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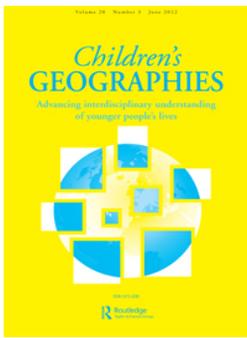
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Article

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Using Persona Dolls in research with children to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma

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ABSTRACT

Persona Dolls are fabric dolls that are used as part of a specific approach (The Persona Doll approach) with young children to encourage inclusion and to challenge inequality and discrimination. Whilst dolls have been celebrated for foregrounding children's voices in research, previous scholarship has not considered the potential for dolls to evade the insider/outsider researcher status dichotomy, facilitating a position of 'inbetweenness'. In this Viewpoint, we propose the use of Persona Dolls in research with children as useful tools to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma recognised in much geographical and other scholarship.

Introduction

Persona Dolls (see Figure 1) are culturally appropriate cloth dolls that are used as part of a specific approach (The Persona Doll approach) with young children, typically aged 2–7 years, to encourage inclusion and participation as well as the celebration of diversity, and to challenge inequality and discrimination (Persona Doll UK 2021). The Persona Doll approach involves telling stories using a Persona Doll, creating a lifelike persona for the doll. The doll becomes like another child, or friend to the children, with real-life experiences (Persona Doll UK 2021). Some stories the doll shares are happy, others are about difficult events or problems related to exclusion, unfairness and prejudice, for instance. The children engaged in the Persona Doll approach help to solve the doll's problems as the doll provides a safe platform to discuss fairness and unfairness and to explore differences. The Persona Doll approach supports international principles of high-quality early childhood and primary education and the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. Despite the value of the Persona Doll approach, it has not been given adequate attention in children's geographies literature, and indeed in broader social sciences literature.

In this Viewpoint, we propose Persona Dolls as a useful participatory tool for use in research with children to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma. That is whether or not researchers hold insider knowledge of a group or setting prior to research being undertaken, and the benefits or indeed drawbacks that this status can hold when undertaking research. This Viewpoint is structured as follows. First, a brief overview of Persona Dolls is provided, reflecting on the role of the dolls as a tool for promoting equality and inclusion with young children. We then move on to discuss the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma in social and geographical research. Following this, we present Persona Dolls as a methodological approach, using the example of a

Figure 1. Maciej, a European Persona Doll (author's own).

Persona Doll named Maciej who is currently in UK foster care. We conclude this Viewpoint by arguing the case for Persona Dolls as a participatory research tool for use with young children to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma, facilitating a position of inbetweennness.

Persona Dolls as a tool for promoting equality and inclusion with young children

Persona Dolls are not dolls to play with in the home corner; they are dolls to share stories. Persona Dolls have their own backgrounds and personalities. The dolls visit settings and tell stories. The children in that setting are then involved in discussions and problem solving and, through the dolls, children are encouraged to acquire a positive attitude to difference as the dolls and their stories reflect differences in society.

There are a number of reasons an early childhood practitioner may introduce a Persona Doll into their setting. First, to validate and support similarities and differences. For instance, the wearing of glasses or a child who does not feel comfortable using their home language. Second, to introduce diversity and to raise awareness, for instance of disability, languages, and family structures. Third, to address a specific equality issue, for instance, girls' play and boys' play, skin colour, disability, poverty and family structures. The dolls provide an opportunity for children to reflect on what is valuable social behaviour. The essence of the Persona Doll approach is intellectual playfulness that allows young children to make sense of their position in the world. The Persona Doll approach (see Persona Doll UK 2021) claims to be participatory, fun, educational, adaptable, empowering and rewarding, and thus contains many qualities that researchers may strive for when designing their research approach.

Persona Dolls have been commended for their ability to combat discrimination (Brown 2001) and have been celebrated as being more powerful than hate (Brown 2018). Existing research with Persona Dolls has explored their use in a range of settings, for instance in an emotional literacy programme with pre-school children (Buchanan 2007; Irish 2009); promoting diversity awareness among preservice teachers through storytelling (Logue, Bennett-Armistead, and Kim 2011); encouraging social work students to develop empathy and understanding for vulnerable populations (Papouli 2019); and as part of anti-bias curriculum practice for young people for Early Childhood Development Teachers (Smith 2009). However, their role as a tool to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma in research with children has not yet been considered.

