

Gender differences in the experience of loneliness among adolescents in Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. During this period, adolescents are prone to problems, one of those problems being loneliness. This research aimed to find out gender differences in the experience of loneliness among adolescents in Jakarta. Six hundred sixty-two participants, which consisted of 318 male and 344 female students aged between 15-20 years old, were selected from five schools by using multi-stage random sampling. 6-Item (short) De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scales were used to measure loneliness. Data was collected through school-based research conducted on senior high school students in the Special Capital Region of Jakarta. The results show that there are significant differences in loneliness between male and female adolescents in overall, emotional and social dimensions. Female adolescents had significantly higher scores of loneliness compared to male adolescents, not only overall but also in emotional and social dimensions.

Introduction

In a human life span, there are times when individuals feel lonely - sometimes to the extent of it becoming a chronic condition. Thus loneliness is also associated with physical and mental health disorders (Karnick, 2005). Previous studies have found a relationship between experience of loneliness and suicide attempts among adolescents (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Schinka, Van Dulmen, Bossarte, & Swahn, 2012). The researchers also found that adolescents who experienced chronic loneliness were more likely to have psychopathological problems, such as behavioral problems, depression, anxiety, social phobia, having ideas of suicide, intentional self-injury, and eating disorders (Goossens, 2006; Lasgaard, Goossens, Bramsen, Trillingsgaard, & Elklit, 2011). This shows that feelings of loneliness have major implications for individual mental health.

Loneliness is a situation experienced by individuals, where the quality of relationships seem unpleasant or inadmissible (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006). Loneliness also occurs when the number of relationships an individual has is smaller than what is desired or allowable, as well as situations where the desired intimacy has not been realized (De Jong Gierveld, J., Van Tilburg, T., & Dykstra, 2006). Loneliness can be divided into emotional loneliness, which comes from the absence of a significant figure or close person of which a person has an emotional bond to (such as a partner or friend), and social loneliness, which

comes from the absence of wider acquaintances or social networks (such as regular friends), co-workers, or neighbours (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006). In some cases, individuals who have no friends or who have just left a very close relationship, are vulnerable to loneliness (Harris, Qualter, & Robinson, 2013; Kaur et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). This condition is very prone to occur in adolescents who are considered to be in a critical period of growth and are in need of the presence of important figures in their lives (Gürsoy & Bıçakçı, 2006).

In adolescence, there is a process of biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional change that begins at the age of 10-13 years and end in the late teens (Santrock, 2016). Early adolescence is marked by the start of developing friendships (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Deković, 2001). Lonely adolescents generally have fewer friends (Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007). This is because adolescents who tend to be more lonely are also more likely to be isolated and socially withdrawn to themselves (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009).

The results of a meta-analysis of 102 studies by Pinquart and Sörensen (2001) that looked at the influence of gender differences in loneliness showed that women displayed a higher level of loneliness than men. This is because men have a more difficult time admitting that they are feeling lonely (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002; De Jong Gierveld, J., Van Tilburg, T., & Dykstra, 2006). However, several other studies showed conflicting results where the level of loneliness in men was higher than that of women (Chen & Chung, 2007; Knox, Vail-Smith, & Zusman, 2007; Yang, 2009). Cheng and Furnham (2002) found that women had a lower level of loneliness, especially in aspects of social loneliness, and showed friendship values that were stronger than men. Several studies related to loneliness and gender have been carried out since before the millennium and the results varied greatly. Research on loneliness in Indonesia has also been carried out within the last few years, but the results have also varied greatly, where some stated that female adolescents are more likely to be lonely (Umami, 2015), while some stated suggest that male adolescents are more likely to be lonely (Garvin, 2017).

Various studies believe several factors that contribute to the emergence of feelings of loneliness, which subsequently explains the differences in the level of loneliness between men and women. Factors such as the experience of abuse, rejection, depression, limited socialization, and boredom are defined as contributing factors to the emergence of loneliness in adolescent students (Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005; Qualter & Munn, 2002). The experience of abuse contributes to the emergence of higher loneliness in adolescent males compared to adolescent females (Parker et al., 2005). Meanwhile, rejection contributes to higher loneliness in adolescent females compared to adolescent males (Qualter & Munn, 2002). Krause-Parello (2008) found that environmental factors, changes in the stages of an individual's development, friendship and family relationships, low social support, and poor communication skills are believed to contribute to the emergence of loneliness in adolescents both in males and females. In adolescence, the factors that have been mentioned often appear in everyday life, particularly due to the significant changes in social relations. Taking into account the following facts, adolescents are at a greater risk of experiencing loneliness.

