

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsou

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Graphic signs of jealousy in children's human figure drawings

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Abstract

The study investigated the graphic signs that children use to convey jealousy in their drawings. One hundred and sixty children aged 4-, 6-, 8- and 10-years were asked to draw two figures: a person feeling jealousy and a person feeling no emotion (control drawing). The results showed that from the age of six years onwards children began to systematically use contextual cues to convey jealousy in their drawings. No prototypic facial and very few postural cues were used by children in all age groups to depict the intended emotion. These findings are discussed in the light of past studies investigating the expressiveness of children's drawings and in relation to research investigating the nonverbal signifiers of jealousy.

Keywords

children , drawings , emotion , expressiveness , graphic cues , jealousy

Introduction

Children's drawings are recognized as a semiotic, or symbolic, system conveying meaning and information about children's mental and emotional states (Atkinson, 2002; Riley, 2004). The present study investigates the semiotic (sign-making) strategies that children use to express emotion in their drawings. The study focuses on one emotion, jealousy, with the aim to identify the specific graphic cues or semiotic strategies that children employ to convey it in their drawings.

Research investigating children's ability to draw expressively (Bonoti & Misailidi, 2006; Brechet, Baldy, & Picard, 2007; Brechet, Picard, & Baldy, 2007; Jolley, 2010; Jolley, Fenn, & Jones, 2004; Picard, Brechet, & Baldy, 2007; Picard & Gauthier, 2012; Winston, Kenyon, Stewardson, & Lepine, 1995) has documented that emotion is conveyed in a child's drawing through facial (e.g., a downturned mouth to convey sadness), postural (e.g., raised arms to convey happiness) and/or contextual signs (e.g., a snake in the background of the drawing to convey fear) (Misailidi & Bonoti, 2014; Picard et al., 2007). As children grow older, their ability to select and synthesize these expressive strategies matures and, hence, drawings become more successful at conveying the intended emotion to the viewers (for a review see Jolley, 2010).

Children's ability to use 'emotion-conveying' graphic signs in their drawings is very much dependent on the emotion to be depicted. For example, research has shown that children are able to depict happiness and sadness in a drawing significantly earlier than they are able to convey fear, anger or surprise (Golomb, 1992; Missaghi-Lakshman & Whissel, 1991; Zagorska, 1996). For example, Zagorska (1996) showed that children aged 4 to 5 years were most successful at depicting happiness, next sadness, next fear and least successful at depicting anger. Other studies reported that while the depiction of happiness and sadness is well attained by the age of 6 years, children begin to correctly signify fear and disgust from the age of 8 and 9 years respectively (Brechet et al., 2009).

Interestingly, previous research investigating children's ability to convey emotion in their drawings has focused on emotions that are principally expressed/ communicated through the face¹. This means that in all earlier studies the expressiveness requirements have been relatively simple and straightforward –even for younger children–, since the depiction of these emotions could be succeeded simply through the introduction of specific alterations in the face of the human figure. For example, the inclusion of a single (upward- or downward-) sloping line in the face of a human figure is all that is required to successfully convey happiness or sadness in a drawing (Cox, 2005; Golomb, 1992; Jolley, 2010; Sayil, 2001). To date, no study, has investigated how children convey in their drawings emotions that are not nonverbally expressed through the human face. One such emotion is jealousy.

Jealousy is an aversive emotional state that occurs in response to a perceived threat to the self and/or to a valued relationship (Izard, 1991). Jealousy belongs to the family of

the so-called social emotions (e.g., guilt, contempt, shame and pride). These are emotions that depend on self awareness and the ability to appraise one's behavior in terms of some social (and/or individual) standards. Emotion theorists (e.g., Arnold, 1960; Ekman, 1992; Izard, 1991; Plutchik, 1980) agree that jealousy does not have a distinctive and universally recognized facial expression. In other words, there are no facial indices through which one can directly infer this emotion. How, then, is jealousy nonverbally expressed?

Some researchers maintain that jealousy acquires its meaning only if one considers the context (or situation) in which it occurs (Bauminger, 2004). This means that the conveyance of jealousy in children's drawings may be expected to involve the inclusion of graphic signs in the context of a drawing. Previous studies showed that children's desire to make their emotional drawing recognizable, leads them to employ contextual signs when they attempt to depict an emotional figure, whose facial modification is not easily achieved (Brechet et al., 2009). More specifically, it has been found that children prefer the use of contextual signs to depict anger, fear, surprise or disgust, than to portray happiness and sadness.

