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Pandemic, War, Flood... What do Children Draw when Asked about Fear?

Pandemia, wojna, powódź...
Co rysują dzieci zapytane o lęk?

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present results of the qualitative research on fear-themed drawings, which was conducted in situations that impact the sense of safety in children, that is, during pandemics, a war or flooding. The research covered 162 children in total, aged between 7 and 12 years of Polish, Ukrainian, and Slovak nationality. The researchers intended to find answers to the following two questions: 1) What do children draw when asked about fear in the situation of pandemics, a war and flooding? and 2) What type of symbols are those of fear identified in children's drawings? Consequently, the authors attempt to explain whether the recognized symbols repre-

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sent fears typical of developmental stages or idiosyncratic ones, that is, connected with the specific contexts in which they arose. In conclusion, the authors attempt to interpret the obtained outcomes by making reference to the available research results provided by other authors.

Keywords: pandemic; war; flood; fear-themed drawings; children at younger school age.

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników badań jakościowych nad rysunkami o tematyce lęku, przeprowadzonych w sytuacji naruszającej poczucie bezpieczeństwa dzieci, tj. w czasie pandemii, wojny czy powodzi. Badaniami objęto łącznie 162 dzieci w wieku od 7 do 12 lat narodowości polskiej, ukraińskiej i słowackiej. Badaczki zmierzały do uzyskania odpowiedzi na dwa pytania: 1) Co rysują dzieci zapytane o lęk w sytuacji pandemii, wojny i powodzi? oraz 2) Jakiego rodzaju symbole lęku można zidentyfikować na rysunkach dzieci? W związku z tym autorki starały się wyjaśnić, czy rozpoznane symbole reprezentują lęki typowe dla poszczególnych etapów rozwoju, czy też idiosynkratyczne, tzn. związane ze specyficznymi kontekstami, w których powstały. Podsumowując, autorki podjęły próbę interpretacji uzyskanych wyników, odwołując się do dostępnych badań innych autorów.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia; wojna; powódź; rysunki o tematyce lęku; dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym.

1. Introduction

Contemporary children function in social and cultural environments that are marked by the presence of events of a crisis character. The occurrences, even though they do not directly affect the youngest, have an impact on their imagination, the sense of safety and the manner in which they perceive the world. The Covid-19 pandemics, military conflicts (personally experienced or presented in the media), as well as the intensification of climatic changes have created a new context of today's childhoods. It is possible, too, that they have created a significant background for fear-related experiences to take shape.

The literature on the subject treats children's fears as both an element of normative emotional development and a reaction to events going beyond children's everyday experience (Kendler et al., 1999). Researchers distinguish

developmental fears that are characteristic of given stages of life (e.g. fear of animals, darkness, separation) as well as situational and idiosyncratic fears connected with exceptional or traumatic circumstances (Vasta et al., 2004, p. 472; Carson et al., 2010, p. 262; Burnham et al., 2019). Experiences of this type take complex forms, particularly in the case of children. This is because the youngest do not always possess suitable linguistic competences to verbalize their own states (Cywińska, 2017). Therefore, their fears quite often manifest themselves in children's activities, plays or artistic creativity (Muris et al., 1997; Lane & Gullone, 1999; Lahikainen et. al., 2003).

In research on expressions of children's emotions, special place is occupied by drawings treated not only as aesthetic artefacts, but primarily as a form of projection and symbolism, a means enabling the non-verbal revealing of difficult content or one of which the child is not aware. Thus, they can be used in examinations of fears, traumas and the sense of safety as a tool which allows grasping both the content that is culturally universal and individual meanings given to emotional experiences (Burnham et al., 2011; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Kendrick, 2021). Such analyses point to the fact that children do not always represent directly the sources of threat, but make use of symbols rooted in the cultural repertoire of fears. In this way, the symbols play an auxiliary function to express their fears (Mitarski, 2002; Konieczna & Talu, 2021; cf. Buss, 2001). In this sense, a child's drawings make a space for negotiation of meanings between an individual's experience and cultural interpretative schemata (Furedi, 2002; Konieczna & Talu, 2021, 2022; Restoy et al., 2022). It is also in such a manner that they are perceived in the research described here.

