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Article

"A Pencil for Your Thoughts": Participatory Drawing as a Visual Research Method with Children and Youth

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Abstract

This article explores the use of participatory drawing as a non-mechanical visual research method in qualitative research with children and youth. Because of its co-constructed and playful nature, as well as its lack of dependence on linguistic proficiency, participatory drawing emerges as a highly efficient and ethically sound research strategy that is particularly suited for work with children and young people across a variety of cultural contexts. The analysis of drawn images, complemented by a subsequent discussion of these drawings in the context of their production, has the potential of revealing a more nuanced depiction of concepts, emotions, and information in an expressive, empowering, and personally relevant manner. As a review of the participatory drawing methodology, this article draws on several examples in order to highlight the inherent affordances of the visual mode and discuss the benefits and limitations of using this strategy in research with children and youth.

Keywords: drawing, visual, participatory, qualitative methods, children, youth, methodology

While language-based research methods—both written and oral—have long dominated the spectrum of communication research, a new range of non-textual strategies is gradually emerging as an alternative and highly versatile way of knowing. Specifically, participatory visual communications, such as drawing, photography, and video, hold the inherent potential of painting a more nuanced depiction of lived realities, while simultaneously empowering the research participants and placing the agency literally in their own hands. Through the process of visual conceptualization, and the reflective discussion of these images in the context of their production, participants are given an expressive channel to voice their inner stories, as well as an active and empowering stake in the research study. Furthermore, because of its playful nature and its lack of dependence on linguistic proficiency, this research method is especially suitable for work with children and youth across a variety of backgrounds and cultural contexts.

Situated within the broader field of visual research in the social sciences, this article will discuss the use of participatory drawing as a non-mechanical visual production tool in research with children and youth. While the discussion will necessarily draw on a series of illustrative examples (both from the core literature on this topic and from my own research using this method), the primary purpose of this article is to explicate the practice of participatory drawing for research purposes. As such, it will function as a much-needed review of this methodology, given that—as I shall presently argue—participatory drawing is a relatively understudied method within the context of qualitative research. The review will begin by tackling the background of using visual methods in social scientific research. After this foundation has been laid out, I will discuss the inherent affordances of visual versus language-based communication modes in the context of qualitative research methodology. Finally, drawing on several examples, the last section of the article will analyze the unique benefits—both practical and ethical—and limitations that this method poses to the qualitative scholar.

Participatory drawing, as a quintessentially visual research method, authenticates "non-textual ways of knowing" by activating the "performative dimensions" of image-making (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006, p. 327). Its principal objective is to facilitate the expression of perspectives and narratives that were previously "overlooked, rejected, or silenced" (p. 317). In this context, it is therefore important to note that the current discussion analyzes the practice of participatory drawing in the context of qualitative research, and not pedagogy. Even though many of the techniques described here can be equally valuable as pedagogical activities because of their inherent potential to foster creative expression and learning, this article is primarily concerned with the knowledge-generating capacity of participatory drawing as a research tool.

Background: The Use of Visual Research Methods in the Social Sciences

The idea of using visuals as a qualitative research method in the social sciences is not new; however, the practice is becoming increasingly participatory. In terms of strategies used, the methodological toolkit in visual research includes both mechanical tools (e.g., photography and video) and non-mechanical tools (e.g., drawing, playdough, Legos, and similar tools). Alternatively, in the current context of participatory research interventions, this distinction can also be represented as a methodological choice between digital and non-digital techniques; some projects also use a combinatory approach (see, for instance, Young & Barrett, 2001), which can represent an insightful methodological comparison of the specific affordances that characterize these tools.

The use of images in modern social science as a way of knowing about human subjects originated in the field of visual anthropology, where researchers documented "exotic" cultures through photographs to supplement their narrative accounts (Collier & Collier, 1986; Scherer, 1992,

1995). This technique, however, is intrinsically anti-participatory, historically placing the disempowered human subject under the colonially-charged gaze of the researcher. Beyond the fields of anthropology and sociology, visual research methods — and, in particular, generative techniques like drawing—have been used extensively in psychology and psychotherapy (Reavey, 2011). Rooted in early 20th century psychological research, photo-elicitation thus emerged as a comparatively more participatory visual communication strategy, where the primary objective is not documentation, but the comprehension and analysis of an individual's intimate world (Gauntlett, 2007). Even within the framework of this approach, however, it is the researcher that takes or selects the photographs, and thus the subjects are denied the agency of producing the images themselves.

