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Creating Space for Children's Voices: Utility of the Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique

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ABSTRACT

A challenge for many School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) practitioners, child psychotherapists and researchers are finding ways to give voice to children and eliciting trustworthy and detailed narratives that could serve as resource for understanding the needs of young clients in the context of all their interpersonal networks. Children are often reticent when asked to self-disclose and tell their stories during consultation. The purpose of the present study was to examine the utility of five sequential steps constituting the Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique (CLET) for scaffolding storytelling among children in middle childhood (aged 9-12 years). Using the CLET for data collection and conducting an interpretive analysis, the researchers explored the performance of 38 middle-childhood children living in three different settings. Findings suggest that the five sequential steps of the CLET adequately and satisfactorily combine to stimulate and elicit rich data and help children to construct their narratives and represent the challenges they face in everyday living. We discuss the application of CLET in SBFC practice as tool when screening and intervention planning for children's perspectives pertaining to a range of topics regarding each of the four quadrants as proposed in the SBFC metamodel.

1. Introduction

A challenge for researchers and those working with children in different settings (e.g., School Based Family Counselling (SBFC) practitioners, counsellors and therapists) is to find ways to create space for the stories that could reveal how the child makes sense of her or his experiences in the past in the present. At the young age of middle childhood, children still struggle to produce a coherent story^[1]. and creating space for children's voices is particularly relevant when working with children in settings where language, societal discourses

and/or local customs pose obstacles to the child's ability to narrate her or his story. There are cultural differences evidence in giving voice to children using narrative elaboration, in which "Western societies typically promote independently oriented self-construal... Eastern cultures tend to espouse an interdependently oriented self-construal, emphasizing instead the relative importance of others in evaluating one's own position in society" (p. 702)^[2]. Nonetheless, in narrative approaches to research and counselling, we search for ways in which to elicit storytelling. Storytelling assists people (and children) to make sense of their lives and their lived experiences, and in

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their narratives children summarise their beliefs, customs, norms, symbolic actions and interactions as representations of how they develop through life.

The Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (CLET) is a visual arts-based research method, which incorporating a semi-structured interview procedure that unfolds in five sequential steps each building upon the other^[3,4]. In this paper, we aim to build a viable case regarding the CLET as innovative technique for conducting narrative research and counselling based on social constructional theory and symbolic interactionism. The purpose of the current study was to examine the utility of the CLET and to describe the use of visual scaffolding through collage-making in three different cultures in stimulating autobiographical remembering and storytelling narrative accounts of children aged 9 to 12 years.. The central question of the study was: *how do the five steps of the CLET combine to elicit rich narratives from children in middle childhood?*

2. Literature Review

The processes of learning to narrate and constructing stories of specific life experiences are influenced by the interaction with social partners. Storytelling is a way in which people make sense of their lives and translate knowing into telling^[5]. Parents or caregivers provide the scaffold for the child's narratives by asking questions and giving comments, thereby helping the child produce narratives with more complex structures^[6,7]. As they grow up, children interact with their parents as well as the social environment to develop narrative skills and cognitive capacities^[8,9]. Being able to recall and organise their memories help children, for example, to establish domain-general cognitive capacities that form the basis for other domain-specific abilities such as causality and intentionality. Children in middle childhood, however, are not yet fully storied posing obstacles to their verbalisation of underlying challenges often hidden from direct observation; others lack the discursive modes of expression, while some cultural conventions also preclude self-disclosure^[10]. Although researchers have used traditional approaches to elicit children's stories^[2,11,12], the current study aimed to find a new way to create space for children's narrative representations, particularly for those children who need some form of stimulation for their verbalisation.

The social constructionist approach^[12-14] and symbolic interactionism^[15] formed the theoretical framework for developing the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET) as an innovative way to open up a space for children's narratives. The CLET makes use of both non-verbal (collage making) and verbal (storytelling) modes of representation. According to social constructionism, language—also non-verbal languages—is a social action in which

people construct/create a subjective reality of the world in which they live through their explanations, descriptions and performances of experiences and perceptions. The symbolic interactionism adopts the notion that people act and interact with the environment based on the meanings that the environment have for them. These meanings result from interactions with others, specifically significant others, social discourses, and culture-specific artefacts, and are often stored in memories that are not easily accessible. Visual images or artefacts are a form of language, and can be combined in a collage to create a non-verbal representation of reality as perceived and experienced by the child^[16,17]. The creator of the collage is telling a story by combining images from culture-specific sources such as magazines providing an expression of the understanding and meanings of their lived experiences.

