

Comparative Interpretation of Tree Painting between People on Different Loneliness Levels

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Abstract

Tree drawing is a form of projective test used to assess one's development (Koch, 1952). In Jungian psychology, tree(s) are often used as a symbol of development; representing a mirror on a person's inner and outer situation (Isaksson et al., 2009). The metaphorical interpretation of tree(s) can be symbolized as how a person relates to other people (Englund, 2004). Dissatisfaction with the quality of relationship increases the likeliness of one to feel lonely (Hawkley, et al., 2008). In this study, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) was used to screen the loneliness of 110 young adults. Twenty young adults were selected and grouped into high and low levels of loneliness. Participants were briefly interviewed about their social life and asked paint tree(s) on an A3 sized paper. Further inquiries were made after completion of the painting. The result shows that people with a high level of loneliness tends to draw a single tree. Furthermore, most of the tree drawing gave an impression of emptiness and had a proportionately larger trunk. This implies the need for attention and a projection of loneliness. Further probing supports the claim that socially the lonely participants feel a need for having a quality relationship but were not willing to engage deeply with people around them. This research is a preliminary study. Further studies may take into account variation in population background and size.

Keywords: Projective Test, Tree, Loneliness, Art

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Introduction

Loneliness and Young Adults

In Erikson's theory, young adults, ageing between 20 – 40 years old, are faced with the intimacy vs isolation crisis. The primary challenge of this phase is intimacy, i.e. the search for a meaningful relationship. Young adults who are successful in forming a meaningful relationship would have a higher feeling of social connectedness and belongingness, hence attaining intimacy and the virtue of love. They would be ready to form a long term committed, reciprocal relationship (Hawkley, 2015; Papalia & Martorell, 2014). On the other hand, those who failed to attain intimacy would develop a sense of isolation. The relationship lacked trust and social connectedness and was perceived as meaningless. Dissatisfaction with the quality of relationship increases the likeliness of one to feel lonely (Hawkley et al., 2008).

Weiss (1973) defines loneliness as perceived social isolation. Loneliness occurs not only when there is no social relationship, but also when the relationship does not meet the person's ideal (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012). A study by Hawkley (2015) shows that 15 – 30% of the general population suffer from chronic loneliness. Loneliness impacts both the human's physical and psychological health. Physically, lonely people are more likely to have poorer health through problems like lower immunity and fragmented sleep.

Psychologically, a lonely person is more sensitive to perceived social threats. Loneliness is also highly related to depressive symptoms in both a clinical and non-clinical population (Hawkley, 2015; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012).

Various questionnaires are developed in an attempt to measure one's level of loneliness. Questionnaires may provide statistical results about loneliness. Combining questionnaires with the projective test will help in understanding what a person feels about the self (Issakson et al., 2009). This research aims to explore the projection of loneliness through tree painting media.

Tree Drawing Related Activity

Tree Drawing Test (TDT) known as the Tree test or Baum test is a projective test used mainly in psychology as a means of analyzing an individual's personality and development (Stevens & Wedding, 2005). Developed by Charles Koch in 1952, Koch believes that a human psyche follows the law of the tree. Hence, when drawing a tree, a human would project their psyche into the tree they are making. Tree, as a form, represents the human body. The vertical orientation with roots as feet on the ground, trunk with arms reaching out to the external surrounding and the nervous system inside are the cycle of a human body (Biedermann, 1995). The trunk of a tree could be a reflection of one's experience to the self. The symbolization of branches reaching out to the world is a reflection of a person relating to other people (Englund, 2004).

In psychotherapy, a different form of tree drawing related activity used known as Tree Theme Method (TTM). The activity includes the patient to paint a symbolic tree and narrate their life on it; focusing on the activity and routines in their everyday life. The therapy is based on art therapy knowledge, storytelling, and value (Gunnarsson,

Wagman, Hakansson, & Hedin, 2015). This therapy aims to provide insight for the patient and to increase the individual's ability to develop strategies to improve their life (Gunnarsson, Jansson, Eklund, 2006).

Used as both assessment and therapy, both activities provide insight to the participant in order to improve their overall life. As young adulthood is a period that focuses more on an individual's intimacy and quality of the relationship, social life is a substantial contributing factor to determine the success of this phase. Loneliness would be the undesirable feeling to the specified adult; that would lead to a lot of unwanted disorders. In this study, the aim is to look for a specific aspect of tree painting that would indicate or identify people who feel lonely.

