Nilüfer Pembecioğlu

Istanbul University, Turkiye
ORCID: 0000-0001-7510-6529

The Hidden Impact of War on Children's Identity and Attachment: „The Magician's Elephant"

Ukryty wpływ wojny na tożsamość i przywiązanie dzieci: „Magiczna słonica"

Abstract

Significant advances in neurology, cognition, and sociopsychology occur during adolescence. Teenagers usually spend less time with their parents as they get older, but they tend to spend a lot more time with their peers let it be their friends or siblings. However, parents still have a significant impact on their adolescent's growth. The bond between a teen and their parent has a significant impact on emotional, social, and cognitive development. Less high-risk behavior, fewer mental health issues, and improved social skills and strategies for coping are all linked to secure attachment. "The Magician's Elephant" is a 2023 computer-animated fantasy action film that Wendy Rogers directed, Martin Hynes wrote the screenplay for, and Julia Pistor acted as producer. This paper questions the hidden impact of war on Children's identity and attachment with the help of the narrative.

Keywords: adolescents, identity, attachment, war, kinship, family

Streszczenie

W okresie dojrzewania mają miejsce znaczące zmiany w neurologii, poznaniu i socjopsychologii. Nastolatki zazwyczaj spędzają mniej czasu z rodzicami, ale za to więcej z rówieśnikami, przyjaciółmi i rodzeństwem. Jednak rodzice nadal mają znaczący wpływ na rozwój nastolatków. Więź między nastolatkiem a jego rodzicem ma znaczący wpływ na rozwój emocjonalny, społeczny i poznawczy. Z bezpiecznym przywiązaniem między nastolatkiem a rodzicem związanych jest wiele pozytywnych efektów: mniej ryzykownych zachowań, mniej problemów ze zdrowiem psychicznym oraz lepsze umiejętności społeczne i strategie radzenia sobie ze stresem. „Magiczna słonica" to animowany komputerowo film akcji fantasy z 2023 r., który wyreżyserowała Wendy Rogers, scenariusz napisał Martin Hynes, a Julia Pistor pełniła rolę producenta. W artykule zakwestionowano ukryty wpływ wojny na tożsamość i przywiązanie dzieci za pomocą narracji.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, tożsamość, przywiązanie, wojna, pokrewieństwo, rodzina

Introduction

Teenagers and teen-related stories are commencing to receive more and more media attention. Although it is recommended that children between the ages of 3–6 should spend up to 30 minutes a day, primary school children around 45 minutes,

middle school students 1 hour a day and high school students 2 hours a day with screens and technological devices, nowadays, these periods are increasing day by day. In the last six months, at least in Turkey, children have been spending approximately 3 hours a day on social media. Children who regularly use social media spent an average of 2 hours and 54 minutes on social media on weekdays and 2 hours and 44 minutes on weekends, according to Turkish Statistical Institute, and 64.4% of children used a cell phone/smartphone. It was observed that children in the 6–15 age group used cell phones/smartphones mostly to attend online classes with 77.7%. This was followed by other reasons such as studying, preparing homework/presentations with 77.4%, video or non-video calls with 68.7% and playing online/offline games with 66.9%[1]. Media is growing exponentially and grasping, occupying all of our time and space, yet children's instinctive need to learn about the world and themselves leads to a form of media addiction known as media obesity.

It is seen that almost all types of media, whether mainstream, children's media or social media, attach importance to producing for children and visualizing stories that will attract their attention. Whether educational or entertainment-oriented, media production for children has increasingly become an industry as Scharrer & Comstock emphasize[2]. On one hand, despite the fact that many wars and conflicts throughout the world have a detrimental impact on people's lives, children have started to dissolve family and kinship ties, lose their sense of identity, and cause issues when they come into contact with the reality of life. It is quite frustrating to witness that these issues remain prevalent in the twenty-first century if it is well-recognized for millennia. Regarding the world population today, exceeding 8 billion, and in many countries, more than half of the population is children. In Turkey, this rate is around 30% for the last decade. The number of the children all over the world is suffering even if the estimated world population profile changes, i.e. by 2050, the number of persons aged 65 years or over worldwide is projected to be more than twice the number of children under age 5 and about the same as the number of children under age 12[3]. According to the IHME report, last decade also had a huge impact on population and specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all components of population change, including fertility, mortality and migration[4]. Thus, countries where fertility levels remain high should prepare to meet the needs of growing numbers of children and young people. However, all children would be requiring some special care since they either experience it virtually through the

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[1] https://www.tuik.gov.tr/.

