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Psychology in the Hunger Games

Rosa E. Trippel

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behavior. It uses an empirical approach to cover a wide variety of subjects, all involving human's biology, mind, and social environments. Psychology is very important because it studies the human experience. Without it, there would not be a way to compare individual human experiences or understand why each person has a different experience. Suzanne Collins' trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, provides an excellent canvas to apply psychological concepts. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen begins her rebellious journey by volunteering for her sister, Prim, and competing in a deadly competition forced upon her by the Capitol, which is the overarching government. The series is in Katniss' point of view and follows her as she wins her first games with Peeta Malark, is forced into another hunger games, and becomes the symbolic leader of the rebellion. Throughout the series, Katniss describes her many friends, acquaintances, and allies that help her along her journey to become the Mockingjay. Psychologist Jean Piaget thought that every person's mind develops in a similar manner and that there are age-related stages that represent this process. Many psychologists agreed and formed their own theories of moral development, as well as lists of psychosocial tasks that each age group needs to accomplish in order to feel satisfied with their lives. In her best-selling trilogy author Suzanne Collins encompasses these psychologists' theories into many of her characters to help teach about psychology and its importance in everyday life. This paper will focus on multiple psychological concepts to better understand characters in *The Hunger Games*, including cognitive development, morality, psychosocial issues, self-esteem, and resilience.

Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist who firmly believed that humans go through "a certain number of stages, each different from the other" (Myers, 2018, p. 175). He believed that children grow cognitively based on their ages in a sequential order. His stages of cognitive development included the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. According to Piaget, the first three occur within the first 11 years of a human's life, beginning and ending at certain ages. However, the fourth stage is where humans remain for the duration of their lives. Myers (2018) describes this stage as having the ability to reason abstractly and reaches milestones of "abstract logic," as well as "potential for mature moral reasoning" (p. 179). The cognitive stages and their milestones can be seen in Collins' trilogy throughout her character development.

In accordance with *The Hunger Games*, there are only a few characters who fall below Piaget's fourth stage of cognitive development. Primrose Everdeen, Katniss' sister, is 12 at the beginning of the first book, so she is just

entering into the formal operational stage. Her ability to think logically is barely beginning to form when Effie Trinket reads her name during the reaping. During this scene, Katniss' journey as a victor begins when she volunteers for Prim, who is "screaming hysterically," (Collins, 2008, p. 23) and terrified that she will never see her sister again. This is an emotional, yet logical reaction from Prim. She displays her emotions vividly by clinging to her sister and crying out, but it is a logical reaction because the odds are not in Katniss' favor as she will be facing twenty-three deadly tributes in the upcoming weeks. It is evident that Prim's ability to think logically is not fully formed when she is saying goodbye to Katniss and encourages her by saying, "maybe you can win" (Collins, 2008, p. 36). Katniss automatically dismisses this idea. With her fully functioning formal operational stage, Katniss knows that the chances of her survival are very low and that "the competition will be far beyond [her] abilities" (Collins, 2008, p. 36). Piaget would think that Prim is transitioning from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage as seen by how she can respond to situations with high levels of logic or a very small amount.

Jean Piaget's stage theory inspired other psychologists to develop their own stage theories based on development. Lawrence Kohlberg "sought to describe the development of moral reasoning," (Myers, 2018, p. 194) throughout a human's lifetime. With this interest, Kohlberg established three stages including preconventional morality, conventional morality, and postconventional morality. He conjectured that children under the age of nine are in the preconventional morality stage where they are focused on "self-interest," and obeying "rules to avoid punishment or gain concrete rewards" (Myers, 2018, p. 195). Once they grow up, they realize that laws need to be upheld to "gain social approval or maintain social order" (Myers, 2018, p. 195). This is the conventional morality stage which Kohlberg says is typically right after age nine and during early adolescence. Finally, the postconventional morality stage starts during adolescence and continues throughout life. Its "actions reflect belief in basic rights and self-defined ethical principles" (Myers, 2018, p. 195). This stage is where people choose to define their own values and beliefs, choosing when they think someone is or is not moral. It takes time and practice to determine. Much of human's morality is based in "moral intuitions [which are] quick gut feelings" (Myers, 2018, p. 195). People have the tendency to decide if something is moral or not based on their initial reaction, instead of long, tedious thoughts on the topic.