The visual research methods are becoming useful modes for working with children^[18-20]. Particularly when exploring challenging topics, collage making has been identified as beneficial to overcome the challenge of language and expression when working with children^[16]. Visual research methods rely on projective and representational techniques that enable the participant to engage with and process subconscious meanings of remembered events. Arts-based research assists the SBFC practitioner gaining access to personalised accounts of the participant's experiences in the past and how these might influence the future. By incorporating some form of graphic communication instead of just talking, collage making aims to serve as a scaffold for children's memories and directs attention inward to what they believe or feel and remember about their experiences^[21]. Creating a collage from locally relevant and cultural resources such as magazines also provides for a discursive co-narrator or conversation partner or audience allowing the storyteller to construct visual and non-verbal narratives, and bring to awareness the intra-personal materials often more difficult to access through merely verbal means and answering questions posed by an interviewer^[4,22].

3. Method

In this project examining the viability of the CLET to create space for children's voices, we employed a case study design^[23] to explore the central question of how the five steps of the CLET combine to elicit rich narratives from children in middle childhood (aged 9 to 12 years). We assumed that the children in each of these settings could select images for collage making that would appropriately represent the topic under investigation to support the propositions regarding the usefulness of the CLET creating space for the children's voices to be heard. Furthermore, we assumed that the positive participatory process embedded in the CLET would

assist the child with representational performance of a full and realistic range of memories about the topic under investigation. Following the replication logic for multiple-case studies and based on the premise that the CLET would provide the same units of analysis, the CLET procedures were implemented in three different settings. The three regional settings included Macao (a former Portuguese colony and now a Special Administration Region of China), Zhuhai (a major city on the south-east coast of China), and Gaborone (the capital of Botswana). Fieldworkers and research assistants in each of the settings assisted with the data collection. Prior to collecting the data, the fieldworkers were trained by the principle investigator (first author) to implement the procedures of the CLET in a semi-structured interview and were provided with a comprehensive guide for conducting the fieldwork.

3.1 Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling^[24] by the fieldworkers who were themselves local citizens and who were introduced to the participant by relatives or friends. The inclusion criteria in all the settings were the same, namely children, both boys and girls, in middle childhood (aged 9-12 years), and with no obvious or diagnosed evidence of a psychological disorder (e.g., learning disability or physical impairment). The fieldworkers recruited altogether 52 child participants in the three settings. However, 14 participants had to be excluded because they either did not fit the age criterion or did not sufficiently complete the CLET, the latter because of the fieldworker's inability to follow procedures rather than the child participant choosing to withdraw. This resulted in 38 participants (73%) for this study ($N_{Macao} = 18$, $N_{Zhuhai} = 14$, and $N_{Gaborone} = 6$) who voluntarily collaborated with the fieldworkers for completing the CLET.

(1) In the Macao setting, five girls and 13 boys participated ($M_{age} = 10.06$, age range: 9 to 12 years); the children were from either single parent or two-parent families, and 10 were the only child in the family.

(2) In Zhuhai, seven boys and seven girls participated ($M_{age} = 9.29$, age range: 9 to 10 years); nine of these participants were single children, and except for one child, all others came from two-parent families.

(3) The Gaborone (Botswana) cases included two boys and four girls ($M_{age} = 10.83$, age range: 10 to 12 years), and all except one had multiple siblings. The single child in this setting was also the only participant from single-parent family.

Since the children were all under the age of 18 years, their parents' consent was solicited prior to conducting the CLET interviews. Parents received information (in English

or Chinese) about the purpose and content of their child's participation and signed the informed consent allowing the fieldworker to audio record the ensuing interview and for the textual data to be used for research purposes. The children participated voluntarily and with no coercion, themselves giving verbal assent for their participation^[25]. All records were archived electronically in a password-protected file. No personal or identifying information of the child and/or their family members was recorded and reported below.