With the advent of participatory communication theory in the 1970s, and fuelled by the poststructuralist critique of, in Deleuze's words, "the indignity of speaking for others" (as quoted in Foucault, 1977, p. 209), the means of visual production (whether the pencil, the camera, or, later, the video camera) gradually passed into the hands of the "subjects." A particularly fruitful application of these participatory visual methodologies has been in the field of community development because of their cross-cultural feasibility and potential to stimulate self- and collective empowerment. Here, entertainment-education has played a significant role in popularizing the application of this methodology in both formative research and impact evaluation (Singhal & Devi, 2003; Singhal, Harter, Chitnis, & Sharma, 2007; Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006; Singhal & Rogers, 1999), but usually with adult populations, given that they are the target audience of most entertainment-education programs.

In regards to the use of visual methodologies in research with children and youth, there are several key applications that have shaped this field, albeit the literature on non-adult populations is comparatively more limited and less diverse. A crucial influence in this area was the work of Paulo Freire, a noted Brazilian sociologist who pioneered the "dialogic pedagogy" approach as a non-hierarchical, dynamic, and transformative process of learning (Freire, 1970). Conducting a literacy project in Peru in 1973, Freire asked slum dwellers to respond to the query of "What is exploitation?" but instead of documenting their oral responses, he handed them cameras and asked them to provide their answers in photographs. In response to this question, most participants took pictures of landlords, grocers, or policemen. One child, however, simply photographed a nail on the wall. This depiction of exploitation made no sense to the adults, but the other children seemed to understand it. The reason for the choice then became clear in the ensuing discussion surrounding the photograph. Many of the young boys in that neighbourhood worked as shoe-shiners, but their clients lived in the city, far from the slums. Since the shoe-shine boxes were too heavy for them to carry to the city every day, these boys used to rent a nail on a wall, usually in a shop or business, in order to hang their boxes there overnight. Thus, in their eyes, it was that nail that best embodied the concept of exploitation (Singhal et al., 2007).

A vast majority of more recent studies using participatory visual research methods have opted for the digital tools of photography and video instead of drawing; thus, photovoice and digital storytelling emerged as two particularly popular approaches in work with children and youth (Streng et al., 2004; Wang, 2007; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participatory drawing was also employed, albeit to a lesser extent, in qualitative studies with children, with Noreen Wetton being one of the first proponents of this method in formative research assessments with children aged 7-8 years (Wetton & McWhirter, 1998; Williams, Wetton, & Moon, 1989). In a series of studies, Wetton has since used participatory drawing to explore children's world-making practices, analyzing, for instance, how children perceive the insides of their bodies (Williams et al., 1989), or how they interpret dental health campaigns (Wetton & McWhirter, 1998). Young and Barrett (2001) conducted a rich study in Uganda, using participatory drawing with homeless children

aged 9-17 to learn more about their experiences living on the streets of Kampala. In the United Kingdom, within a particularly extensive study employing a variety of visual methods, Gauntlett (2005) asked teenagers to draw pictures of celebrities as a way to understand their aspirations and their identifications with media figures.

Overall, however, and in spite of these very insightful studies, the use of drawing in visual communication research with children and youth is surprisingly understudied. The literature review on the topic of participatory visual methods reveals the predominance of reports on photography and video projects (Frohmann, 2005; Gumucio-Dagron, 2001; McIntyre, 2003; Moss, 1999), with much less writing devoted to non-mechanical practices like drawing or playdough. From an academic perspective, moreover, what is also missing is an attempt to build theoretical bridges between this approach and other methodological frameworks of learning, empowerment, or co-constructed research.

It must be noted that the implementation of visual research methods with children and youth is marked by a particular set of developmental considerations regarding the relationship between age, perception, and visual representation. Wetton's early work, which examined— through participatory drawing—the emotional literacy of children aged 7-8, established that children were able to convey visually emotions that they could not express orally or in writing (Wetton & McWhirter, 1998). Wetton concluded, "The children differed only from adults in that they did not have the vocabulary to express themselves" (p. 273). Nevertheless, in terms of expressing themselves through drawing, there are significant differences in the drawing abilities of children of varying ages. With age, children's abilities to produce complex drawings increase, and this difference is at least partly attributed to an increase in working memory capacity (Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey, & Flichtbeil, 2006). Very young children generate simple scribbles; as they mature and their dexterity also increases, representational intentions become more evident, although they still draw things as they are known rather than as they actually perceive them. Finally, as children become older, they start developing spatial and visual realism, including a consideration of perspective (Tallandini & Valentini, 1991). In view of these developmental differences, an important direction for future research within the area of participatory drawing is to attain a better understanding of the efficiency of this methodology at varying age levels, in concordance with the development of cognitive and visual abilities.

