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Symbols of Fear in the Studies of Drawings by Polish and Turkish Children

ABSTRACT
The authors present results of their studies dealing with symbols of fear identified in drawings made by Polish and Turkish children. The studies consisted in comparing results with regard to the categories and content of symbols recognized in the drawings presented by younger school-age children of the two nationalities. For the needs of the comparative analysis the following questions were formulated: In what way did the children present their fears in their drawings? How can the similarities in the symbols of fear presented in the drawings by Polish and Turkish children be interpreted? What do the observed differences testify to? Comparison of the symbols of fear allowed recognizing the similarities and differences occurring in the drawings produced by the examined children. It was found that the largest number of drawings present a symbol of fear connected with the category of animals. While interpreting the results, the authors accepted the thesis that the grasped similarities relating to the manner of presenting fear result from the common history of man, recorded in archetypes and symbols. On the other hand, the observed differences are connected with the tradition present in each of the cultures.

Keywords:
fear, archetype, children’s drawings, symbols of fear, younger school age children.
INTRODUCTION

Fear as a category of human emotions has been present in humans since the beginning of our existence. Epicurus of Samos claimed that on the path to attain happiness there are four types of apprehension. He listed, among them, “the fear of impossibility of experiencing happiness, the fear of suffering, the fear of gods, and the fear of death” (Fajkowska & Szymur, 2009, p. 8). Upon analyzing classical theories of fear, it can be defined as an emotional state which is characterized by a group of peculiar reactions lasting for some time and evoking an unpleasant, annoying feeling of distress. The states of anxiety are accompanied by the sense of helplessness, lack of the possibility of concentration, foreseeing threats and controlling the state of excessive excitement (Butcher, Hooley, & Mineka, 2020, pp. 105–107, 113–115, 219). In the literature, scare is described in a similar manner; however, the difference between scare and fear consists in the fact that the former is a primary state of the latter. In other words, apprehension is an internalized scare, being an inborn reaction, with physiological symptoms occurring in the situation of a real threat. Thus, fear is accompanied by the state which is not evoked by a direct situation, but has been imagined under the influence of the stimuli that have occurred. It is characteristic of anxiety to be awaiting a threat, which may excite physiological symptoms similar to those which are provoked by scare (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2005, p. 720).

Fears typical of the early school age can be counted into the common occurrence connected with the emotional and cognitive development of the child. At their foundation there are situations, events and objects which either find their reflection in the child’s real experience (the so-called reproductive anxieties) or those whose basis does not come from the child’s own experience, but is merely imagining of them (the so-called creative anxieties). Still another type of apprehension is that having its genesis in child’s unsatiated needs, preventing the child from its full development and provoking disorders (Vasta, Haith, & Miller, 2004, p. 472). Still, typical children’s fears should not be identified with anxiety disorders which are linked to a series of maladaptation symptoms of anxiety disorders (Reber & Reber, 2015, p. 361). Such factors as intensification of anxiety reactions, the time of their persistence, as well as the scale of problems which they evoke testify to their occurrence (Carson, Butcher, & Mineka, 2010, p. 262).

As regards the youngest children, their verbal reaction in a situation of fear will be negation, contradiction, taking a dislike or an uncontrolled burst of emotions incited by a stimulus or a situation. In children at early-school age, this can manifest itself by assuming a given attitude (e.g., that of anxiety or a passive one).
A rise in reactions of fear to stimuli is also observed as being provoked by imagination. They concern weather-related phenomena or situations posing a threat, such as a fire, flooding, hurricane. Children, at that age, are worried about their lives and health, therefore they fear drowning, loss of physical powers, or death. However, the majority of worries are connected with fear of animals, supernatural powers or fear of darkness and loneliness (Sargin, 2008, p. 180). Schoolchildren are worried about their health condition, the possibility of a sudden death, safety of their family members, as well as punishment received from older persons. Anxieties which had their origin still at the preschool age, such as the fear of being different from the majority of children, can also intensify. Children will worry about their lower material status and their physical appearance which might differ them slightly from their peers (e.g., untypical colour of hair or skin, being short, inappropriate clothes) (Harwas-Napierała & Trempała, 2002, pp. 59–60). Nevertheless, at that stage, children are most often concerned about issues connected with their school life, both in the sphere of education itself (worries of not being able to cope with learning, falling behind, receiving poor grades, parents’ dissatisfaction, punishments for bad performance in lessons and results in tests), and in the area of interpersonal relationships (fear of being rejected by the peer group, facing lack of acceptance, being different from the others, etc.).

