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The Hidden Hazard of Cinderella

Like all the fairy tales, Cinderella started like this: Once upon a time, there was a small kingdom. A widowed gentleman lived with her little daughter Cinderella. The man married another woman who had two daughters, so Cinderella could have a more complete family. Unfortunately after the man died, the stepmother started treating Cinderella as a maid. Even the stepsisters looked down on her and always made fun of her. Poor Cinderella was forced to live in the attic and do all the housework day after day. However, Cinderella remained kind and optimistic.

One day, the king held a royal ball that invited all unmarried young ladies to attend in order to pick a wife for his son, the prince. The stepmother assigned Cinderella a lot of unreasonable cleaning work to prevent her from going to the palace. Her stepsisters ordered her to help them prepare for the ball. Despite all these unfare rules, Cinderella’s friends, mice and birds, made her a ball gown, which was torn by her stepsisters before they went to the ball. While poor Cinderella was crying at the back garden, a fairy Godmother appeared, made Cinderella a beautiful gown and sent her to the palace. Although Cinderella was the most beautiful girl at the ball and fell in love with the prince, her godmother’s gift could only last until midnight. When Cinderella escaped from the palace, she left one of her glass slippers, which later became the crucial evidence for her being recognized by the prince.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Decades have passed, but Cinderella’s charm has not. In 2008, the American Film Institute honored the ten greatest films in ten classic film genres.[[2]](#endnote-2) Cinderella was on the list, showing its unshakable status among audiences. As one of the most successful films Disney has produced for American children, the intention was to have an educational message, but the evil characters around Cinderella (her stepsisters and her stepmother) may have an unintended consequence–reducing children’s trust of people in their lives, which creates a potential risk for Social Anxiety Disorder in children.

With all the diverse hierarchies, children are a really special group of people in society. Their roles are unconsciously passive because they do not get to choose the environment in which they grow up: they perceive what they are given. In the drama Hello Monster, an extremely intelligent, yet psychotic suspect of a series of murder cases has presented a theory about children’s growth. For each individual, there is a period of time after birth that is key for the completion of a child’s mind. The duration for each species varies. For ducks, it is several hours; for monkeys, it is approximately one year; for human beings, it is ten to eleven years. This period of time is decisive because the things the individual sees, hears, understands, and senses are not easily changed. The suspect calls it a time period that shapes the individual’s soul.[[3]](#endnote-3) Based on this idea, a child’s personality reflects the environment in which he grows up and the knowledge he perceives, whether they are gained on purpose or not. Any subtle piece in his experience–a lullaby his mother sings to him; a pet phrase his father uses while arguing with others; a wall paper pattern on his bedroom wall; the very first fairy tale he reads, other people’s feedback on his schoolwork; or even one line he hears from others’ conversation–may project unimaginable effects in his life.

Since technology and electronic devices started being more and more involved in people’s daily life, animated cartoons have become the most common medium children are exposed to. They have an incredible impact on children’s growth. As the master of animation, Disney has a myriad of impressive animation films as well as characters that are embeded in everyone’s childhoods–especially in American children’s childhoods. Cinderella is one of those well-liked stories that continues to be trusted by parents and their children because of her kindness, gratitude, humility and optimism.[[4]](#endnote-4) The fantastic story that a glass slipper has changed a girl’s lamentable life into living happily ever-after sounds like the most beautiful dream.

In spite of Cinderella’s grace and tenacity, the human characters around her, the stepmother and the stepsisters, made such a big contrast with her. If the story was taken down scene by scene, audiences would realize that Cinderella lived for a long time with the stepmother and the stepsisters’ abuse. She dressed up and ran down the stairs excitedly to find her stepmother, because the stepmother promised her to go to the ball only if she got a proper dress. The stepmother and the stepsisters were astonished by Cinderella’s beauty. The two girls envied Cinderella so they tore her dress into pieces and ripped off her pearl necklace. The stepmother stood silently behind the girls with a sneering smile, watching all of this happen, but she did not stop her daughters. [[5]](#endnote-5)

