



Gender typicality in children's art development: A cross-cultural study



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ABSTRACT

Gender typicality in children's art development was examined from drawings of a person in an environment. Participants ($n = 700$) were aged 6–12 (boys, $n = 314$; girls, $n = 386$) were from 13 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Central America. Inclusion of vehicles, weapons, animals, sports, ground line, Lowenfeld's stage of development, and principal color were observed and analyzed. Boys incorporated vehicles, weapons, and sports more than girls. Girls used more colors than boys. Significant differences were found between some subgroups and countries. Overall there was a significant difference by gender in the following categories: inclusion of vehicles of transportation ($\chi^2 (1, n = 700) = 16.027, p < .01$) with boys including vehicles twice as often as girls, inclusion of weapons, no girls included weapons in their images, though some boys did ($\chi^2 (1, n = 283) = 14.317, p < .01$), inclusion of images of sports: boys were more likely than girls to include images of sports ($\chi^2 (1, n = 700) = 1.562, p < .01$); principal color choice was ($\chi^2 (3, n = 700) = 8.82, p = .032$), with boys more likely to use no color and girls were more likely to use equal amounts of warm and cool colors. The data suggests disparity between ages and stages of Lowenfeld's art development (1987) and adds to information on normative development in art and on gender typicality in drawings cross-culturally.

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Introduction

Children's drawings have been studied through psychological tests and assessments for decades. Therapists and educators make decisions about children's psychological health, emotional and cognitive abilities, problems, and skills through assessments of their images. Drawing assessments typically measure developmental elements through an analysis of graphic components. Practitioners including teachers, therapists, psychiatrists, and psychologists are trained to determine the signs, symbols, graphic indicators or content in drawing which correspond to potential problems. Children's drawing research has concentrated on indicators of problems, rather than creating a normative sample (Betts, 2006; Deaver, 2009). To date, there is no baseline of what constitutes "typical" or "normal" graphic indicators of art development. Cross cultural research on gender differences or similarities in children's drawings are also scarce. Alter-Muri (2002) investigated children's drawings from Europe and compared them to Lowenfeld's stages of art development, noting the presence of gender differences.

Professionals need to expand their knowledge of what is "typical" in children's drawings in order to best understand expected developmental models. Too often, the educational system

and psychological community focus on problem-oriented models whereas functional and commonplace knowledge are equally important. Today's expanding multicultural classrooms and clinical practices, need information on assessing the influence of culture on children's drawings. This study examined whether gender typicality in drawing occurs cross-culturally and whether Lowenfeld's stages of art development can be applied to drawings in our post-modern world. Gender is defined by physiologists Torgrimson and Minson (2005) as "the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex" (p. 786). Gender is determined through cultural, psychological and behavioral traits expectations related to socialization. DePaul (2009) describes the term "gender typicality" as an activity that is typical for ones own gender.

Lowenfeld's theories of art development

Viktor Lowenfeld has been regarded as the prominent theorist in children's art development. His seminal study included a correlation of art development with several facets of childhood development: cognitive, psychological, social, and motor development. Lowenfeld's text, *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947), has become the most widely used work in art education. His most noted contributions are his theories on the stages of art development and he believed that these developmental stages of art should provide the basis for art instruction (Alter-Muri, 2002).

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The application of stage theories has been debated since their inception. Research suggests that development does not always progress linearly and criticisms of Lowenfeld's work also include the relevance and applicability of stages in drawing (Flavell, 1982). Within a single drawing there can be indicators of several distinct stages of development and some children skip stages (Hamblen, 1985; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). Bremner and Moore (1984), Kindler and Darras (1977, 1998) and Wolf and Perry (1988) found that children are often capable of constructing and using a range of visuals within the frame of a single developmental stage, depending on the context, purpose, and choice of artwork. Despite these criticisms, Lowenfeld's theory of artistic development remains a standard tool used by an array of professionals.

The relationship of culture and artistic development

In today's globalizing world, there is a need to investigate the influences of culture on development because of its influence on perceptual training, habits of orientation to space, and the value of rewarding artistic behavior. According to Kindler and Darras (1977), stage theories do not take into account implications of culture and sociocultural factors. Early stages of childhood art show similarities cross-culturally in depiction of time and space, though differences appear as many non-Western cultures do not expect visual realism as the terminal stage of graphic development (Hamblen, 1985; Wilson & Wilson, 1984).

