Animated Vignettes & Child/Adolescent Perspectives in the Global South

Deborah Levison and Anna Bolgrien
Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

Long abstract for PAA 2019

Short abstract & overview. In an effort to expand adult understandings of the perspectives of young people (ages 12-17) about their own lives, we use a mixed method approach to develop a low-risk survey research tool. We argue that animated vignettes with recorded voiceovers heard through headphones, followed by questions referencing the vignettes rather than the young respondent's own life, reduce the risk that nearby adults will disagree with and punish children. Analysis of follow-up interviews and focus groups help us interpret and validate the quantitative results. We report on exploratory research in Sierra Leone (2017) and Tanzania (2018) and two pilots in rural and urban Tanzania (July and December 2018). Finding a way to learn about children's perspective on a large scale will help to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, we expect that better understanding children's perspectives can help demographers understand the demographic behavior of young people.

Frameworks. Jens Qvortrup (2009) writes "Are children human beings or human becomings?" adding that "the view of children as creatures who redeem their promises only when they are adults is neither new nor uncontested."[1] Qvortrup contributes to the New Sociology of Childhood, which critiques the "anticipatory" or outcome-oriented approach that promotes investments in childhood on the basis of returns in adulthood while ignoring – and allowing the neglect of – children and their experiences as they live them, day by day.[2] Although we will not elaborate on it here, it is this literature that inspired the current research. Among other implications of this body of work is the perspective that generational power and bias exists yet is typically invisible to those with such power – adults – in the same way that racial privilege may be invisible to whites[3].

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), or UNCRC, provides a mechanism for those without power – children – to be heard by adults in general and adult policy-makers in particular. The UNCRC states in Article 12:

> *States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

We use the term "voice" to signify this ability to express views that are listened to. Following the

---

[1] Qvortrop, Jens (2009) *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* CXVII(3-4): 631-653.
[2] James, Allison, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge UK: Polity. And Qvortrop, Jens, Marjatta Bardy, Giovanni Sgritta, Helmut Wintersberger, eds., *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, Brookfield VT: Ashgate.
[3] Including in Levison, Deborah (2000) "Children as Economic Agents," *Feminist Economics* 6(1): 125-134.

UNCRC, "children" or "children and adolescents" includes those under age 18. This rights perspective, like the New Sociology of Childhood, argues that children should be valued not only for their future adult outcomes but also as people living their lives at a particular moment in time. Research conducted with a children's participation or human rights framework can help adults understand children's views of their own lives. Children have opinions about, for example, their access to education, how they are treated at school, and their conditions of work. Traditional outcome-oriented surveys, asking questions concerning school enrollment or hours of employment, can be supplemented by children's own perspectives to provide insight into the meaning and nuance of these outcomes.

Most studies that aim to understand children's lives and perspectives do so with qualitative approaches, typically including small numbers of children and especially underrepresenting those in the Global South. While qualitative research of this sort is undoubtedly a valuable way to gain the clearest understanding of children's perspectives and actions, it is time-consuming, expensive, and almost never representative at a population level. We argue that until survey research encompasses children as agents, children's perspectives are unlikely to reach those making policies and designing programs that greatly affect those same children. We propose to combine innovative approaches with modern technologies that may be used relatively inexpensively to include children in large-scale representative surveys.

Existing surveys about children. Most large-scale surveys do not engage children about their current life experiences or agency, instead asking questions *about* children and adolescents, often via proxy reporting. UNICEF, as the United Nations agency focused on child well-being, might be expected to be a leader in listening to children's voices in the Global South. It has, in fact, provided one of the leading sources of information about children via the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). The MICS Surveys utilize proxy reporting from the child's mother or guardian for information regarding children ages 5-17, except for tests of children's literacy and numeracy[4]. Similarly, the International Labor Office (ILO) has, since the 1990s, fielded child labor surveys concerning 5-17 year-olds in over 45 countries, yet initial surveys' questions were formulated in language that would be difficult even for adults, and more recent surveys appear to be proxy-reported.