Method

Participants

The target participants of this study are adults between 20 - 40 years old. The initial screening was participated by 105 adults, with 51 males and 54 females. After the initial screening, 20 voluntary participants, 10 with high levels of loneliness and 10 with low levels of loneliness, are selected at random for a brief interview and tree painting.

Measurement and Tools

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3). Russell (1996) developed the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) to assess subjective loneliness and social isolation. The 20-item unidimensional scale is assessed by a 4-rating scale from 'never' to 'always'. Previous studies show that the scale has proven to have high internal consistency, test-retest reliability, convergent validity, and construct validity (Russell, 1996). The participant filled the Bahasa Indonesia adapted version of the scale. The Indonesian adapted version of the scale has excellent reliability and validity ($\alpha = 0.91$, $\text{rit} > 0.2$)

Brief Interview. The interview aims to explore the participant's feelings of loneliness through daily activities, perception of the quality of social relations, perceived support, and what makes them feel lonely. Participants are further inquired on how they respond to the feeling of loneliness and whether or not there are prior attempts to break through their loneliness. The interviews are conducted in Indonesian language.

Tree Painting. Participants are provided with an A3 sized paper, watercolour, five sizes paintbrush and other supporting materials. The instruction is to 'draw tree in any way you want'. Tree painting serves as a reflection of the painter's self-image (Isaksson, Norlén, & Englund, 2009). In this study, the focus is the projection of loneliness in the painter's tree painting. The aim is to explore and compare the projection of the participants with a high and low level of loneliness. There is no time limit for the painting activity. The participants would further be asked to paint the background if they have not done so. After completion of the painting, researchers inquire participants to explore their painting further. All instructions and inquiries are conducted in Indonesian language.

Results

High UCLA Score CK (Female, 24 years)



Figure 1. CK's tree painting

CK describes her painting as a girl having a hot drink under a tree. She is alone on a starry night. In the interview, she gave a statement regarding her difficulty in developing a deep connection with other people due to her anxiety about getting 'backstabbed' by other people. CK has an impression of the girl sitting alone outside with the distant family member inside the house.

A (Female, 27 years)

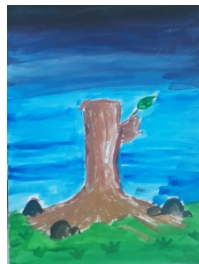


Figure 2. A's tree painting

The cut-off part (crown and branch) symbolize her feeling of incapability/helplessness to 'reach out' and interact with her social surrounding effectively. Based on the interview, A stated her feeling of being emotionally distant to other people in her environment right now. A also had a longing for her old friend she used to keep contact with; which caused her to feel lonely.

VT (Female, 20 years)

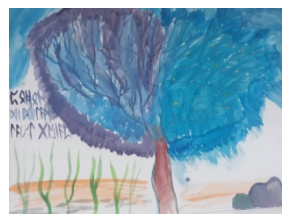


Figure 3. VT's tree painting

VT portrayed her loneliness as the theme of her painting 'An underwater tree'. Her expression of a breathless tree in deep water symbolizes her desire to be 'saved and understood'. VT draws an excessive amount of branches. VT confirmed her feeling of loneliness in the interview, yet she perceives that people who befriend her always

have ulterior motives and up to no good.

AS (Male, 23 years)



Figure 4. AS's tree painting

A visible root usually indicates emotional dependence and instability. AS associates a tree with a park and swing for someone (him) to play with. In the interview, AS expressed his fear of being judged by other people. He would rather talk with a stranger than someone he knows personally. His feeling of loneliness stems from his fear of being judged.

D (Female, 27 years)

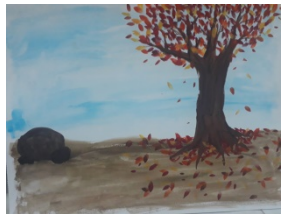


Figure 5. D's tree painting

D claims to be independent and used to do everything alone. The tree was meant only to be watched by sitting on a rock beside it. The impression of her tree painting and interview symbolizes that she distanced herself from other people to avoid the vulnerability of a relationship.

WS (Female, 25 years)



Figure 6. WS's tree painting

The murky and misty atmosphere gave out the feeling of emptiness on the painting. WS described her painting as a tree near a lake. The faint yellow line indicates light from far away. WS said in her interview that she had relationships with others, yet she would be independent and not cling herself to the relationship.

L (Male, 28 years)



Figure 7. L's tree painting

L described his painting as a tree on a high hill near a meadow. He portrays himself as the big tree around the flowers. Concerning his feeling of loneliness, L denied that he felt lonely and used to do everything alone. He stated himself to “just be professional” and decide to not connect to anyone on a personal level.

