Doll tales: Foregrounding children’s voices in research

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This paper discusses how the use of Persona Dolls in research is an effective means of enabling children (ages 4-6) to share life experiences openly. It investigated the place of race in the peer choice of preschool children. Two key research questions drove the inquiry: a) do four to six year old children know their own racial identity? b) do four to six year old children choose friends based on racial characteristics? Semi-structured interviews using Persona Dolls were conducted, with the dolls acting as conduits through which the children engaged in conversations with the researcher. Findings revealed that children were aware of stereotypes and discrimination. One minority child showed deep empathy with the posed dilemma of a dark skinned Persona doll and her inability to establish friendships. Implications are shared with regard to the significance of Persona Dolls, play and life stories in presenting the views of young children.
Introduction

This paper presents a novel way of using Persona Dolls to capture and foreground the child’s voice in order to understand his/her worldviews in a setting that is both safe and conducive to engagement. The focus of the study was on understanding how race and ethnicity operate in the specific setting of one ethnically mixed childcare centre in the South West of Singapore. Fourteen children (ages 3–4.5) and ten children (ages 5.5–6) from the nursery and kindergarten 1 classes respectively participated in the observation phase of the study. From this sample, six girls from the two classes were purposefully selected to include the Singaporean majority race (Chinese) and the other three minority races (Malay, Indian or Eurasian). Persona Doll interviews were conducted with these girls to gain insight into how race and ethnicity may affect friendship choices, and associated matters.

The literature on development of racial identity, prejudice and discrimination posits that children as young as three can comprehend stereotypes and expertly practice discrimination (Aboud, 2003; Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). Local research on race and ethnicity however, centers on the experience of children in primary school settings (Lee et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2004). The views of younger children, between the ages of four and
six would add substantially to the existing pool of knowledge on processes influencing the creation of self, ethnic and racial identities, especially in multiracial settings.

The aim of this study was to intuit a theory with regards to if, and how, race and ethnicity (or other factors) affect friendship choices in this sample. The challenge was to find ways through which children could candidly share their life experiences, worldviews and conceptualizing of personal, ethnic and racial identities. An important aspect was to encourage children to articulate if race and ethnicity were crucial factors in friend selection. Children were conceptualized here to be agentic; having power and being social actors within their cultural settings (Corsaro, 1992; Prout & James, 1990).

The study was driven by two key research questions, namely: a) do four to six year old children know their own racial identity and b) do four to six year old children choose friends based on racial characteristics. MacNaughton’s research studies (2001b; 2001c) provided an initial methodological and analytical map for use to address the issue surrounding the use of Persona dolls. Four female Persona dolls were created to represent one of the four main racial groups of Singapore: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian. These dolls served as a research tool to open conversations amongst the participants and the researcher. Children’s play with the
dolls facilitated focused enquiry about the issues of self identity, including racial and ethnic identity.

The data were gathered using three distinct modes to enable triangulation of data, namely naturalistic participant observation, semi structured interviews involving first, coloured photographs of preschool age children and then Persona dolls. Naturalistic observations spanned seventeen sessions, each lasting on average between three to four hours. Children were observed during indoor/outdoor play, meal and nap times. The semi-structured interviews involved pairs of four-, five-, and six –year- old girls and each interview lasted on average about 45 minutes. This paper only details the research experience garnered by the use of Persona Dolls.

**Literature Review: Dolls and Tales**

Studies investigating racial attitudes of children can be traced back to the 1930s. Katz (1996) provides examples of studies conducted in Western settings from the 1930s to the late 1960s which used dolls (either in photographs or physical dolls) to investigate how self identity develops in young children. The Horowitzs’ (1936; 1939) and the Clarks’ (1939) studied the racial attitudes of white and black children respectively. In recent years, Glenda MacNaughton used Persona dolls as a research tool to investigate children’s concepts of self and ethnic identity in a series of studies.
conducted in Australia (MacNaughton, 2001a, 2001b; MacNaughton & Davis, 2001c).

Persona dolls\(^1\) realistically represent children, their dilemmas and feelings, and have been used successfully to explore discrimination, exclusion and stereotyping (Derman-Spark, 1989) amongst children by engaging their minds and hearts through empathy, resulting in an awareness of diversity as a positive and welcoming reality (Brown, 2001).

Dolls encourage symbolic play, assisting as Guss (2005, p.234) contends, mimesis, which encourages ‘self-definition of standpoints and the potential for identity building’. Children are able to explore different conditions and realities in a play situation as the dolls encourage belief establishment (Brown, 2001). When working with Persona dolls, children are immersed in the presented situation, which reaches their innermost thoughts and feelings through the use of symbols.