Most research aiming to understand children's perspectives uses qualitative approaches. One example of surveying children on a larger scale took place in Tanzania as a part of the "Views of the People" study of the Poverty Monitoring System. This study asked 512 children qualitative questions through role playing and quantitative questions through group surveys (asking children to step into the circle if they agreed with a statement). The results of this study showed innovations in methodology, including a better understanding of the responder burden on the

---

[4] Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys MICS6 "Questionnaire for Children Age 5-17". 20 November 2016.
http://mics.unicef.org/tools#survey-design. Accessed 12 December 2016.

children and ethical consent in areas with lower levels of parental literacy.[5] This type of engagement is able to generalize about a larger population, but it continues to be time consuming and costly.

In light of the challenges of surveying children, our goal is to create an innovative, cost-effective methodology that can be used with large scale, representative surveys while also insuring accurate and reliable data on children's perspectives. Essentially, we aim to find out whether it is possible to represent children's (qualitative) perspectives in a quantitative way, with the help of modern technology. To this end, our pilot studies must be mixed methods. Although of course this tool cannot compete with in-depth qualitative studies in terms of depth of understanding, if it can to some extent convey the perspectives of young people such that policy-making adults pay attention to them, that will further the goal of treating children as people.

Overview of field research. As will be described below, vignettes with images/animations and voiceovers were developed in Tanzania and tested in exploratory research in June 2018. To simulate the experience of using this tool with a large-scale survey, and also to gain contextual information to use in analysis, we conducted a small-scale randomized survey in a rural village in Tanzania in July 2018. In 103 households, we were able to interview 133 children ages 12-17, as well as 103 adults (usually the child's mother). We conducted follow-up interviews with 66 of the young respondents, and a number of them participated in 10 focus groups as well. We will return to Tanzania later this year to conduct a similar urban study.

E-surveys with images. Survey research in the Global South increasingly makes use of digital platforms such as hand-held devices (tablet computers) to record respondents' answers to questions. Producing short animations has also become relatively inexpensive, and thus affordable for survey research. Based on our experience of conducting research with children and examples of qualitative work such as photo voice, we began this study expecting that animated vignettes about dilemmas would be more engaging for children than typical adult-to-child questioning. In addition, illiterate children will not be disadvantaged as they are in text-based surveys. This methodology also prioritizes privacy for child respondents, so adults cannot direct them or penalize them for their choices, and to reduce social desirability bias (trying to please interviewers or onlookers). Child respondents can decide what they think should happen next in the animation's storyline, thus revealing their perspectives. In addition, their suppositions about what is *most likely* to happen next provides information about their experiences as well as prevalent discourses.

Exploratory research using images. The first step of developing a survey instrument that can be used to represent various aspects of children's life was to consult with children in Sierra Leone during the summer of 2017. This was an opportunity to explore how children would respond to images and how they would critique them. Three artists were commissioned to create

---

[5] Research and Analysis Working Group, United Republic of Tanzania (2008) *Children's Perceptions of Education and Their Role in Society. Views of the Children 2007*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

simple line drawings that depicted children in common situations such as attending school, doing household chores, selling in the market, or playing games. We aimed to design an image style that could be used, without presuming literary, in different regions and language groups, while avoiding details about facial structure, body type, hair type, hair style, skin color, clothing, and footwear (for example) that may indicate community membership. Because so many cultural markers can influence responses in complicated and invisible ways, we began experimenting with styles for images that were extremely stripped-down. The children who see these images may not be used to cartoons, so we aim to avoid the use of standard cartoon conventions (for example, thoughts in bubbles, or !! over a head to indicate surprise).

In Sierra Leone, Bolgrien learned through informal conversations with students that even small details influenced their interpretations of the images. For example, in one drawing, the way a person was holding an infant influenced perception of the gender of the person.

