

If this child were a car, what sort of car would it be?

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The Global Child: Using appropriate projective techniques to view the world through their eyes

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Abstract

Many clients around the world are trying to understand what appeals to a young audience. This raises many challenges. Children differ vastly between age and gender; there are clear global social and cultural differences. How can research be carried out on a global basis, with such a diverse audience?

This paper argues that in many ways, qualitative research is far better suited to research with children and young people, than quantitative research. Children do not necessarily have the capacity to fully understand pre-determined questions. They may dislike, or not be good at, reading; they find it hard to think coherently; they are easily distracted; their opinions are not yet fully formed. All this means that commonly used quantitative methods may be less effective with such a young audience. Too often a methodology more suited to adults is imposed on children's research.

It is possible however to look at their attitude, their need states, their drivers through the use of projective techniques, but not necessarily the projective techniques more commonly associated with adults; for example it is probably not appropriate to ask them to liken anything to a car, because it is not within their experience to know a car in the way adults do. A study assessing global differences and similarities, using specialized projective techniques for young people, can be invaluable to clients seeking a world picture of their brand or service.

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The Challenge of research with children

There are many hurdles in carrying out research with children and young people. Clearly, as researchers, we must be careful that we do not exploit or manipulate children, nor undermine their confidence. We need to ensure that codes of conduct are in place, and adhered to (Clarke, MRS Conference 2003). But apart from ethical and moral considerations, which go hand in hand with children and young people's research, there are other points to consider. In quantitative research, consideration should be given to whether a child can actually understand and comprehend pre-determined questions, and at what age. Should an adult always be there to help them, and if so to what extent does that adult influence the response of children, many of whom are eager to please?

There is of course a strong case for quantitative research to determine, for instance, how many children own mobile phones, use the Internet, have a 'My Scene' doll, visit the Warhammer site. Understanding motivation and drivers however, and the need states that lie behind children and young people's preferences, is clearly the place of qualitative research. But carrying out qualitative research with young people is not easy. There are vast differences in age; a five year old is very different from a seven year old, and that child is different from a ten year old. And boys and girls are different too. So the type of methodology, and numbers of groups or paired interviews included in a qualitative study need careful and knowledgeable assessment. Clients can have expectations of qualitative research with children and young people that are not feasible; we sometimes receive briefs from clients asking for two groups of children aged 5 to 12, indicating that these differences have not been fully considered.

Once the hurdles of age, gender, and type of interview are overcome, we need to consider how best to conduct qualitative research with children. Good qualitative research is not so much about what is said, but what underlies what is being

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said. The use of projective techniques proves invaluable in this context to reach the underlying drivers and motivators behind preference and attraction to a particular item or product, and the best researchers have a range of techniques or tools that they can introduce. The principle behind projective techniques is to explore feelings about an activity, or product. They are fun to use, and, used in the right way, without embarrassment or humiliation, respondents enjoy using them too.

Children especially do not necessarily have the range of language to express what they mean, and projective techniques are invaluable in this context. Using qualitative research with children, and drawing heavily on therapeutic techniques used with children who have difficulty in expressing their emotion, including play, pictures and drawing, play acting, extended phantasy, story telling, researchers can gain a far better understanding of what motivates children and young people, and how they are responding to a product, service or to different media.

Communicating with children

A recent interview on BBC Radio 4's 'Today' programme (23.9.04) gave a wonderful and hilarious illustration of how not to interview children, or indeed anyone. Asking 7 year old Jack about his recent approach from Manchester United, the interviewer, clearly not prepared for such a young interviewee, became embroiled in the dreaded 'yes' and 'no' responses that we all fear as researchers. Very simply, the interviewer, an experienced sports correspondent, gave Jack the answers within the questions. 'So, Jack, you've been asked to sign up to Manchester United?' – answer 'yes'. 'Your dad must be proud of you?' – answer 'yes', and so it went on for 3 hilarious minutes, amid much laughter from fellow presenters of Radio 4. The child in this situation wanted to please, but did not really understand what was expected of him.

