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## The Character-Driven Person: How *Frozen's* Anna, not Elsa, Is an Exemplar

A Review of

*Frozen* (2013)

by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee (Directors)

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Reviewed by

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There can be no doubt that Disney's 2013 computer-animated, musical fantasy *Frozen* made a significant worldwide impact. At the box office it earned over \$400 million in the United States, and nearly \$900 million elsewhere, leading to an estimated worldwide total approaching \$1.3 billion (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). It therefore currently stands as the highest grossing animated film of all time (McClintock, 2014).

Alongside its popularity, *Frozen* could equally be viewed as a significant cultural phenomenon. It is unusual among Disney films, and has been praised by feminist critics (e.g., Dockterman, 2014), for having two main female protagonists: Elsa (the newly crowned queen with the "flaw" of turning everything she touches into ice), and Anna (her younger sister), both present as basically good characters. It easily meets the criteria of the so-called "Bechdel Rule," the gold standard for female empowering cinema, requiring that: (a) two women, (b) talk to one another, about (c) something other than men (e.g., Dockterman, 2014).

We argue that the character of Anna, when examined through the lens of character strengths, is one of the strongest characters in recent film history. Nevertheless it is notable, on both sides of the Atlantic, that consumers (young girls and adults alike) have a particular fascination with the older sister Elsa, viewing her as the beloved character of the film. Whether attending Disney-on-ice with our children or simply perusing the *Frozen* aisle of stores, Elsa's light blue colors are much more in evidence than Anna's pink. In sales of numerous items, such as soup, mouthwash, dolls and dresses, Elsa products far out-sell Anna products (Byron & Ziobro, 2014) and Elsa products outsell Anna products by 46% in shipments (Sizemore, 2014). Perhaps partly as a consequence of this, *Time* magazine ranked Elsa the most influential fictional character of 2014 (D'Addario, 2014).

## Why Elsa Captivates Viewers

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Elsa particularly appeals to young children. She has a blonde Barbie-like appearance and wears a “sparkly blue dress,” which in itself appears to be enough to attract young girls to her costume. She also sings “Let it Go,” the show-stopping song of the movie, which won the 2013 Academy Award for best original song (Box Office Mojo, 2013), and received widespread critical acclaim as “an incredible anthem of liberation” (Snetiker, 2013, item no. 2). The remarkable effect of the song on children has been noted by columnists who have dubbed it “musical crack” (Abraham, 2014, para. 3), and an “epidemic sweeping the nation” (Candy, 2014, para. 3). Social media have been awash ever since release of the film with footage of young girls dressed as Elsa, performing the song. To top it all, unlike her sister Anna, Elsa has magical powers that cognitive anthropologists would call “minimally counter intuitive” (MCI; Boyer, 2002)—exotic enough to fascinate us, but familiar enough to be recognizably human.

There are, however, some other more “adult” reasons why Elsa has taken the limelight. She is the more overtly sexualized of the two sisters, as evidenced by the response of U.S. Marines to the “Let It Go” sequence of the film (itsMRich, 2014). She has also been heralded as a champion of the ostracized and rejected. As one critic put it:

She’s a young woman in difficult circumstances, frightened, trying to understand her abilities and burdened by expectation and convention. It’s easy to sympathize with her and marvel at her ability. . . Next to her, Anna is very much a child who needs to grow up. (Pal, 2013, para. 7)

But the majority of accolades reserved for Elsa by adult critics refer to her “moral complexity.” There are too many examples to cite at length, but Donna Dickens’s (2013, paras. 9, 11) statement is typical: “Elsa. . . [is a] flawed hero. . . aloof. And scared. And over-protective. And insecure. And full of guilt. Because people—even animated people—are the sum total of their personalities combined with their experiences.” Elsa has stolen the show because we can identify with her pain. She is flawed, as we are.

Research has consistently revealed that humans have a strong negativity bias that looks for flaws and focuses on weaknesses. It has been documented repeatedly that bad is stronger than good. Negative psychological phenomena are more quickly learned, manifest, and create stronger consequences than good psychological phenomena (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). As emotions expert Rick Hanson put it, “Our minds are Teflon for the positive, but Velcro for the negative” (Hanson, 2009, para. 5).

This negativity bias is also evident within the discipline of psychology. When Martin Seligman inaugurated the positive psychology movement at the turn of the millennium, one of the driving motives was to correct psychology’s obsession with the negative (Seligman, 2003).

One of the major correctives to the negativity bias came in the form of a worldwide multimillion dollar research project designed to identify the psychological strengths and virtues that lead to human flourishing. This research resulted in a book called *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) that identified and described 24 trait-like psychological strengths celebrated ubiquitously across

the globe and throughout history. The recognition and utilization of these strengths has been firmly linked to human flourishing (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) in numerous areas such as psychological well-being (e.g., Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004) and work engagement (e.g., Crabb, 2011). Spotting and using these qualities of character in ourselves and others strongly contributes to what makes life worth living.

We therefore do not deny that there is much that can be learned from the character of Elsa. People overcoming pain can teach us a great deal about how to cope in the face of adversity (Linley & Joseph, 2005) and one book offered over 1,000 popular film examples of principle characters with mental illness (Wedding & Niemiec, 2014). But we believe that with this film, much more benefit can be gained by studying the character of Anna, not Elsa.