3.2 Data Collection

The authors used data collected by fieldworkers in each of the three settings mentioned above. The principal investigator (first author) recruited volunteer fieldworkers and trained them to collect the CLET data following procedures^[26]. The fieldworkers for the Macao and Zhuhai settings were students at a local university who completed the data collection as part of a classroom assignment in a developmental psychology course. In the Gaborone setting, a fieldworker from the local university volunteered and was trained to conduct the CLET interviews. In each setting the instructions for the five steps of the CLET were posed in the child's native or preferred language. The fieldworkers in Macao and Zhuhai conducted the interviews in Cantonese and Putonghua, the respective native languages of the children in these two settings. In Gaborone, the fieldworker conducted the interviews in English, the language preferred by the children in this setting despite their native language being SeTswana. Gaborone children are bilingual, learn English from an early age, and usually attend English-speaking schools to improve their proficiency in the second language^{[27][28]}.

The average interview time for completing all the steps in the CLET with the children was approximately 60-70 minutes, with the first 20-25 minutes for collage making (Step 1) and ± 35 -40 minutes (or more if necessary) for eliciting the narratives (Steps 2-5). The focus topic for the CLET in all the settings was the children's perceptions and recollections of family life. Although we conducted the CLET with this topic (i.e., family life) it was not for the purpose of comparing the children's perceptions regarding their families. Rather, the topic was selected to guide the procedures for completing the CLET and for the purpose of examining our assumptions related to the utility of the CLET to create space for children's voices. Thus, the child participant was asked to make a collage about their memories of significant events or experiences (positive and negative) in the family (CLET Step 1) selecting images from locally resourced magazines and pasting these on A3 paper provided. Scissors and glue were available to

the child for convenience of executing the collage making. Each child was presented with a range of magazines (i.e., 6-8 magazines) including children's magazines with images of cartoons and animations, and life magazines with images of food, travelling, technology, household items, sport, and fashion and clothing, all freely available within the local settings.

After completing a collage about the focus topic, the participants engaged actively in constructing stories for each of the images on the collage (CLET Step 2). Three prompts guided the storytelling phase, namely (1) "tell a story about this image," (2) "what does this image mean to you," and (3) "how does the image relate to the topic." In CLET Step 3, the fieldworkers asked the participant (1) to position themselves in the collage (i.e., "where on the collage would you post a picture of yourself"), and (2) to reflect upon missing image (i.e., "what image would you like to add but could not find when making the collage"). The fieldworkers prompted for the thoughts and feelings about the self-positioning and missing image asking further questions as needed. Next (CLET Step 4) the participant reflected upon similar and different images in order to explore their interpretation of potential challenges embedded in the storytelling about the topic. CLET Step 5 concluded the interview engaging the participant in a final reflection and debriefing, also prompting the participant to add further stories should he/she wish to do so.

3.3 Data Analysis

Since this study used data collected by several fieldworkers, the first step in the analysis was to review the collected protocols to ensure comprehensiveness and completeness of each case. As indicated above, fieldworkers collected the CLET data, but some fieldworkers did not follow the procedures carefully and the initial review resulted in the elimination of incomplete cases. The authors examined the 52 protocols from the initial data set for the three settings carefully and selected the 38 protocols deemed representative of all or most of the five sequential steps of the CLET. To ensure confidentiality of both participants and fieldworkers, all names were changed to pseudonyms for further discussion.

The main objective of this project was to find evidence and justification for the proposition that the CLET is a useful method to elicit vivid memories and rich storytelling from children aged 9-12 years. As is common in qualitative research methods, this required an iterative and interpretive stance for pattern matching, explanation building and cross-case synthesis^[16,29]. The CLET is not a diagnostic tool and thus, we did not test the psychometric properties for such purpose. Rather, we focused on providing thick descriptions

of the children's participation in the CLET so as to explore the utility for further use in research and child counselling.