[2] E. Scharrer, G. Comstock, *Entertainment Televisual Media: Content Patterns and themes* [in:] *The faces of televisual media: Teaching, violence, selling to children*, ed. E. Palmer, B. Young, Mahwah, NJ 2003.

[3] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*, UN DESA 2022.

[4] Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), *Global Fertility, Mortality, Migration, and Population Forecasts 2017–2100*. Seattle 2020, https://doi.org/10.6069/ MJND-3671.

media or become a part of a real war. As a result, past increases in school completion rates may slow or even reverse depending on the duration of full or partial school closures and other factors affecting the health and well-being of children, their families, and educators. Moreover, according to IHME, the average number of children per woman will decline to 1.66 children at the end of the century while the United Nations projects fertility to be around 1.84 at the same date. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) announced that approximately one quarter of the world's children live in countries affected by war, crisis and natural disasters. According to the recent reports released by UNICEF, 535 million children living in these countries do not have access to healthcare, quality education, food and protection. One third of these children, approximately 393 million children, live in sub-Saharan Africa in areas where urgent support is needed. "Approximately twenty thousand babies were born in a war atmosphere states Unicef, on January 19, 2024, the 105th day of the escalation of warfare in the Gaza Strip. A baby is born in conflict every ten minutes as these horrific battles go on"[5].

According to popular belief, children are least troublesome during the times when they are fully with their family, have not yet developed a cause-and-effect connection, and have not begun to question life. A teen's transition marks a moment when life's challenges start to become apparent and felt, and when worry about the future starts to surface[6]. As they experience transition through infancy, teenagers who need to establish an identity and reintegrate into society start to doubt their own values as well as those of their family members, society, and the world around them. They start to view their family members, not as the people with whom they had a natural, biological and psychological attachment, but more objectively, as if they are totally strangers and since they can now become more mobile to move around, they can forge new connections. On the one hand, despite the fact that many wars and conflicts throughout the world have a detrimental impact on people's lives, children have started to dissolve family and kinship ties, lose their sense of identity, and cause issues when they come into contact with the reality of life. It is quite frustrating to witness that these issues remain prevalent in the twenty-first century if it is well-recognized for millennia.

Recently, anyone can make an online family tree using certain software[7]. Artificial intelligence and DNA testing are other tools that individuals might utilize for exploring their origins[8]. While the traditional family structure is seen as threatened

[5] https://www.unicefturk.org/yazi/dunyaya-gozlerini-cehennemde-acmak.

[6] N. Worth, *Understanding youth transition as 'becoming': identity, time and futurity*, "Geoforum" 2009, 40(6), pp.1050–1060.

[7] N. Hendrickson, *Discover Your Family History Online: A Step-by-step Guide to Starting Your Genealogy Search*, Penguin 2012.

[8] M. Smolenyak, A. Turner, *Trace your roots with DNA: Using genetic tests to explore your family tree*, Rodale 2004.

by all of these, it is also recognized as a fundamental human right and as a means of reuniting individuals who have been split up from their families by war, other economic and political upheavals, or migration. Furthermore, a great deal of scientific research is being conducted on how young people perceive their families and origins and how they approach family issues.

Referring back to similar studies, the research by Lavi, Green, and Dekel explores how Israeli teenagers adjusted following the Second Lebanon War. The study uses self-report surveys to evaluate gender, personal characteristics of early traumatic events, and subjective exposure (i.e., measures of fear and failure to meet basic needs during life) for 2,314 adolescents who live in areas that were targets of multiple missile attacks. Participants also respond to questions about media exposure and objective exposure (such as exposure to missile attacks or knowing someone who has been hurt or killed). Fifteen percent of teenagers report moderate to severe symptoms related to their traumatic experiences. Adolescent girls and women who have previously gone through traumatic experiences are known to be more vulnerable to distress. Consequently, the role of subjective exposure was substantially more significant than the level of actual exposure in terms of contributing to distress[9].

Williams and Smith use three tasks to explore the evolution and consistency of children's conceptions of pure inheritance at ages 4, 7, 10, and 14. In the research, participants completed a modified adoption task in which they had to anticipate and explain the origins of several qualities (physical traits, impairments, and personality traits) while differentiating between biological and social parenting. Participants rated how much they preferred different inheritance pathways for physical features in the causal mechanisms task. Participants in the family connection task had to assess how related certain family members were to one another and explain how they understood terminology linked to kinship. For each of the three tasks, developmental tendencies were evident. Decisions made on different tasks seemed to be more consistent with age, but there was a low correlation between explanations given in different task contexts[10].

