What shapes my self

Nancy Jennings
with Franziska Gruber, Stephanie Lahusen, Erny Hildebrand, Sevilay Koray, Gökçe Elif Baykal, Paula Gomez, Yoleiza Toro, Andreas Klempin, Pichsinee Sirichotchumnarn, Warinnet Termsirikamol, Stephanie Talbot, Krysten Stein, and Maya Götz

This article describes the results of an artistic activity in the context of narrative identity completed with 114 5-19 year-olds from 7 countries. The shapes created by the children and adolescents give insights into their inner worlds, what they make of themselves, and how they understand others.

Who are you? This fundamental question is the basis for our sense of identity. While the question is simple, the answer can be very complex. Identity has been defined by different levels of self-representation: 1) individual (differentiated, personal self-concept), 2) relational (self-concept formed by connections and the relational roles with others), and 3) collective (membership within a large group or social category) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Each of these levels combine to help us create our narrative identity — an “internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life” (McAdams, 2011, p. 99). Storytelling about the self starts very early in life (as early as 2 years old) and continues throughout adulthood (McAdams, 2011). Through artwork and interviews, children from around the world were asked to share their narrative identity — to creatively and openly represent themselves. Their stories help us to better understand what their inner worlds are like and how they make meaning of themselves, their relations to others, and their world.

METHODS

Researchers and community members from 7 different countries completed an artistic activity with 114 youths from the ages of 5-19 years. For each participant, a life-size outline of their body was traced. Next, participants laid down on their individual papers in stillness, listening to instructions to think about what makes their identity — what makes you you. Afterwards, each participant drew their inner worlds (their identity) in and around their body outline. Participants were allowed to talk or write about their drawing. For this analysis, information from children who completed both an interview or survey and a picture was used. Youths (63) that participated from Germany (17), the United States (11), the United Kingdom (6), and Mexico (29) experienced typical family life at home. However, youths that participated in other regions (51) experienced different and often difficult situations. Six children currently living in Turkey are refugees from Syria. Five youths from Colombia formerly belonged to armed groups on the margins of the law. 27 children from the sample in Thailand are diagnosed with HIV.

REPRESENTING THE SELF MODEL

Through their art, the participants are symbolizing what they think is most important and understandable about them. For all participants, representing themselves was challenging, but for some, particularly the youngest participants, it was developmentally a really difficult task. However, whatever attempts they made are still valuable as a means for them to express their identity as best they can. The pictures drawn also ranged in aesthetic appearance from the very concrete (specific pictures and words) to the very abstract (shades and tones of color to represent feelings and thoughts). Through analysis of the drawings and interviews, the following 5 ways in which youth represent themselves were observed:

1. Reproducing the actual self

In order to express themselves, children would often draw themselves exactly as they appeared as if their drawing was a reflection in a mirror. For example, a young boy from Mexico was wearing a black shirt and black pants with a red stripe on the day he participated, and he colored a black shirt and black pants with a red stripe in his body. While this was more common with younger children, some adolescents did this as well. A 14-year-old from the United States insisted on coloring her cheeks red, saying that “that’s like a big ... physical trait you see with me as I have rosy cheeks. I was naturally born with them.”

2. Appropriating symbols of the culture

To articulate what is important for them, children also often connect to
their culture, the way of life they are growing up with (Geertz, 1973). Some children would use symbols from their country to reveal their inner world. Children from Germany, Mexico, and Thailand drew the flag of their country to represent themselves or even their future dreams: like in the case of a 15-year-old from Mexico, who says: “First of all, I painted the Mexican flag, as I’m very patriotic. In the future, I want to be the president of Mexico” (Ill. 1). Media, as an important part of children’s culture are also used to express what shapes their feeling of identity. Two Syrian children and two Germans drew, for example, SpongeBob SquarePants in their body outline, or brand names were used in drawings, such as LEGO and NERF in Germany and Disney in the US to symbolize what children feel connected to.

