

# The Child as a Nonegocentric Art Critic

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HART, LYNN M., and GOLDIN-MEADOW, SUSAN. *The Child as a Nonegocentric Art Critic*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1984, 55, 2122–2129. 65 children, ages 3, 5, and 7, were asked to evaluate a series of children's drawings for their own personal likes and dislikes and for the likes and dislikes they imagined individuals older and younger than themselves to have. When attributing artistic opinions to other people, children in all 3 age groups chose drawings for other individuals that were different from the drawings they chose for themselves. In addition, the children justified the drawing choices they attributed to others with reasons that differed systematically from the reasons they gave for their own drawing choices. Thus children as young as 3 appear capable of being nonegocentric art critics, who can judge children's drawings for others differently from the way they judge them for themselves.

Preschool children have traditionally been described as egocentric—that is, unable to take into account perspectives other than their own (Piaget, 1926; Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). For example, when provided with an explanation of a water tap and then asked to describe its workings to another child, young children have been found to produce vague and incomplete descriptions that are inadequate to ensure the listener's comprehension (Piaget, 1926). Similar findings of egocentrism in preschoolers are reported in Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, and Jarvis (1968) and Glucksberg, Krauss, and Higgins (1975).

However, others have found that young children, if asked to describe familiar toys or activities, are able to take the listener's capacities into account (Glucksberg, Krauss, & Weisberg, 1966; Hoy, 1975; Maratsos, 1973; Masur, 1978; Menig-Peterson, 1975; Shatz & Gelman, 1973). Moreover, even when asked to make inferences about another person, if the content of the task is familiar, preschoolers are able to make judgments for others that differ systematically from the judgments they make for themselves. In particular, preschoolers are able to imagine that what one feels (Urberg & Docherty, 1976), what one sees (Masangkay, McCluskey, McIntyre, Sims-Knight, Vaughn, & Flavell, 1974), or what one prefers (Shatz, 1978; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & Brady-Smith, 1977) could differ for them and for others. Thus, when the demands

of a task fall within a child's realm of experience, children as young as 3 are able to make nonegocentric inferences about the feelings, percepts, and preferences of others. Given these findings, one might expect that the preschooler could also make nonegocentric inferences about the aesthetic preferences of others—if the content of the task were familiar.

Recent studies of the young child's ability to judge works of art offer little evidence to suggest that children as young as 6 can differentiate between their own personal artistic preferences and the merit a work of art might have for other individuals (Rosenstiel, Morison, Silverman, & Gardner, 1978; Child, Note 1). However, it is important to note that the stimuli used in these studies were "museum-style" artworks of the masters—artworks that young children are unlikely to have encountered previously and that children may have difficulty discriminating among. Moreover, in these studies the children were asked to determine which works of art might be considered better by either art experts or other (unspecified) people—people whose tastes were unlikely to be familiar to the young child. We hypothesized that, because aspects of the task were relatively unfamiliar to the young subjects, the child's ability to make nonegocentric judgments of art may have been systematically underestimated.

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In our study, we investigated the possibility that young children might be less ego-centric in their attributions of artistic preferences if permitted to judge artwork that is closer to their own skill level and to consider the likes and dislikes of people whom they know. To this end, children ages 3 to 7 were asked to judge other *children's* original drawings (all of spaceships) rather than reproductions of adult masters' works. In addition, to make the other individual for whom the child was to attribute judgments a known quantity, the subjects were asked to intuit the artistic preferences of people close to them (parents, siblings, or friends).

Two measures of the child's ability to take another's point of view were included in the study: (1) the drawing choice—that is, could children choose a drawing for another individual that was different from the drawing they chose as their own personal preference? and (2) reasons for the drawing choice—that is, could children give reasons for their drawing choices for other individuals that differed systematically from the reasons they gave for their own drawing choices?

## Method

*Subjects.*—Twenty-three 3-year-olds (mean age 3-7), 22 5-year-olds (mean age 5-3), and 20 7-year-olds (mean age 7-6) participated in the study. All of the 3-year-olds, 12 of the 5-year-olds, and 10 of the 7-year-olds came from the University of Chicago Lab School; the remaining 5- and 7-year-olds came from a Chicago public school. There were no differences on either the "drawing choice" or the "reasons for drawing choice" measures found between the Lab School and public school children. The subjects included 33 girls and 32 boys, divided evenly across the age groups.