Although loneliness has been considered an important issue in many studies, researchers of this study wish to complement what has been done by conducting research on loneliness in adolescents living in urban areas, particularly in Jakarta as the capital city of Indonesia. Jakarta is the hub of business, education, health, entertainment and more. As one of the main urban areas in Indonesia, people living in the Jakarta are believed to have considerable challenges due to the high level of mobility. This possibly causes many

problems that arise due to the urban context. Compared to the rural context, living in an urban environment has also shown to increase the risk of various mental health problems, such as psychotic disorders, depression, and neurotic disorders (Kelly et al., 2010; Van Os, Kenis, & Rutten, 2010). The presence of other disorders is also associated with social inabilities caused by various factors, such as instability of housing, parental and marital problems, and problems related to the social environment (Van Os et al., 2010).

It is inevitable for adolescents in Jakarta to avoid mental health problems such as loneliness as they are very likely to arise (Garvin, 2017). On a more positive note, the loneliness that arises can spur cognition, where lonely individual brains will be more aware of social threats leading to more focus on self-care (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). On the other hand, focus on self-care becomes negative because it causes individuals to be less attentive to the feelings and needs of others. By conducting school-based research, researchers begin by looking at the level of loneliness in adolescents through their second closest environment right after their families. That way, the depiction regarding the level of loneliness among adolescents can be used as a basis to provide more attention to the condition of adolescents, their schools, family, and the surrounding environment.

Research on loneliness among adolescents living in urban cities will be very beneficial as it can provide an overview of the loneliness experienced by adolescents. The purpose of this study was to determine gender differences in the experience of loneliness among high school students in Jakarta.

Method

A quantitative comparative approach was used in this study that measures and compares differences in the experience of loneliness based on gender (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2017). This study is classified as a cross-sectional study which is used to describe research that classifies individuals into different categories or subgroups (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012).

This research involved adolescents from five high schools representing each of the five administrative cities (East Jakarta, South Jakarta, West Jakarta, North Jakarta, and Central Jakarta) in the Special Capital Region of Jakarta. To select participants, sampling in this study used a multi-stage random sampling method that combined two sampling strategies. Application of these sampling strategies begins by making a list of schools located within each administrative city and randomly selecting one of the schools representing each administrative city. This is done in order to get samples that represent a broad distribution of the population.

The sample criteria in this study were (1) adolescents aged 15-20 years, (2) attending school in the Special Capital Region of Jakarta. This study included only 11th-grade students - both male and female. A total of 662 participants from five high schools participated in this study. 48% (318) of the total participants were men, and 52% (344) were women. Participants were encouraged to engage in this study voluntarily. Informed consent was given and filled in by each participant. Data collection is carried out in the participants' schools after obtaining permission from the principals and the teachers who act as guardian. The participants and guardians were informed about the purpose of the study.

Participants answered demographic questions such as gender, age, occupation and parents' education, frequency of communication, and questions related to social and economic conditions. Demographic data of participants categorized based on gender and age are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Data

	Characteristic	N	%
Gender	Male	318	48
	Female	344	52
Age	15	1	.2
	16	26	3.9
	17	460	69.5
	18	160	24.2
	19	14	2.1
	20	1	.2

De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale a self-report instrument consisting of six items was used to measure loneliness. This scale has been translated and adapted into Indonesian with the help of mental health experts (Umami, 2015). This measuring instrument was developed based on the theory formulated by De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2006) which explains that there are two components of loneliness, namely emotional loneliness and social loneliness. This instrument can be used uni-dimensionally or multi-dimensionally (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006). Uni-dimensionality is obtained by summing the scores of all items, while multi-dimensionality is obtained by summing the scores of several items belonging to only certain components. In this study, loneliness was measured in both uni-dimensional and multi-dimensional methods.