After the initial review of all the protocols, we independently analysed the completed protocols for the three settings separately. We first analysed the collage (CLET Step 1) independent from the storytelling, and coded each collage in terms of the (1) nature and symbolic content of the images, and (2) the overall construction of the collage. Calculating the percentage of images per collage with a human-like content vs. an object-related content, we interpreted a higher percentage (>50%) of human-like images as the child's ability selecting images representative of the focus topic (i.e., the family). Secondly, we analysed and coded the micro-narratives of the stories that the child presented for each image on the collage (CLET Step 2) examining the range of memories and the construction and coherence of these stories with the topic under investigation. We also noted the self-positioning and missing (CLET Step 3), and the reasoning related to similarities and differences (CLET Step 4) further examining whether the child could present vivid stories of their lived experiences when prompted with the CLET procedures. Self-positioning on the collage and the reasons for this position (narratives) represented the child's authenticity as central character in their stories and the underlying perception of self-in-the-world and self-to-other/family relationships. Juxtaposing similar images with different images on the collage provided insights regarding the child's range of memories and experiences of relationships within the family. Finally, we conducted a cross-case analysis comparing the protocols for the three setting separately before examining all cases across settings in order to provide justification for the utility of the CLET with children in middle childhood.

The analysis and interpretations of the CLET case materials evolved with the authors independently and rigorously reading the field texts and maintaining a reflective posture to limit potential biases^[30]. Throughout the analytic process, we adopted a critical reflective position analysing the cases, and crisscrossing interpretations with the original collage and textual materials. Cross-case synthesis in each setting was performed to explore global, local and thematic coherence that emerged, and to build a credible case in support of the propositions regarding the utility of the CLET when used with children aged 9 to 12 years. Thematic coherence emerged from noting the repeated and grounded nature of emerging themes (both visual and verbal). To establish credibility and confirmability of the interpretations^[31] the authors regularly discussed their analyses and interpretations. When discrepancies occurred, we resolved these going over the rationale for our respective decisions, re-reading the protocols, and refining the analytic process

until we reached consensus about disputed or unclear items. There were no items in the final analysis and interpretation upon which the two authors could not come to an agreement. Thick descriptions, referring to information regarding the research settings, the collage, and different perspectives from participants, further added to a better understanding of the usefulness of the CLET as tool for creating space for children to narrate their perceptions and tell their stories. Below we present the findings and wherever feasible, include examples of the units of analysis to support validity and credibility of the CLET as a tool giving voice to children.

4. Comparing Performances on the CLET

Testing the utility of the CLET, we present the findings below comparing the performances of 38 children aged 9 to 12 years in three settings—that is, in Macao (n=18) and ZhuHai (n=14) and in Gaborone (n=6)—and testing the assumption that children in middle childhood would find it easy to follow the procedures when the CLET was conducted as a semi-structured face-to-face individual interview (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison on the completion of 5 steps in CLET

	Macao n = 18	ZhuHai n = 14	Gaborone n = 6
Average number of images	12.50 (range: 9-16)	9.64 (range: 3-14)	10.67 (range: 5-19)
Number of human-related images	40%	48%	84%
Coherence between collage and micro-narratives*	.84	.79	.84
Self-positioning**	.67	.64	.50
Missing image identification (completed Step 3)	14	8	2
Juxtaposition (completed Step 4)	16	14	1

Note: * Coherence: Approaching 1.00 indicates greater interconnectedness between collage images and micro-narratives

** Self-positioning: Approaching 1.00 indicates close to the centre of the collage, approaching 0 indicates positioning the self on the periphery

Comparing the protocols across the three settings, it appeared that most children could follow the five sequential steps and complete each step without problem. The instructions were posed in the child’s native or preferred language and enabled the children to reflect upon their own memories, recollect significant and relevant stories, and choose the strategy for telling their stories.

