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The Veracity of Adolescents' Drawings

It is absolutely matter-of-course that children draw. However, in adolescence years they are less willing to make drawings, and in this period the visual representation is overshadowed by verblativity. As Ferenc Mérei puts it, the beginning of adolescence is the time for children to find knowledge about themselves.¹ Its characteristic feature is active imagination, which performs the function of wish-fulfilment. At the time of sensitivity to self-knowledge it is extremely important for adolescents to deal with themselves, which can be promoted by visual representation as well. Although adolescents constantly face the failure of real-life depiction and thus they get less inclined to draw, a lot of other techniques are available for them to express themselves. Andrea Kárpáti has proved in her empirical research that there is a change of visual language from drawing to broader visual skills, like environmental design or say website creation.² When adolescents were given a suitable topic and medium, the visual message regained its strong emotional content and became a dominant elaboration technique. One of these visual tools for teenagers is the 5-Symbols Art Task Series developed by me, which allows to discover the hidden messages of adolescents.

Based on my PhD dissertation, I will in the present paper discuss the possibilities of symbolic drawings. I review the use of projective drawings in educational context. The 5-Symbols Art Task Series is of great benefit in pedagogical practice. In the course of the discussion I will provide numerous examples of the 5-symbols drawings, to reveal the teenagers' hidden messages.

The 5-Symbols Art Task Series

The 5-Symbols Art Task Series is tailored for pedagogical practice, and its aim is to facilitate students' self-expression. It contains five given symbols: these are a ship, house, heart, tree, and an optional symbol. All of these reflect different parts of the personality.

¹ Ferenc Mérei, "Az önismereti érzékenység a serdülőkor kezdetén" [Sensitivity in Self-Knowledge at the Beginning of Adolescence], in *Az alakuló ember* [The Developing Person], ed. by Alfréd Lux, Budapest: Gondolat, 1976.

² Andrea Kárpáti, *A kamaszok vizuális nyelve* [The Visual Language of Adolescents], Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005.

The five symbols are embedded in a story of an imaginary journey. In this journey we are sailing, so first we have to design our own boat. The boat is the first symbol. The boat or ship represents getting away from the ordinary days, and a journey into ourselves. *In European culture in many cases ships are symbols, and they can have special attributes.* For example, in a number of mythological and religious stories, such as Noah's ark in the Old Testament, or the tale from ancient Greece about the journey of Odysseus. Also Kharon's boat is not just a means of transportation, but it symbolizes transmission between the world of the living and the dead. We can also see special boats in today's popular blockbusters, like the Black Pearl in *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

The equipment, the size or the secure or unsecure visualization of the ship shows the background of a person and his or her senses of security in real life. We can see this if we compare the two boats in Figures 1 and 2. The first is a large and well-equipped, safe ship, but the other one is sinking right now. There is a man standing in a tiny little life boat, and a big shark is about to eat him. He is screaming. These boats clearly show the differences between the two students' sense of security.



Figure 1: Large and well-equipped ship



Figure 2: Sinking ship

While we are sailing, we get into a heavy storm and we get shipwrecked. We are marooned on an island, where we find a house. The house is the second symbol. The House-Tree-Man Test (H-T-P) by Buck is a well-known psychological drawing test.³ Based on Buck's test I expect that the house is a symbol of family relationships. However, because of the storyline, the house in my method symbolizes the drawer's conception of a shelter in a difficult situation. Figures 3–5 show some examples of the different house-drawings, and the differences of sense of security, when the drawing person is in trouble. The drawer of Figure 3 said: *This is a ruinous house.*

³ J. N. Buck, "The Use of the H-T-P in Personality Analysis", *American Psychologist* 3 (1948), p. 284.

Nobody lives here. I don't feel like going inside. Figure 4 is a castle with flowers in the garden.



Figure 3: Ruinous house



Figure 4: Castle

Figure 5 was made by a 14 year-old Romani boy. His house is a prison, and based on his comment I assume that this theme reflects his conception about difficult situations or about his future. He said: *This is a prison at the end of the world. Nobody could get out of here! There is a man standing in the left corner. He is crying and holding up his arms, asking for help.*

