

How realistic is the representation?

PSYCHOTHERAPISTS DISCUSS TV DRAMAS FOR CHILDREN*

5 senior doctors from the Asklepios Fachklinikum Tiefenbrunn (AFK), one of Germany's top psychotherapy clinics, watched a selection of TV shows and films from the PRIX JEUNESSE 2016. They describe the consequences that trauma, abuse, experiences of violence, and the sudden death of a parent can have on children's identity and discuss how accurately high-quality TV shows and films represent these complex scenarios.

DISCUSSION OF DAD – A FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR TRAUMA

The 15-minute-long stand-alone episode from the children's drama series *Eurovision*, broadcast on S4C, Wales, tells the story of 10-year-old Cai living on a caravan site on the Welsh coast. His father has returned from the war with physical and mental injuries which creates a lot of challenges for Cai and his mother. One day, Cai meets the young refugee Amir, who is secretly living on the beach. They become friends and lose track of time as they play together. When Cai's father angrily goes looking for him in the evening, a military aircraft flies past and reactivates his war trauma. Amir is also panicked and attempts to hide. He ends up falling down a steep slope. With the support of his father Cai rescues the refugee boy.

What did you think of the film Dad?

Riediger: Well, there were scenes that were completely authentic and very moving. They had a profound emotional impact on me as a viewer. The whole interaction between the children and also the way they played on the beach and Cai consoled Amir: that's something

very typical. There are children who mutually support each other in this way even at a very young age.

Claaßen: Another really good scene was when the father and son go help Amir after he has fallen down the slope and the father lets his son do it. The father stays behind and supervises his son from a distance.

He can't help himself because of his war injury, but he finds a very neat solution. You wish that the father would give his son opportunities like this more often.

Based on your experience, which aspects of the film's representation of people with trauma were less realistic?

Riediger: There were two small details where I would have expected something different. Firstly, the situation in the traumatised father's family would have been even more complex and volatile, alternating between (for example) rage and alienation. Secondly, the father recovered too quickly. In the scene at the end, when his trauma was reactivated and he was overwhelmed, it's unlikely that he would have been able to move so quickly into playing a supportive role afterwards.

Claaßen: In the scene with the plane, you can see the actors were attempting to recreate the feelings of people with trauma. But what they portray is more of a fear response. In reality, people with trauma tend to be dissociated instead; that is to say, they're much

less present, far more withdrawn inside themselves, even more fearful, and you lose all contact with them. In the moment when a traumatised person is triggered, they experience fragmentary elements of the trauma. They aren't merely affected by this experience and the feelings that accompany it, as depicted in the film, but completely absorbed by them. In the film, you get the impression that the father remains in control the whole time. And that's not quite accurate as a portrayal of a traumatic or retraumatising situation when someone experiences an intrusive episode or flashback.

How can we help children to understand this issue, for instance when it affects their own parents?

Ballin: They don't learn about trauma through educational interventions. Instead, children learn what coping means when they see a parent managing to cope with a psychic trauma: it means having an injury and yet living with it, dealing with it. That's something that's portrayed really well in the film.

On the one hand, the father stumbles on the stony ground; his injury is made clearly apparent. But at the same time, he stays in control of the situation. He guides his son, saying: "Go on, help him!". In this way, he shows that actually he's not completely helpless. He is still able to act, and he can help his son to take appropriate action in this kind of situation. That's the crucial thing.

DISCUSSION OF SLEEPING LIONS – SEXUAL ABUSE BY A STEPFATHER

This 15-minute drama, commissioned by BBC Learning, tells the story of 15-year-old Mia, who was sexually abused by her stepfather. Her mother doesn't suspect anything. When the situation threatens to repeat itself with her younger sister, Mia finds herself facing an even bigger crisis of conscience. Finally, she confides in her boyfriend. They go to the school psychologist and Mia's mother stands by her daughter.

What did you think of Sleeping Lions?

Spitzer: A great film! I thought it was really very good. What I especially liked was that it encouraged people who have suffered abuse to confide in others. It's a film that inspires hope. Fundamentally, it's a film that, by telling this kind of story, motivates, encourages, and urges people to share their experiences. It offers something viewers can identify with: "How does someone get out of that situation?", "How can they do it?".

Ballin: I also found the final lines particularly impressive. Mia's mother tells her she did the right thing. Because the terrible thing about situations of abuse like this isn't just the trauma that the victims suffer, but also the feeling that they themselves are responsible. The children feel guilty because they think they are the ones who have made it happen. That's accompanied by ab-

solutely terrible feelings of shame and guilt. And that's isolating. It's often the most difficult thing for people in that situation. So the closing lines are really great.