Based on their age, each character in *The Hunger Games* can be assigned to one of the levels of moral thinking, but the level is not as important as the values they develop for themselves. Gale, Katniss' best friend and hunting partner, is one of many characters transitioning from the conventional morality stage to the postconventional morality stage during the

course of the series. During *Mockingjay*, Gale makes the most strides to define what he believes to be moral or immoral. He is quick to choose violence and does not see the issues with killing innocent people for the rebellion. Gale's moral development was affected greatly when he suffered the loss of his father, watched as his best friend was taken from him and sent to the Capitol to compete in the gory hunger games, and survived the destruction of his home in district 12. These situations made him vulnerable to think that others deserve the same treatment that he has been given. He longs for revenge on, not only the Capitol, but its citizens, in an attempt to retribute for all of the losses he and his family has suffered. During the rebellion when Katniss and Gale were sent to district 2, Gale proffers an idea about how to take over the Nut, which houses the bulk of the Capitol's military. His plan suggests that the rebels should suffocate the mountain:

'Not if we blow it up,' says Gale brusquely. His intent, his full intent, becomes clear. Gale has no interest in preserving the lives of those in the Nut. No interest in caging the prey for later use. This is one of his death traps...The implications of what Gale is suggesting settle quietly around the room. You can see the reaction playing out on people's faces. The expressions range from pleasure to distress, from sorrow to satisfaction (Collins, 2010, pp. 203-204).

In this quote, the reader can see how Gale does not value human life. His morals say that the value of life is nonexistent, if the person is associated with his enemy in the slightest way. Since Gale is in his late teens, he is still deciphering what his moral beliefs will be. Usually, the postconventional morality stage that he resides in emphasizes the importance of basic human rights, but Gale displays the opposite. He does not see the dignity of all people because of the awful situations he experienced while growing up.

Another psychologist, William James, distinguished between moral action and moral beliefs. Some people say they will act justly in a situation, only to do the opposite. James thought that "religious experience [is] the ground for moral action" (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2011). Meaning that the stronger the religious belief an individual has, the more likely they are to follow through with their moral beliefs and turn them into moral actions. Haymitch Abernathy, Katniss and Peeta's mentor during the hunger games, has the keen ability to lie, which betrays his moral actions. In *Catching Fire*, Haymitch lies to Katniss and Peeta about saving the other. The pair wanted to make sure the other was the victor of the Quarter Quell and made it home. Each asks Haymitch for his help, but instead he betrays their trust. Haymitch said he would do the moral thing and save their lives, but when the moral belief was put into action, he lied to Katniss and made decisions without her. His ease with lying relates to his distance from religious matters, including community and family relationships, which are highly valued in religion.

Haymitch lost all of his family after his own hunger games. This left him without a community, so as a way to cope he turned to alcohol.

After Piaget's introduction of stage theory, Erik Erikson "contended that each stage of life has its own psychosocial task" that needs to be resolved (Myers, 2018, p. 197). The completion of tasks allows for an individual to feel accomplished and that they are on the same level as others of their age. Of the eight tasks, the most prevalent to *The Hunger Games* is identity vs. role confusion. During adolescence and into the early 20s, people are most likely to "work at refining a sense of self by testing roles and then integrating them to form a single identity" (Myers, 2018, p. 197). If they fail to create their own sense of self, they may become confused about their identity. Many characters in the trilogy are trying to create their sense of self, but the task seems to be hardest for Katniss.

Being in consecutive hunger games and a rebellion took a major toll on Katniss. She was attempting to create her own identity but had to pause because of the stress she endured in the traumatic events that were taking place. She was overly concerned with keeping herself and her family alive to consider important questions that define our personalities. During the traumatic events, the heroine continually tries to rely on herself, but falls back on her family, Gale, and Peeta for support. Most teenagers and young adults need this support, but Katniss relies on it completely in some situations. In *Catching Fire*, she has a panic attack after Peeta hits the fence because she thought she would be unable to go on without him. She is too reliant on others to begin to rely on herself.

