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THE MMOGO-METHOD™:  
AN EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES  
THROUGH VISUAL PROJECTIONS

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# THE MMOGO-METHOD™: AN EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCES THROUGH VISUAL PROJECTIONS

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## Abstract

Visual projections are often used as diagnostic and therapeutic aids in psychology. However, there is scant research on the possible applications of projective visual expression techniques in psychological research where data are gathered simultaneously on the personal as well as collective levels. This article contextualises research against the background of indigenous knowledge discourses and the need for developing accountable research methodologies that suit the cultural background of people and accommodate the emotional expressions of diverse research populations. This article discusses a projective visual data gathering method, the Mmogo-method™ (consisting of clay, beads and straws), in which participants use associations to project content that relates to their personal and collective experiences. Personal projections refer to the inner emotional level of experience pertaining to the individual, while collective projections refer to the different contexts in which the experiences are formed. The Mmogo-method™ exposes participants to an unstructured research environment and materials and, through an open-ended research question, invites them to visually express their experience of a specific subject. This is followed by a discussion of the visual presentations by the participants and the researcher. Case studies in which the Mmogo-method™ is used are included. Guidelines for increasing the trustworthiness of visual projective techniques, as well as limitations of the Mmogo-method™, are also discussed.

## Introduction

Visual projective data collection methods are often used to obtain insight, knowledge and a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and contextual aspects underlying human behaviour, which are often difficult to obtain through more direct techniques (Boddy, 2005; Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000; Donoghue, 2000; Keller, Fleury, Perez, Ainsworth & Vaughan, 2009). According to Pauwels (2002), visual research methods are enjoying a boom and are used, among others, in the consumer sciences, education, social sciences, market research and city and town planning (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000; Donoghue, 2000; Puren, Drewes & Roos, 2008; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

The aim of this article is to describe the Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup> as a visual projective research data gathering method and to indicate how data may be elicited simultaneously on the personal as well as collective levels. "Mmogo" is a Setswana word that refers to interpersonal relatedness, co-ownership, togetherness, co-construction and/or interpersonal threads. The Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup> adopts the position that people are relational beings and that their visual presentations project something of themselves and the contexts in which they function (Roos, 2008). The Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup> allows visual expressions of the self as a complex, dynamic system as well as reflections of collective experiences that are embedded in different contexts. In other words, it provides for the simultaneous expression of the autobiographical as well as the collective. Visual projective data gathering methods, for the purpose of this article, are defined as methods in which new knowledge about the personal as well as the cultural and social dimensions of people's life is obtained through the systematic collection and analysis of data created through the senses in a collective research environment and expressed in the form of visual presentations (Wagner, 2007).

Projection is a very common construct in psychology and refers to content that people are unaware of in themselves, but which can be discerned in others and which impact on how people react to each other (Jung, 1933). People project their often unconscious feelings, thoughts or experiences onto something other than themselves. The ways in which projections are used in psychology and research should be differentiated, however. Projective techniques in psychology are used to determine personality types and personality disorders; predict individual functioning; help people to identify unconscious conflicts and render unconscious contents more accessible, thus aiding patients' understanding and comprehension (Blatt, 1975; Boddy, 2005; Jung, 1966; Oaklander, 1988).

In contrast, research uses projections to differentiate between certain facets of the self through bringing them into consciousness and to obtain insight into the inner world of the research participant (Jung, 1961), which is not used for individual therapeutic purposes. In research, projections are elicited through questions and unstructured stimuli, to which people react by expressing their experiences, feelings or meaning in a subjective way (Anning & Ring, 2005; Boddy, 2005; Donoghue, 2000; Handler & Habenicht, 1994; Roe, Bridges, Dunn & O'Connor, 2006; Skybo, Ryan-Wegner & Su, 2007).

Psychological research that uses projective techniques can be divided into five groups, namely: associative techniques that are used when participants are asked to read a list of words and then to indicate the first word that comes to mind; constructive techniques in which a story is constructed using a stimulus provided by the researcher; completion techniques where an incomplete stimulus is presented, such as the beginning of a sentence or a drawing which must then be completed by the participant; choice or sequencing techniques where certain choices must be made, for example organising a series of pictures or statements according to preference; and lastly expressive techniques where certain stimuli are provided to create a unique product. These may include role plays that are played out with certain characters and contents or the creation of drawings

(Handler & Habenicht, 1994; Oaklander, 1988; Roe et al., 2006; Skybo et al., 2007). The stimuli used in projective techniques range from structured to highly unstructured and vague. It is accepted that the more unstructured and vague the stimuli, the more the participants project their own feelings, motives, attitudes and experiences (Donoghue, 2000; Linzey in Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000).