3. Naming self strategies

Rather than pictures, some participants chose words and expressions that name their beliefs. A youth from Colombia wrote the motto “Not one step back, liberation or death” inside the arms of her body outline, and a youth from Mexico wrote “Life is inside us” outside of her body shape. Perhaps the most salient example of these naming strategies was completed by a 15-year-old boy from the US. The only drawing in his work was the outline itself; the rest of his artwork was full of words and phrases. In his interview, he revealed, “I say I don’t know a lot, and this is what goes through my mind when I say that.” Down the length of his outline, he wrote “I DON’T KNOW” and he explained that he darkened the letters for “I DO KNOW” purposefully saying, “the inside is telling me I do know, I’m just trying to avoid the question or the situation or the conversation.” Through these words and phrases, youth are expressing strategies that reflect what is inside them.

4. Revealing self-pillars

Many participants drew items, people, and places that were important to them – that symbolize what holds them up, what supports them. Children and adolescents felt a strong connection to nature – drawing flowers, fish, leaves, rainbows, and rays of sunshine. A 15-year-old boy from the US drew the shape of the place after which he is named – he felt connected to that place because of his name. Family and friends were most commonly drawn as important aspects of the child’s identity. A 16-year-old girl from Thailand drew a man holding the hand of a child standing next to her. In her interview, she revealed that family is especially important, “I am my father’s hope. My father is the only one I have, if I didn’t have my father, I wouldn’t have anyone.”

5. Representing self through actions and experiences

From the ordinary to the extreme, experiences shape the identity of children and adolescents. Sports such as soccer/football were drawn by young children, particularly boys, in Mexico as well as by adolescents in the US. Swimming and fishing were also present in children’s drawings from many countries. However, perhaps the most telling were the images drawn to reflect experiences of the Colombian youth. Many of the drawings contained images of weapons and violence. Even seemingly innocent images evoked dark memories and experiences for these youth. A girl who drew leaves on her chest inside her body outline explained the experiences that shaped her stating, “every time someone is killed, they are covered with leaves.”

Beside this general framework how children and young people symbolize what shapes their self-concept, tendencies in the several axes of identity (Gauntlett, 2002) dimensions of age, gender, and cultural background, and the specific situation they are living in or experiences in their life could be seen.

AGE

Early school years (5-6 years)

Notable differences were observed by the age of the participants. The youngest children (ages 5-6 years) often drew several colored items placed within the body outlines. In interviews, the children revealed that these items were things that they liked or disliked or that were important to them. A 5-year-old...
boy from the US explains his drawing, “I think I draw smiling faces of the sun because I like to.” When being asked what has shaped themselves they sometimes come up with very concrete experiences like visiting an amusement park, like the 6-year-old Thomas from Germany who visited LEGOLAND, took part in the gold panning and got a medal. This experience shaped his self-esteem. Typical media traces in this age group are in some cases used to symbolize themselves, like the 6-year-old boy from Great Britain drew himself as a Rainbow Ninja, proclaiming in his interview that “I am a Rainbow Ninja (...) with every power.”

Middle childhood (7-9 years)

Children in middle childhood (ages 7-9 years) also drew separate images within the body outlines but ascribed deeper meaning to these objects in their interviews. A 7-year-old girl from Germany included a sun in her drawing because “with the sunlight we can reduce our electricity bill.” Even if they drew parts of their body they see it as symbol of their self like an 8-year-old girl from Great Britain: “My brain tells that I’m intelligent. My heart tells that I am kind”. Often the colors they used are meant as a meaningful representation of themselves: “pink stands for love”, says an 8-year-old from Thailand. Furthermore, the children of this age often drew representatives of their family inside their shapes, and the interviews revealed the children in this age group consider parents and siblings as persons of trust. In the case of above mentioned 8-year-old from Thailand for example: “My mother taught me how to love myself. My father taught me how to love myself. My siblings helped me to be a good person”. This age group can mainly name some clear favorite TV programs or games like to play on the iPad or Gameboy. Media traces come up in the fears, like when an 8-year-old from Germany explains why she has drawn dinosaurs, because she is afraid of them and has seen on TV how they eat humans (Jurassic Park) and a huge black hole at her feet: “I’m afraid of black holes, because I saw on TV on Welcome in Gravity Falls how some fell into a black hole”.

