

# Children's Engagement with Images: The Effectiveness of Images to Predict Societal Dynamics

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**Abstract**— We live in a world surrounded by images and pictures. Children have the ability to construct stories around visual stimulus and interpret it by connecting with their immediate surroundings as well as with their wider community. Projective techniques are often intriguing and fun for the children allowing them to express their feelings which are difficult to access through standard interviews or observation. Visual intelligence is developed early in a child as compared to linguistic intelligence which is why any form of visuals tend to leave a deeper impact in the brains. Using visual and verbal stimulus materials such as photographs, sketches and drawing, the paper attempts to establish that research methodologies applying the use of visual stimulus with children is more effective. A group of images are detailed to explain the in-depth portrayal of the environment by children. The results are discussed using voices of children and the social environment in that particular region.

**Keywords**— *Projective technique, Children, Research Methods, Visual Stimulus*

## I. INTRODUCTION

To understand children's thoughts and perceptions is a challenge most of the time due to disproportionate factors like age, size, verbal skills, and context. Techniques for engaging children have to be interesting and fun for the children as well as informative for the researcher. It is believed that children have their own beliefs and perspectives and also the competency to express it. To gain an understanding of their lives and views it is important to use different methods that suit their context, their competence and knowledge.

Certain techniques, like projective techniques, picture reading, participatory picture interviews etc., works well with children as they are non-threatening in nature and taps on their inner thoughts. Such techniques assist us to go beyond the observable behaviour on the surface and lets us gain a deeper understanding of an individual. Projective techniques are engaging for the respondents and permits the respondents to respond from their own frame of reference without any barriers [1]. In a country like India where caste, class, gender and religion is so deeply ingrained that we fail to view it as a social construction.

This paper attempts to unfold the projective technique used to understand the children's perspective on social issues. Focusing principally on such a technique using images, the paper tries to establish that child-centered techniques to collect data from young children are more viable alternatives

to interviews, observations or discussions. Techniques using images or pictures employs a method where the individual is free to respond according to his own rich impressions of the lived experiences and, consequently expressing the concealed feelings [2]. Since the purpose of these pictures were not revealed, they are more susceptible to expressing the inner feelings and thoughts. Projective techniques are defined as methods presumably used to access emotions, views, feelings or any kind of hidden content through imagery and visual stimuli. Linzey, as cited in [1], classified the strategies into 5 categories namely: associative technique, constructive technique, completion technique, choice/ordering technique and expressive technique.

All of these strategies can be used together allowing the participants to draw on hidden meanings by working with stimuli not usually encountered in everyday life. This paper specifically doesn't take all the methods together since the purpose of the study was to explore the effectiveness of imagery when researching with children.

The paper begins with the methodology. The section explains the sample and the process of data collection describing the tools and techniques administered. The following section elaborates on the results and discusses the results in the socio-cultural context. This section also describes the relation between the use of images and the relevance of the data. The conclusion, at the end, tries to establish that such techniques brings out the real picture of the social climate as well as the dispositions of the children

## II. METHODOLOGY

Children in the age group of 10-14 years were part of the study across three locations in India (Sirohi in Rajasthan, Uttarkashi in Uttarakhand and Yadgir in Karnataka). Sampling was a convenient sampling from schools engaged with Azim Premji Foundation, India and an equal number of unengaged schools. The study here used pictures of situations initiating a conversation around it.

The pictures were a part of a larger impact assessment study known as learner's assessment<sup>1</sup>. The learner's assessment study follows a mixed methodology, combining elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Out of the several techniques mentioned by Linzey, in researching children, the present study applied construction projective technique letting the children construct stories based on specific images presented. The process involved in presenting the children with eight images based on gender, caste, class and religion. These images had sketches of normal happenings within a school, classroom, village, hospital etc. It was followed by questions like, 'what is happening in the picture' and encouraging them to imagine and create. The method followed Murray's projective technique procedures, as cited [1] i.e., each child was asked to build a story around the image, what the people in the images might be thinking or feeling etc. Since each image had situations of discrimination, creating stories induced the children to bring out existing social stratification that they have experienced or observed in and around their environment. Pictures were shown to a group of 8 children with an equal mix of girls and boys at a time. A total of 192 students were interviewed across the three geographies. Each child was encouraged with 1-2 probe questions to construct a story around the picture. The conversations were audio recorded and transcribed for content analysis. The projection of the child's views was noted down along with the observations. The caste, class, gender and religion dynamics were observed within the classroom as well.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Image I elicited responses that clearly depicted the discriminatory practices prevailing in their communities. The normalcy in discussing such practices portrayed that gender discrimination is deeply ingrained in their minds. A 10 year old responded, "*Poora pariwaar hospital me hai, Sab khush lag rahe hai. Ladka hua hai unke ghar me*" (The whole family is in a hospital; they all look happy. Baby boy has been delivered).



