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The Study of Children's Drawing

Current Approaches in Psychology

This article sets out to examine basic assumptions underlying current research into children's drawing ability and trail a coat by suggesting that these assumptions may lead to a biased or blinkered view of the process.

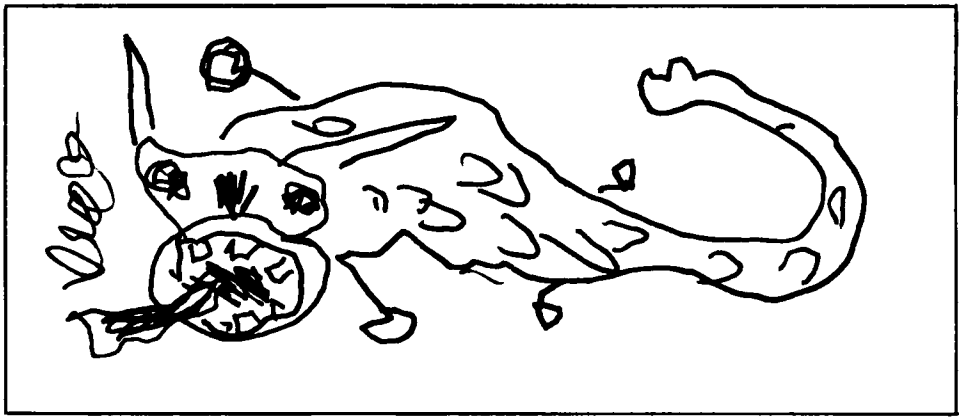
The favoured approach in psychological research in Britain to an investigation and understanding of children's drawing is both experimental and behaviourist. This approach has been frequently expounded by Freeman, 1972, 1975, 1977. He believes that psychologists should examine the demands of the task; the problems the child faces in relating components of the human body to one another when the child draws a man, for example. Freeman is very much concerned with the production of the drawing rather than with either the cognitive or motivational processes which underlie that production.

However, it could be argued that an analysis of the actual production of a drawing tends by omission to degrade in importance underlying cognitive processes such as mental imagery. Other commentators, particularly, Goodnow 1977 and Harris, 1963, use mentalistic and cognitive concepts for a description of the process involved in drawing in very young children. But all these commentators, both behaviourist and cognitive psychologists, share a particular view of the child and of the drawing process.

Any theory of how children draw has within it tacit assumptions of what the child's intentions are when he draws. In much current research in children's drawing there are implicit assumptions about why children draw and about the nature of the drawing process which are rarely examined. One very important assumption behind these approaches is that in drawing, a child is attempting to imitate what it knows of the visual appearance of an object.

It appears to me that the model that these commentators hold is very close to a Piagetian one. In drawing, the child is viewed as an embryo scientist whose main concern is to be able to understand and then control his environment. In order to do this he must be able to record and build models of his environment satisfactorily so that, in drawing, the child actively strives to record on a two dimensional plane those visual relationships he sees in the real world. The tadpole stage of drawing the human figure, for example, has been analysed by several commentators (Freeman, 1977; Bassett, 1977; Goodnow, 1977) and in all cases the assumptions are clear; the child would draw a more realistic figure if he could. The child's ultimate aim is assumed to be that he wishes to draw a man as it would appear in a photograph. Discussion and controversy is not about whether this is an accurate or complete description of what motivates drawing but whether the child is limited by his mental image or by serial order effects of memory in this aim. To quote Freeman, 1977, his aim he says is "to explain why children's drawing of the human figure may look so queer in its slow development towards the stereotyped photographic arrangement". Thus, for many a researcher a child's drawing indicates the level of success which the child has reached in the process of portraying visual reality. The child's drawing supposedly indicates either what the child knows of the visual appearance of the object (Bassett, 1977; Goodnow, 1977) or, at least, what the child is able to get down on paper of the appearance of the object having mastered certain graphic rules (Freeman, 1977).

This model of a child as a scientist is both persuasive and sensible. But is it complete? If the child's aim were to be able to draw visual reality or visual realism, one would expect him to be most dissatisfied with his very early attempts such as the tadpole man. Freeman, 1977, says that there may be "an infinitely more important study of the operation of the passions" in the study of children's drawings. There is a recognition amongst many commentators that drawing is a much more complex activity which brings about emotional and aesthetic pleasure and is much more than the history of a child's attempts to imitate photographic images. Photographic realism has often been assumed to be an important aim of the artist but this view of art and drawing is undoubtedly a narrow one. I believe that the emotional and symbolic aspects of children's drawings have been neglected and we are in danger of developing a blinkered if not biased view of children's drawing as a result. Some art therapists and psychoanalysts have been solely concerned with the expressive and emotional components in children's drawings. But interpretations have often been Freudian which many experimental psychologists have found unacceptable. The problem is to bring the emotional expressive motivation for drawing into its proper importance without resorting to psychoanalytical interpretations.