*Stimuli.*—The subjects were presented with three drawings, all of spaceships, drawn by children ages 3, 8, and 12 (drawings 1, 2, and 3, respectively, in Figure 1). Each drawing was done with a set of colored felt-tip markers on 8½ × 11-inch white paper. There were no identifying names or ages on any of the three drawings. The three child-artists did not participate in the tasks.

*Procedure.*—Each subject was tested individually in a quiet room at school. All interviews were tape-recorded. The experimenter placed the three drawings in random order on the table facing the subject and told the sub-

ject that each drawing was a picture of a spaceship drawn by a child. Even the youngest children appeared to understand that the drawings represented spaceships, although not all of the children considered each drawing to be a good representation of a spaceship (see coding category 5). To establish the child's own personal preferences among the three drawings, the child was first asked, "Which drawing do you like the most?" and "Which drawing do you not like at all?"

The child was then asked two additional sets of questions, each containing two parts: (1) "Which drawing do you think your mother/father would like the most?" ("mother" was used if the subject was a girl, "father" if the subject was a boy), and "Which drawing do you think your mother/father would not like at all?" and (2) "Which drawing do you think your little sister/brother would like the most?" (if the children had no younger siblings, they were asked to predict the preferences of a younger friend),<sup>1</sup> and "Which drawing do you think your little sister/brother would not like at all?" Half of the subjects were asked to make judgments for an older viewer first, and half were asked to make judgments for a younger viewer first.

To tap the reasoning behind the children's own artistic opinions and behind the opinions they attributed to others, after each drawing choice the children were asked to explain why they had made that choice for themselves ("Why do you like this one the most?" or "Why do you not like this one at all?") or for someone else ("Why do you think your little sister/brother would like this one the most?" or "Why do you think your little sister/brother would not like this one at all?"). On average, the 3-year-olds responded to 4.1 (out of six) requests for explanations, the 5-year-olds responded to 5.5, and the 7-year-olds to 5.9.

*Coding categories.*—The explanations given by the subjects to justify their drawing choices were analyzed for types of reasons. Six types were identified. First is evaluation of the drawing in terms of *quantity*. There may be explicit reference to the number of things in the drawing ("It has lots of things in it," "It doesn't have too many things in it," "He'd think it was only one thing; he likes more things in it") and/or indication of at least three parts of the drawing by pointing ("They don't like all this stuff," said while pointing to three items in the drawing). Also, there may

<sup>1</sup> All of the 5- and 7-year-olds and all but one of the 3-year-olds made judgments for a sibling when asked questions about a younger viewer; the remaining 3-year-old made judgments for a younger cousin.