In this measurement, items number 1, 5, and 6, measure emotional loneliness and items number 2, 3, and 4 measure social loneliness. Each item takes the form of a Likert scale with four response options, namely "1 = Strongly Disagree," "2 = Disagree," "3 = Agree," and "4 = Strongly Agree." For each item that measures emotional loneliness, the greater the score obtained, the higher the loneliness, while for each item of social loneliness, the greater the score obtained, the lower the loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006). This means that for each item of the emotional loneliness component responded with either option 3 or 4 will be scored 1, while option 1 or 2 will be scored 0. In the component of social loneliness, each item responded with either option 1 or 2 will be scored 1, whereas option 3 or 4 will be scored 0.

All items that have been scored will be summed to get a total score of loneliness. The total score shows the level of loneliness experienced by the participants. The total score of loneliness obtained is a continuum scale with a range of 0-6 where the higher the total score, the higher the loneliness. Each score is then entered into a categorical scale (or dichotomy) were those who score 0-1 fall into the category of "not lonely" and those who score 2-6 fall into the category of "lonely".

The researcher used descriptive statistics to analyze demographic data. Meanwhile, gender differences in overall loneliness, emotional loneliness, and social loneliness were analyzed using the Independent-Sample t-test. All statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 for Windows.

Results

A total of 662 participants from five high schools participated in this study. From Table 1, it can be seen that the number of female participants (52%) is bigger than the male participants (48%). The age of participants ranged from 15-20 years (Mean = 17.25; SD = .57). Results of the hypothesis testing can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Independent Samples T-Test

	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval		<i>Cohen's d</i>
			<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>	
Loneliness	-2.83 ^a	.005	-.511	-.0926	-.220
Emotional Loneliness	-1.96 ^a	.050	-.215	-4.23e-5	-.153
Social Loneliness	-2.52	.012	-.345	-.0426	-.196

Results of the statistical analysis in Table 2 shows that there is a significant difference in terms of overall loneliness between male and female adolescents ($t = -2.83$; $p = .005$). There is also a significant difference in terms of emotional loneliness ($t = -1.96$; $p = .050$). This is followed by results showing significant differences in terms of social loneliness ($t = -2.52$; $p = .012$). This study also found a small effect size between the two variables included (Field, 2013), namely overall loneliness and gender (*Cohen's d* = -.220), emotional loneliness (*Cohen's d* = -.153), and social loneliness (*Cohen's d* = -.196). Although the results of the effect size test in this study indicate a fairly small size, the research findings still show a significant difference in loneliness between male and female adolescents. This study found that female adolescents had a greater sense of loneliness than adolescent boys, thus indicating gender's significant influence on loneliness in adolescents in Jakarta.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics

	Grouping	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Loneliness	Male	318	1.818	1.258
	Female	344	2.119	1.463
Emotional Loneliness	Male	318	1.075	.651
	Female	344	1.183	.751
Social Loneliness	Male	318	.742	.964
	Female	344	.936	1.014

As shown in in Table 3, by comparing the mean of overall loneliness between genders, it can be seen that the mean of overall loneliness among female adolescents (*Mean* = 2.119; *SD* = 1.463) is higher than among male adolescents (*Mean* = 1.818; *SD* = 1.258). In terms of emotional loneliness, the mean in female adolescent (*Mean* = 1.183; *SD* = .751) is also higher than in male adolescent (*Mean* = 1.075; *SD* = .651). Likewise, mean of social

loneliness among female adolescents ($Mean = 0.936$; $SD = 1.014$) is higher than among male adolescent ($Mean = 0.742$; $SD = .964$).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that there were significant differences in levels of loneliness between female and male adolescents who live in Jakarta. The loneliness experienced by female adolescents is higher than that of male adolescents both in overall loneliness, as well as in emotional and social loneliness. The results of this study are in line with several previous studies conducted in the general population, where women showed a higher level of loneliness than men (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). The similarity of results between this study and the study conducted by Pinquart & Sörensen (2001) is due to using the same research design, that is, cross-sectional study. In a cross-sectional study, researchers have the limitation of not being able to ensure whether participants' responses are honest or solely based on their ideal response in a social situation. This is a consideration for future researchers because previous studies have shown that men find it more difficult than women to admit that they are feeling lonely (Brehm et al., 2002; De Jong Gierveld, J., Van Tilburg, T., & Dykstra, 2006). According to Gürsoy and Bıçakçı (2006), these difficulties particularly arise in the case of male adolescents because they tend to participate in more social activities or sports when experiencing problems, hence a higher opportunity to socialize. Meanwhile, in the face of problems, female adolescents tend to choose sharing the matter to their friends as a strategy to overcome their problems, hence a higher tendency to focus more on the problem and be vulnerable to feeling lonelier.