Katniss' struggle with her psychosocial task is similar to many other teenagers who face adversity in adolescence. When teenagers survive cancer, they either put the experience behind them while focusing on their futures or they cannot move past it causing continued negativity in their lives. Older cancer survivors, even early adulthood survivors, are more likely to move past the experience since they established their life before the diagnosis. Those that faced the challenge in their early teenage years did not have the opportunity to establish themselves before their illness, so they emerge as the same children they were when first diagnosed. Similar to Katniss when she is hospitalized throughout *Mockingjay*, the "patients are thrown back into dependence on their nuclear family" (Eiser, 2009). While the cancer survivors were relying on their family, they did not have the opportunity to experience the independence that is necessary for the task's completion. Katniss relates to the cancer survivors because after emerging from the rebellion, she realizes how much she has changed since her fight against the Capitol began. Just like how the negative thinking survivors look back and see all they could have been doing while sick. Katniss sees her past self as naive and taking life and family for granted, especially her younger sister Prim, who she had to watch die.

By avoiding completing Erikson's adolescent psychosocial task of identity vs. confusion, self-esteem may be lowered. Since Katniss failed to create her identity early on, she lacks a purpose and faith in herself in *Mockingjay*. Her self-esteem seems high when she is in situations from her early life in 12, interests that were established before her traumatic experiences, like hunting with Gale or teasing her sister, but when put in a new environment she doubts herself. This is because of her familiarity with her surroundings. Since "self-esteem is relatively stable," (Orth 2014) what seems like a fluctuating self-esteem in Katniss is simply her level of enthusiasm with a situation. Her self-esteem is at its low point in the beginning of *Mockingjay*, when she is covering to President Coin because she is in a new situation and nervous. When familiarity with the situation and environment develops, she is demanding and asks for the tributes to be spared. Katniss is annoyed by unfamiliar people, leading her to close herself off exposing her low self-esteem.

Katniss' sister, Prim, grew up in harsh, poor conditions. Then in her early teenage years as she was trying to define her own identity, her world is changed by a rebellion. However, this adversity had both positive and negative side effects. Psychologists and researchers originally thought that children who grew up in households struggling with poverty, war, and family violence did not have the proper cognitive development, but after some studies they realized that the children were developing well, some even flourishing in their environments. This is due to resilience, which is defined as "positive patterns of functioning and development during or following exposure to adversity, or, more simply, to good adaptation in the context of risk" (Masten, 2006, p. 4). Prim has great resilience because no matter what hardship her family faced, she was able to support them and show kindness to all. Risk factors may be able to indicate when a child is in an aversive situation. Some risk factors for Prim were the destruction of her home, the death of her father, and the stress of watching her sister in the hunger games. For children at risk, it is important to introduce interventions in order to promote their welfare. Such interventions include helping them set positive goals for themselves as something to work toward and providing a positive role model. Prim's goals include following her mother's footsteps by going into the medical field. In district 13, she started taking introductory classes on medicine in preparation for her transition from nurse to doctor. Prim was very excited, so excited that she volunteered to be a medic in the field, in order to help others. Similar to her sister, Prim wanted to protect the vulnerable and spent her assisting them. At this point, her logical thinking was fully developed, so she knew the risks that were in place when she volunteered. This led to her untimely death in the field. The adverse and challenging childhood prepared Prim to be resilient and ready to face the next challenge.

Psychology is the study of the human experience. Through a psychological lens, the reader sees how Katniss' decisions are contingent upon her psychosocial task to create her own identity, along with how resilience has affected her family's life. The psychological themes in the dystopian novel mirror the lives of real people. Children and teenagers everywhere are fighting against adversity to gain resilience or trying to complete their own psychosocial task to maintain their self-esteem. In her trilogy, Collins attempts to teach the importance of applying psychology to everyday life in an engaging manner. The readers learn about psychology through each of the characters subconsciously. They are unaware of the psychological tropes, until they are pointed out or discussed further. Collins saw the importance of psychology which led her to incorporate it into her bestselling series.

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