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This is America: Using Children's Drawings to Discern their Understanding of National Identity

Abstract: Children's drawings are used to explore their understanding of nation across time and place, employing a methodology that provides visually provocative results. The researchers gathered pictures drawn by children responding to the prompt "This is America" in Poland and the United States in 1991 and in 2019. Six hundred pictures are digitized in a searchable database and are analyzed in three ways: (1) using thematic discourse analysis; (2) coding for the presence of iconic images; and (3) considered for their visual eloquence. The results contribute to an understanding of how children construct the meaning of America, demonstrate the ability of children to incorporate abstract and critical ideas in their drawings, and stimulate us to think about how we might better prepare children to become creatively critical citizens, capable of participating in deliberative democracy.

Keywords: America, children's drawings, national identity, political socialization, citizenship, deliberative democracy

Introduction

The research presented here emerged from simple curiosity. In 1991, one of the research collaborators was traveling to the US from Poland for an academic appointment in sociology, bringing her eleven-year-old son with her. How might he and his classmates depict the United States in the absence of first-hand knowledge? To explore that question, she gathered pictures from Polish children drawn in response to the prompt "This is America."¹ The pictures gathered in Poland were intriguing, so much so that the research continued with pictures gathered from children in the US, responding to the same prompt.²

¹ We purposefully chose the prompt "This is America," rather than "This is the United States," because its symbolic meaning and interpretation is both broader and deeper, seen, for example, in things like its connection to "The American Dream," recognized not only in the United States but in other countries around the world.

² In the data collection from the 1990s, children in the United States were also asked to draw pictures in relation to the prompt, "This is Poland." However, their knowledge and ability to draw was so limited that we did not duplicate this effort in the more recent sample. However, in 2019, Polish children were asked to draw pictures in response to "This is Poland" as well as "This is America." These pictures are not analysed here, but do provide data for another paper that compares their representation of their own and an "other" nation.

The provocative nature of the drawings gathered in the 1990s and their promise as a vehicle to assist in understanding the child's view of their country led us to re-join the project nearly a generation later. Six hundred pictures drawn by children from these two countries are housed in a searchable digitized database. They are analyzed here in three ways: (1) using thematic discourse analysis; (2) coded for the presence or absence of selected iconic national symbols; and (3) considered for their visual eloquence (Hariman and Lucaites 2007).

Our original research questions were simple: How do children construct their view of America when asked to describe it visually, and do their representations change over time? In addition, the drawings themselves prompt us to speculate about the possible connections between what we see in the drawings and the sources of influence—formal school curriculum? family? peers? media? Our conclusions are not definitive. We recognize that the methodology, which uses only the images, not more extensive interviews or biographical information, does not lend itself to exact conclusions. However, we do include suggestions about these influencers in subsequent sections of the paper.

Previous Research Using Children's Art

Research related to children's drawings as a source of data and information for social scientists has a lengthy history (Dennis 1966; Schuster 1978; Klepsch and Logie 1982; Coles 1986; Rosenblatt and Winner 1988; Bessas, Vamvakidou, and Kyridis 2006; Schulte 2011; Elwood and Mitchell 2012). Among the most moving examples are pictures drawn by children in concentration camps in World War II (Volavkova 1993) and those drawn by children of Syrian refugees (Hallet 2016). Drawings have been used to assess intelligence, emotional states, as clinical aids, and as memory aids (Coles 1986; Cox 2009; Taimalu et al. 2007). Researchers have employed them to explore children's understanding of death, challenges to the environment, and their responses to invasive medical procedures (Childers and Wimmer 1971; Lonetto 1980; Leino-Kilpi 2007; Pelander, Lehtonen, and Leino-Kilpi 2007; Campbell 2010). Researchers have also explored developmental aspects and cross-cultural variations in artistic representations using children's art (Schuster 1978; Rubenstein et al. 1987; Mitchell 2006; Cox 2009; Ivashkevich 2009; Gernhardt, Rubeling, and Keller 2011).