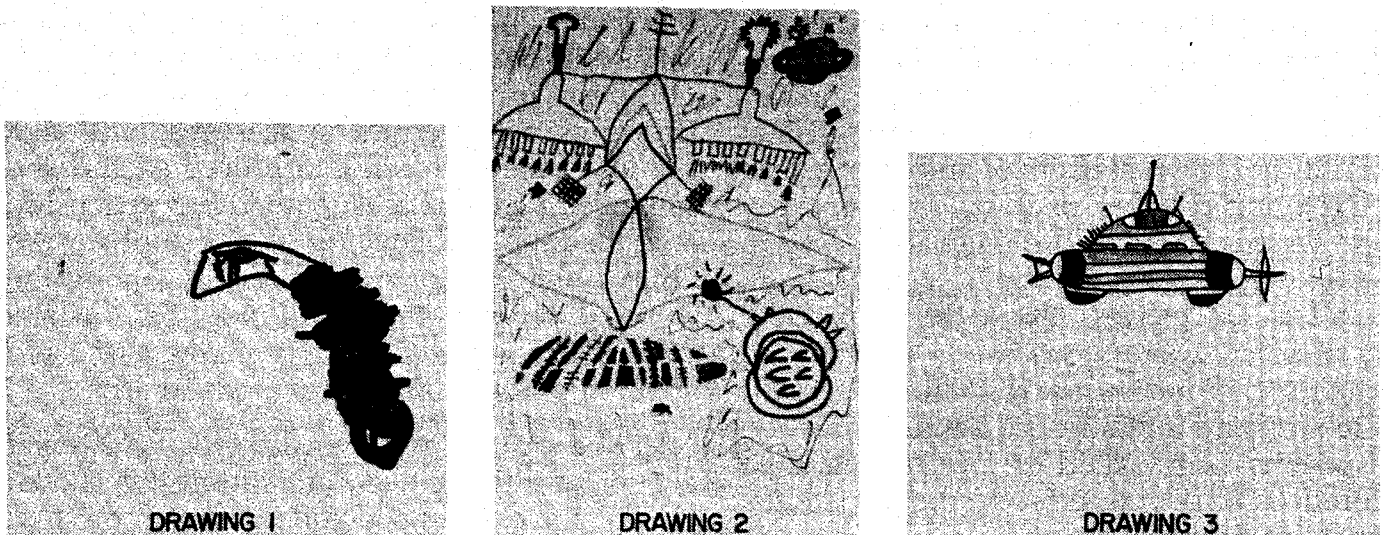


FIG. 1.—The three drawings used as stimuli in the drawing-choice tasks. Each of the three drawings portrays a spaceship. Drawing 1 was done by a 3-year-old, drawing 2 by an 8-year-old, and drawing 3 by a 12-year-old. The three child-artists did not participate in the experiment.

be reference to the size of the drawing (“Because it’s big, she likes big things,” “It’s not too small; it’s just right,” “She doesn’t like it because it’s smaller”).

Second is evaluation of the *quality* of the artist’s ability or of the drawing overall, with no mention of which particular aspect of the drawing is being evaluated. This may occur in four different ways. There may be reference to the goodness/badness of the artist’s ability (“I like the way she drew it,” “Because the person who did it drew real good,” “She did it by taking her time,” “Looks like a little kid drew it,” “This kid doesn’t draw very good; he scribble-scrabbles”). Reference may be made to the goodness/badness of the drawing (“He thinks this is a good picture,” “This is the one I think best of; it’s good,” “It’s better than all of them; it’s just right,” “It looks bad”). Reference may be made to the prettiness/ugliness of the drawing (“It’s beautiful,” “It’s the prettiest drawing,” “It’s pretty, and he loves it,” “I don’t like this one because it’s ugly”). Finally, reference may be made to the neatness/messiness of the drawing (“Because my daddy likes neat drawing,” “He likes it all messy,” “Because it’s tidy,” “She doesn’t like it because it’s not a mess”).

Third, evaluation may be given of the drawing in terms of *color* (“It’s got good colors—green, yellow,” “He likes the orange color in it,” “She really likes colorful things,” “It has almost every color in it,” “It doesn’t have very much colors,” “I don’t like it because it has bad colors”).

Fourth is evaluation of the drawing in terms of *surface* aspects other than color—in particular, designs, shapes, movement, com-

position, texture, or shading (“I like the shape of it, how it’s shaped,” “It’s got a beautiful pattern,” “It’s rough,” “I like these lines and these circles,” “That one is curved, and I don’t like it curved”).

Fifth is evaluation of the drawing in terms of *subject matter*. This may be a direct reference to the content of the drawing (“It’s not the usual kind of spaceship,” “Because he likes spaceships,” “I like the antennae,” “Because this one has a horse in it; it is dumb, and no spaceships have horses in them”). Or it may indirectly refer to the content of the drawing (“It looks like a ray-gun,” “It looks like smoke,” “I don’t like it because it looks like a green banana,” “It looks like a gun instead of a flying saucer”).

Sixth, the evaluation of the drawing may be in terms of the viewer’s *personal* taste and experience (“I remember my own drawing, and I drew like this,” “They make drawings like that, and they like drawings that are like theirs,” “Because he likes working with me on spaceships and flying saucers,” “My daddy likes to go up in the air; he could fly when he was little,” “She doesn’t like it, but she wouldn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings”).

An explanation could be coded as conveying more than one type of reason. On average, the 3-year-olds produced 1.9 reasons per explanation, the 5-year-olds produced 2.0, and the 7-year-olds produced 2.7. The maximum number of reasons per explanation was six for the 3-year-olds, seven for the 5-year-olds, and eight for the 7-year-olds.

Two independent scorers achieved 96% agreement ( $N = 185$ ) using this set of catego-

ries to code a randomly chosen fourth of the children's reasons.

