

## Research on the Use of TEMAS - Tell Me a Story Test in Clinical Assessment of Children with a History of Abuse

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *Seizing the signs of abuse is one of the challenges that clinicians dealing with child protection cases have to cope with. Maltreatment is often at odds with the normal functioning of the child leading to interpersonal difficulties and delays in development.*

**Objectives:** *The aim of the study was to establish TEMAS reliability to assess the specific symptoms of physically, emotionally and sexually abused children. TEMAS test is a multicultural thematic apperception test designed to help clinicians to gain a better understanding of both strengths and deficits in cognitive, affective, intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning of the children.*

**Methods:** *75 children aged between 7 and 14 were involved in the investigation and tested using the Tell me a story Test. The subjects were divided in three groups, based on their clinical history, as follows: 25 children came from classical protection system, 25 children are in the care of a professional caregiver and control group consisted of 25 children without a history of abuse.*

**Results:** *Results indicate that there are significant differences between the non-clinical and the clinical groups ( $p < 0,01/ p < 0,05$ ) for several functions measured by TEMAS.*

**Conclusions:** *TEMAS proved to be a sensitive instrument in assessing the various function of children's personality that can be used as one component of a multi-method assessment battery and can easily be incorporated as such and adapted to Romanian specificity.*

**Keywords:** *maltreatment, child abuse, temas test*

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## **I. Introduction**

TEMAS - Tell me a story (Constantino & Malgady, 1988) technique is a method of assessing a person's Cognitive, Affective and Personality Functions through the interpretation of his or her responses to familiar and different culturally series of pictures.

TEMAS Test has not been adapted and standardized for Romanian subjects even if there are numerous clinical studies (Constantino, Dana & Malgady, 2007) that confirm the usefulness of this test for clinical assessment of children and adolescents aged 5 to 18 years old. Children and adolescents are poor informants and often report absence of emotional and behavioral problems during evaluations, but they reveal underlying emotional problems in narrative techniques. TEMAS test has been recognized as a culturally competent test for culturally diverse youngsters (APA, 2003; Abraham, 2003).

## **II. Method**

75 children aged between 7 and 14 were involved in the investigation and tested using the Tell me a story Test. The subjects were divided in three groups, based on their clinical history, as follows: 25 children came from classical protection system, 25 children are in the care of a professional caregiver and control group consisted of 25 children without a history of abuse.

The history of the children from the abused groups is marked by multiple and repeated abuses, some of them having a history of serious emotional and physical abuse. TEMAS is made up of 23 pictures featuring a wide variety of problematic life events and personal experiences in urban environments, such as familial scenes within the home, solitary dreamlike and fantasy states, street scenes involving peers and adults and school activities. The opposite and antithetical nature of the situations described in the pictures provokes dual feelings and requires adaptive or maladaptive behavior. The theory underlying the TEMAS incorporates the dynamic-cognitive framework which states that personality development occurs within a sociocultural system.

Within the system, individuals internalize the cultural values and beliefs of family and society (Bandura & Walters, 1967; Sullivan, 1953).

The test measures cognitive functions, personality functions and affective functions that can be scored for each TEMAS protocol. Also each stimulus pictures pulls for at least one of this nine personality Functions: Interpersonal Relations, Aggression, Anxiety/depression, Achievement Motivation, Delay of gratification, Self-concept, Sexual identity, Moral judgment, Reality Testing.

Finally, the TEMAS scoring system evaluates seven affective functions: Happy, Sad, Fearful, Neutral, Ambivalent and Inappropriate affect. For this study eighteen quantitative and qualitative TEMAS functions were compared between the non-clinical group and each of the pathological group.

All subjects were administered individually the TEMAS pictures according to the standardized instructions, and their stories were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The scoring on indices of cognitive, affective and personality functioning and the results' interpretation of the stories followed the same methodology and criteria as described by G. Constantino & R. Malgady, 1988. Interpretation of the results is based on the magnitude of the deviations and the number of low scores versus high scores.

## **III. Results**

In order to examine the main differences in the stories across the three groups a quantitative and qualitative analyze was completed. Frequencies for each of the dimensions were compared across groups using one-way analyses of variance (Table 1).