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Like many adults, children often find it easier to express their thoughts by projecting them on to something else, or into some activity, and the techniques we use are to enable this process. When I worked in a men's prison as a counsellor, it was often difficult for the men to let down the guard that was necessary for survival in such a closed and hostile environment. Many of the men in this Category C wing of the prison were allowed to keep a bird, the symbolism of which does not need detailed explanation (freedom, independence, flying away), and they lavished immense care on these birds. One man I visited weekly for several months got around his difficulty in expressing his feelings by projecting all his thoughts, fears, and aspirations onto his parrot. So he would say things like 'The parrot (Shirley) is pissed off today, it might be because it's my kids' 5th birthday.', enabling me to respond 'Shirley must be feeling sad about not being with him'. This way, he could remain the macho individual he needed to be within the prison environment, and the parrot could be vulnerable and uncertain. In a less extreme way, the use of projection within the group discussion can release uncertain respondents, and especially children, from the expectation of having to respond coherently.

When carrying out research with children, there are some essential factors to be taken into consideration, but much of this can apply to adults also. First of course it is important that the child does not feel in any way intimidated or threatened. They are usually brought to the research by a carer (mother, friend, other relative etc), and it is most important that both carer and child feel at ease, and have a sense that they can trust the researcher. This creates goodwill, but also begins to transfer temporary parental authority to the researcher. Many children will mirror their mother or carer's response, so if mother is relaxed so is the child. It is important too that the moderator has a positive expectation that they will like the child or children, and in return will be liked by them.

Once the moderator is alone with the child or children the rapport phase of the interview, or group is essential, and something that in my view it too rushed in the

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interviewer's concern to get to the gist of the research objectives. A warm friendly nurturing approach is recommended at this phase, with the researcher becoming more neutral as the research continues. So at the beginning non verbal communication can be conveyed by congruency. A smiling face (many researchers forget to do this because they themselves are nervous!), body posture and vocal tones that mirror the child, eye gaze on the same level as the child, if necessary kneeling down or sitting on the floor. Once this phase has been achieved, the moderator can step back, and take on a more neutral tone.

Congruency should be maintained however throughout the session, by mirroring the child's speech (e.g. soft spoken if the child is soft spoken), and maintaining eye contact with each respondent. Encouragement is essential, 'you're doing really well', 'well done, that's excellent'.

It is important to say here that research with children should never be undertaken by an inexperienced or untrained children's moderator. Too often it is assumed that working with children will be far easier than working with adults. In fact the reverse is true, and the sign of a good children's researcher is one where the process looks very easy and relaxed and straightforward. When the process goes wrong, and the child misunderstands what is expected, or the researcher does not make clear what is expected, both researcher and child can be left with feelings of inadequacy, failure, and even anger.

Global Studies

Many clients are looking at a global market for their product, or service, and therefore some consistency in research methodology is essential to make a judgment about the effectiveness of a global strategy. It is fascinating to find that in terms of psychological and physical development children and young people develop in much the same way across the world. But in terms of cultural and social differences there are vast differences, and the challenge for clients is how

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to communicate brand values that will have particular meaning to that culture.

For many global brands, it is not feasible to have a completely different strategy in each country, so while it is important to identify the differences, it is essential to look at common identifiers in each country also. Qualitative research can highlight these differences in a clear and insightful way, allowing subtle changes to be made in the way that global brands are communicated, country by country.

Because language and ways of expressing language is different in each country, projective techniques are often the most revealing in highlighting these social and cultural differences. A common questionnaire or discussion guide for instance can be interpreted in completely different ways by respondents in each country. But using the same projective techniques in each country can reveal brand identity and personality far more effectively.

An example of this is to explore how a new children's food product might be launched on a global basis. The first consideration is to explore the eating habits within families. So in France, where there is still a culture of family dining and eating at the table, the food product needs to be able to fit into family dining, and this can be explored through role play and puppet play with both mother and child. In the UK, the same product may well be served to children who are eating alone, or with siblings, but without parents, and again the product needs to fit into this very different scene, and children and mothers' feelings of trust in the product need to be explored. In Spain, the same product is likely to be eaten late in the evening, when family dining takes place, and may even be eaten outside, as the climate accommodates this in summer months. Again, exploration of the product within this setting needs to be looked at in-depth. In all cases, questions alone would not reveal the common values that the product must communicate to incite trust, reassurance and flexibility to appeal effectively in these different markets. But by using the same projective techniques in each country, the product's personality can be explored, and both child and mother's response to

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the product can be embraced to create communication that is relevant to that country.

To achieve this, role play using puppets (for children), and using story telling (for mothers) reveals the thoughts and feelings behind feeding children, the attributes that a new food product needs, and the sense of reassurance and trust that mother is left with. It also allows children to express how they feel about the product and what it will bring with it to the meal.