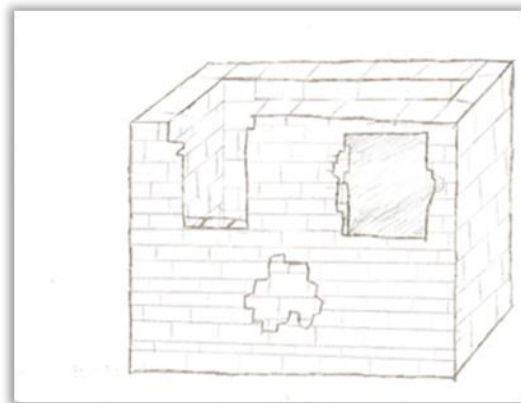


Figure 5: Prison at the end of the world

After we have taken a rest in the house, we start discovering the island. In the middle of the island there is a cave, and deep in the cave we find two magic mirrors. The first mirror shows our heart instead of our body. Our own heart is the third symbol. Generally heart is the symbol of love, or other feelings and desires. In addition, the heart is a state of mind and a feature of the human character. I gathered some common idioms related to heart, e.g. heart of stone, lose your heart to a man, heart of gold, one's heart goes out, my heart bleeds for you, heart-to-heart, one's heart

sinks, etc. Figures 6–8 are examples of adolescents' drawings about their own heart. These pictures reveal different feelings and moods.

Figure 6: Smoking heart

This heart just drinks and smokes

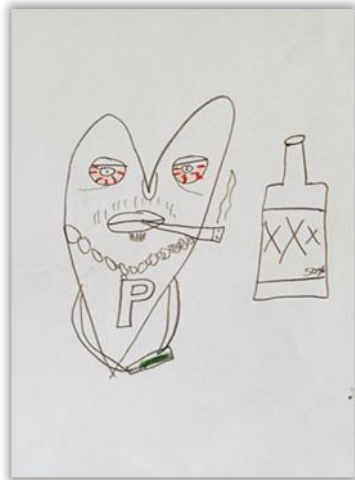


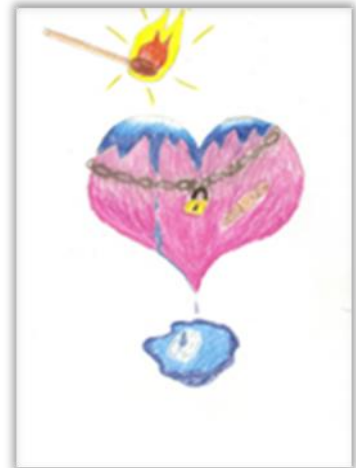
Figure 7: Heart with knife

It's me. My heart is anguished. She is lonely. Somebody bruised her.



Figure 8: Melting heart

My heart is melting right now, because of a new love



In the second magic mirror we can see ourselves altering into something else. This is an optional symbol about our selves. Optional symbols are often animal figures, plants, brand names or logos, and beloved objects. They reveal the conscious or desired aspect of a personality. After that we climb out of the cave. There is a tree near the exit of the cave. The tree is the last symbol. Drawing a tree is a psychological drawing test similar to Buck's house test.⁴ It reveals deeper feelings of the drawer, and the tree symbolises the whole personality. Further on I show examples for the tree and optional symbol drawings.

At the end of the story we are asleep under the tree, and the rescue team with our friends find us there. This is the end of our imaginary journey.

⁴ K. Bolander, *Assessing Personality through Tree Drawings*, New York: Basic Book, 1977.

Projective Drawings in Education

Drawings can be regarded as a representation of the psychic state. Projective drawing tests are common in psychological practice, for example Goodenough's Draw-A-Man test⁵, the Rorschach test,⁶ Buck's House-Tree-Man test, Koppitz's intelligence test,⁷ and so on. Drawing is a projective cue, and the person can express herself through it. In psychological practice, projective drawing tests are used to reveal the unconscious parts of the personality, to diagnose mental or personality disorders or to help therapeutic procedure.

At the same time, in the educational context projective drawings have another function, which requires another point of view. It is very important to see clearly how we can use the projective method in education. In the school, drawing is not part of a therapeutic procedure, and it is not a diagnostic tool. Instead, projective drawing is a tool of nonverbal communication, and helps self-expression through visual representation. According to Kristóf Nyíri, "everyday thinking and communication, as well as scientific theories, involve more than just verbal language. They involve images, too." Pictures are "*natural carriers of meaning*".⁸ Pictures are able to convey the kind of notions which the verbal mode is not, so drawing can be a tool for understanding teenagers. Furthermore, teachers have to use the projective method prudently, because the therapeutic and educational procedures do not have the same roles. Also, teachers have to be aware of their limit of competence, and they should cooperate with other experts in the school if it is necessary (for example the school psychologist, a family advisor, a child protection expert, or a special education teacher). Carefulness with the explanation of symbols is also required from them. In all cases the meaning of the symbolic drawing is based on the drawer's own interpretation. I discuss the possible explanation of drawings in detail in some other publications of mine.⁹

⁵ F. L. Goodenough, *Measurement of intelligence by drawing*, New York: Yonkers, 1926.