A much more fruitful theory has been suggested by Arnheim, 1954, 1975. Arnheim distinguishes between representation and imitation. Imitation is the process of copying the visual appearance of an object and applies to such processes, he says, as copying a shape or the child's first attempt to copy letters. Arnheim rejects that this is what the child attempts to do in free drawing or that reality is imitated in drawing and in art generally. Arnheim developed the concept that the process of artistic representation requires a search for structural equivalents. The process is symbolic; the child invents a symbol which stands for an object or a part of an object. But that symbol may symbolise more than the visual properties of that object.

Golomb, 1974, also holds this view. She says "so long as psychologists hold the naive view that reality could and should be copied they were merely concerned with replication and its deficiences. The absence of realism or naturalism in early drawings of children required an explanation; it was considered an imperfection to be corrected in due time. Thus children's drawings were evaluated in the light of historically and developmentally late accomplishments such as realism in art." Golomb was able to demonstrate that the child chooses structural equivalents suited to the task and the medium in which he is working; it is not so much that the child lacks the understanding of forms or necessarily lacks the ability to execute them, but rather that his experience leads him to choose a symbol which is meaningful to him at that time. Viewed through Arnheim's eyes each stage in drawing has a functional integrity. The child invents structural equivalents that symbolize what he wants to represent of the object at that time. Golomb makes a useful analogy between drawing and play. Both can be viewed as symbolic activities in which the child reconstructs aspects of previous experiences. It would be very odd to ask if a child was playing Cowboys and Indians correctly. Just as it would be mistaken to compare a tadpole man drawing with a photographic image drawing and suppose that the former was incorrect.

Golomb and Arnheim argue against the "Draw-a-Man Test of Intellectual Maturity". Goodenough and Harris, 1963, assume that the child is attempting

to draw visual reality or what he knows of the appearance of a man and that the child's conceptual and intellectual maturity can be gauged on his success at accomplishing this. Drawing for children, as for adults, is not only about representing what the object looks like. It is, and perhaps more importantly, to produce a satisfying symbol of some aspect of their experience. Some artists and art historians are interested in children's drawing precisely because the child is less inhibited by the need for visual realism and more openly expresses his emotions through the medium. The child is viewed as an expressionist rather than as a realist in his drawing.

It seems to be that to bring studies of children's drawings back to artists' and philosophers' theories of child art we need a much more sophisticated theory of drawings. The American philosopher Susan Langer; 1948, 1957, for example, has developed a theory which enjoys esteem amongst artists and philosophers but which has been disregarded by psychologists. Her theory is much closer to Arnheim's formulation of children's drawing, Langer sees drawing and art as one of the expressions of man's unique ability to reconstruct reality through symbolization. In discussing art and drawing she says, for example, "I think every work of art expresses, more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions which the artist has, but feelings and emotions which the artist knows; his insight into the nature of sentience, his picture of vital experience, physical and emotive and fantastic". She demonstrates that a drawing, or any work of art is a formulation in symbols of the artist's concepts and mental experiences. These will include, of course, his visual experiences but his expressions of these experiences through symbols is not confined to the visual alone.

In adult art it is the portrayal of the emotional experience as well as the visual experience that gives great painting its force and significance. The narrowness of the assumption that children are solely concerned to learn to imitate visual realism is revealed if extended to the realm of adult art in civilized or primitive societies. The closeness that a drawing approximates to visual or photographic reality has never been the criterion for judging a work of art or Picasso would have died penniless.

The ability to draw a purely visual or photographic representation is only one aspect of adult artist's skill and, similarly, when the child draws he is expressing his complex understanding of an object, not just the look of the object. In this way Langer adds to Arnheim's concept of structural equivalents. One could argue that when the child draws a man he makes use of previously acquired symbols which represent for him aspects of the human being he wishes to portray. Interestingly, illustrations in children's picture books rarely depict visual reality. Children do not always prefer photographic pictures; they enjoy cartoons and caricatures. The typical picture of a cottage in a child's book is not the picture of the appearance of the object - it is a picture of a symbol of cosiness or homeliness. What the child does in drawing is far more intelligible when viewed as a symbolic or representational activity, rather than as an imitative activity. How else can we account for the pleasure a child derives in creating a distorted image, for the time he spends in deco-

rating and colouring such images and for his lack of criticism at the finished product?

Part of the attraction of viewing children's drawing only in terms of a progression towards photographic realism is that the child's drawing can be compared and deviations measured against an external criterion. Other and perhaps more important aspects of drawing are therefore ignored. And in their fear of those unknown realms of the human emotions and their expression, behaviourist psychologists are like the man who is searching for a lost door key on a dark night but looks for it only under the light.

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