Although fear evokes a sense of psychic discomfort and a loss of the sense of safety in the child, it is most significant for the child’s development. The functional value of anxiety allows the child to avoid dangers, leads to enrichment of its psychic life as well as to formation of adaptative behaviours. Apart from that, it aids the child in adjusting to new roles and working out new schema of reacting, the solidification of which follows in situations where the anxiety is reduced, contributing to an increase in cognitive and behavioural competences in the young (Bakırcióğlu, 2002, p. 313; Bal, 2010, pp. 7–8; Koknel, 2004, pp. 16–17; Muris & Merckelbach, 2000, pp. 813–818; Solter, 2015, pp. 1–2; Young & Szpunar, 2012, pp. 10–14).

**RECOGNIZING CHILDREN’S FEARS: OWN STUDIES ON DRAWINGS BY POLISH AND TURKISH CHILDREN**

The commonness of the phenomenon of fear causes it to find its reflection also in symbols present in culture and art. Its development progressed owing to the function which symbols performed in previous centuries. In the past, man, by personifying anxiety and creating its artistic representations, at the same time defined
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and precisely explained phenomena which were unclear to him. Symbols of fear became thus representatives of the ethical-moral and moral-social spheres of the individual’s life. Currently, this specific symbolism can be treated as a simplified reflection of knowledge about human nature. It makes a metaphorical reflection of drives which have their place in human subconsciousness (Mitarski, 2002, pp. 309, 315–317, 329–330).

The aim of the studies described in this article was to recognize the fears of children aged 6 to 10 years old on the basis of their drawings. The authors looked for an answer to the question with reference to the manner of presentation of fears and the kind of symbols used in the drawings by the examined children of both nationalities. In order to do this, the authors conducted a comparative analysis to grasp the observed similarities and differences regarding the symbols identified in the drawings. For the needs of the analysis, the following questions were formulated: In what way did the children present their fears in their drawings? How can the similarities in the symbols of fear presented in the drawings by Polish and Turkish children be interpreted? What do the observed differences testify to?

The studies dealing with symbols of fear, which are presented in this article, were carried out in Poland and in Turkey in the years 2014–2020. The idea to conduct them was conceived independently by each of the co-authors and the publication of an article by one of them became an inspiration to launch cooperation and to carry out the comparative studies (Talu, 2019, pp. 763–779). The examination in the groups of Polish and Turkish children was executed in the respective native tongue. There were 126 children, including 83 girls and 43 boys, who were thus examined in Poland, while the group of Turkish children comprised 153 girls and 161 boys (314 children in total). All of the examined children were schoolchildren between 6 and 10 years of age. Depending on the place where the examination was carried out, it was of the individual (Poland) or group (Turkey) character. Irrespective of the manner of organizing the examination, the instructions relating to the execution of the drawing and addressing the children were very similar: each child was asked to imagine what he/she feared and then to draw their imagined fear. After finishing the drawing, the child was asked to talk about its content.

The symbols of fear were identified on the basis of the drawings content (the method of content analysis) and the child’s oral explanation. The analysis of the content presents a scientific approach which allows examining verbal and non-verbal (including visual) materials in an objective and systematic way, as well as

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3 The examination was carried out in Poland in the years 2014–2020, whereas that in Turkey – in the years 2017–2018.
organizing them according to defined categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Hill; Leblebici, Kilic, & Aydin, 2004). In the studies in question, it was developed by stages. At the beginning the children’s drawings were subjected to evaluation regarding the compliance of their execution with the instructions given. The next stage consisted in analyzing children’s statements, collected on the basis of a set of questions asked to them with reference to the drawings they had created. On their basis, the symbols drawn by the children were recognized and ordered, the aim of which was to establish whether the symbol visible in the drawing corresponds to the intention of the child who had drawn it and – at the same time – to the interpretation of the researcher (cf. Wright et al., 2020; Deguara, 2019).

