
# Life story board

# Life Story Board: A Tool in the Prevention of Domestic Violence[1]

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## Abstract

The high rate of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities points to the need to explore new ways of understanding how this violence occurs in its context and to seek new and creative ways of preventing the perpetuation of this vicious cycle. The Life Story Board (LSB) is a game board with sets of cards, markers, and a notation system with which to construct a visual representation of someone's life experience at personal, family, and community levels. Initially invented as an interview tool in an expressive art program for war-affected children, the LSB has broader potential for use by those working with youth, adults, and families in a variety of contexts, and as a tool for program evaluation and applied research. This article describes LSB methods and how they may apply in the context of Canadian First Nations, Inuit, and Métis community efforts to respond to, understand, and prevent domestic violence.

**Keywords:** visual methods, narrative methods, domestic violence, Aboriginal communities

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# Background

The intergenerational effects of residential schools and trauma histories have had significant impact on family well-being, mental health, and the prevalence of domestic violence among Aboriginal communities (Elias et al., 2009a; Elias et al., 2009b; Brownridge, 2009). Rates of domestic violence in Canadian First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities affect 25% of women, compared to 10% prevalence among non-Aboriginal Canadian women (Bopp et al., 2003). The ripple effect of trauma is especially powerful in small, close-knit communities.

This article describes methods developed out of the first author's dissatisfaction with conventional research tools used in child mortality and mental health surveys in zones of armed conflict (Ascherio et al., 1992; Chase and Doney, 1999). These limitations may also be encountered in aboriginal contexts: discomfort with questionnaires and psychological checklists; concerns about sensitive written information and misinterpretation of de-contextualized data; cultural differences in expression, understanding of cause and the meanings ascribed to symptoms and the impact of events.

The first version of the Life Story Board (LSB) was developed in 1997 for use in The Butterfly Peace Garden, a creative arts psychosocial program for war affected children in Sri Lanka (Chase, 2000). Over the following decade other uses in international humanitarian contexts were explored. LSB was an assessment tool for a child mental health intervention developed for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Canada using a social ecological evaluation framework; the prototype was pilot tested with refugee youth in Winnipeg in 2003. Other pilot tests included nomadic Tibetan households in Western China (Gaden Relief, 2001), and with children in Cambodia in 2004, and Northern Uganda with War Child Canada in 2007 (Chase, 2008).

# The Life Story Board

## Description

The LSB is a medium of symbolic communication that facilitates personal storytelling by providing a flexible, visual depiction of an individual's personal, relational, and temporal experience. The LSB toolkit consists of a colourful table-top board, and sets of cards, markers, and tokens codified to represent a broad range of people, events, conditions, behaviours, interests, and feelings. By placing these symbols onto areas of the board representing

self, households, community, and the passage of time, the storyteller creates a unique picture of significant life events, relationships, and activities in a manner that enables the individual to explain cultural and contextual significance. The result is an informative, psychosocial eco-map (Carpenter-Aeby et al., 2007), depicting a personalized, contextual narrative that identifies patterns and sources of risk and resilience. Through the LSB's taxonomy of symbols, a storyteller's life experiences appear as an externalized landscape of elements, entities, and meanings that can be seen and reflected upon (Chase, 2008).

LSB methods are amenable to a broad range of applications and cultural contexts. The process is versatile and can follow an individual's narrative flow, making it adaptable and engaging. The LSB's visual nature is useful in cases where literacy and cultural differences may reduce the effectiveness of conventional language-based interview approaches. Professionals can use the LSB both for assessment and as therapeutic intervention with older children, youth, or adults.

## Therapeutic and Research Tool

LSB methods have the potential for wide application as a clinical tool in individual and family assessment, and across a range of disciplines. From a therapeutic perspective, the shift from verbal language to visual-spatial modes of expression opens up new ways of sharing and being heard, enhancing rapport, and trust-building. As internal memories, cognitions, and feelings are given a pictorial representation, emotionally charged material elements are externalized, allowing cognitive distance and relief. Contemplating the interplay of life elements, as reflected back in the story board layout, often brings insights and new understandings to client and counsellor alike.

A tenet of narrative therapy is that within any individual's experiences of difficulty and suffering, there are also stories of survival, coping, and resilience which may be subjugated or buried by the primary identification, both personal and public, with victimhood or dependency (White, 1995; Smith and Nylund, 1997). Focusing solely on the latter may stifle personal agency to actively change, thus locking a person into the vicious cycle of violence, within which victims often become perpetrators. LSB methods have the potential to identify previously hidden or unrecognized strengths and resources, lending themselves to narrative therapy approaches that "assist clients in re-authoring or re-storying conversations" (Morgan, 2000).


(a) LSB board fields are Personal (yellow), Family/Proximal (green) and Community/distal (blue) under the overarching red Timeline. The present household is laid out, the storyteller's person card marked with the small ball of red clay.

(b) The household of origin and extended family are added with vital status, health, relationship, and role cards; important events and moves are recounted and placed on the Timeline.


(c) A fully rendered LSB includes social circles (drawn), with cards for acts, behaviour, feelings, pastimes, hopes, and worries, and various notations.

