

Malcolm In The Middle Teen Media Analysis

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PSY 208 Psychology of Adolescents and Emerging Adulthood

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Monday, November 28, 2022

During its run, *Malcolm In The Middle* had families across the nation tuned in weekly to see what mischievous activities the family was up to. In a household with no last name, which is the running-gag of the show, every day is packed with disobedience and the thrill of youth from not only Malcolm and his siblings, but from their parents as well. Although the show's title alludes to Malcolm being the middle child, he is the 3rd oldest of his siblings, who consist of four boys. Later in the show, a fifth brother is introduced, truly making Malcolm “in the middle”.

The focus of this paper will dwell on aggression and bullying in adolescents with consideration to factors such as parenting styles and peer status; which are both highlighted in the show. To help establish connections between the depictions of adolescence in *Malcolm In The Middle* and the material learned in class, this paper will follow two empirical articles which discuss these aspects of adolescence.

The first article revolves around the association between aggression in adolescents and the parenting styles that their mothers and fathers used respectively (De la Torre-Cruz et al., 2017). A study using 371 children from Southern Spain between the ages of 11 and 16 was conducted, where the children were given three self-report questionnaires: Scale of Affect, Scale of Rules and Demands, and Aggression Questionnaire. Between the Scale of Affect and Scale of Rules and Demands, three dimensions of parenting were recorded. The Scale of Affect measured the dimension of communication between the adolescent and the parent, while the Scale of Rules and Demands measured the dimensions of “inductive discipline” and “strict discipline”. The three self-reports measured the adolescents’ perceived affection from each parent, the perceived intensity and motives of rules and demands from each parent, and aggression that the adolescents

exhibited. These reports consisted of questions such as, “Takes time to talk to me,” that were answered through a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “never” and 5 being “always”.

The responses from the children highlight their perception of their parents’ parenting style and their understanding of their aggressiveness towards their peers. After the self-reports were completed, medians were calculated for the three respective dimensions listed above for the mothers and fathers of the participants. The medians for these dimensions in the mothers were 42, 40, and 29. The medians for these dimensions in the fathers were 38, 40, and 28. Using these medians, the researchers were able to identify which parents exhibited neglecting, authoritative, authoritarian, and indulgent/permissive parenting styles. Parents that scored lower than the median on all dimensions were noted to have neglectful parenting styles. Parents that scored higher than the median for the communication and inductive discipline dimensions, but lower than the median for the strict discipline dimension were noted to have authoritative parenting styles. Conversely, parents that scored lower than the median in the communication and inductive discipline dimensions, but higher than the median for the strict discipline dimension were noted to have authoritarian parenting styles. Lastly, parents who scored higher than the median in the communication dimension, but lower than the median in the inductive and strict discipline dimensions were noted to have indulgent/permissive parenting styles (De la Torre-Cruz et al., 2017).

Once these categories were established, it was time for the researchers to look for associations between the different parenting styles and the levels of aggression that each participant reported amongst themselves. Multivariate and univariate analysis of variance with post-hoc comparisons were conducted.

In their study, the researchers found that there was a negative correlation with the amount of affection from each parent and inductive discipline when comparing these variables with the aggressiveness of the child (De la Torre-Cruz et al., 2017). Conversely, there was a positive correlation between strict discipline and the aggressiveness of the child. Looking deeper into the study, the gender of the children did not yield statistically significant differences when comparing the mothers' parenting style and the aggressiveness of the children. This includes anger, physical aggression, and verbal aggression. However, it was also found that boys admitted to higher levels of physical aggression than girls. Furthermore, the researchers also found that the mothers' authoritative parenting style contributed to less physical aggression in the children than the neglectful and authoritarian parent styles. Children raised with the authoritarian parenting style from their mothers also showed more hostility. When inspecting the relationship between the fathers' parenting styles and the aggressiveness in the participants, the results were similar. Children raised with authoritative or indulgent parenting styles from their fathers reported lower levels of physical aggressiveness than neglectful or authoritarian parenting styles. Additionally, authoritarian parenting styles from fathers were found to manifest more verbal aggressiveness than authoritative parenting styles (De la Torre-Cruz et al., 2017).

The second article follows the association between the perceived rejection or acceptance of an adolescent from their peers and the overall aggressiveness of that adolescent (Malamut et al., 2022). Although this sort of association has been studied in the past, the researchers behind this particular study made sure to consider the "actual status" of participants. Therefore, instead of only inspecting the correlation between the perceived peer status that an adolescent has of themselves and the levels of aggression that are reported, the researchers also factored in the adolescent's actual peer status. Additionally, the researchers tested if the accuracy of the

participants' self-perception varied between participants with high levels of aggression and participants with low levels of aggression (Malamut et al., 2022).

For this study, the researchers approached a cross-sequential design (Malamut et al., 2022). 735 students from Los Angeles High School between the 9th and 10th grade were accounted for on the first part of the study, which measured current aggression. The second part of the study, which was conducted a year later, measured longitudinal aggression. 572 of the 735 students participated in the second part. For both parts of the study, students were given self-report questionnaires to determine their perceived peer status and actual peer status. In these questionnaires, students had to rate the likeness of 50 other randomly selected students to obtain an image of each student's peer status. Furthermore, students then evaluated their own perceived peer status by answering if they believed other participants rated their likeness highly or low. To evaluate aggressive behavior from each student, researchers also required participants to name students that engaged in relational and/or physical aggression.