What else was typical of similar cases from the real world?

Riediger: The way the abuser interacted with his victim was very impressively portrayed and was typical of real-life cases, disputing the child's perceptions and palming off responsibility, as though none of it has anything to do with the abuser: "You're responsible" and "If you reveal what happened, the family will be torn apart and it'll be your fault when your mother is unhappy".

Claaßen: Also, the question of how a child with brothers or sisters responds to this kind of situation. That's something we often see, and it can take all sorts of different forms: several children in a family being abused, one child being abused, one child knowing about a sibling who has been abused. Those are very difficult situations. I thought this was a very important issue to address. Something else we of-

ten see is that adolescents or children turn to people outside the family, like care workers or teachers. They're the first ones to be told about the abuse. The film should be shown to as many care workers and teachers as possible, to give them the courage to take action.

What was less typical of similar cases from the real world?

Ballin: Right at the start, the first time she hugs her boyfriend. Girls in her situation wouldn't tend to do that; they would feel isolated instead. They probably wouldn't be able to develop such a close, trusting bond with someone. I didn't find the other times she hugged him very believable either.

Riediger: Children who have been sexually abused by someone in their family over a long period of time also often look more damaged – in many cases, it's apparent simply from the way they present themselves and their identity. The impression I got from Mia's appearance was more what I would have associated with a healthy adolescent who was sad and conflicted. But in reality, children like Mia are traumatised, and that's usually more clearly apparent.

How does an experience of abuse affect the development of identity?

Riediger: It's very difficult to generalise. But what we very often find is that abuse victims will continue to seek contact with abusers in the form of perverted "good" relations, in order to maintain at least some sense of predictability and attachment. This means that, with respect to themselves, abuse victims have absolutely no sense of boundaries or of the need for distance. Instead, they keep on going back to the abuser, and the abuse keeps on going, too.

Ballin: In the victim's experience of the world, everything is inverted: the things I want, my desires, will lead to a catastrophe, they're wrong; the right thing to do is to say nothing. Telling the truth would be wrong.

Riediger: It's especially bad when the person carrying out the abuse is also a fundamental attachment figure. Everyone alternates between exploratory

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and attachment behaviours. Exploratory behaviours involve going out, discovering the world, and creating our own space. In situations where we're helpless, the attachment system is activated, and we seek protection and proximity. And if the abuser is an attachment figure, when the abuse takes place they simultaneously arouse fear and activate the attachment system, which motivates the child to seek protection. And where will they look for it? From the abuser. This results in what is known as a "traumatic identity", because the person the child is close to is also an abuser. Often, this is then transposed into many subsequent relationships, so you end up with young girls who get abused again in adolescence and women who go on to be beaten by their husbands and whose children are born as a result of rape. And these women stay with these men as if there were no question of doing anything else. That's a case of a traumatic identity.

DISCUSSION OF *WITH ALL RIGHTS – A MOTHER WHO HITS HER SON*

Each 10-minute episode of the series *With All Rights* by UR, Sweden, focuses on a different children's right. One episode tells the story of Eric, who witnesses his mother physically abusing his younger brother. He struggles with a crisis of conscience, but finally confides in a grown-up friend.

What did you think of With All Rights?

Ballin: I found it quite annoying. It completely watered down the real problem. We see far worse cases.

Riediger: That's certainly true, but at the same time the severity of the problem varies between different families. I felt that the final line, "In Sweden, it is absolutely forbidden to hit children", was the central message to viewers. The film was very good at showing the emotional consequences violence can

have for a child in this kind of situation who sees their parents fighting or their brother being abused: the detachment, the isolation of the children, and their uncertainty how to respond.

What aspects of the film were believable and were typical of real-life cases of children being physically abused?

Bünger: The inner anguish when Eric sees that his mother is lying and doing something wrong and when he realises that actually it's not OK, was portrayed well. And then the questions: "Can I remain loyal to her? Do I have to?" or "Can I say 'You can't do that' or 'That's not OK'?". I thought this conflict of loyalty was brought across very well.

Claaßen: Also the fact that he seeks out someone who appears strong, almost "gangster-like": namely Sascha, a grown-up with a ferocious little dog, a baseball cap, and a hoodie. I found it very believable that the boy would seek out someone who is capable of defending himself.

What effect does or can physical abuse have on a child's identity?