The insider/outsider researcher status dilemma in social and geographical research

The insider/outsider dichotomy has been debated extensively in geographical and other scholarship (Giwa 2015). The insider researcher shares characteristics or experiences with those in the population they are studying. Researchers often aim to be insiders in the culture of their participants, perceiving that minimal social distance offers the basis for trust and rapport (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). However, challenges of the insider status of the researcher include: assumed understanding; ensuring analytic objectivity; dealing with emotions; and participants' expectations (Blythe et al. 2013). The outsider researcher instead does not share these characteristics/experiences. This has been reported to affect the ability of the researcher to build rapport with study participants. However, the outsider researcher status is arguably advantageous as it provides the researcher with distance and objectivity. Furthermore, some researchers (see Loftus 2009 and Wilkinson 2015) have argued that outsider status can present the researcher as quirky and exotic to participants, therefore leading participants to be intrigued by the researcher and that this difference can facilitate, rather than hinder, productive research relationships. Given the identified pros and cons of both the insider and outsider status, most recent scholarship has departed from the insider/outsider dichotomy, and geographers have increasingly paid critical attention to the space of inbetweenness (see Botterill 2015; Zhao 2017).

As Skelton (2008) tells, in research with children, researchers can be considered both insiders and outsiders, as they have all once been children (insider), but now as adults, they are outsiders. However, whilst all researchers have had the experience of childhood, there are certain research topics where this position of inbetweenness may be more difficult to achieve. For instance, when researching disability, poverty, hospitalisation, bereavement, to provide a few examples, when a researcher does not have relevant lived experience. However, as Chattopadhyay (2013) argues, we never truly work with 'others' who are totally separate or different from us, as we persistently try to find common ground between us.

With this paper, we propose Persona Dolls in research with children as useful participatory tools to combat the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma recognised in much geographical and other scholarship, facilitating a position of inbetweenness. Part of the usefulness of Persona Dolls comes from the non-threatening nature of the dolls as a child-centred tool (see, for instance, van Keulen 2004). As such, the dolls can be used by researchers to either present the position of an outsider, if a researcher has insider knowledge, or alternatively to present insider knowledge, if the researcher perceives themselves to be an outsider. Importantly, inbetweenness must also be considered in relation to the continuum that both researchers and the Persona Dolls move along. For instance, the researcher and Persona Doll may be more of an outsider to child participants when first introduced to a setting until they become more embedded and find common ground.

Persona Dolls as a methodological approach: creating a persona

The traditional Persona Doll approach can be adapted to a methodological approach for data collection. In doing so, the researcher should follow the following guidance:

- *The Persona Doll is the researcher's doll.* The doll should be used for storytelling and not for playing with. The doll whispers in the researcher's ear what it wants to say. The researcher should then recite this back to the children. There is no need to put on a voice or accent when reciting what the doll has told you. The researcher should treat the doll as a person that they care about.
- *Plan for a programme of visits.* The doll should come to visit once a week for six weeks in a setting appropriate to the age of the child, for instance, a nursery, playschool, home, or children's hospital.
- *Mirrors and windows.* The persona created by the researcher should help the children bond with the doll, for instance through sharing similarities such as likes and dislikes. Further, the doll can be used to introduce the children to a new set of ideas and experiences (through differences). Photographs and artefacts can be used to further bring the identity of the Persona Doll to life and engage children. The persona created for the doll should be as stereotype free as possible. Where a researcher is using a doll to share experiences of the doll as an insider, care should be taken that details are appropriate and accurate.
- *Chair the meeting.* The researcher should listen to the children participants and how they respond to the Persona Doll and follow their lead. Whilst the researcher may have an overarching road map, this should be as unstructured as possible. The Persona Doll is best used as part of a process of co-production whereby the children participants, their ideas and lived experiences, develop the narrative.

Below we introduce the Persona Doll Maciej, whose persona and identity we created to explore the experiences of children living in UK foster care and their imagined futures. In doing so, we hope to provide readers of this Viewpoint with insight into the level of detail required when developing a Persona Doll's persona.