One way ANOVA and post-hoc tests (Bonferroni, Tamhane) were subsequently used so as to determine if abused children from classical protection system or in the care of a professional caregiver could be discriminated from children from control group. Results indicate that there are significant differences between the non-clinical and the clinical groups ( $p < 0,01$ /  $p < 0,05$ ) for several functions measured by TEMAS.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and significance of differences between the three clinical groups for the means, std.deviation and std.error mean**

Functions	LOT CONTROL				RESIDENTIAL CARE				FOSTER CARE			
		Mean	Std. Devia tion	Std. Error Mean		Mean	Std. Devia tion	Std. Error Mean		Mean	Std. Devia tion	Std. Error Mean
IR	25	3.013	.1588	.0318	25	2.260	.2121	.0424	25	2.528	.2390	.0478
AGG	25	2.928	.1646	.0329	25	2.132	.2626	.0525	25	2.265	.2411	.0482
A/D	25	3.079	.1827	.0365	25	2.132	.1796	.0359	25	2.214	.2043	.0409
AM	25	3.192	.2529	.0506	25	2.640	.3428	.0686	25	2.799	.4279	.0856
DG	25	3.296	.3360	.0672	25	2.556	.4814	.0963	25	2.534	.6647	.1329
SC	25	3.808	.2100	.0420	25	2.824	.3479	.0696	25	2.936	.2998	.0600
SEXUAL	25	3.544	.2815	.0563	25	2.648	.3441	.0688	25	2.860	.2677	.0535
MJ	25	3.600	.2965	.0593	25	2.188	.2743	.0549	25	2.280	.3162	.0632
REAL	25	3.640	.3476	.0695	25	2.684	.4930	.0986	25	2.756	.4124	.0825
HAPPY	25	15.12	3.468	.694	25	4.48	2.452	.490	25	5.12	2.759	.552
SAD	25	6.12	3.982	.796	25	11.60	4.143	.829	25	10.20	3.122	.624
ANG	25	1.60	1.732	.346	25	6.20	3.476	.695	25	4.20	2.398	.480
FEAR	25	1.84	1.972	.394	25	8.20	2.179	.436	25	6.20	2.972	.594
OM	25	.24	.663	.133	25	3.88	1.716	.343	25	2.04	1.567	.313
CONFLICT	25	0.00	0.000	0.000	25	6.52	5.157	1.031	25	5.32	3.750	.750
TRANSF	25	1.12	.781	.156	25	17.64	12.355	2.471	25	12.72	9.563	1.913
INAP.AFF	25	.00	0.000	0.000	25	1.68	1.749	.350	25	1.76	3.711	.742
NEUTRAL	25	0.00	0.000	0.000	25	.72	.891	.178	25	1.04	2.150	.430

Significant with  $p < 0.05$

The variance homogeneity was verified using the Lavene test. The results indicates that the

homogeneity condition was met for the analyzed information, taking in consideration that  $p$  is not higher or equal to 0,05 (Table 2)

**Table 2. Test of Homogeneity of Variances**

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
IR	1.478	2	72	.235
AGG	.991	2	72	.376
A/D	.480	2	72	.621
AM	1.839	2	72	.166
DG	1.985	2	72	.145
SC	.875	2	72	.421
SEXUAL	.741	2	72	.480
MJ	.722	2	72	.489
REAL	1.340	2	72	.268
HAP	3.585	2	72	.033
SAD	2.089	2	72	.131
ANG	1.942	2	72	.151
FEAR	2.785	2	72	.068
OM	11.016	2	72	.000

CONF	24.090	2	72	.000
TRANSF	19.986	2	72	.000
INAP.AF	10.437	2	72	.000
NEUTR	11.353	2	72	.000

Significant  $P < 0,05^*$

Repeated analyses of variance (ANOVA) on all functions measured by TEMAS has revealed a significant difference across groups. Results obtained with ANOVA method are similar to those obtained with Post Hoc tests targeting multiple comparisons. A follow up detailed analyze between paired-groups was conducted (Table 3).

For examples, indicators such as interpersonal relations, anxiety/depression, aggression, fearful, achievement motivation, happy, showing significant results statistically measured with Analysis of Variance highlight semnificative differences among the three groups by Bonferroni multiple correlation test.