Once the reports were in, researchers conducted regression analyses to investigate the associations between aggression and self-perceived/actual peer status. From these analyses, the researchers concluded a couple of things. The girls in the study showed higher levels of relational aggression than boys, while the boys showed higher levels of physical aggression (Malamut et al., 2022). These findings, so far, align with what we learned in class regarding aggression differences (Kistner et al., 2010). Teens who are aware that they are highly rejected or accepted tend to be more aggressive overall. When inspecting self-perceived rejection and acceptance, they were found to be associated with current relational aggression, but not current physical aggression. Only self-perceived rejection was associated with longitudinal physical and relational aggression, though. When it came to actual peer acceptance and rejection, they were

both found to be associated with current relational and physical aggression. However, like self-perceived rejection, actual rejection also was associated with longitudinal physical and relational aggression (Malamut et al., 2022). The relationship between self-perceived peer status and aggression was found to be dependent on actual peer status. Researchers found that adolescents who overestimated their acceptance were more likely to engage in relational aggression. Furthermore, adolescents who overestimated their rejection were more likely to engage in physical aggression.

In a general sense, the class material and the findings from each article align with how adolescence in Malcolm's family is depicted, although exaggerated. Each member of the family possesses unique characteristics and personalities that complete one another, which follows the Family System Theory (Class notes). The oldest, Francis, is noted to be the delinquent role-model of Malcolm and his siblings and does not live in the house with the rest of the family, but his hectic life is still incorporated in each episode. Living at home with Malcolm are his polar-opposite parents and his two other brothers, Reese and Dewey. Malcolm's mother, Lois, is a renowned "control-freak" who cannot lay her eyes off her boys for a second without them bringing themselves into trouble. Having no room to listen to any sort of rebuttals, she orders and expects Malcolm and his brothers to listen to every word she says. "Because I said so" is a sentence that Lois uses a lot when disciplining and punishing her kids. Malcolm and the boys' father, Hal, is a loose cannon who only compliments the havoc and dysfunction within the household. Although he can be a fun parent, Hal can put his foot down when the boys need discipline. Unlike Lois, Hal is often able to explain to Malcolm and his siblings about why and how they misbehaved. Summing it up, Lois adheres to an Authoritarian parenting style while Hal demonstrates an Authoritative parenting style (Class notes). Although each parent subscribes to

different parenting styles, it should be noted that the social dynamic in Malcolm's household leaves Lois on top of everyone else. While disciplining the boys, she also finds herself having to discipline her husband. That said, it makes more sense to say these boys were raised more with an Authoritarian parenting style. Aligning with what was found in the first empirical article, Reese and Malcolm turned out to be aggressive adolescents under an Authoritarian household (De la Torre-Cruz et al., 2017).

Malcolm's siblings at home are alike in the sense that they are not the brightest. Reese and Dewey are the second and fourth siblings, respectively. Although this duo is alike in their impulsiveness, they differ in their outlook of the world. Being aware of his peer rejection, Reese confidently takes on the role of a bully at home and at school, clearly posing as an aggressive-rejected child. This behavior is similar to what was found in the second article. Reese knows and is constantly reminded that he is disliked, therefore his aggression manifests (Malamut et al., 2022). Dewey shows neglected traits at school and at home. There was an episode where Dewey, surprisingly, displayed extreme piano skills and won a national award, all without anyone in the house noticing because they were occupied with their own lives. Apart from one episode when Dewey took his Mom's purse to school and loaded it with a brick to use against his bullies, Dewey tends to fall victim to Reese's, and sometimes even Malcolm's, attacks. Aligning with his peer status, Dewey displays good social skills later in the show, but is a shy and unassertive boy overall (Class notes). Reese, on the other hand, does not have friends throughout the entire show. He never talks about any clique or claims any crowd. Most of Reese's interactions with other kids in the show typically end with Reese punching them in the stomach and walking away because he interpreted what they had said or done to be malicious against him. This outlook solidifies his aggressive-withdrawn personality (Class notes).

Finally, Malcolm is a literal genius who is noted to be snobby and ignorant towards his peers, in the sense that his high intelligence makes him egotistical. He is enrolled in a class designed for highly intelligent kids like himself. Malcolm is socially lumped in with the crowd called “The Krelboynes”, which is what the intelligent kids are referred to as by the rest of the kids at school. In the earlier seasons, Malcolm is a part of a clique that consists of 4 other “Krelboynes”. At home, he can be more physically aggressive towards his brothers. Evidently, Malcolm is relationally aggressive towards his peers but physically aggressive towards his siblings. Although his snobbiness is often annoying to his peers, he is still highly valued by them and is often noted to be the “coolest of all Krelboynes”. Since Malcolm is liked by his clique, but disliked by the rest of his intelligent classmates, it all alludes to his peer status being controversial (Class notes). Funnily enough, it constantly surprises Malcolm when he is reminded by his peers that he comes off as unlikeable by many people due to his ego. With respect to the second article, knowing that Malcolm overestimates his acceptance from peers whilst Reese is aware of his rejection, these depictions of adolescents with aggression are correct (Malamut et al., 2022).

All in all, *Malcolm in the Middle* is a fun show that illustrates irony and satire while adhering to true and found aspects of adolescence.

References

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