2. Methodological procedure and characteristics of the research sample

An indispensable stage to commence each scientific exploration is to order the set of basic concepts and terms serving to define the examined phenomenon as well as to precisely determine the paradigm which – in the case of the studies presented here – can count as an interpretative-constructivist one. The choice of it was dictated by the way of our perceiving an individual as a subject who interprets the world from the perspective of their inner ex-

perience and for whom the social reality is being constructed in the course of their activity (Berger & Luckmann, 1983; Szahaj, 2004; Finley, 2010). Since humanistic phenomena are of a changeable nature, it can be comprehended solely through description and interpretation. Following the examined study subjects allows accepting their perspective, which – in the case of the present studies – was expected to enable perceiving the world through the child's eyes. The argument in favour of accepting this paradigm was also the thesis that action 'is based on meanings which individuals attribute to every object' (Rokuszevska-Pawełek, 1996, p. 38) that they enter into interrelation with, while the comprehension of which is a process that consists in negotiating the sense.

The cognitive orientation is more detailed than the paradigm, as it accounts for selecting concrete research procedures. The relevant choice is dependent on the specifics of the analyzed problem. In the case of the present studies, the qualitative orientation appeared the best solution. Although, as regards studies into drawings, the application of quantitative procedures is a common practice, the latter is criticized by proponents of the monographic method (Szuman, 1990, pp. 3–5). Bronisław Hornowski considers the quantitative approach to be valuable in observing regularities in child's development. However, according to the same author, it is deficient as it neglects individual qualities in the examined subject and also because it concentrates on regularities and statistical dependences (Hornowski, 1982, p. 77). Although it is true that in qualitative research there are sometimes cause-and-effect-based attempts made at explaining phenomena, they do not have the character typical of quantitative research. E. Stake believes that they resemble multifaceted sequences of events contextually connected with one another, yet not necessarily interacting (Stake, 2010, p. 633). Strategies of this type are rather of the auxiliary status and serve only to illustrate as well as systematize the collected data (Straś-Romanowska, 2003, p. 36). Other researchers maintain, in turn, that an analysis of results based on statistics is not only insufficient, but detrimental as well, since it 'restricts the outcomes and distorts the picture of the whole' (Karczmarzyk & Trocha, 2016, p. 4). Marta Uberman perceives children's creativity not as a quantitative but a qualitative feature of its existence (Uberman, 2010, p. 169), requiring an interpretative approach, understanding the meanings of drawings as if 'from the inside,' from the perspective of a participant of the given culture. As au-

thors, we are also aware of the fact that the qualitative research and the approach presented here are not free from deficiencies or may provoke critical comments from other authors (Szuman, 1990, p. 5).

The aim of this article is to present results of our research on children's drawings, with particular taking account of the context in which the studies were conducted. The context refers to a situation which, in the researchers' opinion, can cause a loss of the sense of safety, fear or trauma. Consequently, we acknowledged the state of pandemics to be one of such situations, with the Covid-19 pandemics being a manifestation of it as it brought many changes into children's emotional and social lives (Jones et al., 2021; Konieczna et al., 2023; Henke, 2023; Bialy et al., 2024). Serious consequences also resulted from the war in Ukraine. This in turn could influence the course of developmental processes in children to a considerable degree (Sagi-Schwartz, 2008; Yahav, 2011; Slone & Mann, 2016; Bolhuis et al., 2023; Hakala et al., 2024; Deguara & Nutbrown, 2024; Ajduković et al., 2025; Yang & Gong, 2025). Lastly, we counted sudden occurrences connected with weather conditions (precisely flooding) into situations which disrupt children's psychic comfort and evoke the sense of danger. Their more and more frequent occurrence have caused consequences brought on by climatic changes to become part of our contemporary lives as well as make a fear-provoking experience (Stimpson, 2005; Ribeiro & Silva, 2021; Tiyyuri et al., 2023; Al-Mamun et al., 2025; Scherer & Takabe, 2025; Feng et al. 2025; Kakati et al., 2025). The research designed in this way was meant to answer the question: What do children draw when asked about fear in the situation of pandemics, war and flooding? The other question of interest to us was: What type of symbols do the ones identified in children's drawings belong to? (Muris et al., 2002, p. 467; Burnham et al., 2011, p. 237; Jabbar & Betawi, 2019; Kendrick, 2021; Konieczna & Kiriakova, 2023).