Spitzer: Victims of physical violence associate the experience with feelings of incredible powerlessness. This poses an almost insurmountable challenge for personal development: how can you respond to this highly aversive feeling of complete helplessness? Boys often try to counteract it by playing at war, learning martial arts, or joining street gangs. In

this way, they make themselves more powerful so that they can somehow overcome this experience of helplessness. But of course there are countless other variations.

Riediger: Experiences of violence are often also associated with the failure to develop a fully fledged sense of morality. In order for a child to develop this sense, they first need to go through developmental stages such as learning that certain

boundaries may not be crossed and acquiring the ability to see things from other people's point of view and feel empathy. If they are unable to complete these developmental stages, they will be incapable of imagining what other people are feeling and will torment children and animals without any sense of "How does that make them feel?".

Ballin: When someone finds themselves in this psychological situation, in later life they will restore their inner psychological balance using violence too. This means they will act violently because they believe that if they don't, they will become a victim again. Consequently, they not only hurt other people but also constantly run the risk of once again ending up in a situation that they want to avoid at all costs.

DISCUSSION OF *GORTIMER GIBBON'S LIFE ON NORMAL STREET – SUDDEN DEATH OF A MOTHER*

The 28-minute episode (Amazon Originals, USA) tells the story of 12-year-old Mel, whose mother has suddenly died. As her friends try to console her at the day of the funeral, she is fixated on building a time machine so she can prevent her mother's death. Then she meets her 32-year-old self from the future, who has finally managed to build the time machine. She wasn't able to prevent her mother's death – she just missed out on her childhood and youth. At first, Mel wants to travel into the future with her, but her father manages to persuade her to stay.

Putting the fictional elements to one side, what is typical about the way Mel processes the sudden death of her mother in this episode?

Spitzer: Something we see time and again in adults is that they process this kind of loss in terms of guilt. People reproach themselves: “We parted on bad terms”, “I didn’t tell my wife I loved her, and then she had a car accident”, that sort of thing.

Riediger: What’s also typical in children is the desire to be reunited with the lost parent, which was very central here. Denial is another common response, like the scene where the girl threw herself into frantic activity and gave the impression she wasn’t emotionally affected at all by the death: that’s also typical.

The way Mel processed her grief using the time machine reminded me a lot of what the developmental psychologist Seiffge-Krenke calls “imaginary companions”. When children up to the age of around 8 or 9 experience loss and end up in helpless situations in which they are unable to get the support they need from the people they are close to, they sometimes create imaginary companions. They imagine these companions as being all-powerful and able to solve the problems. But this form of symbolisation and processing tends to be found in a different age group. From an adolescent, we would instead expect social withdrawal, rage, irritability, heated arguments with her father, joining suicide forums, self-harm, or similar.

Spitzer: However, the episode also falls into stereotypes. Take the father, for example. He’s the quintessential “Mr Good Guy”: tall, strong, sporty, tanned, and *always* positive. Even when he is grieving the sudden loss of his wife, he doesn’t seem at all broken; he tells jokes to make the other guests at the funeral laugh and takes the burden off everyone else. It’s all so upbeat and polished. That’s unrealistic and presents a picture that isn’t achievable for people in his situation.

What did you think of the episode?

Ballin: You can tell that someone read the literature on grief and then sat down, wrote a good script, found some good actors, and filmed it. That’s how they did it.

And I found it affecting too: at points, I was really sad and moved. However, in this case the quality also represents a limitation, because the way adolescents process grief or the effect of grief and loss on children weren’t really addressed here. It was limited to very general forms of processing grief, the way that adults would do it, too. That’s different from if I describe something

I’ve experienced myself (you get that sense in the film *Dad*, for example) or if someone else describes their experiences to me.

By taking that approach, the work can, as it were, become bigger than the person who created it, filled with keen observations and perceptions, and depicting the way things are.

In *Gortimer’s Life on Normal Street*, the work is smaller than the person who created it, because there’s one overriding intention: “I want to show this and that”. And the film does show it, but as a result it remains limited to just that. I don’t think, incidentally, that that’s a particularly bad thing. You can do it that way if you want to, why not? It can even be educational.

Spitzer: But it results in something normative. It presents a model: “This is the ideal situation” and, as it were, “You must be able to deal with it somehow, just like in this story”. And of course that’s not true at all. There are a thousand different responses that are equally good or equally bad. In reality, people’s identities and the ways they deal with crises are far more complex than a simple model. ■



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