This method of gauging children's perceptions cuts across multiple disciplines: anthropology, aesthetics, art, education, environmental studies, geography, psychology and sociology. The literature suggests that children's drawings provide a pictorial narration, represent a cognitive mapping of the world, and provide a window on the child's perceptions of the social world. Drawings provide a way to consider how the child combines, tests and changes related concepts. They show progressive development, from the ability of the two-year-old to scribble, to the ability in older children (aged 11–14) to incorporate aesthetic principles associated with their particular culture (Klepsch and Logie 1982; Rosenblatt and Winner 1988; Mitchell 2006). Drawings also provide an effective tool for measuring social change, including transition in power relationships (Dennis 1966), and they may effectively address the issue of equivalence of measurement, a central problem of cross-cultural work

(Rubenstein et al. 1987). To summarize, they present a medium for assessing thoughts and perceptions that may not be immediately accessible at the level of verbal conceptualization and communication—a pictorial language as noted above. Their inclusion as a source of data provides a unique method for exploring complex concepts like national identity, citizenship, and global awareness.

Methodology

Children ages 9 to 12 in fifth and sixth grade-school classrooms in both countries, Poland and the United States, and at two different times, 1991 and 2019, participated in this project.³ They were asked to draw a picture in response to a broad, open-ended prompt: “This is America.”⁴ Teachers were present during the exercise, which took about an hour, and the researchers obtained school, teacher and parental permission. Use of human subjects’ policies established by the two universities involved were followed and children were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could choose not to participate. They were allowed to select their own drawing instruments; thus, pictures are done in crayon, marker, pencil, and watercolor.

Development Theory and Children’s Art

Full treatment of developmental and cultural theories of children’s drawing is outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a few comments on this topic and its relevance for our study seem in order. In *Children and Pictures* (2010) Richard Jolley summarizes literature on artistic development in children that reaches back more than 100 years. In their simplest and earliest pictures, children “...are driven by the desire to make realistic representations of the world around them.” However, Jolley notes that this is more “a stage of intention rather than achievement.” (p. 34; p. 19)

In fact, according to Jolley, “...few children succeed in becoming very successful in acquiring the visual realism conventions...(and even) many adults fail to draw in a visually realistic style.” (p. 19) With reference to the work of G. H. Luquet, (1927) Jolley states that “...many children stop drawing tween 10 and 12 years of age...and it is easy to find adult drawings similar to those produced by 12-year-olds...” (p. 19)

This suggests that the images produced by the 9 to 12-year-olds in our own study might also bear similarities to adult representations. While we do not explore that issue here, it might be worth consideration at a later date.

³ Some historic context is called for. In 1991, George H. W. Bush served as President of the United States and the US was playing a dominant role in the war against Iraq. In 2019, the United States was three years into the presidency of Donald Trump and the pictures were drawn in the context of increasing racial and political polarization and demonstrations. In Poland, 1991 marks the year following the election of Lech Wałęsa as Poland’s president and Poland’s first parliamentary election since the rule of Communism. In 2019, pictures were drawn by Polish children during the rule of the Conservative Law and Justice Party, the Presidency of Andrzej Duda, the erosion of democratic institutions, and amidst protests by Polish people.

⁴ Sample sizes are as follows: US, 1991, N = 124; US, 2019, N = 119; Poland, 1991, N = 221; Poland, 2019, N = 63. An additional 67 pictures drawn by Polish children in response to the prompt “This is Poland” are also housed in the digitized database, though they are not analysed here.

Jolley also considers the difference between representational art (as described above) and expressive art, in which “...children’s drawings serve as a means of communicating moods, feelings and ideas in an esthetic sense...” (p. 35). Expressive technique, according to Jolley, includes abstract expression, and this is an ability that appears to increase with age. The drawings selected from our collection do show that the artistic development and ability of the children involved varies, but at least some of the images, especially those in the later section of this paper on ‘visual eloquence’, are at a level of both skill and apparent intention that incorporates abstract ideas and communicates moods, feeling and ideas aesthetically.

Social Context

In Poland in 1991 and 2019, the schools were urban, public, and, while there was economic diversity, they lacked racial diversity. In 2019, the economic differences in the schools deepened, and the number of immigrants from Ukraine whose children attended Polish primary schools increased. In the US, the 1991 pictures were gathered at public schools in two predominantly white, small towns in the Midwest. In 2019, the US sample consists of pictures drawn by children at a private school in a small town in the Midwest that has recently experienced growth in the population of Latino immigrants, and at a public school in a racially and economically diverse suburb of an urban centre.

Numbers and Patterns

While numeric data are available and included at some points to emphasize conclusions, we are less concerned about the numbers and more interested in identifying repeated patterns of meaning and understanding their significance in relation to the simple research questions we have posed: What do children see? Do their representations vary over time and place? Moreover, can we gain some insight using these drawings into the varied social and cultural influences that shape their understanding? The results of our analysis are presented below.

