or achieved by covert or indirect means.

Initial aversion. The child shows reluctance but subsequently can be engaged in the story task.

Disengagement. The child at first shows some engagement with the story task, either by listening to the stem and/or beginning to develop a narrative; but then explicitly or covertly refuses to continue with it, and disengages from the narrative by stepping outside the story line so the story does not reach an end.

Premature foreclosure. The child engages with the story, and provides a resolution, but gives the interviewer the impression of wishing to get the story over as quickly as possible, avoiding any elaboration.

Alters constraints. The child actively alters the motivational constraints given by the narrative stem, indicating that they know this is different to what is given, but continuing to address the main issue of the story.

Disorganization within narrative

Catastrophic fantasy. Disasters, catastrophes, e.g. the family is killed. Some examples of extreme aggression are also coded under this category.

Bizarre/atypical responses. The narrative contains one or more incongruous features which appear improbable and unrelated to the story. The interviewer tends to feel a sense of bewilderment and disorganization.

Bad–good shift. A character portrayed as ‘good’ changes to ‘bad’ (or vice versa) within the same narrative. No reason for the change is given and there is nothing in the narrative to account for it.

Aggression

Coherent aggression. Physical or verbal aggression (excluding punishment, which is separately rated) which seems appropriate and forms a coherent part of the narrative. These aggressive manifestations do not appear extreme or out of proportion, allowing for a certain poetic licence in the story completions especially in the stories involving animals. Aggression is relatively contained.

Extreme aggression. Manifestations of aggression and violence, including punishment, which appear excessive and extreme; and/or senseless, intrusive, unexpected, not of a piece with the narrative. Aggression may take over the narrative to the exclusion of all else.

Representation of parents/adults

Adult helps. An adult provides help, comfort or protection, whether in response to child’s request or not.
Adult affectionate. The adult shows affection to the child, holds, cuddles, kisses, admires, appreciates, etc.

Limit setting. This code is used if a parent or adult character sets limits, or in some way controls a child’s behaviour, often in response to a transgression. Includes mild verbal punishment.

Adult aggresses. Incidents of coherent or extreme aggression shown by an adult.

Physical punishment. This code applies only to parents punishing children. ‘Routine’ and relatively minor acts of punishment or discipline (e.g. a smack). If the punishment is more severe (and may be enacted with marked affect) it is rated under aggression.

Adult rejects. The adult actively rejects the child or fails to respond to an explicit approach, or appeal for help from the child.

Adult unaware. The adult figure is unaware of the child figure’s distress or difficulty, or does not respond, when they could be expected to do so.

Adult injured/dead. The child makes it explicit in the narrative that an adult figure is dead or injured. This rating is given even if a ‘dead’ figure returns to life later in the narrative.

Representation of child

Child seeks help. Child seeks a protective, comforting or helpful response from an adult.

Child helps sib/peer. Narrative shows a child figure providing help, comfort or protection for another child.

Child endangered. The child’s narrative shows explicit risk, threat or danger to a child figure, from any source.

Child injured or dead. The child makes it explicit in the narrative that a child figure is dead or injured. This rating is given even if a ‘dead’ figure returns to life later in the narrative.

Turning on self. A child character in the story shows self-blame or self-damaging behaviour – e.g. rips up own picture.

Realistic mastery. Child figure in story attempts to cope by realistic (i.e. not magical/omnipotent) active mastery. This may involve enlisting the help of others. Where the story situation involves conflict between the wishes of different individuals, realistic active mastery can involve efforts to negotiate between these, whether successfully or not.

Positive adaptation

Pleasurable/realistic representations of domestic life. Representations of domestic routines and interactions, where the child’s affective tone in showing these representations is positive or neutral.

Magic/omnipotence. Responses which involve a quick magical story resolution by a wishful modification of reality; or omnipotent or superhuman powers or behaviour, whether required as part of the story resolution or appearing as a characteristic of the narrator or the child protagonist during the elaboration of the story.