MM (Female, 24 years)

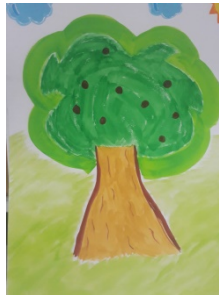


Figure 8. MM's tree painting

MM described her painting as a tree in a park with many people in it. The tree uses a heavy outline of different color which indicates an emphasis on the defense mechanism. In her interview, she stated that she does not have anyone to connect on an intimate level. She felt that in daily activity, she was surrounded by many, yet still felt lonely. The projection of her painting could be interpreted as the feeling of loneliness due to the non-visible people in the picture.

JW (Male, 29)

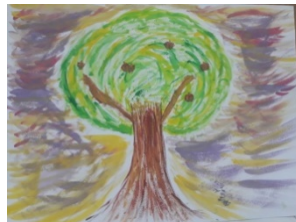


Figure 9. JW's tree painting

JW portrays himself as a tree with a strong trunk. The two branches described by JW as his plans and goals. He also gave out his meaning of color used as the background, creating a random order of color, symbolizing chaos in his external life. In the interview, JW stated that he limits his trust to other people and has a fear of being abandoned by other people. This was projected by the orderly tree (self) and the

chaotic background (environment).

V (Female, 30 years)



Figure 10. V's tree painting

V paints an ideal park according to her with everything she likes; flower, butterfly, and apple tree. V also described the park as cool and breezy. V felt unsatisfied with the butterfly she painted ended up too dark for her. In the interview, she admitted that she has a high standard for a friend on how they should treat each other like a family. If the criteria are not met, she would feel a shallow relationship and feel lonely despite being with other people. V's painting projected her ideal relationship with others while being deeply rooted in her standard.

Low UCLA Score

R (Male, 23 years)



Figure 11. R's tree painting

R describes his painting as a growing tree in a park. He stated that the tree has no specific name or type. R specifically points out the leaves color that differs for each branch. In the interview, R stated that he has a satisfying relationship with his surroundings because he does not expect anything from others. He felt that he had family, friends, and a wife to describe the excellent quality of his social life.

LM (Female, 34 years)



Figure 12. LM's tree painting

LM narrates a story about her painting about a lover under a tree. She pointed out the

tree as a special place for the lover with the beautiful scenery around it; thatches, flowing river, and green grass. In the interview, she found her relationship with family and friends as good. She felt she had a home and friends to share her story.

WD (Male, 29 years)



Figure 13. WD's tree painting

WD described that the tree is a reflection of him with not much explanation afterwards. WD was a meticulous person and took him hours to paint the picture. In the interview, WD said that he was bullied and got no support whatsoever from his parents; hence he learned to depend on himself. WD stated that he does not find his social life satisfactory, yet the reason for him not to feel lonely was more to his viewpoint that he does not feel anything lacking.

HW (Male, 30 years)

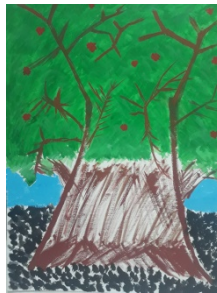


Figure 14. HW's tree painting

HW describes his painting as a giant tree on top of a mountain surrounded by smaller trees. HW projected himself as the big tree that was surrounded by others. Supported by the interview, HW stated that he always feels that he has people to talk to, yet he claimed himself as his own best friend. HW described his relationship with others as satisfying and being a problem-solver to all his friends.

R (Male, 30 years)



Figure 15. R's tree painting

R describes his painting as a mango tree in a forest at noon. R stated that he himself and several animals were there watching the tree. R chose a rather dark color for a noon sky and a spiky tone on the tree crown. In the interview, R stated that he is his own friend. In a bad situation, R stated that he has an old friend that he could depend on. R also said that he enjoyed his own company, while also likes to help people and listen to their problems.

CS (Male, 27 years)



Figure 16. CS's tree painting

CS describes his painting as an apple tree in the backyard. The people in the house would sometimes go out and enjoy an apple from the tree. CS stated that he values his relationship with others to give each other positive energy. CS would rather be himself regardless of the environmental difference in opinion; he would stand on his principle.

CM (Female, 24)



Figure 17. CM's tree painting

CM describes her painting as a mango tree at night near a village. CM presents herself as a tough-looking individual. She valued a good relationship as excellent open communication and keeping in contact once in a while. In the interview, CM stated that she is used to being independent. In time, there were several times she would feel lonely, but overall, she felt satisfied with her relationship with friends and had someone to talk to whenever she felt low.