One of the first stages of the comparative study was qualifying the symbols of fear into one of six categories. The categories were elaborated by E. Talu on the basis of classifications of children’s fears described in the literature on the subject (Ilg, Ames, & Baker, 2020, pp. 156–168; Ilg, Ames, & Baker, 2001, pp. 243–244). The attempt to order the symbols to belong in the individual categories in accordance with similar features revealed the first differences between the drawings made by Polish and Turkish children. They concerned primarily the number of categories into which the drawings could be qualified as regards the symbols they contained. It turned out, for example, that none of the Polish children taking part in the examination had drawn a symbol pointing to fears of medicine (see Tables 1 and 2).

After identifying and ordering the symbols, separate rankings were created with respect to the country of origin of the examined. On this basis, it was possible to conclude that the symbol in the category of “Fear of animals” featured in the largest number of drawings, irrespective of the children’s nationality. Nevertheless, only two categories distinguished in the ranking took the same positions due to the number of symbols qualified; the others differed regarding their positions. The symbols representing “Fear of natural disasters” were the rarest to find in the drawings by the Polish children, whereas those with reference to “Fear of imaginary creatures” appeared slightly more often in their drawings than in those by their Turkish counterparts. On the other hand, the drawings by the Turkish children featured far more symbols belonging in the category of “Dangerous situation and fear related to death/murder” in comparison with those found in the pictures by the children in the comparative group (Positions 2 and 4, respectively).
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Table 1. Categories and Corresponding Symbols of Fear Identified in the Pictures of Polish Children

| No. | Category                              | Symbols of fear                                                                 | Sum |
|-----|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1.  | Fear of animals                        | Spider (50), Snake (10), Bat (2), Dinosaur (1), Wisent (1), Lion (1), Tiger (1), Shark (1), Crocodile (1), Boar (1), Puma (1), Wolf (1), Fox (1), Rat (1), Mouse (1), Scorpion (1), Jellyfish (1), Snail (1), Cockroach (1), Bee (1), Horse-fly (1), Ladybird (1), Tick (1) | 82  |
| 2.  | Fear of imaginary creatures, supernatural powers | Ghost (10), Monster (2), Zombie (1), Witch (1), Evil Genie (1), Tree with eyes (1), Chucky Doll (1), Vampire (1), Critters (1), Giant (1), Evil Goblin (1) | 21  |
| 3.  | Darkness and night fears               | Darkness (8), Being alone at home at night (1)                                 | 9   |
| 4.  | Dangerous situation and fear related to death/murder | Situation of violence towards others (1), Situation of violence from others (1), House on fire (1), Mum shouting (1), Thief (1), Drunk man (1), Death (1) | 7   |
| 5.  | Fear of natural disasters              | Storm (2), Fire (2), Tornado (1), Lightning (1), Swamp (1)                     | 7   |

Source: E.J. Konieczna's own elaboration.

Table 2. Categories and Corresponding Symbols of Fear Identified in the Pictures of Turkish Children

| No. | Category                              | Symbols of fear                                                                 | Sum |
|-----|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1.  | Fear of animals                        | Snake (51), Dog (9), Shark (8), Spider (5), Dinosaur (4), Bear (3), Lion (3), Scorpion (3), Bee (2), Dragon (2), Crocodile (2), Whale (2), Pig (2), Cockroach (1) | 87  |
| 2.  | Dangerous situation and fear related to death/murder | Murder of himself/herself (12), Murder of her/his parents (11), Being kidnapped (11), Disappearance (9), Thieves (8), Gun (7), Falling down from height (5), Traffic accident (4), Getting a whipping (4), Being abandoned (3) | 74  |
| 3.  | Fear of imaginary creatures and supernatural powers | Ghost (17), Bogle (9), Bugaboo (7), Zombie (6), Hell (3), Alien (3), Momo (2), Witch (2), Azrael (2), White-bearded (2), Creature (1), Slenderman (1), Herobrine (1), Rings (1), Caki (1), Skeleton (1), Bugbear (1) | 60  |
| 4.  | Darkness and night fears               | Darkness (26), A bad dream/having a nightmare (12), Becoming lonely at home at night (6), Going out at night (4), Going to bed alone at night (3) | 51  |
| 5.  | Fear of natural disasters              | Earthquake (9), Fire (7), Tsunami (6), Flood (4), Thunder/lightning (3), Storm (3), Hail (1) | 33  |
| 6.  | Fears of medicine                      | Dentist (4), Having an injection (3), Circumciser (1), Doctor (1)              | 9   |