Data Analysis and Results

Thematic Discourse Analysis

Pictures were coded through a process that entailed several different individuals familiarizing themselves first with the entire data set, reviewing pictures multiple times, and then identifying emergent themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017; Luo 2020). This categorization resulted initially in the identification of sixteen themes across all data sets. These were then collapsed into a simpler set of seven themes: (1) political/national symbolism; (2) landscape; (3) criticism/commentary; (4) legends; (5) Hollywood/Disney; (6) “good life”; and (7) collage—pictures that contained three or more seemingly unrelated images. In each data set, several pictures did not fit into any of the themes, and these were coded as “other.” **Table 1** shows the results of this thematic categorization.

Here, we discuss a selection of the results that seem most significant.

Table 1
Major themes by country and date

Country	Themes									Total
	Political	Landscape	Comment	Goodlife	Legends	Hollywood	Other	Collage		
US 1991	57% (71)	15% (19)	7% (9)	2% (2)	—	—	2% (2)	17% (21)	100%	(124)
US 2019	36% (43)	13% (16)	28% (33)	—	—	—	8% (10)	14% (17)	99%*	(119)
Poland 1991	7% (16)	53% (117)	12% (26)	7% (16)	4% (8)	6% (14)	7% (16)	4% (8)	100%	(221)
Poland 2019	25% (16)	35% (22)	19% (12)	3% (2)	—	10% (6)	3% (2)	5% (3)	100%	(63)

* < 100 percent due to rounding.

Political theme

The pictures drawn by US children in both periods clearly show the predominance and consistency over time of political and national themes, with 57 percent fitting into this category in 1991 and 36 percent in 2019. The images in these pictures are political: pictures of the American flag; pictures that include reference to the Constitution or that speak to the “freedoms” associated with being an American; and pictures of the White House and other government buildings (Fig. 1).

Although the decline in percentage between 1991 and 2019 is apparent, it is offset considerably by the number of pictures that provide commentary, much of it political, in 2019. While not all the pictures in the criticism/commentary category are political in content, an important number of them are, focusing in particular on President Trump and problematic issues related to the environment, the “wall”, and immigration.

For children in the US, these political images are likely the product of formal schooling, in particular, schooling that emphasizes political socialization and civic participation (Van Deth, Abendschon, and Vollmar 2011; Wiltgren 2014). Through this aspect of schooling: “...Individuals gain knowledge about the political system and how it works. They develop an understanding of their political culture, the system of shared values and ideologies about how government should function in their society...People gain a sense of belonging to a community and learn about its customs and traditions, which aids them in personally identifying with the political world. They become informed about the role of active citizens...” (Owen 2014 in *Oxford Bibliographies*)

Obviously, children’s drawings, by themselves, present an inadequate measure of the success of school political socialization. Nevertheless, it still seems reasonable to expect that their drawings would include representations of these political images, and they do.

These expectations are reinforced by the existence of national guidelines for social studies curriculum in the United States, which specify this:



Figure 1

“The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. The aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life.... Civic competence rests on this commitment to democratic values, and requires the abilities to use knowledge about one’s community, nation, and world; apply inquiry processes; and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. Young people who are knowledgeable, skilful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life, and participating as members of a global community.” ([National Council for the Social Studies, 2020](#))

We recognize that the proscriptions found in these guidelines do not provide evidence of what is actually taught and, more importantly, internalized by children. Yet we find

it interesting that, while these national guidelines include a statement on the importance of participating in a global community, in the pictures drawn by American children, this recognition is virtually non-existent. It is more present in the pictures drawn by Polish children, primarily through references to multi-national corporate signs and images affixed to buildings in urban settings, and in several images which speak to world or global dominance, as in this one (Fig. 2).

Although these pictures from Polish children were not coded as political—rather they were coded in some cases as commentary, in others as landscape—they do serve to make the point about differences between the two groups.