## Results

*Drawing choice.*—When asked to express their own likes (see Table 1), children in each age group were more likely to choose drawing 3, the drawing done by the oldest artist, rather than drawings 1 or 2— $\chi^2(2) = 14.64, p < .001$ , for the 3-year-olds;  $\chi^2(2) = 24.37, p < .001$ , for the 5-year-olds;  $\chi^2(2) = 34.28, p < .001$ , for the 7-year-olds. In contrast, when asked to express their own dislikes, children in each age group were more likely to choose drawing 1, the drawing done by the youngest artist, rather than drawings 2 or 3— $\chi^2(2) = 24.09, p < .001$ , for the 3-year-olds;  $\chi^2(2) = 33.11, p < .001$ , for the 5-year-olds;  $\chi^2(2) = 34.28, p < .001$ , for the 7-year-olds. Thus, a significant portion of the children in each age group was found to like and dislike the same drawings.

When asked to express the preferences of older and younger viewers, children in each age group tended to choose different drawings for younger or older viewers than they chose for themselves (Table 1). For the liked drawing, the children tended to choose drawing 3 for themselves and for the older viewer more often than for the younger viewer— $Q = 7.44, df = 2, p < .05$ , for the 3-year-olds;  $Q = 12.4, df = 2, p < .01$ , for the 5-year-olds;  $Q = 34.3, df = 2, p < .001$ , for the 7-year-olds.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, for the disliked drawing, 5- and 7-year-olds tended to choose drawing 1 for themselves and the older viewer more often than for the younger viewer— $Q = 8.0, df = 2, p < .02$ , for the 5-year-olds,  $Q = 14.73, df = 2, p < .001$ , for the 7-year-olds. The 3-year-olds tended to choose drawing 1 as the disliked drawing more often for themselves than for either older or younger viewers,  $Q = 7.13, df = 2, p < .05$ .

*Reasons for the drawing choice.*—Table 2 presents the proportion of children in each age group giving at least one reason of each type when justifying the drawing choices they made for their own likes and dislikes. The most common reason given by the 3-year-olds for both personal likes and dislikes was the quantity reason. Moreover, 3-year-olds expressed quantity reasons for personal preferences more frequently than did either 5- or 7-year-olds, for both the liked drawing,  $\chi^2(2) =$

20.15,  $p < .001$ , and the disliked drawing,  $\chi^2(2) = 13.94, p < .001$ . In contrast, the most common reason given by both the 5- and 7-year-olds for their own likes and dislikes was the quality reason. In addition, 5- and 7-year-olds expressed quality reasons for their own personal preferences more often than did 3-year-olds, for both the liked drawing,  $\chi^2(2) = 24.52, p < .001$ , and the disliked drawing,  $\chi^2(2) = 13.90, p < .001$ . Thus, although 3-year-olds and 5- and 7-year-olds tended to choose drawing 3 as their own best-liked drawing and drawing 1 as their own least-liked drawing, they appeared to base these drawing choices on different aesthetic criteria.

For the remaining reasons—color, subject matter, surface, and personal—no reliable developmental patterns were found in either the liked or the disliked drawings.

Table 3 presents the proportion of children in each age group giving quality reasons as often or more often than quantity reasons when justifying the drawing choices for themselves and for other viewers. The children appeared to be taking the viewer's subjective frame of reference into account, evaluating a drawing on the basis of different aesthetic criteria for different viewers. The 5- and 7-year-olds gave quality over quantity reasons more often for themselves and the older viewer than for the younger viewer for both the liked drawing ( $Q = 5.95, df = 2, p < .10$ , for the 5-year-olds;  $Q = 13.86, df = 2, p = .001$ , for the 7-year-olds) and the disliked drawing ( $Q = 15.27, df = 2, p < .001$ , for the 5-year-olds;  $Q = 13.60, df = 2, p < .01$ , for the 7-year-olds). The 3-year-olds gave quality over quantity reasons more often for the older viewer than for either themselves or the younger viewer for the liked drawing,  $Q = 9.56, df = 2, p < .01$ . Children were required to give reasons for all three viewers to be included in Table 3. Only four 3-year-olds fulfilled this criterion for the disliked drawing—too few to show statistically significant effects. However, if all of the 3-year-olds are considered regardless of whether they gave reasons for all three viewers, the overall pattern of reasons for the disliked drawing continues to be the same as the 3-year-old pattern for liked drawing; that is, the 3-year-olds gave quality over quantity reasons more often for the older viewer (69%, 11/16) than for either themselves (35%, 6/17) or the younger viewer (33%, 2/6).