The studies presented here were conducted in three specific periods. The first one was the time of the Covid-19 pandemics, that is the years 2020 and 2021. The second was the beginning of the war in Ukraine, i.e. from March to May 2022. The third period of carrying out the studies was the time following the flood in the Autumn of 2024 (from October to December). What links the three spans is the same procedure regarding the carrying out of the studies. We made use of drawings as a visual research method (Roysircar et al., 2019; cf. Ribeiro & Silva, 2021). The research had an individual char-

acter, which in practice meant that each of the collected drawings was created only in the presence of a supervising researcher, mostly at home or on the premises of an educational institution (school day-rooms, associations, foundations). The instruction for the child to make a drawing ran as follows: 'Please, draw whatever you are afraid of or you don't like.' The open form of it complies with the principles of qualitative research, which assume minimizing the researcher's structural intervention in the process of data production. Each child was also interviewed on the content of its drawing and the role of the talk was to make precise the meanings invested by the child in particular elements of the work. The verbal utterances did not provide a separate analytical material, yet played the function of contextualization of the process of interpretation of the drawings. The participation of the study subjects in the research was voluntary. Children's parents' written agreements as well as children's verbal consents were obtained. The children were informed about the aim of the examination in a way appropriate to their ages and could refuse to participate or withdraw from the examination at any stage of the procedure. The research was carried out with respect for the ethical principles of conducting research involving children, in particular the principle of minimizing the emotional discomfort.

The selection of the sample for the presented research was purposeful and was subjected to the logic of qualitative research, where the superior criterion is not statistical representativeness, but cognitive relevance of cases in relation to the formulated research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). Altogether, there were 162 schoolchildren taking part in the research, aged between 7 and 12 years. The age range had been chosen intentionally due to a relative stability of drawing competences as well as the development of symbolic thinking that enables non-verbal representation of emotional content (Picard & Vinter, 1999; Cherney et al., 2006). Given the qualitative character of the research, we did not do an analysis of differences regarding sex. The criterion of inclusion in the examination was the given child's experience of a defined social context that is acknowledged to be potentially violating its sense of safety. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic it was only Polish children who took part in the research, which was dictated by limited mobility and sanitary restrictions that made conducting research of an intercultural and transborder character impossible. As regards the situation of the war in Ukraine, the research covered Polish and Ukrainian children who had come

to Poland in the first weeks of the conflict. Such a selection of the sample resulted from the wish to grasp different perspectives of children functioning in different positions towards the same societal occurrence, that is children directly experiencing the effects of a war and those who were confronted with it indirectly, chiefly by means of information in the media and adult people's narrations. As far as the situation of flooding was concerned, the research included the most numerous group of study subjects, that is Polish children, Ukrainian children staying in Poland at that time, and Slovakian children. Such a structure of the sample was the result of the supra-regional and trans-border scale of the phenomenon, which created the possibility of conducting the research in comparable social and environmental conditions existing in different countries. It also enabled exploration of similarities and differences in the symbolic representation of fear among children functioning within different cultural contexts, yet experiencing the same type of threat.

The analysis of the collected material was of an interpretative character and was carried out in compliance with the principles of qualitative analysis of visual content. The drawings were treated as cultural and symbolic texts that require embedding in the developmental, situational and cultural contexts. Analytical categories were not imposed a priori, but emerged in the course of repeated reviewing of the material and its comparisons within and between the distinguished research contexts.

3. Presentation and description of the collected material

The first of the above-listed circumstances in which the research was carried out, was not anything new: epidemics have been known in the history of mankind since the 5th century BCE. In a similar way as in the case of phenomena of this kind in the past, the latest pandemics was accompanied by conspiracy theories like the one maintaining that it had been an intended intervention on the part of some states (Krajewska, 2020). However, what distinguished the Covid-19 pandemics from the previous ones was the unprecedented scale and range of the media coverage. None of the pandemics so far had exerted such a strong influence on the way so many countries function in or on such a variety of areas of societal activity, including schools and their students (Konieczna et al., 2023; Weissbrot-Koziarska et al., 2023).

What can be an intriguing finding is the content of the drawings collected during the pandemics. None of the 64 pictures created by Polish children contained a symbol associated in those days with the coronavirus, i.e. a protective mask, syringe, the symbol of virus, empty spaces (lockdown), displays or screens of different electronic devices like laptops, telephones (cf. Bjørkvold et al., 2025, p. 5). Instead, at that time, the children mostly represented fears typical of their ages in their drawings, that is the fear of wild animals. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the dominance of developmental fears over situational ones, which can prove the thesis that in situations of unclear threats, children will reach for culturally fixed symbols of fear (Cherney et al., 2006; Ballús et al., 2023). Out of all of the collected drawings it is solely in the picture of a nine-year-old boy that a situation connected with the pandemics can be spotted.

A boy (Pole), 9 years old. The child drew both what he is afraid of and what he doesn't like, that is Brussels sprouts. It follows from the boy's explanation that his fear has been the result of the possibility of losing the persons who were the nearest to him. In the picture, they are his mom and a friend of his. It does not follow from the interview with the boy, however, that this fear is directly connected with the pandemic. This possibility, of course, cannot be excluded, though.