In another research, Humphreys', one hundred members of an organization that assists adoptees in tracing their origins received a postal questionnaire. 42 women and 34 men with whom either in-person or, more frequently, telephone interviews were conducted, provided responses. Women's journey of self-discovery was obviously more important because marriage and motherhood had reinforced their desire for a stronger sense of identity. While a greater proportion of women than men reported having a negative adoption experience and having a shattered sense of

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[9] T. Lavi, O. Green, R. Dekel, *The contribution of personal and exposure characteristics to the adjustment of adolescents following war*, "Journal of Adolescence" 2013, 36(1), pp. 21–30.

[10] J.M. Williams, L.A. Smith, *Concepts of kinship relations and inheritance in childhood and adolescence*, "British Journal of Developmental Psychology" 2010, 28(3), pp. 523–546.

identity, men were more likely than women to have sought help for personal issues in adulthood. According to the study, the results demonstrate that mother-child reunions have frequently ended in disappointment and occasionally in distress for both sides. On the other hand, finding missing siblings was typically more fruitful. In case of adoptees (especially when reared as only children and/or when psychologically disturbed) can benefit more from seeing a sibling than from meeting a parent, this part of the search for biological relatives demands additional attention[11].

Aim and methodology

Wendy Rogers directed Martin Hynes authored the screenplay, and Julia Pistor produced the 2023 computer-animated fantasy action movie "The Magician's Elephant". Filmed adaptation of Kate DiCamillo's 2009 book of the same name. After the movie's premiere on March 17, 2023 and Netflix-hosted home screenings, critics rated it in a variety of ways. As for the methodology, this study examines if such a kid-friendly narrative has appropriate characters to be taken as a role model. This animated picture, which is adapted from a novel and incorporates the voices of well-known actors, seems to be a family film to be watched with all family members. It is thought that this film has a lot to say to those who are torn between rationality and emotion, as well as social themes like citizenship, democracy, and leadership. It highlights the beneficial effects of belief, and hope, as well as the difficulty of keeping family bonds, and how rapidly hope may disappear in post-war cultures. However, as for the coding of the text, the actions were dwelled upon regarding how much the characters were marginalized or normal when their post-war symptoms were considered. Mainly, the study questions if the signs, symbols, and actions in the film were coded in the right way as to not give any harm to the viewers.

Findings and conclusion

"The Magician's Elephant" is a 2023 computer-animated fantasy action film that Wendy Rogers directed, Martin Hynes wrote the screenplay for, and Julia Pistor acted as producer. Whereas questioning on one hand if the film is kids-friendly one which is appropriate for teenagers or not, this paper questions the hidden impact of war on Children's identity and attachment with the help of the narrative. It could be argued that the film's strength stems from its emphasis on adolescent issues. Achieving this while addressing the fundamental problems of the contemporary era and positioning it in the context of a post-war crisis is an enormous achievement.

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[11] H. Humphrey, M. Humphrey, *Damaged identity and the search for kinship in adult adoptees*, "British Journal of Medical Psychology" 1989, 62(4), pp. 301–309.

As the movie might touch adults more than kids, it would not be appropriate to categorize it as a children's film exclusively. Like in the film, it is traditionally believed that adults nowadays exhibit strong, overly protective attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, it is evident that they are unable to give adequate attention to the souls of young people and that they are unaware of what their true needs are. Adolescence coincides with a time when issues with identity, self-realization, and management become apparent on an emotional and intellectual level. Adolescence has been regarded as a period in which kids start to question the world rationally and cease to see it solely through emotional lenses[12]. At this point, individuals start to act and behave more independently, emotionally, and introvertedly, and they start to ask themselves questions they have never asked anyone before. Psychologist Robert Plutchik defines 8 basic emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust[13]. The film features two primary heroes. Vilna Lutz, an ex-soldier, presents himself as "grandpa" to Peter, kind, gentle boy. Though he was quite young when the war began, Peter recalls his experiences in the war with some vagueness, especially the close attachment he had with his mother and his newborn sister. The grandfather consistently responds vaguely when he inquiries about their prior ages. Peter chooses to sketch his own future because he no longer believes in him, does not trust his grandfather – a veteran soldier – and feels that something is being kept from him. His emotions fluctuate as he experiences the cause-and-effect relationship, interacts with other characters, and goes through several decision-making processes. That is why, even if he meets his sister he does not recognize her and cannot figure out that it could be his relative. Thus, keeping secrets of war seems to be dangerous at this point.