Play as a projective technique

As a child, much of what we do and feel, and the way we work out our place in the world is through play. It is something that, unfortunately, as adults, we too often forget to do. Children are born with a basic, inborn, need to play. Playing, and toys, help children to understand their world, explore different personalities, deal with troubling events, and mimic what they see adults do. Jean Piaget, one of the most influential child psychologists wrote:

“We can be sure that all happenings,
pleasant or unpleasant, in the child’s life,
will have repercussions on its dolls”

Jean Piaget 1962

Play can take many forms, and can be expressed in several ways: Pictures and Drawing, Modelling, Play Acting, Puppets, Extended Phantasy, Story Telling, and all these forms can be utilized when working with children, both therapeutically, and in research. I’ll take some of these, and illustrate how these can work in research.

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Pictures and drawing

This can be invaluable to help reveal thoughts and feelings, and is ideal for children as it does not require spoken language. It is highly effective as a projective technique with adults also, although most of us as adults can feel inept when expressing ourselves through pictures. If this fear can be overcome by reassurance from the moderator, results with adults can be valuable also.

Although it is important not to interpret the drawing or painting, but to accept it as it is, it is worth taking note of what the drawing shows, and checking with the child (or adult). An example of the way this can be used is to ask a child to draw the way in which they see a particular product. It can be noted whether the product is colourful, dull, is it happy, large, small, is it interacting with anything or anyone else, in which case who and where. The moderator can comment on the drawing, 'this looks very colourful and sunny, how does it make you feel?', or 'it looks very big, I wonder why that is', or 'I can see some people in the picture, I wonder who they are?'.

Play acting

Spontaneous acting is natural for many children, although adults can feel self-conscious when asked to role play. Children naturally like to experiment with different roles, and role reversal can work well, For instance the children can become the adult, and tell the moderator how to behave in a certain situation (e.g. in a supermarket), or in a certain setting (e.g. waiting for food to be delivered in a restaurant), or when involved with a product (e.g. playing with a toy). This can give tremendous insight into how it feels to be a child in such circumstances, revealing what is actually basic information but often overlooked by adults, simply because we are no longer children, such as children have small hands and cannot operate the toy so generously given to them, or they get bored and tired and there is nothing to entertain them.

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Puppets

These work well with quieter children, and young people, and they enjoy talking behind the puppet, and also playing different roles with different puppets. They can be used in a variety of ways, both in response to new products, and in relation to a service or to the media. Obviously the puppets have to be age appropriate; young children enjoy working with animals, older teenagers quite like using puppets they make themselves, giving them expressions, hair, clothes that they feel express the personality of the product or service. An example might be asking young people to describe how they feel about particular retail outlets, and the type of people who go there. Whilst they might be able to describe this in words, it is more revealing to allow them to play out the associations they make with different retailers. For instance some environments might be perceived to be quite hip and cool, but in reality make them feel quite intimidated and inadequate, something that the moderator can explore within the puppet play.

Summary

As the use of research with children and young people increases, it is important to assess how it is done, and not merely make it another form of adult research. Children's ability to understand and communicate through language is not as developed as that of adults, and in many ways qualitative research works best with this age group. The use of projective techniques is especially valuable to an audience that can more readily use play, than language, to express how it feels.

The encouraging aspect of using non-verbal communication with children and young people is that it is universal, making it a valuable method for carrying out global research. When launching a product or service globally, clients need to find out differences, but also similarities between countries, to effectively communicate brand values. For a product or service targeted to children or young people this is especially important.

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Effectively using projective techniques with young people globally can give insight and understanding that would not exist through pre-determined questions, or even a common discussion guide. Children and young people find it easier to express feelings and attitudes non-verbally, or through role play, and a common denominator can be found for the communication of brand or service between countries. In many ways this can also apply to research with adults.

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Barbie Clarke is Managing Director of Kids and Youth, a company she set up with a small team of researchers in 2002. She is Editor of Young Consumer (formerly International Journal of Advertising and Marketing to Children). Barbie has been a youth researcher for 18 years, and works closely with Kids and Youth clients on research and consultancy dealing with children's issues. Previously she was brought into NOP World to set up and run its Family division in 1997 where she stayed for four years, and before that ran Clarke Research. Barbie has a post-graduate qualification in psycho-analytical counselling and worked for several years in a therapeutic setting with young people in prison, and in school. She is especially interested in non-verbal communication in research methodology. An accomplished and experienced speaker, she regularly gives papers at international conferences, writes articles, and appears on TV and radio commenting on youth research. Barbie works with several well known children's and young people's brands, and has written extensively on the issues around children's lifestyle and diet.

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