This is heartbreaking. What would a child think about such ruthless bullies that victimize a nice and harmless girl? Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsister’s dark side of human nature would definitely scare children who are still in the process of learning about the world because they would empathize with the protagonists. Professor Beatrice J. Kalisch from the University of Michigan School of Nursing describes empathy as “the ability to enter into the life of another person, to accurately perceive his current feelings and their meanings.”[[6]](#endnote-6) When children listen to stories about Christmas, they believe in the existence of Santa Claus; when children listen to fairy tales about fairies, they believe that fairies would appear one day to save them from hardship. It has been explained that children’s minds are still in the state of growing, so they do not have the ability to tell which parts of a story should be believed and which parts are just made up for a story’s need. The information a child receives after seeing Cinderella being bullied by the only people in her life could reflect ugly human nature. Even Cinderella’s family members, who should be the closest relation and support, are doing this to her, not to mention other people that are out of her kinship. A fear of other individuals arises unconsciously and cannot be held back. Thus, even the most revered fairy tales can impact children negatively by undercutting trust in others.

This fear of otherness is the initial cause of Social Anxiety Disorder in children. Social Anxiety Disorder, also known as Social Phobia, is one of the three most common disorders in the United States.[[7]](#endnote-7) When the term was first used in 1903 by a French psychologist, philosopher and psychotherapist Pierre Janet, “neither the American nor the British psychiatric communities noticed, pursued, or adopted it until Isaac Marks and Michael Gelder in 1966 published a review sketching several different kinds of panic they witnessed in patients.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Social Anxiety Disorder started catching increasing attention in later and recent decades due to a growing social pressure on individuals: people’s life pace was getting faster and faster. Unexpectedly, children are more prone to struggle with this disorder.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Patients who have Social Anxiety Disorder will be really careful about their own actions and are easily embarrassed.[[10]](#endnote-10) Even though nobody is looking at them, they feel nervous just standing in a crowd. Patients are afraid to encounter society. Their hearts start to beat faster and faster. They may panic and start to sweat. As their symptoms become worse, they even feel self-hatred. Therefore, Social Anxiety Disorder can badly influence a person’s daily life.

Children watching Cinderella living in a situation where her remaining family members abused her will instill fear of building relationships with people in their daily life, since the bully scenes they watch in their decisive time period will not be forgotten. They may suspect that people in real life are equally cruel as the stepmother and the stepsisters do. Yet, it is the empathy they have with Cinderella that disturbs their judgment and makes it difficult for them to distinguish between the story and reality. Social Anxiety Disorder is devastating for a child, but it is still treatable based on today’s psychotherapy. Studies show that usually after 12-16 weeks of therapy, a patient’s symptoms will be under control.[[11]](#endnote-11) People always say that parents are the first teachers of children, so while providing resources for children’s education, parents should be very careful. Therefore, parents, being the guardians of children, have the responsibility to guide them to a brighter future. If parents watch Cinderella together with their children, and guide them to perceive the more positive side of Cinderella, the risk of causing Social Anxiety Disorder will be relatively smaller.

1. Notes

   Cinderella. United States: Walt Disney, 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. AFI: 10 Top 10, accessed May 06, 2017, http://www.afi.com/10top10/. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sang-hoon Noh, dir., "Hello Monster," in KBS2, June 22, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. "Princess Profiles: Cinderella," Rotoscopers, August 19, 2014, accessed May 01, 2017, http://www.rotoscopers.com/2013/11/04/princess-profiles-if-more-women-acted-like-cinderella-the-world-would-be-a-better-place/. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cinderella. United States: Walt Disney, 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Beatrice J, Kalisch. "What Is Empathy?" (The American Journal of Nursing 73, no. 9, 1973) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Franklin R, Schneier. "Social Anxiety Disorder: Is Common, Underdiagnosed, Impairing, And Treatable." (BMJ: British Medical Journal 327, no. 7414, 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Christopher, Lane. "A DECISIVE VICTORY: SHYNESS BECOMES AN ILLNESS." In Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness, 71-103. Yale University Press, 2007. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nphr3.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Franklin R, Schneier. "Social Anxiety Disorder: Is Common, Underdiagnosed, Impairing, And Treatable." (BMJ: British Medical Journal 327, no. 7414, 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid

    Annotated Bibliography

    AFI: 10 Top 10. Accessed May 06, 2017. http://www.afi.com/10top10/.