Source: Talu, 2019, p. 766.
As it was mentioned above, in the drawings of both Polish and Turkish children most of the symbols used represented fear of animals. In the case of the Polish children, the fear concerned, first of all, the Spider (50 symbols), while in the case of the Turkish children – the Snake (51 symbols). As it follows from the relevant data, these animals were drawn also as the second one in turn (Snake in the drawings of the Polish children) or the fourth (Spider in the drawings of the Turkish children). There were other similarities observed as well. Independent of the country of origin, apart from the Spider and the Snake, the children drew the Dinosaur, the Lion, the Shark, the Crocodile, the Scorpion, the Cockroach, and the Bee. The Polish children were found to have drawn more differentiated symbols related to one group of animals, that is, predators of the cat family (lions, tigers, pumas). There were also more symbols referring to insects and bugs in their drawings.

Still another element that differed the two groups of the examined were the types of identified symbols within the category of “Imaginary creatures”. The drawings of the Polish children featured symbols from fairy tales and films present in the area of mass culture. In turn, in the pictures drawn by the Turkish children, apart from the above-mentioned, one could additionally identify symbols present in the Islamic culture.

AN ATTEMPT AT INTERPRETING THE STUDY RESULTS

As a result of the hermeneutic perspective that was adopted for the purposes of this study, the drawing by a child was considered a kind of a “text”, the understanding of which consists in discovering meanings included in the symbols4. The symbols are “forms of expression communicating a sense” (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 66), thanks to which it is possible to reach deeper meanings and intentions. Their comprehension requires being a participant of the reality which the symbol comes from and perceiving it as an element of the historical-cultural significance. It is a process which consists in dealing with artefacts of culture for which the language of symbols makes the plane of understanding between the author and the receiver of the creative work. Wilhelm Dilthey called such an “understanding of fixed externalizations of life” (1982, p. 293) an interpretation (clarification) and perceived it as an objectivized examination of the human being’s life. Although the author contradicted the processes of explanation, identifying this act with natural sciences,

4 A broader treatment of this issue will be found in the article entitled “The Hermeneutic Interpretation of the Symbolism of Fear: A Case Study of Drawings by Polish and Turkish Children” (in preparation).
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According to Paul Ricoeur, this clarification is an indispensable condition behind the scientific cognition (cf. Przyłębski, 2019, pp. 93–94).

The authors of the present study were looking for an explanation of the observed similarities in the symbolism of fear in the conception of Carl Gustav Jung who defined the concepts of “archetype” and “symbol” for the needs of analytical psychology. In the common definition, the former is understood as a “formal element of collective un-awareness [...] a universal model defining human behaviour in various domains of life” (Siuta, 2009, p. 29). With reference to the space of culture and art, the archetype will be the primitive image of collective unawareness. It is a type of matrix formed in childhood as a result of existential experiences, e.g., fear (Dudek, 1995, p. 41). An archetype arises on the basis of primary structures of individual consciousness of “ego” which is the foundation of the process of adaptation to social norms. Jung was of the opinion that it appears “in boundary situations, such as danger, contact with insurmountable difficulty [...]” (Jung, 1976, p. 21). Archetypes are helpful in understanding experienced traumas and their symptoms, as well as constitute a model of transformation and are representatives of trans-cultural experiences (Dudek & Pankalla, 2008, p. 351).