Fig.1

Children involve in exploring the world and absorb as much information as they can. Their responses reflect the fact that children learn from observing and exploring the surroundings. A 13-year-old boy from Uttarkashi however responded, "*ye ladki nahi ho sakti kyunki iske sar pe baal nahi hai. Ladke ganje paida hote hai*" (The baby can't be a girl as the baby doesn't have any hair on its head. A boy generally takes birth bald-headed).

Children presented their views more explicitly as opposed to their responses in focused group discussions. 10-year-old children seemed to have faced difficulty in articulating when presented with a hypothetical situation whereas with an image they could immediately relate and express their thoughts. In the absence of pictures, responses for situations depicting gender discrimination elicited socially appropriate responses such as "*ladka-ladki me bhed bhav nahi karna chahiye.*" (There shouldn't be any discrimination between a boy and a girl.) etc.

While constructing stories children were able to read the facial expressions and interpret the situation. "*wo dukhi hoga kyunki uska khana accha nahi hoga aur doosre ka accha hoga*" (he might be sad as his food is not tasty enough and other's food must be tasty). The ability of a child to deduce an emotion from the facial expression or body language contributes to depth of data collected.

Discussions among children, based on the given image II, displays the class dynamics within their immediate environment.



Fig.2

<sup>1</sup> Learner's Assessment Study uses paper-pencil test to assess the children of government schools engaged with Azim Premji Foundation on all subjects from Class III to Class VIII.

Responses such as “*Kelavu makkalu shalege hoogade holadalli kelasa maduvaage Masteru ee makalanu shalege hoogalu heluthare*” (When some children go to the field instead of going to school, the school master insists that they should go to school); “*Gaon me sarkari school nahi hoga. Aur kyunki wo gareeb hai wo school nahi jaa sakta*” (the village might not have a government school and since they are poor, he can’t attend school).



Fig.3

Unlike the focused group discussions, the projective technique with images extracted the child’s in-depth understanding of the society. Observations also revealed that children associate certain characteristics to castes like stammering. One of the responses by a 10-year-old girl was that only a lower caste person stammers. With methods using pictures of people, the children can separate the characters from them and see it from a distance.

From certain pictures it could be derived that children couldn’t relate to them in certain geographical regions. Regions, where majority of children belonging to a vegetarian community are not exposed to meat as food, showed disgust when presented with an image of a meat shop adjacent to a flower and vegetable shop (Image III). Children couldn’t fathom the idea of a vegetable shop next to a meat shop. The picture was interpreted by the children as something unreal. They responded with conviction that such a market lane doesn’t exist in real life and even if it does people would stop buying flowers or vegetables from the nearby shops. Some responses were: “*Aisa nahi hota. Bhagwaan ke phool me khoon lag jayega to kaise denge. Mutton ki dukaan sheeshe ke andar hote hai*” (This doesn’t happen. If flowers meant for God get stained with blood how will we offer it. Mutton shops are usually inside glass windows). Children who consider meat eating as a taboo, such as children from Uttarkashi and Sirohi, has been socialized to believe meat-eaters as inferior. Their facial expressions, showing disgust, explained their perception of meat-eating people. The responses center around the concerns of purity and pollution very similar to some of their views regarding Muslim religion.

According to a Sample Registration System baseline survey conducted in 2014, the percentage of meat-eating people surpassed the number of vegetarians in Uttarakhand. However, Pushpesh pant (2016), a culinary historian, responded contradicting the statement,

*“The survey’s numbers are either flawed or at least it gives a distorted picture of the meat consumption in Uttarakhand since most people living in the state’s higher reaches are too poor to afford meat, at least on a regular basis. Yes, there are large institutes like IMA and even many boarding schools where a lot of people from outside the state enroll and where meat is served on a regular basis. But in places like Haridwar, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Nainital and higher reaches, the people are mostly vegetarian barring may be the tourists who come here for short visits”*

Views of Pushpent Pant resonates with the views of the children from Uttarkashi. Whereas children from Yadgir, familiar with meat shops, had responses like “*Ella onde kade edare kondkolalikke sulaba!*” (If meat, flowers and vegetables are in the same place it is easier to buy everything at once). Karnataka is a state with the lower caste claiming to have outnumbered the upper castes. According to caste census dalits form 19.5% of total population. According to Maruthi and Peter [3], the single largest community of Karnataka follows a non-vegetarian diet. Predominantly children from such families wouldn’t find anything odd in the image since meat is a common sight in their immediate context.