In addition to inviting images of government and democratic values, the prompt “This is America” also invites responses that refer to nation, country, or homeland. Ernest Renan, (1882) a 19th century French scholar, describes nation in this way:

“A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... (A nation)...presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.... *The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. A heroic past, great men, glory...this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.*” ([Renan 1882: 10](#), emphasis added. See also [Anderson 1983](#) and [Hobsbawm 1990](#))



Figure 2

Following Renan, we would expect children's drawings to represent this heroic past, to reference great men, or examples of glory. In fact, the earlier pictures drawn by American children neglect this dimension almost entirely. There are a few references to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and one or two pictures of Abraham Lincoln. The more recent collection includes a number of mostly critical depictions of President Donald Trump. In addition, with the exception of a picture that references Saddam Hussein from the 1991 collection and a collage that references the Boston Tea Party, there are no pictures of famous battles or other historic events. However, a number of pictures from the 1991 US collection contain militaristic images—tanks, war planes, for example—likely influenced by the Gulf War that was waging at the time.

The pictures drawn by Polish children in relation to the same prompt, on the other hand, are somewhat more consistent with Renan's message. They present images of their concept of the legends that define the US: the Wild West and westward movement, cowboys and Indians—legends that, while not necessarily heroic, speak to their understanding of American history (Fig. 3).

The presence of these Western images in the 1991 drawings from Poland is likely related to the popularity of American Westerns that were regularly shown on Polish television, as well as the influence of the poster genre, including a series of fascinating posters derived from American Western films. The most famous of these is one in which Gary Cooper's image in *High Noon* is appropriated as a stand-in for Lech Wałęsa and the *Solidarity* movement in 1989 (Mulroy 1999: 68).

In the Polish collection there is also a picture that features the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, and two other pictures that mark Christopher Columbus' voyage. Another depicts the assassination of John F. Kennedy. While these pictures were coded as legends and not as political, we again make the point here to draw the contrast between the children in the two countries. Nevertheless, the political theme is much less present in the pictures drawn by Polish children, especially in 1991, though it has more than doubled in 2019—from 7 percent to 25 percent. This increase may be associated with a large US presence in the Polish media. The political and economic situation in the States is a frequent subject of current affairs and news, even a greater presence in Polish media than that of European neighbors.



Figure 3

Landscape

If not politics, then what is the predominant theme for Polish children responding to the prompt "This is America"? Overwhelmingly, the most significant theme for these children in both periods is "landscape", with 53 percent of their pictures fitting into this category in 1991, and, while the number has decreased in 2019, it is still the single largest thematic category, with 35 percent of pictures coded here. These pictures are overwhelmingly urban,



Figure 4

with urban landscapes dominating the category (Fig. 4).

Sometimes there are just skyscrapers, as in Figure four; sometimes the skyscrapers have national symbols like the American flag or logos of fast food restaurants affixed to them. As noted earlier, sometimes they have logos of multinational corporations.

Compare this to the percentage of landscape pictures drawn by children in the US. In 1991, 15 percent of the pictures are coded as landscape. In 2019 that number declines slightly, to 13 percent, but it is still not a predominant theme for

American children. And virtually none of the pictures drawn by US children in this category depict an urban landscape, a not surprising finding since three of the four locations from which pictures were gathered are small-town or rural. However, even in the suburban setting, where children are much more likely to interact with an urban skyline on a regular basis, pictures do not reflect this.

Polish children's drawings transpose what they see on a daily basis—that is, their own urban skyline—to what they expect might visually represent the United States. Their pictures are presumably influenced by two television shows popular in Poland in the 1990s: *Dallas* and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, both depicting urban settings. The landscape pictures drawn by children in the US are most often pastoral, sometimes depicting barns, schools and small houses. This is America, literally and parochially, rather than symbolically—it is where I live, go to school, play with my friends.

Commentary—social, political and critical

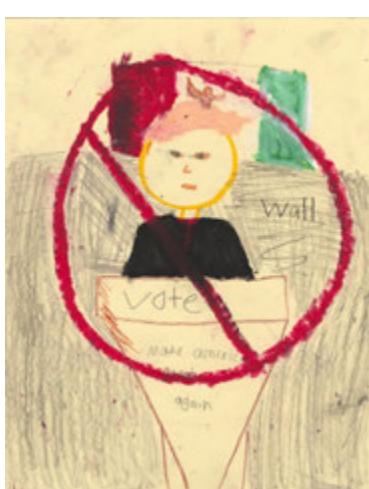


Figure 5

One of the goals of civic education is to promote in children their ability to participate in “deliberative democracy” (Chwalisz 2019), that is, to encourage active engagement as citizens in democratic societies. One measure of this might be found in children’s ability to offer criticism or commentary about country or nation. This commentary might be social or political, satirical, or ironic, and it is, in fact, an important thematic category, especially in the most recent collection of pictures drawn by children in the US, in a period of intense political acrimony and division.