Source: authors' private archive

The second context of the conducted research was a war. To the majority of European society it is a situation that has been known solely from history, literature or art. The outbreak of the conflict in 2022 evoked a series of social (intensified migration), economic (rise in the inflation), psychological (growing sense of endangerment) phenomena.

In our studies run during the initial stage of the war, we collected 40 fear-themed drawings in total. They were made by Polish and Ukrainian children, the latter having just come to Poland. As regards the former, in a similar way as in the preceding years, over a half of the pictures were related to the fear of wild animals and every third drawing featured a spider. None of the children in that group drew a symbol which should represent other fears than that characteristic of this age group. In the case of the Ukrainian children, however, the situation looked quite different: their pictures represented a fear of war and longing for the nearest who had remained at home. Some of the drawings presented personal traumatic experience connected with the Russian aggression (see: Konieczna & Kiriakova, 2023). A good example here is the drawing of a girl who presented both her representations of the war¹ and the real experience of the day.

A girl (Ukrainian), 8 years old. Drew an air-raid. The house on the left was destroyed by a rocket. In the other house, in the basement, the girl drew herself together with the family who are hiding from the danger. The picture presents her experience from the first period of the war, shortly before her emigration to Poland.

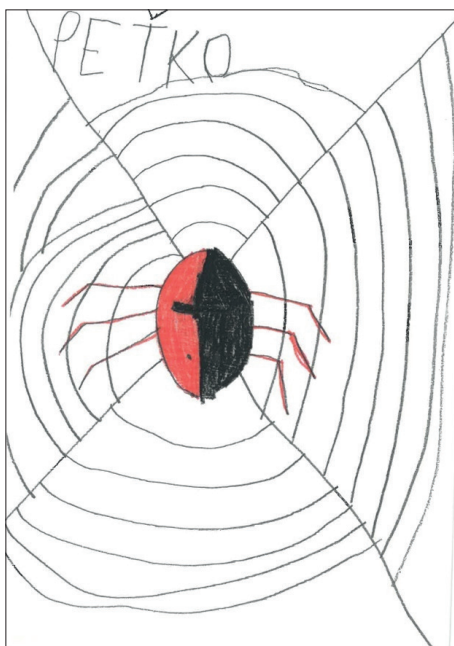


Source: authors' private archive

¹ In the interview, the girl's mother denied that her daughter had seen effects of an air-raid similar to that represented in her picture.

The last of the circumstances in which the present studies were carried out was that connected with the calamity of flooding which struck several European countries in the Autumn of 2024. Thus, that situation created conditions to do research of an international range. It was conducted in the regions that had been affected physically or were directly threatened by this disaster, that is Opole Region (Poland) and Banská Bystrica Region (Slovakia). Consequently, there were Polish, Ukrainian (staying in Poland) and Slovak children taking part in the studies. Altogether, there were 58 drawings collected (20 pictures made by Polish and Ukrainian children each, and 18 made by Slovakian study participants). In the case of the Polish children, the fear-themed pictures were dominated by a representation of the spider, whose symbol was identified in 16 drawings. Again, none of the respondents drew a symbol which could be directly associated with flooding. The same was the case of the Ukrainian children residing in Poland at that time. Every third drawing by the latter also featured a spider, while the others included symbols of fears that are typical of the developmental stage in children at younger school ages. Interestingly, only two pictures of the Ukrainian children displayed symbols with military connotations (namely a bomb and weapon). Comparing the content of the drawings created at the beginning of the war and that of pictures made two years later, it is possible to notice that the present symbolism makes reference to typical developmental fears. As regards the third group, more than a half of the collected drawings also present spiders, while the remaining ones – fears of children typical of their ages. Similarly, the symbolism employed by the Slovakian children did not differ from that in the other drawings collected shortly after the flood.

A boy (Slovak), 7 years old. The drawing expresses the fear of wild animals typical of this age. The spider is drawn in black and red, whose cultural meanings reinforce the drawing's emotional message.



Source: authors' private archive

4. Conclusion

The article aims to present results of research into children's drawings, which was conducted in the context of the Covid-19 pandemics, the war in Ukraine and the calamity of flooding. The object of our special interest was the idiosyncratic symbols included in the children's pictures, reflecting the impact of contemporary global threats on the way of living through emotions by the youngest people.