Our final cartoon-like style, drawn by artist Hillary Carter-Liggett, avoids as many details as possible, as demonstrated in these images.
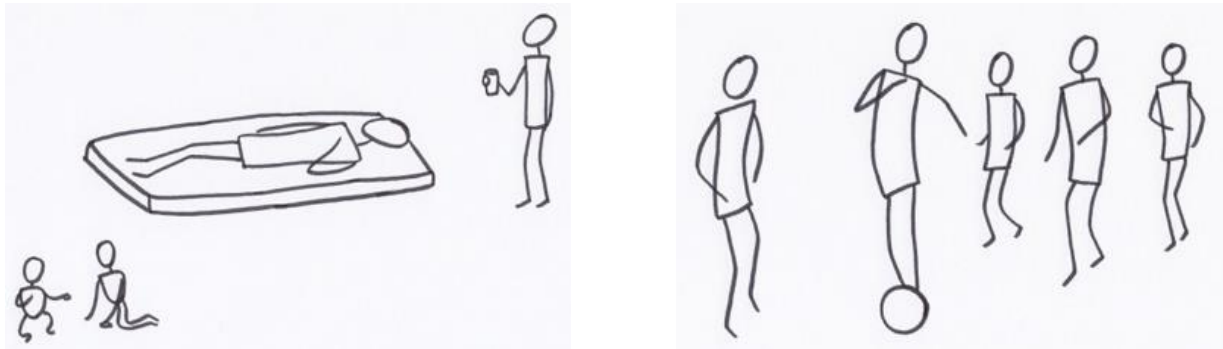
Our search for an (affordable) animator was similarly long and almost unsuccessful. At the last minute we engaged animator Ebenezer Kweka, who had time to animate only selected scenes for our July 2018 pilot study in rural Tanzania. Instead of fully animated vignettes, we used a combination of still images (with fade-ins and fade-outs) and animated scenes. While we are not yet ready to make the videos public via the PAA website, if the organizer would care to email us, we would be happy to provide links to see the current vignettes with Swahili and/or English voiceovers.

Online library. If this survey research tool proves to be useful, we have committed to making a free or open source library of images and animated scenes that researchers can use to create a variety of vignettes.

Vignettes. Development of vignettes was done iteratively. Initially we drew upon the qualitative literature in sociology, education, child rights, and geography, among others, as well as the expertise of our colleagues. For example, Mojola (2014)[6] found that Kenyan girls turn to

---

[6] Mojola, Sanyu A. (2014) *Love, Money and HIV: Becoming a Modern African Woman in the Age of AIDS*, Oakland CA: University of California Press.

older boyfriends when they feel themselves in need of money, so that became an element of a vignette. A colleague documented that boys on Zanzibar (Tanzania) tended to drop out before completing secondary because of the lack of job possibilities, so that became a story line.[7]Our approach thus far has been to describe challenging situations faced by young people in many parts of the Global South in the vignettes, and then end each vignette on a question: what should the main character (a young person) do? Each vignette describes possible outcomes of the situation before ending. In Tanzania, those outcomes were developed in part using exploratory research.

While we developed seven vignettes and used all seven in exploratory research, we focused on four of them for the small pilot conducted in July 2018 in a rural village in Tanzania. Some had separate voiceovers by gender: if the respondent were male, he would hear the voiceover describing a boy as the main character, and similarly for girls. The challenges involved a sick parent, being beaten at school, a teacher making advances to a school girl, and a pregnancy scenario.

As we developed these vignettes, we were to some extent limited by what Mojola (2014) describes as a very real lack of options for young people, at least in East Africa. In exploratory research, we heard very few alternative, creative solutions to typical challenges.

Smiley scale. Another innovation, again driven by a desire to provide respondents as much privacy as possible, was to use a modified 5-point "Smiley scale" to capture young people's responses to alternative outcomes to a scenario. Smiley scales have been used by health care researchers, for example, to record the pain levels of young patients[8].
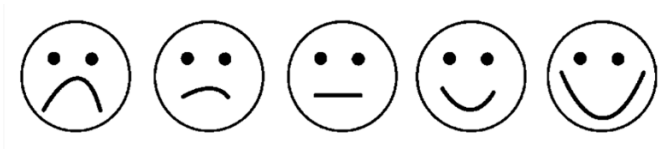
This Smiley scale was printed and laminated, allowing respondents to hold it and point at responses rather than say them out loud. Of course, some kind of technological solution to this problem of stating opinions out loud would be possible, but it would be expensive to program and possibly to adapt to different survey software. One of our goals is for this tool to be inexpensive for adapt.

Other follow-up questions were unable to avoid the necessity of an oral answer. However, even

---

[7] Conversation with an anonymous colleague, whose research is embargoed until February 2018.
[8] As developed in: Scott, J. (1997). *Children as respondents: Methods for improving data quality.* In: L. Lyberg, P. Biemer, M. Collins, E. de Leeuw, C. Dippo, N. Schwarz, and D. Trewin (eds). *Survey measurement and process quality*, pp 331-350. New York: Wiley. Example: King, J. A. (2015). *Getting the Picture : A Cartoon-Based Assessment Tool for Complex Trauma.* University of Pennsylvania.

those adults who refused to stay at a distance from respondents could not tell what situation the questions referenced. We had no situations where young people were put at risk, to our knowledge.