Additionally, there is a consensus that children begin to introduce contextual signs in their drawings by the age of 8 years (Brechet et al., 2007, 2009. Golomb, 1992). This later appearance of contextual graphic signs – as opposed to facial ones – has been attributed to younger children's incapability to conceive the metaphor that such cues bear (Cox, 2005). As regards the types of contextual signs used, previous studies showed that children use a large variety of them in order to communicate to the viewer the emotional meaning of their drawings (Brechet et al., 2007, 2009; Ives, 1984; Jolley et al., 2004; Misailidi & Bonoti, 2014; Picard et al., 2007). Specifically, children often include in the context of their human figure drawing: (a) objects (i.e., a leafless tree for sadness), (b) weather indices (i.e., thunders or storm for fear), (c) other persons (i.e., a friend for happiness), (d) linguistic symbols (i.e., exclamation mark for surprise), and (e) words (i.e., thought bubbles or dialogues).

The present study

The aim of the present study was to explore children's ability to express jealousy in their drawings. Specifically, the study examines the graphic signs –or semiotic strategies– that children aged 4-, 6-, 8- and 10-years use to convey jealousy in their drawings of a human. This study is part of an extended research project investigating the graphic strategies that children use to convey social emotions in their drawings (see also Bonoti & Misailidi, 2015). Based on the findings of previous research investigating the expressiveness of children's drawings (Brechet et al., 2007; Jolley et al., 2004; Misailidi & Bonoti, 2014), it was anticipated that older children would be more adept at conveying jealousy in their drawings. However, the lack of previous research investigating the graphic cues that children employ to depict jealousy (or indeed other social emotions) in

their drawings precluded specific hypotheses to be drawn about the age at which children would begin to convey jealousy in their human figure drawings and/or the graphic signs that they would more frequently use to this effect.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty children (75 boys, 85 girls) ($M = 92.34$ months, $SD = 24.11$ months) took part in the study. The sample was divided into four age-groups: 4-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 5$ years; 1 month, $SD = 6.6$ months; 18 boys and 22 girls), 6-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 6$ years; 9 months, $SD = 7.3$ months; 20 boys and 20 girls), 8-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 8$ years; 5 months, $SD = 3.9$ months, 18 boys and 22 girls) and 10-year-olds ($n = 40$, $M = 10$ years; 3 months, $SD = 3.78$ months, 19 boys and 21 girls). Children were drawn from three schools (nursery and elementary) serving low to middle socioeconomic status neighborhoods in a modest size city in Greece.

Task and Procedure

Children were tested individually in a quiet place at their school. Prior to the main (drawing) task, each child was asked to explain the meaning of the term jealousy (“*Can you tell me what the word ‘jealousy’ means?*”) and to give an example of a time they felt jealous (“*Tell me about a time that you felt jealousy*”). This was done to ensure that all children, regardless of age, had a mature understanding of the jealousy concept.² Those children who gave successful definitions and examples of jealousy were given two pieces of white paper (25×25 cm each), a pencil, an eraser and were asked to make two drawings: (i) one depicting a child feeling jealousy, and (ii) and a second showing a child feeling no emotion (control drawing). The instructions were: “*Here you have a sheet of paper and pencils. Draw a person feeling jealousy [or a person feeling no emotion.]*” The neutral (control) drawing was always drawn first. There was not time restriction for the drawings to be completed.

Coding of drawings: Two independent raters scored the drawings against their controls (neutral drawings) using the following criteria: (i) any changes/alterations in the face of the human figure; (ii) any changes/alterations in the body/posture of the human figure; and (iii) elements in the context of the human figure. Inter-rater agreement ranged between 84.20 and 96.70%.

Results

Figure 1 shows the mean scores for graphic cues used (face, body/posture, context and total) by age group.

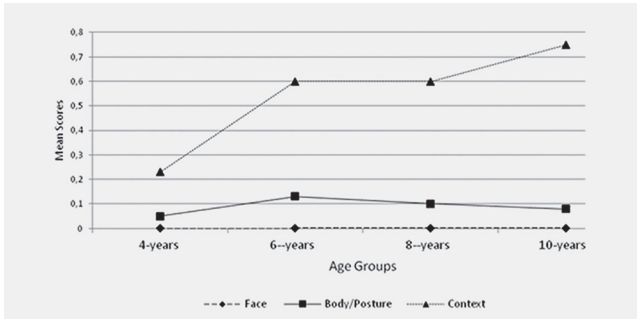


Figure 1. Mean scores for the graphic cues of Face, Body/Posture and Context used to convey jealousy, classified by age group (4-, 6-, 8-, 10-year-olds).