All of the abovementioned techniques focus primarily on acquiring information on an individual level. Very few research techniques use vague and unstructured stimuli to collect data relevant to both the personal and collective levels of experience. An example of a visual expression technique which is used to obtain contextualised data are self-driven photograph eliciting techniques in which participants themselves decide what, how and where they will take photographs, and then answer certain questions about this together with the researcher (Keller et al., 2009; Samuels, 2007). This technique reflects something of the participants' experience and the context in which the photos were taken. However, this data gathering technique is often limited to the availability of material and opportunity for capturing images.

Therefore, a gap exists in research that uses visual projective techniques to activate the personal and collective levels of experience through associations that are carried out as a collective and co-constructed research effort. Associations refer to the connection between ideas and perceptions according to common characteristics, their fit, and conflicting or coincidental presence (Jung, 1966). The personal level of experience refers to that which people know but do not think of in the moment; something that was known before but has been forgotten; everything that the senses perceive but that we may not necessarily be aware of; everything that influences, involuntarily and without attention, people's thoughts, feelings, memories and actions (Jung, 1961). The collective level of experience refers to the meanings that people share as a result of their heredity, socialisation, as well as experiences unique to their group (Harris, 1996). It can be distinguished from the personal level since it does not owe its existence to

personal experience and it is consequently not a personal acquisition (Jung 1959). Both the personal and collective experiences are contextually grounded.

Context refers to the physical, social, economic, political and historical environments in which the personal as well as collective levels of experiences are embedded (Roos & Killian, 2009). Any form of data collection should therefore take into account the individual's position within the contexts in which they function (Lincoln & Guba; Blatt, 1975; Duffy & Wong, 1996; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It is against this background that the Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup> is proposed as a visual projective data gathering method.

The Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup> developed from the observation that, when conducting research in cross-cultural environments, traditional data collection methods such as questionnaires are limited in the desired data that they produce (Khumalo, Wissing & Temane, 2008). Similarly, interviews and focus groups deliver little to no rich data in research that strives to discern the experiences, feelings and perceptions of participants of which they themselves may not be aware or which may be hard to verbalise (Watson, 2008). Consequently, participants were exposed to unstructured stimuli where an open-ended, unstructured question was used to guide the construction of visual presentation of the participants' feelings and experiences. This appeared to be a powerful way for obtaining data because an external narrative is created which is used to converse about the research topic in the presence of the researcher. This method was developed further and is supported by the theories of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 2001) symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2006; Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1975) and community psychology (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2007; Duffy & Wong, 1996; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Naidoo, Duncan, Roos, Pillay & Bowman). The Mmogo-method<sup>TM</sup>'s development and its application to a number of case studies is described in Roos (2008), Roos and Ferreira (2008), Roos, Maine and Khumalo (2008) and Roos and Strong, (2009).

## **Research philosophy of the Mmogo-method™**

The ontological assumption underlying the Mmogo-method™ is that social reality is diverse and subjective, and that it consists of various realities. It is constructed in the reciprocal relationships between people, the contexts and symbolic interactions in which they are immersed. Epistemologically, this implies that the researcher becomes acquainted with the social world through understanding people's perspectives on it and interpreting these in a co-constructed research environment. The metatheoretical paradigm informing the Mmogo-method™ is constructionistic and interpretavistic and it is proposed as a qualitative research methodology. The research design falls within the narrative inquiry genre and data are gathered by applying the Mmogo-method™.

### **The role of the researcher**

Researchers in qualitative research reconcile their methodological approaches with the underlying philosophical assumptions that they have about people and the world by acting on their way of thinking about how they generate valid social knowledge (Stanczak, 2007). I learned about the world in my position as the oldest child in a middle-class, white, Afrikaans family. At a young age, I learned to appreciate the unique expression of diversity through various community actions that I was exposed to by virtue of my father's occupation. My exposure to the South African political and social contexts in which people are excluded and treated unfairly contributed to my questioning of unhealthy systems, my detection of inconsistencies in human interactions and my active opposition to segregation. In entering academia I became involved in facilitating various community projects together with disciplines such as social work, criminology, and speech and communication science. My clinical psychology training was undertaken primarily within a psychodynamic training model but subsequently I focussed specifically on community psychology. Community psychology involves the study of individuals, groups and communities in the contexts in which they find

themselves (Duffy & Wong, 1996; Naidoo et al., 2007; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). I aligned myself with the values underlying community psychology, namely, the recognition of and respect for diversity; empowerment of people, as well as the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation. It was during my involvement with diverse community projects that the value of projective techniques became apparent, since language and cultural differences often render traditional qualitative data collection techniques, such as interviews or focus groups, unfeasible to use in isolation from the research context.