    This event in 2008 shows how Cinderella has impacted not only the 1950s’ audience, but all the children after that generation. As time passes, social values change. Therefore, an animation film needs to be very careful with every message of the story in order to be valued by new audiences. Not only will children watch it, but also their children and grandchildren as well.

    Boer, J. A. Den. “Social Phobia: Epidemiology, Recognition, and Treatment.” BMJ: *British Medical Journal* *315*, no. 7111 (1997): 796-800. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25175804.

    This journal article gives a brief overview of Social Phobia. I noticed that social phobia is still not a very well known topic to a lot of people. A patient had been suffering for quite a long time before being properly diagnosed.

    Cinderella. United States: Walt Disney, 1950.

    My paper focuses on the relationship between Cinderella and SADC. A lot of the scenes in this movie have inspired me since I was a child. I notice how much this movie had impacted me only after I grow up and reflect on my experience. Although I didn’t have SADC, there is still risk of reducing other children’s trust in people.

    Lane, Christopher. "A DECISIVE VICTORY: SHYNESS BECOMES AN ILLNESS." In Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness, 71-103. Yale University Press, 2007. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nphr3.6.

    It is a chapter from the book “Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness.” In the first several paragraphs, Christopher Lane introduces the history of the term social phobia. By discovering the origin, I noticed how small things could bring an unimaginable huge impact, and shyness can become debilitating.

    Kalisch, Beatrice J. "What Is Empathy?" *The American Journal of Nursing 73*, no. 9 (1973): 1548-552. doi:10.2307/3422614.

    In this article, Beatrice J. Kalisch defines “Empathy” in a way that helps me better understand more about children’s actions. We all have empathy. It’s more common in children, because they don’t have as much knowledge as adults in telling the difference between reality and fantasy. Another way to say this is that children are more innocent and trusting, because they are more empathetic.

    Murray, Lynne, Marc De Rosnay, Joanna Pearson, Caroline Bergeron, Elizabeth Schofield, Melanie Royal-Lawson, and Peter J. Cooper. “Intergenerational Transmission of Social Anxiety: The Role of Social Referencing Processes in Infancy.” Child Development 79, no. 4 (2008): 1049-064. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27563537.

    This is an article about child development. At first, it talks about how serious social phobia can be. People usually ignore unobvious symptoms, but there may be a hidden danger under the surface. Social Anxiety Disorder can be fatal for children if they don’t get diagnosed and treated early.

    Noh, Sang-hoon, dir. "Hello Monster." In KBS2. June 22, 2015.

    Hello Monster is a Korean drama about an extremely intelligent psychotic suspect of a series of murder cases. His sick psychology is a result of his childhood experience. For me, the most powerful line in this drama is this killer’s theory of the decisive time period for children’s growth. As I mentioned, small things can have a big impact. Any piece of memory in childhood may potentially change a child’s life.

    "Princess Profiles: Cinderella." Rotoscopers. August 19, 2014. Accessed May 01, 2017. http://www.rotoscopers.com/2013/11/04/princess-profiles-if-more-women-acted-like-cinderella-the-world-would-be-a-better-place/.

    In this website, it summarizes Cinderella’s positive characteristics. Disney created these characteristics on purpose to educate children. I learned more about the movie’s intentions and how separate things could work together in the movie in order to emphasize one topic. Overall, Cinderella is trying to portray an optimistic female figure.

    Schneier, Franklin R. "Social Anxiety Disorder: Is Common, Underdiagnosed, Impairing, And Treatable." *BMJ: British Medical Journal 327*, no. 7414 (2003): 515-16. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25455413.

    Different from other articles I researched, this journal talks about the therapy of Social Anxiety Disorder. Although this disease is dangerous, it is treatable. Not all patients can be cured, but if they receive well treatment, they can live with this disease. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)