Collage-making (CLET Step 1). The first step in the CLET involved making a collage using 10-12 images cut from magazines. The fieldworkers provided magazines with which the children would likely be familiar and that

contained cultural cues reminiscent of their everyday lives. The magazines were social products or artefacts and could provide the children with the freedom to select images that represented their perceptions of family life, and to narrate their own non-verbal stories using cultural relevant cues instead of predetermined categories. The children selected images from the magazines to tell a (non-verbal) story about the family choosing both human-related and object-related images. The collages were generally constructed in a free-flowing fashion and were interpreted as broadly representing how the child remembered events related to the topic (i.e., the family). Figure 1 shows a selection of collages from each of the three settings. On average the children selected 10.94 images for the collage making with a range from 3 to 19. Except for Gaborone children, the children in other settings selected more object-related than human-related images. Selection of human-related images for the collage was considered as being congruent with the topic (i.e., family life), and a higher percentage of human-like images seen as reflective of the collage making stimulating memories about the topic (see Table 1). Cartoon characters were interpreted as human-related images as the children selected these images to represent family members and family events.



Figure 1. Examples of the collages are from children in the Macao, Zhuhai and Gaborone settings

Storytelling (CLET Step 2). The collage making stimulated the storytelling about the topic, and represented the children's ability to integrate the meanings of the visual images associated to perceptions of each family member. We analysed coherence between collage making and storytelling showing an interconnectedness between the collage images and the micro-narratives and stimulating a range of memories related to the topic (i.e., the family). In the Macao setting (84%), ZhuHai setting (79%) and Gaborone setting (84%) coherence emerged demonstrating the children's ability to integrate symbolic meanings of the images with their thoughts and memories and recounting their stories about family life. They also managed to construct a coherent story line moving from one image to the next, reflecting some degree of cognitive organisation. The images on the collages, whether small or large, reflected a full range of memories relevant to the topic under investigation, and the children created non-verbal narratives telling vivid stories about their family life.

Micro-narratives emerged as the child was telling a story about the images on the collage. A female child from Macao, Hou (aged 11 years) narrated the following story for a ball pasted on her collage:

I like playing volleyball and I am the volleyball team member of my school. My family are very supportive to me for playing volleyball as long as it does not affect my study. In the beginning they asked me to try first, but then I found that it is very interesting. Also because my school's coach is a famous member in Macao's volleyball team.

Zhuhai children selected larger images, mostly from children's magazines and cartoons, and pasted images in close proximity and somewhat overlapping. Human-like images were specifically selected to represent their parents, whom the children reported (in their micro-narratives) spent a great deal of time interacting with their single child. Elma, a 10-year old girl in Zhuhai, related the following story about her father when pointing to a bear-like image on the collage:

He'll [father/bear] come and help me to get up when I [little bird] fall or get hurt. He treats me well. Once I told him I hurt my leg when he picked me up after a dancing class. He took a medicine box from the car and put some medicine on my leg. Then we went back home together.

The Gaborone children selected more human-like images to tell their non-verbal family stories. Gaborone is the capital city of Botswana and the participants in this setting mostly came from wealthy families although the country has one of the most skewed income distributions in the world^[32]. In this setting, the fieldworker reported a limited variety of locally relevant magazines, which influenced the selection of images for collage making.

Only life magazines with images of celebrities and fashion could be provided to the child participants, and as in the sample collages from this setting (see Figure 1), some children pasted mostly faces that were cut on the edges and somewhat decontextualized. Nonetheless, the children constructed their collages creating non-verbal narratives expressing a range of memories about the topic. Their micro-narratives in the Gaborone setting also showed coherence across the non-verbal narratives and verbal narratives, and most of the stories directly related to the family or family members.

Kok (female, aged 11, intact family) said: *This is my mom, my dad, and me ... this is a happy moment, when my mom, my dad and I visited another country ... OK, that time we were travelling a lot like, sleeping over at my relatives and we had lots of fun*

Roy (male, aged 11, parents divorced) said: [Image 2] *It is a man ... the man is angry ... it reminds me when my dad was angry. [Image 7] A man ... it reminds me of when my dad was happy... because it reminds me of when my family was happy*