### **Research process**

The use of the Mmogo-method™ requires access to the participants in the contexts in which they function. This is obtained through prior negotiations with the structures of which they form part.



Photo I: Participants in the Mmogo-method™ working as a collective

The purpose of the research is very clearly stated and participants and their structures are approached only after informed consent has been obtained and after the outcomes of the research have been agreed upon.

On the day of data gathering, the research process is explained. The participants are then asked to arrange themselves in groups of not more than eight to ten participants. Each participant is then given a lump of potter's clay, beads, dry grass stalks and a round piece of cloth.



Photo II: Examples of materials that may be used for visual presentations

The participants are then given an open-ended instruction, for example:

Use the material in front of you to make anything that could tell us more about your experience of drought; HIV/AIDS; relationships in your life; your growth in the course of the year.

The participants commence work on their visual presentations. These are usually completed in about 45 minutes, after which the researcher and other participants ask questions about each participant's presentation. Questions include what has been portrayed, the relationship between the different elements in each presentation and the relationship of the images to the research question and the context. The research data consist of the subjective interpretations of both the participants and the researcher (Goldstein, 2007). Zaltman (2003) believes the language of visual images allows researchers to obtain a richer description of the participants' deeper feelings that are often not accessible.



Photo III: Description of visual presentations

Two sources of data are obtained: visual data are obtained through photographs of the visual presentations, while textual data comprise the verbatim transcriptions of the discussions about them. The visual data are analysed according to the specific image that is created, its relevance to the research question and its relationship to symbolic and cultural material. The assumption underlying this procedure is that the visual presentations are expressions of something that is not yet consciously recognised or conceptually formulated (Jung, 1933). The textual data are analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These collective contents are further highlighted in a group discussion after all participants have been given the opportunity to explain their presentations, and are used as part of member validation.

In the following case studies, the Mmogo-method™ is described as a visual projective data gathering method that provides insight into both the personal and the collective levels of experience, with the latter providing particular insight into the context.

### **Case studies illustrating personal and collective experiences**

In the first case study, the research context was the drought-stricken areas of Tosca and Ganyesa in the North West Province of South Africa, between 2002 and 2005. Many of the residents over the age of 60 years receive a state pension and many also collect a children's benefit as they care for their grandchildren and the children of other family members. A purposive sample was used to recruit 30 men and 45 women over the age of 60 years, who had lived in Ganyesa or Tosca for longer than 15 years. The aim of the research was to obtain descriptive information on older people's experience of drought.



Photo IV: Experience of drought

In the visual presentation above one of the participants indicated that the drought had caused his animals to become so emaciated from hunger that their ribs could be seen, and that the animals' food troughs were completely empty. The collective experiences are contextualised against the harsh physical environment caused by the drought as well as the socio-political context that contributed to the vulnerable economic position of older Black people.

Many older participants depend on livestock for their livelihood which they have lost during this time. The collective vulnerability of older persons who have to cope with drought individually, as well as the collective fate of Black older persons who were previously excluded from opportunities to prepare adequately for their old age, emerged from this research.

In the following case study considerable insight was obtained into older people's experience of relationships. The participants comprised eight older women who attended the day programme at the Mthimkhulu centre, Emalahleni (Witbank) in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The following two photographs illustrate how a particular participant portrayed certain facets of her relational life. In the first photo the participant is using clay to anchor vertical poles, with cross-poles mounted on top of these, again using clay to secure them.



Photo V: Experience of relationships – beginning of visual presentation

The second photo shows the construction of an unstable structure, where some poles lie diagonally over the structure and others have fallen in. The participant describes this as her house.



Photo VI: Experience of relationships – completed visual presentation

During the making of the visual presentation the participant struggled to keep together the house she had built. The structure kept falling in, despite her attempts to stabilise it. During the discussion that followed, it transpired that this participant had inherited the house from her father, and that it required extensive and constant repairs. Although she shares the house with other family members, she takes primary responsibility for the maintenance of the structure as well as the care of the members of the household.

On a personal level the participant used the unstructured, indirect research question and the visual presentation to communicate a sense of those dimensions of her life in which she expended the most physical and emotional energy. Collectively this research is contextualised against the socio-political

backdrop of South Africa, and the exercise provided insight into the experiences of many older African women who have to cope with limited resources to care for themselves and many other family members. This particular participant visually expressed the endless struggle of many older women who try to fulfil the roles of carer and provider.