In 1991, only 7 percent of the US pictures fit here; but in 2019 that number has increased to 28 percent. For Polish children in 1991, 12 percent of their pictures are coded as commentary—nearly double the percentage compared to children in the US at that time—and that number increased to 19 percent in 2019.

Some recent pictures from the US offer direct political commentary, several aimed at the sitting US president, Donald Trump, at the time they were drawn (Fig. 5).

Several pictures feature a woman at a podium with references to women's rights or American freedoms. And one girl's political commentary consists of a picture with a barbed wire fence encircling dots that she explained represented American casualties of war and another series of dots outside the fence that represented all those who want to get inside American borders.

In the earlier samples from both countries, there are also pictures that include social commentary and/or criticism. In the 1991 sample from the United States, for example, a number of pictures include the "no" sign—a circle with a line drawn through it over drugs and needles. These pictures were likely influenced by the "Just Say No" advertising campaign that was part of the War On Drugs effort initiated by First Lady Nancy Reagan in the 1980s and lasting for several decades. Similarly, more recent pictures drawn by US children depict environmental crises, wild fires, pollution, racial intolerance, and, in a few pictures, suicide. In the commentary category of pictures drawn by Polish children, particularly in the earlier sample, we see urban pictures depicting guns, pollution, and violence. In one especially poignant picture, we see a picture of brown hands holding on to jail cell bars from the inside of the prison. And in another picture, we see a grotesque red hand squeezing the continents of what appear to be North and South America (Fig. 6).



Figure 6

Several drawings from the 2019 US sample refer to a complex music video with symbolic references to racism and violence in the US. It was first performed by Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) in 2018⁵ and is titled *This is America*, so it is perhaps not surprising that it came to mind for at least a few children who participated in this study. It is important to watch the video to understand fully what prompted children to refer to it. Commentary from the popular media offered at the time of the video's release sheds some light on its significance, including these observations from an article in the *New York Times*:

"What Gambino put together is a true picture of America, where so many of us get to dance and sing and laugh and create. All the while others are largely ignored and trapped in the background, struggling and sometimes dying in a sea of ugliness that many of us would rather not acknowledge, knowing it would ruin the pretty pictures we'd rather focus on." (Berman 2018)

⁵ The artist's real name is Donald Glover; Childish Gambino is his stage name. Follow this link to watch the video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY&ab_channel=ChildishGambinoVEVO

The children who mentioned this video simply wrote “Childish Gambino, This is America,” and in so doing seem to demonstrate their awareness of the contradictions and the dark side of American culture.

Good life

This is not a large category for either group with only a few pictures coded here for American children in 1991 and none in 2019. In the earlier sample, 7 percent of pictures drawn by Polish children fit here, though the number declines (to 2 percent) in 2019, suggesting perhaps that the power of the American Dream has eroded in the twenty first century.⁶ Nevertheless, some of the most interesting pictures from the Polish children are found here.

These pictures focus on the material aspects and promise of American culture. Here we find a picture of a martini glass with high-rise buildings inside it and other drawings that depict people beside swimming pools or beaches. We also find pictures drawn by Polish children that include the American flag with money imposed on top of it—a dollar bill, a one hundred dollar bill. A few pictures in the recent sample gathered in Poland also include pictures of the trappings of American life: the Golden Arches of McDonalds for example, and other images of fast food and fast food vendors. Pictures drawn by children in the US in both periods, while they do occasionally include images of fast food and Golden Arches, fit more readily into other categories.

Collage or Holistic

As noted above, we observed that the pictures differed not only in what they included, but also in how they were drawn. Table One included a category for pictures that we considered to be “pure collage”—that is, they contained three or more unrelated images and did not fit into another thematic category. However, we believed that this sorting might underestimate this manner of depicting nation. Therefore, we re-sorted pictures, this time including as well those that had previously been placed in a different thematic category. [Table 2](#) shows the results.