On the other hand, the results of this study are contrary to prior studies that found a higher level of loneliness among male than among female (Chen & Chung, 2007; Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Knox et al., 2007; Yang, 2009). Cheng and Furnham (2002) saw a striking difference that lies in female adolescents who are judged to have a better quality of friendship than adolescent boys. The contrasting findings may be due to male adolescents in Jakarta having high expectations and skills in friendship, leading to low levels of social loneliness (Lee & Robbins, 2000). Meanwhile, Chen and Chung (2007) suggest that high family income can reduce social loneliness due to the belief that adult men from high-income families having higher social power and self-esteem. Among adolescents in Jakarta, researchers observed a trend of parents providing high school allowance for their children, which is the case for both males and females. This is done by parents to fulfill their children's consumption and transportation needs. However, there may also be an impact on the increase of self-esteem among adolescents, especially among males due to the feeling of having good economic capacity.

Further analysis found that there were also significant differences in terms of emotional loneliness and social loneliness between male and female. The results are not much different from differences in the overall level of loneliness where females showed a higher level of social and emotional loneliness than males. De Jong Gierveld et al. (2006) explained that men try to be emotionally independent therefore prefer exclusive, impartial relationships, yet still depends on the existence of their friends to get social support. Meanwhile, women are considered to have more complex affective needs where an exclusive relationship with one person is not enough. This condition makes women more vulnerable to loneliness than men. González-Jiménez and Hernández-Romera (2014) state that these characteristics are a form of affective expression from adolescents that indicate their insecurity and distrust towards their friend's views towards them. These characteristics

are mostly found among female adolescents and can develop into a fear of being lonely. In responding to the following facts, both parents and the school need to pay more attention so that the loneliness in female adolescents does lead them to further negativity.

Several factors contribute to the differences in loneliness between male and female adolescents in this study. Previous research took samples in the elderly population (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001), while this study focused on adolescents. The results of the study of the elderly population indicate that age affects loneliness, especially in women compared to men. Romantic relationship status can also affect loneliness experienced by adolescents (Brehm et al., 2002) because a person can have a broad social network and a very active social life, but still feel lonely if he or she do not have a significant other, especially in men relative to women.

Studies on loneliness that involve external factors such as quality of friendship (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Lee & Robbins, 2000) and family income levels (Chen & Chung, 2007) found that female adolescents have lower social loneliness than male adolescents. These studies support the finding that adolescents in Jakarta have a higher level of loneliness compared to other regions due to the level of family income affecting how one behaves, which subsequently affects the quality of friendship. In addition, studies analyzing problem-solving abilities (Yang, 2009) and egocentrism (Knox et al., 2007) as internal factors indicate that more men feel higher loneliness than women. These studies also support the results of this study where the involvement of egocentrism in an effort to deal with problems determines whether or not an individual is popular or their friendly environment.

Umami (2015) also stated that parents' presence in an adolescent's perspective should be further explored, as findings show that more female adolescents experience loneliness than male adolescents. Whereas according to McWhirter, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, dan Gat (2002), variables related to social relations are also worth considering as failure to maintain relationships is found as one of the main reasons for the emergence of loneliness in both male and female adolescents. Some of the factors mentioned above are worth considering for further analysis in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the gender differences in loneliness among adolescents.

This study has several limitations. First, this school-based study causes researchers not to be able to get responses from students who were absent during data collection time thus reducing the number of samples and influencing the opportunity to represent the broad distribution of the population. Second, this study uses a self-report questionnaire in which the possibility of participants to manipulate the response is very likely to occur; thus, future research is encouraged to pay more attention to this factor. Third, this study uses a cross-sectional survey so that researchers cannot further analyze the pattern of development and differences in loneliness. Therefore, longitudinal research is needed to determine the risks of feeling lonely. Also, conducting clinical interviews will yield more in-depth results as it allows researchers to ask several questions regarding the causes of loneliness.

Conclusion

Female adolescents in Jakarta experience more loneliness than adolescent boys - both in term of overall, emotionally and socially loneliness. Despite female adolescents tending to a more tight-knit friendship than male adolescents, togetherness and friendship cannot cure the loneliness experienced by individuals. This finding provides evidence that individuals can experience loneliness regardless of being in a crowd.

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