(d) Lastly, in a reflective overview, yellow chips are placed on sources of risk and troubles, and green chips on sources of strength and support. Photographs may be taken before the LSB is "dissolved."

For example, using narrative therapy with women who have been sexually assaulted could avoid the pitfalls of symptom-focused pathologizing of experiences. Draucker (1998, p. 162) states

> narrative therapy can identify unique outcomes which are moments of strength, autonomy, and emotional vitality hidden in life stories that are otherwise saturated with suffering and oppression, to open up possibilities for constructing new life narratives.

The LSB also lends itself to other visual schemas like Karpman's drama triangle used in transactional analysis that maps out the interplay between internal and external rescuer, persecutor, and victim roles (Karpman, 1968).

As a research tool, LSB methods are a qualitative alternative to questionnaires, guided verbal interviews, or focus group sessions. Photographs of story board layouts, kept anonymous by avoiding the use of personal identifiers, are rich in contextualized information that can be aggregated into multidimensional collective data sets. Furthermore, sequential sessions customized to a program or treatment setting can demonstrate change in various measures and indicators. The LSB's innovative recording of contextualized life history, social supports, exposures, and networks can be applied in diverse research and evaluation designs.

## The Use of LSB in the Aboriginal Context and as a Tool to Deal with Domestic Violence

Since 2002, explorations about the suitability and adaptation of the LSB for Aboriginal contexts in Canada have been encouraging. For over four years, half day or day-long sessions were held in a course at the University of Manitoba's Aboriginal Focus Program for Social Work students, most of whom worked in child and family services in Aboriginal communities. After presenting the concept and how the LSB was developed in international contexts, a volunteer student consented to relate her own childhood experience as a demonstration. Extensive family networks, residential school impacts, and experience with violence and loss were portrayed, as were the social bonds and sources of strength. The class discussed their observations and wrote a reflective journal assignment on possible applications (Chase, 2002). Since 2008, training workshops have been held for counsellors and therapists in Winnipeg. A feasibility study of the LSB for use by school coun-

sellors in several high schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba includes sessions with Aboriginal students. Currently, graduate students are taking up the LSB to explore various areas of research, including the multigenerational effects of residential school and the evacuation of expectant mothers from northern Manitoba reserves. As well, it is being considered as a monitoring and evaluation tool by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development working with indigenous-run child family service agencies in northeastern British Columbia (de Finney et al., 2009; Blackstock, 2009).

While the full range of potential contributions has yet to be assessed, particular features of LSB methods may lend themselves particularly well to Aboriginal contexts. Aboriginal cultures have strong traditions of storytelling and of its power in healing and transformation. A LSB session offers a way to share narrative story *verbally*, in dialogue, and *nonverbally* by placing and moving cards, pointing and drawing, to create a self-validating visual expression. The LSB is less constrained by language, dialect, and literacy. The LSB process gives primacy to the person's existential experience, with a balanced enquiry into problems and sources of strength that may be less burdened by western psychological, biomedical, or religious ideologies or biases.

LSB methods could be used by women's shelter staff, those working with violent offenders, and community-based researchers. It would bring into focus individuals' stories of domestic violence, underlying determinants, secondary effects, identify the resources (personal, social, material, and spiritual) necessary for change, and determine whether they are available or presently lacking. The session gives back to the storyteller acknowledgement and validation of their lived experience. Like any tool, what the LSB does depends on who and how it is used. In skilled hands, the LSB process of sharing can draw out resilience and coping strategies and supports, helping someone to visualize a way through and out of a vicious cycle. In this way a LSB session can be seen as an intervention, one that feeds into multiple processes: generating conscious knowledge, discerning attitudes, beliefs, and intentions, and moving towards behavioural change (CIET Canada, 2009).

Recognizing that caseworkers may have limited training, and communities may be underresourced in terms of treatment services, the LSB could serve as an initial assessment tool, with the clients' rendering of their situation on the LSB leading into a second stage, such as counselling or focused intervention. In situations where this level of treatment is not available within the community, it would be important to consider ways to strengthen capacity, human resources, and provide support.

Within Aboriginal communities, the practices of traditional values and culture have an underestimated potential for collective and individual resilience. Development of resilience occurs through spirituality, family strength, elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, identity, and support networks (Andersson, 2008). The LSB is a tool with the potential to build on this resilience as a way to curb domestic violence and deal with its effects at individual and community levels. For example, the LSB process may be complementary to, or fit comfortably within traditional teachings, understanding one's life and path within the macrocosm of the Medicine Wheel, and other indigenous teachings. Furthermore, practitioners using the LSB can work with traditional elders to develop a culturally appropriate line of questioning to ensure a more appropriate use. Our program of research is testing the feasibility of the LSB in various contexts, and the extent of its applicability for different uses, such as diagnosis, treatment, and research.

While the Life Story Board is no panacea, it has the potential to bring personal stories to light and could frame community-led assessments and interventions. The individual and community case histories could be interwoven with quantitative social indicators such as rates of incarceration, child and family service referrals, addiction rates, residential school trauma testimonies, youth suicide attempt and completion rates, and so on, to reach a deeper understanding of domestic violence. At a collective level, the cumulative rendering of identity-protected narrative information could inform policy and program development and future research in indigenous communities.

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