Table 2

Pictures that show elements of collage

US 1991	25% (N = 31; total N = 124)
US 2019	29% (N = 35; total N = 119)
Poland 1991	6% (N = 14; total N = 221)
Poland 2019	24% (N = 15; total N = 63)

Here we see that the “collage” method of drawing is both important and relatively consistent for children in the US in both periods. However, it shows a dramatic uptick in the samples from Poland between 1991 and 2019, from 6 percent in 1991 to 24 percent

⁶ The origins of The American Dream are found in James Truslow Adams' book *Epic of America*, (1931) and references to it are included in other seminal American works like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “*Letter from Birmingham Jail*” (1963). See also Cullen 2003; Samuel 2012; and Lallas 2014.

in 2019,⁷ making the case for a change in how national identity of an “other” is perceived—no longer as a single entity (Fig. 7).

W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) argues that our entry to the twenty-first century represents a pictorial turn, “...signifying a movement away from the power of words toward the singular power of pictures...We live in a culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations and fantasies.

Modern thought has reoriented itself around visual paradigms that seem to threaten and overwhelm any possibility of discursive mastery.” (Mitchell 1995: 2)

Has the idea of ‘nation’ as a singular concept been eroded over a generation? Can it still be captured in a single, coherent image, or, rather, is it more readily represented in fragments, bits and pieces of national symbols, sports figures, popular culture icons, and even geographic representations? Might this speak to the increased fragmentation of American and Polish politics, the inability of citizens to unite around a single theme or national image? The pictures in this category give rise to such questions.

Coding for the Presence of Select Variables

Thematic analysis presented the challenge of numerous pictures easily fitting into more than one category. Recognizing that methodological hurdle and the limitations of subjective categorization of pictures, we decided that, in addition, we would code for the presence of a number of variables that seemed significant—either in the frequency of their appearance in the data or in what we would “reasonably expect” to find as political and national symbols. For example, we coded for the presence of the American flag; the Statue of Liberty; symbols of money; fast food symbols like McDonald’s Golden Arches and other symbols of popular culture; military symbols; and symbols of global corporate structure. Here, we discuss two of the national icons that are present in these drawings.

The Statue of Liberty

The Statue of Liberty represents a manifestation of the American Dream. In her left hand is the tablet marked with the date of the Declaration of Independence. In her right hand is

⁷ As noted, we also gathered pictures in 2019 from Polish children responding to the prompt “This is Poland.” Although we do not present these pictures for analysis in this paper, it is interesting to note that 11 percent of these pictures were presented as “collage”, rather than holistic. Unfortunately, we do not have access to a comparable sample from 1991. Nevertheless, it does seem that Polish children are much more likely to think of their country singularly—as represented by a holistic theme, even though their depiction of America has moved in the direction of multiple and fragmented images.

(The images for this research project are housed at this address: <https://thisismycountry.elevator.umn.edu/>. They can be accessed with permission from the American author.)



Figure 7

the Torch of Enlightenment. Her left foot tramples a broken chain. She provides a symbol of liberty and independence and her image is “...honored around the globe by those who champion freedom, whether it be political, religious, or economic, philosophical or practical” (Khan 2010: 5).

She is found in almost 10 percent of children’s drawings in the US in 1991, but in only 6 percent in the more recent sample. The pattern is the opposite in the drawings of Polish children: though she is present in only 1 percent of their drawings in 1991, she is found in 30 percent in 2019, and she is pictured in a variety of ways. Sometimes she stands alone,

other times she is included with a variety of other images, some political, some not. In one picture from the US, we see just the top of her (Fig. 8).



Figure 8

Another picture from Poland shows the Statue of Liberty holding a dollar bill with a money bag at her feet. While children in the US seem to mostly ignore her as a significant symbol of freedom and the American Dream, children in Poland seem to be much more aware of her significance. Moreover, the US results are surprising, since these most recent pictures were drawn at a time of intense turmoil and debate about the issue of immigration in the US and elsewhere.

The American flag

The American flag is found in so many of the pictures drawn by these children that it warrants some additional discussion. It appears in nearly two thirds of the pictures drawn by children in the US in 1991. Although the number drops to 47 percent in 2019, it is, nevertheless, a dominant presence, more prevalent than any other single image. This is not surprising. Allegiance to the flag is promoted in schools, through the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, for example, and the singing of the Star Spangled Banner and other patriotic songs, as well as the actual presence of a flag in most classrooms, at the school entrance, in the school gymnasium, and on athletic playing fields.

