

What shapes my self?

A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH AND WITHOUT TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

For the artistic project “What shapes my self”, 114 5- to 19-year-olds from 7 countries created shapes which offered insights into their inner worlds and how they understand themselves and others. For each participant, a life-size outline of their body was traced. Then the child or adolescent drew into their “shape” what is important for them and what shapes their identity. The analysis revealed clear differences between the shapes of participants who had not suffered from war, flight, or traumatic experiences and refugee children from Syria or former child soldiers from Colombia.

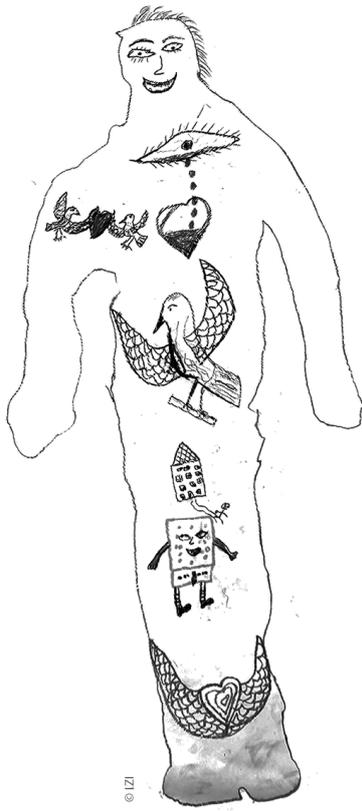


Ill. 1: When Ploy from Thailand (12 years old) thinks about herself, her family immediately comes to her mind. She draws her dream into the middle of her body outline: she wants to become a scientist because they are “cool” and she would like to do experiments

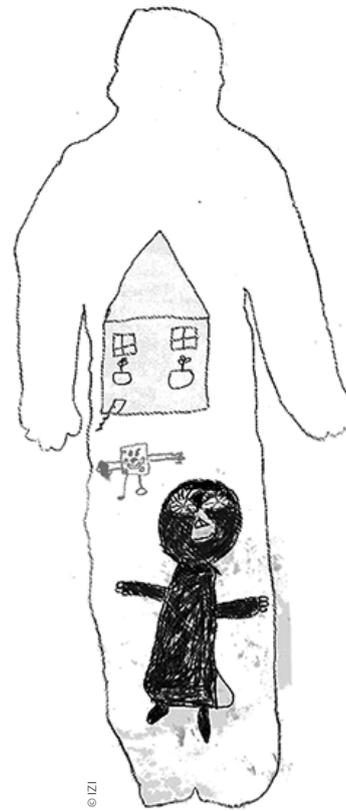
Ill. 2: Marico (15 years old) first drew the Mexican flag because he is very patriotic. He wants to perform military service (some elements look like a uniform) and wants to become the president of Mexico. But he is also confronted with many questions (question mark in the head) and worries (clouds)

Ill. 3: Mea from Germany (11 years old) loves fun and adventures. She draws her hair very wild because she wants to express that she is a free-spirit

Children who have not experienced war or traumatic events created shapes full of colours, emphasising the different parts of their self. Even children with a potentially life-threatening disease like HIV drew diverse aspects of their identity and mentioned things that are really important to them like family or their special interests like chemistry (Ill. 1). The artworks also showed future dreams like in Marico’s picture, where he drew that he wants to become the president of Mexico (Ill. 2), or visualized self-images like Mea from Germany who portrayed herself as a “free-spirit” by stressing her wild hair (Ill. 3).



III. 4: In response to the question what shapes himself, Omer (11 years old) draws a boy running away from home. "I feel ashamed", he says and doesn't want to give any further details. The blood-crying eye might be interpreted as representing the things he had seen and experienced which are now dripping into his heart. The dove is a motive he drew 3 times and it might represent the hope for peace and that the war in Syria would end



III. 5: When Hassan (10 years old) draws what shapes himself, it is a dark version of him leaving their house. He explains that he was thinking of going back to Syria while drawing

Traumatic experiences make the difference

The body outlines of the Syrian children who lived in a refugee camp in Turkey, by contrast, were often unfinished and less precise. Their drawings were rougher and much of their shapes remained unfilled (III. 4-6).

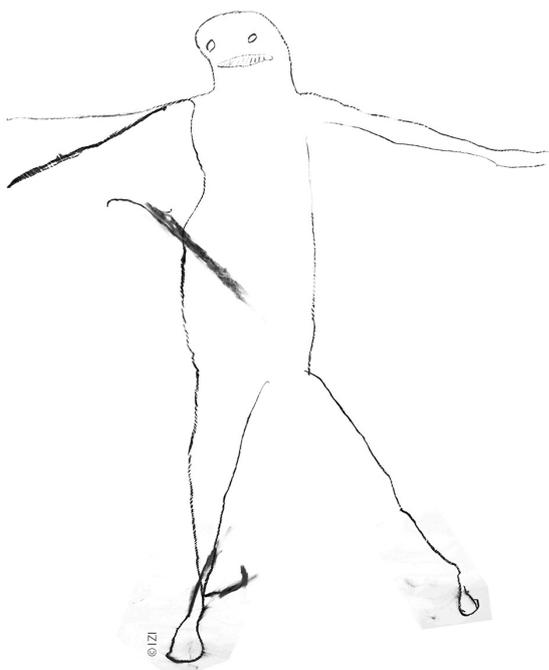
Many of the children and adolescents were not able to concentrate on and engage with the topic for a longer time. Most pictures looked as though they were drawn from a much younger child, which may refer to a developmental delay due to traumatic experiences. As in the shapes of the former child soldiers, the content focussed on the war and experiences of displacement.

An 11-year-old boy from Syria expressed his inner self by drawing a blood-crying eye dropping into a heart and a stick figure running away from a house (III. 4).

The Syrian children disclosed a strong emotional connection to their home country Syria, Arabic, and the Koran through their pictures and texts. Some children drew *SpongeBob* (III. 4 and 5) which might mean that they can have fun despite all difficult circumstances.

The art project revealed that traumatic experiences shape the identity of children and adolescents. ■

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III. 6: For Abdo (11 years old) it was quite difficult to draw what shapes himself. He says he could not think of anything but of his stomach – and that is where blood squirts out