Visual Versus Textual Ways of Knowing

The use of participatory drawing as a research method in the social sciences is a versatile practice, but it is most efficient in situations where this mode of expression best capitalizes on the inherent affordances of the visual medium. Gunther Kress (2004) aptly summarizes these intrinsic affordances of the visual and textual modes, by noting that images represent "the (transformed) recollection of the visually encountered world through the spatially organized mode," while text is "the (transformed) recollection of the actionally experienced world through the temporally organized mode" (Design as choice in context section, para. 2). In discussing images from a social semiotic perspective, he draws attention to their unique ability to depict space and time in a comparatively more unbounded and unregulated fashion (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). In terms of spatial depiction, drawings are able to represent the relationship between visual elements in a way that would be impossible to express via writing or speech. In regards to time, textual representations—both written and oral—are bound by "the 'logic' of temporal sequence" (Kress, 2004, Modes and their affordances section, para. 3); by contrast, images are intrinsically non-linear, thus allowing for a more holistic representation of concepts, emotions, and information without the need to prioritize certain elements along a temporal continuum (Awan, 2007; Gauntlett, 2007).

Images also hold the inherent potential to generate metaphorical representations of identities and concepts, and thus stimulate abstract and creative thought. According to Gauntlett (2007), the drawn image often functions as a metaphor for complex emotions, perceptions, and identities; while textual expression can also achieve the creation of metaphors, this requires a level of experiential maturity and comfort with language that children might not have, especially at a young age. Indeed, the very practice of image-making is, in a sense, the creation of visual metaphors to depict internal realities. Significantly, in regards to the content of the images, drawing is comparatively more generative than digital tools like cameras, because one has to actually draw a world into existence, and not merely select aspects of the external environment to record in a video or a photograph. Indeed, as Banks (2001) notes, in the case of non-mechanical media such as drawing, content is not limited by form; the creative depiction of both physical and abstract realities is, in this sense, unbounded. Furthermore, the physical act of creation and the bodily engagement with one's environment fosters, according to Gauntlett (2007), a different type of cognitive process, which transcends the domain of purely cerebral thought. In view of these features, Rattine-Flaherty and Singhal (2007) convincingly argue that visual participatory research strategies are an inherently feminist approach, due to their valuing of subjective, emotional, and co-constructed ways of knowing.

A further advantage of this method is that, unlike in interviews or focus group sessions where an instantaneous response is expected, the research participants are given time to reflect on their responses, which encourages active conceptualization and contemplation (Gauntlett, 2007). This additional time for reflection also gives the participants an opportunity to craft a more complete depiction, which is more difficult to achieve linguistically in a brief interview or survey. As Gauntlett (2005) aptly notes, language-based methods are more time-pressured than visual or creative methods; while this time pressure may be valuable in certain situations (when, for instance, researchers are principally interested in the spontaneous or instinctual reactions of their respondents), other circumstances or research topics may require a more reflective response, which can be better facilitated by employing creative visual methods.

Finally, from a psychological perspective, this research method is arguably more nuanced than traditional written or oral research strategies, and it can better uncover subconscious or unrealized feelings and perspectives (Rattine-Flaherty & Singhal, 2007). In fact, the famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung, in exploring the creative unconscious, frequently asked his patients to generate drawings during the therapy sessions as a way to peek inside the inner workings of their psyche (Gauntlett, 2007). Thus, the analysis of such visual modes of representation can reveal more subtle messages and more obscure realities than text-based research methods. Furthermore, these visual techniques, by allowing the participants to freely decide on the content and framing of their images, can highlight both presences and absences—significance thus lies in both the visible and the omitted.

Ethical and Practical Benefits

One of the main advantages of using the method of participatory drawing in social scientific research is its inclusive and interactive nature. Children are considered to be a particularly sensitive type of research subject, and thus the researcher must take special care to craft their methodological approach in the utmost ethical manner. As such, and in accordance with Freire's dialogic pedagogy, this technique discourages the sense of a hierarchy between researcher and subject, and it is comparatively more horizontal and more ethical than alternative textual strategies. In this sense, it can also be considered a non-positivistic approach (Banks, 2001). Furthermore, in comparison with other visual methods like photovoice and digital storytelling, drawing, a technology-independent tool, gives equal footing to the children and the adult

researchers, which makes it more comfortable for the child participants (Druin et al., 1999). The hierarchy of knowledge that inescapably conditions participatory photography and video activities is thus inapplicable in the case of drawing, where the children are in their own element and, arguably, the researcher is the outsider.