⁶ H. Rorschach, *Psychodiagnostik*, Bern: Bircher, 1921.

⁷ E. M. Koppitz, *Psychological Evaluation of Human Figure Drawings by Middle School Pupils*, London: Grune and Stratton, 1984.

⁸ Kristóf Nyíri, *Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, pp. 34 and 82, see also Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

⁹ Judit Hortoványi, "Visual Representation as Self-expression in Pedagogical Practice: Possible Explanations of Adolescents' Symbol Drawings", in András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri (eds.), *The Power of the Image: Emotion, Expression, Explanation* (series VISUAL LEARNING, vol. 4), Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, pp. 161–173; Judit Hortoványi, "A média elemeinek hatása 14–16 éves serdülők önkifejező rajzain" [The influence of media elements on the drawings of self-expression of adolescents aged 14 to 16], *Psychiatria Hungarica*, vol. XXX, no. 2 (2015), pp. 192–200.

The following examples show that the same motif can denote absolutely different contents. Figures 9–11 all represent angels. Below the pictures we can read the drawing teenagers' own interpretations, and these make it clear that their feelings and thoughts were different in each case. It is possible to understand the meaning of angel as a symbol if the drawer is taken as a starting point, independently of the teachers' own convictions or their emotional state.



Figure 9: Invisible Angel

This is an angel, because I wish I could disappear. If I could do it, I would hide, far away from my parents. I wish nobody could see me. (16-year-old Romani girl's optional symbol)



Figure 10: Good Angel

Please believe me, I'm really good inside! (15-year-old Romani girl's optional symbol, she repeats a year in the school)



Figure 11: Angel of Death

This is a murder heart, the Angel of Death. He has an axe and a sword. He killed that man, at his own pleasure. He has an eyepatch so that nobody can identify him. (14-year-old Romani boy's heart)

On the other hand, projective drawing is neither a tool of teaching visual arts, nor a measuring instrument. In the school the aim is not to develop drawing skills but to help self-expression through shaping their own symbolic pictures. These drawings sometimes have very low level of representation, because in this case spatiality and realistic depiction are not important. So using projective drawings in education requires a new assessment procedure, where the expressivity and substance of the drawings becomes conspicuous. Figures 12 and 13 are examples of low levels of representation, but strong self-expression. Figure 12 is a heart full of scribble. It shows painful and angry feelings with very simple device. Figure 13 is a raft. This is the drawer's own boat. He is unable to navigate it, without having a sail or power engine. It shows the insecure feelings of the drawer.

5-Symbols Art Task series is a projective type of method, but does not serve therapeutic purpose. This task aims at drawing symbols, and these pictures show the veracity of the inner world instead of the depiction of the outside world. Symbols support self-understanding, because symbols always have two meanings.¹⁰ The everyday meaning gives you the feeling of security, and the hidden meaning of the symbols make self-expression possible. So symbols allow people to reveal themselves and stay safe at the same time. They have the option to choose between these meanings. To draw symbols is an opportunity for the students for self-expression and they can choose to take it or not.

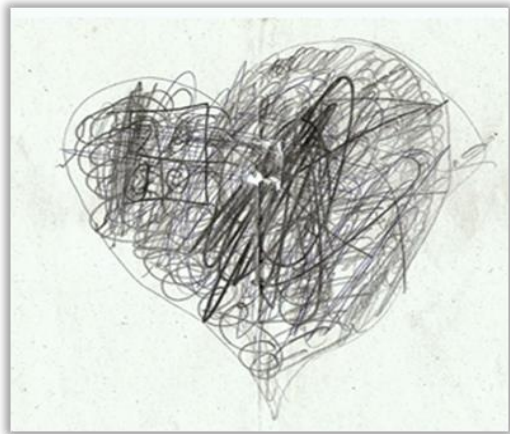


Figure 12: Heart with scribble



Figure 13: Raft

I based my views on the sociological concept of the interpretation of symbols. It sees symbols as a reflection and a concentrated expression of the inner self. Visual symbols are a connection between the inner world and the community, because these pictures reveal the drawer's thoughts and emotions.

