

Running Head: HARRY POTTER AND THE STRUGGLE WITH CHILDHOOD

Harry Potter and the Struggle with Childhood

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Abstract

The character of Harry Potter from J.K. Rowling's almost cult-inspiring series reflects many principles of child development including resilient children, temperament, and attachment theory. The hero of the series proves that despite a severe and terrifying childhood, he can prevail to not only be a strong, normal person, but also the savior of the Wizarding World. Harry's innate characteristics and his loving environment overpower the factors that work against him to result in a rather competent and astounding individual.

### Harry Potter and the Struggle with Childhood

The character of Harry Potter from J.K. Rowling's almost cult-inspiring series reflects many principles of child development. As seen in all seven novels, Harry shows many characteristics of Werner's (2001) "resilient children" in Hawaii and their discovered ability to attract mentors. After a mere 15 months with his parents, Harry is orphaned and spends the better part of his childhood with his abusive aunt and uncle, the Dursleys. This experience is similar to the plight of many orphans in the real world. However, the hero of the series proves that despite a severe and terrifying childhood, he can prevail not only to be a strong, well-adjusted person, but also the savior of the Wizarding World. Harry's innate characteristics and his initial loving environment with his parents overpower the factors that work against him to result in a well rounded and rather astounding individual.

Harry has many traits in common with resilient children that enable him to attract mentors who help him adapt and survive in and out of the Wizarding World. In her 1955 longitudinal study of problem children on Kauai, Werner (1989) observed children who had a very difficult upbringing due to a traumatic birth, poor child rearing, or familial troubles, but nevertheless overcame these obstacles to become contributing and successful members of society. Werner said that, "as resilient children grew older, they seemed to be particularly adept at recruiting such surrogate parents when a biological parent was unavailable" (p. 4). Likewise, Harry has this ability. Substitute parents seem to flock to him, including Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Professor McGonagall and Hagrid. They affect his adolescent life in a multitude of ways including

accepting Harry for the person he is, “guiding Harry to make the right decisions,” acting as a role model and mentor, offering direction and guidance to Harry, and providing unconditional love and support (Provenzano & Heyman 2006, p. 114). In these ways they act as a parent for Harry who is in desperate need of one. These parent figures instill in Harry the importance of mentors in children’s lives. Harry mirrors such actions in the epilogue of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by acting as a mentor for Teddy Lupin (the orphan child of Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks), continuing the circle. Harry knows that all of his mentors had a profound effect on his life and with Teddy he can pass on the favor.

One mentor in particular stands out above the rest – this person of course being the headmaster, Professor Albus Dumbledore. As Werner (1989) notes, “many resilient youths mention a favorite teacher who had become a role model, friend and confidant and was particularly supportive at times when their own family was beset by discord or threatened with dissolution” (p. 5). This defines the impact Dumbledore has on Harry’s life perfectly. Harry believes that Dumbledore has all the answers. Whenever Harry is in trouble, he turns to Dumbledore. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, after Harry experiences pain in his scar, he leaves class early saying, “he was going straight to Dumbledore’s office” (Rowling 2000, pg. 578). This shows that when Harry is scared, in trouble, or just confused, the first person that he thinks of is Dumbledore, proving he trusts that the Headmaster will be able to help him understand. As is said many times throughout the series, “Dumbledore is the only person Voldemort ever feared” (Rowling 2000, pg. 679). Since Harry knows that he, himself, must be the one to kill Voldemort, he looks up to Dumbledore as a role model. Of course, Dumbledore’s

greatest contribution towards the end of the series is to support Harry in his every endeavor towards defeating Voldemort. Not only does Dumbledore provide Harry with the physical tools he needs such as Godric Gryffindor's sword, Salazar Slytherin's locket and the "Resurrection Stone" (Rowling 2007, p. 409), but also he trusts Harry, which gives the hero of the books the self-confidence he needs. Even after Dumbledore's death, Harry knows that he can triumph over Voldemort because Dumbledore taught him everything he needs to save the Wizarding World.