In this study, the Persona dolls were used in a novel way to engage the voices of children. Stories, ‘narrated’ by the Persona dolls, were used as a starting point for discussion in the semi-structured interview. Paley (1995) proposes that

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\(^1\) Brown (2001) discusses the use of Persona Dolls extensively, beginning with their specific construction and then the ways in which these dolls can be effectively used in classrooms to engage young children to participate in the exploration of sensitive issues like racism and discrimination. She emphasizes the role of empathy as a prime mover in enabling long lasting mindset changes in young children.
children function in the realm of the dramatic, hence stories provide the best platform to access children’s deepest thoughts. Since stories connect to emotions through *images*, they allow the children to connect strongly with the teller and the told (Sunderland, 2000). Brown (2002), in turn, argues that stories promote empathy by enabling the listening child to connect to the teller via images.

Braid (1996) echoing Bruner (1991) stresses that meaning making is an interactive process as firstly, the teller needs to weave a sense of coherence by engaging experientially in the tale being told, and the hearer engages in the presented narrative. Motivation to follow the narrative is dependent on the performer enabling empathy for the listener. Engaged listeners *imagine* the events in their mind as the story unfolds. Therefore, making sense of the linguistic data involves a re-imaging or re-contextualizing of the story. Braid (1996, p.19) argues that people ‘fill in the gaps’ by accessing their own experiences and understandings, selecting the appropriate images and filling out the story as it unfolds in their mind. A personal connection or resonance is established between the narrative and the engaged listener.

Stories present powerful means through which children can share how they feel about situations in their lives without exposing their vulnerabilities to other people. When a story is effectively expressed through the use of a Persona doll,
children have the opportunity to identify, empathize and explore without having to, as Bowles (n.d) affirms “directly experience the awfulness of some of the situations”. Additionally, Egan (1995) argues that stories are structured on powerful binary conflicts (security/danger, courage/cowardice, hope/despair). Though these are abstract, when couched in a story form, children are able to understand and respond to these binaries emotionally. When story is combined with the physical doll, the child is able to access and engage with the posed situation. Genuine beliefs, attitudes and reactions can be captured by researchers looking to foreground the voices of young children.

Pilot Study

To ensure that the data gathering tools were suitable to meet the research objectives, a pilot study was conducted on a sample of four children aged between four and five. The following discussion presents the findings from the pilot study which examined the efficacy of the planned procedures and questions for the Persona Doll semi-structured interview. It was found that in order to engage the children and facilitate authentic sharing of their experiences, two crucial ingredients were necessary and ultimately were applied in the main study.
**A Safe Setting**

The interview was conducted in the centre’s Music room, a familiar place where the children usually have their music lessons; a place full of song and dance. A section of this room was transformed into a play corner, with cushions, toys like plastic food items, cutlery, wooden blocks, teddy bears etc. The space was set up to resemble, as far as possible, a play context that it would be familiar and safe for the children to let their ‘guard’ down, be natural, and express themselves in an open way.

The interviews were conducted on a paired basis rather than on an individual basis as coincidental observation of one participant and her sister (after the pilot interview session) engaged in joint play using the dolls suggested that play activity was enhanced if two children are involved. Paired play encouraged spontaneity, eliminated the fear of being interviewed individually and enhanced the children’s ability to get into role more easily.

**Symbolic Paired Play**

In order for the children to use the dolls as a conduit to explore their own feelings and attitudes, it was necessary to provide time and resources for the children to establish belief in the dolls and the play context. Hence, it was found that rather than having the dolls lined up in a row, they were better positioned when the dolls were seated on chairs around the toys on a soft carpet. Children were invited to enter the Music room and were given 15–20 minutes to explore the setting and resources. The
children were encouraged to touch or pick up the dolls and engage in symbolic play.

I waited until the children were engaged in play before asking the interview questions. Whenever possible, questions were posed in response to children’s play and were dispersed as naturally as possible within the play context. The following questions were asked:

1) Can you tell me which doll looks most like you?

2) What is there about this doll that you think looks like you?

3) Can you tell me which of these dolls you would play with? Why?

4) Can you tell me which of these dolls you would invite to your birthday party? Why?

The main thrust of these questions was to engage and foreground children’s own authentic life experiences. However, as the pilot study revealed, the prepared interview questions were able to do this only partially as they were structured in a question and answer format. The questions, though open, did not encourage the children to connect to their own life experiences as the setting and procedure was very formal. The children were not at ease and the atmosphere was tensed. In order to reach the inner fount of the child a more incisive platform was necessary. Hence, for the main study, narrative and naturalistic play with the dolls were used to make stronger connections between the child, the doll and specific questions.
**Revisions to the Main study**

The children were asked to *choose* a doll from the four Persona Dolls that they preferred. They could gesture, point or pick up their preferred doll. The children were also encouraged to play with the other dolls during the interview period. This free play with their preferred doll in relation to less preferred dolls, revealed the criteria children used when selecting friends. Each child enacted a specific preference for particular dolls and in the course of active play, more naturalistically explained the rationale behind the choices they made.

