

AFRICAN ADOLESCENTS' DRAWINGS OF THE INTERIOR OF THE BODY: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS¹

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Summary.—This paper, concerned with cultural variations of representations and beliefs related to the body, reports some preliminary data collected in Africa (Zaire) from a sample of 184 male and 161 female adolescents' drawings of the interior of their bodies. Analysis evidenced specific qualitative characteristics of African subjects' drawings that were not comparable to those produced by European subjects in a previous study.

An active line of research within the field of social psychology concerned with health problems has been the study of different groups of subjects' belief systems and representations about the body and about illness (Herzlich, 1969; Jodelet, 1983), while children's and adolescents' spontaneous notions about the functioning of the body have become of interest to developmental psychologists (Munari, Filippini, Regazzoni, & Visseur, 1976; Crider, 1981; Glaun & Rosenthal, 1987; Amann-Gainotti, 1988; Del Barrio, 1988). Recent studies by Amann-Gainotti and Antenore (1990) have yielded a developmental outline showing progressive levels of organization of interior body image and investigated genital anatomy in adolescent girls and adult women (Amann-Gainotti, Di Prospero, & Nenci, 1989; Amann-Gainotti & Grazioso, 1991).

Within this theoretical frame concerning spontaneous constructions of biological knowledge and cultural variations of representations and beliefs related to the body, the aim of this study was to discuss, in light of our previous studies, some preliminary comparative data collected in Africa (Zaire) from a sample of male and female adolescents' drawings of the interior of their bodies.

Method.—The subjects participating in the study were 184 male subjects and 161 female subjects living in Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire. Ages ranged from 12 to 21 years with most falling into the 15- to 17-year-old group. All were attending schools (but information was not available on the grades or years of schooling for each subject). Drawings were collected during classroom sessions by the subjects' teacher, who had been carefully instructed by the experimenter.

Results.—An analysis of African subjects' drawings of the interior of the body was made by the rules of Amann-Gainotti and Grazioso (1990) to

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whose work readers may refer for quantitative details. Very specific qualitative characteristics of African subjects were evidenced that could not be assimilated to the organization in the levels of progressive complexity of interior body image that had emerged from our previous researches with European subjects. Major characteristics of African subjects' graphic productions were no drawing of the exterior body outline, representation of single body parts (a leg, a heart, the tongue, etc.); when connections between internal body elements were present, these were partial and incomplete; focus was on specific internal body parts such as lungs and intestine (while European subjects focus on heart and brain). Many drawings were stylized and decorative. The present study provides only partial information on the spontaneous representations of the interior of the body of subjects from a nonoccidental culture. We suggest that the drawing of the interior of the body could be an interesting technique for deeper investigations of the anatomical and physiological conceptions of traditional African medicine and healers (Bideau, 1983).

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