More surprising is the prevalence of the American flag in the pictures drawn by Polish children in both periods. It appears in nearly 10 percent of the pictures drawn by Polish children in 1991 and 21 percent in 2019. This change is likely the result of many factors. One of them has already been mentioned: the frequent presence of the US in Polish media and the popularity of American films and series. Another factor may be the increase in patriotic trends observed in Poland itself in the last few years. Patriotic motifs (Polish flag, symbols used during the Warsaw Uprising, patriotic slogans) appear in popular culture and everyday objects. Patriotic clothing is currently very popular among young people, including clothes with the Polish flag, “We remember,” “Cursed soldiers” or “Husaria” (Polish hussars).

The growth of these trends is fostered by the educational reform movement in Poland, one result of which currently places great emphasis on the patriotic education of young Poles. In 1991, Poland was still in the process of wide and enormous changes taking place in all areas of social and economic functioning. At that time, a change in national symbolism

was also visible. There was a clear departure from the display of the national flag and patriotic works—which in the era of socialism was associated with the objectification of these elements during state holidays and ceremonies. In 2019 that has changed and may carry over to Polish children’s use of the American flag as a patriotic symbol for the US in their drawings.

For American children, the inclusion of the flag can be seen as both a product of intentional school messaging, as noted, and a phenomenon described by Michael Billig (1995) as “banal nationalism.”

“The place of national flags in contemporary life bears a moment’s consideration. Particular attention should be paid to the case of the United States, whose filling-station forecourts are arrayed with uncounted Stars and Stripes. …Of all countries, the United States is arguably today the home of what Renan called ‘the cult of the flag.’” (Billig 1995: 39)

“The uncounted millions of flags which mark the homeland of the United States do not demand immediate, obedient attention. On their flagpoles by the street and stitched on to the uniforms of public officials, they are unwaved, unsaluted and unnoticed. These are mindless flags…These reminders of nationhood serve to turn background space into homeland space.” (*Ibid.* p 40; p. 43)

“Banal nationalism possesses a low key, understated tone. In routine practices and everyday discourses, especially those in the mass media, the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged. Even the daily weather forecast can do this. Through such flagging, established nations are reproduced as nations, with their citizenry being unmindfully reminded of their national identity.” (*Ibid.* p. 154. See also Nussbaum 2002.)

That the flag itself symbolizes the US is to be expected. More interesting is the ability of children to take what they are taught, what they are given, and recreate it in novel ways, moving from representational expression to more abstract depictions. This is seen in the variety of ways in which the flag speaks to the meaning of nation and country for these children, in both locations.

Sometimes the flag is the picture, by itself, occupying the entire page—it is equivalent with the nation. Other times, the flag is contained as an image filling the outline of the United States—it equates with the geographic boundaries of the nation. Often, it simply appears as an “attachment,” almost an afterthought, included with a variety of other images, or stuck on the side of a building. It might also be included as one of a number of images in a collage that includes popular culture and other non-political references.

In the most recent US sample, images of the flag move outside the realm of banality and simple representation and take on what appears to be a more intentional, abstract, and critical role. One child drew the flag on top of a rainbow-colored pole. A child who had been in the school system for only a few weeks, a non-English speaking recent immigrant from a Central American country, drew a picture of an unfinished flag, rippling in the wind. And one child drew a picture of the American flag burning (Fig. 9).



Figure 9



Figure 10

In the pictures drawn by Polish children, the use of the flag is equally interesting. Several pictures show the flag with a dollar bill (in one case a \$100 bill) mounted on top of it. In other commentary, mixing humour and satire with the imagery, a Polish child includes the flag as lenses in a pair of sunglasses on the face of a young person. In another, a child plants the American flag in the middle of a giant cheeseburger (Fig. 10).



Figure 11



Figure 12

Visual Eloquence: Iconic Images and Democracy

A number of the pictures just mentioned were noted for their “visual eloquence.” In their book titled *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Hariman and Lucaites (2007), observe that such images

“...bear witness to something that exceeds words. (They are images)...capable of providing deep knowledge of social reality, (providing) ...the viewing public with powerful evocations of emotional experience. (Moreover, these images)...reveal or suggest what is unsayable or at least not being said or seen in print.... Indeed, it is the artistic excellence of the icon—its transformation of the banal and the disruptive alike



Figure 13

into moments of visual eloquence—that reproduces an idealism essential for democratic continuity.” (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 1, 3, 32, 33–35)

The subject of their book is photojournalism. Nevertheless, their observations might apply equally well to the pictures children draw, in that, like the photograph, the pictures say the unsayable, evoke strong emotional reaction, transform the banal into the disruptive, and raise questions about the contradictions and mixed messages of American, democratic society. A few examples follow.