Self-positioning (CLET Step 3a) and missing image (CLET Step 3b). when asked to position themselves on the collage it reflected, to some extent, how the child perceived their relationship to the story (e.g., memories of events) and to the actors (e.g., family members) in the story (Figure 1, marked with an X on the collage). The higher percentage of self-positioning in the centre of the collage (Macao: .67; ZhuHai: .60) rather than on the periphery (closer to 0) was interpreted as representing the self as the central character of their stories and perhaps having good memories and relationships in the context of the family. As the central character in their stories, the children in the Macao and ZhuHai settings, for the most part, told stories both non-verbally (the collage) and verbally (micro-narratives) about their family life filled with happy memories. In contrast, the Gaborone children positioned themselves either as central figure (3 children) or on the periphery as observer (3 children). Peripheral positioning of the children in all three settings was interpreted as an indication of troubled relationships and a wish to escape the present into a less troubling future. In this regard, the CLET alerted us to the need for further assessments and analysis, which could be done in a counselling setting and when planning an intervention. Further assessment was not done for this project because of the research context, but in some cases we alerted the parents that they should consider following up with social and/or mental health service providers.

Regarding the missing image (CLET Step 3b), some of the participating children seemed satisfied with their

first attempts at collage making to tell the non-verbal story. Only two of the six Gaborone children wanted to add an image, one related to the family and the other one an image reflecting a personal experience (e.g., swimming pool). In the Macao setting, four children (22%) and in the ZhuHai setting six children (43%) were satisfied with the collage not wanting to add any further images. The other children in these two settings did identify an image they wanted to add referring to object-related images that were seemingly important to the child (e.g., toy car, baby image, nature/animals, big house) or images of the family more generally (e.g., memory of a grandmother, big family photo). In the CLET, the missing image question encourages participants to reflect upon the silent voice in their stories and is aimed at eliciting rich narratives that could perhaps indicate an underlying problem or challenging relationship, and for which the SBFC practitioner might want to conduct further assessments.

Juxtapositioning (Step 4). In this project, most of the children in the Macao and ZhuHai settings could perform on the question regarding comparing similarities and differences. The Macao children discussed different characteristics of family members, happy or sad memories, and in one case issues related to unresolved grief. ZhuHai children could also comment on family-related dynamics such as harmonious family, studying hard to make the family proud, and the family not being the same as friends. Although a more challenging step in the CLET, juxtaposing similar and different images helped the children to reflect upon and narrate their emotions, their perceptions of the self in the family, and for the Chinese children their responsibilities towards family life more generally. Only one child in the Gaborone setting completed this step comparing facial expressions and emotional content of the images. The other Gaborone children did not want to comment for this step. Given that the children in the other two settings could complete this step without difficulty, we doubt that the low response rate was directly related to the child's inabilities. Rather, we interpreted this as that the fieldworker, who was working at a distance and without regular supervision from the first author, perhaps did not follow procedures and/or prompted the child to complete this step resulting in the low response rate.

Closure and debriefing (Step 5). Overall, the children in all the settings found performance on the CLET a fun activity, allowing them to reflect upon their memories and thoughts and assisting the fieldworker build rapport and break down the barriers of the unfamiliar interview setting. In response to the final question posed by the fieldworker (i.e., "what did you feel like when making the

collage and telling your stories?"), most children could respond with self-reflection and insight:

Andre (Macao male, aged 12): *I picked the pictures without many thoughts at the beginning. But it turned out that I could talk many things about the pictures. It made me call back the things of my family; it made me remember the things that happened when I was small... because it made me think back to my past.*

Jason (Macao male, aged 11): *I found difficulties when choosing pictures but still I could find it slowly ... I need to think for a while when telling the stories. [What do you feel now that we are almost done?] I think ... pretty good. I could speak out something that I like and don't like.*

Henry (Macao male, aged 9): *Um...a little bit bored ... I want to finish it quickly ... I can go to play. I like play computer. [Any problems during the interview?] Telling the story with the pictures ... I don't know how to say ... don't know what I am supposed to say.*

Eli (ZhuHai male, aged 9): *In a word ... it is the happiest thing. I use these pictures to represent the care that my teachers and parents give me.*

Betty (ZhuHai female, aged 9): *I think I do not usually do well with pictures, but this time I draw very well. I am very proud of myself.*

Qin (ZhuHai male, aged 10): *It was difficult to find pictures. The magazines are not enough ... [and now?] I feel that my family had taught me a lot of things. It reminds me about the memories. I should spend more time with them.*

Riana (Gaborone female, aged 11): *I'd like to say that I'm happy that you told me about this project ... [and now?] I feel happy*