<sup>2</sup> The Cochran  $Q$  test for  $k$  related samples is a nonparametric test that provides a method for testing whether three or more matched sets of frequencies or proportions differ significantly among themselves.  $Q$  is distributed approximately as  $\chi^2$  with  $df = k - 1$  (Siegel, 1956). In this study, the matching was based on the fact that the same subjects were used under different conditions (i.e., the same children made judgments for themselves, for an older viewer, and for a younger viewer).

TABLE 1  
PROPORTIONS OF CHILDREN CHOOSING DRAWINGS (NOS. 1, 2, OR 3) FOR SELF, OLDER, AND YOUNGER VIEWERS

	SELF			OLDER			YOUNGER		
	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3
Liked drawing:									
3 years (N = 19)	.05	.21	.74	.11	.26	.63	.42	.32	.26
5 years (N = 22)	.00	.18	.82	.00	.27	.73	.36	.41	.23
7 years (N = 20)	.00	.05	.95	.00	.10	.90	.45	.55	.00
Disliked drawing:									
3 years (N = 20)	.85	.10	.05	.45	.50	.05	.50	.20	.30
5 years (N = 22)	.91	.09	.00	.91	.09	.00	.64	.18	.18
7 years (N = 20)	.95	.05	.00	.95	.05	.00	.50	.25	.25

NOTE.—Four of the 23 3-year-olds failed to choose liked drawings, and three failed to choose disliked drawings for all three viewers (self, older, and younger); these children are not included in the table.

TABLE 2

PROPORTIONS OF CHILDREN GIVING AT LEAST ONE REASON OF EACH TYPE WHEN  
EVALUATING FOR SELF

	Quantity	Quality	Color	Subject Matter	Surface	Personal
Liked drawing:						
3 years ( $N = 23$ )	.91*	.22*	.43	.30	.26	.26
5 years ( $N = 22$ )	.32	.77	.50	.45	.45	.27
7 years ( $N = 20$ )	.35	.90	.55	.35	.50	.00
Disliked drawing:						
3 years ( $N = 17$ )	.53*	.35*	.23	.35	.12	.00
5 years ( $N = 22$ )	.14	.77	.27	.41	.09	.00
7 years ( $N = 20$ )	.05	.90	.25	.50	.15	.05

NOTE.—Six of the 23 3-year-olds failed to give reasons to justify their drawing choices for the disliked drawing for self; these children are not included in the table.

\*  $p < .001$ , compared across age groups.

TABLE 3

PROPORTION OF CHILDREN GIVING QUALITY REASONS AS OFTEN OR MORE OFTEN  
THAN QUANTITY REASONS WHEN EVALUATING FOR SELF, OLDER, AND YOUNGER  
VIEWERS

	Self	Older	Younger
Liked drawing:			
3 years ( $N = 12$ )	.08	.67	.17*
5 years ( $N = 19$ )	.74	.37	.42†
7 years ( $N = 20$ )	.90	.75	.35**
Disliked drawing:			
3 years ( $N = 4$ )	.50	1.00	.25
5 years ( $N = 15$ )	.87	1.00	.33**
7 years ( $N = 18$ )	.94	.67	.39*

NOTE.—Children who did not give reasons for all three viewers (self, older, and younger) are not included in the table.

†  $p < .10$ , trend.

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Both 5- and 7-year-olds were more likely than 3-year-olds to give quality reasons than quantity reasons when justifying their drawing choices for themselves (Table 3). In contrast, when attributing reasons to younger viewers, few children in any of the three age groups gave more quality than quantity reasons (Table 3), while many gave more quality than quantity reasons when attributing reasons to older viewers (Table 3); the liked drawing for older viewers for the 5-year-olds is an exception. Overall, at every age for both likes and dislikes, the children gave reasons for other viewers' drawing choices that differed systematically from the reasons they gave for their own.

