

**Child Development: Film Analysis of Boyhood**

STUDENT EXAMPLE

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*Boyhood* (2013) is a longitudinal cinema film which tracks the bio-psychological development of a young boy named Mason from early childhood to adolescence. The film offers a unique perspective regarding the process of child development as they pertain to the average child. However, Mason faces a few hardships which defined how he developed into adulthood. This is primarily a result of unstable family structure which characterizes the young boy as a victim of divorce. Although single parent households are common, there are a few obstacles as a result that make the film highly empathetical and relatable. During the course of this project, I will analyze this film by applying the bioecological theory to the obstacles in Mason's life. The bioecological theory was founded by Urie Bronfenbrenner and explains child development as a series of interactions between environmental systems and children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This film analysis will describe Mason's development by identifying a factor from all levels of the bioecological model. Thus, allowing insight into the various systems which affect the unique pathology of Mason.

The socio-historical period, or "Chronosystem" characterized by the film is the early 2000-2014. During this period in time, American society had begun to enter the war on terror and emerge into the information age. The socio-political environment resulting from the war on terror placed higher emphasis on public safety and anxious handling of everyday matters; the technological development characterizing the information age caused society to prefer knowledge-oriented careers and allowed information to travel quickly with relative ease. It is difficult to characterize how this time period specifically affects Mason's development. However, I suspect the anxious handling and emphasis on public safety explains why the child's family structure seemed very strict. Overall, the chronosystem acts as a mediating variable by

providing the background on how all of the systems operate during the course of this film (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

With regards to the factors which make up culture as a whole - referred to as the macrosystem - *Boyhood* does an excellent job at clearly displaying cultural factors which negatively impact the developmental pathology of Mason. For example, this film takes place during a time period where single-parent families such as Mason's were becoming more prevalent and tolerated by society - although still viewed as taboo. Furthermore, society was demanding a higher emphasis on education. Both of these movements impact the other levels of the bioecological theory and affect the developmental pathology of Mason. The first factor of the macrosystem which negatively impacted him was society's biases towards single-families. Unfortunately, Mason would be treated poorly by the various people - particularly father figures - which entered his life. This bias would develop into discriminations towards his mother which I believe instilled a sense of burden onto him. This could certainly explain Mason's minor insecurities and geeky personality. An example of this could be seen during early adolescence when he is described as weird by his girlfriend and ridiculed by his second stepfather. With regards to the cultural emphasis placed on education, Mason's mother assumed yet another role as a university student. During this period in time, financially stable jobs began to require additional years of training and a college education became very marketable. Therefore, Mason's mother devoted additional resources into pursuing a degree, which I believe took valuable attention away from her children. His mother's role as a single-parent also resulted in constant relocations which I identify as causing a lack of social consistency for her children. Unfortunately, I believe both of these factors caused Mason to develop lowered self-confidence and struggles with his identity.

The interactions between others and their respective systems, as they pertain to another individual, is known as the Exosystem. Perhaps the most noticeable example is Mason's mothers' role strain. This can be visible as the woman struggles to balance the roles of being a single mother, employee, and student. Although somewhat ambiguous, these roles led to a poor interaction with Mason. His mother had little time to devote to all of her responsibilities which created a sense of tension in the household and resulted in frequent lash outs. This can be illustrated when mason's mother yells at him for taking time away from her other responsibilities. Although I believe she is trying her best to provide for her children, these interactions appear to create somewhat poor attachment skills with Mason. According to psychoanalytic studies in childhood development, this outcome is likely a result of a child's needs failing to be met during early childhood (Levy et al., 2011). Nonetheless, I believe the audience is aware of her acknowledgment of this poor connection when she becomes dejected at the thought of Mason moving for college. This result is evident when significant figures in his life, most notably his girlfriend, ask him to open up more; his peers frequently ask him what he wants to do in life. Therefore, it appears the systems affecting Mason's mother negatively impacted Mason's interpersonal connection with others.

Systems which directly affect an individual belong to the bioecological level known as the Microsystem. Although there are many structures which provide an effect on Mason's development, the most significant one is Mason's family structure. An individual's family is referred to as an immediate context, in other words, the primary setting which psychosocial development occurs. Mason's family system is presented as being very unstable and alternated between a single-parent family, and blended family. This family, lacking a stable father figure, further created a sense of inconsistency. This is owing to the fact that Mason's mother had

custody of both him and his sister and was separated from their biological father figure.

However, the other male figures in their life were abusive, alcoholics, or generally incapable of accepting their mother's status as a single mother. For example, the first man she dated was openly discriminatory and abandoned her due to her role as a responsibility to her children.

There is no doubt that the lack of stable father figures in Mason's life indirectly and negatively impacted the development of Mason. According to a study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, the absence or lack of father figure is negatively associated with poor attachment skills and lowered well-being among children (McLanahan et al., 2013). Given the brevity of the situation, I believe Mason could have experienced issues with attachment due to the instability of his mother's interaction with father figures (Levy et al., 2011; McLanahan et al., 2013).

However, I believe the negative impacts were minor, as the advancements of technology allowed Mason to interact with his biological father consistently.

With regards to the final level of the bioecological model, biological traits of the Mason also play a significant role in his development. As bioecological systems are constantly interacting with one another, it is important to recognize that they are contingent on his individual traits. Nevertheless, Mason has many positive and negative traits. Beginning with the positive traits he is: intelligent, intuitive, explorative, and artistically inclined. With regards to Mason's negative qualities, he appears to be: introverted, aloof, judgmental, overcritical, and gloomy. I believe most of these traits present Mason as a Debbie-downer who has a difficult time opening up to others. Although he is very talented and kind, most of these traits get overlooked due to his internalizing demeanor. Examples of other individuals mentioning Mason's personality are presented when his teacher calls him talented but lacking work ethic; when Mason and his girlfriend breakup and she calls him cynical and gloomy. Therefore, Mason's

individual traits seem to both positively and negatively impact his development in a unique fashion.

Although *Boyhood* does an excellent job portraying child development throughout all three domains and several contexts, it is just as successful at capturing the unspoken struggles of life. Everything about Mason's story seemed unique but typical. The bioecological theory not only explains Mason's unique psychopathology but helped me realize how fragile and unique childhood is. While watching this film, I felt as if I were part of Mason's family. I was able to observe Mason's mind and body develop as he overcame traumatic experiences and reacted to life events. Much to my amazement, I felt immediate sorrow when he departed for college. It seemed as if Mason was my very own child and I was watching him embark on his next journey - adulthood. As for my overall impression of how Mason developed, I believe he struggled with a few hardships, but nothing about him was out of the ordinary. Perhaps the greatest takeaway from this film is that there is no such thing as perfect child development. Unfortunately, we are all atypical in our very own way. As Mason stated during in the film, why would anyone want to be normal?

## References

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