Leo (Gaborone male, aged 12): *It felt interesting and I was feeling happy [to make the collage]. I felt excited ... it makes me feel excited about my family. [Now] I feel just fine.*

5. Discussion

The main objective of this paper was to explore the utility of the CLET scaffolding or priming storytelling and creating space for children in middle childhood and in non-clinical settings to transform their remembering/knowing into telling. The topic for this particular study was the children's perceptions of family. However, we did not analyse their views on the family *per se* but merely used this as a focus for conducting the CLET with the child participants. Therefore, in this paper we do not discuss children's actual perceptions of family life. Rather, we focus on the usefulness of the CLET as a tool for stimulating narratives from children. The analysis of the collages and micro-narratives in the three settings—that is, in Macao and ZhuHai (China) and in Gaborone

(Botswana)—provided evidence that the five sequential steps of the CLET are useful to scaffold children's autobiographical remembering. The different steps combined well to elicit rich and vivid memories, and to structure the micro-narratives that were focused and relevant. It was clear in all the settings that the CLET managed to engage the middle-childhood child in accessing their own unique memories and tell stories representative of the topic under investigation.

All the children in each of the three settings could construct non-verbal and verbal narratives that reflected an ability to cognitively organise and represent a range of memories about the topic. During the process of collage making, participants were fully in charge of their own work, which lessened the dependence on the fieldworker to ask questions and prompt the story telling. The collage making allowed the children sufficient freedom to develop their autonomy and helped build a sense of competence while at the same time suggested a safe and reassuring environment for remembering and performing a full range of memories. Although some children found it difficult at first to select relevant pictures, they could eventually find images representing a range of significant memories pertaining people, object/artefacts, and life events. In some cases, the images were seemingly not relevant to the topic under investigation (e.g., objects, artefacts, nature, fashion). Nonetheless, these images were selected with the topic in mind and representing the child's understanding of the topic. The symbolic meanings embedded in the images generally triggered memories of meaningful family events and object-related images represented family outings (travel, car), eating together (food), and artefacts that signified a family member or family life in general (e.g., jewellery, mobile phone, camera). Overall there was coherence between the collage and the micro-narratives, and we concluded that the collage making sufficiently stimulated or primed the recall of memories for children in middle childhood who were still somewhat constrained in verbal expression.

The size, cutting and pasting of images furthermore provided some insight into the fine motor skill development, the organisation of their memories, as well as the significance of the memories. Through pasting the images on the collage and their self-positioning the children revealed relationship patterns, distances or closeness to their significant others, and some emotional content that lurked below the level of awareness. The analysis further provided evidence that the memories elicited through collage making stimulated the children's verbal expressions, and when the CLET is conducted as a face-to-face semi-structured interview following the five steps

allowed for the elicitation of rich and vivid narratives from the participating children in middle childhood.

In this study, the researchers aimed to build a compelling case for the utility of the CLET. The aim was not to search for universal truths between the three settings or about the children's perceptions of family life per se. Rather, the objective was to explore how well the steps of the CLET could converge to provide access to rich and realistic memories of children in middle childhood. By utilising the CLET, we argue that SBFC practitioners using this technique could gain insight into the concepts and behaviour within the setting, as well as the ways in which children made sense of their specific ways of being. The CLET is not a diagnostic tool but a screening tool for intake interviewing that could provide a source of hypotheses for further exploration either through additional (diagnostic) assessments or further clinical interviewing.

Performances on the CLET cannot and should not be interpreted as either true or false—there is no ultimate right or wrong way to tell their stories and there was no way to justify or validate whether the stories the children told were more correct in one setting than in another. Thus, the CLET and the stories elicited following the five steps are not truth-evaluable and thus not open to standardisation and norms required for specific diagnostic criteria. Instead, performances on the CLET are subjective and projective or representational meaning-making actions or part of the doing of a certain kind of co-action not normally forthcoming by just saying or describing something. When something is wrong with them then they are happy or unhappy, not right or wrong. The CLET is an expressive channel for conveying messages about the self and for modulating emotional impact on everyday functioning. It is also a process that is context-shaped and context renewing or transformative. Both fieldworker/researcher and client gain insights from collaborating in the sense-making process, which helps with developing a less problem-saturated life story and optimal functioning in different everyday life settings.