Drawing 3 was the most popular choice for the children's own liked drawing and drawing 1 was the most popular choice for

their own disliked drawing (Table 1). Nevertheless, the patterns of quality versus quantity reasons for self and for older and younger viewers seen in Table 3 were comparable for likes and dislikes, suggesting that the reasons expressed were independent of the particular drawings chosen.

Further evidence that the children's reasons were not determined by the particular drawings is obtained from an analysis of quality/quantity reasons for older and younger viewers for each drawing individually, combining both likes and dislikes. For drawing 1, 82% (27/33) of the children who gave reasons for older viewers gave quality reasons as often or more often than quantity reasons, while only 46% (18/39) of the children who gave reasons for younger viewers did. This same pattern was found for drawing 2 (60% [9/15] for



older viewers versus 25% [8/32] for younger viewers) and for drawing 3 (63% [25/40] for older viewers versus 24% [4/17] for younger viewers). Thus, the drawings themselves did not account for the types of reasons the children mentioned. Rather, the children appeared to be taking the viewer's subjective frame of reference into account and tended to evaluate a drawing on the basis of quality criteria for older viewers but on quantity criteria for younger viewers.

## Discussion

The results of both measures of egocentrism used in this study ("drawing choice" and "reasons for drawing choice") suggest that children as young as 3 can differentiate between their own and another's frame of reference when making judgments about children's art. We discuss each of these measures in turn.

*Drawing choice.*—When asked to predict the likes and dislikes of other viewers with respect to a set of children's drawings—drawings whose content and style are familiar to the young child—even 3-year-olds were able to choose drawings for others that were different from their drawing choices for themselves (Table 1). Our data are consistent with other recent studies of egocentrism, which suggest that preschool children are able to predict different preferences for others than for themselves when the object choices are familiar items (e.g., birthday gifts, Shatz, 1978; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1977).

In addition, all three age groups for the liked drawing and two of the three for the disliked drawing tended to choose the same drawing for themselves as for older viewers and a different drawing for younger viewers. Apparently, the children thought that individuals older than they were likely to share their own opinions of art, but that individuals younger than they were likely to have different artistic opinions.

These data provide an alternative explanation for the results of Child (Note 1) and Rosenstiel et al. (1978), who reported that 6-year-olds did not distinguish their preferences from those of others. In those studies, children were asked to predict which artworks "others" might think were the best, and the implicit assumption of the experimenter (and probably of the children as well) was that "others" referred to adults. However, in our study, we found the clearest evidence of nonegocentric attributions when we asked the children to predict the drawing choices of

younger individuals (i.e., our subjects predicted that younger viewers would choose a different drawing from the one they chose for themselves, whereas older viewers would choose the same drawing). Consequently, the children in previous studies might have appeared to be egocentric when, in fact, they may have been making nonegocentric judgments for individuals older than themselves—individuals whom our subjects seem to believe share many of their own artistic preferences.

*Reasons for the drawing choice.*—The children in our study were not only able to attribute to other viewers artistic opinions that differed from their own opinions but were also able to give reasons for other viewers' opinions that differed systematically from the reasons they gave for their own opinions (Table 3).

Moreover, when attributing reasons to other viewers, the children appeared to be relatively accurate in their attributions. Overall, few of the children gave quality reasons as often or more often than quantity reasons for the younger viewer, while many more did so for the older viewer (Table 3). This pattern of quality/quantity reasons describes the pattern of reasons the children actually gave to justify their own drawing preferences (Table 2).

If we were to look only at the reasons the 3-year-olds gave to justify their own preferences, we would infer that most 3-year-olds were incapable of giving quality reasons when judging children's drawings (Table 2). However, when we examine the reasons the 3-year-olds gave for other viewers, we find that they were capable of ascribing quality reasons, but attributed them only to older viewers (Table 3). We suggest that, if young children are asked to justify the preferences of others, they may reveal knowledge that they do not typically exhibit with respect to themselves.

We have found that, when young children view children's art and attribute artistic opinions to other (familiar) individuals, they are not only able to imagine that another individual might prefer different drawings from their own personal likes and dislikes but are also able to justify that individual's preferences within a frame of reference different from their own. Thus, young children appear capable of being nonegocentric art critics, who can judge children's drawings for others differently from the way they judge them for themselves.

## Reference Note

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