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Story Completion Methods

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HISTORY

1923-1940: Research work and criteria for story completion methods

History should start with beginnings . . . “Once upon a time . . .” But in this instance, the beginnings are obscure. Recent writers (Wursten, 1960; Miller, 1960) have presented the Madeline Thomas stories (Thomas, 1937) and the Duess fables (Duess, 1940) as the first story completion tasks. The word “task” is important because clinical tools were not considered tests; rather, they were part of the clinician’s armamentarium to be used whole, in part, or even with on-the-spot modifications as aides in working with children.

Yet there were earlier story completion instruments—I dare not use the word “test” yet. Each of those earlier tasks was embedded in a research program. Piaget (1932) asked children to complete stories as part of his study of how children learn to make moral judgments. Before him, Hartshorne and May (1928) used story beginnings in their work on character and deceit. And before them, McGrath (1923) used a story completion instrument in her little-known study of children’s moral development.

These research efforts seem to be unrecognized in discussions of story completion methods. Indeed the idea itself (the story completion technique) is still a somewhat illegitimate child in projective testing. Despite its long history—such tasks are certainly older than either the Rorschach or TAT—the justly famous and invaluable compendia by Buros (1961, 1965) contain no references to any story completion method. Furthermore, until recently (Wursten, 1960), story completion tasks have not received a separate chapter in books on projective techniques, a tradition still honored in Murstein’s (1965a) volume which pays no attention to the methods to be discussed here.

There is also no mention of story completion methods in two volumes in research methods in anthropology (Hsu, 1961; Lindzey, 1961) despite the cross cultural work of Anderson and Anderson (1954) and Métraux.
(1955) with these methods and their particular suitability to work with all societies. It goes without saying that story materials—folk tales, legends, dreams, and the like—have been used extensively by anthropologists. The story completion method, however, is a new tool in that field.

The newness of the techniques to anthropology may explain why they were not mentioned in volumes on projective methods. However, one theme of this chapter may provide a better clue to the seeming illegitimacy of these methods. If you want to use story beginnings, whatever the setting, just go ahead and make up your own stories; tailor-make your instrument to suit your own problems. This cavalier attitude, which has, as we shall see, considerable justification and support from many authorities in the field, has one important consequence: There are few measures which have been carefully designed and for which there are data on reliability and validity. Thus the lack of recognition by experts in testing—because such methods are not tests, at least not in the typical use of the term.

But before the reader protests that he knows several published tests which are story completion methods—structured doll play tests, puppetry, TAT’s with verbal descriptions, dramatic production tests, and the like—I ought to define “story completion methods.” In this discussion there are three criteria for a story completion method: the client or subject is given 1) a prose stimulus which is 2) a story beginning or plot outline which he is 3) to complete.

These criteria are quite restrictive but they are dictated by theoretical issues. Prose presentation is different from prose which is accompanied by dolls or doll play (Lynn, 1959; Korner, 1949), puppets (Bender & Woltmann, 1936; Woltmann, 1951; Haworth, 1957), pictures (Raven, 1951) and other stimuli. In these instances the subject is given additional stimulus material beyond his own cognitive, motivational, and affective associations to the words and structure in the story beginning. It seems reasonable to assume that different psychological processes are brought to bear when stimuli are thus added to the prose story beginning.

The second criterion also has a theoretical base. A story beginning or plot is not equivalent to a fraction of a sentence, even when the fraction is “Once upon a time . . . .” One obvious difference is that the sentence stub invites completion of that sentence, whereas, a “What happened next?” after a story beginning asks for a continuation of the plot, a feeling for consequences, and the like. Another story method which is omitted by the second criterion asks the subject to tell a story, favorite or otherwise, or to repeat a story which has just been told to him (Despert & Potter, 1936). Repetition and memory are important psychological processes and are probably related to personality variables. However, these processes are not the same as the personality variables themselves.

The third criterion focuses on the word “completion.” The subject or client may complete the story by giving his own responses (Piaget,