Veracity of Adolescents' Drawings

Usually feelings and emotions are the most important elements in the drawings of the symbols here discussed. As I mentioned earlier, the drawer's own annotation is the main aspect for the explanation of the drawing. Whatever they say about their drawing, they say all of it about themselves, because these symbols reflect the personality. Sometimes these feelings are connected to forbidden or ashamed contents, for example aggression, anxiety, or inferiority complex. Andrea Kárpáti and Tünde Simon review symbolization processes in a variety of classic and new media. As they write: "Symbols are elicited by tasks that are emotionally engaging and thus may result in the formulation of a personal message. Verbal utterances of

¹⁰ "What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning." (Carl G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, New York: Doubleday, 1964, p. 20.)

aggression, anxiety and phobia are normally suppressed in a school environment, but may be freely expressed during an art class.”¹¹

Some examples demonstrate aggressive or ashamed contents in the drawings. Figures 14 and 15 show aggressive or painful feelings.



Figure 14: Bloody knife

This is a knife. Sometimes I would like to kill somebody. (14-year-old girl's optional symbol)

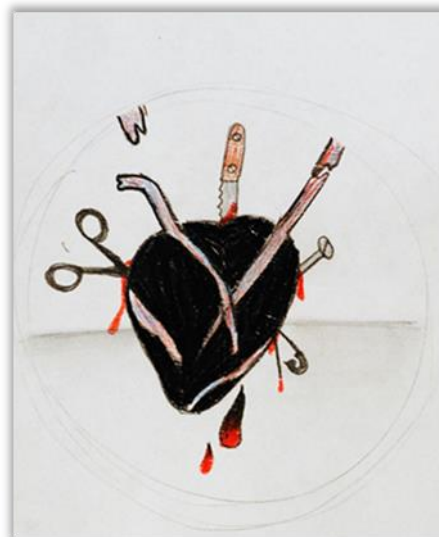


Figure 15: Heart with instruments

This heart has already died. I don't know what will happen with it. A lot of memories have hurt it. We can take these instruments out of the heart, but the scars will remain. (14-year-old girl's heart)

Figure 16 at first sight is a common drawing of a heart. There are no decorative elements, no figures, just some colours. But the drawer tells us that they represent her suffering pangs of jealousy. Figure 17 is a 13-year-old girl's optional symbol. She portrays a tattered and humbled young girl, who is her symbol. Very likely it would be difficult to utter these feelings, but through drawing symbols it is feasible.

¹¹ Andrea Kárpáti – Tünde Simon, “Symbolization in Child Art: Creation and Interpretation of Visual Metaphors”, in András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri (eds.), *The Power of the Image* (cf. note 9 above), pp. 143–160.



Figure 16: Jealousy

This heart is in the dark, because I often feel lonely. Inside it's yellow, it symbolizes my envy of others, who have a lot of friends. Around my heart there is a wall. I built it for defence.



Figure 17: Tattered girl

She is a tattered and humbled young girl. A lot of people harmed her. They were nasty and bullied this girl. She can't protect herself, for this her face is featureless. She doesn't stick out of the mass of people.

Usually these drawings densify a lot of complex or ambivalent thoughts. It is very difficult to denote them in a verbal way, but the picture is a good tool for it. Figure 18 shows a hamster and a snake. It symbolizes the relationship between people. Figure 19 is a variation of a well-known sign, a smiley face. It shows ambivalent thoughts about the drawer's own personality.

During my researches I compare the results of the 5-Symbols Art Task Series to a verbal test about personality. This test is a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ by Robert Goodman.¹² In some cases the drawing shows such deep feelings like mourning, whereas the verbal test shows a totally trouble-free status. It seems they could not talk about their problems, but they could draw about it. Examples for this are shown in Figures 20–22.

¹² R. Goodman, "Psychometric Properties of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire", *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 40, no. 11 (2001), pp. 1337–45.