Social influences to art development

Visual realism is the preferred stylistic endpoint that predominates in Western cultures and is the crux of Lowenfeld's stages. Lowenfeld's research and teaching includes his viewpoint that the art by children of any period of time is influenced by the esthetic orientation of their culture. It is difficult to distinguish children's art from one culture to another before age five because of structural and thematic characteristics in children's art which occur across cultures (Hamblen, 1985). In school, children are motivated to use accepted symbols of broad society and drawings are rooted in culturally available graphic models, children are encouraged to ignore symbols which arise from unique micro-cultures (Gardner, 1983; Kindler and Darras, 1998). Graphic styles also differ between rural areas and cities, as found by Wilson and Wilson (1984) in Egypt, demonstrating that art development consists of learning the conventions one is exposed to in their environment from peers and adults (Kindler and Darras, 1998).

Feinberg (1979) suggested that socially learned traits can influence drawings and Lowenfeld's theories have been criticized for not incorporating variables of social influence. Children's behavior is determined by the rewards and punishments reinforced throughout society and educational systems and variables such as past experiences contribute to artistic depictions, yet do not follow an age pattern (McFee, 1998). Children create imagery influenced by stories they have heard, individual differences, and peer's artwork. Kim (2008) describes the influence of comics and mass media on Korean children's drawings. Because history and socialization are influential to development, McNiff (1982) noted that current events often affect children's spontaneous drawing.

Gender differences in children's drawings

Gender differences in drawings can be determined as early as the preschool years. Flannery and Watson (1995) asserted that the role of gender in children's drawings accounts for differences that cannot be completely explained by biology. Gender differences can be noticed in preschool scribbles by early childhood

providers. Boyatzis and Eades (1999) and Boyatzis and Albertini (2000) showed that judges could accurately identify the gender of a preschool child by looking at his or her scribble drawing.

Behavioral reinforcements from teachers, parents, and society also influence development and boys are reinforced for energetic classroom participation, and girls are reinforced for developing friendships (Feinberg, 1979). Silver (1992) conducted a study of relationships depicted by children; boys drew more fantasies of life threatening events, assaultive relationships, and included other males, whereas girls portrayed unfriendly relationships and included other girls. Research indicates that artistic expression is developed within social context and that children's art is a socially constructed narrative (McNiff, 1982; Silver, 1992; Walsh, 1993) from social functions.

When children choose subject matter in free drawing, they often choose what is culturally appropriate for their gender (Duncum, 1997). Research showed boys preferred to draw monsters, dinosaurs, vehicles and transportation, spaceships, superheroes, machines and mechanics, sports, scenes of violence and battle, and images of power compared to girls who included more images of nature, home and domesticity, and animals (Boyatzis & Albertini, 2000; Duncum, 1997; Feinberg, 1979; Iijima, Arisaka, Minamoto, & Arai, 2001; McNiff, 1982; Reeves & Boyette, 1983; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). Additionally, girls tended to draw more happy faces, landscapes, use curvilinear lines, and depict fashion, royalty, flowers, and pets more than boys (Majewski, 1978; Reeves & Boyette, 1983; Turgeon, 2008). McNiff (1982) examined the content of 1800 drawings by children aged 6–8 years and discovered that 68% of the drawings of people and 80% of drawings containing plants and flowers were created by girls. The majority of drawings created by boys contained some form of conflict. Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey, and Fitchberg (2006) indicated that as children mature their ability to create more detailed drawings increases and as such, girls' drawings show greater fine motor skills than boys by inclusion of details such as fingernails, makeup, and jewelry. Similarly, Reeves and Boyette (1983) reported girls emphasized the eyes of figures.

Feinberg's (1977) study which integrated drawing and writing indicated that boys tended to draw more violent scenes than girls, portraying fighting in terms of direct physical conflict. Boys also depicted drawing fighting scenes which included bodily harm. These images contrasted to the drawings by girls which included more interpersonal conflict, often represented by arguments between people. Feinberg (1977) discovered that girls' "helping" drawings often include scenes of helping a friend or a family member, whereas boys drew "helping" in terms of rescue and danger. Flannery and Watson (1995) asked 3rd and 4th grade students to draw a person or persons involved in an activity. Drawings were evaluated on theme, realism, aggression, expressiveness, and artistic skill. Boys created more drawings with unrealistic themes and aggression than girls; however, their artistic skills were similar.

Although few studies have examined the use of color in artwork, Milne and Greenway (1999) explored the use of color in four free drawings and one projective drawing. Their study of 61 children between the ages of 4 and 14 found that as boys become older they tend to use fewer colors and less often than girls of the same age. Minamoto and Arai (2001) found that boys use more bold colors than girls, and girls tend to use warmer colors. Turgeon (2008) also found that girls used more warm colors than boys and that boys tended to use more black and gray. Deaver's (2009) preliminary study of normative drawings from children from the 2nd and 4th grades showed that younger children tend to use bold colors, and girls scored higher on their realistic use of colors in their Human Figure Drawing (HFD) than boys.

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