An archetype can also manifest itself in the form of symbols (Dudek, 1995, p. 107). In Jung’s framework, it is “an intuitive idea which still cannot be formulated in another, better way” (Samuels, Shorter, & Plaut, 1994, p. 193). On the other hand, in the space of culture, the symbol is an image of the secondary origin, possessing “a large load of unaware archetypal content with reference to the individual (boundary experiences) and collective (trans-cultural experiences) dimensions” (Dudek & Pankalla, 2008, p. 351). Human cognition and behavior are dominated by the use of symbols, which is visible in verbal and visual systems of communication (Fay, Walker, Swoboda, Garrod, 2018, p. 243). Symbols can be found in the world of myth and fable which impacts on the individual and collective process of creating culture and art. Cultivated, stored and handed down to succeeding generations, they become an element of cultural transmission (upbringing, tradition). Despite the changeability of its form, they preserve their archetypal nucleus, which allows reading them in the historical and social context (Dudek & Pankalla, 2008, p. 351; cf. Gubaidullina & Gorenintseva, 2017). Some of them are characterised by stability exceeding the general scope. Philip Wheelwright calls them “archetypal symbols” which, however, cannot – despite the solidity mentioned – be regarded as ultimate and exhaustive (1991, pp. 268, 275–276, 278).

Summing up the above considerations, the spiders and snakes drawn by the children belong in the group of symbols imagining wild animals which for centuries have evoked fear in human beings. Still, looking from the point of view of
current conditions, the common fear of animals finds less justification than fear of real dangers, such as electric sockets or cars (Buss, 2001, p. 50). However, fears of evolutionary origin are most lasting, which got confirmed by the content of the drawings produced by children of both nationalities. The symbols of fear found in the drawings of the examined children are thus representatives of their inner lives possessing features of an archetype.

In turn, causes behind the observed differences in the occurrence of fear-related symbols in the drawings of Polish and Turkish children can be explained on the basis of differing cultural experiences and traditions cultivated in each of the countries. The reason for the emergence of fears such as “Dangerous situation and fear of death/murder” in the drawings of Turkish children can be explained by the fact that such phenomena as violence, murder, abduction, disappearance, beating, traffic accidents, being on rise in Turkey, in recent years have become frequent news items in the media and on television. Naturally, children’s exposure to such news brings about a lot of anxiety and fear that they themselves or their parents can fall victim to crime. These fears are reflected in children’s pictures in the form of drawings of guns, knives or scenes of murder. Similar research findings by Bal (2010, pp. 7–8), İnceoğlu (2000, p. 14), Oghii (2015, p. 71) and Serim, Erdur-Baker, & Bugay (2013, pp. 199–209) support these results.

The differences connected with the category of “Fear of imaginary creatures and supernatural powers” also arise from the cultural background. Several different explanations can be given for the reason why fears in this category emerge, as found in the drawings of the Turkish children. For example, some of these fears (such as Ghost, Bugaboo, Witch, White-bearded, Bugbear) stem from fairy tales passed down from generation to generation in culture, while some (such as Zombie, Alien, Momo, Creature, Slenderman, Herobrine, Rings, Caki, Skeleton) can be explained as fears arising from motion pictures and television series. It is possible to explain some fears (such as Bogle, Hell, Azrael) as a reflection of those arising from the Islamic way of believing. Similar research findings by Erol & Şahin (1995, pp. 85–93), Oghii (2015, p. 87), Serim (2010, pp. 98–99) and Serim et al. (2013, pp. 199–209) again support these results.

5 Bogle is an evil spirit in the beliefs of the Muslim Turkish people. He is believed to live in crowded places and is described as short. Bogle can also turn into an invisible being. Typically, he has a huge head, hair-covered body, and feet that stand upside down (Karakurt, 2012). Hell is a place of punishment in the hereafter in Islam, as in most religions. People will go to heaven or hell according to their actions and beliefs in the world. According to the belief of Islam, people who have sinned will stay in hell to the extent of their sins and will be punished (Wikipedia, 2021). Azrael, on the other hand, is known as the ‘angel of death’ who comes to take the lives of people who have expired in Islam (Islam ansiklopedisi, 2021).
CONCLUSION