Because of its co-constructed design, which enables the participants to take charge of framing their own realities in an expressive and personally relevant manner, this strategy holds a vast potential to stimulate individual and community empowerment through the facilitation of self- and collective efficacy. According to Bandura (2001), self-efficacy is understood as an individual's needed confidence in his or her own skills and ability to implement specific prosocial behaviors; collective efficacy, on the other hand, is the degree to which individuals within a system believe that they can effectively organize and carry out courses of action in order to achieve collective goals. The practice of sharing the visuals generated by the child participants with the larger community of children further facilitates the feeling of collective efficacy among their social group.

Within the spectrum of qualitative research methods, participatory drawing is a comparatively more expressive, engaging, and fun activity, which can turn the research study into an enjoyable experience for those involved and help maintain the participants' attention in situations where their enthusiasm or concentration levels are of concern, as is generally the case in research with children and youth. Moreover, the strategy also holds significant pedagogical potential, and the research session can easily turn into a learning experience for the child participants. According to Seymour Papert's constructionist paradigm, we learn by *making* things, and thus the very act of generating a creative drawing is a valuable learning opportunity (Papert & Harel, 1991). The practice of participatory drawing also fits well within the new media literacies pedagogical framework, as it exhibits all five characteristics of participatory learning: creativity, co-constructed expertise, motivation and engagement, relevance, and connection (Reilly, Vartabedian, Felt, & Jenkins, 2012). In addition, it can foster crucial new media literacies—primarily, but not exclusively, visualization, simulation, and distributed cognition—as well as social and emotional learning skills such as self- and social awareness (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushatma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006).

A further major advantage of this methodology is its impressive versatility. As previously discussed, participatory drawing is a strategy that can be implemented easily and inexpensively (especially in comparison with other participatory visual strategies like photography and video), and it can be used across a variety of social and cultural contexts—including in international contexts, where the language barrier between the researcher and the participant may seem like an insurmountable obstacle. Moreover, and very importantly, because of its non-textual and highly accessible nature, participatory drawing promises to succeed where other methods may fail, including, for instance, with cognitively challenged, mentally unstable, or traumatized children. For example, in their study of Ugandan street children, Young and Barrett (2001) found that the children, who lacked a formal education and regularly intoxicated themselves by inhaling fumes, responded best to visual participatory methods, which proved to be the only way that these researchers could tap into the children's lived realities.

Finally, the method's versatility is also evidenced in its potential to be implemented at all stages of the research process: baseline, midpoint, and endline. This is a significant affordance, which can help craft a more integrative and comprehensive assessment process, while allowing for the complementary and symbiotic use of alternative research methods. The following examples, from my own work in Indian public schools as the Field Coordinator of "The Modern Story" digital

storytelling program, will showcase this flexibility, by demonstrating the use of participatory drawing in two very different research stages: formative research (Figure 1) and evaluative research (Figure 2).