Figure 18. Hamster and snake

The snake twists around the hamster. It symbolises that sometimes I have to push others down, but another time I'm the subordinate. The hamster is frightened. Nobody feels good in such a situation. The best is the accordance. (14-year-old girl's optional symbol)

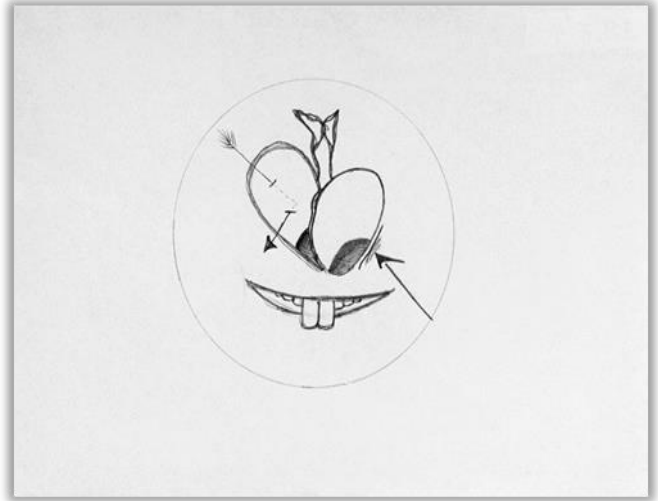


Figure 19: Smiley face

Sometimes I'm inward-turned, sometimes I laugh on everything. One part of my personality is very vulnerable, the other part defends itself and shakes off exterior things. My two parts are separated, even so as a whole. (14-year-old girl's optional symbol)

Figure 20–22 are all from the same boy. This boy was mourning deeply when he made these pictures. His father died suddenly a few months before, and the boy had not spoken a word about it with anyone. His teachers and his mum worried about his being emotionless. But these drawings with his own symbols show his inner world clearly. The little size and the lines show anxiety, and his words about the pictures talk about painful feelings, mourning and loneliness. As in the mourning boy's case, sometimes symbol drawing can be a better tool for self-expression than words. In Figures 23 and 24 we can see two pictures of a 14-year old boy. The drawings were made during his parents' divorce. These pictures show his feelings about it. His symbols are full of fighting, intimidation and defence.

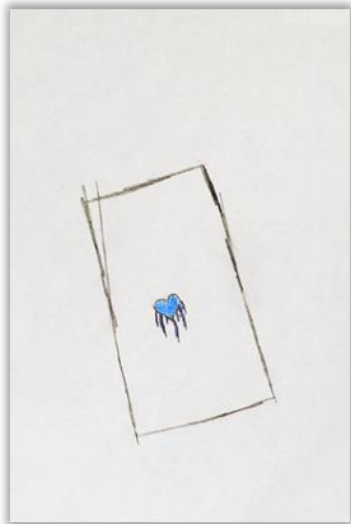


Figure 20: Ice heart

This heart is cold because it's winter (it was in June). Ice covered it. I don't know if it will melt sometimes, or not.

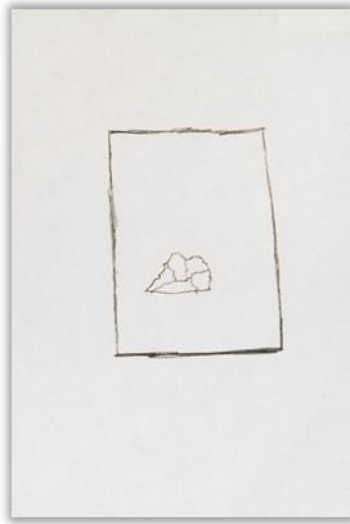


Figure 21: A piece of stone

This is a piece of stone. Big, heavy, and it cracked. Just lying somewhere on the ground.



Figure 22: Winter tree

It's a winter tree, it has no leaves. I think maybe it will have some in spring again, but I'm not sure.

Figure 23: Survivor

There is a survivor in my heart. He has a rocket launcher, because he is in a war.

Figure 24: Fighting man

This is a self-portrait. I try to survive and fight well. I have a hand-grenade and a helmet. I am just tiptoeing very carefully.

Summary and Conclusion

The visualizations made by pubescent children can contain important information about the individual. Based on my research I claim that we can use projective drawings like 5-Symbols Art Task Series successfully in education. They are a useful pedagogical tool not just in Art education, but they help class community work too. They promote self-knowledge and self-communication, conduce to integration of the outermost students, reveal the problems of students who are difficult to handle, lead to understanding conflicts, or contact with parents. It seems that in some cases drawing is a better option than the verbal mode. Projective drawings not only help to come to truly know adolescents, but they contribute to – as mentioned above – possible cooperation with other experts in the school, for example the school psychologist, a family advisor, a child protection expert, or a teacher for pupils with learning difficulties.

A 13-year-old boy said about his own heart: *This is an inner light, which is looking for*



a way out (Figure 25). Drawing can be an appropriate tool for letting the inner light out!

Figure 25: Inner light