After this free play, a second segment, which is the focus of this paper, was centred on the scenario-based task. I selected one of the dolls and through her ‘told’ a pair of girls the doll’s dilemma, emphasizing the *feelings* that the doll experienced (to access empathy from the children), and ‘asking’ them for suggestions that would help her redress the condition she faced.

A dark-skinned Indian doll, Rathí (*pronounced ‘raethee’*), was selected to ‘share’ her dilemma. Because studies (Lappalainen, 2004; MacNaughton & Davis, 2001c; Ramsey, 1991) have indicated that skin tone, especially dark ones can be a contributory factor for peer rejection, this particular doll was picked to be the focal point of the discussion.
I invited the children to sit before me on the floor and moved Rathi from her chair to my lap. I informed the children that Rathi had a problem which was causing her grief and that she had asked me to share her problem with the girls and to ask them for possible solutions on her behalf. I conveyed to the children that Rathi was feeling extremely sad because nobody wanted to play with her. She played and ate alone in her childcare centre because none of the other children wanted to be her friend.

Interviewees were then asked to respond to two questions, firstly why no one in Rathi’s class wanted to befriend her and secondly what strategies they could suggest to Rathi so that she could make some friends in her class. The former question was aimed to elicit possible reasons why the interviewees think some children are rejected as friends, while the second question sought to provide insight into children’s concept of how to develop friendships. What, in their eyes makes a good friend?

The doll Rathi, through her physical presence (facing the children) was able to make the posed problem very real and immediate. Children were very quiet and attentive to the details when the story was shared. When questions were posed, all the children, even the youngest ones at age four were eager to share how Rathi could make friends in her centre. Little hands shot up into the air asking for permission to
speak as soon as the question was articulated. For the purpose of illustration, the experience of Leigh is detailed in this paper.

**A Snapshot: Leigh’s experience**

Leigh is a dark skinned six-year-old Eurasian girl, whose father is ethnically Indian and mother is Eurasian. She is the eldest of two children. Of all the children interviewed, Leigh was the one most empathetic to the doll’s situation. She could connect with the doll’s condition so closely that she was able to understand how the doll would feel.

This may have been linked to Leigh’s own experiences and feelings associated with not having friends which was an issue that she shared with me at the beginning of the interview when she heard that the topic was on making friends. I had noted in my observation field notes in the beginning phase of the project that:

> “Leigh, for the most, plays alone. Occasionally Cathy [Chinese/age 6] joins her, but most times she plays at the vegetable/kitchen set alone preparing make-believe meals”.

Perhaps because of her sense of isolation, Leigh was very sensitive to how Rathi would be affected by her lack of friends. For example, at the completion of the Persona Doll scenario, when Leigh observed me putting Rathi back on her chair, she asked: **“Then why is she [Rathi] so happy?”** Leigh had intuitively understood
friendlessness as being isolated, alone and sad, although the Indian doll like all the
other dolls had a smiling face. Another episode\(^2\) also serves to illustrate the
empathy that enabled Leigh to put herself in doll’s shoes. Here she could *imagine*
how the doll would *feel* when people did not want to play with her.

**Table 1. Empathy Enacted**

In addition, Leigh made a strong co-relation between Rathi’s physical
features to her lack of friends. This was possible for Leigh because like the doll, she
too was dark skinned and like the doll, Leigh also found making friends a difficult
process. Leigh explains her reasoning in the following excerpt:

**Table 2. Not as Pretty**

This excerpt highlights that Leigh believes that the way one looks is integral for
one’s success in making friends. She states that having darker skin rendered friend-
making process more challenging. The following excerpt supports this contention.

Here I am summing up the discussion I had in the last twelve minutes with both
Crystal and Leigh.

**Table 3. She should be White too.**

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\(^2\) Key: Leigh (6 year old Eurasian) girl; Crystal (6 year old Chinese) girl; Mercy (Interviewer). The
data is transcribed using semi-Jeffersonian conventions.
Leigh confirms that being light skinned is a key means through which one could secure friends. It is pertinent to note that Leigh affirms this conclusion after she exhausts her list of possible strategies that Rathi could undertake in order to secure some friends.