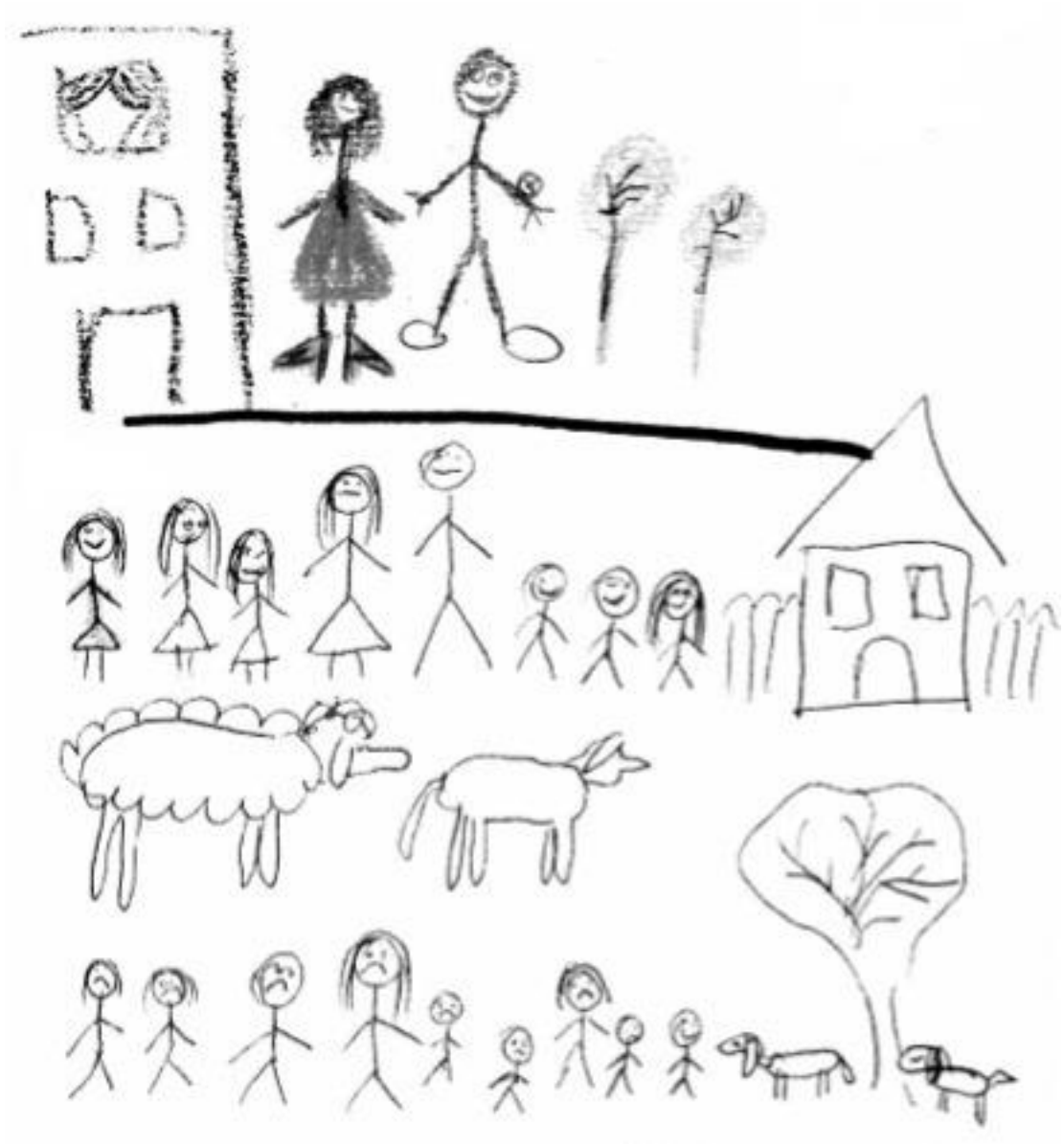

Figure 1. Drawing in response to "What does your community look like?"

Saritha's narration: In my community there are rich people and poor people. Our landowners are nicer than other landowners. They have a nice big house but they are not happy, because they are alone. Their children are in America. We find our happiness in our family, and we are lucky compared to other people in my community. The *dalits* [untouchables] take care of our animals and clean the houses. I don't think they are happy, and I want to help them in the future.

The exercise above was part of a formative research process attempting to identify the crucial socio-economic and cultural factors impacting the students' lives and their sense of self-efficacy within this social context. I was a foreign teacher and, thus, an outsider to this culture, and because the digital storytelling curriculum that I was teaching was focused heavily on social justice issues, this formative research exercise helped me to better understand my students' backgrounds and tailor the curriculum accordingly, while providing them with the chance to express important social realities in a co-constructed and creative manner.

The prompt for Saritha's drawing (Figure 1) was "What does your community look like?" In response to this query, 13-year-old Saritha drew a highly stratified depiction of the various social groups within her community. At the very top, there are the landowners, pictured alongside a big house and dressed in fancy attire. The landowners are pictured alone (without any children or extended family), and they are separated from the other members of the community by a thick black line. Directly beneath this line, we can see Saritha and her family, with a modest house and a few domestic animals. Finally, in the bottom third of the page, we see the dalits (i.e., members of the lowest caste, the untouchables), who have a much bigger family. Their faces are sad, they have no house, and instead of farm animals they have dogs.