CC (Female, 28 years)



Figure 18. CC's tree painting

The paint mixture used for this paint was rather thick. CC started with dark color, slowly adding layers to a brighter and brighter shade later on. CC does not name the place, and she refers to it by the adjective 'peaceful'. CC described her relationship with people as never lacking people to talk to. There would always be people that she could rely on so that she would never feel lonely.

NJ (Female, 23)



Figure 19. NJ's tree painting

NJ described herself as the front most trees on the bunch, with her friends being the other trees in the background. The single tree seemed to be further than the rest, but, being visible to the main tree, NJ stated that the lone tree would not feel lonely because of the presence of the other trees. In the interview, she got an insight regarding her painting as an accurate representation of her social life.

AN (Female, 25 years)

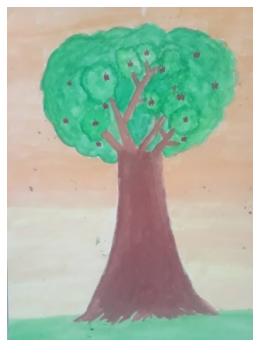


Figure 20. AN's tree painting

AN projected herself as an apple tree during sunset. AN would carefully paint the branches and apples one by one thoroughly focusing on the small detail. In the interview, she stated that her relationship with friends and boyfriend made her feel satisfied with her social life. The choice of conflicting color between the sky and the

tree implies a sign of longing.

Discussion

Tree Drawing Test (TDT) and Tree Theme Method (TTM) have been used as an assessment and therapy method, respectively. TDT focuses more on the projection and more subtle (Koch, 1952), while TTM narrates out the story behind one's tree (Alexi & Gunnarsson, 1995). Tree drawings are symbolized as an inner development being projected outwards in order to understand oneself in a more conscious manner (Hark, 1995). Tree as a whole interacts with the environmental aspect surrounding it. Every segment of the tree represents a different conscious response to the inner (self) and outer (relation) experience that symbolizes how a person would relate to others (Englund, 2004).

This research orients more on the relational aspect of tree drawing to assess loneliness on a young adult. The paintings of participants with a low level of loneliness vary more than those with a high level of loneliness. The findings in participants with high loneliness level have several recurring patterns; overemphasizing on branches or branchless (except participant D [Figure 5] and participant JW [Figure 9]). While most participants draw a single tree, some participants who draw several more trees belong to the low loneliness group. The prompting and interview on the finished painting gave further insight to participants with a high level of loneliness. They would pour in their story and correlate it with their painting to match the situation they feel. The participant would then tell more stories which were uncovered in the brief interview before the painting activity to match their painting. Participants with a low level of loneliness gave more description regarding the physical product they made with comparably fewer insight than those with higher loneliness level.

The following theories are to explain the findings of this research. Weiss (1973) suggested that the second phenotype of loneliness termed social loneliness is the perceived presence/absence of quality friendship or family connections. People with more frequent contact with friends or family have a lower level of social isolation (Hawkley, Browne, & Cacioppo, 2005). Ogdon (1996) and Koch (1952) suggested that branches reflect the ability or desire to develop psychologically and socially; in a literal sense, it reaches out to the environment. People with a high loneliness group would tend to paint lack or too many branches on their painting, while the result on the low loneliness group would be diverse in terms of the branch area. The finding shows that people with high loneliness would reflect themselves in the tree painting as isolating themselves or obsessed from social interaction. Also, Kaplan's (1991) study found that a certain level of artistic skill would have a significant impact on drawing analysis; which would explain participant D's [Figure 5] painting reflected as normal.

Conclusion

This study is conducted to explore differences between people with loneliness levels among young adults. The result shows that people with high loneliness levels would draw a single tree. Most of the painting would have no or an excessive amount (participant VT [Figure 3]) of branches (excluding participant D [Figure 5] and JW [Figure 9]). Most participants would paint a single tree, yet some people with a low level of loneliness would add more (participant HW [Figure 14], CC [Figure 18], NJ

[Figure 19]). The brief interview also reflects the participants' view on their social life. People with a higher level of loneliness would gain more insight from their painting and would correlate it deeply with the situation they feel. Result of this study confirms the theory of branch(es) on tree-drawing/painting would correlate to one's view on social/external life. However, due to the limited number of participants, the result of this study could not be generalized across the populations.

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