Tweens (10-12 years)

The tweens begin to expand beyond the individual images and include written elements (e.g. brand names, speech bubbles) and universal signs such as the peace sign in their drawings. In their interviews, specific situations and experiences are mentioned less frequently than by the younger children. Instead, tweens talked about what shapes their daily lives and expressed their feelings, both positive and negative. A 10-year-old from Thailand who is diagnosed with HIV positive, explains that her drawing is “a memory of my parents and things that had happened.” The symbolizing of the self is getting more explicit, like a 10-year-old from Germany who draws wild hair around her head to explain: “I’m a kind of free spirit mind”. Also colors are used even more purposefully to symbolized a deeper meaning, like a 10-year-old from Thailand who drew her whole body in colors, because for her “dark colors symbolize sadness and bright colors happiness.” Media are used to see funny stories and relax but also to widen the world view. A 12-year-old from Germany explains for example how documentaries on street children have informed her that other children have so much less than she has. That has helped her to value her own life. And sometimes quite media literate interpretations of a story and complex concepts of oneself could be found, like the 12-year-old mentioned above sees herself as Draco Malfoy from Harry Potter, “because even though we have our parents and friends, we still feel unhappy”. The theme of peer group, social inclusion and exclusion gets more important and sometimes media are a part of it, like in the case of 12-year-old who tells of being bullied on WhatsApp and how this has shaped him.

Teens (13-19 years)

Daily life issues like peers, hobbies, and media play an important role in this age group, but particular experiences and memories are hardly mentioned in their interviews. Instead, bigger and more abstract concepts are visible: from the deeper meaning of family, friends and homeland to hopes and dreams – in individual ways as well as in society as a whole. A 16-year-old girl from Thailand explains, “My painting expresses the question if our world will ever be cheerful again.” World peace is a key issue in this age group, particularly for youth in Germany. A 13-year-old girl from Germany explains, “I often think about it, world peace. Because it would
be cool if it existed. Because so many other problems would go away. Like factory farming, war and everything.” To symbolize their complex thoughts, teens use even more metaphors like a 13-year-old from Mexico drawing grey clouds in her mind “I think I’m a girl with a lot of problems”, feeding the tree growing out of her heart and a cube like in Mario video games for all the question she has about herself and the life in general (Ill. 2).

On the question if some media content has shaped them, youth of this age group mention political content or documentaries on industrial life stock farming like a 13-year-old German. Online media are mentioned frequently and YouTube is seen as “a good medium, for it contains information that I didn’t know before” tells a 17-year-old from Thailand.

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**GENDER**

Both boys and girls showed us what they thought revealed their inner selves. Themes of nature were present for both boys and girls – sunshine, trees, water, and flowers. Young girls and boys both tended to represent themselves more concretely than older girls and boys. That is, young girls were just as likely to draw pictures that reproduce the actual self as young boys. Distinctions were apparent between girls and boys in their body shape outline based on clothing. Some children used signs of doing gender, like expressing their love for soccer, and there is a slight tendency that more girls express their suffering and the feeling of being silenced, as in the case of a 15-year-old from Mexico who drew a patch over her mouth (see the picture on the backside of this issue). But overall the gender differences in the aesthetic expression aren’t as obvious and identifiable at first sight as in many other creative qualitative methods (Götz et al., 2005).

One 16-year-old identifies as gender fluid. She drew a question mark between her legs and explained, “most people think I am a guy because of my short hair and the way I act so like I don’t even know what I am like how half my friends call me a guy and half my friends call me a girl and like the rest of them call me they or them so I don’t know.”

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**ILLNESS INSIDE, HIV**

Youth who have been diagnosed with HIV shared very conflicting images; ones of hope for their future coupled with uncertainty and doubt, separation yet support from others, and desire to hide their fears and symptoms from others to show strength and resilience. Many Thai youths drew pictures of their future and their ambitions – to be a science teacher, to graduate from school, to...
have a home, money, and a family. With these hopes comes uncertainty. A 15-year-old girl explained, “Some of my dreams might become true and some might not, but I will try my best to make it happen.” There is a need to feel accepted by others despite their illness. Another 15-year-old girl states, “I like people to understand that even though I got infected I have abilities and imagination that will help me to have a bright future. I also want to tell them they shouldn’t think negative about infected children and that they should have positive thoughts towards them.” Many express that they have support from their family, but miss them, because they are away from them. A few acknowledge their illness and body awareness through their drawings. One 15-year-old girl drew a red ribbon inside her body outline, a universal symbol of awareness and support for those living with HIV (Ill. 3). A 15-year-old boy drew organs, bones, and veins in his body shape, all in red, explaining, “I painted my own body and things that are inside my body and its functions.” Several youth mentioned that they try to hide their weaknesses and symptoms. An 18-year-old girl said, “I keep smiling in front of the others. I let them know that I am okay and that I keep fighting and I can bear whatever it is.”