An analysis of Saritha's drawing showcases many of the modal affordances of the drawn image, as previously discussed. Her use of visual space to depict the social stratification of her community would have been unattainable with textual methods, and given the sensitive nature of this topic, this reality of social stratification might not have emerged as strongly in a written or oral interview. Presented in the visual form of a drawing, though, it reveals a powerful personal perspective. Indeed, the very first thing that Saritha did was rotate the page from a horizontal to a vertical orientation. Furthermore, the size of the people depicted decreases proportionately with each lower socioeconomic status, with the landowners towering over Saritha's family and the very tiny dalits. The inclusion of details such as the landowner's wristwatch—denoting wealth —and his wife's high heels—denoting social status and elegance—is ripe with meaning and provides an insightful glimpse into cultural symbols of status. It is also interesting to note the attention she pays to people's facial expressions, as an indicator of happiness and well-being. In Saritha's family, for instance, the children seem happy and are pictured with smiley faces, while the parents are not smiling; this subjective detail represents a complex emotional snapshot of family relations, juxtaposing the children's carefree life with the parents' more burdened existence. As previously explained, in terms of the content of drawn images, what is significant is both the visible and the omitted. Thus, the fact that Saritha did not depict the landowner's extended family (which, she explains, has emigrated to the US), and did not include a house next to the impoverished dalit family, is highly meaningful.

On the other hand, Saritha's drawing also highlights the issue of cross-cultural interpretation, which will be explored further as one of the principal limitations of this methodology. While the inclusion of a dog alongside a big family may be read by Westerners as a positive sign of a happy family life, in India the dog is considered to be amongst the dirtiest and most sinful animals, and is associated with homelessness as a result of the overwhelming presence of stray dogs in urban areas. Thus, Saritha's depiction of the dog next to the dalit family is a sign of their poverty, homelessness, and unholy perception in Indian society, as the bottommost caste. The participants' narration can help alleviate the challenge of misinterpretation, and should ideally be an integral part of the drawing exercise. In this case, Saritha's narration elucidates many of the elements in her drawing, but also reveals additional aspects, such as her social awareness ("Our landowners are nicer than other landowners" and "We are lucky compared to other people in my community") and high degree of self-efficacy, expressed in her desire to help the less fortunate dalits.

The following two drawings (Figure 2) demonstrate the efficiency of participatory drawing as, in contrast to the formative research method above, an endline strategy of program assessment. In order to understand the perceived impact of the digital storytelling program, the students were asked, at the end of the school year, to draw a portrait of themselves before and after taking part in this project. Navya's pair of drawings (Figure 2) paints a rich picture of the way in which the program equipped her with novel skills and transformed her understanding of formal education.