One of the ways in which Dumbledore is able to help Harry is through "social scaffolding." This technique coined by Vygotsky is defined as support that is given to children to help them solve a given task, which gives hints and teaches different strategies rather than giving answers upfront (Troseth, personal communication, 2008). True to the concept of "social scaffolding", Dumbledore never tells Harry everything he needs to know; indeed, he never tells him that Harry, himself, is a Horcrux, and he must sacrifice himself to kill Voldemort. This Harry must work out on his own, along with many other problems, such as the meaning of The Deathly Hallows and "the prophecy". For example, Dumbledore never explicitly explains to Harry exactly what he needs to know about each Horcrux. In fact, Dumbledore shows Harry a memory containing what he needs to know, and lets Harry work it out for himself. After Dumbledore's death, Harry is forced to work it all out on his own but the hints that Dumbledore gave him (i.e. that the last Horcrux might be a relic of Ravenclaw) help Harry put all the missing pieces together. It is because of Dumbledore's application of social scaffolding that Harry solves the puzzle and defeats Voldemort. Dumbledore knows that Harry has both the Wizarding skills and the inner strength that will be necessary to complete his mission.

Indeed, it seems as if Harry possesses what Siegler, DeLoache, & Eisenberg explain as “emotional intelligence” which attracts his multiple friends and mentors. The authors define this as “a set of abilities that contribute to competence in the social and emotional domains... which include being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustration, identify and understand one’s own and others’ feelings, regulate one’s moods, regulate the expression of emotions in social interactions, and empathize with others’ emotions” (2006, p. 375). Surely, Harry “motivates himself and persists in the face of frustration” in every single book. In the first book, when Harry is attempting to find what Snape is presumably trying to steal, he searches for weeks in the library, despite schoolwork and Quidditch practice. Even though he wants to give up looking, he tells himself that he must find the truth so he can triumph over the evil Snape. Similarly, Harry has the capacity to empathize with others. Besides befriending those who are considered less than him, such as Hagrid and Dobby the House Elf, Harry is able to empathize with Lord Voldemort, a skill that inevitably saves his life. In fact, in *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* when Harry asks Dumbledore if it is important to know about Voldemort’s past, Dumbledore answers, “very important, I think” (Rowling 2005, p. 215). That Harry is able to understand Voldemort’s life story ultimately is the key that allows Harry to defeat him.

However, where Harry’s emotional intelligence wavers is in his sporadic inability to control his own emotions. In fact, his tendency to have little control of his emotions, particularly his anger, can be tied to his innate temperament. According to Siegler, DeLoache, and Eisenberg, temperament is “constitutionally based individual differences in emotional, motor, and attentional reactivity and self-regulation that demonstrate

consistency across situations, as well as relative stability over time” (2006. p. 391).

Multiple characteristics determine a child’s temperament. Fearful distress, for example, is a trait at which Harry knows well. Despite all of the monstrous creatures he encounters throughout the novels, including Fluffy, the three-headed dog, and the Hungarian Horntail dragon, Harry is not truly frightened. Similarly, in characteristics such as attention span and activity level, Harry strongly succeeds. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, undeterred by the tremendous amount of time and effort it takes, Harry patiently deciphers the Horcrux mystery. Where Harry’s temperament is lacking is in his ability to control his emotions. Indeed, one of Harry’s largest character flaws is his tendency to “fly off the handle”. Harry is known to be melodramatic and goes through periods of extreme hostility. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, for example, Harry angers easily and throws temper tantrums when he feels left out, most notably towards his two best friends. Also in this book, Malfoy insults Harry’s parents and the Weasleys until Harry is pushed over the edge and physically attacks him. Still, the archetypal hero is known to be somewhat impetuous and hard to control. It is this biological trait that allows Harry to be the hero that the Wizarding World needs.

Outside of his innate characteristics, Harry’s early environment also seems to have played a role in his outcome, most notably his secure attachment. Good parent-child attachment is defined by Siegler, DeLoache, and Eisenberg (2006) as “the presence of a trusted caregiver providing an infant or toddler with a sense of security that allows the child to explore the environment and hence to become generally knowledgeable and competent” (p. 416). Along the same lines, children use their caregivers as a “secure base”, and become distressed when their guardian leaves the room, and pleased when

they return, as shown in the Strange Situation study (Siegler et al., 2006, p. 416).

Children with these characteristics are designated as “securely attached.” Later on in life, children who have grown up in this group are typically well adjusted and socially skilled. They also understand that expressing and communicating one’s feelings to peers and others is essential to a healthy well being (Siegler et al., 2006).

After the fall of the communist Soviet Union in 1989, an observational study was done on the institutionalized orphans of Eastern Europe, most notably Romania. Victor Groza found that many of these orphans had severe attachment issues and therefore deemed them “challenged children” (Talbot 1998, p. 6). These children suffered as a result of mostly not being cared for by a parent or guardian. They received only physical necessities and suffered from a lack of adult contact. Many of these children later in life developed behavioral and mental problems (Talbot 1998). However, there were some children who Groza designated as the “resilient rascals” who were described as “not displaying any obvious effects of their institutionalization at all” (Talbot 1998, p. 6). These were those children who, despite their adverse childhood, grew up to have the same qualities as non-orphaned, securely attached children. Harry falls into this category.