In the next case study, ten residents of Ikageng, Potchefstroom in the North West Province of South Africa, over the age of 60 years participated in research in which they were asked to make a visual presentation of any aspect of their experience of HIV/AIDS. The group consisted of two men and eight women who were infected and/or affected by HIV and AIDS.



Photo VII: Table portraying togetherness and inclusion

This visual presentation consists of a table with four legs. The table is turned upside down because it is too heavy to stand upright. The colourful beads indicate people sitting next to each other around the table. The participant associates the table with togetherness, where people interact with each other irrespective of their HIV status or whether they have AIDS. The table symbolises inclusion and unconditional acceptance of people.

In the same study, a male participant created a visual presentation of a man watching over a pig, which is eating pig fodder.



Photo VIII: Man watching over a pig eating

According to the participant, the inconsiderate behaviour of people who are HIV-positive and who have AIDS can be compared to the behaviour of a pig. The pig does not care what it eats, whether it is clean or what it does to others. Both these presentations reflect the personal as well as the collective levels of experiences. The personal meanings attached to being an older person infected

or affected by HIV/AIDS must be interpreted within a certain historical and social context where common patterns of stigmatisation and exclusion are evident in the collective experience of HIV/AIDS.

Another case study investigates the processes and functions that enabled a group of foreign students to adapt to new academic and social contexts in a cross-cultural environment. The students had moved temporarily from Botswana to South African to pursue their studies. The participants comprised thirteen students, five men and eight women, between the ages of 25 to 45 years. A male participant used the visual presentation to portray his growth during the process, and to indicate what processes and functions enabled him to adapt in the challenging circumstances since joining the others students in the training programme at the beginning of the year.



Photo IX: Individual growth and relational support

The participant made two visual presentations, which is contextualised in his cultural context. The cattle in the foreground that are growing from thin to fat represent the knowledge that he has acquired since beginning the course.

On a personal level this visual presentation expresses growth and development. The second presentation is about donkeys and cows that are pulling a load. The pulling together of the load symbolises fellow students and lecturers who made it easier for this participant to achieve his goals than if he had been working alone. The visual presentation portrays cooperation and support. Collective experiences that this group expressed were that they felt part of a diverse community that benefits from communal hard work and from learning from each other.

### **The use of metaphors**

Participants who are involved with self-constructed visual images often use metaphors to put their experiences in context. Metaphors are considered the experience of a phenomenon in terms of something else (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Apart from the above examples, the following visual presentation provides an instance of the symbolic value of a metaphor.

Research was undertaken in a tertiary higher education institution that offers a Master's degree in Community Psychology and Counselling with students enrolled between 2007 and 2008. Three men and fourteen women between the ages of 23 and 30 years participated in the study. The following instruction was given to the group: Please make a visual presentation of your development as part of this group since the beginning of the year.



Photo X: Metaphor of flowering plant to illustrate growth

In this visual presentation the participant used several images. On the left top is an unformed mound of clay that represents the student's personal experiences of herself as an unformed counsellor at the beginning of the course. Three arrows represent the process of growth. Collectively this group experienced support from each other (Roos & Strong, 2009) which is expressed by this participant as a watering can that is able to move around and water the plant. In the foreground a seed on the ground has developed through phases into a sturdy plant with colourful bunches of flowers. This symbolises the inherent potential of the relevant participant, which entails an almost imperceptible process of development towards a flowering of potential that is visible and valuable. It is thus a development from undifferentiation to a clearer refinement of features and worth. Metaphors used in visual projective techniques allow participants to make connections with previous experiences (Zaltman, 2003). They are clearly symbolic in nature, and are considered by Jung (1966) to reflect pregnant language that holds greater meaning than it seems.

## **The value of the Mmogo-method™ as a visual projective research method**

The Mmogo-method™ allows for the co-creation of a research environment in which participants are simultaneously involved in creating their personal version of experiences, but collectively they contribute to insight that is more than the sum of their individual experiences.

Furthermore, the case studies illustrate that personal and collective experiences cannot be separated from the structural and dynamic aspects of the context (Barker, 1968). The structural aspects, which refer to one or more common patterns of behaviour, are noted in the interplay between the personal and the collective experiences. The social realities of drought, HIV/AIDS, experiences of relationships and adjustment are diverse and uniquely personal, while the collective experiences which are not a personal acquisition, have shared themes of depletedness, interpersonal support, inclusion and stigmatisation as well as vulnerability. The dynamic aspects are interdependent ways of interaction with specific parts of the context in which the behaviour occurs (Barker, 1968). It emerged in relation to both the personal and collective experiences, as independent, yet related constructs. The specific parts of the context, including the social, physical, economic, political, historical or cultural interact interdependently both with people's personal experiences of a particular phenomenon and are equally with collective experiences.