These data were subjected to a 4 (age group: 4-years, 6-years, 8-years, 10-years) \times 3 (*graphic cue type*: face, body/posture, context) Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) with repeated measures on the last factor. There was a significant main effect of graphic cue type, $F(2, 312) = 134.59$, $p < .001$, $n_2 = .463$, indicating that children used face, body/posture and context cues with different frequency, and a significant main effect of age group, $F(3, 156) = 8.38$, $p < .001$, $n_2 = .139$, suggesting that the four age-groups differed in the amount of graphic cues they employed to depict jealousy in their drawings. The interaction between graphic cue type and age group was also found significant, $F(3, 156) = 9.29$, $p < .001$, $n_2 = .152$.

The significant age-group \times graphic cue type interaction was investigated further with three one-way ANOVAs, one for each 'graphic cue type' (face, body/posture, context). The results showed that the effect of age was significant for context, $F(3, 159) = 9.29$, $p < .001$, but not for face, $F(3, 159) = .514$, $p = n.s.$ or *body-posture*, $F(3, 159) = 0$, $p = n.s.$ Post hoc analysis of the significant main effect of context revealed that the 4-year-old group used context-cues significantly less often than the 6-year-olds (Tukey's HSD = $-.375$, $p < .005$), the 8-year-olds, (Tukey's HSD = $-.375$, $p < .005$) or the 10-year-olds ((Tukey's HSD = $-.525$, $p < .001$). In contrast, the three older age-groups (6-year-, 8-year- and 10-year-olds) did not differ significantly from one another in the frequency with which they used context to denote jealousy (all p 's = $n.s.$). These results indicate that children begin to systematically use context-cues in order to convey jealousy in their drawings by the age of 6 years.

A more thorough investigation of the contextual cues children used in order to signify jealousy in their drawings revealed that these could be classified in four types: (a) persons forming a relationship, (b) objects of jealousy (i.e., toys, clothes, candies, cellular phones, gadgets etc.), (c) words expressing jealousy (i.e., "I want it now!"), and (d) person possessing the object of jealousy. Representative drawings including each type

of contextual cues are presented in Figure 2. The analysis showed that regardless age children more often depicted a person possessing an object (n = 52), persons forming a relationship (n = 17), objects of jealousy (n = 11) and finally words expressing the feeling of jealousy (n = 7).



Figure 2. Types of contextual cues used to convey jealousy.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate children's developing ability to convey jealousy in their drawings. We examined the semiotic signs (facial, bodily/posture, context) that children use to depict jealousy, and the effect of age in the use of these expressive indices.

The results showed that children begin to systematically convey jealousy in their drawings by the age of 6 years, predominantly via the use of context-cues. This result signifies that children are able to introduce contextual signs in their drawings at an earlier age than the one previously reported (Brechet et al., 2007, 2009; Golomb, 1992), in order to ascertain that the viewer will understand the emotional meaning of their drawing (Brechet et al., 2009). More specifically, these cues seem to aid children to pictorially convey to an audience their fear for the loss of a valued relationship and/or their crave for an object of desire.

The finding that the majority of children employ contextual signs to represent jealousy, verifies that the graphic strategies children employ vary as a function of the emotion to be depicted (Picard et al., 2007). This predominance of contextual signs also reveals children's difficulty to identify the facial/postural cues associated with jealousy and their tendency to understand this specific emotion through the context, in which it is experienced (Bauminger, 2004; Masciuch & Kienapple, 1993). The investigation of the types of contextual signs used in children's depictions of jealousy showed that children

focused on the representation of “the situations that provoke jealousy..... and the behavior and action components that indicate jealousy in these situations” (Bauminger, 2004, p. 158). Therefore, they did not produce a human figure alone, but they drew scenes depicting one’s exclusion from an appreciated relationship or their desire for a well-liked object (e.g. popular toy, modern gadgets, delicious candies etc.).

Children in all four age groups did not use any jealousy-specific face-cues to depict jealousy in their drawings. Similarly, very few children in all four groups utilized body/posture graphic signs to convey this emotion. This finding indicates that jealousy is not expressed through any prototypic facial and/or bodily/posture combination of nonverbal graphic cues in children’s drawings. These results corroborate the view (Ekman, 1992) that jealousy does not have clearly identifiable nonverbal (facial or bodily/postural) expressions.

In conclusion, the present study revealed that children’s ability to produce emotional drawings is not restricted in the depiction of basic emotions. Our data provide evidence that children can “invent visual semiotic codes” to represent efficiently their “perceptual experience” of jealousy (Riley, 2004, p. 295). Future research should further investigate whether children use similar or different semiotic strategies to denote different social emotions.

Endnotes

- ¹ Happiness, sadness, fear and anger are discrete emotions which all have distinctive facial displays (Ekman, 2006).
- ² A total of 8 children (6 4-year-olds and 2 6-year-olds) did not give definitions and/or an example of a time they felt jealous and were excluded from further testing.

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