PAA paper. We are just beginning analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data, separately and jointly. The PAA paper will not only describe the tool but answer both basic and more complex questions about it. At this point, we expect to argue that the vignette approach is understandable, engaging, low-risk, and relatively time-efficient and inexpensive. We will address how social desirability and/or discourse about schooling (such as "education is the key to success") affect responses, and discuss what clues we have about the extent to which respondents' data captured their perspectives at that moment in time, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative information. A first look at the quantitative data indicates that there is a substantial amount of variation, and that answers tend toward the socially desirable responses – which may (possibly) be what the young people truly believed.

Limitations. The rural sample was conducted while school was in session, and a number of older children could not be interviewed because they were in boarding school. Thus, our sample is not evenly distributed by age. For this reason, we plan to interview the urban sample in December, when students are on holiday. While this will not solve another difficulty – the challenge of finding out-of-school young people who are working – it will certainly improve the distribution.

Example: Vignette about Pregnancy. One vignette is about pregnancy; there are two scripts, one, for female respondents, is from the girl's perspective. A parallel script, for male respondents, is from the boy's (father's) perspective. The vignette begins with a girl who has an older boyfriend, who is nice to her. She discovers she is pregnant and tries to figure out what to do. The vignette works through the options that such a girl might be thinking about. It ends with a question: "What will happen? What should she do?" Underlying this script is the understanding that in Tanzania, pregnant girls are not allowed to stay in school.

Options presented were "getting her period back" by using medicine or herbs (that is, abortion); marrying the baby's father; (for girls only) finding out that he is already married; giving up the baby to the father's family; the boy denying that the baby is his; and the girl finding relatives on her side to care for the baby, so she can return to school or go to work. Smiley scale responses to the overall situation and to most of the options were typically "very sad/angry" or "sad/angry." Variation by gender indicated that boys were much more likely than girls to respond "happy" or "very happy" to the marriage outcome, possibly because school-aged boys are unlikely to have girlfriends (to have sex with) but would like to (Mojola 2014). Boys are also more positive about the baby being cared for by their relatives.

Many of the respondents had a negative response to the thought that the girl might have an abortion. Over 60 percent of Smiley scale responses were in the two "sad/angry" options. In interviews, focus groups, and exploratory research, participants reflected on abortion being a sin and the possibilities of medical complications from the abortion. Despite this, abortion was often

discussed as a likely outcome in the situation with. Responding to the question, "Among these options that the girl/boy is thinking about [listed in the vignette], what do you think she/he should do?" 17 percent said she should abort.[9] Responding to a question about the most likely outcome if the vignette character lived nearby, 19 percent chose abortion. Preliminary analysis suggests that the primary motivation for an abortion would be that the girl could remain in school. One older boy said, *"For what I see, this girl, before giving birth, she could go and find medicine to abort so that she can continue studies."* (FG10). Another boy in exploratory research responded positively to the vignette girl having an abortion because neither the boy nor the girl were ready to have a baby. Other respondents spoke about dramatic options, such as throwing the baby in the river once it was born, or a number of other methods of abandonment or infanticide.

Almost 30 percent of respondents reported knowing someone in a situation similar to the one in the vignette. In general, there was consensus that teenage pregnancy is difficult for young people and places them at risk of poverty and other hardships. Some participants, however, were hopeful that through marriage and hard work, the mother and father would be able to support the baby. One 17-year-old girl said, "*For example, if it happened to me, I will take the kid to my relatives and go back to school. But if the man will accept me, I will live with him and I will work so that I can take care of our kid.*" (FG 9).

Other responses suggest troubling gender and generational dynamics. Both boys and girls – almost 50 percent of respondents who viewed this vignette – felt that the boy would decide what would happened next, while others felt that the boy's parents (11%) or the girl's parents (16%) would decide happened next. Only 3 percent thought that decisions would be made by the young people jointly with their parents.

Results from the July study will allow us to refine December focus group questions and procedures. We look forward to feedback at PAA on how better to refine, test, and deploy this tool.

---

[9] Note that the word abortion is not used; adults might overhear "take medicine" and would not know the context.