The Mmogo-method™ also enables participants to express their experiences and feelings without having to motivate their decisions about what to convey or how to convey it (Hofstede, Van Hoof, Walenberg & De Jong, 2007). However, participants' involvement in the creative process of visual expression requires focus and attention in planning and executing. By using self-generated visual images, participants are more involved in the construction and expression of their personal perspectives, creativity, and unusual, private and unique feelings and thoughts in relation to the environment and social situations in which they

function (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000; Keller et al., 2009; Samuels, 2007; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). According to Jung (1933), creative activities free people's imagination.

It appeared that the participants were better able to convey their experiences to the researcher and that this data gathering method allowed them to bridge the cultural differences between themselves and the researcher. According to Wegmann and Lusebrink (2000) researchers have to develop research methods that suit the expression of emotions in cultural appropriate ways. The visual presentations created multiple entry levels that the researcher may use to access data on the personal and the collective levels. The Mmogo-method™ provides further opportunities for the researcher and the researched to reflect, recollect and describe (Samuels, 2007).

In line with Boddy (2005) and Samuels (2007) it was found that the participants were also more at ease and comfortable in interacting with the researcher than they may have been in a more direct interview situation. Participants reported that it was fun to do research because it was presented in an unusual way. Schiller (in Jung, 1933) suggests that people are only fully people when they play.

### **Trustworthiness of projective visual techniques**

The findings in qualitative research are often not considered real results, and are seen as "soft" findings that are based on subjective perceptions and opinions. This view is grounded in the standards of quantitative research where findings must be valid and replicable (Morse, 2006). However, guidelines to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research differ from those in quantitative studies because methods where data are gathered on an individual level with the aim of predicting outcomes differ from research methods that aim to collect contextualised data (Blatt, 1975).

For example in quantitative research methods, intrapsychic constructs are identified so that they may be verified, so that predictions can be made, or so that they may be generalised to other contexts. In contrast, qualitative research and especially visual projective techniques accept that the visual presentations continuously move between subjectivity and realism in the space between the presentation, the viewer and the context (Stanczak, 2007). The question is thus not whether the question or findings are replicable, but rather whether the data obtained are relevant to the question that is asked and whether they reflect the experiences of the participants in the context. According to Boddy (2005), it is more important to use methods that allow participants to participate in the research than methods that make the researcher feel comfortable.

Trustworthiness of findings obtained through the Mnogo-method™ include that the participants who construct the visual presentations from their multiple realities approve the findings themselves, thereby ensuring that the data are credible. Both the personal and collective levels that are reflected in the data allow for an understanding of the experiences within the context in which they are embedded.

Furthermore, results are verified through data triangulation by using data obtained by the Mnogo-method™ in conjunction with focus group discussions, individual interviews, and/or observations. Trustworthiness is further increased by applying the common elements of the research material to different groups.

Member checking allows the researcher to assess whether the participants accurately portrayed their intentions; and presents an opportunity to probe for new meanings and to clarify the interpretations of the researcher. Participants are able to add information or correct errors; and researchers have an opportunity to summarise provisional interpretations and to confirm individuals' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Visual data have the ability to produce rich descriptions, which promotes the transferability of results. Trustworthiness is also

enhanced by a research environment which allows participants to express themselves in subtle and nuanced ways.

### **Limitations of the Mmogo-method™**

The skill of the researcher is critically important in describing the underlying meanings expressed through the visual presentations (Blatt, 1975; Donoghue, 2000). Boddy (2005) suggests that the interpretation of the specific projective technique is based on comprehension generated through practitioner experience, and requires more than merely a research-based understanding of the technique. This type of research is also difficult to verify according to the traditional guidelines of trustworthiness. Also, some of the participants may initially experience uncertainty when they are presented with the unusual research material.

### **Conclusion**

Visual projective data gathering methods make a considerable contribution both to obtaining insight into topics that are difficult to articulate as well as in cross-cultural environments. The importance of the context in which research is undertaken is emphasised in the studies reported. The case studies illustrate that the Mmogo-method™ as a visual projective data gathering method can make a substantial contribution as an independent qualitative research method to understanding human behaviour in the context in which it occurs; and that insight into human function can be obtained in a unique way.

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