Fear is a natural reaction of the living organism to what is new and unknown. Children at a younger school age are participants in various social situations which may evoke a state of anxiety and a sense of threat in them. The cause behind the occurrence of children’s fear is also their insufficient knowledge about the situation which they are experiencing and lack of skills to help them cope with it. The authors of the present study accepted the assumption that children’s drawings can reflect fears, the occurrence of which is natural and typical of children at their school age. This way of perceiving drawings rests on the belief that each individual lives in a world of signs and symbols which they co-create, making them subject to processes of internalization and reinterpretation. These processes are accompanied by new experiences and needs. Their representation can be observed in the form of a symbol that is a projection of the inner states and desires. Children’s drawings can thus be treated as a set of symbols possessing a sense that is read in the context of an individual culture-based experience (Gnitecki, 2007, p. 13).

Comparing the results obtained in the studies conducted by the authors was meant to recognize Polish and Turkish children’s fears on the basis of their drawings, as well as to identify the similarities and differences relating to the presented symbols of fear. The examined children most often drew symbols reflecting fear of animals. The largest number of the drawings featured wild animals, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of the evolutionary character (Buss, 2001, p. 50). According to Jung, this type of experience functions in our memory as an archetype, a primary pattern, a long-lasting symbol that is common to the whole mankind. However, in the examined children’s drawings, there were also identified symbols pointing to their experiencing situations of the traumatic character. Here, pictures featuring physical violence or other acts of aggression must be mentioned. Such symbols occurred more often in the drawings by the Turkish children (represented by murder, kidnapping, disappearance). The authors looked for explanations of the differences in the traditions and customs present in the socio-family life in each culture. However, interpreting the children’s drawings relating to fear, it cannot be excluded that they illustrate a learned fear, the origin of which can be explained by classical conditioning. Its source are not direct traumas, but those which arose as a result of the process of learning (Carson et al., 2010, p. 260). Observation of reactions of persons who are of importance to children (e.g., parents) to an object (e.g., a spider or a snake) or to a situation that evokes fear (e.g., an act of violence), as well as noting the manner of describing them by adults, can cause reactions of fear in children. Despite the lack of child’s own negative experience with regard
to an object or situation, the child learns the way of reacting to a given stimulus, taking over the way of behaving which they have perceived in other people. Children’s apprehensions can also be caused by application of fear as a tool of parental discipline, which affects the child’s emotional sphere in a negative way. An example of such an act is making reference to unreal imaginary figures (e.g., witches, ghosts), persons performing medical services (e.g., doctors, dentists), as well as dangerous animals and objects provoking pain (e.g., a needle) (Koknel, 2004, pp. 59–61). Applying unsuitable educational methods lowers the level of child’s social skills and self-evaluation. Moreover, fears solidified as a result of using improper methods of upbringing have a harmful effect on the proper development of children. Fear may become a factor to provoke problems within the psychic health and violent behaviours of children (Driessnack, 2006, p. 1416). Taking into account the above-presented observations, in order to recognize the source of children’s fears which are represented in their drawings it is indispensable to carry out an individual case study which will cover the whole picture of the child’s situation.

It is also worth noting that the above-presented studies offer some conclusions that can be of use to educational practice. Since the natural reaction of a child will be to make an attempt at coping with effects of fear, the role of the teacher is to carefully observe the child’s behavior. Trying to deal with fear most often takes place during the child’s own playing (e.g., drawing) or being involved in activities with other children. It is evident that a drawing is one of the main methods of child’s communication (Mannathoko & Mamvuto, 2018, p. 384), therefore the young can return to traumatic situations by means of this medium, reflecting the content or the course of such occurrences in their drawings. Artistic creativity connected with the need to communicate and express fear can make the basic means of child’s utterance in the face of its insufficient communication and social competences. Nevertheless, the child’s ability to make use of a drawing as a method of communication to a large extent is dependent on teachers’ interests, their encouragement, support and general teaching methods. For this reason teachers ought to facilitate children’s ability to communicate in such a way and foster their engagement in interpretation of their drawings (Alford, 2015, p. 45). In view of the above, the authors believe that drawings should be treated as an auxiliary tool which makes it easier for children to express themselves with reference to the fears they experience.

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