

Drawings of gods in Switzerland: Does religious affiliation (really) matter?

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BACKGROUND

Grasping the representation of God?

Qualitative measures such as drawings and narratives show special relevance for investigating into this complex matter (Boyatzis, 2005).

Developmental characteristics

Previous studies using such methods have highlighted the following tendencies: fewer anthropomorphic figures and greater frequency of symbolic representations with increasing age (Brandt, Kagata Spitteler, & Gilliéron Paléologue, 2009; Bucher, 1991; Dandarova, 2013; Harms, 1944; Ladd, McIntosh, & Spilka, 1998; Tamm, 1996).

Context and religious affiliation

Differences have been found between groups of different religions (Heller, 1986; Pitts, 1977). A similar pattern as the developmental one has been found when comparing Christian (Hanisch, 1996) and Buddhist (Brandt et al., 2009) environments with non-religious ones.

OBJECTIVES

We explored the respective roles of context (public school; church), religious affiliation and age on the representation of God in children. Religious affiliation, religious context and age increasing were assumed to lead to more frequent productions of symbolic/abstract representations and dampen the use of anthropomorphic figures. Gender differences were also evaluated.

SAMPLE

Two hundred eighty-four participants, boys and girls, aged from 6 to 15 years from Swiss French-speaking cantons of Geneva, Neuchatel, Valais and Vaud (see table 1; table 2).

Table 1. Participants by age range and context

Context	Age range (in years)			Total
	6-9	9.5-12	12.5-15	
Public school	75	68	55	198
Church	21	14	51	86
Total	96	82	106	284

Table 2. Participants by age range and gender

Gender	Age range (in years)			Total
	6-9	9.5-12	12.5-15	
Female	48	45	58	151
Male	48	37	48	133
Total	96	82	106	284

MEASURES

Tasks to the children

Instructions: "Have you ever heard of the word 'God'? Could you draw?"
1° drawing; 2° recall of instructions (written); 3° description of drawing (written); 4° answering a questionnaire.

Religious affiliation

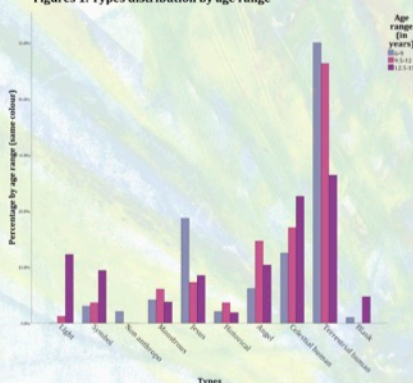
A questionnaire was designed for the present study. Due to sample size we compared the following groups: Christian (66.1%); Non-religious (25.8%).

Coding of drawings

Revised version of Brandt et al. (2009): 10-type qualitative classification; 7 types were retained because of frequency counts (see Figure 1).

Classical dichotomy was also tested: anthropomorphic/non anthropomorphic.

Figures 1. Types distribution by age range



RESULTS

1. Age and gender

Age had a significant effect on the representation of God using both a seven-type classification ($\chi^2(12)=44.180, p=.000$) and a rough dichotomy ($\chi^2(2)=24.593, p=.000$) methods. No significant effect of gender was found with a seven-type method: $\chi^2(6)=8.327, p=.215$.

2. Context and religious affiliation

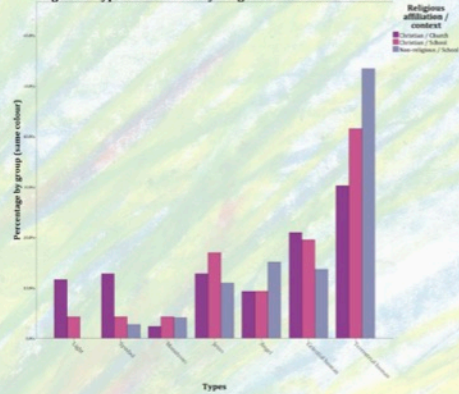
Both context (public school; church) and religious affiliation had an overall significant effect on the type of representation (7-type classification); respectively, $\chi^2(6)=25.332, p=.000$; $\chi^2(6)=14.742, p=.022$.

Identical analyses were run using 3 subgroups based on both context and religious affiliation (see figure 2). Self-reported Christians in between contexts did not differ significantly from each other: $\chi^2(6)=11.208, p=.082$. Similar results were found for Christians/non-religious groups in public school context: $\chi^2(12)=15.132, p=.234$. Only Christians in church compared with non-religious in school groups revealed to be significantly different from one another: $\chi^2(6)=21.344, p=.002$.

3. Pattern

A similar pattern was observed for increasing age, church context and Christian affiliation: proneness to symbolic/abstract representations and lesser use of anthropomorphic figures. More careful examination showed that church and Christian affiliation were associated with the "celestial human" type - between anthropomorphic representations within group, and between groups.

Figure 2. Types distribution by religious affiliation and context



DISCUSSION

Present examination first confirms previous research suggesting that the older the fewer anthropomorphic figures be found, with a greater occurrence of symbolic/abstract representations. However, there was no effect of gender - most likely because of the wide within-range of the types used. Secondly we found an effect of both religious affiliation (Christian/non-religious) and the context (church/public school), overall leading to the same aforementioned pattern.

More interestingly, subgroups could not be discriminated on the basis of their religious affiliation or the context alone. Only groups set apart by both their affiliation and the context showed to be significantly different in their use of specific types of representation of God.

Thus, yes, religious affiliation really matters and so does the context of collection.

Further research should help clarify this specific interplay as well as weigh up contributions of such factors when more finely distinguished (e.g. religious affiliation, religious identity, religious education, psychosocial context influence and conformism). Also, the types that were used could be later on refined and combine eclectic methods for a better accuracy (Gibson, 2008). Finally, working with a bigger sample size will allow us to take interactions with age into account as well as geographical specificities.

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