The collected material points to the fact that drawings made by children during the Covid-19 pandemics – in a different way from that found by other researchers (Yang et al., 2024) – did not contain symbols that could be interpreted in the context of events related to it. Possibly, the lack of symbols of this type in the children's pictures results from the fact that the new symbolism still has not penetrated or solidified in the cultural repertoire of symbols representing fear of the effects of pandemics. On the other hand,

epidemics are nothing new in the human beings' community-related experience (Davey, 1994, p. 17). Yet, most probably those epidemics of old turn out to be too distant contextually to be associated with the current situation of endangerment (see: Łaziński, 2025). At the same time, reports on studies of other authors indicate that even very young children present a high level of understanding of the coronavirus and the Covid-19 disease as multifaceted constructs. The youngest are familiar with the medical, societal and psychological consequences to human beings. The same studies show, too, that Covid-19, according to children, is a disease befalling elderly people (Bonoti et al., 2021). Therefore, it is possible that the children examined by us perceived it in the same way (as something not threatening them directly) and for this reason they did not draw it in their pictures.

Taking account of the circumstances in which our research was being conducted, the absence in the children's drawings of symbols connected with the situation of flooding can be surprising. This natural phenomenon of varied scale and range is fairly common. It has also been present practically since the very beginning of mankind (see: The Book of Genesis, 6–7), and its symbolic significance makes reference to the just punishment, purification, a new beginning. However, the symbolism of flooding did not appear in the drawings of even those children who had experienced it themselves. Probably, there followed the mechanism of dissociation here and the children separated part of this negative experience from their consciousness. In consequence, fragments of this dramatic event were dispersed, which made it hard to visualize it by means of drawings (D'Elia et al., 2022). It is well-known that children can cope with difficult situations also through other forms of expression, e.g. plays (the so-called post-traumatic plays) which consist in repeated re-enacting of scenes. Studies conducted in areas affected by calamities prove that children can prefer this type of play or to keep silent; they also tend to draw something neutral instead of the concrete event (Ribeiro & Silva, 2021). The absence of symbolism connected with the given experience can thus mean choosing a different channel of expression (McGuire et al., 2021).

Obviously, in the case of both of these fears there is still the probability that they were not drawn because of the difficulty in representing them by means of symbols. While designing the studies, we took this into consideration and that is why one of the questions asked to the children ran as follows:

‘Is there anything else that you fear or don’t like, but you haven’t drawn it in your picture?’ Still, in the children’s answers the fears of war, pandemics, flooding or other climatic changes did not appear almost at all.

As far as the situation of the war is concerned, its symbols were present primarily in the drawings of children from Ukraine and, to a large extent, in those made at the initial stage of the conflict. As regards the Polish children, military symbols were identified only in one of the pictures. These differences can be explained with the fact that despite its significance in the media as well as the many-a-century presence in man’s history, such a situation is still an abstract concept to Polish children. It follows from research that this type of symbolism is most often reflected in drawings of children who are victims or witnesses to military actions (Rizzi & Moro, 2019), whereas those who live in countries not affected by a war rarely present the fear of it in their works (Krajewska-Kulak et al., 2016; Konieczna & Talu, 2022). What is more, playing war is still popular with younger children, although the role of soldiers has been taken over by modern superheroes who fight the evil and possess extraordinary powers (Holland, 2000; Bokszczanin, 2013). In the literature, a play of this type is treated as a form of ‘playful aggression’ which oscillates between violence (channels aggression) and pro-socialness (builds social competences) (Hart & Nagel, 2017). It seems then that children who do not deal with a war in a direct way, do not perceive it in the category of fear, but that of distant reality or sometimes also that of a play.

It remains now to explain why children asked about fear, independent of their nationality or circumstances of conducting studies, most frequently draw spiders. Firstly, the results of our research confirm the fact that children’s fears are quite comparable in different cultures (Ollendick et al., 1996; Konieczna & Talu, 2021). The similarities observed result probably from the function which the symbol of fear plays in culture. It is not merely a carrier of individual fears, but an illustration of transcultural tale of the nature of human fear and its emblematic representations (Mitarski, 2002). This enables understanding why children draw spiders that do not threaten them, but not real dangers, e.g. such as cars, electrical sockets (Buss, 2001, p. 50). Although, objectively, they are threatening, in reality, they make elements of everyday life known to children and because of this – to some extent – they have been tamed and acquired a neutral meaning. Thus, looking from the perspective of the cultural sense of the symbol of spider (see: Konieczna

& Talu, 2022, p. 127; cf. Machnicka, 2021, p. 157), the collected drawings displaying this theme should be seen as a reflection of well-grounded stereotypes rather than a documentation of current threats of the modern world.

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