Leigh had suggested the following means of friend making earlier in the interview. She was a staunch supporter of providing others with things in kind to building friendships and to break into a tight circle of friends. Leigh suggested: “She [Rathi] should bring bread, chocolate ice cream…brownies”. She also stated that Rathi should celebrate her birthday in school when, implicitly, Rathi could share her food with the other children in her class.

Another far more interesting suggestion Leigh made in response to the question “What can Rathi do to make more friends”, provides a window into Leigh’s reasoning. “She [Rathi] should have her own teddy bear”. When saying this, Leigh got up from the floor, walked over to a spot on the carpet where a small teddy bear was placed. She picked it up and demonstrated how to hold and cuddle the bear in case one does not have any friends. Leigh believed that the toy could be a substitute or a stand in for a real friend.

The doll’s physical looks and her sad story had resonated strongly within Leigh. She was able to cross the chasm that separated the doll as an inanimate object
from her, as a sentient being through empathy. The doll and her story were able to engender empathy deep enough for Leigh to reach into her own experiences to explain Rathi’s situation and provide possible solutions for it.

**Doll and Tale**

Woolley and Wellman (1990) contend that children’s grasp on reality and fantasy play is multifaceted. Children are able to distinguish between real tangible items (e.g. a train) and a copy of it, either in 2-or-3 dimensional forms.

Interestingly, Prawat, Anderson, and Hapkeiwicz (2001, p.361,367) found that although children were disposed to ascribe animate qualities to dolls, they were adamant that dolls are “for pretend”. Yet, the authors argue that dolls can hold children’s attention and function as a conduit for projection of their own feelings. This was apparent particularly in the case of Leigh, in this research study. The doll Rathi could facilitate a candid discussion and reflection on children’s concepts of self and ethnic identity, including the effect of prejudice and stereotyping with regards to peer selection. As Prawat et al. (2001) posited, the interviewees were fully aware that the dolls were *not* real, yet they generated the belief that the dolls were capable of having feelings and preferences.

This issue resonates with Peter Slade’s (1954; 1995) description of Personal play where children are able to cast “an idea onto, into or around objects around
them” (1995, p.2). Slade argues that absorption or concentration is necessary for children to maintain this kind of play, which demands a deep investment of self. Projected play requires children’s full attention. The girls in this study showcased this type of play when they projected their own views and feelings onto the vehicles the dolls provided. The dolls provided the conduit through which the interviewees were able to express the understandings and applications present in their social world. The story structure enhanced this connectivity as it provided a platform for this kind of deep reflection.

**Final Thoughts**

Julie Landsman (2001; p.12, cited in Ringo, 2008, p.233) writes, “that if I can imagine, I might be able to understand.” Between the imagining and the eventual understanding is the flowering of empathy. It is through empathy that children are able to perceive commonalities rather than differences as empathizing necessities the outlay of self; to listen, imagine and feel along with the other who is undergoing the presented situation. This research with a small group of young Singaporean children highlights the central role that empathy plays in enabling children to voice their feelings and attitudes with regards to the life stories of others. By providing Persona Dolls which are physically representative of particular ethnic groups along with a dilemma showcasing a particular experience, the investigators were able to raise
authentic voices of the children by engaging both their hearts and minds. The resulting data was rich and opened a portal into the very heart of a child’s world. The voice of the child could be foregrounded.

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### Table 1
#### Empathy Enacted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>What about you Crystal? How can she (Rathi) go make friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>She should play with them and play the swing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Play the swing with her? What happens when people don’t want to play with her? Then what happens?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>((Opens her mouth to say something, when L cuts in))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>↑ME ((practically shouts the word out))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Then she’ll be really sad and she’ll be crying and tell teacher=</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
#### Not as Pretty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>([Leigh answers first by raising her hands]) Because (.).Maybe they(.).maybe=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>= maybe what?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Erm..because (.).erm...she’s not erm...she’s not as pretty as this three dolls, (pointing to the Chinese and the White doll seated at the birthday table.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>That could be a possible reason. What about you Crystal? Do you think that is the case?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>And (they)...( ) and the two dolls have beautiful clothes... she {Rathi} don’t have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Ok maybe it’s the clothes she wears maybe. And maybe because she’s not so pretty? Now when you say pretty...why do you think she’s {Rathi} not so pretty? ((posed to Leigh)).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Because (0.3)she [</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>[Wears a hat (pointing to the blue scarf the doll is wearing))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Ok_</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>And her face is all brown and dark ↓brown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3
#### She should be White too

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>((Watching Leigh’s actions and says)) shake hands... talk to each other ...be friendly, oh ok be friendly. Anything else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Anything else that she {Rathi} should do? Anything else she can do? You’ll think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>[I think she should be white also.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