Significant advances in neurology, cognition, and sociopsychology occur during adolescence. Teenagers usually spend less time with their parents as they get older, but they tend to spend a lot more time with their peers let it be their friends or siblings. However, parents still have a significant impact on their adolescent's growth. The bond between a teen and their parents has a significant impact on emotional, social, and cognitive development. Less high-risk behavior, fewer mental health issues, and improved social skills and strategies for coping are all linked to secure attachment. The film seems to achieve the bound between the boy and the grandfather at the end of the film, partly, however, throughout the film, the audience feels his lack of love, attention, and betterment, they also understand Peter's sorrows and hopes.

There are two aspects to this study that need to be considered. The relationship between children and war, or simply children and politics, power, and administration,

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[12] S. Feldman, G.R. Elliott (eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*, Harvard University Press 1990.

[13] R. Plutchik, *A psychoevolutionary theory of emotions*, "Social Science Information" 1982, pp. 529–553.

is significant on the one hand. On the other hand, it is worth considering whether a film that aims to serve as an entertaining spectacle really needs to tackle such weighty and profound issues. There are apparent age stereotypes in the media. The majority of uses for books are individual, for example. Thus, the impression that the book leaves on the reader's memory will not go away unless there are group readings and explicitly scheduled conversations on this topic. Additionally, social media provides a more customized means of communication and has a wider reach, impacting a greater number of people. Longer shows, on the other hand, like TV series or movies, encourage people to watch together and extend their screen time. Like book residue, movies watched in dimly lit places where nobody knows one another – like a movie theater – can go unspoken or unremarked upon. On the other hand, it is anticipated that a family-friendly film that airs on Netflix would likely have a greater watching rate. This is especially the case with animated films. The film's relationships between people of various ages, genders, and work groups convey several very significant concepts. After watching, it is believed to be crucial to discuss feelings and opinions with young viewers or children. Because it will only be feasible to discuss the connections and ideals in the movie in this way.

Since the two men in the film see the world in quite different ways, the individuals watching the film alone could be perceiving the world through a sided point of view. Peter has matured into a teenager, yet he still keeps his feelings within. In contrast, his grandfather is a traditional family member who seeks to resolve conflicts by reason and considers that feelings are superfluous. It is almost time for the needs of two separate generations to stop being dependent on one another in terms of listening, understanding, trust, and love. For the elderly gentleman, everything resembles a win-lose, profit-loss computation, but in the child's mind, family, friendship, honesty, and humor are the most important things. The main source of tension in the film is the child's alternative hopes for the future, despite the grandfather's plan for the child's future as a soldier, in which he personally provides his grandson with the experiences of the past and essential military skills. The movie opens with tranquil, glorious days when everything is in its right place, but it progressively shifts into a period of time when pessimism rules, people are unhappy, there are differences in managerial perspectives, and people are terrified of one another. So, there is the fear appeal within the film, to make people feel the uneasy days that any war situation might bring.

Regarding the Plutchik's Wheel, how frequently the characters jump from one side of the wheel to another is a question. Emotions that fluctuate too quickly and lead the wheel to turn too quickly indicate an insufficient internalization of the story. It is for this reason that the film opens initially, reaches a particular point in the story, and then resumes at a different pace, from the beginning. This helps the audience relate to the story's heroes and gain a deeper understanding of their actions and mental processes as well as decision-making strategies. In the meantime, the