**Table 3. Results for One way ANOVA**

ANOVA		
	F	Sig.
IR	85.758	.000
AGG	88.461	.000
A/D	192.479	.000
AM	16.608	.000
DG	17.940	.000
SC	85.330	.000
SEXUAL	61.059	.000
MJ	177.852	.000
REAL	39.810	.000
HAP	104.116	.000
SAD	14.212	.000
ANG	19.152	.000
FEAR	45.397	.000
OM	42.541	.000
CONF	22.216	.000
TRANSF	22.049	.000
INAP.AF	4.401	.016
NEUTR	3.929	.024

Significant  $P < 0,05^*$

#### IV. Discussion

Also the results indicate that the three groups differed significantly on al major cognitive indices (Conflict, Omissions, Transformation, etc.), all affective functions (Happy, Sad, Angry, Fearful, Neutral, Inappropriate Affect, etc.) and all personality functions (Interpersonal Relations, Aggression, Anxiety, Achievement Motivation, Delay of Gratification etc.).

Comparisons among children with a history of abuse from classical protection system or in the care of a professional caregiver and children from control group indicated that abused children had lower scores

for „Fluency”, and „reaction time” and required more inquires to complete a story, often omit details (characters, setting, event) and failed to recognize and verbalize the psychological conflict depicted in the pictures. This indicates that they are anxious and inhibited. Regarding omissions related to specific pictures, they were interpreted as selective attention, namely a defense mechanism by which the child does not respond to relevant stimuli because they are caused by anxiety or because it is desirable to suppress their undesirable social stimuli presenting topics such as bullying and theft.

If comparisons among children with a history of abuse from classical protection system or in the care of a professional caregiver and children from the control group showed significant differences regarding cognitive, personality and affective functions, the study indicated that there are no major differences between residential group and foster care group.

Comparative analysis of the responses of subjects in the three groups showed that children with a history of abuse from classical protection system and from foster care obtained lower scores for interpersonal relationships which can be interpreted as poor social skills. Also children from classical protection system perceive their relationship with the authority figures as punitive and restrictive. For them fear of punishment seems to be one of the main motivators underlying modulation behavior towards compliance with the rules of temperance and social impulses considered as negative.

The authority is perceived most powerful in relation to both parents and teachers. Also in relation with punishment it is observed the repetition of situations in which the subject feels bullied and punished unjustly, therefore getting involved in a verbal exchange with other mutual accusative of the same age. In this context observed tendency towards passivity and victimhood of the child.

Unlike children in the clinical group who have concerns about competition, autonomy and dominance needs, abused children from classical protection system and foster care seem more resigned and more regressive. Their main needs are affection, protection, safety. They have a strong fear of deprivation, physical punishment and cruelty. Anxieties intensity shows the deep sense of insecurity these children live with.

Regarding parental roles and image of femininity-masculinity, the subjects with a history of abuse from residential care comparing those from clinical represents them as the most violent and aggressive both verbally and physically. In their stories parents are killing children or beat and kill someone.

Parental figures are also presented as having high tendency to reject their children and abandoned them. In association with their feelings of rejection, children from residential care have the sense of helplessness and they tend to distort or transform the reality of present events and situation.

Most of the times in the stories of children in foster care there are assigned all household and childcare tasks, conjuring the image of an impotent women lacking support and too many resources, subject to the authority and aggressiveness of the father and often absent or present but not relevant. The father

is built on an aggressive pattern, punitive, constantly in conflict with both children and wife and not involved in the family domestic life. There are manifested feelings of aggression towards him, his father being attacked or even killed indirectly in several stories. The marital couple is presented in a permanent state of conflicts or stressful home situation and occasionally of aggression.

Representative of this are the following stories constructed by children „Father told the eldest child to leave his house and also beat the child and then, the child who raises his hand with the ball beats his peers and the teacher gave the grade 5 for misbehaviour. The mother gave him a letter and the child made a sign to the one with the ball to give him the ball too. Children fight with their mother and father and after that they go to church, to ask money. End.”

Regarding the fears suggested, one of the most powerful and recurrent themes experienced by children with a history of abuse, coming from orphanages or foster care, than those in normal group, is the fear of aggression and of punishment against which the subject has mainly two types of reactions: running or a depressive reaction, characterized by passivity, isolation and crying, that in many of the stories culminate with the symbolic act of self harm or killing the main character or chasing it away.