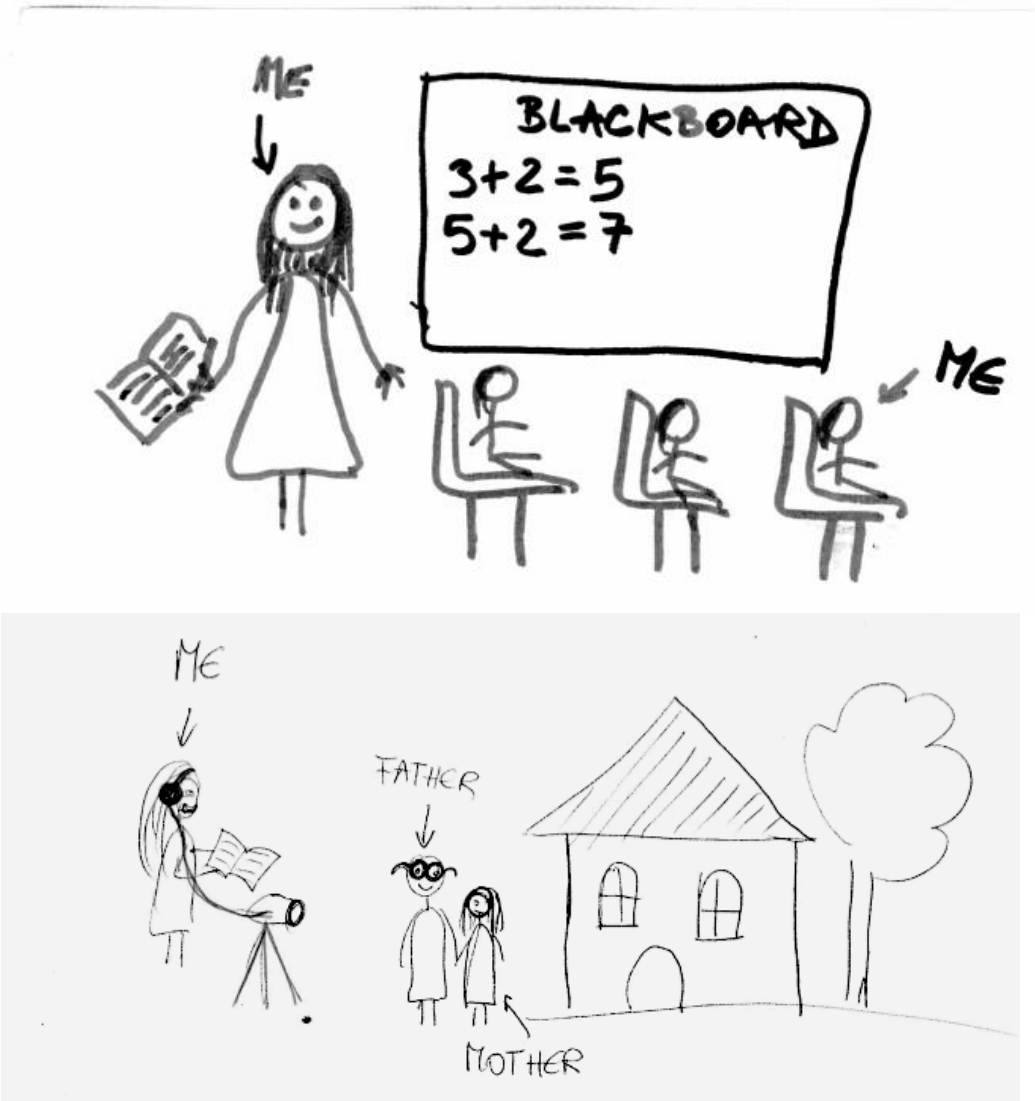

Figure 2. Drawing in response to "Draw a portrait of yourself before and after taking this digital storytelling course."

Navya's narration: Before taking this course, I thought school was useful but not very interesting. Now I enjoy it much more, and I have computer skills and camera skills. My parents were very impressed with my skills, and they told everyone that their daughter is a filmmaker now. Other students don't have the opportunity to study these things in school, but I think it would be useful if all children could film our country and our life.

The first drawing, representing Navya before taking part in the program, depicts her in a typical classroom setting, dominated by uniformity (sitting at her desk, she is visually identical to the other students) and rote learning (as symbolized by the mathematical operations on the blackboard). In the second drawing, representing Navya after the program, she appears in an outdoor setting in her community, instead of the classroom, and her parents are pictured, smiling, next to her. While in the first drawing she is holding a book—the typical symbol for school and formal learning—, in the second image she is holding a book *and* a video camera. The coexistence of the book and the camera in the second drawing is highly significant: the fact that she decided to present both elements rather than substitute the book for the camera (as one would expect, in this environmental context of outdoor filming) indicates her transformed understanding of formal education. Thus, she sees digital storytelling as both an educational endeavor and a community activity, and indeed, this sense of community relevance was one of the main objectives of the program. The value of this project, and of the skills she gained, is further highlighted by her narration: "My parents were very impressed with my skills, and they told everyone that their daughter is a filmmaker now. Other students don't have the opportunity to study these things in school, but I think it would be useful if all children could film our country and our life." Therefore, as this example suggests, taking part in this participatory drawing exercise at the end of the school year also functions as a self-assessment, giving students like Navya the opportunity to actively reflect on their experience and internalize their progress in a meaningful and creative manner.

Limitations

In spite of the various advantages outlined so far, the participatory drawing method also presents several specific challenges in terms of both implementation and data interpretation. Because of logistical considerations, as well as the highly personal nature of this type of research, it is inherently unfit for use with large groups of participants, and thus samples usually tend to be rather small. While this concern is common in qualitative research in general, it certainly affects the generalizability of the findings.

Arguably, a more significant concern is in regards to the interpretation of the findings. Because participatory drawing relies primarily on visuals rather than textual narratives, it is a highly interpretative research method and thus validity is difficult to prove (Silverman, 2001). On the one hand, all qualitative research data (whether an interview, a video recording, or a diary) must be interpreted and thus passes through the necessarily subjective lens of the researcher (Gauntlett, 2005). Visual data is indeed more "open" than language-based strategies and therefore becomes much harder to interpret. The danger of over-interpretation is significant in this case. Myers (1995), for instance, cautions against ethnographers becoming visual translators who instruct their audiences regarding what they should look for in the drawings and what the images are supposed to mean. Researchers working with visual evidence must employ a "critical visual methodology" (Rose, 2001, p. 16), which distinguishes itself from other modes of analysis by paying attention not only to the image itself, but also to the circumstances of its production, circulation, and consumption (which, crucially, includes the acknowledgement that the drawings are not produced spontaneously, but rather at the request of the researcher). The content of the children's drawings should be considered, in this sense, "a departure point for apprehending something of their worlds and world-making" rather than a "mimetic or complete" depiction of their knowledge or perceptions (Mitchell, 2006, p. 63).