We see in some of the children's pictures their use of iconic and other images to depict commentary and criticism, as in figures five and six. We also see complexity (Fig. 11); humour (Fig. 12), and irony (Fig. 13).

Discussion

One of the most important works informing this study is that conducted by psychoanalyst Robert Coles (1986). In *The Political Life of Children*, Coles uses children's drawings and their narrative explanation of them to consider whether children have a political life. He conducts interviews and gathers drawings over a twenty-year period in the United States, Northern Ireland, Brazil, Nicaragua, South Africa, Quebec and Poland. At the conclusion of his book, he says:

"Anyone who doubts the capacity of children for...political and moral consciousness ought to visit an elementary school in Soweto, or simply stand high on a favela and ask children about the city they prowl by day or night—'so that,' as one child told me 'there will be another tomorrow.' I hear that statement and take note of its quality of terse, sad, eloquence. He is telling me about death as a fact, a constant, immanent likelihood—and not because he has been reading the nineteenth and twentieth century existentialists. Dead by nuclear bomb, death by starvation—death either way, these children know, is death by wrongdoing." (Coles 1986: 303)

Coles concludes that indeed children do have "a political life"—a keen awareness of the structures and forces of power that impact their lives. Although our research material includes only images, not extensive interviews with the children, it does give support to this conclusion.

The work described in this paper has its roots in an art exhibit in Poland during the period of martial law (1981–1983). In 1982, artist Stefan Papp created an exhibit of children's art in Krakow which featured children's drawings of their experience of this political context. The exhibit included representations of such disturbing visual eloquence that it was ordered removed by the military government just a few days after it was installed. A signature picture from this exhibit shows a young girl in a pretty dress, surrounded by flowers and butterflies. The caption is "Springtime in Poland." The picture might represent a perfect moment of springtime beauty, except for the rifles that are crossed behind her, evoking angel wings (Fig. 14).

The exhibit is titled, "Caution, children are watching," and, like the attention it requires, our own research echoes this same warning.



Figure 14

What have We Learned and Why does it Matter?

- (1) As expected, many children draw what they know when asked to depict America—the immediate experience of their city or small town—or what they think they know as in the case of children in Poland who see the US in terms of media images or their own urban experience. Not surprisingly, they reproduce the iconic images that are ever present in their physical environment, their classrooms, or in media.
- (2) The methodology employed in this study is suggestive, not conclusive. For example, we are not able to claim with certainty the relative importance of various influences—school, parents, peers, media—on children’s understanding. For children in the US, formal school (social studies) curriculum guidelines prescribe intended outcomes, but this may in fact have no more influence on children’s understanding of nation than television, billboards or music videos. The fit between intended and actual outcomes is worthy of further exploration.
- (3) For many children in both countries, representing country or nation as a singular concept is matched by the inclination to represent it with multiple images, many of which have no obvious political, geographic, or national referent. This in turn raises questions about the decline of singular images like the flag which evoke the emotional responses, shared values, and symbolic messages that are required to sustain shared national identity.
- (4) Political messages that we might think are hidden from children—that we might think we are protecting them from—are nevertheless present in their artistic if not their spoken vocabulary. Their pictures present evidence that they worry about the environment, about racism, about bullying and suicide.
- (5) Many children are able to move beyond the doctrinaire messages of national political socialization and represent their own and, in the case of children in Poland, another’s nation with humour, satire, irony, and complexity. The most interesting pictures are those that take the doctrinaire teachings about nation and country and create new images, reshaping an established idea of America into new forms.

What do these drawings suggest about the opportunities we provide our children to engage in discourse around the meaning of nation? Jessica Kulynych (2001) makes a number of interesting suggestions in an article that explores children’s rights in democratic society.

“In general, we need to institutionalize opportunities for children to be ‘public’ actors....We also need to institutionalize civic education and participation opportunities for children. Civic education programs would give children the opportunity to practice the expression of their social perspective, and provide avenues for children to communicate those perspectives to adults.” (Kulynych 2001: 264)

The pictures selected for this study reveal the manner in which children construct the meaning of America across time and place and suggest possible influences on this construction. They should stimulate us to think about how we prepare children to become not only informed citizens but also creatively critical citizens—public actors as Kulynych suggests—prepared to understand the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and to participate actively in the deliberations democracy requires.

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