One of the criteria used in the original compilation of psychological strengths was that the average person should be able to name people who embody humility, bravery, love or any of the other strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, research shows that much of our learning comes from observing exemplars (Oman & Thoresen, 2003), and these exemplars need not necessarily be living. Historical figures can act as exemplars, as can fictional characters in books and movies (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014).

## **Anna, the Queen of Courage**

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It is unfortunate that Elsa has overshadowed Anna in the hype surrounding the movie *Frozen*. A short survey of even a handful of the character strengths displayed by Anna in the film is enough to make us think again about whether we are failing to appreciate an exemplary character.

First off, it seems that one of the most evident character strengths that Anna displays throughout the movie is love. From the earliest scene of joyfully building snowmen with her sister, to her unflagging attempt to reconnect with Elsa throughout their childhood, and her unflinching belief in the goodness of her older sister, Anna demonstrates the ability to give and receive love. This capacity to care and remain open to what experts on love have called “positivity resonance” (Fredrickson, 2013) requires sharing loving moments with others. Anna remains open to the possibility of connection with Elsa in spite of rejection, whereas Elsa seems to respond to the rejection of others at her coronation by giving up on the possibility of loving or being loved and seeking solitude for the majority of the film.

It is in the area of love, however, that Anna’s most evident weakness lies. Her quickly falling in love with a visiting prince could in many ways be viewed as an underuse of prudence and sound judgment. But it could equally be interpreted as simply an inappropriate overuse of her great strength of loving, as it is our highest strengths that are often most vulnerable to being brought forth so strongly that they negatively affect ourselves or others (Niemiec, 2014). Anna falls in love too deeply and too quickly with a character who later turns out to be untrustworthy. It is this episode that has earned her a reputation for childish naiveté, but it is no less childish or naïve than Elsa’s seemingly wholesale rejection of even the possibility of love.

Anna is also a courageous character. Courage, like love, is a psychologically complex strength: It requires the ability to pursue a goal in spite of internal or external opposition (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Robert Biswas-Diener (2012) views courage as consisting of

(a) managing fear and (b) maintaining performance. It takes many forms: physical bravery, honesty, passion and persistence (all of which are strong in Anna); and it can be displayed publically or privately (Pury, Kowalski, & Spearman, 2007).

Elsa has been celebrated by adult critics as a paragon of the courage to be oneself in spite of the consequences, that is, the courage of authenticity. But Anna is every bit as courageous as Elsa, if not more so. She demonstrates absolute perseverance in pursuing a relationship with her sister in spite of the obstacles that Elsa throws in her path. Her physical bravery is evident when, in the midst of Elsa's magically generated snow storm, she races into the mountains by herself (at first) to find her sister and bring her home with little concern for her own safety. The personal bravery she musters in facing her own loneliness over years of sitting outside Elsa's closed bedroom door shouldn't be ignored, even if condensed into a 3-min montage in the film. Whereas Elsa's courage involves the rejection of others, Anna somehow manages to be loving and courageous at the same time.

## **Anna Leads While Elsa Avoids**

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When Elsa is crowned Queen of Arendelle, it is Anna who most clearly demonstrates the strength of leadership. It is almost a cliché in management psychology to acknowledge that there is no agreed upon definition of leadership, but Anna clearly exemplifies many of the qualities noted in exceptional leaders. She keeps an eye on what she is trying to accomplish while also appreciating those who assist her toward the goal (even if they are a talking snowman, a sardonic reindeer and an ice-hauler), both qualities of what has been called "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1998). Likewise, she demonstrates fierce resolve, plus a willingness to learn; both are characteristics of leaders who make a difference (Collins, 2001). Queen Elsa, on the other hand, broods alone in her ice fortress, leading no one, doing everything in her power to avoid not only her loved ones and her community but her own fears.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the film is that the signature song "Let It Go" is delivered by the one character who finds it most difficult to let things go, at least in terms of forgiving herself and others and letting the past go and moving on. Again it is Anna, not Elsa, who demonstrates strength in the area of forgiveness. She not only forgives Elsa for the years of neglect, but also persistently seeks reconciliation and repair of their relationship. Much of the good in the final scenes of the film, as Anna sacrifices herself for her sister, occurs because of Anna's commitment to their relationship. In this sense she demonstrates all the empathy, acceptance and commitment that characterize acts of forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). With all the attention centered upon Elsa, it is easy to forget that *Frozen* only has a happy ending because of Anna.

Although Anna engages in serious and dramatic life-saving actions, she is also playful and light-hearted as she teases her love interests (displaying the strength of humor), and humble, coming across without a hint of braggadocio, always placing the interests of others before her own. It is likely that a knowledgeable and observant viewer can detect all 24 of the character strengths in Anna.

## Conclusion

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Anna and Elsa have sometimes been presented as a complementary pair, the yin and yang of human experience. Indeed, there is a lot we can learn from both characters, both of whom change for the better over the course of the film. But if we are looking for an exemplar of the good life, of how to build a positive relationship, or how to put our character strengths into action, we would be better served to look to the less popular of the duo. We believe it is Anna's perseverance, bravery, love, zest, leadership, and forgiveness that are the true underlying ingredients of the film's impact. These are the most substantive aspects of the film, and ultimately the qualities that put the warmth into *Frozen*.

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