This challenge of interpretation is a problem with visual evidence in general, but it is especially tricky, as exemplified by Saritha's drawing of the dog, in cross-cultural contexts, where both the production and the interpretation of visual narratives are highly conditioned by specific cultural

factors. Therefore it is vital to keep in mind the fact that participant-generated drawings are always a product of the individual's particular cultural background, and thus resist a culturally neutral interpretation. The temptation to over-interpret can be particularly problematic when the researcher belongs to a culture other than the one they are researching. As John Berger reminds us, when decoding visual imagery, "we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (Berger, 1972, p. 9). In this sense, the researcher may be intrinsically—and, perhaps, unwittingly—drawn to certain interpretations and conclusions that are a product of their own enculturation, and of their own socioculturally-shaped experiences and perceptions.

In order to assuage the challenge of mis- and over-interpretation, participatory drawing should be used in combination with other research methods, thus cross-validating the salience of the findings through triangulation. A complementary strategy—as illustrated by the case studies, and most recommended by the researchers using this methodology—is the generation of summative, reflective discussions, which can help illuminate the more subtle or ambiguous aspects of the images. Specifically, because of the imaginative and creative nature of children's visual depictions, a subsequent discussion of these drawings with the researcher is highly important (Gauntlett, 2005, 2007; Mitchell, 2006; Young & Barrett, 2001). This informal interview both enhances the reflective process and allows the child to voice the rationale behind their visual choices, thus helping to close the gap between the internal and the external narrative that shaped the drawing (Banks, 2001). As Mitchell (2006) aptly concludes, "drawings are not a substitute for children's voices and the absence or muting or fragmentation of children's talk about their images means researchers need to be particularly cautious about over-interpreting their images" (p. 69). Letting the research participants interpret their own drawings is not only more illuminating in terms of the research findings, but also more ethical from a methodological standpoint. Adopting this strategy and encouraging the participants to talk about their own drawings necessarily puts the researcher in the position of the listener, and enables the participants to be in charge of the interpretation process—which is vital, given that the visual evidence is a subjective product of the participants' own perceptions and lived realities.

While these oral or written interviews—whereby the children narrate their own drawings—are the most common and most recommended means of data triangulation, participatory drawing can be used in combination with other strategies of data collection as well, both visual and non-visual alike. The work by Young and Barrett (2001) in Kampala provides a model for attaining a triangulated synergy of visual methodologies, as the researchers used a combination of participatory drawing, mental and depot mapping, daily timelines, and photo diaries to get a more complete understanding of the daily lives of Ugandan street children. And beyond the realm of visual methods, participatory drawing lends itself well to triangulation with other types of ethnographical research, such as, primarily, direct observation, focus groups, and diary methods.

Finally, a lingering limitation in regards to the implementation of this research method has to do with the relative lack of documentation on participatory drawing as a visual research method in the social sciences. Since it is a critically understudied and poorly documented technique, it is more difficult to find guidance on best practices and potential pitfalls when designing the research study. Furthermore, within the field of visual communication research, the selection of photography or video at the expense of non-mechanical tools like drawing might have certain advantages. These digital tools, because of their dependence on the learning of new and awe-inspiring technical skills, can stimulate empowerment and self-efficacy to a greater extent than pen-and-paper drawing. In addition, these tools often act as a hook to a deeper level of engagement, and hold a different kind of pedagogical potential that is highly valued, especially in non-media-saturated societies.

Conclusion

In spite of these limitations, however, there is immense potential in visual participatory research methods across a variety of contexts. Indeed, the versatile and innovative nature of this methodology renders it highly practical for use with children and youth, as well as highly enjoyable for the research participants. The potential to stimulate empowerment and efficacy among community members, and allow them to take an active part in shaping their own realities, also represents a more ethical and horizontal research approach within the realm of qualitative methodologies. Nevertheless, more research is needed on both the practical and the theoretical implications of this approach. Hopefully, given the method's rising popularity in recent years, scholars and practitioners will increasingly turn their attention to the documentation and analysis of such visual participatory strategies, and help shape a better understanding of their practical knowledge-generating potential within international communication research.

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