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UNESCO Chair
on Visual Anticipation
and Futures Literacy
towards Visual Literacy



THE BARCODED BABY

The barcode is a symbol of standardization and tracking associated with commercial goods. When related to a human being, it implies uniformity, categorization and, possibly, reduction in a product. Fritz Lang, in his iconic *Metropolis* 1927 film was among the first to raise concerns about dehumanization because of social conditioning.

The “Barcoded Baby” tool uses the image of a baby face – as a metaphor of innocence and the not-yet-conditioned individuality – and provokes reflection and discussions on how cultural and social systems, norms, and expectations condition individual and collective identities, and with what consequences.



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The tool **aims** to:

- Foster awareness of how individuals unconsciously internalize social expectations.
- Encourage them to explore how the implicit biases they carry affect their perceptions of self and others.
- Support them by balancing the tension between the need of individual expression versus belonging or fitting in a collective.
- Empower them to reclaim agency over their life choices by critically examining external influences.
- Highlight the randomness of identity construction, loosen the deriving rigid divides and stress attention to the dangers that divides pose to democracy and social sustainability.

How to apply it

Although the tool is ideal to deconstruct the concept of identity, it is not limited to that. Depending on the circumstances (i.e. topic of discussion, number and profile of learners, time limitations), facilitators can apply the tool as well when discussing topics, among which democracy, success, failing, stereotypes, diversity, inclusion, well-being etc.

Facilitators share the image of the barcoded baby and pose the following questions:

1. What is your socially imposed bar-code?
2. How much of your self-perception is built by the expectations / assumptions of others?
3. In your daily life and experience, what images around you talk about how your identity should be?
4. What are the consequences of your assumptions, expectations and choices?

The learners are expected to reflect on what are the identity items their society expects them to enact; identify how expectations from family, the professional or the social environment shape the appreciation (or not) of themselves; become aware of the visual and verbal narratives in the public sphere that encourage and solidify stereotypes, and determine the measure of comparison for individuals; and consider how these affect their thoughts, value system, choices and expectations. Open-ended questions support learners to make tangible the thought and behavioural patterns they unknowingly endorse. Facilitators can delve on certain answers or patterns of answers and generate more opportunities for in-depth discussions.

Suggested combination with other Visual Literacy tools

The “Barcoded Baby” tool combines effectively with the “Role Model Stereotypes”, the “Role-playing”, the “Sensing instead of Making Sense”, the “Frame”, the “Identity Triangle”, and the “Visuality Iceberg” tools.