movie has scenes when many heroes experience conflicting feelings. For instance, while Lutz wants to stop Peter from finding his own family and keep him under pressure by pretending that such a reality does not exist, Peter desires to be able to reunite with his own family members and reveal the fact that he has a sister. Which perspective the viewer will accept and internalize will also be crucial.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms include ideas like doubting the existence of death, finding it difficult to accept death, and feeling as though life has no meaning after suffering a loss. The fact that one cannot share them with anyone is the saddest thing. Grief, sadness, pensiveness, are the degrees of sadness and unhappiness. When Peter is grieving, he experiences great sadness with his heartbroken distraction of loneliness and a lack of attachment as a result of losing his mother and father. One could classify these emotions as trauma stemming only from the war's aftereffects. Peter, on the other hand, throughout the film appears to be trauma-free; rather, he is courteous, friendly, upbeat, and humorous with everyone he interacts with. It is evident that he consistently behaves in a cooperative and solution-oriented manner. Lutz, on the other hand, appears to be portrayed as an adult who is reclusive, insecure, lonely, an introverted individual who stays indoors, task-oriented, and incapable of embracing and enjoying life. All his actions and features demonstrate the extent of his trauma. He thinks that fighting is what life is all about and that they will soon have to fight again. For this reason, one must always be prepared for battle and learn to live with less. There is no safe place and he claims that life is already extremely unpleasant and harmful. He highlights the need to exclude emotions and aspirations for the future from life in order to avoid becoming even more fragile, disappointed, and broken. Yet, to the contrary, Peter's ecstasy, joy and serenity is so high that he is always focused on his interests, full of anticipations and hope accompanying them. All these seem to be related with hope and future plannings. However, Lutz is full of anger and annoyance, disgusting people, isolating himself, and avoids having any relationship with the "others" around and at the end he himself becomes a matter of boredom. Whereas Peter is running after the surprises, even if he fears from the negative possibilities or uncertainty, he has trust in himself and in cases of dubiousness, fogginess, he has his joy in his heart and serenity. What does vigilance tell Peter? Something big is coming, his learning about the elephant, his following his instincts, etc. are all about it. The intensity of his feelings provides the audience a setting of experience and trial and error case.

One of the psychological disorders is developing the marginal characters. Developing marginal features is one of the psychiatric diseases. In some cases, the individuals produce them, in some other cases, the society produces distinct, marginal characters. By concentrating on war trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other trauma-related diseases, researchers have attempted to ascertain and validate the impact of violent conflicts on the mental health of individuals affected. This ultimately resulted in the creation of several theories and assistance

initiatives that work to prevent and treat the negative effects of violence on mental health[14]. Towards the end of the movie, Lutz acknowledges that his memory is hazy due to the war and that he forgets certain events, and thus he cannot recall every detail from the past. He acknowledges that there are moments when he must make snap decisions that have a great deal of weight and that he secretly wishes he had made different choices earlier. One of them is just leaving Peter's newborn sister with a nurse, unable to predict that they might never see them again. And he cannot tell if Peter has a sister, live or dead.

In this respect, the nurse, Peter's sister's female caretaker in the film has another trauma. She never leaves her surroundings and prevents the others, Peter's sister, who wants to go around. She feels uneasy, not safe when she leaves the place she belongs.

The Countess, as a female ruler, who never smiles or laughs in fact represents another traumatic character whereas the King who always explores around the edges and extremes, overreacting and presenting the most unlikely options. His conditions for Peter all depend upon the power and extremities somehow related with war. The people who approve of everything and choose to remain only as spectators; a former soldier who always lives in the past, etc. Thus, one could argue that practically every other character in the narrative, exhibits PTSD symptoms. The appearance of a magic, a miracle big enough for all to see, does not take long to inspire people in a setting where not even a magician can enchant anyone or perform magic. From this angle, we must acknowledge that we are watching a kid-targeted movie with a great deal of trauma that young viewers will never be able to comprehend, and nearly every character is scarred and "marginal" in some manner. As previously stated, there appears to be a great deal in this film for adults to explore. For the younger ones, there is a sense of magic, a fairy tale atmosphere, and hope, it is the story of the brother and sister reuniting. At the end, all manage to become a big family just because Peter never gave up questioning the truth behind the scenes and struggled a lot to follow his own insights, hopes and beliefs instead of what is said to him.

The War and Reminisces mean more for the adults rather than children since if the children were really in the war regions, they would have no time to watch films. In summary, the movie emphasizes and acts as a sort of raising consciousness or awareness exercise regarding the possible impact of war on children and childhood. However, aside from the actual conflict, the real struggle of being and becoming "Self" is difficult and appears to need greater effort. The film illustrates how young people face challenges and are provided with inappropriate role models by well-respected older family members, traditional social norms, leaders, and practitioners. In order to fulfill their dreams and learn more about themselves,

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[14] H. Kienzler, *Debating war-trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in an interdisciplinary arena*, "Social Science & Medicine" 2008, 67(2), pp. 218–227.

youngsters should follow their own instincts and aspirations and disobey the law and regulations. People can choose their own identities, rediscover lost or forgotten family members, and always have the chance to look into their ancestry within the framework of the identity problem, which is one of the major issues of contemporary life. At a time when the world is growing more global, multicultural, and diverse, these statements seem to have great significance and importance.

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