Thus, apart from its usefulness as a visual method for research with children, the CLET has implications when working with children in other contexts and when narrating a range of topics. When working with children in school-based or agency settings, the SBFC practitioner often has difficulty gaining access to stories of distress that lurk below the level of awareness^[33,34]. In this regard, the CLET has the potential to serve the clinician working with children to develop hypotheses or arguments for the nature of possible underlying problems in the various set-

tings. For example, a child expected to make a collage of family life and pasting decontextualized images of faces and unrelated objects in a random, disjointed and distant fashion could be telling a story of relationship distances, conflict and potential cut-off in family relations. If the micro-narratives contrastingly tell stories about family warmth and cohesiveness, the practitioner should be alerted to the child potentially hiding or being triangulated in these problematic parental relationships^[35]. Further exploration could then follow, and treatment planning appropriately designed to help the child (and family) develop along healthy lines.

Combining non-verbal and verbal narratives as in the CLET gives access to deeper meanings that might otherwise not be evident in children's self-narratives. Chinese children in particular (e.g., Macao and Zhuhai settings) are often constrained by cultural prohibitions to self-disclose or tell stories that could affect the family's face, and they tend to communicate only what they perceive the audience want to hear or what would reflect positively on the family^[36]. Here the CLET could make a contribution to intake interviewing with children in these contexts as it could elicit what lurked below the surface or was suppressed for fear of retribution. The CLET could access rich and vivid non-verbal and verbal representations, and could enable the researcher and clinician to develop hypotheses for further exploration .

6. Limitations

The project reported here did reveal some limitations of the CLET, particularly when conducted in the child's non-native language. The language proficiency of children should be considered before implementing steps 2 to 5 of the CLET. Children with limited command of a language have greater difficulty to express their thoughts and feelings adequately. For example, Leo (Gaborone male, aged 12) narrating stories about decontextualized faces on his collage, said: "That's my brother ... I chose it because my brother likes being cool." Leo's micro-narratives mostly reflected limited expressions about a person in his family and he had difficulty reflecting on any further meanings. Using locally relevant magazines are intended to provide cues of culturally-relevant socialisation. Although this could be a limitation if sufficient and/or relevant magazines could not be found, there is the option of the SBFC practitioner compiling a resource base beforehand selecting a variety of images from relevant magazines and making these available to the children. The practitioner should make sure that this resource is culturally relevant to the child and contains a broad range of image categories for inclusion in the collage making. The child should also be

able to cut the images to her or his liking before pasting them on the collage.

In this study, we had to rely on trained fieldworkers to conduct the CLET. It was unfortunate that some fieldworkers did not fully comprehend the importance of the five sequential steps and thus skipped a step when having difficulty to prompt the child in the face-to-face interview. Skipping any of the sequential steps could detract from the efficacy of the CLET as each step is purposefully designed to scaffold autobiographical remembering. Although the fieldworkers were carefully trained beforehand, their inexperience in the field in some cases jeopardized the completion of all the steps in succession. Nonetheless, for the analysis reported in this paper, we used only fully completed protocols where all five steps of the CLET were effectively and comprehensively followed.

7. Conclusion

Proposing an alternative mode of representation and narration (i.e., non-verbal telling), we concluded that the CLET allows for free expression of the child's subjective and inter-subjective truths, even when the participant had difficulty recollecting their memories or the memories were about sad situations or events. The collage making and storytelling that constitute the central focus of the CLET allows the SBFC practitioner and researcher to elicit a full and realistic range of memories about the topic under investigation. Through the process of scaffolding autobiographical remembering, the CLET can provide a channel for dialogue about issues the child is not yet aware of and to elicit issues otherwise obscured from observation but where the counsellor or child therapist should direct the interventions. It can also prove useful to elicit areas of strength and weakness, coping styles and resources that the individual might still be unaware of at the point of research or intervention. The CLET is an innovative technique aimed to elicit vivid life storytelling by scaffolding or prompting narrative processes and providing a space for children to tell their stories.

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