It can be observed in these children the existence of the desire to assert themselves, tied to gaining appreciation and affection of the adults and a sense of self-satisfaction, especially targeting academic achievements. How to achieve them requires, according to the subject, effort and focus, along with giving up some things or activities they enjoy but do not support their growth.

Most of the times to meet certain needs to feed themselves, the main character resorts to lying and stealing without expressing remorse in relation to his actions. Representative of this issue is the low score on the Delay of gratification scale obtained by institutionalized children or in foster care. Also they have poor control of aggressive impulses, maladaptive reality testing and low moral judgment.

From the counting of children with a history of abuse it is noticed a powerful dissimulating behaviour by creating happy endings that appear suddenly after an event emotionally invested affective- negative, and the cancellation and denial of verbal statements, replacing a sequence of potentially hazardous story for the Self of the subject with a positive or neutral one. In such situations the tone of the story is dominated by emotional reactions inappropriate or frightening (higher scores on the scales Fearful and Inappropriate Affect).

The main defence mechanisms used by children with a history of abuse are regression, denial, impulsive action, for all standing out a significant difference between the high scores obtained at: Conflict, inappropriate Affect, Anger compared to children in the clinical group. The defensive mechanism as a hallmark of these children is supra accountability, in response to a hostile environment and helpless parental figures.

Regarding the results obtained by children of normal clinical group, the research showed that they obtained low scores for the scales investigated, differing significant statistics compared to the other two groups.

Although scores for personality functions (aggression, anxiety, etc) indicated a number of concerns in this area compared to values of other children, no scores reaches a statistically significant level. Their stories reveal no auto-aggressive impulses and parental figures are described as nourishing, supportive figures. Negative parental representations are less than the other two groups and the representation of the mother is more important than the father.

Unlike children in the clinical group, which have concerns linked to have success in the activities carried out or achieve a goal, the need for autonomy and dominance, children with a history of abuse do not trust their own resources and are poorly motivated.

Their core needs are of affection, protection, security. They have a strong fear of deprivation and physical punishment, with details of cruelty and death of the main character. Anxieties intensity (lower scores on the Anxiety scale) shows the deep sense of insecurity that these children live.

One of the key issues that result from the content of the stories made by subjects with a history of abuse than those in normal group refers to affective functions. In this respect the stories of children with a history of abuse were especially in a sad tone, the main character experiencing discomfort in relationship with another or strong feelings of fear.

Children with a history of abuse are vulnerable to loss of affection and support of others and live strong inner tensions, so that they develop their own adaptive mechanisms. Dysfunctional schemas and maladaptive strategies emphasize dependent behavior and vulnerability of the child.

These children seem not to have a clear representation of secure parental figures but rather parental figures are absent, powerless, less available. They do not recognize conflicts from the pictures and have no inner resources to cope with the traumatic experience and choose the way to overcome a situation

of conflict by escape into fantasy, transformation of the situation.

Significant differences between the three groups were found in the area of cognitive and affective functioning. The results indicate that the children from control group had significantly higher verbal fluency scores and expressed significantly more happy affect in their themes.

The control group comparing with those with a history of abuse had themes expressing more adaptative person relations and greater control of anxiety and better control of aggressive impulses, coping with anxiety/depression, achievement motivation, sexual identity and moral judgement in an adaptative way. Also they expressed the most the ability to delay gratification and also expressed more positive self-concepts than abused children.

## **V. Conclusions**

In conclusion TEMAS proved to be a sensitive instrument in assessing the various function of children's personality that can be used as one component of a multi-method assessment battery and can easily be incorporated as such and adapted to Romanian specificity. Further investigation need to be completed in order to enhance predictive value of the test.

TEMAS helps in understanding the relationship between the child, the characters and the most important trends of his life. The test allows the detection and thorough research regarding: organization / disorganization of personality conflicts related (rivalry, addiction, fixation, ambivalence), maturity/immaturity emotional and attitudinal, relationship between courts personality (self-ego superego) and defense mechanisms used the existing imbalance between these possible points of fixation of the child, neurotic traits: anxiety, depression, nervousness, aggression, immaturity, declining issues, sexual issues, trends obsessive ambivalence, psychotic tendencies and signs of drug abuse, personality disorders.

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