SYRIAN REFUGEES

Their drawings are rougher, sometimes looked unfinished, their body outline was only half completed and much of their body shape was left empty, un-
filled. Most of the pictures looked like if they were drawn from a much younger child. The interviewer described how difficult it was for the children to concentrate even though the project just took 90 minutes. Some of the children draw symbols to describe their experiences like 11-year-old Cemal who drew a blood-crying eye dropping into the heart and a boy running from his home (Ill. 4). Regarding the content of the shapes and drawings, the most prominent outcome for the Syrian refugee youth was to see how they express their love of Syria, Arabic, and Koran and a longing for their own country within the pictures and texts that they produced. An 8-year-old boy used a verbal expression within the stomach as inner part of the body outline to tell that he loves Syria and Arabic, while an 11-year-old boy drew mountains and a river that remind him of Syria outside of his body outline. The 11-year-old boy also asked permission to sing a Syrian folk song during his interview. Linking back to the former Syria and to a time were life was better and more reliable could be seen as an anchor for identity to secure at least a few parts of the self.

WAR AND VIOLENCE
Images youths from Colombia drew revealed a tremendous amount of violence, death, and destruction from their past experiences with moments of peace and dreams of a better future. A boy drew a vest with two grenades on each side, a MiniUzi, a ring pistol, and a person being shot, all inside his body outline (Ill. 5). He explains that he does not like to reveal these experiences to others, because they are “the worst thing you can go through, the shooting of your friends, loved ones, those closest to you, getting shot at, just because no reason.” Another boy describes his picture where he wrote “death” on his leg and explains, “this is death ... the death of a person, that death surrounds us all the time, so you can’t escape it, so that reminds you of it.” However, this same boy also wrote “peace” on the inside of his arm explaining, “I wrote ‘peace’ here because we want it so much, and it’s the best.” The boy who drew the grenades also reveals his strongest wish in his interview, “I would say peace, I mean if we could all return to normal, all the companions going back home to their mothers, in their house, where there is always someone, who is always waiting for you and everything, that’s the best, you think that in the bush you want to go back home.”

CONCLUSION
Who are these children? Through these activities, we were able to learn about their inner world, what they make of themselves, and how they understand others. As children grow and mature, their understanding of themselves and others becomes deeper and richer. Youth move from telling you about things and events they like or dislike when they are young to sharing their inner feelings of love, fear, and peace as teens. They take pride in their culture and are influenced by its meaning. They co-create popular culture and use it to express themselves. Painful life experiences can lead to resilience in children with support from others. These are important aspects to understand as we try to help children and youth tell their life story.

How can they best convey their inner self? First, keep in mind that they represent themselves in many ways – through their culture, their likes and dislikes, their relationships to others, and through their experiences and actions. Ask about as many of these different levels and forms of expression as possible. Second, ask them to explain what they mean as best they can. Make sure you ask for clarity because how you interpret their words or actions may not be reflective of their intended meaning. Third, some children will utilize self-preservation strategies to avoid revealing their inner thoughts, so gaining their trust will be critical. Make sure they feel safe with you and in their storytelling. Fourth, be flexible. Take multiple approaches to gather meaning from their words, actions, expressions, and creative work. Listen and watch for cues that convey meaning in different ways. Remember that self-expression is difficult. You may be asking them to do something no one else has ever asked of them before. Be patient, be honest, be trustworthy, and honor your position to be able to share their story with the world with integrity.

REFERENCES

THE AUTHOR
Nancy Jennings, PhD, is a member of the advisory council at the University of Cincinnati (Ohio), USA.