Harry’s experience while growing up at the Dursleys is comparable to the experiences of the Romanian orphans. His bedroom was a tiny cloakroom under the staircase until he was 11. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Rowling writes that Uncle Vernon “paid a man to fit bars on Harry’s window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening” (Rowling 1999, p. 22). Readers could conclude that the Dursleys never showed him physical affection and



only paid attention to him when it would benefit them. In cases of such maltreatment, Provenzano and Heyman (2006) conclude, “his physical, social, academic, and behavioral functioning are average to extraordinary” (pg. 105). Despite the childhood problems that Harry faces, he surmounts those obstacles and becomes one of the most beloved wizards of all time. Provenzano and Heyman (2006) claim that emotional neglect should send “the message that the child is unloved and defective” (p. 106). Regardless of his negative upbringing, Harry never mentions feeling defective. Certainly he is unloved, and he recognizes that, but he also realizes it is because the Dursleys are mean spirited people, not that he is incapable of being loved.

Much of this sense of understanding can be attributed to the fact that while the majority of his childhood is spent in maltreatment, Harry does spend some of his most formative months in the care of his two loving parents. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry finds a letter written by his mother, Lily, which reads “one year old and already zooming around on a broomstick, he looked so pleased with himself...but we’ve had to make sure we don’t take our eyes off him when he gets going” (Rowling 2007, p. 180). The fact that Harry is given toys such as this broomstick and has the freedom to play with them, but at the same time is carefully watched by his loving parents, is proof that Harry resides in the secure attachment group. Although he only experiences this affection and attachment for 15 months, it is apparently enough time to leave a life-long impression. When Lily sacrifices herself for Harry, she imparts in him her protection of love, which is known as “ancient magic” (Rowling 2003, p. 835) and this love carries him through the next 10 years of misery with the Dursleys, and ultimately saves him and the Wizarding World from Lord Voldemort. Without Harry’s experience of attachment in

his first year of life, these results would have been highly improbable. In the case of the Romanian orphans, they were never loved by anyone and never received the sort of attachment that Harry had with his parents. For this reason, the orphans faced innumerable difficulties that Harry never has to overcome.

The concept of the “internal working model” is also reflected in Harry’s strong sense of self worth. According to Siegler, DeLoache, and Eisenberg (2006), this is defined as “the child’s mental representation of the self, of attachment figures, and of relationships in general that is constructed as a result of experiences with caregivers which guides children’s interactions with caregivers and other people in infancy and at older ages” (p. 417). It conveys to children that relationships should be satisfying and that they should “come to expect that they are worthy of receiving care and love. As adults they should look for and expect to find satisfying and security-enhancing relationships similar to ones they had with their attachment figures in childhood” (p. 417). Similar to the idea of the internal working model, Lily and James’s unyielding love has given Harry the ability to attract mentors and friends in a myriad of ways. Harry’s relationship with his godfather, Sirius, is an example of a mentor who is similar to a childhood supportive figure, his father. Sirius’s capacity to act in the same manner as James helps to relieve Harry of the stress and confusion caused by the absence of a father figure in his life and give him a feeling of self-worth.

This is not to say Harry’s traumatic upbringing did not adversely affect him. This quote from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* is evidence. “Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother” (Rowling 2000, p. 714).

That he had never felt a real hug proves how difficult his childhood must have been. Also evident from his nine years at Number 4, Privet Drive is Harry's pessimistic outlook on life (Goodfriend 2006, p. 85). This is easiest to see in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* before Harry gets sorted into Gryffindor when he thinks to himself, "what if he wasn't chosen at all. What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there has obviously been a mistake and he better get back on the train" (Rowling 1998, p. 103). Harry is quick to believe he is worthless, which obviously comes about from his time at the Dursleys. However, in the end, Harry overcomes both of these obstacles and more to become a healthy, well-attached adult.

Harry's ordeal in the first part of his childhood is one that would make any other child literally crazy (or at least defective in some way). In truth, the fact that Harry overcame all of the mental and physical barriers that come his way is nothing short of remarkable. Many people believe that Harry's defeat of Voldemort made him a champion, but in reality, his reactions to life and the psychological impacts that come with it are what truly make him the hero of the stories.

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