Children treat their adults around them as model and imitate their behaviour and beliefs. A child’s behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning [4]. A young child is most likely to replicate the beliefs and thoughts of his adults. Imitating begins at birth but initially the child is more likely to imitate those people around him/her. Consequently, the imitation is of people from the same gender. Thus gender stereotypes keep reinforcing and strengthening themselves within a society unless an external force enters, like education, giving the child a parallel perspective to ponder upon. Child rearing practices differ across castes, classes and tribes, hence bringing about a change in adult personality, views and beliefs [5].

Religion is an aspect which is as personal as it is political. Children in certain regions were exposed to Muslim religion only through audio-visual media, whereas in other regions children were very familiar with the existence of different religions and their practices. When presented with the image V, the children responded differently in different contexts.

For children who have never ever seen or heard about burqa clad women couldn't comprehend the picture. The children tried creating a story, based on the images, which didn't show any form of inter-religion tension as the country currently faces. Gandhi envisages the view that voluntary moral actions should be associated with knowledge. He, thus, recognizes the importance of *jnana* (knowledge) along with the acquisition of moral or ethical virtues [6]. The knowledge that women wearing burqa might belong to Muslim community was alien to the children and thus acquiring any form of moral or ethical values towards them was not in purview. Responses, of children familiar with the burqa, were most likely around casual conversations between a Hindu and a Muslim woman like asking about the day, borrowing something etc. One of the responses for image IV was “*Ebbaru Hindu jaathi, Karnataka Rajostava aachirisalu hooguthidare*” (Both of them are Hindus and they are dressed up to celebrate Karnataka Rajostava).

Although few responses exhibited that Muslims and Hindus cannot have a cordial relationship. Responses on image IV were different from the responses elicited by image V such as, “*wo kisi aur ka bacha leke jaa rhi hogi, Uska nahi hoga*”



Fig.4



Fig.5

(The child must be someone else's and not her child); *Wo kisika bacha utha ke le aayi hai, uska bacha to Muslim hoga*” (she must have picked someone else's son, her son would also be a Muslim). With the population being highly skewed with predominantly Hindus, the alienation towards the Muslim could be seen in their responses. The identity of belonging to a religious group was evident as they referred to Muslims as ‘they’. Showing such an image evoked the feeling of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Intergroup competition and differentiation is highly influential in building an individual's behaviour and personality.

The results drawn from construction of stories through the images has provided a rich canvas of the three regions to work further dwell upon the social dynamics regarding the discrimination against communities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

Children in all the three regions reflected the views and beliefs of their community. Children are active participants in a society and thus their views are of utmost importance. Engagement with the images elicited spontaneous outcomes and didn't require much of verbal probing which indicates that it can be used with very young children as well. Such a technique can be used in large scale assessments since the use of limited non-verbal communication can be used to maintain uniformity across various locales at a time. Although there has been a lot of criticism around projective techniques yet they prove to be useful in eliciting responses from children on issues which are otherwise inaccessible.

It can be predicted that images can prove to be a viable method of studying children and their views and perceptions towards society. Ambiguous drawings depicting several societal situations seemed to have facilitated the communication of existing discriminations around. Pictures or images when used in conjunction with the other techniques, like discussion, aids progressively in drawing children's perceptions about their society.

The projective technique administered also has its own fallacies. The interpretation of the data collected is in the hands of the researchers. There was a struggle in selecting the stories that actually unfolded the perceptions of the children. There is a scope for a large amount of subjectivity in conducting projective technique unless it is standardized. Issues, such as discrimination, marginalization or human rights etc., are delicate issues and standardization wouldn't make it contextual. The nature of the technique lies in its flexibility where the researcher can maneuver the discussion and stories with specific probe questions.

Similar researches can be conducted using different kinds of projective techniques like associative, expressive or choice or ordering techniques etc. The scope can be assessed when

different such techniques deliver similar results. The researcher needs to be oriented before administering such sessions with children.

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#### Author's Profile

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Dr. Pranalee Sharma pursued B.Sc. (Home Science) from lady Irwin College, University of Delhi in 2010. She pursued her M.Sc. and PhD in Human Development and Childhood Studies, University of Delhi in 2012 and 2018 respectively. She is currently working as a lecturer in School of Continuing Education, Azim Premji University, Bangalore since 2017. She worked on the socialization of children living in the Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam. Her main research work focuses on child development and the cultural-social anthropology of children. She works on Early Childhood Care and Education to improve the capacity of pre-school educators in the country.

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