Maciej: Persona Doll visit 1

Maciej is six years old and does not live with his parents, instead Maciej lives with Jill. Jill is sixty years old and likes gardening. Maciej also lives with three boys, Billy, Jimmy and Jacob, and a baby girl, Saffron but they are not his brothers and sisters. They live together in a nice warm house and Jill cooks them big meals so they never go to bed hungry. They all speak English.

Maciej is lucky enough to have a room to himself.

Maciej likes most things, he likes apples and chocolate, and he especially likes stew, a meal that Jill cooks for him. It has a lot of vegetables in and keeps Maciej strong and warm. He enjoys playing with his toys, especially a red teddy bear he has had since he was a baby, before he lived with Jill. Maciej takes red ted everywhere with him, red ted is here with him today [show children red ted].

Maciej does not like shouting or arguments. He can remember his mummy and daddy used to argue a lot before he came to live with Jill. He feels safer now he is with Jill.

Maciej worries about who he will live with in the future. He will not live with Jill for his whole life, maybe only a few more months until he finds a new family who he will live with until he is much older.

Maciej has a lot of friends. His best friend is Timmy, who lives next door. They often play together on the swings in the park and sometimes Jill invites Timmy around for tea. Maciej worries if he will stay friends with Timmy if his new family lives far away, but he hopes he will.

Maciej: Persona Doll visit 2

On the doll's second visit, there will be the task of 'remembering back', encouraging children to recall information from the previous visit. Researchers using the Persona Doll approach should also share the doll's experience of what has happened since the last visit. We have provided an example below:

Can you remember the last time we met Maciej he was happy and telling us about all the nice food he eats at Jill's house and how he feels safe and cared for? Well, today Maciej is sad. Shall we find out why? Why are you sad Maciej? [Persona Doll whispers in the researcher's ear]

Maciej has found out today that he may soon be moving to a new home. This has made Maciej upset as he is settled with Jill. He enjoys her stew and feels safe in her warm house.

The researcher would then ask the children what else Maciej may be worried about, and if they have had any similar concerns for the future. This is an example of the co-production of knowledge between the child participants and the Persona Doll, whereby the children participants, their ideas and lived experiences develop the narrative.

From the example of Maciej, we hope it can be seen how Persona Dolls can be used as part of a participatory approach, co-constructing knowledge with young children. Following the traditional Persona Doll approach, it is advised that a programme of six visits should be designed, each one involving 'remembering back'.

Conclusions: Persona Dolls as a tool for combatting the insider/outsider researcher status dilemma

Whilst dolls have been celebrated for foregrounding children's voices in research (Jesuvadian and Wright 2011), previous scholarship has not considered the potential for these dolls to evade the insider/outsider status dichotomy, facilitating a position of inbetweennness. In this Viewpoint, we have introduced Maciej whose persona we created to explore children's experiences of foster care in the UK and the imagined futures of looked after children. The persona of this doll could enable a researcher who does not have lived experience of fostering and adoption to explore these sensitive issues with young children. This is just one example, and other examples could include a Persona Doll sharing their experiences of: disability; religious and linguistic differences; immigration; chronic illness, hospitalisation, for instance. Using the Persona Doll in this way within a research setting, to share a story with which children can relate, could draw out some of the benefits that researchers with insider status often report, including the building of trust and rapport. Meanwhile, the researcher still functions as an outsider, drawing on benefits including distance and objectivity. Alternatively, if a researcher holds characteristics similar to a group (insider knowledge), the researcher could use a Persona Doll as an outsider to draw on the benefits of distance and objectivity. The use of Persona Dolls, as with all research methods, has limitations and need for careful implementation. For instance, due to the 'six visits' general rule in the Persona Doll approach and the importance of 'remembering back', use of Persona Dolls may be better suited to studies with a longer periods of data collection than a research project with a one-off data collection event. Further, as mentioned within this Viewpoint, when developing a doll's persona, care should be taken to make the persona as stereotype free as possible, whilst still reflecting populations or societal issues in a way that is recognisable to young children. Researchers may find it useful to attend Persona Doll training to support the development of a doll's persona. Despite these considerations, given the benefits noted in this Viewpoint, we encourage other children's geographers to consider adding Persona Dolls to their methodological toolkits.

Disclosure statement

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